

Sessions 1-4: *Ellis and the Grimms; German nationalism; folk tradition; oral and written culture.*

A good place to start is to consider what we generally mean by “Fairy Tales”. A typical formulation might contain some or all of the following properties: “old; magical; peopled by types rather than heavily individuated characters; formulaic; oral; for children”. We then read Ellis, chapters 1-3, and found that the Grimms’ work took place in a context of growing German nationalism, with an intense focus on German language and culture. The collection was envisaged by the Grimms as a serious work of philology, an attempt to reform and re-build German Literature then awakening from a lengthy period of relative eclipse, to challenge French linguistic and cultural dominance. From there we passed to the concept of oral tradition, the doctrine of “survivals”, and of the cultural shortcomings of Modernity—the central idea here being that a separate and distinctive strand of culture, later called “folklore”, was preserved in oral tradition by the common people, and that although sustained by living memories, some of its contents were extremely ancient. One key earlier text here was James Macpherson in the elaborate scholarly apparatus to his sensationally-successful edition of the *Poems of Ossian* (1765) which had made the argument for the coherence of oral tradition and its ability to transmit cultural materials in a stable form over long periods of time, so that most contemporaries considered that contact with orality guaranteed, *ipso facto*, contact with high antiquity. We needed to remind ourselves about such matters, because in the university reforms of the later nineteenth century folklore arrived too late on the scene to establish itself as a central academic discipline, so that there are only a handful of departments in America today.

Our starting point was James Macpherson and the overwhelming impact upon the European intelligentsia of *Ossian*, the epic poem ostensibly collected in the Highlands of Scotland during the middle years of the eighteenth century. The argument was that things of great cultural richness might be found in oral tradition, in the custody of the common people. The culture of literacy was artificial and expensive to maintain. It was also bland and homogeneous, since literate intellectuals all tended to read the same things and think in the same way. So that the bearers of the oral tradition might actually be the true custodians of national identity—and also its creators. “*Das Volk dichtet*”, said the Grimms (“The People create”), and this proved a powerful idea subsequently. As an example, we considered briefly how American historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) had used this model to argue that the true real America was found not on the Europeanized east coast but out in the Wild West, on the Frontier. So it had to be amongst the common people and nowhere else that theory suggested the Grimms should find their evidence, as they themselves appeared to acknowledge, but—if Ellis is right—this wasn’t quite how things turned out.

A number of conceptual challenges meet us, therefore, on entering this field: forming some grasp of oral tradition and how it worked and the things it contained being of obvious importance. Also, we need to know something about the cultural politics of Europe at the time. When the Grimms began their work, the Napoleonic wars were in progress and their native Hesse/Kassel was under French military occupation. In addition, Germany was politically divided into a myriad of small principalities and France was culturally dominant, French being the preferred language of the upper classes in much of Europe. The Grimms’ object was to rebuild German literature on the foundations of a vigorous genuinely national tradition, and to this end what they published was not a fairy-tale volume of the kind we are familiar with nowadays, but a big multi-

volume scholarly work, intended to be taken very seriously indeed and possessing the usual hallmarks of the type: scholarly apparatus, notes on the text, preface, list of abbreviations, acknowledgments, introduction, glossary, bibliography, footnotes, endnotes, appendices, index—the slimmed down tale-only versions of the Grimms' text came later.

Then we turned to consider Ellis's account of the Brothers Grimm in more detail, centering on informant Dorothea Viehmann, and the fact that she seems to have been —1) literate; 2) middle class; 3) French-speaking, and asked how these characteristics might affect her status as a source. We went from there to considered the specific details of Ellis's case against the Grimms.

The Grimms claimed that they had collected from the peasantry and subsequent scholars believed them; that their tales, therefore, represented in a direct and faithful way the *Volksgeist*, the cultural core, of the German people. This belief became so entrenched that even when powerful evidence accumulated in the 20th century that they had (a) collected from their bourgeois—frequently French-speaking—neighbors and friends amongst the lesser aristocracy and had (b) systematically bowdlerized and re-written between successive editions the materials they *had* got, the belief that they had captured the very soul of the German people was so deeply entrenched in the learned world that this evidence had never been accorded its proper weight. Ellis considered the extent of the Brothers' personal interventions in the text, their habitual re-alignment of the family relationships at the heart of so many of these stories, substituting wicked step-mothers for actual birth-mothers and erasing the frequent traces of father/daughter incest, hence considerably distorting the message of the original tales.

As a class we were particularly interested in the assumptions about the links between language and literature and the projection of power which underlay the whole enterprise. Widening out a little, we considered the differences between “hard” and “soft” power; the concept of “cultural imperialism” --the global dominance of English, for example, enabling people all over the world to be exposed to the full blast of Anglo-American popular culture. Then we noted the cultural prestige and power of writers (“the chief glory of every people arises from its authors” as Dr. Johnson remarked): the idea that Great Countries have Great Literature, (as we see at home in the Center for Editions of American Authors founded by the Modern Language Association at the height of the Cold War to establish a core of classic texts able to rival anything the rest of the world could produce), and it was to renew the power and prestige of German letters that the brothers Grimm began their work.

So we saw something of a great scholarly controversy about the nature of oral vs. written tradition, during which many of the assumptions people commonly have about Fairy Tales came to the surface and were seen to be controversial, and contested; the idea of folk culture and the status of oral tradition; links between language and culture and identity, who and what one is; and complex issues about the inheritance from the past and how it should be treated. Culture and Nationalism, is a powerful motif here, the idea (which should be well to the front of the minds of all students of writing) that there is a body of quasi-sacred texts called “Literature” which not only offer unique insight into the world and the way it works; but as also somehow constituting the life-blood of the nation, a kind of extended and permanent national consciousness, so that if one were to ask, say “who and what are the American people” one could simply point to the canon of American literature and say “that”. The more deeply we are read in this material, the more fully we realize ourselves as representatives in the deepest sense of our national cultures.

Likewise a number of questions were touched upon which were to loom larger as the class progressed; the growth, for example, of children's literature, i.e. writing specifically for a youthful audience. We think of classic titles, such as *Winnie-the-Pooh*; *The Wind in the Willows*; *Peter Pan*; *Treasure Island*; *Harry Potter* (a brilliant attempt to have a text mature in step with its first audience), but these are essentially literary. There are innumerable illustrated stories which loom large in modern childhoods—from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*; *Where's Spot?* *The Elephant and the Bad Baby*; Janet and Alan Ahlberg's books (their most popular work *The Jolly Postman* sold six million, think of it, *six million* copies. There's an interesting Youtube video (you get it by keying in "The Jolly Postman" with a cute kid reading her way through it, and doing so well, taking out all the letters the Postman delivers, including Goldilocks' note of apology to the Three Bears, and an advertising circular addressed to the Wicked Witch); down to that characteristic modern production, *The Little Vampire* which unsettlingly conflates the genres of gothic and juvenile fiction. We were presented at several points in the class with a chance to look at the creation of emergent literary forms. The development of the Fairy Tale as a distinct literary type overlaps with a good deal of this, and so offers an excellent vantage point from which to observe a wide spectrum of cultural change.

There are wide-ranging gender questions as well: the idea is that the Fairy Tale is essentially a women's tradition. This seem distinctly plausible on the face of things, when one bears in mind the largely female informants in the Wild and Hassenpflug families from which the Grimms got so many of their tales, and, of course, their star informant, Dorothea Viehmann. There is the considerable input of French courtly women writers at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century. As we go on we find this motif return again and again, climaxing in the work of Angela Carter and Liz Lochhead in the later years of the twentieth century. This was a theme especially close to the hearts of the pioneers of the feminist revival of the 1970s, and the attendant implication that the great fairy tale tradition was essentially hijacked by male collectors and editors with their greater social power and access to the press at periods when it was scarcely considered respectable for a woman of birth to be a published author. So we add to the complex web of appropriation and counter-appropriation the Grimms making off with essentially French stories; then a group of men--Basile, Straparola, Perrault, the Grimms, Hans Christian Andersen, Walt Disney, making off with women's stories, so that true tradition is continually being overlaid by something else, becoming a kind of palimpsest.

There is the recurring question of commercialization and the exploitation for profit of cultural commons, and the resulting overlap between "folk" and popular culture which we examine in detail when we come to Disney This includes the growth of the concept of the "folk" itself, and what were thought to be its properties. This is linked with fascinating questions of distribution. The Grimms attempted to assert the cultural distinctiveness of one particular national strand of tradition, although, as Ellis suggests, their standing as leading philological scholars should have made them well aware of the international distribution of much of the material with which they worked. Fairy Tales really seem to be a global phenomenon, and as the class went on we considered various theories about whether they are produced by all societies at a particular stage of development, or whether they sprang into being in a small number of culturally favored spots, such as the Nile delta, or northern India, and were diffused from there along the trade routes into the West. You do not have to dig very deeply into commentary on early Italian collectors such as Straparola and Basile before you find the Middle East and even China being cited as the ultimate source of tales transmitted to the West through the great portal of Renaissance Venice.

We also touched upon the intriguing question of the ownership of tradition: whether we should consider popular literature as produced *for* the people, or as produced *by* them. Some approaches consider the common people as the mere passive custodians of a once-aristocratic tradition which had long ago fallen into their possession as fashions altered further up the social scale. This is the so-called “trickle down” theory, and we consider it in more detail when we turn to the writings of the great Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp. It arises again with the creation of a mass “pop culture” during the twentieth century.

The overall strategy was to develop an approach which did not treat the text as a stable and self-sufficient object to be pinned upon a dissecting table and taken apart using various formalistic critical approaches; not just to consider the wider perspective offered by the comparative study of genres and their rise and fall, but of how the very substance of what we call “literature” is affected by things far indeed from the surface of textuality, scarcely even belonging to the study of “literature” as normally conceived, but involving wide international forces, social, economic, and political, which our texts hold briefly in equilibrium, presenting a unique point of cultural vantage.

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From a more practical point of view, in class, we considered how to look ahead to pace work demands over the approaching weeks, since the load cannot be distributed completely equally, one should pace oneself and fit it in to one’s other schedules wherever one can. In any course one should at an early stage, as a matter of routine, look at previous test papers if there is an examination, because this indicates what the course designers thought important, and permits information gathering to proceed in the most efficient and intelligent way. Since we have continuous assessment here we look at essay no 1, and try to suss out what it might require, chief amongst which would seem to be the ability to give a clear outline version of what the Grimms were about and why, and what Ellis thought about them. The face-to-face version of the class also laid much stress the dangers of plagiarism and the value of the square bracket in distinguishing one’s own work from other peoples’ while note taking; the value of pencil annotation and marginalia in the set texts, and the usefulness of compiling summative notes in the process of internalization. Above all, ensuring that material downloaded or cut and pasted from the net was identified as such—by quote marks, colored type, or other typographical device, and always including sources and page numbers so that what is your work and what is other people’s remains clearly distinguished.

The taught version of the Class stressed the value of online research, and how to use a number of subscription-only scholarly sites, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and *JSTOR*. For example, looking up the word “tradition” in the *OED*, reveals many historical uses of the term and gives a good idea of what people have meant by it down the centuries. Using *JSTOR*, we were able to track down a number of reviews of Ellis’s *One Fairy Story Too Many: The Brothers Grimm and their Tales* in a number of scholarly journals. Books of reputation are likely to be noticed in this way, so a survey of scholarly reviews is a speedy way of gaining an informed overview of any particularly “hot” book or topic. We found that Ellis’s characteristically plain-spoken manner had raised eyebrows in the scholarly community, but his conclusions had not been significantly challenged.

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21L.430 / CMS.920 Popular Culture and Narrative: Use and Abuse of the Fairy Tale
Fall 2015

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