Bright Parable of Pernilla

MURRAY J. EVANS

Pernilla in the Perilous Forest, Muriel Whitaker. Illus. Jetske Ironside. Oberon, 1979. 18 pp. $9.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88750-312-8.

Pernilla in the Perilous Forest is about a little girl who tires of her rocking-horse because it will not eat sugar from her hand or lay its head in her lap. Pernilla's parents encourage her to seek a real horse in the Perilous Forest. There she meets seven beasts in succession, each embodying a classic vice: a lion, pride; a snake, envy; a wolf, anger, and so on. Pernilla asks each animal if it will be her horse, to eat sugar from her hand, lay its head in her lap, and all refuse her. At last, she happens upon a unicorn, which agrees to become her own.

This résumé hints at the book's use of many aspects of medieval tradition, competently adapted by the author Muriel Whitaker, herself a medievalist as well as specialist in children's literature at the University of Alberta. Dr. Whitaker has mentioned to me in conversation the resemblance between *Pernilla* and the beast-allegory of the vices in the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Riwle*, a devotional treatise for anchoresses. *Pernilla* also has affinities with the medieval bestiary, best known to modern readers in T.H. White's translation, which combines moralism and natural science in its animal catalogues. Medieval romance, with its knights riding forth into perilous forests after adventures and perhaps self-knowledge, also informs Pernilla's quest for her real horse. Abundantly present, too, in this book is the medieval propensity for alliteration: "looped beneath the lichen-covered larches, lay a serpent." Medievalism is prominent elsewhere, of course, in twentieth-century fiction – in John Fowles' *Ebony Tower*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books. The question here is, do the medieval elements "work" for the modern reader, and modern child reader?

The answer is "Yes", first because of the arresting visual beauty of this book, thanks to illustrator Jetske Ironside, who teaches in the Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta. Each episode of the story takes up facing pages: the left pictures Pernilla's encounter with a beast, while a matching floral border encloses the text on the right (see Figure 1). The bright colours and late Gothic style of these illustrations, imitating illuminations in French fourteenth-century bestiaries, match the medieval elements in Dr. Whitaker's text. The reader will return to contemplate even a single page; a child may well choose *Pernilla* as a favourite picture-book.

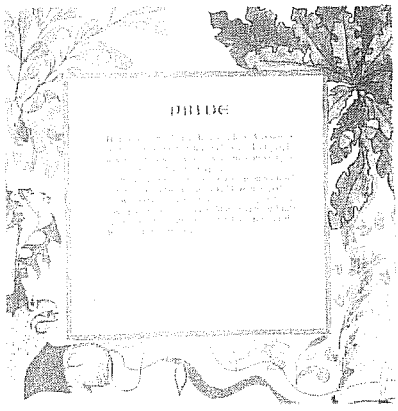

Figure 1.

No page numbers, furthermore, spoil the cumulative effect of viewing, and most of the bibliographical information is tastefully put with the blank pages at the end of the book.

But narration does not lag behind illustration. Take for example the episode entitled "Anger":

> Then Pernilla ran on in the Perilous Forest until she came to a fearsome place. Brambles caught at her skirt. Branches tangled in her hair. A west wind whirled willow leaves down the path and the wild red strawberries at her feet gleamed like drops of blood.
>
> And there stood a wolf.
>
> "Will you be my horse, to eat sugar from my hand and lay your head in my lap?" asked Pernilla hopefully.
>
> The wolf gnashed his teeth so that flecks of foam fell like feathers on the flowers.
>
> "Get out of here. Get out of here before I eat you!" he shouted angrily.

Alliteration underlines first the hostility of the setting ("Brambles . . . Branches . . ."), then the sound and motion of the west wind, and after all this activity, "gleamed" stops us to contemplate, at our feet almost, wild strawberries "like drops of blood." Pause. "And there stood a wolf." Freeze. The economy of the wolf's reply is the more trenchant for hitting both on what most young children presume a wolf is up to in stories, and

also on the essence of anger.

This naturally leads to the question of "message" in the book. While a young child will probably rightly enjoy *Pernilla* for its beautiful illustrations and fairy-tale story, perhaps there are good things here, too, for the older child and even adult. Chrétien de Troyes, twelfth-century author of several Arthurian romances, wrote of composing "une molt bele conjointure," a very pleasant yoking of adventure story with deeper significance.[1] Similarly, *Pernilla*'s occasional sense of understatement, quest pattern, and matching of animals with vices, suggest that there is more to the book than a simple story-line. There are rests (in the musical sense) as the reader turns the page for each successive adventure; the illustrations make lingering sweet. Why does Pernilla want her favourite toy to come alive? What does her desire for a horse have to do with her encounters with seven other evil animals? Why does she find, not a horse, but a bright, majestic unicorn? And what is the unicorn?

The book does not answer these questions, but its art may offer the reader, and the young reader unconsciously to some extent, what Paul Piehler says medieval visionary allegories gave their own readers: "they are offered to their readers for spiritual participation, so that in undergoing the imaginative experience of the vision they may avail themselves of the same process of healing and transcendence."[2] The context of this process, though, is not solely psychological, but by virtue of the headings – among them Lust, Gluttony, Sloth – the context is unabashedly moral, and by traditional associations, theological. *Pernilla* is certainly not a sermon, but in parable fashion it invites the older child and adult reader to ponder larger questions of heart's desire, evil, and beyond-hope satisfaction of heart's desire even as Lewis's *Last Battle* and LeGuin's *Wizard of Earthsea* do. This dynamic of *Pernilla* may be relevant for more than the private reading. For example, so artistically attractive and gently didactic a book which nonetheless draws on time-honoured concepts of right and wrong may well be of interest to parent and educator in the context of present debate over literary curricula and moral values education.[3]

In such an attractive book, the occasional broken letter in the text is unfortunate and might be remedied in future reprints. In the forest setting where "the grasses writhed like snakes," should "Then sea-green among the green branches, looped beneath the lichen-covered larches, lay a serpent" read "*There* sea-green . . . lay a serpent?" As much as frequent alliteration in medieval fashion creates striking poetic effects and makes for a zesty oral rendering, modern taste may prefer a slightly reduced amount. This modern medievalist noticed a somewhat intrusive example in context, in Pernilla's encounter with the wolf quoted above: "The wolf gnashed his teeth so that flecks of foam fell like feathers on the flowers."

But these few matters bear only passing mention: they do not seriously detract from this fine book. I understand that Pernilla, daughter of the illustrator, likes it too.

NOTES

[1]*Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes: I Erec et Enide*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1973), p. 1, l. 14; Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 34f.

[2]*The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory* (London: Arnold, 1971), p. 5.

[3]See for example, "Balance and Freedom: How should we choose the books our students study?" unpub. paper delivered at the annual conference of the Niagara Region English Council, March 9, 1979 by David D. Stewart, Professor & Chairman of German Studies, Trent University; Kathleen M. Gow, *Yes Virginia, There is Right and Wrong!: Values Education Survival Kit* (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Can., 1980).

Murray J. Evans, author of articles on Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, *teaches medieval literature, composition, and children's literature at the University of Victoria.*