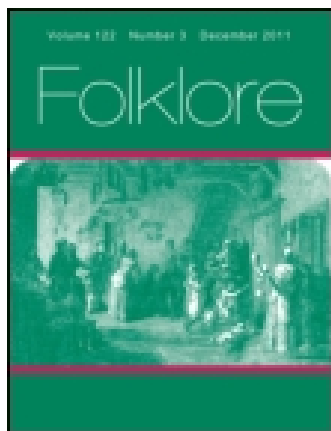


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CORRESPONDENCE.

SHOULD FOLK-TALES BE TERMED MODERN?

To the Editor of FOLK-LORE.

SIR,—In controverting the views of Messrs. Newell and Jacobs with regard to their belief in the modern origin of folk-tales Mr. Nutt seems to have swept away simultaneously the right to term them modern at all. In this I venture to think he has gone too far.

Every tale has a certain individuality of its own, in so far as it consists of a definite number of particular incidents. Eliminate one or more of these, or add a new one, and the tale immediately loses its original personality, and is transformed into a fresh variant with a new form.

It is matter of judgment, varying in each particular case, how long any set form of words can be handed down orally without material change. But certainly the time has a limit. A tale consisting of from ten to fifteen incidents, some of them but loosely attached to the thread of the plot, cannot, it seems to me, have any inordinate length of life without undergoing appreciable alteration. In a hundred years it will have lost or gained somewhat, and so on with each receding century. Should the type it belongs to consist of only two incidents, as in the Cinderella groups, the tale in some form or other might remain a variant for many, perhaps for ten or more, centuries. But here, too, there must be an ultimate limit, though it is impossible to fix it.

Now, if this is true, and the word "modern" is taken to include a period of about 500 years, it appears reasonable and proper to apply the term modern to all tales placed on

record for the first time within the last few centuries. For, in speaking of them, we mean—not tales in the abstract, but—concrete tales with a definite form at a known and not very remote date: a form which cannot possibly exist unmodified for an unlimited period. To call the existing races of mankind modern does not in the least prejudice any views one may hold as to the antiquity of man, and the same applies to folk-tales.

JOHN ABERCROMBY.

[I had certainly no intention of denying to the folk-tale the capacity for development, whether of motive, incident, or style, within the period defined as modern by Mr. Abercromby, and I thank him for the opportunity of removing any misconception as to my meaning. I not only admit the capacity; but the fact that it has been exercised considerably, and increasingly of late years, seems to me the strongest argument against the recent origin of the archaic elements of the folk-tale.

I can the more easily understand my having laid myself open to misapprehension on Mr. Abercromby's part, as I misunderstood his letter in one important respect. It seemed to me to postulate an archetype for each tale, all later versions of which are departures from the purity of the original standard. On my urging objections to this view, he wrote: "I demur to being credited with believing in a single archetype from which all others of the same type have sprung. On the contrary, I regard the type merely as the fundamental incidents common to a group of tales which may have had half a dozen or more origins"—a statement with which I find myself in complete accord.

It is evident that misapprehension is likely to arise from the ambiguity of the word "modern". This may be used as simply equivalent to chronologically recent; but such usage seems to me to ignore the current significance of the word. When we speak of modern culture we certainly do not mean the culture of the Matabele, the Chinese, or the

Connemara peasant—we mean the culture of the most advanced sections of the most advanced races. Using the word in this sense, I think it may be confidently asserted that folk-tales are not modern, any more than the typical peasant story-teller is a typical “modern” man or woman. To avoid ambiguity, the first desideratum of argument, it seems to me undesirable to use modern in a simply chronological sense.

May I use the analogy of the last sentence in Mr. Abercromby’s letter to strengthen my argument against Mr. Newell and Mr. Jacobs? I am not aware that anyone regards the social, intellectual, and moral characteristics by which the savage or the peasant differs from the educated man of civilisation, as of recent origin or as due to degradation from a higher type of culture; yet such is the view which commends itself to certain scholars in respect to the products of savage or peasant fancy.]

ALFRED NUTT.

IRISH FOLK-LORE.

To the Editor of FOLK-LORE.

SIR,—In connection with Professor Haddon’s article on Irish Folk-lore, in the September number of your Journal, the following item may be of some interest. There is a ghostly coach which drives through the streets of Tullamore—never seen, but heard quite distinctly; in fact, my informant, of whose truthfulness there cannot be the slightest question, told me that she had herself, while standing at the open window, heard the rolling past of heavy wheels, but of coach, horses, or driver, neither she nor anyone else had ever had light or sight.

36, *Royal Crescent, Notting Hill,*
December, 1893.

NORA HOPPER.
