Using Fairy Tales to Introduce Medieval Narrative at the Undergraduate Level

by
David K. Gratz

The problem is widespread among medievalists, especially those not teaching at large universities with graduate programs: how to attract enough undergraduates to justify courses on the literature we find so exciting. English majors are scarce, and even they sometimes seem unwilling to venture far beyond contemporary American fiction. Teaching at a small freshman/sophomore campus of the University of Wisconsin, I could see myself never having a course with a significant medieval component again.

And yet the student wariness is certainly understandable. It is not only that they lack context—although how many high school graduates today have even sketchy ideas of European history or geography? It is not only the archaic language, the unfamiliar allusions, or the glibness with which we often skip centuries between works. The works themselves are difficult and unfamiliar in conventions. There is often no realism in the action: when one sets out to find something, one just rides in any direction and it eventually appears. There is little character development, and even less motivation. Frequently there is no logic to the plot or structure, or at least the logic of the relation between one action or incident and another is strange and unnatural. It is clear these are not modern novels.

Students need to be provided a handle, a way to approach medieval narratives, to understand how they work, and to relate them to each other. One possibility I have worked with is a course, taught as Studies in Narrative Literature, which explains the above characteristics as stemming from the oral literature which lies behind these narratives. I have had real success starting with a collection of Celtic fairy tales to discuss the development of characteristic narrative techniques and motifs, and then showing how medieval and even modern authors have utilized these stories.

The cornerstone of the course is a collection of *Celtic Fairy Tales*, edited by Joseph Jacobs (NY: Dover, 1968). After spending a couple weeks with them I move on to *Beowulf*, followed by John Gardner's *Grendel*. Norma Lorre Goodrich provides clear summary versions of several early narratives in *Medieval Myths* (NY: NAL, 1977); I have stopped briefly with "Cuchlain" and "Sifrid" before using "Peredur" as an introduction to the Arthurian material which is a major component of the course. We read Chretien's *Ywain*, available in Ungar's Milestone of Thought series (1957), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Eugene Vinaver's excellent selection from Malory, *King Arthur and His Knights* (NY: Oxford, 1975). I also use T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, and finish the semester with Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*.

While the modern works probably help to attract students, the key to the course is the fairy tale collection. The Dover collection is unusual and diverse, but it is in part

because of its oddities that it provides so effective a preparation for the semester. It is a reprint of an 1892 collection edited by an eminent Victorian folklorist, ostensibly aimed at children, yet not drastically simplified or rewritten, and with a scholarly apparatus of sources and analogues provided. The contents are eclectic, ranging from ancient tales of Connla and Dierdra to more modern stories of leprauchans, with variants of "Cinderella" ("Fair, Brown, and Trembling"),"Snow White" ("Gold-Tree and Silver-Tree"), and other widespread tales, and even a shortened version of "Culhwch" and "Olwen from the Mabinogion". One story includes an authentic Indian rope trick, while another has lifted the entire Cyclops episode from the Odyssey.

Such variety, with the mixture of familiar incidents in unfamiliar contexts, is naturally provocative and leads easily to discussions of the building of oral narratives, the spread and transmission of oral literature, and the prehistory of Europe. Students can discover themselves how similar incidents are built into different plots and various stories are held together by "frame" narratives. They can learn to recognize some traditional motifs—the third son, the exploits of the hero as a child, the animal helpers—and to see the essential dream logic of some of the plots. We always discuss relative dates, and I try to impress the comparative seriousness and sense of danger and awe in the most ancient tales, and the greater attention to psychological motivation in the more modern.

I also introduce them to Alwyn and Brinley Rees, who, in *Celtic Heritage* trace and explain many of the repeated themes and incidents in Celtic myths and folk tales. These authors see the origins of this literature in attempts to understand and control the supernatural:

> In diverse ways myth and ritual loosen the grip of the temporal world upon the human spirit. Under the spell of the storyteller's art, the range of what is possible in this world is transcended: the world of magic becomes a present reality and the world of every-day is deprived of its uniqueness and universality. The storyteller, like the juggler and the illusionist, by convincingly actualizing the impossible, renders the actual world less real. When the spell is over, the hearer 'comes back to earth', but the earth now is not quite so solid as it was before, the cadence of its time is less oppressive and its laws have only a relative validity.(342).

They stress the importance of boundaries and undefined states: the dates of November and May first, the joints between the Celtic half years; the thin line which separates land and water at a shore; twilight (neither dark nor light), mist (neither air nor water), Mistletoe (green, but not a plant of the earth). These states, with stories of multiple paternity or multiple deaths and any sort of pun, riddle, or paradoxical word play, by undermining the fixed stability of our usual existance—what Rees and Rees call "the limitation inherent in definition"(349)—bring us closer to the supernatural powers which surround us.

The Jacobs version of the "Shepherd of Myddvai" can be used to illustrate many of these themes. Sitting by the shore of a lake one day, the shepherd sees three fairy maidens emerge from the water. He falls immediately in love with one, wins her on the third try by a gift of bread which is both baked and unbaked, and picks her out from her identical sisters. She promises to stay with him until he gives her three causeless blows, which, of course, he eventually does, for refusing to attend a Christening, weeping at a wedding, and laughing at a funeral. At the end she calls the cattle she had brought as dower (one of which gets up from the hook where it hangs after slaughter) and walks back into the lake. The story as a whole is eerie and rather sad, and her actions are totally unexplainable in terms of human motivation.

The application of the analysis developed through these discussions should be clear enough so a few examples will suffice. I follow up with *Beowulf* as a work clearly based in plot on older folk tales, and I have found it is always much more successful when prepared in this manner than come at cold in a British survey. One can of course use traditional references to Scandinavian stories and Beowulf as the bear's son, and Martin Puhvel has recently written an interesting, if rather overstated, book tying Beowulf to Celtic analogues. He sees, for example, a probable source for the fight with Grendel in the traditional tale of the "Arm and Child," using it to explain anomalies such as the way Beowulf watches Hondscioh eaten, the sleepiness of his comrades in such a situation, and his curious passivity in the fight itself. Beowulf just grabs an arm and hangs on; he neither wrestles nor, eventually, pursues. Puhvel points out that would be the limit of his options if all he could see of his opponent was an arm coming through the window. (David Dumville has provided a more solid discussion of the possibility of a Celtic connection in a recent article for *Traditio*.) At least the essential unity of the Beowulf narrative becomes apparent in the context of the adventure stories already read.

The students find their experience in the development and adaptation of narrative elements even more relevant when they begin to follow Arthurian literature from "Culhwch and Olwen" through "Peredur" and Chretien's "Ywain" to "Gawain". Not only are there elements and situations they have seen before (in "Peredur" the episode of the Red, the Black, and the White is directly paralelled in the "Story of Dierdra"), but they can see how each successive author changes the emphasis in the narrations to fit his interests.

Chretien's courtly context, for example, brings him to shift emphasis from action to psychology, and to develop elaborate explanations of motivation for actions which in earlier versions would probably have been unexplained. And a similar analysis of Malory can show how he melds a variety of disparate sources: an early story such as Balin is much closer to fairy tale in its structure and character development than are the later episodes involving Lancelot, Guenivere, and Arthur himself.

Giving students the confidence and background to make such analysis is, finally, the real value of developing a semester in this way. It does help them feel comfortable with the narratives, as if they have a handle on what is happening, but the point is not simply to trace analogues or recognize situations. Having established similarities, we can then go on to ask how important they are, what is new, what has been changed, added, deemphasized, and what this tells us of an author's viewpoint and sophistication. Why does the Beowulf poet spend so much space on the Swedish wars? How does his narrative development compare with traditional oral literature? What are the effects

of courtesy or Christianity on the Arthurian narratives? How do narrative structures change with increasing sophistication?

Although it is a bit outside the scope of this essay, I would also like to note that the inclusion of modern works can do more than serve to attract students. Gardner's *Grendel* for example, brings to *Beowulf* perspectives similar to those provided by the fairy tales. Gardner not only makes clear the importance in the traditional work of the scop as creator, but in chapters which are at times Freudian or existential, gives us different approaches to the roots and contexts of the original. Similarly, T. H. White in his narrative not only makes the overall coherence of Malory's work clearer to the modern reader, he also provides, through metaphors such as the Gaels and the Gauls, a comprehensible description of the different traditions Malory used to build his narrative. Finally, *The Last Unicorn* will illustrate the power these traditional elements can still hold for a modern audience.

I have found that given a context—a way to approach the works—even unprepared students can be put at ease with these complex works and maintain a high level of interest and intensity. They have also shown an ability to go beyond appreciation to meaningful analysis. Students, I believe, will respond if we will provide a sense of unity and purpose to courses, especially in areas where they lack the experience to provide their own.

Works Cited

Dumville, David. "Beowulf and the Celtic World: The Uses of Evidence." *Traditio*, 37 (1981), 109-60.

Puhvel, Martin. *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition*. Wilfrid Laurier University, 1980.

Rees, Alwyn, and Prinley Rees. *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*. NY: Thames and Hudson, 1961.