

European Women Writers Series

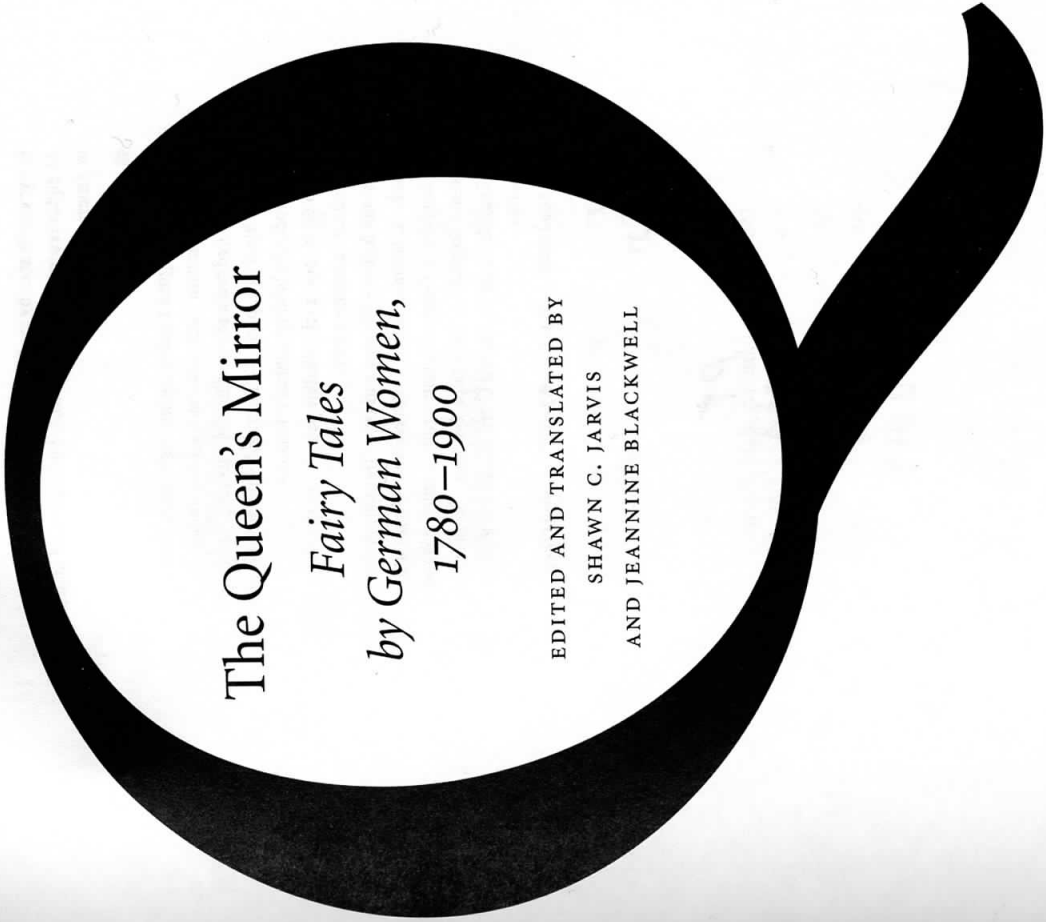
Editorial Board

Marion Faber,
Swarthmore College

Alice Jardine,
Harvard University

Susan Kirkpatrick,
University of California, San Diego

Olga Ragusa,
Columbia University, emerita



The Queen's Mirror
Fairy Tales
by German Women,
1780–1900

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

SHAWN C. JARVIS

AND JEANNINE BLACKWELL

University of Nebraska Press:
Lincoln & London

Karoline Stahl

1776-1837

The contribution of Karoline Stahl to the German fairy tale tradition lies in her mediation of French models for German readers. As a governess in Livonia, Russia, and Germany for several decades, she developed didactic tales for juvenile audiences. Her works were highly regarded by the Grimms, who referred to her collections in their 1857 edition and incorporated her story "The Thankless Dwarf" (in altered form) into their 1837 edition. In the tradition of the French tales that she in part emulated, her fables and reworkings of earlier fairy tale and saga motifs included moral instruction for upper-class children, enjoining them to avoid her catalog of the seven deadly sins of childhood: envy, tattling, vanity, prattling/gossiping, unhealthy snacking, dangerous play, and haughtiness.

In "The Godmothers," Stahl's penchant for using the fairy tale as *modus* for didactic purposes presages the Grimms' use of the fairy tale as an educational primer. The godmothers appear as four animal benefactors to the four royal children; when the father refuses to invite the fourth godmother to the fourth child's christening, the magic spell of benefaction for kindness to strangers in animal form is broken. The three eldest daughters, who had been blessed with beauty and magical gifts, commit Stahl's deadly sins and become haughty, vain, proud, and coquettish. The fourth child, Princess Merry, denied her christening gift by her father, remains virtuous and is ultimately rewarded for her spiritual goodness.

Stories to read with this piece include many of Mme d'Aulnoy's tales with an uglification plot (e.g., "The Green Snake") as well as christening stories such as the Grimms' story no. 1, "The Frog Prince," and "Sleeping Beauty." Spunky heroines like Merry appear in the tales of good and bad sisters like the Frau Holle stories, as well as Maggie in "The Red Flower" in this anthology.

Karoline Stahl, "Die Gevatterinnen. Ein Märchen," in *Erzählungen, Fabeln und Märchen für Kinder* (Nuremberg: Friedrich Campe, 1818), 19-27.

The Godmothers

1818

A KING who was very good lived happily with his wife, and their only wish was to have children. One day, as the queen was walking along the banks of a river, a portly frog caught her attention, and she stopped on the shore to watch him. "Why are you staring at me like that?" croaked the frog. The queen, amazed at hearing him speak, gave a start and replied that she was admiring his big belly, because his comrades were the very opposite of him, all skinny and scrawny as they were. "I'm pleased," said the frog, "that you like me so. I like you as well, and so I'm going to make you a proposal. You will soon bear a little daughter, and all that I ask is that you take me as her godparent." "It would be my pleasure!" replied the queen, who was feeling quite light-hearted and gay. "But how shall I find you again?" "Just have the lord chamberlain bring me an invitation," said the frog. "He can toss it in the water right here, and I will certainly come."

At that the speaker dove into the depths and disappeared from sight. The queen began to laugh and simply couldn't stop; she even started up again at the palace. Her old nurse looked very grave as she heard the event recounted and explained to her majesty that she was laughing inopportunely, because it was, as one could certainly imagine, no ordinary frog but rather an enchanted one, or perhaps even a fairy. Shortly thereafter the queen did indeed bear a little daughter, and as the preparations were being made for the baptismal celebration, the old nurse, ever cautious, reminded the queen to invite the godparent. She even managed to convince the lord chamberlain to toss the invitation into the water at the appointed spot.

The guests had already arrived when a portly frog as big as a cat appeared and joined the ranks of astonished godparents. After the ceremony, he went over to the cradle, looked in, and then hopped away again. The king was not happy about this particular godparent, but, for the sake of his wife, he kept his feelings to himself. When they went over to the little princess, everyone cried out in wonder — she had become quite lovely, and her hair shone like

spun gold. If a strand fell out, it turned into real gold, and from then on the Jewish merchants rushed to the castle every day and bought these strands. Over time, this small fortune grew into a sizable one.

A year later the queen went for a stroll in the woods and spied an owl perched serenely on a branch. "Do I please you?" screeched the bird. "Yes, indeed!" replied the queen. "You please me, too," was the answer. "And after a number of moons, when you again bear a daughter, invite me to the baptismal feast as godparent." The queen vowed to do so, and the old nurse didn't fail at the appropriate moment to remind her of her promise.

All preparations were complete when an owl flew through one of the crystal windows into the hall and took a place among the baptismal sponsors. It fluttered over to the cradle, looked at the princess, and started back through the same window. This child, too, became quite beautiful and had dark eyes that glimmered like coals. Every teardrop she shed turned into a pearl from the purest sea, and, when she was older, two beautiful pearls glistened on her cheeks every morning when she awoke. They, too, fetched a great fortune from their sale.

Some time later the queen once again went out for a stroll, this time across a field. There she spied a mouse of ample proportions chewing on an ear of corn she held on the ground between her paws. "It's tasty, as you can see," she said, "and I am pleased that you are watching so kindly as I eat. I want to do you a favor and serve as godparent to your future daughter. Just have the appropriate invitation brought to this field." The queen felt somewhat awkward, because her husband had not seemed overly enthusiastic about the older princesses' strange godmothers, but she kept it to herself. The old nurse held fast to her view, and the invitation was extended when the queen bore the third girl. This time a stout mouse appeared at the baptism and decorously joined the sponsors. As a baptismal gift the child received not merely beauty but another gift as well: every time she spoke, a magnificent diamond tumbled from her dainty rosebud mouth, and she grew as wealthy as her older sisters.

Almost a full year had passed when the queen, who had pretty much stopped taking walks, was picking flowers at a brook. A charming goldfish swam up and struck up a conversation with her. Shortly thereafter it offered its services as godparent and then swam away merrily. The queen was very distraught because she feared a disagreement with her husband if she invited the fish, so she asked the old nurse for advice. She begged the queen to keep her word but suggested that it would be best to tell the king of the affair beforehand. He flew into a rage and expressly forbade the sponsorship. "Haven't we already entered into a kind of kinship with a frog, an owl, and a

mouse, to the great astonishment of our subjects?" he said. "And now a fish on top of it? If this keeps up, all sorts of snakes and salamanders and other monstrous creatures will slither their way to our children."

The queen wept, but to no avail. At the baptism everyone was splashed with water, and their lovely garments were ruined. Even the little princess in her cradle wasn't spared, and as beautiful as the child had been, it suddenly became just as ugly. The old nurse had warned of the retribution that would be exacted for not following her advice, but it was all too late. "That's precisely why I will love this child so dearly," said the king, "because she's not beautiful and rich."

So all four princesses grew up. Because of their beauty, the three eldest attracted countless admirers, and many foreign kings, enticed by rumors of their beauty and their riches, came and asked for their hands in marriage, but the youngest had no suitors. The elder sisters, Golden Hair, Pearly Eyes, and Brillicinta, became vain, proud, and coquettish from the many flatteries they heard every day. The youngest, Princess Merry, so-called because of her cheerful nature, was instead good-natured, charitable, industrious, and clever. Because her sisters always made fun of her for her lack of looks and riches, she didn't become haughty, and since she was always ignored and overlooked at the royal galas, she stayed in her room instead and occupied herself with useful pastimes.

Once, when she went for a walk with her sisters, they heard a frog croaking pitifully as a nasty boy was about to put a skewer through him. Princess Merry begged the boy to let the poor thing go, but he just laughed in her face. Then she begged Golden Hair for a single golden strand to ransom the frog, but Golden Hair chided her and flounced away. Pearly Eyes and Brillicinta were no better, and Merry stood there completely distraught. At last she came up with an idea: she gave the boy her very pretty handkerchief and then carried the frog away to a marsh. Shortly thereafter several children came by carrying an owl tied to a pole, with lots of little birds fluttering and screeching around the captive. The children said they wanted to nail the nasty bird to a hen house. Princess Merry turned again to her sisters for help, but once more in vain – they just laughed at her. This time she had to sacrifice her earrings and necklace to ransom the owl.

A bit later some boys showed up dragging along a mouse on a string; they planned to give it to a cat. Merry pleaded with her sisters, but they wouldn't relinquish anything, and she ransomed the mouse with her straw hat and rings. Soon they came to a brook where some boys wanted to kill a goldfish they'd captured. Merry pleaded with them and had to hand over her shoes and socks. And so she arrived barefoot and without hat or jewelry at the

castle, where the ladies-in-waiting reprimanded her and scolded her about attire unbecoming a royal princess. Her parents were informed, and the king commanded the foolhardy child to present herself before him, where he gave her a stern warning. Merry listened without interrupting, as was befitting, and she showed her father the little fish she had rescued, now swimming in a goldfish bowl. Suddenly, it began to grow bigger and bigger, and at last there stood before them a lovely woman who sprinkled water on the princess. In a flash the uncomely girl was transformed into a great beauty, and every drop of water that had been in the bowl turned into a magnificent diamond. "You see," said the fairy, "I wanted to be your godmother, but I was turned away, and so I punished you. You saved my life. As a mouse, and owl, and frog I was the godmother and benefactress of your sisters, who are hardhearted and vain. But they shall reap their reward and become as ugly as you once were." Instantly, Golden Hair was a nasty, red-haired thing, Pearly Eyes turned sooty brown and weepy-eyed, while hunchbacked Brilicinta sported a mouth full of black teeth instead of jewels. The riches they still had did not make them happy, because the mirrors that hung all about the palace reflected their hideousness a thousandfold. But Princess Merry remained as good and modest in her beauty as she had always been.

TRANSLATED BY SHAWN C. JARVIS