ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE FOLKTALE “THE FISHERMAN AND HIS WIFE” (KHM 19, ATU 555)

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Abstract: The article is about the illustrations to the folktale “The Fisherman and His Wife” (Grimm, Household Tales No. 19, ATU 555) and similar tales created by Ludwig Bechstein and Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin, the relation between text and illustration, the tradition of illustrated representation, the use in popular media, the role of the illustrator/painter representing dominant scenes/actions and mediating stereotypes. Three phases can be distinguished: the first covers the period of 1809–1840, the second 1840–1890, the third refers to the turn of the 19th century. At the beginning the relation between text and picture is not so close: the idyllic scene of the prior illustrations is replaced by introducing more realistic traits which capture crude elements of the milieu as well. In the third phase, many distinguished artists have contributed a wide variety of pictorial representations (with their vision of the folktale: often the fisherman’s wife as a negative figure with a touch of misogyny). In this context, it will be examined which idea of the fisherman’s wife the illustrations convey and juxtaposed this with the fisherman’s image. Finally, some aspects of the status and popularity of the folktale will be assessed and the ways how the illustrations have influenced its reception.

Key words: Illustrations, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Ludwig Bechstein, Philipp Otto Runge, “The Fisherman and His Wife”

With regard to the history of the illustrations of the folktale about the fisherman and his wife by Runge and Grimm, three phases can be distinguished. The first of these phases covers the period from 1809 to 1840 and is characterised by a single picture. The folktale about the fisherman is one of ca. 50 texts for which pictures are known to exist from this period. For Kindermärchen (1809), an edition by Albert Ludwigm Grimm, the “Maler [painter] Franken” created seven patterns for copperplates (these were originally engraved by Emil Goetze; in 1817, colour was added for the second edition and the number of patterns was enlarged to twelve), one of which was intended for the folktale
“Hans Dudeldee”. The recurring meeting between the fisherman and fish is tempting for a pictorial representation because it determines the plot of the folktale. Moreover, since only one picture was commissioned, there was little question as to which representation should be chosen. On the fourth copperplate (high size) a barefooted fisherman is depicted holding a trap in his hands (Fig. 1). He is looking at a tiny fish which is swimming towards him near the trap. In the background, one can make out a hilly countryside. In the middle of the right-hand side of the picture, there is a big house with two annexes which has to be imagined as being a *Landhaus, wie jenes da drüben* (‘a country house like the one over there’) as described in the text on the left-hand page. The picture shows the fisherman’s first meeting with the fish who will fulfil the fisherman’s wish to transform his country house into *ein prächtiges Schloß mit erleuchteten Zimmern* (‘a magnificent castle with illuminated rooms’). There are two obvious reasons for the illustrator situating the scene at an inland waterway: firstly, a trap is preferred as a fishing tackle in rivers and inland waterways and, secondly, the depicted countryside implies that the scene is set inland. At first glance, it appears as if the text of the folktale was not explicit about the place where the fisherman meets the fish. *De See* (dialectal for ‘the sea’) can refer to inland waterways as much as to the sea. In contrast, the term *Butt* is not ambiguous. This kind of flatfish whose colours range from a deep to a light brown is also known as ‘plaice’ or ‘flounder’ and is mainly found in the coastal waters of the North and Baltic Seas as well as on the coast of West Pomerania where Runge comes from. The fact that the illustrator took the liberty to locate the story at an inland waterway against the indication of the text may be explained by the fact that the readers would not expect a folktale to be closely connected to the sea when regarding the context of the other stories in the book. This is why the representation as it has been executed seems to be a fair compromise for the landlubbers among the readership.

The eight etchings which Count Franz Pocci contributed to the third edition belong to his earliest works. Likewise, the action here does not take place at open sea. In his illustration Pocci shows the fisherman Dudeldee (Fig. 2)
with a trident and a knife in his belt on the shore of a lake, framed by two stumps which still have some green shoots reaching into the air. A bird is sitting on a branch. The contours of the mountains at the opposite end of the lake form the background. It is a picturesque countryside which can be often seen in Pocci’s later works. The fisherman seems to look slightly sullen at the calm surface of the lake as if he had been waiting for a long time in vain to catch a fish in his net. Pocci obviously wanted to convey the mood which exists before the fisherman and the fish meet.

Another illustration of the folktale existed already before Pocci’s in a school textbook which developed as a genre of its own at that time. Thus, Heinrich Dittmar had included the folktale about the fisherman by the Grimm Brothers alongside other folktales and legends by them in his readers. He also printed it in Der Mägdlein Lustgarten (‘The Girls’ Pleasure Grounds’, 1822)² – surely not without reason. The copperplate, engraved after a drawing by Friedrich Buser (1797–1833), shows a young fisherman wearing shoes and a knee-length garment held together with a belt, holding his trap in the lake; next to him is a small eel-like fish (Fig. 3). The scene seems to take place in one of the many visible bays framed by trees with lush foliage, their branches reaching into the
lake. In the background, a path can be discerned with two male figures on their way to a blurred edifice, which appears to be a castle.

Following this comparatively early illustration of the folktale about the fisherman, a second phase can be determined which covers the period from 1840 to 1900. Whereas the action was located at an inland waterway in the earlier pictures contrary to the text in the second phase, the picture and text correspond more closely. The fisherman is wearing wretched clothes. He is on the shore and high cliffs form the background. The small indefinable fish has become the flounder with its typical shape. The idyllic scenery from the first pictures has been replaced by a tableau with the fisherman on the shore or on a little promontory gazing at the approaching fish. The sea is now no longer calm and motionless but, is instead, churned up. Lightning flashes through the night and the air is filled with menace. As before, a single picture prevails but now it often takes up a whole page and is complementary to the text. Most of the time, though, the drawings – frequently pen and ink – take up only two-thirds of a page. The folktale about the fisherman cannot be found in editions with folktales by the Grimm Brothers; rather it is only found in anthologies indirectly connected to the Grimms, containing some of their folktales. Such an example is the *Kindermärchen, dem deutschen Volk entkeimt und nicht mehr ungereimt* (‘Children’s Tales Originating from the German People and No Longer Lacking Rhyme’[1844], 1867) edited by Wilhelm Langewiesche (pseudonym L. Wiese), with coloured lithographies by Johann Baptist Sonderland; the folktale also appears in F. Hofmann’s *Der Kinder Wundergarten* (‘The Garden of Miracles for Children,’ 1878), in the splendid edition *Märchen für Kinder* (‘Folktales for Children,’ 1886) designed by Alexander Zick (Fig. 4), and in Karl Seifart’s *Wunderborn* (‘The Fount of Miracles,’ 1882) with a full-page illustra-
Illustrations to the Folktale “The Fisherman and His Wife”

Figure 5. Ludwig Richter (1857).

tion after Napoleon Neureuther. In addition, there are a few illustrations which are variations on the theme, such as, for example, the illustrations in Ludwig Bechstein’s *Mann und Frau im Essigkrug* (‘Man and Woman in the Vinegar Jug’). The small wood-engravings are reminiscent of pen-and-ink drawings and were executed after Ludwig Richter’s illustrations for Ludwig Bechstein’s *Märchenbuch* (‘Book of Folktales,’ 1853, Fig. 5). Subsequently, they were also used in the Grimm editions. Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin created a folktale in verses about a fisherman and his wife after the model by the Grimms: *Skazka o rybake i rybke* (‘Folktale about the Fisherman and the Little Fish,’ 1833) which was published in a Russian edition in 1868. This was presumably the first picture book with the folktale about the fisherman and contains twelve chromolithographs produced by Arndt & Co. in Düsseldorf.

Again and again, the illustrators succeeded in adding new details, which bestow the pictorial representation an individual force of expression. The barefooted young fisherman is submissive when he greets the flounder. His head leans forward and he holds his cap reverentially in his hand. This representation occurs for the first time in a partial French translation of the Grimm folktales and stems from Bertall (Vicomte Charles Albert d’Arnoux), whose fine strokes with hard contours were also appreciated in German books for children. While most of the illustrations only show the wretched hut, in the background of this illustration the fisherwoman can be seen sitting on a chamber pot. Neureuther uses the picture-in-picture technique and has artistically interwoven the episodes. The text has a subordinate significance here and has merely the function of marking the single phases of the wishes and of depicting the encounter between the fisherman and the fish (with the first line recurring again and again, “Manntje, Manntje Timpetee...”). An angel with wings is depicted in the middle of the picture and towers above the rest. It symbolizes the last of the wishes of the fisherman’s wife to become like God. The sequence of pictures begins on the bottom margin of the page with the introductory scene which is the ending at the same time.

On the whole, assessing the situation of the variegated spectrum of folktales nowadays, the folktale about the fisherman is not the centre of attention. It is not represented in all kinds of media. Thus, it cannot be found in broadsheets,
in printed scraps, as a motif on pictures of glass in the magic lantern, in books especially intended for children and or in the design of toys. This is possibly due to the topic and to its vernacular language. Bechstein’s version of a man and a woman in the vinegar jug received little attention with the exception of the appraisal of the whole volume. In school textbooks and reading book it can be found only once.³

The third phase of the adaptation of the folktale about the fisherman into pictures is determined by a wide variety of pictorial representations. It has begun at about the turn of the 19th century and lasts until today. Here one can also observe that the folktale about the fisherman rarely appears in the new media (e.g., department store pictures, folktale journals, puzzles, board games Happy Families and picture lotto, slide series, video films, DVDs). In collections of advertisements it only occurs comparatively late (1905, 1919, 1939)⁴ (Fig. 6) and the same is true for film adaptations (first one released in 1985)⁵. Yet the folktale can be found quite often as a picture book for children,⁶ as well as in collections of folktales with pictures. In most cases, the folktale was translated into standard German (e.g., 1981, 1993). Runge is generally referred to as the author (e.g., 1984). The Grimm brothers, in spite of their prominent name, have rarely been mentioned (e.g., 1984). This may simply be due to the fact that Runge has indeed been the author of the folktale. Many distinguished artists have created pictorial representations

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**Figure 6. Liebig-Sammelbild (1905).**

**Figure 7. Otto Ubbelohde (1907).**
of the folktale about the fisherman: Otto Ubbelohde (1907, Fig. 7), Dora Polster (1911), Paul Hey (1919, 1939, Fig. 9 on next page), Ruth Koser-Michaëls (1937), Maurice Sendak (1973) and John Howe (1984). In contrast to earlier editions, the folktale has now been included in partial translations of the Grimm folktales from German into British English (1883, 1930), Spanish (1918), Danish (1920), and American English (1944, 1955). Most of the illustrations show the leitmotif-scene between the fisherman and the flounder. Bibliophile editions, containing the folktale about the fisherman as a single text or in combination with another folktale by Runge are primarily intended for adults: Von dem Mahandel-Bohm (‘The Almond Tree’). These editions have been published since about 1920. The picture is juxtaposed with the text and occupies the same amount of space. Suffice to say, the most important works in these bibliophile editions are: the seven colour etchings by Marcus Behmer (dating from 1914 [edited 1920, facsimile 1986]) and the wood-engravings by Ernst Würtenberger (1921), Gerhard Macks (1955) and Ottilie Ehlers-Kollwitz (1965, Fig. 8).

In the case where more pictures have been produced, the following scenes emerge the most frequently: (1) the fisherman’s wife and the fisherman in front of the hut, (2) the fisherman and the flounder, (3) the fisherman before the empress, (4) the fisherman before the Pope, and (5) the fisherman’s wife either as an empress or as Pope. Translations into standard German and abbreviated versions have a tendency to make the text appear more harmless: der “Pißpott” (originally vernacular and colloquial for ‘chamber pot’) stands for an old hut or an old pot. In addition, the demands of the woman on her husband are underplayed in these versions so that the woman does not appear equally dislikeable. The ugly traits of the woman and her domineering attitude are visualized by female and male artists alike in a way that comes close to the grotesque as is reflected in the drawings by Marcus Behmer (1920), Werner Luft (1943), Luise Neubert (1987), and Nikolaus Heidelbach (1995). The textual description of the appearance of the fisherman’s wife is mirrored in the pictorial portrayal of the woman: she has a long nose, wears her hair in a knot, and has a thin and sullen face, pointed fingernails, and spidery fingers which are out of proportion with the rest of the body. The facial expression and

Figure 8. Marcus Behmer (1920).
the posture of the fisherman’s wife clearly suggest that she is a negative figure. With her blasphemous haughtiness she transgresses religious and social norms.

Some artists, however, have given her a more neutral appearance by representing her as a housewife or an old woman at the spinning wheel (1907/1943). The age of the couple also varies. The illustrations show a young couple just as often as a middle-aged or an elderly one. The characterization of the fisherman, in contrast, is always clear-cut. Most illustrators have rendered him helpless and lacking authority in the face of his wife’s exaggerated wishes. John Howe (1984) has emphasized the inferior position of the fisherman with particular conspicuousness: The fisherman is shown with his rod in the right-hand corner of the upper half of the picture while the big flounder has already been caught in the lower half of the picture. The fisherman is squeezed between thumb and index finger of his oversized wife’s doubly ringed hand and is clearly being portrayed here as her hand-puppet (Fig. 10).

Similarly, other recurring images underline the message that a discontented wife is doomed to failure if there is no one to check her unbridled desires. The imperious aspect of the figure is emphasized by showing her as empress or Pope surrounded by courtiers or cardinals in the midst of a magnificent scenery (Figs. 11–12). The scene is occasionally more stylized than one would expect when the fisherman’s wife is surrounded by candles in an ascending sequence (1911, 1972). This is an old religious motif and a symbol of her supposed magnificence and holiness. The mere fact that she is so tall makes the woman stand out from the scene.

Figure 9. Paul Hey (1939).

Figure 10. John Howe (1984).
The fisherman, in contrast, looks up to her fearfully and has a dejected posture, thus demonstrating that he does not feel at ease in his new surroundings.

In summary, it can be said that the folktale by Runge was rapidly incorporated into folktale collections. Was the reason for this that the folktale had nothing in common with the French fairy tales which had hitherto been models of their genre? Was it due to the successful construction of the plot? Or was the story regarded as innovative because it was presented in the vernacular and its many dialogues created the lively effect of the spoken language? Perhaps several factors indeed played a role and it cannot be decided which one prevailed.

It is apparent that the subject matter of a woman of humble background who is never satisfied and works herself into a frenzy of more and more immoderate wishes holds a fascination for the readers. The illustrators succeeded in capturing the key stages and the spirit of the story in ever-changing ways. Together with the artistic plot the pictures might have contributed to the popularity of the folktale in spite of its dialect and the fact that the protagonists are husband and wife and not children. The folktale about the fisherman and his wife is an exception indeed in that it has become popular in its vernacular version and not merely after it had been translated into standard German. Most of the folktales in the vernacular never gained widespread attention as the very limited dissemination of the story about the race between the hare and the hedgehog shows.
ABBREVIATIONS


ILLUSTRATIONS TO “THE FISHERMAN AND HIS WIFE” AND SIMILAR TALES, 1809–2000

A selection

Editions of the Grimm brothers and Ludwig Bechstein are incompletely documented. Generally you can assume that the folktale of the fisherman (text and illustration[s]) is found very seldom in the 19th-century anthologies.


1905 Der Fischer und seine Frau. Liebig Series No. 639 (6 chromolithographies).
1919 Gartmann Schokolade (chromolithography).


1954 Printed scrap from Germany.


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1968 Lackbild Nr. 1212 VEB-Postkarten-Verlag (printed scrap).


1980 Europa No. 289. (record cover).


1985 Michael Mathias Prechtl (aquarelle).


1987 Luise Neubert (silhouette).


1997 *Vom Fischer und seiner Frau*. Deutschland. Ernst Kößlinger (stamp).


1999 Deutsche Apotheker Zeitung Gesundheitsministerin Fischer (cartoon).

COMMENTS


4 See bibliographical references above.

