

Traditional Romance and Tale: How Stories Mean. By Anne Wilson.
Pp. xii + 116, bibliography, index.
Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977. \$12.50 cloth.

Reviewed by Carl Lindahl

Traditional Romance and Tale is irresponsible, underresearched, arbitrary, innovative, and insightful. The last two qualities will justify a reading for anyone with the patience to tolerate the first three. There are some valuable thoughts here, and the reader who recognizes that Wilson is telling only half the story will be repaid many times over for the two hours required to work one's way through this little book.

Wilson's thesis is that traditional stories--both folktales and medieval romances--operate not according to the cause-and-effect logic of realism found in modern novels, but rather according to an irrational but coherent "dream logic." She begins with an analysis of dreams experienced and narrated by her own children, and shows that the "logic" of dreams is emotional. The dream depicts one or more basic problems which are amplified and reenacted in a series of symbolic disguises until the basic problem is either succumbed to or solved. To properly understand a dream, Wilson argues, one must conceive of all its elements as the inventions of the dreamer. The dreamer not only controls his own actions in the dream, but also invents and directs the rest of the cast. Even the villains embody the dreamer's own wishes in various disguises--some transparent some almost impenetrable.

Turning to traditional narrative, Wilson views folktales and medieval romances as objectified dreams whose characters and actions represent the personal fantasies of the fictional heroes. Narrator and audience identify themselves with the tale's protagonist and together create a communal waking dream, which is more satisfying to them as an emotional statement rather than as a rational or esthetic one.

Applying her theories to several Grimm tales and to some of the most famous Middle English romances (including King Horn, Libeus Desconus, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight), Wilson presents enough evidence to persuade the reader of the value of her arguments. She borrows some of Propp's concepts and terms, but modifies them considerably. Wilson rejects Propp's view of folktale structure as a causal chain, where events follow an ordered path like beads on a necklace, inexorably linking the beginning to the end. By shifting the focus of inquiry from the tale's outline to its hero, Wilson arrives at a method of analysis more "internal" and less general than Propp's. Propp views the folktale from the outside and tries to create an outline of narrative possibilities which incorporate all elements intrinsic to the genre. Wilson, on the other hand, tries to work her way inside the folktale and the romance, and treats each story as the unique expression of a certain problem.

Wilson alters Propp's language to suit her own ends. Propp defines the "move" as a self-contained story section with a structural wholeness and resolution of its own. To Wilson, however, the move is simply a statement or restatement of the initial problem--an emotional entity rather than a unit of action. As one emotional move follows another, the tale restates the initial problem until the hero understands and overcomes it.

Wilson's arguments are shown to best effect in her analysis of the Tristan legends. The story of Tristan and Isolde is the definitive catalogue of medieval literary and moral vices. Its tangled plot, riddled with incongruities, dangling elements, and disguises, has eluded scholarly explanation for centuries. It defies all "logical" analysis, and a Proppian reading of its plot can only lead to confusion. But Tristan's own dream logic, Wilson argues, is impeccable and, once decoded, astonishingly simple and clear. Wilson finds that the three characters names "Isolde" in the Tristan tales are really one figure: the hero's mother, whom the hero wishes to have as a lover:

The story of Tristan appears to be the story of the eternal sadness associated with the hero's having to renounce his maternal first love. Indeed, he has been unable to renounce the sexual side of his love for her in his mind and therefore embarks on a search for her which can never be satisfied in his lifetime.

This is the reason why Tristan sees his role as the hopeless lover, and also as the enemy and victim of fathers (p. 50).

The hero fails in each attempt to find a way in which he can possess his mother as lover, and thus he must invent new Isolde's, new ways to seek the fulfillment of his impossible dream. In the end, all efforts having failed, Tristan welcomes death.

A detailed listing of the flaws in this short book would probably fill another book of equal size. Wilson complains that publication costs required her to abridge her arguments and scholarly documentation. Nevertheless, I find it disturbing that she draws heavily on so many predecessors (most notably the gestalt "dream psychologists," from whom she derives the core of her theory) without acknowledging her debt to them. Methodological errors are legion. Wilson sees the folktale as a static entity, essentially frozen in form; while she pays lip service to the concept of performance, her approach is wholly text oriented. Further, she sees each tale in isolation from all others, applying New Criticism to folk narrative. To Wilson, a text is unique unto itself--so much for narrative tradition.

Perhaps most disturbing is her unrelenting focus on the unconscious, inartistic elements of the romance and folktale. Wilson ignores the discipline integral to narrative art and fails to recognize that conscious artistry, shared systems of belief, and the social concerns of a very influential audience enter into the creation of folktales. She doesn't seem to believe that artistic conventions (which connect one tale, in its hearer's waking mind, to many other tales he has heard) can modify the unique, unconscious qualities of each text considered individually as a dream. Do none of these social and artistic elements affect the story to make it anything more than the dramatized fantasy of the group?

Wilson's final chapter, which interprets Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as the story of a child's conflict with his parents and with his own sexuality, will appall anyone who has read the original romance. Wilson may have struck the unconscious chord at the base of the story, but she fails to consider the gist of other works by the same author, the thematic concerns explicit in Sir Gawain, and the accents of style and characterization make it clear that this poet was not simply rattling off a half-conscious fantasy of sexual frustration. There is abundant evidence of conscious artistry in Sir Gawain, and there is also a clear separation between the narrator and the hero--the sort of separation which Wilson claims cannot be found in traditional tales. In treating Sir Gawain as a dream, Wilson cannot come to a worthwhile understanding of the processes involved in its creation.

But even when all the flaws of the book are weighed, one very important contribution remains: Wilson's concept of "emotional structure" is attractive and, in many cases seems to work. Her description of the way in which tales build and cohere around the central conflict of the hero deserves much consideration. Her theory must be qualified and considerably modified to prove useful. But ultimately, many readers--including myself--may find it a more accurate and useful model of folktale structure than the lifeless formalist skeleton created by Propp. Traditional Romance and Tale deserves a wide readership--far wider, I'm afraid, than it is likely to get.