

BENGT HOLBEK AND THE STUDY OF MEANINGS IN FAIRY TALES*

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This paper argues that Bengt Holbek's attempt to reduce all "marvelous" elements in fairy tales to real-world referents drastically conceals the dynamics of traditional symbolic representations underlying this narrative genre.

Bengt Holbek is unusual among folklorists in that his *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* is uncompromisingly set on a theoretical level. After summarizing virtually all preceding scholarship on fairy tales, the Danish author proposes a comprehensive theory the basis for which is the clear assessment that all problems in the realm of "oral verbal art" have "to be seen as being dependent upon that of meaning" (8). After Holbek's magnum opus it is simply not possible to disregard the symbolic aspect of fairy tales. I thus concur with Alan Dundes in seeing in *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* "a seminal work, a veritable landmark" (203). Now this entails, for those of us who would profit from this heritage, an obligation of close readings.

Misgivings on Symbols and Context

In the field of fairy-tale studies nothing is of course simple, let alone self-evident. What one means by "meanings" must, therefore, be clarified. According to Holbek the "marvelous" elements in fairy tales are "symbolic," meaning they "convey *feelings* rather than thoughts." Moreover, such "vivid emotional impressions" are deemed to "refer to beings, events and phenomena of the real world" (409). Since fairy tales supposedly express emotional impressions (435), interpretation consists in retracing all "marvelous" elements back to the real-world referents of such impressions (409).

Holbek uses a system of seven rules for reverting symbolic expressions to their corresponding emotional impressions. In so doing he focuses on three thematic oppositions, namely young versus adult, male versus female, and low versus high. According to him these "define the three categories of crises which occur in fairy tales," all of which are in turn "real or possible events in the storytelling community" (416-8). Holbek thus surmises that the thematic axes of fairy tales express "sensitive, even painful" problems of rural communities. Such concerns are, in a nutshell, the youths' rebellion and incestuous attractions to parents, sexual maturation and the meeting of the sexes, and the tensions between "haves" and "have-nots." It follows that, ideally, "every element [in a fairy tale] may be read as pertaining to real life" (439, cf. 428).

This leaves of course "no room at all for the so-called supernatural beings, the witches, fairies, dragons, ogres, etc.," since – as Holbek stresses – "*they represent aspects of real persons*" (418).¹ "Interpretation" therefore appears as the systematic reduction of unknown elements in fairy tales to the familiar psychological predicaments of average people in rather vague socio-cultural settings. For example, the glass mountain that the hero must sometimes overcome is to be read as "a symbolic expression of the distance between the princess and her lover" (424). The heroine's "guarding monster, ogre, dragon, troll, devil or whatever he may be named ... is the girl's father *seen as the hero's adversary*" (425). In the same vein, the heroine who kills her guardian by breaking the egg that contains his heart "literally breaks her father's heart when she turns to her lover" (426).

I find the association of the dragon to the heroine's father very interesting, as well as the idea that the Dragon Slayer overcomes "the father *in his daughter*"

(426). These insights, taken together and considered along with the well-known secret that in many traditions the Dragon Slayer kills his own father,² suggest however that the issue at stake is somewhat more complex than Holbek acknowledges. The dragon, which anthropologist Chris Knight defines as paradoxical to the core worldwide – uniting in itself high and low, death and life, animal and human, water and fire, dark and light (8) – is certainly more than the bride's father as seen by her wooer. Likewise, all over Europe the crystal mountain is very clearly the realm of the dead, where the means to immortality may be sought when it opens up periodically – and, as Propp shows, its crystal is related to the dragon inhabiting it (1983:82-4; cf. Belmont 63-5). In the same vein, Claude Gaignebet points out that the green color often ascribed to this mountain is traditionally linked to death and resurrection and is, moreover, emblemized by the curled-up serpent that delimitates a realm immune to death and corruption (1974:12). Finally, James Frazer's demonstration that the external heart or soul motif in European fairy tales (and elsewhere) relates to the idea of immortality must be taken into account (668).

Even a cursory consideration of fairy-tales motifs thus suggests that Holbek's readings are severely restrictive. The point here is that his "real-world" perspective conceals a complex underlying system of metaphysical representations, which an interpretation of fairy tales ought to address. Now the Danish author agrees with this in principle. Indeed he recognizes that Jakobson and Bogatyrev's notion of folklore as a specific mode of creation, which he claims to endorse (39-40, 256-7), leads to "'transcendent' interpretation" of an underlying system that is coterminous to Lévi-Strauss's "later notion of a (mythical) meta-language" (43). Thus, Holbek acknowledges "a 'system' or 'meta-language' which is common to several tales, maybe the entire fairy-tale tradition of a given area or group of people" (601-2). Yet, he inflects Jakobson and Bogatyrev's specific use of the Saussurian notion of *langue* – an unconscious semiotic system expressing ideas (Saussure 30, 33, 107) – as he redefines it as a set of rules of oral craftsmanship for the conscious expression of feelings (39-41, 406-8).

Dundes' "plea for psychoanalytical semiotics" (1980), which Holbek explicitly supports (407), may be the key issue here. In general terms, Dundes is concerned both with showing that "psychoanalytic theory can greatly illuminate folklore" and that folklore may be of service to psychoanalytic theory. The two purposes involve distinct analytical procedures, namely "the crucial device of projection" and "allomotifical equivalence" (1980:36-8; 1987a:36-40). Methodological use of projection goes of course with a psychoanalytically inspired reading, whereas, according to Dundes, allomotifs are symbolic equations "made with no help from any a priori theory, psychoanalytic or otherwise" (1987a:40; cf. 1987b:168, 176). In good method the two procedures should then be used in succession – one in identifying symbolic equations, the other in interpreting them. However, although Holbek makes a point of using allomotifical equivalence to test his thesis on symbol formation, I find, in the whole *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, only one unmistakable use of the allomotifical method (425, 457).³ Note that Holbek's basic idea that symbols convey emotional impressions implies projection. Moreover, as I will show, the author really uses the projective device – not allomotifical equivalence – to bring forth his point even as he analyses several versions of one tale type. For this reason, I shall argue that Holbek's interpretations consistently ignore the cultural representations Propp intuits as "abstract notions," Jakobson and Bogatyrev define as a "canvas of actual tradition" (63-4), and Lévi-Strauss describes as the "crystalline parts of discourse," set on "shared foundations," that emerge through the workings of variation in oral tradition (560).

A Case Study

I will briefly substantiate these claims by examining Holbek's analysis of several versions of a particular tale: *King Wivern* (AT 433B). Here is an outline of the plot. An old hag advises a queen with no children to eat either a red or a white rose, but not both (or two not three apples, or two skinned red onions out of three). She disobeys and gives birth to a subterranean serpent called *lindorm* (or a

princess and a snake; or two princes, one of which is a snake). The snake repeatedly demands to marry, but kills each of his brides on their wedding nights. Then the last bride, advised by an old hag (or her dead mother, or her father), causes the serpent to shed its multiple sloughs by shedding, herself, the multiple "shifts" she had donned for the purpose. Moreover, she applies to the serpent vinegar (or wine, or brine, or blood) then milk (and/or linen, or her own "shifts") – or else throws the lindorm into the fire. The monster turns into a prince and marriage is celebrated. Shortly after, the heroine bears twins (or a single son) while her husband is at war. Through deceit the young queen is expelled and subsequently disenchanters aquatic birds and an ass into princes (or gets a contract and frees either an old woman or a man, or feeds doves).⁴

As I noted before, Holbek proposes to use Dundes' notion of allomotif – the idea that if two elements in a tale fill the same structural position they are both functionally and symbolically equivalent – to test whether his own model can account for such equivalences (457). Now the first set of allomotifs in the story concerns the queen eating a red and a white rose, or three apples, or two red onions, one of which not peeled. Holbek's comment is, "It makes no difference whether the queen is eating roses, onions or apples. The only point of importance is her disobedience." The second set of allomotifs regards two twins, or a girl and a serpent, or just a serpent being born. Again, the Danish author states, "it makes no difference whether the queen bears a wivern only or a wivern and a normal child" (495). Now to say "it makes no difference" is the proper thing when one wants to ascertain functional equivalencies in Propp's abstract sense – but this is *not* the same thing as using the notion of allomotif to discover symbolic equivalences in fairy tales.

The indifference of Holbek to actual equivalencies reflects the fact that his interpretation proceeds otherwise. As the author admits, "the nature of the queen's offense does not become clearer by our comparison" (487). This is because there is in fact no comparison. Holbek interprets, from the outset, the mother's act as a psychological projection. The son was born as a serpent because he himself acted wrongly. And, since the mother's act of eating has sexual overtones, the son's hypothetical misdemeanor "has something to do with sexual overindulgence" (481). More precisely, the serpent shape that keeps the young man from marrying is a projection expressing his "unrestrained sexuality coupled with mental immaturity," which comes from being "too closely bound to his mother" (490). Since, however, this interpretation makes no room for the serpent's twin, this is explained away as a split⁵ – "because," Holbek says, "the fate of the normal child turns out to be unimportant" (487).

However, to say that the serpent's human brother is a split because he is unimportant explains neither the necessity of the split nor the presence of the child. Note moreover that Holbek conceives of the split as a special form of *particularization*, whereby "aspects of persons, phenomena and events appear as *independent* symbolic elements" (38, my emphasis). Consequently, use of this notion allows subordinating certain allomotifs to others without ever comparing them. Indeed, since a split entails projection – thus a dragon, split of the father, is actually the daughter's projection (435, 441, 507) – this device actually replaces a search for symbolic equivalencies. Now I am not sure how to understand the idea that a child being born as a serpent is a projection of his own sexual overindulgence – an "externalization" of his own "unrestrained sexuality" (492). Since there cannot of course be such a thing as a projection on the part of a fairy tale character – moreover one yet to be born – the projection is to be ascribed to narrators identifying with the prince. But then one has to contend with the fact that Holbek, who claims that narrators identify with characters according to gender lines, defines this tale as "feminine" (167-8), and indeed takes the heroine's point of view in all other instances of projection he ascertains – namely, in also seeing the lindorm shape as a projection of "the heroine's fear and loathing" (492). Alleged characters' projections being therefore freely ascribable, analysis may smoothly proceed quite apart from the actual contents of tales.⁶

Alternatively, I will suggest that to take allomotif variation into account permits

retrieving the contents Holbek discards. The author himself points out the way as he notes the connection between an onion not peeled properly and the inception of a serpent, that is a child who “must be ‘peeled’ himself” (478). So the onion engenders the serpent because both have several skins. Furthermore the onion is red, and so are the apples and one of the roses. In the case of roses the woman chooses the white one that would give her a girl, not the red one conducive to a boy bound to die in wars. As it happens she eats both, thinking that to have twins “would not be so bad either” – and the lindorm was born (461, 465). This shows two things. First, eating something endowed with multiple skins and/or a red color that connotes bloodshed engenders the snake. Second, the lindorm is equivalent to twins. There is indeed an overall coherence to the fact that a woman, who eats two items instead of one (or three instead of two), originates a multiple-skinned serpent instead of twins. Note that the lindorm is represented in heraldic as “a winged dragon with two feet like those of an eagle and a serpent-like ... tail” (460).⁷ This ontological complexity (two in one) finds its correlate in twins. Granted that the twin child appearing in some versions is not *functionally* necessary, it is then *symbolically* relevant as an explication of the snake’s complex nature.

Let me now develop the relationship between the color red and the snake/dragon. The lindorm, once freed from his sloughs, appears with blood “running off him” (463). The symbolic link of the snake to blood is confirmed by the set of allomotifs regarding the serpent’s turning into human shape. There is first the equivalence between shedding the sloughs and being thrown into the fire, which expresses the pan-European notion that to burn the animal skin of any double-skinned being induces human shape (Bouza-Brey 253; Röhrich 87-8, 241 n. 76; Sébillot 70).⁸ Afterwards, the heroine treats the bloody lump with vinegar or brine, and then milk (Holbek 463, 465), or else uses wine (467), or simply resorts to vigorous scrubbing (474). The underlying idea is clearly that the blood on the serpent must be removed. One version, in which the shedding phase happens through fire, still manages to present blood – the serpent is here bathed in blood then in milk. This is a happy shortcut for the whole series, as it clearly points out that the metamorphosis from snake to human shape is also a transition from blood to milk. If one takes into account that in European traditional conceptions, as elsewhere, milk is essentially concocted blood (Gélis, Laget, and Morel 109-10, 126; Héritier 222, 280-1; Laqueur 104-6), it may be surmised that the human shape is itself the transformation of an ophidian condition.

Indeed this is the nexus of the plot, made clearer when the heroine subsequently disenchanting birds into human shape. The relation of this to the previous episode stands out if one remembers that the lindorm is both a serpent and a bird. The homology of the two episodes is furthermore confirmed by another set of allomotifs. The first thing the heroine sees upon arrival at the enchanted castle is twelve bloody shirts, which she proceeds to wash (Holbek 470), or else the man she is to save presents a bloody shirt every night (474). Moreover, the heroine disenchanting the birds with milk (464, 466), or else by throwing shirts sewed by her over their heads (467, 471-2). This corresponds of course to the previous act of bathing the serpent in milk and enveloping it in the heroine’s own nine shifts (462), or in linen (463). Indeed, one version presents the heroine bringing the snake into human shape by throwing her own shirt over the monster’s head (471). It is then clear that milk, along with the heroine’s shifts, washed shirts and linen, is on the side of human skin, just as blood is inherent to serpent/bird sloughs.

All this supposes that the metamorphosis consists in changing one type of skin for another. This is in accordance with what Ananda Coomaraswamy called “the traditional doctrine about transformation or shape shifting,” whereby “all changes of appearance are thought of in terms of the putting on or taking off of a skin or cloak” (1945, 398 n. 2). This conception is of course central to fairy tales, but, as Lutz Röhrich rightly notes, goes far beyond the genre (87). Significantly, Holbek ignores it. He states, apropos the metamorphosis of the snake, that it would be “hazardous” to “essay a ‘translation’ motif by motif of this strange scene” and that he prefers to “confine” himself, “*as usual*” (my emphasis),

to a "comparison of the before and after." Since before there was a snake and after there is a marriageable man, the snake is seen as both an "*externalization* of the young man's unrestrained sexuality" and a "projection of the heroine's fear and loathing" (492). The symmetrical situation, in which the hero turns a cat into a princess (by beheading it and putting the head where her tail was), Holbek likewise explains as a projection. To the inevitable question, "but why must the hero behead the cat?" he cannot but answer, prosaically, that the hero "learns to treat the cat as a woman" (440). Yet, one version of *King Wivern* provides the traditional conception by stating that the heroine must save a gray ass (the youngest of thirteen enchanted brothers) "by cutting off its head and 'turning out that which used to be inside'" (471). Likewise (as Röhrich notes, 88), in KHM 57 *The Golden Bird*, the helping fox asks, "Shoot me dead and chop off my head and paws" (Grimm and Grimm) – thus referring to regular preliminaries for skinning a body. Indeed, the essence of metamorphosis is an alternation between the inner and the outer, the hairy and the hairless, the bloody and the milky dimensions of complex beings thus cyclically turned, literally, inside out (see Gaignebet and Lajoux 104). This is, incidentally, the essence of Angela Carter's penetrating comment – regarding a werewolf in human shape – to the effect that "the worst wolves are hairy on the inside" (117).

Conclusion

My point is that the symbolic analysis of fairy tales affords glimpses of a metaphysical ontology of reversibility, involving cyclic processes of metamorphosis, at the core of a complex worldview (cf. Dundes 1995; Erdész). In other words, the cycles of enchantment and disenchantment characteristic of fairy tales – of which the sloughing serpent is one paradigmatic image – spell out the dynamics of a traditional image of release of manifold reality from hidden (ophidian) sources, in alternation with enfoldment back into primordial Unity (see Silva 2000). These are, to be sure, the "abstract representations" Propp recognizes at the core of fairy tales, relates to "the kidnapping of a princess by a dragon" (Propp 1996:89, 114), and specifies as a recurring theme of death and rebirth (1983; cf. Belmont 1996:76-7).

Holbek ignores such "canvas of actual tradition" insofar as he replaces Dundes' precept of allomotific comparison with projection as an interpretive device. It follows, seemingly, that allomotific comparison is crucial for interpretation of fairy tales, and that methodological use of projection ought to be confined to global systems of representations – not prodigalized on particular *dramatis personae*. This is, incidentally, how I read Dundes as he speaks about "patterning and system in folklore," and professes that a symbol may be related to "a general system of symbols," before he quotes Freud to the effect that "a large portion of the mythological conception of the world ... is *nothing but psychology projected to the outer world*" (1980:37).

Which brings up the fact that Holbek, while attempting to reduce all symbolic expressions to emotional impressions, consistently relies on fairly standard Freudian symbolism. Since at least 1914, Freud professed of course that an understanding of symbolism demands taking into account myths and fairy tales, sayings and songs, colloquial linguistic usage and poetic imagination (1989:186-8, 195, 205; cf. 1998:386).⁹ Now he admitted he was an "amateur" in these fields and that "real professionals in mythology, anthropology, philology and folklore" would harvest "much richer and more interesting a collection" than he himself could (1989:203-4). Moreover, Freud allowed that the standard technique in his own field, free associations, leaves him "in a lurch" when it comes to symbols (1998:388). I see therefore no reason why fairy-tale specialists should take for granted *as a matter of principle* the tentative readings of symbols proposed, almost one century ago, by a professed amateur breaking new ground.

Specifically, my point that there is more to a dragon than the expression of a father imago or unrestrained sexuality carries the further implication that statements by Freud such as, "children displace some of their feelings from their father on to an animal" (1990:189), and "*wild animals* mean people in an excited sensual

state” (1989:195), should not be considered as immutable truths concerning symbolism in fairy tales.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, some of Freud’s insights are remarkable – and they are, moreover, far in advance of the understanding many folklorists have of symbolism even today. However, to take at face value a proclamation like, “the many fairy tales which begin ‘Once upon a time there were a King and Queen’ *only* mean to say that there was once a father and mother” (Freud 1989:196, my emphasis) entails laying to waste decades of theoretical and methodological findings in fairy-tales scholarship.¹¹ It amounts, in other words, to self-inflicting theoretical castration, that is – if we follow an inspired Freudian equation – to self-imposing blindness regarding the meanings of fairy tales.

Indeed, for Holbek, “‘enchantment’, ‘magic transformation’ etc.,” is a non-issue in a realm he sees as “completely devoid of traces of superhuman or supernatural powers” (450). The Danish author’s decisive step forward in symbolic analysis must therefore be taken onto a different plane. Fairy tales are symbolic – but their meanings are not trivial

Notes

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¹ Unless otherwise stated, all italics in quotations are by the quoted authors.

² See, for canonical examples, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1935), Jane Harrison (1963:434-5; 1992:495), Roman Jakobson and Gojko Ruzicic. (1950), Cornelius Ouwehand (1977), and Calvert Watkins (1995:314, 325, 373, 382, 386-8, 398-9, etc.).

³ Thus, while I am in agreement with Michèle Simonsen in that Holbek’s analysis of *King Lindorm* “can only skim the detailed richness of the concrete messages,” I disagree when she ascribes this to the supposed fact that Holbek emphasizes “the symbolic equivalence of allomotifs to the expense of their (different) secondary connotations” (1998:213). As Simonsen rightly maintains, “a troll conveys secondary connotations which are different from those conveyed by a father, in addition to the main core of meaning, a hostile father figure ... A motif has many connotations ... Ignoring them leads to reductionism” (212). But, I would argue, such reductionism comes from implicit use of the notion of projection, as in the preconception that the hostile father figure is the *main core* of meaning. On the contrary, analysis of allomotif variation aims in principle at integrating *all* found shades of meaning into an encompassing notion. For instance, Holbek objects to Propp’s idea that “the stepmother is a she-dragon transferred to the beginning of the tale” because, Holbek suggests, “the comparison should take the opposite direction ... the witch ... is a (step)mother who has taken on some supernatural traits” (435-6). However, to reduce the she-dragon to a stepmother does away with the conceptual reason for the association in the first place – all characteristic supernatural traits being eliminated, not elucidated.

⁴ One word might be in order on the reason why I do not resort to motif-numbers in the following analysis. The main reason is, I shall be dwelling on interpretation; this requires putting motifs into context; and the motif-index is a masterpiece of de-contextualization. In other words, allomotif comparison entails going beyond superficial traits – but the motif-index is based on precisely such traits. The structural criterium of the former, in short, is not in line with the empiricist outlook of the latter.

⁵ The notion of “split” denotes, in Holbek’s usage, that “conflicting aspects of a character are distributed upon different figures in the tale.” A *split* distributes, in other words, opposite aspects of one given tale role between different figures, which “do not interact” (Holbek 435).

⁶ John Lindow writes, “Holbek’s theoretical stance is to seek meaning from the viewpoint of the narrators and audience.” However, he notes, “the discussion on projection centers on projection of the *audience*, not the characters, but it is embedded in a section dealing

with the splits of symbols among the characters" (1989:405, 408). In other words: although the discussion on projection should center on projections of "the audience" – itself a rather vague concept in Holbek's usage – the Danish author does assign projections to characters. But then projections are the analyst's own, and *not* ethnographic meanings as elicited from either a comparison of allomotifs or a study of the responses of flesh-and-bone people to the tales. In this light, it seems unwarranted to assume that Holbek's theory offers "a better grasp of the context in which the symbols are to be seen" (Lindow 1989:407).

⁷ Characteristically Holbek adds, "but folktales are not concerned with such detailed descriptions. In our fairy tale ... the *lindorm* is a young man transformed into a monster" (460). This is of course to be understood in the context of the author's improbable effort to unlink the symbolism in fairy tales from its wider folkloristic context. However, one text's description of the "large serpent" as a "worm who flies out the window" (470) clearly fits with current representations in heraldry (cf. Lindow 1993:63-6).

⁸ Two qualifications are in order here. First, as in Portugal, the burning of discarded *clothes* also brings the animal werewolf back into human shape. This variation builds on a general equivalence between clothes and skins as shifts, removal and donning of which triggers metamorphosis (see Silva 1995:199-200). The second qualification refers to the fact that – as in Hungarian variants of "Cupid and Psyche" – the prince often retreats into an enchanted realm *after* the burning of his snakeskin (Dégh 140-9). I cannot go, in this brief note, into this theme of falling back into temporary enchantment. Let me simply note that the value of the skin-burning motif remains unaltered even in such cases – as one Hungarian teller makes explicit, "the burning of the snakeskin is a must so that an open wedding can be held" (Dégh 147).

⁹ Freud's discussion of symbolism in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (Chapter VI, Section E) was introduced only as late as the fourth (1914) edition of the book.

¹⁰ Seemingly, Holbek does take them as such. As Lindow rightly notes, "Holbek inclines toward the notion of universals when symbols relate to sex" (1989:407; cf. Holbek 446) – in other words, when symbols are Freudian (cf. Freud 1989:189).

¹¹ Note that this objection concerns the drastic restriction rather than the statement itself. The problem is, again, that alluded to in n. 3 above.

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Response to Francisco Vaz da Silva, "Bengt Holbek and the Study of Meanings in Fairy Tales."

In my review article on Holbek's book (Lindow, 1989), I predicted that the work would inspire debate and included a list of items that I felt might profitably be discussed. One of them was the issue of projection, and I am therefore especially pleased to read the thoughtful analysis of Francisco Vaz da Silva, which takes up projection and related aspects of Holbek's method of reading fairy tales symbolically.

As Vaz da Silva recognizes, there is a double aspect to Holbek's notion of projection. Holbek thought that the narrator and audience of fairy tales in late nineteenth-century Jutland engaged in "collective daydreaming," including both men and women, and in so doing projected onto the characters in the stories their own concerns about growing up, getting married, and establishing a social position. The projection is doubled, however, when Holbek argues that certain of the symbolic actions within the stories themselves involve projection on the part, not of the audience, but of the characters in the stories. Thus, in King Wivern, as Holbek and Vaz da Silva call Kong Lindorm (AT 433B), Holbek reads the initial disruption in the story, caused when the queen violates an interdiction about eating certain things to grow pregnant and as a result gives birth to a monster, a wivern prince, as a projection of the prince's own sexual overindulgence. The prince is a wivern because he cannot control his own sexuality. As Vaz da Silva dryly notes, "[s]ince there cannot of course be such a thing as a projection on the part of a fairy-tale character – moreover one yet to be born – the projection is to be ascribed to narrators identifying with the prince." That is certainly true, but it is also true that there is something a bit off about a new husband whose brides emerge dead after the bridal night, and as Holbek noted, the verb used for what the wivern does to his wives, *splitte ad*, seems to have social overtones. So if we drop the notion of projection here, which I am quite prepared to do, we do not have to abandon Holbek's intuition about King Wivern's essential problem. I argued in my own analysis of the story (Lindow, 1993) that there were also some noticeable reversals of normal gender roles in the story up to the point when the girl disenchanting King Wivern: in overcoming a *lindorm*, she plays a role in legend tradition always played by men, and King Wivern himself does not go out to court her but waits at home.

Vaz da Silva criticizes Holbek for using an essentially Freudian apparatus. As a child of his era, Holbek would have had difficulty looking elsewhere for theories of "daydreaming" about the problems of childhood, marriage, and social status, but in its universalist and reductionist mode, the Freudian theory of Holbek is, I agree, not compelling. However, I still remain convinced that Holbek's essential insights about the fairy-tale tradition of late nineteenth-century Denmark are essentially correct, that is, that "collective daydreaming" really did occur, and that the concerns of the narrators and audience are what Holbek told us they were. At the same time, I accept that Holbek's analysis of King Wivern, and of the other tales he takes up in *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, are necessarily

incomplete, omitting as they do the “secondary connotations” (Simonsen, 1998). I tried to bring to the discussion a number of these secondary connotations in my 1993 analysis, which takes up the background of the lindorm in legend tradition and some of the motifs (e.g., shedding the shifts) in the ethnographic record. What I see as the value of Vaz da Silva’s article, besides his indictment of Holbek’s Freudian apparatus, is to bring to the discussion a number of the other secondary connotations, not from the relevant legend tradition or ethnography but from the greater European fairy-tale tradition. His association of the multi-skinned onion with the multi-skinned wivern is admirable, and the more general discussion of the transformation scene is quite illuminating, even if one does not agree with every detail.

But playing with fire can get you burned. By presenting his own analysis in the context of a criticism of Holbek’s method, Vaz da Silva invites comment on his own method. It relies no less on intuition than Holbek’s did, and it substitutes some unverifiable hypotheses of symbolic equation for the unverifiable Freudian hypotheses taken up by Holbek. Vaz da Silva talks more than once about European traditional conceptions, but what traditions is he actually talking about? Are all European traditional conceptions identical, and have they always been so? To cite Calvert Watkins (1995) on the slain dragon as the hero’s father is to suggest a time frame from before the oldest European languages were recorded down to some peasant fairy tale narrators in nineteenth-century Jutland, and citing Jane Harrison hardly shortens that time frame. And to take another example: if it is really so that dragons are essentially the same creatures, “paradoxical to the core worldwide,” what can we really learn from a Jutlandic lindorm?

The point about a metaphysical ontology of reversibility deserves ventilation in a larger format than was available here. It is stimulating and may be important, but I do not see that King Wivern shows it all that clearly. Certainly the indications of “cyclic processes of metamorphosis” are ambiguous in the story, since Wivern’s change is one-way. If the story shows “the dynamics of a traditional image of release of manifold reality from hidden (ophidian) sources, in alternation with enfoldment back into primordial Unity,” we may fairly ask again: Whose tradition? Where? When? Read against what ethnographic reality? Until we are given the answers to those questions, there is no more compelling reason to accept this notion than to accept the notion that late nineteenth-century Jutlandic peasants worried about such issues as Oedipal urges, castration fears, and penis envy and did so by means of a symbolic system involving such phenomena as projection.

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Reflections on da Silva's Study of Holbek's Interpretation of Fairy-Tales

Bengt Holbek's *magnum opus* (literally, 660 pages) definitely deserves the serious discussion that Francisco Vaz da Silva has opened up in his article. A preliminary problem regarding a discussion about Holbek's book may, due to its vastness, be a lack of agreement as to which of its multiple perspectives might provide the most worthwhile focus for discussion. Da Silva takes up a central problem that certainly deserves careful consideration, i.e., the way Holbek gears the concept of symbol to his analysis of the meaning of texts. He has also paid attention to the important subtitle of the volume, namely "Danish Folklore in European Perspective," as his frequent references to studies in European folklore attest.

I fully agree with da Silva's criticism of the closed system of symbols that is invoked by Holbek's application of Freudian projection as the main, indeed the only, key to the interpretation of the marvelous in fairy tales. The same criticism has been voiced by Isabel Cardigos who replaced Holbek's notion of the symbols of fairy tales as a "code" (Holbek 1987:202) with the term "symbolic language" (Cardigos 1996: 14-5, 43). The methodological implication of the term "code," as shown in Holbek's work, is his unequivocal position that the code stands for the projection of the narrating individuals' postulated feelings. Cardigos's terminological and theoretical choice of "language" enables a more open literary analysis which avoids reduction to one given sign system. Both Holbek's and da Silva's approach to the marvelous could be enriched by consulting Todorov on what he prefers to term the fantastic, the generic epitome of which is in fact the fairy tale (esp. 1975, 1982).

Holbek accounts in detail for the masterful works of Max Lüthi on the European folktale but he often rejects their approach. Da Silva has however not included Lüthi as a point of reference in his reading of Holbek. To my mind the advantage of a "softer," literary, methodology to expound the meaning of folktales or fairy tales, both as a genre and in individual cases, is proven by Lüthi's work (esp. 1986, 1987).

Holbek quotes Lüthi when he discusses the relationship between fairy tale and legend (Holbek 1987:197). Here is one central issue that I want to raise. A great deal of fairy tale scholarship tends to essentialize the genre and as a result to ignore its dialectic relationship with the other major category of folk prose, namely the legend. There may be some cultural variation to this and there may, as Holbek pointed out, be a clear difference between the West and the East (197-8), so that the categories are more overlapping in non-European, especially Asian and Middle Eastern, folk narratives. Close readings of fairy tales may however disclose many hybrid rather than pure specimens of the genre.

I have elsewhere dealt more extensively with the dialectics of folktale and legend as the basis for folk narrative genre analysis, setting apart myth as a cognitive category following Lévi-Strauss, rather than the third component of the traditional genre triad of the Brothers Grimm (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 39-43, 147-50). Isabel Cardigos's discussion of the difficulties involved in distinguishing between fairy tale and myth points in the same direction (1996:21-4). In addition, Cristina Bacchilega discusses this with great clarity in her book on *Postmodern Fairy Tales*. Especially pertinent is her observation, with reference to Jack Zipes's seminal work, that "the fairy tale operates as "myth" par excellence" (1997, 8). A specific theoretical crack may be discerned in the terminological instability of "fairy tale" or "folktale" in the English, both represented for instance by "Märchen" in German, "satu" in Finnish, "saga" in Swedish and "eventyr" in Danish. My impression, although not substantiated by systematic research, is that "folktale" sometimes felt as too close to the generically unspecified "folk narrative" seems to open up a less essentialized perspective than "fairy tale," which takes its name from an element of content.

Da Silva criticizes Holbek's "systematic reduction of unknown elements in fairy tales to the familiar psychological predicaments of average people in rather vague socio-cultural settings." This criticism invites us also to point out that the dissociation of the fairy tale genre from the system of beliefs and customs, of symbolical thought and ritual behavior, seems especially problematic in a work

that underlines the meticulous research of the context of the recording of the texts.

As it happens, the extensive source critical discussion is one of my favorite chapters in Holbek's work (49-183). In it the author leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the focus of attention should be on the individual narrator (182). Holbek attempts to introduce a dialogue between the ethnographic fabric of the experiential world of the nineteenth-century Danish peasant and the schematic patterns of the strictly psychoanalytical interpretation of symbols, but somehow the individual narrator, especially if she is a woman, disappears. It may be this disappearance that accounts for some of the frustration that accompanies the rich intellectual experience in reading Holbek, a frustration that da Silva has competently grappled with in his re-reading of the *King Wivern* fairy tale.

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