

Emancipation and Compensation
In Fanny Lewald's *Modernes Märchen*
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Emancipation and Compensation in Fanny Lewald's *Modernes Märchen*
Thesis directed by Associate Professor Ann Schmiesing

One of Fanny Lewald's first published works, the 1841 *Modernes Märchen*, stands out for being a fairy tale in the bibliography of an author not normally known for works of the fantastic. Nonetheless, it is a window into the development of Lewald's social criticism, exploring issues of women's emancipation through a blend of realism and fantasy. This thesis analyzes how Fanny Lewald's story of a young girl's courtship by two fish in the guise of men demonstrates both the potential for women's emancipation as well as its limits.

Dedication

To my mother, Barbara, who passed away last year. Words cannot express our love for you or the loss we have suffered. I pray that my efforts have made you proud.

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I. Introduction

The Königsberg-born novelist and women's rights advocate Fanny Lewald has fallen into relative obscurity since her death in 1889, but her prolific career of political writing that challenged social norms regarding women and Jews merits a renewed examination of her life and works.¹ Living in her family home and subjected to the strict discipline of her father well into her adult life, Lewald attempted to break out of domestic life with what she considered her "first serious literary attempt," her 1841 fairy tale *Modernes Märchen*.²

Even by the standards of the *Kunstmärchen* to which *Modernes Märchen* belongs, Fanny Lewald's fairy tale stands well outside of the usual expected characteristics of the genre. The fantastic is far from the forefront of the plot and the narrative more closely resembles an autobiography with a smattering of literary and theological commentary. There is also a strong undercurrent of a plea for women's emancipation; in *Modernes Märchen* a strong female voice rings out, and the conventions of nineteenth century marriage are examined and questioned. However, references to Spinoza and to the transmigration of souls lead the reader in a very different direction. One may rightly be hesitant to proclaim one single overarching theme for this fairy tale.

Modernes Märchen takes on elements of many different themes – it appears to be proto-feminist, modern, semi-autobiographical, magic realist and even theological. It hints both at very real social commentary and at more esoteric philosophy. There is a very real conflict here – Fanny Lewald's multifaceted story threatens at times to strain itself, to overreach and muddle its own message. My aim is to identify and examine the many facets of the story and demonstrate that although *Modernes Märchen* is at times complex and even disjointed, two ideas stand out: the use of the fairy tale to comment on the genre of the fairy tale, and the use of the fairy tale as a

medium for social criticism. However, these features are hardly unique among *Kunstmärchen*. What makes *Modernes Märchen* stand out is how it straddles the line between traditional and subversive. It is at the same time emancipatory and conforming, which may be a reflection of the hesitation of its inexperienced author.

Modernes Märchen merits investigation because it is the bridge between Fanny Lewald's early years and her rise to fame as one of Germany's strongest voices of women's rights in the Biedermeier period. Before its publication, Lewald's only published works had been various short nonfiction accounts and poems in her cousin August Lewald's journal, *Europa: Chronik der gebildeten Welt*.³ *Modernes Märchen* was the work Lewald considered to be her first real attempt at writing, and it represents the beginning of her fame. As such, it can be viewed as an incubator for her ideas and a reference work for understanding her later, better-known writings. Although these writings have already been the subject of much commentary, *Modernes Märchen* has been under examined.

In 1861, Lewald released a revised version with the new title *Tante Renate*. I will refer to *Modernes Märchen* here by its original title and will use *Tante Renate* only when referring to changes specific to the second version. All quotations are from the 1841 edition unless otherwise noted. The general plot of the 1861 edition is the same as the original, but there are significant changes to several passages, which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

In *Modernes Märchen*, a young woman named Bertha Einstädt gives an account of a curious encounter with two suitors in her Berlin home three years previously. The story opens with Bertha telling the reader about her aunt, Renate, who remains unmarried, having turned down many suitors, and is intriguingly described by older members of the family as a "Sunday's child" without explanation as to the significance of this. Aunt Renate is as much, if not more, the

focus of the story, and accordingly later republications of *Modernes Märchen* bore the title *Tante Renate*.

At the age of fifteen, Bertha is brought along with the rest of her family to various outings, although Bertha resents being constantly referred to by the rest of the family as a “Backfisch” (an outdated term for a teenage girl, translated by Shawn Jarvis in his English version as “small fry”).⁴ One winter, her family receives two distinguished visitors from out of town, Baron Salm and Assessor Hecht (Baron von Salmon and Assessor Pike).

After Aunt Renate engages the two visitors in a heated discussion over the transmigration of souls, asserting that animals can sometimes inhabit the bodies of men, Bertha is elated to find the two suitors dotting on her with affection. However, the household mood takes a turn for the worse when Bertha, reading out loud for the family, comes to a line from Theodor Körner’s comedy *Der grüne Domino*: “Es ist ein Fischgeschlecht, in Menschenhaut gebannt, Liebhaber so brutal! und Männer so gallant.” The line prompts a somber response from Aunt Renate, who flees the room while weeping as the room falls silent.

Following after her and seeking an explanation, Bertha learns from her aunt that a Sunday’s child becomes “hellsehend, wenn es eine unglückliche Liebe, reinen Herzens, ohne alle Bitterkeit überlebt hat.” This sight, which Aunt Renate connects to the theology of Spinoza, and to several fairy tales, gives one the power to see the true souls of men. From this, Aunt Renate has been able to perceive from their first visit that Bertha’s two suitors are in fact fish inhabiting the bodies of men.

After Aunt Renate recounts the unhappy history of her own development of this power, ending with her discovery that her fiancé was actually an eagle, she convinces Bertha’s suitors to leave Berlin by indirectly suggesting she is aware of their true nature. Bertha, feeling as though

she has been saved from the edge of a cliff, recovers by departing with her aunt for a spa. At the tale's conclusion, Bertha tells her readers that she views the experience with Salm and Hecht as a fairy tale and has put the experience behind her, and that she is now happily married.

Modernes Märchen's plot pulls its reader in several different directions. This may be due to Lewald's ambitious personal aspirations for her tale. Recalling her goals at this period in her career, she writes, "If you could say, if you could show, what you have learned about yourself or observed about others in the last seven years!"⁵ Fanny Lewald consciously and explicitly incorporates her own life and the figures in it into her work. After publishing her novel *Clementine* in 1843, Lewald had an argument with her aunt Minna Simon, in which Lewald declared, "I have put everything that can be said in support of Father's and your views in the mouth of the aunt in my novel, dear aunt!"⁶ Indeed, Minna Simon also appears to be a fitting source for Aunt Renate in *Modernes Märchen*. As with Aunt Renate, Lewald often turned to Minna Simon for advice and guidance, often more so than to her own parents. With this in mind, a look into Lewald's own life may help provide a framework for understanding her fairy tale.

Two themes predominantly appear in the first half of Lewald's life: her search for independence from her father and her search for a marriage out of love rather than mere convenience. She was born as Fanny Markus in 1811. Her father, David Lewald, later changed their name in an attempt to distance the family from its Jewish origins. As a man thoroughly indifferent to religious matters, David saw the family's Jewish identity as a burden to acceptance and success in Prussian society. Several of Fanny's brothers converted to Christianity before her father allowed her to do likewise at the age of 17. However, Lewald wrote that this was merely a conversion of convenience, as she "did not believe anything of what constitutes the essence of

ecclesiastical Christianity.”⁷ Instead, she would later describe her own views as more akin to Spinozism.⁸

Lewald’s father David enforced a strict daily schedule even well into her adulthood, as she continued to live at home, unmarried, when she wrote her first stories. Her first courtship at the age of 16 was ended definitively and without justification by her father. She reacted with resignation, writing, “I did not have the courage to defy my father.”⁹

Lewald later fell in love with her cousin, Heinrich Simon, after meeting him while visiting relatives in Berlin with her father. They kept up a correspondence, but Lewald was devastated when Simon wrote that he was in love with another woman and only wished to be friends with Lewald.¹⁰ Her third encounter with courtship would again be an unhappy one; one day, David Lewald brought two gentlemen into the household with the intention that Fanny would be married off to one of them. This led to a heated argument between father and daughter, with David arguing that an unhappy marriage is better than spinsterhood, and Fanny refusing to give in and arguing for a more modern view of marriage.

The reality of Lewald’s situation was reflected in her art. In this encounter one also sees two suitors, as unwelcome to the young Lewald as the Baron and Assessor will become to her protagonist Bertha. The paternal role in marriage is marginalized in the story; one could imagine this to be wishful thinking from the author. Whereas David Lewald warned his daughter of the despair of becoming a spinster, Lewald places the spinster at the forefront of the tale.

II. Origins of *Modernes Märchen*

The impetus for writing *Modernes Märchen* came in 1840 after she witnessed the coronation and allegiance festivities of Frederick Wilhelm IV in Königsberg.¹¹ A few weeks later, August Lewald wrote to Fanny asking if she could compose an account of the event for his

journal. Her account pleased August so much that he wrote back praising her talents and urging her to pursue writing as a career. Fanny took this advice and after several false starts, resolved to write a fairy tale, as she had previously written one that she had liked.¹² Of the story, Lewald writes,

Its source was a conversation I had had some time earlier. The discussion had concerned the similarity that the upper facial features of some people had with those of animals. We had looked around to see who fit this idea and had then moved on to the concept of the migration of souls. I wondered to myself if the external resemblance to an animal would be reflected in the inside of the person, and how there were probably a considerable number of people whose uncultivated instincts would make them closer to animals than educated human beings. [...]

The whole story had a certain epistolary style, although the physical descriptions were fairly sharply drawn. I did not consider letting it be published, because I had written it in the green book, which held all my literary attempts up to then.¹³

Although Lewald doesn't use the term, it seems likely that her conversation was inspired by physiognomy, the practice of determining a person's character from their physical appearance, an ancient practice brought back into vogue in the late eighteenth century by the Swiss pastor Lavater with his work *Von der Physiognomik*. The first hint that Bertha's suitors are actually fish occurs when she tells the other girls in the household that the Baron and the Assessor had ice-cold hands. One of the girls teases her "die Adorateure eines Backfischchens müssen auch Amphibien oder Fische sein und kaltes Blut haben, das liegt in der Natur, und es ist Sympathie, die sie zu dir zieht."

Despite Lewald's reluctance to consider publication, she read the story to her father and her sisters. Although her sisters enjoyed the story, her father criticized the mixture of reality and fantasy. Lewald defended her choice by referring to the works of Jacques Callot and E.T.A. Hoffman as similarly depicting the fantastic in the real world. Seeking the approval of August Lewald, Fanny sent him the fairy tale, and he responded by publishing it in *Europa* in 1841 and sending payment. This success led to her decision to pursue writing as a career.

Fanny Lewald's fairly straightforward description of the idea behind *Modernes Märchen* leaves much unanswered about the fairy tale. She starts with a simple concept: what if there is a connection between a man's inner character and outer appearance? However, the end result is far more complex. While the narrative is focused inside a single household, it touches upon issues that reach far beyond domestic matters: the status of women in nineteenth century Germany, contemporary conceptions of marriage, and philosophical notions of the soul.

However, the reader cannot neglect that *Modernes Märchen* was written as a fairy tale, and resides firmly within the genre of the *Kunstmärchen*. Discussing her father's reaction to the tale in her autobiography, Lewald mentions that her favorite fairy tales include the Arabian Nights and the folk tales of Musäus. The original edition of *Modernes Märchen* explicitly names several other fairy tales well-known in Lewald's time. The story itself is self-referential; events that later occur are dismissed by others as mere "fairy tales," an ironic remark given that the characters are themselves in a fairy tale. When trying to understand *Modernes Märchen*, the fact that Lewald went to great lengths to identify her story as belonging to this genre is crucial.

Modernes Märchen contains the expected features of a traditional fairy tale. Tante Renate plays the role of the stereotypical wise woman, guiding the young and naïve protagonist to safety. The personification of animals is represented in the figures of the Baron and Assessor.

The classic happy ending is still present, and indeed, the happy ending is triggered by Bertha's marriage rather than through the escape of the danger facing her.

Lewald even includes other fairy tales in her story; Tante Renate directs Bertha, and, one presumes, the reader as well, to several other fairy tales, notably including Fouqué's *Undine* and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. The common thread between these works is that they all deal with creatures of the sea aspiring to humanity, a water nymph in the former case and a mermaid in the latter. In *Modernes Märchen*, it is fish that seek to become human, but the novelty is that the sea creatures are this time men rather than women, an inversion of the usual trope.

Modernes Märchen offers something novel enough to merit further regard, and this lies in the very fact that the story's elements are well-established. The novelty lies in the fact that the story acknowledges the fact that it *is* a fairy tale. The characters seem aware of the fact that they are in a fairy tale, acknowledging that the occurrences around them usually happen in fairy tales. While this also occurs in earlier *Kunstmärchen* such as Tieck's *Der blonde Eckbert* and Hoffman's *Der Sandmann*, what makes Lewald's self-aware fairy tale different is that it retreats back to the expected "happily ever after" ending. Lewald uses common fairy tale devices in order to subvert them; gender roles and societal norms are reversed, only to end her story in a manner that is conservative and respectful of tradition. *Modernes Märchen* is effectively a commentary on fairy tales from within the genre itself.

Viewing the story this way resolves the seeming chasms between various parts of the narrative. Reading the tale without acknowledging these meta-references leaves unanswered the question of what marriage and the transmigration of souls have in common. Understanding Lewald's fairy tale as an allusion to the nature of the genre makes it clear that the seemingly

more esoteric elements are in fact playful. Tante Renate's seemingly deep monologue on pantheism and the natural progression of the world is in fact Lewald's way of explaining a simple fairy-tale idea, that animals can become human. Rather than simply accepting it as an event that happens in the genre, Lewald attempts to make it real, legitimizing the fairy tale as important despite the dismissive comments of the Baron.

I do not mean to argue that the emancipatory and theological aspects of *Modernes Märchen* should be wholly absorbed into this greater narrative. The fairy tale commentary allows these aspects to be packaged together into one story, but *Modernes Märchen* is more than a fantasy story meant only to entertain. Lewald's primary reputation is that of an advocate of women's emancipation, and in this story written at the beginning of her career, she begins to develop ideas that she will later bring to the forefront in her novels. And given that Lewald wrote reverently of Spinoza in her autobiography, it would be negligent to not recognize the importance of a Spinozist reference when it occurs in her fiction.

Thus, an investigation into *Modernes Märchen* serves to contribute to two wider dialogues. Primarily, such an investigation is significant because it breaches important questions about why certain concepts in fairy tales exist in the first place. The fairy tales Fanny Lewald references are the same that form a crucial part of each new generation's upbringing more than a century and a half later. *The Little Mermaid* is no less familiar to us today than it was to Fanny Lewald. Understanding what Lewald wanted to say about fairy tales offers great insight into why we still read them. The secondary conversation that *Modernes Märchen* addresses is the question of what conversations were happening in the mid-nineteenth century. What issues of marriage, physiognomy and pantheism were being raised in Lewald's time?

It is important also to look at these secondary aspects because of the changes Lewald makes in her 1861 edition *Tante Renate*. The very title provokes questions. Has Lewald retreated from the designation of fairy tale, or from the designation of modernity? Tante Renate's references to other fairy tales at the end of her pantheist monologue have been removed in the 1861 edition. This makes it no less of a fairy tale, and does not necessarily undermine my primary thesis, as her characters continue to make meta-references to fairy tales in the second edition. However, these changes raise the question of whether Lewald is retreating from or merely clarifying her original intention twenty years earlier.

III. *Modernes Märchen* and Gender Issues

The most prominent feature of *Modernes Märchen* is its challenge to traditional gender-roles, especially regarding marriage in the Biedermeier period. Lewald's story contributes to a contemporary conversation on the role of women in society as well as the role of marriage, and draws on her personal experience to help shape that argument. In this section, I will outline the ways in which Lewald injects criticism of traditional gender roles into the tale, analyze the story from this perspective and look at contemporary works of literature which influenced Lewald's views on women and marriage.

Modernes Märchen begins, "In unserer Familie hatten wir eine alte, unverheiratete Tante, die sehr schön gewesen sein und hundert Bewerber gehabt haben sollte." Tante Renate is as much the protagonist of the story as is her niece; she is the primary driver of the action, and her own past is embedded into the story. The 1861 edition of the story is named after her. It should therefore be seen as significant that she is described as having cast off the institution of marriage, rejecting many suitors despite her attractiveness. Ironically, it is Tante Renate that the family

entrusts with the approval or rejection of any marriages, a subversive idea in an era when that privilege typically belonged to the girl's father.

Fanny Lewald's more famous works of literature show her to be a champion of female emancipation, but it is also important to note that the changing views on the role of women in Germany in the early nineteenth century played a part in enabling her to become this champion. Hanna Ballin Lewis' abridged and annotated translation of Fanny Lewald's autobiography is titled "The Education of Fanny Lewald." This is a fitting title, as Lewald is the product of a fundamental shift in what constituted women's education in Biedermeier Prussia. Lewald in turn creates characters that idealize this new education in her fairy tale.

Fanny Lewald came from a family belonging to Prussia's "new bourgeoisie,"¹⁴ and one thing that set this class apart was its new understanding on what constituted a woman's education. Whereas previous generations educated women with the aim of developing "household skills,"¹⁵ Ute Frevert writes of Lewald's era, "Now, women were to acquire suitable general knowledge and a basic knowledge of history, literature, languages and biology, so that they would be understanding wives to their husbands and intelligent mothers to their children."¹⁶

Following this tradition, David Lewald provided his daughter with an education that would have been unheard of in earlier years. From the ages of 6 to 15, she studied at Königsberg's Ulrich School, a co-educational school with Pietist leanings.¹⁷ Her secular-minded father eschewed both Jewish and purely domestic education, instead familiarizing Fanny with Goethe, Schiller and fairy tales.¹⁸ This is not to imply that David Lewald was so progressive as to support women's emancipation, as his attempt to marry off his daughter against her will demonstrates.¹⁹

Although the new curriculum for girls was not intended to empower them, it helped serve that purpose by enabling women to engage intellectually with their male peers. As a result, Lewald's career followed those of other prominent female writers in the German-speaking states, such as Bettina von Arnim and Rahel Varnhagen. A secular and modern education enabled Fanny Lewald to engage the portraits of women created by male writers and to counter them in her own works.

The two female protagonists of *Modernes Märchen* are representative of this new generation of educated women. When the two suitors come to visit Aunt Renate's home, their introduction to the "alte, unverheiratete Tante" soon transitions into a lively discussion about literature and theology, in which Aunt Renate stands as an equal with the men. Aunt Renate proves herself to be well-read through the many actual authors and philosophers whom she references. Her niece, Bertha, drives the plot to its climax through the act of reading. An "alte[s] Wunderbuch" is the source of Aunt Renate's realization of her supernatural ability to see the true souls of men. Education in the fairy tale is not only significant for its female characters, but also enables Fanny Lewald herself to show to her reader that she (as well as her story's heroine) can be just as educated as any man of her time.

However, Lewald goes beyond merely depicting women as standing with men as equals in her fairy tale. The female characters in *Modernes Märchen* stand at the forefront and overshadow the male antagonists and supporting figures. The depiction of characters is a reversal of the usual norms of earlier storytelling. It is gynocentric in its narration – Aunt Renate and Bertha Einstädt are the only characters whose actions drive the plot; their speech makes up the majority of the dialogue. They are the only characters in power, the only ones with any activity.

The male figures, on the other hand, are either absent or passive. Given the story's domestic setting and its premise of two suitors courting a young lady, one figure is noticeably absent – Bertha's father. The father figure, who in reality would dominate the household and moderate the courtship of his daughter, is not even so much as mentioned in the story. Instead, the reader finds subversion – it is the aunt who holds the power over marriage and courtship, rather than the father, which is notable when in Lewald's own life it was her father who was the sole matchmaker, often to her dismay.

Only three male figures are found in the fairy tale: the two suitors, Baron Salm and Assessor Hecht, and Bertha's cousin Franz. Of these characters, only two have direct speech. Baron Salm speaks a total of three lines in response to Aunt Renate. Cousin Franz speaks just one – a derogatory remark aimed at Bertha which is quickly dismissed by the Baron. Bertha's reaction to this dismissal firmly establishes the recurring theme of female agency in the story: “Hätte ich damals das schöne Wort gekannt, ich würde gesagt haben, denn ich – bin heute emanzipiert.”

This declaration, which on its own asserts a confidence and courage that fits into the canonical notions of Lewald's writing, is nonetheless curious. It is ironic in that Bertha's feeling of emancipation stems from the judgment of a man. Bertha had no agency in her own emancipation, rather, she remained dependent on how others perceived her. Indeed, in the very next scene, Bertha again remains silent when another young girl teases her when Bertha reveals the Baron had unnaturally cold hands, offering up no defense to the slight against her. What is significant about the young girl's remark is that it accuses Bertha of being less than human, making literal her figurative status as a “Backfisch.” Bertha, in the company of bestial suitors, is threatened with the loss of her humanity. This demonstrates the tension of Bertha's quest for

emancipation; the man who she believed to have emancipated is in fact the very source of her conflict.

It could be argued that the powerless and easily-dismissed Franz is in fact the only true male figure in the entire story. As the plot twist shows the reader, Baron Salm and Assessor Hecht are not men at all, but merely fish inhabiting a male guise, inferior creatures according to Aunt Renate's philosophy. Bertha proves herself to be the superior being in her emancipation. Derided as a "Backfisch" throughout the story, she frees herself from this designation and casts out the true fish. Lewald describes the story herself as a thought experiment on uncultivated men proving themselves to be merely animals rather than "educated human beings." It is then rather telling that it is the women who prove themselves to be the genuine human beings, not only in their education but also in their very physical essence.

Lewald's choice of representing men as fish is not arbitrary. The idea comes in part from a short comedy, Theodor Körner's *Der grüne Domino*, that not only is directly referenced in *Modernes Märchen*, but whose very reading is the cause of the plot twist. The work contains both stylistic and narrative similarities to *Modernes Märchen* and is clearly a key source for Lewald's own work.

Der grüne Domino revolves around two women, Marie and Pauline. Marie is engaged to marry Pauline's brother, Karl. However, her engagement is at the behest of her father, and she has yet to meet Karl in person. As a result, Marie is concerned that she will not be happy with Karl, declaring "Doch Lebensglück gilt mehr als bloße Tochterpflicht." Instead, Marie's thoughts are occupied with the mysterious figure of the Green Domino, whom she recently met at a masked ball and is rumored to have spoken of Marie.

Pauline tries to temper Marie's infatuation by reminding her that Marie does not truly know the Green Domino either, having only met him once briefly, and in a mask, no less. "Man weiß ja schon, was eine Maske spricht," Pauline warns. To prove her point, Pauline dresses herself up in a man's garb, pretending to be the Green Domino visiting Marie and scaring her off with "his" manner. The ruse shakes Marie's interest, leading Pauline to state the moral: "Sieh, liebes Kind, mir schien's ein wen'g lächerlich, in eine Maske sich so plötzlich zu verlieben." The comedy ends just before the real Green Domino approaches the two.

Körner's work has some elements that would have appealed to Lewald, as she makes clear through the words of her own character Aunt Renate, who praises the work as follows:

Körner ist ein wahrer Dichter; sein kindliches Gemüt ahnt und fühlt, was kein Verstand der Verständigen sieht, und oft hat er die frappantesten Wahrheiten, wie durch eine Art von göttlicher Inspiration, ausgesprochen, vielleicht ohne es selbst zu wissen.

The line from *Der grüne Domino* that prompted this response in *Modernes Märchen* was a remark from Pauline on the nature of men: "Es ist ein Fischgeschlecht, in Menschenhaut gebannt, Liebhaber zu brutal, und Helden zu galant."

Lewald found this line powerful enough to use it as the basis for her own fairy tale, and in some ways *Modernes Märchen* can be viewed as an answer or a follow-up to *Der grüne Domino*. Körner's work certainly has some appeal to a critic of nineteenth-century gender norms: as with *Modernes Märchen*, Körner's comedy displays a strong female voice: the only characters with any dialogue are the women. The only two other men referenced, Karl and the Green Domino, only appear indirectly in the women's conversation. The play ends just as the Green

Domino is about to enter the scene. The closest the reader gets to a male character in the entire play is, humorously enough, Pauline's interpretation of a man through her disguise.

Der grüne Domino ends with a warning: be cautious about falling in love hastily.

Modernes Märchen continues the same concept, but with a twist. The suitors in Lewald's story are also wearing masks of sorts, and Bertha's initial infatuation with them turns out to be a dangerous step as the men turn out not to be who she thought they were. But Körner's story implies an ending that aligns with the social conventions of the time: a woman cannot be trusted to select a spouse for herself, and the father is still the rational decision-maker concerning his daughter's fate. Lewald takes the same premise, but changes the ending to have a more emancipatory message: her protagonist finds a man with whom she is happy, without the intervention of any male figures in the decision. The power to see which suitors are unfit lies in the woman, in the power of the "second sight" that Lewald grants to Bertha and Aunt Renate.

In this way, Lewald is engaging in a broader conversation with the male writers of her time. Until the nineteenth century, it had been almost exclusively men who had produced images of women in literature. With *Modernes Märchen*, Lewald can respond to those productions with ones actually created by a woman, substituting second-hand knowledge for an image more directly informed by personal experience. In her autobiography, Lewald criticizes the roles women have played in men's literature. Goethe, in particular, while on one hand serving as a role model for Lewald, is also the target of many of her complaints about the representation of women.

In her autobiography, Lewald describes her father's enthusiasm for Goethe's *Die natürliche Tochter* and her reaction to the work, "one of the first I read."²⁰ Lewald does not share her father's love for the play. "I felt only aversion for my father's ideal of femininity, for

Eugenie and her resigned attitude,”²¹ she wrote. For her father, Goethe’s play represents the idea that every woman should marry, even if the marriage is an unhappy one. Lewald’s aversion to this idea was strong enough that it led her to strive for independence from her father.²² This would serve as a creative spark, as Lewald wrote, “This conviction that is the basis of many of novels arose in that hour.”²³ Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften* would likewise draw similar criticism from Lewald.²⁴

Modernes Märchen is the product of Lewald’s desire to achieve this independence from a male-constructed image of marriage. That Bertha’s father is completely absent from the fairy tale is not an oversight, but rather the result of Lewald’s earlier-stated “conviction.” Just as she resolved never to be forced to marry anyone, she has granted her protagonist the power to choose free from the influences of other people. Lewald’s own success in preventing her father from marrying her off is reflected in her writing. Her first literary work is a resounding answer to her father and his ideas, and it is not surprising that he found reason to criticize it when she first read it to him.²⁵ *Modernes Märchen* is one of the earliest German works in which a female writer challenges male notions of femininity.

This challenge accounts in part for Lewald’s designation of her tale as “modern.” However, while reading *Modernes Märchen* as a sort of proto-feminist text, one must exercise caution. While the beginning of the tale challenges the significance of marriage through the introduction of the powerful yet unmarried Tante Renate, the tale ends on a decidedly less subversive note. It is not the repelling of Bertha’s suitors that ends the conflict, but rather the meeting of a more fitting suitor, leading to her marriage. In the end, Lewald embraces the institution she appeared at first to be criticizing. This reading is further more inadequate at

explaining why Lewald goes into such detail into the supernatural and theological elements of the story, which appear to bear no relation to gender issues.

That Lewald's emancipatory notions have their limit isn't surprising. Lewald was still writing from the home of her father, and her repeated attempts to justify her literary decisions with references to respected writers reveals a certain caution, perhaps even a lack of confidence. However, according to Jack Zipes, this is also a hallmark of the genre. Zipes describes the fairy tale as "compensatory," arguing that "[the fairy tale] presents moral and political critiques of society at the same time as it undermines them and reconciles the distraught protagonist with society."²⁶

IV. Nur ein Ammenmärchen?

Modernes Märchen is social commentary through the medium of a fairy tale, but it is also as much about the medium itself. While they may not take center stage in the story, there are many explicit and implicit references to specific well-known fairy tales in Lewald's time, as well as to generic fairy tale tropes. The presence of these social issues in the fairy tale does not undermine it as a fairy tale but rather reinforces it; gender issues come up time and time again in many classic folk tales. By commenting on the role of marriage in her time, or on a lack of female agency, Lewald is simultaneously commenting on those issues that pervade the genre in which she writes.

Just as social criticism can aid in understand the fairy tale, the fairy tale can be an aid to social criticism. Lewald's legacy was an advocate for women's emancipation, but her better-known works lack the element of the fantastic found in *Modernes Märchen*. However, blending the real with the fantastic can serve as a shield against criticism. By pre-emptively relegating one's work into the realm of the unreal associated with the *Märchen*, a writer can disarm his or

her opponent from seeing the work as controversial or threatening. Perhaps Lewald, not yet emboldened enough to openly criticize gender inequality, opted to couch in a fairy tale for the same reason Heine would a few years later subtitle his highly-controversial critique of Germany *Ein Wintermärchen*.

The decision to write a fairy tale also allowed Lewald to work within the framework of her beloved source of entertainment and draw upon its canon. Lewald repeatedly draws on the authority of earlier fairy tales both within *Modernes Märchen* itself, in private conversations about the work with her father, and in the public sphere through her autobiography. In particular, Lewald refers to E.T.A. Hoffmann to defend her decision to blend the real and the fantastic.

She very likely has Hoffmann's own *Kunstmärchen Der Sandmann* in mind. The narratives of both works purport to come from the realm of the real; *Der Sandmann* through its epistolary style, and *Modernes Märchen* through its first-person point-of-view, although it is noteworthy that Lewald also describes her fairy tale as having an epistolary style. Both are self-referential, with characters dismissive of the events that are happening as characteristic of a fairy tale. *Modernes Märchen* seems to draw upon the same feeling of the uncanny that Freud saw in Hoffmann's tale. Where Hoffmann creates a mechanical doll that takes on the guise of a human, Lewald replaces the doll with two fish. The similarity is highlighted by the fact that in both tales, the protagonists' first physical clue that their lovers are not entirely human is through their hands, described in both cases as "eiskalt."

Modernes Märchen goes further in toying with the idea of the fairy tale as a whole. Tante Renate mocks a common trope of the genre as absurd, saying, "Auch ich bin weit davon entfernt zu glauben, dass irgendein galanter Kavalier oder eine schöne Prinzess plötzlich in einen Löwen oder in ein Vögelchen verwandelt werde – wozu sollte das auch?" But as Lewald pokes fun at

the fairy tale from inside one, Tante Renate cannot dismiss the concept entirely, and continues that the opposite transformation, that of an animal from a human, is indeed possible.

Indeed, the whole of *Modernes Märchen* at times seems to take an ambiguous stance towards the fairy tale, at once dismissing it and reaffirming it. The Baron and Assessor dismiss the transmigration of souls as something that can only be conceived of in a fairy tale, but of course the concept is shown to be real by the end. At the same time, the Baron and Assessor are correct from a meta-perspective, because the transformation *is* happening within a fairy tale. In Tante Renate's frame narrative, her fiancé likewise uses the word "Märchen" dismissively, as she narrates, "Religion war meinem Bräutigam, dem Sohn der Revolution, ein Ammenmärchen." In this case, the reader can see how Lewald operates from both within the fairy tale and without it; Lewald may be using the fiancé as a stand-in for an actual proponent of a belief which she intends to refute.

Lewald's chosen title for the first version reflects its paradoxical nature. It is modern because it reverses many fairy tale conventions. The water nymphs which were female in Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and Fouqué's *Undine* are made into men. Animals transform into humans while the reverse, which frequently happens in Grimm's tales, is dismissed. Men are made monstrous and wicked instead of women. However, for all this, the story remains within the bounds of a traditional fairy tale; the status quo (here, the necessity of marriage for female happiness) is upheld and nothing fundamental is changes. Just as Tante Renate and Bertha reaffirm the validity of the fairy tale within the plot by proving true those very things the others dismiss as a fairy tale, Lewald reaffirms the genre by modernizing it without challenging the fundamentals of it. Her insistence on referring to previous writers to justify her actions both within and without the story serve to show Lewald's hesitance to stray from the norm.

When Bertha declares, “Hätte ich damals das schöne Wort gekannt, ich würde gesagt haben, denn ich – bin heute emanzipiert,” the reader can envision Lewald making the same declaration to herself as she wrote *Modernes Märchen*. There are hints of a yearning for emancipation throughout the story. It is no surprise that Bertha’s father figure is completely absent from the plot when Lewald lamented her father’s oppressiveness throughout the early chapters of her autobiography. She could not yet achieve independence in her own life, but she could do so in her fairy tale. Lewald failed to forge a romantic relationship with her first love or with her cousin, Heinrich Simon, but she could place her protagonist into the arms of a man with whom she is truly happy.

Bertha’s declaration also rings true within the story. Bertha emancipates herself from the threat of her bestial suitors just as her aunt succeeded in doing years before. And this can be read in a more metaphorical sense; while Lewald gives Körner’s original line, “Es ist ein Fischgeschlecht, in Menschenhaut gebannt” a literal reading, it is clear from her own writings and from Körner’s play that this designation of men refers more to the undesirable characteristics of the sex. Bertha and Tante Renate did not just emancipate themselves from animals, but also from the contemporary woman’s plight of finding themselves engaged to men, whom, as Lewald had described it, were more beast than civilized gentlemen.

The recurring theme in all of these cases is that it is possible to emancipate oneself while still remaining within the system that caused the bind. Lewald’s characters do not escape marriage to emancipate themselves from its chains. Tante Renate remained unmarried but found herself in the role of the matchmaker. Bertha fends off her unwanted suitors only to end up with another. She emancipates her fairy tale from some of the expectations of a traditional fairy tale while rigidly adhering to others.

V. Tante Renate

Twenty years after the publication of *Modernes Märchen*, Lewald revisited the story and renamed it *Tante Renate* for release in her 1861 collection *Bunte Bilder*. The change in title is intriguing. Was Lewald attempting to back down from calling her story modern, from calling it a *Märchen*, or even from both? Or should this change be viewed more positively, as an attempt to redirect the focus on to the story's strong and independent wise woman? Before attempting to answer this question, it will first be helpful to consider the changes between the two versions.

Tante Renate tells the same basic story as *Modernes Märchen*, and indeed in the first half appears to be nothing more than a minor revision. The only revisions in the initial pages are various word replacements. In what might hint at a growing nationalist sentiment, in a few places Lewald replaces French terms with their German equivalents, such as substituting *beau monde* for *schöne Welt*. It is in the second half of the story that the reader finds two significant rewrites. The story ends in the same way with the same final sentences, but most of the denouement has been completely revised. The other major revision, to Tante Renate's conversation with Bertha revealing the meaning of the term *Sonntagskind*, attracts more attention.

This part of the story already seems jarring enough in Lewald's original version. After defining the term *Sonntagskind*, previously couched in mystery, Tante Renate elaborates by referring to Spinoza and pantheism, beginning a radical change in what previously appeared to be a story about courtship and marriage. Tante Renate explains her understanding of Spinoza, which is the omnipresence of God. "So blüht Gott in der Blume, so spielt der Strahl der Gottheit in den Goldfischen in jenem Glase," she elaborates. In this monologue, she also reiterates a sentiment she expressed earlier when discussing the transmigration of souls with the Baron, "In

der Welt ist alles fortschreitend.” Thus, an animal soul may migrate to the body of a man, but the other way around would be a violation of the laws of nature. However, Tante Renate explains, this transformation is only temporary, and can only be permanent through winning the love of a human. She then breaks off the explanation, saying that it has diverged too far from what Bertha has to know, and directs her to read Fouqué’s *Undine*, Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, *Tomcat Murr* or *The Hound Braganza* if she would like to know more.

The 1841 monologue fits in well as a commentary on fairy tales. In countless fairy tales, animals and humans switch forms, but the mechanism behind this change is left unexplained. Through Tante Renate, Lewald tries to provide a rationalization for the transmigration. By doing so, she attempts to lend an air of legitimacy to the genre of the fairy tale. The animals in the story attempt to dismiss transmigration. The Baron dismisses it as a fairy tale. Tante Renate’s former suitor, Belaigle, believes “the philosophy of the century” to have rendered it irrelevant. Tante Renate, in true Enlightenment form, argues from the pedestal of reason for her case; there must be a natural progression of beings. By doing this, Lewald gives fairy tales new life, refusing to allow them to be dismissed in a new era by giving them a more modern foundation; perhaps this, too, accounts for the “modernity” of *Modernes Märchen*.

In *Tante Renate*, this monologue is altered considerably. It begins as in the 1841 version with Tante Renate’s interpretation of Spinoza and pantheism. After “in der Welt ist alles fortschreitend,” the two versions diverge. The 1861 edition makes a curious addition to this line, continuing “alles kann sich nur in aufsteigender Linie entwickeln, bis es seinen Höhepunkt erreicht hat und wieder völlig aufgelöst wird in das All, um auf’s Neue den Kreislauf des Lebens zu beginnen.”

The part regarding the power of love to cement a migrating soul's humanity is replaced with a very different idea, continuing on the theme of the natural progression and development of beings. In this version, Tante Renate explains that it is a joy when two beings of the same level of development come together, but a misfortune when the beings come from different levels. The greatest misfortune, however, occurs when a creature that has gained the form of a man still retains its "Tierbildung" and falls in love with an innocent girl "aus einem alten Menschengeschlechte entbrennt." This fate, says Tante Renate, was her own.

The changes made to this key passage raise two questions. The first is whether these changes alter the intent and meaning of the story. The second, which is the key to answering the first, is how significant this passage is to the overall story. The challenge to answering these questions is that although Tante Renate's monologue is undoubtedly an emotional highpoint of the story, it doesn't seem to affect the narrative. If Lewald had removed this passage from *Modernes Märchen*, the plot would still be coherent, the reader likely unaware that anything has been lost at all.

As a commentary on fairy tales, Tante Renate's aside into the realm of pantheism serves as an attempt to further ground the fantastic in the realm of the real. In traditional fairy tales, it is common for humans to be transformed into animals, but, as a genre often relegated to the children's bedroom, the casual fairy tale reader generally does not question the mechanism for this transformation. Bringing Spinoza into the story is Lewald's way of injecting modern rationalism into the fantastic, an attempt on the author's part to give the fantastic a foundation by referring to authority. In fact, in the first edition, this is but one of many attempts in *Modernes Märchen* to justify its own existence.

Of course, Lewald probably wasn't attempting to prove the reality of the fairy tale transformation. The reference to Spinoza, however, does fit the trend of Lewald's calling upon authority throughout the story. It remains a question whether Spinoza, or the pantheism that Lewald reads into Spinoza (a common reading among contemporary Germans), even has anything to do with the transmigration of souls. However, the choice is important when considering the author. Lewald praises Spinoza in her autobiography; to include him in her fairy tale was another way she could begin to make her voice heard in one of her earliest published works.

The change in Tante Renate's speech in the 1861 version of the tale does not fundamentally alter the story itself; it continues to serve the same function of justifying a supernatural occurrence in the fairy tale. It is, however, important when viewing Lewald as a Spinozist. If one takes the entire monologue as a sort of aside from the story, the changes to this key passage can be viewed as Lewald refining or clarifying her understanding of Spinoza and pantheism after two decades of reflection.

What this monologue does not change is the fact that Tante Renate seems to play a more prominent role in the story than the ostensible protagonist, Bertha Einstädt. This is made even more clear with the title change, the 1861 version bearing a title which places the focus squarely on the aunt. The title change is also likely to be Lewald's way of making her work appear more traditional. Naming a fairy tale after a prominent character is quite common in the genre; *Tante Renate* is a more typical title than *Modernes Märchen*.

Tante Renate has also been rendered more traditional in its smaller changes. Lewald has made the intertextuality of the tale far less explicit by removing references to specific fairy tales and their authors, making it appear to be less of a *Kunstmärchen*, where such references are more

typical than in a folk tale. The replacement of French terms with their German equivalents makes the work appear less erudite and more appealing to a wider audience. Lewald may be retreating somewhat from calling her tale modern, although the pantheist elements and the nationalist appeal of using German over French certainly reflect modernity.

What Lewald has certainly not retreated from is the fairy tale. In fact, removing the word *Märchen* from the title makes it appear more like folklore, as this sort of self-reference is common to the genre of *Kunstmärchen*. *Tante Renate* is still as much of a fairy tale, as well as a commentary on them, as *Modernes Märchen* was. The changes in the later tale do not reverse or undermine any of the goals Lewald had in mind when writing the earlier one.

In the literary canon, Lewald is best remembered as a champion of women's emancipation, often compared with France's George Sand. She gained notoriety for her political writings, not only on issues of women's emancipation but also for chronicling Europe's turmoil in the revolutions of 1848. Her reputation as a Jewish women's rights advocate is in fact what led to her fall from the literary canon,²⁷ first during the Third Reich, but as well as in the postwar period as interest in women's literature waned in Germany. *Modernes Märchen* may be as little examined as it is because it appears to sit so far outside of this narrative; Lewald would not become known as a writer of the fantastic. However, her fairy tale tackles many of the issues which Lewald would later become known for engaging in, but by looking at them through the lens of the fairy tale, it offers a fascinatingly unique perspective.

¹ History of Lewald's public reception in Germany: Ujma 19

² Ward 87

³ Lewis 132

⁴ "Modernes Märchen," Fanny Lewald, from *Im Reich der Wünsche: Die schönsten Märchen deutscher*

Dichterinnen, Shawn C. Jarvis (Hg.), C.H. Beck 2012

⁵ Lewis 210

⁶ Lewis 237

⁷ Lewis 117

⁸ Lewis 302-304

⁹ Lewis 116

¹⁰ Lewis 147

¹¹ Lewis 207

¹² Lewis 211

¹³ Lewis 211

¹⁴ Frevert

¹⁵ Frevert 17

¹⁶ Frevert 17

¹⁷ Lewis xvi

¹⁸ Lewis 63

¹⁹ Lewis 178

²⁰ Lewis 90

²¹ Lewis 91

²² Lewis 92

²³ Lewis 92

²⁴ Lewis 157

²⁵ Lewis 211

²⁶ Zipes 118

²⁷ Ujma 19

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