



# Paramyth

The mythological  
dimensions of  
Hans Christian Andersen's  
Fairy Tales

International Conference  
at the University of Zurich

November, 10.-12. 2022

Organized by  
Klaus Müller-Wille (Zurich)

In her master-thesis Alexia Panagiotidis coined the term »paramyth« by stressing the notion that the translation of »fairy tale« in modern Greek would be »παράμυθοι« (paramyth). The indication that there is a hidden, persisting and intriguing relationship between myths and the paramyths of the fairy tale is very fascinating. Maybe it is especially relevant when it comes to the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. At least, one could say that already the exceptional worldwide reception of these fairy tales indicates that they fulfill their function in very different cultural and historical contexts (as myths do).

In looking at the mythological dimensions of Andersen's fairy tales one could first of all discuss in how far it is possible to use the explicit and implicit intertextual references to antique myths (especially Ovid) in his fairy tales in order to establish new readings. Further on, one could use thematic allusions to different forms of metamorphoses (and the corresponding transformations between female/male, living/dead, nature/culture, animal/human) or violent family conflicts in order to illuminate the mythic dimensions of Andersen's texts (which of course are connected to current gender-theoretical, ecocritical or ethical questions). One could also discuss if modern theoretical definitions of myths could be useful to describe structural peculiarities of Andersen's fairy tales. Finally, one could look at the global reception of these fairy tales and different attempts to describe them in relation to myths.

# Program

**Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> of November**

ROOM RAI-F-041

Rämistrasse 74

12:45-14:00 *Lunch*

14:00-14:30

Klaus Müller-Wille (Zurich)

Paramyth – The Mythological Dimension of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales. An Introduction

14:30-15:15

Ejnar Stig Askgaard (Odense)

Andersen's *Eventyr* as paramythos

15:15-16:00

Mads Sohl Jessen (Odense)

»A Comfort that transgresses all Suffering«: A Reading of *The Ugly Duckling*

16:00-16:30 *Coffee*

16:30-17:15

Holger Berg (Odense)

Periodical Comets between Popular Christian Superstition, Scientific Cataclysmic Fears and New Romantic Myths: A Survey based on the Works of Hans Christian Andersen

17:15-18:00

Helena Březinová (Prague)

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales in the light of Cassirer's mythical consciousness (*Et Blad fra Himlen, Tante Tandpine* and others)

\*

## Friday 11<sup>th</sup> of November

ROOM KO2-F-152

Rämistrasse 71

09:00-09:45

Ane Grum-Schwensen (Odense)

Morphing Myths: Folktale, Religious Motifs and Legends of Saints in *The Wild Swans*

09:45-10:30

Patrizia Huber (Zurich)

Knitting a story: Mythological and poetological allusions in *De vilde svaner* (1838)

10:30-11:00 *Coffee*

11:00-11:45

Jacob Bøggild (Odense)

New Mythology; Arabesque and Allegory; Circularity and Eschatology; *The Story of the Year*

11:45-12:30

Karin Sanders (Berkeley)

*Psyche* revisited – Anonymity and the Artist

12:45-14:00 *Lunch*

14:00-14:45

Christian Alenkjær Frandsen (Odense)

The Hidden Reference to the Myth of Artemis and Actaeon in *The Shepherdess and The Chimney Sweep*: An Analysis of Andersen's Creative Use of Mythological Elements in Making the Fairy Tale

14:45-15:30

Timon von Mentlen (Zurich)

Chopping Heads and Feathers off: Violent Killings and Body Transformations in Andersen's *Nabofamilierne* and *I Andegaarden*

15:30-16:00 *Coffee*

16:00-16:45

Kathrine Vig Nielsen (Odense)

»It will bring you great misfortune«. Predestination and freedom of action in *Den lille Havfrue*

16:45-17:30

Alexia Panagiotidis (Zurich)

The Crime of Name-Changing in the Persephone Myth and H.C. Andersen's *Tommelise*

\*

*Dinner*

\*

## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> of November

ROOM KOL 2-F-152

Rämistrasse 71

09:00-09:45

Torsten Bøgh Thomsen (Odense)

»Gud bevares!« – Mythological and Religious Taboos in the Early Translations of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales

09:45-10:30

Lasse Horne Kjældgaard (Odense)

Mythologizing Modernity: Visions of the Future in Hans Christian Andersen's Tales

10:30-11:00 *Coffee*

11:00-11:45

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (London)

Andersen's *Ungdoms-forsøg* as Romantic Shakespeare Myth

11:45-12:30

Sara Bruun Jørgensen (Odense)

Hans Christian Andersen: A Myth in North American Popular Culture?

12:30-14:00 *Lunch*

\*

## Abstracts

### Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> of November

**14:30-15:15 Ejnar Stig Askgaard (Odense): Andersen's *Eventyr* as paramythos**

The Greek word for fairy tales, paramythos, is interesting since the word indicates, that Andersen's fairy tales are to be understood as something besides, parallel, or different to myth – the tales of beings. In European literature and languages there are numerous different words for short prose and numerous different attempts to label the various types of short stories. This paper will focus on the problems that Andersen encountered when trying to find an overall Danish term for the short prose he wrote – known to us as »Eventyr« and »Historier« – as discussed in the tale *Hyldemoer* (1844).

**15:15-16:00 Mads Sohl Jessen (Odense): »A Comfort that transgresses all Suffering«: A Reading of *The Ugly Duckling***

In his diary notes from the period 1994-1995 the Nobel prize winner Imre Kertész (1929-2016) writes that Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* (1844) was his favorite childhood fairy tale. Kertész relates the story to feelings of comfort, revenge, and secrecy. Why does this specific fairy tale hold such power over the imagination of young readers? In this presentation I will argue that Andersen is using rhetorical and narrative techniques that he found in Wilhelm Hey's contemporaneous bestseller *Fabeln für Kinder* (1833). Hey's fables represent provincial scenes where children and animals communicate with each other and between themselves. However, Andersen clearly is not indebted to Hey's sense of countryside happiness. Rather, Andersen in this specific fairy tale combines the settings of animal fables for children with a myth of election that involves an immense amount of hardship on the part of the main character. How can we make sense of Andersen's incredibly influential myth of the swan's egg while avoiding an autobiographical interpretation? In trying to answer this question the contemporary Jewish scholar Moshe Idel's work on the concept of myth will be discussed.

**16:30-17:15 Holger Berg (Odense): Periodical Comets between Popular Christian Superstition, Scientific Cataclysmic Fears and New Romantic Myths: A Survey based on the Works of Hans Christian Andersen**

Periodical comets are a rare, but recurrent sight both on the night sky and in the works of Hans Christian Andersen. This paper first examines two poems by the young author from 1830 and the discussions of comets in his more mature prose pieces (namely *At være eller ikke at være*, 1857). Andersen's tale "The Comet" from 1869 is then analysed with a particular focus on the cyclical thinking, the writing process and the little-known model for the main protagonist, the village schoolmaster Christian Nicolai Andersen.

The findings are placed within the relevant contexts of popular Christian superstition, scientific cataclysmic fears, and the making of new Romantic myths.

17:15-18:00

**Helena Březinová (Prague): Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales in the light of Cassirer's mythical consciousness (*Et Blad fra Himlen, Tante Tandpine* and others)**

It is fair to say that in his fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen conducts programmatic work on myth. Several of his fairy tales can be construed as explicit or implicit disputations on the power of mythical thinking as opposed to the (fatigue of) scientific language. Asserting the insufficiency of scientific logic and language, Andersen accorded well with the efforts of German Romanticism to rehabilitate the myth. Andersen is celebrating the naïve immanence of image and meaning (naive Ungeschiedenheit von „Bild“ und „Sache“) that according to Ernst Cassirer is one of the pivotal features in mythical thinking. Hence, Andersen intentionally activates the mythological symbolic form as defined by Cassirer. What is even more thought-provoking when employing Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, however, is that Cassirer claimed the autonomy of each of them, be it a myth, religion, or science. 'Cassirer never implies,' Edward Skidelsky aptly observed, 'that each new form exhausts the content of its predecessors. There is in his philosophy no *Aufhebung*, no "taking up" of the lower synthesis into the higher. Each symbolic form has its own specific content, incommensurable with that of the others.' In his tales, Andersen advocates the myth as a legitimate, often even paramount, form of organizing the world, next to the other symbolic forms. To support this argument, I will focus on his fairy tales *Klokkekybet*, *Tante Tandpine*, *De vises Steen*, and *De to Jomfruer*.

\*

## Friday 11<sup>th</sup> of November

09:00-09:45

**Ane Grum-Schwensen (Odense): Morphing Myths: Folktale, Religious Motifs and Legends of Saints in *The Wild Swans***

Andersen's tale about *De vilde Svaner* (1838) builds upon a folktale that can be traced back as far as 10.th century Provence. From there it has wandered through German and Danish versions to the edition that Andersen himself declares as his source for inspiration, namely *De elleve Svaner* from Mathias Winther's collection of *Danske Folkeeventyr* (1823). This paper examines Andersen's use and reshaping of the folktale and analyzes how his add-ons tend to incorporate religious motifs and elements from legends of saints. It goes on to discuss if this combination of elements can be seen as an attempt to create a structure in accordance with a contemporary Danish model of a »new mythology« based upon the Aladdin-figure that Adam Oehlenschläger introduced, and which is amongst others described by Johan de Mylius in »Myte og roman« (1981).

09:45-10:30

**Patrizia Huber (Zurich): Knitting a story: Mythological and poetological allusions in *De vilde svaner* (1838)**

The code AT 451 refers to the folk tale »The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brother«, a standard tale known in different folklore traditions. It tells the story of a girl looking for her lost brothers who were turned into birds (sometimes ravens, sometimes swans) and frees them from the curse. Andersen's version of the popular tale, *De vilde svaner* (1838), however, extends the traditional plot considerably, weaving into the basic pattern mythological allusions, poetological reflexions and questions concerning gender and power. In this paper, I will show how *De vilde svaner* combines the stories of two female artists in classical mythology with reflexions about poetic production and gender to a very singular narrative unlike its European siblings.

After her evil stepmother has turned the eleven princes into white swans and tried to drive her out of the kingdom, Elisa decides to look after her lost brothers. Having only known the world through her picture book, she is now confronted with the real nature whose impressions awaken her creative skill. Turning her focus from the mediated products to the real, she gains the artistic gaze and phantasy. This is a skill which then allows her to rescue her brothers by collecting nettles and knitting them to shirts while, in contrast to the other versions, needing to remain mute until her *opus magnum* is finished. Only after weaving together the raw material, she may tell her story and receive justice. Elisa's creative production alludes to two Greek myths where women weave to tell stories: Arachne, competing with Athene over the place of the most talented artist, and Philomela, unable to tell her rape story until she weaves it into her sister's gown. Art is here depicted as a form to express what cannot be told differently, as an empowering act against the injustice of institutional authority. In *De vilde svaner*, the process of creative production is explored even more by narrating the path Elisa takes to become an artist; what is a matter of two sentences in Mathias Winther's version *De elleve svaner* (1823) occupies here the major part of the narrative. Distinctly, Andersen shifts the moment of divine intervention leading to the resolution from the brothers to Elisa which grants her similar artistic skill as Ovid's two ingenious weaver.

11:00-11:45

**Jacob Bøggild (Odense): New Mythology; Arabesque and Allegory; Circularity and Eschatology; *The Story of the Year***

*The Story of the Year* (1852) is a peculiar and therefore interesting text among H.C. Andersen's fairy tales and stories. It is more of a prose sketch or a prose poem than it is a regular fairy tale and according to Niels Kofoed this would qualify it as an arabesque. It relates the succession of the seasons and personifies them in a way which on the other hand is allegorical. At the same time, it is a kind of myth which tells about the circular repetition of the same, the eternal recurrence of the changing of the seasons. But at the same time there is an eschatological dimension to the text. I will discuss the intersection of the modes of arabesque and allegory which occurs in *The Story of the Year* and ask whether this intersection could be viewed as Andersen's attempt to produce some kind of new mythology while at the same time drawing upon some very fundamental mythical structures or figures. My discussion will include sideways glances to *The Snow Queen*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Bird of Folksong* where the changing of the seasons also plays a major part.

11:45-12:30

**Karin Sanders (Berkeley): *Psyche* revisited – Anonymity and the Artist**

To what degree do myths erase the presumed or desired singularity of authors or artists who employ myths precisely to reflect on the power of artistic creation? In other words

can myths backfire and complicate the very task they are called on to perform? The generality of ancient Greek and Roman myths – their broadness in scope and applicability to the universal – seems to run counter to the contemporary Romantic myth of the uniqueness of the artist. This tension between the general and the specific in myths and mythmaking is seen in Hans Christian Andersen's *Psyken* from 1861. A few decades later, Nietzsche argued that since man is both creature and creator we must renounce traditional myths and face our tragic selves. The paper will consider how Andersen's exploration of artistic creation and his use of classical myths are both anachronistic and at odds with the romantic myth of the artist, perhaps pointing toward a concept of a tragic scenario that separates creature from creator.

14:00-14:45

**Christian Alenkjær Frandsen (Odense): The Hidden Reference to The Myth of Artemis and Actaeon in *The Shepherdess and The Chimney Sweep*: An Analysis of Andersen's Creative Use of Mythological Elements in Making the Fairy Tale**

In the manuscript material of *The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep*, especially the draft, it becomes clear that Andersen in making the fairy tale combines elements from different literary sources. One of these sources is Thomasine Gyllembourg's fairy tale *King Deer [Kong Hjort]* from 1830, which draws heavily on the Greek myth of Artemis and Actaeon. In the draft of *The Shepherdess and The Chimney Sweep* Andersen uses Gyllembourg's version of the myth as a creative point of departure. However, in a crucial way Andersen does not follow suit with Gyllembourg. Whereas Gyllembourg in *King Deer* situates the Greek myth within a Christian and didactic framework, to domesticate it and control its uncanny erotic implications, Andersen in making *The Shepherdess and The Chimney Sweep* does not adopt this framework. Instead, he uses the uncanny mythological elements from *King Deer* as creative building blocks allowing him to create a fairy tale imbued with a sense of unease and unrest through and through.

14:45-15:30

**Timon von Mentlen (Zurich): Chopping Heads and Feathers off: Violent Killings and Body Transformations in Andersen's *Nabofamilierne* and *I Andegaarden***

*Nabofamilierne* (1847) and *I Andegaarden* (1861) take place in seemingly idyllic locations on the countryside in which barely any change appears to happen. However, the idyll is deceptive as the animals do horrible things to each other. In *I Andegaarden* a duck bites off the head of an injured songbird since she is annoyed by him and in *Nabofamilierne* young sparrows tear the feathers of their mother off because humans have decorated her among other things with gold leaf and thus the young birds cannot recognize her: Her transformation leads to an alienation and eventually to her death. Comparing Andersen's text to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, striking similarities become apparent. While in *Metamorphoses* violent murders and different kinds of transformations are omnipresent, the story about Actaeon in particular shows a close resemblance to *Nabofamilierne*. Actaeon is transformed into a stag as a punishment by Artemis since he saw her naked and he is then mauled and killed by his own dogs who do not recognize him. Both Andersen's text and Ovid share a drastic and detailed depiction of the killings. However, while in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the narrator, the characters and even the gods show compassion with the aristocratic victims of transformations, in Andersen's two texts the narrator and characters are rather

indifferent to the fate of the anthropomorphized birds. By comparing Andersen with Ovid, I do not only look for similar and different motifs, but I try to show how the depictions of the killing scenes and their narrative framings have different alienating but also distance-crossing effects. Paradoxically, Andersen's texts are at the same time much closer *and* much further away from the reader than Ovid's myths.

16:00-16:45

**Kathrine Vig Nielsen (Odense): »It will bring you great misfortune«. Predestination and freedom of action in *Den lille Havfrue***

In *Folkeeventyrets moderne genbrug* (1987) Torben Brostrøm draws a fundamental distinction between the myth and the folktale. The myth claims to be a retelling of true events. The agents are gods and heroes who are submitted to an unchangeable law of life and attempts to break this law always end badly. Brostrøm sees the folktale as a critique of the myth. In the folktale the hero or heroine can act freely and succeed in shaping their own destiny.

This paper investigates *Den lille Havfrue* (1837) as a narrative that negotiates between the predestination of the myth on one hand and the folktales' freedom of action on the other. While the little mermaid's quest to win the prince and an immortal soul can be viewed as an attempt to shape her own destiny it seems to be bound to fail. She never succeeds in securing the love of the prince. Yet when she is given the opportunity to return to the sea by killing the prince, she chooses to sacrifice herself instead. I will argue, that in this instance the little mermaid rids herself of her predestination and is rewarded by the prospect of earning an immortal soul after all.

16:45-17:30

**Alexia Panagiotidis (Zurich): The Crime of Name-Changing in the Persephone Myth and H.C. Andersen's *Tommelise***

Names have an identity-forming function. The Persephone myth in *The Homeric Hymns* is an example of how name-giving can be the result of an act of violence and have far-reaching consequences. However, name-giving is negotiated ambivalently in this myth insofar as Persephone also acquires power of speech through her (new) name. Tommelise undergoes two sets of name-giving in H.C. Andersen's eponymous tale, whereby the last name-change refers to the myth. Andersen intensifies the naming practice, but deprives it of any identity-forming and self-empowering function. Therefore, this is to be seen as going beyond the original act of violence, a criminal perpetuation of passive ascription. The focus is instead shifted to the onomatopoeia at the end, which foregrounds the narration and thereby renegotiates the question of genre in reference to the myth.

\*

## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> of November

09:00-09:45

**Torsten Bøgh Thomsen (Odense): »Gud bevares!« – Mythological and Religious Taboos in the Early Translations of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales**

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales we find mythological creatures from Nordic folklore in an otherwise Christian setting. The fairy tales represent a Christian understanding of the world and Christian ethics, but they also occasionally present these ethics in an informal or jovial tone. The prevalence and peculiar representation of God, religion, and Christian themes in the authorship has been a problem for several translators from different cultural contexts over time. From the communist regimes' censorship of Christian themes to more pious cultures' "tone policing" concerning religious matters, this paper will examine religion as cause and occasion for redactions of the fairy tales in translation. This will lead on to a discussion of how the consideration of taboo in translations – contrary to expectation – has contributed to a delocalization of the fairy tales, which has increased their world literary potential.

**09:45-10:30 Lasse Horne Kjældgaard (Odense): Mythologizing Modernity: Visions of the Future in Hans Christian Andersen's Tales**

The age of Hans Christian Andersen – “the golden age” in Danish literary history – is a myth, in several senses of the word. Only rarely was it used as an epochal self-characterization in Andersen's lifetime, where the question of how to understand “the present” and prognosticating the future became moot points in Danish literature and politics. My talk will address the ways in which some of Andersen's stories and fairy tales envisioned the future in a critical dialogue with contemporary conceptions of the age.

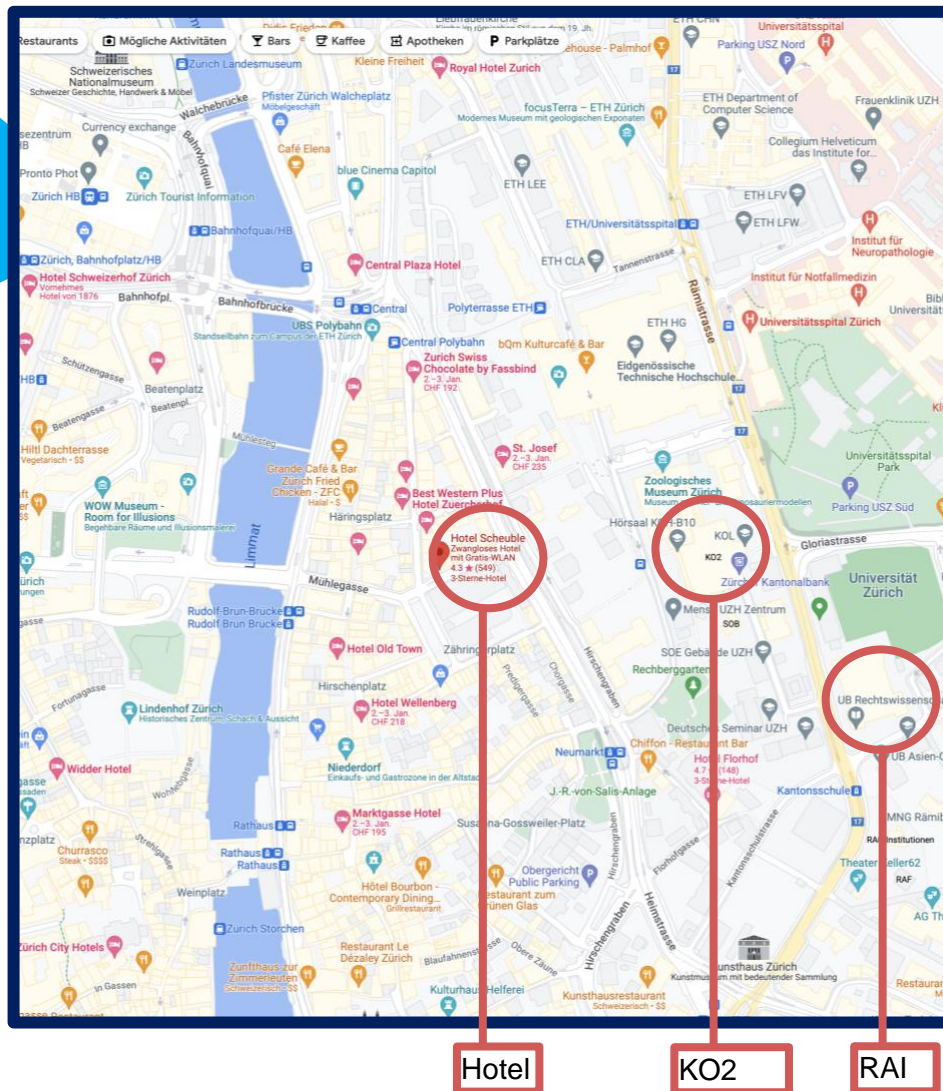
**11:00-11:45 Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (London): Andersen's *Ungdoms-forsøg* as Romantic Shakespeare Myth**

This paper discusses the influence of popular communal reading practices around Shakespeare's life and works on Hans Christian Andersen's construction of his own author-myth in his early self-published work. The paper will trace the importance of a 'Danish Household Shakespeare' to how Andersen constructed his own author figure on such reading practices and on a Romantic Shakespeare author-myth. Centrally, the paper will compare Andersen's prologue to *Ungdoms-forsøg* (1822) to C. J. Boye's play, *William Shakespeare* (1826) - a Romantic play about Shakespeare's early life and rise to fame. It will be argued that Andersen used the prologue to insert himself into a well-known Shakespeare-mythology transposed from Stratford to his native Funen.

**11:45-12:30 Sara Bruun Jørgensen (Odense): Hans Christian Andersen: A Myth in North American Popular Culture?**

Hans Christian Andersen is a worldwide phenomenon, and he has been adapted and disseminated in numerous ways. In this paper, I present examples of how adaptations of *The Princess and the Pea* have contributed to the mythologization of Andersen in North American popular culture. Taking the example of the Broadway comedy musical *Once Upon a Mattress* from 1959 as point of departure, I examine how past and present adaptations becomes a »site of struggle« in which the mythologization of Andersen is continuously negotiated and frozen.

The conference will take place in the rooms RAI F 041 – Rämistrasse 59 – and KO2 F 152 in the main building – Rämistrasse 71 – of the University of Zurich:



The conference is financed with the support of the *Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien (SGSS)*, member of the *Schweizerische Akademie für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften (SAGW)*, and the University of Zurich.



**Universität  
Zürich** UZH



**SCHWEIZERISCHE  
GESELLSCHAFT  
FÜR  
SKANDINAVISCHES  
STUDIEN**



Mitglied der Schweizerischen Akademie  
der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften  
[www.sagw.ch](http://www.sagw.ch)