

Stith Thompson - The Folktale - p86-87

G. EXTRAORDINARY SMALLNESS

Though gigantic persons are very frequent in local tradition, they have played little part in the regular folktale. It is quite different with the tiny hero. In ancient literature we frequently hear of impossibly small men⁽²⁷⁾ and this theme has retained its popularity, not only in the literary account of the travels of Lemuel Gulliver, but also in the widely told popular story of Tom Thumb (Type 700).

This tale of a boy the size of a thumb and his adventures goes back at least to the period of the Renaissance. It seems to have given the name, *Le Petit Poucet*, to Perrault's hero of the story usually known as *Hansel and Gretel* (Type 327), and it undoubtedly suggested Fielding's satirical play of *Tom Thumb the Great*. As a nursery tale it is very popular and has doubtless been propagated very largely through children's books. A glance at its distribution indicates that it is a European story, well established over the whole continent, which has been carried to the nearer parts of Asia, to scattered points in Africa and the Cape Verde Islands, and thence to Jamaica, the Bahamas, the American Negroes of the southern states, and to one tribe of Indians in the Plains.

There is no great variety in the telling. A childless couple wish for a child, however small he may be, and as a result they have a boy who is only as large as a thumb. He drives a wagon by sitting in a horse's ear; lets himself be sold and then runs away; is carried up the chimney by the steam of food; helps thieves in their robbery but betrays them by his cries; is swallowed by a cow and mystifies everyone by crying out from within, so that the cow is slaughtered and he is rescued. Finally he is eaten by a fox or a wolf; whom he persuades to go to his father's chicken-house or pantry for food: when he arrives, he calls for help and is rescued. A few variations, but not very many, are to be found in the details of the thumbing's marvelous adventures. It would seem to be a story whose history would repay a thorough investigation such as it has never received.

(27). For a discussion of such ancient stories, see Bolte-Polivka, I, 395.