



Introduction

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The idea for a seminar on Folktales came from a group of teachers. I was honored to be asked to lead the seminar, although dubious that I had any special expertise in the subject. I had absorbed the standard European fairy tales as a child and as a parent; I had once read a lot of the Brothers Grimm when I was learning German; and as a medievalist I had me notion of the study and classification of folktale types and motifs, because so many medieval narratives such as “Beowulf” and the “Canterbury Tales” are folktales at bottom. But essentially this seminar was as much of a learning experience for me as for the teachers who enrolled in it. Together we spent some time rereading the familiar fairy tales, and studying analyses of them by (among others) Brun Bettelheim, Max Liuthi (my favorite), Maria Tatar, and Jack Zipes. Armed with this review of fundamentals, we then read and discussed African tales, Afro-American tales, Puerto-Rican and other Caribbean tales (which turned out to be nearly all imported from Europe or Africa, and yet naturalized), Native American tales and European-American tales. All through we complemented our reading by drawing on the extraordinarily varied set of personal backgrounds we represented, and we rounded out the seminar with some workshops on storytelling led by Synia Carroll-McQuillan, who coaxed us through a number of the exercises to be found in Appendix A of her unit. By the end I think we all felt as I did, that the experience amounted to a great deepening of our knowledge d understanding of literature. I consider that the members of the seminar have done an excellent job of distilling that new knowledge and understanding in the teaching units they have prepared, and I believe that other teachers will find much of use in the pages that follow.

Traugott Lawler

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