

A Feast of Folktale

MARY H. PRITCHARD

Kyrylo the Tanner, as told by Odarka Chandon. Illus. by Ihor Haras Mykytyn. Kids Can Press, 1977. 27 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-16-8.

How Trouble Made the Monkey Eat Pepper, as told by Rita Cox. Illus. by Roy Crosse. Kids Can Press, 1977. 27 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-14-1.

The Shirt of the Happy Man, as told by Mariella Bertelli. Illus. by Laszlo Gal. Kids Can Press, 1977. 25 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-17-6.

The Maiden of Wu Long, as told by Frieda Ling. *The Axe and the Sword*, as told by Mee-Shaun Lau. Illus. by Joseph Loh. Kids Can Press, 1978. 26 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-18-4.

The Two Sisters, as told by Himani Bannerji. Illus. by Khaletun Majumder. Kids Can Press, 1978. 25 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-15-X.

How the Birds Got Their Colours, as told by Basil Johnston. Illus. by Del. Ashkewe. Kids Can Press, 1978. 27 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-19-2.

The Daughter of the Sun, by Ismael Mascayano after a legend from Ancient Peru. Illus. by the author. Kids Can Press, 1978. 25 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-20-6.

The Little Rooster's Diamond Penny, as told by Marina Mezey McDougall. Illus. by Yuksel Hassan. Kids Can Press, 1978. 29 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-21-4.

The idea of publishing a series of folktales from widely differing cultures needs no apology, and Kids Can Press is to be congratulated on producing a series of attractive, well-illustrated pamphlets at a reasonable price. Moreover, the series has clearly been designed thoughtfully, with an eye to the wider philosophical implications of the undertaking. Perhaps no single literary genre reveals as clearly as the folktale both the differences and the similarities among the members of the human family, and this series is impressive in its confrontation of both.

The most arresting feature of the series stresses our differences. With the exception of the Trinidadian *How Trouble Made the Monkey Eat Pepper*, all the tales are presented both in English translation and in their languages

of origin: Spanish, Ukrainian, Italian, Chinese, Hungarian, Ojibway, and Bengali. The reader can actually see how the stories look when they are written in their native languages, although he might reasonably complain that those languages are not consistently identified for him.

At first glance, the effect is both startling and agreeable. On more careful perusal, one begins to feel uncomfortable. First of all, there is the association of folk tale with oral tradition. Even in our own culture (shades of William Blake!) something is lost in the writing down. Perhaps, one thinks, the better form for such an exercise would have been a series of recordings in which the audience could hear the sounds and rhythms of the unfamiliar languages and come closer to understanding.

Ideally, of course, the reader (or the teacher or librarian) will exploit the riches of the Canadian mosaic and find the voices to read the tales aloud in their original languages. And it is not unlikely that the books will find their separate ways to families of assorted ethnic backgrounds where the stories will play a role in the preservation of an older culture. Most readers, however, will never hear the tales in any language other than English. Most of us will be handicapped by at best a nodding acquaintance with other Germanic and Romance languages and a familiarity with only our own alphabet, and even then we will be unable to reconstruct the linguistic sounds that would contribute musical magic to the tales.

Parallel translation is nothing new, of course, but the sad truth about our Tower of Babel has been addressed both sensitively and intelligently in the series. For example, the impossibility of relating the ideograph to written English is subtly acknowledged by having the Chinese version of *The Maiden of Wu Long/The Axe and the Sword* correlated with the soft brushwork of the illustrations rather than with the stark type of the English translation. The message is clear: the written language is more closely related to picture than to phonetic representation.

In the Bengali tale, *The Two Sisters*, the relationship is not immediately as clear. The Bengali version appears in parallel with the English, usually opposite an illustration, and the lacy figures of the script form an enchanting decoration, ever-changing and mysterious, though to the Western eye not in the least alphabetic. Eventually it becomes apparent, though, that its unfamiliar combination of straight lines and scrolling curves is also reflected in the illustrations (see Figure 1).

As we move closer to our familiar world with the Ukrainian tale, *Kyrylo the Tanner*, the texts are more clearly related to each other (the Cyrillic alphabet has become recognizable to us as a phonetic representation of speech), and we can begin to envisage some correlation between the

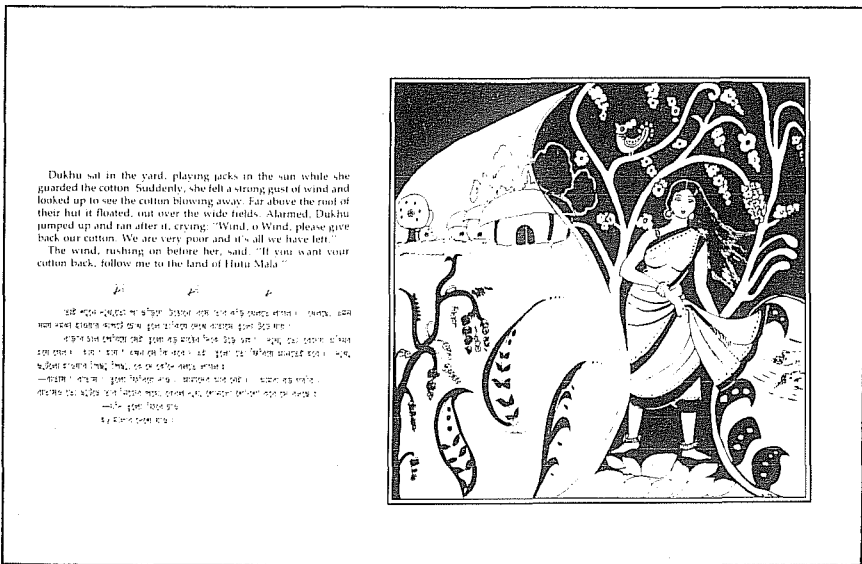


Figure 1.

languages. Significant words are sufficiently identifiable to show both similarities and differences between alphabets. A similar process occurs with the Hungarian *The Little Rooster's Diamond Penny*. By the time we get to Italian (*The Shirt of the Happy Man*) and Spanish (*The Daughter of the Sun*), we feel quite at home.

The odd man out, of course, is the Ojibway tale, *How the Birds Got Their Colours*. There it is, in our alphabet, with no other apparent relationship to our own language group. Again, however, the editors have been quick to address the problem. The tale is told in short sentences, each occupying its own line in each language. The parallel is clear, and from it the curious reader can easily extract some linguistic understanding. On the first page, for example, parallel sentence constructions and several different forms of a significant verb reveal their basic characteristics.

So successfully has the series dealt with its linguistic handicap that the Trinidadian tale, in the same standard English as the translations from other languages, is something of a letdown. Here there is no mystery and, more seriously (except for the inclusion of two lines of apparently irrelevant verse at beginning and end), no sense of the magical cadences that separate West Indian English from our own. The courage and integrity that characterize the rest of the series seem to have been lost when the editors were faced with the English language.

It is difficult not to lose something in translation. To have translated the stories from other languages into anything but standard English would have been artificial and pretentious, but what is lost is made good in the struggle to achieve aesthetic integrity in the use of illustrations and the bilingual text. In the Trinidadian tale, however, the struggle never seems to have taken place, and the result is a rather depressing fuzziness that is echoed in the illustrations. So much for doubts about the value of stressing our linguistic differences.

Meanwhile, of course, there are the similarities, and the entire series goes a long way toward showing us that beneath the different surfaces of language and depiction there beats a universal human heart. The series covers an impressive range of folktale types, all of which are familiar to us, from the simplest fable to mythic fairy tale. Even here, though, there are some intriguing variations. Take dragons, for instance. In the Chinese "The Maiden of Wu Long," the eternal summer in a paradisaal village is threatened by a Great Locust which, like a western-style dragon, breathes clouds of smoky mist. In this world, however, salvation is associated with dragons in the person of the Maiden of Wu Long, the dark Dragon Lady who has power over all the elements.

Less satisfying is the treatment of the dragon in the Ukrainian tale, *Kyrylo the Tanner*. Here the dragon captures a princess but falls in love with her and cannot eat her. Anything but ferocious, he is depicted in the illustration shyly handing her a bouquet of flowers, and we're all set for a Beauty-and-the-Beast ending. Instead, the dragon is attacked and driven off by the powerful and clever Kyrylo who returns the princess to her father and becomes a great hero, leaving the reader feeling a bit cheated.

It is hard to avoid recounting all the tales and even harder to choose a favourite. Still, the Ojibway story, *How the Birds Got Their Colours*, deserves special mention as the one that struck this reader as an exceptionally fine fusion in print and illustration of the linguistic and symbolic elements that make up the tale's delightful combination of aetiologiical myth and beast fable. It is an exceptional book in a splendid series.

Mary Pritchard teaches English language and literature including Children's Literature and Fantasy, for the University of Western Ontario and King's College, one of its affiliates. Her doctoral dissertation was a study of the political and social applications of Aesopian fables.