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The Brothers Grimm and the Hermeneutics of Folklore: An Overview

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Abstract:

Folktales, being a vital part of our social and literary fabric, have played a powerful role in many a childhood, but there is also something in them for every generation. Compelling in their simplicity and emotional range and play, folktales have the power to stir dormant feelings and to quicken our sympathies for the downtrodden. Folktales also offer wit, wisdom, warning and counsel in trenchant formulations, giving tellers, readers, and listeners the opportunity to reflect on vulnerability and strength, risks and rewards, loss and restitution. The stories in the Brothers Grimm's *Nursery and Household Tales* are culturally innocent and solemnly cautionary. These folktales were once told around the fireside to lighten the labours of men and women, and continue to engage and entertain, not only through the 'high drama' of their plots, but also through the 'rich histories' that have attached themselves to those plots. To this day the tales remain the earliest 'scientific' collection of folktales. So, in this article, an attempt has been taken to show the relevance of the classic folktales of Brothers Grimm in the life of an individual even after two centuries.

Keywords: Buchmärchen, Chimerat, Fairy tales, Folktales, Gattung Grimm, Märchen, Naturpoesie, Romantic Movement.

Brothers Grimm, German *Brüder Grimm*, were famous for their classic collections of the folktales. Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm were best known for *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, (*Nursery and Household Tales*) which led to the birth of the science of folklore. It is a collection of German fairy tales first published in 1812 by the brothers Grimm. The collection is commonly known in English as "Grimms' Fairy Tales". The brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were German scholars known for their folktales and for their work in the study of different languages, which included the creation of "Grimm's law."

The Romantic Movement in Germany - a movement in the arts that favoured a return to nature and a greater focus on national culture, especially folktales, awakened the Germans' interest in the past of their own country. Although some work in the rediscovery and editing of medieval (from the Middle Ages, 500–1500 CE) German literature had already been started in the eighteenth century, it was the poets and theorists of the next century who first focused national attention on the origins of German culture and literature. While most of the poets viewed medieval literature mainly as an inspiration for new writing, others turned their attention to the investigation of the past. The Grimm brothers were the most important of these early language and folklore romantic historians.

For some years the brothers had been in contact with the Romantic poets Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, who were preparing a collection of German folk songs. Following their own interests in folklore and legends, the brothers brought out their first collection of tales, *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (*Nursery and Household Tales*), in 1812, implying in the title that ‘the stories were meant for adults and children alike’. These tales were collected by recording stories told by peasants and villagers. Wilhelm put them into written form and gave them a pleasant, childlike style. The brothers added many scholarly footnotes on the tales’ sources and different versions. In contrast to the extravagant fantasy of the Romantic school’s poetical fairy tales, the folk stories of this collection were mostly taken from oral sources, though a few were from printed sources and aimed at conveying the soul, imagination, and beliefs of people through the centuries. The great merit of Wilhelm Grimm is that he gave the fairy tales a readable form without changing their folkloric character and as Maria Tatar concluded, the results were threefold: the collection enjoyed wide distribution in Germany and eventually in all parts of the globe; it became and remains a model for the collecting of folktales everywhere; and the Grimms’ notes to the tales, along with other investigations, formed the basis for the science of the folk narrative and even of folklore.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the two brothers published a book of folktales based on material gathered from storytellers in central Germany. The two distinguished German philologists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published a collection of two hundred and ten tales. They included plenteous notes giving details of the sources and significance of these narratives which they believed represented ‘an untainted expression of an ancient heritage’ and ‘the authentic voices of the German folk’. To them, folk poetry was the only ‘true poetry’ which expressed the eternal joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of mankind.

The Grimms published their first take on the folktales for which they would become known around the world in December 1812, a second volume following in 1815. They would go on to publish six more editions, polishing the stories, making them more child-friendly, adding in Christian references and removing mentions of fairies before releasing the seventh edition – the one best known today – in 1857. The stories collected by the two young students of folklore and philology could still be considered a source of entertainment for all age groups. They appeared in print just when folktales were ‘moving out of barns and spinning rooms and into the nursery.’

Brothers Grimm, by giving their collection the title *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, seemed to imply that their tales were intended primarily for children and that their domain was the domestic sphere. The Brothers Grimms’ own interpretation of the title for their collection reveals that their first edition might have been produced for scholars but that the actual audience for those stories comprised both adults and children: “Children’s tales [*Kindermärchen*] are told so that the thoughts and feelings of the heart can awaken and develop in their pure, mild light; but because their simple poetry can delight everyone and impart to them their truth and because they stay in the home and are passed on from one generation to the next, they are also called household tales [*Hausmärchen*].” Jacob Grimm himself viewed, “Children and adults had equal claims on the folkloristic legacy of their ancestors” (Tatar 22).

Brothers Grimm began collecting folk tales from their surroundings -- peasant storytellers, middle-class friends and families and their servants, as well as from European literary traditions. ‘Briar Rose’ and ‘Hansel and Grethel’, came from a friend called Dortchen Wild

and her family and their nanny. Nevertheless as many as forty informants may have provided tales for the collection of Brothers Grimm. The informants themselves have become part of the popular myth of the Brothers Grimm. Wilhelm's son encouraged the belief that a certain 'Marie', source of many of the most 'romantic wonder tales' such as 'Little Red-Cap', 'Little Snow-White' and 'Briar Rose' was a simple peasant housekeeper. Surprisingly, a number of informants were women, such as Wilhelm's wife, Dorothea Wild, and Marie's two sisters. Frau Dorothea Veihmann, a widow who came to Kassel to sell the produce from her market garden, gave them the tale of '*Aschenputtel*', a version of 'Cinderella', among the nearly thirty stories she told them. She is presented in the notes as the ideal storyteller, and her portrait, drawn by Ludwig Emil Grimm, another brother, adorns the second edition of 1819. She is described as old woman from a peasant village who remembered her tales and told them in a 'simple unforced manner.'

"Skilled raconteurs might find themselves appropriating material from printed sources to flesh out their stories; resourceful writers might draw on recollections of oral tales to thicken their plots. On the narrative spectrum that leads from folklore to literature, the Grimms' collection is located somewhere near the midpoint. While some texts gravitate towards one end of the spectrum and others to the other, most occupy the middle ground", infers Maria Tatar in *The Hard Facts of The Grimms' Fairy Tales*. She further points out, "Even if the issue of the narrative status of the Grimms' tales is settled, or at least clarified, the terminological dilemma remains. Folklorists, who stress the roots of those tales in oral traditions, tend to refer to the Grimms' collection as folktales. Others, foremost among them literary critics, designate the stories as fairy tales, if only because that is the term conventionally used to translate the German word *Märchen*. Still others prefer the German *Buchmärchen*, a word that point to the blend of literary and folkloric elements in the tales. Then there are critics who shrewdly avoid all terminological controversy by coining new terms such as *chimerator* by simply using the phrase *Gattung Grimm* (the Grimm genre)" (Tatar 32-33).

The process of recasting folktales unfolded mainly in three stages for the Brothers Grimm. First, as audience or addressees, they influenced the telling of a folktale simply by their physical presence. Their social standing, age, sexual identity, and body language worked in concert on their informants. Second, the Brothers Grimm altered the texture of the folktales narrated to them. Like the early collectors of folktales, 'they could not resist the temptation to improve on what they heard, to render readable what might be pleasing to the ear alone.' Thirdly, the Brothers Grimm not only created a homogenous, stylized language for the folktale, but also introduced messages, motivations, judgements, morals, and other pedantic touches. The electrifying oral version of the folktales could easily fall flat when transferred to a paper but the Grimms unfailingly smoothed the rough edges of the tales they heard and read, even as they imbued them with the 'values and pedagogical demands' of their time.

Folktales are up close and personal. They mix fact with fantasy in order to tell us about our deepest anxieties and desires. They offer 'roadmaps pointing the way to romance and riches, power and privilege', and most importantly to 'a way out of the woods, back to the safety and security of home'. Folktales bring myths down to earth and inflect them in human rather than heroic terms, by putting a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of 'collective imagination'. In the imaginative world opened up by folktales, children escape the drab realities of everyday life and indulge in the 'cathartic pleasures' of defeating those giants, stepmothers, ogres, monsters, and trolls also known as the grown-ups. There, they encounter and explore the great existential mysteries and profound enigmas of the adult

world. What better tool, as the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim has suggested, for learning how to navigate reality and for figuring out how to survive in a world ruled by adults?

Maria Tatar in the Preface to the expanded Second Edition of *The Hard Facts of The Grimms' Fairy Tales*, clearly states, "The parent who expects to find role models for children in the fairy tales will be deeply disappointed. Jack raids the castle of a giant and murders him; Aladdin is described as an "incorrigible good-for-nothing"; and Snow White breaks into the cottage of the dwarfs and makes herself at home. Parents will also look in vain for so-called family values in stories that show us widower fathers wooing their daughters, women lacing up and suffocating their stepdaughters; fathers turning over their daughters to greedy kings; and peasants who wish for nothing more from life than the prospect of a good meal. But, the stories that have survived from the Grimms' collection meet one requirement of a good children's book: they show the triumph of the small and meek over the tall and powerful."

In order to produce a volume of folktales suitable and attractive to both children and elders, the Brothers Grimm wanted to give their readers a document of German folk culture in its most appropriate form. To make the folktales appear all the more German, the Brothers Grimm transformed every fairy (*Fee*), prince (*Prinz*), and princess (*Prinzessin*) into a more Teutonic-sounding enchantress (*Zauberin*) or wise woman (*weise Frau*), king's son (*Königssohn*), and king's daughter (*Königstochter*). Brothers Grimm added proverbs to give the folktales a more folksy texture, and the proper moral sentiments were woven into the text, for this collection was almost a showcase for German folk culture. When we come across wise monarchs, compassionate heroes, toiling beauties, and proud princesses, then we can easily infer that it has something to do with the folkloric plot pattern.

The first volumes of Brothers Grimm's folktales were criticized because, although they were called "Children's Tales", they were 'not regarded as suitable for children', especially for the subject matter. Many changes were made through the editions – such as transforming the wicked mother of 'Little Snow-White' and 'Hansel and Grethel' into a stepmother. The brothers also removed the sexual references—Rapunzel's innocently asking why her dress was getting tight around her belly, and thus naively revealing to her stepmother about her pregnancy and the prince's visits to their tall and lonely tower. But, in many folktales, violence, particularly the punishing of the villains was increased.

The evil queen in 'Little Snow-White' is the princess's biological mother who plots to murder her own daughter, and a hungry mother in another story is so "unhinged and desperate" that she tells her daughters: "I've got to kill you so I can have something to eat." Never before published in English, as Tatar says, "The first edition of the Brothers Grimms' tales reveals an unsanitised version of the stories that have been told at bedtime for more than two hundred years." Rapunzel, meanwhile, gives herself away to her captor when – after having a "merry time" in the tower with her prince - she asks: "Tell me, Mother Gothel, why are my clothes becoming too tight? They don't fit me anymore." And the stepmothers of Snow White and Hansel and Grethel were originally their mothers. Jack Zipes believes that the Grimms made the change in later editions because they "held motherhood sacred". So, the most astonishing reality is that it is Snow White's own mother who orders the huntsman to "stab her to death and bring me back her lungs and liver as proof of your deed. After that I'll cook them with salt and eat them", and Hansel and Grethel's biological mother who abandons them in the deep dense forest in order to starve and die.

Jack Zipes speculates that the Grimms' changes were "reflecting sociologically a condition that existed during their lifetime - jealousy between a young stepmother and stepdaughter", because "many women died from childbirth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and there were numerous instances in which the father remarried a young woman, perhaps close in age to the father's eldest daughter". Cinderella's stepsisters take on extraordinary attempts to win the prince in the original Grimms version of the folktale by slicing off parts of their feet to fit in the golden slipper in order to win the prince. But, it proved to be a fruitless attempt as the prince spots the blood spilling out of the shoe of the stepsisters. "Here's a knife," their mother urges, in Zipes' translation. "If the slipper is still too tight for you, then cut off a piece of your foot. It will hurt a bit. But what does that matter?"

The original stories are closer to the oral tradition, as well as being "more brusque, dynamic, and scintillating". In his introduction to *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, in which Marina Warner says he has "redrawn the map we thought we knew", and made the Grimms' tales "wonderfully strange again", Zipes writes that the originals "retain the pungent and naive flavour of the oral tradition", and that they are "stunning narratives precisely because they are so blunt and unpretentious", with the Grimms yet to add their "sentimental Christianity and puritanical ideology". But they are still, he believes, suitable bedtime stories. "It is time for parents and publishers to stop dumbing down the Grimms' tales for children," Zipes told *The Guardian*. The Grimms, he added, "believed that these tales emanated naturally from the people, and the tales can be enjoyed by both adults and children. The Grimms also believed that "Hansel and Grethel", "Cinderella" and "The Juniper Tree" were both culturally symptomatic and culturally normative, reflecting German national identity and modelling it for the next generation."

"Since traditionally folktales were related at adult gatherings after the children had been put to bed for the night, peasant raconteurs could take certain liberties with their diction and give free play to their penchant for sexual innuendo or off-colour allusions", says Tatar in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Tatar 23). The Grimm brothers made an idealistic effort to capture the true German folk traditions in print and to make a modest contribution to the history of German poetry. As Jacob Grimm pointed out during his search for a publisher, the main purpose of the proposed volume was not so much to earn royalties as to salvage what was left of the priceless national resources still in the hands of the German folk. The Grimm brothers expressed the hope that the volume in the offing would find friends everywhere and that it would entertain the entire mankind.

Between 1812 and 1815, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their first version of the folktales that became a classic of the world literature. Many of the folktales are actually derived from the printed sources. The library of Freidrich Carl von Savigny, law professor at Marburg, was both source and influence for their appreciation of medieval Germanic literature. Not many of the informants were rustic storytellers, but they were people whom the brothers Grimm met through their circle of friends at Kassel where the family lived. The notes are full of speculations about primitive history and romantic theories about folk composition. Such scholarship was remarkable for its time and has ensured the Grimm Brothers a seminal place in the history of folklore studies, but it is very far from the illustrated books known to the world over.

The volume *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, (*Nursery and Household Tales*) was not an immediate success to the Brothers Grimm. In 1823 an English translation by Edgar Taylor

and David Jardine with illustrations by George Cruikshank appeared. The illustrations made all the difference and the tradition of embodying these tales as images in books and advertising began, in order to make the tales more children-friendly. In 1825 a German version of 'Grimms' Fairy Tales' was produced by Jacob and Wilhelm and illustrated by their brother, Ludwig. This collection of folktales contained a mixture of wonder tales, animal fables, rustic farce, and religious exempla. Best known are undoubtedly the wonder tales (commonly called fairy tales) full of well-loved characters as Cinderella, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel and some favourite villains such as Rumpelstiltskin and the Wolf. In this wonderland, the wicked stepmothers prowl the palaces and witches lurk in the woods, but the hero or heroine always wins out in the end.

The background to the collection and publication of Grimms' folktales was that of the eighteenth century Enlightenment - an age when reason and a classical conception of the fine arts provided the dominant ethos. It was also an age of doubt in which the Romantic Movement in Germany was becoming influential and was beginning to look towards the past, a native past rather than a classical past, for inspiration. The collecting of folktales 'fitted beautifully into this search for a pure native voice unspoilt by the corrupting influence of industrialisation.' Wilhelm Grimm once wrote that if industrial development got out of hand then the result would be 'a splendid barbarism.' The true voice of the people, what he termed '*Naturpoesie*' (natural poetry), as expressed by such things as the tales he collected from the mouths of peasant storytellers in Germany was an antidote to such a fate. Such '*Naturpoesie*' was an authentic and spontaneous creation of 'the folk' who lived in harmony with nature. These folktales were 'culturally valuable' and did not need to be transformed in any way.

The image of the 'folk' as essentially a peasant world is still influential, even modern illustrations of the Brothers Grimm usually set the scene in a rural world. The idealised peasant storytellers of the Grimms were in many ways just an ideal. Many of the texts came from published sources and many of the informants were literate, middle class and Grimms' own friends and family. The Grimms' collection was not actually the first significant arrangement of 'wonder tales'. Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* had appeared in 1697, and even that had been preceded by the *Facetious Nights of Giambattista Basile* in 1637. Modern versions may contain characters such as Disney's ubiquitous signature mouse, but the question of 'authenticity' was bound up with interpretation and a variety of cultural agendas right from the start.

Undoubtedly these folktales entered popular culture as a literary product with the capacity to provide 'moral instruction' for the young and a sense of simple and eternal 'folk wisdom' for adults. They appeal to a middle-class bourgeois public with its belief that hard work leads to success. Sometimes the excessive violence is considered unsuitable for young children or the patriarchal structure unsympathetic to feminist values. Under social and commercial pressures the folktales change, but 'they remain capable of infinite revision within the parameters of juvenile literature and adult fantasy projection.'

The influence of these fairy stories was widespread. W. H. Auden praised the collection during World War II as 'one of the founding works of Western culture'. The folktales themselves have been put to many uses. Hitler praised them as 'folkish tales showing children with sound racial instincts seeking racially pure marriage partners, and so strongly that the Allied forces warned against them'; for instance, Cinderella with the heroine as racially pure, the step-mother as an alien, and the prince with an unspoiled instinct being able to distinguish.

In 1697, in France, Charles Perrault had published what would become classic fairy tales for children, including ‘Cinderella’, ‘Puss in Boots’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, but his versions of the stories was meant for sophisticated aristocratic families. The attitude that the Brothers Grimm displayed was entirely different. They believed that ‘folk stories, handed down by word of mouth from one generation to another over centuries untold, enshrined the fundamental ideas, beliefs and reactions to human experience of the folk’. Expressing their hopes and joys, fears and sorrows, the folktales were profoundly significant for young readers and grown-ups alike. The brothers took stories from Perrault and many others, but their versions were frequently different.

An example is Brothers Grimm’s ‘Cinderella’, where the fairy godmother that Charles Perrault introduced does not appear. Demoted to the family’s kitchen maid after her own mother’s death and her father’s second marriage, the heroine is nicknamed Aschenputtel (‘Cinder-Fool’) by her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella plants a hazel twig on her mother’s grave which she waters by her tears and later that grows into a tree. Two doves that are sent down from heaven by her mother come to the tree to help her when she prays for aid over the royal ball. They drop her a white gown and silk shoes for the ball’s first evening. For the second she has a far more splendid silver gown with silver shoes and on the third evening she is dressed in a magnificent golden gown and golden slippers. The prince has now fallen utterly in love with her and when she drops one of the golden slippers while running away he uses it to find her and identify her with the assistance of the heavenly doves, which also fly down and blind the evil stepsisters by pecking their eyeballs.

As in this case, many of the Brothers Grimms’ versions of the folk stories had a cruelty that was later frequently edited out as the folk stories became more and more popular as tales for young readers. Another change that was often made was metamorphosis of an evil mother in a fairy story into an evil stepmother, which was evidently considered more suitable for the innocent readers. But today we recognize that ‘folktales are much about family conflicts and violence as about enchanting rescues and romances’. When we read “Rumpelstiltskin”, we are more fascinated by the grotesque gnome who dances around a fire than by the wedding of the miller’s daughter to a king with an appetite for gold. Snow White’s encounter with the hunter is far more riveting than her meeting with the prince. And the perfect fit between the glass slipper and Cinderella’s foot is hardly as stirring as the efforts of the stepsisters to make the slipper fit by cutting off their toes and their heels.

Brothers Grimms’ folktales have fascinated and frightened generations of young children in more than 70 languages and have inspired authors, artists, composers and film-makers. It has also generated a minor industry of criticism and interpretation. The Grimm’s collection of folklore had already been popular during their lifetimes, but it went on to become one of the most celebrated works of German literature and the basis for countless books and movies during the next two centuries. On the list of the best-selling authors of all time, some figures place the Grimms in the third place - preceded only by Shakespeare and the Bible.

The worldwide popularity of ‘Grimms’ Fairy Tales’ rivals that of the Bible and is in some ways equally as controversial. The term ‘fairy tale’ means ‘something to nearly everyone and many people even know that it contains not fairies but stories of magical adventures in a world governed by the supernatural’. Scholars are so used to critiquing the idea of fairy tales as public arenas for ‘fantasies and wish fulfilment’ and as ‘sources for

renewing spiritual and poetic perceptions' in the modern world that it is all too easy to overlook how influential these ideas have been and how much the history of the Brothers Grimm tales have influenced such notions. The brothers edited their oral material in dramatic fashion, and their writing style has influenced other fantasy writers from Hans Christian Anderson to Maurice Sendak. The effect on popular culture is nothing short of stupendous. It forms the basis for Walt Disney's media empire which is familiar to all, and there are many less well-known spin offs.

In the Preface to the expanded Second Edition of *The Hard Facts of The Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Tatar affirms, "Today, adults and children the world over read the Grimms' tales in nearly every shape and form: illustrated and annotated, bowdlerized and abridged, faithful to the original or fractured. Considered timeless in content and universal in appeal, the *Nursery and Household Tales* have found their way into a variety of media, ranging from opera and ballet to film and advertising. Perpetually appropriated, adapted, revised, and rescripted, they have become a powerful form of cultural currency, widely recognized and constantly circulating in ways that are sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure. Cutting across the borderlines between high art and low, oral traditions and print culture, the visual and the verbal, they function as robust nomadic carriers of social practices and cultural values."

The Brothers Grimm were keen German nationalists who wanted to see the multitude of German states united as one country and who believed that folktales revealed a national German identity. Even folk stories like 'Little Red Cap', told in varying versions in many languages, were thought by the Grimms to originate from ancient Germanic tales and they identified themes and incidents in Germanic mythology and legend that they believed were echoed in folktales. The Nazis warmly approved of the Grimms' work, which, as Professor Jack Zipes puts it in his book on the brothers, they exploited 'to uphold the racist and nationalist supremacy of the German people'.

While portraying the hard and grim realities of the folktales of Brothers Grimm, Tatar comes to a conclusion: "To search for the hidden meaning of the Grimms' fairy tales is therefore not so fatuous an exercise as some would have us believe. That these tales have entered the realm of "children's literature" does not necessarily mean that they are "innocent" stories devoid of psychological depth. Ever since oral folk narratives were translated into stable written texts intended to entertain children, their original meaning has become masked, or at least obscured. Yet it is not impossible to recover that meaning and its implications. The folk may never have required the assistance of folklorists and psychologists to decode the tales told while spinning wool or husking ears of corn, for they prided themselves on boldness of language and baldness of narrative exposition. Censorship was as unwelcome as it was unnecessary in the company of adults, and the hard core of the plots could remain intact. The modern, written counterparts to these narratives can, by contrast, appear both cryptic and abstruse, in part because original text and context are forever lost to us. For that reason, they invite, indeed demand, interpretation" (Tatar 38).

Through the medium of these traditional cautionary, romantic, violent, reward-and-punishment folktales, even when they fail to meet the standards of political correctness, we can reflect on what matters in our lives, about issues ranging from 'fear of abandonment and death to fantasies of revenge and retaliation that lead to happily-ever-after'. Even if stories were told "once upon a time," in another time and place, they can provide opportunities for reflecting on cultural differences, on what was once at stake in our life decisions and what is at stake today. While turning the dark pages of the Brothers Grimm's *Nursery and Household*

Tales, we can meditate on the effects of the folk stories and reflect on our own cultural values, engaging in a reading that can take at times a playful turn and at times a philosophical turn.

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