BEYOND MORPHOLOGY:

LÉVI-STRAUSS AND THE ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALES

David Pace

There is a kind of residual Hegelianism which still constrains us to seek an underlying unity
a single Zeitgeist, behind the bewildering intellectual diversity we find around us.   In
recent years this tendency has nowhere been more obvious than in the attempt to "discover"
(i.e., create) a single Structuralism from a number of quite distinct intellectual positions.
One might quote a number of such attempts to define a single "structuralist" field of enquiry
but in the discipline of folklore the most significant early effort to create a broad definit
of the methodology was probably that of Alan Dundes, who in his 1964 study of The Morphology
of North American Indian Tales provided an early overview of structuralism.   Characterizing
as "structural" the work of Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and their followers, he
related their work to a wide range of different disciplines:

> The structural approach to folklore in general and to folktales in particular is
> entirely in keeping with new approaches to a variety of other disciplines.   It
> has affinities with Formalism and New Criticism in literary theory; synchronic
> structural linguistics, Gestalt psychology, and the pattern approach in anthro-
> pology.[1]

While this kind of broad characterization of structuralism was quite common in the 1960s,
it seems unwarranted from the perspective of the 1970s.   Dundes has cast his net so broadly
that it is not at all clear what he has caught.   The fact that these diverse methodologies
are held together by undefined "affinities"--a word whose alchemical origin points to its
mystical significance--suggests the uselessness of such a loose umbrella concept.

But even within Dundes' narrower conception of structuralism, even among those approaches
to folklore which he refers to as "structural," there would seem to be a great deal of
diversity.   By using this term to characterize the work of both Propp and Lévi-Strauss,
Dundes creates the impression that these two writers have something basic in common, that
they share some assumptions or approaches which are hidden from the superficial reader.
This is a claim which must be explored, because if this linguistic conflation of the
systems of Propp and Lévi-Strauss is not warranted, the thought of both thinkers may be
distorted by faulty categorization.   Lévi-Strauss may be unjustly transformed into a
Proppian-in-French clothing, or Propp may be seen as a proto-structuralist who had simply
restricted the use of the paradigm to a limited number of Russian folktales.

In justice to Dundes, it should be noted that he did draw a certain distinction between the
methodology of Propp and that of Lévi-Strauss.   The former he characterized as a "syntagmatic"
structuralism, which searched for the linear sequential structure contained in the plot of
the story.   The latter--that of Lévi-Strauss--was "paradigmatic," in which the material was
rearranged in search of the structural oppositions which gave a pattern to the story as a
whole.[2]

This distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic approaches is very important, but it
in no way exhausts the differences between a Proppian folktale analysis and a Lévi-Straussian
study of myth.   The contrasts between the two methodologies is so great, in fact, that a
closer analysis suggests that the only reason that they were ever associated under the same
rubric was that neither fit into older schools of thought.

The gap between the two thinkers was made quite explicit by Lévi-Strauss himself in a 1960
review of Propp's Morphology of the Folktale.   He began by drawing a basic distinction
between form and structure.   "Contrary to formalism," Lévi-Strauss wrote, "structuralism
refuses to set the concrete against the abstract and to recognize a privileged value in the
latter.   Form is defined by opposition to material other than itself.   But structure has no
distinct content; it is content itself, apprehended in a logical organization conceived as

property of the real."[3]

The distinction may be seen in the manner in which the two scholars approach the analysis of their respective material. Propp begins with a series of tales and divides the elements within the entire group into two categories: variables and constants. On one hand are the concrete names and attributes of the characters which change from tale to tale. On the other hand are the abstract functions of the characters, which remain the same. It is this second category of formal constants which Propp studies. The details introduced by particular storytellers are completely outside his purview.[4]

Propp then develops a complex analysis of the formal patterns of the 101 tales in his sample. He demonstrates that each of the characters in these tales may be seen as fulfilling one or more of thirty-one functions and that all the stories are made up by arranging some subset of these functions in a prescribed order.

The details of Propp's scheme are not of relevance here. What is important is his division of the universe of oral tales into two incommensurate orders: the functions, which are abstract, general, and invariant; and the content, which is specific to a particular tale and is the creation of the storyteller. Given this division, most of the specific details of the story are part of the telling, not of the tale; they are, in the language of Saussure, elements of parole, not of langue.

Lévi-Strauss' approach is very different. He begins not with a series of tales, but rather with a single myth. He seeks oppositions between specific qualities, such as high and low, wet and dry, raw and cooked, honey and tobacco, and then seeks to reconstruct the grid of oppositions through which the native culture speaks. In a sense he abstracts from the concrete stories before him. But his abstract patterns are always grounded in the relationships between concrete elements in specific myths.

Dundes has attempted to minimize the significance of the distinction between form and content. Most scholars, he argued, use the terms interchangeably. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss himself has on occasion so departed from the concrete that he has used abstract mathematical models to describe particular myths.[5]

But these comments do not address the crucial methodological distinctions drawn by Lévi-Strauss. When Propp approaches a new tale, he does so with Platonic forms in mind. The tale is always generated by the abstract functions and then elaborated with concrete details. But these details are not relevant to understanding the form of the tale.

A Lévi-Straussian analysis, by contrast, is always immanent—one might even say Aristotelian. The structure is discovered by creating a model of the relationship between the elements in a particular myth. The details are of primary importance. If a character is described as the "Butterfly-Woman" or is said to climb up a tree rather than down, these facts are of primary importance. It is through the juxtaposition of these sorts of details that the structure is created.

Thus, Propp can describe his work as a morphology. In his system there is a distinction between form and content which allows him to study the former in isolation. For Lévi-Strauss, morphological studies are impossible. Borrowing from his mentor Marcel Mauss, he views all human structures as embedded in concrete human practices and perceptions.[6] Without the media there is no message.

This methodological distinction has immense practical implications. As a natural corollary to his approach, Propp's tales are automatically isolated from the society in which they are told, whereas Lévi-Strauss' myths are always embedded within a particular culture. Propp's studies remain horizontal and present the formal interrelations between elements within folktales. Lévi-Strauss' analyses are, at least in theory, vertical and bridge the gap between the myth and the concrete elements in the life of a people.

Dundes recognized this distinction and praised Lévi-Strauss for his notion of the myth as a

model of social relations. But once again, he minimized the distinction by implying that Propp's analysis is only the first step in a very complex process of reconstructing a complete oral tradition. "Possible correlations of structural models of folklore with other aspects of culture," he wrote, "can come only after such models are accurately identified."[7]

But, once again, Dundes has characterized as trivial and practical a distinction which is actually crucial and theoretical. Propp's morphology--isolated as it is in a realm of pure form--has no direct point of tangency with the everyday world. It can be related to the broader cultural context only by introducing new and alien concepts. In Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, by contrast, the concentration upon concrete elements keeps the analyst in constant contact with the culture and its environment. When, for example, Lévi-Strauss studies the symbolic opposition within a myth between boiling and broiling or between marrying in and marrying out, he is not far removed from the study of material conditions or custom. Thus, the transition from myth to social context is a smooth and continuous one.

This distinction should be quite obvious even to the casual reader of the works of these two students of oral tales. Propp's Morphology deals strictly with the tale itself, but in Lévi-Strauss' Mythologiques there are innumerable references to ethnographic details not specifically contained in the story.

Thus, Propp's Soviet censors were correct: his work is totally antithetical to the Marxist concept of the primacy of material conditions. Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, can argue that he has developed a science of superstructures created by Marx.[8] This claim may be exaggerated, but it is clear that Lévi-Strauss does view each myth as an intersection between preexisting versions of the story and modifications induced by changes in the social or environmental infrastructure.[9]

It should be clear from what has been said that adherence to the methodology of Lévi-Strauss would produce a very different type of folklore than that created by the followers of Propp. But, in fact, the implications of Lévi-Strauss' approach generally have not been recognized. Scholars either have completely ignored his distinction between formal and structural studies, or they have acknowledged the distinction and then openly chosen to ignore it.[10] In either case, the result has most often been morphological studies which deal only with the forms of oral tradition and not with its specific content.

To counter this tendency, I will present in the following pages a brief demonstration of the manner in which Lévi-Strauss' method of myth analysis can be used to relate a story back to its social and ideological context. I have chosen a very immediate and contemporary tale-- the story of Cinderella as reproduced by a group of college students. This version undoubtedly owes as much to the technicians of the Disney studios as to the informants of the brothers Grimm. But, as Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, in a structural analysis of a myth all versions share a certain aspect of the same message. Moreover, the use of such a commonly known story avoids the necessity of a lengthy repetition of the tale or a detailed discussion of the social infrastructure of premodern Germany.[11]
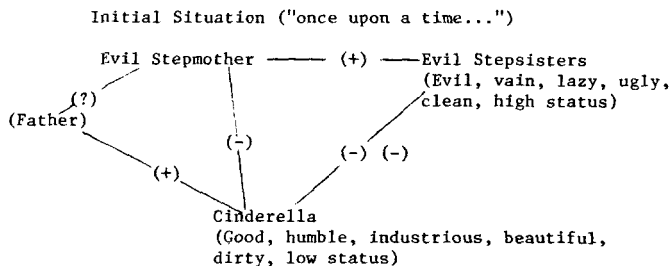
The outline of the contemporary Cinderella myth is simple. The death of her father consigns the beautiful Cinderella to the role of scullery maid, while her wicked stepmother and two ugly stepsisters enjoy the riches of the house. When these ungenerous step-relatives leave to attend the royal ball, Cinderella is left behind. Her fairy godmother, however, inter- venes, and after a series of magical transformations Cinderella is sent off to the ball with all the trappings of wealth, but with the admonition that she must return before midnight. At the ball, the prince falls in love with Cinderella, but at the stroke of midnight she flees the palace, leaving behind the glass slipper her fairy godmother had created for her. The prince, determined to marry this mysterious beauty, searches the kingdom for the woman who can fit into the tiny slipper. The stepsisters attempt to put it on and fight among themselves, but only Cinderella can wear it. The story ends with the marriage of Cinderella and the humiliation of her stepmother and stepsisters.

A Proppian, faced with this story, would begin by seeking to identify the various segments

of the plot with the functions common to that partiular type of tale. If the functions in contemporary American children's stories resembled those in Propp's sample, one might, for example, identify Cinderella's desire to go to the ball with function VIIIa ("lack"), or the gift of the coach, footmen, and so on, with function XIV ("provision or receipt of a magic agent"). Then the functions would be arranged according to an invariant order, a diagram of the succession of functions created, and the analysis would be complete. Something would have been learned about the formal patterns which lie behind this genre of stories, but the tale would remain completely isolated.
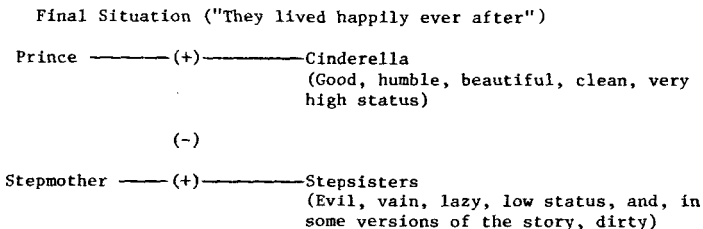
A Lévi-Straussian analysis would begin at a different place and move towards a very different conclusion. All concern with sequential development in time would be dropped, and instead the analyst would search for oppositions between concrete elements.

In a study of Cinderella, for example, a structuralist might begin not with the individual characters which appear at the beginning of the story, but rather with the configuration of relations among these characters. This pattern may be expressed in a simple diagram: Diagram #1

<div align="center">

Initial Situation ("once upon a time...")

Evil Stepmother ——— (+) ——Evil Stepsisters
(Evil, vain, lazy, ugly,
clean, high status)

(?)
(Father)

(-)

(-) (-)

(+)

Cinderella
(Good, humble, industrious, beautiful,
dirty, low status)

</div>

The dramatic tension in this story can be grasped readily from this diagram: the qualities ascribed to Cinderella and to her stepsisters respectively are not homologous. In the world of fairy tales the qualities "good," "humble," "industrious," and "beautiful" should be associated with cleanliness and high status. Conversely, the negative characteristics of the stepsisters should be associated with dirtiness and low social status. In other words, the external, social signs of virtue have not been assigned to the right persons.

This contradiction provides the dramatic core of the story and is resolved at the end of the tale, as may be seen from a second structural diagram:
Diagram #2

Final Situation ("They lived happily ever after")

Prince ——————(+)——————Cinderella
(Good, humble, beautiful, clean, very
high status)

(-)

Stepmother ——— (+)————Stepsisters
(Evil, vain, lazy, low status, and, in
some versions of the story, dirty)

The initial imbalance in the story has been corrected by a transformation of status relations and justice prevails.[12]

These structural diagrams provide an insight into both the causes of the initial imbalance and the factors which re-established equilibrium. The story may be viewed in terms of an economy of the sexes. The removal of a male at the beginning of the story (through the death

of the father) created an initial imbalance which could only be rectified by the introduction of a new male (the prince).

This pattern can also be viewed, on an ideological level, as a restatement of certain conditions which exist in the infrastructure of society. It is clearly implied that only blood or marriage ties can hold a family together. Once Cinderella is isolated within a family unit without the protection of either form of social linkage, she is exploited and treated not as a family member, but rather as a servant. This situation can be rectified only by removing her from this unstable, uncemented family and by forming a new unit through her marriage to the prince.
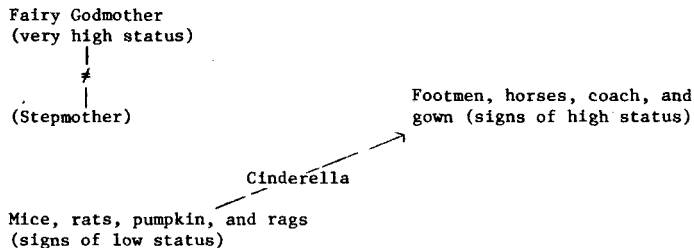
Viewed from another perspective, the transition from the initial to the final situations conveys messages about social mobility. As Michel Butor has argued, many fairy tales provide children with the promise that they will be able to gain status and independence as they mature and form their own families.[13] In the Cinderella myth this theme of mobility through maturation is combined with an adult myth that it is possible to move from the scullery to the palace, provided one is patient and undemanding. Behind both notions of social mobility lies the belief that there is an innate justice within the social system and that wrongs will eventually be righted.

It is also interesting that in both the adult and the childhood fantasies, marriage rather than social change is presented as the means of escaping an inferior social position. Moreover, the marriageable females are treated as incomplete and in need of immediate union with a male of high social position. Thus, to reduce a rich story to a cold equation, it might be said that in the Cinderella myth, unmarried=low status and married=high status.

But the story of Cinderella does not consist solely of a beginning and an end. In between there appear two episodes which provide dramatic tension and color and which reinforce the ideological messages of the story. These two episodes involve the intervention of the fairy godmother and of the prince. The first may be summarized in this diagram:
Diagram #3:

<u>Mediation</u> 1 (Supernatural, temporary)

Fairy Godmother
(very high status)

        ≠

                                          Footmen, horses, coach, and
(Stepmother)   gown (signs of high status)

                         Cinderella

Mice, rats, pumpkin, and rags
(signs of low status)

In this episode a supernatural being (the fairy godmother) intervenes to redress the imbalance of the initial episode. Her identity is of great interest because she stands in implicit contrast to the stepmother. These two roles (stepmother and godmother) are sociologically the closest to that of the biological mother. But the qualities attributed to these two figures are diametrically opposed. The stepmother is demanding and selfish, favors her natural children, and is defined as the protagonist's father's wife. The fairy godmother, by contrast, is giving and generous, is concerned with Cinderella rather than with her step-sisters, and has no romantic or sexual connection with the father. The Oedipal implications of this division are obvious. It is clear that on a psychological level, the myth simply has divided the real mother--a being for whom the most violently conflicting emotions are experienced--into two different mother surrogates: the stepmother, who may be hated without guilt, and the godmother, who may be loved without reservation.
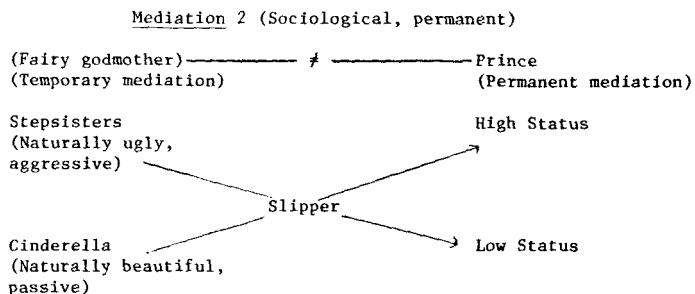
But this same opposition is also used to express another basic social tension. The stepmother treats Cinderella as a servant. She is only concerned about her charge's immediate economic value. The fairy godmother, who is removed from all economic considerations, prepares Cinderella for marriage. Thus, the opposition between the two surrogate mothers expresses not only an Oedipal ambivalence on the part of children, but also a social ambivalence on the part of mothers. On the one hand, mothers have an economic motive for exploiting their daughters and for keeping them at home. On the other hand, they have a social duty to expend money on them and to prepare them for marriage.

The fairy godmother's method of aiding Cinderella is also interesting. As a supernatural being, she can see the natural virtues of this poor scullery maid. Thus, her task--both as a "good" mother and as a force for justice--is to bring Cinderella's outward, cultural attributes into harmony with her internal, natural qualities.

The fairy godmother achieves this goal by transforming the signs which accompany Cinderella's low status (mice, rats, the pumpkin, and rags) into signs of high status (footmen, horses, a carriage, and a gown). This transformation of cultural signs sets the stage for the general recognition of Cinderella's natural qualities.

The magic of the fairy godmother is, however, temporary, and when this episode is compared with the next this fact takes on a new significance. In this portion of the story, the prince searches for the woman who can fit into the glass slipper left at the ball, and in the process he elevates Cinderella to a position of very high status. Diagram #4

Mediation 2 (Sociological, permanent)

(Fairy godmother)——————— ≠ ——————Prince
(Temporary mediation)   (Permanent mediation)

Stepsisters   High Status
(Naturally ugly,
aggressive)

                        Slipper

Cinderella   Low Status
(Naturally beautiful,
passive)

Just as the role of the fairy godmother is defined from the previous episode through its opposition to that of the stepmother, so the role of the prince is defined in opposition to that of the fairy godmother. The fairy godmother, as the "good" mother, can make Cinderella's plight less painful, and she can prepare her for the social recognition of her natural qualities. But this supernatural being is female and as such is incapable of permanently altering Cinderella's position in society. The prince, however, is a man and the social laws dictate that as a male he is able to change the situation permanently. Thus in this episode, the slipper, a gift of the positive mother surrogate, allows the prince to test the natural goodness of Cinderella and to rectify the imbalance between nature and culture which created the dramatic tension of the story.

The ideological messages of the story are furthered by the contrasts between the female characters in this episode. The active attempts of the two stepsisters to win the prince are treated as negative, whereas the passive and shy Cinderella is rewarded. Moreover, the stepsisters are often presented as willing to betray one another to win the favor of the prince, once again suggesting that relationships between women are unstable unless they are mediated by a man.

As this brief and sketchy analysis of the Cinderella tale indicates, the differences between

a Proppian and a Lévi-Straussian analysis are overwhelming. On one hand, the result is a
better understanding of the abstract form of a specific tale; on the other is an analysis
which embeds the story tightly in a particular social context. With Propp we have a study
which is relatively closed and hermeneutic, which relates the tale only to other tales of the
same genre. With Lévi-Strauss we have an analysis which opens the tale to the outer world,
which relates it to sex, age, and class roles and to the power relations of the society
in which it is transmitted. With the formalist we have a method which is automatically
apolitical (i.e., conservative), while the structuralist offers an approach which can be
used to reveal the origin and nature of ideology. Thus, from that slender gap between form
and structure a vast division has come into being, a division which forces a vital choice
upon all future students of culture.

NOTES

1. Alan Dundes, The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales, Folklore Fellows
    Communications 195 (1964): 32.

2. Alan Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African
    Folk Tales," Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition, ed. Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs
    Maranda (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 171-172; Alan Dundes, "Introduction to the Second
    Edition" in Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale (Austin, 1968), pp. xi-xii.

3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp,"
    Structural Anthropology, vol. II (New York, 1976), p. 115.

4. Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, pp. 20, 112-13.

5. Dundes, North American Indian Folktales, p. 57.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'Oeuvre de Marcel Mauss," in Marcel Mauss,
    Sociologie et anthropologie (Paris, 1950), pp. xiv-xxx, xxxiii.

7. Dundes, "Making and Breaking of Friendship," p. 174. See also Dundes', "Introduction,"
    in Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, p. xiii.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago, 1966), p. 130.

9. Claude Lévi-Strauss, L'Homme Nu (Paris, 1971), p. 562.

10. Elli Köngäs Maranda and Pierre Maranda, Structural Models in Folklore and Transforma-
    tional Essays (The Hague, 1971), p. 31.

11. It is interesting to note that the characteristic "industrious" is no longer relevant
    to Cinderella when she reaches a very high status in society. While the audience is apt
    to assume that she has not lost this trait, it has no form of expression in her new
    situation. This asymmetry in the transformation points to another distinction implicit
    in the story-that between those levels of society at which women must concern themselves
    with work and those at which they are expected to remain idle.

12. Michel Butor, "On Fairy Tale" in European Literary Theory and Practice from Existential
    Phenomenology to Structuralism, ed. Vernon W. Gras (New York, 1973), pp. 349-62.

13. As an historian interested in the theoretical concerns of folklorists but untrained in
    the methodology of collecting folktales, I collected this version of "Cinderella"
    from a group of students in a seminar on structuralism at Indiana University, Bloomington
    Indiana, in the fall of 1976.