NOTE: This item is the archived author-version of a book review published in The German Quarterly 96, no. 4 (2023), 592–95. Please cite according to that version of record. [1]

The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism
By Jakob Norberg, Cambridge University Press. 2022. pp. 228. Open access (PDF), £75.00 / $99.99 (hardback)

Jakob Norberg seeks to recover political thought in the writings of two iconic philologists of the early 19th century—Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—as the map of Europe was redrawn with the rise of Napoleon and demise of the Holy Roman Empire. To frame the endeavor, Norberg introduces the "philologist king." This concept, he argues, articulates the understandings and ambitions of the Grimms, Jacob especially: rulers best advised by philologists, who had distinctive expertise to describe and delimit the language, literature, traditions, and even territory of peoples past and present across Europe. The correspondence of nation and monarch proved essential for the Grimms, in Norberg's telling, and this triad of king–philologist–people constitutes a major interpretative lens.

The book articulates two aims: to contextualize the brothers intellectually and politically and to illuminate "the relationship between new methods of knowledge and established political institutions and forms of authority" (6). It formulates a fivefold task: uncovering the "ideological background" of *The Children's- and Household Tales* (sic), recovering the Grimms' "self-appointed task" of mediating between ruled and ruler, highlighting vernacular philology in nation-building, underscoring nationalism's need for specific kinds of knowledge, and examining the political imagination of key figures in the German intelligentsia of the period (15). Ultimately, the volume hopes to nuance our understanding of the Grimms and strengthen our grasp of modern nationalism.

[1] Funded by the European Union (ERC, PhiSci, 101042729). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Norberg's study comprises six main chapters, differentiated by theme, each identified with one element in the "cluster of interconnected ideals and fantasies" of the nationalist imagination (20). Chapter 1 focuses on a speech by Jacob to contextualize his view of the philologist's task: studying texts to describe the history of people, language, and territory amidst political challenges of his age. Turning to both brothers' famed fairytales, chapter 2 argues for their function (on par with that of songs and legends) within "the structure of early nationalist ideology" (72), namely as proof of a pre-existent, pre-political nationhood. In chapter 3, the analysis concentrates on a short, derivative review by Wilhelm to claim that the younger Grimm considered legal material part of a people's cultural heritage, and it draws, again, on the folktale collection to assert that he imagined the philologist, through custodial and reconstructive efforts, as a "redeemer of national being" (107). The next three chapters, like the first, pivot around Jacob. Chapter 4 details his occupational biography and deduces his political convictions. Chapter 5 examines Jacob's (gendered) ideas on language learning and mass schooling. Chapter 6 traces his difficulty plodding through the history of language—as recorded in "foreign" literature—to reach an ancient past of Germanic tribes.

The book succeeds mostly in its first aim, partly in the second. Norberg's work has much to commend itself. Its strategic organization around key themes provides cohesion and affords often revealing perspectives. Moreover, its contextualizing matrices furnish solid framing, whether to contrast philologists as civil servants in a state apparatus with 18th-century *philosophes* at court or early 19th-century radical intellectuals in the public sphere, or to classify the folktale collection as a genre in the nationalist "literary repertoire." The book also embeds the brothers in such contexts, from the particularities of their Hessian homeland to their experience of the French as foe and foil to their ideas on things national vis-à-vis those of an earlier generation. Furthermore, it identifies tensions within each Grimm, revealing how Jacob stood for a nationalist politics yet fell silent on politics within that

nation-state, how he reckoned even Germans "ungerman" if they diverged from his own views, how both brothers celebrated the local yet abstracted from it into the national, and how their research on German cultural productions revealed entanglements with other peoples. Besides, the monograph has effective prose and smooth transitions, although its pacing is somewhat sluggish and its argumentation tediously repetitive. Finally, it provides extensive citations and a bibliography rich in secondary literature, even if such thorough documentation—in endnotes—increases occupational hazards ranging from paper cuts to risking carpal tunnel syndrome due to constant scrolling or flipping.

Historians may find fault in the execution. First, the work is strong on context but less on primary sources. It continuously draws on a rather small set of published primary texts, the size of that corpus obscured by reference to reprintings in collected works, absent original titles and dates. The weight of its claims rests on secondary literature—usually general studies applied to the case of the Grimms—so it remains unclear whether primary texts could support the book's heavy arguments. Second, the volume stands only in loose connection with past scholarship. It seldom engages explicitly, sustainedly, or substantively with other writers despite copious, often highly allusive, citations. Third, the organization renders suboptimal service to the argument. The book unfolds thematically: moving from the "mature political project" (17) of Jacob in the 1840s (though seamlessly integrating sources from two, even three decades prior) back to the brothers' work in the first fifteen years of the century before it presents, in chapter 4, substantive and significant biographical information. Disregarding a historian's predilection for chronology, it delays introducing basic background: on writers and writings, on debates, events, and trends. (Discussion of romanticism comes too little too late; historicism hardly at all.) Reorganization could have made for a more compelling case.

Philologists may also raise concerns. To start, the book lacks rigor at times. For example, it attributes opinions to Jacob individually from an address he drafted to the king,

although the letter was sent from five cosigners, and an editorial comment in his collected works which reports on the manuscript (unmentioned in Norberg's study) alludes to changes they had demanded because of overheated political statements. It ascribes the folktale prefaces to Wilhelm alone, despite evidence to the contrary: the volumes were published under the Brothers Grimm; the prefaces speak in the first-person plural; a note in their reprinting states Wilhelm had "probably the greatest share" of the labor; and scholars inconsistently assign authorship to him or to both brothers. Yet Norberg's study also adduces at times those same prefaces to describe opinions of the Grimms collectively. (The lengthy foreword to the 1850 edition, expressly by Wilhelm, sees no mention, likely because it was omitted from his collected works.) There is little commentary on the changes, long observed and often significant, across the editions of the fairytales. Next, the work offers some dubious readings. It cites a statement by Jacob on "the historical center of German imperial rule" (28), although the original reads "the heart of German history"—not insignificant for a study of philology and politics. The study stresses a shared Grimmian dedication to *national* "particularity" but references texts by Wilhelm on the distinctiveness of medieval *human* history, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as an *individual*, and the *Bavarian* people (73). Exegesis slips into eisegesis in analysis of a brief observation by Jacob on a date (62), Wilhelm fancying himself a folktale prince (133), and even the ideal of a philologist king. Additionally, citations prove ambiguous, whether referring to a primary or secondary source (almost always the latter). On a single page, one sentence points to a political outlook "in Grimm's eyes" yet cites a theoretical article that mentions Jacob not at all, while a second declares another position "in Grimm's view" but invokes the reprint of a different piece on sociological aspects of nationalism—one that quotes Johann Gottlieb Fichte, not Grimm (38). Such ambiguity makes it difficult to evaluate the author's claims and utilize the work for further study.

Scholars may wish for more precision. Accuracy proves lacking in the citation of an original publication but reproduction of that quotation from a modified reprinting (23 and 29). The book names Carl Friedrich Creutzer, not the more usual Georg Friedrich Creuzer (89). The endnotes show English words in German (*Rede and die deutsche Nation* [205]), inconsistent names for foreign cities (Munich [225], Zürich [199], Montréal [204]), unpolished citations (Grimm Kl. Schr. 8, 428 [198]), and orthographic errors (*Die Entstehung der Politischen Strömungen in Deutschland* [199]). Other instances of imprecision abound.

Ultimately, this synthetic book musters a large body of work on political thought to create a composite of early 19th-century German nationalism and uses it, with specialized studies of the Grimms, to reinterpret selected writings by the fraternal duo, as individuals and as a pair. Norberg's thesis is less persuasive for its philologist king—a monarch trained in text and language—than for a king philologist: Germanists like the Grimms expanding their domain for institutional authority, social prestige, and cultural influence.

The volume offers more to those interested in the history of politics than that of philology or the humanities: new forms of knowledge production, promised in the study's second aim, undergo less focused, less robust analysis. (The best chapters here examine Wilhelm on the *Nibelungenlied* as national poetry and Jacob on German tribes as deduced by language.) While the book says much about the Grimms infusing textual and linguistic study with political relevance, it has less to say on philology itself, be it how a fledgling Germanic studies modeled itself on biblical and classical erudition or why a collection of oral folktales falls under the umbrella of a philology defined with respect to "surviving textual documents" (3). The entanglement of language and literature, ancestry and territory, shared past and common custom remains tangled, absent any unraveling of how the brothers conceived, confounded, or conflated them. Likewise, philology's political task becomes more apparent than what makes a philologist, for the Grimms or Norberg, without discussion of the borders

in place or in the making between historians, grammarians, lexicographers, paleographers, comparative linguists, editors, or folklorists in the period. But a more basic question looms: why this particular form of knowledge-making achieved such a privileged epistemological status across humanistic disciplines—that is, how philology became king.

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