



RE-VISIONING FAIRY TALES

Taking on Some Stereotypes

John Powell

The Sorcerer's Apprentice, a famous tale, tells of the adventure of a young man, who, while his master is away, decides to play with a little magic. A disastrous flood results, and the tall, white-bearded master returns, scowling, to confront the young assistant and the mess. We can see a moral, something like the advice of caution in dealing with powerful energies, perhaps a warning to impetuous youth, coming from the domain of the elders. Millions know the Disney treatment of the story in *Fantasia*, but its archetypal roots go deeper than this Mickey Mouse version.

I asked Allan Chinen about this tale in a telephone conversation. Allan, our September speaker and workshop presenter, is known for his exploration of the significance of mid-life and elder protagonists in fairy tales. I suggested taking the sorcerer's point of view. Perhaps the sorcerer could see the apprentice's actions as a forgivable mistake, a part of the process in learning to deal with magic. Instead of merely being angry and punishing the apprentice, he is able to see the larger territory--claiming the wisdom of age and mentorship. Allan suggested the apprentice also might be viewed as a mid-life man, faced with a crisis of individuation. He attempts projects of great risk, living in the fast lane, perhaps taking psychedelics, perhaps driving fast cars, sailing solo, seducing and creating havoc in the process. Yet he is saved and grows wiser, because a spirit guide--the sorcerer--is present and allows the apprentice to notice that risks are sometimes ego-driven. The true soul-work is to embrace the deeper risks of living: openness, intimacy, separation and loss of various kinds.

While we are at it, almost any familiar story can be re-visited in this way. *The Wizard of Oz* has often been interpreted in the model of the Hero's Journey and underworld descent. We follow a youthful heroine, as in other stories and myths such as Psyche, and Persephone. The underworld here is the magical land of Oz. Significantly, the book by L Frank Baum has Dorothy being snatched away and taken to this alien place. The movie version makes it all a dream. Which is truer to the spirit of fairytales? A political view may also be suggested: Tin Woodman (industry), Scarecrow (agriculture), and Cowardly Lion (the downtrodden proletariat) are figures from Marxist theory. Dorothy, the worker-heroine, finally overthrows the witches and the Wizard, who represent oppressive capitalism. Far-fetched and silly? So are some Jungian interpretations.

Ann Ulanov regards the story, screen version, as an individuation parable. Dorothy and friends are all lacking some key aspect of animus. Her longing for home is the individuation quest. The Wizard, a Shaman/Trickster, represents the last stand of inflated patriarchy. If we treat the Wizard as protagonist instead of Dorothy, we notice a profound difference in perspective: only after he is unmasked, appropriately by the dog, Toto, can he bestow his gifts. The ephemeral character of the gifts hints that the friends already possess those qualities within. The very exposure--loss of persona--of the Wizard becomes the key to his salvation.

Allan Chinen reminds us that middle and elder tales often have a Shaman/Trickster in an important role. The strong archetypal forces inherent in this figure are polyvalent; i.e., manifest a variety of directions and shifts. This energy can be drawn upon for transformation if we succeed in connecting with it authentically. Unlike the Hero, who goes out and slays the evil, the Trickster is tolerant of the foibles of people. We can be more tolerant of our failings, our opposites within, and use the tension they cause to become more conscious.

I asked Allan if there was a loss of capacity for mythic imagination in the culture because of the flood of media special effects, blockbuster movies, and soundbites. He said the media are now carrying our myths, and ancient ones at that. Consider Star Wars, with Luke and his two mentors, Obi-Wan and Yoda. Now, those two elders can lead us along interesting paths of active imagination! We are never very far from the possibility of mythic encounter ■
