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*Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale**

by Jack Zipes

Politics and the fairy tale. Power struggles and magic. One is tempted to ask what all those enchanting, loveable tales about fairies, elves, giants, kings, queens, princes, princesses, dwarfs, witches, peasants, soldiers, beasts and dragons have to do with politics. One is tempted by the magic spell of the tales, so it would seem, to obliterate their real historical and social basis and to abandon oneself to a wondrous realm where class conflict does not exist and where harmony reigns supreme. Yet, if we reread some of the tales with history in mind, and if we reflect for a moment about the issues at stake, it becomes apparent that these enchanting, loveable tales are filled with all sorts of power struggles over kingdoms, rightful rule, money, women, children and land, and that their real “enchantment” emanates from these dramatic conflicts whose resolutions allow us to glean the possibility of making the world, that is, shaping the world in accord with our needs and desires. In essence, the meaning of the fairy tales can only be fully grasped if the magic spell is broken and if the politics and utopian impulse of the narratives are related to the socio-historical forces which distinguished them first as a pre-capitalist folk form (*Volksmärchen*) in an oral tradition and which then gave rise in Germany at the end of the 18th century to a bourgeois art form (*Kunstmärchen*) that has its own modern literary tradition.

Since we lack an adequate history of the folk and fairy tales, and since they have unique national and cultural developments, I want to limit my discussion to the politics of the tales in Germany during the 18th and the early 19th centuries with the intention of dispelling false notions about both narrative forms. Needless to say, understanding the politics is not the only approach one can take to folk and fairy tales. Yet, such a perspective will show that it is only the Marxist method which can lead to a historical clarification and a total view of these particular genres.

Heretofore, critics have not been concerned with explaining the socio-political connection between the folk and fairy tale. Most of the research has been conducted in the area of the folk tale with heavy emphasis on anthro-

pological, sociological, psychological, philological and literary methods.¹ The anthropological and sociological studies reveal divergent tendencies which often complement one another: the so-called Finnish School, best exemplified in America by the work of Stith Thompson,² seeks to reconstruct the history of a tale by tracing, collecting and categorizing all its variants; the receptionist-biographical approach focuses largely on the specific input folk narrators make in retelling the tales and how they are influenced by their communities;³ the ethnological-comparative research centers around isolating and examining national characteristics in the tales by comparing variants of different countries.⁴ Psychological interpretations always depend on the adherence to a particular discipline and school of thought.⁵ Obviously the Jungians and Freudians have been among the most active in this field: Jungians have diagnosed the patterns and figures of the tales in relation to the archetypes of the unconscious, following Jung's lead in his famous essay "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in the Fairy Tales," while Freudians and neo-Freudians have made exhaustive studies of the tales in connection to sexual drives, dream symbolism and phases of sexual development and maturation. The philological school has concentrated mainly on providing correct texts, documents and thorough explications of the original tales. An offshoot of the philological school is the formalist. Here the work of Vladimir Propp in the 1920s has been most influential in that he was the first to show the morphological patterns and structures of the tales as though their genetic development were bound by their own aesthetic laws.⁶ Structuralists and literary scholars have moved from this purely formalist approach to include the folk tale in a larger cultural development, and here the work of Max

1. For a good discussion of the different approaches, see Mathilde Hain, "Die Volkserzählung: Ein Forschungsbericht über die letzten Jahrzehnte (etwa 1945-1970)," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*, 45 (May 1971), 243-274, and Richard M. Dorson, "Foreword," *Folktales of Germany*, ed. Kurt Ranke (Chicago, 1966), pp. v-xxv.

2. See *The Folktale* (New York, 1946). The Finnish School's work is best represented by Antti Aarne. See the essay "Ursprung der Märchen" in *Wege der Märchenforschung*, ed. Felix Karlinger (Darmstadt, 1973), pp. 42-60. This excellent collection of essays contains short pieces by representatives of different schools such as Reuschel, Leyen, Panzer, de Boor, von Sydow, Röhrich, Lüthi, K. Ranke and Pop.

3. A good example of this type of work is Otto Brinkmann, *Das Erzählen in einer Dorfgemeinschaft* (Münster, 1931).

4. See Gottfried Henssen, ed., *Mecklenburger Erzählen... aus der Sammlung Richard Wossidlo* (Berlin, 1958) and Reinhold Bünker, *Schwänke, Sagen und Märchen heanzischer Mundart* (Leipzig, 1906).

5. There is an excellent collection of essays covering the different approaches: Wilhelm Laiblin, ed., *Märchenforschung und Tiefenpsychologie* (Darmstadt, 1969). See also Paulo de Carvalho-Neto, *Folklore and Psychoanalysis* (Coral Gables, 1972).

6. *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd rev. ed., Indiana University (Bloomington, 1968).

Lüthy has had great impact.⁷ He has studied the historical development and relation of the folk tale with other genres and explained how folk motifs play a role in other forms of literature. With the exception of the remarkable work by Linda Dégh,⁸ who tends perhaps to overemphasize the importance of the storyteller, very few scholars have tried to place the folk tale in the broader context of a socio-cultural development, and even in Dégh's book, not enough attention is paid to the politics of the tales. In this regard, despite its immense contribution, the scholarship in this field has simultaneously played a part in casting a magic spell over the vital quality of the tales, diluting their socio-historical import and often obscuring problems with extraneous material. By focusing on the politics of *both* the folk and fairy tales from the middle of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th, I want to set a Marxist framework which can encompass other scientific approaches and hopefully indicate how these approaches could be put to a more proper use in a socio-historical context and how they could consequently serve to disenchant the tales. Only through such disenchantment can the nature of their structure and contents be fully comprehended.

Over the centuries the influence of folk and fairy tales has not diminished. On the contrary, they continue to exercise an extraordinary hold over our real and imaginative lives from childhood to adulthood. The enormous amount of scholarship testifies to this as does the constant use and transformation of this material in novels, poetry, films, theater, tv, comics, jokes and everyday conversation. Recently the thriving pornographic industry has sought to capitalize on the general attraction to folk-tale motifs by publishing volumes of sexy fairy tales. The motifs and stories appear to be so well-known and so much part of our lives that mere allusion is all that is necessary to provide pleasure and stimulate interest. Yet, in fact, our comprehension of the folk and fairy tales remains limited and has been colored perversely by a culture industry which has not only begotten a Walt Disney monopoly of this material but which also fogs the underlying reasons for our attraction to the tales. By relocating the historical origins of the folk and fairy tales in politics and class struggle, the essence of its durability and vitality will become more clear, and its magic will be seen as part of humankind's own imaginative *and* rational drive to create new worlds that allow for total development of human

7. See *Das europäische Volksmärchen*, 2nd rev. ed. (Bern, 1960). *Märchen*, 3rd rev. ed. (Stuttgart, 1968) and the English version of *Es war einmal* (Göttingen, 1962), which is translated as *Once Upon a Time* (New York, 1970).

8. *Märchen, Erzähler und Erzählgemeinschaft* (Berlin, 1962). There is also a good survey of folktale scholarship in the chapter "Ueberblick über die Ergebnisse der bisherigen Märchenforschung," pp. 47-65. This book was revised to a certain extent and translated under the title *Folktales and Society* (Bloomington, 1969).

qualities. The utopian impulse has its concrete base. "The magic in the tales (if magic is what it is) lies in people and creatures being shown what they really are,"⁹ and one could add, in being shown what they are really and realistically capable of accomplishing.

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The term *Märchen* stems from the Old High German *mâri*, Gothic *mêrs*, and Middle High German *Märe*, and it originally meant news or gossip. *Märchen* is the diminutive form of *Märe*, and the common term *Volksmärchen* or folk tale (of medieval origins) clearly signifies that the people were the *carriers* of the tales. In English, the term fairy tale does not emanate from the German *Volksmärchen* but from the French *conte de fées* and is comparatively speaking of modern usage. According to the Oxford Universal Dictionary, the first reference to the term fairy tale was in 1750.¹⁰ Most likely the term was derived from the publication of Madame D'Aulnoy's book *Contes de fées*, published in 1698 and translated the following year in London as *Tales of the Fairys*.¹¹ It is extremely important to understand the social connotations of the historical origins of the English term fairy tale, which was applied to all folk tales recorded by the brothers Grimm in 1812 and practically all the *Volksmärchen* that have been collected and translated into English, a good example being Andrew Lang's 19th-century collections of the Green, Violet, Yellow Fairy books, etc. However, the term fairy tale, when used for *Volksmärchen*, is a misnomer. Clearly, fairy tale refers to the *literary* production of tales *adapted* by bourgeois or aristocratic writers in the 17th and 18th centuries such as Basile, Perrault, Madame D'Aulnoy, Madame de Beaumont, Musäus and others, who wrote for educated audiences, and the class nature of the author, which must be studied in detail, adds a new dimension to the folk tales. Secondly, the term fairy tale came into the language at a particular historical juncture and gradually eclipsed the more explicit term folk tale. Since fairies were associated with the supernatural and make-believe and since the upper-class recorders of the tale shifted the emphasis of the stories, the original basis of the tales became obfuscated, and it appeared that their contents and meaning were derived from bizarre occurrences and irrational minds and not from actual social and political conditions. In other words, it is not by chance that the terms fairy tale and *conte de fées* enter the English and French languages during the

9. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London, 1974), p. 11.

10. 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford, 1955), p. 670.

11. *The Classic Fairy Tales*, pp. 14-15.

17th and 18th centuries. In feudalism, “the reigning classes accepted storytelling to distract them, entertain them, and lull them to sleep. Storytelling in these circles was considered not an art but a service to be expected from the serf and from the entertainer, and it was valued as such. . . . While the folktale was the best-loved entertainment at ducal banquets and in the bedrooms of the big landowners, the tales circulating among the people were branded by both the clerical and the secular powers as damnable and inspired by the devil.”¹² Since the imaginative motifs and symbolical elements of class conflict and rebellion in the pre-capitalist folk tales ran counter to the principles of rationalism and utilitarianism developed by a bourgeois class, they had to be suppressed or made to appear irrelevant.

The development in Germany makes for an interesting case study. Given the spirit of the *Aufklärung*, which sought to promote an educational revolution, the suppression and deprecation of the folk tale might seem to be inconsistent with the aims of the bourgeoisie. Yet, “the idea of education for the people (*Volksbildung*) in the 18th and 19th centuries was a contradictory matter. And this contradiction became even more pronounced when the bourgeoisie, which had at first made itself the champion of education for the people, had to recognize that the interests of the ‘people,’ i.e., the peasant, plebeian and proletarian strata, were not (any longer) identical with the bourgeois interests of domination. The ‘educators of the people’ in the 18th and 19th centuries (increasingly supported by the courts of political rule, which put through bans on reading and education, for instance, through censorship) sought to solve this contradiction by arguing for the concept of a ‘limited enlightenment.’ To be sure, the people should be educated and learn how to read—but the contents of this education and reading was to remain controlled.”¹³

The controls were not only placed on the folk tales but on all literary forms which appealed to the imagination and might stir rebellious impulses.¹⁴ In regard to the folk tales, they were predominantly censored in two ways: 1) they were not published and circulated in their original form as told by the lower-class storytellers—the brothers Grimm made the first attempt along these lines in the early 19th century, and even here, they stylized the tales to a certain degree; 2) instead of folk tales, the newspapers, weeklies, yearbooks and anthologies were filled with and flooded the market with didactic stories, fables, anecdotes, homilies and sermons which were intended to sanctify the

12. Dégh, *Folktales and Society*, pp. 65-66.

13. Dieter Richter and Johannes Merkel, *Märchen, Phantasie und soziales Lernen* (Berlin, 1974), pp. 22-23.

14. *Ibid.*, 22.

interests of the emerging middle class.¹⁵ As Leo Balet and E. Gerhard remark, the 18th century was the unique era of moralism and was insistent on preaching about the perfectibility of mankind.¹⁶ However, the morals proved themselves to have a class bias which excluded the “imperfect” lower-class elements of society and their cultural forms as well. In Germany, the folk tale as a pre-capitalist art form continued to be preserved and cultivated by the common people throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. As Linda Dégh points out: “With the spread of literacy, the growth of urban life, and the development of cultural and educational class distinctions, the European folktale became one of the most important means of artistic expression for the lowest strata of society, since education of the people progressed only very slowly as a result of increasingly stronger distinctions among the educational elite. The fundamental feudal aspect of the folktale did not change, or changed only slightly. Though elements of modern technology penetrated the folktale, they did not essentially transform it. The uneven industrial and urban development in Europe had its effect upon the existence of the folktale: the mighty industrial evolution in Western Europe made peasants into a middle class. The folktale remained within the lower middle class and retired to the nursery.”¹⁷ As the bourgeoisie gradually solidified itself into a class in Germany, the folk tale began to be regarded with suspicion and was labeled inferior art because of its supposed vulgarity and lack of morals, i.e., it belonged to the illiterate lower classes and did not contain a bourgeois ethos.¹⁸ In its place bourgeois writers industriously produced didactic tales which preached how one was to conduct oneself in conformity with the laws of one’s social class and state—among the best known of these writings are those of Joachim Heinrich Campe¹⁹ and Christian Friedrich Nicolai²⁰ published toward the end of the 18th century. However, there were certain writers from the bourgeois class such as Wieland (*Der goldene Spiegel*, 1772), Musäus (*Volksmärchen der Deutschen*, 1782-86) and Mozart (*Die Zauberflöte*, 1792), who saw the folk tale as part of a national heritage which had to be recovered if a native German art of high quality were to be developed. These authors as well as the *Sturm und Drang* writers, who followed more in the tradition of

15. See W. H. Bruford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century: The Social Background of the Literary Revival* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 291-327, and Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 29-83.

16. *Die Verbürgerlichung der deutschen Kunst, Literatur und Musik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), pp. 288-299.

17. Dégh, *Folktales and Society*, p. 66.

18. See the introductory chapters to Richard Benz, *Märchendichtung der Romantiker* (Gotha, 1908), and Dégh, *Folktales and Society*, pp. 65-68.

19. See Richter and Merkel, *Märchen, Phantasie und soziales Lernen*, pp. 20-22.

20. See Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, pp. 38-41.

Herder, borrowed heavily from folklore and used it in order to try to forge a sense of unity among the German people. A second wave of German bourgeois writers, the romantics, went a step further at the end of the 1790s by radically utilizing the folk tradition in a heavily symbolical literature to critique the restraints and hypocrisy of bourgeois codes which were gradually being instituted in public spheres of interest. In sum, the end of the 18th century saw the following development: 1) the gradual designation of the folk tale as inferior art (*Trivialliteratur*) by rapidly growing bourgeois reading audiences who were "cultivating" themselves with didactic tales, novels and plays which espoused a bourgeois ethos, 2) a radical transformation of the folk tale by the romantics, who opposed not only the crude manner in which the folk tradition was being discarded by their own class but who also sought to "revolutionize" the folk motifs so that they could serve as a new art form to expose and criticize the growing alienation and banality of everyday life which was slowly becoming dominated by a bureaucratized and industrialized market economy. It should be stressed that, while the romantics assumed a positive attitude toward the folk tale and its tradition, these writers maintained a minority position. In essence, bourgeois audiences began to thrive on rationalistic and moralistic stories and novels published by Nicolai and other entrepreneurs and light didactic plays sanctifying the bourgeois order written by Iffland and Kotzebue. The folk tale, though it continued to exist, was downgraded, as though it were but a figment of people's imagination. By dispensing with the folk tale and establishing their own literary market and art forms which tended to legitimize their interests (and which in part also contained the minority protest of the romantics), the bourgeoisie could effectively minimize and control the utopian impulse of the imaginative elements in the folk tales, dismissing them as nonsensical, irrational and trivial.

Though the term *Volksmärchen* was retained, the 19th century saw the creation of a new term *Kunstmärchen* and the relegation of the *Volksmärchen* to the lower classes and the domain of the household and children. While the term fairy tale is not the "correct" translation and definition of *Kunstmärchen*, I shall be using it as such since it serves to make a clear *historical* distinction *vis-à-vis* the *Volksmärchen*. The folk tale is part of a *pre-capitalist people's oral tradition* which expresses their wishes to attain better living conditions through a depiction of their struggles and contradictions. The term fairy tale is of *bourgeois coinage* and indicates the advent of a new literary form which appropriates elements of folklore to address and criticize the aspirations and needs of an emerging bourgeois audience.

In discussing the connection between the *Volksmärchen* and *Kunstmärchen*, it is vital that a further distinction be made between those bourgeois writers such as the romantics who “revolutionized” the folk tale at the end of the 18th century by endowing it with new forms and meanings in keeping with social and political changes, and the larger bourgeois audience which tended to negate the original utopian potential in the folk tales that was grounded in the common people’s drive to realize their goals in conflict with their oppressors. This important distinction has been thoroughly investigated in the historical study of the folk tale’s reception in Germany by Dieter Richter and Johannes Merkel. Their book, *Märchen, Phantasie und soziales Lernen*, is concerned for the most part with the imaginative elements in folk tales, and they begin by taking the Freudian notion of the imagination and redefining it in a socio-historical context: imagination is not only the necessary product of an individual’s unfulfilled needs which are bound by static infantile sexual wishes for gratification, but it is socially and historically conditioned and embraces more than sexual desires. According to Richter-Merkel: “Imagination is the organizer of mediation, in other words, the [mental] labor process through which natural drives, consciousness and the outer world are connected with one another.”²¹ Hence, imagination is historical and changes; it can be used not only to compensate for what is lacking in reality but can be used *in reality* to supply practical criticism of oppressive conditions and the hope for surmounting them.

Richter and Merkel argue that the domination of the bourgeoisie and the socialization process which developed since the 18th century contributed to organizing and controlling the imagination of all segments of society, thereby preventing its emancipatory potential from being realized whether in action or in art forms. To illustrate this point, they study the function of imaginative elements in the folk tale and show how they underwent a decisive change when the bourgeoisie began consciously to control their transmission in books and magazines. As we know, the folk tales were oral narratives and contained popular motifs which were thousands of years old. In each historical epoch they were generally transformed by the narrator *and* audience in an active manner through improvisation and interchange to produce a version which would relate to the social conditions of the time. These tales did not spring from a supernatural realm, nor were they conceived for children. The basic nature of the folk tale was connected to the objective ontological situation and dreams of the narrators and their audiences in all age groups. In their close study of the Grimm’s collection of folk tales, Richter and Merkel show that

21. *Märchen, Phantasie und soziales Lernen*, p. 18.

these narratives, even though marked by bourgeois stylization, all retain hope for improving conditions of life and that the imaginative elements (miracles, magic) function to bring about a *real* fulfillment of the desires of the protagonists who were often underdogs or victims of social injustice.

To the extent that Richter and Merkel show how liberating the imagination can be and how it has been curbed in bourgeois society, their book is an immensely valuable contribution to the theoretical study of folk and fairy tales. However, there is one significant problem with their work: they do not investigate *the contradictory aspects* of the imaginative and emancipatory elements in the folk tale.²² Whereas it is true that change is realized in the tales, this change reflects the desire of the lower classes to move up in the world and seize power *as monarchs*, not necessarily the desire to alter social relations. The endings of almost all folk tales are not solely emancipatory, but actually depict the limits of social mobility and the confines of the imagination. Still, the tales are vivid images of the contradictions of that period, and they glimpse the need and possibility for limited change.

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The *Märchen*, as we know it today, is a folk form of art which stems largely from late feudalism and early capitalism. This was the period in Germany when the tales became of general interest, were collected and recorded. Therefore, in analyzing a particular tale it is necessary to take into account where and when it was recorded, what possible changes were made in the tale which might have originated thousands of years ago, and what unique contribution the storyteller may have made in light of communal conditions. Often it is difficult to be exact in demonstrating where definite changes were made in a particular version of a tale. However, we do know from the historical evidence and different versions gathered by the Finnish School that in the active telling of the tales the contents were easily applicable and made applicable to the conditions of late feudalism and early capitalism. Thus the folk tale as an art form that was changed constantly by its carriers can be said

22. For the debate about the function of imaginative elements in fairy and folk tales, particularly among Marxists, see Christa Bürger, "Die soziale Funktion volkstümlicher Erzählformen—Sage und Märchen," *Projekt Deutschunterricht 1*, ed. Heinz Ide (Stuttgart, 1971), pp. 26-56; Martin Freiburger, "Wirklichkeit und kindliche Phantasie," *kürbiskern*, 1 (1974), 51-67; Elvira Högemann-Ledwohn, "Warum nicht auch die alten Märchen!" *kürbiskern*, 1 (1974), 70-73; Bernd Wollenweber, "Märchen und Sprichwort," *Projekt Deutschunterricht 6*, ed. Heinz Ide (Stuttgart, 1974), pp. 12-92. See also Wilfried Gottschalch's review of the Richter and Merkel book, "Kinderunterhaltung: Phantasie und Märchen," in *Aesthetik und Kommunikation*, 20 (June 1975), 85-87.

to be stamped by the uneven historical transition from late feudalism to early capitalism in Germany. To this extent the fairy tale (*Kunstmärchen*) is the bourgeoisification of this pre-capitalist folk form arising in Germany largely because of the social changes and upheavals in the 18th century.

As pre-capitalist art form, the folk tale presents, in its partiality for everything metallic and mineral, a set and solid, imperishable world.²³ This imperishable world can be linked to concepts of medieval patriarchalism, monarchy and absolutism, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries in Germany. The world of the folk tale is inhabited largely by kings, queens, princes, princesses, soldiers, peasants, animals and supernatural creatures, rarely by members of the bourgeoisie. Nor are there machines and signs of industrialization. In other words, the main characters and concerns of a monarchistic and feudal society are presented, and the focus is on class struggle and competition for power among the aristocrats themselves and between the peasantry and aristocracy. Hence the central theme of all folk tales: "might makes right." He who has power can exercise his will, right wrongs, become ennobled, amass money and land, win women as prizes. This is why the people (*das Volk*) were the carriers of the tales: the *Märchen* catered to their aspirations and allowed them to believe that anyone could become a knight in shining armor or a lovely princess, and they also presented the stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of everyday life. The manner of portrayal, as Max Lüthi has shown,²⁴ is direct, clear, paratactical and one-dimensional in its narrative perspective, and this narrative position reflects the limitations of feudal life where alternatives to one's situation were extremely curtailed. So it is in the folk tale. There is no mention of another world. Only one side of characters and living conditions is described. Everything is *confined to a realm without morals*, where class and power determine social relations. Hence, the magic and miraculous serve to rupture the feudal confines and represent metaphorically the conscious and unconscious desires of the lower classes. "A world inverted, an exemplary world, fairyland is a criticism of ossified reality. It does not remain side by side with the latter; it reacts upon it; it suggests that we transform it, that we reinstate what is out of place."²⁵ This statement by Michel Butor about French fairy tales is applicable to the folk tale as well and points to the social critique latent in the imaginative elements. The fact that the people as carriers of the tales do not explicitly seek a total revolution

23. For the most comprehensive discussion of the folk tale's style and form, see Lüthi's *Das europäische Märchen*.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Michel Butor, "On Fairy Tales," *European Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. Vernon W. Gras (New York, 1973), p. 352.

of social relations does not minimize the revolutionary and utopian aspect in the imaginative portrayal of class conflict. Whatever the outcomes of the tales are—and for the most part, they are happy ends and “exemplary” in that they affirm a more just feudal order with democratizing elements—the impulse and critique of the “magic” is rooted in a historically explicable desire to overcome oppression and change society.

Perhaps the best known and most widely circulated collection of folk tales is that of the Brothers Grimm. These *Märchen* were recorded during the first decade of the 19th century in the Rhineland. They were told in dialect, largely by servants, housewives, a watchman and inhabitants from towns and small cities and were stylized and transcribed into High German by the Grimms. Consequently, a thorough analysis of the tales must take into account the background of the narrators and their communities, the social upheavals of the times caused by the Napoleonic Wars, the advent of manufacturing and the perspective of the Grimms, including their reasons for choosing certain folk tales for their collection. In dealing with the politics of the tales I want to limit my discussion to an analysis of the socio-historical conditions as reflected in two tales, *How Six Travelled through the World* and *Hansel and Gretel*, to demonstrate how connections might be made to the actual struggles of that period. In the first, *How Six Travelled through the World*, the elements of class struggle are most apparent, and the entire feudal system is placed in question. In the second, *Hansel and Gretel*, which is more widely known and has been watered down in modern versions, the social references are at first not as clear. For audiences of the 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly for the peasantry, the social and political signs were unmistakable.

How Six Travelled through the World concerns a man, who “was well-versed in all kinds of skills,”²⁶ served a king valiantly during a war, but was miserably paid and dismissed by the king when the war ended. The soldier swears that he will avenge himself if he can find the right people to help him. Indeed, he encounters five peasants, who possess extraordinary powers and agree to assist him. The soldier seeks out the king, who has declared in the meantime that anyone who can defeat his daughter in a foot race can marry her. If she happens to win, death is the reward. With the help of his friends and their supernatural gifts, the soldier wins the race. However, the king becomes “irritated and his daughter even more that such a common soldier formerly in his employ should win the wager.”²⁷ The king plots to kill

26. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Munich, 1963), p. 387. The German title of the tale is *Sechse kommen durch die ganze Welt*.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

the soldier and his friends, but they outsmart the king, who promises the soldier all the gold he can carry if he renounces his claim to the princess. The soldier agrees and has one of his friends, who has enormous strength, carry away the wealth of the kingdom. The king sends the royal army after the soldier and his friends to retrieve the gold. Of course, they easily defeat the army, divide the gold amongst themselves, and live happily ever after.

It is obvious that this tale treats a social problem of utmost concern to the lower classes. In the 18th century it was customary for the state to recruit soldiers for standing armies, treat them shabbily and abandon them when there was no more use for them. Here the perspective of the story is clearly that of the people, and though its origins are pre-capitalist, the narrator and the Grimms were probably attracted to its theme because of its relation to the Napoleonic Wars and perhaps even the Napoleonic Code (instituted in the Rhineland). Common soldiers were indeed treated miserably during these wars; yet, the Code gave rise to hopes for greater democratization. In this tale a common man shows himself to be the equal of a king if not better. The miraculous talents—the magic—are symbolic of the real hidden qualities which he himself possesses, or they might represent the collective energies of small people, the power they actually possess. When these talents are used properly, that is, when used to attain due justice and recompense, the people are invincible, a theme common to many other folk tales such as *The Bremen Town Musicians*. Thus, the imaginative elements have a real reference in history and society, for the peasant uprisings and the French Revolution in the 18th century were demonstrations of how the oppressed people could achieve limited victories against the nobility. To be sure, these victories were often of short duration, and the peasants and lower estates could be divided or pacified with money as is the case in this tale, where the social relations are not changed. Still, it is important that the tale does *illustrate* how common people can work together, assert themselves *actively* and achieve clear-cut goals, using their skills and imagination.

The story of Hansel and Gretel is also a story of hope and victory. Again the perspective is plebeian. A woodcutter does not have enough food to feed his family. His wife, the stepmother of his children, convinces him that they must abandon *his* children in the woods in order to survive. The children are almost devoured by a witch, but they use their ingenuity to trick and kill her. No fooling around here. Then Hansel and Gretel return home with jewels and embrace their father.

The struggle depicted in this tale is against poverty and against witches who have houses of food and hidden treasures.²⁸ Here again the imaginative and

28. Cf. B. Wollenweber, "Märchen und Sprichwort," pp. 24-28.

magic elements of the tale had specific meanings for a peasant and lower-class audience at the end of the 18th century. The wars of this period often brought with them widespread famine and poverty which were also leading to the breakdown of the feudal patronage system. Consequently, peasants were often left to shift on their own and forced to go to extremes to survive. These extremes involved banditry, migration or abandonment of children. The witch (as man-eater) could be interpreted here to symbolize the entire feudal system or the greed and brutality of the aristocracy, responsible for the difficult conditions. The killing of the witch is symbolically the realization of the hatred which the peasantry felt for the aristocracy as hoarders and oppressors. It is important to note that the children do not turn against their father or step-mother as one might think they would. On the contrary, they reluctantly comprehend the situation which forces their parents to act as they do. That is, they understand the social forces as being responsible for their plight and do not personalize by viewing their parents as their enemies. The objectifying of the tale is significant, for it helps explain the tolerant attitude toward the step-mother (which is not always the case). It must be remembered that women died young due to frequent child-bearing and unsanitary conditions. Thus, step-mothers were common in households, and this often led to difficulties with the children from former wives. In this respect, the tale reflects the strained relations but sees them more as a result of social forces. The step-mother is not condemned. Neither by the narrator or the children. They return home, unaware that she is dead. They return home with hope and jewels to put an end to *all* their problems.

In both these tales class conflict is portrayed in light of pre-capitalist social conditions which were common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Germany. In neither tale is there a political revolution. What is important is that the contradictions are depicted, whereby the prejudices and injustices of feudal ideology are exposed. The magic and imaginative elements are closely tied to the real possibilities for the peasantry to change conditions, albeit in a limited way. The emphasis is on hope and action. The soldier and his friends *act* and *defeat* the king whenever they are tested. Hansel and Gretel *act* and *kill* the witch. The form of the tale, its closed, compact nature, is shaped by the individual carriers, who distribute the stories and allow the common people to learn how they might survive in an unjust society and struggle with hope. Whatever symbols and magic are used can clearly be understood when placed in the historical context of the transition from feudalism to early capitalism.

Naturally it could be argued that the folk tale has nothing at all to do with the socio-political conditions of feudalism. That is, the folk tale originated

thousands of years ago, and we still do not know how or when. But we do know that it was cultivated in an oral tradition by the people and passed on from generation to generation in essentially 35 different basic patterns which have been kept intact over thousands of years. As Vladimir Propp has shown, there have been transformations of elements within the patterns, and these changes depend on the social realities of the period in which the tales are told.²⁹ Linda Dégh clarifies this point in her thorough examination of the social function of the storyteller in a Hungarian peasant community: "Our knowledge of European folktale material stems from two sources: literary works and oral tradition. The most striking characteristic of the traditional tale lies in the fact that the social institutions and concepts which we discover in it reflect the age of feudalism. Thus the question of the origin of the folktale coincides with that of the origin of literature in general."³⁰ Clearly the folk tales collected in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, though they preserved aesthetic patterns derived from pre-capitalist societies, did so because these patterns plus the transformed elements and motifs continued to reflect and speak to the conditions of the people and the dominant ideology of the times to a great degree. Though primitive in origin, the folk tale in Germany, as told in the late 18th century and collected by the Grimms in the early 19th, related to and was shaped by feudal conditions.

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During the transitional period from feudalism to capitalism in Germany when the aspirations of the emerging middle class became more pronounced, when a trend toward unification of the different principalities increased the chances for expanded trade and manufacturing, when growing public education led to greater literacy of the people, another art form, the *Kunstmärchen*, which owed its origins to the folk tale, began to develop. This fairy tale can be called the bourgeoisification of the folk tale both as short narrative and drama. From the very beginning, if we examine the works of Wieland, Musäus, Klinger, Jung-Stilling and others toward the end of the 18th century, we can see that the fairy tale derived its perspective from the socio-political concerns of the respective authors. The folk tale as a popular narrative and dramatic form which addressed the needs and dreams of the masses during feudalism was gradually appropriated and reutilized by

29. See "Les transformations des contes fantastiques," *Théorie de la littérature*, trans. and ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris, 1965), pp. 234-261.

30. Dégh, *Folktales and Society*, p. 65.

bourgeois writers who sought to express the interests and conflicts of the rising middle classes during early capitalism.

At first the fairy tale was hampered by too much of a dependence on the original folk tale and feudal ideology. It was not until the 1790s when Goethe with his programmatic *Das Märchen*, which concerns the French Revolution and the formation of a new society based on ideas of social reformism and classicism,³¹ and the romantics first with the tales of Wackenroder, Tieck and Novalis and later with those of Brentano, Eichendorff, Fouqué, Chamisso, Hoffmann and others, were drawn to this form that its real "revolutionary" potential could be demonstrated. Characteristic of the tale is the emphasis on class conflict involving progressive segments of the bourgeoisie against more conservative elements. The new hero is no longer a prince or peasant, but a bourgeois protagonist, generally speaking an artist, the creative individual, who has numerous adventures and encounters with the supernatural in pursuit of a "new world" where he will be able to develop and enjoy his talents. The quest is no longer for wealth and social status (though class struggle is involved) but for a change in social relations and a millenium, and this is significant, for it reflected the influence of the American and French Revolutions and other revolutionary movements at the end of the 18th century. Whereas the folk-tale world of absolutism always remains intact, the fairy tale records the breakdown of an old world structure, chaos, confusion, and the striving to attain a new world which might allow for greater humane conduct. In its form, the fairy tale is multi-dimensional, hypotactical not paratactical, and open-ended. Often it is difficult to distinguish between the unreal and the real in the tale. This complex mode of portrayal again reflects a change in society where new perspectives and styles of life were more accessible to and were appropriated by the middle classes and where everything associated with the feudal world and the Judaeo-Christian tradition was brought into question.

As an expression of the progressive elements of the bourgeoisie in early capitalism, the fairy tale at first, both in form and content, places a high regard on the freedom of the creative individual, opposes the growing mechanization of life and the alienation caused by capitalism, and implies that man must master both his own talents and time to create a new world where humanism reigns, not harmony. In contrast to the one-dimensional world of the folk tale, the world of the fairy tale has a broader spectrum of social types. Ideological elements associated with free enterprise, wage labor, accumulation and profit are added, questioned and critiqued. Anti-capitalist

31. See Hans Mayer, "Vergebliche Renaissance: Das 'Märchen' bei Goethe und Gerhart Hauptmann," *Von Lessing bis Thomas Mann* (Pfullingen, 1959), pp. 356-382.

attitudes are frequent (for different reasons, of course) in the fairy tales of Brentano (*Gockel, Hinkel und Gackeleia*), Eichendorff (*Libertas und ihre Freier*), Chamisso (*Peter Schlemihl*) and Hoffmann (*Klein Zaches* and *Meister Floh*) and become more pronounced by the end of the 19th century in Hofmannsthal's *Geschichte des Kaufmannssohnes und seiner vier Diener* and during the 20th century in Horváth's *Sportmärchen* and Döblin's *Märchen vom Materialismus*. Machines, inventions, automatons and cities become standard parts of the settings as Marianne Thalmann has demonstrated in *Romantiker entdecken die Stadt*.³² Subjectivity assumes a more important role. The tale is now part of a *literary tradition*, and the language is more subtle and metaphorical. The action, ideas and forms depend on the author's socio-political stance. In fact, it was through the fairy tale as narrative and drama that bourgeois artists presented the need for social change by purposely reutilizing folk motifs, elements and plots. One could possibly argue that German bourgeois artists were particularly attracted to the fairy tale since they could write their social and political protests in a type of "slave language." Given the censors during the Napoleonic Wars and early Metternich period and the restraints placed on their energies and progressive ideas, German writers and intellectuals became prone to a metaphysical drive to interiorize,³³ and the fairy tale was a suitable metaphorical mode to express their unfulfilled wishes for greater social and cultural freedom. Though some writers took an elitist position and portrayed the artist as savior of society, they all recognized that a new world had to be formed out of chaos, and this world can be likened to a world of eros, ideologically and aesthetically projected as a world where the creative nature of all human beings is allowed full development and where differences between people are cultivated and respected. No matter what has become of the fairy tale, its main impulse was at first revolutionary and progressive, not escapist, as has too often been suggested. The realm of the fairy tale contains a symbolical reflection of real socio-political issues and conflicts.

32. Munich, 1965.

33. See the excellent study by Hans J. Haferkorn, "Zur Entstehung der bürgerlich-literarischen Intelligenz und des Schriftstellers in Deutschland zwischen 1750 und 1800," in *Deutsches Bürgertum und literarische Intelligenz*, ed. Bernd Lutz (Stuttgart, 1974). On p. 114, he remarks: "Since the aristocracy prevented the free-lance writer from participating in the decision-making process, and thereby, at the same time excluded him from that social situation in which he could have fully developed his bourgeois personality, there remained only the way of resignation. This led to different types of inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) in which the free-lance writer—estranged from his literary-political possibilities—was left no other recourse but to make the politically homeless members of the 'middle strata,' i.e., the bourgeois 'class,' appear noble in an aesthetic sense."

In the early phase of romanticism, Wackenroder, Tieck and Novalis wrote fairy tales of protest which drew upon their resentment toward the rationalist utilitarian principles being institutionalized by the bourgeoisie and the states in which they lived. Wackenroder's *Ein wunderbares morgendländisches Märchen von einem nackten Heiligen* (*A Wonderful Oriental Tale about a Naked Saint*) uses the wheel of time as a symbol of bourgeois strict regulation of work ("time is money") to demonstrate how humankind and the imagination can be depleted of their vital essence in such a process. In Tieck's *Der Runenberg*, Christian seeks to escape the orderly life of town and garden since he finds such respectability suffocating. Eventually he goes insane because there are no options for the imagination within bourgeois confines. In his *Klingsohr Märchen*, Novalis has *der Schreiber* (the scribe), representing utilitarian rationalism, pose a threat to the creation of a new realm which is to be composed of love (Eros) and peace (Freya). After the *Schreiber* is defeated, wisdom and imagination give rise to the new realm—obviously a counter model to the real German states which held creative forces in check. In each one of these fairy tales there is a socio-political statement about existing conditions along with an expression of hope that humankind can create non-repressive societies.

Wackenroder, Tieck and Novalis were only the inaugurators of the radical romantic fairy tale. E.T.A. Hoffmann, who came after them, is perhaps the best example for demonstrating how revolutionary and utopian the fairy tale could become. Not only was Hoffmann the culminator of the romantic movement, but he was the most original and ingenious in exploring the aesthetic and political possibilities of the fairy tale. Here *Der goldene Topf* (*The Golden Pot*, 1814), conceived at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, at a time when he was experiencing personal difficulties regarding what professional career he should pursue (musician, writer or lawyer?) and at a time when early capitalist market conditions in publishing and the lack of copyright made the process of writing for unknown audiences all the more alienating, Hoffmann consciously uses the fairy tale to make a socio-political statement. Subtitled "Ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit,"³⁴ Hoffmann's story is divided into 12 vigils, two of which recount the myth of the lost paradise Atlantis. The plot concerns the young student Anselmus, who is in the process of being groomed to become a privy councillor, but who has a mysterious encounter with the beautiful blue-eyed snake *Serpentina*, daughter of the Archivarius Lindhorst. We are informed that Lindhorst was actually banished from Atlantis because he had violated the erotic principles of this

34. E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Fantasie und Nachtstücke*, ed. Walter Müller-Seidel (Munich, 1960), p. 179. "A Tale from the New Times."

paradise. His return is predicated on how he defends these principles on earth and whether he can find suitable matches for his three daughters—young men who believe in the powers of the imagination and love. After Anselmus falls in love with Serpentina, he takes a position with Lindhorst as *scribe*, and he discovers his unusual creative powers as writer. This position as *writer* brings him into conflict with the Konrektor Paulmann and Registrator Heerbrand, who want him to marry the prim and proper Veronika, settle down as Councillor, and lead an orderly, useful bourgeois life. A series of conflicts which involve drunkenness, missed appointments, dream adventures and psychological torment culminate in a major battle between the forces of rationalism, utilitarianism and repression (represented by a witch) and the forces of creativity, imagination and freedom (represented by Lindhorst). Naturally, Lindhorst wins, and in the end, Anselmus arrives in Atlantis where he can realize his love for Serpentina and give full rein to his gifts as artist, unharassed by the constraining forces of functionaries, who want to mold him in their own image.

Obviously there are many levels to this tale, and this short résumé, which focuses on the socio-political implications, does not do justice to the remarkable ironic manner in which Hoffmann subtly weaves dreams, visions, myths and reality to form what Baudelaire has termed a *paradis artificiel*.³⁵ The artificial paradise of this fairy tale is a real composite picture of the social struggles which Hoffmann and other bourgeois artists of that time were experiencing. Anselmus as a young writer (or as a member of the intelligentsia) seeks to avoid the manipulation of civil servants who want to make him into a mere tool of the state. He senses his potential as a creative human being and seeks to liberate himself from forces (Paulmann, Heerbrand) that seek to chain him to a life of drudgery—forces symbolical of social rationalization, civil service conformity and market conditions. The movement in the tale is dialectical: Anselmus swings between two poles, rationalism and idealism, seeking to incorporate the best from both in order to achieve his paradise. His instinctive rebellion (begun in a moment of intoxication) becomes more and more a conscious one during the course of the struggle, and the struggle is clearly against a socialization process which wants to drain the individual of his or her creative and critical qualities for the profit of a ruling class. The very beginning of the tale involves Anselmus turning over a basket of apples and cakes set out for sale by the witch. This clash, described as accidental, turns out to be the major dramatic conflict of the story: market versus human values. As we know from Hoffmann's other tales like *Der*

35. See *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Yves Gerard Le Dantec (Paris, 1961), pp. 323-462.

Sandmann and *Die Automate*, he was very much disturbed by tendencies of early capitalism which caused humans and human relations to assume the properties of things and machines while the real productive power and quality of human beings became distorted and mystified. Therefore, he endeavored to expose this dehumanization in his writings, and in *Der goldene Topf*, he argues that intellectuals and artists from the bourgeois class itself must *refuse* to participate in such a demeaning and demented socio-economic process and must take a stand for another world. This world is not just one of flight, but it is also *an imaginative projection of real possibilities for changing human and productive relations*.

The romantics and their fairy tales have too often been misread and misinterpreted, particularly by Georg Lukács,³⁶ as having initiated irrationalism and a literature of flight and fancy in the German tradition. Nobody can deny the idealistic and imaginative features of romantic literature. However, it is not important to ascertain and judge whether the romantics were consequently decadent and irrational, but to comprehend why and how they reacted to those disruptive and unsettling social forces during the transition from feudalism to early capitalism. By developing the fairy tale, they were actually continuing a folk tradition which they wanted to endow with their own class aspirations and interests. Specifically they all wanted at different stages to project the possibilities for realizing greater freedom in civil society that was undergoing great upheavals. The fairy tale changes and questions the limits of change in a conservative society. It does not present happy-end solutions because there were none in reality (except for Metternich's "happy" Holy Alliance) at the beginning of the 19th century. In its candor and imaginative use of folklore, the fairy tale proves itself to be a characteristic national form, expressing the need for greater justice and more rational alternatives in opposition to arbitrary socio-political repression. Thus it is not by chance that almost all the established and reputable writers of the 19th and 20th centuries (Mörike, Stifter, Keller, Heine, Raimund, Nestroy, Büchner, Storm, Gotthelf, Raabe, Hofmannsthal, Hesse, T. Mann, Rilke, Brecht, Kafka up through Böll and Lenz) have turned to the fairy tale not only to seek refuge from the German *misère* but to comment on and suggest that the *misère* need not be, that change is possible in reality. Naturally, the fairy realms of each one of these authors must be explored carefully in relation to the peculiar attitudes and philosophies of each author, for many of these writers have also used the fairy tale to delude themselves and their

36. Cf. *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Neuwied, 1962) and *Skizze einer Geschichte der neueren deutschen Literatur* (Neuwied, 1964).

audiences about social conditions. Still, at their symbolical best, the German fairy tales include historical and political references which reveal the imagination actively serving the general struggle for greater clarity and freedom in society. Indeed, in transcending the limits and springing the confines of their own society with magic, fairy tales provide insight on how the rationalization process of exploitative socio-economic systems need to be and can be humanized. Hence, the reason for our continual return and attraction to folk and fairy tales: breaking the magic spell in fairy realms means breaking the magic hold which oppressors and machines seem to hold over us in our everyday reality.

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