

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Rumpelstiltskin goes by many names. Titeliture, Purzinigele, Batzibitzili, Panzimanzi, and Whuppity Stoorie are just a few of his sobriquets. Whether he makes an appearance as Ricdin-Ricdon in a French tale or as Tom Tit Tot in a British tale, his essence and function remain much the same. Not so with the tale's heroine. Although she is almost always a young girl of humble origins, her other attributes and abilities change dramatically from one tale to the next. In some versions of the story, she is hopelessly lazy and often gluttonous to boot; in others she is a hard worker, a diligent daughter who can spin heaps upon heaps of straw or who can spin straw into gold, even without the assistance of a helper. In one of the versions of "Rumpelstiltskin" recorded by the Grimms, for example, the heroine needs help because she is "cursed" with the gift of spinning flax to gold, unable to produce "a single flaxen thread."

What makes "Rumpelstiltskin" particularly troubling for those who seek moral guidance for children in fairy tales is the

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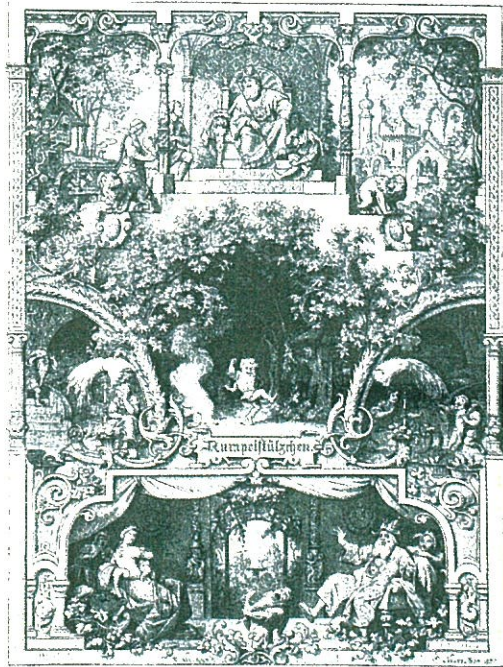
way in which its plot turns on deception and greed. The miller tricks the king into thinking that his daughter can spin straw into gold; the miller's daughter misleads the king; the king marries because he lusts after gold. Finally, the queen not only dodges the terms of the contract drawn up with Rumpelstiltskin but also engages in a cruel game of playing dumb as she rehearses various names before pronouncing the one that will release her from a dreadful pact made in a moment of desperation. The cast of characters is neither clever, resourceful, nor quick-witted. To the contrary, all seem rash, irresponsible, and recklessly opportunistic. And the queen's only real triumph seems to be the identification of "The Name of the Helper," as the story is known to folklorists.

"Rumpelstiltskin" is almost universally known in cultures that depended on spinning for the garments the people wore. Spinning, according to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who wrote an essay about old-fashioned storytelling, produces more than textiles—it is also the breeding ground for texts, creating the endless stretch of time that demands relief through storytelling. "Rumpelstiltskin" shows us how the straw of domestic labor can be transformed into the gold that captures the heart of a king. It is a tale that thematizes the labor that gives birth to storytelling, suggesting in turn that there is an even exchange between the life-giving labors of the queen and the life-saving labors of the diminutive gnome. Spinning straw to gold, Rumpelstiltskin is less demonic helper than agent of transformation, a figure who becomes heroic in his power to save life and to demonstrate compassion. Is it any wonder that many versions of his story show him as a sprightly figure who hightails it out of the palace on a spoon rather than as a vicious gnome who tears himself in two when his name is discovered?

ONCE UPON A TIME there lived a miller. He was very poor, but he had a beautiful daughter. One day it happened that the miller was given an audience with the king, and, in order to appear as a person of some importance,¹ he said to him: "I have a daughter who can spin straw into gold."

"Now there's a talent worth having," the king said to the miller. "If your daughter is as clever as you say she is, bring her to my palace tomorrow. I will put her to the test."

1. *in order to appear as a person of some importance.* Boasting about a child is what generally sets the plot of Rumpelstiltskin stories in motion. The exaggerated claims of an ambitious parent lead to a crisis for the child.



EUGEN NEUREUTHER,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1878

Many nineteenth-century illustrators produced multiple scenes from a fairy tale on a single page. These composite illustrations, by providing visual cues for the plot, create the opportunity for reviving oral storytelling, even when the text was included next to the images.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1918

Bent over with age and with a tail that hints at diabolical origins, Rumpelstiltskin appears both wizened and wizard-like.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1909

Sword in hand, this Rumpelstiltskin seems less diabolical than sullen.

When the girl arrived at the palace, he put her into a room full of straw, gave her a spinning wheel and a spindle, and said: "Get to work right away. If you don't manage to spin this straw into gold by tomorrow morning, then you shall die." And the king locked the door after he went out and left her all alone inside.

The poor miller's daughter sat there in the room and had no idea what to do. She didn't have a clue about how to spin straw into gold. She felt so miserable that she started crying. Suddenly the door opened, and a tiny little man walked right in and said: "Good evening, Little Miss Miller Girl. Why are you sobbing so hard?"

"Oh, dear," the girl answered. "I'm supposed to spin that straw into gold, and I have no idea how it's done."

The little man asked: "What will you give me if I do it for you?"

"My necklace," the girl replied.

The little man took the necklace, sat down at the spinning wheel, and whirr, whirr, whirr, the wheel spun three times, and the bobbin was full. Then he put another bundle of straw up and whirr, whirr, whirr, the wheel spun three times, and the second bobbin was full. He worked on until dawn, and by that time the straw had been spun and all the bobbins were full of gold.

At the crack of dawn, the king made his way to the room. When he saw all that gold, he was astonished and filled with joy, but now he lusted more than ever for that precious metal. He ordered the miller's daughter to go to a much larger room, one that was also filled with straw, and he told her that if she valued her life she would spin it all into gold by dawn. The girl had no idea what to do, and she began to cry. The door opened, as before, and the tiny little man reappeared and asked: "What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for you?"

"I'll give you the ring on my finger," the girl replied. The little man took the ring, began to whirl the wheel around, and, by dawn, had spun all of the straw into glittering gold. The king was pleased beyond measure at the sight of the gold, but his greed was still not satisfied. This time he ordered the miller's daughter to go into an even larger room filled with straw and said: "You have to spin this into gold in one night. If you succeed, you will become my wife."

"She may just be a miller's daughter," he thought, "but I could never find a richer wife if I were to search for one the world over."

When the girl was all by herself, the tiny little man appeared for the third time and asked: "What will you give me if I spin the straw for you again?"

"I have nothing left to give you," the girl replied.

"Then promise to give me your first child, after you become queen."²

2. "Then promise to give me your first child, after you become queen." Escalating demands are typical of fairy-tale helpers. They ask for something trivial to start with, then move to something that is beyond the norm of an economy of bartering. The helper or donor quickly moves into the role of villain.

3. "I prefer a living creature to all the treasures in the world." Rumpelstiltskin's desire for something "living" links him with demonic creatures who make pacts with mortals in order to secure living creatures. At the heart of all versions of "Rumpelstiltskin" is the contract made between an innocent young girl and a devilish creature, a misshapen gnome of questionable origins who is probably one of the least attractive of fairy-tale figures. Yet Rumpelstiltskin comes off rather well in a world where fathers tell brazen lies about their daughters, marriages are based on greed, and young women agree to give up a firstborn child. He works hard to hold up his end of the bargain made with the miller's daughter, shows genuine compassion when the queen regrets the agreement into which she has entered, and is prepared to add an escape clause to their contract even though he stands to gain nothing from it.

4. "If by then you can guess my name, you can keep your child." Rumpelstiltskin's challenge to the queen reminds us of the power of names and how the name taboo came about. In ancient religions, naming the gods compelled them to respond to worshipers, hence the taboo against invoking their names. Knowing the name of your antagonist represents a form of control, a way of containing the power of the adversary. Since names are a vital part of personal identity, revealing your name can be dangerous. In numerous myths and folktales, there is a prohibition against asking the name of the beloved, and violation of the taboo often leads to flight or transformation into an animal. In Puccini's opera *Turandot* (1926) the Chinese princess named in the title is challenged to identify the name of the man who has solved her riddles.

"Who knows what may happen before that?" thought the miller's daughter. Since she was desperate to find a way out, she promised the little man what he had demanded, and, once again, he set to work and spun the straw into gold.

When the king returned in the morning and found everything as he wished it to be, he made the wedding arrangements, and the beautiful miller's daughter became a queen.

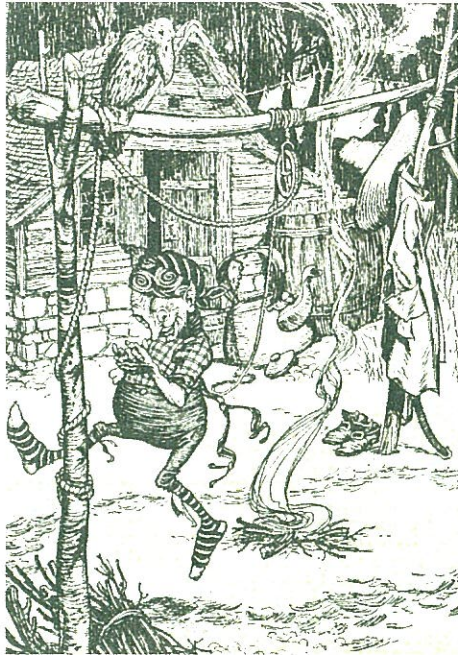
A year later the miller's daughter gave birth to a beautiful child. She had forgotten all about the little man, but one day he suddenly appeared in her room and said: "Give me what you promised."

The queen was horrified, and she offered the little man the entire wealth of the kingdom if only he would let her keep the child. But the little man replied: "I prefer a living creature to all the treasures in the world."³ The queen's tears and sobs were so heartrending that the little man took pity on her. "I will give you three days," he declared. "If by then you can guess my name, you can keep your child."⁴

All night long the queen racked her brains, thinking of all the names she had ever heard. She dispatched a messenger to inquire throughout the land if there were any names she had forgotten. When the little man returned the next day, she began with Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar and recited every single name she had ever heard. But at each one the little man said: "That's not my name."

The next day she sent the messenger out to inquire about the names of all the people in the neighborhood, and she tried out the most unusual and bizarre names on the little man: "Do you happen to be called Ribfiend or Muttonchops or Spindleshanks?" But each time he replied: "That's not my name."

On the third day the messenger returned and said: "I couldn't find a single new name, but when I rounded a bend in the forest at the foot of a huge mountain, a place so remote that the foxes and hares bid each other goodnight,



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1909

Rumpelstiltskin parades triumphantly around a fire, confident that the queen will not divine his name.

I came across a little hut. A fire was burning right in front of the hut, and a really strange little man was dancing around the fire, hopping on one foot and chanting:

'Tomorrow I brew, today I bake,
Soon the child is mine to take.
Oh what luck to win this game,
Rumpelstiltskin is my name.'

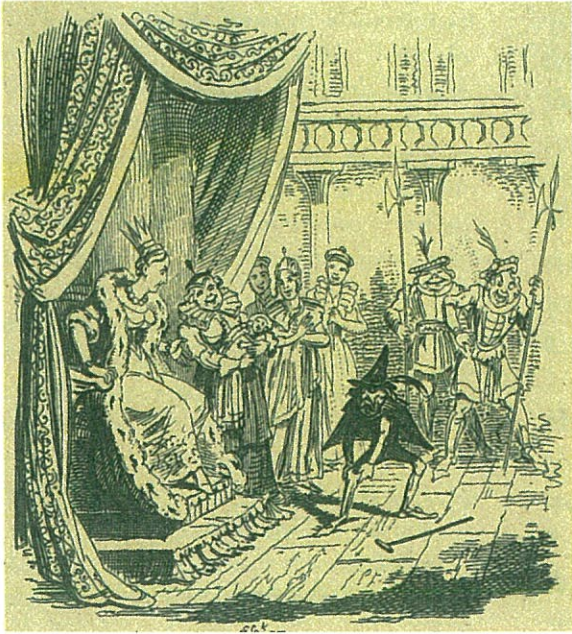
You can imagine how happy the queen was to hear that name. The little man returned and asked: "Well, Your Majesty, who am I?"

The Queen replied: "Is your name Conrad?"

"No, it's not."

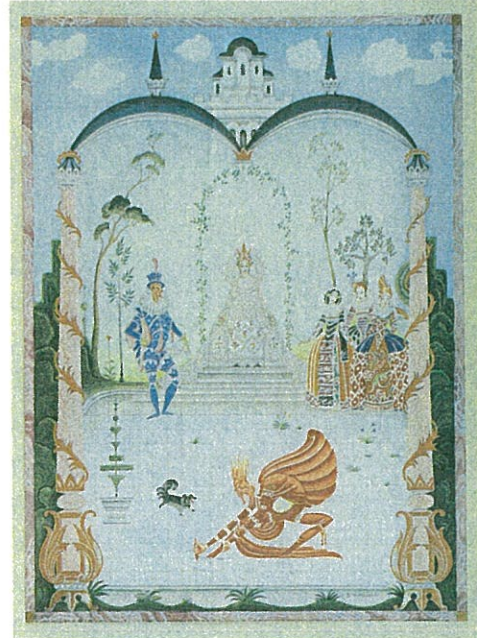
"Is your name Harry?"

"No, it's not."



GEORGE CRUIKSHANK,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1823

Rumpelstiltskin is about to tear himself in two, while courtiers look on in amusement. Note how the gnome appears diabolical through his dress, hat, cane, and scowl.



KAY NIELSEN,
"Rumpelstiltskin," 1925

An enraged Rumpelstiltskin, dressed in vibrant red, begins to tear himself in two. The serenity of the courtiers, expressed in the perfect symmetries of the composition, is disrupted by the mad gnome.

"Could your name possibly be Rumpelstiltskin?"

"The Devil told you that, the Devil told you!" the little man screamed, and in his rage he stamped his right foot so hard that it went into the ground right up to his waist. Then in his fury he seized his left foot with both hands and tore himself in two.