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Are the Grimm Tales Traditional?
The Tale of the Girl Who Seeks Her Brothers in KHM and in Oral Traditions

Francisco Vaz da Silva

It is well established today that the Brothers Grimm have blended a number of oral variants into composite tales, and they have embellished and sanitized the tales they collected. This behavior is not quite in line with the professional standards of folkloristics. Today we take it for granted that the business of folklorists is to record data faithfully; whereas storytellers are free to change their stories, folklorists are the guardians of fixed texts.[1] Of course, it would be anachronistic to expect someone in the early 19th century to abide by 20th-century standards. Even so, the Brothers Grimm did agree in principle with the need to convey their materials faithfully. In the first edition of their collection they wrote, "We have tried to collect these tales in as pure a form as possible … . No details have been added or embellished or changed."[2]

But in the second edition the Brothers admitted the texts had been "almost completely reworked … and there are very few tales that do not appear in an improved form." And yet, a few sentences below they write, "accuracy and truth were what counted for us above all. … [W]e tried to relate the content just as we had heard it." But then, again, they complete this sentence by saying, "we hardly need emphasize that the phrasing and fitting in of details were mainly our work, but we did try to preserve every particularity that we noticed…"[3] These statements were all uttered in the same breath—and they seem contradictory. But this is actually a matter of perspective—of our perspective. The fact of the matter is, the Brothers Grimm believed they were being faithful to the tales even as they kept changing the texts. Why?

Tales and variants

To answer, let us take a close look at the Brothers' claim that they faithfully convey the "content," if not necessarily the "phrasing," of what they heard—the spirit if not always the letter of the tales, as Maria Tatar nicely rephrased this statement.[4] The Grimms firmly proclaim their commitment to preserving the "particularities" they find, and to recording the variations on each theme. Then they offer an illuminating explanation for their stance:

> These different variations are more noteworthy to us than they are to those who see in them nothing more than variants or corrupt forms of a once extant archetypal form. For us they are more likely to be attempts to capture through numerous approaches an inexhaustibly rich ideal type.[5]

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[1] See Neil Philip, "Creativity and Tradition in the Fairy Tale," in *A Companion to the Fairy Tale* (Cambridge, MA: Brewer, 2006), 45.

[2] I am quoting passages from the prefaces to the first and second editions of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* using Maria Tatar's translation in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 210.

[3] Tatar, *Hard Facts*, 220.

[4] Tatar, *Hard Facts*, 204, 220

[5] Tatar, *Hard Facts*, 221.

This passage dismisses the idea of archetypical forms. The Brothers refuse the notion of fixed primordial tales, which inevitably entail treating textual variations as corruptions of the true, original, fixed text. On the contrary, for the Grimms tradition is all about variation. The important point, I think, is this. When the Brothers state that variants are expressions of an inexhaustibly rich ideal type, they operate a distinction between *tales* and *variants***.** Tales, as I am using the term, are those inexhaustible ideal types—in other words, they are abstract notional schemes that find expression in a number of variants. And, conversely, variants are utterances that variously express tales. From this point of view, any tale exists in the set of its variants—for no single variant is final, and none ever fully captures a tale. This is why the Brothers make a distinction between the contents of the *tale,* which they mean to convey, and its various phrasings in *variants,* which they feel free to improve on. As Siegfried Neumann pointed out, the Grimms "saw all their informants as well as themselves as links in a chain of storytellers, each having a certain right to retell the stories in his or her own way."[6] In short, one might say the Brothers Grimm felt free to improve their variants in order to better convey the tales.

Therefore, we can certainly say the Brothers Grimm conceived their amended texts as traditional. Whether we should agree with them depends, of course, on how we represent tradition. Here is my view on the matter. If any tale is transmitted by variants and yet remains stable, this is, I suppose, because the many variants conveying that tale tend to be built on equivalent motifs rather than on arbitrary substitutions .[7] Alan Dundes famously called the equivalent motifs in different variants "allomotifs," and he stressed that the investigation of allomotifs can advance our knowledge of folk symbolism.[8] Indeed, if tale variants convey stable themes by means of different images, then a comparison of the different images may help disclose the underlying meanings. From this assumption, I take it that the safest way to decide whether the Grimm tales are traditional is on semantic grounds. Do the texts edited by the Grimm Brothers still share symbolic codes with oral variants? Do Grimm and oral variants still converse, do they illuminate one another?

In order to answer, I shall examine a few variants of ATU 451, "The Girl Who Seeks Her Brothers" in the Grimm collection and in oral variants, along with some other Grimm tales.

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[6] Siegfried Neumann, "The Brothers Grimm as Collectors and Editors of German Folktales," in *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 31–32.

[7] For a comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Francisco Vaz da Silva, "Tradition Without End," in *A Companion to Folklore*, ed. Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[8] Alan Dundes, "The Symbolic Equivalence of Allomotifs in the Rabbit-Herd (AT 570)," in *Parsing through Customs: Essays by a Freudian Folklorist* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 168; Alan Dundes, The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), 319–24.

Autopsy of a changed motif

First, let me directly address the matter of variant changes with an example. In the first (1812) edition of KHM, the tale no. 25 was called "The Three Ravens."[9] It was about a mother who had three sons who once played cards during the church service. The mother scolded and cursed her godless sons, who turned into black ravens and flew away. But the Grimms changed the title to "The Seven Ravens" because they grafted into the text an episode featuring seven brothers. The edited variant now starts with a man who had seven boys and no girl. When at last the much-anticipated girl was born, she was so weak that the father sent the boys fetch water at the wellspring for an emergency baptism. But the boys accidentally dropped the jug into the well, and they dared not return home. The father, who was afraid that the girl would have to die without being baptized, cursed the boys to become ravens.

The motifs of cards-playing during mass and of the baptism of a little sister are equivalent in a basic sort of way. In both, boys who perform a godless act—either playing cards during the church service, or obstructing the performance of a baptism—get cursed. So, it is quite feasible to replace one motif with the other. But why did the Brothers actually do it? We can only guess, of course. But let me note two things.

First, the sister who was born after the brothers disenchants them by simply finding them. She has the power to disenchant the brothers, which suggests she was involved in their enchantment in the first place. However, the initial card-playing motif discloses nothing about this link, whereas the brothers-and-sister motif clearly associates the sister's birth to her brothers' enchantment. So, the grafted motif actually clarifies the text of tale no. 25, for it shows the whole picture—the sister causing the brothers's enchantment, and then bringing about their disenchantment. It also highlights the thematic connection between this text and tales no. 9 ("The Twelve Brothers") and no. 49 ("The Six Swans"), which likewise present the theme of many brothers and their sister. Second, as both Nicole Belmont and Jack Zipes noted, the fact that Jakob and Wilhelm were the oldest in a series of brothers and a younger sister may help explain their interest in this theme.[10] Whatever one may think about this biographical motivation, it is arguable that the grafting of the sister's baptism into tale no. 25 clarifies this variant. And it prompts a question that goes to the heart of this tale: why would the sister be the cause of her brothers' enchantment and disenchantment?

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[9] Heinz Rölleke, ed. *Die älteste Märchensammlung der Brüder Grimm: Synopse der handschriftlichen Urfassung von 1810 und der Erstdrucke von 1812* (Cologny-Genève: Fondation Martin Bodmer, 1975), 226–29.

[10] Nicole Belmont, *Poétique du conte: Essai sur le conte de tradition orale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 103n1. Jack Zipes, ed. *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Norton, 2001), 641.

Many brothers and a sister

In order to get a clear idea on this matter, consider the opening motif of tale no. 9, "The Twelve Brothers." A king with twelve children, all boys, decrees that if the thirteenth child the queen is about to bear is a girl, the twelve boys must die so that her possessions can be great and the kingdom may fall to her alone. As I mentioned, in "The Seven Ravens" the girl born after seven brothers risks dying, but she thrives after her protective father curses the boys into exile. And in "The Twelve Brothers" a protective father decides to get rid of twelve boys so that a girl to be born after them can thrive. The common ground for both motifs is that the wellbeing of a last-born girl depends on getting rid of her brothers. This notion suggests that there is a special vulnerability to a girl born after many brothers.

Presumably, this theme draws on a venerable stock of folk ideas regarding extraordinary children, which has been extant in Europe across several centuries. In Portugal and Galicia on finds such ideas alive as late as the mid-20th century. Across Europe, the basic unchanging idea appears to be that any child born in excess of many same-sex siblings had no available place in the social sphere and was, therefore, fated to remain in touch with the otherworld.[11] This complex of ideas and customary practices suggests that the vulnerability of a girl born after a saturated series of brothers rests on the notion that there is no available family position for her. This explains why, in the Grimm tales, securing the girl's wellbeing involves getting rid of her brothers. In order for the girl to thrive, the brothers have to repair to the otherworld.

The otherworldly demise of the brothers stands out clearly in "The Seven Ravens." After turning into ravens, the brothers repair to a glass mountain or castle. As the sister tries to join them, she goes beyond the end of the world, into the realms of the sun, the moon, and stars. The moon's statement that it smells human flesh emphasizes the notion that the sister has reached a realm where no human flesh abides. This is the realm of the dead, in a broad sense, where the brothers dwell in bird shapes in accordance with the folk idea that the soul taking flight from the body may assume the shape of birds. This is the simplest depiction of their enchantment.

Blood in the forest

But in tale no. 9, "The Twelve Brothers," things get more complicated. The sister undergoes a few tribulations of her own, and these interfere with the fate of the brothers. When the mother delivers a girl, she puts up a "blood-red flag which announced that they were all to die." As the

[11] I have studied this complex of ideas and customary practices in "Iberian Seventh-Born Children, Werewolves, and the Dragon Slayer: A Case Study in the Comparative Interpretation of Symbolic Praxis and Fairytales," *Folklore* 114, no. 3 (2003): 335–53.

twelve boys see the flag, they swear that wherever they may "find a girl, her red blood shall flow."[12] Then they flee to the dark forest, take residence in a bewitched hut, and become hunters. After the sister finds them, she stays along and keeps house for them. She collects wood and gathers herbs in the forest, and she cooks for the brothers. But, one fateful day, she plucks twelve lily flowers that grow in the garden of the enchanted house, and then her brothers turn into ravens and fly away over the forest. To disenchant them, the sister presently must endure seven years without either speaking or laughing. She spends part of that time sitting in a tree, spinning; then she marries, but her "stepmother" slanders her and she cannot defend herself. The young woman is condemned to death, and she is about to be burned when the seven years are over, and the brothers, having resumed their human form, save her.

So the realm of enchantment is now a hut in the dark forest, and the sister herself suffers some trials and tribulations even as she doubles the brothers' enchantment. Notice a red leitmotiv. A blood-red flag sends the brothers into the forest, and they promise they will shed the "red blood" of any girl they meet; then they become hunters, which means they shed the blood of prey. So, the dark forest is a place where blood flows. There the brothers shed blood—and there the sister seems bound to bleed as she joins them. This variant states that the brothers forgive her, of course. But then, why present such a tight set of blood hints? In order to clarify this matter, let us look beyond the Grimm variants for a moment.

In Giambattista Basile's "The Seven Little Doves," the seven boys who leave home as their mother delivers a sister eventually reach a dark wood. They settle in the house of an ogre who "was such an enemy of the female sex that he ate up every one of them that he could get.[13] The ogre is blind because his eyes were once torn out by a woman while he was sleeping. When the sister joins her brothers, they warn her to stay in the room to hide from the ogre. She is now to share all her food with a she-cat that lives in the room. But one day, as she she fails to share a hazelnut, the cat pees on the cooking fire and extinguishes it. The girl has to go steal a firebrand from the ogre, who sharpens his fangs in anticipation. But the brothers, back from hunting, push the ogre into a deep ditch. On his grave grows a rosemary bush, from which the sister picks a sprig. Her seven brothers turn into doves and fly away.

Basile's variant confirms a couple features hinted in Grimm no. 9. First, there is a definite danger awaiting the sister—she risks shedding her blood in the forest. Second, the sister causes the

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[12] Jakob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm's Household Tales, with the Author's Notes* (London: Bell, 1884), 1:38, 39.
[13] Giambattista Basile, *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 351.

metamorphosis of her brothers. In Grimm's "The Twelve Brothers" the girl plucks flowers linked to the brothers; in Basile she picks rosemary growing on the ogre's tomb. This parallel suggests that the brothers and the ogre are—somehow, at some level—the same. This is actually no surprise, for Basile's misogynist ogre corresponds to the blood-spilling brothers who vow to attack girls in Grimm. Notice that the two variants unveil different aspects of the forest episode. Whereas the tale "The Twelve Brothers" mentions the spilling of the sister's red blood at the hands of the hunter brothers, it denies that the act actually takes place. Basile, on a different tack, acknowledges an attack but imputes it to the ogre. If we put together the two hints, we may suspect that the sister does bleed after she joins her brothers in the woods. But now we have to turn to oral variants.

Blood and fire in ATU 451

Consider a set of French oral variants that owe nothing to either Grimm or Basile. A variant from Limousin called The Werewolf (*Le malbrou*), narrated in 1961 by an 83 years-old shepherd woman who learned it as a young child from an elderly neighbor,[14] adds some details to the forest scene. After the sister fails to share her bread with a dog at the brothers' house, and the fire goes out, she gets new fire from the werewolf 's wife next door. Then, in exchange for the fire received, the werewolf demands that she allow him to suck blood from her little finger. The brothers eventually cut out the werewolf's head, which they sell to his wife. She makes combs out of the bones, and whoever uses those combs will be unable to ever heal again. In a Britton variant, "The Three Brothers and their Sister" (*Les trois frères et la sœur*),[15] the foe who sucks the young woman's blood is a seven-headed serpent. After the brothers behead the serpent, his mother crafts combs with the bones. The sister buys the combs for her brothers, who turn into rams. In a variant from Burgundy, called "The Seven Brothers" (*Les sept frères*),[16] the elder brother buries the werewolf's head in the garden, and a thicket of beautiful and fragrant flowers grows there. The sister uses some of those "poisoned" flowers to perfume the boys' linen. As a result, the brothers turn into birds and fly away. A variant from Nivernais depicts the sister herself burying the ogre's head in the garden and then using the flowers growing on the grave—which, we are told, are "more beautiful and fragrant than roses"—to perfume the linen. The brothers turn into white bulls.[17] According to a variant from Vendée, called "The Red Ball" (*La boule rouge*), a beautiful patch of parsley grows on the ogre's grave. The sister uses it to season her brothers' food, and they turn into sheep.[18]

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[14] Geneviève Massignon, *De bouche à oreille: Anthologie de contes populaires français* (Paris: Corti, 2006), 225–26.

[15] François Cadic, *Contes et légendes de Bretagne: Les contes populaires*, vol. 2 (Rennes: Terre de brume/Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998), 57–65.

[16] Claude Seignolle, *Contes populaires et légendes de Bourgogne* (Paris: Les Presses de la Renaissance, 1977), 23–35.

[17] Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze, *Le Conte populaire français: Catalogue raisonné des versions de France et des pays de langue française d'outre-mer*, vol. 2 (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977), 131.

[18] Geneviève Massignon, *Contes de l'Ouest (Brière, Vendée, Angoumois)* (Paris: Érasme, 1954), 175–82.

These oral variants, besides describing the sister's bleeding in the woods, depict a remarkable process. First the ogre sucks the sister's blood, then the brothers kill the ogre, and finally the remains of the blood-gorged ogre cause the brothers' metamorphosis. When the metamorphosis is caused by plants, the plant allomotifs suggest an underlying idea of blood in the grave. In the Burgundy variant, the fragrant flowers that cause the brothers' enchantment are poisoned; in the Nivernais variant they are more beautiful than roses. This semantic articulation is significant, for in European folklore roses and poison consistently come together in regard of feminine blood. As the term "defloration" implies, virgins are deemed metaphorically in flower. This is clear in the French expression *jeunes filles en fleurs* ("maidens in flowers") as much as in Shakespeare's description of a virgin as "a fresh uncropped flower" destined to lose her "roses" and barely keep her "thorns" to prick herself (*All's Well That Ends Well* 4.2.18–19, 5.3.126, 5.3.319). Shakespeare's dissociation of roses into blooms and thorns is interesting, for it precisely matches the contents of "Little Briar Rose" (KHM 50), in which the sleeping rose's hedge turns from briars into blooms. This dichotomy actually corresponds to the two dimensions of feminine blood, fruitful and baneful, in an ancient folk model of reproduction mentioned by Aristotle (in "Generation of Animals") and repeatedly found in historical and ethnographical sources.[19] On the one hand, womb blood is the feminine substance of procreation; on the other, the monthly flux purifies this procreative medium; therefore, it is deemed toxic. As a 16th-century French medical doctor named Laurent Joubert aptly summarizes this notion, women are "venomous and could poison men through copulation when they had their flowers."[20] Overall, this analogical background explains why the fragrant flowers growing from a grave containing a blood-gorged ogre evoke both roses and poison. The use of parsley as an allomotif is consistent with this theme, for—as Bernardette Bricout has pertinently noted—in folk medicine parsley favors the shedding of feminine blood.[21] And while rosemary has a well-attested funereal value throughout Europe, data collected by Angelo di Gubernati suggest that it also relates to maidens, brides, and young fairies.[22]

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[19] See Sandra Ott, "Aristotle among the Basques: The 'Cheese Analogy' of Conception," *Man* 14, no. 4 (1979). I have examined at some length the matter of the twofold value of feminine blood in A*rcheology of Intangible Heritage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 63–66.

[20] Laurent Joubert, *Popular Errors*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa, AL, and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 128.

[21] Bernadette Bricout, *La clé des contes* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 47.

[22] Manuel Mandianes Castro, "Les arbres des morts en Galice," in *Les plantes et les saisons: Calendriers et représentations*, ed. Marianne Mesnil (Bruxelles: Institut de sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1990), 314. For example, a Sicilian variant of ATU 407, "The Girl as Flower," shows a girl born in the shape of rosemary—see Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 583–85. Angelo de Gubernatis, *La mythologie des plantes, ou Les légendes du règne végétal*, vol. 2 (Paris: Reinwald, 1882), 315–17 states that in Sicily young fairies dwell in rosemary. He also mentions that German brides would offer the officiating priest a branch of rosemary adorned by red strings, which suggests that this plant relates to the blood of young women.

Fire and blood in Grimm tales

Of course, a blood-gorged ogre lies in the grave because of a mysterious scene involving fire. In this scene, after the girl lets the fire die she has to visit the ogre and bleed. Notice that there is barter involved. The girl who receives fire must reciprocate with blood, and this tit-for-tat logic suggests the equivalence between the substances being traded. Significantly, the fire and the blood never overlap—rather, they give way to one another. While the sister minds the cooking fire, no mention is made of blood; but after the fire dies out, she starts bleeding. Actually, she starts bleeding after receiving the new fire—but she does not resume cooking, for the blood is what matters now. I submit that the new fire the girl gets from the ogre amounts to the blood she sheds anew; that, in other words, this scene of a dying fire and finger bleeding represents the onset of the girl's menarche.

Indeed, there is a symbolic link between finger bleeding, putting out a fire, and the onset of bleeding. A brief review of some other Grimm tales brings out this link. Recall that "Little Briar-Rose" features a girl fated to prick her finger at fifteen years-old and to fall into an enchanted slumber inside a briars hedge. Eventually, the young woman called Briar Rose revives after the briars turn into roses and a suitor transposes her flowers—in other words, deflowers her. This young woman, after bleeding at age fifteen, enters a blood phase. (Perrault makes it clear in his own variant, *La Belle au bois dormant,* that the sleeping girl's cheeks were carnation and her lips were coral. The Grimms present a similar description in Snow White, tho swooned after eating the red part of an apple.) During her swoon, a number of suitors have perished in the briars hedge. But, at length, the time comes when a suitor can trespass her flowers, after which she wakes up and duly gets married. Relevantly, in Perrault's variant the cooking fire is prominent in the list of things that go dormant along with the princess, and cooked meat is conspicuously available after she revives. Although the text of "Little Briar Rose" originally collected by the Brothers Grimm did not include the motif of the dormant-and-rekindled fire, the Brothers inserted it in the text of the first (1812) edition,[23] and they kept it even after subsequently purging "foreign" materials. They offer no clue as to where they took this motif from. However, its insertion in the text manages to convey the symbolic link between finger bleeding, the onset of menarche, and putting out a fire. This is a good example of a literary emendation that conveys a traditional pattern.

Now let us examine another tale. "Frau Holle" (KHM 24) features a girl spinning by a well until her fingers bleed. Her shuttle gets stained with blood, it drops to the bottom of the well, and the young woman follows it. While falling down she faints, and after she comes to in the underworld

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[23] Rölleke, ed, *Die älteste Märchensammlung der Brüder Grimm: Synopse der handschriftlichen Urfassung von 1810 und der Erstdrucke von 1812, 106–09*.

she finds herself in a meadow with many thousands of flowers. There she rescues loaves from an overheated oven and shakes an apple tree. Therefore, in this story, the finger bleeding unleashes a swoon into a well. Down in the well, the girl is associated with flowers and with apples that fall "like rain"[24]—a metaphorical red flux. In other variants mentioned by the Grimms, the girl in the well milks a *red* cow, or she meets "a little *red* woman."[25] The underlying theme comes out plainly in a variant to "Aschenputtel" in which, after the heroine married her prince and "is lying ill after the birth of a son," she is thrown into a well of blood.[26] This blunt image confirms that falling into a well after bleeding (either from menarche or childbirth) amounts to entering a wet phase—a blood phase. And the idea that she enters a wet phase helps explain why the girl counters the blaze of a fire. In "Frau Holle," the menarcheal girl who gets into the well proceeds to mitigate the effects of a cooking fire as she takes bread loaves out of an overheated oven, and a variant from Hesse (quoted by the Grimms) explains that she "quickly takes the soup off the fire, pours water on the roast meat, draws the cakes out of the oven."[27]

By the same token, the realization that the menarcheal girl enters a wet phase helps us understand why in ATU 451 a domestic animal urinates on the fire before the girl starts bleeding. Regarding this fire-drenching pet, you may recall that Basile depicts a *she*-cat dowsing the cooking fire. Why would he be so gender specific? For a possible answer, consider the fact that Basile—in line with Mediterranean traditions—calls Cinderella *Gata Cenerentola* ("Cat Cinderella"). As Basile associates a girl who fails to upkeep the fire with a she-cat who kills the flames, he invokes—consciously, or otherwise—the stock figure of *Gata Cenerentola*. This young woman, who bears a cat and cinders in her name, "does not relate to the cooking fire," as Nicole Belmont correctly noted; rather, "she in on the side of the dead fire in the hearth, on the side of cinders…"[28] Indeed, the Cinderella cycle strikingly correlates the onset of puberty and the dormancy of a cooking fire. In Grimm no. 65 "Allerleirauh," for example, the girl whom her father wants to marry runs away and becomes a scullion. In this period of her life, she "carried wood and water, swept the hearth, plucked the fowls, picked the vegetables, raked the ashes, and did all the dirty work."[29] But when, at length, she is ready for love and romance, the cook becomes her ally and she takes to cooking bread-soups for her prince. Whereas in "Little Briar Rose" the prince makes the young woman his lover and the cooking fire lives again, in "Allerleirauh" the young woman goes from ashes to the

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[24] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 1:105.
[25] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 1:369, 371.
[26] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 1:364.
[27] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 1:371.
[28] Nicole Belmont, "De Hestia à Peau d'Âne: Le destin de Cendrillon," *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* 25 (1989), 22.
[29] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 1:279.

cooking pot to win the prince's heart. In both cases, bleeding and cinders go together, whereas the cooking fire is on the side of love and romance.

Dark seclusions

So this traditional symbolic pattern is pervasive in the Grimm tales. In fact, beyond the Grimm tales, it is a staple of symbolic thought. James Frazer, in a section of his *The Golden Bough* called "The Seclusion of Girls at Puberty," quotes many instances worldwide of the custom of keeping bleeding girls away from both the sun rays and the cooking fire. For this purpose, the girls are often placed between heaven and earth, as it were, kept in dark enclosures that prevent them from touching the ground and seeing the sky. Frazer notes,

> A superstition so widely diffused as this might be expected to leave traces in legends and folk-tales. And it has done so. The story of Danae … perhaps belongs to this class of tales.[30]

The famous story of of the mother of Perseus is relevant, of course. But Frazer could also have mentioned "Maid Maleen" (KHM 198), a tale in which a father shuts his daughter for seven years in a "dark tower … into which no ray of sunlight or moonlight should enter … and thus cut [her] off from the sky and from the earth." Even after Maid Maleen eventually exits the tower, her diet consists of "unboiled" and "unroasted" nettles, and she takes to working as a scullion. Relevantly, only after she manages to marry her prince does she say, "today … the sun is shining on me once more."[31] It needs no saying that this tale describes the separation between a young woman and fire, also found in other tales, in terms strikingly similar to the widespread custom mentioned by Frazer —namely, the enclosure of girls between heaven and earth, in darkness, away from fire.

The tower-seclusion motif appears in other Grimm tales as well. Famously, "Rapunzel" (KHM 12) presents a pregnant mother who craves for rampion growing in the garden of an enchantress, eats some, and in return has to surrender the girl, whom the enchantress shuts in a tower at age twelve. In Basile's variant, "Petrosinella," the pregnant mother eats parsley and the girl she delivers, showing a little clump of parsley on her chest, is named after the plant. In many oral variants the girl is likewise born from parsley and is named after the plant, which she appears to impersonate. So we can say that the girl shut in the tower personifies the plant reputed for favoring feminine hemorrhages,[32] which fits the theme of the seclusion of bleeding girls.

Indeed, as Marina Warner sagaciously noted, rampion was a herb recommended for regulating the menstrual cycle.[33] Moreover, the text of "Rapunzel" specifies that the tower of seclusion is

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[30] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1925), 602.
[31] Grimm and Grimm, *Household Tales*, 2:350, 352, 355.
[32] Bricout, *Clé*, 39–51.
[33] Marina Warner, "Rapunzel, Parsley & Pregnancy," *The New York Review of Books* (2008).

surrounded by thorns. The prince actually pierces his eyes in them, and this detail takes us back to "Little Briar Rose." You may recall that Briar Rose slumbers in a tower surrounded by a hedge of briars—a hedge that grows until it hides her father's palace. In "Maid Maleen," likewise, when the young woman exits the tower she finds her father's kingdom in ruins. In both cases, the paternal domain vanishes during the young woman's seclusion. The seclusion, in other words, functions as the girl's passage from being a daughter to becoming a bride. In both cases, the father tries to isolate his daughter from cyclic time so as to avoid this passage. The Maid Maleen's father shuts his daughter in the tower where she can't tell days from nights; and Briar Rose's father fails to invite for her birth celebration the fairy who represents dark seclusions in a tower. Indeed, Perrault makes it clear that the uninvited *fée* had been shut in a tower for so long that people thought she was either enchanted of dead. This description fits that of the utterly isolated old spinner in the tower, who materializes the girl's curse, in Grimm's variant. So it seems reasonable to say that this fairy impersonates dark periods in a tower, which is why there is no golden plate for her at the banquet. It is her business to introduce girls to cyclic time, represented by spindles—the revolving tools in which wise women, like herself, weave the cyclic threads of time. Unwisely, the father fails to invite the secluded fairy and then bans all the spindles in the kingdom. But, inevitably, his daughter will meet the ancient spinner in her "old tower," and she starts her cyclic bleeding as soon as she spins a spindle.

Thorns, thirteenth fairy, thirteenth child

Incidentally, the symbolic value of bleeding fingers is fairly transparent beyond fairy tales. Ethnologist Yvonne Verdier, when studying the French custom of sending girls spend a winter with a seamstress at age fifteen, pointedly remarked that the repeated pricking of the young women's fingers by needles and pins throughout this winter "symbolizes their fresh menses."[34] This suggests a striking conceptual parallel between Little Briar Rose, who pricks a finger on meeting an old spinster at age fifteen, and flesh-and-bone girls who joined a seamstress at the same age. Interestingly, Verdier specifies that these girls in transition would resort to pins as a defensive means against too enterprising young men. She relates this customary practice with the symbolic expression *épinasser sa fille,* meaning the need to figuratively surround your daughter with briars against predatory boys, in reference to the adage *qui s'y frotte s'y pique*—meaning, "he who rubs himself gets pricked."[35] Again, the parallel with Briar Rose surrounded by fearful briars that keep her from wooers stands out. Moreover, in Brittany the defensive pin in the arsenal of young women

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[34] Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 242.

[35] Verdier, *Façons*, 242@240.

used to be called the *thirteenth* pin.[36] In the Grimm tale, of course, it is the *thirteenth* fairy that promotes the pricking fate of Briar Rose. In both cases, the number thirteen is associated with the prickly unavailability of menarcheal young women. This is relevant because, again, in "The Twelve Brothers" the sister—announced by a red flag, and fated to bleed in the woods—is herself a thirteenth child.

Conclusion

By and by, this discussion has suggested that the Grimm variants are built on the same symbolic patterns as European oral variants and folk customs. I have tried to show that the Grimm texts can help clarify oral variants and, reciprocally, can be illuminated by oral narratives and customs. Wilhelm mostly altered his texts along allomotific lines, that is, using the equivalent imagery found in parallel variants. In this sense, the Grimm tales are traditional. Of course, as Wilhelm changed the texts he infused his own moral values into them. It has been shown that he replaced mothers with stepmothers, hid references to pregnancies and other morally awkward occurrences, and emphasized politically-correct messages suiting his time.[37] But, again, such are the privileges of taletellers as long as their personal preferences follow traditional trends.

Recently, the writer Philip Pullman published his own retelling of fifty Grimm tales. In his introduction, he stated:

> The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration. To keep to one version or one translation alone is to put a robin redbreast in a cage. If you, the reader, want to tell any of the tales in this book, … you have a positive duty to make the story your own. A fairy tale is not a text. … I believe that every story is attended by its own sprite, whose voice we embody when we tell the tale, and that we tell it more successfully if we approach the sprite with a certain degree of respect and courtesy. … I have done my best for the sprites who attend each one, as did Dorothea Viehmann, Philipp Otto Runge, Dortchen Wild, and all the other tellers whose work was preserved by the great Brothers Grimm.[38]

This is, I think, the right spirit to approach traditional tales. What Pullman calls the sprite of tales meets the Brother Grimms' own notion of tales as "ideal types" to be captured through numerous approaches. When the Brothers proclaimed their faithfulness to the spirit of the tales, if not to the letter of the variants, they were doing just this. The Grimms wanted to present near-perfect variants

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[36] Verdier, *Façons*, 242.
[37] See in particular Tatar, *Hard Facts*.
[38] Philip Pullman, *Grimm Tales: For Young and Old* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), xvii–xx.

—texts that came as close as possible to the fullness of each tale. They could attempt this, of course, because they were operating in writing. Whereas oral variants are more or less *ad hoc,* incomplete renderings of each tale, the Grimm texts cram as much traditional details as possible into a symbolically dense variant that becomes a fixed (and, as it happened, canonized) text. In *Kinder- und Hausmärchen,* traditional oral tales became traditional literary tales. The rigid line between folklorists and tale tellers does not work here, as the Brothers took up both roles as once.

But I wonder, was the line between taletellers and tale scholars involved in understanding texts ever rigid? Interestingly, the term "folklore" covers both the field of study and the discipline that studies it—the tales and their interpretations. The same is true of the word "mythology," and Claude Lévi-Strauss has repeatedly expressed his conviction that in mythology each interpretation is bound to become a new variant of the myth.[39] However this may be, it is certain that traditional tales have been decisively transposed beyond oral tradition by the Brothers Grimm—allowing film makers, writers, and perhaps you, to carry on the traditional chain.

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[39] I have examined Lévi-Strauss' idea of a receding frame in folklore and mythology in "Folklore into Theory: Freud and Lévi-Strauss on Incest and Marriage," *Journal of Folklore Research* 44, no. 1 (2007), 10–16 and in "Tradition," 45–46.

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