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***Errol Le Cain's Fairy Tales as Manuscript Illumination***

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Errol Le Cain (1941-1989) first illustrated book, *King Arthur's Sword*, was published in 1968 and started his career as an illustrator of children's books. Born and educated in Singapore, Le Cain lived in India for five years, travelled through the Far East, and then moved to England. The majority of his over fifty books consisted in illustrating work by others, notably in retelling a variety of classic fairy- and folktales.

The books are deliberately consistent with the origin and style of the story they illustrate. While *Aladdin* is inspired by the Arabic world of the nineteenth-century imagination of the 1001 Nights or of Omar Khayyam 'Persian' vision, others are indebted to Russian folktales. Le Cain's own travels no doubt contributed to his use of Indian decorative traditions, and of Chinese art. His eight 'medievalist' books, chronologically *King Arthur's Sword* (KAS), *Sir Orfeo* (SO), *Cinderella*, *Early Britain* (EB), *Thorn Rose* (TR), *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* (TDP), *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (PPH) and *Molly Whuppie* (MW) interest me here. TR and TDP are retellings of two Brothers' Grimm tales, and *Cinderella* of Charles Perrault, while PPH refers to the old German story (not to Browning's poem). In SO Le Cain illustrated not the original Greek myth, but the Middle English poem, and MW also illustrates a poem, by Walter de la Mare. KAS and EB are the only two books with a specific medieval theme, the first as a retelling of the story of Arthur, Merlin and Excalibur, the second as a children's history book. Yet all of these carry out a strong medievalist flavour in their choice of decoration and visual cues.

First and foremost of these cues is the repeated representation of the fairyland multi-turreted castle, whether as a background illustration in the opening or closing pages in KAS and in MW (where it serves as a contrast to the Giant's house in the forest), or as the main focus of the story in TR, *Cinderella*, and TDP. This leitmotif is joined by a variety of medieval images, constructed from various sources, most notably in TR, where the opening page weaves subtly in a picture based on late medieval French and Italian costumed ladies, in front of a tent with pennant, as seen in the *Lady with the Unicorn* tapestries or in paintings by Uccello, moving about in a millefleurs landscape of the kind so often seen in such tapestries of hunting or courtly love parties. The next page fairy procession, also travelling through the forest at night in a millefleurs setting, includes a fairy riding a unicorn. The fifteenth-century setting continues through the castle style and courtiers' dress, and develops the Gothic theme of nature as it encroaches more and more on the palace through the growing wall of thorns, until the prince arrives, a hundred years later, correctly attired in Renaissance dress, to wake up the princess. All full-page illustrations in SO refer specifically to a fifteenth-century court: headdresses, caparisoned horses, knights in Crusader tabards are all present. This medieval fantasy style is used by Le Cain for the upper social echelons of king, princesses and courtiers, often appearing seated at banquets, dressed in the appropriate brocades, furs and headgear. By contrast, a second type of medieval inspiration, used for the 'below stairs' folk, for example the castle's kitchen in TR, or the giant's house in MW, comes from Flemish painting, especially Brueghel, in imitation of the peasants' costumes, activities and human types (the fat cook, the kitchen maid plucking a fowl, the round-faced children). The fullest example of the Brueghel-style can be seen in PPH, where the whole town, centred around a 'Grand'Place' seen in the background, includes houses, streets, clothing and interiors inspired by countless Flemish paintings, and the Pied Piper himself is a medieval court jester. But Le Cain rarely takes his inspiration from one model alone. Together with the Flemish, he uses the model of the old

German folktale for clothes and interiors, kitchen hearths and wooden furniture in MW and PPH; a background townscape whose walls, houses and grouping of people is reminiscent of the Book of Hours of Jean de Berry, in PPH; and a double-page spread illustration of the battle in KAS which is clearly modelled on the Bayeux Tapestry (as is the Anglo-Saxon lettering in EB).

These are all direct medieval themes, placed in the body of the text to illustrate the story. A subtler form of medieval inspiration runs through most of these books and sometimes even through unrelated stories illustrated by Le Cain: his use of illuminated borders around the text, his illuminated initials and the fonts. In KAS, before the Gothic-font title page, the opening page contains the customary fairyland castle, seen through a flower border with angels in roundels blowing their trumpets. Many illustrations in this and other books are inset into a decorated initial, with either zoomorphic geometrical patterns or birds clearly inspired from the Insular style. In PPH, the opening pages are even more clearly modelled on the arches of Anglo-Saxon and Irish Insular manuscripts such as the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels, and illuminated borders frame the text and illustrations, incorporating roundels with pictures of a German or Flemish-style medieval town. The characteristic illuminated border, found on almost every page, contains flowers, fruit, animals or birds, and sometimes anthropomorphized depictions of the Sun and Moon, reminiscent of the full page illustrations of manuscripts or millefleurs tapestries, especially clear on the last page of PPH, in the forest setting for the children led by the Pied Piper now happily living in the middle of nature, perhaps symbolising plenty and truth, in contrast with the hypocrisy and greed of the townspeople. The most immediate Insular manuscript style is that of SO, with a title page almost literally copied from the Lindisfarne Gospels, while two other illustrations, both made up of roundels within one main page, mix, in one case, Insular lettering with fifteenth-century manuscript scenes, and in another an imitation of a book such as the Eadwine Psalter. Illuminated borders framing the text are a constant feature of Le Cain's work, and they carry out his medievalist style even in those books whose stories are set in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, where dress and furnishings are in fact depicted in that context, as in TDP and Cinderella. Finally the line drawings in EB, mixing a more 'realistic' style, nevertheless retain the manuscript format, and the frontispiece has at the top a king whose depiction is a mix of the Christ of the Arrest, and of St John, in the Book of Kells.

Le Cain said that: "The first task of an illustrator is to be in full sympathy with the writer. No matter how splendid and exciting the drawings may be, if they work against the story, the picture book is a failure". Using models culled from medieval pictures for stories set in the Middle Ages would thus be entirely appropriate. Yet the medievalist strand extends to other books, at least in the decorative style of borders and initials, as well as in the use of the glowing jewelled-like colours. Le Cain clearly had a wide knowledge of medieval artefacts, and used it to mix and match styles and themes. His two most obvious styles, the ethereal, stylised one, and the more realistic, robust Flemish-painting one, mostly match the two opposing worlds of the stories: the kings and princesses in their castles are drawn in the first, the 'real' peasants and burghers in the other, but both of these remain within the visual vocabulary of the medieval. Unlike Rackham or Dulac, some of Le Cain's precursors, the models used are those of manuscript illumination, a source of inspiration consistent with his own taste for rich and vivid colours and vibrant sparkling tones.