

THE GRIMMIFICATION OF NARRATIVE TRADITION

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Would you know German sculptor Georg Petel (1601/02-1634/35), Belgian composer André Grétry (1741-1813), Russian reformer Mikhaïl Speransky (1772-1835), or Italian poet Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907)? These characters do not belong to the canon of famous people an average Western intellectual would regularly be acquainted with. And yet, all of them have been equated with iconic characters in their field of expertise that are disproportionately better known.¹ Petel has been labelled the German Michelangelo, Grétry the French Mozart, Speransky the Russian Montesquieu, and Carducci the Italian Heine. Of course, these labels fit only to a limited degree. Their main intent is to evoke the universally acknowledged authority of an iconic character and to transfer this unchallenged authority to a lesser-known character in another national community, thus enhancing the latter's status. Numerous similar equations name characters enjoying world-wide renown on both sides: Pushkin has been labelled the Russian Goethe, the Marquis de Sade the French Boccaccio, Dante the Italian Shakespeare, Kant the German Robbespierre, Krzysztof Penderecki the Polish Beethoven and chancellor Angela Merkel the German Thatcher. Amusing as some of these equations may or may not be, in the present context they serve to draw attention to a number of theoretical issues related to the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm B themselves icons in the field of historical and comparative folk narrative research B and to the reception of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Nursery and Household Tales; henceforth KHM), the bicentenary of whose first publication has been commemorated worldwide in numerous scientific and honorific meetings in 2012.

Applying my somewhat playful introduction to the brothers Grimm, one finds a number of similar equations emphasizing the Grimms' iconic character. In alphabetical order of regional or national background, Walt Disney (1901-1966) has been labelled the American Grimm (Jack Zipes 1999), Jean-François Bladé (1827-1900; Tenèze 1979)² the French, Elek Benedek (1859-1929; Kovács 1979) the Hungarian, Italo Calvino (1923-1985) the Italian, and Alexander Afanasjew (1826-1871; Levin 1977) the Russian Grimm. I will leave aside for the moment the linguistic reduction

- 1 Unless stated otherwise, all of the equations quoted in the present essay's initial paragraphs have been located in a variety of internet resources. Since many of these resources are rather uncritical, I refrain from supplying detailed references. The point in quoting the equations here is precisely to argue with popular assumptions and uncritically conceived notions.
- 2 As a long-term senior member of the editorial board of the German language *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (EM), I would explicitly like to make it a point in the present essay that encyclopedic articles are meant to be quoted. The disproportionately large number of articles from the EM referenced in the present essay thus consciously serves to advertise the wealth of information contained in this concise handbook of historical and comparative folk narrative research.

of the two brothers Jacob and Wilhelm to a single Grimm – a reduction that is probably due to the dominant perception of Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) as the one brother who shaped the fairy-tale style of the Grimm tales more than his brother Jacob (Denecke 1990). I also do not intend to reflect on the implications of the quoted equations. Tentatively, we may surmise that they allude to a similarly intense impact of the respective national individual as that exercised by the brothers Grimm in Germany. Instead, I am primarily interested in the reductionist message implied in the quoted equations and its impact on subsequent oral tradition and related folklorist perception.

The following considerations supplement an essay, originally published in 1955, in which Kurt Ranke (1978) discussed the influence of the KHM on popular narrative tradition in Germany. I do not intend to link my considerations to the current debate on the primacy of written or literary tradition over popular oral tradition such as continued most recently by Willem de Blécourt (2012) and Jack Zipes (2012: 175-189). Instead, I propose to discuss a neglected aspect of the most pertinent issue of the KHM's reception (Rölleke 1993: 1285-1286), namely the formation of a folklorist canon and its potentially detrimental impact on subsequent oral tradition. While my considerations are directed at probably the most influential folktale collection ever published, they are part of greater discussions, such as those on canonicity and world literature. Even though some of my remarks are fairly polemical, their consciously biased tone should not distract us from acknowledging the serious impact of canonicity in the field of folk narrative studies, a field whose subject – folk narratives – diametrically opposes canonicity by displaying variability (Kiliánová 2010) and diversity as one of its most fascinating characteristics.

The publication of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by the brothers Grimm is duly acknowledged as a major achievement in the documentation and study of popular narrative. Firmly embedded in the romantic discourse of collective tradition such as programmatically outlined by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803; Poltermann 1990) the Grimms not only managed to draw public and scholarly attention to the hitherto neglected genre of folktales and fairy tales. Moreover, by diligently commenting on the history and distribution of the tales, they also laid the cornerstone for the discipline of folk narrative research that was subsequently developed by scholars such as Theodor Benfey (1809-1881; Simson 1979), Emmanuel Cosquin (1841-1919; Tenèze 1981), Walter Anderson (1885-1962; Ranke 1977), Antti Aarne (1867-1925; Rausmaa 1977), and many more. Meanwhile, our indebtedness to the Grimms for laying the foundations of our discipline and our fascination with the tremendous impact their collection had in terms of national and international attention awarded to popular narrative tradition is only one side of the coin. In particular considering the fact that the vast majority of tales from oral tradition were collected after and, essentially, as a result of the Grimms' initiative, it is imperative that scholars not only praise the Grimms for having opened up a new perspective on popular tradition. Instead, we should also consider whether the collection's fame may or may not have worked to the disadvantage of living oral tradition and its scholarly perception.

Prior to the Grimms, and contemporary with their work, numerous variants of specific folk narratives are known to have existed in German oral tradition. The Grimms themselves bespeak this variety by occasionally discussing versions of the

stories they published that differed in wording, structure, or content. The available evidence leads us to presume that the popularity of the Grimms' collection not only, and maybe even not primarily, resulted in a creative urge to collect folktales and other items of oral tradition. According to Kurt Ranke, it even seems as if the early popularity of the KHM prevented any initiative in terms of independent publications prepared by other researchers for several decades (Ranke 1981: 510). Supposedly, the collection's popularity also exercised a certain normative impetus, to the effect that many, if not most, tales collected from German oral tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are often more or less direct retellings of the Grimm tales. If this assessment holds true, the effect of the Grimm collection would ultimately be detrimental, since it would have impoverished the variety and diversity of narrative tradition, in the long run risking to relegate formerly vibrant indigenous narrative traditions to the ephemeral status of endangered species. To denote this hypothetical phenomenon, I here use the term "Grimmification". This term, while rarely employed in previous studies, has so far been defined in direct opposition to the belittling, harmonizing, and commercializing effects of "Disneyfication" (Bendix 1993) as "the act of allegedly de-bowdlerizing a story, but going to the other extreme: making it Grimmdark," ("Grimmification" [1]) or else "making a traditional fairy tale even darker and edgier than it may have already been" ("Grimmification" [2]). By applying the term "Grimmification" to the discipline of folk narrative research, I rather denote the long-lasting and decisive impact of the Grimm tales on both subsequent oral tradition and the research discipline studying this tradition.

Before elaborating my contention in regard to the Grimm tales in some detail, let me first turn to a similar case whose effects are probably even more striking than that of the Grimm tales. The Arabic collection of stories originally known as *The Thousand and One Nights* was first introduced to the European public by way of its French adaptation prepared by Antoine Galland at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Galland presented the Arabic tales in a translation that subsequent research has labelled a "belle infidèle" (May 1986; Larzul 1996: 20-24). This term denotes the contemporary practice of a relatively free translation aiming to accommodate both traits of the original and addressing the contemporary audience in a language and style it would appreciate. Galland's translation immediately met with a fascinated audience and was soon translated into the other major European languages. In English, the collection became known as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, in short *The Arabian Nights*, or shorter even as the *Nights*. Research over the past decades has proved beyond reasonable doubt that those tales of the *Nights* that are best known in European and international tradition never belonged to the original collection. Rather, they had been inserted by Galland in response to the contemporary audience's demand while drawing on and elaborating the oral performance of Syrian Maronite storyteller Hanna Diyab (Abdel-Halim 1964: 271-287; Marzolph 2012). The triad of "usual suspects" most readers of the *Nights* would primarily remember includes the stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sindbad. Through a process that is tainted by mystification and wrong assumptions, these tales have shaped the popular notion of a typical tale of the *Nights* and, hence, have come to represent the collection as a whole in an exemplary manner. Meanwhile, whereas nobody would deny the fact that these tales are fascinating examples of the Oriental art of storytelling, they have neither been part of the *Nights* in their

indigenous Arabic or, for that matter, "Oriental" context, nor did they ever possess an exemplary status for the collection itself. Following the reception of the animated cartoon version of *Aladdin* produced by the Disney studios in 1992, popular perception was narrowed even further (Cooperson 1994; Marzolph 1995). Now, the Disney version of *Aladdin* could be taken as representative of the tale's version in the *Nights* and, by extension, as representative of the *Nights* in general. Because the collection as a whole had been taken as an ethnographic representation of "Oriental" life since the nineteenth century, uncritical recipients would furthermore be tempted to perceive the roles and stereotypes in the Disney *Aladdin* as representing "authentic" "Oriental" life.

From today's perspective, the introduction of the *Nights* to world literature is generally praised as making available a major source of inspiration. After all, the *Nights* had a tremendous impact in virtually all fields of the creative arts on a truly international level. Meanwhile, we should not forget that the Western reception of the *Nights* also contributed to the creation of the perfunctory and biased perception of the "Orient" known as "Orientalism", a term that is best known through the work of Palestinian American literary scholar Edward W. Said (1978). Moreover, the canonization of the *Nights* as a monument of Arabic storytelling also implies a simplistic and reductionist perception. Since the general audience takes the character of the *Nights* in its present form for granted, scholars attempting to unravel their complex textual history risk being regarded as poor sports. Moreover, the exclusive attention awarded to the *Nights* cynically relegates to oblivion the tremendous amount of anonymous Arabic collections of tales on whose repertoire the *Nights* would often draw (Chraïbi 2008). Assessed in general terms, the creation and adoration of a monument (in the present case, a monument of narrative tradition) displays a deep human longing for authority, while at the same time inherently inhibiting the monument's adequate assessment against the complex backdrop of its historical development.

As for the impact of the *Nights* on European oral tradition, there is no doubt that each and every single version of tales such as *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Robbers* recorded from oral storytelling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is but a retelling of the text as read in the *Nights*, as heard performed following the performer's reading, or as listened to during a secondary performance (Marzolph 2013a). Aboubakr Chraïbi (2007) has convincingly argued for the existence of indigenous Arabic versions of *Ali Baba* that are independent from Galland's version. Meanwhile, virtually all of the *Nights'* tales documented from European oral tradition betray a clear connection to or even direct dependency on the literary text that originated from an extraneous context.

Rudolf Schenda (1993, 2007) has labelled the process underlying this kind of tradition as "semiliterate" or "semi-oral". Referring to Albert Wesselski's (1871-1939; Marzolph 2013b) seminal studies about the impact of medieval and early modern written versions on the oral versions of a given tale, Schenda has collected numerous quotations from the prefaces or notes to nineteenth- and twentieth-century European tale collections in which the storytellers themselves are mentioned as commenting on the influence of a published text on their performance. Meanwhile, for the vast majority of tales collected from oral tradition, we rely on secondary evidence in order to determine the degree of their dependency on written versions the storytellers might have read or to whose performance they might have listened.

In order to find out to which extent the oral versions of specific tales may or may not have been influenced by the versions contained in the Grimm collection, I have browsed through the relevant entries in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. These entries are essentially short encyclopaedic studies, discussing the content, history, distribution, and variation of a specific international tale-type³. Even though the entries follow a given structure, they have been written by various authors and betray specific focuses as well as varying preferences.

The resulting survey shows that many of the entries mention the Grimm version in one way or another. But even those entries that analyse a given tale's versions in oral tradition rarely discuss the specific question of how the oral versions may or may not relate to the corresponding Grimm tale. Meanwhile, the majority of entries that actually do include statements about the relationship between the Grimm text and versions documented from subsequent oral tradition regularly stress the latter's dependency on its published predecessor or closely related versions. This is a short selection of statements (in chronological order of the KHM):

- Extended versions of tale-type 1642: *The Good Bargain* are said to depend in all likelihood on KHM 7 (Moser-Rath 1990: 449).
- The few versions of tale-type 310: *The Maiden in the Tower* documented from German oral tradition betray a close similarity to KHM 12, whereas international tradition is dominated by Basile's version (Uther 1993b: 792).
- The entry for tale-type 555: *The Fisherman and His Wife* mentions that the strong influence of KHM 19 on subsequent oral tradition "can hardly be overestimated" (Rölleke 1984: 1232).
- The article for tale-type 510 A: *Cinderella* states a strong influence of KHM 21 on oral versions documented in Germany, Denmark, and Norway (Wehse 1981: 43).
- Versions of tale-type 851: *The Princess Who Cannot Solve the Riddle* documented from oral tradition in Canada, Africa, and East India are assessed as deriving from KHM 22 (Goldberg 2004: 288).
- Versions of tale-type 333: *Little Red Riding Hood* either follow KHM 26 or the Perrault version, the respective model being discernible through a detailed analysis of the specific variation of details (Shojaei Kawan 2004: 856).
- In the course of the twentieth century, adaptations of KHM 27 have superseded the richly diversified versions tale-type 563: *The Table, the Donkey and the Stick* recorded from oral tradition (Neumann 2010: 590-591).
- For tale-type 800: *The Tailor in Heaven* we learn about a strong impact of the fourth edition of KHM 35 on oral tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Dinslage 2007: 148).
- For oral versions of tale-type 65: *The She-Fox's Suitors*, KHM 38 is quoted to have been influential (Belgrader 1987: 237).
- For tale-type 710: *Our Lady's Child*, we learn that "since the publication of

3 The theoretical concept of tale-type is one of the backbones of the discipline of comparative folk narrative research. It has most evidently been put to practice in the catalogue of folktales documented from Indo-European tradition compiled by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (1961), and its revision by Hans-Jörg Uther (2004).

- the *Nursery and Household Tales*, the Grimm version [KHM 39] dominates both the literary and the oral development of the tale" (Drascek 1999: 340).
- For tale-type 720: *The Juniper Tree* the inclusion of KHM 47 in the KHM's Small Edition (1825) apparently had a decisive impact on later tradition (Lox 2010: 825).
 - Oral versions of tale-type 405: *Jorinde and Joringel* often display a clear dependency on KHM 69 (Uther 1993a: 633).
 - For tale-type 157: *Animals Learn to Fear Men* the influence of KHM 72 is not to be underestimated, since printed versions of the Grimms and their epigones appear to have exercised a stabilizing effect on the tale's version as documented in north- and middle-European tradition (Lindahl 1987: 577).
 - Tale-type 652: *The Prince Whose Wishes Always Come True*, even though rarely documented, became part of (or "returned" to) oral tradition through the repercussion of KHM 76 (Meder 2002: 1328).
 - Tale-type 980 A-B: *The Ungrateful Son* became known worldwide by virtue of KHM 78 (Rölleke 1990: 252).
 - Oral versions of tale-type 750 A: *The Three Wishes* betray a strong influence of KHM 87 (Chesnutt forthcoming).
 - KHM 110 exercised a strong influence on the development of tale-type 592: *The Dance among Thorns* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bottigheimer 2010: 198-199).
 - Oral versions of tale-type 660: *The Three Doctors* documented in the past 150 years follow KHM 118 (Thompson 1981: 744).
 - All versions of tale-type 1130: *Counting Out Pay* documented from oral tradition derive from KHM 195 (Lixfeld 1990: 71).

In this manner, the entries dealing with the issue of post-Grimm tradition mention a more or less pronounced influence of the Grimm version on subsequent oral tradition. Only a few of the entries explicitly warn against overestimating the impact of the related Grimm version on oral tradition. For instance, for tale-type 451: *The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers*, only a few of the versions recorded from oral tradition are quoted to derive from KHM 25 with certainty (Shojaei Kawan 1996: 1360). For tale-type 700: *Thumbling*, only versions documented from secondary oral tradition in Iran, Japan, and New Mexico obviously betray a discernible influence of the Grimm version (KHM 37; Pape 1981: 352). And the scarce documentation of tale-type 410: *Sleeping Beauty* (KHM 50) in oral tradition even leads to the generalized statement that it indicates the relatively feeble influence of the Grimm collection on living popular tradition (Ranke 1978: 81-82; Neemann 2007: 15-16).

If we take the analysis of the EM-entries as representative assessments, the question remains as to how we are to evaluate the general impact of the Grimm tales on subsequent oral tradition. At this point, it is first of all useful to take into consideration the publishing history of the Grimm collection. Ruth Bottigheimer (1993) reminds us that the first edition (1812/15) of the Grimm tales was a poor commercial success. Even though the publication of the KHM's first Small Edition (1825) "is supposed to mark the point at which the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* finally captured the hearts and minds of the German people" (84), the Grimm collection continued to have "a limited share of the German-language fairy-tale market during much of the nineteenth century" (94). Substantial sales

only occurred after the expiration of the collection's copyright in 1893, and sales figures have been soaring ever since. If one applies these results to the present discussion, significant evaluations of the impact of the Grimm collection on subsequent oral tradition can best be made for tales collected after the turn of the century. While this chronological range excludes the many nineteenth-century collections of tales from oral tradition, the mass-production of the latter half of the twentieth century added yet another facet to both publishing history and public reception. It is only then that the repertoire of the Grimm tales is further boiled down in numerous popular editions. Similarly to equating the tale of Aladdin with *The Thousand and One Nights* in general, popular perception would eventually identify the Grimm tales with probably less than a dozen popular tales such as *Puss in Boots*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow-White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. While empirical research will yet have to substantiate this claim, we may conclude that if the Grimm collection eventually had a detrimental impact on subsequent oral tradition, this effect occurred only in the long run and as a result of changing market conditions.

Moreover, even though the Grimm versions of specific tales may or may not have exercised a strong impact on oral tradition, we should not underestimate the creativity of the storytellers. Even if storytellers of the nineteenth and twentieth century took the models of their tales from the Grimm collection, their orally performed tales are often characterized by creative adaptation rather than slavish reproduction. Trusting in the storytellers' creativity – or, as Ranke had it, in the fact that fairy tales in oral tradition follow their own laws (1978: 85) – the publication of the Grimm tales would have served to fertilize oral tradition by supplying new raw material rather than exercising a strong normative effect.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that we are not to blame the Grimms themselves for whatever happened to their tales after their well-intentioned effort to draw public attention to German oral narrative tradition. Nothing could better illustrate this point than the recent media hype related to the alleged "discovery" of five hundred new fairy tales in Germany (Bendix 2012). These tales had been collected in Bavaria by Franz Xaver Schönwerth (1810-1882; Alzheimer 2007), a character well known and appreciated for his work in German folkloristics and cultural anthropology. Sensationalist news coverage suddenly created international attention for this collection, resulting in positioning Schönwerth as a hitherto unknown, neglected and forgotten competitor to the brothers Grimm. Were we to blame the brothers Grimm for anything they did, it should rather be their "violation" (Zipes 1988: 104) of contemporary oral tradition in terms of consciously creating a fairy-tale language and style that did not exist previously. The narrowing impact their collection had on both oral tradition and scholarly perception in the long run should rather be blamed on the deep human longing for authority that has already been quoted in relation to the reception of *The Thousand and One Nights*. And finally, we probably need to take into account a limited human capacity to comprehend complex correlations, and an equally pronounced craving to dissolve the complexity, diversity, and ambivalence of the human condition in favour of reductionist and essentialising solutions.

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