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The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome: Survivorship Fantasies and Parental Desertion

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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U. C. Knoepfelmacher (bio)

"Hansel, we're saved! The old witch is dead," Gretel triumphantly shouts as she opens the door to release her brother. The children promptly plunder the house of the crone Gretel has just killed. The happiness of these little survivors is unbounded. Even Wilhelm Grimm seems to want an editorial share in their expressions of fraternal glee: "How thrilled they were: they hugged and kissed and jumped up and down for joy!" (Tatar 189).¹

But one slight obstacle remains. The children still must find their way back to the home of the parents who have twice left them to perish in a dark forest. How can the trauma of such a desertion be resolved? As Maria Tatar has suggested, perhaps more than any other Grimm fairy tale, "Hansel and Gretel" seems to "perpetuate strangely inappropriate notions about what it means to live ever happily after" (182). The fairy tale's ostensibly happy ending asks us to become as forgetful of the trauma of abandonment as the story's child protagonists. The alacrity they display upon coming home thus seems even more surprising than that of the returning Dorothy who, after her own witch-killings, so eagerly hugs Aunt Em. When all four versions of Grimm's story ask us to believe that Hansel and Gretel joyfully throw their arms around their father, we are invited to repress parental betrayal just as much as the sturdy children who have, against all odds, managed to survive extinction.²

Wilhelm Grimm's masculinist narrative conflates the witch with the children's bad mother and exculpates a husband who allows himself to be dominated by his wife: "The man had not had a happy hour since the day he had abandoned the children in the forest. His wife had died. Gretel emptied her apron and the pearls and jewels rolled all over the floor" (189–90). A derelict father is not only showered with diamonds, but is also awarded a more pliable replacement for the spouse who had tyrannized him. Not one, but two witches have been expunged from the narrative: the gluttonous child-devourer who fattened Hans and the bread-denying child-starver whom Grimm had **[End Page 171]** alternately presented as the children's biological mother and as their stepmother. By offering her father a dowry of jewels, Gretel can now become his "little

missus," as Captain Crewe, the imprudent diamond-mine investor, used to call the daughter he, just as imprudently, handed over to a witch, in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. But Burnett compensates Sara, and not her father, for the traumas he has induced. Indeed, in a poignant reversal of Gretel's act of bribery, Sara enlists another unhappy and weak father-figure, her guardian Carrisford, to help her spread her newfound wealth. The new heiress wants to feed masses of "hungry children" on "days" as "dreadful" as those behind her (185). Sara is as unembittered as little Gretel. But, unlike Gretel, she refuses to forget her protracted servitude as a starving slave-laborer. Whereas the ending of Grimm's tale invites us to repress the past, Burnett's narrative keeps alive a child's memory of betrayal, abuse, and deprivation.

In November 2003, when Maurice Sendak appeared with Tony Kushner after a performance of the Theresienstadt child-opera *Brundibar* at New York's 92nd Street "Y," he invoked the story of "Hansel and Gretel" as an analogue for the new picture book he and Kushner were presenting to the public. The links are certainly there. Pepicek and Aninku, the brother-sister pair in *Brundibar*, also must thread back to the cottage of a starving parent. But it is now a needy peasant mother, not a guilt-ridden woodcutter father, who becomes revitalized by returning offspring. And, whereas a witch was required to obtain the nourishment denied to Hansel and Gretel, the children in the Sendak/Kushner book are cast as nourishers from the very start. Nor will this pair be alone, for they eventually count on child-allies far more numerous than Sara Crewe's small band of friends. All threats...

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