

## **'Thou's let oot thy-sel' fro' unner th' sto'an': the narrative environment of Yallery Brown.**

**Mick Gowar, Anglia Ruskin University.**

*This paper will look at a small group of closely linked stories, or variations, based on a core folk tale: my own retellings of Yallery Brown. I describe them as a group because my re-tellings of Yallery Brown now exist in what I think of as a web of intertextual relationships - relationships not only between my versions of the tale, but also relationships with what might be regarded as the 'standard' versions, from which my versions diverge in a number of significant ways, and more recently with the digital retellings which have resulted from a number of creative workshops with groups of children and students. I would also venture to suggest that the processes through which my different versions of Yallery Brown have developed mirror, albeit within a much shorter timeframe, the ways in which traditional tales mutate over the centuries, and may shed interesting light on why and how stories change over time.*

The story of *Yallery Brown* comes originally from the fens of Lincolnshire. Yallery Brown himself is a *yarthkin*, an elemental earth spirit; a 'fetch' rather than a fairy, and as such related to the 'greencoats' and creatures such as Tom Tit Tot and Tiddy Mun found in a number of East Anglian tales. These beings customarily demonstrate a dual nature, helpful to humans if placated with certain gifts (which must be offered according to established forms and rituals), but liable to turn spiteful and bring disaster on humans who neglect to offer them gifts, or if certain prohibitions or taboos are broken. In Yallery Brown's case there is a prohibition on voicing thanks, similar to the giving of clothes as an expression of gratitude in the more familiar tale of *The Shoemaker and The Elves*, which causes such offense that it drives away the shoemaker's supernatural helpers. But the story of Yallery Brown is unusual and notable for the malignancy of Yallery Brown himself. This is how Diane Purkiss in *Troublesome Things* summarizes not only the basic story, but also her own shocked response to the tale:

*It was almost dark on a winter evening when I first caught the fascination of fairies. I had always thought of fairies as dull, too pretty to be interesting. But suddenly I found myself reading about a fairy who wasn't pretty at all. He was Yallery Brown, a sprite from the Fen Country of Eastern England and he was inexorable, mindlessly cruel. He was found by a farmhand who heard a soft weeping sound, like a child crying. The man was a kindly soul, and he searched for the child, to comfort it. What he found, when he overturned a rock was a little withered thing with bright eyes and a cloud of long yellow hair. The little thing made him a promise: to stay with him for ever and to help him with his work, as long as he was never thanked. So far, so bad. But Yallery Brown's help turned out to be no help at all. Everyone avoided the farmhand because they could see his work being done for him by invisible hands. Things went from bad to worse, until one day the poor farm hand thanked his helper in a despairing effort to get ride of him. From then on Yallery Brown spoiled everything he did, and haunted him day and night, crying out, "Loss and mischance and Yallery Brown/You've let out yourself from under the stone." The farmhand died friendless and destitute with that voice ringing in his ears.*

The first published version of Yallery Brown that I have been able to trace was part of a collection made by M C Balfour entitled *Legends of the Lincolnshire Cars* (1891) and presented in her own version of the dialect of the Lincolnshire wolds. The story was subsequently 'translated' into a more standard English by Joseph Jacobs, and included in *More English Fairy Tales* (1894). In Jacobs's version it is made clear that 'Yallery Brown' is a description and not the creature's real name - for indeed what magical creature would knowingly lay itself open to the humiliation suffered by Rumpelstiltskin? But precisely what sort of creature Yallery Brown is remains a mystery, which Yallery Brown himself is reluctant to clarify:

*"I am no bogle, but ye'd best not ask me what I be; anyways I be a good friend o' thine."  
Tom's very knee-bones struck, for certainly an ordinary body couldn't have known what he'd been thinking to himself, but he looked so kind like, and spoke so fair, that he made bold to get out, a bit quavery like--"Might I be axing to know your honour's name?" "H'm," says he, pulling his beard; "as for that"--and he thought a bit--"ay so," he went on at last, "Yallery Brown thou mayst call me, Yallery Brown; 't is my nature seest thou, and as for a name 't will do as any other. Yallery Brown, Tom, Yallery Brown's thy friend, my lad." "Thankee, master," says Tom, quite meek like.*

In 1994 I was commissioned by the Britten Sinfonia, in association with the Aldeburgh and St Magnus festivals, to write the libretto for a music theatre piece for children based on the story of Yallery Brown, to be set to original music by the composer Glyn Evans. The commission also included leading a series of creative workshops with a class of primary school children who would form a chorus for the final performance. We decided, very early on, to divide the chorus into approximately 15 'farmhands' and 15 'little people'. The 'farmhands' would have ruddy complexions, torn shirts and straw hats; the 'little people' would be painted green and masked. The creation of these two choruses proved to be an important development not only for the plot of our musical piece, but also for the subsequent story versions, because it introduced into the story two strong but opposing groups or forces with which Tom would be in conflict. Furthermore, the story would now need to be changed from the original in a number of ways in order to accommodate our two choruses. The farm workers – barely mentioned in the versions of the story retold by Mrs Balfour, Joseph Jacobs and more recently by Kevin Crossley-Holland - would now need to be developed further into a significant motivating force within the narrative; likewise the chorus of little people, who weren't mentioned at all in other versions of the story. I was also aware at this stage of a potential narrative and dramatic similarity between the farm hands and 'the Borough' in Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and with Glyn's enthusiastic support I developed the farm workers' chorus through our workshops into a mob - at first suspicious, then vengefully attacking Tom while chanting 'Witch boy! Witch boy!' - who would force Tom from the farm and into the hands of the opposing chorus of little people.

Tom was further separated from the other farm workers in our musical version by being a 'trouser role', played by a mezzo-soprano. We decided to emphasize the changeability and untrustworthiness of Yallery Brown by representing him on stage as a mask, with the role being shared among four members of the chorus - an obvious, but we felt not inappropriate

reference to the practices of Greek drama.

We soon realized that some substantial changes needed to be made to the story to make it work effectively as drama. A particular problem was the ending. We wanted to avoid what we felt would be the clumsy device of an onstage narrator, which meant that the blighting of Tom's life for thirty or forty years, the ending of the various published versions of the tale, after the stage action had ceased would be extremely difficult to convey. However, after seeing a production of *Don Giovanni* in which the Don was dragged to Hell in the penultimate scene by imps and demons evidently played by children, I decided to end our piece with Tom being dragged under the stone by the fairies in place of Yallery Brown, who would thus be freed into the world.

The original staging was in the round, with a single prop: a papier mache slab, from under which Yallery Brown would apparently emerge, and under which Tom would be dragged. This was a very powerful visual image which I developed further in my published and versions of the story for solo performance on which I am still working. Immediately after the production of *The Songs of Yallery Brown* I began work on the script I intended to use as the starting point for further creative workshops, and this script eventually became the story version which was published in a trade edition by Scholastic in their *Everystory* series and in an educational edition, with a number of significant changes, by Ginn.

The stage version was only one of the elements shaping the narrative environment. I was also consciously drawing on other East Anglian folk and fairy tales such as *Long Tom and The Dead Hands*, and especially the powerlessness of mortals when faced with the overwhelmingly powerful and malevolent other worldly forces which are such a distinguishing feature of these stories. I was also familiar with other tales of bogles and fairy helpers, like *Tiddy Mun* and *Tom Tit Tot*, and critical and historical surveys of fairy tales and folklore, such as the books by Diane Purkiss and Katherine Briggs and Jack Zipes's *Breaking The Magic Spell*, and particularly his essay *On The Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children* in which Zipes questions Bettelheim's psychoanalytical interpretation of fairy tales and asserts that folk and fairy tales:

*remain an essential force in our cultural heritage, but they are not static literary modules to be internalized for therapeutic consumption. Their value depends on how we actively produce and receive them.*

In *The Songs of Yallery Brown* Tom is lazy and *chooses* to have Yallery Brown do all his work for him without any prompting. but I decided that if Tom was tempted or tricked it would establish him as an innocent victim of supernatural malevolence rather than an accomplice - or at least culpable through his idleness - introducing elements into the narrative blend of other mortals being tricked into deals by supernatural and fairy, such as Weber's *Die Freischutz*, and incidents of supernatural persecution of innocents, such as Goethe's *Erlkonig*. Furthermore, portraying the 'little people' or fairies as guardians and custodians of the wood, strengthens the magical and liminal nature of the place.

Other changes I made in the process of shaping what I then thought of purely as a script on which to base an oral performance of the story, included the introduction into the story of Tom's mother, and the fact of Tom's separation from her for most of the week, and placing the meeting with Yallery Brown on a Sunday when the other villagers and the farmer are in

church.

I also needed to create the voice and character of a storyteller, initially for myself but later it would act as an important framing device in the written versions of the story, and in the first published version, my storyteller introduces the story with some observations on the origin and nature of fairies, taking a traditional view, and one acknowledged by K M Briggs as once widely held:

*The commonest explanation was that fairies of various kinds are spirits of long-dead or extinct races. John Boylin of County Meath suggested that the fairies were accounted for by some of them being spirits of Fir Bolgs, some of the Milesians, some of the Tuatha De Danann....An old Welshman living near Strata Flow evidently thought of the Tylwyth Teg as spirits of prehistoric people....Mr Henry Madden, an architect who had learned his pixy-lore as a child from his old nurse, said in his evidence: "Pixies are often supposed to be the souls of the prehistoric dwellers of this country. As such, pixies are supposed to be getting smaller and smaller, until finally they are to vanish entirely."....The dwindling of the pixies would represent their loss of power, and account for their eagerness to get hold of human changelings and reinforce their weakening stock."* The Fairies in Tradition and Literature

As Marc Alexander summarizes the theory in *British Folklore Myths & Legends*:

*They were forced into forests and remote regions, just as some centuries later the British Celts were driven into Cornwall Wales and Scotland by the Saxons.... fairy sites are frequently associated with pre-Celtic barrows and megaliths, and in the days when belief in fairies was general prehistoric flint arrowheads were known as 'elf shot'. It was also common knowledge that fairy folk had an overwhelming aversion to iron. This could relate to the despair of the Beaker People, whose stone axes were no match for the weapons of Celtic iron. Inevitably there would be some uneasy contact between the newcomers and the dispossessed natives. The latter might perform menial tasks - like fairies in many legends - in return for basic necessities or, when the opportunity arose, steal from the settlers, before vanishing into the woods.*

The idea of Yallery Brown might once have been a member of a hypothetical prehistoric aboriginal race and therefore once mortal was a significant factor in my ending of the tale - when Tom is finally dragged under the stone to replace Yallery Brown - and in a sense *becomes* Yallery Brown. In my spoken and written versions, Tom works extremely hard for a cruel master, and in these versions Tom takes a short cut through the wood it is in order to avoid a beating. The wood is the subject of prohibitions - the village children are warned never to go into the woods - but Tom is braver, more defiant. Unfortunately, the prohibitions prove to be not merely arbitrary, capricious or conventionally and groundlessly superstitious; within the woods is a secret, even the knowledge of which the villagers shun.

The slab represents an entry point – an opening into the equivalent of a hollow hill - into an other worldly place in which humans like Tom or human-like creatures like Yallery Brown can live and suffer for centuries. The wood is a borderland between the two worlds and the dwelling place of a race of 'little people', fairies who seem to act as some sort of guardians, but also appear confined, trapped possibly - as Yallery Brown has been trapped - within the wood.

But Yallery Brown, as the character has developed in my oral and written retellings, isn't

simply an awoken or unquiet spirit. Her has a *demonic* energy, and as Mary Maclean of Barra explained to Walter Evans-Wentz a darker explanation exists for Yallery Brown's captivity beneath a stone, more commensurate with his devilish nature:

*When the fallen angels were cast out of heaven God commanded thus - 'You will go to take up your abode in crevices, under the earth, in mounds, or soil, or rocks.' And according to this command they have been condemned to inhabit the places named for a certain period of time.*

But perhaps the metaphorical imprecision of the slab should be the point. As John Burnside observes in his poem *The Hunt In The Forest*:

*How children think of death is how the shadows  
gather between the trees: a hiding-place  
for everything the grown-ups cannot name.*

Tom, in his naivety, does not realize that his deal with Yallery Brown is based on trickery and that he will never get the life of ease he imagines. Yallery Brown can certainly work magic, in the sense of being able to function outside the normal rules of cause and effect: he can work with superhuman speed and strength to complete Tom's work and destroy the efforts of the other farm workers in a single night; although his greatest supernatural feat is to have survived beneath the stone for centuries, possibly longer. But the 'magic' he works on Tom with the choices he offers requires nothing more than basic conjuring skills and hucksterish cunning: misdirection and manipulation; the equivalent of card forcing. At first Yallery Brown appears to offer Tom anything he wants, but he quickly restricts the choice to three options, only one of which doesn't require powers of imagination for which Tom is either too befuddled or possibly insufficiently educated and/or experienced to be capable of appreciating.

But what is also becoming clearer to me, through developing and expanding this 'bargain scene' in performance, are the particular resonances of the choices Tom is given. The gifts he is offered by Yallery Brown represent precisely those forces which most oppress and define Tom as a member of one of the lowest social classes. These are: money - or in Tom's case lack of it; sexual success and the autonomy of a family of his own, and Tom is living in poverty, in bachelor accommodation provided by the farmer; and work - Tom is a virtual serf, working such long hours that he must be separated from his mother and subject to routine and brutal physical punishment if his work fails to meet the farmer's standards. Tom is in a form of limbo: suspended between childhood and adulthood; between his mother's cottage and a life and home of his own. And this border/limbo land is represented by the internal narrative environment within the story: the woodland no-man's land in which Yallery Brown creates fictions and illusions of escape from Tom's imprisonment.

In their separate entrapments between worlds, Tom and Yallery Brown have much in common, and this adds to the inevitability of their changing places at the end of the story.

The bargain Tom makes with Yallery Brown places Tom beyond the pale as far as other humans - the farm hands - are concerned and they drive him from the 'home' of the farm and the village and into the literal no-*man's* land of the wood and to his tragic end. And, as Jack Zipes reminds us, it is this hunger for home, shared between reader/listener/viewer and the characters in the tale, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the fairy tale:

***The very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset and makes the repressed unfamiliar familiar again....The process of reading involves dislocating the reader from his or her familiar setting and then identifying with the dislocated protagonist so that a quest for the Heimische or real home can begin. The fairy tale ignites a double quest for home. Fairy Tales & The Art of Subversion***