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What Makes a Repulsive Frog So Appealing: Memetics and Fairy Tales

ABSTRACT: This essay explains why it is important to explore and to apply theories from the sciences and social sciences, such as biology, memetics, evolutionary psychology, and cultural anthropology, in order to grasp why tales from oral tradition are transformed and stick with us as memes. I have already discussed this topic in my book, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006), and here I endeavor to elaborate some of my theses in more detail, and, I hope, with greater clarity. I use the classical version of the Grimms' "The Frog King" as an example of how a discourse about mating has been disseminated memetically and how this particular fairy tale enables us to grasp the mating strategies that different cultures have developed over several centuries. Folk and fairy tales are part of a civilizing process in all societies and evolve according to basic natural and cultural human needs and dispositions. "The Frog King," more often referred to as "The Frog Prince," provides an interesting case study of how people are attracted to and employ this tale to comment on the strategies of mating.

ALTHOUGH MOST READERS of the Brothers Grimm tale "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich" call this story "The Frog Prince" and do not know much about how the tale evolved from the oral tradition to become a literary classic, almost everyone knows—even those people who have never read the tale—about the aggressive, nasty, disgusting, talking frog, who wants either to sleep with or to be kissed by a beautiful princess.

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And almost everyone knows that the prince/king needs to be magically transformed to get what he wants—even if it means he must sometimes be slammed into a wall or have his head cut off instead of obtaining permission to sleep in the princess's bed or to receive a kiss. The slimy, repulsive reptile is not what he seems to be; his attempts to coerce the princess to have sex with him fail until he shows his true colors. Only when he is handsome and wealthy and suits the mating standards of the princess does he succeed in bedding and wedding her. He then passes the test as an appropriate bridegroom suited for a lovely princess.

“The Frog Prince”—I shall call the tale by its more popular title—is known and beloved throughout the world in many variants. In fact, there are probably thousands of versions in diverse languages; the tale has been adapted and disseminated through poems, illustrations, radio, film, cartoons, photographs, postcards, CDs, DVDs, toys, posters, paintings, clothes, plays, and the Internet.¹ We love the lascivious frog who magically turns into a prince. Perhaps love is too strong a word. Let us just say that we have a fatal attraction to the frog and we don't know why.

What is interesting about “The Frog Prince” and most canonical fairy tales in the Western world is that we have no idea why we care about them, know them so well, are attracted to them, and are apt to pass them on to other people without a second thought. Certain fairy tales have become almost second nature to us and not simply because they have become part of an approved hegemonic canon that reinforces specific preferred values and comportment in a patriarchal culture—something that they indeed do—but rather because they reveal important factors about our mind, memes, and human behavior. In particular, they reveal facts about mating strategies and courting practices that can be traced back hundreds, if not thousands, of years in different societies. I want to try to explain this appeal through the use of memetics, relevance theory, and evolutionary psychology.

First, I should like to comment briefly on the Brothers Grimm and their versions of “The Frog Prince” in order to demonstrate how they artistically shaped, prepared, and stabilized the tale to embody the qualities that made it memetic. By memetic, I am referring to Richard Dawkins' notion of meme, defined as a cultural artifact that acts as a cultural replicator or cultural adaptor that manages to inhabit our brains. It becomes so memorable and relevant that we store it and pass it on to others. A folk or fairy tale that becomes a meme is a communication that indicates something significant about our genetically

and culturally determined behavior and our adaptive interactions with our environment within a historical process. In the case of “The Frog Prince,” the information conveyed by the narrative, symbols, and icons is related to particular cultural transformations that have modified our innate mating behavior. Some memeticists might argue that the tale itself as meme seeks to propel us to disseminate it willy nilly. *But not every folk or fairy tale is a meme or can become a meme.* My definition of a folk or fairy tale as meme departs from the more orthodox and restricted definitions of the term.² I argue that only when a tale makes itself relevant or is made relevant through human agency, and also fulfills certain basic needs, will it become a meme within a pool of memes or a memplex. Once it retains a place within a module of our brain, it provides information vital for adapting to the environment. In the case of “The Frog Prince,” it provides information vital to the process of sexual selection, reproduction, and the evolution of culture.

The Grimm Versions

Although “The Frog Prince” is the most famous variant of a tale type catalogued by folklorists as “ATU 440: Frog King or Iron Henry,” related to the Beast/Bridegroom narratives,³ it is not commonly known that the original title in the Grimms’ 1810 Oelenberg manuscript was “The Princess and the Enchanted Prince.”⁴ Indeed, if I were able to rewrite the title, I would place the emphasis on the princess as protagonist and call the tale, “How and Why a Princess Selected Her Mate.” It will become clear later why I prefer this title. Wilhelm Grimm wrote down this tale after hearing it from one of the female members of the Wild family in Kassel some time between 1808 and 1810. Then, in 1812, when the brothers decided to publish the collection of tales they had gathered and heavily revised, “The Princess and the Enchanted Prince” was given the title “The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich.” It was considered significant enough to lead off their collection and remained in this place through the seven different editions published during their lifetime. Moreover, in 1815 the Brothers even published a variant in the second volume of the first edition, which they called “The Frog Prince.” However, they deleted this variant in the second edition of 1819 because they had incorporated elements of this tale into “The Frog King,” which they retained and kept changing until the final edition of 1857.

“The Frog King” continues to be the first tale one reads in all the

complete collections of the Grimms' tales, including all translations. In many respects, it has seeped into our consciousness as the model Grimm tale in style, form, and content. Wilhelm labored over embellishing this tale for almost forty years. It communicated a moral message that advocated for the restoration of the patriarchal word and world order to which young women were to subscribe. Therefore, this tale deserves special attention, and it is fascinating to compare the text's evolution from its inception in the 1810 manuscript to its final print form in 1857. Let us examine the initial scene of the 1810 manuscript, the 1812 printed text, the 1815 variant, and the 1857 final text:

The Princess and the Enchanted Prince (1810)

The youngest daughter of the king went out into the woods and sat down by a cool well. Soon after she took out a golden ball, and as she was playing with it, the ball suddenly rolled into the well. She watched as it fell deep into the water and stood sadly by the side of the well. All at once a frog stuck its head out of the water and said, "Why are you lamenting so?" (Rölleke 1975:144.)⁵

The Frog King or Iron Henry (1812)

Once upon a time there was a princess who went out into the woods and sat down by a cool well. She had a golden ball that was her most cherished plaything. She threw it high into the air and then would catch it and enjoyed this very much. One time after she threw the ball high into the air, she stretched out her hand and curled her fingers, ready to catch the ball. However, it bounced on the ground right by her and rolled and rolled until it fell into the water.

The princess watched it fall and was horrified. The well was so deep that it was impossible to see the bottom. Then she wept despondently and began to lament: "Oh! If only I had my ball again! I'd give anything to get it, my clothes, my jewels, my pearls. Anything in the world!"

Just as she was grieving, a frog stuck its head out of the water and said, "Princess, why are you grieving so bitterly?" (Panzer n.d.:63)⁶

The Frog Prince (1815)

Once upon a time there was a king who had three daughters. In his courtyard there was a well with beautiful clear water. On a hot summer day the oldest daughter went down into the courtyard and scooped a glass full of water from the well. However, when she held it up before the sun, she noticed that it was musty. Since this was so unusual, she decided to dump the water back into the well. Just as she did this, a frog stirred in the water and stuck its head into the air. Finally, it jumped on to the edge of the well and said to her:

“Whenever you decide to become my sweetie,
I’ll give you clear water, clear as can be.” (Panzer n.d.:398–99)⁷

The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich (1857)

In olden times, when wishing still helped, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, which had seen many things, was always filled with amazement each time it cast its rays upon her face. Now, there was a great dark forest near the king’s castle, and in this forest, beneath an old linden tree, was a well. Whenever the days were very hot, the king’s daughter would go into the forest and sit down by the edge of the cool well. If she became bored, she would take her golden ball, throw it into the air, and catch it. More than anything else she loved playing with this ball.

One day it so happened that the ball did not fall back into the princess’s little hand as she reached out to catch it. Instead, it bounced right by her and rolled straight into the water. The princess followed it with her eyes, but the ball disappeared, and the well was deep, so very deep that she could not see the bottom. She began to cry, and she cried louder and louder, for there was nothing that could comfort her. As she sat there grieving over her loss, a voice called out to her, “What’s the matter, princess? Your tears could move even a stone to pity.” (Zipes 2003:2)

There are several important observations to be made about the Grimms’ editing process, which was largely supervised by Wilhelm Grimm beginning with the second edition of 1819:

1. The tale almost doubled its length by the 1857 edition.
2. The descriptions grow more lavish; the characters are fleshed out; the transitions are more fluent; the style, more florid and artistic.
3. The initial phrase in the final text of 1857 is not “once upon a time,” but “in olden times, when wishing still helped.” This elegant beginning, which introduces us to a princess whose beauty amazes even the sun, indicates how carefully Wilhelm Grimm tailored the tale to meet the expectations of educated, upper-class readers. Accordingly, he de-eroticized the story he heard (and probably other variants as well) so that the princess appears to be a child and the frog never enters her bed. The strong female perspective is modified by the introduction of a severe father figure who represents the moral code of the Grimms.
4. Although the text of 1857 stabilizes the story in the form that Wilhelm Grimm wished to convey, it is not a static text. Rather,

I would call it a flexible text that the one editor was constantly changing in print in order to incorporate other oral and literary versions. Both Wilhelm and Jacob were inclusive and sophisticated editors. They tended to modify the tales that they published to include motifs and components of variants that they collected from friends, colleagues, and informants, and they grew to appreciate the deep historical roots and common features that their tales shared with stories throughout the world. Like other tales in their collection, “The Frog King” has an extraordinary capacity to appeal to and to attract readers and tellers because it was constituted by and cultivated through a constant exchange of oral and literary articulation and communication. Wilhelm’s artistic shaping of the tale enabled it to become more relevant, memorable, and accessible so that it could be more readily disseminated not only in Germany, but also throughout the world. In the hands of the Grimms, “The Frog King” “latched” on to them and their readers and kept insisting that it be replicated in some form or another, adapting to cultural conditions and revealing something about mating customs in a particular society. By “latching” on, I do not mean to imply that the tale actively grabbed hold of and attached itself to a listener or reader. Rather, I am seeking to explain how a cultural artifact may become so attractive in form and relevant in meaning that it captivates and draws the attention of readers and listeners who are already, or may become, predisposed to remembering the tale and retaining it in their minds. Humans have “innate expectations about objects in their environment and the nature of relationships among them” (Henrich and Boyd 2002:112).

5. The power of the tale depends on the human agent’s receptivity to it and use of it in understanding the environment (that is, the social-cultural context) and translating it in other situations. The tale’s dissemination is prompted by the cultural significance it has achieved in a given population or culture. Thus, it may become embedded in the brains of humans as a meme and propel them to spread it. This memetic force, however, cannot drive the spread of the tale unless it benefits humans and their need to adapt to their environment and to select mates in accordance with the evolution of their culture. Although there are many ways to interpret “The Frog Prince” from an evolution-

ary perspective, every narrative opens up a space for contested meanings and ideologies. In my opinion, the tale's "essential" paradigmatic, ostensive, and attractive aspects concern mating strategies and practices. Therefore, I want to concentrate on these aspects in order to understand its persistent appeal to audiences throughout the world up to the present.

The different texts that the Grimms produced all deal with how a young girl, who has probably reached puberty, is ready to marry, that is, to mate with a desirable partner. The golden ball, her most precious possession, is symbolic of her virginity and her physical appeal. Carrying the ball into the woods and temporarily losing it indicates that she is, so to speak, testing the waters of the process of seeking an appropriate mate. She in turn is being tested. When the frog appears, his looks indicate he is not the right mate for her. He desires her because of her youth, beauty, and wealth. Although the princess is repulsed, she feigns acceptance of his proposal and uses him to regain her ball. Abandoned, if not betrayed, the frog knows that the only way to court and bed the princess is through the authority figure of her father. Therefore, he pursues the princess by appealing to the father's courtly "moral" principles. During the period in which the Grimms lived, mating and marriage were not based on love. Women, particularly those from the upper classes, were often forced to marry men for whom they did not care. Generally, the father represented the ultimate authority for patriarchal law and custom. In "The Frog Prince," the frog, perhaps symbolic of an old, ugly aristocrat, has the father's implicit approval. The father wants his daughter to mate with the frog, or at least to treat him with respect. The daughter's resistance is clear and is in great part due to the inclination of a woman to select attractive men with good genes and qualities, who will be able to guarantee that she will be protected and that both she and her offspring will have good genes and a bright future. Hence, it is only when she makes her will known by smashing the frog against the wall that the frog can fulfill her expectations and their mating can be consummated. Her inclination to choose what's best for her leads her to rebel against the moral strictures of her father. In the end, this strange rebellion ensures she selects the mate her father has chosen. The frog had to transform himself to conform in status and appearance in order to gain royal approval for a wedding. Ugly beasts must show that they

know how to groom themselves, or at the very least they must devise a strategy to deceive their future brides and to influence the brides' fathers, if they want to obtain the object of their desire.

Women's and Men's Mating Strategies and Some Scholarly Strategies

As anyone familiar with folklore and fairy-tale scholarship knows, each and every fairy tale can be approached and analyzed from different perspectives. The more classical and canonical a fairy tale becomes, such as "The Frog Prince," and the more it is mediated through oral traditions and cultural institutions, the more it will be dissected and interpreted in different ways. For instance, not only are there numerous references and essays about this famous fairy tale, there are also three scholarly books in German: *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen! Das Grimmsche Märchen Nummer Eins in seinen Wandlungen* (1987) by Lutz Röhrich, *Der Froschkönig . . . und andere Erlösungsbedürftige* (2000) edited by Helga Volkmann and Ulrich Freund, and *Der Froschkönig: Grimms Märchen tiefenpsychologisch gedeutet* (2003) by Eugen Drewermann, as well as an American M. A. thesis, *The Fairy Tale as the Tree of Knowledge: Freudian, Jungian, & Feminist Approaches to "The Frog Prince"* (1984) by Trudy Luebke Cox, not to mention numerous self-help books published in the UK and US. Many of the interpretations discuss the theme of sexual maturation. For instance, Bruno Bettelheim uses a neo-orthodox Freudian approach to explain that,

the awakening to sex is not free of disgust or anxiety, even anger. Anxiety turns into anger and hatred as the princess hurls the frog against the wall. By thus asserting herself and taking risks in doing so—as opposed to her previous trying to weasel out and then simply obeying her father's commands—the princess transcends her anxiety, and hatred changes into love.

In this way the story tells that 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. (1976:228)

Bettelheim's interpretation is overly simplistic and implies that the princess is anxious when she is actually cunning and furious. The princess wants to destroy the frog because he is inadequate and repulsive as a mate. Bettelheim also implies that the princess is unaware of the sexual implications of the frog's proposal and therefore wants nothing to do with him. Her actions prove otherwise. In contrast to Bettelheim, the Jungians dismiss the tale's sexual aspects and celebrate its spiritual

wholeness, although not all agree. J. C. Cooper represents a common Jungian position when he argues that “in *The Frog Prince* the Princess encounters the Frog rising from the watery element, symbolic of the chaotic and unmanifest, but she tries to ignore this dark side by first forgetting, then rejecting it. The King, the masculine solar aspect, makes her keep her rash promise, face and accept the dark side, and convert it into the light in the handsome Prince” (1983:116).

It is clear that the frog prince may symbolize sexual repulsion (although he is pictured as cute by numerous illustrators) and may also represent the dark side of the princess’s life. However, it is doubtful that Freudians and Jungians can help us to grasp why this tale has such a powerful grip on our minds, especially since they want to stabilize its meaning and to impose categories that are so nebulous and misleading that the tale becomes paradigmatic for their theories and detached from its historical and cultural context. I would like to suggest that an evolutionary psychological approach might be able to provide a method for interpreting “The Frog Prince” (and other classical tales) that not only sheds greater light on the conflicts within the Grimms’ text but also enables us to comprehend why and how the tale has retained its relevance throughout the world, has become a meme, and continues to exercise its memetic force today.

In *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, David Buss writes, “it may seem odd to view human mating, romance, sex, and love as inherently strategic. But we never choose mates at random.” In other words, “our mating is strategic” and is “designed to solve particular problems.” Understanding successful mating “requires an analysis of sexual strategies. . . . [as adaptations that] are evolved solutions to the problems posed by survival and reproduction” (2003:5).

Tales of all kinds enable us to comprehend our strategies and to learn how to court and mate. They also help us to adapt and use strategies as cultural and environmental conditions change. Hence, their relevance. If we examine the hundreds of tale types that concern mating, especially those that involve an ugly male desiring a beautiful young woman or an ugly female desiring a handsome man, we can see how closely their narrative plots are predicated on the actual strategies to win mates. The fairy tales that stick in our brains as memes serve to guide us, to provide information about our attractions, and to help us to resolve problems encountered as we proceed to choose a mate under the conditions of a particular civilizing process.⁸

In her provocative and significant book, *What's Love Got to Do with It? The Evolution of Human Mating*, anthropologist Meredith Small states that “evolutionists argue that each sex should be expected to look for partners of high reproductive value,” that is, women who are fertile and men who can provide for the “children they produce” (1995:140). Although Small believes that evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists exaggerate the differences between male and female desires and expectations, most would tend to agree with Elizabeth Cashdan’s argument that women not only have sharp conflicts of interest with men but also with other women. For example, she argues that a “man can enhance his fitness by investing in his children and maximizing his number of mates, but time and resources devoted to one interfere with the other. These trade-offs lead to variation in male strategies [and] the trade-offs [in turn] define the choices facing women” (1996:139). Scholars in many fields (anthropology, history, ethnology, psychology, and biology) have demonstrated that the formation of polygamous, monogamous, matrilineal, matrilineal, patrilineal, and patriarchal societies throughout the world have created diverse conditions under which women and men mate. The choices a woman makes in one society will not necessarily be accepted or tolerated in another. The same applies to men. The first question, however, that men and women have posed consciously and unconsciously throughout the centuries and in all parts of the world is how to devise a strategy for copulation and reproduction, that is, how to mate most effectively, to enjoy the sex, and get the most out of the union, whether it is brief or long-lasting. Since women have to consider the possibility of pregnancy and childbirth, their thinking and mating strategies have tended to be more selective than those of men. As Small so bluntly maintains throughout her book, love has had very little to do with it. Instead, as Buss explains, women are “judicious, prudent, and discerning about the men they consent to mate” (2003:47).

Early Indian, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Arab, and African tales and myths as well as early medieval European stories and documents demonstrate that mating and mating strategies were the subjects of many conversations, stories, and rituals thousands of years ago. There is some evidence that “The Frog Prince” was an ancient tale that may not at first have been related to mating. For instance, in many stories frogs kept popping their heads out of wells, springs, rivers, woods, and so on to announce a forthcoming pregnancy. That is, they were often symbols of fertility. The situation is different in ancient Greece and Rome. In *Fairytales*

in the *Ancient World*, Graham Anderson remarks that there is a reference to “the man who was (once) a frog is now a king” in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, and he also points to another possible source in the myth about the forty-nine obedient daughters of Danaus of Argos (2000:176–77). The classical myths focus more on the power of the gods, seduction, and rape than on strategies of mating. However, courting and mating are important themes as are transformations into and out of animal shapes by both men and women. Often human beings are changed into a lowly animal such as a donkey, as is the case in Apuleius’ second-century work, *The Golden Ass*, which contains the famous tale of “Eros and Psyche.” This, in turn, served as a model for many of the French literary versions of “Beauty and the Beast” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is obvious that “The Frog Prince” is related to all the ancient and modern tales of the beast/bridegroom variety. In an article titled “The Story of ‘The Frog Prince’: Breton Variant, and Some Analogues” (1890), the erudite British folklorist William Alexander Clouston refers to numerous oral and literary versions of the medieval tale “The Knight and the Loathly Lady” that may have contributed to the ultimate formation of the Grimms’ “Frog Prince.” These include Icelandic versions (from the Latin of Torfoeus and from Gríms Saga), Turkish Sanskrit, Kaffir analogues, Arabic variants, Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” and Gower’s “Tale of Florent” in the first book of the *Confessio Amantis*.

Clouston associates “The Frog Prince” with numerous tales that involve a young *man* or knight who must *kiss* a frog in order to attain money or to save his life. He translates M. F. M. Luzel’s Breton variant, “Jannac aux Deux Sous,” as “Penny Jack.” This tale involves a poor orphan who is confronted by an enormous frog at a fountain. Although horrified, Penny Jack agrees to kiss the frog when she promises him a great deal of money. When he kisses her for the third time, she is transformed into a beautiful princess, who had been held under a charm until “a virgin young man should kiss her thrice” (p. 494). However, he must prove that he is worthy of her before she takes him to her father, a powerful king of the East. Therefore, “he was to return to town, and after a year and a day he must come to the fountain at eight in the morning, alone and fasting. She would be there, and would take him to her father. He must kiss no other woman” (p. 494). Of course, he fails to do this three times. The princess disappears, and Jack must endure many trials and hardships before he can marry her. As Clouston points out, this Breton oral tale resembles a variety of beast/bridegroom tales and also tales that do not involve ani-

mal transformation, such as Gower's "Tale of Florent," in which a young knight must solve a riddle—"What do women most desire?"—to avoid death. The knight encounters an ugly woman, who promises to help him only if he weds her. After pondering his situation, he agrees. He learns that women wish to be sovereign over a man's love and have their own will. Once he answers the riddle he returns to the ugly woman because he is a true knight who must keep his word to kiss her and bed her. In so doing, he discovers that she is the beautiful daughter of the King of Sicily who had been transformed into an ugly woman by her stepmother until a good knight gives her his love and allows her mastery over him.

As we can see from Clouston's study, numerous oral and literary tale variants of a frog/animal transformation or analogues of "the loathly lady" circulated in Europe during the late medieval period and Renaissance. At one point, the Grimms' informant, a young woman in the Wild family in Kassel, perhaps Dortchen Wild who later married Wilhelm, heard a version pertaining to "The Frog Prince" and changed it to suit her "desires." Interestingly, the Wilds were a French Huguenot family that had settled in Germany. The frog had symbolically come to represent a male, a phallic figure, who, under pressure by an enchantment or a curse, had to mate in order to be liberated and to regain his human form. Or perhaps the frog had represented a female, who needed a kiss and power over a man in order to regain her human form and be wed. Clearly, the Grimms' informant used tales that stemmed from other European traditions, and it is striking that the storyteller appears to have been familiar with Celtic and Scottish variants.

Lutz Röhrich maintains that the motifs of the tale are ancient. The earliest text in the west can be found in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1979 [c. 1550]), a political and literary work by Robert Wedderburn, in which a young lady is sent by her stepmother to the well at the world's end. A frog appears at the well and allows her to draw water only if she will marry him. If she doesn't, he threatens to tear her to pieces. Of course she accepts and later the frog appears at her door and demands:

Open the door, my hinny, my hart,
 Open the door, mine ain wee thing:
 And mind the words that you and I spak
 Down in the meadow, at the well-spring! (1987:23)⁹

This tale was well-known and widely disseminated in Scotland and England until the end of the nineteenth century, as the works of James Orchard

Halliwell-Phillipps (1849), J. F. Campbell (1890), and Joseph Jacobs (1890) reveal. Toward the end of Jacobs' popular version, the frog says,

Go with me to bed, my hinny, my heart,
Go with me to bed, my own darling;
Mind you the words you spake to me,
Down by the cold well, so weary. (2002:151)

And the narrator continues: "But that the girl wouldn't do, till her stepmother said: 'Do what you promised, girl; girls must keep their promises. Do what you're bid, or out you go, you and your froggie'" (p. 153). The girl lets the frog sleep in her bed but keeps her distance. In the morning the frog asks her to chop off his head. She hesitates, but since he is so persistent, she complies. Of course he turns into a prince who carries her off to his castle and marries her.

What is significant about the Scottish and English versions and the Grimms' later version is that the Brothers Grimm evidently brought together all the characters, motifs, and the topic of mating in such an efficient and aesthetically pleasing manner that from this written version the tale stuck in the minds of many people and spread in many different versions in Europe and elsewhere throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. The plot did not always remain the same, and the Grimms' text may not have served as the basis for the rewriting or re-telling of each new variant. For instance, in the first English translation of the Grimms' version in 1823, Edgar Taylor may have used two variants. He changed the title to "The Frog Prince" and the princess allows the frog to sleep in her bed three times. On the third occasion, he becomes a prince and weds the princess. The motif of the frog that must sleep in the princess's bed three times was common in European and American literature throughout the nineteenth century and can even be found in the American writer/illustrator Wanda Gág's 1936 adaptation *Tales from Grimm*. In other European and Asian tales the frog asks to have his skin cut off and burned so that he can become a prince. Sometimes his head must be chopped off, as was common in the Scottish versions. In almost all the tales, he must be transformed either by the princess's act of throwing him against a wall or by gaining permission to sleep in the princess's bed. Rarely, if ever, does a kiss change the frog into a prince in the nineteenth-century versions. Hans-Jörg Uther (2008:3) maintains that the kiss began appearing at the end of the nineteenth century, but he does not provide documentation. There

is plenty of evidence, however, that in the tales in which a princess is the frog the male must often kiss and bed the frog (loathly woman) to transform her. Significantly, the male, whether frog or human, must change or pass trials to suit the taste and to meet the mating standards of a young woman. Often the young woman goes to a well to draw water and loses a ring in the water. She is not a princess nor is the frog an enchanted prince. But both are brought together in a mating game and must devise strategies to obtain what they want or to avoid what they do not want. Whatever the variant or outcome may be, "The Frog Prince" has become relevant as a communication and is disseminated widely because it enables people to reflect upon the possibilities and hazards of mating and to draw their own conclusions. Although the Grimms sought to moralize mating, especially with the addition of the faithful servant at the end, their tale (which is not *theirtale per se*) undercut their intentions, because love, fidelity, and morality have little to do with mating. Their protagonist, the young princess, makes this clear by rejecting her father's final command and the advances of the frog. Sexual choice, governed in large part by desire and selection for adaptation, is key to understanding how and why we mate. For evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller, it is fundamental to grasping why sexual choice is also a driving force in the mind's evolution. His thought-provoking book, *The Mating Mind*, argues that we have inherited our sexual taste from "our own ancestors [who chose] their sexual partners as sensibly as they could [and] we are the outcome of their million-year long genetic engineering experiment in which their sexual choices did the genetic engineering" (2000:10). Historically and scientifically, Miller traces how the growth of the brain size of the human species and the origination of language opened the way for humans to devise strategies of sexual choice in mating that have affected the evolution of the mind. In his view, the species set itself "a strange new game of reproduction. They started selecting one another for their brains. . . . The intellectual and technical achievements of our species in the last few thousand years depend on mental capacities and motivations originally shaped by sexual selection" (p. 210).

What becomes evident in Miller's analysis is that the manner in which men compete for women and women compete for men has fostered great and diverse innovations in the arts, sciences, and technology. This variety of cultural transformations, in turn, may have contributed to biological adaptations and affected the way we transmit cultural artifacts with our brains.

Relevance Theory, Memetics, Evolutionary Psychology

But what does the brain and evolutionary psychology have to do with “The Frog Prince” and the thousands of variants connected to mating? In my recent book *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (2006), I endeavored to demonstrate how relevance theory, memetics, and evolutionary psychology may help us to understand why *certain* fairy tales become so deeply embedded in our minds and culture that we tend to spread them almost as if they were viruses. Some scientists and social scientists liken these tales to genes and call them memes, following a notion first proposed by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*.¹⁰ Although many critics have attacked and mocked the notion of meme and memetics—some have even urged Dawkins to abandon the term¹¹—*meme* has spread memetically throughout the world and is now recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as well as many others. The term meme itself has become memetic and has replicated itself in hundreds if not hundreds of thousands of ways. The thought-provoking philosopher Daniel Dennett has used memetics to explain religion as a natural phenomenon in his recent book, *Breaking the Spell* (2006). In his article in *The Encyclopedia of Evolution* (2002), he argues that memes must be understood as coded messages of information formed by neurons that are passed from person to person in different shapes. “Memes, cultural recipes, similarly depend on one physical medium or another for their continued existence (they aren’t magic), but they can leap around from medium to medium, being translated from language to language, from language to diagram, from diagram to rehearsed practice, and so forth” (2002:350).

Dawkins’ proposal that most any cultural artifact can become a meme implied that it would be scientifically impossible to describe a meme and its functions. Dennett asks the rhetorical question “just how big or small can a meme be?” He then answers his own question by stating: “a single musical tone is not a meme, but a memorable melody is. Is a symphony a single meme or is it a system of memes? A parallel question can be asked about genes, of course. No single nucleotide or codon is a gene. How many notes or letters or codons does it take? The answer in both cases tolerates blurred boundaries: a meme, or a gene, must be large enough to carry information worth copying” (2002:353).

What is worth copying, that is, what is valuable, depends on individual transmitters and cultural conditions, even if the meme is persistent and

acts selfishly to replicate itself no matter what information it is carrying. What many theoreticians and critics of memetics sometimes forget is that a meme is *not* eternal and that it cannot endure outside systems of cultural evolution. As we shall also see, a meme does not replicate itself with fidelity or determine the form and contents of its variant or the version produced by its individual carrier. It will not be perpetuated unless it enables adaptation to a changing environment. Furthermore, its changes in replication are reflective of relative transformation in the environment. Memes change, shape shift, and have their own specific evolutionary history, as can be seen clearly in the evolution of certain folk and fairy tales. But there are core qualities in style, plot, and content that are retained and distinguish it from other memes. Through distinction and selection, people as agents activate a particular meme as story to enable them to relate to a particular situation.

In his insightful essay, "The Gene Meme," biologist David Haig clarifies Dawkins' notion of gene and meme and demonstrates precisely why Dawkins' analogy between gene and meme can help us to grasp certain principles of cultural evolution. He describes the nature of memetic transmissions in terms of:

communication acts including sounds, texts, actions, and artifacts [and in terms of the insights we gain] when we register a communication act [and integrate its content] into our private set of concepts, and when we emit communication acts. Introspection may be an unreliable guide because unconscious aspects of our motivations are hidden and our conscious perceptions may be partial, inaccurate, and misleading. Communication acts appear closer to the concept of genotype (things transmitted) whereas the conscious and unconscious effects of these acts on our internal state appear closer to phenotype (effects that influence what is transmitted). In the history of genetics, the phenotype was apparent and the genotype hidden. But this relation seems to be reversed for memetics. Memes are observed, rather than inferred from their effects, whereas their effects are in large part hidden. (2006:61–62)

In the case of folk and fairy tales, memes are easily observed in the communicative act between storyteller and listener. Moreover, they assume material form in the shape of texts in printed books, plays, operas, toys, songs, music, clothes, paintings, films, hypertexts on internet sites, advertisements, greeting cards, and so on. "The Frog Prince," for instance, has been replicated in all these material forms and others, implying different meanings and causing diverse effects,

which not only make the tale memorable, but also open up a discourse on modes of mating and topics connected to mating. Here the analogy with the gene is significant. As Haig notes,

The gene has a material definition in terms of a DNA sequence that maintains an uninterrupted physical integrity in its transmission from generation to generation. Memes also have a physical form in their transmission from one individual to another, sometimes as sound vibrations, or text on paper, or electronic signals relayed through a modem. When these 'outward' forms of a meme are perceived, they elicit changes in a nervous system that constitutes the meme's 'cryptic' form. The material basis of the cryptic form is probably unique to each nervous system colonized by the meme. Memetic replication, then, has nothing like the elegant simplicity of the double helix. (p. 61)

Since it is not entirely clear how a fairy tale as meme functions within the brain and nervous system, that is, whether there is a special module or groups of modules that register the communication and facilitate its replication, it is difficult to postulate how a specific fairy tale maintains its integrity and guarantees that it will be transmitted from one person to another within the conditions of cultural evolution. Hence, its cryptic nature. However, other theories can be brought to bear and I should like to discuss some of the significant ones to illustrate the possible advantages that an evolutionary approach to folk and fairy tales may offer in helping us to understand how tales are disseminated and why certain, and only certain, tales become memes.

For the past thirty to forty years, biologists, geneticists, ethnologists, evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists, and other scientists have increasingly turned their attention to culture and have made important scientific contributions to our comprehension of how culture evolves. For instance, in the 1970s the eminent Italian biologist Luigi Luca Cavalli Sforza began publishing studies with Marcus Feldman, in relation to genetic evolution, on the joint transmission, dependent on two phases of communication, of what he called cultural characters (his term for memes) in populations. In his most recent book, *L'evoluzione della cultura* (2004), he explained:

With regard to cultural transmission, the first phase is mutation, or transformation that brings about the creation of a new idea. This phase is the phase of creation or invention. If new ideas are not created, there is also the possibility of another kind of mutation—the loss of an idea, or a custom.

The innovation won't be transmitted unless there is a desire to teach

it, that is, to disseminate it and learn it. One could say that the transmission passes through two phases: the communication of information, of an idea, by a teacher (transmitter) to a student (transmittee), and the comprehension and acquisition of the idea. This is the act of reproduction of the idea that happens when the idea passes from one brain to another. Assuming that we consider such an act analogical to the generation of a child, we can speak about the self-reproduction (*autoriproduzione*) of the idea. It is clear that the mechanisms are profoundly different in biology and in culture, but the result is essentially the same. A DNA can generate many copies of itself that lodge (live) among bodies of different individuals, and the idea can generate many copies of itself in other brains. Without a doubt we are dealing with self-reproduction also in the case of the idea, and it is just as clear that ideas have the possibility of mutation. It is necessary to understand the mutation in a more general sense in so far as there is the possibility for completely new ideas to emerge like a generation from nothing, a true creation. Ideas (even if we do not know exactly what they are) are material objects inasmuch as they require material bodies and brains in which they are produced for the first time and reproduced in the process of transmission: like DNA they are material objects, even if they are profoundly different from DNA. (2004:68)

Another renowned biologist, Edward Wilson, published an important book, *Consilience Theory: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), in which he demonstrated how seemingly disparate phenomena in the world are connected. The French ethnologist Dan Sperber coined the terms mental representation and public representation to explain how ideas were fostered and disseminated in material culture in his book *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (1996). In short, a host of studies, books, and essays have endeavored to clarify the relationship between genetic and cultural evolution.

One of the more recent and most stimulating books to explore the relationship between culture and nature is *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (2005) by Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd.¹² They define culture as information capable of affecting behavior, acquired “through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission. By information we mean any kind of mental state, conscious or not, that is acquired or modified by social learning and affects behavior” (p. 5). Instead of using the term “meme,” “cultural character,” or “mental representation” to define the “bits” of information disseminated by humans to form culture, they use the term “cultural variant,”¹³ which is learned and spread in distinct

population groups and which derives from information stored in human brains (p. 5):

Our definition is rooted in the conviction that most cultural variation is caused by information stored in human brains—information that got into those brains by learning from others. People in culturally distinct groups behave differently, mostly because they have acquired different skills, beliefs, and values, and these differences persist because the people of one generation acquire their beliefs and attitudes from those around them. (p. 5–6)

Richerson and Boyd do not dismiss the notion of meme; instead, they pose a strict definition:

population thinking that does not require cultural information takes the form of *memes* [as] discrete, faithfully replicating genelike bits of information. . . . Culture is interesting and important because its evolutionary behavior is distinctly different from that of genes. For example, we will argue that the human cultural system arose as an adaptation because it can evolve fancy adaptations to changing environments rather more swiftly than is possible by genes alone. Culture would never have evolved unless it could do things that genes can't! (p. 6–7)

Richerson and Boyd thus develop a theory of co-evolution of cultural variants and genes to explain how human behavior is determined by a historically evolved biological process and a historical-social process of dissemination of cultural variants. Most of their examples are convincing, and their claims are modest. They freely admit that there is still much that we do not understand about how cultural variants operate, but that “thinking about culture using Darwinian tools opens many new avenues for investigation” and even, the possibility of a qualitative ethnography. “We need to characterize cultural variation in the same quantitative detail as genetic variation. Recent work in cross-cultural psychology and in the use of economic games to investigate the norms of fairness cross-culturally will open a new era of quantitative ethnography that will revolutionize our understanding of human behavioral variation” (p. 250–51).

In fact, the problem that confronts any theory of cultural evolution related to genetic evolution or based on a co-evolution of culture and genetics is that we know very little about how the brain and language operate. In addition, we must take into consideration technologically advanced inventions in mass media along with globalization processes that have transformed particular cultural variants into trans-cultural

variants. Finally, we must be able to explain why cultural variants stick in diverse cultures, especially if they are fomented and reinforced by culture industries and political and religious institutions. We must also decide whether a term such as meme should be defined in such narrow terms as Richerson and Boyd propose, for nothing can be copied or replicated with complete fidelity or always remain discrete. In fact, Dawkins maintained that replication does not entail fidelity. Memes are culturally varied and can be transformed by human carriers precisely because they enable adaptation to the social and natural environment. But it is too early to determine scientifically just how a meme operates until we learn much more about how the brain functions.

What we can continue to do is to bring together research in the humanities and natural sciences so that we have a clearer picture of how culture evolves and what role folklore and fairy tales play in this evolution. Here I believe the work of Deirdre Wilson (1995) and Dan Sperber (1996) can help us further understand how mental representations or cultural variants might function in language and how particular mental representations (cultural variants) might successfully be replicated in some kind of memetic process. Using concepts from cognitive linguistics, Wilson and Sperber state that when people speak and want to communicate, their brains function as efficiently as possible to maximize the relevance of an utterance and to convey a presumption of its optimal relevance. The brain takes inputs from internal and external sources to form a communication that becomes ostensive, that is, draws attention to whatever the transmitter wants to communicate. The inferred meaning, its intention, must be grasped on some level in order for the communication to be successful. This is true of any folk or fairy tale. Despite the possible ambivalence of meaning, there is something implied in any folk or fairy tale. In my opinion, it is only because the tale makes itself relevant as a meme, or has been made relevant by human speakers in order to enable them to adapt to their environments and cultural communities as well as to provide guidance for sexual selection, that it sticks in brains and is replicated in manifold ways. Without being made relevant, a meme cannot successfully propagate itself over a long period of time. Like a gene, it may cooperate with other memes in order to maintain itself successfully and be passed on. For example, "The Frog Prince" is a specific kind of Beast-Bridegroom tale type and cooperates with similar type tales (cultural variants) to form a memplex. Within this memplex, it is often chosen over others to be disseminated as a meme in a particular social-cultural context.

If the actions of individuals depend to a great extent on their selfish genes, as Dawkins has demonstrated, human beings are bound to produce and to be attracted to memes that will assist them in reproducing their genes and particular aspects of their culture. As forms of communication, tales have evolved out of the basic needs of human beings. They contain vital information for the reproduction and adaptation of the human species. Tales have been generated out of the experiences that people have gathered over hundreds of thousands of years—experiences that have led not only to the gradual transformation of genes, genotypes, and phenotypes but also to the formation of culture. Since information about how we mate, why we mate, and what makes us attractive is vital for both genders, it is not by chance that hundreds of thousands if not millions of tales as communications about mating have been produced ever since language came into being. What is interesting in the development of folklore and storytelling is that specific types of tales that address specific areas of human behavior began to develop and to evolve as a discourse at a certain point in history. These tales were passed on in many different forms. In the modern era, that is, in the period since the revolutionary invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, certain tales that had already circulated widely became stabilized *and* flexible in print. The printing press facilitated their replication. The printed text became a reference point that, though not always copied with fidelity, was one means that enabled tales, relevant for the adaptation and propagation of the species, to be spread. In the process, mating tales evolved and continue to evolve with “The Frog Prince” as meme playing a significant role in the evolution of culture, including specific cultures and globalized culture. “The Frog Prince” has never remained the same but evokes similar responses and associations in people disposed to react to its communication about mating. The communication will never be blandly or passively accepted and may be a debatable communication, but it does say something important about the human adaptation of mating strategies in a social-cultural context.

The Frog Prince in Contemporary Culture

Those folk and fairy tales about mating that become memetic initiate and constitute a discourse on bodies through bodies about a particular behavior in a setting that provides information about natural and cultural selection. The “Frog Prince” discourse that is conveyed me-

metically will not draw a response from listeners/readers/spectators unless its relative meaning about sexual selection is made relevant in a socio-historical context. As a meme, "The Frog Prince" guarantees its preservation and replication on two levels: 1) its most generic text, the 1857 version by the Brothers Grimm, continues to be retold, reprinted, and re-presented in images so that it is not forgotten, emphasizing a basic genetic disposition of men and women who seek to further the propagation of their own genes as best they can; 2) the thousands of variants that are generated in specific cultural discourses as cultural artifacts about the strange courtship between the repulsive frog prince and the reluctant princess communicate information about alternations (and alternatives) even as they recall the generic text connected to the historical evolution of psychology and culture. It is possible to argue that the memetic significance of particular fairy tales is so germane to the historical evolution of the human species in every culture in which it exists that, as meme, it has employed (and been employed in) every possible means of mass communication in order to disseminate information about mating. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that people themselves, sensing that their ancestors were the originators of this mental representation thousands of years ago, have responded by using every possible means of mass communication to elaborate, embellish, critique, parody, and expand the information.

To show how "The Frog Prince" continues to be preserved and disseminated in contemporary culture, I want to discuss several diverse examples in literature and film. These examples will be taken largely from cultural artifacts in the Anglo-American tradition, primarily books and stories, but also some films disseminated in the US and UK during the last thirty years. It should be noted that "The Frog Prince" as meme *cannot* be found in every culture in the world and thus is culturally bound to distinct populations. However, I suspect that every culture possesses a particular narrative discourse about courtship, sexual preference, and mating. For instance, most of the major cultures in the world have beast-bridegroom tale types. With regard to "The Frog Prince," we shall see that the implicit sexual connotations of the tale that was de-eroticized and sanitized for family reading in the Grimms' version have been altered to meet certain socially coded expectations of readers/listeners/viewers.

Although there is no clear demarcation to indicate when major shifts occurred in the discursive tradition of "The Frog Prince"—for instance, it is not clear when and why the kiss replaced the slam against the wall

or the sleeping-together-in-bed motifs—certain transformations in the variants suggest that how we select our mates has significantly changed since the rise of the feminist movement in the late 1960s, if not before. For example, an extraordinary proliferation of self-help books during the past thirty or forty years reflects how “The Frog Prince” continues to play a central role in thinking about mating strategies. The titles alone indicate the tale’s memetic significance: Joanne Vickers and Barbara Thomas, *No More Frogs, No More Princes: Women Making Creative Choices at Midlife* (1993), Nailah Shami, *Do Not Talk to, Touch, Marry, or Otherwise Fiddle with Frogs: How to Find Prince Charming by Finding Yourself* (2001), Michael McGahey, *Why Kiss a Frog? Your Prince Is Out There! Every Woman’s Complete Guide to Friends, Lovers, and the Search for Her Perfect Partner!* (2002), Kathleen Hardaway, *I Kissed a Lot of Frogs: But the Prince Hasn’t Come* (2002), and Lydia Lambert, *Kissing Frogs: The Path to a Prince* (2005). Most of these books are written from a feminist viewpoint that points out how women have been deceived by “charming princes” and argues that they must become more independent of men and a system of patriarchy. There is an explicit admission that the “The Frog Prince” meme is invoked in these works in order to comment on the inadequacy of the approved mating standards. There are, however, some self-help books, such as Geoff Dench’s *The Frog, the Prince & the Problem of Men* (1994), which use “The Frog Prince” to argue that feminism has “spawned a frog culture in which the sexes are polarising, and men are becoming increasingly marginal as they revert to a wild state” (p. 251). Whether or not one agrees with Dench, it is clear that feminism has changed relations between the sexes. In the last forty years most poems, stories, novels, and films have either eliminated or minimized the role of the father as an authority figure in sexual selection. The young woman, who is no longer a princess, is responsible for her choice. Not every frog is a prince, nor are good looks the most compelling attribute for choosing a mate. And in the case of enchanted frogs, they are not always satisfied with alluring princesses.

Books produced for children up through the early teenage years tend to eliminate or to deal in a comic fashion with the sexual elements in the motif of mating with a frog. They indicate that significant rules and customs of courting and mating have either been totally reformed or are being questioned. For instance, several picture books depict a frog who refuses to become a prince or prefers to remain a frog rather than to court a princess. In *The Strange Story of the Frog Who Became a Prince* (1971) by Elinor Lander Horowitz, a wicked witch transforms a

handsome frog into a prince. When he wishes to be the frog he was, she forgets the magic spell and transforms him into many comical creatures before she finally undoes the harm she has caused. In A. Vesey's *The Princess and the Frog* (1985), after the princess returns home and tells her mother that a frog, who retrieved her golden ball from a pond, has followed her, the queen tells her not to worry, because he will turn into a prince. The frog, who is obnoxious, bossy, and leads a life of luxury in the castle, keeps annoying the princess, who complains to her mother. Once again the queen tells her not to worry and to kiss the frog. When the princess does this he does not turn into a prince. More angry than ever, the princess demands an explanation and the frog replies that he never pretended to be a prince. In fact, he is married with children and intends to bring his entire frog family to the palace to enjoy the luxuries of life. In *A Frog Prince* (1989) by Alix Berenzy, the frog realizes that he is no match for the princess who throws him into a corner and tells him to look at his ugly face in the mirror. When he does so, he sees nothing wrong and the moon tells him:

Little green Frog alone at night,
 Beauty is in the Beholder's sight.
 Follow the Sun, then follow me,
 To lands beyond, across the sea.
 In another kingdom you shall find
 A true princess of a different kind. (1989:6)

Indeed, in a mock version of a knight's voyage, he travels to another kingdom to find a sleeping frog princess, whom he awakens with a kiss and marries. In *The Frog Prince Continued* (1991), Jon Scieszka portrays the prince and princess after their marriage and describes their unhappiness because the princess cannot tolerate the fact that the prince continues to behave like a frog. Consequently, the frog runs away and tries to find happiness in the woods. After three encounters with three different witches, none of whose magic helps him, he returns home because he misses his wife. Ironically, when he kisses her they both turn into frogs and hop off to live happily ever after. In *The Horned Toad Prince* (2000) by Jackie Mims Hopkins, a feisty cowgirl named Reba Jo strikes a bargain with a horned toad after she loses her sombrero in a well. Later, when she tries to break the bargain, her father compels her to live up to it. So, she kisses the toad, and he changes into Prince Maxmillian José Diego López de España. He then leaves her in the lurch because he wants his freedom more than he wants a wife.

In each of these picture books clever twists indicate that the male frog, as the major protagonist, is more interested in finding his identity and living autonomously than he is in pleasing a princess. Her wealth, status, and beauty are not sufficient reasons for him to want to bed or marry the princess. In some longer novellas for young readers there is often a gender shift. For instance, in Ellen Conford's *The Frog Princess of Pelham* (1997), a lonely rich girl named Chandler, living in a New York suburb, is transformed into a frog when Danny, the most popular boy in her school, kisses her to win a bet. Feeling responsible, Danny tries to take care of her until the army learns about the talking frog. When it appears that Danny will be arrested for not revealing the secret of the talking frog, Chandler intercedes, with a brave gesture that brings about the re-transformation of the frog princess into a young girl. Chandler and Danny remain friends and sort out their personal difficulties. In E. D. Baker's *The Frog Princess* (2002), the princess Emeralda runs off into the forest to avoid spending time with Prince Jorge, whom her mother hopes she will marry. In the woods she encounters a frog named Prince Eadric. When she kisses him, she herself is turned into a frog. Together the princess and prince survive all sorts of adventures until they learn how they have both been cursed. Fortunately, a fairy enables them to return to their human forms and Emeralda decides that the struggles Eadric and she have gone through have brought them together. She will marry him instead of Prince Jorge. Finally, in Patricia Harrison Easton's *Davey's Blue-Eyed Frog* (2003), a young boy discovers a talking frog named Amelia in a pond. She tries to convince him that she needs a kiss before two cycles of the moon pass to turn her back into her human form. He, however, wants to show her off to his friends and refuses to kiss her. After taking her home, he must protect her from his little brother Kevin and other people as well. In the end he resolves her dilemma.

In each one of these novels for young readers, the father, who generally sets the standard for morality, is absent, and the focus is less on mating than on establishing one's identity. "The Frog King" becomes an extended adventure story in which a young girl must demonstrate that she is able to make her own decisions. The emphasis on adventure and tests is most clear in three humorous novels published by Donna Jo Napoli: *The Prince of the Pond: Otherwise Known as De Fawg Pin* (1992), *Jimmy, the Pickpocket of the Palace* (1995), and *Gracie, the Pixie of the Puddle* (2004). This trilogy records the vicissitudes of two generations of frog/humans. The first novel lays the groundwork for all the others. Told

from the perspective of Jade, a female frog, this adventure involves a natural mating between Jade and the fawg pin (frog prince), who was once a human prince and had been transformed into a frog by a hag. Most of the novel concerns how Pin must accustom himself to becoming a frog and how he and Jade fall in love and have fifty froglets. Their favorite son, Jimmy, is threatened by the hag, and Pin must save him. In the course of the action, Pin is accidentally kissed by a princess and turns back into a naked prince. Jade is confused and takes her froglets back to the pond, while the prince waits for the princess to bring him clothes. The second novel is told from the perspective of the son Jimmy, who discovers that his father is now a human prince. He travels to the palace and after he also becomes human and helps to defeat the hag again, he returns to the pond as a frog. In the last novel, the narrative is told from the perspective of the frog Gracie, who is in love with Jimmy and does not believe that he is the human prince's son. When Jimmy learns that the evil hag is about to destroy all the frogs in the pond, he travels to retrieve the magic ring that his father has kept, for it will help Jimmy and the other frogs to defeat the hag. Gracie follows him because she wants to win his love. After many strange encounters that involve the hag becoming a crocodile, Jimmy turns human again and manages to retrieve the ring. But he must decide whether he will return to the pond as a frog with Gracie or stay human and live with his father. In the end, he wishes to be with Gracie and, at the same time, causes the hag to be turned into a toad.

While Napoli's novels focus on the comic adventures of Pin and his son Jimmy and how they discover their true identities, they are also about mating and fidelity. Pin, though his nature is different from Jade's, looks after her and their family, just as Jimmy promises to do with Gracie. The difference is that Jimmy, born a frog, will stay in a pond with Gracie. Jade comes to realize that Pin will never return and moves on with another mate. Whether frog or human, it is through common experiences and mutual support that the couples learn to love one another and choose each other as mates. Once again, fathers are absent, and there is no pressure placed to marry according to class or prestige.

In the novels and stories published for an adult reading audience, the central focus tends to be on the mating process, the false promises generated by the classical story of the frog prince by the Brothers Grimm, and on marriage. Stephen Mitchell's *The Frog Prince: A Fairy Tale for Consenting Adults* (1999) is more an ironical philosophical meditation

on mating than a novel. The frog employs his great rhetorical skills and intellect to convince a proud princess that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, while she begs him to trust her as she throws him against the wall so that he can become human. At the end, Mitchell writes,

Researchers recently studied a number of ex-frogs who are now handsome, happily married princes (a necessarily small number since, as the philosopher says, all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare). These ex-frogs were unanimous in their accounts. The great transformation they said, had three requirements: a sustained not-knowing, the willingness to be thrown against a wall, and, always the love of a visionary woman. And a fourth requirement: patience. Yes, an enormous patience, since the interval between the being-thrown and the actual impact may last for a decade or more. (p. 184–85)

The tone is much different in Nancy Springer's *Fairy Peril* (1996), a mock comic feminist novel about Buffy Murphy, a forty-year-old storyteller, who has gone to pieces after being scorned and divorced by her husband. She finds a frog in a forest, but refuses to kiss it, even when he declares he is a prince named Adamus d'Aurca. Buffy explodes:

"What the hell do I need a prince for?" Men. They all seemed to assume they were God's gift. "I just got rid of one dickheaded male. I don't need another one." Especially as she'd reached a point in her life where celibacy was far preferable to the terror of getting pregnant. "Anyway, what on earth do you think you're prince of? England? Monaco? Those slots are taken." (p. 6)

Buffy tries to keep the talking frog as a pet to help her with her storytelling and does not trust the manner in which the frog tries to court her. Then, her sixteen-year-old daughter, Emily, falls for the frog and kisses him, turning him into a gorgeous young man. Buffy's main task then becomes to save her daughter, who has escaped with the prince to a shopping mall. At times, the mall turns into the realm of Fairy Peril. In the end, Buffy manages to save both the prince and Emily. Ironically, when she develops compassion for the prince and kisses him, he turns into a teenager named Adam, who heads west to find himself. At the same time, Buffy appears to be calm and content, for she apparently has learned to overcome her distaste for frogs and deal with her illusions and delusions. Springer's focus is more on a dowdy divorced woman who discovers that the happily ever after story of "The Frog Prince" is an illusion, and that divorce, which smashed that illusion, requires that she learn to stand on her own two feet and to tell her own story.

Recently, Jane Porter has written a similar (but much more trite) novel, *The Frog Prince* (2005), about a twenty-five-year-old woman named Holly Bishop, who is about to get divorced after one year of marriage. Brought up on fairy tales, Holly tries to get over their deceptive messages as she begins the dating game. At the end of this predictable, poorly written work, she declares that “getting married and divorced in a year was pretty damn awful, but I have to say, kissing that toad two years ago probably saved my life. I wouldn’t be where I am today if I hadn’t discovered that all the magic I ever wanted is right inside me. I *am* a princess. I’m the Frog Princess” (p. 371).

Many of the contemporary stories and cartoons for adults concern a false expectation based on the fact that the classical tale by the Brothers Grimm has become memetic: the frog does not change into a charming prince but rather changes into an ugly toad; he is simply not the right choice for the princess. Marriage is a disaster. The woman is generally conned into believing that the fairy tale is a true story and that her happiness depends on kissing the frog.

This feminist critique of “The Frog Prince” is developed in a more nuanced way in some of the films adapted from the Grimms’ text or from memories of the text. For instance, Jim Henson’s *Tales from Muppetland: The Frog Prince* (1972) and Eric Idle’s “The Tale of the Frog Prince” (1982), produced by Shelley Duvall’s *Faerie Tale Theatre*, both mock the king and queen who want to arrange a marriage for their daughter. In contrast, one of the first films made by Tom Davenport (1981), who has produced numerous Appalachian versions of the Grimms’ tales, follows the traditional plot and essentially reinforces its patriarchal tendencies. The sexual drives of prince and frog are downplayed, and the father’s authority governs the actions of the princess. However, sexuality is at the heart of David Kaplan’s *The Frog King* (1994), a short black and white experimental film in which the teenage princess is obviously disgusted by the phallic appearance of the frog. Her decrepit parents, a peasant couple, old enough to be her grandparents, compel her to comply with the frog’s desires. Kaplan ends his film with an ironic shot of the parents, who are content that their daughter is mating with the frog turned prince.

Perhaps the most interesting cinematic depiction of “The Frog Prince,” which explores different kinds of courting and mating, is the made-for-TV film, *Prince Charming* (2001), directed by Allan Arkush. The setting is England in 1500 and young Prince John of Arkan is obliged to marry a princess from another realm to end years of the Tulip Wars. How-

ever, Prince John cannot keep his sword in his pants and is constantly rescuing damsels in distress only to seduce them. In fact, he copulates in a church tower with a luscious peasant woman on the day of his wedding. For this mistake he and his squire are transformed into frogs for eternity unless the prince can find a princess who will kiss him. Once he is transformed into a prince, however, he has five days to marry the princess and must remain true to her. Five hundred years pass and Sir John and his squire are accidentally picked up as frogs by an American in England and transported to New York City. By chance, they make their home in Central Park, which they consider a forest. Prince John is accidentally kissed by a vain actress playing different aristocratic roles in Shakespeare in the Park. He and the squire reassume their natural forms and John soon falls in love with a young woman named Kate, who drives a horse and buggy in Central Park. It is only by demonstrating that he can keep his sword in his pants and be true to Kate that John, despite the curse, can retain his human shape.

All kinds of contemporary courting and mating practices are portrayed in this sentimental film enlivened by the comic situations. The squire mates with a woman named Serena, the actress's assistant, because of her interest in magic. The actress, married three times, wants the director of Shakespeare in the Park to marry her, while she competes for him with a younger actress. Kate must be convinced that Prince John is not a con man because she has recently been dumped by a cad. None of the characters follow rules. Instead, their natural inclinations and mental deliberations determine their love interests and strategies, although it is clear that the men, especially Prince John and the director, are more apt to spread their sperm indiscriminately and perhaps have other relationships than the "princesses" they choose to fulfill their lives. Apparently, their genes will sway their actions.

The messages of all of these diverse cultural artifacts are dependent on some knowledge of "The Frog Prince," whether it be through the text by the Brothers Grimm, or from word of mouth, hearsay, advertisement, illustration, cartoon, or poster. Whatever the case may be, in most Western societies "The Frog Prince" exists as meme in millions of brains. Whether it will endure is difficult to say, but as long as men and women, whether heterosexual or homosexual, develop mating strategies that stem from their natural dispositions and mental capacities to make sexual choices influenced by changing social codes, "The Frog Prince" will play a role in the discourse about mating. Indeed, as

meme, we are prone to use it as a social symbolic act that enables us to understand the ramifications of decisions we seem to make freely and decisions that are made for us.

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Notes

1. For a thorough account of the different ways that the tale has been disseminated, including many different scholarly interpretations, see Gail de Vos and Anna E. Altmann, "The Frog King or Iron Henry," in *New Tales for Old: Folktales as Literary Fictions for Young Adults* (Englewood, Col.: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), 77–107.

2. There are now a few hundred or more scholarly endeavors to explain what a meme is. Two of the more stimulating and "orthodox" approaches are Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think* (New York: Free Press, 2002). Dawkins has recently elaborated his original definition in *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 191–201. He makes some interesting points that may have some bearing on how and why certain folk tales are retained in human minds.

For didactic purposes, I treated genes as though they were isolated units acting independently of one another. But of course they are not independent of one another . . .

Genes, then, cooperate in cartels to build bodies, and that is one of the important principles of embryology. It is tempting to say that natural selection favours cartels of genes in a kind of group selection between alternative cartels. That is confusion. What really happens is that the other genes of the gene pool constitute a major part of the *environment* in which each gene is selected versus its alleles. Because each is selected to be successful in the presence of the others—which are also being selected in a similar way—cartels of cooperating genes *emerge*. (p. 197)

Then Dawkins goes on to say: "Although meme pools are less regimented and structured than gene pools, we can still speak of a meme pool as an important part of the 'environment' of each meme in the memplex. A memplex is a set of memes which, while not necessarily being good survivors on their own, are good survivors in the presence of other members of the memplex" (p. 198).

3. See Hans Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, vol. 1 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004):262–63. This catalogue is based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson.

4. For the most exhaustive history and analysis of this tale, see Lutz Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen! Das Grimmsche Märchen Nummer Eins in seinen Wandlungen* (Cologne: Diederichs, 1987) and "Froschkönig (AaTh 440)," in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Vol. 5, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 410–22.

5. Author's translation.

6. Author's translation.

7. Author's translation.

8. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen, 1978) and Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

9. See also the citation and discussion in Hans-Jörg Uther, *Handbuch zu den "Kinder-und Hausmärchen" der Brüder Grimm* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2008):1–6.

10. See also the most recent revised thirtieth anniversary edition, Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

11. See Jerry A. Coyne's review of Dawkins' thirtieth anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene* and of Alan Grafen's and Mark Ridley's book, *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*: "His Tale Is True," *Times Literary Supplement* (June 16, 2006):7–9.

Dawkins's ambivalence toward memes is not hard to understand. It is difficult to disown an idea, however problematic, if it has helped to make you a celebrity. But intellectual courage demands that you admit when your ideas do not add up—and might be expected in someone like Dawkins, who has shown immense courage in standing up before the world as a vocal opponent of religion. It is time for him to detach himself from the herd of people who have taken memes far more seriously than he intended, and to reprove these advocates for their excesses. (p. 9)

12. Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson previously published a significant work, *Culture and Evolutionary Process*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

13. Of course, culture can be defined in much different ways. See Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225–32. He begins by citing the famous British anthropologist, Edward Tylor: "Culture of civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law custom, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 225). For an excellent summary of how culture has been viewed by sociologists and Marxist thinkers, see William Outhwaite, "Culture," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 109–12. Outhwaite cites Herbert Marcuse's important definition in "On the Affirmative Concept of Culture": "There is a general concept of culture . . . that expresses the historical process of society. It signifies the totality of social life in a given situation, in so far as both the areas of ideational reproduction (culture in the narrower sense, the 'spiritual world') and of material reproduction ('civilisation') form a historically distinguishable and comprehensible unity" (p. 111). There is an apparent lack of sociological categories in Richerson and Boyd's book and many important studies such as Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* are not taken into account. In a review of the Richerson and Boyd book, Dan Sperber and Nicolas Claidière maintain that,

when anthropologists and others talk of culture—independently of the way they might define it—, they refer to this widely distributed information and to the mental representations, behaviors, artifacts and institutions that, one way

or another implement this information. Richerson and Boyd's definition of culture . . . does not mention the scale of this distribution and would be satisfied, for instance, by the micro-local information that John acquires from Helen when she says, "Careful, the coffee is hot!". Still, it is clear that they mean by "culture" widely distributed beliefs, norms and skills, and not such ephemeral trivia. What we want to stress, however, is that there is a continuum of cases between these and widely distributed information. Throughout this continuum, most mental representations and behaviors are shaped by a mix of individual and social inputs, so that there is no way to pry apart cultural information from all the information found in a human population. (2008:290)

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