With the possible exception of the harp, no musical instrument has become so interwoven with folklore and tradition as the fiddle. In myth, legend, and belief, the fiddle had become known as l'instrument du diable, the instrument of the devil, at least since medieval times. This association is probably due in part to the use of the instrument for accompanying dancing, which was often viewed by religious authorities as one of the devil's favourite devices to ensnare hapless mortals in his demonic coils. It therefore should come as no surprise that there is a large body of folklore in which the theme of dancing with the devil plays a major role.

Two tales from Quebec can be used to demonstrate the differences in theme and motif, but both are alike in that the devil does indeed play a prominent role in the final outcome of the stories. The first is the story of Ti-Jean Gauthier, who wanted to be the finest fiddler in his home village, but who was never recognized as such because he could not coordinate the ability to play the fiddle with the ability to tap his feet in the stationary dancing rhythm so common to French-Canadian fiddle styles and musical accompaniments.

One evening Ti-Jean encounters in his kitchen a stranger who gives him a charm which, when applied to his hands and feet, literally turn him into a first class fiddler in an instant. However, once he starts to play the fiddle, he cannot stop, and so, having begun to play, he dances his way out of his house and down to the parish hall, where the weekly dance has begun. Ti-Jean continues to play his fiddle and the dancers begin to dance, and once they begin they cannot stop, no matter how hard they try. It is only through the intervention of the local priest twelve hours later that the music stops, the dancers stop, and the devil's curse is lifted, but unfortunately poor Ti-Jean is whisked off to the infernal regions far below, to his eternal reward.

In the second tale, the story of Rose Latulippe, a young girl risks her soul and salvation through her constant flirtations and coquettish behavior, which comes to the fore at a dance to celebrate the beginning of the Lenten season. A young, handsome stranger catches her eye, and she totally falls under his sway. Only an innocent child and an elderly grandmother holding a crucifix know him for what he truly is, and it is only because Rose's fiancé notices that the stranger's horse has coals for eyes and the steam beneath his hooves in the snow, plus the stranger's refusal to remove his hat and gloves, that eventually his true identity is revealed. Again, the local priest intervenes to save Rose by tricking the devil, making him believe that Rose has given herself over to the Church, and the stranger eventually flees, though not before punching a great hole in the wall of the house where the dance is being held.

Although these tales are told in Quebec, other versions and variations of both can be found far beyond Quebec's borders. The tale of the magic fiddle endowed with demonic or other powers is a story and theme known from the southern United States to the northwest frontier of India and from Canada to the remote steppes of Russia. The tale of the fiddle that can make its hearers dance till they drop or are told to stop dancing is a common story, with perhaps one of its best versions coming from the southwest of Britain, principally in the story of the wedding of Stanton Drew, in which an entire wedding party is turned into a ring of standing stones because of their refusal to obey the commandment not to dance or make music on a Sunday; the stranger who plays for them after Saturday midnight is the devil himself, and just at sunrise, he pronounces his dire punishment on the entire company and turns them into the ring of standing stones which can still be found today at the very spot where the wedding party is said to have taken place. A Sicilian monk once defied his bishop and played his fiddle on a Sunday and was punished by being turned into a stag and torn apart by the bishop's own pack of hunting hounds. In a tale from the Shetland Islands, a man purchases a fiddle from a pawn shop and is almost strangled to death by a set of invisible hands belonging to the fiddle's previous owner, who has put a curse on his fiddle, vowing that no other would ever play on it and live to tell the tale. The story of the demon-haunted fiddle may in fact have given rise to such fiddle tune titles as "Devil's Dream," "The Devil Among the Tailors," "Devil in the Strawsack," and a
number of other popular tunes in the repertoire of many a grand member of the bowing fraternity. The very fact that in the Quebec version, the luckless Ti-Jean must make a bargain, unwitting though it may be, with the powers of Hell so that he can become a respected fiddler shows the deep respect Quebecois and other people have had for their local fiddle players. "Poor Ti-Jean," says the storyteller, "he loved so much his fiddle that he sold his soul to the devil, but for twelve hours, he was the damned best violonisseur in the world, and that's for sure."

In the second tale, the story hinges upon a different motif, the appearance of the devil in human guise to punish unseemly or haughty behavior on the part of a young girl, who was often described as very beautiful but very vain and proud, to the consternation of all her friends and family, and who tempted the very wrath of God Himself. Even the very end of the tale is often left into question, with a number of different endings suggested by the storyteller, including Rose's punishment by the devil, her salvation and eventual reform to better behaviour, her salvation only to become a member of a religious order, or her punishment by never marrying her intended sweetheart and remaining a maiden the remaining days of her life.

As in the tale "Ti-Jean and the Devil," Rose is saved from her punishment by the timely intervention of the local priest and by his clever use of a contract to trick the devil into releasing Rose from his clutches. The fact that she gave herself to him willingly does not faze the good priest in any sense, and he manages to force Old Scratch to retreat in defeat and a gust of flame and brimstone.

This is a tale that is also found far and wide, from the southwest of the United States to rural Greece and from the highlands of Scotland to southern Spain and Portugal. The tale is often told as a cautionary warning against the sins of pride and flirtatious behavior on the part of young unmarried women, as well as a tale warning against disobedient behavior when an elder tells a young girl not to attend a certain social function, for one reason or another. In many of the tales of this sort, a young girl spurns all offers of social company on the part of the local menfolk, only to fall victim to a stranger who catches her eye. The ending is not always the same; as in the Quebecois story, the intervention of a priest or loved one often saves the day, but in as many cases, the luckless girl finds out too late just who her admirer is, but by that time, she is halfway to total perdition and the final results are dire, if somewhat predictable. In some versions, the stranger's very demeanour gives him away, as in several Hispanic versions from Texas, in which he is discovered by what is called Pato de gallo, the rooster's foot, the sign of the devil himself. In some versions, the stranger is often forced to remove his hat and gloves, revealing his true identity. In a version from Finland, the motif of coal for eyes and steam beneath the horse's hooves is similar to the Quebecois version.

Even when help arrives in time, the results are sobering, to say the least, with lifetime scars being in evidence, both physical and otherwise. The girl in question is often disfigured and in many endings refuses to marry and lives a quiet life as a maiden, or even retreats into a religious life of quiet contemplation.

The motif of the devil at the dance shows once again that a good story not only is known far and wide, but can show up in many unusual forms and modes, even when maintaining a generally universal theme. The tales "Ti-Jean and the Devil" and "Rose Latulippe" tell us much about human nature, whether it be the often desperate desire for fame and recognition or the results of pride and thoughtless behavior. As in many other folk narratives, greed and pride are punished, goodness is rewarded, and cleverness and forthright bold action are their own reward. But then, that is really what the best of stories are all about, and, as the tellers say in Quebec, that's for sure.

Notes and Sources

1. It is said that the only people in the world immune to the devil's fiddle are the Romany-speaking gypsies, and that is because a passing Romany stole the nail intended from Christ's heart during the crucifixion, and for that kindness God gave the gypsies two rewards: they could steal anything not nailed down, and they would be forever immune to the devil's fiddle, whatever their behavior.
2. Another story says that when the celestial war for supremacy was at its bitterest and the outcome was
in doubt, Gabriel grabbed the first thing to hand, which was not his famous trumpet, but an out-of-tune fiddle, and played so badly that Lucifer and his minions fled from heaven, never to return, and ever since then he has had it in for every fiddler on earth; this tale was collected by J. Mason Brewer in central Texas.

3. Ti-Jean is a favorite character found in many tales from French Canada, often playing the same role as Jack in Appalachian tales, Kelloglan in Turkish stories, or the youngest of three sons in many world folk tales, often winning through cleverness, trickery, or the aid of magical helpers, human or otherwise. These popular tales have been found among French-speaking folks in Maine, Missouri, Louisiana, and elsewhere.

4. A version of Ti-Jean and the Devil can be heard on Songs and Tales of Canada, Folkways 3532; several interesting versions of the Wedding at Stanton Drew can be found in ballad form, recorded by the Scottish band Bully Wee on Mad-men of Gotham (Redrag Records) and by Paddy Tutty on her excellent debut disc (Prairie Druid Records). The Shetland tale of the Dancing Fiddle can be found on a recording entitled Stories from the Other Side, featuring Illinois-based teller and ballad singer Dan Keding, available from Turtle Creek Music, Box 1701, Springfield, Illinois, USA, 62705. In his fine collection Folktales of Mexico (from the University of Chicago series of tales from around the world), Américo Paredes gives a Mexican version of the Magic Fiddle, wherein folks must dance until told to stop.

4. The tale of Rose Latulippe can be found in Tales for an Unknown City: Stories from the 1001 Friday Nights of Storytelling, collected by Dan Yashinsky, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Kingston, Ontario. For some other versions of the Devil at the Dance, try Ghost Stories from the American South, edited by William McNeal, August House Publications, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Le diable qui vient danser -- variations sur un thème populaire.

Si l'on excepte la harpe, le violon est l'instrument musical le plus intimement lié au folklore et à la tradition. Depuis l'époque médiévale, le violon dans les mythes et légendes représente "l'instrument du diable". Cette association entre le violon et le diable vient probablement du fait que le violon accompagne la danse, et les autorités religieuses voyaient souvent dans la danse un occasion pour le diable d'entrainer les mortels dans ses embûches. Donc il n'est pas étonnant que dans le folklore et la littérature du monde, beaucoup d'histoires populaires associent la danse et le diable.

Deux contes québécois démontrent des thèmes et des motifs différents, mais se ressemblent puisque le diable joue un rôle important dans le déroulement final. Le premier raconte l'histoire de Ti-Jean Gauthier, qui voulait devenir le meilleur violoneux du village. Malheureusement pour lui, il n'arrivait pas à taper du pied et jouer en même temps -- un talent nécessaire dans le style traditionel du violoneux canadien-français.

Un soir, Ti-Jean rencontre dans sa cuisine un étranger qui lui donne un charme appliqué aux mains et aux pieds qui le transforme en violoneux virtuose. Toutefois, il ne peut s'arrêter de jouer, et il danse hors de la maison pour se rendre à la salle paroissiale où la danse vient de commencer. Ti-Jean continue de jouer, et les danseurs dansent sans pouvoir s'arrêter. Douze heures plus tard, l'intervention du curé termine la musique et la danse, mais le pauvre Ti-Jean est emporté aux enfers.

Dans le second récit, le comportement coquette d'une jeune fille (Rose Latulippe), risque son âme et son salut lors d'une danse pour célébrer le début du carême. Elle tombe sous le charme d'un beau jeune homme. Seuls un enfant innocent et une vieille grand'mère portant un crucifix reconnaissent l'identité de l'étranger; de plus le fiancé de Rose remarque que le cheval de l'étranger a des charbons ardents à la place des yeux, et que sous les sabots du cheval il y a de la vapeur qui s'échappe de la neige. Enfin, c'est le refus de l'étranger d'enlever ses gants et son chapeau qui...