

PHAEDRUS AND FOLKLORE: AN OLD PROBLEM RESTATED¹

I. MYTHOS

There was once a man in a certain village in the mountains, who made his living by making up stories, which he used to tell to the people of his village to while away their evenings. One day he went on a journey to a strange village far away in the plains, and there he saw a group of men sitting round another story-teller. Being curious to learn whether his rival was as good a story-teller as he was, he joined the group and listened. He was astonished to find that the story being told was one he had made up himself. So when the story-teller had finished, the man took him aside and said, 'That was a good story, but it is my story, which I made up, and you must pay me money for it.' 'You are wrong,' said his rival. 'It is my story, for I made it up myself this morning'.

At first the man was minded to kill his rival, since he had proved himself a liar as well as a thief. But he said to himself, 'How can I be sure that he is lying? Perhaps he did make up the same story, though I can hardly believe it. Besides, I am alone in this village, and if I kill him his friends will kill me in turn. I will go home, and on the way consult the old crow in the withered oak. If he says the man is lying, I will come back with the people of my village and kill him.' So he left.

On his way home he stopped at the withered oak, and there was the crow. 'I have a problem,' said the man. 'I am a story-teller, and I have a rival in another village who is telling my story, but says it is his own. Surely he is lying.' 'What is the story?' asked the crow. 'It is the story of a rich man and a poor man, who are both suitors of the same girl. The girl's father chooses the rich man, but he has no mule to carry her in the wedding-procession, and by chance hires the mule belonging to the poor man. But a storm scatters the procession, the mule carries the girl home to the poor man, and you can guess the rest.' 'And is his story the same?', asked the crow. 'He has made the mule into a horse, because they have horses in the plains and not mules as we do in the mountains, and he has left out the storm, since they do not have storms in the plains such as we do in the mountains. So I tell the story better, but it is really the same story.' 'Well?' said the crow. 'Either my rival has stolen my story, so that he is a thief and a liar, and I shall kill him, or it is a great coincidence that he has hit on the same story, and I do not believe in coincidences.' 'You are a foolish man,' said the crow. 'There are coincidences and coincidences. First there are accidental coincidences, and I do not believe in those either, though there is an owl in a wood near here who says it is a matter of odds, whatever that may mean. But there are also coincidences which can easily be explained, so that they are not really coincidences at all.' 'How do you mean?' asked the man. 'In all villages', answered the crow, 'men marry girls, otherwise there would be no more men. Often two men want the same girl, and some men are rich, some poor. Fathers like their daughters to marry rich men. In many villages, unless her father has a

¹ See J. G. W. Henderson, 'The homing instinct. A folklore theme in Phaedrus, App.

Perott. 16 Perry/14 Postgate', *PCPS* N. S. 23 (1977), 17-31.

cart, the girl rides on a mule or horse in the wedding-procession. Poor men can only live by hiring out their beasts, and beasts will go home if left to themselves.' 'Is that all?', said the man. 'No,' said the crow. 'All the world loves a lover, and since people are mostly poor they like stories about poor men getting the better of rich men. Also they like stories in which people give or lend things and get more back in return. Such stories are pleasingly symmetrical and morally satisfying, and make up for what happens in real life.'

'Yes, I see all that,' said the man. 'But why should my rival have hit on the *same* story about these things?' 'You are a *very* foolish man,' said the crow. 'Have you not heard of Jung and the mandala, or Chomsky and the deep structure of syntax, or Lévi-Strauss and the binary structure of myth, or Propp and the morphological analysis of folk-narrative?' 'Yes, I have,' said the man. 'We have owls in our village too. But it is almost *exactly* the same story.' 'You are a very foolish and ignorant man,' said the crow. 'Do you not know the words of the sage Ben-Amos: "For folklore studies a text is necessary but not sufficient documentation; they require proxemic, kinesic, paralinguistic, interactional descriptions, all of which might provide clues to the principles underlying the communicative processes of folklore and its performing attributes"?'² 'Yes,' said the man, 'I know those words also, though I do not fully understand them. But I recall the words of a venerable sage of our own village, who said: "Stories with a defined plot have, we may be pretty sure, been invented in one place where there is a taste for this kind of art; yet as a rule the evidence is not sufficient to say where".'³ I have such a taste, and I also have the evidence, since I know that I made up the story; and these words help me more than those of Ben-Amos or Propp or Lévi-Strauss or Chomsky or Jung.' 'What do you mean by a "defined plot"?' said the crow. 'Such a plot as my story has,' said the man, 'a story told in detail with a clear point and a special and unpredictable twist. Now answer my question: if we neither of us believe in coincidence, how has my rival hit on the same story with the same detail and the same well-defined plot?' 'You are without doubt the most foolish and ignorant man I have ever met,' said the crow angrily, 'and you would do better to give up stories and stick to stamp-collecting.'⁴ 'But I do not like stamp-collecting,' said the man, 'It bores me.' 'And so do you bore me,' said the crow, and he flew away flapping his wings and crowing derisively.

So the man went on with his question unanswered, and being deep in thought he did not look where he was going, so that he fell into a ravine and was never seen again.

II. LOGOS

The general problem raised by Mr. Henderson's learned and convincing paper is an old one: to explain how the same story, or what common sense would call the same story, is found at different times and in different places, when direct transmission seems unlikely. Henderson, having blocked all plausible conduits with unassailable arguments, offers no solution; but in his last two paragraphs he hints that a solution might be provided in due course by the morphological

² D. Ben-Amos and K. S. Goldstein, 'Folklore, performance and communication', *Approaches to Semiotics* (1975), p. 5, cit. Henderson, op. cit., n. 70.

³ R. M. Dawkins, *Modern Greek folktales* (1953), p. xxii.

⁴ Cf. J. Bédier, loc. cit. Henderson, op. cit., n. 16.

approach to folk-narrative. After a disarming concession that 'the parallelism between Phaedrus' poem and the modern analogues is striking', he goes on:

It may indeed seem to make little difference in practice whether we apply the 'historical-geographical' method . . . or the 'morphological' approach. But false notions are endemic in 'motival' or 'tale-type' analysis from which 'structuralists' are free The sequential pattern abstracted by 'structural' analysis . . . may be used to identify a 'genre' of folk communication that exists in oral tradition—and outcrops into literature—rooted in human thought, imagination and expression.

Then in a slightly different context: 'It may be that new techniques for the exploitation of our poem of Phaedrus will emerge from current research into the problems of orality and literacy.' He concludes by recommending a structuralist comparison, 'with the limited aim of sharpening our perception of the manipulative quality of the Latin poem'.

No doubt this limited aim could be achieved in the way he suggests. I wish however to argue (i) that this does not touch the problem his article seems to raise; (ii) that any solution of the problem on these lines is in principle impossible. As I have no expertise in these matters it may seem presumptuous of me even to venture a criticism, and I realize that in a sense the criticism is misdirected, since the problem which worries me is only incidental to his article. Nevertheless the general point may be worth making in this context.

Structural, morphological, or 'eidochronic' analysis of myth or folk-narrative is concerned with variables or variable-types, not with the values of variables. The variants on the story of Asdiwal, for example, simply exhibit different values for the variables of the same formula or structure, and it is the formula with which structuralists are concerned. But we are concerned not with variable-types and patterns, but with stories having the same *values*: this is what creates the problem. The 'eidochronic narrative element' (*eidon*) is a variable-type which may include a wide range of values. For example, the movement of a man up to heaven inside a fish, and the bringing of a wounded bird inside a house, may both be counted as instances of the same *eidon*, *Transport*.⁶ No doubt this *eidon* also includes a mule carrying a bride back to its stable from a wedding-procession and a horse carrying a bride back to its stable from a wedding-procession. But whereas common sense would call the latter pair the same episode, the former are obviously very different, even if they are of the same type.

It might be thought that a genre 'rooted in human thought, imagination and expression' could be so specific that there is no problem: people tell the same sort of stories because they think in the same way, and live in the same kind of environment. But would they actually tell the *same stories*? This, as it seems to me, can only happen in the following ways. (i) Coincidence. The odds cannot be given a numerical value, but the probability is minute. (ii) Diffusion. The odds against a given conduit may seem high, but we cannot tell.⁷ (iii) Archetypal

⁵ Op. cit., p. 24, after Ben-Amos, *Folklore genres*, p. 217, cit. Henderson, op. cit., n. 65.

⁶ See B. Colby and M. Cole, 'Culture, memory and narrative', in *Modes of Thought* (1973), pp. 82–3, ed. R. Houghton and R. Finnegan.

⁷ Let us suppose that there were runes on the Venetian lions from the Piraeus (cf. W. Miller, *Essays on the Latin Orient*, 1921

[1964], 48–9; the 'runes' are disputed, and now obliterated, but the argument is not affected). This would be inexplicable, save for the fact that Harold Hardrada and some troops of his were in the Imperial Guard at Constantinople in 1040. The runes may be fiction, but the conduit is there, or nearly all the way there, and we know of it only by accident.

patterns (Jung). I discount this as mysticism. (iv) The genetic encoding of narrative patterns. No hard science, to my knowledge, has suggested that any but the most general and abstract patterns of thought are so encoded, let alone claimed that this is demonstrable. There is of course evidence to show that this is so with specific patterns of animal behaviour,⁸ and specific learning-patterns in children,⁹ but to treat communication as a form of behaviour when we are concerned with the *content* of what is communicated is just a behaviourist error. We are left with very long odds against coincidence, and shorter odds against unlikely diffusion. It is rational to prefer the shorter odds, and so far as this problem goes I remain an old-fashioned diffusionist.

This is not of course to say that the morphological approach is not performing the more important task and producing the more valuable answers. But though this method brings out similarities in sequential patterns which we might not have suspected, by the same token it is a positive bar to identifying the *same* story at different times and in different places. So the historical-geographical approach, despite its shortcomings,¹⁰ still has its uses, even though lack of evidence must often frustrate them.

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⁸ N. Tinbergen, *A Study of Instinct* (1951) is a classic in this branch of science. Bird-song is also an interesting example of inherited 'language'; the pattern seems to be encoded, but it is subject to individual variation.

⁹ Jean Piaget and Roman Jakobson were pioneers in this field. The latter's findings,

in particular, formed the empirical basis for Noam Chomsky's far-reaching theories about the fundamental structures of language.

¹⁰ Henderson justly criticizes Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folkliterature* (1955-8) for its unhelpful categories, but this does not invalidate its approach.