

The Grimms' "Snow White": Tracing the Legendary Fate of Hessian Countess Margaretha von Waldeck

CLAUDIA SCHWABE

Utah State University

In 1994, German historian Eckhard Sander published his research book *Schneewittchen: Märchen oder Wahrheit? Ein lokaler Bezug zum Kellerwald* (Snow White: Fairy Tale or Truth? A Local Reference to the Kellerwald). In his work, Sander explores the parallels between the popular, 19th-century fairy tale "Snow White" by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and the life of Margaretha von Waldeck (1533-1554), a German countess from Bad Wildungen, Hesse who was the mistress of Prince Philip II of Spain during the 1500's. To tie a fairy-tale figure to a historical figure rooted in the real world is a bold endeavor, one that raises a great deal of skepticism among fairy-tale scholars and rightfully so. Renowned German folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther describes Sander's connection of "Snow White" with the city Bad Wildungen as belonging to the "Reich der Kuriositäten" (realm of curiosities) (2008: 131-32). After all, there are numerous reasons why the attempt to trace a *Volksmärchen* or folk tale (a fairy tale from oral folk tradition; for simplification I will primarily continue to use the common term "fairy tale" throughout this essay) back to an existing location and a specific moment in time appears preposterous. First, fairy tales are by "definition" (fairy-tale scholars have acknowledged the complexities of defining the fairy tale) "narratives set in a fictional world" (Tatar 2003:33) and the Grimms stated in the preface to their *Deutsche Sagen* (German Legends) "the fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historic" (my translation, 1816:V). Second, fairy tales are composed of various fairy-tale motifs from different oral and literary sources stemming from different time periods. Third, oral and literary sources of fairy tales have cross-pollinated over time. Fourth, because fairy tales "have been with us for thousands of years and have undergone so many changes in the oral tradition, it is difficult to determine the ideological intention of the narrator" (Zipes 2006:52). Despite this rationale, however, I argue that when analyzing specific fairy tales in

their sociohistorical contexts, one cannot exclude with absolute certainty and *a priori* any references to unique historical sources, existing places, and people who once lived. Indeed, there are numerous German folktales and literary fairy tales that contain names and descriptions of very specific geographical settings in Germany, such as the city Bremen in the Grimms' "Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten" ("The Town Musicians of Bremen"), the heath nearby the city Buxtehude in the Grimms' "Der Hase und der Igel" ("The Hare and the Hedgehog"), the Spessart mountain range in Wilhelm Hauff's "Das Wirtshaus im Spessart" ("The Inn in Spessart," posthumously published in 1828), and the Black Gate of the city Dresden in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der goldne Topf. Ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit" ("The Golden Pot: A Modern Fairytale," 1814), to name a few examples. Since the Grimms drew on "many different Hessian stories" (my translation, Grimm 1856:87) for their unique version of "Snow White" in *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales, 1812-15), it stands to reason that one (or more) source stories took shape based on real-life events that occurred in Hesse and were part of local oral folklore. For clarification, I am not attempting to prove in this essay that Snow White really lived or that she was Hessian, nor am I geographically fixating the Grimms' published versions of "Snow White" to the Kellerwald region (a low mountain range in northern Hesse close to the towns Waldeck and Bad Wildungen). Instead, I will scrutinize, draw on, and further expand Sander's research to carve out existing indications of potential influences on oral source stories that may have contributed to shaping the Grimms' version of the exceptional tale. Further, I call attention to the fact that Sander's very serious, long-standing research activities and considerable efforts should not be lumped together with parodists of fairy-tale research as recently done by Luis Guadaño in *The Fantastic Made Visible* (2015:72).

Although Sander is not the first person to connect fairy tales with potential historical sources and locations, a differentiation must be made between those writers who admittedly produced persiflages of what can be termed "fairy-tale archaeology" and those authors with a sincere interest in making valuable contributions to the fields of fairy-tale studies and local history. In Germany, among the most prominent examples of parodies mocking the research methods of fairy-tale scholars, folklorists, and traditional academics are the works by caricaturist Hans Traxler, pharmacist Karlheinz Bartels, and teacher Theodor Ruf. Traxler's 1963 book *Die Wahrheit über Hänsel und Gretel. Die Dokumentation eines Märchens der Gebrüder Grimm* (The Truth about Hansel and Gretel: The Documentation of a Fairy Tale by the Brothers Grimm) is a pseudoscientific hoax that convinced many

Germans at the time that the teacher Georg Ossegg, a fictional character invented by the author, uncovered the archeological evidence of the “real” Hansel and Gretel in 1962. For the pure joy of spinning yarns, Traxler located the fairy tale in the Spessart, a range of low wooded mountains in the states of Bavaria and Hesse. Fairy-tale scholar Vanessa Joosen has referred to the book as “fictive nonfictional text,” which “carries the features of a nonfictional text but consciously misleads the reader by disregarding relevant information or providing false ‘facts’” (2011:31). Bartels added to Traxler’s tongue-in-cheek scholarly study by publishing his 1985 satirical treatise “Neue Erkenntnisse über ‘Hänsel und Gretel’” (New Findings about “Hansel and Gretel”) in which he announced the creation of a work group of fabulists. In the Bavarian town Lohr am Main, the circle of regulars met at a local inn to reflect on how to appropriate the Grimms’ fairy tale “Snow White” for the purposes of local tourism.

In his 1986 essay “War Schneewittchen eine Lohrerin?” (Was Snow White a Native from Lohr?) and 1990 book *Schneewittchen: Zur Fabulologie des Spessarts* (Snow White: About the Fairy-Tale Science of the Spessart), Bartels used his new approach of *Fabulologie*, a method of critically approaching fairy-tale texts based on the assumption that artifacts, locations, and characters must be interpreted as real rather than symbolical (Ruf 1995:13). His approach led Bartels to the conclusion that Snow White’s historical identity was Maria Sophia Margaretha Catharina von Erthal (born 29 June 1729 in Lohr). Although Ruf identifies Bartels’ work as hoax in his 1995 book *Die Schöne aus dem Glassarg: Schneewittchens märchenhaftes und wirkliches Leben* (The Beauty from the Glass Coffin: Snow White’s Fairy-Tale and Real Life) Ruf took Bartels’ “strange discoveries” (1995:12) as a point of departure to continue spinning yarns about Snow White and the city of Lohr. In a review for *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Ruth B. Bottigheimer notes: “By cleverly incorporating his own research into the genealogy of the German Counts of Rieneck, Theodor Ruf was able to mind-bendingly but affectionately parody meta-, quasi-, or pseudohistorical fairy-tale scholarship” (1997:223). In his final section, Ruf distances himself from the idea that Snow White ever existed as a real person. He emphasizes that the Grimms’ fairy tale is a product of many different oral and literary influences and traditions throughout history, and contains a *mélange* of various well-known and lesser-known motifs: “The motifs of ‘Snow White’ have their origin in daily life everywhere, reflect fundamental human experiences and wishes, and are being combined to an attractive, exciting story that is highly entertaining

especially for children but not only for them” (my translation, Ruf 1995:91).

Unlike the parodists Traxler, Bartels, and Ruf, local historian Sander has devoted over 26 years (since 1989) of his life, including time-consuming archival research and international research travels across Europe, to closely investigate the parallels between the Grimms’ versions of “Snow White” and the personal history of Margaretha von Waldeck. Whether or not Sander’s conclusions are incontrovertible evidence is of secondary importance. What matters is that Sander has unearthed a substantial number of references and significant indications that tie “Snow White” and the Brothers Grimm to historical figures and geographical places. These circumstances must not be ignored by fairy-tale scholarship or be dismissed as a case of fairy-tale satire but rather be given due recognition as potentially influential to one (or more) of the source texts that the Grimms worked with. It should be duly noted that Sander’s claims, which I will explore in the following sections, can only be listed and discussed in very condensed form due to the space constraints of this essay.

First, a brief summary of Margaretha’s biography: Margaretha was born in 1533 as the daughter of Count Philipp IV von Waldeck and Margarethe von Ostfriesland (Margaret of East Frisia) at the Castle Friedrichstein in Wildungen (now known as Bad Wildungen). Margaretha was only four years old when her mother passed away and six years old when her father married her stepmother Catharina von Hatzfeld. According to the home chronicles in the city archives of Bad Wildungen, Margaretha was of extraordinary beauty. At the age of 16, Margaretha was sent to the court of Queen Maria von Ungarn (Mary of Austria/Hungary) in Brussels located in the Duchy of Brabant (now Belgium), a state of the Holy Roman Empire at that time. Maria von Ungarn was Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands and the younger sister of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. As court lady of Queen Maria, Margaretha should prove herself in the political arena, find a powerful prince and follow him as his wife to his castle. When seen from the geographical position of Hesse, Margaretha’s new home in Brabant was located beyond the *Siebengebirge* (seven mountains range). At the court of Brussels, Protestant Margaretha was romantically pursued by several high-ranking, Catholic personalities, such as Lamoral, Count of Egmont, and the future Philip II of Spain. Crown Prince Philip II, however, was already engaged to marry the eleven years older Queen Mary I of England (“Bloody Mary”). After Margaretha’s health took a turn for the worse, she passed away on March 15th, 1554 at the age of 21 years.¹ The home chronicles of Waldeck indicate that Margaretha was presumably poisoned. The

poison arsenic, commonly used in the Middle Ages, would explain the trembling hand writing of her will.

In his book *Schneewittchen: Märchen oder Wahrheit* and in his more recent publication *Schneewittchen und die 7 Zwerge—Das Märchen: Das Leben der Margaretha von Waldeck* (Snow White and the 7 dwarfs—The fairy tale: The life of Margaretha von Waldeck, 2013), Sander points out intriguing parallels between the non-fictional Margaretha and the fictional figure Snow White of the Grimms' tales. Furthermore, the historian makes valid observations that help explain the appearance of dwarfs in the Hessian fairy-tale version and sheds light on relevant connections between the area of Bad Wildungen and potential storytellers of "Snow White" who served as sources for the Brothers Grimm. In this essay, I am taking Sander's basic claims as a foundation and add new research of my own, in particular concerning the local geography, an aspect that remains largely unexplored in Sander's work. My translations and linguistic cross-examinations of three different literary sources that trace the legendary death of Margaretha between the years 1650 to 1853 reveal that her mysterious demise changed within these 200 years from legendary narrative to factual narrative and back to legendary narrative again. I am also contributing more detailed research about both poisoning with arsenic and German child labor in mining, and am tracing the close ties between the Grimm, Wild, and Hassenpflug families in relation to the Brothers Grimm and their narrative sources. Finally, I am placing Sander's research in context with scholars critical of his work, such as Lutz Röhrich and Hans-Jörg Uther, to provide a more comprehensive overview of the matter at hand.

I call the legend surrounding the mysterious death of Margaretha von Waldeck a historical legend based on the second legend type of Hermann Bausinger's developmental scheme, as cited in Linda Dégh's *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (2001): "a remarkable happening, natural phenomenon, historical event, or murder is the basis of historical legends" (38). The historical legend of Margaretha can be traced through the literary works by different authors from four consecutive centuries, namely, Veit Weinberg (1551), Daniel Prasser (1650), Friedrich August von Klettenberg (1738), Johann Adolph Theodor Ludwig Varnhagen (1853), and Jacob Christoph Carl Hoffmeister (1883), and multiple copies thereof. In fact, clean copies exist today in a variety of Hessian libraries and literary archives stretching from Bad Arolsen and Kassel to Marburg. During my fieldwork in Bad Wildungen in May 2014, I conducted interviews with the local townspeople and found that the historical legend of Margaretha was very much alive but has become closely intertwined

with the Grimms' fairy tale "Snow White." This fact can be attributed to Sander's publications on the one hand and to the efforts undertaken by the local tourism office on the other.

Reckhard Pfeil, who works in the marketing department of the tourist office in Bad Wildungen, first learned about Margaretha von Waldeck in the early 1970s, during history class in middle school. About twelve years later, in 1982, he read a copy of Weinberg's rhymed chronicles located in the local city archives. He believes that the story of Margaretha has turned into a legend because it centers on a historical crime case that people find intriguing and mysterious. Since 2014, tourists can book special "Margaretha von Waldeck" tours at the Castle Friedrichstein with tour guides dressed as Margaretha look-alikes. Four young ladies currently lead the tourist groups through the castle on round tours, talking to them from the first-person perspective "I am Margaretha." Although the legend has made the local news multiple times, it has spread within recent years in the national and international media. In 2005 the German television station ZDF aired a documentary titled *Schneewittchen und der Mord in Brüssel* (Snow White and the Murder in Brussels) on the legend of Margaretha and its ties to the Grimms' fairy tale "Snow White." On August 18, 2015, the German national news show *Tagesthemen* featured a segment on the legend of Margaretha and framed it with a report on the newly opened museum "Grimmwelt" (world of Grimm) in Kassel. In addition, the legend has gone viral with numerous international websites featuring references to Margaretha and Snow White.

Parallels: Snow White versus Margaretha

Appearance

In most of the Grimms' versions of "Snow White" (starting with their 1819 edition and the five revisions that follow), the fairy-tale princess has a stepmother. The tale states that the new queen was beautiful but also proud and arrogant, and she could not stand it if anyone might surpass her in beauty. Snow White, however, grew up and became ever more beautiful: "When she was seven years old she was as beautiful as the light of day, even more beautiful than the queen herself" (my translation, 1819:263). By the age of six, Margaretha also had a stepmother and several sources of the home chronicles in the city archives of Bad Wildungen attest to her extraordinary beauty, the oldest one dating back to 1551. In the rhymed chronicle by the city scribe Weinberg it is written:

Miss Margaretha von
Waldeck,

Freulin Margaretha gebornn
von Waldegken

Died at the Queen's Court in Brabant Anno Christi 1551.	an der Königin Hoffe In Brabant gestorben Anno Christi 1551.
Called Miss Margaretha von Waldeck,	Freulin Margaretha genhant
As beautiful as I have ever known one,	So schon als Ich eine habe gekant
Came from the court in Brabant	Kam raus von hoff aus brabant
To her father in the countryside,	Zu Ihrem her vater Ins Landt
And soon moved again To the emperor's sister	vnd baldt widder gezogen hin Nach des Keisers schwester fein
There she remained long at court	Do sie Lang am hoff gewest
And died in Brussels On March 17 th	vnd zu Brüssel gestorben ist den 17ten Martij zwar
In the year four and fifty.	In dem vier vnd fünfftzigsten jar
(my translation)	(Sander 2013:23)

Friedrich August von Klettenberg, diplomat and privy councilor of Waldeck, remarked in another source of 1738:

Margaretha, born: anno 1533, was of excessive beauty and resided in Brussels at the Court of Queen Mary, sister of Emperor Charles V ...	Margaretha, geboren: Anno 1533, war von ausbündiger Schönheit, und hielt sich zu Brüßel am Hoff der Königin Maria, Kaysers Caroli V Schwester auff ...
(my translation)	(Sander 2013:23 and my translation)

In the archive of the Princely Court Library of Waldeck (*Fürstlich Waldeckische Hofbibliothek*) in Bad Arolsen, a family tree of the Counts of Waldeck depicts Margaretha with blond hair (figure 1).

At first glance, this seems to be inconsistent with the theory that the historical figure of legendary beauty found its way into a source story of the Grimms' "Snow White." Snow White is described in most of the Grimms' versions with ebony dark her and thanks to Disney's iconic animation film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the image of



Figure 1 Margaretha von Waldeck. Source: Excerpt of the portrait family tree of the Counts of Waldeck in the archive of the Princely Court Library of Waldeck in Bad Arolsen, *Fürstliche Hofbibliothek, Signatur V Waldec. 9: Genealogia iconica seu picturata comitum in Waldeck, antehac in archivo asservata [ca. 1580], fol. 5v*

a black-haired princess has become manifest in Western cultural memory. However, in one of the earliest versions of the Grimms' tale from 1810, included in the so-called *Oelenberger Handschrift* (Olenberger Manuscript),² Snow White has blond or rather "yellow" hair as well:

Because she liked the comb so
much, she let herself be

Da ihm nun der selbe Kamm
gar zu wohl gefiel, so ließ es

<p>deceived, and opened the door, and the old woman entered and began to comb her yellow hair and left the comb there until she sank down as if dead.</p> <p>(my translation)</p>	<p>sich verleiten und schloß die Thüre auf, und die Alte trat herein und fing an, in seinen gelben Haaren zu kämmen, und ließ den Kamm stecken, bis es wie todt hinsank.</p> <p>(Rölleke 1975:248, 382)</p>
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Geography

In the Grimms' 1812 edition of "Snow White," the magic mirror states a significant geographical landmark to reveal Snow White's hiding place to the queen. Upon the popular question of the wicked queen "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who in this land is fairest of all?" the mirror replies:

<p>My queen, you are the fairest one here: but Little Snow- White beyond the seven mountains is a thousand times fairer than you.</p> <p>(my translation)</p>	<p>Frau Königin, Ihr seyd die schönste hier: aber Sneewittchen, über den sieben Bergen ist noch tausendmal schöner als Ihr.</p> <p>(Rölleke 1975:251)</p>
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The seven mountains are also mentioned throughout the fairy-tale text and depending upon the version, they are referenced up to four times in the narrative:

Editions	Number of times cited
1808 ³ (unpublished)	Unknown
1810 (unpublished)	None
1812	2
1819	4
1837, 1840, 1843, 1850, 1857	3

Although it is possible that the Grimms changed the vague location of "the mountains" to the more specific description "the seven mountains" in their published editions simply to match it to the magical fairy-tale number "seven" of the dwarfs, it is also conceivable that the Grimms incorporated elements of a source story into their tale that contained an authentic geographical reference. The *Siebengebirge* (seven mountains range), an upland range to the East of the Rhine in North Rhine-Westphalia, is closely linked to the story of Margaretha and her 250 mile journey from her home castle in Hesse to Brabant.⁴

Although the origin of the name *Siebengebirge* is disputed, the oldest name was in fact *Sieben Berge* (seven mountains). Bernhard Möller, a monk from Munster, Westphalia, published in 1570 a poetic description of the river Rhine from its origin to its disappearance in the Netherlands. Embedded in poetic verses, he describes the Seven Mountains in Latin as: “Septem montes, quorum quatuor habitabiles sunt” (The seven mountains, four of which are habitable) (154).

A glance at the map of Germany and Belgium (Figure 2) shows that the *Siebengebirge* lies in between Margaretha’s home city Bad Wildungen and Brussels, as the crow flies. From the viewpoint of Hesse, Margaretha literally travelled “beyond the seven mountains,” similar to Snow White, to reach her destination in the Duchy of Brabant.



Figure 2. Source: Google Maps, showing (A) Bad Wildungen, Hesse, Germany, (B) Siebengebirge, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, and (C) Brussels, Belgium

Poisoning

Poison plays a crucial role in the Grimms’ “Snow White.” The evil queen, who knows how to create poisoned objects, attempts to kill Snow White with a poisoned comb but fails because the dwarfs find the comb and pull it out of Snow White’s hair. The malicious queen then fabricates an object of consumption: an apple so artfully made that only the one half is poisonous. Masqueraded as a peasant woman, the queen crosses the seven mountains to find Snow White. Since Snow White is afraid of being poisoned again, the queen cuts the apple in half, eating the white (harmless) half and giving the red (poisoned) half to Snow White. After taking a bite, Snow White falls down dead.

The earliest written evidence that Margaretha was poisoned can be found in Prasser’s writings of 1650. The mayor of the city Wildungen

noted in Latin in the municipal chronicles that Margaretha died on March 16th, 1554 presumably by poison:

Margaretha, born anno 1533 on the day of the Lord's Ascension. She lived with the royal family (of Queen Maria, Sister of Charles V.) in Brussels, she was a girl of outstanding beauty, but died (**killed by poison, as it is said**) in the same place in the year 1554 on March 16. Buried there with the Franciscans. After her death, King Philip of Spain sent fifteen gifts to the house of Waldeck (along with a portrait of the king himself painted on a wooden panel) to preserve her memory and love (i.e. his love of her), which, nevertheless, at the time of the death/demise of her family line, vanished along with her letters.

Side notes:

1. Queen Maria Sister of Charles V.
2. Killed by poison, as it is said/she is said to have died of poison
3. Along with a portrait of the king himself painted on a wooden panel

(My translation, assisted by Mark Damen, Professor of History at Utah State University and Cornelis Schilt, PhD-researcher in Early Modern History of Science at the University of Sussex)

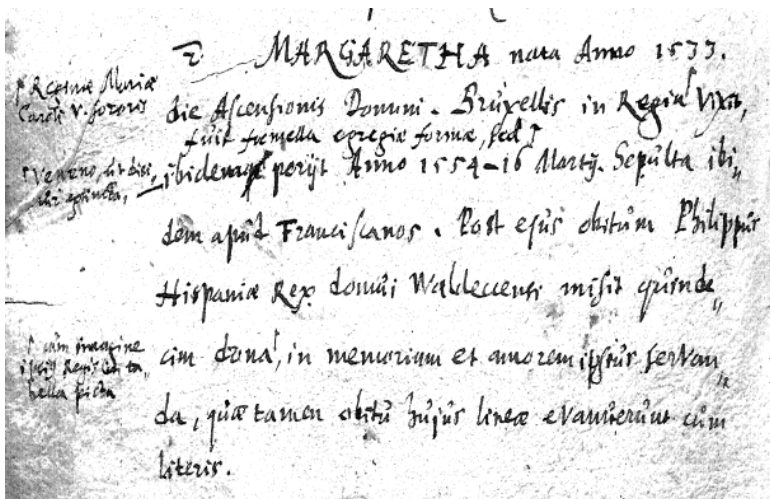


Figure 3. Source: Staatsarchiv Marburg, StAM: 147 Genealogia, Prasser 1650

Klettenberg comments in his writings of 1738 not only about Margaretha's death by poison but he also indicates speculations about the alleged motif:

... but **poison** was given to her anno 1554, the 15th of March, when she was not yet 21 years of age, because it was assumed that Philip II, who was widower then, would have wedded her; she lies buried in Brussels at the Franciscan Church. After her death, the crown prince sent his portrait and 15 precious gifts to her father Count Philip IV, with the assurance of continuous grace. The letter together with the painting being disappeared with the ceasing of this old line of Wildung.

(my translation)

... es wurde Ihr aber Anno 1554 den 15. Mart, nachdem Sie noch nicht 21 Jahr alt worden, mit **Gifft** vergeben, da man meinte Philippus II der eben damahls Wittwer war, würde sich mit Ihr vermählet haben; Sie ligt zu Brüßel in der Franziscaner Kirche begraben. Nach ihrem Todt schickte dieser Königl. Printz ihrem Vater Graf Philippo IV sein Bildniß und 15 kostbahre Geschenke, mit Versicherung fortwährender Gnade. Welcher Brief samt Gemählde mit Erlöschung dieser alten Wildungischen Linie verlohren gegangen sey.
(Sander 2013:23 and my translation)

Although Klettenberg's translation states the act of poisoning as a fact, Varnhagen's translation's from 1853 is closer to Prasser's wording. Thus, Maragaretha's tragic fate sounds more legendary:

... **It was speculated that poison** was given to her because she was in love with the Infant of Spain, Don Philip, subsequently king, and that he might have thought of marrying her; at least he sent a letter and fifteen gifts along with his portrait to her relatives after her death. With the ceasing of this older line of Wildung the letter was lost, but the painting still existed in

... **Man mutmaßte, es sei ihr Gift** beigebracht worden, weil der Infant von Spanien, Don Philipp, nachmaliger König, sie geliebt habe, und vielleicht gesonnen gewesen sei, sich mit ihr zu vermählen; wenigstens übersandte er nach ihrem Tode den Ihrigen ein Schreiben und fünfzehn Geschenke nebst seinem Bildniß. Mit Erlöschung dieser älteren Wildungischen Linie hat sich

the castle Waldeck around 1650. Her corpse was buried in Brussels at the Franciscan Monastery.

das Schreiben verloren, das Gemälde aber ist noch um 1650 in dem Schlosse Waldeck vorhanden gewesen. Ihr Leichnam wurde zu Brüssel in dem Franciskanerkloster beerdigt.

(my translation)

(Varnhagen 1853:67-68)

During his archival research, Sander discovered a letter written by Margaretha to her father on May 27th, 1551 indicating that she suffered from poor health, feeling very weak and feverish (2013:31). Three years later, Margaretha had her will drafted on February 23rd, 1554. She did not write the will herself but only signed it in a very shaky handwriting, which reinforces Prasser’s and Klettenberg’s claims about poisoning.

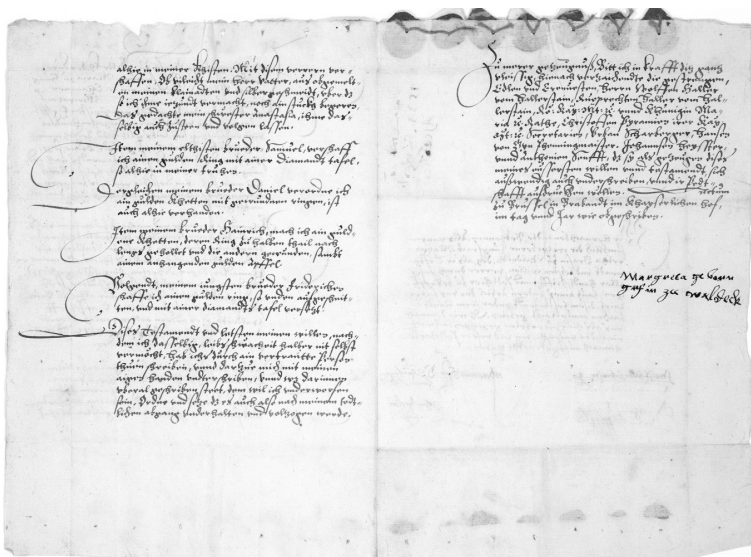


Figure 4. An excerpt of Margaretha’s will, signed with her shaky handwriting on February 23rd, 1554. Source: Staatsarchiv Marburg Paket 115.1. Nr. 251

Historian Dr. Gerhard Menk of the Hessian State Archive in Marburg commented in a television interview about her handwriting: “When she drafted the will, it was completely clear to her that her life would not last much longer. One can make out a clearly blurred script on the will. She wrote with a hand that was trembling. And in this respect death

was foreseeable early on” (my translation) (*Schneewittchen und der Mord in Brüssel*). In her will, Margaretha noted that her body is *blöd* (weak) but her mind and reason are still healthy:

I Maragetha of Waldeck,
chambermaid of Serene
Highness Princess Misses
Mary of Hungary and
Bohemia etc. Queen etc.,

On this date today,
the twenty third day of
February, in the year of our
Lord fifteen hundred fifty
four, I, my body half weak,
but my mind and reason
healthy, order, set make, and
command by power of will,
according the order of law in
the name of God. Namely my
soul, when it departs from this
perishable world, I commit it
to God the Almighty.

(my translation)

Ich Margaretha zu Waldeckh,
der durch Leuchtigisten
Fürstin, frawen Maria zu
Hungern und Behaim etc.
Khunigin etc.
ChammerJungfraw,

Wiewol auf heut
datum, den dreyvundzwaint-
zigisten tag february, im Jahr
unsers Herrn funfzehnhundert
vierundfunfzig, ich leibs halb
blöd, Jedoch meines gemuets
und vernunft gesundt, Ordne,
setzte, schaff und gebiet in
kraft Testaments, nach
ordnung der Rechten in namen
Gottes also. Nemb lich mein
seel, wan dieselbig von dieser
zergenglichen weldt
abschaiden, beuelch ich sy
Gott allmechtigen.

(Sander 2013:33)

Since the second century BC and especially during the Middle Ages, arsenic was a popular poison that was commonly used at court to remove disagreeable contemporaries. The almost odorless substance has a slightly sweet taste to it and can therefore be added in dissolved form to food and drink without causing any suspicions. Arsenic, also called “the poison of kings” or “inheritance powder” is fatal already at very low doses (Holstege et al. 2010:51; Wilhelm, Zhai, and Maibach 2012:219). An acute poisoning causes nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and kidney damage (Proctor, Hughes, and Hathaway 2004:423). Arsenic is an insidious poison because the process of dying can take several days and sometimes even weeks. Stripp notes in *The Forensic Aspects of Poisons* (2007): “By the late 1500s, poisoning reached almost epidemic proportions and spread throughout Europe. Poisoners and their potential victims shaped much of the historical record with assassinations, murder, and the resultant paranoia” (40-42). If we are to believe the early records by Prasser, Klettenberg, and Varnhagen,

Margaretha was most likely poisoned and thus murdered. Her weakening health at her young age of 21 years supports that theory. The slow effect of the poison would explain the wasting away of her body. Although Margaretha was buried at the Franciscan monastery in Brussels, her grave has disappeared without a trace since the church was dismantled in 1799 and the graves were torn up. Today, the old parts of the church are a popular tourist attraction known as “Bruxella 1238 Museum.”⁵

Dwarfs

In the Grimms’ tale, Snow White survives the poisoning attacks by the queen and lives happily ever after not least because of the help of the dwarfs who save her life repeatedly. Although one might think that the notion of dwarfs who slaved away in mines from morning till evening to search for ore and gold (as written in the tale) is a purely fictitious idea, the popular fairy-tale motif is not far-fetched from a gruesome reality, namely child labor. Already Werner Sombart remarked that

In the mining industry (as early as the 16th century) one can find child labor hidden under the pretense of apprenticeships: the boys began to work as *Kläuberbuben* (mining apprentices) between the ages of 10 and 12 ... A similar justification of employing children is used in the copper mines of Mansfeld [Saxony-Anhalt]: Children between the ages of 13 and 14 years have to retrieve the ore from the longwalls of the miners ... In doing so they are getting used with time to the hard work ... they tie the rope of the mine cart loaded with ore to the foot and drag it this way, lying on their side, outside of the structure. (my translation, 1919:839)

The *Deutsches Bergwörterbuch mit Belegen* (German Mountain Dictionary With Records, 1871) by Heinrich Veith states:

Because of the location here (close to the Riestädt [now spelled Riestedt, Saxony-Anhalt]) coal mining takes place along stretches that are partially horizontal and fall partially by five to ten degrees. For this reason boys between the ages of 14 and 19 years ... can be used advantageously for this work. (my translation, 282)

Sander discovered that there is also a striking connection between child labor in the mines of Waldeck/Wildungen and Margaretha’s family. In 1561 Margaretha’s brother Samuel opened several copper, ore, and gold mines close to Waldeck since mining was a lucrative

business for the entire region. Only people of small growth were suitable candidates for this kind of hard labor since the narrow tunnels were only about 30 inches in height (some tunnels were even much smaller): “The tunnels are not higher than 2.5 feet ... It is miserably sour work for the boys to bring forth the mining carts, because they often have to crawl on their hands and feet to then push the mining carts in front of them” (my translation; Jordan 1803:284). The employment of children and teenagers was common practice because they were cheap day laborers who risked their health without any complaints. Many families lived in such poverty that the youngest had to earn an extra income below ground. Johann Philipp Riess states “über 200 arme Kinder” (over 200 poor children) earned a living in the Hessian copper, slate, and cobalt mine Riegelsdorf [now Richelsdorf] (1791:50). By researching the mining pay slips dated 1586 of a mine in the Principality of Waldeck, Sander found the rubric “Servants and Boys” and a list of 13 names (1994:69).

Even the lankest boys must have suffered from the narrowness of the tunnels, constantly threatened by falling rocks since their woolen or leather headgear, the *Gugel*—a type of hood with a trailing point—provided little protection. The labor below ground caused many chronic illnesses and physical deformities, not to mention the mental damages and psychological distress. The physical infirmity brought death to many of the young workers who were still in their developmental phases. Due to a lack of sunlight and hard work in awkward positions, the children’s bodies gradually withered away and became stunted. Often they suffered from malnutrition and their faces were pale and emaciated. In a collection of reports on *The Physical and Moral Condition of the Children and Young Persons Employed in Mines and Manufactures* dated 1843 by British Commissioners, the children working in coal mines are described as “chicken-breasted,” “crooked and short-legged,” having a “remarkably stunted appearance,” and frequently a “crippled gait” (58-60). A very specific description of a pitman is given as follows: “His stature is diminutive, his figure disproportionate and misshapen; his legs being much bowed; his chest protruding ... his cheeks beings generally hollow, his brow overhanging ... (Parliamentary Report 1843:60).

Given that the children working in mines aged considerably faster than average, one can easily imagine that in the 16th century, when the miners came out of the mines with their headgear on, they must have looked like dwarfs. The book *De Re Metallica* (On the Nature of Metals/Minerals, 1556) on German mining technology by German scholar Georg Bauer (Pawer), alias Georgius Agricola (1494–1555), contains numerous woodcuts depicting miners of the 16th century. Their

resemblance to the notion of dwarfs with beards and pointed caps is remarkable.⁶



Figures 5, 6, and 7. German miners with the typical headgear and work clothes in the 16th century. Source: *De re metallica* (1556) Book VI, 213; Book VI, 161; Book II, 40.

Another interesting parallel between the dwarfs in the Grimms' tale "Snow White" and the miners from the Waldeck/Wildungen area can be unearthed with regard to the unique communal living situation in a single living and bedroom space. In the "Snow White" version of 1810 it is written: "As Little Snow White entered the house, there was a table, and on the table seven plates with seven spoons, seven forks, seven knives, and seven glasses, and also in the room were seven small beds" (my translation, Rölleke 1975:246). In the 16th century, the miners of the small town Bergfreiheit (near Waldeck and Wildungen) usually shared one small house that was equipped only with the bare essentials because the miners' families lived too far away from the mine and a daily return home was unfeasible (Sander 1994:53). Sander's research reveals that Bergfreiheit was the only mining village with miners' houses of a single room that combined the living area with the sleeping area (1994:51). The unique architectural design of the houses, as well as the shared living community of the miners, resembles the living situation of the dwarfs in "Snow White."

The Grimms' Sources and Precursors

Between 1798 and 1841, the Grimms lived and worked about 30 years in Kassel, only 29 miles away from the towns Bad Wildungen and Waldeck. It was during this time that they collected and revised their versions of "Snow White." But who were the Grimms' main sources? Whose source story could have been inspired by the legendary murder of Margaretha von Waldeck? How would this particular source story have reached the Grimms? And if the Grimms' "Snow White" is based on Hessian sources, as they stated in their annotations, why is the title "Sneewittchen" written in Low German?

To begin with, a note about the Grimms' title *Sneewittchen*/*Schneeweißchen* (from Low German *Snee*, High German *Schnee* [snow], Low German *witt*, High German *weiß* [white], the German suffix "-chen" creates a diminutive form). Although the tale itself was recorded in High German, the Grimms used both forms in the first edition of 1812. In their annotations about the origins of "Snow White," the Grimms remarked: "Taken from many diverse Hessian stories, this fairy tale is one of the best known stories. The Low German name of the fairy tale is maintained in areas where High German is spoken or distorted into Schliwitchen" (my translation, Grimm 1856:87). Low German was also spoken in the 16th century in the Hessian Principality of Waldeck, as Sander was able to prove by means of a dictionary from the region (*Waldeckisches Wörterbuch*) containing the translation of *snewit* to *schneeweiss* (Bauer 1969:95).

While there is no evidence that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm have ever visited Waldeck or the nearby city Wildungen personally, a letter written by their sister Lotte (Charlotte Amalie) confirms that she had travelled in 1818 to Wildungen for a health spa and mineral water treatment (*Brunnenkur*). Since the health spa in Wildungen was a popular venue, it is not difficult to imagine that it attracted illustrious guests who would while away the time with drinking mineral water and entertaining conversations about the local area and its history. Lotte's letter indicates that she was accompanied by her brother Ludwig Emil Grimm, a painter who also contributed the frontispiece for the second edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1819.⁷ They moved in with Rose (Rosine Wilhelmine) Wild, who was married to Philip Müller, pharmacist and mayor of Wildungen. Rose was a fairy-tale aficionada and maintained close contact with fairy-tale collectors, such as Marie Hassenpflug (who lived with her two sisters Jeanette and Amalie in Kassel) and pastor Ferdinand Siebert from Treysa (about 16 miles from the city Bergfreiheit). The Grimm, Wild, and Hassenpflug households were not only bound together through their common interest in fairy tales but also through marriages. While Lotte Grimm married Marie's brother Ludwig Hassenpflug in 1822, Wilhelm Grimm married Rose's sister Dorothea (Dortchen) Wild in 1825.

When exploring the question of how and when fairy-tale source stories were swapped between the Grimm, Wild, and Hassenpflug families it is important to understand that a very close relationship between the storytellers already developed soon after Wilhelm had returned to Kassel from a six-month Berlin trip in December 1809. Valerie Paradiz describes the Hassenpflug sisters in this connection as "fairy-tale think tank" (2005:86). The ladies "became steady members of the reading circle that met each week in the Grimm home. The salon had become a center for gatherings of the young, educated middle class of Kassel. It brought Lotte Grimm and the women of the Wild and Hassenpflug families together, and meaningful friendships developed around their delight in telling and remembering stories" (2005:86). Given the frequent exchanges of readings, fairy tales, legends, and other entertaining stories at the Grimms' home it is conceivable that one of the young women also contributed the local story about the legendary death of Margaretha von Waldeck.

Besides the statement that "Snow White" is based on many diverse Hessian sources, the Grimms identify the names "Siebert" and the "Hassenpflugs" as story tellers of the tale "Snow White" (Rölleke 1975:259). Rölleke remarks about the source of the tale: "Uncertain; since the story was already added in 1808 and was written down twice by Jacob Grimm, it probably goes back to the oral transmission of

Marie Hassenpflug” (1975:380). Besides Marie Hassenpflug, Rölleke assumes that Siebert contributed an alternative ending to the tale (1975:383). While it is impossible to list with absolute certainty all contributors who provided the Grimms with source stories and specific fairy-tale motifs, the Grimms themselves indicated other variants of the “Snow White” canon they were already familiar with. One example is the Italian literary fairy tale “The Young Slave” written by Giambattista Basile in his 1634 work the *Pentamerone*, which contains the fairy-tale motif of the glass coffin, here seven crystal chests. The Grimms not only listed five different beginnings of “Snow White” and a version that Jacob learned in 1815 during his stay in Vienna, but also made note of Johann Karl August Musäus’ “Snow White” variant “Richilde” in his *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (Folktales of the Germans, 1782–1786). This particular story locates Snow White, here named Blanca (“White”), in Brabant. When the jealous stepmother, the Countess of Brabant Richilde, consults her magic mirror, she asks:

Mirror blink, mirror blank,
golden mirror on the wall,
show me the most beautiful
maid in Brabant.

(my translation)

Spiegel blink, Spiegel blank,
goldner Spiegel an der Wand,
zeig mir die schönste Dirne in
Brabant.

(Grimm 1856:90; Rölleke
1975:384)

In contrast to the Grimms, Musäus names the existing location Brabant in his tale and defines a specific time period by referencing the Catholic saint Albertus Magnus, who lived between 1200 and 1280.⁸ The fairy-tale motifs in Musäus’ “Richilde” share striking commonalities with the motifs used in the Grimms’ “Snow White,” e.g., a magic mirror, the dwarfs, three attempted murders of Blanca with poisoned objects (a pomegranate, soap, and a letter), and Richilde’s punishment of dancing in hot iron slippers.

Interestingly, another “Snow White” variant preceded the Grimms’ published tale. In fall of 1808, German writer and politician Albert Ludewig Grimm (1786-1872) (not related to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm) completed his collection of fairy tales and published it in 1809 under the title *Kindermärchen*. His “Schneewittchen” is a fairy-tale play in 1057 verses. According to Albert Ludewig Grimm the tale “Schneewittchen” is based on “a popular folktale of that name which varies greatly in various ways” but had been changed by him in form (my translation, 1809:VII).⁹ While this version shares some parallels with the Grimms’ tale, such as the queen’s hate for her stepdaughter and envy of her extraordinary beauty, the seven dwarfs, the murder

attempt with poison (poisoned figs), and a magic mirror, it also contains significant differences, e.g., Snow White has a stepsister called Adelheid who is banished into a magic mirror, a dwarf king rescues Snow White, and the punishment of the evil queen is to lie in a glass coffin for 99 times 99 years. The Brothers Grimm were not only aware of their competition, they also publicly frowned upon the work of their namesake. In a footnote of the preface to their first edition (1812), they wrote: “But it has to be noted explicitly that a not so successful collection titled *Kindermärchen*, published in Heidelberg by a namesake A.L. Grimm, has absolutely nothing in common with us and our collection” (my translation, 1812:XIX-XX).¹⁰

Conclusion

The attempt of tracing the roots of a specific fairy tale in historical reality is a laborious undertaking to say the least. Few people have dared to do so and among those who tried even fewer approached the matter with a sincere scientific interest. Fairy-tale parodists like Traxler and Bartels have intentionally mocked scholars and the general public with their professionally drawn up persiflages. But does that render every earnest intention to connect fairy tales with references in real history *a priori* futile? If we rule out the mere possibility of connections between fairy tales and real places and people in advance then how do we justify the mentioning of the city Bremen in the fairy tale “The Town Musicians of Bremen” or the heath nearby the city Buxtehude in “The Hare and the Hedgehog”? In his essay “Orale Traditionen als historische Quelle” (Oral Traditions as Historical Source), Lutz Röhrich calls the endeavor to historicize fairy tales “töricht” (foolish) (1988:79). He draws attention to the concerning fact that even if assumptions about fairy tales are far from historical reality, they are still spread in the media and serve as advertisement in the tourism industry, e.g., for the so-called “*Märchenstraße*” (Fairy-Tale Route) in Germany (1988:80). But this is an entirely different issue and one can argue just the same that the tourism industry helps to promote the fairy tale, increases awareness of the genre, and fosters people’s engagement with fairy tales on some level.

Yet, it is true that the increased propagation, oversimplification, and hyping of potentially false information about fairy tales by the media can be unsettling, especially when such flawed information is combined with the effects of *Rückkopplung* (feedback, regeneration), that is when stories, e.g., fairy tales and legends, to the extent they grow in popularity and are mediated, find their way back again to the people and are being retold (Petzold 1999:118). Sabine Wienker-Piepho made a similar observation about fairy-tale sensationalism in

her review of Sander's book *Schneewittchen: Märchen oder Wahrheit* for the renowned fairy-tale journal *Märchenspiegel*. Wienker-Piepho cites headings from German newspapers and tabloids, including the *Bild Zeitung*, which sensationalized and decontextualized Sander's research with headings such as "Snow White Really Lived—But She Was Blond ..." or "Snow White Comes from Wildungen" (1994:16). Considering the fact that such kind of sensationalism can hardly be avoided in the age of Internet memes and social media, it is even more so the responsibility of today's folklore scholars to educate the public about fairy-tale and legend scholarship.

Finally, what may be concluded from Sander's research? What about the possibility that one of the numerous Grimm versions was influenced by a source story based on the historical figure Margaretha von Waldeck and her legendary death? One might be tempted to look no further than J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal lecture "On Fairy-Stories" delivered in 1939 and first published in 1947. Tolkien argues:

Speaking of the history of stories and especially of fairy-stories we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty. For this reason, to take a casual example, the fact that a story resembling the one known as 'The Goosegirl' is told in the 13th century of Bertha Broadfoot, mother of Charlemagne, really proves nothing either way: neither that the story was (in the 13th century) descending from Olympus or Asgard by way of an already legendary king of old, on its way to become a Hausmärchen; nor that it was on its way up. (1947:53)

Some key motifs of the Grimms' "Snow White," such as the poisoning of a young, beautiful, aristocratic woman, reflect events and incidents that happened in real life. As the centuries passed such historical occurrences may have indeed not only turned into legends but also intermingled with fairy-tale motifs, characters, and plot elements. So what does that mean when we are trying to distinguish between fairy tales and legends? Should fairy tales and legends be classified as distinctively separate genres at all?

Perhaps a rethinking is necessary of whether the narrow distinctions between the two genres are overdrawn. Already German scholar Martin Wähler pointed to the fact that the legend of the "White Lady" examined in his study *Die Weisse Frau* (1984/1931) shares commonalities with the goddess Holda (or Hulda, Holle, Holla), which is also a prominent figure in the Grimms' fairy tale "Frau Holle"

(“Mother Hulda”) (76). In the foreword to their *Deutsche Sagen*, the Grimms emphasized:

To try to debate the advantages of both genres would be inept, and even in this discussion of their divergence one should neither overlook nor deny their common properties, nor the fact that they intermingle with one another in infinite combinations and intertwinings, often resembling one another to a greater or lesser degree. (my translation, 1816:VII)¹¹

The Grimms were highly invested in collecting and preserving both legends and fairy tales. At the same time, they took great interest in their home state Hesse and researched its local history. Jacob remarked in an article about the names of Hessian towns: “He who loves his homeland also must be willing to understand it and he who wants to understand it, has to immerse himself in its history everywhere” (my translation, 1840:134).¹²

Although the Grimms’ Snow White is a fairy-tale figure from the realm of fantasy and imagination, the earthly destiny of Margaretha von Waldeck clings to her. By delving into the local history of 16th-century Hesse, Sander has shed light in his research on existing places and connections of historical events. He has helped to disclose a possible murder of international dimension, explored child labor conditions in Hessian mines, and provided detailed background information on the family of Waldeck. Lastly, he has established numerous connections between the Grimms’ “Snow White” and the life history of Margaretha von Waldeck, thus establishing a platform for further research on a potentially Hessian source story. In the end, who is to decide which stories were written by life itself and which ones are purely fictional?

Notes

¹ The exact date of Margaretha’s death is unclear. Different sources vary between March 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th, 1554. I decided to pick the middle date between March 13th and 17th, 1554.

² On October 17, 1810, the Brothers Grimm sent their first collection of forty-eight fairy tales to their friend Clemens Brentano with the remark “for any desired use” but with the request to receive the documents back. Wisely, they had made copies of all tales because Brentano never returned them. After Brentano’s death, a close friend of the family, abbot Ephrem van der Meulen, stored the manuscripts in the Abbey of Oelenberg, a monastery of Trappist monks in Alsace. Forty-six fairy tales were discovered in the 20th century and published as *Oelenberger Handschrift* in 1924 by Franz Schulz, in 1927 by Joseph Leffitz, and in 1975 by Heinz Rölleke.

³ Fairy-tale scholar Heinz Rölleke noted that Jacob Grimm sent six fairy tales in April and May 1808 to his friend and former teacher Friedrich Carl von Savigny (for his daughter Bettina), and among them a copy of “Snow White” titled “Schneeweißchen,

Schneewittchen, auch: Das Unglückskind,” calling Snow White “The Unlucky Child” (1975:342, 381).

⁴ Although the *Siebengebirge* consists of over forty hills altogether, there are seven mountains that stand out. Depending on the viewpoint near the river Rhine, one notices almost exactly seven hills, which are not always the same and not even the highest: Großer Ölberg (460 m), Löwenberg (455 m), Lohrberg (435 m), Nonnenstromberg (335 m), Petersberg (331 m, former name: Stromberg), Wolkenburg (324 m), and Drachenfels (321 m).

⁵ See City of Brussels n.d.

⁶ The fact that Waldeck and Wildungen are old mining countrysides might also explain why there are so many sagas associated with dwarfs and gnomes in this particular area. Louis Friedrich Christian Curtze’s book *Volksüberlieferungen aus dem Fürstenthum Waldeck* (Folklore from the Principality of Waldeck) (1860) contains 15 sagas about *Zwerge, Hollen, and Wichtelmännchen* (dwarfs/gnomes).

⁷ Sander also discovered that Ludwig Emil Grimm was in the area of Bad Zwesten (about 8 miles from Wildungen) some time between the years 1814 and 1824 where he drew the picture of a mineral water fountain.

⁸ In a Grimm version of 1810 the queen asks the magic mirror “Wer ist die schönste Frau in ganz Engelland” (Who is the fairest woman in all of angel land.” According to Wilhelm Mannhardt, the term “angel land” equals the terms “fairy land” and “glass mountain” (1858:XVII-XIV, 333, 740). The terms indicate a mythical or heavenly location of the souls, a realm of light, and the home to all life (1858:414). The terms “Glasberg” or “gläserner Berg” (glass mountain) appear in many other of the Grimms’ fairy tales, in a Viennese version of “Snow White” (see Grimm 1856:90; Mannhardt 1858:333), and in Albert Ludewig Grimm’s “Snow White” version of 1808.

⁹ “Das Märchen vom Schneewittchen ist nach einem unter mancherley starken Abweichungen bekannten Volksmärchen dieses Namens, aber nach eigener Umformung bearbeitet” (A. L. Grimm 1809:VII). See also Erich Reimers’ dissertation (1985) and Heinz Rölleke’s entry on Albert Ludwig Grimm in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (167-169).

¹⁰ “Ausdrücklich aber muß noch bemerkt werden, daß eine vor ein paar Jahren von einem Namensverwandten A.L. Grimm unter dem Titel: Kindermärchen zu Heidelberg herausgekommene, nicht eben wohl gerathene, Sammlung mit uns und der unsrigen gar nicht nicht gemein hat.”

¹¹ “Ueber den Vorzug beider zu streiten wäre ungeschickt; auch soll durch diese Darlegung ihrer Verschiedenheit weder ihr Gemeinschaftliches übersehen, noch gelehnet werden, daß sie in unendlichen Mischungen und Wendungen in einander greifen und sich mehr oder weniger ähnlich werden.”

¹² “Wer seine Heimat liebt muss sie auch verstehen wollen, wer sie verstehen will, überall in ihre Geschichte zu dringen suchen.”

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