

# Treue in Three Tales by the Brothers Grimm

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**Abstract** The article focuses on the cardinal virtues of faithfulness and loyalty as they manifest themselves in “The Frog Prince”, “Faithful John” and “The Three Snake Leaves”. Extreme loyalty is shown in the first tale as the servant mourns the loss and metamorphosis of his prince; referring to Freud’s “reality principle” and “pleasure principle” the author demonstrates how the servant in “Faithful John” follows the former while his master is in the grips of the latter. The author also makes use of Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis and indicates how the significance of the number three in the fairy tale may be connected with the oedipal triangle. The tale “The Three Snake Leaves” once again rewards an uncompromisingly faithful servant, here a soldier in the service of his king. The soldier is also involved in a particularly interesting, complex erotic relationship with the princess.

**Key words** Loyalty; metamorphosis; the oedipal triangle

The German fairy tales gathered by the Brothers Grimm are often criticized for their violence and bloody punishments. As Maria Tatar notes, the German tales “came to be viewed as nourishers and reflectors of a cruel, perverse national mentality. The only question that remained open was whether to see them as causal contributors to the horrors of the Hitler regime or simply as early signs of what was to come” (185). A cursory glance at fairy tales from other countries shows that the Germans have no monopoly on violence in their fairy tales. However, every fairy tale, “no matter what its origin, tends to absorb something of the place where it is narrated—a landscape, a custom, a moral outlook.”<sup>1</sup> The fairy tale has no set form: “. . . it endlessly adjusts and adapts itself to every new culture as it takes root” (Tatar 191). A universal story will take on features of the culture that does the telling.

“Treue” (faithfulness, loyalty) was a cardinal virtue of the Germans from ancient times. This quality has always been important in tribal societies, and it is no wonder that fairy tales in every country show an appreciation of it, and punish its absence. Three fairy tales gathered by the Brothers Grimm in Germany illustrate the quality of loyalty/fidelity in its many manifestations. While all three contain a faithful servant, one gives us many other examples of fidelity. “Der Froschkönig oder der eiserne Heinrich” (usually translated as “The Frog Prince”) and “Der treue Johannes” (usually translated as “Faithful John”) show extreme loyalty to one’s superiors. “Die drei Schlangenblätter” (“The Three Snake Leaves”) is a kaleidoscopic tale of various kinds of loyalty and the punishment of infidelity.

The story of the faithful servant is one of the most ancient, and one of the most universal tales. It is found in ancient India and throughout Europe. The first fairy tale in the Grimm brothers' collection is "The Frog Prince." (The German title, translated literally is "The Frog King or Iron Henry.")<sup>2</sup> The outlines of this tale are well-known; a princess loses an object (in the Grimm tale it is a golden ball) in a well, and a frog volunteers to retrieve it if he can come home with the princess and share her bed and table. The annoyed princess after a time throws the frog against the wall, whereupon he turns into a handsome prince, whom she then marries. Although this story is very well-known, the final scene of the German version is not. In that version, the morning after the wedding a coach pulled up drawn by eight white horses in golden chains with white feathers decorating their manes. Behind them stood the servant of the young king, "der treue Heinrich" ("loyal Henry").<sup>3</sup> Heinrich helps his prince and the bride into the coach, and they set off. Hearing a loud crashing noise, the prince leans out the window and asks Heinrich if something is wrong with the coach, whereupon Heinrich explains that his sorrow was so great when his master was turned into a frog by a witch that he had three iron bands bound over his heart so it would not break from sadness. Two more times the crashing noise is heard; the iron bands have broken and fallen off, and Heinrich is happy again, "because his lord was redeemed and happy."<sup>4</sup> The entire story of "Iron Henry" is told in one paragraph. The story of the frog prince is generally known without its addition.

Although the story of the devoted servant Heinrich seemed almost an afterthought, the fairy tale of "Der treue Johannes" ("Faithful John")<sup>5</sup> shows us a focus on loyalty and its costs. This tale also treats of the confrontation with death. The story begins with the common fairy tale element of the "forbidden door," which most famously occurs in the French "Bluebeard" tale, as well as in several tales in the Grimm collection. Johannes's master, the old king, instructs the servant not to allow the young prince into one locked room in the palace, in which hangs the portrait of a beautiful princess. Johannes promises: "And when faithful Johannes had once again given the king his hand on it, the latter became still, laid his head on the pillow, and died" (66). After the funeral, Johannes tells the prince candidly what he promised his father and stressed his wish to be loyal to his new master: "I want to keep my promise and be faithful to you as I was to him, *even if it should cost me my life*" (66).<sup>6</sup> After the mourning period Johannes showed the prince his inheritance. But the prince noticed that Johannes always passed by one room in the castle, and he insisted on seeing what was in the room – despite the fact that Johannes said there was something in the room that the prince should not see. Trying to break open the door violently, the prince refused to budge from the spot until Johannes unlocked the door.<sup>7</sup> The faithful servant tried to warn the impetuous prince: "I promised your father before his death that you should not see what is in the room; it could cause great misfortune to you and to me" (67). The prince remains intransigent and seeing that opposition was useless, Johannes "with a heavy heart and much sighing" (67) opens the door. He thought if he could go in first he could cover the portrait—but the prince stood on tiptoe and looked over his shoulder. After seeing the princess bedecked with gold and precious stones, the prince fell unconscious to the floor. The princess was in

a far kingdom and known to be inaccessible. Knowing that she loved objects of gold, Johannes develops a plan: he has the goldsmiths of the prince's kingdom make all kinds of golden tools and ornaments, and then he and the prince sail to the faraway kingdom; Johannes takes many golden objects to the castle, where the princess sees them and wishes to see more. Loyal Johannes lies to the princess, telling her he is a merchant and his master has many finer objects on his ship, and she must come and see them. Once on the ship, the princess does not even notice that the boat is sailing away. Johannes has helped the prince abduct the princess.

Steven Swann Jones gives a Freudian interpretation of the tale; he notes that while the real father of the prince gave rigid rules, Johannes was willing to give way: "The servant represents a more flexible and sympathetic father figure who gives the young man some credit and undertakes to support and assist him in his decisions" (56). The contrast between the rational servant and the irrational young man in love is one established by Freud:

Faithful John follows Freud's reality principle: he is concerned with cause and effect and the consequences of his actions, and thus he is pragmatic in his orientation. Appropriately, the faithful servant does indeed know how to woo the princess. In contrast, the young man follows the pleasure principle; he wishes only to satisfy his burning desire to possess the beautiful maiden but does not know how to accomplish this goal. (56)

According to Swann Jones, faithful Johannes represents duty, or conscience.

Already on the ship returning to the prince's kingdom, Johannes saw three ravens and heard them speaking.<sup>8</sup> The fairy tale simply tells us that he understood the language of birds; no explanation for this feat is given. There follows a lengthy conversation among the ravens about what is going to happen to the prince, how to prevent it, and what the consequences will be for Johannes if he ever reveals any of it. A magic horse will try to carry off the prince, and must be killed – but if the killer reveals why he did it, one third of his body will turn to stone. The prince will put on a night shirt that looks beautiful but is really made of pitch and will burn him. Someone must put on gloves and throw the shirt into the fire – but if that person reveals the reason for his actions, another third of his body will turn to stone. The princess will dance at her wedding and fall down dead, if someone can not draw three drops of blood from her right breast and spit it out. If the protector tells why he is doing this, the last third of his body will turn to stone, and he will be dead.

There are three trials, and each time a third of Johannes' body will turn to stone. The number three is ubiquitous in fairy tales, and there are differing interpretations of why this is so. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the number refers to "the three aspects of the mind: id, ego, and superego" (102). Elsewhere he tells us the number three is understood by the child as his two parents and himself (106). Bettelheim also provides a more Freudian understanding of the number three:

Three is a mystical and often a holy number, and was so long before the Chris-

tian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It is the threesome of snake, Eve, and Adam which, according to the Bible, makes for carnal knowledge. In the unconscious, the number three stands for sex, because each sex has three visible sex characteristics; penis and two testes in the male; vagina and the two breasts in the female. The number three stands in the unconscious for sex also in a quite different way, as it symbolizes the oedipal situation with its deep involvement of three persons with one another . . . (219)

Whatever the origin, the number three is an omnipresent feature in the content and structure of fairy tales. The German proverb “Aller guten Dinge sind drei” (“All good things come in threes”) itself comes from the Grimm fairy tale “Tischchen deck dich, Goldesel und Knüppel aus dem Sack”—“Table, set yourself, Golden Donkey and Club in the Sack” (224).<sup>9</sup>

Johannes manages to save the prince the first two times, and manages to avoid any explanations. But the third time, when he bends down over the prostrate princess to draw blood from her breast, the prince is enraged at this inappropriate touching, and Johannes, the faithful servant, is sentenced to death. Just before his execution he explains his actions, and is then turned to stone. The prince has the stone statue installed in his bedroom; Steven Swann Jones interprets this as a sign of the prince’s willingness to follow social codes; faithful Johannes, the symbol of the conscience, is put in that place where the prince had previously shown little self-control (61).

Although drawing blood from the princess was the final trial in the Grimm version, other versions have as the last test the killing of a large serpent that has entered the bridal chamber. The combination of serpents and birds as animals of wisdom is frequent in the Grimm fairy tales, and is related to ancient Germanic mythic material. One thinks of Thora in *Ragnar Lodbrok’s Saga* who nourishes a pet snake that turns into a monster and is killed by Ragnar—who himself will die in a snake pit. One thinks of Sigurd in *Volsungasaga* and Siegfried in *Das Nibelungenlied*; both heroes killed a dragon (serpent), inadvertently tasted the juice emanating from the roasting heart, and then understood the language of the birds. The birds warned them of danger and saved their lives. As Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian critic of fairy tales, notes: “There is a germ of truth in the contention that the telling of fairy tales belongs to the paganism of the past, as the Grimm Brothers said” (112). The ravens Johannes hears warn of the actions to be taken and their consequences. And, of course, the serpent in Christian story is associated with the Tree of Knowledge.

The prince and his bride mourn Johannes and two sons are born to them, who will provide a means to bring the servant back to life. When the prince, alone with his little sons, again looked at the statue and wished that he could revive Johannes, the statue spoke and said, “If you behead your two children with your own hand and smear their blood on me, I will be alive again” (72). Incredibly, the prince does this, and Johannes comes to life again. Faithful Johannes says to his master: “Your faithfulness (*Treue*) will not go unrewarded,” (72) and sets the heads back on the children’s bodies, smears them with blood, and they spring to life. The princess has been at church, and before she returns, the prince hides the two sons and Johannes

in a closet. When the queen returned, he asked her if she would be willing to sacrifice their sons to revive Johannes. Amazingly, she says yes, whereupon the children and Johannes emerge from the closet and all live happily ever after. The words “*treu*” (“faithful”) and “*Treue*” (“loyalty, fidelity”) occur frequently in this fairy tale. Never mind that Johannes broke his promise to the old king; he was willing to die to show his prince that he had remained faithful to him. The prince was willing to kill his own sons to be faithful to his trusty servant, to whom he owed his happy family life. That the princess also was willing to do this remains incomprehensible to the modern mind.

“The Three Snake Leaves”<sup>10</sup> tells the story of a young man who was born poor; his father could not support him, so he left to make his own living. And since the king of a powerful realm was at war, the young man (who remains nameless throughout the story, as in so many fairy tales) becomes a soldier. In battle the general is slain and many of the soldier’s comrades fell, and the others wanted to flee. But the young man said “We can not let our Fatherland be defeated” (126) and fought so bravely that the battle was won. The king, in gratitude, made the faithful soldier one of the most important people in the land. The king had a beautiful daughter that the soldier wanted to marry. But this unusual maiden required that any suitor swear an oath that, if she died first, he would go with her into the grave. She promised to do the same, should her husband die first. The soldier was so smitten that he wanted to marry the princess despite the oath. So they married and lived happily for a time, until the princess fell ill and died. The soldier had shown himself faithful to his nation, and to the king. He showed himself faithful to the princess when he took the oath. And although he had no intention of breaking his oath, “he felt terror at being buried alive” (127) but there was no way out; the king had put watchmen at all the gates to prevent him from leaving, even if he tried.

The corpse of the princess and the prince were locked in the vault with a table, four loaves of bread, four bottles of wine, and four candles. After he had consumed these, the prince would have to die of hunger and thirst. The prince saw death approaching ever nearer. While he was staring into space, a snake crawled out from a corner and approached the corpse. Thinking the snake wanted to eat his wife’s body, the prince drew his sword and hacked it into three pieces. After a while another snake crawled from the corner, saw its mate in three pieces, and withdrew. But it came back with three leaves in its mouth. It placed a leaf on each piece of the dead snake, and suddenly everything grew back together and the two snakes slithered away, leaving the leaves.<sup>11</sup> The prince, having seen this, wondered if the leaves could work their magic on human beings, and he placed one leaf on the mouth of his dead wife, and the other two leaves on her eyes. Suddenly, she came back to life, and the two of them pounded on the door and made noise until the king was summoned. They were let out and there was much rejoicing. The young king had been careful to take the three leaves with him, giving them to a faithful servant and enjoining him to always carry them on his person.

The fairy tale tells us that a change came over the young wife after her resuscitation, and she no longer loved her husband. The young couple seem to have gone to

live in a distant place, although this is not stated in the tale. We read that the young wife wanted to visit her old father “across the sea” (128) and the couple boards a boat. The wife falls in love with the skipper, and when the young king was sleeping, the faithless wife grabs her husband’s head and the skipper grabs the feet, and they pitch him overboard into the sea. Now another “faithful servant” will save his master. The king’s faithful servant, who had seen everything, quietly lowers a rowboat and rows with all his might to the spot where the body disappeared under the waves. He manages to find the corpse and get it into the boat. He then pulled out the three snake leaves, put one on the prince’s mouth, the other two on his eyes, and brings him back to life. They rowed with all their might and came to the old king’s castle before the wife and skipper in the bigger boat. After hearing what happened, the old king puts them in a “hidden chamber” (128). When the princess arrived alone with the skipper, the old king asks where her husband is. She said he became ill and died on the way, and feigned sadness. The king said “I want to make the dead man alive again” (129) and opened the chamber, bidding his daughter and the skipper to enter. The princess, upon seeing her husband, was “as struck by lightning” (129). But her own father said “there is no mercy” (129), reminding his daughter of how her husband was willing to die with her, and even brought her back to life. He tells his daughter she should receive the reward she deserves. She and the skipper were put in a boat bored full of holes and set adrift on the sea, where they “soon sank down into the waves” (129).

In this fairy tale, we again have a loyal servant; he brings his dead master to life, just as the prince brought his faithful servant to life in “Faithful John.” We have a faithful subject of the king, and a faithful husband willing to die for his wife. We see the mate of the dead snake resuscitate it. We see the husband bringing the dead wife back to life. We have many different kinds of “Treue” — patriotism, loyalty to authority, marital fidelity, and we have the glaring example of the princess’s infidelity, which is unfortunately not explained. Although she underwent an emotional change after being resuscitated, this did not seem to happen to her husband, who was also resuscitated — although being murdered by one’s wife would presumably cause the love to disappear without any magic.

Loyalty is a virtue much admired in German culture, and we see this fact illustrated in “The Frog Prince,” “Faithful John,” and “The Three Snake Leaves.” Faithful Johannes was willing to accept death as the cost of faithfulness to his prince, and he was resuscitated by the blood of the children, who were then resuscitated by blood as well. The husband in “The Three Snake Leaves” was willing to accept death as the price of loyalty to his deceased wife, and he was resuscitated by the magic leaves. For the unfaithful wife, there would be no resuscitation (a second time). Death was the “reward” for her infidelity. Faithful Johannes told his prince that the loyalty he showed him “would not go unrewarded” (“unbelohnt”). And the king in “The Three Snake Leaves” told his daughter that death at sea was her “reward” (“Lohn”).

Although respect for authority and the importance of oaths were nearly universal at the time when these tales originated, that respect seems to have maintained its vi-

tality to a greater degree in German-speaking lands than elsewhere.

## Notes

1. Italo Calvino, as quoted in Maria Tatar's *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*.
2. This fairy tale is number 440 in Stith Thompson's index, *The Folktale* (New York: Dryden Press, 1951) 483.
3. Not surprisingly, Adolf Hitler's nickname for SS-chief Heinrich Himmler was "der treue Heinrich" ("loyal Henry"), however ironic that appellation became by the end of World War II.
4. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen. Vollständige Ausgabe* (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 2005) 43. All three fairy tales discussed in this essay are taken from this edition. All translations are my own. Quotations will be identified by page number in parentheses following the quotation.
5. This fairy tale is no. 516 in the Thompson index.
6. My emphasis.
7. Maria Tatar notes that female characters who violate a prohibition suffer punishment, but the prince, who was ready to break down the forbidden door, is not punished — but instead acquires wealth and the desired bride. Faithful Johannes also violates the prohibition stipulated by his master, the old king, without penalty (167).
8. Quite a number of the Grimms' fairy tales feature birds revealing secrets to people, or warning them, or providing important knowledge. Bettelheim usually sees birds as symbols of the superego. From early medieval works birds have been representatives of the soul (as in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, in which there is an island populated by souls, appearing as birds.) According to Marie-Louise von Franz, "Birds in general represent psychic entities of an intuitive and thinking character" (67).
9. Of course all European languages have similar proverbs, and the number three was significant in medieval Germanic legal practices as well.
10. This fairy tale is no. 612 in the Thompson index, p. 484.
11. Snakes have been associated with healing since very ancient times. The rod of Asclepius showed a winding snake and the Hebrew Nehushtan which Moses formed to protect the Israelites from snake-bite in the desert, also shows a rod and a serpent.

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