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Depth of Meaning

in Popular Medieval Romance and Fairy Tales

It seems likely that certain kinds of speech, and subsequently writing, have always been thought to have a ‘hidden’ or ‘inner’ meaning, especially if religious. That is certainly the well-known case with ancient Greek and Hebrew mythologies. The inner meaning can also often be detected in ordinary speech, either in ambiguities or deceitful communications, or more lightheartedly in riddles and puns. That well-known English expression introduced into the language in the seventeenth century by Dryden in 1673, *double entendre*, still not a French idiom, says it all. Much of Classical literature and the Bible in the Middle Ages were extensively understood as allegory, and ‘allegory’ explicitly divides ‘surface’ from ‘deep’ meaning. Allegory flourished in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, in the nineteenth century in mythological study, and in anthropology. Matthew Arnold recognised it beautifully:

Below the surface stream, shallow and light,
Of what we *say* we feel — below the stream
As light, of what we *think* we feel — there flows
With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,
The central stream of what we feel indeed.
(Matthew Arnold, *St Paul and Protestantism*, 1870)

There are some very interesting implications here. First, the imagery of space, here depth, combined with the imagery of flow, continuous movement. We are already in the field of metaphor, of duality of meaning. Secondly (on the presumption that conscious deception does not seem to be referred to here) there is the implication that *real* feeling is not what we are trying to express, but something hidden even from the conscious mind of the speaker. It is implied that what is consciously meant and felt is not only ‘superficial’ and therefore trivial but less ‘real’, less ‘true’ even than what we think we are trying in good faith to say. Only what cannot be said or thought, it is claimed, is really meant and felt. What is hidden is more true than what can be seen, heard or expressed. And feeling is more important, and ‘deeper’, than thinking. Clearly the world was waiting for Freud — if he had not existed he would have had to have been invented, to paraphrase a famous remark of Voltaire about God.

Following the work of Freud there has been a huge increase in the attempts at interpretation which distinguish, in the terms of our general title, “Surface et

Profondeur". An important distinction must immediately be made between allegory and symbol. I propose a simple old-fashioned distinction for this paper: namely that allegory is a form of writing where the reader or hearer is intended to understand a deeper, or at least different meaning, along with, or 'beneath', the literal surface meaning. Such an intention the author signals by such a device as for example a personification giving instruction, or representing some different entity — for example Dame Nature, Dame Study, etc. There are many important examples in European literature. More difficult, though very numerous, are the cases where an allegorical interpretation is imposed upon the text which the author obviously did not intend. A very clear example is given by St Paul in *Galatians* IV, 22-31, about Abraham's two sons, one by a bondmaid, one by a freewoman, 'Which things are an allegory' (24). However Paul's doctrine may be interpreted, it is certain that the original writer (*Genesis* XVI, 15) did not intend the meaning Paul attributed to the words. The same must be said of a huge amount of literary interpretation of the Bible offered since the original texts were written. At the present time the remarkable burst of literary theory, especially that associated with Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, to mention only the most obvious, has promoted our consciousness of the potential multiplicity of meanings in language.

In only one period of our literary history has there been a strong resistance to the notion that language has at least potentially multiple meaning. That was from the mid-seventeenth century (though there are suggestions in Bacon) until towards the end of the eighteenth. The famous words of Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, sum up the idea: 'words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon by them: but they are the mony of fooles'. This attitude to language developed into what became known as 'verbal criticism', which was an extreme insistence on literalism, which found so many faults in Shakespeare's style, but of which the extreme example is Bentley's edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1732).¹ But throughout the Middle Ages, as everyone knows, the Bible could be interpreted on as many as four levels, literal, moral, allegorical, tropological. The object of taking different levels was to extract useful lessons of the kind that fitted the exegete's purpose, rather in Paul's manner in *Galatians*, but often far more complex. Classical literature was subject to a similar process which continued until well into the nineteenth century.² The allegorical habit of mind thus continued even during the Enlightenment when the 'Spirit of the Age' was less sympathetic to it. These examples show how deeply ingrained is the habit of distinguishing between *Surface et Profondeur*.

¹ Derek Brewer, "The Development of Literalism and Verbal Criticism", *Poetica* (Tokyo: Sanseido), 2 (1974), 71-95, where the phenomenon is fully discussed.

² Derek Brewer, *Classical Mythography and Romantic English Literature*, Birmingham: The School of English, University of Birmingham, 2002.

Another vein of interpretation which distinguished between surface and depth had always flourished in all periods of which we have record: the interpretation of dreams, though again there was a decided weakening in the eighteenth century. But a huge new impetus was given by the work of Freud, especially in the interpretation of dreams, which is a mode of interpretation, of discerning the difference between the surface and what is, by implication, more 'real', the depth.

There is some difficulty in proceeding here. Despite the extraordinary popular success of the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis throughout the twentieth century, it has come under severe attack in the latter part of the century. This is due partly to the normal revision and development of any scientific theory but also to a depth of commitment which exceeds the usual disagreement on scientific theories and practice. It is no part of the present purpose to enter such controversy,³ but if possible to make use of such concepts as may forward a particular argument. For the moment it will be sufficient to note that even the most hostile, and for the most part convincing attack on Freud's methods and achievements, that by R. Webster, is happy to make use of the general concept of the unconscious part of the mind, and the consequent involuntary expression of meaning of which even the speaker may be unaware. In other words, no conscious deceit is implied, but the actual or 'real' meaning is not exactly the same as that literally expressed. Normal experience of life tells one that this can happen in the ordinary course of work or social life. It is the situation expressed in Matthew Arnold's verses quoted above.

Freud focussed his interpretation of dreams on a belief that dreams, where the conscious mind is less in control, expressed deeper concerns or concepts than the conscious mind wished to recognise. To judge from my personal experience (and who can use other than their own experience in this matter?) it may be that a very few dreams are symbolic in some way. The rest are a very numerous, usually entertaining, highly miscellaneous jumble which mostly have nothing whatever to do with my ordinary experience, are barely remembered, and even when remembered are immediately subject to the ordering rationalising activity of the conscious mind. In fact the medieval theory, or theories, of dreams, muddled as they are, attributing them to multiple causes and meanings, from indigestion to prophecy, through a gamut of emotions and perceptions, to be taken more or less seriously according to origin or temperament, make an intriguing comparison and contrast with Freud, and a real

³ A recent calm and sensible exposition of Freudian psychoanalysis is Henk de Berg, *Freud's Theory and its use in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester N.Y.: Camden House, 2003. Examples of attacks on the theory and practice are E. Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement*, London: Paladin Books, 1985, and R. Webster, *Why Freud was Wrong*, London: Harper Collins, 1995. On either side of the controversy there are many more books.

warning. For a convenient and self-confessedly puzzled summary of medieval theory by our most intelligent and learned medieval author, see Chaucer's *House of Fame*, 1-58. Chaucer's scepticism of the would-be scientific theory is justified. Yet he goes on, not altogether seriously, to relate a wonderful dream of his own, and modern scholarship has traced most of its sources in earlier literature. This procedure may justify us in regarding much literature and folktale as indeed 'such stuff as dreams are made on' as Shakespeare's Prospero says of all human life. Multiple meanings are a characteristic of works of art, whether the artist intentionally created them or they are discovered by later critics.

This leads us again to the question of intention, and the now obvious conclusion that there is in literature, as Milton noted, 'more than meets the ear'.

What kind of meaning, let alone what meaning, may lie in the 'depths' is the subject of sometimes furious controversy. Apart from works of conscious allegory, with or without apparent symbolic implications, there are many works in which an attentive, or perhaps inventive, reader may find further implications. This is particularly the case with stories of any kind. Some may be so short and simple as to have few or no further implications. But shortness and apparent simplicity may have the profoundest and most extensive implications of a kind by definition far beyond the possible expectations of their original creators — for example, the story of Adam and Eve, one of the foundation myths of Western culture, *Genesis* I-III. Such stories are themselves the product of multiple authorship, the accumulation, like language itself, of the re-handling of many re-tellers and re-writers. They are not conscious, intentional allegories, and though the word 'symbolism' is vague in implication, that vagueness at least allows a liberty of interpretation. The problems of all such literary interpretation are how related are they to the original story; how can one prove their validity; how important are they? How can their validity be tested? These questions may well be applied to many modern interpretations especially of older literature which seem to be so entirely at odds with the original point of the original story as to be not merely perverse but perverted. Modern productions of Shakespeare in England are an example. It is rarely possible to see a Shakespeare play in England whose fundamental values are not changed from anything that Shakespeare could have conceived of in his historical situation. In these cases, the underlying stream, in Arnold's phrase, or even the mud beneath, has been brought up to the surface. From an entirely modern point of view there can be no objection to this, unless one is interested in Shakespeare rather than in some modern producer's need to make his own name known, to write his own play under the umbrella of the great name of Shakespeare. Traditionally, writers re-wrote old texts from their own point of view. All of Chaucer's work, all of Shakespeare's, let alone all the writers of the books of the Old Testament, were simply re-writing pre-existent texts, written or spoken. That is, in a sense, the

proper job of most historians today. In so doing there may well be a claim to bring out the 'inner' or 'deeper', or at any rate a different meaning within that mysterious entity that I have called, for simplicity's sake, 'the original text'. In fact, as we all know, no text exists simply on its own. It relies on all sorts of implicit and explicit assumptions and contexts, and very much on the assumptions and knowledge of a reader or hearer. The original text, even when a major work of literary art, is only a momentary pause, so to speak, in the course of a larger entity, as it were a block of ice in a flowing river. We who live after the invention of writing are in the remarkable situation of being able to some extent to still the flow of communication of which the text is a part. Here metaphors again fail us. The block of ice is itself not soluble or unified. But it is a legitimate interest to seek to revive the original meaning as near as we can get it of a text from our own or another culture. Literary study aims at a sympathetic comprehension, a one-ness of understanding with the text that is studied, but it also demands that we recognise the otherness of the text, even if it is contemporary with us, and how much more if it is from an earlier period of our own culture, or from a different culture. If we turn the text into a mirror of ourselves we gain nothing.

Of the otherness of old texts, which combines with an immediate sympathetic unity, folk tales and especially fairy tales are an interesting example, especially as they offer tantalising glimpses of the conjunction, and difference, of 'surface' and 'depth', not without controversy. They also offer a certain simplicity if taken in their original form, together with interesting possibilities of additional 'layering', for it is a characteristic of folk tales, and the fairy tales which are part of their total body, that they are constantly re-told by many different kinds of people.⁴ They belong to no one and are not allegorical. Any deeper meaning attributed to them, beyond the literal surface of the narrative must be inherent in the nature of the story. It may indeed seem to be misleading to call it symbolism, except that there is often no other convenient word for what is more than implicit meaning, or deeper (or higher) layer. Almost all stories may be regarded as susceptible of further generalisation or implication. Some generalisations are simple and obvious, others merge into interpretations and symbol.

An interesting and difficult field which is likely to be controversial is that area of folk tale which is taken up into popular medieval chivalric romance. All medieval romances, including those by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* are

⁴ A. Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki: Academia Scientiorum Fennica, FF Communications No. 184, 1973. (This great compilation of course relies almost entirely on transcripts or versions of oral folk tales); Derek Brewer, 'Retellings', in *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, eds. Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997, pp. 9-33; *Telling Tales: Medieval Narratives and the Folk Tradition*, Eds. F. S. Sautman, D. Conchado and G.C. Di Scipio, London: Macmillan, 1998.

based on folkloric themes, for example, the Calumniated Wife who is twice in the same narrative set adrift at sea in a boat without provisions, and the second time with her new-born babe (“The Man of Law’s Tale”). In the chivalric popular romances there are many recurrent motifs. These romances are a mass of folkloric commonplaces. Some favourite topics are the pursuit of a magic animal, exchange of rings, father-son battles where they do not know each other. And of course there are battles, and princesses to be won, etc. See the frequent remarks to this effect in the admirably detailed accounts by various scholars in the *Manual*.⁵ The nature of folk tale is therefore quite different from the novel in concept. The folk tale caters to fantasy and the recurrence of motifs indicates their enduring interest for the kind of audience for which they were intended. That so many novels also use such motifs disguised in realistic style though varied in literal verbal realisation indicates that there is an enduring basic structure below the surface. It is to this underlying structure that the reader responds.⁶ What that response may be will vary with the structure, but it is not a valid criticism to say that the structure, being recurrent in varied tales, is of no special interest. The fuller interest comes with the interaction of the underlying structure with its verbal realisation in a particular tale. Yet for the purposes of analysis we may wish to isolate the structure in its own right. In very simple tales it may be no more than an obvious moral, but even this has depths. Other themes are more complex. There is no particular moral in the abandonment to sea of the Calumniated Wife, except that patient endurance will in the end overcome misfortune. But there is surely more implicit meaning. Some form of social anthropology may detect here complex attitudes to gender and marriage, an expression of misogyny (to get rid of the burden of wife and child, deep distrust between the sexes) and equally an attempt to recover from that, to realise not only the ambivalent power of suffering, but the claims that women’s suffering may legitimately if paradoxically assert over men who impose it. The stories that involve a spendthrift knight, who becomes impoverished by his liberality, but yet is rewarded and happy in the end, reflect a deep and ancient concept not only of the virtue but of the value of generous giving, which underlie much medieval and even some modern relationships. There are plentiful religious injunctions to this end, usefully gathered together in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer to encourage the Offertory. ‘God loveth a cheerful giver’, *2 Corinthians IX*, 7- (there is much in *2 Corinthians IX*

⁵ J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, Fascicule I. Romances, New York: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967. See also G. Boardman, *Motif Index of the English Metrical Romances*, Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications 190, 1963.

⁶ Brewer, Derek *Symbolic Stories*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980; ‘The Interpretation of Fairy Tales’ in *Fairy Tales. A Critical Companion*, Ed. Anna Chaudhuri and Hilda Ellis Davidson, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, forthcoming (2003).

on the riches of poverty. St Paul is as paradoxical as Derrida.) Modern anthropology has explored these deeper meanings, beginning with the work of M. Mauss, but carried further as recently illustrated by Ad Putter on *Sir Amadace*, where the significance of the topos of the Spendthrift Knight is well explored, added to in this story by the mysterious significance of the Grateful Dead,⁷ a very wide-spread tale-type drawing, in part from the apocryphal Book of Tobit and merging with many other themes during the course of its travels. The general structure of the tale owes much to the obligation to bury the dead, that is, to perform a humane action without hope of reward. Our deeper feelings about death and corpses are also engaged. But there is also the notion, again Biblical, that a generous disinterested deed will be unexpectedly rewarded a hundredfold. This is indeed wishfulfilment which Freud deplored, but it is easy to recognise the value of encouraging fantasies especially in harsh and deprived lives. So a story like *Sir Amadace* and hundreds somewhat similar tales, has a moral not far below the surface, but within or beneath that moral has implications of how life should be lived, without being in the least didactic. On the surface is a lively interesting tale of adventure and love. 'Beneath' a series of highly improbable, fantastic events, which however are easily imaginable, and not totally out of experience, is evoked a sense of mystery and encouragement. The same may be said of, for example, all the popular English metrical romances, yet until recently the best that critics have been able to say of them is that they are absurd, not bound by material cause and effect, but occasionally redeemed by touches of 'blunt, honest realism'. The inability to see below the surface, the restriction to superficial naturalism (which can never, if truth be told, even in the most realistic and naturalistic novel match the full physical reality of life) deprives the critic of the capacity to see anything. Yet we are not talking in any precise way, about 'symbolism' nor in any way denigrating the literal surface. We can only come to the story through the literal verbal realisation, but for any understanding we can no more stop there than if we put our hand in a stream we can avoid disturbing the depth. The surface needs the depth beneath for its existence. The depth, equally, cannot avoid having a surface, though for the purposes of analysis and understanding we can notionally separate the two.

The same situation obtains with that kind of folk tale which we call 'fairy tale'. It offers an interesting example of depth of meaning in a very simple narrative. Since the early eighteenth century fairy tales have been seen especially as children's stories but their origin is in folk tale in general, as Marina Warner shows in her admirable historical account *From the Beast to the*

⁷ Ad Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*', *Review of English Studies*, N.S. 51 (2000), 370-94.

Blonde.⁸ Very small children listen to fairy tales with interest and it would seem unconscious appreciation of their underlying elements. In brief, fairy tales, like many folk tales, are 'about' growing up. For this reason I have argued that they are set within the personal tensions that constitute the nuclear family in its simplest form. The surface level is usually fantastic, the series of events improbable, and the outcome usually fortunate. *Cinderella* is the archetypal example — interestingly with a female protagonist, like many others. (The medieval romances concentrate on male protagonists, but the ultimate pattern closely resembles that of the female.) Whatever the surface level presents it is possible to discern a recurrent pattern of protagonist, two parents, and the Other, of opposite sex to the protagonist. The story is about how the family first nourishes and protects until the protagonist grows up sufficiently to wish for independence. Then the parent-figures become oppressive. The protagonist — each one of us as we grow up — finds friends and enemies: a helpful animal, for example, or an opposing giant, the one a figure for the supportive mother-figure, the other a figure for the repressive father-figure (fortunately giants are always stupid and always defeated. Oedipus had no problem with killing his father. His problem was that he could not escape from his mother.) In fairy tales dominant older females are menacing, cruel stepmothers for example, but they can usually be foiled, as with Snow White. The rescuer is the Other, of opposite sex, the fairy prince or princess. It is noticeable that representatives of siblings of the opposite sex (like the dwarves in *Snow White*) are helpful, while siblings of the same sex are hostile, like the sisters in *Cinderella*.

Not every fairy tale represents the whole family. In *Beauty and the Beast* the story is basically of a foolish father, and the discovery of the Other through love. Sexual maturity may be at first repellent to the growing girl, as in this story, or *The Frog Prince*.⁹ It is important to remember that fairy tales may have no fixed verbal realisation, and that any separate version has its own validity and interest. Re-tellings are not mere repetitions. A story is identified by its always somewhat fluid nucleus and individual versions of a particular story may be either great works of art or botched re-handlings.

Because fairy tales represent that crucial development in our lives they tend to have happy endings because most of us do grow up. But some of us, whether

⁸ M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London: Vintage, 1995. Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980. A general account moving from Fairy Tale through a series of medieval and Shakespearean examples to Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. For a huge comprehensive account of great value see Bengt Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective*, Helsinki: FF Communications, 1987. At the beginning of his book Holbek is unsympathetic to the interpretations I offer but appears to accept them in at least broad outline by the end.

⁹ A useful basic collection is *The Classic Fairy Tales*, eds. Iona and Peter Opie, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

metaphorically or actually, do not, so that the same story may have alternative endings, happy or sad. This is particularly true of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The underlying basis is indeed maturation, and the original version seems to date back to the eleventh century in Liège. Here the wolf-figure is not hostile. But later versions, whose variations must be left aside here, are clearly about a young girl meeting a predatory man — a recurrent event, and one that may lead to tragedy. But often it does not. In some versions there is a rescuing father-figure. The dominant elder female figure here is sometimes the protective granny, but sometimes she is killed or as it were metamorphosed into a predatory wolf who kills her. But the girl may escape by using her own wits. Although it is an ancient story with many versions, it has its relevance today, as have most fairy tales. The changeable verbal realisation allows many inner meanings within the variable surface. The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* has one obvious yet not literal meaning: ‘Little girls should not go out with strange men’ — a lesson tragically illustrated all too recently in England and elsewhere, but the story itself has been the subject of many studies. This particular story has also, like a number of other traditional fairy tales, been retold by Angela Carter in a famous version ‘The Company of Wolves’.¹⁰ This version shows how a traditional inner meaning may be changed — some would say perverted — and illustrates the malleability of traditional stories. Carter begins with an elaborate introduction, but the point of the story as she tells it, is how delightful it is for a little girl to be seduced by a fur-coated gentleman. Carter turns other tales around in somewhat similar fashion. Certainly the depth of meaning in the Carter version comes to the surface at the end of this baroque fantasy but such versions show the malleability of narrative, and the potential alternatives in layers of meaning. The implications of this story have given rise to many studies particularly of the eighteenth-century ‘Beast of Gévaudan’ in central France.¹¹

These are but a few of the aspects of *profondeur* beneath the *surface* of such tales. There is no doubt that the terminology of psychoanalysis has been helpful in allowing us to formulate some of the inner meanings and understand the mutations of character. The concept of *condensation*, whereby two characters in the story represent the same person, is helpful. So especially is that of ‘splitting’, whereby one can see that two characters in the story represent different aspects of the same ‘person’, often the good side and the bad side, as viewed through the eyes of the protagonist, who is always central. But the central protagonist himself is ‘split’ into two in the world-wide story called *The*

¹⁰ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1979, reprinted Penguin, 1981, etc.

¹¹ C. Velay-Vallantin, ‘From “Little Red Riding Hood” to the “Beast of Gévaudan”’: The Tale in the Long Term Continuum’ (transl. by Binita Mehta) in *Telling Tales: Medieval Narratives and the Folk Tradition*, n. 4, pp. 269-95.

Two Brothers which exists in many versions.¹² It should be emphasised that the Freudian approach is only one possibility. The main point is that there is depth of meaning in these, as in many other stories, open to a thoughtful and sympathetic approach, which is not the unique possession of any one school of thought.

¹² The most famous example of the psychoanalytic approach to fairy tale is Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, London, 1976, Penguin Books 1978. This admirable book is however open to various criticism, most notably for being too rigidly Freudian, and adapting the stories to suit Freudian principles. But indeed it is the nature of such stories to allow of such adaptation, and to suit, within limits, the prepossessions of the story-teller and the context.