BOOKS

# THE BROTHERS GRIMM WERE DARK FOR A REASON

*Their version of "Cinderella" or "Rapunzel" could be disturbing. But turning Germany into a unified nation, they believed, meant unearthing its authentic culture.*

**By Jennifer Wilson**

November 4, 2024

Jacob and Wilhelm's riches-to-rags childhood had its fairy-tale aspects.  Illustration by Golden Cosmos



nce upon a time, a family by the name of Grimm carried on a life that was a

Then, one day, a dark cloud appeared, as if summoned by a witch jealous of their domestic idyll. In 1796, Philipp, only forty-four years old, succumbed to pneumonia. Jacob later recalled seeing his father's body being measured for a coffin. Dorothea and her children were ordered to clear out. Without Philipp's income, they were forced for a time to shelter in an almshouse just next door—cursed with a view of their former home and the courtyard where they once played, happily, until what came after.

Jacob and Wilhelm, the Brothers Grimm, experienced the kind of sharp reversal of fortune characteristic of the genre that became synonymous with their name: the fairy tale. A prince turned into a frog; a beloved daughter reduced to a scullery maid. Where the French rendition of "Cinderella," by Charles Perrault, opens with Cinderella already in tatters, laboring away for her stepmother, the Grimms' version, "Aschenputtel," begins with the heroine's mother on her deathbed. Ann Schmiesing, the author of "The Brothers Grimm: A Biography" (Yale), observes that the change transforms a "story of 'rags to riches' to 'riches to rags to riches'—a trajectory, incidentally, that parallels the Grimms' experience." The Grimms' version hacks away at the French tale in other ways. When the prince shows up with the fateful slipper, Aschenputtel's stepsisters slash at their heels to make their feet fit. Each makes it to the gates of the castle before the prince notices blood gushing everywhere.

The dark tenor of the Grimms' fairy tales is almost a punch line at this point, and their surname, which means "wrathful" in German, hasn't helped. Even in their lifetime, the brothers were subjected to t.....he obligatory punning. Jacob, an accomplished philologist, thanked a friend for resisting the urge to crack the obvious joke after he published his book "German Grammar": "I do so appreciate that you have not chided my *Grammar* as a *Grimmer*." In truth, there's an almost comical severity to their tales, among them "How Some Children Played at Slaughtering," in which a pair of siblings, having just seen their father butcher a pig, try out the act on

each other. In “Briar Rose,” the Grimms’ version of “Sleeping Beauty,” suitors trying to reach the slumbering maiden become snagged on the briar hedge surrounding her castle, dying “miserable deaths.”

These stories amount to wish fulfillment for people who want to believe stereotypes about German austerity, which may be a measure of the Grimms’ success. Their aim in collecting such folklore—alongside the fairy tales, the Grimms published legends, songs, myths—was to create a cohesive national identity for German speakers. It’s why the brothers, especially Jacob, also wrote books on German philology and began what was intended to be the most comprehensive dictionary of the German language, the Deutsches Wörterbuch. (Toiling into their final years, they got as far as *frucht*, fruit.)

The Grimms were Germanists before there was a Germany. When they were born, “Germany” contained what the historian Perry Anderson describes as a “maze of dwarfish princedoms,” and they died not long before the country’s unification, in 1871. In between, the outlines of their homeland shifted again and again, with the Napoleonic invasion of Hessen, in 1806, the Congress of Vienna and post-Napoleonic redivisions of Europe, and, eventually, the rise of Otto von Bismarck. Amid such geographic disarray, the Grimms believed that shared language and cultural traditions could be the connective yarn of a people, their people. All that was needed was a fellow, or two, to come along with a spinning wheel.

Though posterity has conjoined them, Jacob and Wilhelm were two rather disparate men. Wilhelm was the bon vivant to Jacob’s introvert. The elder was the more accomplished scholar. Jacob’s research on phonetics established what is still known today in linguistics as Grimm’s law. (He had noticed patterns by which consonants from other Indo-European languages altered as they made their way into German.) When, in their mid-fifties, the brothers accepted appointments at the University of Berlin, Jacob spurned any honors and illustrious positions that would take him away from his desk.

“I would happily don a homespun smock of the coarsest material and strive for nothing other than that,” he joked to a friend. Meanwhile, Wilhelm’s diary from that period shows him watching a production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” strolling through the botanical gardens, and taking in the Cabinet of Art, where Napoleon’s hat was on display. A “rare day without any visit,” he noted in one entry.

And yet a joint biography is the only kind that feels appropriate; posthumously disentangling one brother from the other seems tantamount to desecrating a corpse, for Jacob and Wilhelm were ardently inseparable. When, during their undergraduate years, Jacob briefly worked abroad for one of their professors, Wilhelm wrote to him, “When you left, I thought my heart would tear in two. I couldn’t stand it. You certainly don’t know how much I love you.” Jacob pledged that it would never happen again, and sketched out what he hoped their life would look like after they completed their studies: “We will presumably at last live quite withdrawn and isolated, for we will not have many friends, and I do not enjoy acquaintances. We shall want to work with each other quite collaboratively and to cut off all other affairs.” When Wilhelm married, Jacob lived with his brother and new sister-in-law. A friend once addressed the brothers in a letter as “My dear double hooks!”

Their bond was forged through their shared history of loss and social isolation. After Philipp’s death, Jacob and Wilhelm no longer enjoyed the status that came with being the sons of a magistrate. Matriculating at the University of Marburg, in their late teens, they had to pay their own way; stipends were typically reserved for the sons of aristocrats and landowners. Jacob saw his situation at Marburg as akin to the slights that the German people—lacking the political and economic advantages that came with being part of a nation-state—suffered on the European stage. He wrote in his autobiography, “Sparseness spurs a person to industriousness and work, keeps one from many a distraction and infuses one with noble pride that keeps one conscious of self-achievement in contrast to what social class and wealth

provide. . . . A great deal of what Germans have achieved overall should be attributed to the fact that they are not a rich folk."

While at the university, the brothers came under the influence of Friedrich Carl von Savigny, a young law professor who maintained that laws should not be imposed upon a people but, rather, be derived from them. A legislator, then, must be a kind of historian, or, better yet, a philologist, alert to a people's desires as expressed in their language and storytelling. In a study of the Brothers Grimm and German nationalism, the scholar Jakob Norberg argues that, if Plato prescribed a "philosopher king" to rule the city-state, the Grimms envisioned a "philologist king" to lead the nation-state.

It was also at Marburg, and through Savigny, that the Grimms fell in with Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, two wellborn writers who had begun to amass German folk songs, aiming to capture the *Volksseele*—the soul of the people—that predated the European Enlightenment and French neoclassicism. Arnim and Brentano were founding members of what became known as Heidelberg Romanticism. If early German Romanticism, which flowered in Jena, in the seventeen-nineties, prized the "individual, subjective worldview," Schmiesing writes, "the Heidelberg Romantics celebrated folk and heroic literature because they saw in it the collective experience of a people."

Savigny's dictum situated the national will in the hearts, or, more precisely, on the tongues, of common folk. Though the Grimms began by helping Arnim and Brentano, they came to see themselves as uniquely fluent, by virtue both of their family's impoverishment and of the lore surrounding their home state of Hessen. They would gather many of their fairy tales there, convinced that the region's relative remove from commercial roads preserved its authentically German character.

Hessen also had a touch of myth to it. The land had been settled in ancient times by the Chatti people, described by the Roman historian Tacitus as

being brawnier than other Germanic tribes. With much of its rugged terrain a hindrance to agriculture, mercenaries became a primary export. Twenty-five per cent of British land forces in the American Revolutionary War were Hessian. (Washington Irving's headless horseman was rumored to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper.) The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a father of German nationalism, even accused Europeans of deliberately keeping German lands fragmented—the better to enlist German valor for their own conquests. It was on this embattled landscape that the Grimms set about stitching together a cultural heritage that they could raise as a flag.

A foe for the ages had appeared. Napoleon's conquest of Germanic lands was a watershed moment for German Romanticism. "Soon everything changed from the ground up," Wilhelm recalled, of French troops occupying his home town of Kassel, in 1806. "Foreign people, foreign customs, and in the streets and on walks a foreign, loudly spoken language." Hessen was subsumed into the Kingdom of Westphalia, led by Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's hapless brother, who had scarcely learned more than three words of German: those for "tomorrow," "again," and "jolly." (This earned him the moniker King Jolly.) Jérôme was rumored to bathe in red wine, which, Schmiesing writes, "underscored his foreignness in a region accustomed to white wine."

Jacob actually served as Jérôme's personal librarian, but his real vocation was as a kind of foot soldier-folklorist amid the Napoleonic Wars. He later assembled a group of folklorists who took an oath to "honor the fatherland" through the "rescuing of our folk literature." The tales they gathered were bread crumbs that would guide the German people to their cultural home.

The first volume of the Grimms' "Children's and Household Tales" was published in December of 1812. It contained eighty-six stories, including classics like "Rapunzel," "Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White," "Rumpelstiltskin," "Briar Rose," and "Little Red Riding Hood," along with extensive footnotes. Critics weren't sure what to make of a collection of

"children's tales" that came with scholarly addenda and randy animals. "Mrs. Fox," where a fox with nine tails, which scan as furry phallic symbols, tests his wife's faithfulness, was not the kind of bedtime story that parents had in mind. The same went for "Rapunzel," in which the fairy (not the witch) realizes that her long-tressed prisoner has been receiving visits from the prince when, one day, Rapunzel asks, "Why are my clothes becoming too tight?" For the Grimms, what mattered was to be authentic, not appropriate, and fairy tales, across many literary traditions, weren't always intended for children. According to the scholar Maria Tatar, these were folktales shared among adults after hours, while the children were asleep. She cites a French version of "Little Red Riding Hood," in which the big bad wolf has designs on the little girl that are not gastronomical. In that version, she does what amounts to a striptease, peeling off her clothes as the disguised wolf watches from the bed, giving fresher context to "What big hands you have!"

Then, there was the matter of the Grimms' language—sparse, hectic, visceral, unfiltered. In the preface, the brothers boasted of the collection's fidelity to their sources: "No circumstance has been poeticized, beautified, or altered." Well, that much was clear, complained the Grimms' old friend Clemens Brentano, who thought they went too far. "If you want to display children's clothes," Brentano wrote, "you can do that with fidelity without bringing out an outfit that has all the buttons torn off, dirt smeared on it, and the shirt hanging out of the pants." But the Grimms wanted to preserve the culture of the common folk, not to make the folk sound cultured.

Schmiesing's biography of the Grimms is the first major English-language one in decades. It can be dense with details, but when I read Murray B. Peppard's "Paths Through the Forest" (1971), a more approachable biography of the Grimms, I found myself missing Schmiesing's unrulier thickets of Prussian bureaucrats and long asides about German grammar. Hers is hearty German fare. It also presents findings that complicate the brothers' image as ethnographic purists.

The popular perception of how the Grimms collected their tales was captured in an illustration that appeared in an eighteen-nineties German magazine: Jacob and Wilhelm are shown visiting a humble cottage, listening to an older peasant woman. “This rustic scene did not actually take place,” Schmiesing writes. The Grimms’ informants tended to be well-educated women from affluent families who retrieved stories from villagers and servants in their employ. The woman in the illustration, Dorothea Viehmann, was indeed one of the Grimms’ poorer informants, but her tales were not as “genuinely Hessian” as the brothers once described them. She was of Huguenot extraction on her father’s side, accounting, scholars have speculated, for the French influence on some of her stories.

Schmiesing also revisits the scholarship on Wilhelm’s change in editorial policy. Possibly in response to critical disapprobation, he updated the second version of “Children’s and Household Tales” to satisfy nineteenth-century gender norms. In the first edition, the story of Hansel and Gretel begins with their mother telling their father to abandon the siblings in the woods. In the second edition, the father’s wife—the archetypal evil stepmother—makes the order, because it was unseemly to suggest that a biological mother would dispose of her children so coolly. (The father going along with it all—just fine!)

Although their legacy may be as German Mother Geese, the brothers regarded their fairy-tale volumes as one project among many, and hardly the most important. In 1829, the Grimms, then in their forties, took jobs as librarians at the University of Göttingen, in the kingdom of Hanover. There, Jacob published “German Mythology” (1835). He believed that, just as etymologists could identify features of ancient languages through modern descendants, he could approximate ancient German mythology through folklore. He scoured ballads, fairy tales, and legends for references to heroes, wise women, dwarfs, giants, ghosts, cures, magic, and more.

Unlike “Children’s and Household Tales,” “German Mythology” was a

national, and nationalist, sensation. The book positively rejuvenated the composer Richard Wagner. In his autobiography, "My Life," Wagner wrote of encountering "German Mythology": "Before my mind's eye, a world of figures soon built itself up, which in turn revealed themselves in such unexpectedly sculptural form and so primordially recognizable that, when I saw them clearly before me and heard their speech within me, I finally could not comprehend whence came this almost tangible familiarity and certainty of their bearing. I cannot describe the effect of this on the disposition of my soul as anything other than a complete rebirth." With "German Mythology," Jacob had hoped to defend his ancestors—the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman Empire—against allegations of barbarism. It's a defense that, Schmiesing writes, "was at times overtly racialized." Though Wilhelm praised the fairy tales of Sierra Leone, Jacob once wrote an article in which he called fetishism "a descending into dullness and coarseness, like that which rules the wild Negro," and insisted that it was "essentially foreign to a people like our ancestors, which as soon as it appears in history, acts worthily and freely and speaks a finely wrought language that is closely related to that of the noblest peoples of antiquity."

The Grimms' professional lives were as unstable as the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1837, a new monarch dissolved Hanover's legislative assemblies and cast aside its constitution. Jacob and Wilhelm, joining five of their colleagues, signed a statement in protest. The dissenters —who were ordered to leave Hanover within three days—became known as the Göttingen Seven, and their act of defiance was later enshrined in German history as a banner moment in the nation's path to democracy. Wilhelm even revised a fairy tale with the episode in mind. In an earlier version of a story titled "The Blue Light," a man leaves the military because he is too old to fight. In the new version, the protagonist is a wounded soldier who is discharged by his sovereign with the words "You can go home now. I no longer need you, and you shall receive no more money from me. I give wages only to those who can serve me."

The detail of wages withheld spoke to the financial straits in which Jacob and Wilhelm now found themselves. In 1840, Arnim's widow implored the Prussian prince, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, to find positions for two of her friends, whom she did not name. After doing some digging, the Prince learned their identities, and wrote back, "The fruit of my grim researching was—two researching Grimms!" Alexander von Humboldt, the celebrated geographer and naturalist, arranged for the brothers to pursue their scholarship in Berlin on a combined salary of three thousand thalers, to be divided as they pleased "since they live like man and wife."

Two years later, Humboldt came to Jacob with a question. The Prussian court was announcing a new honor for achievements in the arts and sciences. Could Jacob advise on how a specific word in the statute should be spelled? The word in question: *deutsch*.

The project that would preoccupy the Grimms for the remainder of their lives was the Deutsches Wörterbuch—the German dictionary. A publishing house in Leipzig had pitched them the idea in 1838, but Jacob hesitated. He had concerns about the systematizing of language, and about German-language classes in schools—he cherished the idea of the mother tongue being imparted by actual mothers. Still, the Grimms had models for a different kind of lexicon. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, from the mid-eighteenth century, had been part of a movement away from rigid language textbooks. Entries featured texts drawn from various periods, giving a sense of how language changed over time. Johnson and others believed that dictionaries could record, and not merely dictate, the expressions of a people, in a version of what Savigny, the Grimms' old professor at Marburg, had preached about the law.

Just as they had worked with informants on their fairy tales, the Grimms solicited dictionary entries from more than eighty contributors, including professors, philologists, and preachers. The results could be enchanting. The first entry was for the letter "A":

> *A,* the noblest and most primordial of any sound, resounding with fullness from the chest and throat, first and easiest sound that a child will learn to produce, and which the alphabets of most languages rightfully put at the beginning.

The men worked twelve hours a day to meet publishing deadlines, but they managed to sneak in some fun. In the complete first volume, which appeared in 1854, the Grimms included Wilhelm's affectionate nickname for his wife, *bierlümmel* (beer lout). It took them sixteen years to finish that first section—which ended with the entry for *biermolke* (beer whey)—but the quibbles rolled in almost immediately. Catholics complained about the preponderance of word-usage examples from Martin Luther, and about the tone of certain entries. The one for *ablass* (indulgence) read, "Principally the ecclesiastical remission of sin for money . . . against which the Reformation victoriously inveighed." Jacob believed that the capitalization of common nouns was an inorganic import and did away with it, a choice that inspired parodies in the German press.

Despite their critics, the Grimms carried on. In their hands, the dictionary was a form of political speech, the only kind that ever worked for them. In 1848, amid the wave of nationalist revolutions across Europe, Jacob was invited to serve as a representative at the Frankfurt National Assembly, a body convened in an effort to create a unified German state. But the meeting descended into factionalism as competing class and geographical interests revealed the country to be far more divided than Jacob had fantasized. The

brothers retreated to their study to work on the dictionary. Every letter was a step toward the goal—if not a unified Germany, then at least a unified German people, connected by words, and by familial bickering about their meaning.

On December 16, 1859, Wilhelm died, at the age of seventy-three, following complications from back surgery. Jacob sat by his bedside and counted each of his brother's last breaths. Four years later, Jacob followed. Stricken with an inflamed liver and then a stroke, he lay in bed conscious but unable to speak. He reached for a picture of Wilhelm and brought it up to his face, and died not long afterward. The two are buried in Berlin as they lived, side by side.

In 1871, Kaiser Wilhelm ascended to the throne of a newly unified Germany. In Goslar, a northern town in the Harz Mountains, an imperial palace was renovated to include a fresco drawing of "Briar Rose," symbolizing a long-slumbering, finally awakened German identity. It was the fairy-tale ending the Grimms had dreamed of, and, as in many of their stories, there was no happily ever after.

The Grimms' stories, with their promise of bodying forth an authentically Teutonic spirit, were so sought after during the Nazi years that Allied occupying forces temporarily banned them after the war. Scholars have since stressed that their nationalism was rooted in a shared cultural and linguistic heritage, not blood and soil. Still, the task of narrating the lives of Jacob and Wilhelm remains as thorny as the hedge that trapped Briar Rose's suitors. As Schmiesing writes, it "entails navigating between too naively or too judgmentally presenting the nineteenth-century constructions of Germany and Germanness to which they contributed."

In truth, this ambivalence existed for Jacob, too, who worried that the standardization of German in schools might downgrade dialects and the very folk speech that their lives had been devoted to capturing. The brothers

knew better than anyone that every story of enchantment is also a story of disenchantment, and their lifelong cause was no exception. The nation has proved to be humanity's most cherished fairy tale, and its grimmest. ♦

*Published in the print edition of the November 11, 2024, issue, with the headline "Beautiful Dreamers."*