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The Medieval and Renaissance Fool in Germany and Its Impact on Grimm's Fairy Tales

“There once lived a man who had two sons. The older boy was bright and clever and knew just what to do and when. The younger was stupid and had trouble learning things, and he understood nothing” (Tatar 15). These opening lines from the Grimm's *A Fairy Tale About A Boy Who Left Home To Learn About Fear* shocks the sensibilities of modern readers with its callous comparison of the two sons. People have never been quite certain what to do with those who deviate from society's norm. Michel Foucault, in his study of the history of madness, presents a dramatic picture of late medieval Europe as a time when the fools and the mad were loose in the land. Before they were confined to institutions and hospitals, they roamed the highways, byways, and roads of the civilized (Middlefort 229). The New York City Public Library holds a copy of medical doctor William W. Ireland's book entitled *The Mental Affections of Children, Idiocy, Imbecility and Insanity* (1898). Ireland notes that, while France officially documents the existence of “36,000 idiots,” it is probable “that number exceeds 60,000” (4). The concept and place of the fool in society is a fascinating study as it unfolds through history. Our modern conscience recoils at labeling people as fools, idiots, nitwits, retards, and a host of other now-politically-incorrect descriptors. But, one thing has never changed in regards to the fool; we cannot help but stare, and stupidity is still very much in vogue. From *The Three Stooges* to *Dumb and Dumber*, there is ample evidence that we still love to laugh at and in every way gaze upon stupidity. The contemporary actor Will Ferrell has made a great deal of money and established a

fine career of playing the dimwit. Regarding his role as Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman*, Ferrell says, “I like playing a guy who’s dumb and doesn’t know it” (Smith 2). Speaking in 2009 at *The American Political Science Association* John S. Nelson notes that “fools are a mythic staple of literature and film in western civilization” (2). Why? Simply put, foolish people fascinate and entertain us. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s nineteenth-century collection of fairy tales parallel German attitudes toward the “fool” during the medieval and Renaissance periods - attitudes that are canonized in a number of their fairy tales.

Defining “The Fool”

First, we need to define what we mean by “fool.” Fools, jesters, and clowns are nearly universal, appearing throughout history in all cultures. In her sourcebook for *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*, Vicki Janik says that “defining foolishness is notoriously difficult” (2). Desiderius Erasmus’ seminar work from the early sixteenth-century *In Praise of Folly* addressed superstitious abuses of the Catholic Church and played a significant role in the Protestant Reformation. Erasmus’ satirical main character Folly warns against the absurdity of attempting to define foolishness (Janik 2). Yet, even the names ascribed to the fool are often quite descriptive. The Latin term *foliis* can be defined as a bellows, windbag, or a scrotum. Likewise, *coglione* is commonly denoted as a foole or a dolt, but it literally means a testicle (Willeford 11). It is not a subtle descriptor. Other synonyms for fool from the fifteenth-century Latin dictionary include *ignarus*, *lunaticus*, *ineptus*, *insensis* (Swain 3). Various other names of European origin identify the fool as *buffoon*, *jongeur*, *joculator*, *sot*, *mimus*, *histrion*, and *morio* (Otto 1). Whether nitwit, imbecile, dummy, or idiot, the inevitable characteristic of the fool lay in his or her inherent deficiency in education, experience, or innate capacity to understand. German Sebastian Brant, who authored the famous novel *Ship of Fools* (1494), may offer the

best definition of fool as “the human inability to act in one’s own best interests” (qtd. in Midelfort 242). In Grimm’s tales, the fool appears frequently as he does in *A Fairy Tale about a Boy Who Left Home to Learn about Fear* where the youngest son is described as “stupid” and he “had trouble learning things, and he understood nothing” (Tatar 15).

Not all fools are created equal, as more than one version of the fool is clearly evident through history. The Bible’s book of Proverbs warns the sinful fool that he defies wisdom at his own peril. In scripture, foolishness is especially equated with the sin of denying the existence of God (Psalm 14:1). Many early medieval writers focused on this aspect of foolishness. Another type of fool is sometimes described as the natural or innocent fool. The natural fool is unable to function normally because of a physical or mental deficiency. These fools are most often characterized as sincere and genuine in their nature. Barbara Swain describes these fools as the often-daily companions of most fifteenth century citizens. During the medieval ages and the Renaissance, fools were not isolated in institutions but “supported as harmless dependents in villages, courts and country houses” (2). Sometimes, especially “gifted” natural fools would be kept in the courts of kings, leaders, and wealthy dignitaries as a matter of compassion and kindness; yet, this “kindness” was not entirely selfless. In her book *Fools Are Everywhere*, Beatrice Otto indicates that while “the keeping of naturals may well have involved an element of charity... the revenue could far outweigh the expense” (33-34). Natural fools were sought out for their ability to entertain and amuse. There are even indications that those who worked for noblemen were tasked with the job of “talent-spotting for Fools” as they travelled the countryside (Billington 32). Quite naturally, people with a talent for entertaining began to see this as an opportunity to forge a fine career. While medieval fools were typically seen in a derogatory light, the Renaissance period embraced professional fools, often referred to as jesters

or clowns, and they could secure positions that led to substantial financial security as well as social status. A king's court would likely be made up of both natural and professional fools, with many people unable to distinguish between the two.

Any discussion of the history of fools will intersect with the subject of dwarfs. The Grimm's tale *The Queen Bee* features a "little insignificant dwarf" as the protagonist. He is the youngest of three sons and is described as "young and simple" whose brothers "laughed at him" (Grimm, "Queen"). His role is typical of the way the medieval and Renaissance periods portrayed the dwarf. The earliest known jester was a dwarf who served in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh Pepi II (Willeford 14). However, it was not simply an ancient phenomenon considering that, in 1566, Rome's Cardinal Vitelli employed thirty-four dwarfs to serve at an ecclesiastical banquet (Willeford 14). Beyond there being a universal fascination with human monstrosities, a dwarf's miniature size corresponds to the fool's lack of intelligence; it was natural for people to link the fool and the dwarf. Dwarfs were in high demand during the medieval and Renaissance times, and high demand coupled with low supply always attracts abuse and crime. Such was the case when it came to dwarfs. Parents would sometimes lock their children in special chests which stunted their growth and made them into dwarfs (Willeford 14). As barbaric as this sounds, parents saw this as an opportunity to create an opportunity for their child to pursue a profitable career in a world where prospects were rare. More often, however, children were kidnapped or purchased and turned into artificial dwarfs. This could be accomplished using the grease of bats, moles, or dormice, as well as through aptly named drugs such as dwarf elder and daisy juice mixed with milk (Otto 29). History is witness to the egregious abuse human beings will wield upon fellow humans when there is profit to be had, and fools were lucrative business.

For the medieval Christian theologian, the fool was a person to be chastised and shunned. Their foolishness endangered their own eternal soul, and their folly could bring down those around them as well. Still, medieval citizens looked upon the fool with curiosity or even awe. Renaissance dignitaries and citizens alike embraced fools and reveled in their value as entertainers. The fool became a true celebrity in the Renaissance culture. Storytellers and dramatists made great use of the fool as a rich character who helped create fertile ground for satire, comedy, and drama alike. In the nineteenth-century, folklorists Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm sought out fairy tales in their original, oral form. What they discovered, however, is that one will never find tales in their pure form. Tales have been adapted by every generation to their specific locale and unique cultural context, thus creating many different tales with similar storylines. Beyond that, oral tales do not translate seamlessly into the literary form. The stories published by the Grimm's have undergone considerable revision to best fit the written form. Yet, each tale preserved by the Grimm's provides insight into the prevailing attitudes of the Renaissance period, medieval times, and beyond. A number of the tales characterize the fool, and in doing so, provide opportunity for insight into lingering attitudes and developing beliefs within German culture regarding the classic fool.

“The Fool” in Medieval and Renaissance Germany

The Bible paints a picture of King Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived. His name, in fact, is often synonymous with wisdom, and authorship of the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are universally attributed to him. Ecclesiastes, however, has a much different tone than Proverbs. The phrase “everything is meaningless, completely meaningless” leads some to label Ecclesiastes pessimistic. Medieval theologians pointed to Ecclesiastes 2:21 where Solomon reflects on the fact that some people work wisely and skillfully, but at death they must leave the

fruit of their labor to those who have neither earned nor worked for it. Some saw, in this interpretation, the possibility of the fool experiencing victory on the shoulders of the wise. This simple interpretation spawned a movement of fiction reversing the role of the wise and the fool. J.M. Kemble “mentions the fact that Pope Gelasius in the fifth-century expelled from the Canon a *Contradictia Salamonis* [contradictory Solomon] and that a monk of St. Gall writing in the eleventh century reported that among the ‘haeretici’ [heretical] fables were current, *suculares literae*” [secular literature] (qtd. Swain 30). Within this literature, a fictional character arose named Marcolf, a “hairy clown, ignorant and obscene,” who made a fool of the great King Solomon (Swain 30). Marcolf appears in various works of literature throughout this period, including in an early twelfth-century German romance (Swain 31). In this romance, Solomon is a “pompous braggart who is defeated at his own game of being the wise man by the foulest creature in his kingdom” (Swain 34). The moral of the story is clearly that the wise man and the fool have changed places in the world. It was a tectonic shift in medieval thought that, in an age when most people have little power over their lives, the fool can triumph over the wise.

There is no shortage of authentic information about the place of fools in medieval and Renaissance Germany. In his book *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, Enid Welsford searched German state documents from the archives of Dresden and uncovered “seven fools in the sixteenth century and seven fools in the seventeenth century who were employed temporarily or permanently as entertainers of the Electors of Saxon” (137). Likewise, Otto has painstakingly researched known “jesters” from around the world and documented twelve named official court jesters in Germany between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries (271-290). One of the most famous (or infamous) German fools was Claus Narr whose exploits came at the end of the medieval period (note that his last name is the German word for “fool”). While on a hunting trip,

an official from the Electors of Saxony spotted the “half-witted peasant boy of Ranstadt, whose absurd behavior while keeping geese” made him an ideal candidate to serve in the royal court (Welsford 143). Claus’ fame rose to such heights that he was not only the subject of popular poetry but also immortalized by Wolfgang Bittner in a collection of over six hundred anecdotes detailing his many exploits, not the least of which were his clairvoyant abilities described as his “second sight” (144). The famous German reformer Martin Luther was aware of Claus and suspected that his clairvoyance came with the aid of demonic forces (Midelfort 259). For better or worse, Claus was a fool known throughout all of German culture.

There is a virtual parade of fools through the history of Germany. “Fool literature” was as stylish throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as fools themselves. Bartholomaeus Kruger, the organist and town clerk of Trebbin in Brandenburg, Germany, published *The History of Hans Clawerts* in 1587. He is portrayed as an itinerant buffoon, clairvoyant, quack-doctor, and general maker of merriment. He performed his theatrics in the homes of German nobles as well as the taverns of local villages (Welsford 22). But, it was not simply the natural fools that owned the day. Brant penned these words in *Ship of Fools* (1494):

Some fools seek knowledge high and higher,
 To M.A., Ph.D aspire,
 Though people deem them very bright,
 These fools can’t understand aright (qtd. In Otto xi).

Friedrich Taubmann demonstrated that fools were not relegated solely to those born nitwits. Taubmann attended Wittenberg University where he studied philology and earned a Professorship of Poetry. Yet, history seems to remember him most for being the “Scurra Palatii” (palace clown) because of his outrageous antics (Welsford 23). He was often found passed out

drunk where his students would play tricks on him. Wellsford describes Taubmann as “both a butt and a wit, and was equally renowned as an absurd glutton, a shameless beggar, a learned Latinist and a skillful improviser of poetry” (24). Taubmann found that there was more money to be made as a court jester than a university professor, and he became a professional fool, or the “amusing advisor,” at the Saxon court of Wittenberg (Midelfort 272). Clearly, the culture of the time seemed to reward foolish behavior on many fronts.

Writers in seventeenth-century Germany generally felt that the very existence of the German state was threatened by “Narrheit,” or folly, and that sheer stupidity was a major impediment to progress (Midelfort 230). In "Seventeenth-Century Views of Human Folly," K.G. Knight traces the century's development of German thought related to the fool. Alsatian Moscherosch wrote a satirical series of fourteen books called the *Gesichte* (History) that emphasized German nationalism and the risk that folly posed to state health and security (Knight 54). Aegidius Albertinus wrote a book inventorying the “follies of the day” (56). Christian Weise wrote a series of novels including *Der Politische Nascher* (The Political Dabbler) promoting taste, sophistication, and correct standards of speech. He discussed a “gallery of fools” who served as examples not to follow (Middlefort 65). The progression of thought concerning fools in the seventeenth-century moved from Brant's concept of foolishness as disobeying God's laws to Moscherosh's condemnation of fools who sacrifice their souls to foreigners to Weise's view that fools lack social sophistication as upstanding members of society. Swain reflects on the “ironic significance of this parade of fools.” She notes that fools are, at once, wholeheartedly condemned by one segment of society, and yet, enthusiastically embraced by another. It is out of this complicated milieu that the oral traditions of German fairy tales were forged.

The Role of “The Fool” in Grimm’s Fairy Tales

Though the place of the fool was beginning to lose vogue in German society, he yet maintained a strong hold among the German populace well into the early modern period when Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm began to collect their fairy tales. The popularity of fools amongst the common people is clearly evidenced in a number of the Grimm’s’ tales. The fool has often played a symbolic role in imaginative literature, and we see a variety of these roles expressed in a number of Grimm’s fairy tales.

Fools provide comic relief

The Grimm’s include two tales of fools that seem to serve the sole purpose of comic relief. *The Seven Swabians* detail the misadventures of seven men from Swabia, the southwest historical and ethnic region of Germany that has often been the butt of jokes in German lore. This slapstick adventure begins with the words “Once seven Swabians were together” and proceeds to reveal the utter stupidity of this band of fools. First, Herr Shulz hears a beetle and mistakes it for a war drum. He shouts out a warning to the others. Jackli believes he smells gunpowder, which causes Herr Schulz to jump over a fence, land on the teeth of a rake, and cry, “I surrender.” The others follow suit in throwing up their hands in surrender. When they realize they have surrendered to a rake, they swear to tell no one and move on in their journey. Their stupidity then leads them to mistake a hare for a monster, and finally to unwittingly follow each other into a river where they drown (Grimm, “Swabians”). Similarly, *The Clever People* offers value only as comic relief. In this tale, a husband leaves his wife with instructions to sell their three cows and gives her the minimum price he will accept. He reminds her that she “once fell on her head” as a little child and she is still affected by it (Grimm, “Clever”). He warns her that if she “messes things up,” he will beat her until she is black and blue. The wife quickly sells the

cows to a man who has forgotten his money belt. He convinces her to keep one of the cows as a security deposit until he returns with the remainder of the money. He, of course, never returns. The incensed husband calls her the “stupidest goose that ever waddled on God’s earth,” and mercifully offers to withhold her beating if he can find someone more stupid than her. “Clever” as he is, the husband succeeds in duping others simpletons until he recoups his money and says to his wife, “If stupidity always brought in as much as that, I would be quite willing to hold it in honor” (Grimm, “Clever”). There is little instructive morality of inspirational virtue to be taken from these two tales; they are purely fool’s tales designed to make people laugh in the tradition of Claus Narr and Hans Clawerts.

Laughter is a quintessential quality of being human. J.J.M. Askenasy of the El Aviv School of Medicine says, “No case of a human being who did not laugh once in his lifetime has been published in the literature” (qtd. in Janik 33). Though laughter is as common as people, why one laughs is a genuine scientific mystery. Robert Provine, a University of Maryland behavioral neuroscientist and author of the book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, says that “in the world of serious science, laughter is seen as a lightweight topic – an area lacking in clout and prestige” (2). He undertook the task of bringing scientific insight to the topic of laughter. Among his conclusions, he refers to the writings of Henri Bergson who suggests that “laughter is a means of forcing compliance to group norms through humiliation” (11). Laughter is part of our attempt to understand and, somehow, maintain the social order. This certainly explains why people laugh at the fool; we are making a statement about what is, and is not, acceptable behavior. The fool helps us make sense of the world and better understand our place in it. Beyond that, the fool helps us feel better about ourselves. St. Chrysostom says we laugh at the fool because it is “he who gets slapped” (qtd. in Welsford 318). Conceivably, in a world where

people feel powerless, stressed, hungry, tired, lost, hopeless, and “slapped” with every imaginable type of emotional burden, it is therapeutic to laugh at the fool because we identify with him and possibly feel better about our lot in life because of him. Then again, maybe we laugh because we are not the one who was slapped today and feel better for it. One thing we know: we laugh. Welsford concludes his study of “The Fool” by arguing that he is the “great untrusser of our slaveries, and comedy is the expression of the spirit of the Fool” (324).

Witnessing the fool makes our life feel more bearable.

Fools inspire by reminding people what it means to be human

The innocent fool inspires because he offers hope to the person who feels powerless and defeated. Nelson describes this as the ability to “confront trouble that brings out their surprising political resources” (2). Or, as Willeford contends, “The fool usually survives both his clumsiness and stupidity, or even madness, and the adversity that searches him out (28). Without the resources of intelligence, strength, or guile, the fool is the David who brings a smooth pebble to a fight with the mighty Goliath. Yet, he is somehow able to humiliate his abusers, outwit the wise, and defeat the powerful. Against all odds, the fool passes the tests, wins the heart of the beautiful princess, becomes the king, and lives happily ever after. “The fool,” as Welsford aptly describes it, “is not only physically, he is morally and spiritually resilient” (321). When many are tempted to quit their battles with life, the fool stands out as one who never gives up. For those who think they lack the resources to overcome their obstacles, the fool demonstrates how a little can be turned into much. The fool is the ultimate underdog...who wins.

In Grimm’s *The Three Languages*, an aged count’s only son is “stupid and can learn nothing” (Grimm, “Three”). On three separate occasions, the father sends him away for a year to a boarding school where he can learn. Each time, he returns with only one skill, the ability to

speak to a new type of animal. Finally, the father “fell in to the most furious anger” and pronounced to his servants, “This man is no longer my son” ” (Grimm, “Three”). Not content to disown him and send him away, he commanded his servants to murder his son in the forest. Reminiscent of Snow White, the servants took pity on him and released him rather than kill him. He appeared to be supernaturally guided when he “took it into his head” to travel to Rome.” Upon his arrival and as he walked into the church, the cardinals were engaged in discussions concerning who would be appointed Pope. In a clear allusion to the baptism of Jesus, two snow-white doves descended and landed on the shoulder of the fool. The cardinals were so moved by this miraculous act, they appointed him as “His Holiness the Pope.” Because he did not know how to lead, the two doves continually sat on his shoulder and whispered instructions into his ear. Because of his inherent goodness, God empowered him. In both of these tales, we witness the ultimate triumph of the fool over the wise. In the end, the moral is that goodness will be rewarded.

We love to root for the underdogs, especially when they are abused and marginalized. Clearly, the boy in *The Three Languages* has the mental capacity of a child. He has been left for dead, is utterly incompetent and absolutely incapable of caring for himself without intervention. Dogs, frogs, and doves aid him as he wanders on his own through the countryside. In the end, he is vindicated from his father’s abuse when God communicates directly to the fool through the doves. Ultimately, the fool is elected Pope, the highest position of power in the land. This innocent fool is blessed because he is utterly pure in his motives and inherently good in all that he does. Janik describes this depiction of the fool as a “prelapsarian mindset” sweeping through the “postlapsarian world” (227). It is precisely this sinless virtue that defines the innocent fool and makes him a model of untainted humanity. We do not desire his mental incapacities, but we

need his moral goodness and ethical purity. People yearn for the uncomplicated world in which the fool resides.

Philip Newell describes the attraction of the fool as “an explicit or implicit challenge to experience the kind of innocence and joy we had as children. We are all fools, and we all wear masks. The fool invites us – ironically, since they wear them – to take off our masks and live free” (117). What these fools represent is a true spirit of authenticity that we often lose as adults. This fool is not trying to convince people that he is something he is not. He presents himself as he is, without embarrassment, unaware that he is less than what he should be. There is a part of each of us that desires to live with that kind of freedom. Dana Heller, in her article "Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture," describes how the childlike figure of Jim - Huckleberry Finn's companion – is able to teach lessons to Huck because of, not in spite of, his naivety, humbleness, modesty, and kindness (Heller, “Holy” 6). The medieval and Renaissance periods granted the fool “a legal and moral innocence” that makes them a unique character in history, one who is able to serve as a role model with a unique sense of moral authority (McDonagh 134). Medieval and Renaissance fools often, true or not, symbolized the best that humanity had to offer.

Fools are granted the right to say what others are unable to

It is a fascinating historical fact that fools have served as advisors to the powerful. The German word “Narrenfreiheit” represents the license the fool has to speak “the unvarnished truth to those in power” (Middlefort 231). The immunity from punishment that allowed the fool to speak freely traces its origins as far back as the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Mexican Aztecs (Heller, “Holy” 3). Welsford discusses the genesis of the superstition surrounding the fool as “an awe-inspiring figure whose reason has ceased to function normally because he has

become the mouthpiece of a spirit, or power external to himself, and so has access to hidden knowledge - especially to knowledge of the future” (76). While not all rulers would grant the fool that type of authority, the powerful would often welcome a fool’s counsel simply because he lacked guile or ulterior motive and would unassumingly speak the truth as he saw it. A German proverb states that “the wise would do well to learn from fools” (Otto 103). The professional fool Friedrich Taubmann once listened to the duke sentence a German soldier – one who accidentally shot a colonel from behind – to have his hand cut off. Taubmann flippantly replied that, “It was too late. They should have cut his hand off before he shot the officer.” The duke laughed and then pardoned the soldier (Otto 83). Sometimes, the truth is more effectively delivered and more openly received when it is done with humor. At this, the fool excelled.

However, the fools of Grimm’s fairy tales do not boldly proclaim truth to kings, wisely provide counsel to dignitaries, or clairvoyantly predict tragedies to be avoided. With Grimm’s fools, the bold proclamation, the wise counsel, and the clairvoyant prediction are the fairy tales themselves. Grimm’s tales were told by common folk around evening fires, among women as they labored over daily chores, and to children by hard-laboring fathers. While the ruling class was living in the lap of luxury in palaces and country homes, the common folk were eking out a living any way they could. While the ruling class was eating its fill of the finest foods, the common folk suffered from malnutrition and wondered where their next meal would come from. For those who felt the privileged were living the high life off of their backbreaking labor and the powerful were deaf to their expressions of pain, fairy tales served as their bold voice. The message was as simple as it was daring: The clever are not as clever as they think; the powerful are not as powerful as they think; the privileged are not as safe as they think. There is justice and God will mete it out one day to the rich and the poor alike. This is the moral of the fool’s tale.

That a simpleton and fool can unseat the king, rule a nation state, or provide spiritual leadership to the Catholic Church is the highest insult if one occupies that throne or serves as a church leader. Fools own the unique ability to get away with making those types of statements.

Fools provide a test of true character

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, encourages the Christians there to become “fools for Christ’s sake” (1 Corinthians 4:10). Paul’s irony is used to illustrate that the fool is wise in this world but foolish in the things of God. In her dialogue with Dana Heller, Elena Volkova describes this concept as the basis for the “holy fool” tradition of Eastern Christianity (Heller, “The” 2). Volkova defines the holy fool as “a person who pretends that he is mad in order to save his own soul and the souls of others. Similarly, Welsford defines holy foolishness as “concentration on spiritual enlightenment to the extent that a person becomes distinctly different from others – reminiscent to the clown or fool” (233-234). By either definition, Jesus is the model for the holy fool. In his most famous sermon, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25) that has a simple moral: how one treats the weakest of people says everything about one’s character. The fool confronts the “normal” person with this very test. German pastor Philip Cradelius’ 1619 sermon exhorts his congregation to “treat such creatures [fools] kindly and use them as looking-glasses for their own weaknesses” (qtd. in Welsford 147). Many apparently did not follow Reverend Cradelius’ advice, and by all accounts, the characters in the Grimm’s tales fail this test. The father in *The Three Feathers* abandoned the very name he gave his son and joined with everyone else in simply calling him “Dummy” (Tatar 283). “Dummy” became his sole identity. His brothers “made fun of Dummy” and were certain he was “way too stupid” to accomplish his assigned tasks (Tatar 284). In *A Fairy Tale About A Boy Who Left Home To Learn About Fear*, the father tells his son, “talking to you just seems to

be a lost cause” (Tatar 16). His brothers torment him, and strangers mock him. Finally, the father pays his son fifty talers to leave home and never return, telling him, “Don’t tell anyone where you’re from or who your father is. I’m ashamed of you” (19). It is gut wrenching to read. Perhaps, it is an indictment against the character of the culture out of which the oral tales developed, or the Grimm’s Germany that continued to tell the tales. Perhaps it was both.

Conclusion

Certainly, these Grimm brother’s fairy tales offer a consistent reflection of German attitudes toward the “fool” in the medieval ages, the Renaissance, and the early modern period. It is easy for us to pass judgment on the way fools are represented in the Grimm’s tales, and, in many cases, we would be right in condemning the fathers, brothers, husbands, and strangers for the way they treat the unlovely and incapable among them. The Grimm’s fairy tales not only reflect the values of the nineteenth-century when they were written but also the attitudes and values of the cultures out of which those oral traditions are birthed and nurtured. Vicki Janik argues that fools serve the same function as did deconstructionist philosophy of the 1970s and 1980’s. “Like deconstruction” she says, “fools embody a resistance to clear meaning” (20). Simply because we are more politically correct today and are aghast at the treatment of fools in fairy tales does not mean that we are above reproach. In fifteenth-century Germany, Paul Wust declined a generous offer to become a court jester in the palace of Duke Eberhard the Bearded of Wurtemberg. Beatrice Otto recounts that “with a sort of brazen dismissiveness that explains why he was asked... he replied, ‘My father sired his own fool; if you want one too, then go and sire one for yourself’” (3). While it is easy for us to pass judgment, we have created our own cadre of modern fools that we both loathe and love. The list is long: The Three Stooges, Jacques Clouseau, Harry and Lloyd, Pee-wee Herman, Bill and Ted, Carl Spackler, Bluto, Cousin Eddie,

Brick Tamland – to name a few. Only time will tell what future generations will conclude about us when they see our adoration of the fool-driven characters who populate our movies and print.

We have always loved to laugh at the fool.

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