

The Insoluble Conflict of Transformation: The Modern Aspect of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Galoshes of Fortune"

Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen

Head of Institute of Literature, Culture and Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark
DK-5230 Odense M, Denmark
Email:jnf@litcul.sdu.dk

Abstract In this article, I analyse the tale "The Galoshes of Fortune", published by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen in 1838. The story was thus written more than a century before the emergence of the Danish welfare state, or the so-called welfare model, so there is hardly any point in drawing historical or societal parallels between Andersen's age and our own in the Scandinavian countries, where the welfare state is solidly anchored as a concept and a social model. Hans Christian Andersen, though, based his short stories, tales and fairytales on certain experiences from his own life, and these can perhaps even so shed light on aspects of modern life under the welfare state. Hans Christian Andersen was a so-called mould-breaker. He was born and grew up in poverty and abject circumstances, but via his art was able to rise into the highest social spheres. This rise, or mould-breaking, is present in many of his tales in the form of an enormous productivity, fantasy and restlessness that could never be satisfied. In that sense, Andersen is a highly modern writer, just as his themes point towards a modern society where social change is a societal necessity.

Key words social imagination; mould-breaker; welfare society; yearnings and narration

The Welfare Society Calls for Fleetness of Root

A modern welfare society such as the Danish requires mobility and the ability to adapt to its population. It is, for example, characteristic of the Danish welfare state — or of the Scandinavian, for that matter — that there is a relatively complex and dynamic relation between various considerable economic and occupational structural changes from a distinctly agricultural and industrial society in the 1950s and 1960s to a society that to a far greater extent bases its existence on the generation of knowledge and networking in a global economy.

Naturally, Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries are not alone in this respect. Far from it! But in order to constantly be able to finance and develop the institutions of the welfare state and the resulting relatively high level of taxation precisely these societies have always demanded a high level of education, a high level of so-

cial mobility and a will to change on the part of its citizens. This is, of course, a highly simplified presentation, but in a society such as the Danish the readiness and the individual ability to break moulds and patterns and to move around in the social landscape are important elements. One could perhaps claim that fleetness of foot rather than depth of root is what is called for. The generations that grew up in Denmark after about 1945 and the conclusion of the Second World War, have had to a great extent to chart their own paths in the new mental landscapes. The experiences of their parents, gained from the family-owned farm or the small trades and professions, have often proved to be limited when it came to indicating paths to the technical, academic or economic qualifications gained by their daughters and sons — and the modern, urban reality that was to become theirs.

The modern welfare society, in order to develop, has thus required mobility, feet on the move and the ability to adapt both socially and mentally — in particular to adapt from a mainly local and national economy and culture to functioning within a far more international and global economy and culture. These changes, which most countries and cultures are facing in an ever more globalized world, call for the capacity to break moulds and a readiness to work on one's identity. A modern society calls for fleetness of foot — and proper footwear!

It has been documented by a number of research projects and scientific works in Denmark just how art and literature in particular have thematized the relation between the societal changes and the identity-related aspects. In Denmark, for example, major and highly interesting research efforts are being linked to the analysis of the thematisation by contemporary writers of the welfare state and its social institutions.¹ The establishing of the welfare state has given the individual considerable existential and life-related gains, but also at a cost to individual identity. Breaking with social patterns and cultural traditions does not come free of charge. Nor does it revolting against the *status quo*, a great deal of energy is often released in the process.

This article portrays the ambiguous or conflict-torn experiences of such a revolt as captured in a literary work. This will be attempted not in the analysis of a work by a contemporary writer but one of a story by the greatest author in the history of Danish literary history, Hans Christian Andersen (1805 – 75), who lived in a completely different age, i. e. the class-divided, traditional society of the 19th century, where breaking the social mould, as Hans Christian Andersen did, was absolutely not the norm.

Andersen based his now world-famous fairytales and short tales on personal experiences and these may possibly shed light on aspects of modern life and its call for constant change. Andersen was to a great extent what is now referred to as a social mould-breaker. He was born and grew up in poverty and abject circumstances, but via his art and ambition was able to rise into the highest social spheres. This rise, or mould-breaking, is present in many of his tales in the form of an enormous productivity, fantasy and restlessness that could never be satisfied. In that sense, Andersen is a highly modern writer, or, at any rate, his fairytales and stories are extremely modern for they look profoundly at aspects of identity which modern life insists on and has brought into being, including the demands of modern life regarding social changeabil-

ity, which is now a fundamental societal condition. So when Hans Christian Andersen at various points in his work allows shoes and footwear to be included as essential and often magical objects, it is not just because he came from an environment where, among other things, both his father and grandfather were shoemakers, but because shoes, boots, galoshes and other kinds of footwear are symbols of movement.

Magic Galoshes

Hans Christian Andersen published the tale or fairytale “The Galoshes of Fortune”² in the collection *Tre Digtninger* in 1838. This means it belongs to the first and comprehensive group of fantastic tales and stories that begin to flow from Andersen’s pen from *Eventyr – fortalte for Børn* (*Tales Told for Children*, 1835) onwards. These are often characterised as having broken the boundaries between traditional genres and thereby established their own forms. “The Galoshes of Fortune”, which is about 25 printed pages long, does precisely this moving out exuberantly into new narrative landscapes. In that way, “The Galoshes of Fortune” is already in terms of forming a kind of journey, with the tale also dealing with transformation and sudden shifts in time, space and identity.

Strictly speaking, “The Galoshes of Fortune” is not really just one story but a number of smaller stories that are loosely held together by means of a framework and a recurring portrayal of a pair of galoshes with magical properties. The framework consists of what the literary researcher Klaus P. Mortensen has called “a self-made myth”³ that deals with a fairy of fortune and a fairy of Care who make an experiment with humans’ desire to have their wishes concerning the transformation of time, place, body and identity fulfilled with the aid of a security, a pair of galoshes that send the wearer off into the realisation of a dream the very moment it has been dreamt. It is not at all the fairy of fortune in person but “an assistant to one of her ladies in waiting, used to delivering the more trifling gifts of fortune” (Andersen 1838, 98), and this reservation Andersen has probably introduced in order to ironically suggest that good fortune is not what one believes. Not in this tale, at any rate. The fairy of Care, on the other hand, is the very person in question: “She was Dame Care, who always goes in her own sublime person to see to her errands herself, for then she knows that they are well done” (Andersen 1838, 99).

The two fairies, or fairy representatives, in the tale do not just have the role of observers who, on behalf of the reader, comment on the strange nature of human life. They are also initiators, for it is fortune’s representative who, because it is her birthday, has been allowed to hand over a gift to humanity. The gift is a pair of galoshes, which, once put on, transport the wearer instantly to the place and the time that person is dreaming of. The first fairy believes that this can only serve to enhance that person’s good fortune, but Care claims that, on the contrary, it will make that person unhappy and want to return to the point of departure and the situation prior to the galoshes.

Within the framework of the fairies’ staging, a series of highly odd episodes and dramas takes place in which the galoshes allow their character to travel to the Middle

Ages, into the heart of the bourgeoisie, out in space to the moon, inside the feathered form of a lark, get a head stuck in a railing of heavy iron bars at the entrance to Frederiksberg Hospital, travel to Italy and go on several out-of-body journeys. They are extraordinary journeys that go far beyond common sense, but at the same time the various depictions are of situations and environments characterised by social realism and a high degree of social recognisability. They are portrayals of people in concrete environments who desire some form of change. And this is what they get, but it is definitely not good fortune that awaits them. On the other hand, the reader is served with if not good fortune then a sublimely entertaining reading experience, for Andersen's framed tales about human striving for fortune are divinely amusing.

In the Entrance Hall of the Bourgeoisie

"The Galoshes of Fortune" begins, so to speak, the move into the entrance hall of the bourgeoisie! Hans Christian Andersen wanted with all his heart to be taken in and accepted by this upper middle class, which he nevertheless treated ironically at the same time, or even distanced himself from in some of his tales. He admittedly, despite his humble beginnings, gained the recognition of the bourgeoisie as an artist, but throughout his life and in many of his tales he demonstrates a strongly ambiguous relationship to this same bourgeoisie. This particular tale starts as follows:

It was in Copenhagen, in one of the houses on East Street, not far from King's Newmarket, that someone was giving a large party. For one must give a party once in a while, if one expects to be invited in return. Half of the guests were already at the card tables, and the rest were waiting to see what would come of their hostess's query: "What can we think up now?" (Andersen 1838, 98)

The introduction is driven forwards by a marked irony which demonstrates that social life is mainly a question of repetitions and emptiness — and the rest of the passage continues in this vein. The men discuss the scientific treatise by the physicist Hans Christian Ørsted on the relation between old and new times, with Ørsted making a great point of emphasising the advantages of the modern age. But the councillor of justice with the funny name Knap (the Danish word can refer to both orders and buttons on a uniform) claims that the past, and the Middle Ages at the time of the Danish medieval King Hans in particular, were absolutely better than the present.

It is this pompous councillor of justice who ends up exchanging his own galoshes for those of Fortune when he is to go home — and immediately he finds himself in the midst of the muddy, dark medieval city. In the scene that now unfolds, Andersen does not pull his punches. The councillor of justice is a fatuous person who is lucky enough to finally lose the galoshes and therefore end up in back home in East Street, where he is obliged to praise the lighting, and thereby also modern life.

Head Stuck

It is not a friendly portrait that Andersen paints of the representatives of the bourgeoisie, nor are there only friendly about the dreamers in the other depictions. Even so,

Andersen does include a certain sympathetic understanding in his portrayal of the town watchman who finds the galoshes, for he longs to be freed from his cold, lonely job in the city streets at night. Via the galoshes he turns into a fine, love-stricken lieutenant, but even so longs for his own kindly wife and their tiny tots back home. His next dream is of the universe and the large full moon he can see in the night sky. He thinks to himself that his body could well remain here on the stairs where he is sitting and that only his soul could fly off to the moon. Which it does!

Andersen now explains the soul's journey to the moon in such a way that it becomes a whole scientific dissertation, one where the reference to the physicist Ørsted plays a certain role. In this way, an ironic distance is also introduced into the tale:

All of us know how fast steam can take us. We've either rushed along in a train or sped by steamship across the ocean. But all this is like the gait of a sloth, or the pace of a snail, in comparison with the speed of light, which travels nineteen million times faster than the fastest race horse. Yet electricity moves even faster. Death is an electric shock to the heart, and the soul set free travels on electric wings. The sunlight takes eight minutes and some odd seconds to travel nearly one hundred million miles. On the wings of electricity, the soul can make the same journey in a few moments, and to a soul set free the heavenly bodies are as close together as the houses of friends who live in the same town with us, or even in the sameneighbourhood. However, this electric shock strips us of our bodies forever, unless, like the watchman, we happen to be wearing the galoshes of Fortune. (Andersen 1838, 108 – 109)

In this fashion, the tale continues about the soul's transmigration to the moon, about the physical nature of the moon and its "population" of strange creatures that live in soft cities of egg-white, are delicate souls and speak a mental language which, among other things, they use to discuss whether the earth can be inhabited, something they very much doubt.

In almost every way, it is the transcending of boundaries that is sought in this phantom journey to the soft landscapes of the moon, for the "scientific" presentation, which is punctuated so to speak by imaginative and humorous moments, walks a tight-rope between grotesque and fantastic elements that erase the conventional boundaries between these different areas of reality.

From the journey to the moon, which ends when a passer-by in the street in Copenhagen steals the galoshes of the body of the town watchman without his soul, the tale now takes us on a grotesque journey. It is now the young interne at the hospital who arrived too late and sees that the wrought-iron gate of Frederiksberg Hospital is closed, but he is sure he can squeeze between the railings. All goes well with most of his body. But his head gets stuck in the railings, and this incident is symbolically what happens to those who think they can get past the railings of social life. He gets caught while trying to cross between two worlds and becomes a terrible source of ridicule, just as Hans Christian Andersen probably recalled all his life that he had been the first few times he stuck his neck out to try and gain access to high-class places.

The Ambiguous Ascent

The fun continues through the sections where the so-called copying clerk, an office employee, takes the form of a lark and has to flee from the cat's claws. In paradoxical fashion he says, because he has heard a parrot repeating time and time again, the sentence: "Come now, let us be men!" — and this restores him to his original body and his original position at the desk as a copying clerk who, like a parrot, repeats and repeats. The copying clerk rejects his out-of-body experience as "all nonsense from beginning to end", i. e. some form of magic enchantment, such as only exists in a strange and completely unreal dream.

In the sixth and last of the small tales, a transmigration of souls also takes place. A young theologian borrows the galoshes and, because he hears the sound of a stagecoach horn in the street, he exclaims: "Oh to travel, to travel. That's the most pleasant thing in the world!" (125) and he happens to mention Switzerland as his dream destination — and suddenly he finds himself in a tightly packed diligence in Switzerland. He then is borne off on the wings of his dream as a tourist to various parts of Italy, but only travels on tourist class, so to speak, for he gets bad food to eat and is bitten by mosquitoes, so he now wishes:

"Traveling," said the student, "would be all very well if one had no body. Oh, if only the body could rest while the spirit flies on without it. Wherever I go, there is some lack that I feel in my heart. There is always something better than the present that I desire. Yes, something better—the best of all, but what is it, and where shall I find it? Down deep in my heart, I know what I want. I want to reach a happy goal, the happiest goal of all." (Andersen 1838, 127 – 128)

The theologian now immediately returns in his ethereal form as a soul to his home, where his body lies inanimate and dead in a black coffin:

Long white curtains draped the windows, and in the middle of the floor a black coffin stood. In this he lay, sleeping the quiet sleep of death. His wish was fulfilled – his body was at rest, and his spirit was free to travel. (Andersen 1838, 128)

The explicit narrator of the tales then reflects more about the dead body by citing the words of the antique poet and statesman Solon that one can call no man happy until he rests in his grave. Fortune is fleeting and transient. Only at death is one's fate determined and the thread finally spun. The narrator also reflects on the enigma of the sphinx, as it is called, for "Shall I arise only in the graveyard grass?" (Andersen 1838, 128). Is the body all there is, or do we have a soul that travels to the far side? Here in the story the problem solves itself, for Care, one of the two fairies, shows herself to be merciful and removes the galoshes from the dead man in the coffin. And the theologian is immediately alive once more. But Care takes the galoshes with her, for, as Andersen ends his story in bitter and ironical fashion: "She proba-

bly regarded them as her own property” (Andersen 1838, 129).

By means of his tale of the magic galoshes, Hans Christian Andersen has presented in artistic form a desire for leave-taking and transformation that is fulfilled. In this magic story, meeting the man in the moon or travelling in beautiful Italy presents no problem, just as a journey back to the time of King Hans in the Middle Ages is also possible. For all of these journeys, these leaps in time and space, however, one has misfortune or care as one’s travelling companion. All of the characters get into scrapes: the councillor of justice ends up in the mud, the interne gets his head caught in the railings, the copying clerk is in danger of the cat’s claws but able to escape by his parrot-like behaviour. They all manage to get out of a tight corner, which every time proves itself to be Care’s domain, by returning to the point of departure in the same body, the same place, the same function.

So the tale has to do with the strange imbalance of the human mind. People cannot accept finding themselves where they find themselves socially, physically and as regards their level of awareness. They long to get beyond time and place, beyond their own experiences, beyond their own limitations. All the time they want to be somewhere else, and often even in another body. Perhaps there is a different, more profound longing behind this earthly longing, i. e. the desire to only be a soul, a longing for death and a resurrection in the divine robes of the soul.⁴ That is probably how one is to understand Andersen’s artistic reflections in “The Galoshes of Fortune”, as, by the way, in a whole series of his tales. The tale captures and interprets human restlessness that does not lead anywhere — and certainly not to happiness. Human beings are to live life here on this good earth and leave the rest to God.

What makes this tale so modern and so instructive is its thematisation of the relation between longing and binding, one that is admittedly described in an infinitely amusing and ironical fashion, but which is also written with the seriousness that characterises the course of Hans Christian Andersen’s own life. All through his life, he longed to get beyond himself and his own situation. The restlessness, the modern aspect of Andersen, led to great art that transcended norms, conventions and genres, just as it took Andersen on his travels. The restlessness and ambiguous attitude to time and place and identity that Andersen stages here artistically seems to have become a social and existential condition for access to the reality of present-day welfare society, which requires the single individual to constantly leave behind the patterns and perception of reality it had and regarded as being universally accepted a moment earlier. The portrayal of the eternal restlessness, the desire to become happy in a different figure or form, is one of Hans Christian Andersen’s greatest artistic achievements — and it is this that makes his art so modern. For it contains within it the insoluble existential conflict of the mould-breaker.

Notes

1. See Anne-Marie Mai. *Hvor litteraturen finder sted. Moderne tider 1900 – 2010*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2011. 283 – 347. Nils Gunder Hansen (ed.). *Velfærdsfortællinger; Om dansk litteratur i velfærdsstatens tid*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2010. Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen et al. *Den*

centrale periferi. Aarhus: Hovedland, 1994. 38 – 72.

2. I quote "The Galoshes of Fortune" from the translation by Jean Hersholt. See [www.Anderson.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The Galoshes Off Fortune/html](http://www.Anderson.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/The%20Galoshes%20Off%20Fortune/html). Online. The pages stated refer to the Danish edition. See Hans Christian Andersen. "Lykkens Kalosker". *Tre Digtninger* (1838). *Samlede Eventyr og Historier*. København: Gyldendal, 1962. 98 – 129.

3. See Klaus P. Mortensen, *Tilfældets poesi*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007. 62 – 64.

4. See Klaus P. Mortensen. *Tilfældets poesi*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007. 63 – 65.

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