

Preface to the Second Edition of the Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm (1819)

Abstract

The brothers [Jacob](#) (1785–1863) and [Wilhelm Grimm](#) (1786–1859) collected proverbs and myths and compiled an extensive dictionary of the German language. They are best known, however, for their famous collection of fairy tales. In the preface to the second edition of their collection, the brothers describe the various characteristics of folk culture.

Source

PREFACE BY THE BROTHERS GRIMM

After a storm or another misfortune from the heavens has knocked an entire field of growing crops to the ground, it is possible that near some low hedges or bushes a small safe place can be found where a few growing spikes remain. If the sun shines again, they begin to grow, lonely and unnoticed. No hasty scythe harvests them for the great store houses. But in late summer, when they are ripe and full, poor hands come to search for them. Gleaned one by one, carefully bound together, and valued more than whole sheaves, they are carried home. They provide sustenance for the winter and are perhaps the only seeds for the future.

That is how it appeared to us when we saw how nothing more remained from all that had blossomed in earlier times. Even the memory of it all was almost completely lost among the people, but for a few songs, books, legends, and these innocent fairy tales. Gatherings around the oven, around the kitchen stove, on stair landings, holidays still celebrated, grazing pastures and forests in their silence, and above all the unspoiled imagination—these were the hedges that protected these seeds and passed them down from one age to another.

It was perhaps the right time to grab hold of these fairy tales, for those who preserved them were becoming ever rarer. Admittedly, those who still know them usually know quite a bit, because it is the people who die off, not the tales. But the custom itself is becoming less and less common, as are all the secret places in homes and gardens that live on from grandfather to grandson, giving way to the constant change of empty splendor, which is like the smile with which one speaks of fairy tales, a smile that appears distinguished but in reality costs very little. Where they still exist, they live, so that no one thinks about whether they are good or bad, if they are poetic or in poor taste for intelligent people. One knows them and loves them because that is the way they were learned, and one delights in them without any specific reason. So splendid is the living custom—indeed, poetry shares with all things enduring that one is drawn to it even against one's own will. One can easily note, by the way, that poetry can only be grasped when there is a vibrant receptivity for it, or where there is a capacity for fantasy that has not been extinguished by the wrongs of life. In the same way, we do not want to praise these fairy tales nor even defend them against other opinions. Their mere being is sufficient to protect them. Whatever delights again and again, whatever moves and instructs, carries its own necessity in itself and has certainly emerged from that eternal source which covers all living things with dew, and even if it were but a single drop caught by a small leaf it would nonetheless shine in the dawn's first light.

An inner purity is found in these compositions, which is why children appear so wonderful and blissful to us. They have the same bluish-white faultless shining eyes which cannot grow anymore, while the other

limbs are still tender, weak, and unfit for working the soil. That is the reason why we did not wish our collection to merely serve the history of poetry and mythology. It was our aim that the poetry itself—alive within the tales—would have an influence and delight whom it can, that it could thus serve as an educational tool. For such a work, we do not seek that sort of purity which is attained through an anxious expurgation of everything that relates to certain conditions and relations, which occur daily and in no way can remain hidden. The impulse to do so relates to the illusion that what can be achieved in a printed book can also be done in life. We seek purity in the truth of a direct narrative which does not hold back anything unjustly. Therefore, we have carefully removed from this new edition every expression that is unsuitable for children. Should one nonetheless object that one thing or another appears offensive to parents and embarrasses them to the point that they would not want the book to fall into the hands of children, the concern may be valid in some cases. In that case, one could easily select which tales would be appropriate. On the whole, which means for those in a healthy condition, this is entirely unnecessary. Nothing can better protect us than nature itself, which allowed these flowers and leaves to grow in the forms and colors they do. Whoever feels they are not beneficial according to certain needs cannot demand that they should therefore be colored or shaped differently. True, too, that rain and dew fall with kindness upon everything on earth; whoever cares not to put his plants outside because they are too sensitive and might be damaged and instead chooses to shut them up in a room and water them, such a person would never claim that rain and dew shouldn't exist. Everything that is natural can thrive, and that is what we should strive for. We know, incidentally, of no book which instructs the people, and that includes of course the Bible, in which such considerations are not present. The correct approach would not find evil in such things but rather, as the fine saying goes, a testimony of our heart. Children point at the stars without a thought, whereas others fear offending the angels, as the popular tradition would have it.

We have been collecting these tales for thirteen years. The first volume, which appeared in 1812, contains for the most part what we again and again found in oral traditions in Hesse, in the Main and Kinzig regions of the Earldom of Hanau, where we hail from. The second volume was completed in 1814 and came together more quickly, in part because the book itself had made friends who supported it, who understood what it was and how it was intended, and in part because of fortune, which is something that seems like coincidence but which often favors dedicated and industrious collectors. If one is used to paying attention to something, one encounters it more often than one can believe, and that is certainly the case with popular customs and peculiarities, saying and jokes. The lovely Low German tales from the Principalities of Munster and Paderborn we owe to exceptional kindness and friendship: the reliability of the dialect with all of its inner maturity shows itself here in an especially favorable light. There, in the famous old regions of German freedom, legends and fairy tales have been preserved as a regular feature of holidays and the country is still rich in inherited customs and songs. There, partly because written language is not yet disturbed by the introduction of outside influences nor overloaded until it is blunted, and partly because it assures that memory does not become careless, especially among peoples whose literature is not very significant, oral traditions prove themselves to be stronger and more unsullied replacements. Thus, Lower Saxony has also preserved itself more than other regions. How much more complete and internally rich a collection would have been in the fifteenth century, or in the sixteenth century, in the era of Hans Sachs and Fischart!

It was one of those lucky coincidences that we happened to make the acquaintance of a peasant woman in Niedezwehrrn, a village near Kassel, who recounted the best and greater part of the fairy tales in the second volume. Frau Viehmann was still vigorous and not much more than fifty years old. Her facial features were solid, intelligent, and pleasant. Her large eyes saw sharply and clearly. She preserved the old legends in her memory and admitted herself that this gift is not bestowed on everyone and that many are incapable of keeping track of the intricacies. Her manner of storytelling was deliberate, confident, and uncommonly lively—she clearly took pleasure in it. At first, her narrative was very free, then, if one wanted it, once again slowly, so that with practice one could transcribe it. In this way, much could be

preserved word for word and its truthfulness unmistakable. Whoever believes that sloppiness and distortion are the rule with oral traditions, and that they therefore cannot endure, must hear how exacting this woman's narrative was and how she strove for accuracy. When she repeated something she never changed it. As soon as she recognized an oversight, she corrected it, even when she was in the middle of her story. The devotion to oral traditions among people who continue to live in the same way is stronger than we, who are so accustomed to change, can comprehend. For that reason, it has a certain urgent proximity and inner efficiency that other things cannot so easily attain, however splendid they may appear on the surface. The epic basis of folk literature can be compared with the greenery which in its manifold forms is omnipresent in nature at various levels, something which satisfies and refreshes without ever becoming monotonous.

In addition to the tales in the second volume, we received numerous supplements to the first volume as well as better versions of many of the stories published there from the same or similar sources. As a hilly land far away from the grand boulevards and mostly occupied with farming, Hesse has the advantage of being better able to preserve old tales and customs. A certain seriousness, a healthy, thorough, and brave mind-set that history will not ignore, even the large and attractive frame of the region's men—it was at one time the actual dwelling place of the Chatten, a Germanic tribe—all these have been preserved and allow the lack of comfort and elegance (in comparison to other lands, Saxony, for example) to be considered more as an advantage. One perceives as well that regions which are rougher but also magnificent belong to the lifestyle of the whole as does a certain strictness and poverty. The Hessians must certainly be counted as those among our fatherland's peoples who have held on most firmly through the changing times to the unique features of their essence as well as to their old dwelling places.

We wanted to incorporate everything that we have collected up until now into the second edition of the book. For that reason, the first volume has been almost completely reworked. Everything that was incomplete has been expanded, much of the narrative has been simplified and purified, and there are few sections which have not been improved. Everything that appeared questionable has been examined again, which means that everything has been excised which might have been of foreign origin or distorted through later additions. New pieces have been added, including contributions from Austria and German Bohemia, so that one may discover previously unknown things. In the previous edition, there was only very limited space for notes. In this expanded form, we could dedicate a separate third volume to notes. This made it possible to not only relate what had previously been held back, but also to furnish new sections which we hope will make the scholarly value of these traditions more visible.

Concerning our methods of collecting material, it was faithfulness and truthfulness which mattered most to us. We did not add anything of our own, nor did we embellish any circumstance or feature of the tales. We simply reproduced their content just as we had received it. It is self-evident that the expression and execution of the details is in large part ours, yet we have sought to keep every unique feature that we noticed, so that in this way, too, the collection could be given over to nature's diversity. Anyone occupied with similar work will grasp that this can in no way be termed a carefree and inattentive interpretation. On the contrary, attentiveness and tact is necessary, the sort of thing that can only be acquired with time, in order to discern the simple, pure, and perfect from the adulterated. Where they complemented each other and no contradictions were there to be eliminated, we combined several tales into one. If there were discrepancies in the different versions, we selected the best and preserved the others in the notes. We were more curious about these sorts of discrepancies than about those which were mere changes or distortions of an earlier prototype, because these may very well be only attempts, some of the many and inexhaustible, to approach such a prototypical image, present only in spirit. Repetitions of single sentences, features, and introductions should be considered as lines in an epic which, as soon as the opening tone begins, always repeat, and, in another sense, these cannot be understood at all.

We have happily preserved a resolute dialect. If that could have been the case everywhere, the narrative

certainly would have profited. Here we have a case where all of the education, refinement, and art a language has achieved is as nothing and one feels that a purified written language, as adroit as it may otherwise be, may be clearer and more transparent, but also less flavorful and less able to grasp the crux of things. It is a shame that the Low Hessian dialect in the Kassel region is an indefinite and not purely comprehensible mixture of Low Saxon and High German, as in the border areas of the old Saxon and Frankish districts of Hesse.

In this sense, there is to our knowledge no other collection of fairy tales in Germany. Either there were only a few tales, which were coincidentally passed on, or one considered them merely as raw material from which greater stories could be formed. We declare ourselves opposed to such treatments. It is doubtless that in every living feeling for literature there is a poetic formation and reformation without which even an oral tradition would be unfruitful and extinct. This is indeed one of the reasons every region, every mouth relates a story differently. But there is a great distinction between the sort of half-conscious simplicity which is infused with the unmediated life-source and resembles the silent reproduction of plant life, and a deliberate modification which arbitrarily throws everything together and probably trims it down as well—this is the sort of thing which we cannot approve. The sole guiding principle would be the all-powerful view of the individual writer, dependent upon his education [*Bildung*], whereas in every natural expansion [*Fortbilden*] the spirit of the people reigns in the individual and does not permit a special urge for one to push forward. If one ascribes a scholarly value to oral traditions, this means—one must admit—that mentalities and formations of earlier times are preserved in them. Thus, it is self-evident that this scholarly value is destroyed by such revisions. Even the aesthetic dimension loses something with these sorts of revisions, for where is literature truly alive if not there where it reaches the soul, where it cools and refreshes or where it warms and strengthens? But every revision of these legends which takes away their simplicity, innocence, and plain purity removes them from the environment in which they belong and where one longs for them again and again without ever becoming weary. It can be, and this is the best case, that one replaces these things with elegance, spirit, humor (which brings with it the ridicule of the ages), a tender elaboration of the feelings, which is not so difficult to one schooled in the literatures of all peoples. But these gifts have more gloss than use, they remind one of the kind of single reading or hearing to which our age has become accustomed to, and for which its passion has sharpened. But when something is repeated, its humor tires us. What endures is something quiet, calm, and pure. A hand trained in such revisions can be compared with the unfortunate man in the legend whose touch turned everything—even food—into gold; in the midst of riches he could neither eat nor drink. Where should mythology be created when not in the images of pure imagination? How pale, how inwardly empty, how formless everything looks despite the best and strongest words! This, incidentally, is only said in opposition to the so-called revisions which seek to make fairy tales more literary and more attractive, not against the sort of free interpretation which transforms these tales into works of art which belong to our time—for who would care to set boundaries for art?

We present this book to well-wishing readers, conscious of the purifying power which it contains. We wish that it should remain concealed from those who do not allow these crumbs of poetry to the poor and the frugal.

Kassel. July 3, 1819.

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