

Stith Thompson - The folktale - pp 107-108

Two tales of quests are so much alike that it is convenient to consider them at the same time. In both stories a king sends his sons out on a quest; in both the youngest succeeds and eventually overcomes the treachery of his elder brothers. The first of these tales is *The Bird, the Horse, and the Princess* (Type 550). At night a bird steals golden apples from the king's orchard, but while doing so drops a golden feather. The king orders his sons to find the bird. As in so many tales of this kind, the two elder boys are discourteous to animals or to an old woman and fail, but the youngest, because of his kindness, receives their help. As the brothers leave, they find a place where three roads part and where inscriptions on each tell what will happen if that road is chosen. Each brother chooses a different road. The hero reaches the tree of the golden bird, but he finds that he may not have the bird until he undertakes further quests. He succeeds in accomplishing these, receives a magic horse, wins a princess, and, along with the magic bird, reaches home. His elder brothers rob him and throw him into a well or a den. He is helped out by a friendly fox or wolf to which he feeds meat. The fox is decapitated becomes a prince. The hero is restored to his wife and possessions.

This story has a considerable literary history. With slight variations it is known in the *Thousand and One Nights* and has appeared since that time frequently in literary reworkings.⁽⁵⁾ The story is, however, so well established in the oral repertory of tale-tellers in practically every country of Europe, and fits in so well with the general spirit of many other common oral tales that its essentially popular nature seems unmistakable. It is quite as well known in Scandinavia as it is in Italy and Russia and the Baltic states, and, indeed, all the rest of Europe. It is almost equally popular in western and southern Asia, where it appears in a number of versions in Armenia, India, Indonesia, central Africa, and is told by the French in Missouri. With so many Asiatic versions balanced against so many European, it is quite impossible, without exhaustive study, to hazard a guess as to where this tale may have originated.

From the general likeness of plot, the identity of many details, and the similarity of the geographical pattern of their occurrences in folklore, it seems reasonable to suppose that this tale and that one which the Grimms called *The Water of Life* (Type 551) have had much the same history. A mere hasty comparison of the several hundred versions of each of the tales is not sufficient to determine which of these gave rise to the other or whether two stories with the same basic outline have, in the course of time, converged into something like twin types.

Future research will doubtless clarify the mutual relation of these stories. It would seem that the first has much the older literary history and is known in Asia. The second has no Asiatic distribution, but has been carried to both North and South American continents.

The plot of *The Water of Life*, as its name indicates, concerns a quest for a magic healing water or for some other marvelous remedy. The sick or blind king sends his three sons out on this quest. As in the other tale, the two elder brothers are unkind and the youngest kind to animals or an old person. With their aid he succeeds where his brothers have failed. He not only secures the water of life (or of youth), but he also reaches a magic garden where he sees a princess asleep. He lies by the princess and on his departure, writes his name, leaves it with her, and returns home.⁽⁶⁾ As in the other tale, his treacherous brothers rob him and throw him into a well or den and he is helped by the fox or wolf. The princess comes seeking the father of her child. After overcoming the treachery of the elder brothers she finds the hero and marries him.

(5) For a discussion of the literary history of the tale, see Bolte-Polivka, I, 511.

(6) It will be noticed that the entire episode with the sleeping princess appears also in quite another connection in the story of *The Hunter* (Type 304).