

COLLECTING FAIRY TALES – IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE? (in German)

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»[...] their mere existence is enough to protect you.«¹

As an orally communicated form of narration, fairy tales are essentially immaterial. And yet over the course of history, many have felt the need to record them for posterity. Such efforts were especially popular during the period of Romanticism. Perhaps the best-known ›fairy-tale collectors‹ were the brothers Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859). By no measure, however, did they live up to their aspiration of collecting tales ›from the common folk‹ in a scientifically objective manner. First, the story-tellers with whom they spoke were mostly highly educated members of the bourgeoisie. Secondly, due to their extensive editorial changes, the Grimm's themselves created the prototype of what we know today as fairy tales. Therefore, it appears the term ›fairy tale collection‹ deserves a thorough re-examination. With their ›Children's and Household Tales‹, the Grimm's played a significant role in popularising the genre and, by extension, increasing the materiality of the fairy tale. Over time, more and more material and thus collectible expressions of fairy tales have been produced – from books – as their physical medium – to illustrations, theatre and film adaptations, and everyday items depicting fairy tale characters. This wealth of material and its inclusion into various collections requires further investigation. One of the key questions we should ask is whether these items are even suitable vessels for collecting fairy tales. Aren't such items rather placeholders, with which we merely demarcate the cultural and reception history of a genre, but not the actual fairy tale? The cultural practice of telling fairy tales was added to the ›Nationwide Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage‹ by the German Commission for UNESCO in 2016 and is actively cultivated by numerous story-telling groups, associations and other institutions. But to what extent are such actions capable of truly preserving the fairy tale in its oral form? And is it even possible to archive these performative narrative situations?

¹ Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm: Preface (1819), in: Heinz Rölleke (ed.): Brüder Grimm. Kinder- und Hausmärchen, 1st vol., Stuttgart, 2010, p. 16.