

Fairy Tales and Composition in Performance –A Period Storytelling Technique.

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What is it:

A method for telling a fairy tale, or magical folktale, the way it would have been done in period, assuming a predominantly oral tradition of transmission.

Historical Basis:

Even though, in English, the phrase fairy tale was not used until the 18th century, fairy tales as a genre did exist in period. While not recorded the way we know them today, there are period examples of what we now recognize as fairy tales.^{1,2}

When we prepare for performances today, we consult the written text, memorize it, and then recite it, perhaps with some variation. In an oral society with lack or paucity of written texts, the transmission and performance of tales has to be done differently.

Materials and Methods:

Oral formulaic theory

It was at some point assumed, in oral tradition, after a text was composed verbally, it was memorized by subsequent performers for future retellings. However, in 1971, M. Parry, who studied Homer's epics, argued that the works of Homer were recorded oral epics, and thus are folklore, rather than literature, and that the oral epics were not memorized, but re-created with each telling. He supported his work by making parallels with living oral epic traditions, studying contemporary storytellers in the former Yugoslavia.³

¹ Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales from before Fairy Tales : The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

² Iona Archibald Opie and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³ Tim Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia Dell'arte : Beyond the Improvisation/Memorisation Divide* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995)., 24.

He developed the oral-formulaic theory, which applies to storytelling in an oral tradition. This theory was developed with epic poetry in mind. However, it was applied successfully to other oral genres.

The main points of the oral-formulaic theory:

- Oral texts are variable. They depend on and are created in performance (“composition in performance”), as opposed to written texts, which are composed prior to performance.
- The oral texts are transmitted via “composition in performance”, as opposed to memorization and recitation of written texts.
- Unlike written texts, the oral texts do not have an original, authentic, or correct version.
- Performance is essential to oral texts: unlike written texts, they exist in performance only.⁴

Therefore, “Poets did not memorise their texts beforehand, but neither did they have to hesitate for words and lines as they performed, for they were drawing on a familiar store of “formulaic” phrases, themes, incidents and plots, all of which could be combined and recombined according to the requirements of a particular occasion”.⁵

Therefore, the oral performance are both variable (*flexibility*), as no two retellings of the story will be the same, and fixed (*fixity*), as it still remains a recognizable story.⁶

The meaning of “formulaic” differs from researcher to researcher, and can refer to descriptions, characters, and whole plots. The storyteller/poet relies on these formulae to “regenerate the narrative” in the context of a given performance. The story then will depend not only on the storyteller, but on the audience as well, as the tellers would modify the story and adjust it depending on response from the audience.⁷

We can think to a story as having two layers: the superficial variable elements applicable to the genre, which the storytellers take from memory, and the deeper and more fixed skeleton. While both layers can be considered “formulaic” the skeleton is more fixed, and makes the story recognizable to the audience. This of course assumes that the audience is familiar with the genre and its basic patterns.

⁴ Ibid., 23-24, gives a nice summary of key points of oral-formulaic theory.

⁵ Ibid., 25, citing Finnegan 1988, pp.130-131.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷ Ibid., 27.

The Aarne Thompson Motif Index and Tale Type Index

“A motif is a the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition. In order to have this power it must have something unusual and striking about it. Most motifs fall into three classes. First are the actors in a tale – gods, or unusual animals, or marvelous creatures like witches, ogres or fairies. ... Second come certain items in the background of actions – magic objects, unusual customs, strange beliefs, and the like. In the third place there are single incidents – and these comprise the great majority of the motifs.”⁸

The fairy tale motifs, which are the basic building blocks of the tales, are classified and sorted according to topic (somewhat arbitrarily), and their source recorded.⁹

The original motif index is six volumes, and is rather daunting to work with. Thankfully, more narrow indices are also available, dealing with motifs of specific time period or geographic index. For example, there are 45 books dealing with various motif indices in the Library of Congress at the time of this writing.

This sorting and classification of motifs is not perfect; for example, the index ignores the grouping of motifs (like genes in a genome, certain motifs tend to stick together), and predominantly lists European motifs, but it’s still very useful.¹⁰

The other way to catalogue the building blocks is Aarne -Thompson tale type index , which organizes the fairy tales themselves by type: according the narrative plot, and assigns them a number.

“A type is a traditional tale that has an independent existence. It may be told as a complete narrative and does not depend for its meaning on any other tale. ... It may consist of one motif or many. ... Most animal tales and jokes and anecdotes are types of one motif. The ordinary Marchen (tales like Cinderella or Snow White are types consisting of many of them.”¹¹

Morphology of the Folktale

⁸ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, 1st AMS ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1979)., 415-416.

⁹ *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature; a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk-Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediæval Romances, Exempla, Fables, Jest-Books*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind., 1932).

¹⁰ Alan Dundes, "The Motif-Index and the Tale Type Index: A Critique," *Journal of Folklore Research* 34, no. 3 (1997).

¹¹ Thompson, *The Folktale*., 415.

The 1928 work on structure of folktales by Soviet folklore researcher V. Propp, available in English. Excellent and short summary is available at:

<http://www.northangerlibrary.com/documentos/AN%20OUTLINE%20OF%20PROPP'S%20MODEL%20FOR%20THE%20STUDY%20OF%20FAIRYTALES.pdf>

His work generally applies to magic folktales, generally those types listed from 300 to 749 in Aarne tale type index.

All magic folktales can be broken down to 31 functions. Each fairy tale includes variable number of functions, but the order they occur in are immutable. (Please see Appendix 1 for the list of functions.) Functions move along the plot, the function can be positive (hero defeats the villain) or negative (hero fails to defeat the villain). The sequences of actions form a “move” or a narrative episode of the tale.

The characters are those who perform the functions, and all the fairy tale characters can be reduced to seven types: hero (seeker), villain, false hero, donor, helper, princess (the one sought), princess’ father.

The dramatis personae are classified on the basis of what they do, not who they are. Furthermore, each character only performs a limited number of functions (see Appendix 2).¹²

Using Propp’s approach, a fairy tale can be easily reduced to a formula, regardless of its origin, complexity or completion.

Conclusion:

Using the above techniques, and utilizing the motifs used in period, (and it is easier to find fairy tale fragments rather than complete tales), one can reconstruct a period plausible tale. If given the motifs (such as requests from the audience), one can compose and simultaneously perform such a tale (based on Propp’s structural approach and Parry’s “composition in performance”).

The goal of this exercise is to provide another method for period type performance rather than memorization and recitation of known written period texts.

¹² V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed., Publications of the American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series (Austin,: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Please note that this method would be more valid for an oral culture. In a society where literacy and written texts are common, and compositions are authored, rather than anonymous, memorization and recitation would be a perfectly valid method.¹³

A wealth of period motifs are available, as there are whole tales and fragments of recorded tales in chronicles, the Bible, the lives of saints, private correspondence, and period fiction such as chivalric romances, works by Marie de France, Boccaccio, Straparola, etc.

What would be done differently in period:

The period storytellers would have had a great repertoire of the story elements, and could perform both short stories and long epics, with tens of thousands lines of texts. I do not have the skills of the professional storytellers, nor does my listeners have the same experiences to draw on. One of the reasons I chose a fairy tale for this demonstration, is that it is one of the few period genre modern listeners are universally familiar with.

I had to acquire my fairy tale building blocks by reading books, not by listening, as it would be commonly done in period. However, reading books to build up one's repertoire is perfectly period: there were collections of fabliaux (comic tales), to be used as resources both by the jongleurs (professional entertainers), and by preachers in their sermons, dating from 13th century.¹⁴ Furthermore, in Renaissance Italy, among the upper classes a very strong culture of oral storytelling coexisted with written texts as sources and references.¹⁵

The tales are tailored to the audience, and in my re-generation of the fairy tale, I omit the building blocks which would be objectionable to the modern audience. These omissions would be different in period.

Furthermore, as the stories are told and retold, the popularity of the motifs and the tale types change; so given the same building blocks (motifs) as I am given today, the period storyteller would have probably told a different story.

¹³ Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado, and Marilyn Lawrence, *Performing Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2005), Brian J. Levy, *Performing Fabliaux*, pp. 123-40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, John Ahern, *Dioneo's Repertory*, pp.41-58.

Appendix 1. List of functions in Propp's Morphology of the Folktale.

In 1928 V.I. Propp published his *Morphology of the Folktale*. It was first translated into English in 1968. He made an observation that the tales are extraordinarily diverse, but at the same time very similar across cultures; and that fairy tales consist of interchangeable elements, which we can call motifs. For the overwhelmingly exhaustive (and exhausting) list of motifs, with documentation of occurrence, the best resource is *The Motif Index of Folk Literature*, by Thompson.

A complex of motifs is called a theme. The fairy tales can be organized into types according to their themes, (Aarne classification) although the classification is approximate. Propp noted that many elements of the motifs are interchangeable: for example the protagonist can be a peasant, a smith, a prince, and merchant's son, etc, a villain can be a serpent, a dragon, an ogre, or an evil king, but the fairy tales remains fairly the same. Thus Propp proposed his classification based on the functions of Dramatis Personae. These functions remain constant independent of the characters that perform them. He described 31 such functions, while not all functions are present in tales; the order of functions is immutable. Each function is indicated by a letter or a symbol.

Here they are:

- α the situation ("once upon a time there was...")
- β one of the member of the family absents himself from home
- γ an interdiction is addressed to the hero.
- δ the interdiction is violated
- ε the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance
- ζ the villain receives information about his victim
- η the villain attempts to deceive his victim to take possession of him or his belonging
- θ the victim submits to deception and unwittingly helps the enemy.
- A the villain causes harm or injury to a family member
- a A family member either lacks something or desires to have something
- B Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command and is allowed to go or is dispatched.
- C The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction
- ↑ The hero leaves home

- D The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc, which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper
- E The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor
- F The hero acquires the use of a magical agent
- G The hero is transferred, delivered or led to the object of search.
- H The hero and the villain join in direct combat
- I the villain is defeated
- J The hero is branded
- K the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated
- ↓ The hero returns
- Pr The hero is pursued
- Rs Rescue of hero from pursuit
- o the hero, unrecognized arrives home or in another country
- L a false hero presents unfounded claims
- M A difficult task is proposed to the hero
- N the task is resolved
- Q the hero is recognized
- Ex false hero or villain is exposed
- T the hero is given a new appearance
- U the villain is punished
- W the hero is married and ascends the throne.

These analyses get more complicated with introduction of trebled elements, and repeat moves. Additionally the each function get a superscript number designation according to subtype, for example A¹, B², etc,

Appendix 2. The Dramatic personae and their functions

The functions are assigned to the Dramatic Personae as follows:

Villain A, H, Pr
 Donor D, F
 Helper G, K, Rs, N, T
 Princess/her father M, J, Ex, Q, U, W
 Dispatcher B
 Hero C↑, E, W
 False hero C↑, E, L

Please note that one character may be involved in more than one group of actions, for example, the grateful animals start out as donors, and end up as helpers, and a princess who provides the hero with the magical items, and then marries him is both a princess and a donor. In some cases the functions of the villain and the donor are combined. Therefore, the functions and spheres of functions are defined based on the consequences of actions of the characters, and not on the characters' motivation and intent.

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- As well as many fairy tale collections, too numerous to be listed here.