

Booklog

The Hard Facts about the Bad Girls

Shawn Jarvis

Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.

Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.

The two-hundredth anniversaries of the births of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1985 and 1986, respectively) brought in their wake newly edited and freshly produced books and essays about the brothers and their 173-year-old collection, *Die Kinder und Hausmärchen* (KHM). Works from Heinz Rölleke's annotated reprints of the various KHM editions to the upcoming Weimar catalogue of the Grimms' extensive library holdings have generated the critical mass necessary for many of the current studies on the most published, translated, and internationally popular German book.

Thus *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* by Ruth Bottigheimer and *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* by Maria Tatar are embedded in a larger picture of revived Grimm and fairy tale scholarship. And they both bring fresh perspectives to the study of the tales. Read separately, Bottigheimer's work may appeal more to the Grimm researcher, Tatar's to the general reader. Read together, they complement each other in their approaches and offer new impulses for further research.

That Bottigheimer and Tatar are writing with different intentions and to different audiences becomes readily apparent in the titles they choose for the KHM: Bottigheimer's abbreviated version, *Grimms' Tales*, signals her interest in the stories as the product of the brothers themselves; Tatar openly rejects the commonly used title *Grimms' Fairy Tales* because, among other reasons, it "perpetrates that misconception that the tales have a single author" (xxiii). She opts instead for *Nursery and Household Tales*, a nomenclature more consonant with her treatment of the KHM as children's literature. Bottigheimer works from the idea that the Grimms

(and here she usually means Wilhelm) molded the collection in their own likeness, with their own “social and moral vision”—and she produces strong evidence to support her claims—whereas Tatar proceeds more from the assumption that the collection was reshaped by Wilhelm Grimm’s concern with critical (and to some extent commercial) successes (“[Wilhelm’s] nervous sensitivity about moral objections to the tales in the collection reflects a growing desire to write for children rather than to collect for scholars” [19]) and by his attention to changing cultural codes and rules of conduct.

Bottigheimer’s *Grimms’ Bad Girls and Bold Boys* is a content analysis of the entire body of tales, “focusing in particular on the use of gender in the stories” (jacket cover). The author relies on Stith Thompson’s *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* and *Index of Tale Types* for chapters ranging from “natural powers and elemental differences” (3); “witches, maidens and spells” (4) to “prohibitions, transgressions, and punishments” (8); “deaths and executions” (9); and “towers, forests, and trees” (10). At times we buckle under Bottigheimer’s onerous burden, the almost fairytale isolation of the author spinning a product not out of straw, but of heaps and mountains of notecards. But these notecards spin intricate structures; with her (excruciatingly) meticulous content analysis, Bottigheimer weaves complex patterns from seemingly disparate motifs. She finds, for example, that there is “a gender specificity about springs, wells, and brooks that not only favors women but at the same time threatens men” (30); that “of the successful spells actually laid in *Grimms’ Tales*, the overwhelming majority, if not all, are performed by young, beautiful, and usually nubile girls [and their] effectiveness in laying spells seems related to an inborn connection to nature itself” (40); and that “men and women in *Grimms’ Tales* might inhabit radically different worlds as indicated by their associations with fire and water” (35).

The chapter “Paradigms for Powerlessness” (7) is, to my mind, one of the most interesting, because there Bottigheimer “venture[s] beyond content analysis to try to relate these patterns to the society in which they took shape” (73). Here she offers a model for understanding the tales as a product of the society from which they sprung as she relates language use to social power and social roles. In truly interdisciplinary fashion, she brings to bear eclectic arguments from sociology, anthropology, comparative studies, and even lexicology to explore the equation of speech with individual power and autonomy. She concludes: “It is precisely the deprivation and transformation of power that seems to motivate the shifts evident in the transformation of individual folk and fairy tale heroines during the Early Modern period in European history. Positively presented,

powerful female figures either were deprived of their inherent power or else had their power transformed in the tales into the godless potency of witchcraft, punishable by unimaginably vicious executions; on the other hand, a large proportion of 'happy' endings were preceded by the loss or deprivation of female speech" (76–77). Unfortunately no picture of the "society in which [these patterns] took shape," i.e., the "real-world" society in which real women were silent or silenced, emerges. Yet the question remains: to what extent may Wilhelm Grimm's editorial changes have been informed by his own and/or his society's visions of women?

Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys is an ambitious work that cannot possibly tie up all threads. Nor should it have to. The work reminds one in its empirical vigor of Vladimir Propp's painstaking analysis in *Morphology of the Folktale*; the test of time has shown the value and necessity of such studies that pave the way for what might prove to be "more engaging and compelling investigations of folklorist narratives" (Propp in his introduction). Bottigheimer amasses overwhelming evidence of gender typing and gender prescription in the KHM—a monumental contribution, to be sure—although she seems tentative about what conclusion should be drawn. In her closing statements she comments: "Reordering symbols, images, and motifs in tale variants produces changes in meaning, often profound, which can turn a tale on its head; furthermore, such reorderings *may* [emphasis added] tell us something about the society that produced a particular variant" (168). She relies on empirical internal evidence within the rarified atmosphere of the KHM, but she only rarely attempts to tie that world to the society external to the texts. Bottigheimer has, however, done groundbreaking work for those who will want to find out something about that society.

The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales, on the other hand, is anything but ivory-tower. Tatar seems more relaxed in her parlor, reading the tales and enjoying them for all they're worth. Her work is accessible to the general reader, chock-full of wonderful illustrations (18 in all, from a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon of the Grimms debating their next fairy tale motif to Bluebeard's wife fleeing the forbidden chamber in horror) and titillating chapter titles like "Sex and Violence: The Hard Core of Fairy Tales" (1) and "From Nags to Witches: Stepmothers and Other Ogres" (6). And, despite its deceptively easy-reading style, the book contains a wealth of carefully researched information (especially on the editorial history of the Grimms' collection) that I have not seen presented or argued in quite this way before.

Tatar's examination of the tales themselves relies heavily on Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian analysis and Propp's structural studies—the two, she says, who have most informed her work. And thus her conclusions

often echo ideas Bettelheim articulated so adamantly in *The Uses of Enchantment*—that the tales “have the power to stir long-dormant childhood feelings and to quicken our sympathies for the downtrodden” (xiii); that “these stories incarnate our deepest hopes and most ardent desires” (xv); and “that . . . fairy tales concern themselves with inner realities” (xv). She artfully manages to superimpose Bettelheim’s psychoanalytical approach onto Propp’s structural analysis, i.e., the functions of characters remain static while their psychological motivations shift depending on national linguistic and literary traditions. *And depending on their gender.* This is the big surprise in *The Hard Facts*. Bottigheimer rejects Bettelheim’s notions because, as she has demonstrated, “the [KHM] as a whole presents a consistent vision of gender differences which does not support many of the psychological interpretations that have been made up to now. Bruno Bettelheim asserts that *girl* and *boy* in *Grimms’ Tales* can be and are read, without gender distinction, as *child* by youthful readers” (168). Tatar, whose metier in this book is not gender studies, finds (like Bottigheimer) that heroic and villainous traits and acts *are* gender-specific, and that there is something skewed about how women are in a Grimmian world.

What I find striking in both works is that their authors come, from very different directions, to many similar conclusions. What I miss in both these works is the “next step.” For feminists who will find much of value in these two books, a more synthesizing approach toward gender issues like that of Renate Steinchen¹ would be welcome. Examining “Snow White,” Steinchen takes us through two centuries of images of women that informed Wilhelm Grimm’s vision, from Kant to J. H. Campe. She shows how reading layers of the Grimms’ tales from the earliest Ölenburg MS to the 1857 edition reveals “the parallel between social and cultural-historical developments at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the corresponding development of the KHM.” Using a paradigm like Steinchen’s, it can be argued that editorial changes in the KHM reflect not so much the Grimms’ attempt “to capture the authentic voice of the common people” (Tatar) or Wilhelm Grimm’s personal “social and moral vision” (Bottigheimer), as the milieu of shifting social and historical conditions of women’s lives in the nineteenth century.

Notes

¹Märchenerzählerin und Sneewittchen—Zwei Frauenbilder in einer deutschen Märchensammlung: Zur Rekonstruktion der Entstehungsgeschichte Grimmscher Märchenfiguren im Kontext sozial- und kulturhistorischer Entwicklung,” *Mythos Frau: Projektionen und Inszenierungen im Patriarchat*, eds. Barbara Schaeffer-Hegel and Brigitte Wartmann (Berlin: Publica, 1984), 280–308.