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SUBJECTIVE RETELLING: THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL AND INDIVIDUAL  
FACTORS ON THE FOLKTALES OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM

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The folktales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are, if nothing else, iconic. Since first publishing *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, or *Children's and Household Tales*, in 1812, their stories have been read, told, watched, and referenced all over the world. The Brothers Grimm were not the original authors of their famous stories; instead, they primarily considered themselves recorders of myths that had been processed through oral tradition for centuries. An awareness of this ideal of objective collection often evokes an image of the two brothers embarking on a passionate, far-reaching mission to capture and, ultimately, rescue culturally significant stories from certain extinction.<sup>1</sup> The significance and impact of the folktales recorded was, and is, unquestionably enormous, but the assumption that they holistically represent the genuine German culture and dialogue of oral storytelling in existence up until the point at which the Grimms wrote their stories down is incorrect and oversimplified. Complex personal experience and societal factors alike influenced specific nuances that shaped the tales: whether or not they intended to, Jacob and Wilhelm inserted themselves deeply into their narratives. While the Brothers Grimm are widely known for compiling the traditional folktales of their time into written form for the purpose of pure cultural preservation, stories such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Snow White* were ultimately influenced, altered, and defined by the historical context, audience, and uniquely individual experiences of the writers themselves.

Jacob, born in 1785, and Wilhelm, born in 1786, did not develop an interest in folktales or philology until later in their lives. They grew up in the small towns of Hanau

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1. Cay Dollerup, "Translation as a Creative Force Literature in: The Birth of the European Bourgeois Fairy-Tale," *The Modern Language Review* 90, no. 1 (1995): 94, accessed Nov 11, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3733256>.

and Steinau with their three younger brothers and one younger sister.<sup>2</sup> Raised as devout Reformed Christians, the brothers received a classical education typical of the time, schooled in Greek and Latin by private tutors. The death of their father in 1796, however, left the previously affluent family in a state of financial instability. The Grimms were left to depend on extended family members for monetary support, a fact that only further motivated the brothers to push and prove themselves academically.<sup>3</sup> In 1802, Jacob left home to continue his studies at the University of Marburg in Kassel, where Wilhelm, though battling chronic illness, joined him a year later. Together, they made plans to study law; a decision that they were assured would eventually lead them to stable jobs so they could properly support their family.

It was at Marburg that the brothers' ultimate path began to take shape. Law professor Friedrich Carl von Savigny became an influential mentor to Jacob and Wilhelm. Savigny applied a deeply historical approach to the study of law, vocalizing the belief that a rigorous study of the past was the only reasonable way to address contemporary questions of the present.<sup>4</sup> Although Germany remained a heavily divided nation at the time, due to widespread civil unrest and various French occupations, Savigny held that all Germans were innately linked by the shared cultural and historical narrative of their past.<sup>5</sup> Regaining a sense of national unity, he believed, was a crucial challenge that would require unearthing and revitalizing historical remnants of old cultural and moral values. Savigny's ideas resonated deeply with the Grimms. They, too, began to see historical study as fundamental to full cultural vitality and understanding.

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2. Jack Zipes, introduction to *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, ed. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xxi

3. *Ibid.*, xxi

4. *Ibid.*, xxii.

5. *Ibid.*, xvii

They soon developed a shared view that defined language as the connective force of culture.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Savigny's influence, Jacob and Wilhelm decided to leave law behind to pursue a path of philology and literature, and spent their days at the University pouring over old relics of German literature. Although uncontrollable events of their personal lives interfered, such as the death of their mother in 1808 that left the brothers as the sole providers for their siblings, Jacob and Wilhelm were resolved to uphold a pact that they would remain and work together for the rest of their lives. Even after Wilhelm married, the brothers continued to live in the same house, working at desks positioned so they could face each other.<sup>7</sup>

By the early 1800s, the brothers' goals had changed dramatically from when they had first arrived at Marburg. Rather than aspiring to become respectable civil servants, they now held on fervently to the idea that by analyzing ancient language they were uncovering *Naturpoesie*, or "natural poetry," something that, if achieved, they believed would reveal deep, underlying truths with the power to ultimately define and unify the German population.<sup>8</sup> Their study also heavily emphasized and idealized the *Volk*, a concept many Romantic thinkers considered to be the quintessential voice of the common German people.<sup>9</sup> The Grimms lived in an era that saw a blossoming of the German nationalist movement, one they readily joined. In a nation divided and diluted by French invasion and occupation, the *Volk* epitomized, to the Grimms and many other Romantic

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6. *Ibid.*, xxii.

7. Joan Acocella, "Once Upon a Time: The Lure of the Fairy Tale," *The New Yorker*, July 2012, 1.

8. Donald R. Hettinga, "Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm," in *The Teller's Tale: Lives of the Classic Fairy Tale Writers*, ed. Sophie Raynard, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), 139.

9. Ruth Michaelis-Jena, "Oral Tradition and the Brothers Grimm," *Folklore* 82, no. 4 (1971): 265, accessed Nov 11, 2016, [www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/1260545](http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/1260545)

scholars of the time, the heart of German roots, culture, morality, and identity.<sup>10</sup> Seeing their passion, Savigny soon connected the brothers with two leading German romantic writers and thinkers: Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. In addition to sharing the Grimms' nationalist leanings and passion for the written word, they dedicated time to collecting remnants of old German literature and had already published an anthology of German folk songs. Brentano was the first to encourage Jacob and Wilhelm to begin gathering traditional folktales of the German people, a task that they eventually understood as a quest to excavate and preserve the integral *Naturpoesie* of the *Volk* before it was lost forever.<sup>11</sup> The Grimms worked tirelessly for the rest of their lives on various philological projects, such as a detailed dictionary of the German language, but they are undoubtedly best known for the collections of folktales they began to publish at this time, starting with the first edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* in 1812.

For all their talk of using their work to encapsulate the essence of the *Volk*, however, the stories of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* were drawn from a surprisingly narrow selection of sources. While a few stories originated from the words of local retired soldiers and older peasant women, the majority were taken from the mouths of friends of their sister's: young, unmarried, generally middle class, girls.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many tales drew from already established works with origins outside of Germany. "Little Red Cap," "Cinderella," and "Briar Rose," for example, borrow significant portions of their narratives from the work of Charles Perrault, a Frenchman who published his own anthology of folktales nearly two hundred years before the Grimms.<sup>13</sup> There was a valid

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10. Acocella, "Once Upon a Time," 4.

11. Zipes, introduction to *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales*, xxiii.

12. Dollerup, "Translation as a Creative Force," 96.

13. Acocella, "Once Upon a Time," 2.

effort made to reach a broader range of sources, expressed in a circular written and distributed by Jacob imploring German people to record and share with the brothers any folktales, legends, proverbs, and other remnants of oral tradition “without embellishment or addition, from the mouth of the teller, and whenever possible in his own words.”<sup>14</sup> Despite an earnest intention to expand their base of sources, Jacob’s effort to reach more voices, and ultimately obtain the raw materials to produce a collection that truly encapsulated the voices of the *Volk*, was largely unsuccessful, as his letter was met with minimal response—a fact that the Grimms did little to advertise. The preface to the original 1812 edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* echoed a similar sentiment to the circular, despite failing to collect the diverse breadth of stories they had initially aspired to: “We have tried to grasp and interpret these tales as purely as possible...No incident has been added or embellished and changed, for we would have shied away from expanding tales already so rich in and of themselves with their own analogies and similarities.”<sup>15</sup> The Grimm’s philosophy remained consistent, but their ideology surrounding how the stories should be recorded was ultimately irrelevant when faced with the project’s reality. The original stories themselves could hardly begin to represent the fullness of the true German *Volk*, and capturing the tales they were given “as purely as possible” would do nothing to change that fact. As the brothers continued to collect and study the folktales that would define their careers and legacies, the published results veered even further from these original sources.

After the publication of the 1812 edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, Wilhelm took on the role of primary editor, bringing with him a refreshed philosophy: that his job

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14. Michaelis-Jena, “Oral Tradition,” 269.

15. Zipes, introduction to *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales*, xxvii.

was to not only collect the stories, but to edit, expand, and improve them. Some stories grew in length and detail; some, he blended together; others, he omitted completely.<sup>16</sup> Wilhelm allowed his vision of whom the stories should benefit, in addition to his personal understanding of what messages and themes they should feature, to intervene and adjust their overarching messages and underlying tones. In his mind, these changes were completely justified: “the aim of our collection was not just to serve the cause of the history of poetry: It was our intention that the poetry living in it be effective.”<sup>17</sup> Deviations from the original material, he maintained, were acceptable as long as they improved the ‘effectiveness’ of the work itself. Wilhelm’s technique undeniably drew more popularity to the brothers’ subsequent publications, but the stories themselves shifted further and further from their primary forms.

The Grimms made the decision to alter the stories in order to attract a broader audience, primarily middle class families and their children. The publication of the 1812 edition of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* drew little widespread attention, and while their immense passion for the project remained, but it is likely they were at least partially financially motivated as they initiated changes that would make the stories more appealing to more people.<sup>18</sup> Much of the criticism the brothers had received for their first edition was that the stories were too dark and graphic to be suitable for children.<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm, and eventually Jacob, accepted the fact that *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* would be more widely accepted and enjoyed if the stories were changed to more closely align

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16. Michaelis-Jena, “Oral Tradition,” 267.

17. Hettinga, “Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm,” 140.

18. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, “The Publishing History of Grimms’ Tales: Reception at the Cash Register,” in *The Reception of Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, ed. Donald Haase, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 81.

19. Dollerup, “Translation as a Creative Force,” 97.

with the typical family values of the time.<sup>20</sup> They therefore chose to omit stories that featured overt violence. “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering,” for example, an extremely brief tale that appeared in the 1812 edition, depicts a group of young, unnamed children that decide to murder one of their friends as a part of a twisted game of ‘butcher.’ It features images such as the following: “the butcher now fell upon the little boy playing the pig, threw him to the ground, and slit his throat open with a knife, while the assistant cook caught the blood in her little bowl.”<sup>21</sup> This was one of many tales removed from subsequent collections for an unnerving, gruesome nature that would have alienated families seeking stories to reinforce the morals and values they hoped to instill in their impressionable children—especially considering the fact that the young murderer is set free without consequence at the end of “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering.”<sup>22</sup> Other stories survived in modified forms: the character of the evil queen in “Little Snow White,” for example, was transformed from Snow White’s biological mother with intentions to prepare and eat the young princess’s lungs and liver once she was killed; to a stepmother, who remained jealous and cruel but lacked any cannibalistic impulse.<sup>23, 24</sup> Again, a decision was made to limit some of the more disturbing pieces of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* to make it more appropriate for children. Likewise, by changing Snow White’s villainous biological mother to a distant stepmother, the Grimms

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20. Hettinga, “Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm,” 143-144.

21. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering,” in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed./trans. Jack Zipes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 169.

22. *Ibid.*, 169.

23. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “Little Snow White,” in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, ed./trans. Jack Zipes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 170-178.

24. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “Snow-White,” in *One Hundred Favorite Folk Tales*, ed. Stith Thompson, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 326-333.

made the story easier to swallow and ultimately more attractive to the time's bourgeoisie, which would have held the general belief that no biological mother would be capable of such contempt for their own child.<sup>25</sup> The Grimms' initial ideal of objective recording ultimately came in conflict with the reality of the works' reception: as *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* grew in popularity, it began to bend to external pressures: namely, the values, beliefs, and demands of what Jacob and Wilhelm determined to be the collection's target audience. In addition, the stories were subject to subtler, more intimate influences: the values and beliefs of the brothers themselves.

It is often asserted that despite the changes the Grimms did initiate, the themes of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* remain rooted in their original Germanic pagan tradition, and therefore are genuine recollections of their ancient forms. However, while the stories do retain old German influences, they are simultaneously reminiscent of the Grimms' own religious understanding as Reformed Christians. The resulting tales were neither completely pagan nor completely Christian: instead, they present an unprecedented spiritual blend, evident in stories such as "Hansel and Gretel." "Hansel and Gretel" tells the story of a brother and sister abandoned in the woods by their impoverished parents, who no longer have the means to feed them. Wandering through the forest, the hungry children discover and begin to eat a house made entirely of candy and sweets. However, they soon learn that the house belongs to an evil witch, who promptly imprisons them with plans to cook and eat them. Hansel and Gretel eventually kill the witch, escape, and return home rich with jewels.<sup>26</sup> The presence of Germanic religious influence in this story

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25. Bottigheimer, "The Publishing History of Grimms' Tales," 81.

26. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "Haensel and Gretel," in *One Hundred Favorite Folk Tales*, ed. Stith Thompson, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 55-61.

cannot be ignored. The concept of the ‘enchanted forest’ that appears so frequently in the Grimms’ work is an inherently pagan one: the spirit world, it was believed, primarily resided in the natural one.<sup>27</sup> For Hansel and Gretel, it is not until they enter completely into the archetypal woods that they encounter the supernatural witch. However, the Grimms’ retelling also heavily emphasized the story’s Christian themes—much more so than, for example, “Hop O’ My Thumb,” a similar story written by Perrault upon which “Hansel and Gretel” is thought to be based.<sup>28</sup> After overhearing his parents plan to leave their children to die in the woods, Hansel reassures his sister: ““Don’t weep, Gretel, and just go to sleep; the dear Lord will surely help us.””<sup>29</sup> This statement of optimism is remarkably similar to one Jacob wrote in a letter to Wilhelm, comforting him after the death of a family member: “...the same stars are in the skies, and God will continue to help us.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Hansel and Gretel’s journey is repeatedly guided by doves: a motion that Wilhelm himself identified as “God [sending] his help” in his publication *Über das Wesen der Märchen, or On the Nature of Fairy Tales*.<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, the siblings’ temptation to gnaw at the witch’s house echoes the Christian tale of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve are tempted by an antagonistic serpent to eat from the tree of life.<sup>32</sup> Hansel and Gretel, like Adam and Eve, are punished for their selfish actions: the witch imprisons them, just as their biblical counterparts are symbolically imprisoned by original sin. In addition, Wilhelm, as noted by Murphy after studying annotations in his

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27. G. Ronald Murphy, *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of the Grimms’ Magic Fairy Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53.

28. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. Grimm and Grimm, “Hansel and Gretel,” 58.

30. Murray B. Peppard, *Paths Through the Forest, A Biography of the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 6.

31. Murphy, *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove*, 58.

32. *Ibid.*, 60.

personal Bibles, understood love as the epitome of spiritual belief.<sup>33</sup> This theme is clearly present in “Hansel and Gretel,” as the loving siblings comfort, confide in, and defend each other throughout their story. It is their love for each other that ultimately saves them: not the magic forest, and not God. Their love keeps them together, and only by the strength of this bond are they able to outwit the forces that conspire against them.

Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm retained the pagan roots of “Hansel and Gretel,” in addition to countless other tales, while simultaneously drawing out its Christian ones, allowing personal spiritual values to emerge intertwined with the traditional narrative.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm initially set out to objectively uncover, compile, and spread traditionally oral folktales in the purest possible form, which they believed held the core of the German peoples’ lost culture and collective identity, the *Volk*. The pervading belief that they succeeded in this regard may stem from their intense passion to uphold the Romantic ideal. However, the stories documented, in addition to being drawn from a narrow selection of sources that could not begin to represent the entire German population, were heavily influenced by both external and internal forces, such as the desire to make them more appealing to children and the insertion of the Grimms’ personal spiritual values. And yet, the Grimms are championed to this day as iconic, massively influential storytellers: frequently cited as the fathers of the modern fairytale genre. So it feels odd, inaccurate even, to label them failures. The words of their published work were never going to exactly match what they had been hundreds of years

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33. Murphy spent many years intimately studying Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms’ personal Bibles, letters, and other various external writings. Most other work analyzing the spirituality of the Brothers Grimm that I came across therefore refers back to Murphy’s study (exhibited in *The Owl, The Raven, and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of the Grimms’ Magic Fairy Tales*) as I have. Further study would require a command of the written German language and vernacular of the time in addition to access to these primary source documents.

before—the nature of something as fluid and dynamic as oral storytelling inherently dictates that whatever that ‘true’ dialogue was had already been long lost to history before the Grimms had even begun to consider it. Perhaps by altering the skeletal scraps of stories they began with into more complex, engaging forms, the brothers Grimm returned to them the quality of connectivity, richness, and truth that they had been hoping to discover already existed in full. Regardless of the degree to which they allowed the tales to transform and evolve, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm defined, through their tireless work, the essence of what makes a good story: the power to bring people together, in emotion, in solace, in identity, and in hope.

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