Propp's Morphology as Narrative DNA: The 29-Function Plot Genotype of "The Robber Bridegroom"

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Synopsis:

In this paper, I demonstrate how a refined version of Vladimir Propp's morphology provides the theoretical foundations for a coherent analysis of the plot genotypes of the European corpus of fairy tales.

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October 8, 2014

Introduction

From the time of Aristotle on, literary theorists have been interested in the subject of how the plots of stories are organized. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle put forward the crucial idea that a plot must possess sufficient amplitude to allow a probable or necessary succession of particular actions to produce a significant change in the fortune of the main character (57). In the early twentieth century, the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp made a substantial contribution to plot analysis when he wrote his groundbreaking study on the plot composition of the Russian fairy tale. In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), Propp put forward the radical idea that each of the plots in his corpus of a hundred Russian fairy tales consisted of a sequence of 31 functions executed in an identical order. In this way, Propp had demonstrated how it might be possible to use the idea of a continuous sequence of functions to specify Aristotle's vague but accurate understanding of the plot as a probable or necessary succession of particular actions to achieve a significant change in heroic fortune. For Propp, the concept of the function was the act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action (21). According to Propp, "the functions of the actors are constant; everything else is a variable":

a. The king sends Ivan after the princess; Ivan departs.
b. The king sends Ivan after some marvel; Ivan departs.
c. The sister sends her brother for medicine; she departs.
d. The stepmother sends her stepdaughter for fire; she departs.
e. The smith sends his apprentice for a cow; he departs.

As Propp suggests, the only constants in this analysis are the functions or actions that are carried out. The identity of the dispatching and departing characters, and even the character motivation for carrying out these actions, are variables (Propp 1971 94-5).

Propp's *Morphology*: A Critique

Flush with the success of his methodology, Propp stated: "I feel that in its present form this study is accessible to every fancier of the tale, provided he is willing to follow the writer into the labyrinth of the tale's multiformity, which in the end will become apparent to him as an amazing uniformity" (Propp, 1968 xxv). In truth, however, Propp's belief in "an amazing uniformity" is overstated. Not all fairy tales contain the 31 functions that Propp believed constitute this invariant structure. Indeed, at times, Propp comes close to recognizing this himself, with this intuitive recognition taking the form of his distinction between "Seeker Heroes" and "Victimized Heroes" (Propp 1968 36). What is more, a close reading of *Morphology of the Folktale* demonstrates the existence in Propp's own analysis of the outlines for two distinct compositional schema. In his initial presentation, Vladimir Propp suggests that the pivotal eighth function turns on the choice of one or other of two possibilities:

8. Villainy: villain causes harm or injury to a family member; the complication is begun by an

act of villainy

8a. Lack: one member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something. (Propp

1968 30-6)

Let us call this choice at the onset of the Pivotal Eighth Function the choice of a different plot function allele. In Perrault's "Cinderella", for example, the pivotal eighth function involves an Enthusiastic Hero who strongly desires something; in the Brothers Grimm *"The Robber Bridegroom"*, however, the pivotal eighth function involves a very different plot function allele: that of a Reluctant Hero who falls into a trap set by a Villain.

Analyzing "The Robber Bridegroom"

"The Robber Bridegroom" is one of the most memorable stories in the entire collection of the Brothers Grimm. It is a tale in which a young woman must resist the advances of someone who

is intent on killing and eating her. Unlike the 31-function folk tale, the 29-function structure of "The Robber Bridegroom" does not end with a marriage but rather more simply with the survival of the Reluctant Bride and the Punishment by execution of the Robber Bridegroom and his Godless Crew.

"The Robber Bridegroom" has a number of unusual features. First, before the fairy tale begins, something bad has already taken place. This marked initial situation, which involves the idea that the Robber Bridegroom is already a killer of young women, is not itself a function, but it serves to confirm that the plot is about a Heroine who strives against a Murderous False Hero. In this fairy tale, the Father requests the Heroine to do something that she is reluctant to do. In consequence, the Heroine does not lack anything; indeed, she wants to refuse the offer of marriage because she fears that it represents a trap. Here too, the Donation is not a gift donation such as a coach and a beautiful ball gown; it is rather a gift of information about something bad that has already taken place. In somewhat similar fashion, the Struggle is a murderous struggle in which the Heroine must stay alive by keeping out of the sight of the Godless Crew; it is not an open amorous struggle conducted on the palace ballroom to attract the attention of the Prince. Then too, the Pursuit does not consist in the Heroine being chased by the man she will eventually marry, but rather the danger of being chased from the lonely house in the woods by a Godless Crew who wishes to kill and eat her. Finally, the Recognition is not a Heroine being recognized as the beautiful Princess who danced with the Prince but rather the Robber Bridegroom being recognized as a murderer of young women. In addition, the cast of characters is substantially different from Propp's original. Indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that the plot structure of "The Robber Bridegroom" represents a kind of horrific mirror image of the structure presented in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*.

Mechanisms for Story Mutation

In their essay, "Detecting Multiple Motif Co-occurrence in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Tale Type Catalogue: A Preliminary Survey" (1999), Sándor Darányi and László Forró contend that there are four ways in which chromosome mutation and story mutation are strikingly similar: (a) deletion; (b) duplication; (c) inversion; and (d) translocation (9). A Proppian morphological analysis of "The Robber Bridegroom" reveals a clear example of deletion: the absence of the *21. Pursuit-22. Rescue* part of the complete sequence *20. Return-21. Pursuit-22. Rescue-23. Anonymous Arrival*. In other plot phenotypes based on this plot genotype, the longer sequence may be restored. For example, in the Hollywood movie *Wrong Turn* (2003), the *20. Return-21. Pursuit-22. Rescue* sequence takes up much of the central portion of the film, during which the Reluctant Heroes are repeatedly pursued by the cannibalistic Mountain Men ("Wrong Turn"). Although there are no examples of duplication in "The Robber Bridegroom", this story mutation was specifically addressed in *Morphology of the Folktale* by Propp under the heading of trebling. In certain versions of particular fairy tales, an action may be carried out three consecutive times, with the third action typically being the most difficult (Propp 1968 74). Inversion involves the reverse order occurrence of particular paired functions such as the replacement of the *4. Spying-5. Delivery* sequence by the *4. Delivery-5. Spying* sequence. In two of the major European fairy tale collections, there are examples of this type of inversion. For example, in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale *The Frog Prince*, the Princess calls out for help to retrieve her golden ball before the Frog Prince asks her to do so ("The Frog Prince"); in Charles Perrault's *Puss-in-Boots*, the Youngest Son cries out that he can do nothing with his paltry inheritance except eat it before Puss asks him what is wrong ("Puss-in-Boots"). In each case, the inversion serves to distinguish a good character who merely appears to be bad from a bad character who appears to be good. Finally, there are numerous examples of translocation in European fairy tales. For example, in both the Brothers Grimm "Cinderella" and in Marie Le Prince De Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast", there is the use of a virtually identical

motif for the execution of the second and third functions (a father asks his three daughters what they want when he returns from a trip, with the Heroine requesting something modest in contrast with the expensive requests of her two elder sisters) What is interesting here is that the tendency of sequences of functions occupying particular slots in the compositional schema of one fairy tale to recur in exactly the same Proppian functional position in another fairy tale. For Darányi and Forró, "motifs and motif sequences are not identical with, although related to, Propp's functions, but the exact nature of dependency of the two atomic approaches is not known" (Darányi and Forró 4). The suggestion is made here that a given motif may be defined as a particular sequence of Proppian plot functions.

Conclusion

Besides providing a common language for the discussion of story structure, it is suggested that plot genotype theory may provide a bridge to link the work of those theorists interested in pursuing more traditional methods of text interpretation with the growing number of theorists interested in data mining and other computational-based methods of analysis. In addition, plot genotype theory may allow for a more complete integration of the work of narratologists on the one hand with literary stylisticians on the other. Fairy tales offer themselves as the most immediate material for such work, but this could soon be extended to cover the more interesting examples of the short story, modern drama, the novel and the Hollywood screenplay.

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