

Stith Thompson - The Folktale - p 76-77

An interesting variation on the story of the hero with his three magic objects is that known from the Grimm collection as *The Jew among Thorns* (Type 592). The tale is widely distributed over every part of Europe, but, except for single and apparently sporadic appearances in Indonesia and among the Kabyle of North Africa, it has not traveled east or south. It has been reported in English tradition in Virginia, among the Missouri French and the Jamaica Negroes. It has been so frequently treated in literature, especially in Germany and England, ever since the fifteenth century, that these literary forms have undoubtedly affected the oral tradition. For whatever reason, the story appears with unusual variations of detail. Perhaps a thorough comparative study of the relationship of the more than two hundred and fifty reported versions with the many literary treatments would clarify its complicated history.

The story has many points in common with several we have been examining. The hero is driven from home by an evil stepmother or he is dismissed from service with a pittance after many years of labor. He gives the small amount of money he has to a poor man, and in return he is granted the fulfillment of three wishes. Most important of these is for a magic fiddle which compels people to dance. Usually he asks for a never-failing crossbow and for the power of having all his desires obeyed. Other magic objects or powers besides these frequently appear in this story. In the course of his adventures he meets a monk, or more frequently a Jew, and they shoot at a bird on a wager. As the loser of the contest, the Jew must go into the thorns naked and get the bird. With his magic fiddle the hero compels the Jew to dance in the thorns. In some versions this whole episode of the dancing in the thorns is replaced by a story of the defeat of a giant by making him dance. Eventually the boy is brought to court for his misdeeds and is condemned to be hanged. As a last request he secures permission to play on his fiddle, and he compels the judge and all the assembly to dance until he is released.

Anyone acquainted with European folktales will recognize a number of motifs in this story which he has already encountered in other tales. Its central unifying idea seems to be the magic fiddle and the dancing it compels. The evil stepmother, the dismissal from service with a pittance, the helping of the poor man with the last penny, and the escape from execution by an illusory last request show affinities with many other tales. A consequence of this abundance of folktale commonplaces is the fact that there are many points at which this story may lead imperceptibly into other well-known plots.(11)

(11). For a list of the most usual of these combinations see analysis for Type 592.