

Jane Bliss Transcript – Violet Needham

dear colleagues,
in this short talk i would like to introduce a writer very much less well known than Tolkien, Le Guin, or Pullman:
Violet Needham, whose work is forgotten except to members of the Violet Needham Society and/or a few of my generation. But medievalists may enjoy reading her romances for children.

i have not investigated the Society, nor would i call myself an expert in the enormous (and growing) field of fantasy for children.
however, this writer has been a favourite of mine for some time, and i have been re-reading some of her books with great pleasure.
Caroline's call for contributions to the Oxford Fantasy Podcast has persuaded me to come out of hibernation and offer you a short entertainment.

Violet Needham first published *The Woods of Windri* in 1944.
i have chosen this one, among several that i possess, because i happened to notice somebody saying she set her romances in 'Ruritania' having been influenced by the novels of Anthony Hope (you know, 'snobbery with violence' stuff).
be that as it may, in my view there is a simpler reason: the enchanted forest of Broceliande would be too easy to get to in the twentieth century! Brittany is part of what is now France, accessible by car - or bicycle from the nearest town. Even Wace went there, in the middle ages, and came away disappointed - he says.
Needham does not disappoint, and in any case Ruritania has always been much harder to get to, being apparently somewhere in south-eastern Europe and thus more remote ... even if it were real.

in the opening chapter the scene is set, just on the verge of mystery as follows: 'south and west of the castle stretched the Woods of Windri, the danger spot of the empire, woods so vast that an army might encamp there and not be discovered unless the Lord of Windri kept ceaseless watch ...'
it is with this Lord and his two daughters that our story is concerned.

before i continue, i want to set out a few of the themes that Needham uses to invoke the pervasive and enduring genre of romance.

first, there is a question about the identity of both heroes! Naming is a dominant theme of medieval romance, as i argued in my first book (*Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance*, 2008).

typically, Needham offers the theme in an unusual and quite distinctive variation: the hero is named in the first chapter but the reader doesn't know he is the hero - nor do the characters who are talking about him. then he is introduced in romantic incognito in the second chapter, but neither we nor those same characters find out until much later that the two are identical.

the other hero, a boy, doesn't know his own full name; this is a matter of great danger because he is at risk of being murdered (so too is the adult hero, in fact). he chooses his own pseudonym on arrival at the Lord of Windri's castle, and ultimately finds a true name that identifies him with his family both real and adopted.

key to the mystery is the boy's (inherited) birthmark, a useful plot device familiar to

story-tellers since olden times.

this talk is not a synopsis of the plot, so i shall pass over the ramifications: as in many adventure stories, great men (and sometimes women) intrigue and scheme to get power, dastardly deeds include murder unless the good characters manage to prevent them by knightly combat, that sort of thing.

more elusive is the magic of the woods. mysterious, yes, but all the marvellous things that happen there are to do with the virtue of the principal characters - the sympathetic ones, that is.

two of these are the young girls, daughters of the lord warden of the forest. they know that the place is friendly to its own, and so it proves, although we never witness an actual miracle or any actual magic there.

this is very reminiscent of something helen cooper has remarked: a hero may have a magic ring (for example) but it is in fact his own knightly qualities that effect his triumph over enemies and other difficulties.

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199248865.001.0001/acprof-9780199248865-chapter-4>

cooper's book, the english romance in time (2004) has a section entitled 'magic that does not work', and previously published an article in *medievalia and humanistica* with this title (1976).

wherever we are, needham does not actually tell us it's ruritania! so how can we be so sure? it is clearly not britain, so it must be somewhere in europe. the fact there is an empire means it is not necessary to say which country, or even which continent. i am aware that somebody is currently working on the theme of place in children's literature (focusing on british sites, i believe) but i haven't seen anything of it yet.

it is clearly somewhere vaguely exotic; magdalen's dog is called turk, the hero's horse is called black sultan, but needham doesn't overdo it. most of the human names are pan-european: phillippa, gertrude, theodore, hubert, oliver ...

it would probably not be useful to try and identify what kind of religion obtains in the story so as to compare it with various european church practices. it must be broadly roman catholic, because of things such as shrines, pilgrimage, the canonical hours and so on. anyway, the time is quite clearly before the reformation!

it occurs to me that not everybody knows about hope's ruritanian novels, so may not immediately place needham's work there (wherever it is).

other possible names might include transylvania, although this is now thought of as a place where vampires etc are found. transylvania is at least a real place, historically!

it might be interesting to mention philip pullman's razkavia here; but we are told exactly where - and when - that is, unlike needham's nameless and timeless realm - but discussion of this and other such fictional locations would be for another time and another project.

the important thing is, to my mind, that needham invokes a romantic elsewhere and makes it familiar to us.

the book raises questions about the meaning of certain words: magic, mystery, marvel. although there are no miracles, needham's readers are made aware of some of these meanings. miracles and mysteries happen in the readers' minds rather than in the story.

there is a mysterious hermit, a secret underground passage, a devil's pool, an abbey, a city with its bustle, the emperor's court, some armed bandits ... but there are no unicorns or witches.

the horse that young theodore `borrows' somehow finds its way safely and unguided through the forest to the castle, but it does not speak; the little girl's enormous faithful dog has no more than canine powers; the only dragon appears on a flag.

we are not told why the woods, although in some uncanny way kind to windri folk, were not safe for solitary travellers.

these woods are central to the story, and provide almost all its mystery.

although the main sphere of action is described with almost geographical precision, the wider world is less identifiably drawn. we are not told the name of the empire, nor even which century we're supposed to be in - the setting is broadly feudal. even `the capital', where some of the characters travel to meet the emperor, is not given a name; the emperor is merely `your majesty'.

we are shown exactly which track to follow through the forest, to the abbey, to the hermitage, to the neighbouring estates ... but we are not told exactly where the forest (windri, like broceliande) actually is. it is like a real world set into an unreal world.

a comparable situation is that we can feel ourselves very much at home in one of tolkien's places: the shire, being familiar with the hobbits' houses and surroundings. then as soon as we step out of the shire we are somewhere we could never have imagined.

in my `naming and namelessness' (p. 76) i cited a remark about place-names in the preface to henry james' novel, roderick hudson (preface pp. 13--15 in the penguin edition).

he regrets giving a name to his `peaceful, rural new england community quelconque' ... but his town is situated in america and we all know where that is. so it's the reverse of needham's geography.

in fact, james would have had to rewrite the passage on the first page of chapter one: he says that among cecilia's misfortunes was the fact that she lived at northampton, massachusetts. to say she lived at `a peaceful ... community quelconque' would sound odd, and calling it `nondescript' would not quite work either. northampton is too well drawn, and in any case does not have to be made mysterious.

needham is careful not to introduce inter-textual references: nobody talks of lancelot or roland, so the cultural landscape is neutral except for some religious details: a dominican priest, mention of nones, a shrine of st mary magdalen. st martin is mentioned, but only for st martin's summer! reference to a jack-in-a-box, for example, reassures us that the children know the same games that we know - which makes them more real.

the characters, thanks to the illustrations and some description of dress and behaviour, are good-quality pretend medieval without being over the top. i can't show you the pictures because the edition i am using is still in copyright.

although the language is slightly archaizing, it is clear and neutral; there is a refreshing lack of `gramercy sire' cliché. the girls' father says `god bless my soul!' when he is astonished, and (as a warning) `be careful, should you come across him, not to let him see you closely'. this works well.

the children are educated as befits their station: the girls because it is proper for the children of lords to be able to read and write, even including some latin - they will be able to help with management of the castle and household. needham does not patronize her young readers by explaining latin etc, but writes as if this is perfectly normal in their society; the boy learns more latin and even some greek because - until he ran away - he was destined to become a monk.

it is the younger daughter who finds the boy wandering lost in the forest, looking for the lord of windri to beg for his protection (and honourable employment); she brings him into her father's castle.

other sympathetic themes: the elder daughter must marry well because the lord has no male heir; he hopes to find her a husband who will be a powerful ally. his wife is dead and both his sons died young; he cherishes the girl all the more because of this. the daughters are brought up and companioned by the lord's sister (a pleasant woman who takes little part in the plot but is a necessary piece of furniture - there is no wicked stepmother).

the elder, now sixteen and a good church-going damsel, was attracted by the life of the nuns when visiting them on a brief family pilgrimage. she says she would rather enter a nunnery than take a husband; her father is reluctant to force her into marriage against her will, and hopes to persuade her in spite of his desire to keep her with him.

the younger daughter is a seven-year-old scamp with admirable qualities; apart from the wonderful woods of the title she is the real heroine, and much of the story is driven by her exploits.

so, here are the themes in common with medieval romance:

love, of course (with a happy ending in this case).

courtoisie - plenty of noble behaviour.

there is also more than one quest, that i have not explored here but play their part in the story.

naming and namelessness.

forest and court as setting; date uncertain.

plus several kinds of mystery.

as in all good fiction, there is plenty of coincidence. but whether the book counts as 'fantasy' i don't know!