



# UNIVERSALITY OF THE FOLKTALE



THE teller of stories has everywhere and always found eager listeners. Whether his tale is the mere report of a recent happening, a legend of long ago, or an elaborately contrived fiction, men and women have hung upon his words and satisfied their yearnings for information or amusement, for incitement to heroic deeds, for religious edification, or for release from the overpowering monotony of their lives. In villages of central Africa, in outrigger boats on the Pacific, in the Australian bush, and within the shadow of Hawaiian volcanoes, tales of the present and of the mysterious past, of animals and gods and heroes, and of men and women like themselves, hold listeners in their spell or enrich the conversation of daily life. So it is also in Eskimo igloos under the light of seal-oil lamps, in the tropical jungles of Brazil, and by the totem poles of the British Columbian coast. In Japan too, and China and India, the priest and the scholar, the peasant and the artisan all join in their love of a good story and their honor for the man who tells it well.

When we confine our view to our own occidental world, we see that for at least three or four thousand years, and doubtless for ages before, the art of the story-teller has been cultivated in every rank of society. Odysseus entertains the court of Alcinoüs with the marvels of his adventures. Centuries later we find the long-haired page reading nightly from interminable chivalric romances to entertain his lady while her lord is absent on his crusade. Medieval priests illustrate sermons by anecdotes old and new, and only sometimes edifying. The old peasant, now as always, whiles away the winter evening with tales of wonder and adventure and the marvelous workings of fate. Nurses tell children of Goldilocks or the House that Jack Built.

Poets write epics and novelists novels. Even now the cinemas and theaters bring their stories direct to the ear and eye through the voices and gestures of actors. And in the smoking-rooms of sleeping cars and steamships and at the banquet table the oral anecdote flourishes in a new age.

In the present work we are confining our interest to a relatively narrow scope, the traditional prose tale—the story which has been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth. Such tales are, of course, only one of the many kinds of story material, for, in addition to them, narrative comes to us in verse as ballads and epics, and in prose as histories, novels, dramas, and short stories. We shall have little to do with the songs of bards, with the ballads of the people, or with poetic narrative in general, though stories themselves refuse to be confined exclusively to either prose or verse forms. But even with verse and all other forms of prose narrative put aside, we shall find that in treating the traditional prose tale—the folktale—our quest will be ambitious enough and will take us to all parts of the earth and to the very beginnings of history.

Although the term "folktale" is often used in English to refer to the "household tale" or "fairy tale" (the German *Märchen*), such as "Cinderella" or "Snow White," it is also legitimately employed in a much broader sense to include all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years. In this usage the important fact is the traditional nature of the material. In contrast to the modern story writer's striving after originality of plot and treatment, the teller of a folktale is proud of his ability to hand on that which he has received. He usually desires to impress his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp of good authority, that the tale was heard from some great story-teller or from some aged person who remembered it from old days.

So it was until at least the end of the Middle Ages with writers like Chaucer, who carefully quoted authorities for their plots—and sometimes even invented originals so as to dispel the suspicion that some new and unwarranted story was being foisted on the public. Though the individual genius of such writers appears clearly enough, they always depended on authority, not only for their basic theological opinions but also for the plots of their stories. A study of the sources of Chaucer or Boccaccio takes one directly into the stream of traditional narrative.

The great written collections of stories characteristic of India, the Near East, the classical world, and Medieval Europe are almost entirely traditional. They copy and recopy. A tale which gains favor in one collection is taken over into others, sometimes intact and sometimes with changes of plot or characterization. The history of such a story, passing it may be from India to Persia and Arabia and Italy and France and finally to England, copied and changed from manuscript to manuscript, is often exceedingly complex. For it goes through the hands of both skilled and bungling narrators and improves

or deteriorates at nearly every retelling. However well or poorly such a story may be written down, it always attempts to preserve a tradition, an old tale with the authority of antiquity to give it interest and importance.

If use of the term "folktale" to include such literary narratives seems somewhat broad, it can be justified on practical grounds if on no other, for it is impossible to make a complete separation of the written and the oral traditions. Often, indeed, their interrelation is so close and so inextricable as to present one of the most baffling problems the folklore scholar encounters. They differ somewhat in their behavior, it is true, but they are alike in their disregard of originality of plot and of pride of authorship.

Nor is complete separation of these two kinds of narrative tradition by any means necessary for their understanding. The study of the oral tale, which we undertake in this volume, will be valid so long as we realize that stories have frequently been taken down from the lips of unlettered tale-tellers and have entered the great literary collections. In contrary fashion, fables of Aesop, anecdotes from Homer, and saints' legends, not to speak of fairy tales read from Perrault or Grimm, have entered the oral stream and all their association with the written or printed page has been forgotten. Frequently a story is taken from the people, recorded in a literary document, carried across continents or preserved through centuries, and then retold to a humble entertainer who adds it to his repertory.

It is clear then that the oral story need not always have been oral. But when it once habituates itself to being passed on by word of mouth it undergoes the same treatment as all other tales at the command of the raconteur. It becomes something to tell to an audience, or at least to a listener, not something to read. Its effects are no longer produced indirectly by association with words written or printed on a page, but directly through facial expression and gesture and repetition and recurrent patterns that generations have tested and found effective.

This oral art of tale-telling is far older than history, and it is not bounded by one continent or one civilization. Stories may differ in subject from place to place, the conditions and purposes of tale-telling may change as we move from land to land or from century to century, and yet everywhere it ministers to the same basic social and individual needs. The call for entertainment to fill in the hours of leisure has found most peoples very limited in their resources, and except where modern urban civilization has penetrated deeply they have found the telling of stories one of the most satisfying of pastimes. Curiosity about the past has always brought eager listeners to tales of the long ago which supply the simple man with all he knows of the history of his folk. Legends grow with the telling, and often a great heroic past evolves to gratify vanity and tribal pride. Religion also has played a mighty role everywhere in the encouragement of the narrative art, for the religious mind has tried to understand beginnings and for ages has told stories of ancient days and sacred

beings. Often whole cosmologies have unfolded themselves in these legends, and hierarchies of gods and heroes.

World-wide also are many of the structural forms which oral narrative has assumed. The hero tale, the explanatory legend, the animal anecdote—certainly these at least are present everywhere. Other fictional patterns are limited to particular areas of culture and act by their presence or absence as an effective index of the limit of the area concerned. The study of such limitations has not proceeded far, but it constitutes an interesting problem for the student of these oral narrative forms.

Even more tangible evidence of the ubiquity and antiquity of the folktale is the great similarity in the content of stories of the most varied peoples. The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world in most puzzling fashion. A recognition of these resemblances and an attempt to account for them brings the scholar closer to an understanding of the nature of human culture. He must continually ask himself, "Why do some peoples borrow tales and some lend? How does the tale serve the needs of the social group?" When he adds to his task an appreciation of the aesthetic and practical urge toward story-telling, and some knowledge of the forms and devices, stylistic and histrionic, that belong to this ancient and widely practiced art, he finds that he must bring to his work more talents than one man can easily possess. Literary critics, anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and aestheticians are all needed if we are to hope to know why folktales are made, how they are invented, what art is used in their telling, how they grow and change and occasionally die.



## FORMS OF THE FOLKTALE



With the folktale as with all other products of man's artistic endeavor the scholar runs the risk of too subtle analysis. He may interest himself in studying the entire body of oral narrative of a people so as to divide it neatly into categories according to origin or form or content, but although such a close examination of the stories undoubtedly teaches him much, he must realize that the men and women who tell them neither know nor care about his distinctions. Much hair-splitting has taken place in the past and much useless effort devoted to the establishment of exact terms for the various kinds of folktale.

Yet some very general terms are not only helpful but necessary. The limitations of human life and the similarity of its basic situations necessarily produce tales everywhere which are much alike in all important structural respects. They have as definite form and substance in human culture as the pot, the hoe, or the bow and arrow, and several of these narrative forms are quite as generally employed. Others are confined to definite areas or belong to particular periods of time. But all of them, whenever they become so well recognized that they are continually referred to, have, in the course of time, been given names. Sometimes these are accurate and sometimes not, but from the very beginning anyone who discusses the folktale inevitably uses them and wishes his reader to be able to use them too.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most frequent of all concepts to be met when one studies the folktale on a world-wide basis is that which the Germans call *Märchen*. We have nothing in English that is quite satisfactory, though the term is usually translated by "fairy tale," or "household tale." The French use *conte popu-*

<sup>1</sup> Several of these narrative forms are discussed in some detail farther on; see pp. 21, 234, and 303.

*laire*. What they are all trying to describe is such tales as "Cinderella," "Snow White," or "Hansel and Gretel." *Fairy tale* seems to imply the presence of fairies; but the great majority of such tales have no fairies. *Household tale* and *conte populaire* are so general that they might be applied to almost any kind of story. The German *Märchen* is better, and is fairly well agreed on. A *Märchen* is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous. In this never-never land humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms, and marry princesses. Since *Märchen* deal with such a chimerical world, the name "chimerat" has been suggested for international usage, though it has not yet received wide adoption.

Near to the *Märchen* in general structure is the *novella*. Literary examples of this form may be seen in the *Arabian Nights* or Boccaccio, but such stories are also widely told by the unlettered, especially by the peoples of the Near East. The action occurs in a real world with definite time and place, and though marvels do appear, they are such as apparently call for the hearer's belief in a way that the *Märchen* does not. The adventures of Sinbad the Sailor form such a *novella*.

The distinction between *novella* and *Märchen* is not always drawn, the former being sometimes referred to as *Novellenmärchen*. In any case there is much overlapping between the two categories, so that some tales appear in one land with all the characteristics of a *novella*, in another with those of a *Märchen*.

*Hero tale* is a more inclusive term than either *Märchen* or *novella*, since a tale of this kind may move in the frankly fantastic world of the former or the pseudo-realistic world of the latter. Most *Märchen* and *novelle*, of course, have heroes, but would hardly be called hero tales unless they recounted a series of adventures of the same hero. Almost everywhere are found such clusters of tales relating the superhuman struggles of men like Hercules or Theseus against a world of adversaries. Stories of this kind are particularly popular with primitive peoples or with those belonging to a heroic age of civilization, like the early Greeks or the Germanic folk in the days of their great migrations.

For another general narrative pattern used all over the world, the German term *Sage* has been widely adopted. English and French attempts to express the same idea are *local tradition*, *local legend*, *migratory legend*, and *tradition populaire*. This form of tale purports to be an account of an extraordinary happening believed to have actually occurred. It may recount a legend of something which happened in ancient times at a particular place—a legend which has attached itself to that locality, but which will probably also be told with equal conviction of many other places, even in remote parts of the world. It may tell of an encounter with marvelous creatures which the folk still believe in—fairies, ghosts, water-spirits, the devil, and the like. And it may

give what has been handed down as a memory—often fantastic or even absurd—of some historical character. The story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, of the wild horseman encountered by Ichabod Crane, of old Barbarossa sleeping in the mountain, and the dozens of tales of Indian lovers' leaps from cliffs all over America—all these are *Sagen*. It will be observed that they are nearly always simple in structure, usually containing but a single narrative motif.

Very close to the local tradition is the *explanatory tale*. Other terms for it are *etiological tale*, *Natursage*, *pourquoi story*. The local legend often explains the existence of some hill or cliff or tells why a certain river meanders over the landscape. There are similar stories explaining the origins and characteristics of various animals and plants, the stars, and mankind and his institutions. Frequently this explanation seems to be the entire reason for the existence of the story, but more often than is usually recognized these explanations are merely added to a story to give an interesting ending. Such explanations may indeed be attached to almost any narrative form, such as the *Märchen* or the hero tale.

Of all the words used to distinguish the classes of prose narrative, *myth* is the most confusing. The difficulty is that it has been discussed too long and that it has been used in too many different senses. The history of such discussion is interesting but inconclusive. As used in this book *myth* will be taken to mean a tale laid in a world supposed to have preceded the present order. It tells of sacred beings and of semi-divine heroes and of the origins of all things, usually through the agency of these sacred beings. Myths are intimately connected with religious beliefs and practices of the people. They may be essentially hero legends or etiological stories, but they are systematized and given religious significance. The hero is somehow related to the rest of the pantheon and the origin story becomes an origin myth by attachment to the adventures of some god or demigod. Whether hero legend and origin story generally preceded myth or whether they became detached from it, the fundamental difference between these forms is reasonably clear.

Animals play a large role in all popular tales. They appear in myths, especially those of primitive peoples where the culture hero often has animal form, though he may be conceived of as acting and thinking like a man or even, on occasion, of having human shape. This tendency toward ascribing human qualities to animals also appears when the tale is clearly not in the mythical cycle. It is such non-mythological stories that we designate by the simple term *animal tales*. They are designed usually to show the cleverness of one animal and the stupidity of another, and their interest usually lies in the humor of the deceptions or the absurd predicaments the animal's stupidity leads him into. The American Indian series of stories of coyote and the popular European cycle of the fox and the wolf, best known in America as the tales of Uncle Remus, are outstanding examples of this form.

When the animal tale is told with an acknowledged moral purpose, it becomes a *fable*. The best known are the great literary collections, Aesop and the Panchatantra. They usually attach an actual maxim, though this is not necessary. But the moral purpose is the essential quality which distinguishes the fable from the other animal tales.

Short anecdotes told for humorous purposes are found everywhere. They are variously referred to as *jest*, *humorous anecdote*, *merry tale*, and (German) *Schwank*. Among some they are usually animal tales, but even where this is true the action is essentially that characteristic of men. Important themes producing these popular jests are the absurd acts of foolish persons (the *numskull tale*), deceptions of all kinds, and obscene situations. There is a tendency for jests to form cycles, since humorous adventures become attached to some character who thereafter attracts into his orbit all kinds of jests, appropriate and inappropriate. The same hero may be celebrated for his clever ruses, and for his utter stupidity, and obscene tales may often be told about him. But jests frequently detach themselves from cycles and may be encountered in the most unlikely places. They are easily remembered and universally liked, so that they travel with great ease. Some of the funny stories heard today have lived three or four thousand years and have been carried all over the earth.

Because of their possible confusion with terms we have already mentioned, two narrative forms primarily literary deserve a short notice. In some languages the term *legend*, which we have used above in discussing the local and the explanatory legend, can be used only in the special sense of the life of a saint. In English it is necessary to use the full expression *saint's legend* if that is meant. Such pious stories are normally handed down in literary collections, though a number have entered the stream of oral tradition, where they are sometimes not to be distinguished from the fairy tale, or *Märchen*.

*Saga* is also a misleading term. Its use should be restricted to the literary tales of the heroic age, particularly of Scandinavia and Ireland, and not employed loosely to mean "an experience" or "a story." And it should not be confused with the German *Sage*, which as we have seen has an entirely different meaning.

Other words for oral narrative forms have been suggested from time to time, but for the practical purpose of examining and discussing actual folktales as they appear over the world, these few which we have listed will be sufficient. We shall find these forms not so rigid as the theoretician might wish, for they will be blending into each other with amazing facility. Fairy tales become myths, or animal tales, or local legends. As stories transcend differences of age or of place and move from the ancient world to ours, or from ours to a primitive society, they often undergo protean transformations in style and narrative purpose. For the plot structure of the tale is much more stable and more persistent than its form.