



*A review of*  
**Grimm Tales for  
Young and Old**

**Francisco Vaz da Silva**

**P**hilip Pullman, the author of the award-winning *His Dark Materials* trilogy, presents in this book fifty annotated tales selected from the seventh (1857) edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children and Household Tales* – henceforth, *KHM*). Presumably, Pullman's selection of fifty tales draws on the example of the small edition published by the Brothers Grimm since 1825, containing fifty selected tales meant for children; while his annotations are in line with the scholarly notes in the large edition of *KHM*. Thus, this collection of Grimm tales 'for young and old' felicitously combines the best features of the small and the large editions of *KHM* – a compact selection of best-loved tales complemented with annotations containing basic information on sources, parallel variants and ATU tale types as well as short comments on the stories.

The subtitle casts this selection of Grimm tales as 'a new English version' (as opposed to a new translation), which gives fair warning to the fact that Pullman retells these stories in his own voice. This is arguably yet another way in which he follows the Grimms' precedent, for Wilhelm Grimm extensively edited the stories Jacob and he collected. In the introduction to the second edition of *KHM*, the Brothers acknowledged they tampered with the phrasings – while claiming unwavering faithfulness to the contents – of the tales. The contradiction in this stance is only apparent. The Grimms explained that they regarded tale variations as attempts to variously capture inexhaustibly rich 'ideal types'. This view distinguishes what we might call 'tales' and 'variants'. The rich ideal types are the tales, which find a concrete plural expression in variants. The Brothers wanted to present variants that would come close to the fullness of each tale; therefore, they worked on the phrasings of variants in order to convey better the contents of tales.

Pullman, too, acknowledges fairy tales are not fixed texts; rather, he points out that a written fairy-tale text is a transcription of a particular variant, among many, of a given tale. Variation is part of the game. As Pullman puts it, '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'. And, since fairy tales are not fixed literary texts, Pullman deems it is the duty of every teller to make the tale her/his own – with a crucial caveat, bearing on Grimms' notion of tales as 'ideal types':

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... every story is attended by its own sprite, whose voice we embody when we tell the tale, and ... we tell it more successfully if we approach the sprite with a certain degree of respect and courtesy.

As a writer, Pullman is interested in how fairy tales work as stories. He is fascinated with the possibility of authoring a tale that would come close to the 'serene, anonymous voice' of traditional tales. After concluding this is probably impossible, he falls back on 'trying for clarity'. Pullman vows to clear out of the way anything that would prevent each story 'from running freely', so as to present variants that are 'as clear as water' and to help the story 'emerge more naturally' in his own voice. This emphasis on the naturalness of the tales is in line with the Grimms' own romantic view of *Märchen*, of course, and is another telltale sign that Pullman anchors his retelling in what we might call the Grimm tradition. He has done his best for the sprite of each tale, Pullman says, 'as did Dorothea Viehmann, Philipp Otto Runge, Dortchen Wild, and all the other tellers whose work was preserved by the great Brothers Grimm'.

In attending to the sprites of each tale, Pullman tends to expand the Grimm texts with flair and grace. To get a sense of this, consider how the original terse description of the trespassing of a famous thorn-hedge, a bit expanded by Wilhelm Grimm over the years, becomes loquacious in Pullman's retelling. You may note that Pullman felicitously hints at the symbolic equivalence between roses and apples in regard to menarcheal maidens, recurrent in the *Märchen*, and contrasts the stinging defeat of previous suitors with the Edenic bliss of the prince:

| Oldenberg ms.,<br>1810  | KHM 7th edn, 1857<br>(trans. M. Hunt)   | Pullman retelling   |
|---|---|---|
| <i>But when the prince approached the thorn-hedge, all the thorns in front of him appeared as flowers, and behind him they became thorns again.</i> | <i>When the King's son came near to the thorn-hedge, it was nothing but large and beautiful flowers, which parted from each other of their own accord, and let him pass unhurt, then they closed again behind him like a hedge.</i> | <i>He came to the great thorn hedge and found it not at all as the old man had said, because as well as thorns the hedge was bearing pretty pink flowers, thousands upon thousands of them. For all that, though, he could see the skeletons of many other young men tangled deep in the briars. A sweet fragrance like apples filled the air, and as the prince came close to the hedge, the branches pulled apart by themselves to let him through, closing up behind him afterwards.</i> |

Still, not everything is roses in these retellings. Sometimes Pullman is not consistent when noting the textual changes he has made. In 'The Twelve Brothers', for instance, he silently changes the sentencing of a slandered wife to death by her husband into a sentencing by 'a court packed with the old woman's favourites'. And sometimes the choices he makes are just unhelpful. In his note on the same tale, Pullman remarks that the husband's mother is first called Mutter and then Stiefmutter. He describes this change as a 'slip of the tongue', and proceeds to elide the 'stepmother' clue in spite of the fact that it occurs in other texts as well (and so is not a slip of the tongue at all).

But these are small matters. Overall, Pullman's retelling of Wilhelm Grimm's retellings of traditional tales is a thrilling and valuable addition to the Grimm tradition. Its vivid and crisp style, together with informative notes, will contribute to reviving the appeal of these tales for young and old – and to their preservation in the future.

Author: Philip Pullman.  
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