

## The Brothers Grimm and Their Folk Tales

Talk given at the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution in association with the Folklore Society March 2000 to accompany an exhibition of David Hockney's 'Grimms' Fairy Tales etchings.'

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, two brothers, published a book of folktales based on material gathered, for the most part, from storytellers in central Germany. The two distinguished German philologists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published a collection of two hundred and ten tales in 1812. They included copious notes giving details of the sources and significance of these narratives which they believed represented an untainted expression of an ancient heritage, the authentic voices of the German *volk*. The volume *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, (Children's and Household Tales) was not an immediate success. 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 had begun. In 1825 a German version produced by Jacob and Wilhelm and illustrated by their brother, Ludwig, was produced just in time for the Christmas market and the commercialisation of Grimm's Fairytales was underway.

The collection 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 such well-loved characters as Cinderella, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel and some favourite villains such as Rumpelstiltskin and the Wolf. Here is a world in which wicked stepmothers prowl the palaces and witches lurk in the woods, but the hero or heroine always wins out in the end. Known in English as *Grimm's Fairytales*, its worldwide popularity 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 founded in the 1930's which is familiar to all, and there are many less well-known spin offs. For example a tourist route, the Deutsche Märchenstrasse begins at the town in which the Brothers Grimm were born and meanders through the German countryside while, more exotically, there is a Fairytale theme park in Japan.

Jacob and Wilhelm's own story has elements which seem to come straight from the tales they collected. They were born within a year of each other in 1785 into a good middle-class German household. They lived first in Hanau and later in Stenau where their father was town clerk. Wilhelm attributed their interest in folklore to their idyllic childhood

wandering the countryside. There is undoubtedly some autobiographical nostalgia in this. In fact after their father's untimely death in 1796, the family fell on hard times. Nevertheless the brothers attended the Lyceum at Kassel and later the University at Marburg where they began collecting tales for German romantic poet/scholars such as Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, whose own research resulted in *Das Knaben Wunderhorn*. Between 1812 and 1815, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their first version of what has become a classic of world literature. Like the unpromising hero in so many of their stories, the collection did not originally resemble what it was to become. Their purpose in producing the tales was scholarly and certainly not aimed at a popular, much less a juvenile, market and the work was not initially a commercial or even critical success.

Many of the tales actually derive from 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. Nor were many of the informants rustic storytellers, but people 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 the world over. Nevertheless as many as forty informants may have provided tales for the collection. 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 'Red Riding Hood', 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty' was a simple peasant housekeeper. In fact she was a well-educated woman of French-Hougenot background, Marie Hassenpflug. A surprising 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 and forms the basis for one of Hockney's etchings. She is described as old woman from a peasant village who remembered her tales and told them in a simple unforced manner. In actual fact, she too had a French Huguenot background and was not illiterate. Another interesting informant whose name has come to light only in the past thirty years is Serjeant Friedrich Krause. Wilhelm Grimm wrote to a friend that 'an old soldier' had given him some unusual tales in exchange for some old clothes. Among these tales are 'The King of the Golden Mountain' and 'The Napkin, The Knapsack and The Horn' in which the underdog or a poor man makes good often by cunning or even trickery. Just the thing for an elderly ex-soldier living on the margins of poverty, and it gives us something which the universalised, re-written tales so familiar to all deny us, a look at the individuals who chose particular tales that pleased them and told them in highly individual ways.

We now see the tales through the eyes, and perhaps even more crucially, through the illustrations of late Victorian and early twentieth century adapters and illustrators, but the background to the collection and publication 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, at least by the end of the century, an age of doubt in which the romantic movement in places like Germany was becoming more 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, especially in the province of Hesse, was an antidote to such a fate. Such *Naturpoesie* was an authentic and spontaneous creation of 'the folk', in this case German peasants, who lived in harmony with nature. Such texts were culturally valuable in themselves 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. However, the extensive notes in the early editions tell a much more complicated story. The idealised peasant storytellers of the Grimms were in many ways just that, an ideal. Many of the texts came from published sources and many of the informants were literate, middle class and from the Grimms' own circle of friends and family. The Grimm's 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.

This seems a curious beginning for a world classic. Tales which are actually quite different from those which the informants told the collectors, informants who were hardly peasant storytellers, extensive notes, no pictures and not even the first of its kind. In a very real way the illustrations provide the key. In 1823 an English translation called *German Popular Stories* appeared. The editors, Edgar Taylor and David Jardine, reduced the notes, added illustrations, and re-focused the tales for a juvenile audience. Juvenile literature was undergoing a halcyon period at the time and would continue to flourish throughout the nineteenth-century and twentieth centuries, as long as middle-class families took an interest in the education and moral outlook of their offspring. Walter Scott noted in a preface to Taylor's translation that tales with 'a wild fairy interest' were better adapted to awaken the imagination of the young than the good-boy stories especially composed for them. Allowing for reference to the non-existent fairies in the Brothers Grimm tales, Scott hit the nail squarely on the head and the process of popularisation began. In 1825, the Brothers Grimm produced their own popular version, *Kleine Ausgabe* shortened to about fifty tales with illustrations by their brother Ludwig. The illustrations made all the difference and marked the beginning of a trend which embodies these tales in images of all kinds, book illustrations, films, advertisements or a series of prints.

The twentieth century further extended the popular reach of this material with the rise of department stores and mail order catalogues which made the book and eventually collateral merchandise available to a wider public. . The most influential modern adaptations of the Brothers Grimm stories are Walt Disney's full-length movies, *Snow White* in 1937, *Cinderella* in 1950 and *Sleeping Beauty* in 1964 and most recently *Beauty and the Beast*. The tales had become objects of marketing even before that. *Snow White* was adapted as a musical in America as early as 1913 and pop-up books appeared in the 1930's even before Disney's watershed animation of *Snow White* in 1937. Pantomime versions of *Cinderella* were already part of London theatre by the end of the 19th century. *Cinderella* is notable in being a cross between the Brothers Grimm version and that of Charles Perrault. In the Grimm version known as *Aschenputtel*, the girl consults her mother's spirit and receives her ball dresses (three not one) from a bush growing on her mother's grave and the ugly sisters happily slice off their feet to accommodate the glass slipper. The Perrault version is more genteel and set in an eighteenth-century world, and it is the costuming and attitudes of the eighteenth century seem to predominate.

The popularity of the tales coupled with the effects of re-writing and marketing has caused them to be atomised into individual units. We no longer think of the tales as told by a particular storyteller, much less part of an extended repertoire. They exist as universal and independent units and this has facilitated their use in mass media. The stereotypical Germanic peasant surroundings are beginning to disappear in, for example, the Levi's jeans television commercial in the 1990s in which a female 'prince' searches for the male 'Cinderella' who fits into a pair of Levi jeans. With the advent of the Disney chain stores, collateral marketing has reached new heights and there are many who are uneasy with the effects of this. However the Brothers Grimm still provide a reference for children's literature and for the popular consumption of tales. The strength of this can be seen in places like Russia and China where the decisions of political regimes have encouraged the popularisation of their own native heritage. Once these pressures are relaxed, more universal popular images, especially when linked to advertising, begin to gain headway. It is now accepted that the Brothers re-wrote their tales to a great extent. At this period folk materials were almost universally treated in this way, and what is interesting from the point of view of popular culture is the way in which they changed and continued to change their texts. Undoubtedly these texts 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 violence is considered unsuitable for children or the patriarchal structure unsympathetic to feminist values. Under social and commercial pressures the tales change, but they remain capable of infinite revision within the parameters of juvenile literature and adult fantasy projection.

When the Grimms began collecting their tales, they felt as so many have since then, that such material was about to disappear under the onslaught of progress. In this they were certainly mistaken. The peasant world as they saw it was full of unlettered peasants professing the profound and basic wisdom contained in their oral heritage and living a simple, noble existence according to an ancient way of life. The Grimms' peasant world

probably never existed and certainly the areas where they collected have changed, but the tales continue. The life they depicted in the tales and in the background notes which accompanied the first editions was not an easy life, but it was one with rustic nobility. One suspects they would not have approved of the chocolate box romanticism of Walt Disney, but one feels that the spare almost harsh style of Hockney's prints would have been very much to their taste.