Hansel and Gretel

‘Hansel and Gretel’, German folk tale, with analogues all over the world. The tale combines several important motifs: the wicked stepmother, the abandoned children, the trail of crumbs or peas that are eaten, the edible house, and the tricking of the witch/ogre. Parts of it closely resemble Perrault’s ‘Petit Poucet’ (with an analogue in the Italian tale ‘Chick’) and d’Aulnoy’s ‘Finette Cendron’, as well as the candy houses in the medieval Land of Cockaigne.

The tale was first published by the Brothers Grimm in the first edition of their Kinder- und Hausmärchen (1812); their source was their neighbour Dortchen Wild, later Wilhelm Grimm’s wife. It bears striking resemblances to other tales in their collection: ‘Brother and Sister’, ‘God's Food’, and ‘Children of Famine’, and to the recently published tale ‘Dear Mili’. They persistently lengthened and altered the tale from the early terse manuscript version (1810), adding names for the children and Christian motifs in 1812, transforming the mother to a stepmother in 1819, and further rationalizing the abandonment of the children in 1843 and 1857. Their final version (1857) goes like this: A woodcutter is persuaded by his wife to abandon his children, Hansel and Gretel, in the forest because the family faces near-starvation in a time of famine. The first time the children find their way back to the family cottage by following the trail of pebbles Hansel has strewn on their path. The second time, however, they are unable to return because birds eat the crumbs Hansel has scattered. They walk deeper and deeper into the forest, subsisting on berries, until a bird leads them to a house made of bread, with ‘cake for a roof and pure sugar for windows’. Hansel gorges himself on a large piece of the roof, while Gretel eats a piece of the window pane in spite of the voice from inside the house crying:

Who's that nibbling at my house?
Nibble, nibble, I hear a mouse.
Who's that nibbling at my house?

They answer that it's just the wind, but then are appalled to see the witch emerge from the house. She invites them in, feeds them pancakes and milk, and puts them to bed in clean white sheets. They think they are ‘in heaven’, but the witch's cannibalistic intentions are clear. The next morning she puts Hansel in a cage to fatten him up; Gretel must cook him nourishing meals, while eating only crabshells herself. The near-sighted witch regularly tests one of Hansel's fingers to see if he's getting fatter, but he cleverly gives her a chicken bone to feel. After a month she decides to eat him anyway and commands Gretel to build the fire in the oven. Gretel tearfully follows her orders, but when the witch tells her to climb in to see if the oven is hot enough, she pretends not to understand and asks the witch to demonstrate. The witch climbs in, Gretel slams the door shut, and then releases Hansel from his cage as the witch, howling, is burned to death. They fill their pockets with gold and jewels from the witch's house, are carried over a wide river by a friendly duck, and finally reach the family cottage again. Their stepmother has died, and they live with their father (and the jewels they've brought) ‘in utmost joy’.

Some scholars have focused on the biographical origins for the Grimms' investment in the tale and the changes they made, stressing their own closeness as siblings, their reverence for their mother, their ‘abandonment’ by their long-dead father, and the importance of domestic harmony.
and security in their lives. Others have stressed the historical background of the tale: the repeated famines in the early 19th century in Germany, the tradition of the abandonment of children, the ubiquity of stepmothers because so many mothers died young, the brooding presence of real forests that were always threatening, uncivilized places. (This urge to see the tale as a historical source has been brilliantly parodied by Hans Traxler in Die Wahrheit über Hänsel und Gretel (The Truth about Hansel and Gretel); he provides mock-documentation for the location of the family hut near the Frankfurt–Würzburg autobahn, of the witch's cottage and oven in the forest nearby, and of fossilized biscuits from its roof.)

Other scholars have focused on the psychological states and childish impulses the story represents. Bruno Bettelheim insists that the story, his favourite tale, is really about dependence, oral greed, and destructive desires that children must learn to overcome. They arrive home ‘purged of their oral fixations’. Other interpreters have stressed the satisfying psychological effects of the children vanquishing the witch or of the wicked stepmother's death. Jack Zipes argues that the Grimms' final version of the tale celebrates the Oedipus complex and the symbolic order of the father, systematically denigrates the adult female characters (who may in fact be the same person), and rationalizes the abuse of the children.


Bibliography

- Tatar, Maria, “‘Table Matters; Cannibalism and Oral Greed’”, in Off with their Heads! (1992).

— Elizabeth Wanning Harries

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