





A Carnavalesque Recasting of the Grimms' Tales

A review of **Tales of the Brothers Grimm**

Sandra L. Beckett

Natalie Frank brings raucous new life to 36 carefully selected Grimms' tales in this impressive and thought-provoking collection. An introduction by renowned fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes situates Frank's work within the context of the Grimms' tales and their illustration. Frank is drawn to more obscure and unusual tales, but her repertoire also includes some of the most celebrated tales, including 'Cinderella', 'Little Red Cap', 'Rapunzel', 'Hansel and Gretel', and 'Snow White'. These canonical tales surprise and disturb just as much as the lesser-known ones since readers are generally familiar only with adulterated, sanitised versions that have been stripped of their raw violence and sexuality. With a contemporary eye, Frank views and re-imagines the social reality reflected in the Grimms' tales. She focuses on the hard, sordid facts of life with which humans struggle in all ages: infanticide, child abuse, incest, rape, death, and murder. These taboo subjects are rendered in the traditional medium of drawing. The artist deliberately chose this medium because its speed and immediacy created a 'place where [she] could commit crimes and transgressions'.¹

Frank's stunning book is a feast for the eyes, albeit one that may prove somewhat indigestible for weaker stomachs. Her drawings are at once luminous and obscure, colourful and grim, playful and disturbing. Seventy-five full-page colour images in gouache and chalk pastel tell a visual narrative in up to five drawings per story. While some of the more famous tales may have only a single illustration (e.g., 'Bluebeard' and 'Rumpelstiltskin'), one of the least known tales, 'The Maiden without Hands', is the object of five memorable drawings. The full-page drawings are complemented by small colour illustrations that punctuate the text. The troubling drama of Frank's drawings is heightened by the book's overall design by the Canadian graphic artist Marian Bantjes, who 'wanted the imagery of the book crowding in, sometimes ominously, to create a kind of theatrical space on the page'.² Only two of the

book's 272 pages are devoid of images. Interspersed in the text of the introduction and essays are pictures of small evocative objects: a piece of fur, a feather, a wishbone, a jewel, a flower, a leaf. The black-and-white drawings on the title pages offer rather traditional images which are immediately subverted in the subsequent illustrations. For example, the cheery, active, apron-clad Cinderella on the title page contrasts starkly with the later portraits of a pious-looking young girl on her knees in the hearth; a haloed, angelic figure with ghost-like eyes under the hazel tree; a tall, sad-looking woman looking down a huge, bulbous nose at her magnificent dress; and a homely bride holding the hand of an uncharming prince. The somewhat decorative border that frames the text throughout the book – vaguely reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts but much more invasive and oppressive – is a striking blend of conventional and subversive images in black and white.

Frank was introduced to the Grimms' tales by the celebrated Portuguese-born British artist Paula Rego, whose provocative, visceral interpretation of fairy tales profoundly marks her own approach. Under the book's dedication to Rego, a drawing depicting an elegant wolf licking the face of an earthy Riding Hood pays homage to the artist whose *Little Red Riding Hood Suite* is among her best-known works. At Rego's recommendation, Frank turned to the original sources for inspiration. Like a number of contemporary female artists and illustrators, including Paula Rego, Kiki Smith, and Susanne Janssen, Frank explores the obscure depths of these timeless tales and offers new insights by shocking our happy-ever-after view of the genre. Linda Nochlin titles her essay in the book 'Natalie Frank: the dark side of the fairy tale', and rightly claims that the artist has a 'natural affinity' not only for 'the dark side of the fairy tale' but 'for the dark side of life in general' (250). Frank's revisioning is in stark contrast to the syrupy Disneyfied stories that pervade the collective imagination. Although many of the tales do have happy endings, Frank's illustrations highlight the struggle, violence, and misfortune at the heart of the narratives. Visceral, primal drawings – filled with cruelty, violence, terror, vulgar eroticism, and uncanny fantasy – constantly remind viewers of the tales' roots in an age-old folkloristic tradition. Through the Grimms' tales, Frank explores the human condition and particularly the roles attributed to women.

The striking border around the text creates the sense of a strangely interconnected world, where characters and motifs are inextricably intertwined. The latter effect is achieved in a more joyous tone on the book's title page, where a chain of vividly coloured, boisterous creatures encircle the title and illustrator's name. Struck by the fact that the Grimms' tales borrow from each other, Frank adopts a similar technique, weaving recurring motifs throughout her drawings. This awareness has obviously dictated the choice of tales and the order in which they appear. An initial drawing of batrachians follows the introduction and establishes Frank's predilection for frogs, toads, and long, sinuous tongues. It is followed by a Pietà image, depicting a veiled, Rego-like female holding a green, amphibious male in her arms. Together these drawings announce the first tale, 'The Frog King or Iron Heinrich', with its strange, hybrid frog-man figures. The obsessive motif of the tongue joins those of

low-voiced, "Put me down. It's urgent!"

"Put me up on there," said the man on whose head he was sitting. "I don't mind. I've used to the little drooping something on an every now and then."

"No," said Thumbling. "I know what's proper. Steady up and put me down."

The man took off his hat and set the little fellow on a nail by the window. Then Thumbling jumped and started among the cloth scattered here and there on the ground. Suddenly he slipped into a mousehole, which was what he had been looking for.

"Goodness, gentlemen!" he cried out, laughing at them. "Don't go home without me!"

"This never be the spot and stick stick into the mousehole, but their efforts were in vain. Thumbling kept subsiding farther and farther into the hole. When it became pitch dark outside, the man went back to bed, took some half a dozen but with empty paws.

When Thumbling saw this way gone, he crawled out of the underground passage and said, "If no danger working in the best of the dark, you can easily break a neck or a leg." Fortunately he thrust open an empty mouse-hole. "Thank goodness," he said. "I can spend the night here in safety." After he got inside and was about to go to sleep, he heard his own walking by and talking.

"How are we going to manage to get the rich parlor's money and to get away of them asked."

"I can tell you how," said Thumbling, interrupting them. "What was that?" the other three said in horror. "I heard a voice!"

"The few men, however, standing there and intoned. Then Thumbling spoke again. "Take me with you, and I'll help you."

"Where are you, then?"

"I've stuck on the ground and pay attention to where the voice is coming from," he answered.

After a while the three found him and lifted him up in the air.

"You little fellow," they said, "how are you going to help us?"

"Look," he answered. "I'll crawl between the top hair into the parlor-room, and I'll find you whatever you want."

"All right," they said. "Let's see what you can do."

When they got to the parlor-room, Thumbling crawled into the room and immediately cried out with all his might, "Do you want to have something that's hard?"

"The three were alarmed and said, "Speak softly or you'll wake up!"

But Thumbling professed not to understand and repeated once more. "What do you want? Do you want something that's hard?"

The man who was sleeping in the room next door heard the voice, he got up in bed and intoned. But the three had retreated some distance out of fright. Gradually they regained their courage and thought, "The little fellow is not lying on us. So they came back and whispered to him. Now he returns and finds us something!"

Then again Thumbling screamed as loud as he could. "Don't I give you all you want?" Just then he heard his own hands."

The man was still referring to the three everything quite quietly. He jumped out of bed and thrust open the door. The three had retreated away and ran as if a wild beast were after them. Even the man could not see a thing the next day morning. When the returned with Thumbling had left without saying a word and headed into the hole. The man searched the entire house, but after finding nothing, he went back to bed and thought the fact only been seeing and hearing things in his dream.

In the meantime, Thumbling strolled about in the day and found himself a nice place to sleep. He intended to rest there until daylight, and then return home to his parents. However, he did not turn out the way he expected. Indeed, there is a great deal of sorrow and misery in this world. When the day dawned, the man got out of bed to feed the cows. He first moved was in the barn where the girl set up an animal of her, and if was that very day in which Thumbling was lying awake. Indeed, he was gazing so intently that he did not notice a thing, nor did he wake up until he was in the part of a man that pulled through with the hat.

"Oh, God!" he exclaimed. "How did I get into this charming world?"

But when he noticed where he was, and he had to be careful not to get caught between the cow's teeth or else he would be crushed. Soon he slipped down into the cow's stomach with the hat.

"How they forget to put whatever in this room!" he said. "No nothing particular here, and it seems they won't be bringing cows!"

He was not very pleased with the circumstances, and the worst of it was that the fresh hay kept coming through the door and the space between crumpled. At last his might became so great that he crept out as usual or he could. "No more father! No more father!"

The man was milking the cow when he heard the voice without ear.



THE UNGRATEFUL SON

ONCE A MAN AND HIS WIFE were sitting for the evening to their house. They had a roasted chicken in front of them and were about to eat it when the man saw his father coming toward them. So the man quickly grabbed the chicken and hid it because he did not want to give him any. The old man came, had a drink, and went away. At the son's request he got the roasted chicken back on the table. He found that it had turned into a hawk which was gnawing onto his face, off there, and would not leave him, if anyone tried to take it off, the hawk would look at the person voraciously as if it wanted to spring right into his face too. So nobody dared touch it. And the ungrateful son had to feed the hawk every day afterwards. It would have eaten away part of his face. Then the son wondered about the world without a moment of rest.



the frog and the princess, whose own tongue takes on reptile-like dimensions. The second tale, 'The Ungrateful Son', allows Frank to develop the imagery of tongues, batrachians, and green-hued humans. Frank's otherwise realistic portrait of the ungrateful son assumes a surreal dimension due to the man's green complexion and the long red tongue that extends from his mouth to that of the large toad sitting on his forehead, as if they share a common tongue. Frogs open and close the book: the frog from the title page seems to have hopped to 'The End', where a rather lascivious-looking frog – his prominent tongue curled in the air – reclines on the letters of the second word (the first word is written over a pair of long bare human legs). Tongues are a conspicuous absence in the small drawing of a young girl and boy engaged in serious smooching below the epigraph, a quote by G.K. Chesterton, that precedes 'The Frog King': 'The first two facts which a healthy boy or girl feels about sex are these: first that it is beautiful and then that it is dangerous.'

Images of birth are a common motif in Frank's drawings. The eponymous protagonist of 'The Stubborn Child', depicted in a womb-like grave, bears a striking resemblance to the baby in the egg-shaped frame on the quilt in 'Hans My Hedgehog', where another green-hued human figure stares fixedly off the page. In one drawing, a baby dangles from the belly of a grotesque mother. The wolf appears to give birth to Little Red Cap, whose torso protrudes between his bent legs, while beside him a nude human figure (the grandmother or Little Red Cap?) is curled in a foetal position. It is difficult to distinguish the wolf from Little Red Cap, as a detailed human hand extends out of the wolf's jaws and a red leg could belong to either. Physical transformation and shape-shifting are a common thread throughout the drawings, which often depict grotesque figures that are part human and part animal. The female characters are frequently the subject of dramatic metamorphoses, as in 'All Fur', where there is an unsettling fusion of woman and beast. Frank's work also contains strange human-vegetal hybrids, as in the case of the hazel tree onto which a human head with a piercing blue eye seems to be grafted.

Frank's drawings are a fascinating blend of figuration and abstraction. She references classical painting only to subvert it, as in the case of religious motifs like the Pietà or the crucifixion. Earthy, solid figures keep company with strange, surreal creatures. Realistic portraits and classic nude bodies are set in surrealist dreamscapes. Elsewhere, the human body is distorted, fragmented, featureless, surreal, or strangely coloured. Disembodied body parts haunt Frank's drawings, emphasising the gory side of many of the Grimms' tales. In 'The Juniper Tree', a head is dropped into a pot, a severed leg stands on the table, and a nose lies on a plate. 'The Maiden without Hands' opens with a realistic portrait of a distressed young woman holding her detached hands to her face while disembodied hands punctuate the end of the tale and form part of the border. A hand, a heart, and an eye sit on a shelf in the only drawing of 'The Three Army Surgeons'. The not-so-little arm of 'the Stubborn Child' emerges from the grave while a bird-headed mother smacks it with a switch. Frank has a predilection for disembodied eyes, which stare disconcertingly at the viewer and add a surreal touch to many drawings. Eyes are

a particularly obsessive motif in 'Cinderella', where an eye on the sole of a foot punctuates the closing line about the stepsisters' blindness. The many disembodied eyes throughout the book contrast with the dark, empty eye sockets of the death-like figure on the half-title page. Here the storyteller seems to assume the traits of death, pointing a long, sharp, admonitory finger in the direction of the child running across the page toward him.

In addition to frequent images of violence and death, including skulls, skeletons, and strangled or corpse-like bodies, Frank's drawings also contain many sexually graphic images. Two drawings, both bed scenes, are particularly striking in this regard. The swollen reddish-brown genitals of an ass-headed king occupy the focal point of the first drawing in 'All Fur', while the lighting highlights the bare breasts, belly, and pubic area of his nubile daughter standing at arm's length. The king's eyes, head, and hands, as well as the diagonal lines of the canopy and the bed clothes all carry the viewer's eye toward his sexual organs. Similarly, the first illustration in 'Little Red Cap' gives the viewer and a nude, very crimson Little Red Cap a full frontal view of the wolf in bed. With his hand-like paw touching his conspicuous scrotum and his eyes rolled back in his head, the wolf appears to be engaged in masturbation. An orgy-like chain of nude or scantily-clad bodies borders 'The Lettuce Donkey'. From the nubile All Fur to Little Red Cap's masculine-looking granny with drooping dugs, female figures are frequently depicted nude or in various states of undress. It is difficult to say whether Brier Rose is in the throes of ecstasy or the shocked agony of rape as the prince straddles her, but she has the distinct look of a modern porn star: Although the Little Red Cap who stands with her back to the viewer looks childish and awkward, the bright red nude body and the devil-like figure standing behind her cast the heroine in a demonic light and her reflection in the mirror over the bed is that of a much older-looking female reminiscent of a Toulouse-Lautrec prostitute. In this collection, the lurid and the horrific are rendered in extravagant colour and a ludic manner that brings a unique grotesque and carnivalesque approach to the Grimms' tales. Frank sets the tone for the book in the vibrant front endpapers, where several of her ambiguous, grotesque heroines – both victims and victimisers – line up on what appears to be a theatre stage, waving their arms as if in welcome. On the final endpapers, the stage is occupied by an even more bizarre group of outlandish human-animal hybrids who usher viewers out of Frank's disturbing but spellbinding world.

Authors: Claire Gilman and Linda Nochlin. Illustrator: Natalie Frank.
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Notes

1. Natalie Frank, interview by Dasha Shishkin, *Bomb* 127 (Spring 2014), 128.
2. Alanna Martinez, 'Grimm's Fairy Tales, and the Women of Them, Uncensored and Updated by Natalie Frank', *The Observer*, 10 April 2015.