About “The Feathered Ogre”

By Daniel Peretti

Folklorists, those scholars and storytellers who pay attention to stories like “The Feathered Ogre,” learned a long time ago that we’ll probably never know where most fairy tales come from. “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk”—the origins of these are generally lost to time. But we can learn how a story has developed, and we can learn about the people who still tell the story today.

The more popular the story, the easier this process is. “The Feathered Ogre” is not a very popular story, but we are lucky to have some of its history. It’s an Italian version of a story known throughout Europe. I chose it from the stories retold from oral tradition in Italo Calvino’s *Italian Folktales*. Calvino got the story from Giuseppe Pitré, who published it in 1878. Pitré heard the story from Rosina Casini, a woman from Garfagnana Estense, a village in the mountainous part of norther Tuscany. We don’t know much about Casini, but Pitré was a physician and mayor in Sicily while managing to collect a vast amount of folklore, including superstitions and proverbs. He would often collect stories while traveling around Italy to visit his patients; he wrote his books on the road, at a desk set up in his horse-drawn coach.

Stories from oral tradition don’t always have titles. Pitré called this story “Il diavolo fra i frati” (The Devil among the Friars). Calvino published it as“L’orco con le penne”—The Ogre with the Feathers, which is his own invention. Pitré’s version refers to the creature as an animal or a monster (*animale* or *mostro* in Italian); it’s not the devil of the title, though the devil is in the story. Pitré, like most folklorists, tried to keep the stories exactly as he heard them. Calvino, who is famous for his post-modern fiction, felt comfortable changing the stories to fit his own tastes.

As I adapted “The Feathered Ogre” into an audio drama, I strayed quite far from the oral tradition, in which a king gets sick and his knight goes on a quest to find the only thing that can cure him: a feather from the back of an ogre. The knight meets a trapped ferryman, a despairing innkeeper, an impoverished fountain owner, and a quarrelsome group of monks. Each asks the knight to help them with their problems, too, and I’ve kept the encounters largely as described, though I changed the order and omitted the monks for time purposes.

Listeners might recognize similarities to “Jack and the Beanstalk”: the ogre, like the Giant, returns home and smells a human intruder, for example. Calvino changed the ending of the story, adding a scene after Pitré’s story ends. I liked his addition and made it a more important part of the audio drama because I thought it made the heroine more heroic. Calvino, who says that this is a story about human generosity, justifies his ending by pointing out that he got it from another folktale recorded from oral tradition called “The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs,” this time recorded by the Brothers Grimm. That story closely resembles “The Feathered Ogre,” with the hero on a quest to get something for a king and helping others with their problems in the same way, but in this one the king is the antagonist, sending the hero to the Devil to get rid of him.

The feathers are an unusual detail for this tale. The hairs are more common, but other versions, including another one by the Grimms, have the hero trying to get feathers from a bird of some kind—often a phoenix. The leap from devil to bird to ogre is the kind of thing that happens in oral tradition.

In fact, that’s how traditional storytelling works. Different tellers take the core of a widely known story and change it to suit the times, the medium, the audience, and their own sense of creativity. That’s what we’ve done with “The Feathered Ogre,” and all the tales in this series. We hope you enjoy them.