

## *Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus*

### THREE TALES RETOLD

**Tales from the Amazon.** Martin Elbl and T.J. Winik. Illus. Gerda Neubacher. Hayes Publishing, 1986. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88625-127-3; **The enchanted tapestry: a Chinese folk tale retold.** Robert San Souci. Illus. Laszlo Gal. Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-050-2; **The nutcracker.** Veronica Tennant. Illus. Toller Cranston. McClelland & Stewart, 1985. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-2316-2.

Variant versions of fairy and folk tales have been intensively investigated by anthropologists, folklorists, and others interested in the tales' historical origins, cultural mutations, and "paths of diffusion". The historico-geographical method of investigation, for example, systematically determines and compares traits of recurrent cross-cultural tales (oral and written) and attempts to establish a hypothetical archetype for each tale and to map each version in terms of time and locale. Though these studies do not examine the tales in terms of function and psychology, they do recognize their kinship with myth. All cultures produce myths, and co-opt those of other cultures. As they are kept alive in retelling, history, customs, origins, and beliefs are preserved. but, inevitably, as classical and mythical tales are retold in our culture, alteration processes may obscure or lose features containing the original mythical resonance.

It is clearly wrongheaded to dismiss a retelling simply on the basis of its lack of resemblance to original or subsequent effective versions, for it is through alterations of some kind that myths and tales can become relevant to the retelling culture, and be ensured of continuing life. It is the *kind* of alterations that matter: we should ask of a retelling that it not bowdlerize a tale by making simplistic or by "tidying up the morality" (*Only connect*, 129). The recurrent motifs in myths and tales across time and cultures are flood, slaying of monsters, incest, sibling rivalry (usually between brother), castration, and androgynous deities. But when did you last read a modern retelling of an old take which presented, even indirectly, incest or castration? As Tolkein writes,

...the age of childhood-sentiment has...produced a dreadful undergrowth of stories written and adapted to what was or is conceived to be the measure of children's minds and needs. The old stories are mollified or bowdlerized, instead of being preserved; without

even the intrigue; or patronizing; or (deadliest of all) covertly sniggering, with an eye on the other grownups present. ("Children and Fairy Stories")

Three samples of retold tales give a taste of the kind of retellings available. These three books are very different from one another in both type of story and geographical origin: *Tales from the Amazon*, adapted by Martin Elbl and T.J. Winik, illustrated by Gerda Neubacher; *The enchanted tapestry*, a Chinese folktale retold by Robert D. San Souci, pictures by Laszlo Gal; *The nutcracker*, retold by Veronica Tennant, illustrated by Toller Cranston. The three tales from the Amazon are "adaptations" rather than "retellings" of one of the most universal of all myths: creation myths. They are simply, but not simplistically, told, and open with evocative formulaic allusion to "a great uncharted world of time" (*Children and Literature*, 206) and to a particular place. For instance "The Man who Married a Star" (perhaps related to the network of North American native myths about "the Star Husband") opens with "on a rich, green bank of the Muddy River there once lived a young hunter". Each of these vivid tales explains a natural phenomenon. "The Man who Married a Star" accounts for a particular star formation. Along the way, it imparts wisdom the suspicious meddling of others forces the young hunter and his bride into banishment in the sky. "Why the Old Never Grow Young", advises that, though people grow old and die, this is for the best, for otherwise the world would "burst and crack apart". "The Sun, The Moon and The Rain" accounts for the lack of rain, the scorch of the sun, and the troubles of night-hunts; it also grounds customs and traditions in reason.

*The Enchanted Tapestry* contains many of the structural features of a mythological tale: three brothers, one of whom outshines the other two, a quest involving tests of strength and faith, and a magical other-world of dream to which only the strong and true have access. Though it is good tale well told, I suspect the reteller eradicates, or at least downplays, much of the original Chinese flavour. Except for the Chinese names, and perhaps the significance of the East and West winds and of the large red sun (none of which are made much of here), the tale could have any historical and geographic origins, unlike the tales from the Amazon. The questing son meets a "sorceress" and "fairies" which, though not evident in this retelling, must be of a different nature than those of the western world. The effective illustrations are distinctly oriental, but take these away and one is left with a generic tale.

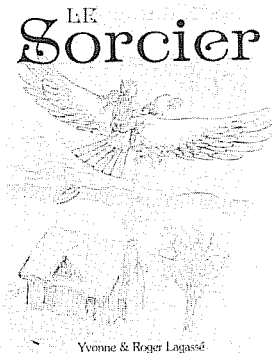
Tennant's retelling of E.T.A. Hoffman's *Nutcracker and the King of mice*. (1816) is a special case. Hoffman's *Nutcracker*, though fantasy, is not a literary or an oral myth. It is tempting to say that Tennant's version is highly bowdlerized: in one sense it is a completely different story, which sugar-coats and simplifies. But Tennant practically acknowledge this as her intention. She writes in the foreword: "The original work by Hoffman was dark and arresting and not at all frivolous. I have tried to retell it in the style of Toller [Cranston]

ton]'s paintings, romantic, exotic, and with faith in the existence of magic." (Hoffman was a German Romantic, but Tennant is "romantic" in the sentimental sense). So Tennant is not guided in her retelling by any literary predilections, but by Cranston's art (P.L. Travers tells us that tales have often been ill-treated when rewritten to fit illustrations) and by Tchaikovsky's music, and by the ballet she danced so often. From these her story has strong support; without them it would not stand as well. Retellings need as much depth and significance as an original story, and cannot derive their strength from allusion and familiarity alone: this version is rather generalized and superficial. Tennant has truly made it her own; highlighting dances and musical sounds. But the battlescene, a complex climax described in dramatic detail in Hoffman, is quickly dismissed by Tennant as a bothersome plot point. After following Hoffman's Marie on her fantastic journey, the reader will find that Tennant's Clara seems to be on a whistlestop packaged tour. The rough-edged nastiness of some of the characters and of the relations between characters is smoothed over in Tennant's version. She even tacks on a moral at the end.

Myths, like children, are tougher than we generally assume. Yet, though old tales can thrive and survive the influences of changing times and places, retellers should not impose so much on them as to distort their fundamental nature. If they cannot preserve the mythical resonance, they should create a new story with a new title.

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## UN CONTE DE FÉE TRADITIONNEL



**Le sorcier.** Yvonne et Roger Lagassé. Illus. Gilbert Freynet. Saint-Boniface, Éditions des Plaines, 1986. 39 pp., 3,95\$ broché. ISBN 0-920944-65-5.

Dans ce petit livre de Roger et Yvonne Lagassé, le jeune lecteur découvrira un conte de fée tout à fait traditionnel où les éléments fantastiques conventionnels (métamorphoses surprenantes, pouvoirs extraordinaires des animaux, transformations magiques) sont intégrés à une intrigue pleine d'aventures.