Grim Variations
From Fairy Tales
to Modern Anti-Fairy Tales

WOLFGANG MIEDER

The appearance of the two volumes of the Brothers' Grimm Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales) in 1812 and 1815 not only signified the publication of one of the true bestsellers of the world, approaching the international and multilingual dissemination of the Bible, but it also marked the beginning of a large global scholarly field commonly referred to as folk narrative research. While scholars of the 19th century assembled significant national and regional fairy tale collections that paralleled those of the Grimms, serious investigations into the origin, dissemination, nature and function of these texts also began to appear in a steady flow which has not ebbed. In fact, interest in fairy tales has increased considerably in the past three decades, and obviously, the bicentennial celebration of the births of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm will mark a high tide, not only in the scholarship on their fairy tale collection and their philological, folkloric, mythological, legal and literary endeavors, but also in research concerning the fascinating question of what their work and in particular "their" fairy tales mean to people in modern technological societies.

At the present time beautifully illustrated editions of Grimms' tales can be found in bookstores everywhere, attesting to the ongoing fascination with fairy tales even by children of the computer age. Modern children can still learn from these tales that certain problems, dangers and ordeals can be overcome, that transformations and changes must occur, and that everything will work out in the end. They will learn to solve their problems imaginatively, and if we can give credence to psychological interpretations of the tales, such children will become independent and socially responsible citizens whose naive search for personal pleasure is replaced by an analytical understanding of social reality. Above all, children can learn from fairy tales to have an optimistic and future-oriented world view, and they will realize and understand universal human problems, which in turn will be a key to coping with their own individuality and the world at large. Child psychologists, in particular Bruno Bettelheim, have made a strong case for the didactic value of fairy tales for children as they go through various rites of passage in their maturation process to adulthood, and there appears to be no need to argue with the contention that these tales of times gone by seem to be appropriate literature for young and innocent children.

But what about the adult? What value and meaning do these children's stories, as they are commonly referred to, have for people who have long surpassed their childhood? Do fairy tales have some universal appeal to people of all age groups and social classes, or are they today only for children and scholars who study them for various reasons? Why is it that cultural and literary historians, folklorists, sociologists, psychologists and others have studied and continue to investigate the deeper meaning of fairy tales? Surely not because they simply love children's literature and in a wave of nostalgia long to return to those cozy moments when a beloved family member read or perhaps even told them one of those old stand-by Grimme tales many years ago. The reason, obviously, is that scholars have long realized that these tales were originally not children's stories, but rather traditional narratives for adults, couching basic human problems and aspirations in symbolic and poetical language. Even though they present an unreal world with miraculous, magical and numinous aspects, fairy tales nevertheless contain realistic problems and concerns that are universal to humanity. They are symbolic comments on basic aspects of social life and modes of human behavior: presented are not only such rites of passage as birth, adolescence, courtship, marriage, old age and death, but also feelings and typical experiences in people's lives. Emotions such as love, hate, joy, sorrow, happiness and sadness are found again and again, and often one and the same tale deals with such phenomena in contrasting pairs; that is success versus failure, wealth versus poverty, luck versus misfortune, kindness versus meanness, compassion versus indifference, or, simply put, good versus evil.
Fairy tales present the world in black and white, but in the end this conflict is resolved, and happiness, joy and contentment become the optimistic expression of hope for a world as it should be. This trust in ultimate justice and the belief in the good of humanity have to be of significance to adults today if hope is to exist for mankind at all in an age that is anything but a fairy tale. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch talks so much about the utopian function of fairy tales in his monumental work, Das Prinzip der Hoffnung, (The Principle of Hope), which appeared from 1954–59. For him, at least some fairy tales contain emancipatory potential for mankind, liberating people from oppression and leading to more just societies.4 Read and interpreted in this vein, fairy tales clearly contain elements of social history from a time far removed from the present. They often camouflage the trials of oppressed people against malevolent rulers, the ever present conflict between the haves and the have-nots, the desire for a fairer political system and social order, etc.5 The supposedly children’s stories conceal in part the frustrations of adults, who to this day long for a better and fairer world, where people can in fact finally live happily ever after.

This element of hope for social justice, fairness and humanity enables these traditional fairy tales to survive today among children and adults. Their universality in dealing with human questions as well as their universal appeal as aesthetic expressions of the resolutions of these queries have occupied more psychologists and philosophers than Bruno Bettelheim and Ernst Bloch. The scholarship on the Grimm fairy tales alone is so vast by now that an individual researcher can hardly claim to know it all. There exist, in the meantime, superb critical editions with voluminous notes by such renowned scholars as Johannes Bolte, Georg Polívka,6 and Heinz Rölleke,7 several detailed studies concerning the aesthetics of fairy tales by Max Lüthi,8 fascinating structural investigations by Vladimir Propp,9 significant historical studies by Lutz Röhrich,10 socio-political interpretations by Jack Zipes,11 and many more.12 Mention should also be made, at least in passing, of the inclusive tale-type studies which have been carried out using the Finnish geographic-historical method of analyzing the origin and dissemination of individual fairy tales. There are among others Ernst Böklen’s two volumes of Schneewittchenstudien (Leipzig 1910 and 1915), Anna Birgitta Rooth’s The Cinderella Cycle (Lund 1951), Marianne Rumpf’s Rotkäppchen. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung (Göttingen 1951) and more recently Michael Belgrader’s Das Märchen von dem Machandelboom (Bern 1980).13 But the basic problem with these otherwise excellent studies is that they document variants of these major tales only through the 19th century. While they present attempts at finding the archetype of each tale and its historical dissemination more or less world-wide (or at least for the Indo-European tradition), they concern themselves not at all with what is happening to such well-known fairy tales in the present century. There is no immediate need for additional tale-type studies of such detail (although they obviously have their intrinsic and respected value), since what is really needed is bringing the existing studies up-to-date, i.e. taking them from the Brothers Grimm to the present day.14 Dozens of variants in the form of rewritten children’s stories, or literary reworkings, parodies and satires exist, and there are also many uses of such fairy tales in movies, caricatures, cartoons, comic strips, advertisements and graffiti, which all need to be documented and interpreted in regard to their function and significance.

In a most enlightening essay concerning the possibility of fairy tales in the modern age, Hermann Bausinger argues successfully that mankind is predisposed toward a type of “Märchenkenen” (fairy-tale thinking), i.e. mankind longs for and strives toward the happy ending so vividly expressed in fairy tales. Even though there might be moments of regression or deviation from this path, people will always try to escape the status quo of social reality in their longing for happiness. He too refers to Ernst Bloch’s view of the fairy tale as a future-oriented departure toward utopia and the fact that the biographical plots of many fairy tales thus become mirrors of people on their path to a better life.15 In this regard Max Lüthi speaks of the fairy tale as presenting “opportunities” to people for a “purposeful motion” toward a world as it ought to be.16 Jack Zipes refers to this aspect as the “emancipatory potential” of fairy tales “chart(ing) ways for us to become makers of history and our own destinies,”17 and Lutz Röhrich even talks of the “Modell-Charakter” of many fairy tales for human emancipation from certain role expectations.18 In this regard the traditional fairy tales are in fact therapeutic, didactic and optimistic expressions couched in symbolic language.

But many adults are unwilling or incapable of accepting the positive value system of the old fairy tale as even a possibility to be hoped for, since they are too occupied with real-life problems. If suffering and oppressed people of earlier ages created these fairy tales as an escape valve from an unhappy and ugly reality, modern people, adhering to a pessimistic if not cynical world view at the expense of the optimistic nature of the fairy tales, rather identify with the societal problems of former times that appear to resemble their own. It has often been remarked that the fairy tale contains its anti-pode in its very essence. That is, while certain characters achieve ultimate happiness, others very drastically go to their doom. To many people of the present day the actual fairy tale is simply too far-fetched to accept, and it is the anti-fairy tale that appears to give a clearer symbolic view of what the human condition is really like.19
The moment one does not look at a fairy tale as a symbolic expression of the idea and belief that everything will work out in the end, the cathartic nature of the tale vanishes rather quickly. Rather than "enjoying" the happy state of the fairy-tale heroes and heroines at the very end of the fairy tale, modern adults tend to concentrate on the specific problems of the fairy tales since they reflect today's social reality in a striking fashion. Who after all would possibly admit to being so naive and trusting as to believe in the optimism and hope of fairy tales? A good dose of negativism is present in an intellectual view of the world and also in the pragmatic reaction to the ills of modern society. Although at times we may wish and hope for a better or even fairy-tale existence, we are in fact preoccupied and burdened with real problems which prevent us from longing for, let alone finding, that marvellous happy ending. The positive and emancipatory vision of fairy tales appears more often than not to be buried in a world where one tragedy and crime chases the next. Pessimism, skepticism and cynicism are rampant and perhaps too much even for the traditional fairy tales to overcome.

We constantly reinterpret a handful of tales by recalling them not necessarily in their entirety, but rather by looking critically at particular problems in the individual tales. Neglecting the final positive resolution of all problems at the end of the tales, certain of their episodes are seen as reflections of a troubled society, as a critical view of the belief in perfect love, as a concern with social matters, etc. Such modern reinterpretations of fairy tales gain in pungency when contrasted with the traditional tale, that is when reality is juxtaposed with the world of wishful thinking. The resulting interplay of tradition and innovation not only takes place in the reinterpretations of these fairy tales or segments of them by individuals, but also in the many modern allusions to fairy-tale elements in movies, advertisements, comic strips, caricatures, cartoons, greeting cards and graffiti, as well as in poetic reinterpretations of entire tales or parts thereof.

Let us now turn to a short analysis of at least three well-known fairy tales to show how these traditional stories survive today in the form of questioning anti-fairy tales. A New Yorker cartoon can serve as a starting point for some of the grim variations which are to follow. It shows a car approaching a large road sign with the inscription, "You are now entering Enchantment—'Gateway to Disenchantment.'" One can well imagine a somewhat archaic town-crier walking through the streets of the town ahead and calling out the following news stories of the day: " 'Snow White kidnapped. Prince released from spell. Tailor kills seven. These are the headlines. I'll be back in a moment with the details.'" Fairy-tale violence appears to be making big news, and even children seem to react negatively to the more gruesome aspects of some fairy-tale episodes. This is made clear in another cartoon in which a small boy comments to his mother who is reading him Grimms' tales for the umpteenth time: "'Witches poisoning princesses, giants falling off beanstalks, wolves terrorizing pigs... and you complain about violence on TV!?'" A German cartoon expressed this splendidly by taking the formula "and they lived happily ever after" literally and juxtaposing it with present day reality. The caption of this cartoon showing a couple sitting in front of a television set explains: "'...so leben sie noch heute.' Verlass dich drauf, in den Grimmschen Märchen steckt mindestens ein halbes Dutzend todsicherer Grusicals und Kriminalthriller drin!'" ("'... and they lived happily ever after.' You can bet that there are at least half a dozen sure horror and detective thrillers in Grimms' fairy tales").

The first fairy tale in the Brothers Grimm collection, The Frog Prince, certainly has been reinterpreted along these lines numerous times, most likely due to the fact that it deals with obligation, transformation, maturation, sex and marriage. Such universal themes are particularly relevant to the adult world, even though Dennis the Menace might naively ask his mother upon having this fairy tale read to him, "How long was Dad a frog before you kissed him?" Let's at least hope that Dennis's mother and father are happily married and that his mother does not reproach her husband with, "You kissed better when you were a frog." Or that the father must conclude, "If you must know, yes! I was happier when I was a frog!" Next, we have the unhappy father sitting in a frog-like position at a pond and the mother explaining to the child, "Don't worry about it, dear. Your father's just reliving his youth." And if fairy-tale transformations were possible, he might even change back into a real frog and leap back into the

"Witches poisoning princesses, giants falling off beanstalks, wolves terrorizing pigs... and you complain about violence on TV!?"

Cartoon by Randy Glasbergen. Originally published in Good Housekeeping. Reprinted by permission.
water with the woman left to comment: "He's opted out of society again."
29 While these cartoons might be joking reversals of the fairy tale, they put into question the truth of the tale by secularizing and demythologizing its symbolic content. 30 On a more serious literary level, Susan Mitchell has expressed this longing to get out of a marriage in her poem, "From the Journals of the Frog Prince" (1978), in a caring and understanding fashion. What at first seemed to be a fairy-tale transformation has proven to be a curse in a world where perfect marriages are not possible:

[...]
Night after night I lie beside her.
"Why is your forehead so cool and damp?" she asks.
Her breasts are soft and dry as flour.
The hand that brushes my head is feverish.
At her touch I long for wet leaves,
the slap of water against rocks.

"What were you thinking of?" she asks.
How can I tell her
I am thinking of the green skin
[...]

"What are you thinking of?" she whispers.
I am staring into the garden.
I am watching the moon
wind its trail of golden slime around the oak,
over the stone basin of the fountain.
How can I tell her
I am thinking that transformations are not forever? 31

What this person (frog) is in fact saying is that marriage should not force a person to lose his identity. Another cartoon shows this splendidly where a frog faced with a princess about to kiss him argues, "But I don't want to be turned into a prince. I want you to accept me for what I am." 32 Life at court or in today's materialistic world is not necessarily desirable, especially not if it means giving up a more contented life. Thus a frog can even be ridiculed by his peers for having such transformation thoughts: "I'm a frog, you're a frog. Hell, we're all frogs. Except, of course, for Prince Charming over there." 33 Again we have a poetic reworking of this idea in a poem by Hyacinthe Hill so appropriately called "Rebels from Fairy Tales" (no date):

We are the frogs who will not turn to princes.
We will not change our green and slippery skin
for one so lily-pale and plain, so smooth
it seems to have no grain. We will not leave
our leap, our spring, [...].
We scorn their warm, dry princesses. We're proud
of our own bug-eyed brides with bouncing strides.
Keep your magic. We are not such fools.
Here is the ball without a claim on it.
We may begin from the same tadpoles, but
we've thought a bit, and will not turn to men. 34

In this regard, consider finally the wonderful German cartoon from the perspective of the frogs, where a kid-
frog begs his mummy: "Lies noch mal den Teil vor, in
der der häßliche Prinz ein hübscher Frosch wird!" 
(Read that part again where the ugly prince becomes a
beautiful frog!) What a wonderfully humorous and yet
telling inversion of the fairy tale motif!

Concerning the kiss scene, there is of course the fear
of the unknown, be it merely a sexual encounter or a
more lasting relationship. Charles Addams, for exam-
ple, drew a somewhat timid young woman next to a
large overwhelming frog with the caption, "Aber woher
soll ich denn wissen, daß du ein verzauberter Prinz
bist?"36 (But how am I supposed to know that you are
an enchanted prince?). A more sophisticated modern
princess doubtfully confronts the would-be seducer
with the question, "You really expect me to believe that
you're a prince?"37 Another young woman is concerned
about sexual promiscuity and first asks the frog, "How
do I know you don't have herpes?,"38 and finally, there
is the basic question, "But how do I know you'll turn
into a prince?"39 in a clean cartoon from Playboy which
confronts beauty and the beast in the only too human
concern about beginning a meaningful relationship.
This fear also plays a major role in the fairy tale The
Frog Prince, and it is not surprising to see it reinter-
preted today, however with the big difference that the
sexual context of this episode is much more blatantly
expressed. This is particularly true in parts of Anne Sex-
ton's lengthy poem, "The Frog Prince" (1971), in
which the fear of sexual maturation is put into the
following words:

[...]
Frog has no nerves.
Frog is as old as a cockroach.
Frog is my father's genitals.
Frog is a malformed doorknob.
Frog is a soft bag of green.

The moon will not have him.
The sun wants to shut off
like a light bulb.
At the sight of him
the stone washes itself in a tub.
The crow thinks he's an apple
and drops a worm in.
At the feel of frog
the touch-me-nots explode
like electric slugs.

Slime will have him.
Slime has made him a house.40
[...]

It is, of course, the possibility of sexual interpretation of
this fairy tale which has made it so popular in the adult
world. Such magazines as Playboy, Penthouse and
worse, as well as films of erotica contain numerous allu-
sions to this tale,41 of which only a few of the less inde-
cent ones will be included here to indicate the deliberate
perversion of Grimm fairy tales. In a harmless cartoon

the deceptive frog has obviously gotten the young
woman to kiss him without his miraculously changing
into a prince. His sly comment is simply, "Funny! I
usually turn into a handsome prince."42 But in a Pent-
house cartoon we find the frog in an animalistic sex act
with the princess who can only comment, "Hey, I
thought you were supposed to change into a prince
first,"43 and a second cartoon from this magazine shows
the frog putting on his frogsuit after the sexual act and
slyly saying, "I lied!"44 An additional poem by Phyllis
Thompson entitled "A Fairy Tale" (1969) may bring
the sexual preoccupation with this tale to a close. She
too describes once more the bedroom scene of the fairy
tale, but obviously in a vocabulary and directness which
destroy the magic of human love involving sex:

[...]
How shall I tell the shapely change that fell
On us as we embraced, reluctant? When
You kiss my glistening skin I feel a spell
Dissolve, and I come green to your hands again.

I do not know the seeming from the true
As we slip into our unambiguous climax!
I, last and loveliest born, most happy—you,
Prince, still humped like a frog in the slime of sex.45

Our final examples of grim reinterpretations of this
popular tale stem from the larger social sphere of polit-
sics and economics. Here the frog motif is used to satir-
ize the problematic state of the economy in particular
which is not at all free of worries as in the fairy tale.
There is, for example, the king who has just been
changed into a frog by the witch and rather than being
upset he declares: "Frankly, now that I've found out
the size of my kingdom's national debt, I'd rather re-
main a frog."46 Or we have the bankrupt king sitting at
the Internal Revenue Service office lamenting, "Bet-
between 1962 and 1974 I was a frog. Then in 1975 I was

"I'm a frog. You're a frog. Hell, we're all frogs. Except,
of course, for Prince Charming over there."

Drawing by Ziegler, © 1984 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.
crowned king, and 1975 was a very bad year for kings."47 Perhaps the new tax bill might help him as was caricatured by two frogs with signs "Kiss me—I'm really a handsome GOP Tax Bill."48 Maybe even the prime rate might go down if someone dares to kiss yet another obese frog claiming, "He's an enchanted prime rate."49 While these cartoons use the positive symbol of the kiss-scene of the fairy tale, they are in fact negating its utopian significance. There is no hope expressed in these modern variations, but instead one senses an overpowering clash of the magic and the real. Even if the kiss were to take place, the economic problems would remain in the form of only a slightly deflated frog.

Turning to a few last political allusions to the fairy tale The Frog Prince, we have one frog commenting to another, "I can only hope when I become a prince again it [my kingdom] hasn't changed into a democracy."50 Hope springs eternal for the prince, but obviously he doesn't want any change in the political status quo. There was also an interesting cartoon in 1983 showing the entire women's vote represented by a princess confronting the democratic contenders with the comment, "Just wait a minute now! Let me get this straight .... A kiss will turn one of you Democrats into a President?!"51 But the magic didn't work, since political reality refuses to be patterned after fairy tales. Even more bitter in its satire is another political caricature showing the strained relations between the Reagan administration and the Soviet Union. The artist has changed the Soviet Union into an ugly toad called Olga whom Prince Reagan is about to kiss. The stage directions for this absurd encounter read "... Then, when I kiss you, Olga, you turn from an ugly old toad into a not-too-bad looking broad, and we live more-or-less happily ever after."52 All that we can hope is that our political leaders will at least succeed in maintaining a world balance in which we can, in fact, live "more-or-less happily ever after." They have already succeeded in alienating us from the belief in magic fairy tales, but the fact that we continuously draw on old fairy-tale motifs to comment on our human comedy here on earth is ample proof that hope still exists for a transformation of humanity toward a higher level of social consciousness. In every humorous or satirical allusion to a fairy tale is hidden a statement of how things ought to be, and in this emancipatory thrust lies the significance of fairy tales such as The Frog Prince for adults, in addition to recalling fond memories of childhood days long passed.

The modern reinterpretations of certain parts of the Snow White fairy tale also reflect human follies and vices. This tale of narcissism, beauty, jealousy, competition, temptation and eventually maturation once again addresses basic conflicts that are parts of any socialization process. As a symbolic account of the pitfalls of wanting to be the absolute best, this fairy tale can serve as a parody of a society in which outward appearance is more highly valued than ethical convictions. In the case of Snow White, it is the universally known verse, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" which has served innumerable times as an attention-getting advice to shock people into a critical analysis of their own selves or of problems surrounding them.

Imagine the disappointed look on the woman's face, who after having asked the standard question, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of all?" received the answer, "Elizabeth Taylor,"53 in a 1957 New Yorker cartoon. Other women, realizing that they are no match to such competition, rephrase the question to a safer, "Who's the greatest Mom of them all?"54 or "Who is the fairest one of all, and state your sources!"55 And if the mirror, as it is likely to do, gives an unsatisfactory answer, the reaction is quick and to the point: "Well, then, who's the most intelligent?"56 or "Oh, yeah? Well, I've seen better-looking mirrors, too!"57 Of course there are also the defeatists who don't give the mirror a chance since they know that some "Snow White" will obviously beat them out: "Mirror, mirror—I know, why belabor the point ..."58 or "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, go to hell."59 But there is always hope, and in the modern technological world an aggressive woman would definitely turn from a mirror to a much more objective and reliable computer. After complicated calculations, she is able to read the print-out to her female competitors with much spit and self-assurance: "It says I'm the fairest one of all! So there!"60 Even though she might have won this grotesque beauty contest, the cartoonist clearly wants to satirize this preoccupation with appearance. The ends that some women are willing to go to in order to beautify themselves are fittingly ridiculed in a cartoon where a woman sits in front of a mirror surrounded by dozens of cosmetic items. She too asks the traditional question, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" but the answer by the "advertising" mirror is, "Just keep spending, sweetheart, it could be you!"61 We wouldn't be surprised if this woman were to buy a new type of handy mirror along with her cosmetics that was advertised with four pictures and the appropriate slogan: "Mirror Mirror. On the wall. On the desk. On the shelf. On the door."62 In comparison, how much more relevant and significant is an article on various concepts of female beauty at different ages, from Nefertiti to Rubens' female figures and others. Befittingly, the journalist chose the headline "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall . . ."63 for this intriguing essay.

Yet the problems of narcissism, beauty and greatness are not restricted to the female population. Men too are riddled by such insecurities, and the cartoons which we have located of men asking the mirror appear to be even more absurd in their questions for which the mirror has no answers. Picture a poor fellow in the morning in
front of a mirror shaving and putting the following question to his bathroom oracle: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most successful regional manager of computer-systems analysis in East Orange, New Jersey?" And a king, who doesn't have such mundane worries, stands in front of the mirror wondering while exposing himself, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, whose is the largest..." Just as ridiculous is a third man with his query: "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most unself-consciously hipper-than-thou-almost-over-thirty-type person of them all?" In these cartoons the mirror symbolizes the concern of people with their identity and shows some of the anxieties and fantasies that prevent us from achieving self-recognition and maturity. In addition to answering questions of this type, the mirror has also become a political looking glass in which the future of politicians is put under scrutiny. From 1960 dates a fascinating cartoon in which Richard Nixon is shown as the evil and witch-like stepmother getting the poisoned apple ready for Snow White and asking evilly: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" This is a splendid satire of dirty and tricky politics which is somewhat equalled by a German political cartoon showing Indira Gandhi standing in front of her mirror wearing a banner with the inscription "Bürgerrechte" (Civil Rights) and holding a club in her hand. The mirror, probably in this case the people, will not dare to answer her question, "Wer ist die Schönste im ganzen Land?" (Who is the fairest one of all?) negatively. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, recently was shown in quite a different predicament on the cover page of The Economist. As he strikes a meditative pose looking ahead, his head is flanked by pictures of Reagan and Gorbachev. Alluding to his attempt to steer India between the two super powers, the caption to this photo montage reads: "Picture, picture on the wall, I would like to love you all." The cartoons show us how infantile our behavior can be and are grim alterations of the same question raised in the Snow White fairy tale in a poetic fashion.

There are, of course, also the seven dwarfs who have captured the fantasy of the adult world and that of modern children. Two telling cartoons might be mentioned here where a child gets the traditional fairy tale somewhat mixed up with the more realistic problem of divorce. Dennis the Menace, for example, asks his dad to entertain him with the Snow White tale by requesting, "Read me about Snow White and the Seven Divorces." And his German female counterpart asks her mother about the marital status of the dwarfs' mother, to which the mother responds matter of factly: "Tut mir leid, die Geschichte sagt nichts darüber, ob die Mutter der sieben Zwergen Witwe oder geschieden war" (I'm sorry, the story doesn't mention whether the mother of the seven dwarfs was widowed or divorced.) Such fairy tale cartoons become telling commentaries on societal problems like divorce, and they also show that children or adults are prone to place certain fairy-tale motifs in contrast with realistic situations facing them. Seen like this, the cute little dwarfs, who were made even more saccharine by Walt Disney's movie version, become much more significant figures. Often they are also seen by adults as representing multiple concerns in sexual or international politics.

The personalized dwarfs, or also just the old anonymous ones, have been interpreted sexually by adults for quite some time, ranging from light-hearted humor to crude obscenity. Robert Gillespie wrote his poetic reinterpretation, "Snow White" (1971), along these lines, clearly wondering about the sexual activities of the Disney dwarfs and moving the underlying fairy tale once again into the original realm of adult entertainment.

She found herself 7 no less dwarfs!
Such disney images—where did they come from, the yellow pages?
grumpy sleepy squeezy happy dopye doc Doc?
So why didn’t she ever have any little dwarfs?
She was afraid of her father’s handlebar moustache?
Who does she think she is, no hostility like the rest of us toward stepmother? Her mother for dying?
What is really going on out there in that house in the woods?
Do they really know?
Does it ever get dirty and dull
fishy-stale in her innocent linens?
What are their little penises like, Snow White? 72
[.. .]

As in this poem, the dwarfs in sexual cartoons also seem to be unable to forget the wonderful girl with whom they enjoyed common sexual activities. That such matters went on, as far as the adult interpretation of the fairy tale is concerned, is well documented in a cartoon in Playboy magazine in which the dwarfs are lustlessly showing up for their morning work. The explanation given is: "Snow White withheld her favors this morning, so we all got up Grumpy." 73 There are also American and German cartoons showing the dwarfs at the window of the palace where Snow White now lives her life with her prince husband. The American caption quite pointedly has Snow White send her former "lovers" away with the statement: "Can't you get it through your heads? That part of my life is over!" 74 while the German drawing by Horst HAITZINGER has the prince ask his bride - "Hast du eigentlich noch Kontakt zu deinen Freunden von früher, Schneewittchen?" 75 (Are you still in contact with your former boyfriends, Snow White?) There is also a cartoon in which the prince finds the seven dwarfs in bed with Snow White. This scene results in his resolute declaration: "Jetzt will ich aber mit diesen sieben Zwergen ein Wörtchen reden, Schneewittchen!" 76 (Now I really want to have a word with these seven dwarfs, Snow White.)

Yet there obviously are more serious reinterpretations of the seven dwarfs as well. Consider for example the following three political cartoons that make U.S. presidents into grotesque Snow Whites. Ridiculing our involvement in Southeast Asia, a cartoon from 1970 in Punch shows former President Nixon as a democratic peace-bringer followed by seven dwarfs turned generals, each with a briefcase labeling his respective country: "South Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia, Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia and Laos." The caption puts this entire democratization plan into question by stating: "Snow White and the Seven Experiments." 77 During the Watergate scandal, Nixon also was drawn as Snow White surrounded by his dwarf-like cronies. This time the caption is a mere "Snow White," 78 which suffices to place the conniving Nixon into a shocking juxtaposition with the pure Snow White of the fairy tale. The presidential advisors involved in the cover-up also absolutely negate the innocent dwarfs of the traditional tale. In a final political caricature, we have President Reagan as Snow White with his little helpers surrounding him. No caption is necessary, but seven of the politicians with whom Reagan has surrounded himself have names on their shirts which pervert those sweet Walt Disney labels in a most telling manner: "Sleazy, Shifty, Cozy, Slick, Easy, Porky and Grabby." 79 On yet a more serious note, there is finally also a German poem about "Der Spiegel" (The Mirror) (c. 1940) by Max Herrmann-Neisse that miraculously survived a major war. The poem closes with the question which all people ask their politicians: "Spieglein, Spieglein, an der Wand, wann kommt der Friede diesem Land?" 80 (Mirror, mirror on the wall, when will peace come to this land?) No doubt the mirror oracle will be questioned for many centuries to come, since questions of identity, beauty, etc., will always plague mankind.

In his interpretation of the Hansel und Gretel fairy tale Bruno Bettelheim states that "the gingerbread house is an image nobody forgets," 81 and judging by the many allusions to it in modern texts and illustrations, it definitely has been implanted in our consciousness. Who wouldn't want to give in to his oral greed and nibble on all those wonderful goodies? The temptation certainly is always there for children and adults to give in to the drive of the taste buds. Even if Hansel and Gretel stand in front of a marvellous gingerbread house that displays a sign drawing attention to the fact that the sweets are "Containing glucose, dry skimmed milk, oil of peppermint, dextrose, etc." 82 they probably will not be able to control their desire. There is always Alka Seltzer for immediate relief after gorging oneself, as can be seen from a splendid three-frame comic strip: the

"Jetzt will ich aber mit diesen sieben Zwergen ein Wörtchen reden, Schneewittchen!"
first frame shows Hansel and Gretel munching away, the second pictures them suffering indigestion and burping, and the third drawing has them hurrying towards a house made of Alka Seltzers. This satire is clearly directed at the quick and easy fixes that our modern pharmaceutical products seem to offer us. This is also shown in a more serious cartoon in which the gingerbread or Alka Seltzer has been transformed into that universal drug Valium. A truly perverted gingerbread house offers even more potent stuff as Hansel finds out by sniffing the chimney on the top of the roof, his eager message to Gretel being “Let’s go inside. Someone’s smoking pot.” Two really up-to-date Swiss kids are, however, a lot brighter than to let such a modern witch lead them astray. Their short remark to the eternal temptress while turning away from that unhealthy stuff is simply: “Nein, danke, wir essen nur Bio-Kost!” (No thanks, we only eat health food.)

In such mutations of the traditional gingerbread house, we recognize how the dangers for children have changed in the modern world. But the fact that people will always be confronted by new ills makes this motif a most convincing symbol of human problems. This is also the case in two very innovative cartoons that show the witch traveling in a trailer-gingerbread house. In the one, she stops on the road and attempts to pick the children up by asking: “Hi, kids! Want a lift?” and in a very similar illustration two years later in the same magazine, only the black witch is shown in her mobile home looking for possible victims. Such cartoons obviously humor us adults at first, but once we are reminded of the evil witch in the fairy tale, the many stories of child abductions come to mind and turn these seemingly funny picture-jokes into grim black humor.

This is also the case with the numerous cartoons that choose the gingerbread motif as a way to comment on today’s construction industry and all the problems associated with it. There is, first of all, the wise-crack of two know-it-all children who confront the witch with the perfectly realistic question: “Gingerbread? Really? How did you get a mortgage?” Much more serious is, however, another cartoon in which a bank official gives the witch the following sad news: “I’m from the marshal’s office. Nabisco has foreclosed on your mortgage.” Once the “witch” is seen as an elderly single person, this cartoon becomes a telling satire on how people lose their homes due to financial problems. Of course people also lose their homes because of larger and higher buildings or because of the epidemic of town houses and condominiums. In front of a quaint and charming gingerbread house we find a sign of a large construction firm explaining that “This structure will be torn down and replaced by a new 44-story cookie.” And if it weren’t a tall office building that would replace this family homestead, some contractor would certainly put up a whole array of little homes, trying to sell them as a little fairy-tale village for rich suburbanites with the claim, “Gingerbread Village—105 Tasty Units—Immediate Occupancy.” And so what if the old witch were to fight city hall and actually win the case and retain her beloved home. Someone would soon put up a highrise right next to her, and a young concerned couple called Hansel and Gretel would only state to each other, “Beats me how they got planning permission.” Or the city would simply build the needed highway over the house which it could not destroy since “She fought the court order to the hilt.” Progress would win out, and the fairy tale world would be squeezed underneath the super highway of our busy society.

And finally also consider a cartoon in which a realtor leads the prospective buyers Hansel and Gretel to the house explaining, “We just listed it...some young punks vandalized the place and cooked the owner.” That leads us to an interesting anti-fairy tale poem by Sara Henderson Hay with the curious title of “Juvenile Court” (1963):

Deep in the oven, where the two had shoved her, They found the Witch, burned to a crisp, of course. And when the police had decently removed her, They questioned the children, who showed no remorse. “She threatened us,” said Hansel, “with a kettle Of boiling water, just because I threw The cat into the well.” Cried little Gretel, “She fused because I broke her broom in two,

And said she’d lock up Hansel in a cage For drawing funny pictures on her fence...” Wherefore the court, considering their age, And ruling that there seemed some evidence The pair had acted upon provocation, Released them to their parents, on probation.
Just as in the cartoon, Hansel and Gretel are interpreted here as juvenile delinquents who really don’t get much of a punishment. This opens up a whole new question about the character of Hansel and Gretel, who, like so many primitive fairy-tale heroes, have committed a most serious crime. The German poet Josef Wittmann treats this question in his short “Hänsel und Gretel” poem (1976):

Nichts als die Not gehabt,
erwischt beim Stehlen,
eingesperrt,
ausgebrochen
und ihren Wärter dabei umgebracht.
Und aus denen,
meinst du,
soll noch mal was werden? !\textsuperscript{97}

(Nothing but rough times,
caught stealing,
locked up,
escaped
and the warden murdered.
And of them,
you think,
something will come some day?!)\textsuperscript{97}

Looked at realistically and episode by episode, the children do in fact commit a criminal act. This is also very evident from another most telling poem by Louise Glück, where we find “Gretel in Darkness” (1971), i.e. tortured by nightly attacks of a terribly guilty conscience about having pushed the witch into the oven:

[...]
No one remembers. Even you, my brother,
summer afternoons you look at me as though
you meant to leave,
as though it never happened.
But I killed for you. I see armed firs,
the spires of that gleaming kiln—

Nights I turn to you to hold me
but you are not there.
Am I alone? Spies
hiss in the stillness, Hansel,
we are there still and it is real, real,
that black forest and the fire in earnest.\textsuperscript{98}

Interpreted in a realistic and isolated fashion, this scene depicts a gruesome act by the young Gretel, who, however, kills the witch only to protect the life of her brother. In the fairy tale this is but one symbolic step in dealing with an evil force and a way toward liberation and independence. At the end of the tale, the children are shown as benevolent persons who have learned to cope with their own needs and those of others. Momentary regressions, even into criminal acts, function as contrasts to the fairy-tale path toward eventual bliss and fulfillment. Black and white are in continuous struggle until the inherent good of the fairy-tale hero triumphs. As modern interpreters of the tale, unwilling to accept the symbolic nature of these tales, we are bound to emphasize the gruesome isolated scenes since they reflect life all around us. But the fact that fairy tales too appear to have inhuman scenes should certainly not be an excuse for realistic actions. Fairy tales must be seen in their entirety, or otherwise they will be as disenchanting as the news of the day. Once again realizing the pessimistic world view that understandably surrounds us, it is only natural that such negative reinterpretations have become popular. But in all of that despair there is also always that glimmer of hope that something will someday come of us, just as it did of Hansel and Gretel.

Our final examples turn grimmer yet: we find a magazine cover of The Economist with a rather traditional drawing of Hansel and Gretel approaching the witch’s house, but with the interesting headline: “West Germany’s Greens meet the wicked world.”\textsuperscript{99} Implied is, of course, that the young people of this new German political party with their idealism concerning the environment, disarmament, and social justice will have to realize that “Realpolitis” is as mean and unpleasant as the witch in the fairy tale. Talking of the environment, consider also the appropriate comment of a little boy to his father who is just reading him the part of the fairy tale where the children have dropped the bread crumbs: “They shouldn’t have been dropping that bread. That’s littering.”\textsuperscript{100} Better yet is a more serious interpretation of that touching passage in the traditional fairy tale. In 1983 Horst Haitzinger published a full-page color cari-
cature depicting this scene with the caption: "Da nahm Hänsel Gretel an die Hand und ging den Plastiktüten und Blechdosen nach, die zeigten ihnen den Weg zu ihres Vaters Haus." 101 (Then Hansel took Gretel’s hand and followed the plastic bags and tin cans that showed them the way to their father’s house.)

As a final point in this section on Hansel and Gretel consider the following four cartoons, caricatures, and poems which bring the sweet gingerbread house into striking juxtaposition with the anxiety over nuclear power. With the atom bomb that fell on Hiroshima still fresh in mind, Dorothy Lee Richardson in 1949 wrote her poem “Modern Grimm” which starts and ends with a traditional verse:

"Nibble, nibble, little mouse,
Who is nibbling at my house?"
"Only the wind.
Only the wind."

“What have you sown, O darling children?
What have you grown in the land of magic?”
“Only the wind. Only the wind.”

“What chroma of wind, O clever children?
What brilliant shade have you made with your magic?
What color of wind?”

“A rich red wind over Hiroshima,
Darkly blowing, brightly glowing.
A red-black wind.”

“We have sown the wind. Its seed we found
And dropped it lightly to the ground.
We have sown the wind.”

“The small thing split. It branched to bear
A thousand red-black fruits in air.
We have sown the wind.”

“We have sown the wind. It rises high
Till it beats the ear and blinds the eye
And sweeps a hole in the crouching sky
Where the whirlwind rushes in!”

"Nibble, nibble, little mouse,
Who is nibbling at my house?"
“Only the wind.
Only the wind.”102

Nothing has changed since this poem was written, and the threat of a nuclear accident, if not war, hovers over us. To illustrate this danger, a 1981 caricature transforms the chimney of the gingerbread house into a “Nuclear Power”103 cooling tower. The witch has become the personification of this dangerous force and the innocent children walking toward it symbolize mankind’s path toward possible annihilation. And in light of the actual nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, I located two bitter satirical reactions in recent publications. The cartoonist Mike Peters has placed the gingerbread house in front of two nuclear cooling towers and has the witch step out to lure the children inside. But to her amazement she finds them not alive anymore. Her short remark is the apocalyptic: “That’s odd . . . They’re cooked already . . .”104 This reinterpretation of the gingerbread scene was repeated with the identical caption in a very recent “Mother Goose and Grimm”105 comic strip. But what kind of comics are these? They are certainly not funny, but rather grim statements of the dangers mankind has invented for itself. That these comments are expressed through altered motifs of fairy tales is yet another indication of mankind’s desire to find utopian solutions to these problems. By effectively alienating the adults from their fairy-tale dreams through perverted fairy-tale motifs in literary texts or cartoons, the hope is always expressed that this shock therapy might recall the emancipatory goals of fairy tales. The tale of Hansel and Gretel and its many reinterpretations certainly are ample proof that such disenchanting reactions are at least small moralistic attempts to bring about such a change.

Similar materials as the ones presented for The Frog Prince, Snow White and Hansel and Gretel are available for other well-known Grimm fairy tales. Everywhere we look, the surprising adaptability of these tales or at least their motifs becomes obvious. The simple telling of the fairy tales or their satirical, parodistic or alienating changes all signify the “Erneuerungsmöglichkeit”106 (rejuvenating possibility) of fairy tales. This is possible only because fairy tales are “welthaltig”107 (world-encompassing), as Max Lüthi declared almost forty years ago. They contain universal human experiences of love, hate, fear, anxiety, etc., and that is why they can be applied to the modern age as well, even though their semantic language might be changed to express today’s reality. No matter which technological or epistemological advances mankind might undergo, the fairy tales will always “represent the diverse possibilities of actual
existence. Although they themselves are scarcely real, they represent real things. The glass beads of the fairy tale mirror the world." 108 Recalling one more time the drive toward the positive solution of all conflicts in fairy tales, where good wins out over evil in the end, the modern anti-fairy tales represent, in spite of their grim variations of traditional Grimm fairy tales, a continuous movement toward improving the human condition. Fairy tales were always meant to be emancipatory tales for people of all ages, and we need them, as well as their survival forms, to cope in an ever more complex world.

The University of Vermont

NOTES

1. For an excellent survey of this research see Max Lüthi, Märchen (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1962, 71968). Much bibliographical information to individual fairy tales also by Walter Scherf, Lexikon der Zaubermärchen (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1982).

2. An inclusive overview of the Brothers' Grimm various research interests with detailed bibliographical references is provided by Ludwig Denecke, Jacob Grimm und sein Bruder Wilhelm (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971).


10. See above all Lutz Röhrich Märchen und Wirklichkeit (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1945; 31974); and L. Röhrich, Sage und Märchen. Erzählforschung heute (Freiburg: Herder, 1976).

11. For Jack Zipes (see note 4).


13. For these remarkable studies see Ernst Böcklen, Schneewittchen (2 vols. (Leipzig: C. F. Hinrichs, 1910 and 1915); Anna Birgita Rooth, The Cinderella Cycle (Lund: C. W. K. Gleesup, 1951); Marianne Rumpf, Rotkäppchen: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung (Diss. Göttingen, 1951); Michael Belgrader, Das Märchen von dem Machandelboom (KHM 47). Der Märchentypus AT 720: My Mother Slew Me, My Father Are Me (Bern: Peter Lang, 1980).

14. See in this regard Joseph Ryan's pioneering article "Fairylore and Mass-Lore," Sonoma 36 (1971): 3-9, in which he argued that "there is no reason why the Finnish method employed so successfully in the field of folktales could not be applied to the study of the transmission and migration of modern mass-lore rumors" (p. 9). We propose that the Finnish method be used to study the dissemination of modern texts and allusions to certain fairy tales in the mass media on an international basis. See also Priscilla Denby, "Folklore in the Mass Media," Folklore Forum 4, no. 5 (1971): 113-125; and Donald A. Bird, "A Theory for Folklore in Mass Media," Southern Folklore Quarterly 40 (1976): 285-305.


17. See Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell (note 4) 18.

18. See Röhrich, Märchen und Wirklichkeit (note 5) 4v.

19. The term "Anti-märcherm" (anti-fairy tale) was first used by André Jolles, Einfache Formen (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1930, 31965) 242. See also Lüthi (note 16) 87.


33. New Yorker (August 6, 1984) 33.

34. Reprinted in Miedler (note 24) 27.

41. See for example the *Adult Erotica Catalog* published by Diverse Industries in California. The Spring Catalog 1978 contained advertisements for such films with appropriate illustrations on p. 10, each film costing $12.95.
42. *Punch* (June 29, 1966) 958.
49. *Newsweek* (November 12, 1979) 85.
52. *Burlington Free Press* (January 26, 1994) 8A.
54. *New Yorker* (October 2, 1965) 53.
55. *New Yorker* (December 10, 1984) 54.
56. *New Yorker* (March 26, 1965) 42.
60. *New Yorker* (February 16, 1963) 35.
61. *Burlington Free Press* (December 11, 1978) 10A.
64. *New Yorker* (January 8, 1966) 34.
65. *Playboy* (December 1978) 315. For an obscene female counterpart to this sexual cartoon see *Hustler* (February 1979) 84.
69. *The Economist* (June 14, 1985) cover page.
70. *Burlington Free Press* (June 23, 1983) 7D.
73. *Playboy* (September 1979) 179.
75. See Horst Hailzinger, *Archetypen* (München: Bruckmann, 1979) 43. Other sexual cartoons can be found in *Playboy* (August 1977) 150; *Penthouse* (December 1977) 214; *Playgirl* (January 1984) 94. See also the obscene joke which parallels these visual interpretations in *Playboy* (March 1982) 132.
77. *Punch* (July 1, 1970) 33.
81. See Bettelheim (note 3) 161.
87. *New Yorker* (October 20, 1975) 45.
92. *Punch* (December 6, 1978) 1008.
96. Reprinted in Mieder (note 24) 66.
98. Reprinted in Mieder (note 24) 68.
100. *Burlington Free Press* (December 4, 1982) 11A.
102. Reprinted in Mieder (note 24) 60.
107. See Lüthi, *Das europäische Volksmärchen* (note 8) 69. For the English translation of this significant book by John D. Niles see Lüthi (note 6) 74.
108. Lüthi (note 6) 80.