

Name: _____

Modern European History

Date: _____

Unit 6 –Nation-Building and War

Nationalism and the Brothers Grimm

Nationalism played a vital role in the lives and works of the brothers Grimm. They revered national, indigenous, anonymous folk poetry in the belief that it contained primitive folk wisdom which was peculiarly German in character. The Hausmarchen¹ though beloved among many generations of children all over the world, were designed originally to stimulate German national sentiment and to glorify German national traditions.

The Brothers Grimm, Jakob Ludwig Karl (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Karl (1786-1859) devoted themselves to the scientific study of German language and literature. Their major works stressed national indigenous literature, such as folk poetry, as well as works on the history of the Germanic languages, law, folklore, and comparative mythology. The Grimms were certain that every language has its own peculiar spirit standing in relationship to the national character. They preferred knowledge of native literature to all foreign lore, because “we can grasp nothing else as surely as our innate powers” and because “nature herself guides us towards the Fatherland.” From the beginning they were attracted by all national poetry, either epics, ballads, or popular tales, and they received full satisfaction in the study of the language, traditions, mythology, and laws of their countrymen.

When Jakob visited the libraries of Paris in 1805, he quickly became homesick and wrote to his brother that he always dreamed of the Fatherland: “At night I am always home in Germany.” Four years later he informed Wilhelm that he would not go to a certain vacation resort “because there are too many Frenchmen there.” After watching a French festival bonfire in 1814, he wrote to Wilhelm: “I wished that an effigy of Bonaparte be thrown ceremoniously into the fire and burned.” When his friend Benecke received a call to Edinburgh in 1821 and asked for his advice, Jakob replied: “I cannot advise you but I can say that, if I were in your place, I would not emigrate.” “All my works,” Jakob wrote later in one of his last essays, “relate to the Fatherland, from whose soil they derive their strength.”

From the outset the Grimm brothers took the Romantic position which was closely allied with rising German nationalism. The Grimms sought to unlock the poetry and experiences of the German people. Many of the German Romantics saw their organic-genetic conception of culture as the expression of the Germanic national soul. It was this type of romanticism, stressing folk language, customs, personality, and the idea of *Volksgeineinschaft*, or community of the people, which was an important factor in the historical evolution of modern nationalism.

In 1805 the Brothers Grimm began their laborious collection of German sagas and fairy tales, believing a collection of children’s stories would be a present for the young people of the future. The work proceeded

¹ also called *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, or Children and Household Tales

under difficult conditions, for in 1806 the armies of Napoleon overran their town of Kassel. "Those days," wrote Wilhelm, "of the collapse of all hitherto existing establishments will remain forever before my eyes... The ardor with which the studies in Old German were pursued helped overcome the spiritual depression." Working thus in difficult times, the Grimms completed their first volume, which appeared at Christmas, 1812 - the winter of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. It was an immediate success.

The Grimms obtained their folk tales from peasant women, shepherds, vagrants, old grannies, and children in Hesse, Hanau, and other areas. Their first concern in collecting the stories was "faithfulness to the truth" and they sought to keep the tales "as clean as possible," adding nothing and changing nothing. In their thorough commentary on the stories, the Grimms gave painstaking and accurate references to the exact source from which each tale was taken. For example, 19 of their finest tales were taken from Frau Katerina Viehmann (1755-1815), the wife of a tailor who lived in a village near Kassel. "Anyone believing that traditional materials are easily falsified and carelessly preserved, and hence cannot survive over a long period, should hear how close she always keeps to her story and how zealous she is for its accuracy."

The fact that the brothers Grimm took down the tales with almost fanatical accuracy does not at all invalidate the thesis that the *Marchen* have played a role in the historical evolution of German nationalism. Quite the contrary - the many sentiments typical of German nationalism which are found in the tales existed among the old peasants, nurses, and workers from whom the Grimms obtained their material. What the anthologists did was to catch the varied strands of German national tradition and weave them into a pattern glorifying German folk stories. Themselves superb patriots who always believed in sanctifying the ancient German tongue, the Grimms stressed those peculiar traits which have since come to be known as important elements of the German national character. Moreover, in the very cooperative action by which the tales were written a quality of national validity and individual unity appears.

The environment of the Grimms' tales was one which reflected similarities of family life in the same culture, namely German culture. The milieu consisted of farmland, villages, towns, and the forest, but the sea was alien. In the village lived the peasant, the tradesman, and the artisan, near the castle of the king and his court. The forest, a dark jewel containing evil spirits and lovely treasures, was a fascinating but frightening unknown, where witches lived in huts and princesses in enchanting castles. The family was a cohesive unit, with the good and able father, respected and obeyed, at its head; its cohesiveness was challenged by such unattractive elements as poverty, the stepmother, and inheritance trouble.

Society consisted of royalty, the aristocracy, the military, the professionals, merchants, artisans, and peasants. Class distinctions were definite. The upper and lower classes are depicted favorably in the tales, but the middle class, consisting of merchants, innkeepers, doctors, clerics, and Jews, is condemned for its greed and quackery. Virtue is always rewarded and sin punished, though virtue was complicated somewhat by heroes lying, cheating, stealing, and slaying to gain an end.

There is plenty of evidence in the fairy tales to show the existence of what may be called universal factors of personality, qualities which are typical of *many* peoples from all parts of the world. But at the same time there is also evidence of the existence of such relatively uniform and striking attitudes as respect for order, obedience, discipline, authoritarianism, militarism, glorification of violence, and fear of and contempt for the stranger.

A strong respect for the desirability of order is indicated in the opening paragraph of *The Sole*:

The fishes had for a long time been discontented because no order prevailed in their kingdom. None of them turned aside for the others, but all swam to the right or left as they fancied, or darted between those who wanted to stay together, or got into their way; and a strong one gave a weak one a blow with its tail, and drove it away, or else swallowed it up without more ado. "How delightful it would be," said they, "if we had a king who enforced law and justice among us!" and they met together to choose for their ruler the one who would cleave through the water most quickly, and give help to the weak ones.

The concept of obedience is emphasized again and again. A little hare tells a musician: "I will obey you as a scholar obeys his master." When the Devil orders a father to cut off the hands of his own child, the father asks his daughter to understand his predicament. She replies: "Dear father, do with me what you will, I am your child." Whereupon she lays down both her hands, and allows them to be cut off. When Hans serves his master for seven years, the master gives him as reward "a piece of gold as big as his head." A diligent servant is every morning the first out of bed, the last to go to bed at night, and whenever there was a difficult job to be done, which nobody cared to undertake, he was always the first to set himself to it. Moreover, he never complained, but was contented with everything, and was always merry.

This concept of obedience, together with its corollary - discipline - amounted to something more than mere obedience of the child to its parents. It was closely akin to that type of authoritarianism manifested in attitudes towards the family, society, and the state. The father is head of the home and the ruler of the family; it is wrong and dangerous to challenge his authority. Society itself is static, with definite gradations from top to bottom. The state is supreme and the end of all striving. In the state the king is supreme. His word is law and his orders must be strictly obeyed, even if forfeiture of life be the result. He may on occasion order death or grant wealth at a mere whim.

The nature and personality of the king become dominant themes in the *Marchen*. The land of the tales is made up of many small kingdoms, in each of which the king emerges as the strong, all-powerful personality. When a king made a great feast and invited all the young men likely to marry from far and near, he ordered them to line up according to their rank and standing: first came the kings, then the grand-dukes, then the princes, the earls, the barons, and the gentry. The king is omnipresent and omniscient: when a shepherd boy's fame spreads far and wide because of his wise answers, the king naturally hears of it and summons him; when a horn sings by itself "the king understood it all, and caused the ground below the bridge to be dug up, and then the whole skeleton of the murdered man to come to life."

The greatest virtue of either the clever or dullard boy is courage. When a young soldier is asked if he is fearless, he replies: "A soldier and fear - how can the two go together?" A little tailor was not frightened by a bear that had never left anyone alive who had fallen into its embraces, but was, on the contrary, quite delighted, saying: "Boldly ventured is half-won." The virtue of courage is closely associated with another dominant theme of nationalism: the veneration of the military spirit. Again and again the tales show that war is good, that fighting gives great moral vigor, that bearing arms is the highest of all possible honors, and that the military instinct is a blessing. Even the animals are infected with the war spirit: "when the time came for the war to begin, the willow-wren sent out spies to discover who was the enemy's commander-in-chief." Force is accepted as normal and desirable: when a cat jumps upon her friend, the mouse, and swallows her down, the story ends: "Verily, that is the way of the world."

Still another obvious theme of the *Marchen* was fear of and hatred for the outsider, characteristic of nationalism. The stepmother is invariably a disgusting old woman who performs evil deeds with inhuman zest and cruelty. If she has any children from her first marriage, she will seek to displace her stepchildren so that her own flesh and blood will acquire the family fortune. In *Hansel and Gretel*, the stepmother purposely loses her stepchildren in the forest so that they will no longer be in the family. The stepmother is an alien in the home, an outsider, a foreigner in the state. She must be hated and eliminated because she will throw the accepted order into chaos with her new ideas and foreign attitudes and methods.

It is reasonable to conclude that, with their fairy tales, the brothers Grimm contributed as much to the German revival and to German nationalism as generals, diplomats, and political figures. They belong doubtlessly in the broadest sense among the founders of the new German Reich. They exhibited all the German virtues: the inner love of family, true friendship, the kindly love for the Hessian homeland, the inspiring love for the Fatherland. With full right they earn therefore a place among Germany's greatest men.

Adapted and revised from Louis L. Snyder's "Nationalistic Aspects of the Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1951.