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The Fairy Tale Jew

This essay examines the figure of the Jew in three fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and two by Clemens Brentano and argues that the surface antisemitism of these texts is reinforced by a series of rhetorical gestures that derive from an Enlightenment paradigm. This Enlightenment troping is both programmatic and political in nature. Written against the backdrop of the debate about the “Jewish question” – the debate about Jews’ legal and civil status in Germany – these tales present a moral exemplar in which Enlightenment becomes synonymous with antisemitism. In these texts to be Enlightened is to be antisemitic.

The character of the evil Jew figures prominently in numerous fairy tales and folktales from the German Romantic tradition. The typecasting of the Jew in this role is significant. Unlike other nefarious figures that populate the fairy tale world (trolls, giants, ogres, witches, phantoms, and the like), the fairy tale Jew has a real-world referent, a fact exploited by the Nazis during the “Third Reich” when they promoted the Grimms’ fairy tales as folk literature. There can be no doubt that fairy tales played a subliminal role in shaping the antisemitic consciousness of a nation. The Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children’s and Household Tales) was second only to the Bible in book sales by the early 20-century Germany,¹ and the Nazis systematically capitalized on the Tales’ popularity to advance their Aryan agenda. In 1938 the Journal for Racial Political Pedagogy proclaimed: “No German childhood without fairy tales; no folk-specific and racial education without them!”² Moreover, in the “Third Reich” the Grimms’ Tales was officially recognized as a “sacred book”, schools were required to use the Tales as a textbook, and all German households were required to own a copy.³ Nazi ideologists celebrated the few overtly

antisemitic tales in the collection, and perverted other tales to promote Nazi cultural values. Little Red Riding Hood, for example, was interpreted as a symbol of the innocent German people, terrorized by the evil “Jewish” wolf and liberated by Hitler, the huntsman. Similarly, Cinderella was seen as the embodiment of racial purity, while her evil stepmother and stepsisters were condemned as ‘rassenfremd’, “racially foreign”.

As significant as the Nazis’ corruption of fairy tales into “Jewish” tales is, those fairy tales from the German Romantic tradition that originally contain Jewish characters comprise an even more compelling area of research from a cultural-historical perspective, from the perspective of the history of antisemitism in German letters. These are the texts – represented here by in-depth analyses of three well-known tales by the Brothers Grimm and brief readings of two tales by their erstwhile collaborator, Clemens Brentano – that are the topic of this essay. The figure of the Jew has remained curiously unexplored in most studies of these Romantic texts; the few scholars who have noted these tales are antisemitic have not analyzed in any detail the discursive strategies from which the texts derive their force. Perhaps this is because the anti-Jewish rhetoric in the tales is so crass – so obvious – that an extensive investigation would seem unnecessary. However, a structural analysis of this fairy tale corpus indicates the surface antisemitism of these texts is reinforced by a series of rhetorical gestures that derive from an Enlightenment paradigm. This Enlightenment troping, I will argue, is both programmatic and political in nature. Written against the backdrop of the debate about the “Jewish question” – the debate about Jews’ legal and civil status in Germany – these tales present a moral exemplar in which Enlightenment becomes synonymous with antisemitism. In these texts to be Enlightened is to be antisemitic.

I.

A conscious anti-Jewish agenda arguably informs the Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children’s and Household Tales), to a small but significant degree. (To be sure, this anti-Jewish agenda is not the driving force behind the collection as a whole.) Of the 211 tales published in the final edition of 1857, three have Jewish main characters: “Der gute Handel” (“The Good Bargain”, no. 7), “Der Jude im Dorn” (“The Jew in [the] Thorns”, no. 110), and “Die klare Sonne bringt’s an den Tag” (“The Clear Sun Will Bring it to Light”, no. 115). Two of these tales, “The Good Bargain” and “The Jew in Thorns” are overtly antisemitic; the third, “The Clear Sun Will Bring it to Light”, is ambiguous in its depiction of the Jew. On a first reading, one might be tempted to think that “the

4 Dégh (note 3). P. 36 and Tatar (note 3). P. 41.
5 Bottigheimer (note 2). P. 22.