

The Portrayal of the Maturation Process of Girl Figures in Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm. By Diann Rusch-Feja. (European University Studies Series 1, German Language and Literature, vol. 1539. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995. P. xi + 288, abstract, appendix, bibliography, indices, ISBN 3-361-4837-2; US ISBN 0-8204-8954-6.)

Christine Goldberg

Volume 20, Number 1-2, 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087750ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087750ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Goldberg, C. (1998). Review of [*The Portrayal of the Maturation Process of Girl Figures in Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm.* By Diann Rusch-Feja. (European University Studies Series 1, German Language and Literature, vol. 1539. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995. P. xi + 288, abstract, appendix, bibliography, indices, ISBN 3-361-4837-2; US ISBN 0-8204-8954-6.)]. *Ethnologies*, 20(1-2), 244–246. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087750ar>

The Portrayal of the Maturation Process of Girl Figures in Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm. By Diann Rusch-Feja. (European University Studies Series 1, German Language and Literature, vol. 1539. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995. P. xi + 288, abstract, appendix, bibliography, indices, ISBN 3-361-4837-2; US ISBN 0-8204-8954-6.)

This work integrates two-and-a-half different perspectives. The “maturation process” is observed from a point of view representing analytical psychology and psychoanalysis. The Grimms’ tales are pursued through all relevant editions, with attention to their sources. And, for some tales, other versions of the tale-type are invoked for comparison.

The author explains (p. 29) that tales in which the heroine does not seem to mature were omitted. Whether for this or for another reason, many well-known tales, such as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel, are not featured, which happily leaves room for more lesser-known tales. Sixteen are discussed in depth, eight brother-sister tales (KHM 9, 11, 15, 25, 49, 51, 79, and 141) and nine in which the heroine is kept from her proper husband (KHM 11 again, 13, 89, 113, 127, 135, 186, 193, and 198). The selection includes tale types (AT 450, AT 451) with more than one version, and tales with substituted brides. This selection automatically permits the author to note differences in versions of the same story. In addition, she has routinely checked the summaries in Bolte-Polívka, and occasionally refers to variants from other sources in order to comment on the particular details in the Grimms’ version.

For each tale, Rusch-Feja shows the alterations that the Grimms (chiefly Wilhelm) made in the text when these are relevant to the portrayal of the heroine’s personality development. In Hänsel and Gretel, for example, Gretel was rendered more timid. The Grimms repeatedly altered situations that suggested sexuality. They increased contrasts, made some motifs more Germanic, and added a moralizing Christian tone.

People who attempt psychoanalytic interpretations of folktales are inclined to put time and effort into thinking about the stories, and this often leads to interesting observations. The author notices repeated references to blindness and sight in *The White Bride and the Black Bride*, and a doublecross of the true and false brides in *Maid Maleen* (where the true bride is forced, ironically, to impersonate the false one). Motifs shared by two or more tales are frequently highlighted. The author observes that, in all of these tales, there is a period of

waiting. Having been attacked or threatened by a villain, the heroine suffers for an indefinite time, silently spinning, minding geese, helping the witch, etc. This hiatus is interpreted as a time of maturation during which the girl's previously undifferentiated personality develops.

Psychoanalytic interpretations of folktales are often felt (by skeptical folklorists) to be somewhat arbitrary because they depend on a single variant that may not be representative of the tradition. By distinguishing subsequent alterations from the Grimms' original version, Rusch-Feja has clarified the source of some of the features. The fact that the additions often improve the psychological dynamics that can be read into the tales shows how deeply Freud, Jung, and their successors depended on the same system of symbols that the Grimms conveyed.

Many psychoanalysts have testified that folktales can facilitate clinical treatment. Such therapists naturally think that the human psyche is of primary importance, and therefore they apply to folktales the same intellectual constructs which they have learned to apply to the psyche. Folklorists, however, have no excuse for such reductionism. Fusch-Feja presents her book as an interdisciplinary study involving philology, psychoanalysis, and folklore. But her brief section on "The Psychoanalytic Approach to Fairy Tales" (p. 9-15) will not convince all readers that psychoanalysis is indeed a discipline that produces verifiable results. Moreover, suggestions that a character transformed into an animal is psychologically immature, that a withdrawal must be a regression, that a hostile older woman is a negative mother figure and an imposter is a shadow figure, and that the marriage at the end of the tale evidences the couple's higher consciousness, may be descriptive, but they do not actually explain anything. It is also bothersome that minor alterations in a tale require major alterations in interpretation. Because male-female is a basic opposition in Jungian psychology, for example, a change in gender (such as that of the ogre in AT 327 or AT 313, or the family situation described at the outset of AT 403 or AT 451) requires a whole new exegesis. Furthermore, the episodic composition of the tales featured here calls into question the psychoanalysts' assumption that each tale embodies a "unity of meaning" (Hedwig von Beit, quoted on p. 11, note 23).

This book began as a dissertation, and the footnotes are copious. Many document changes in the Grimms' texts; others refer to interpretations offered by such psychoanalytically-oriented authors as von Beit, Bettelheim, von Franz, Heuschler, and Kast. The 32-page bibliography is impressive and useful.

However, neither of two current strands of potentially relevant "new historical" scholarship (McGlathery 1993: 24-28, 51-56, 93-95), a leftist feminist approach and the examination of *Buchmärchen* intended for consumption by bourgeois families, is discussed. Nor does Rusch-Feja correlate the Grimms' alterations that she identifies with what other scholars during the past century, and especially since 1980, have observed about the same process in other Grimm tales (McGlathery 1993: 40-48, 52-54). Rusch-Feja is of course entitled to define her own topic, but her specifically psychoanalytical focus necessarily affects the appeal of her work. Her willingness to take folktales seriously is commendable, and it is to be hoped that in the future she will investigate some of the important questions raised more directly by the tales.

Reference

McGlathery, James M. 1993. *Grimms' Fairy Tales: A History of Criticism on a Popular Classic*. Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House.

CHRISTINE GOLDBERG
Los Angeles, California
