

# THE FROG KING, OR IRON HEINRICH<sup>1</sup>

*Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*

This story, the first in the Grimms' Nursery and Household Tales, bears a distinct family resemblance to "Beauty and the Beast." Like Beauty, the princess is obliged to accept an animal suitor, but she finds herself relentlessly repulsed by the beast who helped her out when she needed a favor. Despite her father's double admonition to accept the frog as her "companion" ("If you make a promise, you have to keep it," and "You shouldn't scorn someone who helped you when you were in trouble."), the princess balks at the idea of allowing a frog into her bed. She flies into a rage and hurls the erotically ambitious frog against the wall: "Now you'll get your rest, you disgusting frog."

Bruno Bettelheim has read "The Frog King" as a compressed version of the maturation process, with the princess navigating a path between the pleasure principle (represented by her play) and the dictates of the superego (represented by the father's commands). His reading helps to understand why

1. *Iron Heinrich*. The tale seems to be a hybrid form, combining a story about an animal groom with a tale about a loyal servant. Iron Heinrich gets his name from the hoops of steel that keep his heart from bursting while his master remains under a spell.

From Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Der Froschkönig, oder der eiserne Heinrich," in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Dieterich, 1857; first published, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812).

*the tale has such a powerful combination of erotic and didactic elements. In the end the princess does not overcome her disgust and kiss the frog (as in some versions disseminated in the United States) but asserts herself and expresses her true feelings: "To be able to love, a person first has to become able to feel; even if the feelings are negative, that is better than not feeling." Rather than showing how compassion and subordination lead to true love, as in "Beauty and the Beast," "The Frog King" endorses an act of defiance and an expression of genuine feeling. The princess may have failed to keep a promise, but she has been able to set limits for her importunate suitor, and this, above all, redeems him.*

**I**N THE OLDEN DAYS, when you could still wish for things, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful. The youngest was so beautiful that even the sun, which had seen so much, was filled with wonder when it shone upon her face.

There was a deep, dark forest near the king's castle, and in that forest, beneath an old linden tree, was a spring. When the weather turned really hot, the king's daughter would go out into the woods and sit down at the edge of the cool spring. And if she got bored, she would take out her golden ball, throw it up in the air, and catch it. That was her favorite activity.

One day it so happened that the golden ball didn't land in the princess's hands when she reached up to catch it, but fell down on the ground and rolled right into the water. The princess followed the ball with her eyes, but it disappeared, and the spring was so deep that you couldn't even see the bottom. The princess began to shed tears, and she wept louder and louder, unable to stop herself. A voice interrupted her crying and called out: "What's





ARTHUR RACKHAM,  
 "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich,"  
 1913

The princess can barely contain her disgust as she extends her arm to recover the golden ball retrieved by the frog. The large tree trunks looming in the background suggest a sense of isolation, far from the security of the palace and court, in this wooded setting.

going on, Princess? Stones would be moved to tears if they could hear you."

She turned around to figure out where the voice was coming from<sup>2</sup> and saw a frog, which had stuck its big old ugly head out of the water.

"Oh, it's you, you old splasher," she said. "I'm in tears because my golden ball has fallen into the spring."

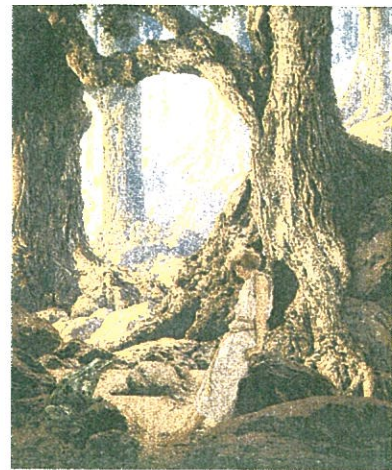
"Be quiet and stop crying," said the frog. "I can probably help you, but what will you give me if I fetch your little toy?"

"Anything you want, dear frog," she said. "My dresses,



OTTO UBBELOHDE,  
 "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich,"  
 1907

The princess seems intrigued by the amphibian that promises to help her by retrieving her golden ball. The frog, emerging from a spring with a headstone bearing a patriarchal visage, seems to show some empathy for the princess's loss.



MAXFIELD PARRISH,  
 "The Enchanted Prince," 1934

The princess and the frog prince face one another, each gazing directly into the eyes of the other. The forest behind the two, with its unusual lighting and majestic intricacies, gives us a classic Parrish landscape.

2. She turned around to figure out where the voice was coming from. Critics frequently underscore the phallic nature of the frog. Julius Heuscher notes, "The innocent young girl's fear of and repugnance toward the male genitals and the transformation of this disgust into happiness and sanctioned matrimony can hardly be symbolized better than by this transformation of the frog into a prince." Frogs are also animals that undergo transformations, existing in one form when young, in another when mature.



3. "My dresses, my pearls and my jewels, even the golden crown I'm wearing." In "Rumpelstiltskin," the miller's daughter similarly tries to satisfy the demands of the helper with material possessions.

my pearls and my jewels, even the golden crown I'm wearing."<sup>3</sup>

The frog said: "I don't want your dresses, your pearls and jewels, or your golden crown. But if you promise to cherish me and let me be your companion and playmate, and let me sit beside you at the table and eat from your little golden plate, drink from your little cup, and sleep in your little bed, if you promise me all that, I will dive down into the spring and bring back your golden ball."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I'll give you anything you want as long as you get that ball back for me." But all the while she was thinking: "What nonsense that stupid frog is talking! He's down there in the water croaking away with all the other frogs. How could anyone want him as a companion?"

Once the frog had gotten her word, he put his head in the water and dove down into the spring. After a while he came paddling back with the ball in his mouth, and he tossed it on the grass. When the princess saw her beautiful toy in front of her, she was overjoyed. She picked it up and ran off with it.

"Wait for me," the frog cried out. "Take me with you. I can't run the way you do."

He croaked as loudly as he could, but it did him no good at all. The princess paid no attention, hurried home as fast as her legs would carry her, and quickly forgot about the poor frog, who had to crawl back down into the spring.

The next day, the princess sat down to dinner with the king and some courtiers and was eating dinner on her little golden plate when something came crawling up the marble staircase, splish, splash, splish, splash. When it reached the top of the stairs, it knocked at the door and called out: "Princess, youngest princess, let me in!"

The princess ran to the door to see who was there. When she opened it, she saw the frog standing right before her. Terrified, she slammed the door as hard as she could and went back to the table. The king could see that her heart was pounding and said: "My child, what are you

afraid of? Is there some kind of giant at the door coming to get you?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "It wasn't a giant, but it was a disgusting frog."

"What does a frog want with you?"

"Oh, Father dear, yesterday when I was playing by the spring, my little golden ball fell into the water. And because I was crying so hard, the frog got it for me, and because he insisted, I promised that he could become my companion. I never thought that he would be able to leave the water. Now he's outside and wants to come in and see me."

Just then there was a second knock at the door, and a voice cried out:

Princess, Youngest Princess,<sup>4</sup>  
 Let me in.  
 Did you forget  
 Yesterday's promise  
 Down by the chilly waters?  
 Princess, Youngest Princess,  
 Let me in.

The king declared: "If you make a promise, you have to keep it."<sup>5</sup> Just go and let him in."

The princess went and opened the door. The frog hopped into the room and followed close on her heels until she reached her chair. Then he sat down and cried out: "Lift me up and put me next to you."

The princess hesitated, but the king ordered her to obey. Once the frog was up on the chair, he wanted to get on the table, and once he was there, he said: "Push your little golden plate closer to me so that we can eat together."

The princess did as he told her, but it was obvious that she was not happy about it. The frog had enjoyed his meal, but for her almost every bite stuck in her throat. Finally he said: "I've had enough to eat, and I'm tired.

4. *Princess, Youngest Princess.* In this version of the story, as in others, the frog speaks in verse. Compare the Scottish "Well at the World's End":

*"Open the door, my hinny, my hart,  
 Open the door, my ain wee thing.  
 And mind the words that you and I spak  
 Down in the meadow, at the well-spring."*

5. "If you make a promise, you have to keep it." The Grimms added maxims like this one to strengthen the moral backbone of the tale.





ANNE ANDERSON,  
 "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich," 1930

An unwelcome guest, the frog helps himself to the food on the princess's plate, while the king and servants ponder the unusual situation.

6. *threw him with all her might against the wall.* Some variants of the Grimms' tale feature a princess who admits the frog to her chamber despite his revolting appearance, but most give us a princess who is perfectly capable of committing acts rivaling the cold-blooded violence of dashing a creature against a wall. In Scottish and Gaelic versions of "The Frog King," the princess beheads her suitor, and a Polish variant replaces the frog with a snake and recounts in lavish detail how the princess tears it in two. A more tame Lithuanian text requires the burning of the snake's skin before the prince is freed from his reptilian state. Deeds of passion as much as acts of compassion have the power to disenchant. Although the princess of "The Frog King" is self-absorbed, ungrateful, and cruel, in the end she does as well for herself as modest, obedient, and charitable Beauty.

Carry me up to your room and turn down the silken covers on your little bed."

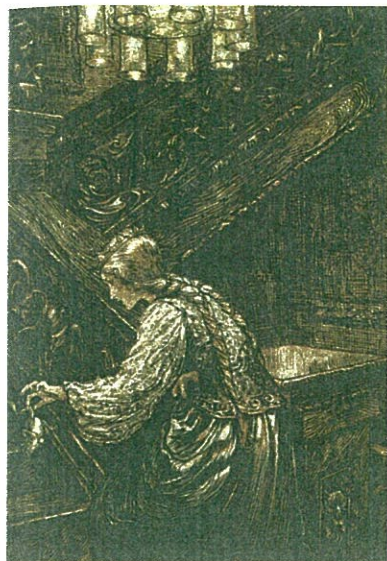
The princess began to weep, and she was afraid of the clammy frog. She didn't dare touch him, and now he was going to sleep in her beautiful, clean bed. The king grew angry and said: "You shouldn't scorn someone who helped you when you were in trouble."

The princess picked up the frog with two fingers, carried him up to her room, and put him in a corner. While she was lying in bed, he came crawling over and said: "I'm tired and want to sleep as much as you do. Lift me up into your bed, or I'll tell your father."

The princess became really annoyed, picked up the frog, and threw him with all her might against the wall.<sup>6</sup> "Now you'll get your rest, you disgusting frog!"

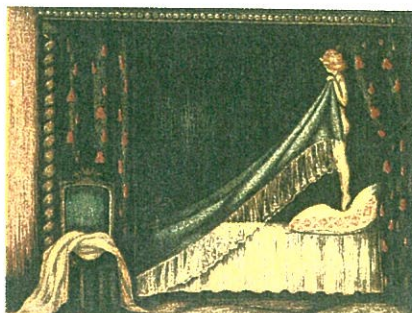
When the frog fell to the ground, he was no longer a





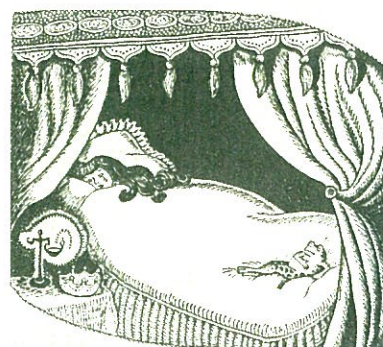
ARTHUR RACKHAM,  
"The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich,"  
1909

A horrified princess carries the frog upstairs to her bedroom.



FERNANDE BIEGLER,  
"The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich,"  
1921

On tiptoes, with a coverlet pulled over her body to hide her nakedness, the redheaded princess is horrified to discover a frog at the foot of her bed. The crown on the frog's head, suggesting that he might be more than he seems, does not seem to reassure her.



WANDA GÁG,  
"The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich,"  
1936

A tearful princess considers her next move, as the frog reclines comfortably at the end of her coverlet. The crown resting on the nightstand is the only sign that this little girl is anything more than an ordinary child.

frog but a prince with beautiful, bright eyes. At her father's bidding, he became her dear companion and husband. He told her that a wicked witch had cast a spell on him<sup>7</sup> and that the princess alone could release him from the spring. The next day they planned to set out together for his kingdom.

The two fell asleep and, in the morning, after the sun had woken them, a coach drove up. It was drawn by eight white horses in golden harnesses, with white ostrich feathers on their heads. At the back of the coach stood Faithful Heinrich,<sup>8</sup> the servant of the young prince. Faithful Heinrich had been so saddened by the transformation of his master into a frog that three hoops had been placed around his chest to keep his heart from bursting with pain and sorrow. Now the coach had arrived to take the young prince back to his kingdom, and Faithful Heinrich lifted the two of them into the carriage and took his place in the rear. He was elated by the transformation. When they had covered a good distance, the prince heard a cracking

7. *a wicked witch had cast a spell on him.* The cause of the transformation is not elaborated in any variants of the tale.

8. *At the back of the coach stood Faithful Heinrich.* The cracking of the three iron bands around Heinrich's chest externalizes the sense of liberation felt by all the characters. The name Heinrich, as the Grimms point out, has a representative quality, suggesting solidity and decency.

noise behind him, as if something had broken. He turned around and cried out:

“Heinrich, the coach is falling apart!”

“No, My Lord, it’s not the coach,

But a hoop from round my heart,

Which was in sheer pain,

When you were down in the spring,

Living there as a frog.”

Two more times the prince heard the cracking noise, and he was sure that the coach was falling apart. But it was only the sound of the hoops breaking from around Faithful Heinrich’s chest, for his master had been set free and was happy.