

Fevers Deeply Burning: Sexuality in the Brothers Grimm's "Nixie of the Millpond"

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One of the rare Grimm's stories that deserves greater attention is "The Nixie of the Millpond."¹ Rich in symbolic detail and psychological depth, embodying in Joseph Campbell's phrase "a world of magic...symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche," it well repays close critical study.² Like "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" and other tales from the so called "animal groom" sequence, "The Nixie of the Millpond" is steeped in the mysteries of human sexuality, with which it deals simply but not simple-mindedly. In the tradition of romantic comedy, to which most fairy stories adhere, it offers hope in the ultimate benignancy of the human condition without understating the dangers and the difficulties we all know to be a part of that condition. "The Nixie of the Millpond" celebrates in festive terms a full, rounded view of sexual love towards which so many in the latter twentieth century grope with increasing anxiety and frustration.

The plot is fairly complicated for a fairy tale. It begins with a miller who has lost his fortune through one of those quirks of fate common in fairy tales as in life. One day, as he wanders near his mill he sees a beautiful woman rising from the water. Although he rightly takes her to be a water spirit and reacts at first with fear, she cunningly wins his confidence and offers to restore his fortune in return for "the young thing which has just been born" in his house. Unwittingly, he

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²Joseph Campbell, "The Question of Meaning," *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, trans. Margaret Hunt and James Stern (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972) 863.

consents to this bargain, and only later discovers that his wife has just given birth to a baby boy. The miller is remorseful, and brings his son up to fear the water and the Nixie, but over the years, as his fortune returns and the Nixie does not appear to claim her part of the bargain, the miller begins to feel at ease about the Nixie. The boy grows up to be a fine huntsman and is married to a “true-hearted maiden” from the village. Everything is fine until he accidentally ventures near the pond to wash his hands after hunting. The Nixie ascends, “smilingly” wraps her arms around him, and drags him under. The huntsman’s wife goes to the millpond when her husband does not return, and finding his hunting pouch by the shore, guesses what has happened. Vainly, she curses the Nixie and paces around the pond. After many hours, she falls asleep and dreams that she climbs a mountain and visits an old woman who lives in a little cottage. Upon waking, she resolves to act in accordance with her dream and indeed discovers the old woman in her cottage. On three occasions, the woman offers the wife gifts to take to the millpond. Whenever the wife leaves one of the gifts at the water’s edge, she sees part of her husband’s body appear above the water. Each time, however, a wave rises from the pond and drags him down again. The third time, the husband manages to escape with his wife, but the couple are threatened by a tidal wave. In desperation, the wife calls on the old woman for help, and she responds by turning the wife into a toad and her husband into a frog. Thus they escape the flood, though the water separates them, and when they regain their human form they cannot find each other. In their need, they both turn to tending sheep, and drive their flocks for years “full of sorrow and longing.” One spring they meet by chance, but do not recognize each other. They do feel comforted in each others company, however, and so continue their friendship. One day the man pulls out a flute and begins to play. The woman weeps on hearing this, and when questioned, replies that the air was one she played on a golden flute (one of the wife’s gifts to the Nixie) on one of the occasions she saw her husband rise from the water of the millpond. The two then recognize each other and live happily thereafter.

The plot is composed of three loosely connected sections: the story of the miller inadvertently offering up his child, the story of the boy’s capture and his wife’s valiant efforts to free him, and the story of the couple’s separation and eventual reunion. The miller’s story, a common motif in fairy tales, is curiously incomplete. He does not undergo any development and indeed disappears from the story completely after the first part. As the husband plays a relatively passive role throughout, the main focus of interest is on two characters: the Nixie and the wife. Interestingly, their parts overlap, the Nixie appearing in the first two thirds of the story, the wife in the last two thirds. The miller and the old woman balance

each other in the first two sections, and are completely absent from the last section, which is left to the husband and wife alone. The progress of the plot is to isolate and make autonomous the married pair. The story's symmetry derives from its balancing of characters, the miller against the old woman, the Nixie against the wife, and ultimately the wife with the husband.

The miller and the old woman function at strategic moments to propel the plot. In effect, they represent the harmful and helpful influence of an older generation on the young couple. The miller's foolish greed in trading his son for gold, an act he regrets but does not disclaim (he accepts the Nixie's gold in spite of the probable consequences of this action), predestines his son's bad fortune. The old woman balances the miller's greed with her own generosity. Her golden gifts, a comb, a flute, and a spinning wheel, enable the wife to pay back the Nixie for the gold she gave the miller. The old woman, whose white magic counters the black magic of the Nixie, acts also as a mother figure to the young wife, duplicating in her relation to the wife the miller's relation to his son. Together they suggest the ambiguous relation of the older generation to the younger often found in comedy. The miller is a blocking character, or *senex iratus*, while the helpful old woman is a type of *ieron*, facilitating the young lovers' escape to a festive conclusion.

The Nixie and the wife are the characters most interesting in themselves. They are described in such opposite terms that one is almost tempted to think of the old Victorian dichotomy of the whore and the angel of the house. In a certain sense, such a symbolic opposition suggests a splitting of character and thus essential identity. The Nixie and the wife are negative images of each other. The wife has long black hair. The Nixie has long hair also, and although its color is not specified, we may imagine from her obvious association with figures like the Lorelei, that her hair is blonde. The Nixie is always described in what are essentially sexual terms. When the miller meets her, she is presumably naked and holds her long hair "off her shoulders with her soft hands." She is described as having a "sweet voice," which she uses to manipulate the miller. Her taking of the huntsman is described as an erotic act: "Scarcely, however, had [the huntsman] dipped [his hands] in than the nixie ascended, smilingly wound her dripping arms around him, and drew him quickly down under the waves." The wife, on the other hand, seems completely a-sexual. She is "a beautiful and true-hearted maiden" when she is married to the hunter, and we are given no reason to suppose that she changes until her husband is taken from her. Though the two "loved each other with all their hearts," they have no children, and one may infer that their domestic paradise is innocent of its sexual component. At this point, the "love" of the huntsman and the "true-hearted maiden" is more akin to *agape* than *eros*.

Indeed, this is the heart of the story. Bruno Bettelheim has argued interestingly that all good fairy tales suggest some moral or emotional development on the parts of their heroes and heroines.³ The development of the huntsman and his wife is a matter of accepting sexual maturity. The huntsman must learn to become a husbandman (suggested by his career change from hunter to shepherd, from predatory male, as it were, to nurturing protector), while the wife must learn to acquire some of the Nixie's arts, in other words to found and embrace the sexual side of her nature. Until they do this, they are embroiled in what is essentially a love triangle. Lacking a sexual component in his marriage, the huntsman, like many others (Whoso list to hunt?), has gone hunting for it and wound up in the clutches of the Nixie. The fact that he is captured while washing his hands after having disemboweled a deer reinforces this notion. The location of such drives in the unconscious is suggested by his visiting the pond, the natural habitat of the Nixie. The wife too has to come to terms with her unconscious sexual drives; she must visit the pond three times to dicker with the Nixie and ultimately learn to survive in some form in the watery element.

The wife's development is the most interesting part of the tale. It begins with her dream of the old woman, suggesting that the route she must take is through the unconscious. From the old woman she learns how to be a woman, and the implication of the dream is that this is achieved only by a fuller understanding of herself. The three gifts she receives from the old woman are fairly commonplace in fairy tales (one thinks, for instance, of the similar gifts in "East of the Sun and West of the Moon"), but they are of interesting symbolic significance in this context. The comb, flute, and spinning wheel suggest three important aspects of a woman's love if not woman herself: sexual attractiveness, a spiritual component, and domestic industry (the spinning wheel, I dare say, was more commonly used in its day by women of a certain class than the microwave oven in our own time). The flute is also of special significance, implying that in order to rise above empty sex love must have a spiritual element, a "primal sympathy" to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth. Indeed, it is this primal sympathy, suggested by the remembered melody of the flute, which brings about the festive *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the conclusion.

The primal sympathy was always there as we know ("they loved each other with all their hearts"), but to achieve a mature and lasting love, the couple must first learn to deal with and domesticate the sexual sides of their natures. They must

³Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

deal with and escape the Nixie. It is interesting that their escape is made possible by their being changed into amphibian creatures. Bettelheim contends persuasively that amphibians in fairy tales are almost always sexual symbols, primitive creatures associated with the primitive drives of the id as well as “our ability to move from a lower to a higher stage of living.”⁴ The transformation to amphibians suggests that the couple are at last able to deal with their sexuality and indeed transcend it. The process is not easy, however, and the husband and wife must spend years as shepherds (a symbolic wandering in the desert) before they recognize each other in terms of mature love. The act of shepherding represents the effort to domesticate their drives, the symbolic husbanding of sexual energy necessary for the social ideal of a family. This is not a limiting of sexual possibility, nor the imposition of unrealistic expectations, but the hope of a healthy society, the hope of renewal and regeneration which the greatest comic art dramatizes and predicts.

⁴Bettelheim 101.

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