

Stith Thompson - The Folktale - p 83-85

E. KNOWLEDGE OF ANIMAL SPEECH

A skill which proves convenient to the heroes of a number of tales is that of speaking and understanding the language of animals. This trait is old and widespread in folklore and mythology. Siegfried in Norse myth and Melampus in Greek possessed this power, and they both received it from a serpent (20) or dragon. This motif in all its details forms the introduction to one of the best known traditional stories of Asia and Europe, The Animal Languages (Type 670). As reconstructed by Aarne,(21) the generalized form of the tale is as follows:

A snake who wishes to repay a man for a favor teaches him the language of animals, but does so under the condition that he shall never say anything to anyone about it: if he should do so, he must die. In his home one day the man hears two animals talking together and their conversation amuses him so that he laughs at it. When his wife sees him laughing when there is apparently nothing to laugh at, she demands to know the cause. The man hesitates to tell her, and says that he must die if he should ever tell anybody the reason. The wife, however, insists upon her demand; Finally the man makes up his mind to satisfy the curiosity of his wife, and prepares to die. But just then he chances to hear another animal conversation. The male animal (usually a cock) speaks words of warning about a man who can maintain no discipline in his house, but who is thinking about dying for the sake of his wife. The man takes these words to heart and refuses to betray the secret.

Both on account of the frequent appearance of this story in the older literary texts of India and because of the stability of the oral variants of India and surrounding countries, there seems little doubt that the tale has been brought into Europe from the East. It appears in such notable Oriental collections as the *Ramayana*, the *Jātaka* (both the Indian and the Chinese forms), the *Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire*, the Persian *Tuti-Nameh*, and the *Thousand and One Nights*. Its presence in medieval Europe is indicated by its appearance in the *Gesta Romanorum*, in a novella of Morlini, and in Straparola's collection of tales. But in spite of this literary background the story has been adopted by the people and has become a part of the repertory of oral tales in almost every country of Europe. It is especially common in Finland and the Baltic states. In the Near East and in present-day India it is well established, and beyond India it is known at least in Annam and Java. It is one of the most popular of all foreign tales which have been taken over by African tribes, not fewer than twenty-five versions having been

reported, from every quarter of the continent. The tale has, however, hardly entered the western hemisphere; at least none have been noted except from Jamaica and from a Cape Verde Island tradition in Massachusetts.

In some stories the knowledge of animal languages serves to promote the success of the hero in much the same way as Aladdin's lamp did his. In the tale known from the Grimms' title as *The Three Languages* (Type 671), the father sends his stupid son off to school, but all he learns is the language of dogs, birds, and frogs. His father is disgusted at his stupidity and orders him killed. But a compassionate servant substitutes an animal's heart, and lets him escape. (22) By means of his knowledge of animal languages, he cures a sick princess or discovers a treasure, and eventually he marries the princess.

Later a bird indicates his election as pope (or king) (Motif H171.2). This tale is so frequently confused with another containing this same power to understand the animal, namely, *The Boy Who Learned Many Things* (Type 517), that any consideration of their origin and distribution will be postponed until the latter tale is taken up in a more appropriate place. (23)

Special virtues in connection with the learning of language are ascribed to a serpent's crown, though its efficacy is by no means confined to this function. In one story of this kind (Type 672A) a man steals a serpent's crown and when the serpent pursues he throws a garment behind him and escapes. The cook now cooks the crown and learns, in place of his master, the language of animals. In some versions he receives instead, or in addition, a considerable sum of money. A second tale of a serpent's crown (Type 672B) tells how a little girl takes away the gold crown which the serpent has laid down. As a result, the serpent dies. A third tale (Type 672C) is one of gratitude. The maiden feeds the serpent milk (24) and as a result he appears at her wedding and leaves a crown of gold and silver. All three of these small tales of serpents' crowns are frequently told as local legends. They seem to be confined largely to central Europe, primarily Germany.

(20). This motif is found in Grimm's tale, *The White Serpent* (Type 673) and in an Estonian and three Finnish analogues. By the use of the knowledge of animal languages the hero discovers the queen's necklace or prevents an accident. These folktales apparently go back to medieval literary sources. For a good discussion of them, see Bolte-Polivka, I, 131-34. The

trait seems to belong quite as much to local tradition and mythology as to folktale. For another story of animal languages, see Type 781.

(21). Der tiersprachenkundige Mann.

(22). For the appearance of this motif in other tales, see Motif K512.2 and the literature there cited.

(23). See p. 138, below.

(24). In a similar incident well known in Germany and surrounding countries (Type 285) the child not only feeds the serpent milk but says, "Have some bread, too."