

Women in the World of the Grimms' Fairy Tales

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Abstract: Although the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm seem to conform altogether to the traditional ideals of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century patriarchal society, their efforts to collect and to preserve traditional tales also implied that they were not entirely in control in the way how their narratives develop and what types of gender roles emerge. Here a selection of representative tales is presented in which a surprising variety of female figures emerge, some of whom prove to be characterized as highly intelligent, independent, self-reliant, and self-conscious. Of course, there are all the various types of evil mothers-in-law, dangerous witches, and foolish young women. But the careful analysis also brings to light that the world of the fairy tales was not simply dominated by patriarchy. A sensible gender oriented discussion of this famous collection of tales illustrates how much the discourse on women's roles in society had continued throughout the centuries and finally found its remarkable expression in this corpus of fairy tales.

Key words: fairy tales, Brothers Grimm, gender roles, women's role in patriarchal society, Biedermeier literature, romanticism.

Stepmothers seem to be the most dreaded creatures in the world of the Grimms' Fairy Tales. Wherever we turn, stepmothers almost represent evil incarnate, that is, heartless women who do not care about their husband's children from the first marriage, and rather resort to murderous violence than to acknowledge them in their own right. Often these stepmothers figure primarily in those tales where economic hardship makes the life of the entire family extremely difficult. But the tales as a whole do not simply cast a

misogynistic light upon women just because of these stepmothers. In “Hänsel und Gretel,” for instance, the little girl demonstrates that gender is not the decisive criteria for the distribution of good versus evil. And “Rapunzel” introduces a witch who does not seem to be entirely evil and instead treats the girl under her control rather well, though as a prisoner, protecting her from the world of sexuality against her own will. However, the witch in “Hänsel und Gretel” who later threatens to eat the two children, also is female and is killed by Gretel who pushes her into the baking stove and lets her burn to death. The other favorite negative figure in the world of the Grimms’ fairy tales proves to be the greedy and insatiable wife who demands that her more and more exorbitant wishes be fulfilled by a magical flounder until she loses everything again (“Von dem Fischer un syner Fru,” no. 19). The husbands, on the other hand, tend to be simple-minded, plain people, such as the fisherman, who care little about the riches of this world and display a happy constitution, though they have little chances against their power- and money-hungry wives. The third significant female type consists of the royal princess who is forced to marry a man of a lower social status because her father has made a promise to give her to any man who can fulfil a certain task and liberate the country from a grave danger, such as in “Das tapfere Schneiderlein” (no. 20).

The Grimms’ fairy tales, their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, first published in 1812 and 1815, subsequently reprinted in seven new editions, each of them expanded and revised, soon proved to be some of the most popular German literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and gained worldwide fame. Despite much research by folklorists, anthropologists, and literary historians, these fairy tales invite ever new approaches in the investigation of the roles assigned to women, as reflected in recent studies by

Jerilyn S. Fisher and Ellen S. Silber, and Elisabeth Panttaja.¹ Would it be fair to say, for example, that the Grimms idealized certain female stereotypes, and demonized others? Did they advocate women's subordination under patriarchal rule by casting extraordinarily negative light on powerful, highly knowledgeable women—mostly witches? Or do we have to read their fairy tales as expressions of a newly emerging interest in gender issues resulting from profound economic and political changes effecting German society since the late eighteenth century? The latter approach seems to be the least likely, considering the dominant function assumed by the male figures throughout the collection, but each narrative invites a new critical perspective because of a wide variety of relationships and diverse power positions both within the family and within society at large. After all, as Valerie Paradiz could demonstrate recently, many women in the lives of the two brothers had a considerable impact on the creation of this famous collection.² Moreover, the Grimms included tales that focus on queens, peasant women, sometimes also on urban wives and their daughters, girls, and other females, and although certain types are idealized, many do not easily fall into simple categories.

1. Jerilyn S. Fisher and Ellen S. Silber, "Fairy Tales, Feminist Theory, and the Lives of Women," eadem, and Carolyn Gilligan, eds., *Analyzing the Different Voice: Feminist Psychological Theory and Literary Texts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 67-95; Elisabeth Panttaja, "Making Reality Evident: Disempowerment and Reempowerment in Two Grimm's Fairy Tales," *Folklore Forum* 21, 2 (1988): 166-80.

2. Valerie Paradiz, *Clever Maids: The Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales* (New York: Basics, 2005), xi-xii, underscores: "Few readers know that more than half of the 210 fairy tales included in the Grimm anthologies had a woman's hand in them, whether they were recorded from her storytelling or recorded by her as she listened to another storyteller. These were the sisters of the Wild, the Hassenpflug, the von Haxthausen, and the von Droste-Hülshoff families. They served as fairy tale think tanks to whom Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm turned for the majority of the stories."

My intention in this paper is not to continue with those highly popular Freudian readings that perceive dramatic “female Oedipal conflicts” wherever an evil stepmother appears and makes the lives of her stepchildren both miserable and unbearable, if they don’t simply aim for their elimination.³ We also would not do justice to the tales by observing that the Grimms subtly integrated many explicit references to sexuality and its many perversions and consequences, such as incest, prenuptial pregnancy, teenage sexuality, and the like, as if every symbolic allusion to love and marriage has to be read as an indication of occluded sexual perpetration affecting women’s lives.⁴ First, such a thesis, though often propounded, would require a thorough investigation of all of the fairy tales and would have to be considerably differentiated, and second, as I would like to argue here, the large variety of tales with individual female figure of many different social backgrounds, age groups, and characters indicates that such attempts to reach simplified conclusions about the fairy tales are bound to fail. Moreover, as a typical feature of the entire genre of fairy tales, the open range of possible interpretations of these narratives due to their wealth of symbolism makes it particularly difficult to establish absolute and finite conclusions.⁵ However, this

3. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (1987; Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 155.

4. Diann Rusch-Feja, *The Portrayal of the Maturation Process of Girl Figures in Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. European University Studies. Series I: German Language and Literature, 1539 (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin et al.: Peter Lang, 1995), 227-34. The classical study on Freudian aspects in the tales is by Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

5. Some recent scholars have tried to describe the entire collection of the Grimms’ fairy tales as religious in nature, see, for instance, G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove. The Religious Meaning of the Grimms’ Magic Fairy Tales* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); but see my review in *German Studies Review* XXVI, 1 (2003): 151-53.

fundamental problem of interpretation also offers intriguing opportunities with respect to the history of mentality, particularly if we focus on the position assigned to women in these tales.

Finally, as fairy tales the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* do not simply reflect social-historical reality, and by the same token they are also considerably more than plain products of literary fantasy; instead they allow us important insight into the mental history of a certain period insofar as they represent dream projections, fears, and hopes of a certain reading audience.⁶

Feminist-oriented scholars have tended to underscore the passivity and humble obedience displayed by women throughout the tales.⁷ But some of them have also detected long-hidden traces of matriarchy in the Grimms' stories insofar as many female figures demonstrate a considerable degree of power and influence, of secret knowledge and by now demonized witchcraft.⁸ Gertrud Jungblut went so far as to argue that the Grimms "adopted the values of a patriarchal cultural tradition in which girls accordingly are pure, naive, innocent, stupid, docile, without a will of their own, passive, and in any case, however, *dependent*

6. Wilhelm Solms, *Die Moral von Grimms Märchen* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1999), 10-12, discusses the different interpretations offered by Max Lüthi and André Jolles; for theoretical and pragmatic discussions of the history of mentality, see Peter Dinzelsbacher, ed., *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte: Hauptthemen in Einzeldarstellungen* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1993).

7. Marcia R. Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," *College English* 34 (1972/1973): 383-95; Kay [F.] Stone, "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us," Claire R. Farrer, ed., *Women and Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975), 42-50.

8. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, *Die Göttin und ihr Heros: Die matriarchalen Religionen in Mythos, Märchen und Dichtung*. 3rd ed. (1980; Munich: Frauenoffensive, 1983); Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "The Transformed Queen: A Search for the Origins of Negative Female Archetypes in Grimms' Fairy Tales," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik* 10 (1980): 1-12; Id., *Grimms Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

and *lacking in self-reliance*.”⁹ Other critics, such as Ingrid Spörk, have emphasized the often noticeable absence of the biological mother which then leads to the violent behavior patterns of the stepmother who entirely irrationally hates her stepdaughter.¹⁰ Most modern readers have also expressed their discomfort with the unrestricted and often quite barbaric violence perpetrated in the Grimm’s tales, though this criticism does not assist us in gaining a deeper understanding of the social and mental-historical aspects reflected in the narratives, especially as this violence proves to be directed against those guilty of having lied, murdered, kidnapped, and even tortured. Maria Tatar alerts us to the fact that “Wilhelm Grimm gave free play to his imagination. It never occurred to him to eliminate beheadings, stabbings, slashings, and other forms of bloodshed.”¹¹ However, the treatment of violence in the fairy tales is not gender specific and affects men and women alike, not to mention, once again, that a sizeable portion of the collection consisted of contributions by women story tellers whose own fantasies hence would have to be considered for an appropriate analysis.¹²

If we want to reach a solid understanding of the meaning of the Grimms’ fairy tales with respect to the actual or at least imagined roles which women played in the first half of the nineteenth century, we would be well advised to keep in mind that

9. Gertrud Jungblut, “Märchen der Brüder Grimm — feministisch gelesen,” *Diskussion Deutsch: Zeitschrift für Deutschlehrer aller Schulformen in Ausbildung und Praxis* 91 (1986): 497-510; here 499.

10. Ingrid Spörk, *Studien zu ausgewählten Märchen der Brüder Grimm: Frauenproblematik-Struktur-Rollentheorie-Psychoanalyse-Überlieferung-Rezeption*. 2nd ed. Hochschulschriften Literaturwissenschaft, 66 (1985; Königstein i.T.: Hain, 1986), 238.

11. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 2003, 181.

12. Valerie Paradiz, *Clever Maids*, xiii-xv, and for some specific observations regarding women’s standing in Napoleonic Europe, 45-53.

each edition published by the brothers (until 1857 when the seventh and last edition of their full collection appeared in print) varied in length, selection, and development of the individual tales.¹³ For our purposes, however, suffice it here to rely on the 1819 edition.¹⁴ It also would be desirable to develop a full-blown picture of the actual historical, economic, social, intellectual, and moral conditions for women since the late eighteenth and far into the early nineteenth century as a backdrop for our analysis.¹⁵ Here we can at least draw from the observations developed by a number of social historians, such as John C. Fout, Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, Mary Jo Maynes, and Priscilla Robertson.¹⁶ Nevertheless, our approach will be primarily literary-historical, with an emphasis

13. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Ausgabe letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm mit einem Anhang sämtlicher, nicht in allen Auflagen veröffentlichter Märchen und Herkunftsnachweisen. Ed. Heinz Rölleke. 3 vols. Universal-Bibliothek, 3191-93 (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980); see also the valuable survey of the relevant scholarship by James M. McGlathery, *Grimms' Fairy Tales. A History of Criticism on a Popular Classic*. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1993).

14. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*. Vollständige Ausgabe in einem Band (1946; Zürich: Manesse, 2002); I will quote from this edition throughout.

15. Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Die deutsche Familie: Versuch einer Sozialgeschichte*. 2nd ed. (1974; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975), 32-37; esp. 35: "Im Gegensatz zur Mythe, die ein kollektives Geschick zum Inhalt hat, schildert das Märchen individuelle Schicksale, die allgemeine Gesellschaftskonflikte auf Familienniveau offenbaren."

16. John C. Fout, ed., *German Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984); Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes, eds., *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Priscilla Robertson, *An Experience of Women: Pattern and Change in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982). See also Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres, *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation*. Women in Culture and Society (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

on mental-historical perspectives. Finally, as a caveat, the examination of women roles in fairy tales does not necessarily provide us with an accurate picture of women's actual lives. However, the great popularity of the fairy tales at a time of considerable social, political, and military upheaval in Germany suggests that the texts either reflected common concepts of female roles, or projected notions of idealized or demonized women characters.

Our general starting point would be that women's lives during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries continued to be mostly limited to the house and a life within marriage, though divorce was not impossible in a number of circumstances. Individual women such as Sophie La Roche, Caroline Schlegel, Elise Bürger, Sophie Mereau, Dorothea Mendelsohn, Caroline Michaelis, and Rahel Varnhagen ventured outside of the rigid gender categories and made their voices heard in literary circles and on the book markets,¹⁷ but the ultimate relevance of the family with its patriarchal structure was never challenged during this time. In fact, during the period of the Biedermeier, "[d]ivisions between male and female preserves were drawn more and more sharply, and the catalogue of womanly duties regulated down to the finest detail."¹⁸ Highly insightful for our own discussion also proves to be Barbara Becker-Cantarino's summary comment at the end of her seminal *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit*: "[a]usgehend von der Diskussion über die Rolle der

17. As recent research could demonstrate, many more women succeeded in establishing a name as independent writers during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see *Beruf: Schriftstellerin. Schreibende Frauen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. Ed. Karin Tebben. Sammlung Vandenhoeck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

18. Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*. Trans. by Stuart McKinnon-Evans in association with Terry Bond and Barbara Norden (Oxford, Hamburg, and New York: Berg, 1989), 63.

Frau in der Familie ... wurden die Geschlechterrollen von 'außen' für den Mann und 'innen' für die Frau immer wieder eingeübt. So entstand das Leitbild der bürgerlichen Hausfrau, die unmündig, arbeitsam, aber glücklich, da ökonomisch abgesichert, sich 'Kirche, Kindern und Küche' widmen konnte, sollte und es dann auch selbst wollte. Diese einschränkende Rolle wurde im 19. Jahrhundert weiter sentimentalisiert und idealisiert."¹⁹ By the same token, obviously as a consequence of the growing industrialization and the emergence of a solid bourgeois middle class, physical labor was increasingly relegated to the world outside of the family life and regarded as degrading for women of bourgeois status.²⁰ This, however, only affected the type of work deemed worthy for middle-class women, not the ethical attitude toward work as such, especially within the house.

When we now turn to the Grimms' fairy tales, we need to keep several aspects in mind. The two brothers did not create these fairy tales by themselves, instead they collected them and adopted them for their own purposes, changing their outlook, content, structure, and ideological orientation with each new edition. However, irrespective of the various oral and literary sources, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* truly represent the product of Jacob and Wilhelm's assiduous efforts with these texts, excluding some and adding others, adapting, modifying, refining

19. Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit: Frau und Literatur (1500-1800)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), 347; see also Albrecht Classen, "Germany: 1848-1919," *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*. Vol. III: *History, Philosophy, and Religion*. Ed. by Helen Tierney (New York, Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1991), 176-78.

20. Weber-Kellermann, *Die deutsche Familie*, 107: "Als Folge der häuslichen Zurückgezogenheit der bürgerlichen Frau und ihrer wachsenden Entmündigung im öffentlichen Leben ergab sich aber nun im Ausgleich eine unerwartete sentimentale Ausfüllung des innerfamiliären Bereiches, wie sie das Biedermeier entschieden auszeichnet und charakterisiert." See also Solms, *Die Moral*, 40-43.

the texts, and also rewriting many to meet their own expectations and to appeal to an audience that was deeply shaped by bourgeois morals and values.²¹

Remarkably, many of the tales, though steeped in highly traditional images directly borrowed from the world of the Middle Ages—but perhaps just because that is the case—introduce a number of surprisingly outspoken, robust, intelligent young women who resist their fathers' wishes that their daughters are submissive and docile members of the family. In the "Froschkönig," for instance, the young princess complies with her father's order to share her dinner and bedroom with the animal, but when the frog finally requests that she take him under her covers, she angrily grabs the frog and hurls him against the wall, definitely intent on killing him.²² This action, however, suddenly transforms the frog into a young prince who subsequently becomes the young woman's husband. Her aggression results from his threat to reveal her disobedience to her father, although the narrative framework refrains from explaining the sudden change in the erotic configuration. Why would the young woman be rewarded for her intention to kill the frog to whom she was obligated for his service? Or do we have to read this narrative from a psychological perspective, suggesting how much the princess was fighting against growing into adulthood?²³ Undoubtedly, the

21. Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 10-17.

22. For a commentary on the origin, development, and significance of this tale, see Brüder Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Vol. 4: *Nachweise und Kommentare, Literaturverzeichnis*. Nach der Großen Ausgabe von 1857, textkritisch revidiert, kommentiert und durch ein Register erschlossen. Ed. by Hans-Jörg Uther. *Die Märchen der Weltliteratur* (Munich: Diederichs, 1996), 7-9 (subsequent references to this commentary will always list the page numbers).

23. Ottokar Graf von Wittgenstein, *Märchen, Träume, Schicksale* (Düsseldorf: E. Diederichs, 1965), 83-95.

fascination of this fairy tale rests in the *rite de passage* for the young woman who at first seems to be nothing but a playful child, but as soon as the frog has attempted to get his part of their agreement fulfilled, does the erotic element enter the tale and forces the princess to accept her awakening sexuality.²⁴

Quite a different perspective can be observed in “Der Wolf und die sieben jungen Geißlein” (no. 21),²⁵ where the evil wolf manages to devour six of the young goats but overlooks the seventh. When the mother goat returns and learns of the tragedy, she is deeply grieved and laments the loss of her children. But suddenly discovering the wolf sleeping outside of her house, she demonstrates a considerable resoluteness and courage and illustrates that mothers know how to fight for their children. As unreal as the entire process proves to be, the mother is nevertheless portrayed as fearless and intelligent when she cuts open the wolf’s stomach and so frees her children who are still alive. Although the woman is shown primarily within the domestic sphere, she knows well how to defend her family, even though she cannot prevent the attack by the wolf because she has to find food for her children. Remarkably, no husband seems to be around, and the old goat has to fend all by herself. Yet, as the outcome demonstrates, she overcomes the greatest problems in her life and defeats the wolf almost with his own strategy of deception. In this respect, the mother assumes the role of the highest authority figure who can anticipate the threatening danger, she knows how to warn her children about it, but she cannot prevent the attack from happening. Nevertheless, as a mother she

24. For further interpretations and literary-historical material, see Walter Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*. Two vols. (Munich: Beck, 1995), 356-61 (when Scherf does not comment a tale, I will not include a reference to his work).

25. Uther, commentary, 14-16.

immediately intervenes after disaster has struck, and she uses all her energy and skill to overcome the arch enemy of her family.²⁶

A different constellation once again surfaces in “Die drei Männlein im Walde” (no. 13) which is predicated on a number of noteworthy social problems.²⁷ Two marriages are deeply disrupted because one of the partners dies on both sides, and in both cases the widow and respectively the widower have only one daughter. The widow convinces the widower that she would be the ideal wife for him, and since in a test of his own future he finds that marriage is predestined for him again, he woos and then marries the widow. At first, the two girls are treated equally, but very soon the situation changes radically, and the stepmother begins to hate her stepdaughter whom she badly mistreats and tries to hurt because her own daughter lacks in beauty and looks ugly compared to the other girl. Finally, she sends her on a suicide mission, to use military parlance, demanding from her to search for fresh strawberries in the middle of the winter, dressed in nothing but a thin paper dress. Obediently the good girl goes out into the cold world and comes across a house where three dwarfs live with whom she shares the little hard bread her stepmother had given her. Afterwards she even sweeps their backdoor patio and is richly rewarded by the dwarfs, and so she can return with strawberries and with the gift of producing a gold coin with every word she says. She is also supposed to marry a young king, but first the other daughter is sent out by her mother who hopes that this ugly daughter of her’s would be as lucky as the beautiful one. The opposite, of course, happens, because the morose and spoiled girl is unwilling to share her rich meal with

26. Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1413-16; Paradiz, *Clever Maids*, 15, equates the outcome with women’s (Dorothea Grimm’s and Henriette Zimmer’) struggle for survival in the aftermath of the German defeat against Napoleon.

27. Uther, commentary, 29-30; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 213-16.

the dwarfs, and refuses to help them removing the snow. Consequently, her reward is that toads jump out of her mouth whenever she says a word, but the beautiful girl is swept off her feet by a king, who marries her and soon has a child with her. But the stepmother then comes for a visit, and together with her own daughter she kills the young queen by throwing her into the river. Eventually, through natural magic, the truth is revealed, and once the queen has been given back her life, the king puts the old stepmother on trial and has her brutally executed.

Several aspects relevant for our purpose deserve closer attention. Although the widower does not show true interest in remarrying, the miracle with his boot that holds water despite the hole in the bottom convinces him that a life without a wife is not worth it. He acknowledges that marriage brings both joy and sorrow, but he rather accepts the latter than to renounce the former. After the wedding, however, he completely disappears from the scene, whereas the narrative then entirely focuses on the different lives of the two girls. The widower's daughter demonstrates how girls ought to behave: to be obedient, friendly, sharing even the last piece of bread, willing to work with or without pay, which eventually leads to her happy marriage, soon blessed with a child. The true conflict dealt with here has nothing to do with the traditional gender conflict, but instead, which is typical of many of the Grimms' fairy tales, with the deep-seated hostility between women of different families who have to share the same resources. We do not hear anything of significance about the young queen's relationship with her husband who cannot even protect her against the stepmother's evil intentions to kill his young wife and to replace her with her own daughter. In other words, the women are vying for the man's love, and only those women who are submissive, obedient, beautiful, and fertile achieve their goal.

This finds its immediate confirmation in the subsequent tale, “Die drei Spinnerinnen” (no. 14), but again we are confronted with a very different constellation that almost seems to contradict our previous observation.²⁸ This time a young woman is extremely lazy so that her mother gives her such a hard beating that the queen, who just happens to pass by her house, notices it and inquires about the cause for the loud crying. The mother, ashamed of her own daughter’s bad behavior, pretends that the very opposite situation is the case, that is, that her daughter works too hard as a spinner and that she, the mother, cannot procure enough flax for her. The queen, full of praise of the allegedly most industrious young woman, takes her to the castle and promises her the hand of her son if she transforms three rooms full of flax into yarn. At first the young woman does not do anything, but then three ugly women appear who offer her help if she were to invite them to her wedding and would recognize them as her relatives. Once the deal has been struck, and all the flax has been spun into yarn, the young woman is allowed to marry the prince, and they celebrate their wedding. In contrast to the “Froschkönig,” however, the young woman remembers her promise and invites the three ugly workers, acknowledging them as her cousins. Interestingly, once the prince has found out why these three women are so deformed physically (huge flat foot, big lower lip, and broad thumb), namely from their intensive spinning, he orders that his wife would never return to spinning, and so frees her for good from an activity she obviously has hated all her life. Whereas usually a king offers his daughter’s hand for the one person who can solve a major problem affecting his country, here it is the queen who promises her son as bridegroom for the young woman if she indeed proves to be such

28. Uther, commentary, 31-32. Commentators have often pointed out the strong similarities with “Rumpelstilzchen.” See also Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 222-24.

a hard worker. The son also displays the same disposition as his mother, being deeply impressed by his future wife's prodigious spinning. He only changes his mind once he has seen the physical consequences of this intensive female work on the bodies of the three alleged cousins, and so liberates his wife from any further proofs of her effectiveness in spinning.

Conflicts of love within marriage also seem to have interested the Brothers Grimm, as documented by "Die Weisse Schlange" (no. 17) where a young man discovers the secret of a snake which knows how to restore its dead fellow back to life by means of some leaves. Later, once he has accomplished several seemingly impossible tasks as a test, he is allowed to marry the king's daughter although she rejects him at first because of his low social status and tries her best to make these tasks as difficult as possible. The tale ends with the marriage, although the princess accepts her future husband only grudgingly. As the narrator emphasizes, however, once she has eaten one of the magical apples of life, her heart melts and blooms in love for him. Significantly, here the princess determines the competition for her own hand, and the account identifies her as the one who is actively looking for a husband, though the successful candidate must achieve almost miraculous deeds before she would accept him as her spouse.²⁹

A rather dubious turn of events in "Das tapfere Schneiderlein" (no. 20) signals that the social conflict between a princess and her bridegroom of lower social status was not simply compensated by love. Whereas the tailor first accomplishes his

29. Uther, commentary, 36-38; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1380-83. The parallels to the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), where King Gunther must win in three athletic competitions before he can claim Brunhild's hand, are striking, especially as the semi-god Siegfried, similar as the friendly animals in this fairy tale, must assist the human king Gunther, otherwise he would have been killed for his failure.

goals simply by bragging about his enormous military successes and scares everyone out of his wits, soon he proves to be indeed highly sophisticated and resourceful which allows him to compensate for his rather weak physical conditions. Here both the king and his daughter are distraught over the mismatch but they cannot retract their promise to the tailor after he has overcome two giants, a dangerous unicorn, and a ferocious boar. But the young woman does not give up so easily, especially once she has learned through her husband's talking in sleep of his true social background. Yet, both her father's and his daughter's plan to have him assassinated at night also fails because the king's weapon carrier betrays the plot to the tailor who is thus in a position to save his life by scaring the assassins away. Since then he lived his life at the side of his wife, but we do not learn whether she ever changed her mind toward him.³⁰

True love, however, overcomes all these problems in one of the most famous fairy tales by the Grimms, "Aschenputtel" (no. 21), and here it is the young prince who disregards the class difference, pursues the unknown girl, and makes every effort to identify her until he succeeds with the help of her golden shoe. As to be expected for a fairy tale, Aschenputtel's two jealous stepsisters miserably fail in their attempts to win the prince's love, and they are painfully punished by the pigeons that pick out their eyes before and after the church wedding. Remarkably, however, once again the true struggle is carried out among members of the same gender who jealously guard their own territory and viciously fight against anyone who could threaten their rise to power. Aschenputtel/Cinderella, although portrayed as the innocent victim in this battle for the prince's attention and ultimately his love, is by far not so naive as the narrative seems to imply on the surface. Although mistreated all the time by her stepmother

30. Uther, commentary, 43-46; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1171-75.

and the two stepsisters, she has the magical support of a white bird sitting on a tree growing out of her mother's grave, who provides her with anything she might wish for, and of two pigeons who help her with her kitchen assignments. In fact, she is firmly bent on attending the court festivals where the prince would select his future bride and so certainly reveals that she also has secret intentions to attract the prince's attention. Once again, the entire narrative is dominated by (this time four) women figures, whereas Aschenputtel's father completely fades away into the background after he has remarried, and the prince does not leave any significant impression, except that he falls in love with Aschenputtel and pursues her.³¹ However, he has obviously a hard time even to remember her facial features and naively accepts any woman as his bride whose foot would fit into the shoe—would we then be allowed to call him a 'foot fetishist'? Only when the two pigeons sitting on the tree growing out of the grave of Aschenputtel's mother alert him to the deception does he realize his mistake and returns first the one, then the other sister.³²

Here as well as in many others of the Grimms' fairy tales do the women enter a vicious battle for a power position within society by means of marriage with the prince or king. Their true competitors are not the fathers, brothers, or any other male relatives, but their stepsisters and stepmothers. But we also observe a considerable criticism against haughty and self-conceited royal women who despise male wooers who are not of aristocratic origin yet have demonstrated high spirits, outstanding courage, and unmatched intelligence and wit with which they ultimately overcome all opposition and rise into the highest power

31. Maria M. Tatar, "Born Yesterday: Heroes in Grimms' Fairy Tales," *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*. Ed. by Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 95-114; here 101.

32. Uther, commentary, 46-49; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 41-46.

positions. As “Frau Holle” (no. 24) illustrates, however, this conflict among the female characters also emerges when no stepmother is involved since here the mother simply shows favor for one daughter who is lazy and ugly, whereas her beautiful and industrious daughter suffers from her mother’s neglect and rejection.³³ The criticism raised is directed against social injustice within the family and the mean-spirited competition among the female members. Moreover, jealousy and envy of the beautiful and successful woman also play a major role in the Grimms’ tales.

“Rotkäppchen” (no. 26), on the other hand, introduces a different configuration since here three women’s lives intersect, the grandmother’s, the mother’s, and the little girl’s. And all of them care for each other deeply and are sincerely concerned for the well-being of each other. The mother worries about the grandmother and sends her daughter to take some cake and wine to the former. The latter happily goes to visit her grandmother because she cares about her and is worried about her ill health. Moreover, when the wolf suggests to her to look around and enjoy the forest, she discovers the meadow covered with flowers and picks a bunch as a gift for her grandmother. The subsequent tragic events with the wolf cannot be blamed on Rotkäppchen, but once the grandmother and her granddaughter have been rescued by the hunter, Rotkäppchen swears to herself never again to veer off the prescribed path and to follow her mother’s directives without any deviation. In an alternative conclusion to the tale, another wolf pursues Rotkäppchen and tries to trap her, but the grandmother and her granddaughter work together to deceive the wolf and so manage to kill him. At any event, here we have the remarkable example of an intimate community of women from three different generations who help each other and successfully

33. Uther, commentary, 51-53; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 342-46.

defend themselves against the threats from the outside world, in this narrative represented by the wolf.³⁴

A noteworthy social commentary about social class structure can be observed in “König Drosselbart” (no. 52), where the sharp criticism is aimed at the princess who rejects all possible wooers because she finds faults with each and everyone. Consequently her father marries her to the first beggar who arrives at his castle, and subsequently she is deeply humiliated because she does not know how to work and fails in every one of her efforts to earn money. Once, however, she has reached the deepest point in her married life and is laughed at by all members of the court where she had found work in the kitchen, her husband suddenly turns out to be a king who had wanted to teach her a lesson. The tale does not undermine the traditional class structure, but it demonstrates that those who toil hard for their living also deserve respect by the members of the noble classes. Moreover, “König Drosselbart” offers a lesson in matters of love insofar as the princess must realize that her own arrogance in the selection process of a good husband led to her own downfall. But the tale concludes with a happy end because the princess recovers her previous social status and enjoys a good life with the man whom she had derided before. In other words, the tale strongly promotes equality among the married couple and warns of the dire consequences if the bride believes herself to be so much better than all her male wooers.³⁵

“Sneewittchen” (no. 53), probably the best-known fairy tale in the Grimms’ collection, reconfirms our previous observation of female competition within the family leading to almost deadly consequences. Again the stepmother’s jealousy pertains to Sneewittchen’s unmatched beauty, and the older woman does

34. Uther, commentary, 55-59; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 996-99.

35. Uther, commentary, 103-05; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 695-99.

everything in her power to kill her, first by asking a huntsman to do the job for her, then by pretending to be a simple woman who goes to the dwarfs' house and attempts to murder her stepdaughter. Significantly, the father figure again fades away after the king has remarried and brought the new queen to his palace. Only the dwarfs try to protect the young woman, but they are no match to the queen's evilness and witchcraft with which she can eventually achieve her goal. But Sneewittchen is revived just by accident after a long time lying in a coma because the glass coffin is shaking when the young prince's servants carry it away and stumble at one point, making it possible that the poisoned piece of an apple flies out of the young woman's throat. In true fashion of the Grimms' tales, during the wedding the evil stepmother appears and is condemned to die a horrifying death as punishment for her deeds.³⁶ As the narrative framework indicates, the female heroine hardly can maintain her life without male protection because of the female competition, and she is not even safe within the house provided by the dwarfs because they go out to do their work every day, making it possible for the evil stepmother to carry out her assassination attempts.³⁷

But as "Rumpelstilzchen" (no. 55) indicates, even when a father figure looms large in the background, this does not guarantee the young woman's protection.³⁸ On the contrary, here the miller brags about his daughter's alleged ability to transform flax into gold and so subjects her to a life-threatening situation since the king, who wants to test her skills, warns her that she would have to die if she would not comply with his wishes.

36. For a surprisingly religious, also rather speculative reading of this tale, see G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *The Owl*, 130-32; cf. Uther, commentary, 105-09; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1127-33.

37. Shuli Barzilai, "Reading 'Snow White': The Mother's Story *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, 3 (1990): 515-534.

38. Uther, commentary, 111-13; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1000-05.

Once Rumpelstilzchen has helped her out, the king reveals even more greed for gold and forces her to spin the double amount of flax into gold, threatening her again with the death penalty if she were to resist his order. Finally, after the third night, the king accepts the young woman as his bride despite the social class difference because she proves to be the richest woman in the world - an aspect (lust for money) that often surfaces in the Grimms' fairy tales in clear contradiction to the seemingly fantastic and imaginary character of these narratives.³⁹ The other noteworthy aspect in this tale, which also finds confirmation in a number of other tales, seems to be the young woman's inability to handle the work assigned to her. Her social rise to the status of a queen after having accomplished the practically impossible task of spinning gold out of flax indirectly represents the profound changes in the early-nineteenth-century economy which made it impossible for women to find work in the industry if they belonged to the working class, or which prevented them from working in the first place if they belonged to the bourgeois class.⁴⁰

A typical example, which is also enriched by many other narrative motifs, can be found in "Allerleirauh" (no. 65) where the king's daughter is pursued by her incestuous father, but can escape from him in the nick of time before the wedding, and hides in the woods. There another king's huntsmen discover her, and she is allowed to join the court as the cook's helper. Because she has covered up her beautiful face and figure, nobody

39. During the early half of the nineteenth century Germany experienced a highly confusing, often contradictory and economically damaging monetary policy and had to deal with a wide array of currencies that made the few remaining silver and gold currencies in North Germany look ideal because of their stability, see Bernd Sprenger, *Das Geld der Deutschen: Geldgeschichte Deutschlands* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, and Zurich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991), 156-71.

40. Weber-Kellermann, *Die deutsche Familie*, 102-03.

recognizes her true nature, but three times, after having transformed into her beautiful self, she secretly joins the dance at the court. Subsequently she cooks a soup for the king, dropping one of the three objects she had taken with her on her escape from her father into the pot, obviously in order to establish a personal connection with the king. Ultimately, her true identity is revealed, and she marries the king. This ends her miserable fate as a kitchen maid and elevates her back to her traditional role as a princess, now as queen, which also frees her from the danger of incest at the hand of her father and the need to earn her living through manual labor.⁴¹

When a tale does not present idyllic couples who eventually marry and enjoy a happy life together, or when a tale does not focus on stepmothers and stepdaughters, then we often come across severe problems of mistrust and disbelief that threaten to destroy a marriage, such as in “Die Nelke” (no. 76). Once a queen has delivered a child that will get all his wishes fulfilled according to an angel messenger, a cook one day kidnaps her son and pretends that the queen deliberately allowed wild animals to take it away, as falsely evinced by blood from a chicken that he sprinkled on her.⁴² The subsequent complications shed significant light on the endangered situation of the queen who, as the mother of such a miraculous child, is threatened by the power-hungry cook who successfully maligns her and succeeds in convincing the king to throw her in prison where she is supposed to die of hunger. But again, divine intervention keeps

41. There are many medieval examples of an incestuous father who pursues his own daughter, see, for instance, *La Manekine* and *Mai und Beaflo*; see also Uther, commentary, 130-33; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 14-18; cf. also Nancy B. Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville, Tallahassee, et al.: University Press of Florida, 2003), 57-65.

42. Uther, commentary, 145-46; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, does not seem to include a chapter on this tale.

her alive for seven years during which the young boy grows up and eventually rescues his mother and has the cook punished for his evil deed. Nevertheless, after the queen has been freed from the prison, she refuses to take any food and dies within three days, soon followed by her husband. This tale obviously was intended to appeal to a religious sentiment, but it also evokes profound sympathy for the innocently accused and persecuted queen who is glorified by God as a saint-like figure, a major theme already dealt with in late-medieval German literature.⁴³ As “Die Nelke” indicates, the theme of women’s victimization, particularly at the highest social level, appealed to the audience, especially as the conclusion provided a deep sense of satisfaction about the perpetrator’s appropriate punishment, especially since the latter at one point even plots to have the young man killed by his own girl friend.

Intriguingly, this almost painfully violent narrative about a woman’s mistreatment is coupled with a tale immediately following in the collection, “Das kluge Gretel” (no. 77), where the female cook tends to eat and drink whatever she likes and knows how to get herself out of any trouble even after she has devoured two chickens that were supposed to serve as her master’s and his guest’s meal. Once the master has arrived, she pretends that the chickens are still there, but she secretly informs the guest that the entire dinner set-up only serves as a trap since the master wants to cut off his ears. After the guest has run away, however, she pretends to her master that the former has stolen the chicken. The humorous tale, which finds many parallels in late-medieval literature, is predicated on the cook’s intelligent employment of contradictory explanations, and since the guest

43. Albrecht Classen, “Die leidende und unterdrückte Frau im Roman des 15. Jahrhunderts. Zur Verfasserschaft des frühneuhoch-deutschen Romans *Pontus und Sidonia*,” *Seminar* 29, 1 (1993): 1-27.

runs away and the master, assuming that the other has the two chickens with him, pursues him, the cook remains free of any accusation and has fooled both men without losing our sympathy.⁴⁴

Finally, when we turn to “Die Gänsemagd,” we come across still another figurative constellation, insofar as here the female protagonist is the daughter of a widowed queen. When the young woman is sent to her bridegroom, the mother is seriously worried about the future developments and equips her daughter both with a rich dower and also a magical horse that can talk and a handkerchief stained by her own three drops of blood that would help her to defend against dangers.⁴⁵ Whereas normally we hear of a jealous stepmother or envious stepsisters who make every effort to push the young and beautiful heroine aside to make room for their own marriages, here the chambermaid who is accompanying the daughter assumes the role of the evil woman. At first she refuses to serve the princess who needs some water, then she forces her to exchange their clothing, and to reverse their roles. Subsequent to this role reversal, the chambermaid is mistaken for the princess and marries the old king’s son, whereas the true princess must help the geese keeper in his work. However, after a while the old king learns of the truth and rescues the princess, whereas the chambermaid is gruesomely executed. The tale ends with the short comment that the true princess married the prince and that both ruled over their country peacefully and full of blessing.

Despite the imaginary narrative framework, several interesting conclusions can be drawn. Whereas in many other cases the king is the widower, here we come across a widow queen who arranges the wedding of her daughter without

44. Uther, commentary, 147-49; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, .

45. Uther, commentary, 169-71.

accompanying her to the bridegroom. This in turn makes it possible for the chambermaid to assume the princess's place. The royal father-in-law, however, can unravel the secret and helps the mistreated princess to regain her previous social status. Finally, once the evil woman—another noteworthy female competitor—has been executed, the young couple assumes the governance together.

The *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* contain many other examples of different types of female relationships, and we can already confirm on the basis of our short selection of tales that both the two collectors and their audiences were obviously deeply interested in the destiny of the female characters. Typical of the fairy tale structure, the outcomes always represent a happy end, but wherever we turn, profound conflicts, deadly attacks, betrayal, jealousy, and envy often dominate the Grimms' fairy tales. Scholars have evaluated the individual women figures from quite different perspectives, whether as "guardians of rites and tradition,"⁴⁶ or as competitors in the area of female sexuality,⁴⁷ not to mention the numerous psychological readings of a Freudian or Jungian nature, or religious and social-critical interpretations.⁴⁸ Here I would like to offer the concluding observation that we would not do justice to the large corpus of the Grimms' fairy tales if we interpreted them according to only one hermeneutic category. In particular, the presentation of women in these rich and highly popular narratives introduces a wide array of characters who represent both lower and upper classes, whereas

46. Marthe Robert, "The Grimm Brothers," trans. by Wylie L. Powell. Peter Brooks, ed., *The Child's Part*. Yale French Studies, 43 (New Haven: Yale French Studies, 1967), 44-56; here 49.

47. Karen E. Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (1979): 237-57; here 241.

48. See the critical overview of the relevant research literature by James M. McGlathery, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 1993.

the world of the urban class is mostly occluded here. Some women exert tremendous influence and rule their countries, others are relegated into the forest and so maligned as witches. Many women emerge as innocent victims of other women's machinations who are jealous of them because of their beautiful appearance. Many times young women lose their parents and are haunted by evil stepsisters and stepmothers. But all good female protagonists triumph over their enemies, even if magic or divine intervention are required to achieve this goal. Honorable and respected young women often prove their virtue through hard work and submissive behavior, but many times we also observe young princesses who do no longer need to work because their husbands love them and want to secure them a privileged and luxurious lifestyle.⁴⁹ Wise and intelligent women also figure in the Grimms' tales, but then they mostly belong to a mythical or demonic realm. Good mothers, on the other hand, tend to die early and can only protect their daughters from evil people by means of magic objects.

In short, even though the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* obviously do not provide a direct reflection of the social and economic realities of the early nineteenth century, they allow us to gain clear insight into the general projection and imagination of women's roles in the public's mind and reflected in the tales. Remarkably, the Grimms seem to have taken a rather dim view of virtuous women's chances to survive in society insofar as these are constantly threatened and generally achieve their goals or survive within a world of hostility only by a miraculous event or a

49. Elfriede Moser-Rath, "Frau," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. Ed. Karl Ranke. Vol. 5 (Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1985), 100-37; her 128-29: "Es fehlt . . . keineswegs an positiven Akzenten, allerdings vor allem dann, wenn sich Eigenschaften und Verhaltensweisen der Frau mit den von einer männlich geprägten Gesellschaftsordnung vorgeprägten Rollenzuweisung decken."

mysterious helper intervening in the last minute. In all cases, however, true love emerges as the ultimate reward for all those women who quickly grow up into young adulthood and face the difficult situation to live with their new husband and to adjust to his family. Some of these women actively pursue their future bridegroom and leave behind sufficient trails for him to trace and discover them, so to speak, hidden in the ashes (“Aschenputtel”). Even though most women characters seem to remain silent, especially when they display the best of all virtues and are downtrodden by evil stepmothers, it would be erroneous to identify silence as the absolute ideal projected by the Grimms’ fairy tales.⁵⁰ In general, however, married life itself plays no significant role, whereas the winning of a bride assumes center position throughout the entire collection, which also frees the narrators from dealing with sexuality within marital life.⁵¹ The exception to this rule, however, consists in the fact that many small children appear who often face serious dangers coming from either their stepmothers or resulting from their father’s poverty. Moreover, in many cases newly-born children are abused because they involuntarily serve as payment for contracts their parents have previously concluded with demonic creatures. But the witches are defeated and killed, and so the ugly and dangerous gnomes and dwarfs, especially because the female protagonists do not simply give up and pursue their own goals despite all odds (“Rumpelstilzchen”), especially since they fight to their last breath for their own children (“Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein”).

50. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, “Silenced Women in the Grimms’ Tales: The ‘Fit’ Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context,” *Fairy Tales and Society*, 115-31.

51. Lutz Röhrich, “*und weil sie nicht gestorben sind. . .*.” *Anthropologie, Kulturgeschichte und Deutung von Märchen* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2002), 60-73.

There is no doubt that the Grimms' fairy tales represent a dream world, but in many cases it is less a world of dreams than a world of nightmares. With respect to the role of women, we can observe that they predominantly assume a largely subordinate and silent role, but there are sufficient counterexamples that demonstrate that even within the fairy tales many women emerge—whether portrayed as evil or as good—who command supreme knowledge and wisdom, at times have turned into witches and magicians, and are the central source of life in a religious sense (Virgin Mary, Lady Holle, etc.). Women are at times portrayed as foolish and ignorant (“Die kluge Else,” no. 34), but the same applies to many young male protagonists (“Hans im Glück,” no. 83). True criticism, however, is hardly ever voiced against those with a simple mind, whereas the evil and wicked characters regularly meet their well-deserved destiny and are executed or die because of their own fault.

The one tale, however, apparently most representative of “Biedermeier” ideals in nineteenth-century Germany, proves to be “Die Brautschau” (no. 155).⁵² The young shepherd who wants to marry cannot decide among three sisters and asks his mother for advice. She tells him to observe all three girls while cutting cheese, and the one who does it in the most economic way would surface as the ideal choice. As in many other cases, the wise mother emerges as a major authority figure, and she also determines who her future daughter-in-law will be by means of this test. Here, love plays no role whatsoever, whereas the ability to run a household in a circumspect, economizing manner identifies the ideal wife, which finds its confirmation in many other tales as well (e.g., “Die Schlickerlinge,” no. 156). However, when the fairy tale reflects upon the world of the nobility, physical labor

52. Uther, commentary, 289-90, correctly emphasizes the economic criteria that proves to be decisive for the young man's decision.

proves to be a punishment, and the ultimate liberation from the necessity to work for one's living represents the award for virtuous female behavior. As "Die wahre Braut" (no. 186) illustrates, those women who are destined for a life as royalties have first to experience much misery and the mean treatment by an evil stepmother.⁵³ But then the latter dies through an accident and the major theme, the quest for her future husband, comes to the fore, reconfirming once again that loyalty and virtuosity will be rewarded with love.

53. Uther, commentary, 343-44; Scherf, *Das Märchenlexikon*, 1351-52.