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Tale Spinners: Submerged Voices in Grimm's Fairy Tales

by Ruth B. Bottigheimer

Each generation approaches old texts with new questions. One text which has shown itself to be a rich site for shifting readership concerns is The Household Tales (Kinder-und Hansmärchen) collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The evocative power of the collection has been reflected in the changing nature of the assumptions implicit in the criticism and interpretation of these tales over the last 100 years. Beyond their power to delight the young, the tales were perceived in the late 19th century to perform a normative function for its young readers. A generation later the National Socialists found the tales to be archetypically Germanic, and yet another generation later, the neo-Freudian Bruno Bettelheim and the Jungian Hedwig von Beit unearthed a different archetype, that of the lineaments of sexual maturation and psychological world view. In the last decade writers and scholars of a wide variety of social and political persuasions have undertaken revisions of these tales more in accordance with their view of society, a good overview of which can be found in Jack Zipes' "Who's Afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and Politization Through Fairy Tales."

The tales can also be viewed as documents in themselves. In conjunction with parallel material which can be found above all in the first three volumes of Johannes Bolte and Georg Polivka's continuation and expansion of the Grimms' original notes to the KHM, the folktales — which appeared during the Grimms' lifetime in seven large and twelve small editions from 1812 to 1856 — can be seen as a sourcebook for the mentality not only of the 19th century but also of former ages. Investigated in this light, each tale can be seen to consist of interpenetrating layers of narrative. A further level is that evoked in the mind of

* Hereafter KHM.

the reader which arises from the reader's own concerns, which differ again from those of Wilhelm Grimm, who edited the material, from his informants individually and severally, and from their innumerable predecessors in the oral and written tradition. I have chosen to restrict my analysis to the document itself, the tales as published in the final edition of 1856, drawing to a limited extent on variants, where doing so clarifies the thrust of the tale under consideration.

My particular interest here is the work ethic as expressed in a delimited corpus, the spinning tales. I have defined spinning tales as those in which either the act or the implements of spinning form part of the tale. This work ethic is expressed by at least two voices, the first of which is the narrative voice of Wilhelm Grimm, which purports to render faithfully the folk material gathered by himself or by his friends and colleagues. The second voice must be teased out, since it appears to have been overlaid — probably quite unintentionally — by the collating, editing, and refining undertaken by Wilhelm Grimm. Nonetheless, I believe that we can discern faint cries of distress and fatigue from the spinning room — Spinnstube — in the centuries preceding the Grimms' work.

The first signal perceived by the reader that the spinning tales differ from other tales in the KHM lies in the opening phrases of the tales. "Hard by a great forest dwelt a poor wood-cutter with his wife." Thus begins the tale of Hansel and Gretel, and in a like manner many other tales in the KHM. There was once a miller, a soldier, a farmer, a king. These phrases are only story initiators, however, for the miller does not grind, nor does the soldier bear arms, nor the farmer plough, nor the king rule. Each of these initiators identifies a character in the tale to follow. Sometimes the story initiator identifies a queen, an old woman, a poor woman, a girl. Yet, among the 200 folk tales, of which approximately thirteen concern spinning directly or indirectly, not a single one begins: "There was once a spinner," although Spinnerin occasionally appears in a title. The reason appears to be that the tales grew out of an age and a place in which spinning was yet another task performed by every woman, the task that awaited her when every other household task had been finished. In this context one was not a spinner; one was a girl, a woman, a wife who spun — or who didn't want to spin. And whether or not a woman spun, and spun well, marked her in a particular way.

For the 2,500 years before the 19th century, hand spinning in Western Europe — whether with a drop spindle or with a spinning wheel —

5. All translations of the tales are taken from The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales, trans. Margaret Flunt and James Stein (New York: Pantheon, 1944).
had been carried on exclusively by women (with individual exceptions, such as isolated shepherds). Its appearance in association with women is constant in western literature and the visual arts; yet, its specific association with work itself in a collection of tales takes a new tack with Wilhelm Grimm. For instance, Boccaccio did not allow work as such to obtrude in the tales told by his ladies and gentlemen of Florence in the Decameron. The same thing is essentially true both of the early 16th-century Piacevoli Notti by Straparola, where spinning appears chiefly as a mark of the lowest social level but not as a form of employment per se, and of Basile’s collection of tales, the Pentamerone, produced in 1634, but not published until 1675. This orientation may only reflect the early industrialization of spinning in Italy, which began to take place in the 13th century, so that one may infer that in general in Italy only poor rural women spun, whereas north of the Alps spinning was widespread among both urban and rural women.

In England, France, Switzerland, and the Germanies in the 18th and early 19th centuries different traditions obtained. Women of both the middle and lower economic classes appear to have spun in England and Switzerland, whereas in France it was an occupation for the urban poor and for cottagers, and in the Germanies it appears to have been practiced mainly as a rural occupation. Beyond this difference in geographical and sociological locus, spinning in England, France and Switzerland appears to have been integrated into general family employment, whereas spinning in the Germanies appears to have been characterized as an occupation carried on primarily as a sexually segregated employment.

In the German tradition, Jacob Grimm asserted that “the spindle is an essential characteristic of wise women.” The spindle is, as the tales themselves demonstrate, not only the identifying mark of wise women, but of all women, and especially — in the Germanies from the Middle Ages to the 19th century — of diligent, well-ordered womanhood.

Unlike the tales produced for polite society such as Contes nouvelles ou les Fées à la mode by Madame d’Aulnoy (1698), German folk tales were assumed to have originated in or to have passed through in many cases the Spinnstube, for it was there that women gathered in the evening and told tales to keep themselves and their company awake as they spun. And it was from informants privy to this oral tradition that Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm gathered many of their folk tales. Thus, we can assume a personal relationship between the tales that follow and spinners themselves.

However, two voices seem to be present: one expressing dissatisfaction towards this archetypically female employment, with another

voice appearing to affirm and extol spinning as a worthwhile enterprise. The latter voice, I argue, belongs to Wilhelm Grimm, through whom a 19th-century value system and its vocabulary became amalgamated with the tales as we know them today.

The Three Spinners exemplifies most completely the characteristics of the spinning tales taken individually or as a group. Spinning itself is the subject of this tale, which is the German expression of a tradition documented from Ireland in the West to Greece in the East and with an ancestry stretching back to the 5th century B.C. Moreover, the continued social relevance of the tales is implied by the modernization of the ancient spindle to the roughly contemporary spinning wheel, the direct agent of the girl’s grief.

The tale can be understood as having an ancient lineage from its cast of characters: mother, daughter, queen, three crones, and only peripherally a prince. The prince, however, provides a further modernization in being the agent of the typical 18th-19th century happy ending — poor girl marries prince. Such a cast comes straight from the predominantly female-populated Spinnstube. It is related to the oldest level of the German folk tale, in which women were understood as intermediaries between men and natural forces, a theme which is evident in The Goosegirl and in the figure of Mother Holle. The tale further concerns the spinning of flax, the fiber prepared and worn by the broadest segment of population in Germany.

Specific folk — and fairy — tale elements are basic to this tale. Deceit steers the plot, first when the mother lies to the queen about why her daughter is crying, second when the daughter lies to the queen, and third when the crones imply to the prince that his bride will be transformed into their collective image if she continues to spin.

The number three appears prominently: three chambers full of flax to be spun, three crones who help, three days of futile contemplation of the job, three questions put to the three crones at the wedding feast.

And finally there is a promise exacted from the poor girl by the crones, the precise significance of which provides the resolution of the girl’s problem at the climax of the tale.

And what does this tale recount? Private preferences and public values. The former is expressed in the opening sentence: “There was a girl who was idle and would not spin.” The latter, directly contravening this statement of fact, is a lie; as the mother declares to the queen: “I cannot get her to leave off spinning. She insists on spinning for ever and ever, and I am poor, and cannot procure the flax.”

Even in her mother’s absence the girl cannot confess the deceit she has been made party to. No threat — as in Rumpelstilzchen — constrains the girl, for if she doesn’t spin, she simply won’t marry the prince.
(whereas the miller's daughter in *Rumpelstilzchen* must spin straw to gold — or die).

After the passage of three days in the tale, deliverance is magically provided. Three old women appear, benevolently offering to spin in return for an invitation to her wedding feast, their acceptance of which results in the bride's being released forever from the hated spinning.

Thus, the private preferences of the poor protagonist are recognized, validated, and incorporated into her future by creatures who banish the work ethic publicly espoused by the mother, the queen, and — by his use of the adjective, *fauI* (lazy), in the opening sentence — Wilhelm Grimm himself. *Faulheit* (laziness) has triumphed over *unverdrossener Fleiss* (untiring industry), and the *geschickte und fleissige Frau* (clever and industrious wife) is an illusion created by magical forces which free the bride forever from *das böse Flachsspinnen* (the hateful flax-spinning).

*Garstig* (hateful), which in other tales is applied either to a lazy woman who won't spin or to the flax itself here modifies *Freundschaft* (friendship, friends) in the prince's question: "Wie kommst du zu der garstigen Freundschaft?" Knowing this, the reader first understands that the prince's use of this adjective registers his surprise that his beautiful bride should claim such ugly relatives. But we can also understand the survival of this adjective into the last edition of the *KHM* as an implicit commentary by the editor of the effect of the aunts' actions on the entire tale: they've protected and confirmed idleness — *garstig* indeed!

Each of the tales I have defined as a spinning tale can be analyzed similarly, using vocabulary and plot analysis in conjunction with motif and theme. The first — vocabulary analysis — leads us directly into the mental set of the 19th century as exemplified by Wilhelm Grimm, who became more and more identified with the *KHM* as Jacob followed other interests in his later life. The second and third directions — plot and motif — take us into the oral tradition which preceded and produced and raw material for the folk tale collection.

In many cases Wilhelm Grimm altered the language of the tales from the source to its first appearance in the *KHM* and thereafter from edition to edition. Vocabulary carries its own normative freight, and young readers of these tales could make no mistake about the nature of a girl who took up the work appropriate to her and did it well: she was *geschickt* (clever, skillful), *fleissig* (diligent), *schön* (beautiful), *treu* (loyal), *flink* (nimble), *arbeitsam* (industrious), and *lustig* (jolly). She also took on additional tasks like puffing up her mistress' down comforter, and she was associated with riches in the form of gold.

The two tales, *King Thrushbeard* and *Rumpelstilzchen*, include young
women who would spin if they could, but either the task is impossible or they haven't been bred to it. In this case a slightly different constellation of characteristics appears, mingling those with positive and negative connotations: schö'n (beautiful), stolz (proud), übermutig (haughty) and riches in the form of gold.

On the other hand the attributes of girls who don't want to spin are an indictment in themselves: faul, Faulheit, faulenzen (lazy, idleness, to be lazy), garstig (hateful), and bös (ugly).

In terms of plot four sub-groups can be distinguished among the spinning tales. In the first, spinning itself is the subject of the tale. In the second, spinning functions as an indicator of the character or characteristics of the female protagonist; while in the third group, spinning as an action serves only to advance the plot. In the last group, spinning symbolizes the female sex and/or onerous tasks.

Where spinning itself is the subject of the tale, the female protagonist is unequivocal in her detestation of spinning, resorting to trickery, deceit, or supernatural powers to avoid it. Parallel tales from nearly every European country warn of the woeful consequences of spinning: hips that become too wide to pass through a doorway, lips licked away from constantly moistening the thread. We are here in a predominantly female circle composed of a mother who wants her lazy daughter to spin; a queen who wants an industrious wife for her son; a daughter who hates spinning; and three wise women who help her and whom she must publicly acknowledge as her relatives (Basen) as part of the bargain. We see everything from the woman's point of view, and it declares that flax-spinning is evil, awful (bös) and the best one can do is be quit of it!

Like The Three Spinners, The Lazy Spinner was one of the earliest tales collected by Wilhelm Grimm. No queen, no prince appears here, just a man and woman. Hard necessity requires the woman to sustain her part of the domestic economy, but she resists. When she claims she can't wind her yarn because she has no reel, her husband goes to the woods to cut her one; but she climbs the tree and — hidden by the foliage — chants down at him: He who cuts wood for reels shall die, And she who winds, shall perish. Such trickery and deception are women's weapons in a generally unyielding environment which is ultimately controlled by men because only they can promise the security which marriage offers, security which nowhere appears attainable outside of marriage.

Among those tales in which spinning functions as a character indicator, four females emerge as diligent and capable, while three are...
revealed to be either incompetent or lazy. Diligence incarnate doesn’t vary much in its appearance, but idleness can take the form of incapacity, sloth, or deceit. For instance, the proud princess in *King Thrushbeard* is simply incapable of spinning flax, for her fine hands can’t handle the flax fibers; and the industrious maid and her lazy mistress in *The Hurds* offer a familiar study in contrasts. On the other hand, the lazy, ugly daughter in *Frau Holle* tries to make it appear that she has spun so much that her fingers have bled, whereas in truth she has simply thrust her hand into a thorn hedge in the hope of fooling Frau Holle into believing that she, like her genuinely diligent sister, is worthy of a rich reward. That spinning itself is peripheral to this tale emerges in several ways. Although Frau Holle appears in other contexts as the special protectress of spinners, the original version of this tale in the 1812 edition contains no reference to a bloodied spindle, which derives apparently from a later informant. In addition the main idea of rewarding stepisters differentially according to their merits also appears in *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, which contains reference not to spinning, but to each girl’s willingness to share her food with the dwarfs. Functionally, spinning in *Frau Holle* stands for female virtues, which are outlined in *The Three Little Men in the Wood* as selflessness and/or generosity, traits which in women are also associated with poverty. This complex — selflessness, generosity, women, poverty — is especially clear in *The Goose-Girl at the Well* Derived from Kletke’s *Almanach* of 1840, it contains many familiar motifs and is more highly structured than the tales rendered by Wilhelm Grimm himself. Here spinning is the symbol for and the visible attribute of the penury and personal degradation into which a princess is plunged when she is deprived of male protection. The same poverty-generosity-spinning complex emerges in *The Spindle, the Shuttle and the Needle* with its naive and ingeniously moralistic pro-spinning ethic. In this tale, the spinning, weaving, and sewing tools are depicted as operating on their own. “It seemed as if the flax in the room increased of its own accord, and whenever she wove a piece of cloth or carpet, or had made a shirt, she at once found a buyer who paid her amply for it, so that she was in want of nothing, and even had something to share with others.” This bourgeois dream of picturesque carefree cottage labor rewarded by rich patrons first appeared in Auerbacher’s *Büchlein für die Jugend* in 1834 and was taken directly into the next edition of the *KHM*, where it remained in subsequent editions as a sentimental evocation of a past

8. Ibid., I, p. 207.
9. Ibid., I, p. 305.
10. Ibid., III, p. 355.
age symbolized by the spinning maiden. It is in stark contrast to the actual social condition of spinners in Prussia, whose very occupation made them certifiable mendicants, or in Switzerland and southern Germany, where a day's labor was paid for at a rate which did not even cover the costs of food.

In the next group of tales where spinning serves principally to advance the plot, it is also peripheral to the central theme. A characteristically female occupation — either spinning or sewing — is part of *Little Briar-Rose* in all its European and Near Eastern variants: in Catalonia a princess pricks her finger on a flax fiber; in the late French medieval prose novel, *Perceforest*, a tiny splinter in the first fiber pulled from the distaff causes a deep sleep; while in the Arabian story of Situkan, a flax filament under the heroine's fingernail sends her to sleep. In eastern European variants fibers and spindles as a sleeping agent are replaced by a needle, which characterizes women's occupations much as the spindle does elsewhere. Here spinning represents a neutral value; it is merely a hinge on which the tale turns.

The other tale in this group, *Rumpelstilzchen*, represents an amalgamation of several traditions in its historical development into the form in which we know it. Polivka sees a relationship between it and *The Three Spinners.*11 "He finds the origin of both (tales) among the Germanic peoples, according to whose beliefs, elves and dwarves spin and weave, which is fostered by Frau Holde and Frikke...the Swedish version is the original one, in which the girl receives from the dwarf a pair of gloves with which she can spin straw to gold."12 If Polivka is correct in this assumption, then one must posit the incorporation of another tradition which appears in many tales: offering help and/or riches in return for something young (*The Nixie of the Mill-Pond*), or for the first thing that greets the returning husband or father (*The Girl Without Hands*), or for something craved (*Rapunzel*). This by no means exhausts the list, but gives an indication of the variety and frequency with which this theme recurs in the *KHM*. Even if the historical basis for *Rumpelstilzchen* is to be found in the associates of a Frau Holle figure, the antagonistic mien of Rumpelstilzchen to the miller's daughter removes this tale from the tradition of the mild gracious Frau Holle. By the time Wilhelm Grimm collected it from Dortchen Wild in 1811, the plot had changed from the early one in which elves freely offered help to enable a girl to spin straw into gold to a plot in which a girl's father's false pride precipitates her into the greedy hands of a king, from whose threat of death (if she does not spin a roomful of straw into gold) she can be saved only by pledging her firstborn to the dwarf who saves her life.

Frau Holle and related figures function quite differently: they reward demonstrated goodwill and diligence, whereas the dwarf, as one of the men who enter or share her life (her father, her sovereign, the dwarf) casts the miller’s daughter into a perilous position. It is precisely such shifts in tradition which enable us to make inferences about the way in which minds in another age made sense of the world in which they found themselves. The benevolent assistance of a Frau Holle or of the three crones in the Spinnstube in the older tale is here displaced by a fearful tributary relationship to men in general.

In the last group of tales, Allerleirauh, The Water-Nixie, Tales of the Paddock, Eve’s Various Children, and The Nixie of the Mill-Pond spinning occupies a clearly symbolic position representing either the work appropriate to the female in the tale and/or onerous toil of the captive or poverty-stricken female.

The importance to Wilhelm Grimm of spinning for plot development emerges from a comparison of the Ölenberg MS. of 1810 with the first edition of 1812. In re-working the material for publication, he added spinning as an indication of hardship to several tales. For instance, the princess’ sufferings are increased by the addition of spinning in King Thrushbeard. In The Water-Nixie, the idea of two impossible task — filling a leaky waterbucket and hewing a tree with a blunt axe — are amplified by the interpolation in the 1812 edition of spinning flax. Furthermore, although spinning exists in both of the early versions of Rumpelstilzchen, Wilhelm Grimm changed the entire motivation for the tale between 1810 and 1812. The MS. version begins: “There was once little girl who was given a hank of flax to spin, but everything she spun was golden thread and not flax at all. She got very sad and sat on the rooftop and started spinning, and for three days she spun nothing but gold. Then a dwarf came along and said: I will help you.” The motivation for the entire tale shifts from the girl’s being released from spinning gold (1810) to her being forced to spin gold at the risk of her life (1812): “Then the king had the miller’s daughter come and commanded her to change the whole room full of straw into gold in one night, and if she couldn’t do it, then she’d have to die.”

Spinning as an activity is characterized only once in the KHM, in The Three Spinners, where spinning is described as böös (ugly, awful). In other tales the fibers themselves are represented as garstig (hateful), and hart (rough, hard).

15. Ibid., p. 239.
Throughout the tales the act of spinning emerges as highly undesirable despite the surface message that it will lead to riches. It identifies subjugated womanhood in Allerleirauh; it is an occupation to be escaped in The Lazy Spinner; it is also a punishment in The Water Nixie, a deforming or injurious occupation in The Three Spinners, Mother Holle, and King Thrushbeard; and at its worst an agent of death or a curse in Little Briar-Rose. Although many tales declare that spinning mediates wealth in the form of gold, it is primarily associated with poverty in Tales From the Paddock and The Goose-Girl at the Well. Above all it is the archetypal employment of domesticated poverty-stricken womanhood in Eve's Various Children. As Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott point out in Women, Work, and Family, a poor widow who remarried into an economic situation considerably worse than that which her first husband offered could expect to become an agricultural field laborer or a spinner.

As though to confirm the mean station occupied by spinning women in the Germanies, a Nürnberg woodcut of 1490 adorning women to stay in their place and spin renders the spinners not in human form at all but as swine. And in a traditional French tale fairies carry two immense boulders, one on their head and one in their apron, while spinning with their free hand. If they didn't have to spin, they say, they could carry four boulders, thus equating the burden of spinning with carrying two immense boulders!

Despite the good face that Wilhelm Grimm tried to put on spinning as a pursuit, incontrovertible internal evidence appears to tell us just the opposite. We become aware of the double message of the spinning tales themselves. In plot the tales generally convey the conventional morality of the society which produced them, while on the lexical and thematic level the subjects of these tales themselves communicate with us the reality of their experience.

This mode of articulating the social relevance of the Kinder- und Hausmärchen offers another interpretive tool in the search for a clearer understanding of the KHM. In reformulating earlier folk material Wilhelm Grimm — perhaps unwittingly — buried a message within these tales. Uncovering the manner and direction in which the material has been bent reveals not only the social interest and outlook of Wilhelm Grimm, but also of his informants.