

VLADIMIR PROPP

From Morphology of the Folktale†

The Method and Material

Let us first of all attempt to formulate our task. As already stated in the foreword, this work is dedicated to the study of *fairy tales*. The existence of fairy tales as a special class is assumed as an essential working hypothesis. By "fairy tales" are meant at present those tales classified by Aarne under numbers 300 to 749. This definition is artificial, but the occasion will subsequently arise to give a more precise determination on the basis of resultant conclusions. We are undertaking a comparison of the themes of these tales. For the sake of comparison we shall separate the component parts of fairy tales by special methods; and then, we shall make a comparison of tales according to their components. The result will be a morphology (i.e., a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole).

What methods can achieve an accurate description of the tale? Let us compare the following events:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Sūčenko a horse. The horse carries Sūčenko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Iván a little boat. The boat takes Iván to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Iván a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Iván away into another kingdom, and so forth.

Both constants and variables are present in the preceding instances. The names of the *dramatis personae* change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale *according to the functions of its dramatis personae*.

We shall have to determine to what extent these functions actually represent recurrent constants of the tale. The formulation of all other questions will depend upon the solution of this primary question: how many functions are known to the tale?

† From Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: U of Texas P, 1968) 19-24. Copyright © 1968. Reprinted by permission of University of Texas Press.

Investigation will reveal that the recurrence of functions is astounding. Thus *Bába Jagá*, *Morózko*, the bear, the forest spirit, and the mare's head test and reward the stepdaughter. Going further, it is possible to establish that characters of a tale, however varied they may be, often perform the same actions. The actual means of the realization of functions can vary, and as such, it is a variable. *Morózko* behaves differently than *Bába Jagá*. But the function, as such, is a constant. The question of *what* a tale's *dramatis personae* do is an important one for the study of the tale, but the questions of *who* does it and *how* it is done already fall within the province of accessory study. The functions of characters are those components which could replace Veselóvskij's "motifs," or Bédier's "elements." We are aware of the fact that the repetition of functions by various characters was long ago observed in myths and beliefs by historians of religion, but it was not observed by historians of the tale. * * * Just as the characteristics and functions of deities are transferred from one to another, and, finally, are even carried over to Christian saints, the functions of certain tale personages are likewise transferred to other personages. Running ahead, one may say that the number of functions is extremely small, whereas the number of personages is extremely large. This explains the two-fold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesque, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition.

Thus the functions of the *dramatis personae* are basic components of the tale, and we must first of all extract them. In order to extract the functions we must define them. Definition must proceed from two points of view. First of all, definition should in no case depend on the personage who carries out the function. Definition of a function will most often be given in the form of a noun expressing an action (interdiction, interrogation, flight, etc.). Secondly, an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration. The meaning which a given function has in the course of action must be considered. For example, if Iván marries a tsar's daughter, this is something entirely different than the marriage of a father to a widow with two daughters. A second example: if, in one instance, a hero receives money from his father in the form of 100 rubles and subsequently buys a wise cat with this money, whereas in a second case, the hero is rewarded with a sum of money for an accomplished act of bravery (at which point the tale ends), we have before us two morphologically different elements—in spite of the identical action (the transference of money) in both cases. Thus, identical acts can have different meanings, and vice versa. *Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.*

The observations cited may be briefly formulated in the following manner:

From: *The Classic Fairy Tales* Ed by Maria Tatar

the degree of repetition of tale phenomena. If repetition is great, then one may take a limited amount of material. If repetition is small, this is impossible. The repetition of fundamental components, as we shall see later, exceeds all expectations. Consequently, it is theoretically possible to limit oneself to a small body of material. Practically, this limitation justifies itself by the fact that the inclusion of a great quantity of material would have excessively increased the size of this work. We are not interested in the quantity of material, but in the quality of its analysis. Our working material consists of 100 tales. The rest is reference material, of great interest to the investigator, but lacking a broader interest.

* * *

Propp's Thirty-One Functions

1. One of the members of a family absents himself from home (*absentment*).
2. An interdiction is addressed to the hero (*interdiction*).
3. The interdiction is violated (*violation*).
4. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance (*reconnaissance*).
5. The villain receives information about his victim (*delivery*).
6. The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings (*trickery*).
7. The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy (*complicity*).
8. The villain causes harm or injury to a member of the family (*villainy*).
- 8a. One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something (*lack*).
9. Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched (*mediation, the connective incident*).
10. The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction (*beginning counteraction*).
11. The hero leaves home (*departure*).
12. The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper (*the first function of the donor*).
13. The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor (*the hero's reaction*).
14. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent (*provision or receipt of a magical agent*).
15. The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search (*spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance*).

16. The hero and the villain join in direct combat (*struggle*).
17. The hero is branded (*branding, marking*).
18. The villain is defeated (*victory*).
19. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (*liquidation*).
20. The hero returns (*return*).
21. The hero is pursued (*pursuit, chase*).
22. Rescue of the hero from pursuit (*rescue*).
23. The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country (*unrecognized arrival*).
24. A false hero presents unfounded claims (*unfounded claims*).
25. A difficult task is proposed to the hero (*difficult task*).
26. The task is resolved (*solution*).
27. The hero is recognized (*recognition*).
28. The false hero or villain is exposed (*exposure*).
29. The hero is given a new appearance (*transfiguration*).
30. The villain is punished (*punishment*).
31. The hero is married and ascends the throne (*wedding*).

* * *

Propp's Dramatis Personae

1. Villain
2. Donor or provider
3. Helper
4. Princess (a sought-for person) and her father
5. Dispatcher
6. Hero
7. False Hero