

Marina Warner, Animals in Fairytales, The Guardian, 16 October 2009

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss commented that animals were "*bons à penser*" (good to think with), and fairytales speak through beasts to explore common experiences – fear of sexual intimacy, terror and violence and injustice, struggles for survival. A tradition of articulate, anthropomorphised creatures of every kind is as old as literature itself: animal fables and beast fairytales are found in ancient Egypt and Greece and India, and the legendary Aesop of the classics has his storytelling counterparts all over the world, who use crows and ants, lions and monkeys, ravens and donkeys to satirise the follies and vices of human beings and display along the way the effervescent cunning and high spirits of the fairytale genre.

By contrast with animal fables, where something of an animal's observable, actual character helps make the point (monkeys are clever, sharks, well, shark-like, in *The Heart of a Monkey* from Zanzibar), the beast of fairytale romance comes in fantasy shape – mythological creatures such as a dragon, a snake, a yellow dwarf, or, as AS Byatt translates one such beast, Mme d'Aulnoy's "*Le Serpentin vert*", as a "great green worm". They belong in a world of romance and psychology rather than satire and practical wisdom. Monster bridegrooms can also take the form of animals that used to pose a real threat – wolves and bears and pigs and warthogs (Walter Crane's chosen beast for his marvellous illustrations of *Beauty and the Beast*). But they can also assume a more domestic, less terrifying animal appearance – a ram, a frog, a bird, a hedgehog.

In every case, the outer form conceals the inner man, and it will take something momentous to overturn the beast's fate and restore him to his proper, princely identity. Beastly fairytales like these follow a narrative arc: the story begins with a spell or a curse that binds the male hero under a terrible disguise, and after a passage of ordeals and horrors, closes with recognition and fulfilment (these are Cinderella tales with a male protagonist). Sometimes the plot follows emotional or psychological logic, but not always; a great deal of the impact of this literature depends on the stark absence of explanation, on the sheer mysteriousness of the premises and outcome: how did the Beast come to be a beast? Why is Hans a hedgehog?

Magic will vanish with too much rationalisation, and fairytales derive their power from the enigma of enchantment, or, in the animal fable, from the playful charm of the anthropomorphism. But the moral ballast of the tradition has tended to swing writers towards moralising: Mme de Beaumont was a governess working in England and her famous story *La Belle et la Bête* was published in 1758 in *The Misses' Magazine*, which she compiled for the young ladies she was tutoring; her tale mixes and blends many elements from earlier tales of monster bridegrooms to create an Enlightenment romance about the power of reason, mercy and love. Among her sources was the fairytale of *Cupid and Psyche*, from the 2nd-century metaphysical romance fiction *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, but her version is kindly and domestic, shaped to help young women facing arranged marriages to hope for a happy future and accept the match their father proposed, however unappealing they find the prospective husband. They will come to love him, the story reassures them. As Angela Carter acerbically commented, Mme de Beaumont was in the business of "house-training the id".

The Grimms collected *Hans My Hedgehog* from one of their most prolific informants, Dorothea Viehmann, and its oral character shows in the repetitions of motifs and reprises, in the frightening, mischievous, and playful episodes (does the narrator make-believe pricking the child with the animal's quills?). As in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Heart of a Monkey*, a stress falls on the binding power of words and the importance of paying attention to what is being said: these elements are historic survivals from a pre-literate society when concepts of honour and trust provided the foundation for stability. The fairytales themselves, growing out of the spoken word, become part of that legislating fabric, and by issuing warnings about what happens to kings and princesses, sharks and other beasts who don't keep their promises, reminds us to keep ours.