Challenges and Potentials of the Authorized Heritage Discourse on Hans Christian Andersen

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As cultural heritage, Hans Christian Andersen and his works are continuously found valuable enough to be passed on to future generations across the globe. This makes him an obvious case for critical heritage studies that focuses on how the past (and thereby heritage) is used in the present (Gentry & Smith, 2019; Harrison, 2013; Smith, 2006).

As a heritage scholar, I study how Andersen and his writings are used by different communities where they are adjusted to prevalent values and ideological convictions. In this essay, I will focus on some examples of how Andersen functions as a national icon in Denmark.[1] Though my geographical focus is limited, I hope these reflections will be relevant to other national and cultural contexts as well.

Andersen's status and function as a cultural icon in Denmark reflects an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) on him (Smith, 2012, p. 535). I begin this essay with a conceptualization of these two key concepts: cultural icon and AHD. The subsequent analysis focuses on how the AHD about Andersen affects his use as a Danish cultural icon in party politics, teaching (here, I draw on examples from my previous research), and in biographies written for children. In conclusion, I suggest that researchers and curators who aim to challenge the AHD on Andersen can make use of *anarchiving* and *counter-archiving* in future approaches to Andersen's biography and his writings.

The Cultural Icon and the AHD

In my book, *H.C. Andersen som kulturelt ikon* (Hans Christian Andersen as a cultural icon), I have presented some thoughts on how a cultural icon can be conceptualised and approached in cultural analyses (Bom, 2020).

The word 'icon' stems from the Latin icon and the Greek εἰκών which can both be translated to 'image,' 'portrait,' or 'likeness.' These meanings illustrate that there is a connec-

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[1] A more detailed version of the argument in this essay is published in my article "Hans Christian Andersen as a Danish Cultural Icon" (Bom, 2025).

tion embedded in the word icon itself: The connection between the image and the viewer. Thus, the icon requires a connection – it cannot stand alone. Icons only function when they are recognized as representing something or someone; they exist through the connections they create with their surroundings.

The word 'icon', however, is used for many very different things and concepts. The image on the off button on a computer, for example, is called an icon, and it can only work as an icon for turning off electronic devices if it is recognized as such by its surroundings. Another example of icons are religious wooden carvings in the orthodox church. They work as icons when their target group supply them with a connection to God and worship. These two very different icons both stand for something or someone, and they have both been assigned meanings that encourage certain actions.

The same applies to cultural icons, which acquire meaning through what they represent and the connections they establish with their surroundings. The complexity here is that they stand for culture – and culture is dynamic and changing in time and space. We cannot assume that we perceive the same iconic qualities and functions in Hans Christian Andersen, as our perception is culturally conditioned. To approach Andersen as a cultural icon means to examine the culturally conditioned communication about him and his work and to ask how he works as functional symbols in different contexts. How is he used as a shortcut to explain important values and convictions? What identity myths (narratives about common histories and values) are attached to him? (Holt, 2004).

In Denmark, Andersen is often used and referred to as a symbol of Danishness, which is the idea of an essence of national identity. When he is framed as a representative of something particularly Danish, he is used as a national icon. The cultural processes where connections between Andersen and the nation are established and negotiated reflect an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) on Andersen. AHD is a key concept in critical heritage studies, first presented by heritage scholar Laurajane Smith, who argues that AHD is a professional discourse – a dominant, state-sanctioned framework that privileges materiality, monumentality, and expert knowledge in defining heritage – that:

> Focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for their 'education,' and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past. (Smith, 2006, p. 29)

Smith argues that AHD is not a neutral description but a hegemonic discourse that naturalizes Western elite cultural values as universal, thereby marginalizing alternative and community-based understandings of heritage. Within critical heritage studies, AHD is thus approached as a problematic construct because it constrains debate, legitimizes exclusionary practices, and obscures the social and political 'work' that heritage performs. As Smith famously asserts, "there is no such thing as heritage; rather, it is a discursive construction that does cultural and political work," (Smith, 2006, p. 13) highlighting the need to interrogate and destabilize the assumptions embedded in AHD.

Obvious examples of AHDs in practice are the handlings and selections of heritage by global organizations like UNESCO and ICOMOS. Here, AHDs privilege expert knowledge and hegemonic societal values. It is a main purpose for critical heritage studies to examine the content and function of AHDs to suggest alternative interpretations and democratically oriented potential uses of heritage.

The Making of a National Icon

When a young Georg Brandes wrote his dissertation, *H.C. Andersen som Æventyrdigter* (Hans Christian Andersen as a fairy tale author) in 1869, he was one of the first to suggest that Andersen had iconic potential.

At this time, Andersen was widely recognized by critics both in Denmark and abroad for his works. But the Danish discourse on him and his writings was affected by the first negative critics who had highlighted that Andersen's "odd and undeveloped" personality permeated his work and that the fairy tales could not teach children anything because they did not present explicit morals (e.g. Kierkegaard, 1838). Brandes' main purpose was to challenge these prevailing perceptions by shifting the focus to Andersen's fairy tales. He did so by reframing the "childish" in the fairy tales and suggested that the actual audience for the work was not just children but all mankind: The childish, Brandes argued, was the generally understandable ("det almenforstaaelige"), and he stated that it was this fundamental tone in the fairy tales that would elevate Andersen above time and beyond national borders and class boundaries (Brandes, 1869/2005, p. 75). Brandes anticipated Andersen's future status as world heritage. Combined with the concept of the cultural icon, this suggests that Andersen's generally understandable texts give him an iconic potential, making him accessible and adaptable across diverse cultural contexts across time and space. But what people understand

when they read Andersen depends on what they recognize in his works and thereby on the culturally conditioned connections they make between themselves and Andersen.

Now, I will show some examples of Andersen's role and function as a Danish national icon. As a national icon, Andersen stands for Danish culture and is framed as cultural heritage that belongs to the nation. This is reflected in processes where Andersen is connected to common ideas, values, and perceptions in different societal contexts. Here, Andersen is found worthy and usable as a symbol for Denmark, the Danish community, and Danish national identity. These processes all indicate key elements in the Danish AHD on Andersen.

A frequently used Danish version of Andersen is a political one where he is framed as a poster boy for nationalism. A recurring piece of work that is used for this purpose is Andersen's 1850 poem "Danmark, mit Fædreland" (Denmark, my native land; see also Thomsen & Bom, 2019). For example, the first lines of the poem have been added to a postcard from 1920 that depicts a landscape with windmills, Danish flags, a dolmen stone setting, farmhouses with thatched roofs and a beach. And almost 100 years later, very similar images of a "typical" Danish landscape were used with the line "from here my world extends" from the same poem in an election campaign run by the Danish People's Party. In both cases, the borderless is replaced with the Danish and the timeless is replaced with the time-specific as the poem is used to establish connections between Andersen and ideas about Denmark as a rural, idyllic fairy-tale country founded in the 19th century: Hans Christian Andersen's century.

The 19th century is a centrepiece of Danish cultural history. In this century, Denmark was not only established geographically, but also ideologically and in terms of values. It was a century when autocracy was replaced with democracy, when Denmark became a nation state, and when Danishness and who was considered Danish or not became new societal issues.

The myth about Andersen and the myths about the new nation had the same temporal origin and mirror each other (Bom, 2020; de Mylius, 2016). Denmark was a huge multi-cultural state at the beginning of the century and a small monocultural nation state at the end of it. This instigated a national self-narrative of growing from within: what is lost on the outside must be gained on the inside, as the famous quote says. Andersen lived his life while these significant societal changes took place – and he communicated his own life trajectory as a mirror of the changes when he framed his life story as a story about his social climb: as the ugly duckling that turned out to be a swan (de Mylius, 2016, pp. 12–13).

Andersen's own focus on his position as someone who had made a break with their origins and moved across social classes matches the prevailing national myth that was established in the 19th century. And while the Danish AHD still contains elements about Andersen's peculiar personality, his own focus on the social ascent prevails: it was Andersen who served the myth about Andersen to his posterity.

Borders also emerge as a theme in the citizenship tests required for newcomers seeking Danish citizenship. In the additional learning material, newcomers can read a few facts about Andersen's biography and work, and questions like these are asked in the tests: "Andersen is one of Denmark's most famous authors. Which of these fairy tales did he write?" and "In what city was Andersen born?" In the learning materials, Andersen is always visualized as either a statue or with a photograph of him: static versions of a static national icon. A gatekeeper (Bom, 2019).

These political versions of the cultural icon illustrate that there is a harmonious connection between Andersen and the nation when he is used politically in Denmark. Two significant traits in the perception of Andersen here are that he is deeply embedded within the Danish 19th century, and that this use of time entails a focus on his biography.

Andersen in Danish Schools

The nationalized image of Andersen has been repeatedly reproduced over time. This is particularly evident in institutional uses of Andersen and his works. Numerous examples illustrate how the Danish AHD operates at the institutional level. This section focuses on examples of Andersen's use in schools (see also Bom & Schaffalitzky, 2021).

Andersen is a part of the mandatory common canon for primary schools: a list of Danish authors that students must get acquainted with in some way and at some point during their education. In many educational practices, this canonization links Andersen inextricably to the subject of Danish and its academic tradition. In this context, his works are very often introduced and categorized as typical romantic texts with clear morals.

One example appears in the learning material *Vild med Dansk* (Crazy about Danish) for the Danish subject. In a section about romantic art, the spiritual values of romanticism, "the good, the beautiful and the true," are mentioned alongside the romantic focus on how ideas and truths are reflected in the real world. Then, "The Ugly Duckling" is chosen as the illustrative example like this:

You probably know Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale The Ugly Duckling. It is a true romantic fairy tale where the truth is revealed in the end: The haunted duckling turns out to be a beautiful swan. There is no evil in the duckling, it swallows its defeats, and it refrains from taking revenge. The moral of the fairy tale is that everyone will become what they were created to be. (Ammitzbølet al., 2008, pp. 217–218, my translation)

Here, Andersen is positioned in time as a Romantic author, and with this temporalization, the fairy tale is equipped with a true moral. In other educational materials, the focus on Andersen's biography is very significant. For example, students can be asked to "plot" Andersen's life story into the narrative structure of "The Ugly Duckling" (Bom & Schaffalitzky, 2019).

These examples illustrate that a specific Danish version of Andersen as a cultural icon emerges when Andersen is framed and used in politics and education in Danmark. This version contains 1) the idea of Andersen's social climb (and thereby a focus on his biography and personality) and 2) the idea of him as a fairy tale author rooted in the 19th century Denmark. This Danish AHD reduces Andersen to a case of National Romanticism and positions him as a gatekeeper at Denmark's borders – a small, homogeneous, monocultural fairy-tale nation.

Andersen's Biography Written for Danish Children

Another example of how Andersen is connected to the nation is when his life story is passed on in biographies written for Danish children – the next generation of Danes. These practices are pivotal for Andersen's continued status as cultural heritage and as a national icon because Andersen's heritage status depends on ensuing generations to find him and his works valuable enough to be passed on as heritage. Paradoxically, research on how Andersen is perceived and used in these cultural practices remains scarce.

As I wrote this essay, I decided to explore the vast, complex, and multi-layered field of Andersen's framing and use as an icon among Danes. I have chosen to limit my focus to one kind of material, namely a selection of biographies about Andersen's life written for Danish children.[2] As the national interest in Andersen's personality and biography has existed since

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[2] The biographies I use as material in this part of the essay are Emma Kraft: *H.C. Andersens Liv, fortalt for Børn* (2002), Johannes Møllehave: *H.C. Andersens liv fortalt for børn* (1994), Villy Sørensen: *En ensom fugl. H.C. Andersens livs historie fortalt for børn* (2000), Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara: *H.C. Andersen. (Små mennesker, store drømme)* (2020), Frank Egholm Andersen: *H.C. Andersen som ung* (2003), Kim Fupz Aakeson & Signe Kjær: *Hans Christian Andersen – et liv med modgang, medgang og en masse eventyr* (2022).

he published his first writings, the number of Andersen biographies is enormous and still growing. Many of them are written explicitly for children. The material reflects both the idea of social ascent and national identity, and it targets the most influential audience of all: children. My very preliminary studies of the biographies show that the Danish AHD is confirmed and even amplified in these cases. I will mention three key features in the biographies:

1. *When the authors address the target group directly, they connect Andersen to the nation*
In the biographies I have studied for the purpose of this essay, the first lines are introductions with pedagogical arguments for why the children should listen to the story about Andersen's life. All the biographies end with concluding statements about why the story was important. In these introductions and conclusions, Andersen is connected to the nation. Here are two examples: In the first lines of her Andersen biography *H.C. Andersens Liv, fortalt for børn* (Hans Christian Andersen's life told for children) from 1902, Emma Kraft writes:

> Every Danish boy and girl probably know at least some of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, but few may know anything about his life, and yet his life was as colorful and diverse as one of his most beautiful fairy tales in everyday costume. (p. 3, my translation)

In this example, Kraft justifies her book by the indirect statement that it is not sufficient for "every Danish boy and girl" to know the fairy tales: they must be familiar with his life story as well.

Another example is from Johannes Møllehave's biography with the same title: *H.C. Andersens liv fortalt for børn* (1994). In the last lines of the book, Møllehave writes:

> Now you've heard a little about Hans Christian Andersen's life and fairy tales. And actually, you can be happy that you can listen to and read him in his own language. Because he is difficult to translate. No matter what language you translate him into, there's always something you can't get right. You were born in his country and can understand what he cries about and smiles at. You know the landscapes he lived in. (p. 142, my translation)

Here, Andersen is linked to the nation by framing Danish children's identity as privileged because they share his native language.

2. *Andersen's life is used to communicate Danish cultural history*

To tell a life story is to tell time. In the biographies, all authors take an omniscient position from where they tell the life story chronologically. In their versions of Andersen's life, the authors also convey a portrayal of 19th-century Denmark. Here is an example from Villy Sørensens *En ensom fugl. H.C. Andersens livs historie fortalt for børn* (2000; A lonely bird: Hans Christian Andersen's life story told for children):

> When he was little, he lived with his mum and dad in a very small house in Odense. It only had one living room, which you entered from the street. His father also had a shoemaker's workshop, so there wasn't much room for furniture. Hans Christian's bed was just a board that was pushed up against the wall during the day and only taken down at bedtime. (Sørensen, 2000, p. 8, my translation)

Here, Sørensen connects Andersen to class as he uses the life story to describe the living conditions in the workingclasses in Denmark at the time.

In this example, Møllehave describes Andersen's arrival in Copenhagen:

> He took a good look around. And what did he see? He saw the farms and the cows and the big gate called Vesterport. Back then, Copenhagen had four gates. […] Inside the gates, the watchmen kept an eye out for fires. They also made sure that people weren't attacked in the streets […] Hans Christian knew them from Odense. (1994, p. 53, my translation)

Møllehave describes a very time-specific version of Copenhagen through Andersen's eyes and thereby uses Andersen's biography to teach Danish children about Copenhagen in the 19th century.

These ways of framing Andersen as time- and class-specific lead to the final point I will mention about the Andersen biographies for children.

3. *Andersen's biography is inextricably linked to the fairy tales and vice versa*

In the biographies, Andersen's unique fantasy and creativity is explained with his biography as the only possible prism for the fairy tales. Møllehave, for example, frames Andersen's failed love life as follows:

When he talked about his own unrequited love, he couldn't smile at the same time. But he learned to do so when he talked about a top and a ball that couldn't get together. […] Or when he talked about a snowman who fell in love with a brick oven. (1994, pp. 96–97, my translation)

In Sørensen's book, the fairy tales are not woven into the life story with words but with illustrations. Every second spread in the book has a rich and detailed illustration of selected fairy tales. Andersen is depicted in all the pictures, and the visual effect is that the fairy tales are framed as personal and biographical statements from the author. This is further emphasized in the few explanatory lines that are added to every illustration. For example, the text for the illustration of "The Little Mermaid" states: "The Little Mermaid is one of Hans Christian Andersen's first fairy tales, he wrote it in the summer of 1836 when Edvard Collin got married" (Sørensen, 2000, p. 10, my translation)

Such instances of biographism may be inevitable in biographies, yet they reflect a key trait of the Danish AHD on Andersen: presenting his biography and fiction as inseparably linked. This approach risks reductive readings of the fairy tales by situating Andersen and his works as representatives of a specific historical moment in Denmark.

The connections between Andersen's biography, his fairy tales and hegemonic national discourses in Denmark are all parts of the Danish AHD on Andersen. This discourse reproduces a narrative about Denmark as an idyllic fairy tale country founded ideologically and geographically in the 19th century. When this imagined version of the nation is connected to Andersen, he is used as an aesthetically pleasing heritage object that belongs to a monocultural, white Danish community: a community that existed to some extent in the 19th century but seized to exist many years ago.

Counter-archiving and Anarchiving Andersen

Paradoxically, the very conditions that shaped Andersen as a cultural icon in Denmark – his alignment with national narratives and the institutionalization of his works – also risk freezing him as a national romantic symbol, functioning only as an icon for a narrowly imagined version of Denmark's past and present.

Within the framework of critical heritage studies, the past and heritage are understood as resources continually reframed and adapted to present needs. This goes for Andersen as well. In the examples in this essay, 'the present' is a political temporal construction and 'the needs' are also politically motivated affirmations of hegemonic narratives about past, present

and future. In these uses, Andersen risks becoming 'idolized as a relic,' a term coined by critical theorist Theodore Adorno to describe cultural objects that degenerate into ideological elements; celebrating the past so excessively that they become frozen as cultural and political products, disconnected from the present (Adorno, 1992–1993, p. 77).

But even though such uses of Andersen have frequently been reproduced in the Danish AHD on him, they constitute a very small part of the complete Andersen archive, and the connections between Andersen and his surroundings are never set in stone. In the last decade of Andersen research and curating, the AHD on Andersen has been challenged in different ways. Such actions exemplify 'counter-archiving', which seeks to diversify conventional archives – not merely by adding material but by interrogating the very logic of the archive itself (Thompson, 2018).

It is, however, not always an easy task. For example, when the new Hans Christian Andersen Museum was established, earlier connections to the nationalized version of Andersen were omitted. Instead, the affective dimensions of and values in the fairy tales are at the center of the current exhibition. For instance, "The Little Matchstick Girl" is presented in an installation where visitors press a button to advance the story.[3] At the end, when the girl lies dead in the freezing snow, the button lights up again and appeals for one more push. If the visitor pushes the button, the girl says something like: "But I am already dead – what more do you want?" By this move, the focus shifts from the matchstick girl to the one who observes her in the fairy tale. The installation is inspired by these lines from the story:

> The snowflakes fell onto her long blond hair that curled so beautifully round the nape of her neck, but she wasn't really thinking about such fripperies.

and
> But in the corner of the two houses in the cold morning sat the little girl with red cheeks, with a smile on her lips – dead, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. […] She wanted to warm herself! people said […]. (Andersen, 2024)

The installation is counter-archiving because it returns to the text, highlights detail, and activates the visitor as a participant in the story. As the focus shifts from the girl to the one

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[3] This particular installation is also discussed in Henrik Lübker's article "Performing Fairy Tales. Possibilities of Practicing Difference in the Museum" (2019).

who observes her, the complexity of the affective dimensions in the fairy tale is included and amplified. While the installation enables participation, however, the visitors do not have acces**s** to the textual details that inform the installation. Thus, a high level of knowledge and reflective competences are required to understand and fully appreciate it.

While the museum's initial counter-archiving attempt aimed to democratize Andersen as a heritage object with emphasis on the fairy tales, it can be argued that many elements in the current exhibition offers a limited access to Andersen because it is constructed on a very high and intellectual level of abstraction. This is of course on the radar among the curators at the museum, and in these years, new initiatives are presented with alternative connections between Andersen and his surroundings.

Our task as intellectuals is to interrogate the processes through which Andersen is managed as heritage. We handle him ourselves when we interpret his works and the different cultural meanings he is supplied with in different contexts. And we observe other actors who do it in museums as well as in political, educational and everyday contexts. To interrogate how connections between Andersen and his surroundings are established, for example in the AHD on him, is called 'anarchiving.' To anarchive means to focus on the cultural processes where Andersen is used (Springgay et al., 2020). A key concept in anarchiving is 'response-ability': The hyphen emphasizes that the responsibility to take care of our heritage depends on our abilities to respond to heritage. Pivotal questions here are: What is decided to be important and why? What connections between icon and surroundings are constructed and reproduced and for whom? Thus, anarchiving directs analytical attention to how archived objects are handled over time because the handling itself tells stories about how humans interact with non-human objects.

I hope that current and upcoming connections between Andersen and his surroundings will direct attention to the future we anticipate at the expense of reductive versions of an imagined common past that was never common. This requires response-ability: we must remain aware of what we respond to, how and why we respond, and for whom, when we engage with Andersen as heritage and as a cultural icon.

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