

1985

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Recommended Citation

Shearer, Tom (1985) "A Strange Judgement of God's? Stevenson's The Merry Men," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol20/iss1/7>

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Tom Shearer

A Strange Judgement of God's?
Stevenson's *The Merry Men*



The Merry Men, one of Robert Louis Stevenson's first stories to make substantial use of Scots, exists in two versions. It was first published as an anonymous serial in *The Cornhill Magazine* during the summer of 1882.¹ The second version emerged in 1887 as title story to the collection *The Merry Men and Other Tales*. Despite Stevenson's remarks in a letter to his father that "*The Merry Men* I mean to make much longer, with a whole new denouement, not yet quite clear to me,"² the two versions are substantially similar, as Roger Swearingen has noted:

Stevenson did not revise the story extensively . . . but he did make many minor changes in wording and, especially in the last two chapters, deleted sentences and a number of scattered paragraphs to condense it.³

Most of these alterations are trivial enough to be ignored; unless indicated otherwise, all references are to the second, better known version.

Stevenson typically used first person narratives in his fiction; and *The Merry Men*, far from being an exception, is a tale where

interpretation of events depends to a large extent on understanding the personality of the narrator. Charles Darnaway arrives on Eilean Aros Jay (Gaelic for "the island of the House of God") to stay with his uncle and, he hopes, to marry the old man's daughter. The first chapter does little to advance the plot, but supplies much important background. He speaks a lot of the island's geography, and in particular about the fearsome tide-race, the Roost, and rocks, the Merry Men, which make the surrounding waters "no better than a trap" when the weather is unkind (p. 7). While travelling, he thinks about the local legends told to him by Rorie, his uncle's servant: sea-kelpies, mermaids and silkies abound, boding no one good; Saint Columba landed there on leaving Ireland; and a ship of the Spanish Armada sank in Sandag Bay. Supernatural evil from the sea, religion, and shipwreck: these are the strands from which *The Merry Men* is fashioned.

Shortly after this, Charles reveals the other motive behind his visit. Before leaving Edinburgh, where he had been a student, he had been working on papers dealing with the Armada, and finds something which connects with Rorie's folk-tales:

I found a note of this very ship, the "Espirito Santo," with her captain's name, and how she carried a great part of the Spaniard's treasure, and had been lost . . . and, being a fellow of a mechanical turn, I had ever since been plotting how to weigh that good ship up again with all her ingots, ounces and doubloons, and bring back our house of Darnaway to its long-forgotten dignity and wealth (p. 9).

This plan, he promptly admits, was not fruitful, "since I became the witness of a strange judgement of God's, the thought of dead man's treasures has been intolerable to my conscience" (p. 9). This is not the first hint that Charles is to narrate dire events. As protagonist he is involved in the action of the story, but as narrator he has already lived through it, and knows, unlike his earlier self or the reader, what is going to happen: "many woeful things befell our family, as I propose to tell" (p. 7).

Stevenson frequently made his narrators allude to things outside the immediate frame of the story, so as to heighten the illusion that they are people telling about things that have

happened, rather than simply a narrative convention. In *The Pavilion on the Links*, to take one example, the heroine's first appearance is greeted with the observation that "she might equally well have been as ugly as sin or as beautiful as I afterwards found her to be"; and the narrator-hero often remarks that he was later to marry this woman.⁴ It is the same in *The Merry Men*:

The thought of all these dangers, in the place I knew so long makes me particularly welcome the works now going forward to set lights upon the headlands and buoys along the channels of our iron-bound, inhospitable islands (p. 7).

Such a reference at first seems irrelevant; but it helps to foster the illusion of Charles's character, which is crucial to the interpretation of the story.

The young man has, for a start, a very vivid imagination. Diving to locate the treasure-ship, he accidentally recovers a synecdochic shoe-buckle:

I held it in my hand, and the thought of its owner appeared before me like the presence of an actual man. His weather-beaten face, his sailor's hands, his sea-voice hoarse with singing at the capstan, the very foot that had once worn that buckle and trod so much along the swerving decks My uncle's words, "the dead are down there", echoed in my ears; and though I determined to dive again, it was with a strong repugnance (pp. 30-1).

On his second dive, he surfaces clutching a human leg-bone. Scunnered by this, he abandons his quest.

Charles's mind is suspicious as well as inventive. The papers he had been sorting at college were for a Spanish historian, and when a Hispanic-looking man is seen in the area, Charles promptly concludes that he has come seeking the "Espirito Santo," and "would more likely be after treasure for himself than information for a learned society" (p. 24). Furthermore, when he sees men survey Sandag Bay, he thinks they can only be searching for the treasure, and are indubitably "poor, greedy, and most likely lawless" (p. 35). He has no firm ground for such assumptions, although when the strangers' ship is later wrecked,

Charles's interview with the one survivor does prove one of his suppositions to be correct:

He showed me where the boat was, pointed out seaward as if to indicate the position of the schooner, and then down along the edge of the rock with the words, "Espirito Santo", strangely pronounced, but clear enough for recognition. I had thus been right in my conjecture (p. 55).

A problem with the narrative method used is that it makes it difficult to tell whether the narrator's account of his earlier states of mind are accurate, or whether it has been distorted by hindsight and reflection. Charles asserts that "I must acquit myself of sordid greed; for if I desired riches, it was not for my own sake, but for the sake of a person who was dear to my heart" (p. 9). But are his own purposes not those he condemns in the seamen? Indeed, while commenting that he felt his uncle's house to have been blighted by the salvage from a wreck it contains, he admits that "in view of the errand I had come upon to Aros, the feeling was baseless and unjust" (p. 12).

Cousin Mary is also uneasy about the salvaged finery. The change accompanying these riches, she complains, has not been for the better: she "would have liked better, under God's pleasure, they had gone down into the sea, and the Merry Men were dancing on them now" (p. 13). But what is her father's attitude?

"They're grand braws, thir that we hae gotten, are they no'? Yon's a bonny knock, but it'll no gang; and the napery's by ordnar. Bonny, bairnly braws; it's for the like o' them, an' maybe no' even so muckle worth, folk dauntin God to his face and burn in muckle hell; and it's for that reason the Scripture ca's them, as I read the passage, the accursed thing" (p. 14).

Gordon Darnaway was raised among Cameronians, so at first this may seem only the distrust of carnal pleasures common among puritanical Christians. There is more to it, however:

"Why the Lord should hae made yon unco water is more than ever I could win to understand But troth, if it

wasna prentit in the Bible, I would whiles be temp't it to think it wasna the Lord, but the muckle, black deil that made the sea" (p. 16).

Gordon's fear of the sea, it is clear, is at least partly superstitious.

Here a problem emerges. *The Merry Men* is, or at least can be read as, a study of the psychological disintegration of Gordon Darnaway. Yet this explanation leaves some things unaccounted for. Crossing in the ferry to Aros, Charles notices that Rorie is disturbed by something in the water, and looks to see what it is:

For some time I could see naught; but at last it did seem to me as if something dark—a great fish, or perhaps only a shadow—followed studiously in the path of the moving coble. And then I remembered one of Rorie's superstitions: how, in a ferry in Morven, in some great, exterminating feud among the clans, a fish, the like of it unknown in all our waters, followed for some years the passage of the ferry-boat, until no man dared to make the crossing (p. 11-12).

After their arrival, Gordon early asks "Was it there?" (p. 17). Some strange phenomenon in the sea seems to be, if not a cause, at least a focus for Gordon's behaviour. But can the story then be about insanity? Are Charles and Rorie also crazy? They, not Gordon, are the ones who see something trailing the coble. Yet if the "great fish" is of supernatural provenance, it is the only preternatural element in the tale—unless "the man from the sea" really is the devil. But it does not have the importance in the development of the plot that this would lead one to suspect. By its proximity to other passages where the sea is seen as bringing death and disaster—the folktales Charles mentions should not be forgotten—the incident contributes to a growing atmosphere of foreboding. Its uniqueness, however, suggests that it should do more.

Gordon fears all the ocean as evil; but his apprehension centers on the Merry Men. The literal and littoral meanings of the name are linked by incessant personification: for example, "the Merry Men were dancing" (p. 13); or "'They're yowlin' for thon schooner'" (p. 46); or "the voice of these tide-breakers was

still raised for havoc" (p. 60). The choice of language is deliberate, as a speech of Charles makes clear:

At that hour, there flashed into my mind the reason of the name that they were called. For the noise of them seemed almost mirthful, yet instinct with a portentous joviality. Nay, and it seemed almost human. As when savage men have drunk away their reason, and, discarding speech, bawl together in their madness by the hour; so, to my ears, shouted these deadly breakers by Aros in the night (p. 44).

It is but a small step to believing that, because the waves seem jovial while they are destructive, they must be jovial because destructive. That is, they must be malevolent. Gordon follows this false logic, and thus contributes to his madness.

Edwin Eigner has this to say about Gordon: "Religious mania makes him regard the Merry Men as a special example of the world's wickedness. Therefore he despises them. Yet he is also fascinated, finding them irresistible and their dance 'bonny'."⁵ This is perhaps an over-statement, for although Gordon is strongly Calvinist and has a terror of the sea, the two are not necessarily linked. But some passages do support Eigner's thesis. During a storm, for example, old Darnaway has perched himself on a headland, drinking, watching the Merry Men destroy a foreign craft. The following morning his nephew reprimands him, to be answered thus:

" . . . when I hear the wind blaw in my lug, it's my belief that I gang gyte."

"You are a religious man," I replied, "and this is sin."

"Ou," he replied, "if it wasna sin, I dinna ken that I would care for't. Ye see, man, it's defiance. There's a sair spang o' the auld sin o' the warld in yon sea; it's an unchristian business at the best o't; an' whiles when it gets up, an' the wind skreighs—the wind an' her are a kind of sib, I'm thinking—an' thae Merry Men, the daft callants, blawin' an' lauchin' and puir souls in the deid thraws warstlin' the lee lang nicht wi' their bit ships—weel, it comes ower me like a glamour. I'm a deil, I ken't. But I think naething o' the puir sailor lads; I'm wi' the sea, I'm

just like ane o' her ain Merry Men (p. 50).

Gordon's actions thus appear to have metaphysical depths, but these depths are hard to fathom. From one angle he can be seen as an image of the deists' God who, having set the world in motion, becomes only a spectator. But Gordon is not responsible for the reefs; and he is not, from what is known of his beliefs, a deist. His religion is a Christianity warped to deal only with evil and damnation. The sea is part of God's creation—it says so in the Bible—yet the sea is to him evil. Is this wickedness part of the divine will? If so, how can God be good? If not, how can God be all-powerful? At times Gordon blames God for the Merry Men: "ye mauna interfere; ye mauna meddle wi' the like o' that. It's His'—doffing his bonnet—"His will'" (p. 39). At other times, as has been remarked, he suspects the ocean to be the creation of "the muckle, black, deil" (p. 16). Perhaps because of this ambivalence, Gordon flirts with damnation:

"Ay," said my kinsman, "at the hinder end, the Lord will triumph; I dinna misdoobt that. But here on earth, even silly men-folk daur Him to His face. It is no' wise; I am no' sayin' that it's wise; but it's the pride of the eye, and it's the lust o' life, an' it's the wale o' pleasures" (p. 51).

The final calamity comes when one man from the wrecked ship is found to be alive. The man is black; and Gordon breaks down completely, for in Scottish tradition the devil frequently appears as a black man.⁶ This superstition is made explicit only in the *Cornhill Magazine* version, where it is made clear that Gordon had, as a child, been regaled with "tales of the devil appearing as a black man, and, with cozening words and specious pretexts, luring men to ruin" (Vol. 46, p. 71). Gordon flees, ensconces himself on a hill-top, and refuses to return home while the stranger is there. Rorie and Charles try to escort the castaway to the mainland, but the ferry has sunk in the storm and their companion cannot swim. The three then attempt to chase Gordon back to the house by exploiting his fear of the Black. Charles makes a false move, and Gordon finds himself fleeing towards the sea, the stranger at his heels. Gordon's fear of the ocean is great, but his fear of the man he apparently believes to be Satan is greater: he runs on to meet the waves.

His pursuer, unable to stop (if human), or anxious to secure his victim (if demonic), plunges after him, and both are swept away.

Any attempt to make a coherent reading of *The Merry Men* is complicated by the way the reader's perception of events is filtered through the mind of Charles Darnaway. Because of this, the state of Gordon's psyche is unclear: he is clearly less than sane, but the nature and cause of the disturbance can only be guessed at. Charles is sure that the madness is rooted in murder; but the crime he suspects his uncle of may never have taken place. As Eigner remarks,

Stevenson seems to be using his narrator as a second or externalized conscience for his protagonist. As Charles rejects his uncle as evil—"I lost toleration for the man . . ."—so does Gordon Darnaway reject himself. Charles, like his uncle, interprets the latter's wild actions as 'sin'; it may be that he imagines more evil deeds that have actually been performed (p. 140).

Charles does indeed share his uncle's cast of mind about such things. Despite insisting "I have said a thousand times I am not superstitious" (p. 53), he makes frequent reference to the religious and superstitious world. His speech is interspersed with phrases such as "Heaven help the man" (p. 6), "something sacrilegious in its nature" (p. 28), or "God alone can tell" (p. 62). Early on he suggests that the Darnaway family was accursed, claiming that "there is little luck for any of that race"; and his verdict on his uncle's doom is that it was "a strange judgement of God's" (p. 9); "Heaven's will," he believes, "was declared against Gordon Darnaway" (p. 58).

Does Charles not contradict himself when he maintains that his uncle's death was both an act of destiny and the fluke of a guilt-twisted mind? It cannot be argued that it was Gordon's weird to murder, for nowhere in the text is there evidence of the killing's inevitability. Nowhere in the text, moreover, is there any proof that there has even been a killing. Charles insists that there has been; and since he is so certain, and the narrator, no other possible explanation is posited. His suspicions are plausible, but the evidence is only circumstantial.

Charles feels uneasy about the "braws" salvaged from the first wreck, the "Christ-Anna", right from the start. Then Mary

comments on them: "I neither like these changes, nor the way they came, nor that which came with them" (p. 13). Hearing his beloved echo his feelings, he rapidly becomes convinced that there is something unclean about the wreck and all connected with it. Shortly afterwards, nephew and uncle go for a stroll, and pause to look at disturbances on the face of the water caused by the tides. One of these "sea-runes" resembles the letter C. Charles decides that it represents his name. His uncle decides that it denotes the "Christ-Anna"—and one should here pause to wonder how he knows the name of the vessel. The connotations seem to disturb him.

"Weel, weel, but that's unco strange. Maybe, it's been there waitin', as a man would say, through all the weary ages. Man, but that's awfu'." And then, breaking off: "Ye'll no' see anither, will ye?" (p. 21)

Charles does see another, in the shape of an M. His uncle becomes even more distraught at this, and refuses to say what he thinks it stands for. Charles then does some amateur semiotics, and decides that it signifies murder.

The following morning, Charles's suspicions increase. While surveying the bay where he believes the wreck and riches of the "Espirito Santo" to lie, his eyes "were suddenly arrested by a spot, cleared of fern and heather, and marked by one of those low, and almost human-looking mounds that we see so commonly in graveyards" (p. 26). He has seen what he assumes to be a grave. It may well be a grave, but at no time does Charles attempt to ascertain if there has been a recent burial in Sandag Bay.

Charles obtains his next "clue" when his uncle, being told that men had come ashore at the bay,

dropped his pipe and fell back against the end of the house with his jaw fallen, his eyes staring, and his long face as white as paper. We must have looked at one another silently for a quarter of a minute, before he made answer in this extraordinary fashion: "Had he a hair kep on?"

I knew as well as if I had been there that the man who now lay buried in Sandag had worn a hairy cap, and that he had come ashore alove (p. 37).

Once more Charles's interpretation is perfectly plausible; once more he does not seek proof. He then berates the old man:

"As for your own guilty terrors, man, the dead sleeps well where you have laid him. I stood this morning by his grave; he will not wake before the trump of doom" (p. 37).

Gordon gawps; but is his speechlessness the result of a troubled conscience, or does he simply not know what Charles is talking about? It may not be through guilt that Gordon agonizes; Charles agnizes this not.

If there has in fact been no crime, then Charles is partly to blame for his uncle's death. After the wreck of the schooner the young man once again alludes to the supposed homicide; and Gordon's reaction can again be explained as either guilt or incomprehension. At this point the Negro appears; on seeing him, Gordon refers to the wreck as the "Christ-Anna." This would seem to support Charles's allegations, but before explanations can be made, the catastrophe takes place. Gordon goes to pieces; Charles does the wrong thing:

My kinsman began swearing and praying in a mingled stream. I looked at him; he had fallen on his knees, his face was agonised; at each step of the castaway's the pitch of his voice rose, the volubility of his utterance and the fervour of his language redoubled. I call it prayer, for it was addressed to God; but surely no such ranting incongruities were ever before addressed to the Creator by a creature: surely, if prayer can be a sin, this mad harangue was sinful. I ran to my kinsman, I seized him by the shoulders, I dragged him to his feet.

"Silence, man," said I, "respect your God in words, if not in action. Here, on the very scene of your transgressions, He sends you an occasion of atonement. Forward and embrace it; welcome like a father yon creature who comes trembling to your mercy." With that, I tried to force him towards the black; but he felled me to the ground . . . and fled (pp. 53-4).

The pages following this vary between versions. The 1887 one does not mention the superstition about the devil. This has a

double effect: it makes Charles's interpretation more likely, by playing down the supernatural; but because there is no longer any evidence that he knows the belief, it makes him less well-equipped to understand his uncle's attitude, and thus lowers his credibility as a narrator. The disposition of the castaway also changes: in 1882, "his eye and his mind were continually wandering; and I have never seen anyone who smiled so often or so brightly" (Vol. 46, p. 68); yet in 1887 "he had a powerful mind and a sober and severe character" (p. 56). The first avatar makes it seem that he will be unlikely to prove to be anything other than a truly warm and wonderful human being, and indeed it is he who suggests how to leave food for the fugitive Gordon (Vol. 46, p. 70). Charles reacts differently in each instance. In the earlier edition, he says that "even his black face was beautified; and before we had reached the house of Aros I had entirely conquered the first repulsion of his looks" (Vol. 46, p. 68); in the second this becomes "before we reached the house of Aros I had almost forgotten, and wholly forgiven him his uncanny colour" (p. 56). These changes heighten the mystery by reducing both the suggestions that the uncle suspects the castaway to be the devil and the suggestions that the stranger is merely a man. Both versions are ambiguous, but the first has the ambiguity of contradiction, the second that of uncertainty.

One section of *The Merry Men* seems to disprove Charles's interpretation of his uncle's behaviour.

All last winter he had been dark and fitful in his mind. Whenever the Roost ran high, or, as Mary said, whenever the Merry Men were dancing, he would lie out for hours together on the Head, if it were at night, or on the top of Aros by day, watching the tumult of the sea, and sweeping the horizon for a sail. After February the tenth, when the wealth-bringing wreck was cast ashore at Sandag, he had at first been unnaturally gay, and his excitement had never fallen in degree, but only changed in kind from dark to darker Since Rorie had first remarked the fish that hung about the ferry, his master had never set foot but once on the main-land of Ross A fear of the sea, a constant haunting thought of the sea, appeared in his talk and devotions, and even in his looks when he was silent (pp. 41-2).

It is clear that Gordon's madness started before the wreck of the "Christ-Anna." The passage also contains another reference to that mysterious fish. On one level it functions as a harbinger of doom or disaster, yet on another it is totally unaccounted for. Is it fish, phantom, or fancy? It seems to belong more to Rorie's world of Highland myth than to Gordon's warped religiosity.

Several aspects of *The Merry Men* make it difficult to produce a coherent reading of what it is "about." The nature of the fish is a problem of matter; most of the others are ones of manner. They are linked to Charles's performance as a narrator. As has just been suggested, his interpretation of the circumstances surrounding his uncle's death may have little to do with what actually happened. Furthermore, as has also been indicated, his attitude to looting wrecks depends on who is doing it; and he echoes his uncle's religious sentiments to a greater extent than he admits. Not only is his judgment possibly dubious, but his ability to structure a narrative must also be questioned. More than half his tale is devoted to his efforts to retrieve the riches of the "Espirito Santo," but the existence of this treasure is ignored for the rest of the story; and his early remark about lighthouses makes it clear that the world did not end when Gordon Darnaway did; the narrative awakens interest in the future of Charles and Mary and in the fate of the treasure, but leaves the reader's curiosity unslaked.

The critical problem with the story—critical both in the sense of major and in that of afflicting the critic more than the casual reader—is the question of how unified a work it is. Stevenson's own literary aesthetics contribute to this. In his essay "A Gossip on Romance," he argues that the essential ingredient in fiction, the thing which lays hold of the reader's attention, is the incident:

The desire for knowledge, I had almost added the desire for meat, is not more deeply seated than this desire for fit and striking incident. The dullest clown tells, or tries to tell, himself a story, as the feeblest of children uses invention in his play; and even as the imaginative grown person, joining in the game, at once enriches it with many delightful circumstances, the great creative writer shows us the realisation and the apotheosis of the day-dreams of

common men.⁷

The Merry Men contains individual scenes of great power—the journey on the ferry, the descriptions of the sea, the uncle gloating over the wreck—and it may be that, in concentrating on the parts of his tale, Stevenson did not really bother to check if their implications were reconcilable in juxtaposition. Whatever the reason, there is little unity of metaphysic. What there is, though, is unity of mood; in this context two remarks of Stevenson's are worth noting. Graham Balfour reports him as saying that, among the possible approaches to the construction of a story,

"you may take a certain atmosphere and get action and persons to express and realise it. I'll give you an example—*The Merry Men*. There I began with the feeling of one of those islands on the west coast of Scotland, and I gradually developed the story to express the sentiment with which that coast affected me."⁸

Earlier, in a letter to W.E. Henley dated August 1881, Stevenson had had this to say:

My uncle himself is not the story as I see it, only the leading episode of that story. It's really a story of wrecks as they appear to the dweller on the coast. It's a view of the sea.⁹

On these terms, perhaps *The Merry Men* is a success.

A few snags remain. For a start, a work does not always do what its author thinks it will do or has done. But even if this was not true, an assertion Stevenson makes in "A Humble Remonstrance" has to be accounted for:

from all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this, and if there is anywhere a word that looks another way, the book would be stronger, clearer and (I had almost said) fuller without it.¹⁰

As if this was not enough, the assessment of mood or tone is surely largely subjective. Stevenson's use of language associated with religion, superstition and perdition might help generate an atmosphere; but how much of the effectiveness of this depends on the author's manipulation of language, and how much on the connotations the terms used have for the reader? Are the implications of "justified" the same for a fundamentalist Christian and an atheistic type-setter?

There remains one possible way out: is it an immutable literary law that a story which leaves questions unanswered must be "bad"? *The Merry Men* opens up theological avenues which are left unexplored: the reader must make his or her own way along them. Could it be that *The Merry Men* is, to use the terminology of Roland Barthes, not a Work but a Text? After all, one of the features of a Text is that it

asks the reader for an active collaboration. This is a great innovation, for it compels us to ask "who *executes* the work?" The reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the "boredom" that many people feel when confronting the modern ("unreadable") text, or the avant-garde movie or painting: to suffer from boredom means that one cannot produce the text, play it, *make it go*.¹¹

Furthermore, "the Text is plural. This does not mean just that it has several meanings, but rather that it achieves plurality of meaning, an *irreducible* plurality (p. 76). Unfortunately, Barthes' essay is itself difficult to make a coherent reading of (because of its own Textuality?): he warns that "these propositions are to be understood as enunciations rather than arguments, as mere indications, as it were, approaches that 'agree' to remain metaphoric" (p. 74). What, it cannot go unasked, is the difference between "several meanings" and "plurality of meaning"? If further complications are required, a different translation of the essay insists that the vital distinction is that between "several meanings and "the very plural of meanings."¹²

In his essay "On the Interpretation of Ordinary Language: A Parable of Pascal,"¹³ Louis Marin gives what seems to be a lucid account of the mysterious plurality:

it does not imply that there are *several meanings* and that the truth of the interpretation is dependent upon the contingency of critical approaches, the arbitrary choice of a point of view, procedure or method of analysis, or the opportuneness (not to say the opportunism) of a historical, social and cultural position of critical discourse. It signifies rather that *meaning is plural*, that the possible, the latent, the divergent enter into its very definition—not just into its speculative definition, but also into its concrete production, be it that of the writer or the reader, of the emitter or receiver of the message at different moments of history and at different places in the world and in culture (p. 239).

By this definition, it is probably not true to say that *The Merry Men* is a Text. Barthes writes, it should be noted, that "the Text's plurality does not depend on the ambiguity of its contents

So the initial problem remains: on its surface, *The Merry Men* is an excellent, straight-forward tale. Yet the implications raised by different sections of it are sometimes contradictory: are these overtones to be ignored as accidental by-products of a simple story, or are they, being bound up in the author's language, as important a part of the ordered, self-relating play of words that form fiction as anything else? Perhaps to recognize that the work is composed of juxtaposed incidents is not to censure it; the idea that a work should display structural and philosophical unity is merely conventional. But there are two objections to this: firstly, as a convention it is so deeply engrained that it is difficult to see how to operate without its axiomatic backing; and secondly, Stevenson himself—as has been mentioned earlier—did believe, at least at times, in the essential oneness of literature. *The Merry Men* breaks on an irreconcilable disjunction in Stevenson's aesthetics: how can a story be constructed of discrete episodes and yet form a unified whole?

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NOTES

¹*Cornhill Magazine*, 45 (1882), 676-95, and 46 (1883), 56-73.

²*The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Skeeryvore Edn., 30 vols. (London, 1924-6), 28, 211-2 (19 April 1884). The edition is henceforth referred to as *Works*. *The Merry Men* appears in Vol. 7, pp. 3-62. The page numbers of further quotations from *The Merry Men* appear in the text.

³Roger G. Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: an Index and Finding-list*, (San Francisco, 1978), pp. 52c-53.

⁴*Works*, 1, 183-247.

⁵Edwin M. Eigner, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, 1967), p. 136.

⁶Stevenson also uses this tradition in "Thrawn Janet," another of the tales in the *Merry Men* collection. Historical examples of the superstition are discussed in Coleman O. Parsons' article "Stevenson's use of Witchcraft in 'Thrawn Janet'" *Studies in Philology*, 43 (1946), 551-71.

⁷*Works*, 25, 141.

⁸Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, 2 vol. (London, 1901), 2, 142.

⁹*Works*, 28, 49-50.

¹⁰Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Humble Remonstrance," 25, 155-68.

¹¹Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari, (London, 1980), p. 80.

¹²See Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image—*

Music—Text: Essays, selected and trans. by Stephen Heath (London, 1977), pp. 155-64.

¹³Louis Marin, "On the Interpretation of Ordinary Language" A Parable of Pascal," in *Textual Strategies*, pp. 239-59.

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