

THE HORNS AND THE SPIRAL

Distribution, structure, functions and origin of a Eurasian children's rhyme about snails
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3 – THE STRUCTURAL MODEL: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

We will soon present our structural model. Before doing that, however, we think that some preliminary remarks are necessary.

FIRST REMARK: ABOUT THE USE OF “YOU” (or: whose parents are they?)

In our note to version 10, in the database, we have already commented a linguistic problem which seems to be particularly important in the context of this research.

A very large number of the collected texts, actually, have verbal forms in the singular second person, that is referring to an unspecified, generic “you”.

Now, in some cases it is evident who is the addressee. Let's consider the following examples:

(2) "come out or I will make a hole in your house"

(8) "come out of your hole, or else I'll beat you as black as coal"

(52) "Snail, -ail, -ail, stretch out your horns in the sun, since your father and your mother stretched them out in the same way"

We think that in such cases the addressee is certainly the snail.

In other cases, however, even if we take into account that the meaning of a children's rhyme can be purely fantastic and unreal, we think that it is very unlikely to think that the addressee is the snail:

(14) "Here comes an old beggar to cut off your corns (*interpreting “corns” literally as “crops of cereals” and not as a linguistic substitute of “horns”*)."

(78) "and you will see your father and your mother, who are cooking soups in their pot"

(93) "since your father and your mother have gone to Aragon (region), to buy shoes of the color of lemon"

(220) "thus you will be able to bring home a bucket full of wheat for your children"

We are therefore obliged to explain those cases in a different way: obviously, the speaker is projecting onto the snail needs, fears, hopes, desires or apprehensions that, in reality, should be attributed to human beings, to people.

Besides, another linguistic solution exists, at least in some cases: the “impersonal you”.

See about this:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generic_you

This a feature present in various languages, including English (and Italian, too): actually, when we say “yes, I understand what he did to make plans for his own future, because you must have plans for your life”, we mean “yes, I understand what he did to make plans for his own future, because *one* must have plans for his life”, or “...because to have plans for one's life is right”. When we use such sentences, we do not mean to address our speech to a real person, nor to the person we are speaking with, but we are just imagining to address another fictitious second person (“you”) that we are just mentioning as an abstract example. Therefore, it will be possible for some variants of the rhyme to interpret their meaning starting from the possible use of an “impersonal you” of this kind.

In some cases, we feel that the “you” referring to the snail and the “you” referring to human beings are alternated and mixed:

(135) "Snail, creep out of your house, your house is burning, your children are crying, your wife, parturient in labor, is lying in her bed: can't I speak with you once, at least?"

In a very large number of cases the interpretation is ambivalent and double; in such cases, the possible use of the “impersonal you” will cast new light on the comprehension of an otherwise obscure text, or it will be possible to hypothesize alternative meanings (or, if one prefers another approach, the same will happen by supposing that the fear or the desire is only projected onto the snail, but in reality is to be

attributed to human beings).

Let's make just two more examples:

(69) "since your father and your mother ate a swallow's egg and did not die."

(193) "you will have oysters and white wine to drink and the silver spoons and the forks, well disposed in a row one after another."

We think that, in the first case (69), to consider the word "your" as addressed to the snail would lead to imagine the parents of the snail who are eating an egg, which would be pretty meaningless to us; the use of the "impersonal you", or anyway the hypothesis that they are the parents of a human being, would on the contrary lead to suppose that this version is mentioning a situation of famine, where the people, in order to survive, are even obliged to eat the eggs of the swallows and may die: an explanation that seems much more meaningful and realistic.

In the second case (193), by changing the meaning of "you", the overall meaning changes completely. It changes from a comical and grotesque situation, in which, very strangely, a mollusk is ensured that it will lunch in a luxury upscale restaurant, with expensive food (if we think that the word "you" is addressed to the snail), to a situation in which, probably to react to a gloomy poverty condition, one is wishing that people will be able to have such a lunch at last (and this is the meaning that we obtain if we suppose that the text is using the "impersonal you", or if we suppose that the word "you" is addressed to a human being).

For sure, also in this case the explanation would be much more realistic.

But does it make sense to look for "realistic" explanations for a children's rhyme? Frankly, this could irritate those who take for granted that a "children's rhyme" is only a fancy, naïf and funny text for children; however, given that our aim is precisely to verify in which context our rhyme may have been originated, and to verify whether an ancient age existed in which it was still considered a "serious" invocation and not a childish game, then we think that any realistic explanation is really to be taken into account and considered very seriously, exactly because of the aim we have established for this research.

In our analysis schemes, therefore, we will take care to specify in the analysis of each variant whether we are considering the word "you" as addressed to human beings or to the snail.

We will mark this during the process of structural classification that will be done for each version of the rhyme: we will write (An) (= "Animal") when we think that the word "you" is addressed to the snail, and (Hm) (= "Human") when we consider that word as addressed to people. If both the interpretations are possible, then we will report both of them, one marked (An) and the other marked (Hm).

SECOND REMARK: HOW MANY ARE THE "HORNS"?

Different variants of our rhyme report a strange number of what are commonly, though erroneously, called the snail's "horns". Sometimes they are two (286); they are very often four (5, 6, 42, 45-48, 254, 282 and many others); sometimes they are even described in details with regard to their size, specifying the correct distinction between two longer ones and two shorter ones (48, 390, 392); sometimes, however, their number is absolutely uncanny: three (273, 314, 442, 443, 445, 446), five (227), and even seven (122, 205)! Surely, we must not view the problem in a too rationalistic way. When the "horns" are three, at least in the Venetian area, for instance, what matters is the distribution formula ("one to me, one to you, one to a third character") which is always made of three repetitions: in the structure of the rhyme, the "ritual" role of these three repetitions is more important than any logical reasoning whatsoever, and any different exact number of horns previously mentioned in the same rhyme does not matter in presence of the distribution formula, which will always be made of three repetitions in any case. The repetitions are often three, as in the fairy tales (with two repetitions we would not understand that something is being repeated; a fourth repetition, on the other hand, would be unnecessary and redundant). From this point of view, the version 314 itself is an exception, because first it mentions three horns, then it says that four of them are distributed, as if returning to a more realistic description of the animal. When the horns are five or seven, other symbols may play a role, which are also more important than any realistic description. A possible influence on the multiplication of versions of the rhyme mentioning odd numbers of horns (completely unrealistic) could have been

exerted, at least in the northern Germanic area, by the Icelandic (and formerly Norse) belief that snails have, beside the usual “horns” that everybody knows, also a mythical additional hidden “central horn”, which they can extract and show at will, and which could bring a lot of good luck to those who are able to touch it (see: 442, 443, 445, 446, 524). Another possible explanation of the uncanny number of horns is the comparison, probably of parodic medieval origin, between the snail and a “dragon”, which has been found in many circumstances during our research. In any case, the number of “horns” does not seem to us to have any decisive importance with regard to the classification of each variant of the rhyme.

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