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HAWTHORNE'S A WONDER-BOOK AND TANGLEWOOD TALES:
PAGAN MYTHS ADAPTED FOR CHRISTIAN CHILDREN

by

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In a letter of May 23, 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to James T. Fields, the famous second-half of the Boston publishing company Ticknor and Fields, describing his ambition to retell the Greek and Roman myths in the form of stories for children. After relating to Fields some of the sample stories that he wanted to write, Hawthorne said that

....unless I greatly mistake, these old fictions will work up admirable for the purpose; and I shall aim at substituting a tone in some degree Gothic or romantic, or any such tone as may best please myself, instead of the classic coldness, which is as repellent as the touch of marble....

The book, if it comes out of my mind as I see it now, ought to have pretty wide success amongst young people; and, of course, I shall purge out all the old heathen wickedness, and put in a moral whenever practicable.¹

Hawthorne soon fulfilled his intention of rewriting the classic myths, for later in 1851 he published A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys, a work proving so popular that he issued a sequel in 1853 entitled Tanglewood Tales.

Hawthorne's primary motive for writing the tales was to provide without condescension a serious rendition of ancient myths for children. This noble purpose was quickly accepted by adult buyers, for romantic literature had long idealized the child and the innocent paradise within which the child

¹James T. Fields, Yesterday With Authors (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), p. 59.

existed. Moreover, the revolution in religious and secular education which was making education more child-centered² helped further to provide Hawthorne not only with an atmosphere conducive to recreating myth, but with a receptive audience as well.

As he planned A Wonder-Book and wrote the stories, then, he tested this aim by trying them out on eight-year-old Una and five-year-old Julian.³ This close relationship between father and young children is reflected in the easy, friendly style which gives the stories their particularly attractive readability. And though written for children, the tales are obviously something more than children's stories. The themes, the motifs, the essence of Christian morality that are all so characteristic of Hawthorne's other tales, sketches, and novels are also at work in the midst of giants, flying horses, and children named Sweet Fern and Squash-Blossom.

Unfortunately, though, most critics from the beginning have either ignored A Wonder-Book and Tanglewood Tales altogether or have seen them as little more than sweetness and spice produced only for juvenile consumption. In an 1852 Athenaeum review of A Wonder-Book, Henry F. Chorley claimed that these stories were "pleasantly American and gracefully fantastic" and that rarely have "more delicious stories for

²Richard D. Hathaway, "Hawthorne and the Paradise of Children," Western Humanities Review, 15 (Spring, 1961), 163.

³Kathleen Lines, Foreword, The Complete Greek Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1963), p. 9.

children" been seen.⁴ Reinforcing this notion that the stories are written for children is an unsigned review in the January, 1852 Graham's Magazine. Here A Wonder-Book is proclaimed as a "children's classic" that is "the best of its kind in English literature. It is a child's story-book informed with the finest genius."⁵ Certainly the books are children's classics, but giving the tales this label implies that only children would enjoy reading them because the style and content are filled with gimmicks to attract the child's imagination. This is not the case at all.

In later generations, it was the professional specialists in children's literature who complained of Hawthorne's lack of depth and seriousness in transforming myth into fairy tale. Perhaps the most severe reaction against such poetic license was Porter MacClintock's irate comment in 1907:

When one reads Hawthorne's version of Pandora and Prometheus and realizes the mere babble, the flippant detail, under which he has covered up the grim Titanic story of the yearnings and strivings of the human soul for salvation here and hereafter, the very deepest problems of temptation and sin, of rebellion and expiation, he must see clearly what is most likely to happen when a complex and mature myth is converted into a child's tale.⁶

Similarly, May Hill Arbuthnot in 1948 complained against the

⁴Henry F. Chorley, "A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys," Athenaeum, (Jan. 17, 1852), rpt. in J. Donald Crowley, ed., Hawthorne, the Critical Heritage (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 234.

⁵Anon. "A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys," Graham's Magazine, (Jan., 1852), rpt. in J. Donald Crowley, ed., Hawthorne, the Critical Heritage (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 233.

⁶Porter Lander MacClintock, Literature in the Elementary School (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), p. 122.

"lost dignity of the gods," accusing Hawthorne of playing havoc with literature. Indeed, she goes so far as to accuse Hawthorne of taking such devastating liberties with the myths that in sensationalism and theatrics he is the equal of Walt Disney.⁷

Nor have Hawthorne's prominent modern critics shown his retold myths much more enthusiasm than did these earlier commentators. Mark Van Doren in Nathaniel Hawthorne (1949) and Richard Harter Fogle in Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark (1952, rev. ed. 1964) do mention A Wonder-Book and Tanglewood Tales, but only as if these books were journeyman attempts by Hawthorne as he relaxed between more serious endeavors.⁸ There is absolutely no critical mention in Roy R. Male, Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (1964); Hyatt A. Waggoner, Hawthorne (1955, rev. ed. 1963); Newton Arvin, Hawthorne (1961); Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1948); F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (1941); or Frederick C. Crews, The Sins of the Fathers (1966).

As this record indicates, many readers and critics have seen little importance in Hawthorne's retold myths. When the twelve stories that make up the collection are placed in the context of all Hawthorne's work, they reveal his aesthetic and his Puritan background as well as any of his other novels and tales. Indeed these stories include almost every theme and

⁷May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books (Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company, 1947), p. 265.

⁸New York: Viking Press, p. 186; Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, p. 11.

motif that Hawthorne worked with in his other writings. There are the characteristic contrasts between the light and the dark, and between appearance and reality, and equally familiar concerns with the ambiguity of thought and action, the curse of materialism, the redemptive power of human sympathy, the Faustian quest for knowledge, the power and personality of the artist, and related moral and spiritual themes. At their best, moreover, as in "The Paradise of Children" or "The Golden Touch," the imagery and diction of these "baby stories" are not unworthy of their author's greatest work.

In his preface to A Wonder-Book, Hawthorne repeated his design of providing a "Gothic or romantic guise"⁹ to the tales. Probably though, the implications of Hawthorne's use of the term "Gothic" differ from present-day connotations; he meant, not so much the manipulation of the materials of adventure, horror, and the supernatural for their own sakes, but rather the use of such external elements as a means of getting at the interior truths of the human heart. Consequently, his Gothicizing of the Greek myths is not merely "bedaubing a marble statue with paint"¹⁰ (p. 135) in order to make them

⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys and Tanglewood Tales (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 13. Future references to this primary source will be the page numbers directly following the quoted material.

¹⁰Hawthorne puts this accusation against the stories in the mouth of a Mr. Pringle, an adult listener, who feels that to place the classical myths in a frame that is acceptable for a child's comprehension is to make a mockery and a travesty out of something beautiful and immortal.

more readable for a young audience. It is interpreting them in a light which is essentially moral, even Christian--that is, in a spirit altogether in character for the Hawthorne of the dark, mature works.

To accomplish the goal of Gothicizing and romanticizing the myths in such a way as to appeal to the juvenile reader without offending the adult buyer, Hawthorne thought it necessary to effect many changes in the traditional Greek and Roman mythology. He wanted to "purge out all the old heathen wickedness," but this purgation process could not be a matter of deletions alone. Hawthorne brought about the changes he sought in the focus, emphasis, and theme of the tales by adroit additions and substitutions as well.

We can best consider the patterns of these changes by knowing what sources Hawthorne apparently consulted for the original mythology. Of his twelve tales, six were first recorded in Ovid's Metamorphoses: "The Gorgon's Head," "The Golden Touch," "The Miraculous Pitcher," "The Dragon's Teeth," "The Pomegrante Seeds," and "The Golden Fleece." Other sources for Hawthorne include Homer, Hesiod, and Apollodorus of Athens. Hesiod recorded the original myths that Hawthorne made into "The Paradise of Children" and "The Pygmies." Apollodorus, Homer, and Ovid present similar versions of the myth that Hawthorne transformed into "The Three Golden Apples." Homer provided the basic facts for "Circe's Palace" and "The Minotaur," and both Apollodorus and Hesiod recorded the story of the three-headed monster that Hawthorne retold as "The Chimaera."

Indeed Hawthorne worked with the stories of prestigious poets, and it is certainly a credit to his story-telling ability that our understanding today of many of the myths is derived not from the ancient tales, but rather from Hawthorne's modern adaptations.

Supplementing the use of these antique originals, Hawthorne seems to have relied at least as heavily on a contemporary source. With a few allowances for irony, the description of Eustace Bright, the college student who is the narrator of the tales, could well be applied to Hawthorne in his own creative process: "Working up his sophomorical erudition with a good deal of tact, and incurring great obligations to Professor Anthon, he, nevertheless, disregarded all classical authorities, whenever the vagrant audacity of his imagination compelled him to do so" (p. 20). With this passing reference, Hawthorne admitted his indebtedness to Professor Charles Anthon, the author of the imposing tome, A Classical Dictionary, Containing an Account of the Principal Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors, and Intended to Elucidate All the Important Points Connected With the Geography, History, Biography, Mythology, and Fine Arts of the Greek and Romans (1841). Apparently Hawthorne used this book frequently in his composition of A Wonder-Book and Tanglewood Tales, for there are striking similarities between Anthon's method of description and Hawthorne's. To begin with, his spelling of proper names follows Anthon to the last diphthong, although the simplified spellings of such popular mythologists as Mary Dwight and Samuel Griswold,

Hawthorne's early publisher, were undoubtedly familiar to him also.¹¹ More important though, Hawthorne frequently gives a close paraphrase of Anthon's text. Thus Anthon's picture of Mercury's "short sword bent like a scythe"¹² becomes (in Hawthorne's "The Gorgon's Head") Quicksilver's "short and crooked sword" (p. 28). Jason, in Anthon's version, "bore....two spears; he wore the close-fitting Magnesian dress, and a pard skin to throw off the rain, and his long unshorn locks waved on his back."¹³ In "The Golden Fleece" from Tanglewood Tales, Jason "took a spear in each hand, and threw a leopard's skin over his shoulders, to keep off the rain, and set forth on his travels, with his long yellow ringlets waving in the wind" (p. 381). Still further, when Anthon records variant stories, as he does in the history of King Midas, Hawthorne often selects details from more than one.¹⁴ Also important is that Hawthorne frequently reproduces exactly the narrative order of Anthon's descriptions. The parallel is particularly striking in

¹¹Hugo McPherson, "Hawthorne's Major Source for His Mythological Tales," American Literature, 30 (1958), 365.

¹²Charles Anthon, A Classical Dictionary, 4th ed., (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), p. 826.

¹³Anthon, p. 658.

¹⁴For example, in Anthon's commentary about the Midas myth, he lists different legends that have grown up around King Midas. According to one source, Midas owns a rose garden in which Silenus is captured and is forced to answer difficult philosophical questions. Another legend has it that Midas obtains the golden touch from Bacchus only to regret the gift because it threatens him with starvation. When Hawthorne relates the story, Midas has both a rose garden and a golden touch.

"The Minotaur."

We know of course that Hawthorne was familiar with the ancient authors long before beginning his project; indeed he seems to have known most of them from boyhood.¹⁵ But we have no evidence of how thoroughly he may have consulted them again in 1851-1852. What seems clear is that he was most indebted to them for the broad outlines of their myths rather than the details; these last seem to come from Anthon. Whether or not Hawthorne reread the original myths at Tanglewood, then, it would appear that he read what Anthon had to say about the legends there, and then through addition and deletion, devised a mixture of both that would inculcate his own particular beliefs and ideals.

In this process of modification, everywhere, in both A Wonder-Book and Tanglewood Tales, Hawthorne simplified. By simplifying the myth, he felt he could be most successful, for children "possess an unestimated sensibility to whatever is deep or high, in imagination or feeling, so long as it is simple. Likewise, it is only the artificial and the complex that bewilder them" (p. 14). Rather than confuse the child with a quick succession of inadequately developed details, Hawthorne dwells on each event until he evokes a vivid image of it in the reader's mind. The complex and lengthy stories of Jason, Theseus, or Perseus, with their fast action and multitudinous dragons, are ruthlessly cut down so that the major events may be developed. The rescue of Andromeda by Perseus,

¹⁵Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 16-17.

which occupied Ovid for several hundred words, is passed over by Hawthorne in a sentence--"And Perseus thrust the head [of Medusa] back in the wallet, and went to tell his dear mother that she need no longer be afraid of the wicked King Polydectes" (p. 48). Indeed, Hawthorne drastically condenses this whole legend of the Gorgon's head as recorded in the Metamorphoses; the new version thus becomes much more pointedly an initiation story than Ovid's or Anthon's had been.¹⁶ As the climax of Hawthorne's story, Perseus kills Polydectes, thus freeing his mother from self-imposed exile. Then, rather than complicate the story with various anti-climactic episodes as did so many of the ancient writers, Hawthorne ends it there.

Another feature of Hawthorne's process of revising the original myths for children is his familiarity of manner, which helps to give his young audience a sense of intimate involvement, and thus to draw them deliberately out of the past into the present. Each of the stories is placed within a frame so that Hawthorne, through Eustace Bright, can give an introduction to the myth that is to follow and then can ask for the children's response.¹⁷ This method also lets Hawthorne make obvious appeals to the childish imagination:

¹⁶Mary S. Mattfield, "Hawthorne's Juvenile Classics," Discourse, 12 (1969), 350.

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This frame for the stories is also significant in that it furnishes Hawthorne an opportunity for personal comment on the stories, on his theories of mythology, and on his literary neighbors in the Berkshires--Holmes, Catherine Sedgwick, and, of course, Melville.

The little brook ran along over its pathway of gold, here pausing to form a pool, in which minnows were darting to and fro; and then it hurried onward at a swifter pace, as if in haste to reach the lake; and, forgetting to look whither it went, it tumbled over the root of a tree, which stretched quite across its current. You would have laughed to hear how noisily it babbled about this accident. And even after it had run onward, the brook still kept talking to itself, as if it were in a maze. It was wonder-smitten, I suppose, at finding its dark dell so illuminated, and at hearing the prattle and merriment of so many children. So it stole away as quickly as it could, and hid itself in the lake. (pp. 51-52)

But King Cadmus, lest there should be too much of the dragon's tooth in his children's disposition, used to find time from his kingly duties to teach them their ABC,--which he invented for their benefit, and for which many little people, I am afraid, are not so grateful to him as they ought to be. (p. 305)

Gone are the stately rhythms of the ancient authors, the rolling recitals of places, gods, and heroes. In another collection of myths for children, The Heroes (1855), Hawthorne's contemporary, Charles Kingsley, tried to achieve the epic tone characteristic of the original myths:

So they rowed on over the long swell of the sea, past Olympus, the strait of the immortals, and past the wooded bays of Athos, and Samothrace, the sacred isle, and they came past Lemnos to the Hellespont, and through the narrow strait of Abydon, and so on into the Propontis, which we call Marmora now.¹⁸

In contrast to this, Hawthorne's tone is more chatty than epic. Consider this piece of mythic detail from "The Minotaur" in Tanglewood Tales:

Was Theseus afraid? By no means, my dear auditors. What! a hero like Theseus afraid! Not had the Minotaur had twenty bull heads instead of one. Bold as he was, however, I rather fancy that it strengthened his valiant heart, just at this crisis, to feel a tremulous twitch at the silken cord, which he was still holding in his left hand. (p. 240)

Complementing this substitution of pert conversation for an august style, Hawthorne also added elements of humor and satire when he retold the myths. There is little humor indeed in the myths as recorded by Homer or Ovid or any of their contemporaries, but Hawthorne managed to supply a bit of satire and buffoonery to the tales that give his myths an added dimension. The three gray sisters in "The Gorgon's Head" from A Wonder-Book become old crones named Scarecrow, Nightmare, and Shakejoint, who all vie for the transient one eye among them. Hawthorne also establishes a comic conflict between Eustace and twelve-year-old Primrose, his oldest and most exacting listener:

"Was not that a very fine story?" asked Eustace.

"Oh yes, yes!" cried Cowslip, clapping her hands. "And those funny old women, with only one eye amongst them! I never heard of anything so strange."

"As to their one tooth, which they shifted about," observed Primrose, "there was nothing so very wonderful in that. I suppose it was a false tooth. But think of your turning Mercury into Quicksilver, and talking about his sister! You are too ridiculous!"

"And was she not his sister?" asked Eustace Bright. "If I had thought of it sooner, I would have described her as a maiden lady, who kept a pet owl." (p. 49)

"Well, children," inquired Eustace, who was very fond of eliciting a definite opinion from his auditors, "did you ever, in all your lives, listen to a better story than this of 'The Golden Touch'?"

"Why, as to the story of King Midas," said saucy Primrose, "it was a famous one thousands of years before Mr. Eustace Bright came into the world, and will continue to be so as long after he quits it. But some people have what we may call 'The Leaden Touch,' and make everything dull and heavy that they lay their fingers upon." (p. 75)

Along with these appeals to childish fancy, an occasional satiric thrust seems intended more for the adult audience than the juvenile. In a stretch of the imagination not at all present in the original myth, Hawthorne elaborated on the courage and valor of the Pygmies against their enemies, the cranes, in such a way as to suggest a satire on Mexican War jingoism:¹⁹

Then the Pygmy army would march homeward in triumph, [after the giant Antaeus had routed their enemies for them] attributing the victory entirely to their own valor, and to the warlike skill and strategy of whomsoever happened to be the captain general; and for a tedious while afterwards, nothing would be heard of but grand processions, and public banquets, and brilliant illuminations, and shows of waxwork, with likenesses of the distinguished officers as small as life. (p. 254)

Replete with satiric examples of spread-eagle oratory and humorous vignettes of the Pygmies playing hide-and-seek in the giant's beard, this retold myth owes more to Swift and the Lilliputians than to Ovid.

Equally satiric is Hawthorne's description of some of the Argonauts as found in "The Golden Fleece," the final story of Tanglewood Tales. His disdain for transcendental meditators and seers is strongly suggested when these people appear as

prophets and conjurers, of whom there were several in the crew, and who could foretell what would happen tomorrow, or the next day, or a hundred

¹⁹Hathaway, p. 168.

years hence, but were generally quite unconscious of what was passing at the moment....Lynceus saw a whole day's sail ahead, but was rather apt to overlook things that lay directly under his nose. If the sea only happened to be deep enough, however, Lynceus could tell you exactly what kind of rocks or sands were at the bottom of it; and he often cried out to his companions that they were sailing over heaps of sunken treasure, which he was none the richer for beholding. To confess the truth, few people believed him when he said it. (p. 396)

Furthermore, though the original myths usually de-emphasized the parent-child relationship, Hawthorne made this relationship an important added factor in the action of many of his stories. Mother Ceres, the mother of Proserpina in "The Pomegranate Seeds" and Queen Telephassa, the mother of Europa in "The Dragon's Teeth," search sadly throughout the world, oblivious of everything else about them, for their kidnapped daughters. The mothers of Perseus and Theseus watch their brave and noble sons turn into men by battling fierce monsters. As we will presently see, however, perhaps the strongest bond between parent and child in Hawthorne's retold myths is the one between King Midas and his daughter, Marygold. Neither Anthon nor Ovid mentions such a relationship.

Just as Hawthorne heightened the importance of the parent-child relationship when he rendered the myths into modern stories for modern children, he at the same time suppressed the husband-wife sexual relationship. In "The Gorgon's Head," there is absolutely no mention of the marriage of Perseus and Andromeda. Hawthorne's version of the rape of Europa by the white bull is likewise de-emphasized:

Having got the child on his back, the animal gave a leap into the air, and came down so like a feather that Europa did not know when his hoofs touched the ground....And what do you think the snowy bull did next? Why, he set off, as swift as the wind, straight as the wind, straight down to the sea-shore, scampered across the sand, took an airy leap, and plunged right in among the foaming billows....And there stood Cadmus, Phoenix, and Cilix [her brothers] gazing at this sad spectacle, through their tears, until they could no longer distinguish the bull's snowy head from the white-capped billows that seemed to boil up out of the sea's depths around him. Nothing more was ever seen of the white bull,--nothing more of the beautiful child. (pp. 274-276)

And the rape of Proserpina by Pluto is treated similarly:

In the chariot sat the figure of a man, richly dressed, with a crown on his head, all flaming with diamonds. He was of a noble aspect, and rather handsome, but looked sullen and discontented; and he kept rubbing his eyes and shading them with his hand, as if he did not live enough in the sunshine to be very fond of its light....No sooner did Proserpina begin to cry out, than the stranger leaped to the ground, caught the child in his arms, and again mounting the chariot, shook the reins, and shouted to the four black horses to set off. They immediately broke into so swift a gallop that it seemed rather like flying through the air than running along the earth. (pp. 345-346)

Perhaps most subtle is the ending of "The Dragon's Teeth" where Cadmus settles down in his new palace with "his friend Harmonia....who is given you instead of sister, and brothers, and friend, and mother. You will find all those dear ones in her alone." Soon, "before many years went by, there was a group of rosy little children (but how they came thither has always been a mystery to me) sporting in the great hall..." (p. 305).

This explicit omission of sexual relations is probably necessary in these stories for, after all, the original muscle-bound heroes and the sultry, provocative heroines are no longer that--they have been transformed into children or at most

adolescents. As I indicated earlier, hostile critics like MacClintock and Arbuthnot argue that such a transformation merely emasculates the stories by eliminating the passions that drove men to action in the original myths. However, we shall presently see that this deletion enabled Hawthorne to replace the Greek sense of an overarching fatality, which put men at the mercy of the gods, with a sense of the individual's moral responsibility. And moreover, in changing Pandora, Proserpina, and Europa from young women into little girls, Hawthorne was not simply skirting the pitfalls of sex, but helping his young readers to achieve that imaginative identification necessary to fullest enjoyment. He transports us to an innocent Eden where Europa, Marygold, Proserpina, and Pandora frisk in the sun-drenched meadows, laden with flowers, where even Ovid's feast of Baucis and Philemon becomes a meagre meal of milk and honey instead of flesh and wine.

In writing about this land of pastoral antiquity, it might seem at first, Hawthorne idealized both the child and the land so thoroughly that both are part of that new-world civilization being reborn and purged of the corrupting influence of Europe. In the symbol of Eden were summed up all the romantic yearnings for escape from the burden of the past, of time, of original sin, of the hard, implacable present.²⁰ This dream of an uncorrupted human nature was epitomized in the celebration of childhood and its innocence. But in his children's myths as in his other writings, Hawthorne remained mindful of the Fall.

²⁰ Daniel Hoffman, "Myth, Romance, and the Childhood of Man," in Hawthorne Centenary Essays, ed. by Roy Harvey Pearce (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1964), pp. 199-200.

With this Edenic perspective, Hawthorne introduced the reader to perhaps the most pervasive and influential modification that he made in dealing with the myths. This perspective is not original with Hawthorne, for obviously a concept of paradise, or pastoral serenity, existed in the original Greek and Roman stories. What Hawthorne did, however, was to put this concept into sharper focus, using many of the materials already available.

Indeed of all the changes that Hawthorne brought about so that the myths could be made more understandable and enjoyable for children, this Christian-oriented change is by far the most important. For if you remember, Hawthorne was writing with the belief that

these old legends, so brimming over with everything that is most abhorrent to our Christianized moral sense,--some of them so hideous, others so melancholy and miserable, amid which the Greek tragedians sought their themes, and moulded men into the sternest forms of grief that ever the world saw; was such material the stuff that children's playthings should be made of! How were they to be purified? How was the blessed sunshine to be thrown into them? (p. 209)

Because of his Puritan heritage and because of his continual emphasis upon sin and salvation throughout his writings, Hawthorne, to be honest to his art, was compelled to interject these same concepts and values into these myths. In effect, he substituted for the pagan rituals and passions the values of love, humility, faith, and self-discipline that are so basic to Christian morality. This revitalizing of the original stories is most effectively portrayed in "The Golden Touch," "The Paradise of Children," "The Miraculous Pitcher,"