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Shucking and sorting  
beans in Oak View.  
Photo Elaine Enns.

**Jack and the Beanstalk:  
A Political Reading of an Old, Wise Folktale, Part I**

by Ched Myers

**Note:** *Since we're harvesting beans this month, and since it's summer, we thought we'd share this fun but serious piece with you. It is based on a workshop we gave at the "Practicing Resurrection" conference in Cameron, ON this month. Part II will appear in the September E-News.*

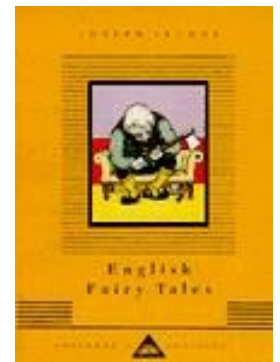
In both ancient and modern civilization, the elite control the media. Thus it is the news, the public myths, the histories and the philosophies of the *haves* that are broadcast and preserved. The perspectives of the *have nots* are marginal-ized, suppressed and disappeared from history. This means that the points of view of the majority of folk who are *not* elites, past and present, are difficult to come by, especially for people of relative privilege like us. The poor are not the subjects of our formal education, much less movies, television shows, popular books or political speeches—or if they are, they are relentlessly caricatured, scapegoated or romanticized.

However, in the dominant cultures of the North Atlantic, there are two notable exceptions to this rule. The Bible is one; it is the story of desert nomads, freed slaves, highlands hardscrabble farmers and poor urban minorities who are looking and working for God's justice in a world dominated by empire. Biblical voices and perspectives grate against our modern, rational ears, which is one reason why we should pay close attention to them.

The other exception, oddly enough, are old European folk and fairy tales. The versions we all learned at home and school—of e.g. Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, and Snow White—have been largely domesticated and sanitized, of course. But the original tales were earthy and subversive, in which the protagonists are always poor people whose fortunes change through their own cunning and the intervention of magic and mystery. These stories sprang from a cosmology that longed for a universe that, as Dr. King put it once, bends toward justice. And if we listen closely enough to the versions we have received, we can still hear the voice and longing of the poor just under the surface. These stories, too, are odd to our ears, and thus worth revisiting.

Here I'll take the example of one of the most popular and ubiquitous of this genre, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In part I like this folktale because it is about beans, and our experience over the last number of years planting, growing, and eating beans at our place in California has really enamored us of bean culture. But this story is also instructive concerning Sabbath Economics.

I've reproduced here the most common version of this popular folktale (below in italics), recorded by Joseph Jacobs in *English Fairy Tales* in 1890. Keep in mind, however, that this is only one of many versions, with various roots that go way back in peasant storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Jacobs' version employs common images, characters and plot lines found in diverse tales from throughout Europe and beyond. Occasionally I'll refer to an earlier version, the first literary production of the story, which dates from 1807. After each section, I provide some social and literary commentary to help us see the subversive voice of Sabbath Economics in between the lines. So let's look again at this wise old tale about agriculture and empire.



*I. There was once upon a time a poor widow who had an only son named Jack, and a cow named Milky-White. And all they had to live on was the milk the cow gave every morning, which they carried to the market and sold. But one morning Milky-White gave no milk, and they didn't know what to do.*

*"What shall we do, what shall we do?" said the widow, wringing her hands.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Christine Goldberg, "The Composition of 'Jack and the Beanstalk.'" *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy Tale Studies* (vol. 15, no. 1 [2001]), pp.11-26. Versions of tale can be found at: [www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0328jack.html](http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0328jack.html); the earliest version at [www.cts.dmu.ac.uk/AnaServer?hockliffe+2290+hoccvview.anv](http://www.cts.dmu.ac.uk/AnaServer?hockliffe+2290+hoccvview.anv)

*"Cheer up, mother, I'll go and get work somewhere," said Jack.*

*"We've tried that before, and nobody would take you," said his mother. "We must sell MilkyWhite and with the money start a shop, or something."*

*"All right, mother," says Jack. "It's market day today, and I'll soon sell Milky-White, and then we'll see what we can do."*

**Commentary:** The social setting of this narrative, like most peasant folk tales, is one of grinding poverty. These are stories, like Jesus' parables, of the *real* world of disparity, dispossession and violence. The magical plot has to do with the radical change in the peasant protagonist's social fortunes, usually through their own cunning, but always with an assist from mystical forces. Jack Zipes, one of the foremost scholars of this genre, in his pioneering book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, stresses that these stories reflect "the social order in a given historical epoch, and, as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of the people... The initial ontological situations of the tales generally deal with exploitation, hunger and injustice familiar to the lower classes in pre-capitalist societies. And the magic of the tales can be equated to the wish-fulfillment and utopian projections of the people." Zipes concludes: "The imaginative and magic elements of the tale had specific meanings for a peasant and lower-class audience at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century..." Only later in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were these stories transformed into fairy tales for the entertainment or moral formation of middle class children by the Brothers Grimm, English nursery rhymes and finally by Disney.



The opening scene of desperation portrayed in Jack's household here is a case in point. The poverty would have been typical of village peasants, and here is doubly destitute because of the absence of the male breadwinner. Moreover, their plight is intensified by their utter vulnerability to emerging predatory market forces: they are forced to sell their sole, milked-out, cow just to survive. This of course exactly mirrors the social conditions of early industrial England, with the destruction of the Commons and traditional agriculture, the displacement of the peasantry from field to factory, the destruction of village life by market culture, and the widening gulf between poor and rich.

*(Left: Jean François Millet, "Peasant Women with Brushwood," ca 1858.)*

This social scenario is emphasized by the repetition of the plot in the next episode as Jack explains his plight to a stranger. Jack—an almost generic folktale name—turns out to be a complicated figure. Though at first apparently unemployable and gullible, Jack will exhibit a mixture of curiosity, adventurousness and wiliness. He will emerge as a sort of trickster

figure whose crafty survival skills will outwit the Giant. But this story is ultimately tragic, so that Jack is both hero *and* object lesson.

II. So Jack took the cow's halter in his hand, and off he started. He hadn't gone far when he met a funny-looking old man, who said to him, "Good morning, Jack."

"Good morning to you," said Jack, and wondered how he knew his name.

"Well, Jack, and where are you off to?" said the man.

"I'm going to market to sell our cow there."

"You look the proper sort of chap to sell cows," said the man. "I wonder if you know how many beans make five."

"Two in each hand and one in your mouth," says Jack, as sharp as a needle.

"Right you are," says the man, "and here they are, the very beans themselves," he went on, pulling out of his pocket some strange-looking beans. "As you are so sharp," says he, "I don't mind doing a swap with you -- your cow for these beans."

"Go along," says Jack. "Wouldn't you like it?"

"Ah! You don't know what these beans are," said the man. "If you plant them overnight, by morning they grow right up to the sky."

"Really?" said Jack. "You don't say so."

"Yes, that is so. And if it doesn't turn out to be true you can have your cow back."

"Right," says Jack, hands him over Milky-White's halter and pockets the beans. [Right: Flora Annie Steel, Illustrator of Arthur Rackham, ed., *English Fairy Tales*, 1918).



**Commentary:** The “funny looking man” who somehow knows Jack’s name is not given further

explanation in this version of the story. In the 1807 version, he is the representative of the fairy godmother to Jack's dead father, who explains that Jack's task will be to reclaim his rightful inheritance from the giant who killed his father. There the rage of the oppressed and

their desire for vindication is clearer. In other similar scenarios found throughout European folk tales, the mysterious stranger is an old woman, or a saint, representing the hand of God aiding the poor. Jack answers the old man's riddle smartly, the first indication in the story that he is far brighter than might first appear. We Christians might see in the *five* beans a symbol of Torah wisdom, or an echo of Jesus' parable about the smallest of seeds that grows into the largest of weeds.

"Sow beans in the mud," said an English folk proverb of the time, "and they'll come up like trees." We are deep in the realm of peasant cosmology here. Beans are basic, which also means they are magical, because they are fertile. As bean gardeners ourselves, we've learned the mystical yet earthy truth that "you know how many beans are in the pod, but you never know how many pods are in the bean!" And beans were a staple diet of the poor, who would have been the original audience of this story—then and now. Poverty has stripped Jack down to a handful of beans. Yet as any campesino knows, a miracle hides there; in the parlance of Jesus' mustard seed, it symbolizes nothing less than the Kingdom of God. But that is despite appearances; Jack's deal looks to his desperate mother like a disaster, and elicits a violent beating.

*III. Back goes Jack home, and as he hadn't gone very far it wasn't dusk by the time he got to his door.*

*"Back already, Jack?" said his mother. "I see you haven't got Milky-White, so you've sold her. How much did you get for her?"*

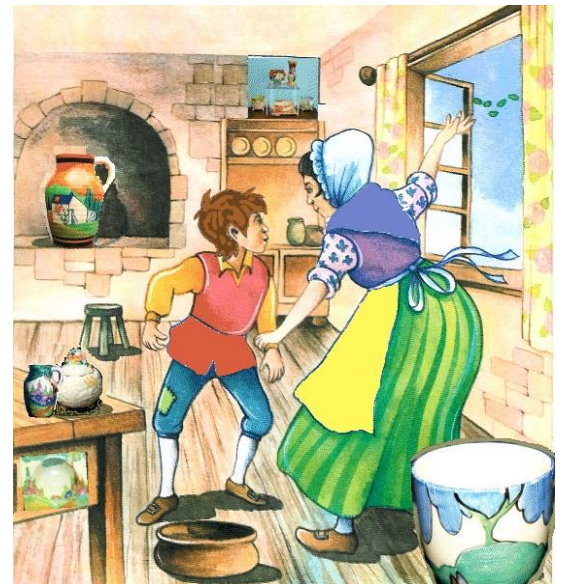
*"You'll never guess, mother," says Jack.*

*"No, you don't say so. Good boy! Five pounds? Ten? Fifteen? No, it can't be 20."*

*"I told you that you couldn't guess. What do you say to these beans? They're magical. Plant them overnight and --"*

*"What!" says Jack's mother. "Have you been such a fool, such a dolt, such an idiot, as to give away my MilkyWhite, the best milker in the parish, and prime beef to boot, for a set of paltry beans? Take that! Take that! Take that! And as for your precious beans here they go out of the window. And now off with you to bed. Not a sup shall you drink, and not a bit shall you swallow this very night."*

*So Jack went upstairs to his little room in the attic, and sad and sorry he was, to be sure, as much for his mother's sake as for the loss of his supper. At last he dropped off to sleep.*



**Commentary:** In light of their now intensified poverty, Jack's punishment fits his "crime": he is beaten and sent to bed hungry. Such things are hardly metaphorical in the life of poor people, which is surrounded by the violence of deprivation and the violence that comes from deprivation. Jack is "sad and sorry," another accurate portrait of how marginalized people internalize depression, blaming themselves for their condition. But there is a faint humming of magic in the background of this awful scene. It is after dusk, and the beans that were tossed out the window now mysteriously go to work on this dreary world of wealth and poverty.

IV. *When Jack woke up, the room looked funny. The sun was shining into part of it, and yet all the rest was quite dark and shady. So Jack jumped up and dressed himself and went to the window. And what do you think he saw? The beans his mother had thrown out of the window into the garden had sprung up into a big beanstalk which went up and up and up till it reached the sky. So the man spoke truth after all. The beanstalk grew up quite close past Jack's window, so all he had to do was to open it and give a jump onto the beanstalk which ran up just like a big ladder. So Jack climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed till at last he reached the sky.*



**Commentary:** Wow—a beanstalk reaching the heavens! From the literal point of view, this is hysterical: climbing beans can't begin to hold themselves up, which is why they are called *pole beans*! From the symbolic perspective, however, we are beholding an *axis mundi*. (Left: Scott Gustafson, "Jack in the Beanstalk").

This is a term used to describe the nearly universal image in traditional myth and symbolism of a cosmic pole that unites heaven and earth. It is often figured as a sacred tree or mountain. The most famous instance of this symbol in the Bible is a different Jack of old: *Jacob's* dream in the desert, his head on a stone: a ladder stretches to heaven, upon which angels are ascending and descending. It was a vision of heaven that enabled Jacob to see that the very earth he lay on was sacred, indeed the house of God. The

cosmic beanpole beckons our latter day Jack to a *very* long climb—repeated seven times in the narrative (how archetypal!). But this pole not only connects heaven and earth; it transgresses the great gulf between rich and poor, and heralds a radical redistribution of resources literally from those "above" to those "below."

V. *And when Jack got there he found a long broad road going as straight as a dart. So he walked along, and he walked along, and he walked along till he came to a great big tall house, and on the doorstep there was a great big tall woman. "Good morning, mum," says Jack, quite polite-like. "Could you be so kind as to give me some breakfast?" For he hadn't had anything to eat, you know, the night before, and was as hungry as a hunter.*

*"It's breakfast you want, is it?" says the great big tall woman. "It's breakfast you'll be if you don't move off from here. My man is an ogre and there's nothing he likes better than boys broiled on toast. You'd better be moving on or he'll be coming."*

*"Oh! please, mum, do give me something to eat. I've had nothing to eat since yesterday morning, really and truly, mum," says Jack. "I may as well be broiled as die of hunger." Well, the ogre's wife was not half so bad after all. So she took Jack into the kitchen, and gave him a hunk of bread and cheese and a jug of milk.*



**Commentary:** Gazing for the first time on “the world above,” Jack beholds “a long broad road going straight as a dart,” leading to “a great big tall house” and “a great big tall woman.” Everything seems bigger to him—because it is—the rich simply take up more space. This is no crooked country lane for donkey carts, but a well-oiled freeway to get the wealthy from home to factory and back. Indeed, such infrastructural projects were beginning to transform the English countryside in the early industrial revolution. We now encounter the grim image of a cannibalistic ogre, with an appetite for “boys broiled on bread.”

Such a metaphor was not at all far fetched to the peasant imagination; from their perspective, they and their livelihood were constantly being eaten by the aristocracy. Jack resignation is poignant: “I may as well be broiled as die of hunger”—perhaps an allusion to the thankless choice facing so many late 18<sup>th</sup> century English peasants: dying of starvation in the countryside, their lands having been expropriated and privatized, or dying in the sweatshops of the new industrial factory.

The role of the woman provides a ray of light. Some variants of the tale replace the Ogre’s wife with a captive servant girl, who helps Jack and escapes with him (and in some versions later marries him). Heidi Anne Heiner notes that all of the female roles in the tale are mothering ones; not only here does the woman feed Jack, but she will also hide him from her husband. “The women are in control of the men in this story,” Heiner concludes.<sup>2</sup> [When I shared this with Elaine she responded: “Well now that *is* a fairy tale, isn’t it?”]

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<sup>2</sup> “Annotations for the Jack and the Beanstalk Fairy Tale.” *SurLaLune Fairy Tales* ([www.surlalunefairytales.com](http://www.surlalunefairytales.com)).

VI. But Jack hadn't half finished these when thump! thump! thump! the whole house began to tremble with the noise of someone coming. "Goodness gracious me! It's my old man," said the ogre's wife. "What on earth shall I do? Come along quick and jump in here." And she bundled Jack into the oven just as the ogre came in.

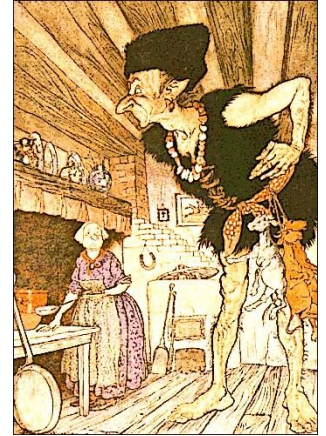
He was a big one, to be sure. At his belt he had three calves strung up by the heels, and he unhooked them and threw them down on the table and said, "Here, wife, broil me a couple of these for breakfast. Ah! what's this I smell? "Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman, Be he alive, or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

"Nonsense, dear," said his wife. "You're dreaming. Or perhaps you smell the scraps of that little boy you liked so much for yesterday's dinner. Here, you go and have a wash and tidy up, and by the time you come back your breakfast'll be ready for you."

So off the ogre went, and Jack was just going to jump out of the oven and run away when the woman told him not. "Wait till he's asleep," says she; "he always has a doze after breakfast." Well, the ogre had his breakfast, and after that he goes to a big chest and takes out a couple of bags of gold, and down he sits and counts till at last his head began to nod and he began to snore till the whole house shook again.

Then Jack crept out on tiptoe from his oven, and as he was passing the ogre, he took one of the bags of gold under his arm, and off he pelters till he came to the beanstalk, and then he threw down the bag of gold, which, of course, fell into his mother's garden, and then he climbed down and climbed down till at last he got home and told his mother and showed her the gold and said, "Well, mother, wasn't I right about the beans? They are really magical!"

**Commentary:** Jack is hidden in the oven, which unlike *Hansel and Gretel*, is here a place of safety, maybe even a womb symbol. The over consuming oligarch is caricatured as having several calves just for breakfast—a stark contrast to Jack's one cow. Again, we Christians might recall Nathan's parable to David about the poor man with one sheep that is confiscated by the rich man with 99. The Ogre is like a predatory animal, with a keen sense of smell. The famous "fi-fi-fo-fum" is the taunt of someone with the power and the hardness of heart to "grind the bones of the poor to make his bread." Might this be a faint echo of Isaiah 3:15: "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says YHWH."





The caricature continues as the sated giant settles in to count his gold—the favorite pastime of the oligarchy. The peasant Jack would likely never have seen gold before, which is why it plays such a prominent, alluring role in this story. As the Ogre nods off the wily Jack, again with an assist from the sympathetic wife, sneaks up and takes—or should we say takes *back*?—a bag of gold, and scurries off back down the beanstalk. I love the part where he throws down the bag of gold “which, of course, fell into his mother's garden”—surely alluding to the old peasant cosmology that understood all true wealth to come from that which the land produces. The beans have proven magical because they have enabled Jack to cross what Luke’s story of Lazarus and Dives portrays as the “impassable gulf” between rich and poor, and to redistribute wealth from top to bottom. How did Jesus’ mother put it in the “nursery rhymes” she sang to him? “God has

brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:53). (Left: © Yanyun Chen and Sara Chong).

Ah, if only the folktale ended *here*! But it has more to teach than just economic redistribution. Money is a principality which preys on poor and rich alike—which is why true social change requires personal as well as political transformation. We’ll look at the second half of the tale next month.

### Jack and the Beanstalk: A Political Reading of an Old, Wise Folktale, Part II

by Ched Myers

Note: This is the second part of the workshop we gave at the “Practicing Resurrection” conference in Cameron, ON last month. Part I appeared in the August E-News.

VII. ...So they lived on the bag of gold for some time, but at last they came to the end of it, and Jack made up his mind to try his luck once more at the top of the beanstalk. So one fine morning he rose up early, and got onto the beanstalk, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed till at last he came out onto the road again and up to the great tall house he had been to before. There, sure enough, was the great tall woman a-standing on the doorstep. "Good morning, mum," says Jack, as bold as brass, "could you be so good as to give me something to eat?"

"Go away, my boy," said the big tall woman, "or else my man will eat you up for breakfast. But aren't you the youngster who came here once before? Do you know, that very day my man missed one of his bags of gold." "That's strange, mum," said Jack, "I dare say I could tell you something about that, but I'm so hungry I can't speak till I've had something to eat."



Well, the big tall woman was so curious that she took him in and gave him something to eat. But he had scarcely begun munching it as slowly as he could when thump! thump! they heard the giant's footstep, and his wife hid Jack away in the oven. All happened as it did before. In came the ogre as he did before, said, "Fee-fi-fofum," and had his breakfast off three broiled oxen. Then he said, "Wife, bring me the hen that lays the golden eggs." So she brought it, and the ogre said, "Lay," and it laid an egg all of gold. And then the ogre began to nod his head, and to snore till the house shook.

Then Jack crept out of the oven on tiptoe and caught hold of the golden hen, and was off before you could say "Jack Robinson." But this time the hen gave a cackle which woke the ogre, and just as Jack got out of the house he heard him calling, "Wife, wife, what have you done with my golden hen?"

And the wife said, "Why, my dear?" But that was all Jack heard, for he rushed off to the beanstalk and climbed down like a house on fire. And when he got home he showed his mother the wonderful hen, and said "Lay" to it; and it laid a golden egg every time he said "Lay."

Commentary: The story starts up again with a revised scenario: "They came to the end of the gold." There it is: the infertility of money. The implicit contrast in this tale is between the finitude of inanimate gold and the inexhaustible fertility of seed. "Use Mammon only in order to build social relations," warned Jesus in Luke 16:9, "so that when [not if] it fails, your friends may welcome you into their enduring tents."

Jack (now an adult?) and his mother are poor again, but now they have some of the appetites of the rich, which means he wants to go back to the castle to get more. Here in a nutshell is the problem of modern capitalist development: its solution to poverty is to "pull the poor into the industrial system to make them middle-class consumers." The problem is that our planet simply does not have the ecological carrying capacity to bear the affluenza of the minority who already consume way more than our share. "Too much" and "too little" both inevitably result from capitalism, and both are social disasters. Jack did not use his wealth to rebuild a sustainable community in his village—so he has to return to the land of the Ogre.

"Good morning mum said Jack as bold as brass." Jack is a trickster who may be too clever for his own good. His hunger now is only a pretense, his manner more devious. The scenario in the castle repeats itself, now intensified. This time the Ogre has three broiled oxen for breakfast; this time the object of desire is the famous "hen that lays the golden egg." This metaphor is deeply ironic; Jack does know about chickens, but this hen represents a kind of grotesque commodification of natural fertility. Gold on demand seems like dark allusion to the relentless fetishism of capitalism. Instead of the patience of the farmer, the land, and the seasons, it is an impatient, insatiable command: "Lay, hen, lay!"

Don't take it, Jack! But he does, and upon his return home Jack finds himself now mimicking the Ogre's greedy script: Lay hen! "He who battles monsters must beware," said Nietzsche, "lest a monster he become." Indeed, Jack's deteriorating condition is summed up in the very next phrase of the story:

VIII. Well, Jack was not content. And it wasn't long before he determined to have another try at his luck up there at the top of the beanstalk. So one fine morning he rose up early and got to the beanstalk, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed till he got to the top. But this time he knew better than to go straight to the ogre's house. And when he got near it, he waited behind a bush till he saw the ogre's wife come out with a pail to get some water, and then he crept into the house and got into the copper. He hadn't been there long when he heard thump! thump! thump! as before, and in came the ogre and his wife.

"Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman," cried out the ogre. "I smell him, wife, I smell him."

"Do you, my dearie?" says the ogre's wife. "Then, if it's that little rogue that stole your gold and the hen that laid the golden eggs he's sure to have got into the oven." And they both rushed to the oven.

But Jack wasn't there, luckily, and the ogre's wife said, "There you are again with your fee-fifo-fum. Why, of course, it's the boy you caught last night that I've just broiled for your breakfast. How forgetful I am, and how careless you are not to know the difference between live and dead after all these years."

So the ogre sat down to the breakfast and ate it, but every now and then he would mutter, "Well, I could have sworn --" and he'd get up and search the larder and the cupboards and everything, only, luckily, he didn't think of the copper. After breakfast was over, the ogre called, "Wife, wife, bring me my golden harp."

So she brought it and put it on the table before him. Then he said, "Sing!" and the golden harp sang most beautifully. And it went on singing till the ogre fell asleep, and commenced to snore like thunder. Then Jack lifted up the copper lid very quietly and got down like a mouse and crept on hands and knees till he came to the table, when up he crawled, caught hold of the golden harp and dashed with it towards the door. But the harp called out quite loud,

"Master! Master!" and the ogre woke up just in time to see Jack running off with his harp.

Commentary: This is an old storytelling device: the so-called "folkloric rule of three." Just like a good joke, we know that the third time 'round represents the punch line. Such repetition provides rhythm and adds drama while making the oral story easier to remember and follow. Having contracted the Ogre's disease of unwhetted appetite—"Jack was not content"—it's up the beanstalk one more time. This time the giant's wife is no longer an ally, but Jack outsmarts both of them and hides in the "copper," or metal boiler. The wife's comment to her frustrated husband is chillingly revealing: "How careless you are not to know the



difference between live and dead after all these years.” The lives of the poor are cheap to the rich. There is no sympathy in this story for the Ogre as a symbol of the predatory aristocracy.

This time the prize is a golden harp that plays itself. As before, once the giant sleeps, Jack darts out, grabs the golden object, and hightails it out. This time, however, the harp calls after its master, and the chase is on. Here is the ultimate irony: Jack steals an instrument so loyal to the “Master” that it blows the whistle on him. Perhaps this reveals just how caught Jack has become in the Ogre’s obsessive-compulsive system. As Audrey Lorde put it, “You can’t dismantle the Master’s House with the Master’s tools.”

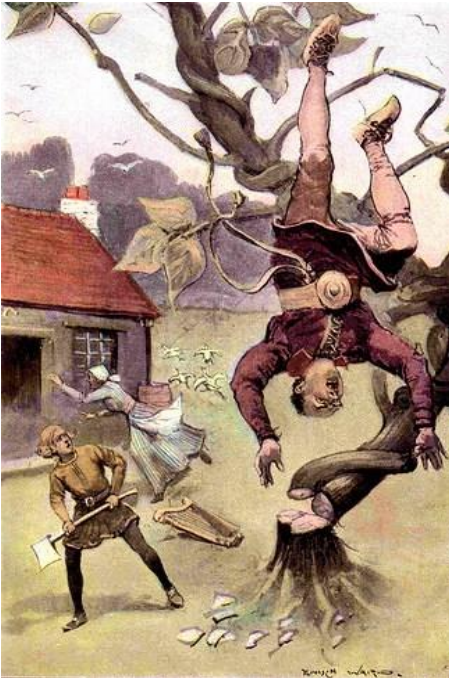


IX. Jack ran as fast as he could, and the ogre came rushing after, and would soon have caught him, only Jack had a start and dodged him a bit and knew where he was going. When he got to the beanstalk the ogre was not more than twenty yards away when suddenly he saw Jack disappear, and when he came to the end of the road he saw Jack underneath climbing down for dear life. Well, the ogre didn't like trusting himself to such a ladder, and he stood and waited, so Jack got another start.

But just then the harp cried out, "Master! Master!" and the ogre swung himself down onto the beanstalk, which shook with his weight. Down climbs Jack, and after him climbed the ogre.

By this time Jack had climbed down and climbed down and climbed down till he was very nearly home. So he called out, "Mother! Mother! bring me an ax, bring me an ax." And his mother came rushing out with the ax in her hand, but when she came to the beanstalk she stood stock still with fright, for there she saw the ogre with his legs just through the clouds.

But Jack jumped down and got hold of the ax and gave a chop at the beanstalk which cut it half in two. The ogre felt the beanstalk shake and quiver, so he stopped to see what was the matter. Then Jack gave another chop with the ax, and the beanstalk was cut in two and began to topple over. Then the ogre fell down and broke his crown, and the beanstalk came toppling after.



Commentary: Jack zigs & zags to escape the clutches of the bigger, faster adversary. Picture a peasant “thief” who, having just stolen a loaf of bread, is chased by Victorian constables into a wheatfield, where to their consternation, he disappears. Similarly, the Ogre pulls up short at the beanstalk, refusing to “trust himself to such a ladder.” This vine is the domain of the campesino, not the patron; indeed, it will be the instrument of the latter’s demise. The giant only takes the plunge when the hijacked harp, ever loyal, calls again for help.

At the bottom of the stalk, it is Jack’s mother’s turn to freeze, unable to swing the ax in the face of such a spectacle (and perhaps unwilling, given the stalk’s lucrative history). So it is Jack who must hack down the magic pole. The denouement is a humorous bit of intertextuality. “The ogre fell down and broke his crown and the beanstalk came toppling after” clearly alludes to another Jack of a contemporaneous nursery rhyme, who went up the hill to

fetch water, but who then “fell down / And broke his crown / And Jill came tumbling after.” Perhaps this “quotation” means to soften the trauma of the Ogre’s death. But this Giant—like capitalism itself—eats people, and must be destroyed. As Zipes puts it, in peasant folk tales the adversary symbolizes “the entire feudal system or the greed and brutality of the aristocracy, responsible for the difficult conditions,” and her or his destruction symbolically realizes “the hatred which the peasantry felt for the aristocracy as hoarders and oppressors.” Think of the famous chorus in *The Wizard of Oz*: “Ding, dong, the wicked witch is dead!” sing the celebrating munchkins.

X. Then Jack showed his mother his golden harp, and with showing that and selling the golden eggs, Jack and his mother became very rich, and he married a great princess, and they lived happy ever after.

Commentary: The last scene (including the traditional “happily ever after” ending formula) is short and sweet—unless we have eyes to see its bitterness. The beanstalk, the magical source of peasant power, is gone. It could have provided a lifetime supply of staple food for the village—but instead Jack’s life now revolves around gold. He has become like the giant: rich, and politically upwardly mobile, underlined by his marriage to a “princess.” There is no indication that the economic system of radical disparity has changed—only that Jack has changed positions within it. Jack seems to have won the battle, but lost the war he had started with the Ogre’s world.

There are two instructive biblical echoes to this folktale. One is the warning parable of the Israelites' worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32; right). But there Moses "comes down from above" to excoriate the people's gold fetishism, whereas here Jack becomes a worshipper. Jack's defeat of the giant also recalls the old tale of David and Goliath. The peasant Hebrew shepherd boy uses cunning and native skill to overcome a much stronger opponent—a bigger than life Philistine professional mercenary soldier (I Samuel 17). Yet once David



gains power as king of Israel, he becomes that which he allegedly vanquished—a powerful warrior who, especially in his murder of Uriah (II Sam 11), fits the Ogre's description as being "careless about the difference between live and dead."

Jack and the Beanstalk is a complex folk tale of both promise and warning. The first half imagines a spry hero who realizes a sort of revolutionary overthrow of the cannibalistic aristocratic powers who live in high places. Stolen wealth is redistributed through the power of the most basic agricultural symbol: a simple bean plant. But alas, Mammon has its own power, which slowly takes hold of the narrative. In the end, the bitter disparity of wealth and poverty is not transformed, but merely reversed. (Right: Varieties of heirloom beans used in Oak View, originally gifted to us by friends Sandy Lejeune of Santa Barbara and Amber Baker of Portland).

There are at least two morals to this story.

First, it warns against the delusion that "money buys happiness," which seeks to rule the minds and hearts of all who are not rich, whether in biblical antiquity, medieval Europe or urban North America.

Second, it cautions us about any movement to subvert unjust systems that results in powerful protagonists becoming like their oppressors (as has occurred all too often in history). The demanding task of resisting such seductions is why the biblical work of Sabbath Economics must always be spiritual as well as political.