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‘Nur manchmal mußten sie laut und unverhofft lachen’:
Kerstin Hensel’s Use of Märchen

This article examines the changing perspectives of Kerstin Hensel’s versions of Märchen. Three early texts from 1989-1990 parody traditional Märchen by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen; alluding to their GDR origins, these tales lend themselves to interpretations as political allegory. A more recent text is a modern fairy tale told in an ironic and feminist tone. Through close examination of the texts and their intertextual references, this article considers how Hensel’s Märchen versions contain social criticism while interrogating the genre’s conventions and function. Above all, the parodies highlight Hensel’s interest in narrative and storytelling.

The Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen have cast a long shadow in German literature. Their enduring popularity and wide-spread reception – Jack Zipes refers to them as an institution – has spawned numerous copies, revisions and parodies; as literary archetypes, the tales lend themselves to reinterpretations and modern rewritings which highlight contemporary socio-political issues. Fairytales, particularly the Grimm’s Märchen, constitute some of the most frequent intertexts for Kerstin Hensel’s work, and the different ways she has treated these sources tie in with the wider trajectory of her prose work and its changing context since 1989. While the focus of her intertextual references, parodies and creative versions has shifted, her work remains in dialogue with these earlier tales, confirming both their vitality, and Hensel’s interest in narrative forms and storytelling.

Images and quotations from fairytales recur in Hensel’s work, from fragmentary passing references to full-length parodies, which are my interest here. Literary parody is the imitation of a text (or genre) with an implied, usually critical, attitude towards that text (or genre); in this it functions as a particular literary form of irony, which also implies an evaluative attitude, and where the meaning of the whole (utterance or text) exceeds the literal meaning, and needs to be completed by the interpreter (the reader). Hensel writes alternative versions of ‘Hänsel und Gretel’ in ‘Da ward gutes Essen aufgetragen’ in Hallimasch (1989), and Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ in ‘Des Kaisers Rad’ in Neunerlei (1997); and she parodies the Grimms’ Märchen as a genre in ‘Ein Hausmärchen’, a short piece published in a newspaper in 1990. ‘Das Licht von Zauche’, written in 1995 and first published in 2002, draws on elements of the Grimms’ narrative style, and alludes particularly to the dancing princesses of ‘Die zertanzten Schuhe’, but goes far beyond these references: this later text is less a parody than an ironic, modern version of a Märchen. These parodies take on particular
motifs, themes, form and language from their models; they are constructed through a range of narrative devices, such as exaggerating, reversing, foreshortening or omitting aspects of the source texts, or by adding incongruous new elements. Above all, parodies highlight their new context and are often used to criticise contemporary socio-political conditions. As well as incorporating critical distance both to individual texts and to the genre, Hensel’s literary parodies also work as satire, implying critical comment of society through allegory or by using irony to engage with cultural norms. The specific, early parodies are clearly directed against the GDR state and people; moreover, the twist Hensel’s texts give to this satirical or symbolic function also implies criticism of the relation between literature and politics particular to the GDR. The later text ‘Das Licht von Zauche’ is set in contemporary post-unification Germany and takes on a generic Western society, particularly the representation of women; Hensel’s feminist stance is characterised by, and constituted through, irony. In this modern fairytale, the narrative style converges with her other prose writing, most notably *Im Spinnhaus* (2003), which employs a similar distanced, ironic perspective to relate fantastic occurrences.

Kerstin Hensel (b. 1961) belongs to the youngest generation to have begun writing under the GDR, and her first prose collection, *Hallimasch*, was published in 1989 in slightly different forms in East and West Germany. *Hallimasch* contains a parodic rewriting of part of the tale of ‘Hänsel und Gretel’, ‘Da ward gutes Essen aufgetragen’. The title quotes the Grimms’ story, describing the feast that the witch offers the lost and starving brother and sister when she invites them into her house. Hensel takes up the narrative just after the story shifts into the marvellous. Her tale consists of a single, breathless sentence which exaggerates the parataxis typical of the Grimms’ style (the Mitteldeutscher version of Hensel’s text does not even end with a full stop) and emphasises the oral storytelling on which the Grimms claimed to have based their texts. Hensel alters significant elements of the story: both children are imprisoned, whereas in the original it was only Hänsel. The children make no attempt to trick the old woman, whereas in the original the short-sighted woman, explicitly referred to as a witch, feels Hänsel’s fingers to see if he needs more fattening, so Hänsel offers her bones to feel instead. Hensel’s children scold the old woman for her bad food, and even when she dies, they do not immediately try to free themselves. The Grimms’ timescale of approximately four weeks is expanded: years pass, and, rather than being killed by Gretel pushing her into the oven, the old woman eventually dies of old age. It transpires that the door had in fact been open all along, so the children, by now adults, open it,