



A KANNADA FOLKTALE

the parakeet and the hunter-boy

TRANSLATED BY MADHAV AJJAMPUR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NANDITHA TM

Once upon a time, there lived in a forest a hunter-boy. This boy made a living trapping parakeets and selling them in the nearby town. Now it happened once that a rare type of parakeet was caught in his net.

But before the boy could get hold of it, the parakeet spoke: “Dear boy, please spare me. You will be rewarded for it later.”

Said the boy, “I don’t mind. But to let you go free means I will have to go hungry today—”

“Is that all!” exclaimed the parakeet. “Just let your net lie as it lies now. No sooner am I gone than a many-coloured parakeet will fly into this very net. Take it up and give it to your king. He will reward you.”

So the boy let go the parakeet and spread out his net. No sooner had the first parakeet flown away than a many-coloured parakeet came and fell into the net. The boy was overjoyed. He took it up and carried it straight to the king himself. The king too was greatly taken with the parakeet. He instantly gave the boy the price he asked for. Not just that, he even gave the boy a present as a token of his gratitude.

The king had a golden cage made for the many-coloured parakeet. In less than a week, the parakeet had begun to talk too. This development brought the king no end of joy. Every spare second found him delighting in the parakeet’s company.

Now it happened that this king had a wicked minister. That a mere boy, a nobody, should be given such a handsome reward did not sit well with him. He was further displeased by the favour the king showered on the parakeet. The king was no less attentive to the hunter-boy, and was forever asking about his welfare.

How best, the minister wondered, to turn the king against the boy? Of

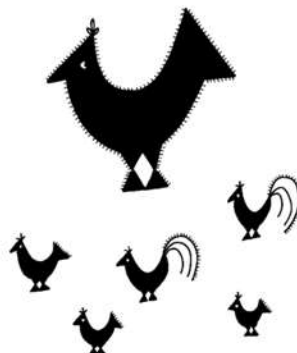
course, killing the boy was out of the question. So the minister waited for his chance. One day he said confidentially to the king—

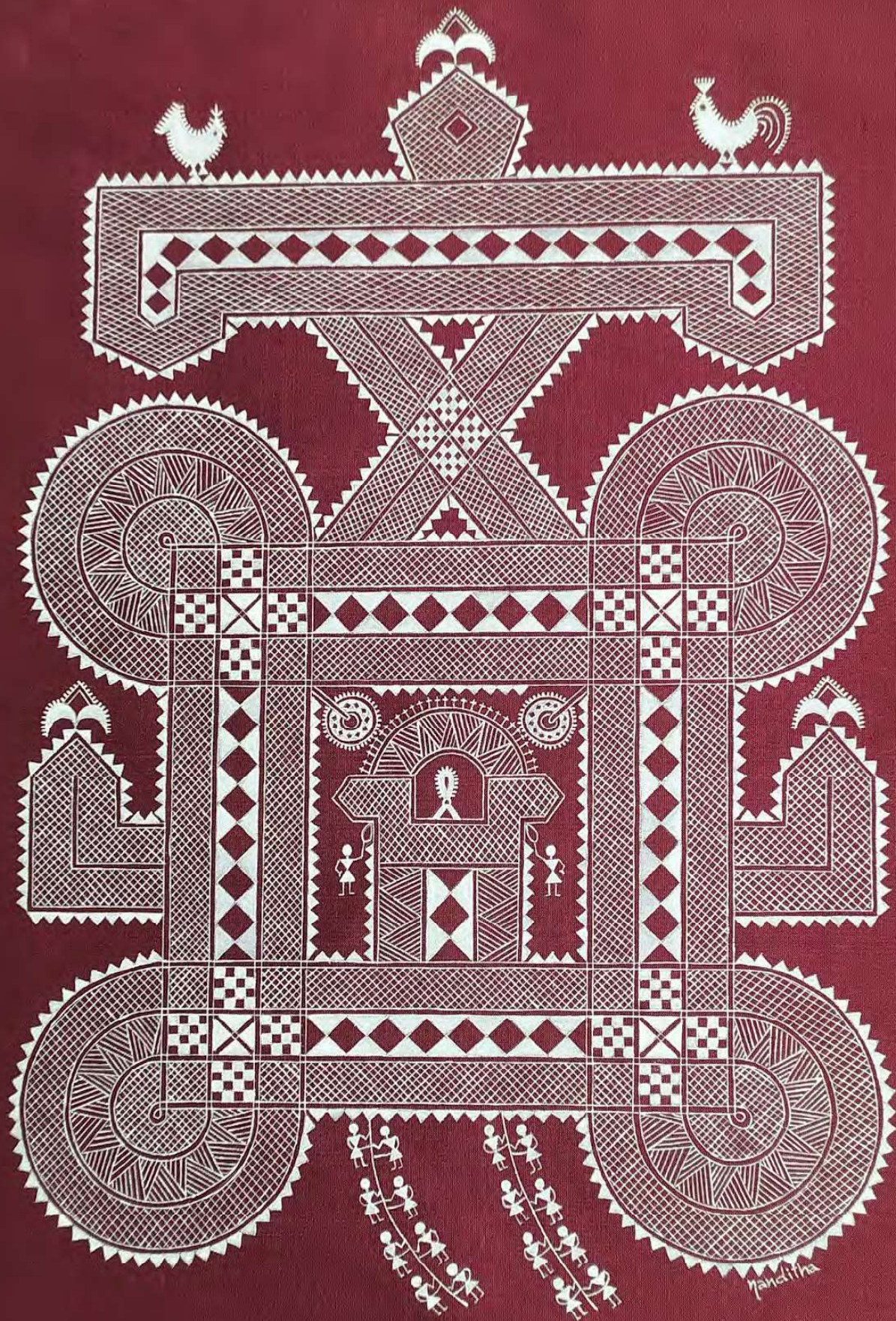
“Maharaj, it is my opinion that a golden cage is not sufficient adornment for such a rare bird as this many-coloured parakeet. Nor does it become your Majesty’s greatness. But a *mantapa* built of pure ivory—that would be the very thing! Think too of how much it would burnish your Majesty’s reputation.”

“You tell the truth,” said the king thoughtfully. “But one can get a tusk or two at most. Where am I to get enough ivory to build a mantapa?”

“Why let that vex you? You could always call on that hunter-boy. He’s a mighty resourceful fellow. He will certainly be able to do this for you should you ask him.”

The idea pleased the king, who sent word of his order with his minister. The minister went up to the boy and said, “Now look here, boy. It is the king’s wish that an ivory mantapa be built for his parakeet. You have been given two fortnight’s time to collect the tusks necessary to build it. If you bring them, you shall be rewarded. If you do not, you will be put to death.”





The hunter-boy sat down disconsolately, his head in his hands. He rued the day he had presented the many-coloured bird to the king. He was sitting like this when, of a sudden, there was a flutter of wings and the parakeet he had set free alighted on his wrist.

The hunter-boy put his hands together and pleaded with the minister.

“Mister, I can get a tusk or two if I am lucky. But where am I to get enough ivory to build a mantapa?”

“It doesn’t matter where you get it from,” answered the minister. “Nor does it concern me. I have only come to tell you what the king’s order is.” He then sped away.

The hunter-boy sat down disconsolately, his head in his hands. He rued the day he had presented the many-coloured bird to the king. ‘I have only a month left to live,’ he thought sadly. He was sitting like this when, of a sudden, there was a flutter of wings and the parakeet he had set free alighted on his wrist.

“What ails you, dear boy?” asked the bird.

“Why relate my misfortune!” cried the boy. “I used to live simply, catching and selling parakeets. But I was happy too. Then came you and the many-coloured parakeet. I sold the many-coloured parakeet to the king like you told me to, and had returned to being happy when alas! what should I hear but that the king wants enough ivory to build a mantapa with. Is that even possible? I have been granted two fortnights to find the ivory—if I fail, I shall be put to death.”

“Do not despair, dear boy,” said the bird, “but head eastward instead. There, you will find a forest. In the middle of the forest is a lake, which is the watering hole for the forest’s elephants. Among them is an old elephant, the head of the herd. Tell him your trouble and ask him for his help. He will see to the rest.”

The boy made east the next day. Everything was as the bird had said. He came upon the forest first. In the middle of it was the lake. In the afternoon came the herd of elephants. Their grazing finished, they romped and splashed around in the water. When they were done, they rose and began to make their way back to their grazing grounds. Bringing up the rear was a solitary old elephant, the leader of the herd. The boy went up him, fell on his knees, and clasped the old tusker’s feet.

“Save me, O King of elephants!” he pleaded.

Said the old elephant: “Who are you, young brother? What is it that ails you?” whereupon the boy poured out his woes. “Only you can save me now!” he cried.

The old elephant listened to this and said: “Young brother, there lives a lion in this forest who picks off one of our herd every single day. We are all of us helpless against him. Rid us of that menace and I will see to it that you get all the ivory you need.”

The hunter-boy was more perplexed than ever. He stood there unmoving, trying to think of a way to help the elephants. He stood there so long that his throat turned dry, whereupon he went up to the lake to quench his thirst. As he bent down to scoop up a handful of water, his reflection looked back at him. A sudden idea struck him. He hurried back to town, bought a pair of large mirrors and set them up opposite one another by the bank of the lake. He then sat down by their side, singing softly to himself.

Very soon—having caught the scent of a man—a lion came bounding up, roaring fiercely. But the boy showed no sign of fear—unperturbed, he continued to sit where he was, singing softly to himself. The lion was astounded by the boy’s behaviour.

“What kind of arrogance is this, boy?” it asked. “Do you not know that the very bravest men flee at the sight of me? Are you not afraid of me?”

Said the boy nonchalantly—“What reason have I to be scared? I have captured and caged a thousand lions like you.”

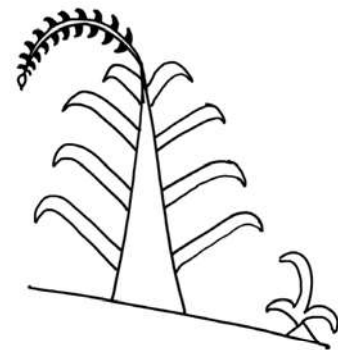
The boy’s sangfroid angered the lion. It let forth a roar that shook the very ground of the forest.

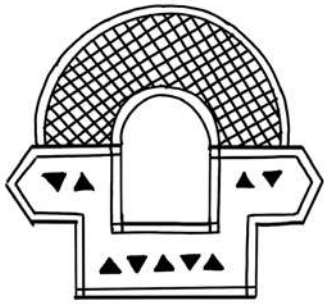
“Foolish boy!” cried the lion. “Do you hope to evade me with your petty lies?”

“Lies?” answered the boy. “The captured lions are all here. Would you like to look at them?”

“Think yourself dead, arrogant boy!” roared the lion as it landed with a spring between the two mirrors that faced each other. But lo, when it looked in the mirror what should it see but an endless parade of lions! This sight was too much for the lion, whose knees almost collapsed under it. Half-crazed with fear, scarcely knowing if it was awake or dreaming, it turned tail and fled without a backward glance.

The fierce roars of the lion had caused the elephants to huddle together in fear. Seeing it flee now, they danced with spontaneous joy.





The elephant king then praised the boy's resourcefulness and said: "The lion has killed so many of our herd that there is an enormous pile of tusks you can help yourself to." He showed these to the boy and then, loading the elephants of the herd with huge sacks of ivory, bade them accompany the boy home.

The hunter-boy led these loaded elephants to town and presented himself to the king. The overjoyed king showered the boy with presents of every kind and appointed him the Keeper of the royal elephant herd. He then enlisted the help of a famed sculptor and had made a most beautiful ivory mantapa, within which he placed the many-coloured

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parakeet. This largesse on the king's part only served to stoke the minister's envy. His well-laid plan had gone awry. For, consider, is it a common thing to be able to collect enough ivory to build a mantapa? The minister had been sure that the boy would fail and be punished for it—instead, he had succeeded splendidly. But this only made the minister more determined than ever to get rid of the boy, and he set about hatching a plan with renewed vigour.

One day, as he watched the king talk merrily to the parakeet, a devious idea struck the minister.

"Maharaj," said he, "is it not strange that a bird that talks so enchantingly cannot sing?"

"Perhaps he does not know how to," replied the king.

"Ah, Maharaj," answered the minister, "can one believe that a parakeet cannot sing? Besides, it is said by those who know that even a bird that has forgotten its song will sing in the presence of he who first kept it. Summon that person and we shall know if this parakeet can sing or not."

His minister's words vexed the king.

"What you say is true," he said, "but we do not know who first kept it, do we?"

"But surely the Keeper of the royal elephants, I mean our hunter-boy, will know?" said the minister smoothly.

The idea pleased the king, who, like before, sent word of his order with his minister. The minister went up to the boy and said, "Look here, boy, you have two fortnights to find and bring back to the palace the person who first kept the many-coloured parakeet. If you carry out the task, you will be rewarded. If you do not, you will be put to death."

The hunter-boy's head whirled. "Mister," pleaded he, "I brought the parakeet back from the forest. I do not know who first kept it."

"That does not concern me," said the minister, "I have only come to tell you what the king's order is." He then sped away.

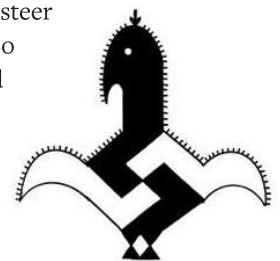
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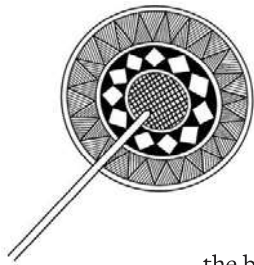
"What ails you, dear boy?" it asked.

"What's there to tell!" lamented the boy. "I have been ordered by the king to find and bring to me the one who first kept that many-coloured bird. I have been given two fortnights time to do so. If I fail, I shall be killed. What am I to do?"

"I see," said the bird after it had listened to the boy. "Then come with me," and saying so, it took wing and hovered in front of the boy. The boy climbed onto the bird's back and the two set off. Very soon, they reached a temple within the forest. A rocking-horse stood to one side. Said the bird to the boy—

"Climb onto that horse. It will fly. When you reach the ocean and are flying over it, you will spot a beautiful island. Bring the horse down onto it. As soon as you do, you will be swarmed by slave-girls who wish to look at the horse. Show them how to mount it, how to fly it, and how to bring it back down. Offer to take a few of them for a ride. Once you have humoured them, their mistress, the princess, will herself come to look at the horse. Help her mount the horse. Then jump on it yourself and steer it back here." So saying, the bird showed the hunter-boy how to mount the rocking-





horse, how to fly it, and how to bring it back down. Having learnt the manoeuvres, the boy climbed onto the horse and took off.

As he was flying over the ocean, the boy saw the island the bird had spoken of, and steered the rocking-horse down towards it. No sooner had they landed than a large group of slave-girls came up to look at the horse. He kept them entertained by showing some of them how to mount it, fly it, and get off. Finally, the princess herself came up to look at the rocking-horse. She had only just climbed onto it when he gave the horse a tug, wheeled around, and flew off. Thinking this his idea of a sport, the princess sat back to enjoy herself. By the time she realized she was being kidnapped, it was too late—neither her screams nor her tears had the slightest effect on her captor.

The hunter-boy made straight for the palace. No sooner had they landed in the courtyard than the many-coloured parakeet recognized its mistress and burst into song. The occasion brought the king such joy that he danced a jig in celebration. Equally happily, the princess and the king had fallen in love at first sight, and were married within the week. As for the hunter-boy, the king showered him with riches and appointed him Chief of the royal army. The minister's flaming jealousy was now mingled with fear. 'The hunter-boy went from being a mere stripling to being the Keeper of the royal elephants,' he thought worriedly. 'He has now risen to be Chief of the royal army. Who knows, if he keeps this up, he may even usurp my ministership.' He determined to cause the boy's undoing.

A few weeks later, the princess took ill with a stomach-ache. A

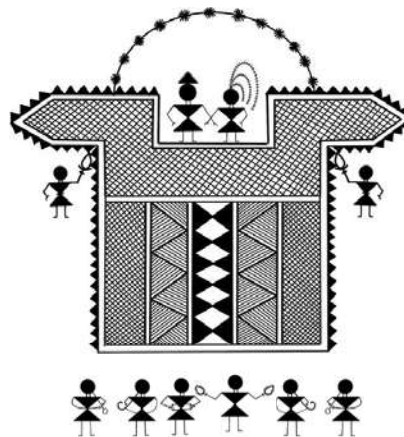
phalanx of royal physicians tried to cure her, but their efforts yielded no fruit. When the king raged at them for their incompetence, they said: "Maharaj, it appears to us that the queen is not one of our own. Instead, we think she must be of the race of the gods themselves, for not one of our medicines has had the slightest effect. We can only suggest that one of her own people from the island be brought to cure her."

Sensing an opportunity, the minister intervened. "The royal physicians speak the truth, Maharaj," said he.

"But if that is so," asked the king, "who is to go the island?"

"Why let that worry you, Maharaj?" said the minister. "Surely the Chief of the royal army, the hunter-boy, will be able to help us. Why not send him?"

The king was preparing to send the hunter-boy back to the island when the queen got wind of the plan. "Alas," said she in deep dejection, "there is nothing to be achieved by going there. For there is but one soul who knows the cure—she is my beloved companion, whom, in a moment of anger, my curse transformed into a parakeet. Thenceforth she has lived in the wilds, winging her way in the ten directions. What chance have we of finding her? Ah woe is me, for death is at my doorstep—"



That evening, the hunter-boy returned home and sat down, thinking all the while of a way to save the queen. He was engaged thus when his friend, the parakeet, flew up and alighted on his wrist.

That evening, the hunter-boy returned home and sat down, thinking all the while of a way to save the queen. He was engaged thus when his friend, the parakeet, flew up and alighted on his wrist.

"What is the matter now, dear boy?" it asked.

"What can I say?" replied the boy. "The queen is suffering from a pain in the stomach, the cure to which is known only to a beloved companion of hers. But, alas, an impetuous curse of the queen's transformed that very companion into a parakeet—which, right at this moment, may be flying through some unknown wilderness. So, there lies the queen, disconsolately awaiting her death as the king grieves for her. It is in the hope of helping them, poor souls, that I am wrapt in thought."

"If that is so," said the bird. "then take me with you to the palace."

The boy did as the bird asked and took it with him to the palace. Inside, the king and his family stood in a circle around the suffering queen, their faces etched with lines of helpless despair. When the hunter-boy entered with the parakeet, the queen immediately recognized the bird for her long-lost companion

and turned her back to her original form of a woman. Thus transformed, the queen's companion stood in the room, glowing with a rare beauty that was not lost on the hunter-boy—who gazed at her with frank appreciation. The companion then deftly prepared the medicine and fed it to the queen, who recovered instantly.

When this was done, the king made the hunter-boy his minister as a mark of his appreciation. He also made arrangements for the hunter-boy to be married to the queen's companion. As for the minister, the king finally recognized his wickedness and had him banished from the kingdom.

So, our heroes lived happily ever after in their kingdom. And we? We live on here.



MADHAV AJJAMPUR is a writer and translator. His essays, poems, and translations have been published or are forthcoming in *The Hindu*, *Firstpost*, *EKL Review*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Another Chicago Magazine* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*. He is the author of the recently-released *The Pollen Waits on Tiptoe*, a book of his English translations of selected poems by D. R. Bendre, the Kannada language's foremost lyric poet. You can read more of his writing on his website, www.mkajjampur.com.

MANDITHA TM, having worked in the Indian fashion for more than a decade, has passionately taken up the less known Chittara art form from the Malnad region of Karnataka. Born in Shivamogga, Karnataka, traditional art forms have always fascinated her. Currently she is working towards revival and promotion of this dying art form. Chittara was formerly painted on the housefronts and interiors by women of the Deewaru Community on auspicious occasions. See more of her works on Instagram @artchittara

AFTERWORD

This folktale is from a collection titled *Janapada Kathegalu* (Folk Stories), compiled by Dr. Chandrashekhara Kambara, an eminent dramatist, novelist, poet, and creative folklorist of 20th-century Kannada. (The Kannada language is one of the five major Dravidian languages of South India. It is spoken by about 60 million people and is the official language of the linguistic state of Karnataka.) While the “theme” of the story is not dissimilar to themes found in folktales across the world, there are elements in this version—such as the use of parallel mirrors to create an infinity of images—that I have not found in other stories of this kind.

In his foreword to the Kannada collection titled *Garateeya Haadu* (*Songs of our Womenfolk*), D. R. Bendre, 20th-century Kannada's foremost lyric poet, describes the “spontaneous tercets” found within the book as “real poetry,” with all other poetry being “just a shade of [this] real poetry.” To a contemporary reader, this assertion may seem little more than romantic exaggeration and rose-tinted nostalgia. But that would be to miss Bendre's point. I do not believe Bendre was looking to place those “spontaneous tercets” above all other poetry (including his own); instead, he was trying to trace humankind's production of poetry, especially lyric poetry, to its source. From this perspective, the spontaneous poetry composed by unlettered but sensitive womenfolk becomes both the wellspring of all subsequent poetry and the manifestation of humankind's innate creative impulse.

Bendre's assessment seems to me equally applicable to the folktale. After all, isn't the oral folktale—be it Indian or Native American, Japanese or Paraguayan, European or African—both the precursor to and the progenitor of the modern story? Don't the fanciful anthropomorphism and farfetched adventures of the characters seem akin to what we today label “magical realism”? Isn't the “narrative arc” employed in these folktales the basis (whether through its imitation or its disruption) of the modern short story or novel? Yes, we consume stories differently now and the millennia-old oral tradition is no longer the primary source of stories for most human beings, but the tradition's influence can still be found—in the ubiquity of the “once upon a time” trope; in the refashioning of the oral (and aural) story through audiobooks and podcasts; and even in the imaginative retellings, via “fan fiction,” of stories that people have made their own.

To use a loose analogy, there is a parallel between humankind's “invention” of the folk story and its invention of the wheel: in the same way that the humble wheel remains essential for the liftoff of the modern marvel that is the flying aircraft, so too does the folk story implicitly serve as the point of departure for every grand modernist and post-modernist experiment in creative writing. At the crux of both is the human impulse to create, constantly reimagined.

