



PEASANTS TELL TALES: THE MEANING OF MOTHER GOOSE

THE MENTAL WORLD of the unenlightened during the Enlightenment seems to be irretrievably lost. It is so difficult, if not impossible, to locate the common man in the eighteenth century that it seems foolish to search for his cosmology. But before abandoning the attempt, it might be useful to suspend one's disbelief and to consider a story—a story everyone knows, though not in the following version, which is the tale more or less as it was told around firesides in peasant cottages during long winter evenings in eighteenth-century France.¹

Once a little girl was told by her mother to bring some bread and milk to her grandmother. As the girl was walking through the forest, a wolf came up to her and asked where she was going.

"To grandmother's house," she replied.

"Which path are you taking, the path of the pins or the path of the needles?"

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"The path of the needles."

So the wolf took the path of the pins and arrived first at the house. He killed grandmother, poured her blood into a bottle, and sliced her flesh onto a platter. Then he got into her nightclothes and waited in bed.

"Knock, knock."

"Come in, my dear."

"Hello, grandmother. I've brought you some bread and milk."

"Have something yourself, my dear. There is meat and wine in the pantry."

So the little girl ate what was offered; and as she did, a little cat said, "Slut! To eat the flesh and drink the blood of your grandmother!"

Then the wolf said, "Undress and get into bed with me."

"Where shall I put my apron?"

"Throw it on the fire; you won't need it any more."

For each garment—bodice, skirt, petticoat, and stockings—the girl asked the same question; and each time the wolf answered, "Throw it on the fire; you won't need it any more."

When the girl got in bed, she said, "Oh, grandmother! How hairy you are!"

"It's to keep me warmer, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What big shoulders you have!"

"It's for better carrying firewood, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What long nails you have!"

"It's for scratching myself better, my dear."

"Oh, grandmother! What big teeth you have!"

"It's for eating you better, my dear."

And he ate her.

What is the moral of this story? For little girls, clearly: stay away from wolves. For historians, it seems to be saying something about the mental world of the early modern peasantry. But what? How can one begin to interpret such a text? One way leads through psychoanalysis. The analysts have given folktales a thorough going-over, picking out hidden symbols, unconscious motifs, and psychic mechanisms. Consider, for example, the exegesis of "Little Red Riding Hood" by two of the best known psychoanalysts, Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim.

Fromm interpreted the tale as a riddle about the collective unconscious in primitive society, and he solved it "without difficulty" by decoding its "symbolic language." The story concerns an

adolescent's confrontation with adult sexuality, he explained. Its hidden meaning shows through its symbolism—but the symbols he saw in his version of the text were based on details that did not exist in the versions known to peasants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus he makes a great deal of the (nonexistent) red riding hood as a symbol of menstruation and of the (non-existent) bottle carried by the girl as a symbol of virginity: hence the mother's (nonexistent) admonition not to stray from the path into wild terrain where she might break it. The wolf is the ravishing male. And the two (nonexistent) stones that are placed in the wolf's belly after the (nonexistent) hunter extricates the girl and her grandmother, stand for sterility, the punishment for breaking a sexual taboo. So, with an uncanny sensitivity to detail that did not occur in the original folktale, the psychoanalyst takes us into a mental universe that never existed, at least not before the advent of psychoanalysis.²

How could anyone get a text so wrong? The difficulty does not derive from professional dogmatism—for psychoanalysts need not be more rigid than poets in their manipulation of symbols—but rather from blindness to the historical dimension of folktales.

Fromm did not bother to mention his source, but apparently he took his text from the brothers Grimm. The Grimms got it, along with "Puss 'n Boots," "Bluebeard," and a few other stories, from Jeannette Hassenpflug, a neighbor and close friend of theirs in Cassel; and she learned it from her mother, who came from a French Huguenot family. The Huguenots brought their own repertory of tales into Germany when they fled from the persecution of Louis XIV. But they did not draw them directly from popular oral tradition. They read them in books written by Charles Perrault, Marie Cathérine d'Aulnoy, and others during the vogue for fairy tales in fashionable Parisian circles at the end of the seventeenth century. Perrault, the master of the genre, did indeed take his material from the oral tradition of the common people (his principal source probably was his son's nurse). But he touched it up so that it would suit the taste of the salon sophisticates, *précieuses*, and courtiers to whom he directed the first printed version of Mother Goose, his *Contes de ma mère l'oye* of 1697. Thus the tales that reached the Grimms through the Hassenpflugs were neither

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very German nor very representative of folk tradition. Indeed, the Grimms recognized their literary and Frenchified character and therefore eliminated them from the second edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*—all but “Little Red Riding Hood.” It remained in the collection, evidently, because Jeannette Hassenpflug had grafted on to it a happy ending derived from “The Wolf and the Kids” (tale type 123 according to the standard classification scheme developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson), which was one of the most popular in Germany. So Little Red Riding Hood slipped into the German and later the English literary tradition with her French origins undetected. She changed character considerably as she passed from the French peasantry to Perrault’s nursery, into print, across the Rhine, back into an oral tradition but this time as part of the Huguenot diaspora, and back into book form but now as a product of the Teutonic forest rather than the village hearths of the Old Regime in France.³

Fromm and a host of other psychoanalytical exegetes did not worry about the transformations of the text—indeed, they did not know about them—because they got the tale they wanted. It begins with pubertal sex (the red hood, which does not exist in the French oral tradition) and ends with the triumph of the ego (the rescued girl, who is usually eaten in the French tales) over the id (the wolf, who is never killed in the traditional versions). All’s well that ends well.

The ending is particularly important for Bruno Bettelheim, the latest in the line of psychoanalysts who have had a go at “Little Red Riding Hood.” For him, the key to the story, and to all such stories, is the affirmative message of its denouement. By ending happily, he maintains, folktales permit children to confront their unconscious desires and fears and to emerge unscathed, id subdued and ego triumphant. The id is the villain of “Little Red Riding Hood” in Bettelheim’s version. It is the pleasure principle, which leads the girl astray when she is too old for oral fixation (the stage represented by “Hansel and Gretel”) and too young for adult sex. The id is also the wolf, who is also the father, who is also the hunter, who is also the ego and, somehow, the superego as well. By directing the wolf to her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood manages in oedipal fashion to do away with her mother, because

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mothers can also be grandmothers in the moral economy of the soul and the houses on either side of the woods are actually the same house, as in "Hansel and Gretel," where they are also the mother's body. This adroit mixing of symbols gives Little Red Riding Hood an opportunity to get into bed with her father, the wolf, thereby giving vent to her oedipal fantasies. She survives in the end because she is reborn on a higher level of existence when her father reappears as ego-superego-hunter and cuts her out of the belly of her father as wolf-id, so that everyone lives happily ever after.⁴

Bettelheim's generous view of symbolism makes for a less mechanistic interpretation of the tale than does Fromm's notion of a secret code, but it, too, proceeds from some unquestioned assumptions about the text. Although he cites enough commentators on Grimm and Perrault to indicate some awareness of folklore as an academic discipline, Bettelheim reads "Little Red Riding Hood" and the other tales as if they had no history. He treats them, so to speak, flattened out, like patients on a couch, in a timeless contemporaneity. He does not question their origins or worry over other meanings that they might have had in other contexts because he knows how the soul works and how it has always worked. In fact, however, folktales are historical documents. They have evolved over many centuries and have taken different turns in different cultural traditions. Far from expressing the unchanging operations of man's inner being, they suggest that *mentalités* themselves have changed. We can appreciate the distance between our mental world and that of our ancestors if we imagine lulling a child of our own to sleep with the primitive peasant version of "Little Red Riding Hood." Perhaps, then, the moral of the story should be: beware of psychoanalysts—and be careful in your use of sources. We seem to be back at historicism.⁵

Not quite, however, for "Little Red Riding Hood" has a terrifying irrationality that seems out of place in the Age of Reason. In fact, the peasants' version outdoes the psychoanalysts' in violence and sex. (Following the Grimms and Perrault, Fromm and Bettelheim do not mention the cannibalizing of grandmother and the strip-tease prelude to the devouring of the girl.) Evidently the peasants did not need a secret code to talk about taboos.

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Little Red Riding Hood, by Gustave Doré

The other stories in the French peasant Mother Goose have the same nightmare quality. In one early version of "Sleeping Beauty" (tale type 410), for example, Prince Charming, who is already married, ravishes the princess, and she bears him several children, without waking up. The infants finally break the spell by biting her while nursing, and the tale then takes up its second theme: the attempts of the prince's mother-in-law, an ogress, to eat his illicit offspring. The original "Bluebeard" (tale type 312) is the story of a bride who cannot resist the temptation to open a forbidden door in the house of her husband, a strange man who has already gone through six wives. She enters a dark room and discovers the corpses of the previous wives, hanging on the wall. Horrified, she lets the forbidden key drop from her hand into a pool of blood on

the floor. She cannot wipe it clean; so Bluebeard discovers her disobedience, when he inspects the keys. As he sharpens his knife in preparation for making her his seventh victim, she withdraws to her bedroom and puts on her wedding costume. But she delays her toilette long enough to be saved by her brothers, who gallop to the rescue after receiving a warning from her pet dove. In one early tale from the Cinderella cycle (tale type 510B), the heroine becomes a domestic servant in order to prevent her father from forcing her to marry him. In another, the wicked stepmother tries to push her in an oven but incinerates one of the mean stepsisters by mistake. In the French peasant's "Hansel and Gretel" (tale type 327), the hero tricks an ogre into slitting the throats of his own children. A husband eats a succession of brides in the wedding bed in "La Belle et le monstre" (tale type 433), one of the hundreds of tales that never made it into the printed versions of Mother Goose. In a nastier tale, "Les Trois Chiens" (tale type 315), a sister kills her brother by hiding spikes in the mattress of his wedding bed. In the nastiest of all, "Ma mère m'a tué, mon père m'a mangé" (tale type 720), a mother chops her son up into a Lyonnais-style casse-roule, which her daughter serves to the father. And so it goes, from rape and sodomy to incest and cannibalism. Far from veiling their message with symbols, the storytellers of eighteenth-century France portrayed a world of raw and naked brutality.

How can the historian make sense of this world? One way for him to keep his footing in the psychic undertow of early Mother Goose is to hold fast to two disciplines: anthropology and folklore. When they discuss theory, anthropologists disagree about the fundamentals of their science. But when they go into the bush, they use techniques for understanding oral traditions that can, with discretion, be applied to Western folklore. Except for some structuralists, they relate tales to the art of tale telling and to the context in which it takes place. They look for the way a raconteur adapts an inherited theme to his audience so that the specificity of time and place shows through the universality of the topos. They do not expect to find direct social comment or metaphysical allegories so much as a tone of discourse or a cultural style, which communicates a particular ethos and world view.⁶ "Scientific" folklore, as

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the French call it (American specialists often distinguish between folklore and "fakelore"), involves the compilation and comparison of tales according to the standardized schemata of tale types developed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. It does not necessarily exclude formalistic analysis such as that of Vladimir Propp, but it stresses rigorous documentation—the occasion of the telling, the background of the teller, and the degree of contamination from written sources.⁷

French folklorists have recorded about ten thousand tales, in many different dialects and in every corner of France and of French-speaking territories. For example, while on an expedition in Berry for the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in 1945, Ariane de Félice recorded a version of "Le Petit Poucet" ("Tom Thumb" or "Thumbling," tale type 327) by a peasant woman, Euphrasie Pichon, who had been born in 1862 in the village of Eguzon (Indre). In 1879 Jean Drouillet wrote down another version as he listened to his mother Eugénie, who had learned it from her mother, Octavie Riffet, in the village of Teillay (Cher). The two versions are nearly identical and owe nothing to the first printed account of the tale, which Charles Perrault published in 1697. They and eighty other "Petits Poucets," which folklorists have compiled and compared, motif by motif, belong to an oral tradition that survived with remarkably little contamination from print culture until late in the nineteenth century. Most of the tales in the French repertory were recorded between 1870 and 1914 during "the Golden Age of folktale research in France," and they were recounted by peasants who had learned them as children, long before literacy had spread throughout the countryside. Thus in 1874 Nannette Levesque, an illiterate peasant woman born in 1794, dictated a version of "Little Red Riding Hood" that went back to the eighteenth century; and in 1865 Louis Grolleau, a domestic servant born in 1803, dictated a rendition of "Le Pou" (tale type 621) that he had first heard under the Empire. Like all tellers of tales, the peasant raconteurs adjusted the setting of their stories to their own milieux; but they kept the main elements intact, using repetitions, rhymes, and other mnemonic devices. Although the "performance" element, which is central to the study of contemporary folklore, does not show through the old texts,

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folklorists argue that the recordings of the Third Republic provide enough evidence for them to reconstruct the rough outlines of an oral tradition that existed two centuries ago.⁸

That claim may seem extravagant, but comparative studies have revealed striking similarities in different recordings of the same tale, even though they were made in remote villages, far removed from one another and from the circulation of books. In a study of "Little Red Riding Hood," for example, Paul Delarue compared thirty-five versions recorded throughout a vast zone of the *langue d'oil*. Twenty versions correspond exactly to the primitive "Conte de la mère grand" quoted above, except for a few details (sometimes the girl is eaten, sometimes she escapes by a ruse). Two versions follow Perrault's tale (the first to mention the red hood). And the rest contain a mixture of the oral and written accounts, whose elements stand out as distinctly as the garlic and mustard in a French salad dressing.⁹

Written evidence proves that the tales existed long before anyone conceived of "folklore," a nineteenth-century neologism.¹⁰ Medieval preachers drew on the oral tradition in order to illustrate moral arguments. Their sermons, transcribed in collections of "Exempla" from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, refer to the same stories as those taken down in peasant cottages by folklorists in the nineteenth century. Despite the obscurity surrounding the origins of chivalric romances, *chansons de geste*, and *fabliaux*, it seems that a good deal of medieval literature drew on popular oral tradition, rather than vice versa. "Sleeping Beauty" appeared in an Arthurian romance of the fourteenth century, and "Cinderella" surfaced in Noel du Fail's *Propos rustiques* of 1547, a book that traced the tales to peasant lore and that showed how they were transmitted; for du Fail wrote the first account of an important French institution, the *veillée*, an evening fireside gathering, where men repaired tools and women sewed while listening to stories that would be recorded by folklorists three hundred years later and that were already centuries old.¹¹ Whether they were meant to amuse adults or to frighten children, as in the case of cautionary tales like "Little Red Riding Hood," the stories belonged to a fund of popular culture, which peasants hoarded over the centuries with remarkably little loss.

The great collections of folktales made in the late nineteenth

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and early twentieth centuries therefore provide a rare opportunity to make contact with the illiterate masses who have disappeared into the past without leaving a trace. To reject folktales because they cannot be dated and situated with precision like other historical documents is to turn one's back on one of the few points of entry into the mental world of peasants under the Old Regime. But to attempt to penetrate that world is to face a set of obstacles as daunting as those confronted by Jean de l'Ours (tale type 301) when he tried to rescue the three Spanish princesses from the underworld or by little Parle (tale type 328) when he set out to capture the ogre's treasure.

The greatest obstacle is the impossibility of listening in on the story tellers. No matter how accurate they may be, the recorded versions of the tales cannot convey the effects that must have brought the stories to life in the eighteenth century: the dramatic pauses, the sly glances, the use of gestures to set scenes—a Snow White at a spinning wheel, a Cinderella delousing a stepsister—and the use of sounds to punctuate actions—a knock on the door (often done by rapping on a listener's forehead) or a cudgeling or a fart. All of those devices shaped the meaning of the tales, and all of them elude the historian. He cannot be sure that the limp and lifeless text that he holds between the covers of a book provides an accurate account of the performance that took place in the eighteenth century. He cannot even be certain that the text corresponds to the unrecorded versions that existed a century earlier. Although he may turn up plenty of evidence to prove that the tale itself existed, he cannot quiet his suspicions that it could have changed a great deal before it reached the folklorists of the Third Republic.

Given those uncertainties, it seems unwise to build an interpretation on a single version of a single tale, and more hazardous still to base symbolic analysis on details—riding hoods and hunters—that may not have occurred in the peasant versions. But there are enough recordings of those versions—35 "Little Red Riding Hoods," 90 "Tom Thumbs," 105 "Cinderellas"—for one to picture the general outline of a tale as it existed in the oral tradition. One can study it on the level of structure, noting the way the narrative is framed and the motifs are combined, instead of concentrating on fine points of detail. Then one can compare it with

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other stories. And finally, by working through the entire body of French folktales, one can distinguish general characteristics, overarching themes, and pervasive elements of style and tone.¹²

One can also seek aid and comfort from specialists in the study of oral literature. Milman Parry and Albert Lord have shown how folk epics as long as *The Iliad* are passed on faithfully from bard to bard among the illiterate peasants of Yugoslavia. These "singers of tales" do not possess the fabulous powers of memorization sometimes attributed to "primitive" peoples. They do not memorize very much at all. Instead, they combine stock phrases, formulas, and narrative segments in patterns improvised according to the response of their audience. Recordings of the same epic by the same singer demonstrate that each performance is unique. Yet recordings made in 1950 do not differ in essentials from those made in 1934. In each case, the singer proceeds as if he were walking down a well-known path. He may branch off here to take a shortcut or pause there to enjoy a panorama, but he always remains on familiar ground—so familiar, in fact, that he will say that he repeated every step exactly as he has done before. He does not conceive of repetition in the same way as a literate person, for he has no notion of words, lines, and verses. Texts are not rigidly fixed for him as they are for readers of the printed page. He creates his text as he goes, picking new routes through old themes. He can even work in material derived from printed sources, for the epic as a whole is so much greater than the sum of its parts that modifications of detail barely disturb the general configuration.¹³

Lord's investigation confirms conclusions that Vladimir Propp reached by a different mode of analysis, one that showed how variations of detail remain subordinate to stable structures in Russian folktales.¹⁴ Field workers among illiterate peoples in Polynesia, Africa, and North and South America have also found that oral traditions have enormous staying power. Opinions divide on the separate question of whether or not oral sources can provide a reliable account of past events. Robert Lowie, who collected narratives from the Crow Indians in the early twentieth century, took up a position of extreme skepticism: "I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever."¹⁵ By historical value, however, Lowie meant factual accuracy.

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cy. (In 1910 he recorded a Crow account of a battle against the Dakota; in 1931 the same informant described the battle to him, but claimed that it had taken place against the Cheyenne.) Lowie conceded that the stories, taken as stories, remained quite consistent; they forked and branched in the standard patterns of Crow narrative. So his findings actually support the view that in traditional story telling continuities in form and style outweigh variations in detail, among North American Indians as well as Yugoslav peasants.¹⁶ Frank Hamilton Cushing noted a spectacular example of this tendency among the Zuni almost a century ago. In 1886 he served as interpreter to a Zuni delegation in the eastern United States. During a round robin of story telling one evening, he recounted as his contribution the tale of "The Cock and the Mouse," which he had picked up from a book of Italian folktales. About a year later, he was astonished to hear the same tale from one of the Indians back at Zuni. The Italian motifs remained recognizable enough for one to be able to classify the tale in the Aarne-Thompson scheme (it is tale type 2032). But everything else about the story—its frame, figures of speech, allusions, style, and general feel—had become intensely Zuni. Instead of Italianizing the native lore, the story had been Zunified.¹⁷

No doubt the transmission process affects stories differently in different cultures. Some bodies of folklore can resist "contamination" while absorbing new material more effectively than can others. But oral traditions seem to be tenacious and long-lived nearly everywhere among illiterate peoples. Nor do they collapse at their first exposure to the printed word. Despite Jack Goody's contention that a literacy line cuts through all history, dividing oral from "written" or "print" cultures, it seems that traditional tale telling can flourish long after the onset of literacy. To anthropologists and folklorists who have tracked tales through the bush, there is nothing extravagant about the idea that peasant raconteurs in late nineteenth-century France told stories to one another pretty much as their ancestors had done a century or more earlier.¹⁸

Comforting as this expert testimony may be, it does not clear all the difficulties in the way of interpreting the French tales. The texts are accessible enough, for they lie unexploited in treasure houses like the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in Paris and

in scholarly collections like *Le Conte populaire français* by Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze. But one cannot lift them from such sources and hold them up to inspection as if they were so many photographs of the Old Regime, taken with the innocent eye of an extinct peasantry. They are stories.

As in most kinds of narration, they develop standardized plots from conventional motifs, picked up here, there, and everywhere. They have a distressing lack of specificity for anyone who wants to pin them down to precise points in time and place. Raymond Jameson has studied the case of a Chinese Cinderella from the ninth century. She gets her slippers from a magic fish instead of a fairy godmother and loses one of them at a village fête instead of a royal ball, but she bears an unmistakable resemblance to Perrault's heroine.¹⁹ Folklorists have recognized their tales in Herodotus and Homer, on ancient Egyptian papyrus and Chaldean stone tablets; and they have recorded them all over the world, in Scandinavia and Africa, among Indians on the banks of the Bengal and Indians along the Missouri. The dispersion is so striking that some have come to believe in Ur-stories and a basic Indo-European repertory of myths, legends, and tales. This tendency feeds into the cosmic theories of Frazer and Jung and Lévi-Strauss, but it does not help anyone attempting to penetrate the peasant mentalities of early modern France.

Fortunately, a more down-to-earth tendency in folklore makes it possible to isolate the peculiar characteristics of traditional French tales. *Le Conte populaire français* arranges them according to the Aarne-Thompson classification scheme, which covers all varieties of Indo-European folktales. It therefore provides the basis for comparative study, and the comparisons suggest the way general themes took root and grew in French soil. "Tom Thumb" ("Le Petit Poucet," tale type 327), for example, has a strong French flavor, in Perrault as well as the peasant versions, if one compares it with its German cousin, "Hansel and Gretel." The Grimms' tale emphasizes the mysterious forest and the naïveté of the children in the face of inscrutable evil, and it has more fanciful and poetic touches, as in the details about the bread-and-cake house and the magic birds. The French children confront an ogre, but in a very real house. Monsieur and Madame Ogre discuss their plans for a

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dinner party as if they were any married couple, and they carp at each other just as Tom Thumb's parents did. In fact, it is hard to tell the two couples apart. Both simple-minded wives throw away their family's fortunes; and their husbands berate them in the same manner, except that the ogre tells his wife that she deserves to be eaten and that he would do the job himself if she were not such an unappetizing *vieille bête* (old beast).²⁰ Unlike their German relatives, the French ogres appear in the role of *le bourgeois de la maison* (burgher head of household),²¹ as if they were rich local landowners. They play fiddles, visit friends, snore contentedly in bed beside fat ogress wives;²² and for all their boorishness, they never fail to be good family men and good providers. Hence the joy of the ogre in "Pitchin-Pitchot" as he bounds into the house, a sack on his back: "Catherine, put on the big kettle. I've caught Pitchin-Pitchot."²³

Where the German tales maintain a tone of terror and fantasy, the French strike a note of humor and domesticity. Firebirds settle down into hen yards. Elves, genii, forest spirits, the whole Indo-European panoply of magical beings become reduced in France to two species, ogres and fairies. And those vestigial creatures acquire human foibles and generally let humans solve their problems by their own devices, that is, by cunning and "Cartesianism"—a term that the French apply vulgarly to their propensity for craftiness and intrigue. The Gallic touch is clear in many of the tales that Perrault did not rework for his own Gallicized Mother Goose of 1697: the *panache* of the young blacksmith in "Le Petit Forgeron" (tale type 317), for example, who kills giants on a classic *tour de France*; or the provincialism of the Breton peasant in "Jean Bête" (tale type 675), who is given anything he wishes and asks for *un bon pêché de piquette et une écuelle de patates du lait* ("crude wine and a bowl of potatoes in milk"); or the professional jealousy of the master gardener, who fails to prune vines as well as his apprentice in "Jean le Teigneux" (tale type 314); or the cleverness of the devil's daughter in "La Belle Eulalie" (tale type 313), who escapes with her lover by leaving two talking pâtés in their beds. Just as one cannot attach the French tales to specific events, one should not dilute them in a timeless universal mythology. They really belong to a middle ground: *la France moderne* or the France that existed from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century.

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That time span may look distressingly vague to anyone who expects history to be precise. But precision may be inappropriate as well as impossible in the history of *mentalités*, a genre that requires different methods from those used in conventional genres, like political history. World views can not be chronicled in the manner of political events, but they are no less "real." Politics could not take place without the preliminary mental ordering that goes into the common-sense notion of the real world. Common sense itself is a social construction of reality, which varies from culture to culture. Far from being the arbitrary figment of some collective imagination, it expresses the common basis of experience in a given social order. To reconstruct the way peasants saw the world under the Old Regime, therefore, one should begin by asking what they had in common, what experiences they shared in the everyday life of their villages.

Thanks to several generations of research by social historians, that question can be answered. The answer must be hedged with qualifications and restricted to a high level of generalization because conditions varied so much in the kingdom, which remained a patchwork of regions rather than a unified nation until the Revolution and perhaps even well into the nineteenth century. Pierre Goubert, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Pierre Saint-Jacob, Paul Bois, and many others have uncovered the particularities of peasant life region by region and have explicated them monograph by monograph. The density of monographs can make French social history look like a conspiracy of exceptions trying to disprove rules. Yet here, too, there exists a danger of misplaced professionalism; for if one stands at a safe enough distance from the details, a general picture begins to emerge. In fact, it has already reached the stage of assimilation in textbooks like *Histoire économique et sociale de la France* (Paris, 1970) and syntheses like *Histoire de la France rurale* (Paris, 1975/76). It goes roughly as follows.²⁴

Despite war, plague, and famine, the social order that existed at village level remained remarkably stable during the early modern period in France. The peasants were relatively free—less so than the yeomen who were turning into landless laborers in England, more so than the serfs who were sinking into a kind of slavery east of the Elbe. But they could not escape from a seigneurial system

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that denied them sufficient land to achieve economic independence and that siphoned off whatever surplus they produced. Men labored from dawn to dusk, scratching the soil on scattered strips of land with plows like those of the Romans and hacking at their grain with primitive sickles, in order to leave enough stubble for communal grazing. Women married late—at age twenty-five to twenty-seven—and gave birth to only five or six children, of whom only two or three survived to adulthood. Great masses of people lived in a state of chronic malnutrition, subsisting mainly on porridge made of bread and water with some occasional, home-grown vegetables thrown in. They ate meat only a few times a year, on feast days or after autumn slaughtering if they did not have enough silage to feed the livestock over the winter. They often failed to get the two pounds of bread (2,000 calories) a day that they needed to keep up their health, and so they had little protection against the combined effects of grain shortage and disease. The population fluctuated between fifteen and twenty million, expanding to the limits of its productive capacity (an average density of forty souls per square kilometer, an average annual rate of forty births per thousand inhabitants), only to be devastated by demographic crises. For four centuries—from the first ravages of the Black Death in 1347 to the first great leap in population and productivity in the 1730s—French society remained trapped in rigid institutions and Malthusian conditions. It went through a period of stagnation, which Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have described as *l'histoire immobile* (unmoving history).²⁵

That phrase now seems exaggerated, for it hardly does justice to the religious conflict, grain riots, and rebellions against the extension of state power that disrupted the late medieval pattern of village life. But when first used in the 1950s, the notion of immobile history—a history of structural continuity over a long time span, *la longue durée*—served as a corrective to the tendency to see history as a succession of political events. Event history, *histoire événementielle*, generally took place over the heads of the peasantry, in the remote world of Paris and Versailles. While ministers came and went and battles raged, life in the village continued unperturbed, much as it had always been since times beyond the reach of memory.

History looked "immobile" at the village level, because seigneurialism and the subsistence economy kept villagers bent over the soil, and primitive techniques of farming gave them no opportunity to unbend. Grain yields remained at a ratio of about 5-to-1, a primitive return in contrast to modern farming, which produces fifteen or even thirty grains for every seed planted. Farmers could not raise enough grain to feed large numbers of animals, and they did not have enough livestock to produce the manure to fertilize the fields to increase the yield. This vicious circle kept them enclosed within a system of triennial or biennial crop rotation, which left a huge proportion of their land lying fallow. They could not convert the fallow to the cultivation of crops like clover, which return nitrogen to the soil, because they lived too close to penury to risk the experiment, aside from the fact that no one had any notion of nitrogen. Collective methods of cultivation also reduced the margin for experimentation. Except in a few regions with enclosures, like the *bocage* district of the west, peasants farmed scattered strips in open fields. They sowed and harvested collectively, so that common gleaning and common grazing could take place. They depended on common lands and forests beyond the fields for pasture, firewood, and chestnuts or berries. The only area where they could attempt to get ahead by individual initiative was the *basse-cour* or backyard attached to their household plots, or *manses*. Here they struggled to build up manure heaps, to raise flax for spinning, to produce vegetables and chickens for their home brews and local markets.

The backyard garden often provided the margin of survival for families that lacked the twenty, thirty, or forty acres that were necessary for economic independence. They needed so much land because so much of their harvest was drained from them by seigneurial dues, tithes, ground rents, and taxes. In most of central and northern France, the wealthier peasants rigged the collection of the main royal tax, the *taille*, in accordance with an old French principle: soak the poor. So tax collecting opened up fissures within the village, and indebtedness compounded the damage. The poorer peasants frequently borrowed from the rich—that is, the few relatively wealthy *coqs du village* (cocks of the walk), who owned enough land to sell surplus grain on the market, to build up

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herds, and to hire the poor as laborers. Debt peonage may have made the wealthy peasants hated as much as the seigneur and the ecclesiastical *décimateur* (tithe collector). Hatred, jealousy, and conflicts of interest ran through peasant society. The village was no happy and harmonious *Gemeinschaft*.

For most peasants village life was a struggle for survival, and survival meant keeping above the line that divided the poor from the indigent. The poverty line varied from place to place, according to the amount of land necessary to pay taxes, tithes, and seigniorial dues; to put aside enough grain for planting next year; and to feed the family. In times of scarcity, poor families had to buy their food. They suffered as consumers, while prices shot up and the wealthier peasants made a killing. So a succession of bad harvests could polarize the village, driving the marginal families into indigence as the rich got richer. In the face of such difficulties, the "little people" (*petites gens*) survived by their wits. They hired themselves out as farm hands, spun and wove cloth in their cottages, did odd jobs, and took to the road, picking up work wherever they could find it.

Many of them went under. Then they took to the road for good, drifting about with the flotsam and jetsam of France's *population flottante* ("floating population"), which included several million desperate souls by the 1780s. Except for the happy few on an artisanal *tour de France* and the occasional troupes of actors and mountebanks, life on the road meant ceaseless scavenging for food. The drifters raided chicken coops, milked untended cows, stole laundry drying on hedges, snipped off horses' tails (good for selling to upholsterers), and lacerated and disguised their bodies in order to pass as invalids wherever alms were being given out. They joined and deserted regiment after regiment and served as false recruits. They became smugglers, highwaymen, pickpockets, prostitutes. And in the end they surrendered in *hôpitaux*, pestilential poor houses, or else crawled under a bush or a hay loft and died—*croquants* who had "croaked."²⁶

Death came just as inexorably to families that remained in their villages and kept above the poverty line. As Pierre Goubert, Louis Henry, Jacques Dupâquier, and other historical demographers have shown, life was an inexorable struggle against death everywhere in

early modern France. In Crulai, Normandy, 236 of every 1,000 babies died before their first birthdays during the seventeenth century, as opposed to twenty today. About 45 per cent of the Frenchmen born in the eighteenth century died before the age of ten. Few of the survivors reached adulthood before the death of at least one of their parents. And few parents reached the end of their procreative years, because death interrupted them. Terminated by death, not divorce, marriages lasted an average of fifteen years, half as long as they do in France today. In Crulai, one in five husbands lost his wife and then remarried. Stepmothers proliferated everywhere—far more so than stepfathers, as the remarriage rate among widows was one in ten. Stepchildren may not have been treated like Cinderella, but relations between siblings probably were harsh. A new child often meant the difference between poverty and indigence. Even if it did not overtax the family's larder, it could bring penury down upon the next generation by swelling the number of claimants when the parents' land was divided among their heirs.²⁷

Whenever the population expanded, landholding fragmented and pauperization set in. Primogeniture slowed the process in some areas, but the best defense everywhere was delayed marriage, a tendency that must have taken its toll in the emotional life of the family. The peasants of the Old Regime, unlike those in contemporary India, generally did not marry until they could occupy a cottage, and they rarely had children out of wedlock or after they reached their forties. In Port-en-Bessin, for example, women married at twenty-seven and stopped bearing children at forty on the average. Demographers have found no evidence of birth control or widespread illegitimacy before the late eighteenth century. Early modern man did not understand life in a way that enabled him to control it. Early modern woman could not conceive of mastering nature, so she conceived as God willed it—and as Thumbkin's mother did in "Le Petit Poucet." But late marriage, a short period of fertility, and long stretches of breast-feeding, which reduces the likelihood of conception, limited the size of her family. The harshest and most effective limit was imposed by death, her own and those of her babies during childbirth and infancy. Stillborn children, called *chrissons*, were sometimes buried casually, in anonymous collective graves. Infants were sometimes smothered by their



Puss 'n Boots, by Gustave Doré

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parents in bed—a rather common accident, judging by episcopal edicts forbidding parents to sleep with children who had not reached their first birthdays. Whole families crowded into one or two beds and surrounded themselves with livestock in order to keep warm. So children became participant observers of their parents' sexual activities. No one thought of them as innocent creatures or of childhood itself as a distinct phase of life, clearly distinguishable from adolescence, youth, and adulthood by special styles of dress and behavior. Children labored alongside their parents almost as soon as they could walk, and they joined the adult labor force as farm hands, servants, and apprentices as soon as they reached their teens.

The peasants of early modern France inhabited a world of stepmothers and orphans, of inexorable, unending toil, and of brutal emotions, both raw and repressed. The human condition has changed so much since then that we can hardly imagine the way it appeared to people whose lives really were nasty, brutish, and short. That is why we need to reread *Mother Goose*.

Consider four of the best-known stories from Perrault's *Mother Goose*—"Puss 'n Boots," "Tom Thumb," "Cinderella," and "The Ridiculous Wishes"—in comparison with some of the peasant tales that treat the same themes.

In "Puss 'n Boots," a poor miller dies, leaving the mill to his eldest son, an ass to the second, and only a cat to the third. "Neither a notary nor a lawyer were called in," Perrault observes "They would have eaten up the poor patrimony." We are clearly in France, although other versions of this theme exist in Asia, Africa, and South America. The inheritance customs of French peasants, as well as noblemen, often prevented the fragmentation of the patrimony by favoring the eldest son. The youngest son of the miller, however, inherits a cat who has a genius for domestic intrigue. Everywhere around him, this Cartesian cat sees vanity, stupidity, and unsatisfied appetite; and he exploits it all by a series of tricks, which lead to a rich marriage for his master and a fine estate for himself, although in some of the pre-Perrault versions the master ultimately dupes the cat, who is actually a fox and does not wear boots.

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A tale from the oral tradition, "La Renarde" (tale type 460), begins in a similar way: "Once there were two brothers, who took up the inheritances left to them by their father. The older, Joseph, kept the farm. The younger, Baptiste, received only a handful of coins; and as he had five children and very little to feed them with, he fell into destitution."²⁸ In desperation, Baptiste begs for grain from his brother. Joseph tells him to strip off his rags, stand naked in the rain, and roll in the granary. He can keep as much grain as adheres to his body. Baptiste submits to this exercise in brotherly love, but he fails to pick up enough food to keep his family alive, so he takes to the road. Eventually he meets a good fairy, La Renarde, who helps him solve a string of riddles, which lead to a pot of buried gold and the fulfillment of a peasant's dream: a house, fields, pasture, woodland, "and his children had a cake apiece every day."²⁹

"Tom Thumb" ("Le Petit Poucet," tale type 327) is a French version of "Hansel and Gretel," although Perrault took his title from a tale that belongs to type 700. It provides a glimpse of the Malthusian world, even in Perrault's watered-down version: "Once upon a time there was a woodsman and his wife, who had seven children, all boys. . . . They were very poor, and their seven children were a great inconvenience, because none was old enough to support himself. . . . A very difficult year came, and the famine was so great that these poor folk resolved to get rid of their children." The matter-of-fact tone suggests how commonplace the death of children had become in early modern France. Perrault wrote his tale in the mid-1690s, at the height of the worst demographic crisis in the seventeenth century—a time when plague and famine decimated the population of northern France, when the poor ate offal thrown in the street by tanners, when corpses were found with grass in their mouths and mothers "exposed" the infants they could not feed so that they got sick and died. By abandoning their children in the forest, Tom Thumb's parents were trying to cope with a problem that overwhelmed the peasantry many times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the problem of survival during a period of demographic disaster.

The same motif exists in the peasant versions of the tale and in other tales, along with other forms of infanticide and child abuse.

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Sometimes the parents turn their children out on the road as beggars and thieves. Sometimes they run away themselves, leaving the children to beg at home. And sometimes they sell the children to the devil. In the French version of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" ("La Pomme d'orange," tale type 325), a father is overwhelmed by "as many children as there are holes in a sieve,"³⁰ a phrase that occurs in several tales and that should be taken as hyperbole about Malthusian pressure rather than as evidence about family size. When a new baby arrives, the father sells it to the devil (a sorcerer in some versions) in exchange for receiving a full larder for twelve years. At the end of that time, he gets the boy back, thanks to a ruse that the boy devises, for the little rogue has picked up a repertory of tricks, including the power to transform himself into animals, during his apprenticeship. Before long, the cupboard is bare and the family is facing starvation again. The boy then changes himself into a hunting dog, so that his father can sell him once more to the devil, who reappears as a hunter. After the father has collected the money, the dog runs away and returns home as a boy. They try the same trick again, with the boy transformed into a horse. This time the devil keeps hold of a magic collar, which prevents the horse from changing back into a boy. But a farm hand leads the horse to drink at a pond, thereby, giving it a chance to escape in the form of a frog. The devil turns into a fish and is about to devour it, when the frog changes into a bird. The devil becomes a hawk and pursues the bird, which flies into the bedroom of a dying king and takes the form of an orange. Then the devil appears as a doctor and demands the orange in exchange for curing the king. The orange spills onto the floor, transformed into grains of millet. The devil turns into a chicken and starts to gobble up the grains. But the last grain turns into a fox, which finally wins the transformation contest by devouring the hen. The tale did not merely provide amusement. It dramatized the struggle over scarce resources, which pitted the poor against the rich, the "little people" (*menu peuple, petites gens*) against "the big" (*les gros, les grands*). Some versions make the social comment explicit by casting the devil in the role of a "seigneur" and concluding at the end: "And thus did the servant eat the master."³¹

To eat or not to eat, that was the question peasants confronted in

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their folklore as well as in their daily lives. It appears in a great many of the tales, often in connection with the theme of the wicked stepmother, which must have had special resonance around Old Regime hearths because Old Regime demography made stepmothers such important figures in village society. Perrault did justice to the theme in "Cinderella," but he neglected the related motif of malnutrition, which stands out in the peasant versions of the tale. In one common version ("La Petite Annette," tale type 511), the wicked stepmother gives poor Annette only a crust of bread a day and makes her keep the sheep, while her fat and indolent stepsisters lounge around the house and dine on mutton, leaving their dishes for Annette to wash upon her return from the fields. Annette is about to die of starvation, when the Virgin Mary appears and gives her a magic wand, which produces a magnificent feast whenever Annette touches it to a black sheep. Before long the girl is plumper than her stepsisters. But her new beauty—and fatness made for beauty under the Old Regime as in many primitive societies—arouses the stepmother's suspicions. By a ruse, the stepmother discovers the magic sheep, kills it, and serves its liver to Annette. Annette manages to bury the liver secretly and it grows into a tree, which is so high that no one can pick its fruit, except Annette; for it bends its branches down to her whenever she approaches. A passing prince (who is as gluttonous as everyone else in the country) wants the fruit so badly that he promises to marry the maiden who can pick some for him. Hoping to make a match for one of her daughters, the stepmother builds a huge ladder. But when she tries it out, she falls and breaks her neck. Annette then gathers the fruit, marries the prince, and lives happily ever after.

Malnutrition and parental neglect go together in several tales, notably "La Sirène et l'épervier" (tale type 316) and "Brigitte, la maman qui m'a pas fait, mais m'a nourri" (tale type 713). The quest for food can be found in nearly all of them, even in Perrault, where it appears in burlesque form in "The Ridiculous Wishes." A poor woodsman is promised the fulfillment of any three wishes as a reward for a good deed. While he ruminates, his appetite overcomes him; and he wishes for a sausage. After it appears on his plate, his wife, an insufferable scold, quarrels so violently over the wasting of the wish that he wishes the sausage would grow on her

nose. Then, confronted with a disfigured spouse, he wishes her back to her normal state; and they return to their former miserable existence.

Wishing usually takes the form of food in peasant tales, and it is never ridiculous. The discharged, down-and-out soldier, La Ramée, a stock character like the abused stepdaughter, is reduced to beggary in "Le Diable et le maréchal ferrant" (tale type 330). He shares his last pennies with other beggars, one of whom turns out to be Saint Peter in disguise, and as a reward he is granted any wish he wants. Instead of taking paradise, he asks for "a square meal"—or, in other versions, "white bread and a chicken," "a bun, a sausage, and as much wine as he can drink," "tobacco and the food he saw in the inn," or "to always have a crust of bread."³² Once supplied with magic wands, rings, or supernatural helpers, the first thought of the peasant hero is always for food. He never shows any imagination in his ordering. He merely takes the *plat du jour*, and it is always the same: solid peasant fare, though it may vary with the region, as in the case of the "cakes, fried bread, and pieces of cheese" (*canistrelli e fritelli, pezzi di broccio*) served up in a Corsican feast.³³ Usually the peasant raconteur does not describe the food in detail. Lacking any notion of gastronomy, he simply loads up his hero's plate; and if he wants to supply an extravagant touch, he adds, "There were even napkins."³⁴

One extravagance clearly stands out: meat. In a society of de facto vegetarians, the luxury of luxuries was to sink one's teeth into a side of mutton, pork, or beef. The wedding feast in "Royaume des Valdars" (tale type 400) includes roast pigs who run around with forks sticking out of their flanks so that the guests can help themselves to ready-carved mouthfuls. The French version of a common ghost story, "La Goulue" (tale type 366), concerns a peasant girl who insists on eating meat every day. Unable to satisfy this extraordinary craving, her parents serve her a leg they have cut off a newly buried corpse. On the next day, the corpse appears before the girl in the kitchen. It orders her to wash its right leg, then its left leg. When she sees that the left leg is missing, it screams, "You ate it." Then it carries her back to the grave and devours her. The later, English versions of the tale, notably "The Golden Arm" made famous by Mark Twain, have the same plot without the

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carnivorousness—the very element that seems to have made the story fascinating for the peasants of the Old Regime. But whether they filled up on meat or porridge, the full belly came first among the wishes of the French peasant heroes. It was all the peasant Cinderella aspired to, even though she got a prince. “She touched the black sheep with the magic wand. Immediately a fully decked table appeared before her. She could eat what she wanted, and she ate a bellyful.”³⁵ To eat one’s fill, eat until the exhaustion of the appetite (*manger à sa faim*),³⁶ was the principal pleasure that the peasants dangled before their imaginations, and one that they rarely realized in their lives.

They also imagined other dreams coming true, including the standard run of castles and princesses. But their wishes usually remained fixed on common objects in the everyday world. One hero gets “a cow and some chickens”; another, an armoire full of linens. A third settles for light work, regular meals, and a pipe full of tobacco. And when gold rains into the fireplace of a fourth, he uses it to buy “food, clothes, a horse, land.”³⁷ In most of the tales, wish fulfillment turns into a program for survival, not a fantasy of escape.

Despite the occasional touches of fantasy, then, the tales remain rooted in the real world. They almost always take place within two basic frameworks, which correspond to the dual setting of peasant life under the Old Regime: on the one hand, the household and village; on the other, the open road. The opposition between the village and the road runs through the tales, just as it ran through the lives of peasants everywhere in eighteenth-century France.³⁸

Peasant families could not survive under the Old Regime unless everyone worked, and worked together as an economic unit. The folktales constantly show parents laboring in the fields while the children gather wood, guard sheep, fetch water, spin wool, or beg. Far from condemning the exploitation of child labor, they sound indignant when it does not occur. In “Les Trois Fileuses” (tale type 501), a father resolves to get rid of his daughter, because “she ate but did not work.”³⁹ He persuades the king that she can spin seven *fusées* (100,800 yards) of flax a night, whereas in fact she eats seven crêpes (we are in Angoumois). The king orders her to do prodigious

gious feats of spinning, promising to marry her if she succeeds. Three magic spinning women, one more deformed than the other, accomplish the tasks for her and in return ask only to be invited to the wedding. When they appear, the king inquires about the cause of their deformities. Overwork, they reply; and they warn him that his bride will look every bit as hideous if he permits her to continue spinning. So the girl escapes from slavery, the father gets rid of a glutton, and the poor turn the tables on the rich (in some versions the local seigneur takes the place of the king).

The French versions of "Rumpelstilzchen" (tale type 500 and some related versions of tale type 425) follow the same scenario. A mother beats her daughter for not working. When a passing king or the local seigneur asks what the matter is, the mother devises a ruse to get rid of an unproductive member of the family. She protests that the girl works too much, so obsessively, in fact, that she would spin the very straw in their mattresses. Sensing a good thing, the king carries off the girl and orders her to perform superhuman tasks: she must spin whole haystacks into rooms full of linen, load and unload fifty carts of manure a day, separate mountains of wheat from chaff. Although the tasks always get done in the end, thanks to supernatural intervention, they express a basic fact of peasant life in hyperbolic form. Everyone faced endless, limitless labor, from early childhood until the day of death.

Marriage offered no escape; rather, it imposed an additional burden because it subjected women to work within the "putting-out" system (cottage industry) as well as work for the family and for the farm. The tales invariably place peasant wives at the spinning wheel after a day of tending livestock, hauling wood, or mowing hay. Some stories provide hyperbolic pictures of their work, showing them yoked to ploughs or hauling water up a well with their hair or cleaning ovens with their bare breasts.⁴⁰ And even though marriage meant accepting a new load of labor and the new danger of childbearing, a poor girl needed a dowry to enter into it—unless she would settle for a frog, a crow, or some hideous beast. The animals did not always turn into princes, although that was a common form of escapism. In one burlesque version of peasant marriage strategy ("Les Filles mariées à des animaux," tale type 552), the parents marry their daughters off to a wolf, a fox, a hare, and a

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pig. According to the Irish and North European versions of the tale, the couples set off on a series of adventures, which are necessary to metamorphose the animals back into men. The French versions simply recount what the young couples serve when the mother comes calling—mutton procured by the wolf, turkey fetched by the fox, cabbage filched by the hare, and filth from the pig. Having found good providers, each after his own fashion, the daughters must accept their lot in life; and everyone gets on with the basic business of foraging for a living.

Sons have more room to maneuver in the tales. They explore the second dimension of peasant experience, life on the road. The boys set out in search of their fortune, and often find it, thanks to the help of old crones, who beg for a crust of bread and turn out to be beneficent fairies in disguise. Despite the supernatural intervention, the heroes walk off into a real world, usually in order to escape poverty at home and to find employment in greener pastures. They do not always get princesses. In "Le Langage des bêtes" (tale type 670), a poor lad who has found work as a shepherd comes to the aid of a magic snake. In return, he finds some buried gold: "He filled his pockets with it and the next morning he led his flock back to the farm and asked to marry his master's daughter. She was the prettiest girl in the village, and he had loved her for a long time. Seeing that the shepherd was rich, the father gave him the girl. Eight days later they were married; and as the farmer and his wife were old, they made their son-in-law sole master of the farm."⁴¹ Such was the stuff that dreams were made of in the peasant tales.

Other boys take to the road because there is no land, no work, no food at home.⁴² They become farm hands or domestic servants or, in the best of cases, apprentices—to blacksmiths, tailors, carpenters, sorcerers, and the devil. The hero of "Jean de l'Ours" (tale type 301B) serves five years with a blacksmith, then sets off with an iron staff, which he takes as payment for his labor. Once en route he picks up strange fellow travelers (Twist-Oak and Slice-Mountain), braves haunted houses, fells giants, slays monsters, and marries a Spanish princess. Standard adventures, but they fall within the framework of a typical *tour de France*. "Jean-sans-Peur" (tale type 326) and many of the other favorite heroes of the French tales

follow the same scenario.⁴³ Their exploits take place in a setting that would have been familiar to an audience of artisans who had spent their youth on the road and to peasants who regularly left their families after the summer harvest and covered hundreds of miles as shepherds, peddlers, and migratory laborers.

They confronted danger everywhere on their travels, for France had no effective police force, and bandits and wolves still roamed through the wild lands separating villages in vast stretches of the Massif Central, the Jura, Vosges, Landes, and *bocage*. Men had to make their way through this treacherous territory by foot, sleeping at night under haystacks and bushes when they could not beg hospitality in farms or pay for a bed in an inn—where they still stood a good chance of having their purses stolen or their throats cut. When the French versions of Tom Thumb and Hansel and Gretel knock at the doors of mysterious houses deep in the forest, the wolves baying at their backs add a touch of realism, not fantasy. True, the doors are opened by ogres and witches. But in many tales (“*Le Garçon de chez la bucheronne*,” tale type 461, for example), the houses contain gangs of bandits like those of Mandrin and Cartouche, who really did make traveling hazardous in the eighteenth century. There was protection from traveling in groups, but you could never trust your fellow travelers. They might save you from disaster, as in “*Moitié Poulet*” (tale type 563) and “*Le Navire sans pareil*” (tale type 283); or they might turn on you when they caught the scent of booty, as in “*Jean de l’Ours*” (tale type 301B). Petit Louis’ father was right when he advised the boy never to travel with a hunchback, a lame man, or a *Cacous* (a pariah-like ropemaker) (tale type 531). Anything out of the ordinary represented a threat. But no formula was adequate to the task of decoding danger on the road.

For most of the population flooding France’s roads, fortune seeking was a euphemism for beggary. Beggars swarm through the tales, real beggars, not merely fairies in disguise. When poverty overwhelms a widow and her son in “*Le Bracelet*” (tale type 590), they abandon their hut at the edge of the village and take to the road, carrying all their goods in a single sack. Their way leads through a menacing forest to a gang of robbers and the poor house before rescue finally comes from a magic bracelet. In “*Les Deux*

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Voyageurs" (tale type 613), two discharged soldiers draw lots to see which shall have his eyes put out. Desperate for food, they can think of no way to survive except by operating as a team of beggars, the blind man and his keeper. In "Norouâs" (tale type 563), a single crop of flax means the difference between survival and destitution for a peasant family living on a tiny plot of land. The crop is good, but the bad wind Norouâs blows the flax away while it is drying in the field. The peasant sets out with a club to beat Norouâs to death. But he runs out of provisions and soon is begging for crusts and a corner in the stable, like any vagabond. Finally he finds Norouâs on top of a mountain. "Give me back my flax! Give me back my flax!" he screams. Taking pity on him, the wind gives him a magic tablecloth, which produces a meal whenever it is unfolded. The peasant "eats his fill" and spends the next night in an inn, only to be robbed by the hostess. After two more rounds with Norouâs, he receives a magic staff, which thrashes the hostess, forcing her to surrender the cloth. The peasant lives happily—that is, with a full larder—ever after, but his tale illustrates the desperation of those tottering on the line between poverty in the village and destitution on the road.⁴⁴

Thus, whenever one looks behind Perrault to the peasant versions of Mother Goose, one finds elements of realism—not photographic accounts of life in the barnyard (peasants did not actually have as many children as there are holes in a sieve, and they did not eat them) but a picture that corresponds to everything that social historians have been able to piece together from the archives. The picture fits, and the fit was a matter of consequence. By showing how life was lived, *terre à terre*, in the village and on the road, the tales helped orient the peasants. They mapped the ways of the world and demonstrated the folly of expecting anything more than cruelty from a cruel social order.

To show that a substratum of social realism underlay the fantasies and escapist entertainment of folktales is not to take the argument very far, however.⁴⁵ The peasants could have learned that life was cruel without the help of "Little Red Riding Hood." Cruelty can be found in folktales as well as in social history everywhere from India to Ireland and from Africa to Alaska. If we are to get beyond vague generalizations in interpreting the French tales, we

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need to know whether something set them off from other varieties. We need to make at least a brief attempt at comparative analysis.

Consider, first, the Mother Goose that is most familiar to English speakers. Admittedly, the disparate collection of lullabies, counting rhymes, and bawdy songs that became attached to the name of Mother Goose in eighteenth-century England bears little resemblance to the stock of tales that Perrault drew on for his *Contes de ma mère l'oye* in seventeenth-century France. But the English Mother Goose is as revealing in its way as the French; and fortunately a good deal of it can be dated, because the verses proclaim their character as period pieces. "At the Siege of Belle Isle" belongs to the Seven Years' War, "Yankee Doodle" to the American Revolution, and "The Grand Old Duke of York" to the French revolutionary wars. Most of the rhymes, however, appear to be relatively modern (post-1700), despite persistent attempts to link them with names and events in the remoter past. Experts like Iona and Peter Opie have found little evidence for the assertions that Humpty Dumpty was Richard III, that Curly Locks was Charles II, that Wee Willie Winkie was William III, that Little Miss Muffet was Mary Queen of Scots, and that the spider was John Knox.⁴⁶

In any case, the historical significance of the rhymes lies more in their tone than in their allusions. They have more gaiety and whimsy than the French and German tales, perhaps because so many of them belong to the period after the seventeenth century when England freed itself from the grip of Malthusianism. But there is a note of demographic agony in some of the older verses. Thus the English counterpart to the mother of *Le Petit Poucet*:

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe;
She had so many children she didn't know what to do.*

Like peasants everywhere, she fed them on broth, though she could not provide any bread; and she vented her despair by whipping them. The diet of other children in Mother Goose was not much better:

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*Pease porridge hot,
Pease porridge cold,
Pease porridge in the pot
Nine days old.*

Nor was their clothing:

*When I was a little girl,
About seven years old,
I hadn't got a petticoat,
To keep me from the cold.*

And they sometimes disappeared down the road, as in the Tudor-Stuart rhyme:

*There was an old woman had three sons
Jerry and James and John.
Jerry was hung and James was drowned,
John was lost and never was found,
So there was an end of her three sons,
Jerry and James and John.*

Life was hard in the old Mother Goose. Many characters sank into destitution:

*See-saw, Margery Daw,
Sold her bed and lay upon straw.*

Others, it is true, enjoyed a life of indolence, as in the case of the Georgian barmaid, Elsie Marley (alias Nancy Dawson):

*She won't get up to feed the swine,
But lies in bed till eight or nine.*

Curly Locks luxuriated in a diet of strawberries, sugar, and cream; but she seems to have been a late eighteenth-century girl. Old Mother Hubbard, an Elizabethan character, had to cope with a bare cupboard, while her contemporary, Little Tommy Tucker, was forced to sing for his supper. Simple Simon, who probably belongs to the seventeenth century, did not have a penny. And he was a harmless village idiot, unlike the threatening poor of drifters and deviants, who appear in the older rhymes:

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*Hark, hark,
The dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town;
Some in rags,
And some in jags,
And one in a velvet gown.*

Poverty drove many Mother Goose characters into beggary and theft:

*Christmas is a-comin;
The geese are gettin fat.
Please to put a penny
In an old man's hat.*

They preyed on defenseless children:

*Then came a proud beggar
And said he would have her,
And stole my little moppet [doll] away.*

And on their fellow paupers:

*There was a man and he had nought,
And robbers came to rob him;
He crept up to the chimney top,
And then they thought they had him.*

The old rhymes contain plenty of nonsense and good-humored fantasy; but from time to time a note of despair can be heard through the merriment. It summons up lives that were brutally brief, as in the case of Solomon Grundy, or that were overwhelmed with misery, as in the case of another anonymous old woman:

*There was an old woman
And nothing she had,
And so this old woman
Was said to be mad.
She'd nothing to eat,
She'd nothing to wear,
She'd nothing to lose,
She'd nothing to fear,*

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*She'd nothing to ask,
And nothing to give,
And when she did die
She'd nothing to leave.*

All is not jollity in Mother Goose. The older rhymes belong to an older world of poverty, despair, and death.

In general, then, the rhymes of England have some affinity with the tales of France. The two are not really comparable, however, because they belong to different genres. Although the French sang some *contines* (counting rhymes) and lullabies to their children, they never developed anything like the English nursery rhymes; and the English never developed as rich a repertory of folktales as the French. Nevertheless, the folktale flourished enough in England for one to venture a few comparative remarks and then to extend the comparisons to Italy and Germany, where they can be pursued more systematically.

English folktales have much of the whimsy, humor, and fanciful details that appear in the nursery rhymes. They concern many of the same characters: Simple Simon, Dr. Fell, the Wise Men of Gotham, Jack of "The House That Jack Built," and especially Tom Thumb, the hero of the folktale, who loaned his name to the first important collection of nursery rhymes to be published in England, *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* (1744).⁴⁷ But Tom Thumb bears little resemblance to his French cousin, Le Petit Poucet. The English tale dwells on his pranks and the Lilliputian quaintness of his dress: "The fairies dressed him in a hat made of an oak-leaf, a shirt of spiders' web, jacket of thistle-down, and trousers of feathers. His stockings were of apple-rind, tied with one of his mother's eyelashes, and his shoes of mouse-skin, with the hair inside."⁴⁸ No such details brightened the life of Poucet. The French tale (tale type 700) does not mention his clothing and does not provide him with help from fairies or any other supernatural beings. Instead, it places him in a harsh, peasant world and shows how he fends off bandits, wolves, and the village priest by using his wits, the only defense of the "little people" against the rapacity of the big.

Despite a considerable population of ghosts and goblins, the world of the English tales seems far more genial. Even giant killing

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takes place in a land of nod; thus the beginning of "Jack the Giant-Killer" in one oral version:

Once upon a time—a very good time it was—when pigs were swine and dogs ate lime and monkeys chewed tobacco, when houses were thatched with pancakes, streets paved with plum puddings, and roasted pigs ran up and down the streets with knives and forks in their backs, crying "Come and eat me!" That was a good time for travellers.⁴⁹

In numbskull fashion, Jack trades the family cow for a few beans and then climbs his way to riches with the help of magic props—a fantastic beanstalk, a hen that lays golden eggs, and a talking harp. He is a kind of Simple Simon, like the Jacks and Jocks of a great many British tales. Brave but lazy, good-natured but thick-headed, he blunders into a happy ending in a happy-go-lucky world. His initial poverty and the ominous chorus of fec-fi-fo-fums from above the beanstalk do not spoil the atmosphere. Having overcome adversity, Jack earns his reward and emerges in the end looking like Little Jack Horner: "Oh what a good boy am I!"

The French giant killer belongs to another species: Petit Jean, Parle, or Le Petit Fûteux, according to different versions of the same story (tale type 328). A pint-sized younger son, "extraordinarily sharp witted . . . always lively and alert," he joins the army with his nasty older brothers, who persuade the king to send him on the suicidal mission of stealing treasure from a giant. Like most French giants, this "bonhomme" does not live in a never-never land somewhere over the beanstalk. He is a local landlord, who plays the fiddle, quarrels with his wife, and invites the neighbors in for feasts of roasted little boys. Petit Jean does not merely run away with the treasure; he bamboozles the giant, torments him in his sleep, oversalts his soup, and tricks his wife and daughter into baking themselves to death in an oven. Finally, the king assigns Petit Jean the seemingly impossible task of capturing the giant himself. The little hero sets off disguised as a monarch and driving a coach loaded with a huge iron cage.

"Monsieur le roi, what are you doing with that iron cage?" the giant asks. "I'm trying to catch Petit Jean, who has played all kinds of tricks on me," Petit Jean replies. "He can't have been worse to you than to

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me. I'm looking for him, too." "But, Giant, do you think you are strong enough to catch him all alone? He is supposed to be terrifically powerful. I'm not sure that I can keep him locked up in this iron cage." "Don't worry, Monsieur le roi, I can handle him without a cage; and if you like, I'll test yours."

So the giant gets in the cage. Petit Jean locks it. And after the giant exhausts himself trying to break the bars, Petit Jean announces his true identity and delivers his victim, helpless with rage, to the true king, who rewards him with a princess.⁵⁰

If one blends an Italian variety into the different versions of the same tale type, one can observe the flavor changing from English fantasy to French cunning and Italian burlesque. In the case of tale type 301, which concerns the rescue of princesses from an enchanted underworld, the English hero is another Jack, the French another Jean. Jack frees his princesses by following the instructions of a dwarf. He descends into a pit, runs after a magic ball, and slays a succession of giants in copper, gold, and silver palaces. The French Jean has to contend with more treacherous surroundings. His fellow travelers abandon him to the devil in a haunted house and then cut the rope when he tries to haul himself out of the pit after delivering the princesses. The Italian hero, a palace baker who is run out of town for flirting with the king's daughter, follows the same path through the same dangers, but he does so in a spirit of buffoonery as well as bravura. The devil comes down the chimney of the haunted house in a magic ball and tries to trip him by bouncing between his feet. Unperturbed, the baker stands on a chair, then on a table, and finally on a chair mounted on the table while plucking a chicken as the diabolical ball pounds helplessly around him. Unable to overcome this circus act, the devil steps out of the ball and offers to help prepare the meal. The baker asks him to hold the firewood and then deftly chops off his head. He uses a similar trick in the underground pit to behead a sorcerer, who meanwhile has abducted the princess. Thus piling trick on trick, he finally wins his true love. The plot, identical to those in the English and French versions, seems to lead through the *Commedia dell'Arte* rather than into any kind of fairy land.⁵¹

The *buffa*-Machiavellianism of the Italian tales comes through

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even more strongly, if they are compared with the German. The Italian version of "The Youth Who Wanted to Know What Fear Was" (Grimm 4) contains an Alphonse-Gaston routine, in which the hero out-tricks the devil by making him go first through a succession of traps.⁵² The Italian Little Red Riding Hood bamboozles the wolf by tossing him a cake full of nails, although later, as in the French tales, he tricks her into eating grandmother and then eats her himself.⁵³ The Italian Puss 'n Boots, like the French but unlike the German (tale type 545, Grimm 106), is a fox who plays on the vanity and gullibility of everyone around him to win a castle and a princess for his master. And the Italian "Bluebeard" shows how completely a tale can change in tone while remaining the same in structure.

In Italy, Bluebeard is a devil, who lures a succession of peasant girls into hell by hiring them to do his laundry and then tempting them with the usual device of the key to the forbidden door. The door leads to hell; so when they try it, flames leap out, singeing a flower that he places in their hair. After the devil returns from his travels, the singed flower shows him that the girls have broken the taboo; and he tosses them into the flames, one after the other—until he comes to Lucia. She agrees to work for him after her older sisters have disappeared. And she, too, opens the forbidden door, but just enough to glimpse her sisters in the flames. Because she has had the foresight to leave her flower in a safe place, the devil cannot condemn her for disobedience. On the contrary, she acquires power over him—enough, at least, to be granted one wish. She asks him to carry some laundry bags back to her mama so that she can have help in coping with the gigantic backlog of filthy washing that he has accumulated. The devil accepts the task and boasts that he is strong enough to make the entire trip without laying the bags down for a rest. Lucia replies that she will hold him to his word, for she has the power to see great distances. Then she frees her sisters from the hellfire and sneaks them into the laundry bags. Soon the devil is lugging them back to safety. Every time he begins to stop for a rest they call out, "I see you! I see you!" In the end, Lucia frees herself by the same ruse. So all the girls reach safety, using the devil himself to do the job and making a fool of him while they are at it.⁵⁴

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The German version of the tale (Grimm 46) follows the same story line, but it adds macabre touches where the Italian version uses humor. The villain is a mysterious wizard, who carries the girls off to a castle in the midst of a gloomy forest. The forbidden room is a chamber of horrors, and the narrative dwells on the murdering itself: "He threw her down, dragged her along by her hair, cut her head off on the block, and hewed her in pieces so that her blood ran on the ground. Then he threw her into the basin with the rest."⁵⁵ The heroine escapes this fate and acquires some magic power over the wizard by holding on to her key. She brings her sisters back to life by reassembling their mutilated corpses. Then she hides them in a basket, covers it with gold, and orders the wizard to carry it to her parents, while she prepares for the wedding that is to unite her with the wizard. She dresses a skull in bridal ornaments and flowers and sets it in a window. Then she disguises herself as a giant bird by rolling in honey and feathers. Coming upon her on her way back, the wizard asks her about the wedding preparations. She answers in verse that his bride has cleaned the house and is waiting for him at the window. The wizard hurries on; and when he and his accomplices have gathered for the ceremony, the girl's kinsmen sneak up, lock the doors, and burn the house to the ground with everyone in it.

As already mentioned, the French versions (tale types 311 and 312), including Perrault's, contain some gruesome details but nothing approaching the horror of the Grimms. Some of them emphasize the escape ruse, and most depend for their dramatic effect on the delaying tactics of the heroine, who slowly dons her wedding dress, while the villain (a devil, a giant, a "Monsieur" with a blue or green beard) sharpens his knife and her brothers rush to the rescue. The English versions seem almost jolly in comparison. "Peerifool" begins in Peter Rabbit fashion, with some robbing of a cabbage patch. It meanders through episodes involving riddles and elves but no hacked-up corpses, and it ends with some good, clean giant killing (by boiling water).⁵⁶ Although each story adheres to the same structure, the versions in the different traditions produce entirely different effects—comic in the Italian versions, horrific in the German, dramatic in the French, and droll in the English.

Of course, a storyteller could produce almost any effect from a tale, depending on how he told it. There is no way of knowing what effects the different versions of "Bluebeard" actually produced on listeners in different parts of Europe two centuries ago. And even if that could be known, it would be absurd to draw conclusions about national character by comparing variations of a single tale. But systematic comparisons of several tales should help one to isolate the qualities that gave the French oral tradition its peculiar character. The comparing works best where the tales are most comparable, in the French and German versions. If done thoroughly, it could extend to many volumes filled with statistics and structural diagrams. But one should be able to do enough within the bounds of a single essay to advance a few general propositions.

Consider "Godfather Death" (tale type 332). The French and German versions have exactly the same structure: (a) A poor man chooses Death as a godfather for his son. (b) Death makes the son prosper as a doctor. (c) The son tries to cheat Death and dies. In both versions the father refuses to accept God as godfather because he observes that God favors the rich and powerful, whereas Death treats everyone equally. This impiety is rejected in the Grimms' transcription of the German tale: "Thus spoke the man, for he did not know how wisely God apportions riches and poverty."⁵⁷ The French version leaves the question open and goes on to suggest that cheating works very well as a way of life. The doctor makes a fortune, because Death provides him with an infallible prognostic technique. When he sees Death standing at the foot of a sick person's bed, he knows the person will die. When Death appears at the head of the bed, the patient will recover and can be given any kind of fake medicine. In one instance, the doctor successfully predicts the death of a lord and in return receives two farms from the delighted heirs. In another, he sees Death at the foot of a princess's bed and pivots her body around so that Death is duped. The princess survives, he marries her, and they live to a ripe and happy old age. When the German doctor tries the same stratagem, Death seizes him by the throat and hauls him off to a cave full of candles, each of which stands for a life. Seeing that his own candle has almost expired, the doctor begs to have it lengthened. But Death

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snuffs it out, and the doctor falls dead at his feet. The French doctor eventually comes to the same end, but he postpones it quite successfully. In one version, he asks to say a *Pater* before the extinction of the candle, and by leaving the prayer unfinished tricks Death into allowing him a still longer life. Death finally gets him by pretending to be a cadaver at the side of the road—a common sight in early modern Europe and one that evoked a common response: the saying of a *Pater*, which brings the tale to a rather unedifying end. True, the story demonstrates that no one can cheat death, at least not in the long run. But cheating gives the Frenchman an excellent short run for his money.

“Le Chauffeur du diable” (tale type 475, Grimm 100) conveys a similar message. It, too, has the same organization in the French and German versions: (a) A poor, discharged soldier agrees to work for the devil, stoking fires under cauldrons in hell. (b) He disobeys the devil’s order not to look inside the cauldrons and finds his former commanding officer(s). (c) He escapes from hell with a magic object, which, though nasty looking, produces all the gold he needs to live happily for the rest of his life. In the German version the plot unwinds in a straightforward manner but with fanciful details that do not exist in the French. As a condition for hiring the soldier, the devil demands that he not trim his nails, cut his hair, or bathe during the seven-year term of his service. After finding his former commanding officers in the cauldrons, the soldier stokes the fire higher; so the devil forgives him for his disobedience, and the soldier serves his seven years without further incident, growing more and more hideous in appearance. He emerges from hell looking like *Struwelpeter* and calling himself “the devil’s sooty brother” as the devil had commanded. His obedience is rewarded, for the sack of sweepings which the devil had given him as wages turns into gold. When an innkeeper steals it, the devil intervenes to get it restored. And in the end, well-heeled and well-scrubbed, the soldier marries a princess and inherits a kingdom.

The French version turns on trickery. The devil lures the soldier into hell by pretending to be a gentleman in search of a servant for his kitchen. When the soldier discovers his former captain cooking in the cauldron, his first impulse is to pile new logs on the fire. But the captain stops him by revealing that they are in hell and offering

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advice on how to escape. The soldier should feign ignorance of his true situation and demand to be released on the grounds that he does not like the work. The devil will tempt him by offering gold—a ruse to get him to reach into a chest so that he can be beheaded when its cover slams down. Instead of gold, the soldier should demand an old pair of the devil's breeches as payment. This strategy works; and the next evening, as he arrives at an inn, the soldier finds the pockets full of gold. While he sleeps, however, the innkeeper's wife grabs the magic breeches and screams that he is trying to rape and murder her—another ruse, this time aimed at capturing the gold and sending the soldier to the gallows. But the devil intervenes in time to save him and to claim the breeches. And meanwhile the soldier has siphoned enough gold out of the pockets to retire happily and even, in some versions, to marry a princess. By out-tricking the tricksters, he arrives at the same point that his German counterpart reached by hard work, obedience, and self-degradation.

"Le Panier de figues" (tale type 570, Grimm 165) provides another example of how different messages can be construed from the same structure. It goes as follows: (a) A king promises his daughter to whoever can produce the finest fruit. (b) A peasant boy wins the contest after being kind to a magic helper whom his elder brothers had treated discourteously. (c) The king refuses to give the princess up and sets the hero a round of impossible tasks. (d) Aided by the helper, the hero performs the tasks and marries the princess after a final confrontation with the king. The hero of the German version is a good-natured numbskull, Hans Dumm. He carries out the tasks in a setting charged with supernatural forces and crowded by fanciful props—a boat that flies over land, a magic whistle, a hideous griffin, dwarfs, castles, and damsels in distress. Although he sometimes shows glimmers of intelligence, Hans overcomes disaster and wins his princess by taking orders from his magic helper and by following his nose.

His French counterpart, Benoît, lives by his wits in a rough-and-ready world of dupe or be duped. The king defends his daughter like a peasant battling for his barnyard, using one ruse after another. As in the German tale, he refuses to surrender the princess unless the hero can guard a flock of rabbits without letting any of

them stray, and Benoît succeeds with the help of the magic whistle, which makes the rabbits come when they are called, no matter how hopelessly they seem to be dispersed. But instead of sending Benoît, like Hans, on a chase after a man-eating griffin, the king tries to separate rabbits from the pack by a series of stratagems. Disguised as a peasant, he offers to buy one for a high price. Benoît sees through the maneuver and uses it as an opportunity to turn the tables on the king. He will only surrender the rabbit to someone who can succeed in an ordeal, he announces. The king must drop his breeches and submit to a flogging. The king agrees but loses the rabbit as soon as it hears the magic whistle. The queen tries the same ruse and gets the same treatment, although in some versions she has to turn cartwheels, exposing her bare bottom. Then the princess has to kiss the hero—or, in some cases, to lift his donkey's tail and kiss its anus. No one can pry a rabbit from the pack. Still the king holds out. He will not give up his daughter until Benoît produces three bags of truth. As the court gathers round, Benoît lets loose his first truth, *sotto voce*: "Is it not true, Sire, that I switched you on the bare behind?" The king is trapped. He cannot bear to hear the next two truths and surrenders the princess. The magic props have fallen by the side. Battle has been joined *terre à terre*, in a real world of power, pride, and deviousness. And the weak win with the only weapon they possess: cunning. The tale pits the clever against the clever by half: "A rusé, rusé et demi," as one of the peasant raconteurs observes.⁵⁸

That formula hardly does justice to the variety of themes that would emerge from a more thorough comparison of the French and German tales. One can certainly find clever underdogs in Grimm and magic in *Le Conte populaire français*, especially in the tales from Brittany and Alsace-Lorraine. A few of the French tales hardly differ at all from their counterparts in the Grimms' collection.⁵⁹ But allowing for exceptions and complications, the differences between the two traditions fall into consistent patterns. The peasant raconteurs took the same themes and gave them characteristic twists, the French in one way, the German in another. Where the French tales tend to be realistic, earthy, bawdy, and comical, the German veer off toward the supernatural, the poetic, the exotic, and the violent. Of course, cultural differences cannot be reduced

to a formula—French craftiness versus German cruelty—but the comparisons make it possible to identify the peculiar inflection that the French gave to their stories, and their way of telling stories provides clues about their way of viewing the world.

Consider a final set of comparisons. In “La Belle Eulalie” (tale type 313), as already mentioned, the devil’s daughter makes some talking pâtés and hides them under her pillow and the pillow of her lover, a discharged soldier who has sought shelter in the devil’s house, in order to cover their escape. Suspecting foul play, the devil’s wife nags at him to check on the youngsters. But he merely calls out from his bed and then snores off again, while the pâtés return reassuring replies and the lovers dash to safety. In the corresponding tale from the Grimms (“Der liebste Roland,” number 56), a witch mistakenly decapitates her own daughter while trying to dispatch her stepdaughter one night. The stepdaughter drips blood on the stairs from the severed head and then runs away with her lover while the drops answer the witch’s questions.

The good daughter who obligingly delouses the strange woman at the well in “Les Fées” (tale type 480) finds gold louis in the hair and becomes beautiful, while the bad daughter finds only lice and turns ugly. In “Frau Holle” (Grimm 24), the good daughter descends into a magic land beneath the well and serves the strange woman as a housekeeper. When she shakes a feather quilt, she makes it snow on earth. And when she receives a reward for her good work, a shower of golden rain clings to her and she becomes beautiful. The bad daughter performs the tasks begrudgingly and is showered with black pitch.

Persinette, the French Rapunzel (tale type 310), lets down her hair so that she can make love with the prince in her tower. She hides him from the fairy who keeps her captive and devises a variety of burlesque stratagems to impugn the testimony of the pet parrot who keeps betraying them. (In one version Persinette and the prince sew up the parrot’s rear end, so it can only cry, “Ass stitched, ass stitched.”)⁶⁰ The lovers finally escape, but the fairy changes Persinette’s nose into the nose of an ass, which ruins their standing in court, until at last the fairy relents and restores her beauty. In Grimm’s “Rapunzel” (number 12), the enchantress sep-

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arates the lovers by banishing Rapunzel, with her hair shorn, to a desert and by forcing the prince to leap from the tower into some thorns, which blind him. He wanders in the wilderness for years, until at last he stumbles upon Rapunzel, and her tears falling on his eyes restore his sight.

After sharing his food with a fairy disguised as a beggar, the poor shepherd boy in "Les Trois Dons" (tale type 592) gets three wishes: that he can hit any bird with his bow and arrow, that he can make anyone dance with his flute, and that he can make his wicked stepmother fart whenever he says "atchoo." Soon he has the old woman farting all over the house, at the *veillée*, and at mass on Sundays. The priest has to turn her out of church in order to get through his sermon. Later, when she explains her problem, he tries to trick the boy into revealing his secret. But the little shepherd, who is trickier still, shoots a bird and asks him to fetch it. When the priest tries to grab it in a thorn bush, the boy plays the flute, forcing him to dance until his robe is torn to shreds and he is ready to drop. After he has recovered, the priest seeks vengeance by an accusation of witchcraft, but the boy sets the courtroom to dancing so uncontrollably with his flute that they let him free. In "Der Jude im Dorn" (Grimm 110), the hero is an underpaid servant, who gives his poor wages to a dwarf and in return receives a gun that can hit anything, a fiddle that can make anyone dance, and the power to make one unrefusable request. He meets a Jew listening to a bird singing in a tree. He shoots the bird, tells the Jew to retrieve it from a thorn bush, and then fiddles so implacably that the Jew nearly kills himself on the thorns and buys his release with a purse of gold. The Jew retaliates by getting the servant condemned for highway robbery. But as he is about to be hanged, the servant makes a last request for his fiddle. Soon everyone is dancing wildly around the gallows. The exhausted judge sets the servant free and hangs the Jew in his place.

It would be abusive to take this tale as evidence that anticlericalism functioned in France as the equivalent of anti-Semitism in Germany.⁶¹ The comparison of folktales will not yield such specific conclusions. But it helps one to identify the peculiar flavor of the French tales. Unlike their German counterparts, they taste of salt. They smell of the earth. They take place in an intensely hu-

man world, where farting, delousing, rolling in the hay, and tossing on the dung heap express the passions, values, interests, and attitudes of a peasant society that is now extinct. If that is the case, can one be more precise in construing what the tales might have meant to the tellers and their audiences? I would like to advance two propositions: the tales told peasants how the world was put together, and they provided a strategy for coping with it.

Without preaching or drawing morals, French folktales demonstrate that the world is harsh and dangerous. Although most were not directed toward children, they tend to be cautionary. They erect warning signs around the seeking of fortune: "Danger!" "Road out!" "Go slow!" "Stop!" True, some have a positive message. They show that generosity, honesty, and courage win rewards. But they do not inspire much confidence in the effectiveness of loving enemies and turning the other cheek. Instead, they demonstrate that laudable as it may be to share your bread with beggars, you cannot trust everyone you meet along the road. Some strangers may turn into princes and good fairies; but others may be wolves and witches, and there is no sure way to tell them apart. The magic helpers whom Jean de l'Ours (tale type 301) picks up while seeking his fortune have the same Gargantuan powers as those in "Le Sorcier aux trois ceintures" (tale type 329) and "Le Navire sans pareil" (tale type 513). But they try to murder the hero at the point in the plot where the others save him.

However edifying some folktale characters may be in their behavior, they inhabit a world that seems arbitrary and amoral. In "Les Deux Bossus" (tale type 503), a hunchback comes upon a band of witches dancing and singing, "Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday." He joins the group and adds "and Thursday" to their song. Delighted with the innovation, they reward him by removing his deformity. A second hunchback tries the same device, adding, "and Friday." "That doesn't go," says one of the witches. "Not at all," says another. They punish him by inflicting him with the first hunchback. Doubly deformed, he cannot bear the taunts of the village and dies within the year. There is neither rhyme nor reason in such a universe. Disaster strikes fortuitously. Like the Black Death, it cannot

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be predicted or explained. It must simply be endured. More than half of the thirty-five recorded versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" end like the version recounted earlier, with the wolf devouring the girl. She had done nothing to deserve such a fate; for in the peasant tales, unlike those of Perrault and the Grimms, she did not disobey her mother or fail to read the signs of an implicit moral order written in the world around her. She simply walked into the jaws of death. It is the inscrutable, inexorable character of calamity that makes the tales so moving, not the happy endings that they frequently acquired after the eighteenth century.

As no discernible morality governs the world in general, good behavior does not determine success in the village or on the road, at least not in the French tales, where cunning takes the place of the pietism in the German. True, the hero often wins a magic helper by a good deed, but he gets the princess by using his wits. And sometimes he cannot get her without performing unethical acts. The hero in "Le Fidèle Serviteur" (tale type 516) escapes with the princess only because he refuses to help a beggar drowning in a lake. Similarly, in "L'Homme qui ne voulait pas mourir" (tale type 470B), he is finally caught by Death because he stops to help a poor wagon driver who is stuck in the mud. And in some versions of "Le Chauffeur du diable" (tale type 475) the hero wards off danger only as long as he or she (the protagonist can be a servant girl as well as a discharged soldier) can maintain a string of lies. As soon as he tells the truth, he is undone. The tales do not advocate immorality, but they undercut the notion that virtue will be rewarded or that life can be conducted according to any principle other than basic mistrust.

Those assumptions underlie the nastiness of village life as it appears in the tales. Neighbors are presumed to be hostile (tale type 162) and may be witches (tale type 709). They spy on you and rob your garden, no matter how poor you may be (tale type 330). You should never discuss your affairs in front of them or let them know in case you acquire sudden wealth by some stroke of magic, for they will denounce you as a thief if they fail to steal it themselves (tale type 563). In "La Poupée" (tale type 571C), a simple-minded orphan girl fails to observe these basic rules after receiving a magic doll, which excretes gold whenever she says, "Crap, crap, my little

rag doll." Before long she has bought several chickens and a cow and invites the neighbors in. One of them pretends to fall asleep by the fire and runs off with the doll as soon as the girl goes to bed. But when he says the magic words, it craps real crap all over him. So he throws it on the dung heap. Then, one day when he is doing some crapping of his own, it reaches up and bites him. He cannot pry it loose from his *derrière* until the girl arrives, reclaims her property, and lives mistrustfully ever after.

If the world is cruel, the village nasty, and mankind infested with rogues, what is one to do? The tales do not give an explicit answer, but they illustrate the aptness of the ancient French proverb, "One must howl with the wolves."⁶² Roguery runs through the whole corpus of French tales, though it often takes the milder and more agreeable form of tricksterism. Of course, tricksters exist in folklore everywhere, notably in the tales of the Plains Indians and in the Brer' Rabbit stories of American slaves.⁶³ But they seem especially prevalent in the French tradition. As shown above, whenever a French and a German tale follow the same pattern, the German veers off in the direction of the mysterious, the supernatural, and the violent, while the French steers straight for the village, where the hero can give full play to his talent for intrigue. True, the hero belongs to the same species of underdog that one meets in all European folktales. He or she will be a younger son, a stepdaughter, an abandoned child, a poor shepherd, an underpaid farm hand, an oppressed servant, a sorcerer's apprentice, or a Tom Thumb. But this common cloth has a French cut to it, particularly when the raconteur drapes it over favorite characters like Petit Jean, the feisty blacksmith's apprentice; Cadiou, the quick-witted tailor; and La Ramée, the tough and disillusioned soldier, who bluffs and braves his way through many tales, along with Pipette, the clever young recruit, and a host of others—Petit-Louis, Jean le Teigneux, Fench Coz, Belle Eulalie, Pitchin-Pitchot, Parle, Bonhomme Misère. Sometimes the names themselves suggest the qualities of wit and duplicity that carry the hero through his trials; thus Le Petit Fûteux, Finon-Finette, Parlafine, and Le Rusé Voleur. When passed in review, they seem to constitute an ideal type, the little guy who gets ahead by outwitting the big.

The trickster heroes stand out against a negative ideal, the

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numbskull. In the English tales, Simple Simon provides a good deal of innocent amusement. In the German, Hans Dumm is a likeable lout, who comes out on top by good-natured bumbling and help from magic auxiliaries. The French tales show no sympathy for village idiots or for stupidity in any form, including that of the wolves and ogres who fail to eat their victims on the spot (tale types 112D and 162). Numbskulls represent the antithesis of tricksterism; they epitomize the sin of simplicity, a deadly sin, because naïveté in a world of confidence men is an invitation to disaster. The numbskull heroes of the French tales are therefore false numbskulls, like Petit Poucet and Crampouès (tale types 327 and 569), who pretend to be dumb, all the better to succeed in manipulating a cruel but credulous world. Little Red Riding Hood—without the riding hood—uses the same strategy in the versions of the French tale where she escapes alive. “I have to relieve myself, Grandmother,” she says as the wolf clutches her. “Do it here in bed, my dear,” the wolf replies. But the girl insists, so the wolf permits her to go outside, tied to a rope. The girl attaches the rope to a tree and runs away, as the wolf tugs on it and calls out, having lost patience with waiting, “What are you doing, shitting coils of rope?”⁶⁴ In true, Gaulois fashion, the tale recounts the education of a trickster. Graduating from a state of innocence to one of fake naïveté, Little Red Riding Hood joins the company of Tom Thumb and Puss 'n Boots.

These characters have in common not merely cunning but weakness, and their adversaries are distinguished by strength as well as stupidity. Tricksterism always pits the little against the big, the poor against the rich, the underprivileged against the powerful. By structuring stories in this way, and without making explicit social comment, the oral tradition provided the peasants with a strategy for coping with their enemies under the Old Regime. Again, it should be stressed that there was nothing new or unusual about the theme of the weak outwitting the strong. It goes back to Ulysses's struggle against Cyclops and David's felling of Goliath, and it stands out strongly in the “clever maiden” motif of the German tales.⁶⁵ What matters is not the novelty of the theme but its significance—the way it fits into a narrative framework and takes shape in the telling of a tale. When the French underdogs

turn the tables on the high and mighty, they do so in an earthy manner and a down-to-earth setting. They do not slay giants in a never-never land, even if they have to climb beanstalks to reach them. The giant in "Jean de l'Ours" (tale type 301) is *le bourgeois de la maison*,⁶⁶ living in an ordinary house like that of any wealthy farmer. The giant in "Le Conte de Parle" (tale type 328) is an overgrown *coq du village* "having supper with his wife and daughter"⁶⁷ when the hero arrives to bamboozle him. The giant in "La Soeur infidèle" (tale type 315) is a nasty miller; those in "Le Chasseur adroit" (tale type 304) are common bandits; those in "L'Homme sauvage" (tale type 502) and "Le Petit Forgeron" (tale type 317) are tyrannical landlords, whom the hero fells after a dispute over grazing rights. It required no great leap of the imagination to see them as the actual tyrants—the bandits, millers, estate stewards, and lords of the manor—who made the peasants' lives miserable within their own villages.

Some of the tales make the connection explicit. "Le Capricorne" (tale type 571) takes the theme of "The Golden Goose" as it is found in the Grimms (number 64) and transforms it into a burlesque indictment of the rich and the powerful in village society. A poor blacksmith is being cuckolded by his priest and tyrannized by the local seigneur. At the priest's instigation, the seigneur orders the smith to execute impossible tasks, which will keep him out of the way while the priest is occupied with his wife. The smith succeeds in the tasks twice, thanks to the help of a fairy. But on the third time, the seigneur orders a "capricorn," and the smith does not even know what it is. The fairy directs him to bore a hole in his attic floor and to call out "hold tight!" at whatever he sees. First he sees the servant girl with her nightdress between her teeth picking fleas from her private parts. The "hold tight!" freezes her in that position, just as her mistress calls for the chamber pot so that the priest can relieve himself. Walking in backward in order to hide her nudity, the girl presents the pot to the mistress, and both hold it for the priest just as another "hold tight!" sticks all three of them together. In the morning, the smith drives the trio out of the house with a whip and, by a series of well-timed "hold tight!," attaches a whole parade of village characters to them. When the procession arrives at the seigneur's residence, the smith

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calls out, "Here is your capricorn, Monsieur." The seigneur pays him off and everyone is released.

A Jacobin might be able to tell that story in such a way as to make it smell of gunpowder. But however little respect it shows for the privileged orders, it does not go beyond the bounds of nose thumbing and table turning. The hero is satisfied with exacting humiliation; he does not dream of revolution. Having ridiculed the local authorities, he leaves them to resume their places while he resumes his, unhappy as it is. Defiance does not take the heroes any farther in the other tales that venture close to social comment. When Jean le Teigneux (tale type 314) gets the upper hand on a king and two haughty princes, he makes them eat a peasant's meal of boiled potatoes and black bread; then, having won the princess, he takes his rightful place as heir to the throne. La Ramée wins his princess by using a kind of flea circus in a contest to make her laugh (tale type 559). Unable to bear the idea of a beggar for a son-in-law, the king goes back on his word and tries to force a courtier on her instead. Finally, it is decided that she will go to bed with both pretenders and choose the one she prefers. La Ramée wins this second contest by dispatching a flea into his rival's anus.

The bawdiness may have produced some belly laughs around eighteenth-century hearths, but did it knot the peasant viscera into a gutlike determination to overthrow the social order? I doubt it. A considerable distance separates ribaldry from revolution, *gauloiserie* from *jacquerie*. In another variation on the eternal theme of underdog boy meets overprivileged girl, "Comment Kiot-Jean épousa Jacqueline" (tale type 593), the poor peasant, Kiot-Jean, is thrown out of the house when he submits his proposal to his true love's father, a prototypical *fermier* or wealthy peasant, who lorded it over the poor in the villages of the Old Regime and especially in Picardy, where this story was collected in 1881. Kiot-Jean consults a local witch and receives a handful of magic goat dung, which he hides under the ashes of the wealthy peasant's hearth. Trying to revive the fire, the daughter blows on it, and "Poop!" she lets out an enormous fart. The same thing happens to the mother, the father, and finally the priest, who emits a spectacular string of farts while sprinkling holy water and mumbling Latin exorcisms. The farting continues at such a rate—and one should imagine the peas-

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ant raconteur punctuating every few words of his improvised dialogue with a kind of Bronx cheer—that life becomes impossible in the household. Kiot-Jean promises to deliver them if they will give up the girl; and so he wins his Jacqueline after surreptitiously removing the goat dung.

No doubt the peasants derived some satisfaction from outwitting the rich and powerful in their fantasies as they tried to outwit them in everyday life, by lawsuits, cheating on manorial dues, and poaching. They probably laughed approvingly when the underdog dumped his worthless daughter on the king in “*Les Trois Fileuses*” (tale type 501), when he whipped the king in “*Le Panier de figues*” (tale type 570), tricked him into rowing the boat as a servant of the devil in “*Le Garçon de chez la bucheronne*” (tale type 461), and made him sit on the peak of his castle roof until he surrendered the princess in “*La Grande Dent*” (tale type 562). But it would be vain to search in such fantasies for the germ of republicanism. To dream of confounding a king by marrying a princess was hardly to challenge the moral basis of the Old Regime.

Taken as fantasies of table turning, the tales seem to dwell on the theme of humiliation. The clever weakling makes a fool of the strong oppressor by raising a chorus of laughter at his expense, preferably by some bawdy stratagem. He forces the king to lose face by exposing his backside. But laughter, even Rabelaisian laughter, has limits. Once it subsides, the tables turn back again; and as in the succession of Lent to Carnival in the unfolding of the calendar year, the old order regains its hold on the revelers. Tricksterism is a kind of holding operation. It permits the underdog to grasp some marginal advantage by playing on the vanity and stupidity of his superiors. But the trickster works within the system, turning its weak points to his advantage and therefore ultimately confirming it. Moreover, he may always meet someone trickier than himself, even in the ranks of the rich and powerful. The out-tricked trickster demonstrates the vanity of expecting a final victory.

Ultimately then, tricksterism expressed an orientation to the world rather than a latent strain of radicalism. It provided a way of coping with a harsh society instead of a formula for overthrowing it. Consider a final tale, “*Le Diable et le maréchal ferrant*” (tale

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type 330), one of the trickiest in the repertory. A blacksmith cannot resist giving food and shelter to every beggar who knocks at the door, although he "has no more religion than a dog."⁶⁸ Soon he is reduced to beggary himself, but he escapes from it by selling his soul to the devil in return for seven years of freedom from poverty back at the smithy. After he has resumed his old habit of careless generosity, Jesus and Saint Peter call on him, disguised as beggars. The smith gives them a good meal, clean clothes, and a fresh bed. In return Jesus grants him three wishes. Saint Peter advises him to wish for paradise, but instead he asks for unedifying things, which vary according to different versions of the tale: that he can have a good meal (the usual fare: biscuits, sausage, and plenty of wine), that his pack of cards will always win for him, that his fiddle will make anyone dance, that his sack will be filled with anything he wishes, and in most cases that anyone who sits on his bench will remain stuck. When the devil's messenger comes to claim him at the end of the seven years, the smith offers hospitality as usual and then keeps him stuck to the bench until he grants a reprieve of seven years. Once they have elapsed, he wishes the next emissary from the devil into the sack and then pounds him on the anvil until he gives up another seven years. Finally, the smith agrees to go to hell, but the terrified devils refuse to take him in, or alternatively he wins his way out by playing at cards. Leading a troop of the damned—souls that he has won at the devil's gambling table—he presents himself at the gates to heaven. Saint Peter will not have him because of his impiety. But the smith takes out his fiddle and makes Peter dance until he relents, or else tosses his sack over the gate and wishes himself inside. Then, in some versions, he plays cards with the angels and wins his way up the celestial hierarchy: from a corner, to a place by the fire, to a seat on a chair, and finally a position close to God the Father. It goes without saying that heaven will be as stratified as the court of Louis XIV and that you can cheat your way into it. Cheating serves very well as a strategy for living. Indeed, it is the only strategy available to the "little people," who must take things as they are and make the most of them. Better to live like the smith, and to keep the belly full, than to worry about salvation and the equity of the social order. Unlike the German version (Grimm 81), which is

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full of piety and nearly empty of tricks, the French tale celebrates the trickster as a social type and suggests that tricksterism will work quite well as a way of life—or as well as anything in a cruel and capricious world.

The moral of these stories has passed into proverbial wisdom in France—a very French kind of proverbializing to the Anglo-Saxon ear:⁶⁹

A rusé, rusé et demi: Against the clever, the clever by half.

A bon chat, bon rat: Against a good cat, a good rat.

Au pauvre, la besace: To the poor man, the beggar's bag.

On ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser les oeufs: You don't make an omelette without cracking eggs.

Ventre affamé n'a point d'oreilles: A famished stomach has no ears.

Là où la chèvre est attachée, il faut qu'elle broute: Where the goat is tied it must graze.

Ce n'est pas de sa faute, si les grenouilles n'ont pas de queue: It's not his fault if frogs don't have tails.

Il faut que tout le monde vive, larrons et autres: Everyone has to make a living, thieves and the rest.

The peasant raconteurs did not moralize explicitly in this fashion. They simply told tales. But the tales became absorbed into the general stock of images, sayings, and stylizations that constitute Frenchness. Now, "Frenchness" may seem to be an intolerably vague idea, and it smells of related notions like *Volksgeist* that have acquired a bad odor since ethnography became polluted with racism in the 1930s. Nonetheless, an idea may be valid even if it is vague and has been abused in the past. Frenchness exists. As the awkwardness of the proverbs' translations suggests, it is a distinct cultural style; and it conveys a particular view of the world—a sense that life is hard, that you had better not have any illusions about selflessness in your fellow men, that clear-headedness and quick wit are necessary to protect what little you can extract from your surroundings, and that moral nicety will get you nowhere. Frenchness makes for ironic detachment. It tends to be negative

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and disabused. Unlike its Anglo-Saxon opposite, the Protestant ethic, it offers no formula for conquering the world. It is a defense strategy, well suited to an oppressed peasantry or an occupied country. It still speaks today in colloquial exchanges like: *Comment vas-tu?* ("How are you?") *Je me défends.* ("I defend myself.")

How was this common coinage minted? No one can say, but the case of Perrault demonstrates that it was a complex process.⁷⁰ On the face of it, Perrault would seem to be the last person likely to take an interest in folk tales. A courtier, self-conscious "moderne," and architect of the authoritarian cultural policies of Colbert and Louis XIV, he had no sympathy for peasants or their archaic culture. Yet he picked up stories from the oral tradition and adapted them to the salon, adjusting the tone to suit the taste of a sophisticated audience. Away went the nonsense about paths of pins and needles and the cannibalizing of grandmother in "Little Red Riding Hood." Nevertheless the tale retained much of its original power. Unlike Mme d'Aulnoy, Mme de Murat, and other leaders of the fad for fairy tales under Louis XIV, Perrault did not deviate from the original story line and did not spoil the earthiness and simplicity of the oral version with prettified details. He acted as a *conteur doué* for his own milieu, as if he were the Louisquatorzean equivalent of the storytellers who squat around fires in Amazonia and New Guinea. Homer probably had reworked his material in a similar way twenty-six centuries earlier; Gide and Camus would do so again two centuries later.

But much as he has in common with all storytellers who adapt standard themes to particular audiences, Perrault represents something unique in the history of French literature: the supreme point of contact between the seemingly separate worlds of elite and popular culture. How the contact took place cannot be determined, but it may have occurred in a scene like the one in the frontispiece to the original edition of his tales, the first printed version of *Mother Goose*, which shows three well-dressed children listening raptly to an old crone at work in what seems to be the servants' quarters. An inscription above her reads *Contes de ma mère l'oye*, an allusion, apparently, to the cackling sound of old wives' tales. Marc Soriano has argued that Perrault's son learned the stories in some such scene and that Perrault then reworked them. But Perrault himself

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probably heard them in a similar setting, and so did most persons of his class; for all gentle folk passed their early childhood with wet nurses and nannies, who lulled them to sleep with popular songs and amused them, after they had learned to talk, with *histoires ou contes du temps passé*, as Perrault put it on his title page—that is, old wives' tales. While the *veillée* perpetuated popular traditions within the village, servants and wet nurses provided the link between the culture of the people and the culture of the elite. The two cultures were connected, even at the height of the Grand Siècle, when they would seem to have least in common; for the audiences of Racine and Lully had imbibed folklore with their milk.

Furthermore, Perrault's version of the tales reentered the stream of popular culture through the *Bibliothèque bleue*, the primitive paperbacks that were read aloud at *veillées* in villages where someone was capable of reading. These little blue books featured Sleeping Beauty and Little Red Riding Hood as well as Gargantua, Fortunatus, Robert le Diable, Jean de Calais, les Quatre Fils Aymon, Maugis l'Enchanteur, and many other characters from the oral tradition that Perrault never picked up. It would be a mistake to identify his meager Mother Goose with the vast folklore of early modern France. But a comparison of the two points up the inadequacy of envisaging cultural change in linear fashion, as the downward seepage of great ideas. Cultural currents intermingled, moving up as well as down, while passing through different media and connecting groups as far apart as peasants and salon sophisticates.⁷¹

Those groups did not inhabit completely separate mental worlds. They had a great deal in common—first and foremost, a common stock of tales. Despite the distinctions of social rank and geographical particularity, which permeated the society of the Old Regime, the tales communicated traits, values, attitudes, and a way of construing the world that was peculiarly French. To insist upon their Frenchness is not to fall into romantic rhapsodizing about national spirit, but rather to recognize the existence of distinct cultural styles, which set off the French, or most of them (for one must make allowances for the peculiarities of Bretons, Basques, and other ethnic groups), from other peoples identified at the time as German, Italian, and English.⁷²

The point might seem obvious or belabored, except that it flies

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in the face of conventional wisdom in the history profession, which is to cut the past into tiny segments and wall them up within monographs, where they can be analyzed in minute detail and rearranged in rational order. The peasants of the Old Regime did not think monographically. They tried to make sense of the world, in all its booming, buzzing confusion, with the materials they had at hand. Those materials included a vast repertory of stories derived from ancient Indo-European lore. The peasant tellers of tales did not merely find the stories amusing or frightening or functional. They found them "good to think with." They reworked them in their own manner, using them to piece together a picture of reality and to show what that picture meant for persons at the bottom of the social order. In the process, they infused the tales with many meanings, most of which are now lost because they were embedded in contexts and performances that cannot be recaptured. At a general level, however, some of the significance still shows through the texts. By studying the entire corpus of them and by comparing them with corresponding tales in other traditions, one can see this general dimension of meaning expressed in characteristic narrative devices—ways of framing stories, setting tone, combining motifs, and inflecting plots. The French tales have a common style, which communicates a common way of construing experience. Unlike the tales of Perrault, they do not provide morals; and unlike the philosophies of the Enlightenment, they do not deal in abstractions. But they show how the world is made and how one can cope with it. The world is made of fools and knaves, they say: better to be a knave than a fool.

In the course of time, the message spread beyond the limits of folktales and beyond the bounds of the peasantry. It became a master theme of French culture in general, at its most sophisticated as well as its most popular. Perhaps it reached its fullest development in Perrault's *Puss 'n Boots*, the embodiment of "Cartesian" cunning. Puss belongs to a long line of tricksters: on the one hand, the crafty younger sons, stepdaughters, apprentices, servants, and foxes of the folk tales; on the other, the artful dodgers and confidence men of French plays and novels—Scapin, Crispin, Scaramouche, Gil Blas, Figaro, Cyrano de Bergerac, Robert Macaire. The theme still lives in films like *Les Règles du jeu* and journals like *Le Canard*

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enchâiné. It survives in ordinary language, as in the approving way one Frenchman will call another *méchant* and *malin* (both “wicked” and “shrewd”—France is a country where it is good to be bad). It has passed from the ancient peasantry into everyone’s everyday life.

Of course everyday life no longer resembles the Malthusian misery of the Old Regime. The modern trickster follows new scenarios: he cheats on his income tax and dodges an all-powerful state instead of trying to outwit a local *seigneur*. But every move he makes is a tribute to his ancestors—Puss ‘n Boots and all the rest. As the old stories spread across social boundaries and over centuries, they developed enormous staying power. They changed without losing their flavor. Even after they had become absorbed in the main currents of modern culture, they testified to the tenacity of an old view of the world. Guided by proverbial wisdom, the French are still trying to outwit the system. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

APPENDIX: VARIATIONS OF A TALE

So that the reader can see how the same tale type is inflected in different ways in the oral traditions of Germany and France, I have transcribed the Grimms’ version of “Der Jude im Dorn” (tale type 592, Grimm 110, reprinted with permission from *The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, by Jakob Ludwig Karl Grimm and Wilhelm Karl Grimm, translated by Margaret Hunt and James Stern, copyright 1944 by Pantheon Books, Inc. and renewed 1972 by Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., pp. 503–08, followed by its French counterpart, “Les Trois Dons” (*Le Conte populaire français*, vol. 2 [Paris, 1976], pp. 492–95, my translation).

THE JEW AMONG THE THORNS

There was once a rich man, who had a servant who served him diligently and honestly: he was every morning the first out of bed, and the last to go to rest at night; and whenever there was a difficult job to be done, which nobody cared to undertake, he was

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always the first to set himself to it. Moreover, he never complained, but was contented with everything, and always merry.

When a year was ended, his master gave him no wages, for he said to himself: "That is the cleverest way; for I shall save something, and he will not go away, but stay quietly in my service." The servant said nothing, but did his work the second year as he had done it the first; and when at the end of this, likewise, he received no wages, he submitted and still stayed on.

When the third year also was past, the master considered, put his hand in his pocket, but pulled nothing out. Then at last the servant said: "Master, for three years I have served you honestly, be so good as to give me what I ought to have; for I wish to leave, and look about me a little more in the world."

"Yes, my good fellow," answered the old miser; "you have served me industriously, and therefore you shall be graciously rewarded"; and he put his hand into his pocket, but counted out only three farthings, saying: "There, you have a farthing for each year; that is large and liberal pay, such as you would have received from few masters."

The honest servant, who understood little about money, put his fortune into his pocket, and thought: "Ah! now that I have my purse full, why need I trouble and plague myself any longer with hard work!" So on he went, up hill and down dale; and sang and jumped to his heart's content. Now it came to pass that as he was going by a thicket a little man stepped out, and called to him: "Whither away, merry brother? I see you do not carry many cares." "Why should I be sad?" answered the servant; "I have enough; three years' wages are jingling in my pocket."

"How much is your treasure?" the dwarf asked him.

"How much? Three farthings sterling, all told."

"Look here," said the dwarf, "I am a poor needy man, give me your three farthings; I can work no longer, but you are young, and can easily earn your bread."

And as the servant had a good heart, and felt pity for the little man, he gave him the three farthings, saying: "Take them in the name of Heaven, I shall not be any the worse for it."

Then the little man said: "As I see you have a good heart, I grant you three wishes, one for each farthing. They shall all be fulfilled."

"Aha?" said the servant, "you are one of those who can work wonders! Well, then, if it is to be so, I wish, first, for a gun, which shall hit everything that I aim at; secondly, for a fiddle, which when I play on it, shall compel all who hear it to dance; thirdly, that if I ask a favor of any one he shall not be able to refuse it."

"All that shall you have," said the dwarf; and put his hand into the bush and just imagine, there lay a fiddle and gun, all ready, just as if they had been ordered. These he gave to the servant, and then said to him: "Whatever you may ask at any time, no man in the world shall be able to deny you."

"Heart alive! What more can one desire?" said the servant to himself, and went merrily onwards. Soon afterwards he met a Jew with a long goat's-beard, who was standing listening to the song of a bird which was sitting up at the top of a tree. "Good heavens," he was exclaiming, "that such a small creature should have such a fearfully loud voice! If it were but mine! If only some one would sprinkle some salt upon its tail!"

"If that is all," said the servant, "the bird shall soon be down here," and taking aim he shot, and down fell the bird into the thorn-bushes. "Go, you rogue," he said to the Jew, "and fetch the bird out for yourself!"

"Oh!" said the Jew, "leave out the rogue, my master, and I will do it at once. I will get the bird out for myself, now that you have hit it." Then he lay down on the ground, and began to crawl into the thicket.

When he was fast among the thorns, the good servant's humor so tempted him that he took up his fiddle and began to play. In a moment the Jew's legs began to move, and to jump into the air, and the more the servant fiddled the better went the dance. But the thorns tore his shabby coat from him, combed his beard, and pricked and plucked him all over the body. "Oh dear," cried the Jew, "what do I want with your fiddling? Leave the fiddle alone, master; I do not want to dance."

But the servant did not listen to him, and thought, "You have fleeced people often enough, now the thorn-bushes shall do the same to you"; and he began to play over again, so that the Jew had to jump higher than ever, and scraps of his coat were left hanging on the thorns. "Oh, woe's me!" cried the Jew; "I will give the gentleman whatsoever he asks if only he leaves off fiddling—a

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whole purse full of gold." "If you are so liberal," said the servant, "I will stop my music; but this I must say to your credit, that you dance to it so well that one must really admire it"; and having taken the purse, he went his way.

The Jew stood still and watched the servant quietly until he was far off and out of sight, and then he screamed out with all his might: "You miserable musician, you beer-house fiddler! Wait till I catch you alone, I will hunt you till the soles of your shoes fall off! You ragamuffin! Just put six farthings in your mouth, that you may be worth three halfpence!" and went on abusing him as fast as he could speak. As soon as he had refreshed himself a little in this way, and got his breath again, he ran into the town to the justice.

"My lord judge," he said, "I have come to make a complaint; see how a rascal has robbed and ill-treated me on the public highway! A stone on the ground might pity me; my clothes all torn, my body pricked and scratched, my little all gone with my purse—good ducats, each piece better than the last; for God's sake let the man be thrown into prison!"

"Was it a soldier," asked the judge, "who cut you thus with his sabre?" "Nothing of the sort!" said the Jew; "it was no sword that he had, but a gun hanging at his back, and a fiddle at his neck; the wretch may easily be recognized."

So the judge sent his people out after the man, and they found the good servant, who had been going quite slowly along, and they found, too, the purse with the money upon him. As soon as he was taken before the judge he said: "I did not touch the Jew, nor take his money; he gave it to me of his own free will, that I might leave off fiddling because he could not bear my music."

"Heaven defend us!" cried the Jew, "his lies are as thick as flies upon the wall."

But the judge also did not believe his tale, and said: "This is a bad defense, no Jew would do that." And because he had committed robbery on the public highway, he sentenced the good servant to be hanged. As he was being led away the Jew again screamed after him: "You vagabond! You dog of a fiddler! Now you are going to receive your well-earned reward!" The servant walked quietly with the hangman up the ladder, but upon the last step he turned round and said to the judge: "Grant me just one request before I die."

"Yes, if you do not ask your life," said the judge.

"I do not ask for life," answered the servant, "but as a last favor let me play once more upon my fiddle."

The Jew raised a great cry of "Murder! Murder! For goodness' sake do not allow it! Do not allow it!" But the judge said: "Why should I not let him have this short pleasure? It has been granted to him, and he shall have it." However, he could not have refused on account of the gift which had been bestowed on the servant.

Then the Jew cried: "Oh! woe's me! tie me fast!" while the good servant took his fiddle from his neck, and made ready. As he gave the first scrape, they all began to quiver and shake, the judge, his clerk, and the hangman and his men, and the cord fell out of the hand of the one who was going to tie the Jew fast. At the second scrape all raised their legs, and the hangman let go his hold of the good servant, and made himself ready to dance. At the third scrape they all leaped up and began to dance; the judge and the Jew being the best at jumping. Soon all who had gathered in the market-place out of curiosity were dancing with them; old and young, fat and lean, one with another. The dogs, likewise, which had run there, got up on their hind legs and capered about; and the longer he played, the higher sprang the dancers, so that they knocked against each other's heads, and began to shriek terribly.

At length the judge cried, quite out of breath: "I will give you your life if you will only stop fiddling." The good servant thereupon had compassion, took his fiddle and hung it round his neck again, and stepped down the ladder. Then he went up to the Jew, who was lying upon the ground panting for breath, and said: "You rascal, now confess, whence you got the money, or I will take my fiddle and begin to play again." "I stole it, I stole it!" cried he; "but you have honestly earned it." So the judge had the Jew taken to the gallows and hanged as a thief.

THE THREE GIFTS

Once upon a time there was a little boy, whose mother died soon after his birth. His father, who was still young, remarried soon afterward; but the second wife, instead of taking care of her stepson, detested him with all her heart and treated him harshly.

She sent him out to tend the sheep along the roadside. He had to

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stay outdoors all day, with only tattered and patched-up clothes to cover himself. For food, she gave him only a small slice of bread with so little butter that it hardly covered the surface, no matter how thinly he spread it.

One day as he was eating this meager meal while sitting on a bench and watching over his flock, he saw a ragged old woman come along the road leaning on a stick. She looked just like a beggar, but was really a fairy in disguise, such as existed in those times. She came up to the little boy and said to him, "I am very hungry. Will you give me some of your bread?"

"Alas! I hardly have enough for myself, for my stepmother is so stingy that every day she cuts me a smaller slice. Tomorrow it will be smaller still."

"Take pity on a poor old woman, my boy, and give me a bit of your dinner."

The child, who had a good heart, agreed to share his bread with the beggar, who returned the next day when he was about to eat and asked for pity once again. Although the piece was still smaller than the one from the previous day, he agreed to cut off part of it for her.

On the third day, the bread and butter was hardly as large as your hand, but still the old woman received her share.

When she had eaten it, she said, "You were good to an old woman who you thought was begging for bread. I am really a fairy, and I have the power to grant you three wishes as a recompense. Choose the three things that will give you the most pleasure."

The little shepherd had a crossbow in his hand. He wished that all of his arrows would fell small birds without a miss and that the tunes he played on his flute would have the power to make everyone dance, whether they wanted to or not. He had a little trouble deciding on the third wish; but in thinking back on all the cruel treatment he had received from his stepmother, he wanted to have vengeance and wished that every time he sneezed she would not be able to resist letting out a loud fart.

"Your desires will be accomplished, my little man," said the fairy, whose rags had become transformed into a beautiful dress and whose face appeared young and fresh.

Peasants Tell Tales

In the evening, the little boy led his flock back; and as he entered the house, he sneezed. Immediately, his stepmother, who was busy making buckwheat cakes at the hearth, let out a loud, resounding fart. And every time he said "atchoo," the old woman answered with such an explosive sound that she was covered with shame. That night when the neighbors gathered together at the *veillée*, the little boy took to sneezing so often that everyone reproached the woman for her nastiness.

The next day was a Sunday. The stepmother took the little fellow to mass, and they sat underneath the pulpit. Nothing unusual happened during the first part of the service; but as soon as the priest began his sermon, the child began to sneeze and his stepmother, despite all her efforts to contain them, immediately let out a salvo of farts and turned so red in the face that everyone stared at her and she wished she were a hundred feet under the ground. As the improper noise continued without letting up, the priest could not go on with his sermon and ordered the beadle to usher out this woman who showed so little respect for the holy place.

The next day the priest came to the farm and scolded the woman for behaving so badly in church. She had scandalized the entire parish. "It's not my fault," she said. "Every time my husband's son sneezes, I can't prevent myself from farting. It's driving me crazy." Just at that moment the little fellow, who was about to leave with his sheep, let out two or three sneezes and the woman responded immediately.

The priest left the house with the boy and walked along with him, trying to discover his secret and giving him a scolding all the while. But the crafty little rogue would not confess anything. When they passed near a bush where several small birds were perched, he shot one of them with his crossbow and asked the priest to fetch it. The priest agreed, but when he arrived at the spot where the bird had fallen, a thorny area overrun with brambles, the little boy played on his flute and the priest began to whirl and dance so fast, in spite of himself, that his cassock got caught in the thorns; and before long it was torn to shreds.

When at last the music died down, the priest was able to stop; but he was completely out of breath. He brought the little boy before the justice of the peace and accused him of destroying his

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cassock. "He is a wicked witch," the priest said. "He must be punished."

The boy took out his flute, which he had carefully slipped into his pocket, and as soon as he sounded the first note, the priest, who was standing, began to dance; the clerk began to whirl on his chair; the justice of the peace himself bounded up and down on his seat; and everyone present shook their legs so wildly that the courtroom looked like a dance hall.

Soon they became tired of this forced exercise, and they promised the little boy that they would leave him alone if he would stop playing.