ITALIAN FOLKTALES

Selected and Retold by

ITALO CALVINO

Translated by George Martin

A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

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Introduction

A Journey Through Folklore

The writing of this book was originally undertaken because of a publishing need: a collection of Italian folktales to take its rightful place alongside the great anthologies of foreign folklore. The problem was which text to choose. Was there an Italian equivalent of the Brothers Grimm?

It is generally accepted that Italian tales from the oral tradition were recorded in literary works long before those from any other country. In Venice, as early as the middle of the sixteenth century, tales of wizardry and enchantment (some of them in dialect) as well as realistic novellas written in a Boccaccio-like style were collected by Straparola in his *Piacevoli Notti*. These tales imparted to his book a flavor of magic—part gothic, part oriental—suggestive of Carpaccio. In Naples, in the seventeenth century, Giambattista Basile wrote fairy tales in Neapolitan dialect and in baroque style and gave us the *Pentameron or Entertainment for the Little Ones* (which in our century was translated into Italian by no less a personage than the philosopher Benedetto Croce). Basile's work resembles the dream of an odd Mediterranean Shakespeare, obsessed with the horrible, for whom there never were enough ogres or witches, in whose far-fetched and grotesque metaphors the sublime was intermingled with the coarse and the sordid. And in the eighteenth century, again in Venice, to countervail Goldoni's middle-class comedies, Carlo Gozzi, a surly conservative, deeming that the public deserved no better, brought to the stage folktales in which he mingled fairies and wizards with the Harlequins and Pantaloons of the Commedia dell'Arte.

But it was no longer a novelty: ever since the seventeenth century in France, fairy tales had flourished in Versailles at the court of the Sun King, where Charles Perrault created a genre and set down in writing a refined version of simple popular tales which, up to then, had been transmitted by word of mouth. The genre became fashionable and lost its artlessness: noble ladies and *précieuses* took to transcribing and inventing fairy stories. Thus dressed up and embellished, in the forty-one volumes of the *Cabinet des fées*, the folktale waxed and waned in French literature along with a taste for elegant fantasy counterbalanced by formal Cartesian rationalism.

Thanks to the Brothers Grimm it flourished again, somber and earthy, at the beginning of the nineteenth century in German Romantic literature, this time as the anonymous creation of the Volksgeist, which had its roots in a timeless medieval period. A patriotic cult for the poetry of the common people spread among the *littérateurs* of Europe: Tommaseo and other scholars sought out Italian popular poetry but the tales waited in vain for an Italian Romantic to discover them.

Through the diligent efforts of the folklorists of the positivistic generation, people began to write down tales told by old women. These folklorists looked upon India, as did Max Muller, as the source of all stories and myths, if not of mankind itself. The solar religions impressed them as being so complex that they had to invent Cinderella to account for the dawn, and Snow White for the spring. But meantime, after the example first set by the Germans (Widter and Wolf in Venice, Hermann Knust in Leghorn, the Austrian Schneller in Trentino, and Laura Gonzenbach in Sicily), people began collecting "novelline"—Angelo De Gubernatis in Siena, Vittorio Imbriani in Florence, in Campania, and in Lombardy; Domenico Comparetti in Pisa; Giuseppe Pitrè in Sicily. Some made do with a rough summary, but others, more painstaking, succeeded in preserving and transmitting the pristine freshness of the original stories. This passion communicated itself to a host of local researchers, collectors of dialectal oddities and minutiae, who became the contributors to the journals of folkloristic archives.

In this manner huge numbers of popular tales were transmitted by word of mouth in various dialects, especially during the last third of the nineteenth century. The unremitting efforts of these "demo-psychologists," as Pitrè labeled them, were never properly acknowledged and the patrimony they had brought to light was destined to remain locked up in specialized libraries; the material never circulated among the public. An "Italian Grimm" did not emerge, although as early as 1875 Comparetti had attempted to put together a general anthology from a number of regions, publishing in the series "Poems and Tales of the Italian People," which he and D'Ancona edited, one volume of *Popular Italian Tales*, with the promise of two additional volumes which, however, never materialized.

The folktale as a genre, confined to scholarly interests in learned monographs, never had the romantic vogue among Italian writers and poets that it had enjoyed in the rest of Europe, from Tieck to Pushkin; it was taken over, instead, by writers of children's books, the master of them all being Carlo Collodi, who, some years before writing *Pinocchio*, had translated from the French a number of seventeenth-century fairy tales. From time to time, some famous writer such as Luigi Capuana, the major novelist of the Sicilian naturalist school, would do as a book for children a collection of tales having its roots both in fantasy and popular sentiment.

But there was no readable master collection of Italian folktales which would be popular in every sense of the word. Could such a book be assembled now? It was decided that I should do it.

For me, as I knew only too well, it was a leap in the dark, a plunge into an unknown sea into which others before me, over the course of 150 years, had flung themselves, not out of any desire for the unusual, but because of a deep-rooted conviction that some essential, mysterious element lying in the ocean depths must be salvaged to ensure the survival of the race; there was, of course, the risk of disappearing into the deep, as did Cola Fish in the Sicilian and Neapolitan legend. For the Brothers Grimm, the salvaging meant

bringing to light the fragments of an ancient religion that had been preserved by the common people and had lain dormant until the glorious day of Napoleon's defeat had finally awakened the German national consciousness. In the eyes of the "Indianists," the essential element consisted of the allegories of the first Aryans who, in trying to explain the mystery of the sun and the moon, laid the foundations for religious and civil evolution. To the anthropologists it signified the somber and bloody initiation rites of tribal youths, rites that have been identical from time immemorial, from paleolithic hunters to today's primitive peoples. The followers of the Finnish school, in setting up a method for tracing migrations among Buddhist countries, Ireland, and the Sahara, applied a system similar to that used for the classification of coleoptera, which, in their cataloging process, reduced findings to algebraic sigla of the Type-Index and Motif-Index. What the Freudians salvaged was a repertory of ambiguous dreams common to all men, plucked from the oblivion of awakenings and set down in canonical form to represent the most basic anxieties. And for students of local traditions everywhere, it was a humble faith in an unknown god, rustic and familiar, who found a mouthpiece in the peasantry.

I, however, plunged into that submarine world totally unequipped, without even a tankful of intellectual enthusiasm for anything spontaneous and primitive. I was subjected to all the discomforts of immersion in an almost formless element which, like the sluggish and passive oral tradition, could never be brought under conscious control. ("You're not even a Southerner!" an uncompromising ethnologist friend said to me.) I could not forget, for even an instant, with what mystifying material I was dealing. Fascinated and perplexed, I considered every hypothesis which opposing schools of thought proposed in this area, being careful not to allow mere theorizing to cloud the esthetic pleasure that I might derive from these texts, and at the same time taking care not to be prematurely charmed by such complex, stratified, and elusive material. One might well ask why I undertook the project, were it not for the one bond I had with folktales—which I shall clarify in due course.

Meanwhile, as I started to work, to take stock of the material available, to classify the stories into a catalog which kept expanding, I was gradually possessed by a kind of mania, an insatiable hunger for more and more versions and variants. Collating, categorizing, comparing became a fever. I could feel myself succumbing to a passion akin to that of entomologists, which I thought characteristic of the scholars of the Folklore Fellows Communications of Helsinki, a passion which rapidly degenerated into a mania, as a result of which I would have given all of Proust in exchange for a new variant of the "gold-dung donkey." I'd quiver with disappointment if I came upon the episode of the bridegroom who loses his memory as he kisses his mother, instead of finding the one with the ugly Saracen woman, and my eye became so discerning—as is the wont with maniacs—that I could distinguish at a glance in the most difficult Apulian or Friulian text a "Prezzemolina" type from a "Bellinda" type.

I was unexpectedly caught in the spiderlike web of my study, not so much

by its formal, outward aspect as by its innermost particularities: infinite variety and infinite repetition. At the same time, the side of me that remained lucid, uncorrupted, and merely excited about the progression of the mania, was discovering that this fund of Italian folklore, in its richness, limpidity, variety, and blend of the real and the unreal, is unsurpassed by even the most famous folktales of Germanic, Nordic, and Slavic countries. This is true not only where the story is recorded from the words of an outstanding narrator—more often than not a woman—or when the story is laid in a region noted for brilliant storytelling, but the very essence of the Italian folktale is unparalleled grace, wit, and unity of design. Its composition and genius for synthesizing the essence of a type is unique. Thus, the longer I remained steeped in the material, the fewer became my reservations; I was truly exalted by the expedition, and meanwhile the cataloging passion—maniacal and solitary—was replaced by a desire to describe for others the unsuspected sights I had come upon.

Now my journey through folklore is over, the book is done. As I write this preface I feel aloof, detached. Will it be possible to come down to earth again? For two years I have lived in woodlands and enchanted castles, torn between contemplation and action: on the one hand hoping to catch a glimpse of the face of the beautiful creature of mystery who, each night, lies down beside her knight; on the other, having to choose between the cloak of invisibility or the magical foot, feather, or claw that could metamorphose me into an animal. And during these two years the world about me gradually took on the attributes of fairyland, where everything that happened was a spell or a metamorphosis, where individuals, plucked from the chiaroscuro of a state of mind, were carried away by predestined loves, or were bewitched; where sudden disappearances, monstrous transformations occurred, where right had to be discerned from wrong, where paths bristling with obstacles led to a happiness held captive by dragons. Also in the lives of peoples and nations, which until now had seemed to be at a standstill, anything seemed possible: snake pits opened up and were transformed into rivers of milk; kings who had been thought kindly turned out to be brutal parents; silent, bewitched kingdoms suddenly came back to life. I had the impression that the lost rules which govern the world of folklore were tumbling out of the magic box I had opened.

Now that the book is finished, I know that this was not a hallucination, a sort of professional malady, but the confirmation of something I already suspected—folktales are real.

Taken all together, they offer, in their oft-repeated and constantly varying examinations of human vicissitudes, a general explanation of life preserved in the slow ripening of rustic consciences; these folk stories are the catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed, i.e., youth, beginning with birth, which itself often foreshadows the future; then the departure from home, and, finally, through the trials of growing up, the attainment of maturity and the proof of one's humanity. This sketch, although summary, encompasses everything: the

arbitrary division of humans, albeit in essence equal, into kings and poor people; the persecution of the innocent and their subsequent vindication, which are the terms inherent in every life; love unrecognized when first encountered and then no sooner experienced than lost; the common fate of subjection to spells, or having one's existence predetermined by complex and unknown forces. This complexity pervades one's entire existence and forces one to struggle to free oneself, to determine one's own fate; at the same time we can liberate ourselves only if we liberate other people, for this is a sine qua non of one's own liberation. There must be fidelity to a goal and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph. There must also be beauty, a sign of grace that can be masked by the humble, ugly guise of a frog; and above all, there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things.

Criteria for My Work

The method of transcribing folktales "from the mouths of the people" was started by the Brothers Grimm and was gradually developed during the second half of the century into "scientific" canons scrupulously faithful to the dialect of the narrator. The Grimms' approach was not "scientific" in the modern sense of the word, or only halfway so. A study of their manuscripts confirms what is abundantly plain to an experienced eye perusing *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, namely that the Grimms (Wilhelm in particular) had added their own personal touch to the tales told by little old women, not only translating a major part from German dialects, but integrating the variants, recasting the story whenever the original was too crude, touching up expressions and images, giving stylistic unity to the discordant voices.

The foregoing serves as an introduction and justification (if I may take refuge behind names so famous and remote) for the hybrid nature of my work, which likewise is only halfway "scientific," or three-quarters so; as for the final quarter, it is the product of my own judgment. The scientific portion is actually the work of others, of those folklorists who, in the span of one century, patiently set down the texts that served as my raw material. What I did with it is comparable to the second part of the Grimms' project: I selected from mountains of narratives (always basically the same ones and amounting altogether to some fifty types) the most unusual, beautiful, and original texts. I translated them from the dialects in which they were recorded or when, unfortunately, the only version extant was an Italian translation lacking the freshness of authenticity, I assumed the thorny task of recasting it and restoring its lost originality. I enriched the text selected from other versions and whenever possible did so without altering its character or unity, and at the same time filled it out and made it more plastic. I touched up as delicately as possible those portions that were either missing or too sketchy. I preserved, linguistically, a language never too colloquial, yet colorful and as derivative as possible of a dialect, without having recourse

to "cultivated" expressions—an Italian sufficiently elastic to incorporate from the dialect images and turns of speech that were the most expressive and unusual.

As the notes at the end of the book testify, I worked on material already collected and published in books and specialized journals, or else available in unpublished manuscripts in museums and libraries. I did not personally hear the stories told by little old women, not because they were not available, but because, with all the folklore collections of the nineteenth century I already had abundant material to work on. Nor am I sure that attempts on my part to gather any of it from scratch would have appreciably improved my book.

My work had two objectives: the presentation of every type of folktale, the existence of which is documented in Italian dialects; and the representation of all regions of Italy.

As for the real and genuine fairy tale (*fiaba*), that is, the wonderful, magical story that tells of kings of imprecise realms, all its "types" of any significance are represented by one or more versions that struck me as being the most characteristic, the least stereotyped, and the most steeped in local color (a concept I shall clarify presently). The book is also interspersed with religious and local legends, short stories, animal fables, jokes, and anecdotes—in short, popular narrative components of various kinds which I came across in my search and which held me by their beauty or else served to represent regions for which I lacked other material.

I drew very little on local legends concerning place origins or customs or historical records; this is a field entirely different from that of the folktale: the narratives are short, undeveloped, and their anthologies, with very few exceptions, do not reproduce the speech of the people; they only evoke it in a nostalgic, romantic style: in short, it was material I found unusable.

As for Italian dialects, I have taken all those that make up the Italian linguistic area, but not all those in Italy as a country. Thus I dealt with folktales from the French coast of Nice, whose dialect is closer to the Ligurian than to the Provençal, and passed over those from the Italian Aosta valley where a French dialect is spoken: I included some of the Venetian dialects of Jugoslav Dalmatia, and none from the German-speaking South Tyrol province of Italy. I made an exception for the small settlements of Greek-speaking sections of Calabria, two of whose folktales I included (since their narrative folklore is well integrated with that of the rest of Calabria; in any case, I am happy to have them in the book).

In parentheses at the end of each folktale in the book is the name of a locality or region. In no instance does it signify that the folktale in question originated in that particular area. Folktales are the same the world over. To say "from where" a folktale comes makes little sense; thus, scholars of the "Finnish" or historical-geographic school who seek to determine the zone of origin of each type of folktale come up with rather dubious results, placing them anywhere between Asia and Europe. But international circulation of common tales does not exclude their diversity, which is expressed,

according to an Italian scholar, "through the choice or rejection of certain motifs, the preference for certain kinds, the creation of particular characters, the atmosphere suffusing the narration, the stylistic traits that reflect a formal, defined culture." Folktales are labeled "Italian" insofar as they are narrated by the people of Italy, tales that have come into our narrative folklore via the oral tradition; but we also classify them as Venetian, Tuscan, Sicilian. Since the folktale, regardless of its origin, tends to absorb something of the place where it is narrated—a landscape, a custom, a moral outlook, or else merely a very faint accent or flavor of that locality—the degree to which a tale is imbued with that Venetian, Tuscan, or Sicilian something is what led me to choose it.

The notes at the end of the volume account for the name of the locality I have assigned to each story, and they also list the versions I read in other Italian dialects. So it will be quite clear that the designation "Monferrato" or "Marche" or "Terra d'Otranto" does not mean that the folktale itself had its origin in Monferrato, Marche, or Terra d'Otranto; but that as I recorded that particular tale I kept foremost in mind the version of it from one of those regions. Because of the various texts at my disposal, this particular one struck me as not only the most beautiful or the richest or the most skillfully narrated, but also as the one which, rooted in its native heath, had drawn from it the most pith, thereby becoming typical of Monferrato, Marche, or Otranto.

It must be noted that with many of the first folklorists, the urge to collect and publish was stimulated by the "comparatist" passion peculiar to the literary culture of the period, in which similarity rather than diversity was stressed, and when evidence of the universal diffusion of a motif rather than the distinction of a particular place, time, and narrative personality was emphasized. The geographic designations of my book are, in certain cases indisputable (in many of the Sicilian tales, for instance), while in others they will appear arbitrary, justified solely by the bibliographical reference in the note.

In all this I was guided by the Tuscan proverb dear to Nerucci: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it"—in other words, its value consists in what is woven and rewoven into it. I too have thought of myself as a link in the anonymous chain without end by which folktales are handed down, links that are never merely instruments or passive transmitters, but—and here the proverb meets Benedetto Croce's theory about popular poetry—its real "authors."

The Folklore Anthologies

The work of documentation of Italian narrative done over nearly a century by folklorists has a very uneven geographical distribution. For some regions, I found a mine lode of material; for others, almost nothing. There are full, good collections for two regions in particular: Tuscany and Sicily.

For Sicily my most important source is Giuseppe Pitrè's *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari Siciliani* (*Sicilian Fables, Stories and Popular Tales*, 1875). It consists of four volumes containing 300 narratives classified according to type, written in all the dialects of Sicily: it is a scholarly work, painstakingly documented, replete with footnotes of "variants and collations" and lexical comparatist notes.

Giuseppe Pitrè (1841–1916) was a medical doctor dedicated to the study of folklore, who had a large team of collectors working for him.

The secret of Pitrè's work is that it gets us away from the abstract notion of "people" talking; instead, we come into contact with narrators having distinct personalities, who are identified by name, age, occupation. This makes it possible to uncover through the strata of timeless and faceless stories and through crude stereotyped expressions, traces of a personal world of more sensitive imagination, whose inner rhythm, passion, and hope are expressed through the tone of the narrator.

Pitrè's collection dates from 1875; in 1881, Verga wrote *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree*). Contemporaneously, two Sicilians, the novelist and the scholar, listened, each with a different purpose, to the fishermen and gossips, so as to transcribe their speech. We may compare the ideal catalog of voices, proverbs, and customs which each of them sought to put together, the novelist coordinating it with his own inner lyrical and choral rhythm, the folklorist with a carefully labeled museum which can be inspected in the twenty-five volumes of the *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane* (1871–1913), the twenty-four years of his journal, *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari,* 1882–1906 ("Archives for the Study of Popular Traditions"), the sixteen volumes of the series, *Curiosità popolari tradizionali* ("Popular Traditional Oddities"), and even in his collection of folk art and craftsmanship now housed in the Pitrè Museum in Palermo. Pitrè did in folklore what Verga had done in literature; he was the first folklorist to transcribe not only traditional motifs or linguistic usages, but the inner poetry of the stories.

With the advent of Pitrè, the folklore movement began taking into account, in the very existence of a storytelling tradition, the part played by poetic creativity. This is entirely different from the field of folksong, where the song is forever fixed by its lines and rhymes, anonymously repeated in its choruses and with a very limited possible range of individual variations. The folktale must be re-created each time. At the core of the narrative is the storyteller, a prominent figure in every village or hamlet, who has his or her own style and appeal. And it is through this individual that the timeless folktale is linked with the world of its listeners and with history.

The protagonist of Pitrè's collection is an illiterate old woman, Agatuzza Messia, a former domestic of Pitrè's, a quilt maker in Borgo (a section of Palermo) living at 8 Largo Celso Nero. She is the narrator for a number of Pitrè's best tales and I have freely chosen among them (see stories 148 through 158). This is how Pitrè, in the preface to his anthology, describes his model narrator:

> She is far from beautiful, but is glib and eloquent; she has an appealing way of speaking, which makes one aware of her extraordinary memory and talent. Messia is in her seventies, is a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother; as a little girl she heard stories from her grandmother, whose own mother had told them, having herself heard countless stories from one of her grandfathers. She had a good memory so never forgot them. There are women who hear hundreds of stories and never remember one; there are others who remember them but haven't the knack of storytelling. Her friends in Borgo thought her a born storyteller; the more she talked, the more they wanted to listen.
>
> Messia can't read, but she knows lots of things others don't, and talks about them so picturesquely that one cannot help but appreciate her. I call my readers' attention to this picturesqueness of speech. If the setting of the story is aboard a ship due to sail, she speaks, apparently unconsciously, with nautical terms and turns of phrase characteristic of sailors or seafaring people. If the heroine of a story turns up penniless and woebegone at the house of a baker, Messia's language adapts itself so well to that situation that one can see her kneading the dough and baking the bread—which in Palermo is done only by professional bakers. No need to mention domestic situations, for this is where Messia is in her element; inevitably, for a woman who, like all her neighbors, has brought up her children and the children of her children "to serve the home and the Lord," as they say.
>
> Messia saw me come into the world and held me in her arms; this is how I heard from her lips the many beautiful stories that bear her imprint. She repeated to the young man the tales she had told the child thirty years before; nor has her narration lost one whit of its original purity, ease and grace.

Messia, like a typical Sicilian storyteller, fills her narrative with color, nature, objects; she conjures up magic, but frequently bases it on realism, on a picture of the condition of the common people; hence her imaginative language, but a language firmly rooted in commonsensical speech and sayings. She is always ready to bring to life feminine characters who are active, enterprising, and courageous, in contrast to the traditional concept of the Sicilian woman as a passive and withdrawn creature. (This strikes me as a personal, conscious choice.) She passes completely over what I should say was the dominant element in the majority of Sicilian tales: amorous longing, a predilection for the theme of love as exemplified in the lost husband or wife motif, so widespread in Mediterranean folklore and dating back to the oldest written example, the Hellenistic tale of *Amor and Psyche* told in Apuleius' *Metamorphosis* (second century A.D.) and repeated through the ages in hundreds and hundreds of stories about encounters and separations, mysterious bridegrooms from the nether regions, invisible brides, and horse- or

serpent-kings who turn into handsome young men at night. Or else the fragile, delicate genre that is neither myth, short story, nor ballad, epitomized by that sigh of melancholy, sensual joy, *La sorella del Conte* ("The Count's Sister").

In contrast to the Sicilian folktale which unfolds in a somewhat limited gamut of themes and often from a realistic starting point (how many hungry families go out into the country looking for plants to make soup!), the Tuscan folktale proves a fertile ground for the most varied cultural influences. My favorite Tuscan source is Gherardo Nerucci's *Sessanta novelle popolari Montanesi,* 1880 (*Sixty Popular Tales from Montale*—a village near Pistoia), written in an odd Tuscan vernacular. In one of these a certain Pietro di Canestrino, a laborer, told, in *La Regina Marmotta* ("The Sleeping Queen"), the most Ariosto-like tale to come from the mouth of a man of the people. The story is an uncertain byproduct of the sixteenth-century epic, not in its plot (which in its broad outline is reminiscent of a well-known folktale) nor in its fanciful geography (which also dates back to the ballads of chivalry) but in its manner of narrating, of creating magic through the wealth of descriptions of gardens and palaces (much more complete and literary in the original text than in my own highly abridged reconstruction, where I sought to avoid any appreciable divergence from the general tone of the present book). The original description of the queen's palace even includes a list of famous beauties of the past, introduced as statues: ". . . and these statues represented many famous women, alike in dress, but different in countenance, and they included Lucretia of Rome, Isabella of Ferrara, Elizabeth and Leonore of Mantua, Varisilla Veronese with her beautiful face and unusual features; the sixth, Diana of Regno Morese and Terra Luba, the most renowned for her beauty in Spain, France, Italy, England, and Austria, and whose royal blood was the purest . . ." and so forth.

The book of the sixty Montale stories appeared in 1880, when many of the most important Italian collections of folktales had already been published, but the lawyer Gherardo Nerucci (1828–1906, somewhat older than the other folklorists of the "scientific" generation) had begun collecting tales much earlier, in 1868. Many of the sixty stories were already in the anthologies of his colleagues; some of the most beautiful tales in the Imbriani and Comparetti collections are his. Nerucci was not concerned with comparatist storytelling (his interest in popular tales was linguistic), but it is plain that the Montale stories are based, often, on literary sources. To be sure, this village also produced its share of obscure and prehistoric tales, such as *Testa di Bufala* ("Buffalo Head") which simply clamors for ethnological interpretation. There were also tales that appear strangely modern and "invented," like *La novellina delle scimmie* ("The Little Tale of the Monkeys") but a great many of the stories have the same themes and plots as popular poems (going back to the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) and as the *Arabian Nights*; these (with only the settings transposed) are so faithful to the French eighteenth-century translation by Galland (allowing

for an adaptation to suit Western taste) as to exclude the possibility of influences stemming from long ago, via who knows what oral paths from the Orient. These were unquestionably directly plucked from literature and transposed into folklore quite recently. Thus, when the widowed Luisa Ginanni repeats from beginning to end the plot of Boccaccio's *Andreuccio da Perugia,* I believe that it derives not from the popular tradition that was the source of Boccaccio's story, but from a direct version in dialect of the most picaresque story in the *Decameron.*

Thus, with Boccaccio, we come close to defining the spirit in which Pistoia country people told stories. It would appear that in this region the link has been established (or that Nerucci perceived it) between a *fiaba* (fairy tale) and a *novella* (short story); the transition between the narrative of magic and the narrative of fortune or individual bravery has been pinpointed. The tale of magic flows smoothly into a mundane, "bourgeois" story, short story or novel of adventure, or tear-jerking account of a damsel in distress. Let us take, for example, *Il figliuolo del mercante di Milano* ("The Son of the Merchant of Milan") which belongs to a very old and obscure type of folktale: the youth who draws from his adventures—always the same, in which a dog, poisoned food, birds play a role—a riddle in nonsense rhyme. He puts it to a princess who is reputed to be a riddle-solver, and thus wins her hand. In Montale, the hero is not the usual predestined character, but a young man of initiative, ready to run risks; he knows how to capitalize on his winnings and profit from his losses. The proof is that—and it is very odd behavior in a fairy-tale hero—instead of marrying the princess, he releases her from all obligation to him in exchange for economic gain. This happens not just once, but twice in succession: the first time in exchange for a magic object (more exactly, the permission to win it himself), and the second, even more practical, in exchange for a steady income. The supernatural origin of Menichino's success is quite overshadowed by his true native ability to make the most of these magic powers and retain all profits for himself. But Menichino's outstanding trait is sincerity, the ability to win people's trust: the hallmark of a businessman.

Nerucci's favorite storyteller is the widow Luisa Ginanni. Of all the Montale storytellers, she knows the greatest number (three-quarters of the collection originate with her); often her imagery is quite striking, but there is no great difference between her voice and that of others. In a style full of verbal invention Nerucci intended to show us the richness of the unusual vernacular that results when the people of Montale speak in Italian—a harsh, mangled, violent Tuscan. Whereas with most of the other texts my task was somehow to enhance the stylistic color, with Nerucci's my rewriting had to tone it down; there were, consequently, unavoidable losses.

Rewriting Tuscan texts from a vernacular not so different from current Italian was for me a difficult task. The odds were stacked against me. And the hardest ones—for the simple reason that they are the most beautiful and already have a distinct style—were those fifteen or so tales I singled out from

Nerucci. (On the other hand, in the case of the Sicilian texts from Pitrè's collection, the more beautiful they were, the easier my task turned out to be; I translated them literally or freely, as the text required.)

As I have already indicated, Tuscany and Sicily have the choicest selection of folktales, both in quantity and quality. And immediately after, with its own special interpretation of a world of fantasy, is Venice, or rather, the entire range of Venetian dialects. The outstanding name here is Domenico Giuseppe Bernoni, who published (in 1873, 1875, 1893) several booklets of Venetian tales. These fables are remarkable for their limpidity and poetic power; although well-known types recur in them they always somehow evoke Venice, her spaces and light, and in one way or another they all impart an aquatic flavor; the sea, canals, voyages, ships, or the Levant figure in them. Bernoni does not give the names of the narrators, nor do we know how faithful he was to the original tales; but there is a distinct harmony overlying the gentle tones of the dialect and the atmosphere pervading various folktales, qualities which I hope are reflected in my transcription of the seven tales I singled out from his collection (stories 29 through 35).

In the same period, Bologna's contribution, through Carolina Coronedi-Berti, was a copious, first-rate anthology (1874), written in a dialect brimming over with zest and consisting of well-rounded, well-told stories shrouded in a somewhat hallucinatory ambience and set in familiar landscapes. Although the names of the storytellers are not given, one is often conscious of a feminine presence, who tends, at times, to be sentimental, at others to be dashing.

In Giggi Zanazzo's Roman collection (1907), the tale becomes a pretext for verbal entertainment. It is based upon knavish and suggestive modes of speech and makes for rewarding and pleasant reading.

The Abruzzi have to their credit two very fine collections: the two volumes by Gennaro Finamore (1836–1923), a teacher and medical doctor. He collected texts in dialect from various localities and transcribed them with great linguistic precision; a vein of melancholy poetry occasionally emerges from these texts. The other Abruzzi anthology is the work of the archeologist Antonio De Nino (1836–1907), a friend of D'Annunzio's, who recast the tales in Italian in very brief stories interspersed with short ballads and refrains in dialect in a playful and childlike style—a method of doubtful value from the scientific point of view as well as from mine. But the book contains many unusual stories (although a number of them are culled from the *Arabian Nights*) and curious ones (see my *Gobba, zoppa e collotorto*, "Hunchback Wryneck Hobbler"), that have an underlying irony and playfulness.

Eight of the best tales I ran into are in Apulian dialect, in Pietro Pellizzari's book, *Fiabe e canzoni popolari del contado di Maglie in terra d'Otranto* (*Popular Fables and Songs from the Country of Maglie in Terra d'Otranto*, 1881). They are familiar types, but written in a language so witty, in so racy a style, with such enjoyment of grotesque malformation, that they give the impression of having been conceived in that very language, like the excellent

I cinque capestrati ("Five scapegraces") the plot of which can be found in its every detail in Basile.

In Calabria (mainly in the village of Palmi) Letterio Di Francia, the scholarly author of a history of storytelling, transcribed a collection, *Fiabe e novelle calabresi* (*Calabrian Fables and Short Stories*) published in 1929 and 1931, complete with the fullest and most precise notes ever recorded in Italian. The author names the different outstanding narrators, among whom there is a certain Annunziata Palermo. Calabrian storytelling exhibits a rich, colorful, complex imagination, but within it the logic of the plot is often lost, leaving only the unraveling of the enchantment.

Characteristics of the Italian Folktale

Can one speak of the Italian folktale? Or must the question of the folktale be dealt with in terms of a remote age that is not only prehistoric but also pregeographic?

The disciplines concerned with studying the relationships between the folktale and the rites of primitive societies yield surprising, and for me, convincing results, as in Propp's *Historical Roots of Russian Fairy Tales* (1946), and it seems to me that the origins of the folktale are to be found in these rites. But having arrived at this conclusion there are still many unanswered questions. Was the birth and development of folklore a parallel and similar phenomenon throughout the world as the proponents of polygenesis claim? In view of the complexity of certain types that explanation may be too simple. Can ethnology explain every motif, every narrative complex throughout the world? Evidently not. Therefore, quite apart from the question of the ancient sources of folktales, the importance of the life which every folktale has had during a historical period must be recognized: storytelling as entertainment means the passage of the tale from narrator to narrator, from country to country, often by means of a written version, a book, until the story has spread over the entire area where it is to be found today.

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Tuscany, through its ballads and popular verses, often imitative of folklore motifs, must have defined and diffused the most successful categories. The ballad has its own history, distinct from that of the folktale, but the two cross: the ballad draws its motifs from the tale and in turn adapts the tale to suit its motif.

We must be careful not to "medievalize" the folktale too much. The ethnological view plucks the fable from the décor given it by a romantic taste, and has accustomed us to see the castle as the hut where initiations to the hunt took place, to regard the princess as a sacrificial offering to the dragon for agricultural necessities, the wizard as the sorcerer of the clan. Moreover, one need only glance at any collection faithful to the oral tradition to understand that the people (namely those of the nineteenth century unfamiliar either with the illustrations of children's books or with Disney's *Snow White*) do not visualize the folktales in terms of images which seem

natural to us. In these stories description is almost always minimal, the terminology is general. Italian folklore tells of palaces, not castles. It rarely speaks of a prince or princess but rather of the son or daughter of the king. The names of supernatural beings such as ogres or witches are drawn from the most ancient pagan background of the locality. The names of these beings are not classified with any precision, not only because of the diversity of the dialects—for example, in Piedmont the *masca* (witch) is the *mamma-draga* (mother dragon) in Sicily, and in Romagna the *om salbadgh* (wild man) is the *nanni-orcu* (orca) in Puglia—but also because of the confusion that arises within the confines of a dialect; for example, in Tuscany *mago* (sorcerer) and *drago* (dragon) are often confused and used interchangeably.

Nevertheless, the medieval stamp on the popular tale remains strong and enduring. These stories abound in tournaments to win the hands of princesses, with knightly feats, with devils, and with distortions of hallowed traditions. Therefore, one must examine as a prime occurrence in the historical life of the fable that moment of osmosis between folktale and the epic of chivalry, the probable source of which was Gothic France, whence its influence spread into Italy via the popular epic. That substratum of pagan and animistic culture which at the time of Apuleius had taken on the trappings and names of classical mythology, subsequently fell under the influence of the feudal and chivalrous imagination, of the institutions, ethics, and religious beliefs of the Middle Ages.

At a certain point this amalgam blends with yet another, a wave of images and transfigurations of oriental origin which had spread from the south when contacts with and threats from the Saracens and Turks were at their height. In the numerous sea stories I have included, the reader will see how the notion of the world divided between Christian and Muslim takes the place of the arbitrary geography of the folktale. The folktale clothes its motifs in the habits of diverse societies. In the West the imprint of feudalism prevailed (notwithstanding certain nineteenth-century touches in the south such as an English lord) while in the Orient the bourgeois folktale of the fortunes of Aladdin or of Ali Baba dominated.

One of the few folktales, perhaps—according to Stith Thompson the only one—that can be considered of "probable Italian origin," is that of the love of three oranges (as in Gozzi) or of the three lemons (as in Basile) or of the three pomegranates (as in the version I chose). The tale abounds in metamorphoses in baroque (or Persian?) taste altogether worthy of Basile's inventive powers or of those of a visionary weaver of rugs. It consists of a series of metaphors strung into a story—ricotta and blood, fruit and girl; a Saracen woman who looks at her image in a well, a girl in a tree who turns into a dove, the dove's drops of blood from which a tree suddenly grows and, completing the circle, the fruit out of which the girl emerges. I should like to have given this folktale greater prominence but having examined numerous popular versions I did not find one that could be considered the frame story. I have included two versions, one (no. 107) integrated with some others is from Abruzzi and represents the most classic form of the tale,

the other (no. 8) is a curious variation from Liguria. However, I must say in this instance, Basile is unrivaled and I refer the reader to his tale, the last in the *Pentamerone.*

In this very mysterious story of transformations, with its precise rhythm, its joyous logic at work, I think I perceive a characteristic of the popular elaboration of the Italian folktale. There is a genuine feeling for beauty in the communions or metamorphoses of woman and fruit, of woman and plant in the two beautiful companion pieces of the *Ragazza mela* ("Apple Girl") from Florence (no. 85) and the *Rosmarina* ("Rosemary") from Palermo (no. 161). The secret lies in the metaphorical link: the image of the freshness of the apple and of the girl or of the pears beneath which the girl is hidden in order to increase the weight of the basket (no. 11) in the story "The Little Girl Sold with the Pears."

The natural cruelties of the folktale give way to the rules of harmony. The continuous flow of blood that characterizes the Grimms' brutal tales is absent. The Italian folktale seldom displays unbearable ferocity. Although the notion of cruelty persists along with an injustice bordering on inhumanity as part of the constant stuff of stories, although the woods forever echo with the weeping of maidens or of forsaken brides with severed hands, gory ferocity is never gratuitous; the narrative does not dwell on the torment of the victim, not even under pretense of pity, but moves swiftly to a healing solution, a part of which is a quick and pitiless punishment of the malefactor—or more often the malefactress—to be tarred and burned in the grim tradition of witches' pyres, or, as in Sicily, being thrown from a window and then burned.

A continuous quiver of love runs through Italian folklore. In speaking of the Sicilian tales, I mentioned the popularity of the Cupid and Psyche type found not only in Sicily but also in Tuscany and more or less everywhere. The supernatural bridegroom is joined in an underground dwelling. Neither his name nor his secret must be divulged lest he vanish. A lover is produced by sorcery from a basin of milk; a bird in flight is wounded by an envious rival who puts ground glass in a basin or tacks on a window ledge where the bird will alight. There is the serpent- or swine-king who at night turns into a handsome youth for the bride who respects him, while the wax of the candle lighted by curiosity thrusts him back under the evil spell. In the story of Bellinda and the monster a curious sentimental relationship develops between them. In those cases where the suffering partner is the man, it is the bewitched bride who comes silently at night to join him in the deserted palace; it is the fairy love of Liombruno who must remain a secret, it is the girl-dove who recovers her wings and flies. These stories differ but they tell of a precarious love that unites two incompatible worlds, and of a love tested by absence; stories of unknowable lovers who unite only in the moment in which they are lost to one another.

Fairy tales are rarely structured along the simple and basic lines we associate with a love story in which the characters fall in love and encounter obstacles to their marriage. This theme is developed only occasionally in

some melancholy tales from Sardinia, a land where girls used to be courted from their windows. The countless tales of the conquest or liberation of a princess always deal with someone never seen, a victim to be released by a test of valor, or a stake to be won in a joust to fulfill a destiny, or else someone falls in love with a portrait or the sound of a name or envisages the beloved in a drop of blood on a white portion of ricotta. These are abstract or symbolic romantic attachments that savor of witchcraft or of malediction. However, the most positive and deeply felt loves in folklore are not these, but rather those in which the beloved is first possessed and then conquered.

Propp, in *Historical Roots of Russian Fairy Tales*, gives the Cupid and Psyche type of story a suggestive interpretation. Psyche is the girl who lives in a house where youths are segregated during the final phase of their initiation. She comes into contact with young men in the guise of animals, or in the dark, since they must be seen by no one. Hence it is as if only one invisible youth loved her. Once the period of initiation is over, the young men return home and forget the girl who lived segregated with them. They marry and begin new families. The story grows out of this crisis. It describes a love born during the initiation and doomed to destruction by religious laws, and shows how a woman rebels against this law and recovers her young lover. Although the customs of millennia are disregarded, the plot of the story still reflects the spirit of those laws and describes every love thwarted and forbidden by law, convention, or social disparity. That is why it has been possible, from prehistory to the present, to preserve, not as a fixed formula but as a flowing element, the sensuality so often underlying this love, evident in the ecstasy and frenzy of mysterious nocturnal embraces.

This eroticism of tales that we now consider as a part of children's literature proves that oral tradition was not intended for any particular age level; it was simply an account of marvels, a full expression of the poetic needs at that cultural stage.

Folktales especially intended for children exist, to be sure, but as a separate genre, neglected by more ambitious storytellers and carried on in a humbler and more familiar tradition, having the following characteristics: a theme of fear and cruelty, scatological or obscene details, lines of verse interpolated into the prose and slipping into nonsense rhymes (see story no. 37, "Petie Pete versus Witch Bea-Witch"), characteristics of coarseness and cruelty which would be considered wholly unsuitable in children's books today.

The tendency to dwell on the wondrous remains dominant, even when closely allied with morality. The moral is always implicit in the folktale in the victory of the simple virtues of the good characters and in the punishment of the equally simple and absolutely perverse wrongdoers: rarely is it sententiously or didactically presented. No doubt the moral function of the tale, in the popular conception, is to be sought not in the subject matter but in the very nature of the folktale, in the mere fact of telling and listening. That too can be interpreted as prudent and practical moralism, such as the tale of "The Parrot" seems to suggest (see no. 15). This is a tale within a

tale; Comparetti and Pitrè both published it at the beginning of their anthologies as a kind of prologue. The parrot, by telling an interminable story, manages to save the virtue of a girl. It is a symbolic defense of the narrative art against those who accuse it of being profane and hedonistic. The suspense of the story keeps the fascinated listener from transgression. This is its minimal and conservative justification, but something more profound is revealed in the very narrative construction of "The Parrot": the art of storytelling which the narrator displays and which is humorously exemplified in the parody of tales that "never end." Therein lies, for us, its real moral: the storyteller, with a kind of instinctive skillfulness, shies away from the constraint of popular tradition, from the unwritten law that the common people are capable only of repeating trite themes without ever actually "creating"; perhaps the narrator thinks that he is producing only variations on a theme, whereas actually he ends up telling us what is in his heart.

A regard for conventions and a free inventiveness are equally necessary in constructing a folktale. Once the theme is laid out there are certain steps required to reach a solution; they are interchangeable ingredients—the horse hide carried up in flight by an eagle, the well that leads to the netherworld, dove-maidens whose clothes are stolen while they bathe, magic boots and cloak purloined by thieves, three nuts that must be cracked, the house of the winds where information is given about the path to be followed, and so on. It is up to the narrator to organize these, to pile them up like the bricks in a wall, hurrying over the dull places, all this depending upon the degree of the narrator's talent and what he puts into his story, mixing his own mortar of local color and personal tribulations and expectations.

Certainly the greater or lesser ease with which one picks one's way through a fantasy world has its grounds in one's actual experience and culture: we notice, for instance, the different ways Sicilian and Tuscan folktales refer to kings. As a rule, the court of kings in popular tales is a general and abstract concept, a vague symbol of power and wealth; in Sicily, however, king, court, and nobility are distinct and concrete institutions, with their hierarchy, protocol, and moral code—a whole world and terminology, mostly invented but with which the illiterate old women narrators are familiar down to the last detail. "There was a king of Spain who had a left-hand squire and a right-hand squire." It is characteristic of Sicilian folktales that kings never make an important decision without the advice of their counselors: "Gentlemen, what is your advice?" or, more briefly, the king shouts, "Counselors! Counselors!" and they advise him.

But Tuscany, although more cultivated in many areas, has never had a king; "king" is here a generic term with no institutional implication; it evokes no more than the condition of affluence; storytellers say "that king" just as they would say "that gentleman," without any royal association or any notion of a court, of an aristocratic hierarchy, or even of a real land. It is thus possible to find one king living next door to another, looking out the window at each other or paying visits to one another, just like two good country burghers.

In contrast to this world of kings is that of the peasants. The "realistic" foundation of many folktales, the point of departure spurred by dire need, hunger, or unemployment is typical of a large number of Italian popular narratives. I have already noted as a prime motif of numerous and particularly southern folktales that of the *cavoliccidaru* (cabbage picker): the cupboard is bare, so father or mother, along with daughters, scour the countryside for plants with which to make soup; pulling up a cabbage larger than the others, they come upon a passage into an underground world where a supernatural husband waits; or there may be a witch who will hold the girl prisoner, or a Bluebeard who feeds upon human flesh. Or else, especially in seaside localities, in place of the farmer who has neither land nor work, there is a hapless fisherman, who one day nets a big talking fish.

But the "realistic" state of destitution is not merely a starting point for the folktale, a sort of springboard into wonderland, a foil for the regal and the supernatural. There are folktales that deal with peasants from start to finish, with an agricultural laborer as hero, whose magic powers are merely complements to natural human strength and persistence. These folktales appear like fragments of an epic of laborers that never took shape and which on occasion borrows its themes from episodes of chivalry, replacing deeds and tournaments to win princesses with mounds of earth to be moved by plow or spade. Examples of these are the remarkable Sicilian tale, "Out in the World" and the Abruzzi "Joseph Ciufolo, Tiller-Flutist," or "The North Wind's Gift" from Tuscany, and "Fourteen" from Le Marche; and on the subject of women's work and tribulations, "Misfortune" and "The Two Cousins" (both Sicilian).

Those who know how rare it is in popular (and nonpopular) poetry to fashion a dream without resorting to escapism, will appreciate these instances of a self-awareness that does not deny the invention of a destiny, or the force of reality which bursts forth into fantasy. Folklore could teach us no better lesson, poetic or moral.

I. C.

Translated by Catherine Hill

ITALIAN FOLKTALES