Analysis of The Girl Without Hands

Attention:

“My child, if I don’t cut off both of your hands, the devil will take me away, and out of fear I have promised it to him.

But help me with my need and forgive me for the evil I do you.”

She answered, “dear father, do with me what you will, I am your child.”

Then she laid down both hands and let them be cut off.

This passage doesn’t come from a horror story, rather surprisingly from a children’s story called “The Girl without Hands.”

Purpose:

In this short presentation, I will discuss the context of this act of mutilation and, along the way, present you with an analysis of the value system present in this story and many of the Grimm folktales.

Preview:

To do that, I will provide you with a brief summary of the story, followed by its historical, regional, and cultural contexts.

Next, I’ll discuss a previous interpretation of The Girl without Hands, and, finally, I’ll offer my own analysis of the story through a brief discussion of characters and narrative.
Summary:

The Girl without Hands is the story of a poor miller who unknowingly makes a deal with the Devil to gain great wealth.

What he doesn’t realize is that he’s just traded away his daughter to Satan.

Three years later, when the Devil comes to collect his prize, he discovers that the girl is too pure for him to take and he ultimately commands the Miller to cut her hands off so that she can’t wash herself.

However, her tears wash her and, ultimately, the Devil must relent.

Deciding she can’t stay with her parents, the young girl has her arms bound behind her and travels off on her own.

She ends up in a garden where she meets a King who marries her.

While the King’s away, she is left in the care of his mother as she gives birth to their son.

To his mother’s horror, it seems that the King commands that both his wife and child be slaughtered, but it is actually the Devil who’s played a nasty trick.

Because the King’s Mother can’t bring herself to follow his orders, she sends the Queen away with her child bound to her back, and she arrives at a small cottage in the woods where she’s cared for by a ghostly virgin.

Upon the King’s return, his Mother reproaches him for his cruelty, but when it’s revealed that they’ve been tricked, she tells him that his wife and child have only been sent away.

The King wanders for seven long years without eating or drinking before he finds his wife and child.

Reunited, they return home to celebrate a second wedding.
History:

The Girl without Hands appears in Grimm’s Kinder- und Hausmärchen which was published in seven editions, beginning in 1812 and concluding with the definitive version in 1857.

After the initial printing, at least four versions of the story were discovered and significant changes were made based on them. According to Grimm’s Kinder- und Hausmärchen annotations, there are two versions deriving from Hessen, one from Paderborn, and a fourth version from Mecklenburg. Echoes of the story also appear in other folktale traditions dating back before the Middle Ages.
According to Maria Tartar in her analytical text, “The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales,” the version of this story printed in the first edition was the least objectionable, because it replaced what were the father’s sins with the actions of the Devil.

An alternative version of the story emerging from the Zwehrn region of Hessen describes a father whose sexual advances toward his daughter are spurned. Consequently, he has her hands and breasts cut off and sends her into the wilderness wearing nothing but a white shirt.

But even the definitive version from 1857 retained the character of the Devil and disguised the father’s incestuous intentions.

According to Tartar, this was part of a systematic effort by the Grimms to purge the tales of pagan references and enforce a Christian mythology.

In fact, numerous stories employ St. Peter, Jesus, God the Father, St. Joseph, The Virgin Mary, and the Devil in the place of earlier figures.

Tartar also notes specifically that The Girl without Hands becomes progressively more God-fearing from one version of Kinder- und Hausmärchen to the next.

Let’s consider the consequences of this for how characters and narrative represent the value-system of the story…
Analysis:

The value system of any folktale is revealed by examining character traits in reference to narrative outcomes. Because folktales depict a world that is idealized by culture, it is correct to conclude that valued traits will be rewarded and undesirable traits will be punished.

In *The Girl without Hands*, the Miller loses his daughter because he is both gullible and cowardly.

…

The King comes to a positive end because he is merciful and devoted.

…

The Miller’s Daughter is the protagonist of this tale and so we learn a lot from her about the embedded value system. The story says explicitly that she’s “beautiful” and “pious,” but we can also conclude that she’s pure, obedient, and faithful.

…

However, let’s not forget the child who embodies the value of faith and innocence when he says to his mother “I have no earthly father. I’ve learned the prayer ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ You said my father would be in heaven and is God. How can I call such a wild man my father?”
Conclusion:

To conclude, it seems clear at every point in The Girl without Hands that piety, faith, and devotion are held up as values, especially when considered in light of the Christian agenda of the Middle Ages, which sought to uproot pagan folklore and replace it with Biblical characters, lessons, and values.