

BORN YESTERDAY

The Spear Side

"There comes an old man with his three sons—"

"I could match this beginning with an old tale."

—SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*

IDENTIFYING fairy-tale heroes by name is no mean feat. In the Grimms' collection, only one in every ten actually has a name. But it is also no secret that the most celebrated characters in fairy tales are female. Cinderella, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, and Sleeping Beauty: these are the names that have left so vivid an imprint on childhood memories. With the exception of Hansel, who shares top billing with his sister, male protagonists are exceptionally unmemorable in name, if not in deed. Lacking the colorful descriptive sobriquets that accord their female counterparts a distinctive identity, these figures are presented as types and defined by their parentage (the miller's son), by their station in life (the prince), by their relationship to siblings (the youngest brother), by their level of intelligence (the simpleton), or by physical deformities (Thumbling).¹

Most people may be at a loss when it comes to naming fairy-tale heroes, but few have trouble characterizing them. "In song and story," writes Simone de Beauvoir, "the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants." And what are this young man's attributes? One commentator on the Grimms' collection describes him as "active, competitive, handsome, industrious, cunning, acquisitive." That list sums up the conventional wisdom on the dragon slayers and giant killers of fairy-tale lore.²

The Hard Facts of
the Grimm's FT

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That conventional wisdom, however, proves to be a fairy tale so far as German folklore is concerned. A reading of the first edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales* reveals that there are exactly two dragon slayers and only one giant killer in the entire collection of some 150 tales.³ One of those stories, "Johannes-Wassersprung and Caspar-Wassersprung," rehearses the classic story of the slaying of a seven-headed dragon and the liberation of a princess, but (for unknown reasons) the tale never made it to the second edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*. The other dragon-slaying hero bears the distinctly unheroic name Stupid Hans (Dumhans), and the contest in which he dispatches three dragons, each with a different number of heads, is less than gripping. As for the giant killer, he succeeds in decapitating three giants, but only because the proper sword is placed directly in his path. If there is any attribute that these heroes share, it is naiveté. Like so many other heroes in the Grimms' collection, they are decidedly unworldly figures. "Innocent," "silly," "useless," "foolish," "simple," and "guileless": these are the adjectives applied repeatedly to fairy-tale heroes in the Grimms' collection.

Among folklorists, it is the fashion to divide heroes into two distinct classes. There are active heroes and passive heroes, "formal heroes" and "ideal heroes," dragon slayers and male Cinderellas, tricksters and simpletons.⁴ According to theory, the oppositions active/passive, seeker/victim, brave/timid, and naive/cunning serve as useful guides for classifying fairy-tale heroes. In practice, though, it is not always easy to determine whether a hero relies on his own resources or depends on helpers. Does he have a zest for danger or does he simply weather the various adventures that befall him? Just what is his level of intelligence? What at first blush appear to be straightforward choices turn out to be fraught with complexities. The happy-go-lucky simpleton who appears to succeed without trying is not always as doltish as his name or reputation would lead us to believe, and the roguish trickster does not always live up to his reputation for shrewd reasoning.

There is a further complication. Despite their seeming artlessness, the *Nursery and Household Tales* are not without occasional

ironic touches that subvert surface meanings. In particular, the epithets and predicates reserved for their protagonists can highlight utterly uncharacteristic traits. The eponymous heroine of "Clever Else" ranks high on the list of dull-witted characters; "Hans in Luck" charts a steady decline in its hero's fortunes; and the brave little tailor in the story of that title displays more bravado than bravery.⁵ In the world of fairy tales, a simpleton can easily slip into the role of a cunning trickster; a humble miller's son can become a king; and a cowardly fool can emerge as a stout-hearted hero. Character traits display an astonishing lack of stability, shifting almost imperceptibly into their opposites as the tale unfolds. Bearing this in mind, let us take the measure of male protagonists in the Grimms' collection to determine what character traits they share and to assess the extent to which the plots of their adventures follow a predictable course.

If the female protagonists of fairy tales are often as good as they are beautiful, their male counterparts generally appear to be as young and naive as they are stupid. Snow White's stepmother may be enraged by her stepdaughter's superior beauty, but the fathers of male heroes are eternally exasperated by the unrivaled obtuseness of their sons. To the question, Who is the stupidest of them all? most fairy-tale fathers would reply: my youngest son. Yet that son is also the chosen son, the son who ultimately outdoes his older and wiser siblings. In an almost perverse fashion, fairy tales featuring male protagonists chart the success story of adolescents who lack even the good sense to heed the instructions of the many helpers and donors who rush to their aid in an attempt to avert catastrophes and to ensure a happy ending. "You don't really deserve my help," declares one such intercessor in frustration after his sage advice has been disregarded on no less than three occasions.⁶

In fairy tales all over the world, the one least likely to succeed paradoxically becomes the one most likely to succeed. Merit rarely counts; luck seems to be everything. Aladdin, the prototype of the undeserving hero who succeeds in living happily ever after, begins his rise to wealth and power under less than auspicious circumstances. The introductory paragraphs of his tale give the lie to the view that classical fairy tales reward virtue and punish evil. "Once

for contrast

upon a time," begins the story "Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp," "there lived in a certain city of China an impoverished tailor who had a son called Aladdin. From his earliest years this Aladdin was a headstrong and incorrigible good-for-nothing." When he grows older, he refuses to learn a trade and persists in his idle ways until his father, "grieving over the perverseness of his son," falls ill and dies. Yet this same Aladdin, who becomes ever more wayward after having dispatched his father to the grave, ultimately inherits a sultan's throne. As one critic correctly points out, the story of Aladdin and his enchanted lamp exalts and glorifies "one of the most undeserving characters imaginable." It is telling that Aladdin made his way so easily from the pages of German translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* to the oral narratives of one region of Germany. Once his exotic name was changed to Dummhans, he was evidently quickly assimilated into Pomeranian folklore, so much so that it was difficult to distinguish him from native sons.⁷

The heroes of the *Nursery and Household Tales* may, for the most part, be unlikely to win prizes for intelligence and good behavior, but they are even less likely to garner awards for courage. Their stories chronicle perilous adventures, but they often remain both cowardly and passive. When summoned to discharge the first in a series of three tasks, the simpleton in "The Queen Bee" simply sits down and has a good cry. In "The Three Feathers," the hero sits down and "feels sad" instead of rising to the challenges posed by his father. Fairy-tale heroines have never stood as models of an enterprising spirit, but it is also not rare for fairy-tale heroes to suffer silently and to endure hardships in a hopelessly passive fashion.

For all their shortcomings, the simpletons in the Grimms' fairy tales possess one character trait that sets them apart from their fraternal rivals: compassion. That compassion is typically reserved for the natural allies and benefactors of fairy-tale heroes: the animals that inhabit the earth, the waters, and the sky.⁸ Even before the simpleton embarks on a journey to foreign kingdoms or undertakes diverse tasks to liberate a princess, he must prove himself worthy of assistance from nature or from supernatural powers by displaying compassion. Of the various tests, tasks, and trials imposed on a hero,

this first test figures as the most important, for it establishes his privileged status. Once he exhibits compassion—with its logical concomitant of humility—he can do no wrong, even when he violates interdiction, disregards warnings, and ignores instructions. This preliminary test of the hero's character comes to serve the dual function of singling out the hero from his brothers and of furnishing him with potential helpers for the tasks that lie ahead.

Two fairy tales from the Grimms' collection illustrate the extent to which compassion is rewarded. In "The Queen Bee," the youngest of three sons defends an anthill, a bevy of ducks, and a beehive from the assaults of his mischievous brothers. "Leave the animals alone," he admonishes his elders on three occasions. Compassion pays off in the end, for this youngest son is also the one to escape being turned to stone—a punishment that perfectly suits the crimes of his callous siblings. With the help of his newly won allies, the simpleton of the family discharges three "impossible" tasks written for him on a stone slab. He gathers a thousand pearls that lie strewn about the forest, fetches a bedroom key from the sea's depths, and succeeds in identifying the youngest of three "completely identical" sisters. To be more precise, the ants gather the pearls, the ducks fetch the key, and the bees identify the youngest sister. Yet the simpleton is credited with disenchanting the palace in which the trio of princesses resides; he thereby wins the hand of the youngest and earns the right to give the other two sisters in marriage to his brothers.

The hero of "The White Snake," like the simpleton of "The Queen Bee," hardly lifts a finger to win his bride. Once he displays compassion for wildlife by coming to the rescue of three fish, a colony of ants, and three ravens, he joins the ranks of the "chosen," who receive assistance from helpers as soon as they are charged with carrying out tasks. Although male fairy-tale figures have customarily been celebrated for their heroic feats, their greatest achievement actually rests on the passing of a character test. By enshrining compassion and humility, which—unlike intelligence and brute strength—are acquired characteristics rather than innate traits, the Grimms' tales make it clear to their implied audience (which grad-

ually came to be adolescents) that even the least talented youth can rise to the top.⁹

Once the hero has proven himself in the preliminary character test, he is braced for the tasks that lie ahead. The grateful beneficiaries of his deeds are quick to even out the balance sheet. As soon as the hero finds himself faced with an impossible task—emptying a lake with a perforated spoon, building and furnishing a castle overnight, devouring a mountain of bread in twenty-four hours—help is at hand. For every task that requires wisdom, courage, endurance, strength, or simply an appetite and a thirst of gargantuan proportions, there is a helper—or a group of helpers—possessing the requisite attributes. And ultimately the achievements of the helper redound to the hero, for he is credited with having drained the lake, built the castle, and consumed the bread.

Passing the preliminary test and carrying out the basic tasks are sufficient to secure a princess and her kingdom. Nonetheless, a number of fairy tales mount a third act in keeping with the ternary principle governing their plots.¹⁰ The final trial the hero must endure is motivated by the reappearance of the fraternal rivals who vexed the hero in his earlier, preheroic days. The brothers seize the earliest opportunity to pilfer the hero's riches, alienate him from his beloved, malign his good name, or banish him from the land. Yet they are no match for the hero, who deftly outwits them and survives their assaults. Although the hero is rarely instrumental in carrying out the tasks imposed on him, in the end he acquires the attributes of his helpers and gains the strength, courage, and wit needed to prevail.

Just as the humble male protagonist matures and is elevated to a higher station in life, so his antagonists are demeaned and demoted in the final, optional segment of the tale. If the hero often distinguishes himself by showing mercy for animals, he remains singularly uncharitable when it comes to dealing with human rivals. "Off with everyone's head but my own," proclaims the hero of "The King of the Golden Mountain." And he makes good on that threat. Even brothers and brides are dispatched by fairy-tale heroes without a moment's hesitation once their deceit comes to light. The hero of

"The Knapsack, the Hat, and the Horn," for example, does away with his wife once he uncovers her duplicity. Treachery is punished as swiftly and as predictably as compassion is rewarded. This third phase of the hero's career endows his story with a symmetry and balance for which all tales strive. Like the first two acts, the final act stages a contest between a youth and his two older, but morally inferior brothers. Both dramatic conflicts culminate in the rewarding of good will and the punishment of treachery; the last act simply intensifies the reward (a princess and a kingdom) and the punishment (death). In doing so, it adds not only moral resonance, but also a measure of finality to the tale. The hero has not only attained the highest office in the land, but has also eliminated his every competitor. For that office, he was singled out in the tale's first episode, made singular in the tale's second part, and celebrated as the sole and single heir to the throne in the tale's coda.

The trajectory of the hero's path leads him to the goal shared by all fairy tales, whether they chart the fortunes of male or female protagonists. In keeping with the fundamental law requiring the reversal of all conditions prevailing in its introductory paragraphs, the



FIGURE 7. Otto Ubbelohde's hero of "The King of the Golden Mountain" surveys the scene of carnage that stands as the final tableau in the story.

fairy tale ends by enthroning the humble and enriching the impoverished. The male heroes of fairy tales are humble in at least one, and often in both, senses of the term. More often than not they are low on the totem pole in families of common origins. But whether born to the crown or raised on a farm, they are also frequently humble in character; without this special quality they would fail to qualify for the munificence of helpers and donors. Thus, humility seems to be the badge of the fairy-tale hero. And since humbleness, in one of its shades of meaning, can inhere in members of any social class, both princes and peasants are eligible for the role of hero in fairy tales.

Humility also comes to color the psychological makeup of fairy-tale heroines. Female protagonists are by nature just as humble as their male counterparts, but they display that virtue in a strikingly different fashion and at a different point in their fairy-tale careers. Fairy tales often highlight psychological characteristics by translating them into elements of plot; in the case of female heroines, this proves especially true. Daughters of millers and daughters of kings alike are not merely designated as humble; they are actually humbled in the course of their stories. In fact, *humbled* is perhaps too mild a term to use for the many humiliations to which female protagonists must submit.

Since most fairy tales end with marriage, it seems logical to assume that a single tale suffices to illustrate the contrasting fates of male and female protagonists. Yet though there is often a happy couple at the end of a fairy tale, the fate of only a single, central character is at stake as the tale unfolds. That pivotal figure stands so firmly rooted at the center of events that all other characters are defined solely by their relationship to him and consequently lack an autonomous sphere of action. In "Cinderella," for instance, even the bridegroom, for all the dashing chivalry attributed to him by Walt Disney and others, remains a colorless figure. The tale tells us nothing more about him than that he is the son of a king. Lacking a history, a story, and even a name, he is reduced to the function of prince-rescuer waiting in the wings for his cue. The brides in stories of male heroes fare little better. Relegated to subordinate roles, they

too fail to engage our interest. Still, there are exceptions to every rule, and the Grimms' collection provides one noteworthy variation on the principle that only one character can occupy center stage in fairy tales. "The Goose Girl at the Spring" weaves together the fates of both partners in the marriage with which it concludes. To be sure, there are signs that the tale is not of one piece, that at some historical juncture it occurred to one teller of tales to splice two separate plots.¹¹ Nonetheless, the two plots conveniently dovetail to create a single narrative. The story of the humble count and the humbled princess who marries him offers an exemplary study in contrasts between the lot of males and that of females in fairy tales culminating in wedding ceremonies.

"The Goose Girl at the Spring" commences with an account of the heroine's future bridegroom. The young man is handsome, rich, and noble, yet he must—like the most lowly fairy-tale heroes—prove his mettle by displaying compassion and humility. Without these virtues, his otherwise impeccable credentials would prove utterly worthless. And indeed, we learn that the young count is not only able to "feel compassion," but that he is also, despite his noble station, not too proud to translate compassion into action. Once he demonstrates his humility by easing the burdens of a feeble old hag shunned by everyone else, he earns himself a passport to luck and success. Like his many artlessly benevolent folkloric kinsmen, the count becomes the recipient of a gift that accords him a privileged status among potential suitors of a princess. The emerald etui bestowed upon him by the old hag ultimately leads him to his bride—a princess masquerading as a shepherdess.

Neither the count nor his rustic bride can boast humble origins. The unsightly girl tending geese at the beginning of the tale is not at all what she seems. At the well, she peels off her rural costume along with her rough skin to reveal that she must be a princess. Despite her aristocratic origins, she too can ascend to a higher position, for her fairy-tale days are spent in the most modest of circumstances. Unlike her groom, however, she was pressed into assuming a humble position when her own father banished her from the household. Like countless folkloric heroines, she suffers a humili

ating fall that reduces her from a princess to a peasant, from a privileged daughter to an impoverished menial. Fairy-tale heroes receive gifts and assistance once they actively prove their compassion and humility; heroines, by contrast, become the beneficiaries of helpers and rescuers only after they have been abased and forced to learn humility.

There are many well-known tales of victimized female heroines who rise to or return to the ranks of royalty once they have been humbled and humiliated.¹² But no tales more explicitly display the humiliation prerequisite to a happy ending than "King Thrushbeard," "The Mongoose," and "The Six Servants." King Thrushbeard's bride furnishes a classic example of the heroine who earns a king and a crown after straitened circumstances break her arrogance and pride. It is not enough that she curses the false pride that led to her downfall; her husband must also solemnly state: "All of this was done to crush your pride and to punish you for the haughty way in which you treated me." When King Thrushbeard generously offers to reinstate her to a royal position, she feels so deeply mortified that she declares herself unworthy to become his bride. The princess in the tale known as "The Mongoose" also finds herself humbled by her prospective husband. Nonetheless, she takes the defeat in stride and observes to herself with more than a touch of satisfaction: "He is cleverer than you!" The princess-heroine of "The Six Servants" is also cheerfully repentant and resigned to her fate by the end of the story. Reduced to tending swine with her husband (a prince who has duped her into believing that he is a peasant), she is prepared to accept her lot: "I've only got what I deserved for being so haughty and proud." After revealing the true facts of his life, her husband justifies the deception by declaring: "I suffered so much for you, it was only right that you should suffer for me."

As the tale "The Six Servants" makes clear, young men "suffer" by taking the credit for tasks carried out by animal helpers, human servants, or supernatural assistants. Women suffer by being forced into a lowly social position. In short, male heroes demonstrate from the start a meekness and humility that qualify them for an ascent to wealth, the exercise of power, and happiness crowned by wedded

bliss; their female counterparts undergo a process of humiliation and defeat that ends with a rapid rise in social status through marriage but that also signals a loss of pride and the abdication of power.

Before moving to another category of heroes, a quick review of our first class is in order. The naive hero in tales of three sons lacks the brains and brawn conventionally associated with heroic figures; he must rely on helpers with superhuman or supernatural powers to carry out every task demanded by a king in return for the hand of the princess. Instead of slaying dragons, he offers to louse them; instead of killing giants, he befriends them and makes himself at home in their dwellings. His demonstrations of compassion set the stage for the reversal of fortunes characteristic of fairy-tale plots. Only from a position of humility can he be elevated to the loftiest office in the land. Just as this hero works his way up the social ladder by climbing down it, so too he acquires intelligence and power by displaying obtuseness and vulnerability. Although it is never explicitly stated that he becomes smart and strong in the end, most fairy tales imply that their heroes have acquired the attributes of royalty right along with the office of king.

The youngest of three sons makes his way through magical kingdoms where an ant might plead for a favor, an enchanted princess could call on his services, or a dwarf might demand a crust of bread. But a second group of heroes in the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales* moves in what appears to be the more realistic setting of folk tales: villages and the roads connecting them. The cast of characters in tales with these heroes includes kings and princesses, yet the tales lack the supernatural dimension of fairy tales and tend to be more earthy in humor and down-to-earth in tone. The heroes are often far enough along in life to have a profession; many are apprentices, but some are tailors, foresters, tradesmen, or mercenaries. Many are men and not boys. (One is so old that he finds himself obliged to choose the eldest of twelve princesses when a king offers him one of his daughters in marriage.) Still, these heroes do not seem equipped with much more intelligence, strength, or valor than the young simpletons of fairy tales. They may not be village idiots, but in accord-

ance with the general tendency of German folklore to avoid endowing male protagonists with heroic traits, their strengths are rarely described in much detail.

Naiveté also appears to be the principal hallmark of village boys and men. But what appears to be a character defect is in fact turned to good account once the protagonist determines to seek his fortunes in the world. Nietzsche once observed that fear is an index of intelligence, thus confirming the old saw that fools rush in where wise men fear to tread.¹³ The more naive the hero, the more foolhardy and fearless he is, and the more likely he is to rise to the challenges devised to foil the suitors of a princess. Naiveté implies fearlessness, which in turn can take on the character of courage.

In much the same way that naiveté can shade into courage, it can translate into cunning. A hero's stupidity can take such extreme forms that it utterly disarms his antagonists. A young man who starts out handicapped by naiveté may in the end triumph over his adversaries by outwitting them. The protagonist unwise to the ways of the world can therefore be in the best possible position to exhibit heroic qualities by the close of the story.

Heroic feats performed by figures with clear character defects—lack of wisdom and wit—can end by producing comic effects. Blockhead, Numbskull, and Simpleton rush into one hazardous situation after another; they get the upper hand by putting their dimwittedness on display, taking every word of advice that they hear literally; but they also escape harm because they are so naive that they confound their opponents. It may be true that they succeed in accomplishing the tasks laid out for them, but there is more than a touch of vaudeville to their every move.

The burlesque effect produced by tales chronicling the deeds of fearless heroes is perhaps most pronounced in "The Fairy Tale of One Who Went Forth to Learn Fear." The hero of that tale tries in vain to learn to be afraid, or more precisely, to shudder. Through one hair-raising episode after another he preserves his equanimity and coolly turns the tables on his would-be terrorizers. In one last desperate attempt to discover what it is to feel fear, he spends three nights warding off and ultimately exorcising the demons haunting

a castle. His reward is the hand of a princess, but still he feels no fear. Only in his marriage bed does he finally learn to shudder, when his resourceful wife pulls off his covers and pours a bucketful of live minnows on him. Bruno Bettelheim is surely right to read psychosexual implications into the final act of the tale, particularly since the art of shuddering rather than the actual experience of fear constitutes the overt tale value. But the hero's inability to feel fear ought not to be construed as a negative trait; Bettelheim asserts that "the hero of this story could not shudder due to repression of all sexual feelings."¹⁴ It is precisely the absence of the capacity to fear that enables the sprightly hero to withstand the horrors of a haunted castle and consequently to win the hand of his bride. Indeed, the inability to fear comes so close to courage here that the protagonist, for all his unflinching artlessness, begins to take on heroic attributes. Unlike his humble and helpless kinsmen in classical fairy tales of three sons, he breezily accomplishes one task after another without receiving aid from foreign agents. Were it not for the comic overtones to his adventures, it would seem entirely appropriate to place him in the class of heroes who live by their courage and wits.

If naiveté and courage are virtual synonyms in the folkloric lexicon, naiveté and cunning are also not far apart in meaning.¹⁵ The more hopelessly naive and obtuse the hero of a tale, the more likely it is that he will triumph over his adversaries and that his adventures will be crowned with success. The Brave Little Tailor, who decorates himself for having dispatched seven flies with one blow, seems to stand as the very incarnation of fatuous vanity. Yet his bravado endows him with the power to outwit giants, to complete the tasks given by his bride's belligerent father, and to subdue a blue-blooded wife who is repelled by the thought of a marriage below her social station. In this tale, the line dividing naiveté from shrewdness and bravado from bravery has been effaced. The naive hero without fear and intelligence becomes virtually indistinguishable from the trickster.

By now it should be clear that the humble and naive youngest of three sons is a not-so-distant cousin of the fearless and naive hero.

In fact, the hero of the Grimms' "Crystal Ball" combines the attributes of humble heroes and fearless fools; he possesses the simplicity and humility that go hand in hand with his familial status as the youngest of three sons, and he is also said to have "a heart without fear." It is above all his foolishly dauntless spirit that gives him the audacity to line up as the twenty-fourth suitor to seek out a princess imprisoned in the "Castle of the Golden Sun" and to undertake her liberation. And it is precisely his slow-wittedness that provides him with the means for arriving in the kingdom inhabited by the princess. He "forgets" to return a magical hat to two giants and thereby receives just the right means for transporting himself to that kingdom. In fairy tales, brashness can accomplish as much as bravery; naiveté is as effective as craft. The manifest lack of a virtue often translates into its possession. Just as Cinderella proves to be the fairest and the noblest of them all despite her shabby attire and her station at the hearth, so the simpleton of the family ultimately prevails over older and wiser antagonists.

As noted, the rigors of a fairy-tale hero's life endow him in the end with the attributes commonly associated with royalty. Even if the humble simpleton never lifts a sword and is incapable of answering a single question, let alone a riddle, he becomes a prince in more than just name. The feats of each and every woodland helper become his own deeds and accomplishments; he becomes a figure with all the qualities of dragon slayers and giant killers. Since our other class of tales, those featuring the comic adventures of heroes without fear, generally dispenses with tests of compassion, it also does away with the helpers responsible for elevating humble protagonists to heroic stature. Fearless heroes must rely wholly on their own mental and physical resources, however modest these may be. It is those resources that are put to the test in the opening paragraphs of the tale, where brashness achieves more than bravery, and artlessness proves more effective than artifice.

Since the hero without fear displays a greater measure of self-reliance than his humble kinsmen, the plot of his adventures contains the potential for greater realism. Gone are the encounters with talking animals, supernatural counselors, and other exotic agents. In-

stead, the hero meets hunters, locksmiths, sextons, innkeepers, and similar folk. He may not marry a peasant's daughter, but the castle in which he finally takes up residence has the distinct odor of the barnyard. Again, we are in the village rather than in an enchanted forest. Yet it would be misleading to label these tales realistic. They do not strive to hold up a mirror to the social conditions of the age or culture in which they were told. These are tall tales, stories that take advantage of exaggeration, punning, parody, and literalism to produce comic effects.

The many realistic touches in these folk tales, in tandem with their farcical aspects, point to their basic affinity with tales of tricksters, where professional fools, tradesmen, discharged soldiers, and youths of various other callings conspire to thwart their masters, creditors, or any other members belonging to the species of the overprivileged. Through ingenious disingenuousness they succeed in coming out on top. An open-ended episodic principle organizes the plot of both tall tales featuring heroes without fear and trickster stories. One absurd skirmish follows another, with no distinctive growth, development, or maturity. By contrast, the humble hero's adventures take the form of a three-act drama, with a test in the first act, tasks in the second, and a final trial crowned by success in the third. The goal may be the same for both types of heroes, but the paths bear little resemblance to each other.¹⁶

Tales charting the adventures of male protagonists posit from the start one dominant character trait that establishes a well-defined identity for the hero even as it proclaims his membership in the class of heroic figures. The verbal tag attached to the character ("Dummy," "the youngest of three sons," "Blockhead") ensures that he is recognized as the central character of the narrative. But in the course of the hero's odyssey, his dominant character trait begins to shade into its opposite through a process of inversion. The humble hero weds a woman of royal blood; the brazen fool proves his mettle; the naive simpleton outwits just about anyone. In fairy tales and folk tales, the youth lacking a good pedigree, a stout heart, and a sharp wit is precisely the one who wins a princess and a kingdom.

Inversion of character traits is a common occurrence in folkloric

narratives. A reversal of the conditions prevailing at the start is, after all, manifestly the goal of every tale. The folktale in general, as Max Lüthi has observed, has "a liking for all extremes, extreme contrasts in particular." Its characters, he further notes, are either beautiful or ugly, good or bad, poor or rich, industrious or lazy, and humble or noble.¹⁷ Yet much as readers and critics insist on the folktale's low tolerance for ambiguity and stress the inflexibility of the attributes assigned to heroes and villains, the frequency with which inversion appears suggests that they overstate their case. Just as "Beast" can be at once savage and civilized, so the youngest of three sons can be both simpleton and sage, humble lad and prince, coward and hero. Both character attributes and social conditions can rapidly shift from one extreme to the other.

That character traits are not as standardized or programmed as would appear becomes evident if we analyze the fate of one character who does not figure prominently in the pantheon of folkloric heroes. The eponymous protagonist of "Hans in Luck" might, in fact, well be called an anti-hero. In the course of his travels, he outwits no one; he instead becomes the victim of numerous transparently fraudulent transactions. His fortunes, rather than rising, steadily decline. And at the end of his journey, he seems no wiser and is decidedly less prosperous than he was at the beginning. Still, Hans is said to be lucky, and he feels he is among the happiest men on earth. The steps of Hans's journey to felicity are easy enough to retrace. After serving his master loyally and diligently for seven years, Hans winds his way home with a weighty emolument: a chunk of gold the size of his head. Hans happily barter this monetary burden for a horse that will speed him on his way. In the further course of his journey, he exchanges the horse for a cow, the cow for a pig, the pig for a goose, and the goose for a grindstone and rock. Even after these two worthless rocks land at the bottom of a well, leaving him nothing to show for seven years of labor, Hans remains undaunted. He literally jumps for joy and praises God for liberating him from the burdens that slowed his journey. Unencumbered by earthly possessions and with a light heart, Hans heads for his mother's home.

Conventional wisdom has it that the happy-go-lucky hero of this tale stands as the archetypal fool. The very title of the tale, "Hans in Luck," is charged with irony: only a fool would delight in parting with the hefty wages Hans receives from his master. Yet on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the story of lucky Hans may also celebrate freedom from the burden of labor. On the last leg of his journey, Hans jettisons grindstone and rock—the tools of the trade that was to secure for him a steady flow of cash; at the outset of his journey, he rids himself of the gold with which his labor was compensated. In a stunning reversal of the value system espoused in fairy tales, Hans's story not only substitutes rags for riches, but also supplants marriage to a princess in a foreign land with a return home to mother. In short, it ends where most tales begin. Instead of charting an odyssey toward wealth and marriage, it depicts the stations of a journey toward poverty and dependence. But in remaining wholly indifferent to the wages of labor and freeing himself from its drudgery, Hans displays a kind of wisdom that invalidates ironic readings of his tale's title. Bereft of material possessions yet rich in spirit, he turns his back on the world of commerce to embrace his mother.¹⁸

The story of lucky Hans dramatically demonstrates the impossibility of establishing a fixed set of character traits shared by male heroes. Like Hans, who is both foolish and wise, poor and rich, lucky and unfortunate, the heroes of numerous fairy tales possess attributes that imperceptibly shade into their opposites. All the same, it is clear that certain oppositions (humble/noble, naive/cunning, timid/courageous, compassionate/ruthless) are encoded on virtually every fairy tale with a male hero. It is, then, difficult to draw up an inventory of immutable character traits, largely because a single figure within a tale can—and usually does—have one character trait and its opposite. But it is equally difficult, if for different reasons, to establish precise models for the plots of tales featuring male heroes. For every score of heroes who wed princesses and inherit kingdoms, there is one who returns home as an impoverished bachelor. For ten heroes who receive assistance and magical gifts by demonstrating compassion, there is one who acquires aid and magical objects

through an act of violence. For every animal bridegroom who is released from a curse through the love and devotion of a woman, there is one who is disenchanted by the callous treatment he receives at the hands of his bride. To be sure, there is a measure of predictability in these plots, but only if we bear in mind that every narrative norm established can be violated by its opposite. Thus the preliminary test of good character at the start of tales with a ternary plot structure can be replaced by a demonstration of the hero's ruthlessness. The story of a hero dependent on magical helpers in carrying out appointed tasks can exist side by side with the tale of a hero who acts autonomously and takes on the characteristics of helpers.¹⁹

Recognizing and appreciating the fairy tale's instability—its penchant for moving from one extreme to another—is vital for understanding its characters, plots, and thematic orientation. Fairy-tale figures have few fixed traits; they are re-formed once they reach the goals of their journeys, when they become endowed with the very qualities in which they were once found wanting. Male protagonists may adhere slavishly to the ground rules of heroic decorum, or they may break every rule in the book; either way, their stories end with accession to the throne. And finally, the conditions prevailing at the start of the tales are utterly reversed by the end. The fairy tale, in sum, knows no stable middle ground. Inversion of character traits, violation of narrative norms, and reversal of initial conditions are just a few of the ways in which it overturns notions of immutability and creates a fictional world in which the one constant value is change.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing once again some of the disparities between folkloric fantasies and social realities. The radical reversals that lift fairy-tale heroes from humble circumstances to a royal station were virtually unknown during the age in which fairy tales developed and flourished, but they undeniably correspond to childhood fantasies of past ages and of our own day. If in real life the youngest of three sons rarely had the wherewithal to succeed in life or to transcend his station in life, fairy tales held out the promise that humility and other virtues might well outweigh the benefits of an inheritance. But beyond offering consolation to underprivileged sons who lived in an era when primogeniture was custom or law,

fairy tales more generally respond to the insecurities of every child. Even the eldest child is likely to perceive himself less gifted or less favored than his siblings and can thereby readily identify with simpleton heroes. Fundamental psychological truths, rather than specific social realities, appear to have given rise to the general plot structure of those tales.

A stable plot still leaves much room for variation. Skillful raconteurs can take the same story line and give it unique twists and turns. The tone may vary from one tale to the next, and the hero may be presented in different lights. As Robert Darnton has shown, comparing different national versions of a single tale type can be a revealing exercise. Reading through various tellings of "Jack the Giant Killer," one can register the changes from "English fantasy to French cunning and Italian burlesque." More important, there are subtle shifts in the character of the protagonist as he slips from one culture into another. Darnton has observed that the trickster figure is especially prevalent in French folklore and literature.²⁰ By contrast, as we have seen, the simpleton or (to put it in more flattering terms) the guileless youth figures prominently in the Grimms' collection. These differences between the folkloric heroes of the two cultures may, however, be more apparent than real, for the roguish Gallic trickster and his naive Teutonic counterpart have more in common than one would suspect. Even the names most frequently bestowed in the *Nursery and Household Tales* on the two types (Dummling for the simpleton and Däumling for the trickster) suggest that they are kindred spirits. Both the simpleton and the trickster ultimately make good by outwitting or outdoing their seemingly superior adversaries. Still, the shift in emphasis from cunning to naïveté as one moves across the Rhine is telling, suggesting that the French celebrate cleverness and audacity while the Germans enshrine the virtue of guilelessness.

If we take a closer look at German literary traditions—both oral and written—it becomes clear that the naïve hero is by no means a folkloristic aberration. He fits squarely into a long tradition of such figures. Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival, who comes to incarnate the highest chivalric ideals, is described as *der tumme* (the young and inexperienced one). Dressed by his mother in the costume of a

fool, he mounts a wretched nag to seek his fortune in the world. Although there are hints that he is something of a dragon slayer (he arrives at Munsalvæsche during the feast of Saint Michael, the vanquisher of Satan as dragon), the only dragons he slays are emblazoned on his opponent's helmet. But like folkloric heroes, Parzival knows no fear and consequently displays valor on the battlefield. Although he fails the initial test of compassion, in the course of his adventures he develops that quality and learns humility.

Remaining in the same poetic climate but moving to another era, we find that Richard Wagner's Siegfried also launches his heroic career as a naive youth without fear. The resemblances between his story and the "Fairy Tale of One Who Went Forth to Learn Fear" are unmistakable. To his cantankerous guardian, Mime, Siegfried confides that he wishes to learn what it is to fear, to which Mime responds that the wise learn fear quickly, the stupid have a harder time of it.²¹ Siegfried clearly belongs in the latter category. Like the one who went forth to learn fear, he discovers that emotion in the experience of love. As he sets eyes on the sleeping Brünnhilde, he feels a mystifying quickening of emotions:

How cowardly I feel.
Is this what they call fear?
Oh mother! mother!
Your fearless child!
A woman lies in sleep:
She has taught him to be afraid!

(*Siegfried*, act 3)

No one was more surprised by the resemblances between the Grimms' fairy-tale character and the heroic Siegfried than Richard Wagner. In a letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig, he wrote: "Haven't I ever told you this amusing story? It's the tale of the lad who ventures forth to learn what fear is and who is so dumb that he just can't do it. Imagine my amazement when I suddenly realized that that lad is no one else but—young Siegfried."²²

It would not be difficult to identify countless other guileless fools and lads without fear in German literature. From the baroque era through the romantic period to the present, naiveté is the signature of many a literary hero. The protagonist of Grimmelshausen's *Sim-*

plicius Simplicissimus may be a clever rogue, but his name is telling. Like Parzival, he moves from foolish innocence to an understanding of the ways of the world, though his story ends in disillusion. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, perhaps the finest exemplar of the *Bildungsroman*, that most hallowed of German literary traditions, gives us a naive innocent who happens to be fortunate enough to stumble into the right circles. We do not have to look far in the romantic era for heroes pure in heart and innocent in spirit. Each and every one of them—from Novalis's Heinrich von Ofterdingen to Josef von Eichendorff's Florio—begins the first leg of his journey into the wild blue yonder as a charming young man wholly untutored in worldly matters.

Twentieth-century German literature has no shortage of similar types. In a belated introduction to *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann makes a point of bowing in the direction of Hans Castorp's literary antecedents. Mystified by the way in which the weight of literary tradition—without his knowing it—determines his protagonist's character, he is also flattered by the company in which literary critics placed his hero. Both Parzival and Wilhelm Meister, he notes, belong to the class of "guileless fools," and his Hans Castorp is no different. His "simplicity and artlessness" make him a legitimate literary cousin of those two quester figures. Yet Hans Castorp can also display all the wisdom of an innocent: when he wants something, he can be "clever," "crafty," and "shrewd." That Mann further emphasizes resemblances "here and there" between Hans Castorp's story and fairy tales comes as no surprise.²³

It may seem to be stretching a point to suggest that fairy tales can tell us something about what historians of the *Annales* School call *mentalités*. Yet, throughout the ages, storytellers have embroidered the narratives passed on to them with the cultural values as well as with the facts of their own milieu. Every subtle change can be significant, so long as it takes place on a large scale and does not simply represent one idiosyncratic telling of a tale. What the Grimms' collection tells us about heroes does not deviate fundamentally from what other German folkloric and literary sources declare. There is far more to naiveté than meets the eye.