

THOMPSON, The Folktale, 58-39

Largely because of the influence of Perrault's collection of fairy tales, one of the best known of all stories of helpful animals is Puss in Boots. Though the story is generally concerned with a hero who is helped by a cat (Type 545B), a considerable number of versions (Type 545A) have a girl as the central figure. A difference is also made in the animal helper. Instead of a cat, very frequently there appears a fox, and sometimes even other animals.

The hero (or heroine) inherits nothing but a cat, who turns out to have miraculous powers. The cat takes the youth to the palace and proclaims to the king that the boy is a dispossessed prince. He also woos the princess in behalf of his master. Obeying the cat's instructions, the boy is not abashed at the luxury he sees about him, but always remarks that he has better things at home. When the king is to visit the boy's castle, the cat goes ahead and succeeds in making the peasants tell the king that they are working for his master. The cat also goes to the castle of a giant, whom he kills through trickery. He takes possession of the castle for his master and brings about a happy marriage with the princess. At the end, the cat's head is cut off and thus_ the enchantment is broken, so that he returns to his original form as a prince.

Among the writers of literary folktales this has been one of the most popular stories. It appears in the Italian collections of Straparola and Basile in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Perrault's French version at the end of the seventeenth century has been of primary influence on the tradition of this tale. No systematic investigation has been made, but it seems clear that this is primarily a folktale which lives in books and is more at home in the nursery than in an adult gathering. Nevertheless, the story has maintained a real oral tradition. It is found not only in all parts of Europe, but clear across Siberia; and in southern Asia it is well known in India, whence it has traveled to Indonesia and the Philippines. Colonists and travelers have carried it to the American Indians and to Africa, though sometimes it is difficult to be sure whether a particular helpful animal story actually belongs to this tradition or not. As one gets away from central Europe, the greater variations one finds from the literary version of Perrault, It is in such more purely oral tales that we find the girl as central actor. In some of these the helper may not be an animal at all, but, instead, a grateful dead man (Type 505). All these complications would make the story of Puss in Boots an interesting study in the mutual relationships of literary and folk tradition.