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Rumpelstiltskin's (Queer) Secret: Nonbinary Bodies Buried  
between the Lines of the Brothers Grimm

Andrea Meyertholen

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## Rumpelstiltskin's (Queer) Secret

### Nonbinary Bodies Buried between the Lines of the Brothers Grimm

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It is no secret that the Brothers Grimm wrote in drag. In this case, the two male authors performed the part of a specific female stock character: the storied “*Märchenoma*,” or fairy-tale grandma, as Julie Koehler labels her (181). Like many men and women active within the fairy-tale and folktale traditions, the Grimms availed themselves of this obvious façade to generate an aura of authenticity for the tales that they had collected, edited, and rewritten several times over for the seven editions of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*KHM*, *Children's and Household Tales*).<sup>1</sup> As Marina Warner has shown, elderly female narrators have been associated with the “old wives’ tales” of folklore and legend as far back to the second century AD (14).<sup>2</sup> By the time Charles Perrault made use of Mother Goose after the emergence of the literary fairy tale in seventeenth-century France, the European variant of the old storytelling woman was already the stuff of legends. The innumerable illustrations prefacing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fairy-tale anthologies evidence her ossification into an archetypal persona whom Maria Tatar describes as “an elderly, careworn peasant woman with a spindle or spinning wheel by her side and a cluster of attentive youngsters at her feet” (*Hard Facts* 109). The grandmotherly narrator served as “the visual entry point to the world of printed fairy tales” because it was she and her feminine ilk who, through the oral tradition of storytelling, had hitherto been the chief propagators and preservers of folktales and fairy tales (109). As indicated by her spindle and reflected in the idiom to *spin a tale*, the customary site for the telling and retelling of stories was the working milieu of the spinning room.

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Of course, the reality of oral storytelling and its relationship to literary tales is, much like the Grimms' "collaboration" with their *Märchenomas*, less straightforward than popular imagination would have us believe. Recent scholarship by Koehler along with Shawn Jarvis and Jeannine Blackwell advances earlier studies by Tatar and Ruth Bottigheimer to demonstrate the extent to which oral and literary traditions engaged in a complicated interplay marked by mutual influence and reciprocal exchange. As would be expected, the path from peasants' lips to the Grimms' pen is comparably complex but not subject to similar reciprocity. Of the over fifty women and girls of diverse social ranks who provided source material, only Dorothea Viehmann is singled out by name and face as the exemplary *Märchenoma* (Blackwell 1; Koehler 183).<sup>3</sup> The rest were more or less subsumed into her persona, their contributions largely uncredited and their words systematically overwritten by the male authors who published the *KHM* under their names. Although Viehmann invested their work with the authority of the storytelling spinster, the Grimms divested their *Märchenoma* of creative autonomy along with the female voices she represented. Their preface portrays Viehmann as a passive receptacle whose storytelling, much like the rhythmic cycling of the spinning wheel, derives from mechanical repetition rather than imaginative invention (Koehler 189–90; Tatar, *Hard Facts* 112–13).

In this sense, the spinning-room door opens into multiple levels of meaning. On the one hand, the chamber is a historical site popularized in the romantic imagination as the proverbial venue for female narration. While spinning and weaving were traditionally considered gender-specific activities associated with poorer populations, Bottigheimer emphasizes that this was especially the case in the German states where these rural occupations were sexually segregated well into the nineteenth century ("Tale Spinners" 143). In this largely feminine space, women "manned" the wheels and told the tales that passed time and entertained one another along with the young children who may also have occupied the chamber (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 113). Even if oversimplified and overstated, that spinning is entwined with the storytelling of peasant women charges the space with symbolic importance: though containing and devaluing the female voices within, it also occasioned an opportunity for subversion. The tales spun by such women resonated with listeners and future raconteurs on two levels, as Karen Rowe indicates, "speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language" (57). This "hidden language" becomes even more arcane after the Grimms set it to paper with purported faithfulness and publish it as "authentic" folktales despite Wilhelm Grimm's editorial liberties. Though their male narratives efface the words and artistry of the female storytellers, we can, as Bottigheimer phrases, still "discern faint cries of distress and fatigue from the spinning room—*Spinnstube*—in the centuries preceding the

Grimms' work" ("Tale Spinners" 142). What is lost to the *Spinnstuben* (spinning rooms) and left unwritten by the Grimms continues to be recovered through active rereading, reinterpreting, and reimagining the tales, be it to decipher coded messaging of the past or yield new insights for contemporary culture.

One attempt is Harry Rand's 2019 book *Rumpelstiltskin's Secret: What Women Didn't Tell the Grimms*. In this case, the "secret" entails the sexual wisdom, coded ridicule, and workplace grievances that were exchanged within the walls of the *Spinnstube* and then passed on to concomitant and subsequent generations of women in the form of the fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin" (*KHM* 55). Drawing from folklore and psychoanalysis, Rand interprets the title figure as a mechanism that enabled story-telling women to cope with, if not challenge, the patriarchal structures controlling their lives. Identifying with the miller's daughter imprisoned in the castle to spin straw into gold, the working women of the *Spinnstube* wove personal experiences with male impotence into successive iterations of the tale to humiliate and retaliate against powerful men. In turning Rumpelstiltskin into a hieroglyph for masculine impotence, they asserted their voices in a world where they went from their fathers' property into their husbands' hands to labor as spinners and wives. If the tale, Rand writes, "subversively mocks male-dom, this perplexing story's reprisals represent different ways to get even" while also functioning to "prepare a young woman to accept harsh realities about actual, not idealized, men" (108). For Rand, readers of "Rumpelstiltskin" unaware of the Grimms' appropriation or ignorant of its origins are unwittingly initiated into its secret symbolism. For those attuned to the "faint cries of distress from the *Spinnstube*," however, his thesis provocatively overtures toward modern-day moments of female resistance to patriarchal structures and institutionalized misogyny such as the #MeToo movement.

While Rand commendably insists upon the continuing cultural relevance of fairy tales by connecting their literary content to issues in our everyday lives, I believe that more tantalizing implications are unearthed when we regard Rumpelstiltskin not as another instance of men behaving badly, but as something other than "man" at all. In what follows, I present an alternate reading of the character as one not contained within the binary categories defined by heteronormative sexuality. As indicated by the narrative's implicit and explicit de-sexing of the mysterious figure as masculine, Rumpelstiltskin is not interchangeable with or symbolic of the tale's other men. Instead, Rumpelstiltskin represents a non-heteronormative or "queer" sexuality and constitutes another marginalized social group within the same hegemonic regime victimizing the miller's daughter. Understanding the character as such unlocks a queer secret leading to broader insights about social resistance and

its failures that prompt reflection upon the construction of institutional identities, their relational dynamics, and their potential for disruption.

### Queer, Queering, and Reading Queerly

In complicating binary notions of gender and sexuality in “Rumpelstiltskin,” I situate myself in the burgeoning subfield within fairy-tale studies indebted to the contributions of prominent voices like Pauline Greenhill, Jeana Jorgensen, Jennifer Orme, Louis Seifert, and Kay Turner. Their queer interpretations willfully engage with literature against the grain of conventional categories and institutionalized reception. Donald Haase asserts the criticality of such “private readings” in his rebuttal to Heinz Rölleke’s polemic for empirical and sociohistorically verifiable analyses (Haase, “Response and Responsibility” 243, Rölleke “Die ärchen”). Haase defends the coexistence of both “responsible” and “irresponsible” interpretations in Rölleke’s sense, justifying the latter because it imparts the “living meaning of fairy tales and their role in society” and acknowledges a “recipient’s experience, perspective, or predisposition” (243–44, 235). Evidencing the “broad interpretative potential” and “apparent flexibility” of the genre, queerly read fairy tales represent the diversity and indeterminacy of responses elicited vis-à-vis the ever-evolving cultural contexts of their audiences (235).

Subject to similar plasticity is queerness itself, which is a concept whose “semantic clout” and “political efficacy depend[ ] on its resistance to definition,” as Annamarie Jagose welcomes in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1). Wading through the depth of GLBTQ discourses, she summarizes the term as describing “those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (3). Its conceptual reach can extend beyond this familiar focus to denote more broadly “the excess of something always unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity,” as Lee Edelman puts forth (Dinshaw et al. 189). The constant struggle of Edelman’s “normativity” to abject the “unassimilable” constantly undermining its integrity is reformulated by Jennifer Orme as the “relations between center and margin,” each dependent on the other for its definition (“Wolf’s Queer Invitation” 91). In other words, a center cannot hold without necessarily circumscribing its margins. That normative categories of sex, gender, and desire take shape at the social center implies the marginalized existence of nonnormative constructions: the queer elements and subjectivities not fitting into society.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the oversimplified binaries at the normative center, the non-normative categories at the margins are multifaceted and multitudinous. Lewis C. Seifert designates as queer “not only gay male and lesbian sexualities but also nonnormative heterosexualities and the range of gender expressions often classified as transgender” (“Introduction” 16). When deployed “[a]s forms of resistance to the heteronormative order, queer genders and sexualities aim to destabilize the binaries (such as masculine–feminine, heterosexual–homosexual, dominant–submissive, and active–passive) that are so central to upholding normative categories” (16). As verb, Seifert continues, “queer” derives its agency to “*make strange* by accentuating what departs from normative social expectations about gender and sexuality, thus exposing the notions of ‘normal’ gender and sexual identities as myths” (16; emphasis added). “Queering” becomes a critical practice that “necessarily involves reading against the grain so as to pick up signs and meanings neglected or obscured by heteronormative interpretations” (16). A queerly read fairy tale, Orme concludes, is “dedicated to interrogating the themes and structures that contribute to the fairy tale’s popular reputation as a genre that has historically championed restricted subjectivities” and brings to light the “work of de-centering, shifting and troubling discourses that would wish to keep the genre fixed, stable, enmeshed in hegemonic discourse, and therefore predictable and immediately comprehensible” (124). My “irresponsible” reading of “Rumpelstiltskin” goes against the grain to uncover how the title figure subverts the tale’s central heterosexual patriarchal structures with a nonnormative, nonbinary queerness that threatens the essential constructs of masculinity and femininity alike.

### **Spinning Yarns and Telling Secrets**

Despite our discovery of the name at the heart of the story, Rumpelstiltskin’s identity remains a mystery from beginning to end. The text presents the character as a short-statured creature with a magical talent made perverse. When a miller’s daughter faces certain death if she cannot spin straw into gold for a greedy but otherwise indifferent king, Rumpelstiltskin miraculously appears in her hour of need. Though rescuing the persecuted female protagonist three times from certain death by performing the task at stake, Rumpelstiltskin ultimately demands her firstborn child if she cannot correctly guess the creature’s name. Its eventual discovery provokes Rumpelstiltskin to self-destruct in rage by tearing in two. Yet the apparent amenability to exploit desperation and powerlessness for personal gain does not so easily pigeonhole Rumpelstiltskin into the role of villain.

Indeed, a lack of altruistic or admirable behavior dominates a tale where self-interest drives the actions of all its characters. After lying about his

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daughter's abilities to curry favor with the king, the impoverished miller knowingly hands her over in bad faith to perform an impossible task. The king, attracted only by the prospect of increasing his gold reserves, thrice-over threatens to execute the maiden if she does not deliver on her father's boast. Faced with the worst choices, the miller's daughter promises to surrender her child to save herself. That she attempts to renege on her bargain after becoming queen can be read ambiguously: she either breaks a binding contract with Rumpelstiltskin or enters one with no intention of fulfilling it. Readers cannot determine whether her motives for saving her child stem from motherly love or the fear that her husband would learn the truth about the lies and likely loss of heir. The happily-ever-after waiting at the end sees a maiden who has successfully ascended to queen, but still married a man with a well-established willingness to sacrifice her life for gold. The story arc assembles the familiar elements of Seifert's "classically normative heterosexual fairy-tale plot" only to twist the tropes and leave the audience in limbo with an (at best) questionably happy marriage ("Queer Time" 21).<sup>5</sup> Even when wealth is the primary pursuit of the eventual husband in a fairy tale, Maria Tatar observes that "[f]ew tales in the Grimms' collection are so crass as 'Rumpelstiltskin' in depicting purely economic motives for marriage" (*Hard Facts* 124). While this crassness could account for Disney's lack of interest, it does not deter the surface levels of the tale from presuming normative heterosexual relationships, however unloving, and rigorously defending patriarchal values. The extent to which these structural paradigms reflect the intervention of the Grimms has been subject to investigation, with scholarship revealing how their revisions of "Rumpelstiltskin" redirected the plot trajectory and social interests of the folkloric versions previously transmitted by women (Bottigheimer, "Tale Spinners"; Haase, "Gold into Straw"; Rowe; Schmiesing; Tatar, *Hard Facts* 106–33; Zipes, "Spinning with Fate").

The Grimms themselves publicized their lack of authorship as both selling point and *raison d'être* of the *KHM*. Beginning with the second edition of 1819, the prominent placement of Viehmann's visage as literal and figurative frontispiece gave a historical human face to the German female storytellers whose tales the Grimms purported to record faithfully in text and preserve as cultural heritage.<sup>6</sup> As already noted, the image of Viehmann romanticized in Wilhelm's introduction was carefully crafted to legitimize the professed authenticity of the tales and conform to the expectations of the largely bourgeois target audience (Dégh 85–87; Hafstein 27–29; Zipes, "Grimm Legacies" 62–64). Viehmann, who in fact descended from French Huguenots, numbered among several identifiable female figures from which the brothers culled their tales (without due credit by our contemporary standards). While the first to assemble a fairy-tale compendium that named living sources and even included an

image of one, the brothers were “spotty” in their identifications and, as Koehler emphasizes, “failed to treat the *Märchenoma* as a creative individual” (188). Indeed, the “very elements that made her the ideal source in the Grimms’ eyes (her class, gender, and lack of education), also denigrated her work to that of only source material” in need of the corrective and intellectual intervention of a male author (190). Female sources of higher social rank received similarly reductive treatment. Most belonged to the Grimms’ social milieu, like Dortchen Wild, family friend and Wilhelm’s future wife, her sister Lisette, their sister Charlotte (“Lotte”) Grimm, and her sister-in-law Marie Hassenpflug (Tatar, “Classic Fairy Tales” 342–43). As for the female published and future-published authors whom the Grimms consulted, their contributions were either altered and uncredited, as in the case of Karoline Stahl, or like Bettina Brentano-von Arnim, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, and Benedikte Naubert excluded from the *KHM*.<sup>7</sup> Being literate, these women, like the Grimms, are believed to have consulted both oral and textual source material from other European traditions (Blackwell 1–5; Koehler 181–99).

The provenance of “Rumpelstiltskin” harkens back to a version based on an anonymous oral tale recorded by Jacob Grimm in 1808 under the title “Rumpenstünzchen” (Zipes, “Spinning with Fate” 47).<sup>8</sup> Along with earlier drafts of other tales, this version appeared in the Ölenberg manuscript prepared by the Grimms in 1810 for their friend and fellowfairy-tale enthusiast Clemens Brentano (Joosen 100).<sup>9</sup> The tale underwent steady revision for the seven large editions of the *KHM* printed until 1857, yet the version of “Rumpelstiltskin” in the initial 1812 run already differed substantially from its Ölenberg antecedent due to the influences from the Grimms’ social circle, Johann Fischart’s *Gargantua* (1582), and the French variant “Ricdin-Ricdon” (1705) by Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier (Zipes, “Spinning with Fate” 47). Heinz Rölleke’s commentary on the 1837 edition of the *KHM* identifies Dortchen Wild and the Family Hassenpflug as the contaminants responsible for the changes between 1810 and the 1812 edition, while the tale bore the additional imprint of another oral variant related by Lisette Wild for the 1819 edition (Grimm, 1985, vol. III, 1222).<sup>10</sup> Whether “Rumpenstünzchen” might be the closest to a variant as once orally told cannot be definitively stated given the bidirectional dynamic that constantly shaped and reshaped literary and oral variants. Moreover, sociohistorical revolutions involving oral storytelling and the occupation of spinning likely affected the women in the *Spinnstube* and precipitated literary adulteration well before the Grimms interceded.

As the carefully edited result of interweaving oral folktales with examples from preceding literary collections, “Rumpelstiltskin” represents a fusion of male and female voices and their at times competing perspectives. Even if the Grimms would seem to silence their female contributors, comparative analyses

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by Bottigheimer ("Tale Spinners" 148–49), Haase ("Gold into Straw" 195–96), and Zipes ("Spinning with Fate" 48–56) show how Wilhelm's revisions substantively transformed the perspective and meaning of the versions told by female storytellers. "Rumpelstüncchen" recounts the plight of a young maiden whose spinning wheel would only spin flax into gold. Thus, what becomes the solution for the Grimms as of 1812 (turning straw into gold) began as the problem that propelled the plot in 1810. That the tale originally centered on the working concerns of the maiden represents the female perspective of the tale's initial tellers and provides evidence of its origins in the peasants' *Spinnstube*. By completely reversing the premise and inserting the male characters (father, king), the Grimms lessen the value of producing goods and prominently position the maiden as male property, which undercuts both the autonomy of the female protagonist and the consequence of her labor. Shifting from production to reproduction, the Grimms frame a woman's worth as dictated by men and defined by her ability to give birth. The miller's daughter, divested of her freedom and spinning capabilities at once, must depend on Rumpelstiltskin who, in this light, reads as merely another male oppressor, one symbolically enacting the colonization of female means of production. The figure joins the king and miller in forcing the maiden to spin for her life, while also elbowing her out of the public sphere and even attempting to appropriate her role as mother. While the feminine creativity and esteem for spinning that marked earlier manifestations as perhaps told in the *Spinnstube* are lost in translation from oral tradition to reworked text, traces are still recoverable in the "intertextual dialogue" between variants and consideration of sociohistorical context (Joosen 99).

Case in point, *Rand's Rumpelstiltskin's Secret* approaches the fairy tale from an alternate perspective so as to conjecture how the social conditions of the preindustrial women in the *Spinnstube* might have shaped Rumpelstiltskin into a figure of ridicule rather than repression. Rand makes use of psychoanalytic theory and linguistic analysis to propose that the character served as cipher to mock male sexual inadequacy. Rumpelstiltskin emerges as an inside joke of sorts—a coded way for women to vent their frustrations with men and speak about taboo topics like impotence that would otherwise emasculate and humiliate their male oppressors if publicized. As substantiation, Rand considers various etymological reconstructions of the character's name, ultimately deriving the meaning "crumpled stalk" which he interprets as code for a flaccid penis (41).<sup>11</sup> In supposing that Rumpelstiltskin's diminutive physiognomy satirized the sexual shortcomings of men, Rand finds in the figure a further vestige of female agency and opportunities for female resistance. Retelling the story restages the lewd humor and emasculating humiliation that female spinners ostensibly intended when originally telling the tale as a small act of

subversion against an invidious patriarchal structure. As opposed to another avatar of male oppression, Rumpelstiltskin became a vehicle for challenging it.

### **An Identity, Wrapped in a Mystery, Inside an Enigma**

Once taken out of the *Spinnstube* and composed by the Grimms to suit the conceptions of nineteenth-century bourgeois audiences, Rumpelstiltskin's identity, though immortalized with certain words, is no less uncertain. Contrary to Zipes's dismissal of the name as "meaningless," the question of Rumpelstiltskin's identity is the tale's central impetus, if only because the tale insists upon it ("Spinning with Fate" 43). Even variants not named for the Rumpelstiltskin figure are classed according to its identity, cataloged in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU Index) as tale type 500, The Name of Helper. Taking issue with this, too, Zipes aligns Rumpelstiltskin with the tale's other exploitative men even though we cannot state with certainty that Rumpelstiltskin is male or that the figure is *not* the helper (43). The language in all *KHM* editions is incredibly vague, operating with almost purposeful evasiveness to avoid naming names and other determinative aspects about the character's motives and identity. The plot of the tale teaches the power of words but also indicates the meaningfulness of their absence.

Bottigheimer's study of female speech patterns in the tales demonstrates just how assiduously the Grimms chose their words and how thoroughly Wilhelm's revisions deprived female characters of speaking opportunity. Reproducing the political and social stifling of women in nineteenth-century German culture in the text, verbs control who exercises the right to speech and mark it as "licit or illicit" ("Silenced Women" 120). Emergent is the "image of silent women and of silent repose as the most praiseworthy female character trait" (117). Though I cite from the tale's presumably finalized iteration from 1857, the editions of "Rumpelstiltskin" from 1819 onward grant the maiden several occasions for "licit" direct speech.<sup>12</sup> Besides uttering the identifying word that destroys the creature and resolves the tale, she also sets the terms of the exchange during the first two visits. Only on the third night does Rumpelstiltskin propose the exchange, leading the reader to infer that a child was the end game. An interesting division in speech performance occurs when narrated indirect speech delivers the maiden's promise but after her directly quoted thoughts have already betrayed her intentions to break it.

Her duplicitous behavior toward someone who has made good on promises to prolong her life could comprise an instance of "illicit" speech that replicates the ambivalence of her precarious position. Although the threat of death renders her relatively powerless to refuse Rumpelstiltskin's demand, the

relationship between the maiden and Rumpelstiltskin is not subject to the same disparities in power as the other male figures. The maiden never denies, defies, or answers the boasts of her father or dictates of the king, let alone speak—or think—falsely. When Rumpelstiltskin returns, instead of fulfilling the promise from which only she has profited, the newly crowned queen seeks a way out of the contract. Although the female character perpetrates several “illicit” speech acts in her encounters with Rumpelstiltskin, the story rewards her audacity, which suggests that Rumpelstiltskin neither inspires the fear nor warrants the deference reserved for story’s men. Despite having an audible voice, Rumpelstiltskin does not use the agency of speech to issue threats or express the desire to oppress. Nor are intentions for the child or the overtures of assistance ever explained; the offer to help is simply extended and something in return is requested. A human child might seem a high price, but the reader has little reason to suspect Rumpelstiltskin of wishing to harm the child.

Quite the contrary, Rumpelstiltskin displays a marked concern for human life and vulnerability for compassion. Acting against self-interest, Rumpelstiltskin takes pity (*Mitleid*) on the crying queen and even extends her three extra opportunities to save her child. This display of mercy further differentiates Rumpelstiltskin from the male characters who have no qualms about sacrificing the life of a woman for status and gold. Rumpelstiltskin is the only character who consistently recognizes the value of life, for even the maiden negotiates her child to save herself.<sup>13</sup> Contrasting Rumpelstiltskin with its male humans, the text situates the figure in greater proximity to the female character, as Tatar perceives in the linkage between the “life-giving labors of the queen and the life-saving labors of the diminutive gnome” (“Classic Fairy Tales” 124). Yet, to call Rumpelstiltskin a “gnome” is speculative; the Grimms make no mention of or allusion to any breed of preternatural wee folk from which Rumpelstiltskin could descend.

To be sure, the unspoken motives behind Rumpelstiltskin’s behavior obscure the character’s identity. Noting the lack of expressed ill will, Roni Natov comments on the inappropriateness of the usual folkloric suspects: “Although it may appear that his desire for a child is typical of the malevolent wishes of magical figures like dwarves and fairies (note the popular changeling motif in folk tales), Rumpelstiltskin is the only character who cannot be bought off. Nothing is as dear to him as human life” (74). Given Bottigheimer’s sensitivity to the weight of linguistic nuance and the implications of its absence, she surprisingly refers to Rumpelstiltskin as a “dwarf” despite no such signification (“Tale Spinners” 148–49).<sup>14</sup> In an extensive review of methodologies undertaken by folklorists to pin down a lineage, Lutz Röhrich finds no one category

wholly applicable and eventually estimates Rumpelstiltskin to be most dwarf-like in nature (283–86). Rölleke's commentary on the 1837 edition refers to Rumpelstiltskin as a "Dämon" with parallels to the devil in "The Devil and His Grandmother" (KHM 125) in that he appears unbidden to administer a riddle solved with three guesses (III, 1223). However, I would echo Röhrich's disinclination to place the figure in league with the devil given the tale's conclusion. For Rumpelstiltskin to accuse the queen of receiving the correct name from the devil ("The Devil told you that!") suggests that the two are separate entities with an adversarial relationship (130).

The failure of cryptozoological classification has spawned ever more creative approaches. Reviving a nineteenth-century hypothesis about the fabled origins of subterranean species like dwarfs and kobolds, Otto Kahn perhaps proposed the most outlandish theory back in 1960s: that Rumpelstiltskin really lived and, as fairy tale, represents the now-vanished factions of underground resistance fighters.<sup>15</sup> The 1980s witnessed Konrad Soyez's application of biotechnological theory to observe how Rumpelstiltskin fits the behavioral profile of bacteria able to infiltrate the castle body, divide itself two, and function to the advantage or detriment of the human host. Though Ann Schmiesing's more recent study from 2011 does not carry the metaphor to microbiological extremes, her study of the story's incorrect guesses accentuates the underlying themes of disease and disability to contextualize the figure as an "agent of disease" that causes deformity and claims the lives of children but "can be survived only if it is correctly diagnosed (or *named*) and treated" (305, 307; original emphasis). Other than shortness, though, the tale leaves Rumpelstiltskin's appearance to the reader's imagination with no textual direction to infer deformity. This has not deterred illustrators from delivering interpretations of pygmy-sized figures with features ranging from deformed to devilish (Tatar, *Hard Facts* 129). The illustrations included amid Tatar's translation present a parade of contorted physiques—impossibly angular legs, grotesquely enlarged noses, and hunched backs—clad in dark pointed hats, tapered shoes, and cloaks (*Classic Fairy Tales* 125–30). Whether intellectually inferred by Schmiesing or imaginatively embellished by artists, the idea of *deformation*—of not fitting the normativity of a presumed form—bespeaks the incapacity of preexisting categories to contain a figure whose identity operates external to the social (or physiological) organism. Accordingly, the tale locates the figure's dwelling far outside the city walls, in "a place so remote that the foxes and hares bid each other goodnight" (128). At heart, the discourses of dwarfs, disease, and deformity, though leading to diverse conclusions, converge at a conceptual awareness of otherness. And it is, as I propose, precisely this otherness that opens the potential for queerness.

### The Queerness That Dares to Speak Its Name

As we have seen, Rumpelstiltskin is a remarkably elastic character capable of slipping in and out of often contradictory roles with no concrete motives. At once male persecutor and merciful savior, the figure is an instrument of patriarchal oppression and a means to subvert it. Depending on theory, Rumpelstiltskin's identity ranges from life-taking dwarf to lifesaving gnome, from potent disease to an impotent penis. Perhaps secondary literature reaches no consensus in determining Rumpelstiltskin's identity because an appropriate label does not exist—not as a normative construct at the social center but also not as a conceivable expression of nonnormativity residing at its margins. It is little wonder that naming assumes such prominence, for Rumpelstiltskin confronts the fairy-tale realm with a not-yet-defined or not-yet-acknowledged type of being that falls beyond and in between existing regimes. Read in this light, the fairy tale unfolds as a sort of social experiment with Rumpelstiltskin as the catalyst whose presence disturbs the stability of a patriarchal society regulating itself and its subjects according to traditional codes of sex and gender.

These roles are established at the tale's onset with the introduction of the two primary male figures (miller, king) and the female protagonist (maiden). Organizing the three principal characters into tabular form and comparing their social identities, actions and behavior, and power relations reveals a system of gender relations consistent with conventional expectations as heteronormatively defined and patriarchally ordered (see table 1). Dualistic in nature, the assignation of gender roles in "Rumpelstiltskin" corresponds to the prevailing notions of gender-specific character traits and duties that strictly defined masculine and feminine spaces in nineteenth-century society. The sociohistorical studies of Ute Frevert and Karin Hausen examine the development of gender roles during this period with Hausen in particular honing in on the now-antiquated idea of *Geschlechtscharakter* ("character of the sexes") that gained currency in the eighteenth century and undergirded assumptions about the "quintessential nature of man and woman" in the nineteenth (Hausen 51). The accepted model for the "socio-economic sexual division of labour" relegated women to the domestic sphere, believing their bodies and minds to be "intended for the reproductive or generative purpose and the patriarchal monogamous marriage" (51, 56). Destined for public life, men were the bearers of reason and intellect and so exhibited character traits of "*doing*" as Hauser lists: "independent, "striving," "acquisitive" (avaricious), "giving," "ability to get his way," "force," and "antagonism" (56). By contrast, women were beholden to character traits associated with "*being*"—"dependent," "busy," "receiving," "self-denial," "love," and "sympathy"—and complemented masculine rationality with their feminine emotionality (56).

Table 1. Character analysis of “Rumpelstiltskin” (1857)<sup>16</sup>

	Male	Neutral/ambiguous third gender	Female
Noun (gender)	der Müller (miller) der König (king)	das Männchen (little man) das Männlein (little man)	das Mädchen (maiden) × 7 die (Müllers) Tochter (miller's daughter) × 9 die Jungfer (unmar- ried woman) die Müllerin (female miller) die Gemahlin (wife) die Frau (woman) × 2 die Königin (queen) × 8
Pronoun (sex)	er (he) ihm (him)	es (it)	sie (she) es (it) × 1 ihr (her)
Social identity	Rather, miller, ruler, husband	???	Daughter, wife, mother
Sexuality	Presumed het- erosexual men (one marries a woman)	Unclear (wants child but not woman)	Presumed hetero- sexual woman (mar- ries man)
Power relation	Oppressor	Helper	Oppressed
Actions/ behavior	Active in public life, proposes transactions, able to move freely (independ- ent), no com- passion, concern for wealth as opposed to life	Spins, bakes, brews, dances, proposes transactions, able to move freely (inde- pendent), capable of compassion, concern for life, prone to emotional fits (rage), displays sympathy, gives help	Restricted to private sphere (does not leave castle), depen- dent, expected to spin, prone to emo- tional fits (crying, sobbing), gives birth, concern for life, receives help

	Male	Neutral/ambiguous third gender	Female
Result	Reward (gold, presumable status)	Punishment of death (self-destructive bifurcation)	Reward (becomes queen, keeps child)

We find a similar sort of polarization separating the male and female figures in the text. Active in the public sector, the male figures hold the positions of economic, political, and social power by conducting business (miller), managing politics (king), and completing transactions for commercial and social gain. By contrast, female subjectivities represented by the maiden are confined to the private sphere and disenfranchised from direct participation in public life, even if affected by its processes. The maiden moves from her father's home to the king's castle as a piece of male-owned property without personal involvement in the exchange that determines her future and endangers her life. As first a prisoner of the king, she is expected to produce goods (gold) from which she will not profit. As queen, she is still unable to leave the castle but expected to produce heirs to the throne. Much like the Grimms' characterization of their *Märchenoma* and other female sources, the maiden's work is diminished to the "busy" work registered by Hausen; requiring neither intellect nor creativity, the maiden is meant to mechanically spin the wheel and obey the presumed biological imperative of body to bear children. Men are domineering husbands and fathers, women are dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers. King and maiden marry in an assertion of heterosexuality and form the traditional nuclear family when baby makes three.<sup>17</sup>

That the roles and attributes of these three characters are consistently maintained for the duration of the tale is indicated by the marker of grammatical gender, the significance of which is largely lost in English translations. Unlike English, German has retained its three grammatical genders—masculine (*der*), feminine (*die*), and neuter (*das*)—and their respective pronominal correlates (*er/ihm*, *sie/ihr*, *es*). In most instances, pronouns reflect the grammatical gender of the antecedent even if the object or person in question is of a different biological sex or not human at all. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the tales with heroines whose names end in a diminutive suffix (*-chen*, *-lein*) or those featuring a young girl or maiden (*das Mädchen*). Like *Mädchen*, characters like *Schneewittchen* ("Snow White") or *Dornröschen* ("Briar Rose") are

grammatically neutral and hence referenced in German with the neuter *es* instead of the feminine *sie*. Although English translations elide this discrepancy with blanket application of feminine pronouns (*she, her*), Orrin W. Robinson's examination of pronominal inconsistency in the *KHM* implies that the Grimms' choice in pronouns is highly complex and therefore instructive for understanding their biases of gender and sex. Wilhelm's stylistic practices tend toward de-sexing younger, ostensibly sexually immature female characters with *es* despite grammatically feminine antecedents. *Sie* indicates sexual maturity or increased age even for neuter antecedents.

Surveying the tale's inventory of nouns and pronouns in German suggests that grammatical gender could also code for gender identity and biological sex. Definite articles and pronouns harmonize without exception for male characters. For the female protagonist, nouns alternate arbitrarily (even within the same sentence) among six different feminine options and the neutral *Mädchen* regardless of context or audience but with clear preference for feminine nouns. Of the thirty instances in which nouns designate the female protagonist, twenty-two are feminine. The use of the feminine pronouns *sie* and *ihr* is overwhelmingly consistent. On the one occasion in which *es* refers to the female protagonist, its antecedent is *Mädchen*, and *ihr* occurs within the same sentence with reference to *Mädchen*.<sup>18</sup> That *Mädchen* disappears altogether after Rumpelstiltskin's third intervention would, per Robinson's theory, solidify the maiden's femaleness and suggest a latent conceptualization of the suffix *-chen* as indicator for a third sexuality—namely, the absence of sexual maturity or capability.

The existence of a third sexuality is made incarnate as a sexually ambiguous body and advanced as a tenable category through Rumpelstiltskin, who introduces a nonbinary gender identity operative in the liminal space between the male–female polarities. Abstruse by design, this identity prefaces the tale as its title and provides the problematic object propelling the plot of its second half but is only recognized with a name—Rumpelstiltskin—at the story's end. Until then, all *KHM* editions designate the figure as a *kleines Männchen* (“tiny little man”) or simply *Männchen* (“little man”) and apply without exception the neutral pronoun *es*. If we, for a moment, bracket off the plot tensions and focus only on all characters as specified with nouns and pronouns, we effectively have three consistently labeled, stable gender groupings: masculine (miller, king), feminine (maiden), and neutral (Rumpelstiltskin). The steadfast maintenance of these categories throughout the tale suggests that grammatical gender is more than incidental. English-language translations inevitably overlook this aspect by paraphrasing *Männchen* as “little man” and

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using the pronoun “he.” As a result, they miss a significant component of Rumpelstiltskin’s identity and essentially misrepresent what and who the character is.

Like *Mädchen*, *Männchen* is a grammatically neuter noun due to its diminutive suffix (-*chen*). The addendum grammatically de-sexes the masculine noun *Mann* and would render it *not masculine*, as in a “man-not-masculine.”<sup>19</sup> Now, couched in terms of biological sex, this could be a sign of sexual immaturity or inability such as theorized with *Mädchen*, the “little maid” commonly conceptualized as a “woman not yet sexually feminine.” Yet, the alternative label for *Männchen*, the name Rumpelstiltskin, asks us to consider the de-sexed “little man” as a “man not quite masculine,” as consonant with Rand’s proposed translation of flaccid penis. Interestingly enough, Schmiesing reaches the contradictory conclusion of an erect penis by combining *rumpel* or *rummel* (commotion such as during coitus) with *stiel* (stalk or penis) and citing the “many twentieth-century critics (Sigmund Freud among them) who equate Rumpelstiltskin with the phallus” (309). When we add the suffix -*kin*, a translation of -*chen* (present in the original German title), the erect penis is effectively neutered. Corroborating this scenario is Schmiesing’s etymological investigation of the incorrect guesses *Rippenbiest* (“Ribfiend”), *Hammelswade* (“Muttonchops”), and *Schnürbein* (“Spindleshanks”) (305–06).<sup>20</sup> Though not immediately evident in Tatar’s translations, all three names contain phallically shaped body parts (rib, calf, and leg), with the latter two strongly evocative of genital mutilation. From the old verb *hamelan* (“to mutilate”), *Hammel* denotes a castrated ram, whereas *Schnürbein*, besides alluding to atrophied or deformed legs, draws from *schnüren* (“to tie up”), a verb also used to describe the binding of testicles to castrate animals. Though unsuccessful guesses, their subtext resonates with Rumpelstiltskin’s plausible meanings. That the queen’s final attempts approximate the semantic field of the correct name could indicate that she intuits a certain “not quite masculine” character as inherently belonging to Rumpelstiltskin’s identity. With the common denominator being male genitalia made ineffective, Rumpelstiltskin could present as a figure with male-typical sexual anatomy that is either underdeveloped or physiologically non-functional; in other words, a “man not quite masculine.”

Although Rumpelstiltskin might be grammatically “neutered” by the suffixes -*chen* and -*lein*, it would be precipitous to conclude that the character is biologically de-sexed. For one, Robinson’s analysis reveals that male characters with diminutive suffixes are not subject to the same pronominal alternations as their female counterparts. Nevertheless, it could be argued by Robinson’s own theory that such male characters (who are fewer and far between, I might add) exhibit a lack of gender concord because they have already reached sexual maturity. Robinson only singles out “Das tapfere Schneiderlein” (“The Brave

Little Tailor," *KHM* 20) as exemplary of the Grimms' general avoidance of *es* when referencing the tailor (109), but both title figures in "Vom klugen Schneiderlein" ("The Clever Little Tailor," *KHM* 114) and "Das Bürle" ("The Little Farmer," *KHM* 61) are consistently the masculine pronoun *er*. Not so in "Brüderchen und Schwesterchen" ("Little Brother and Little Sister," *KHM* 11), where *es* signifies both children. We therefore might be wont to accept the premise that *Brüderchen's* still sexually immature body would also be grammatically de-sexed. However, this logic does not appear to underlie the instances of the noun of most immediate relevance to the current discussion—namely, *Männchen/Männlein*. Here Grimms' pronominal usage is strikingly discordant except when Rumpelstiltskin is the body in question. Whereas Rumpelstiltskin as *Männchen/Männlein* is invariably *es*, the little men in "Die drei Männlein im Walde" ("The Three Little Men in the Woods," *KHM* 13) and "Das junggeglühte Männlein" ("The Old Man Made Young Again," *KHM* 147) are uniformly referenced with masculine pronouns despite the alternating presence of *Männerchen/Männlein*.<sup>21</sup>

This survey of masculine nouns with diminutive suffixes leads to no definitive answers about the intersection of biological sex and grammatical gender. The addendum *-chen/-lein* could indicate a de-sexed body (*Brüderchen*), but not necessarily (*Schneiderlein*, *Bürle*). Considering the other incidences of *Männchen/Männlein* in the *KHM* moreover muddies the water, for the Grimms were demonstrably inclined to conceive of these bodies as male given their unwavering use of masculine pronouns in these contexts. This means that Rumpelstiltskin's body is not as *Männchen/Männlein* unequivocally *unmanned*, and yet the exceptional occurrence of consistently neuter pronouns leaves the question of sexuality unsettled and open to interpretation. The ensuing ambiguity coincides with Rumpelstiltskin's indeterminate and unnamable identity and complicates any straightforward reading that would consign the character to clear-cut categories of male or female.

In this regard, Rumpelstiltskin resembles the ambiguous bodies at the heart of Margaret R. Yocum's queer analysis of "Allerleirauh" ("All Kinds of Fur," *KHM* 65). Yocum focuses on the ambiguous pronouns and their concurrence with the many disguises donned by the title figure who "appears to others as a male, female, human, spirit-world being, thing, or living entity whose characteristics cannot be discerned" (96). As *Allerleirauh* explores the experience of different genders, sexualities, and hybrid identities signified by shifting pronouns, the character's identity is constantly interrogated ("Who are you?") and subsequently called "weird" and "strange" (93). Rumpelstiltskin, the "really strange little man," also has a questionable identity resistant to masculine/feminine binaries, yet the tale does not, as Yocum's reading of "Allerleirauh" concludes, treat configurations of sex and gender as skins,

masks, disguises (Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 129). Instead, Rumpelstiltskin hovers in a liminal middle ground, oscillating between polarities with an ambiguously defined body and social behaviors which draw from both categories.

The not-quite-masculine character of the ambiguously sexed body finds expression in a gender identity that appears to conceive of itself as female. Rumpelstiltskin engages solely in activities associated with conventional expectations of women: there is baking and brewing, as we overhear during the figure's song and dance, also female arts.

Most notably, there is spinning, which is the "archetypically female employment" and indicator of "diligent, well-ordered womanhood" as Bottigheimer phrases ("Tale Spinners" 143). That women as opposed to men were both destined and doomed to spin finds personification in the three weaving Fates (*Moirai*) of Greek mythology and idiomatic expression in the dictum "Adam hackte das Feld, und Eva spann Wolle" ("Adam worked the field, and Eve spun wool"), whose roots Rölleke dates back to the thirteenth century ("Ein bekannter Spruch" ["A well-known saying"]). In placing a high price on a women's ability to spin, "Rumpelstiltskin" is not unique. By Bottigheimer's count, thirteen tales in the *KHM* implicate spinning, and her contention that it serves as a marker for a girl's marriageability, her character, and the female sex in general is supported by the work of Marianne Rumpf. With the exception of "Rumpelstiltskin," only women work at the wheels. In fact, "The Twelve Huntsman" (*KHM* 67) literally invokes spinning as the test to determine masculinity and femininity, for no man sits at a spinning wheel ("das tut kein Mann") (I, 360). Rumpelstiltskin not only spins as a "well-ordered" woman would, but demonstrates a supreme talent for it.

Rumpelstiltskin also exhibits the overly emotive behavior stereotypically attributed to women, matching the maiden's emotional outbursts of sobbing with eruptions of rage. For her part, the maiden treats Rumpelstiltskin more like a woman or, at least, as distinct from the miller and king. As previously discussed, she approaches Rumpelstiltskin with an agency for speech and defiance unimaginable against the tale's men. Finally, the figure's fervent desire for a child and compassionate concern for human life conforms to social conceptions of women as nurturing souls and mothers. For all we know, parenthood is perhaps Rumpelstiltskin's objective all along—one unfortunately obstructed by biological sex. Though artfully able to labor at the wheel, Rumpelstiltskin is ultimately unable to perform the labor of childbirth due to the presence of male-typical anatomy. Adding insult to injury, the inability of the male genitalia to function properly prohibits the creation of an own child through sexual intercourse or alternate biological route. Rumpelstiltskin's not-quite-masculine sex organs would clarify not only the sexual disinterest in the maiden but the extremes to which the figure resorts to procure progeny.

And yet, extortion was not an inexorable means to an end. Instead, I would argue, it is an outcome engendered and encouraged by the patriarchal structures seeking to suppress the threat represented by Rumpelstiltskin's transgressive body and gender identity. But let me back up. Considering the complex nexus of possible self-identifications created through multitudinous intersections of biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity, we do not have enough textual evidence to assign labels such as intersex, transgendered, gay, and bisexual. Conclusive is a nonbinary otherness, a queer identity ambiguous in definition yet radical in understanding itself as something apart from yet in between the two established categories of sex and gender. As an ambivalent third subjectivity marked as not heteronormative, not binary, and so not easily assimilable into the strictly regulated patriarchal structures, Rumpelstiltskin's uncontainable queerness threatens to unmask the naturalized conventions of gender and acceptable sexualities as unnatural social constructions. As Greenhill perceives in "Fitcher's [Queer] Bird," it potentially "subverts patriarchy, heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity alike," and yet this potential is never truly realized in "Rumpelstiltskin" (147). Unlike the heroine of "Fitcher's [Queer] Bird" whose transgression of normative gender roles is rewarded; Rumpelstiltskin's demise reaffirms rather than subverts the binary status quo. Consequently, whatever nonbinary identity Rumpelstiltskin may be, the heteronormative and patriarchal perspective of the Grimms' tale dictates that it should *not* be. The heteronormative characters are rewarded with happy ends despite shockingly bad conduct, whereas Rumpelstiltskin—who keeps all promises, saves the maiden's life, facilitates her rise to queen, and shows compassion—is put to death, a punishment unjust even by fairy-tale logic.

Where the punishment–reward system typically governing fairy tales might fail, we discern instead the patriarchal prejudices embedded in the story's constitution. Institutional boundaries are policed, but not by overtly deploying masculine characters to neutralize the destabilizing threat. Rather, the tale's patriarchal authorities turn the female and queer subjectivities against each other, constructing their relationship as inherently antagonistic and forcing their conflict. The tale's men directly control the maiden's life under the auspices of normative social expectations and thereby keep her body domesticated and potential for resistance contained. Rumpelstiltskin's attempts to assimilate into society are initiated by way of the already marginalized woman, with whom the figure first seeks an alliance and sensibly so. The maiden's femaleness is oppressed by the patriarchy, Rumpelstiltskin's queerness is suppressed and not even recognized. The tale lays the groundwork for a mutually beneficial coalition sewn together by the common threads of labor and life whereby the woman cannot spin but gives birth, whereas Rumpelstiltskin spins but cannot give birth.

The chiasmic relationship that binds their similar interests yet respects their dissimilar experiences never culminates in a partnership or the sort of nontraditional “kinship system” such that Kay Turner discerns in her queer readings of “Frau Holle” (*KHM* 24) and “Frau Trude” (*KHM* 43) (“Queer Enticements” 51). In the world of what-ifs, Rumpelstiltskin’s queerness could have reorganized social paradigms in advantageous ways for women. Alas, the figure’s claim for social space would seem to come at the maiden’s cost when the talents for spinning and fascination with childbearing compromises the domains conventionally reserved for women. Rumpelstiltskin is resultantly perceived to threaten female subjectivity, not as another male oppressor but a gender-ambiguous interloper. The tale perverts their relationship into a competition with the loser’s life on the line and asks readers to support the female protagonist who suddenly springs to life as figure worth our identification. The passive, weeping woman from the tale’s first half develops the wherewithal to act in the second, albeit within her circumscribed social sphere inside the castle walls and with assistance from the male messenger. It is of course another male figure who truly saves the day by overhearing Rumpelstiltskin’s name. His appearance ensures that heteronormativity wins out and restores binary categories of sex and gender. Although recourse to extortion was not inevitable, it was conceivably the only avenue to parenthood made available for Rumpelstiltskin by the patriarchal mechanisms dictating the storyline.

“Rumpelstiltskin” as queerly read with incoherent and unassimilable expressions of gender and sexuality exposes moments of narrative rupture that make visible those marginalized subjectivities previously neglected or obscured by interpretations predicated on heteronormative assumptions and binary gender. Embodying one such subjectivity, Rumpelstiltskin is neither male nor female, neither oppressor nor object of ridicule, but a person likewise persecuted and pitted against the miller’s daughter to neutralize the threat their unity would present to patriarchal authority. Ultimately, the tale demonstrates how segments of society are systemically disenfranchised and turned against one another rather than against the originary cause of social inequity: the patriarchy itself. The Grimms’ version in German reinforces patriarchal structures but offers an opening for destabilizing and reconfiguring them by suggesting that multiple subjectivities of various sexualities could institute radical change.

To unlock these secrets, we need only contemplate the spectrum of prospective nontraditional familial constellations facilitated by the fulfillment of Rumpelstiltskin’s presumptively good-intentioned wish for offspring, the most obvious of which exist independent of the tale’s masculine elements. For instance, we could imagine Rumpelstiltskin and the queen cohabiting and co-parenting.<sup>22</sup> Maybe Rumpelstiltskin could be a single parent or raise the child in a GLBTQ

relationship with another Rumpelstiltskin. The tale puts forth a bleak assessment for the probability of finding such a partner, however, given Rumpelstiltskin's self-destruction by seizing and ripping the queer body in two. The split could be a desperate measure to fit a nonbinary body into the binary categories sanctioned by society or perhaps an ill-fated effort to create another of oneself; a productive halving would alleviate the alienation of leading a solitary existence in a singular body. Either way, the visceral action destroys Rumpelstiltskin. Yet, the emptiness where the ambiguous body once stood is fraught with the queer potential to revisit and reinterpret a fairy tale whose secrets, though definitively solved, will nevertheless remain relevant for contemporary culture and the queer voices seeking to spin their own narratives within it.

### Notes

1. My use of the term "drag" is not synonymous with the concept of "literary cross-dressing" developed by Tatiana Korneeva to analyze Benedikte Naubert's 1789 fairy-tale novella *Der kurze Mantel* (*The Short Cloak*). As defined by Korneeva, "literary cross-dressing" is "a technique where a male author invents a female narrator, and vice versa" (283). The Grimms ultimately asserted their own intellectual claim to the tales and reinforced gendered dualisms. In this regard, the Grimms' drag performance resembles Madeleine Kahn's "narrative transvestism" whereby authors like Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson invent female narrators to "gain access to a culturally defined female voice and sensibility but run no risk of being trapped in the devalued female realm" (6).
2. Marina Warner cites the collection of stories by Aristides of Miletus from the second century AD (18). She further notes how the "connection of old women's speech and the consolatory, erotic, often fanciful fable appears deeply intertwined in the language itself, and with women's speaking roles." In Romance languages, the "fairy" of fairy tales is etymologically rooted in the Latin feminine word *fata*, meaning "goddess of fate" (18–19).
3. As Julie Koehler elucidates, the Grimms often mentioned anonymous *Märchenomas* or perhaps even invented personages such as "Alte Marie" and the "Marburger Märchenfrau." Whether these women were factual or fictitious is still subject to debate. See for example Hermann Rebel ("Why Not Old Marie?") and Heinz Rölleke ("Die Marburger Märchenfrau"; "Die 'stockhessischen' Märchen der 'Alten Marie'").
4. See Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill's introduction to *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012) for orientation and overview of "queering" and "queerness" as pertaining to GLBTQ scholarship and fairy-tale studies (1–26).
5. The marked disregard for love and happiness coupled with the king's indifference to the life of his potential wife recalls the murderous marriages in tales like "The Robber Bridegroom" (*KHM* 40) and "Fitcher's Bird" (*KHM* 46). Compare to Pauline Greenhill's queer reading of the latter, where the picture of heterosexual matrimony is also "clearly fraught with danger and evil *from [its] onset* ... and makes explicit the false payoff for women that lies in marriage ("Fitcher's [Queer] Bird" 150–51;

original emphasis). Greenhill is later reinforced by Catherine Tosenberger, whose own queer reading of "Fitcher's Bird" echoes many of Greenhill's salient points.

6. The innkeeper's daughter from a village outside Kassel in the brothers' Hessian homeland was a widowed mother with seven children when first discovered by the Grimms in the early 1800s (Dégh 85; Hafstein 27–29; Koehler 189). Being an older woman from the local peasantry, Dorothea Viehmann embodied the *Märchenoma* ideal and was praised in the preface as the "true" source of the compendium's best tales. Of the over 200 tales in the *KHM*, scholarly consensus attributes only a few dozen to Viehmann as based on the Grimms' notes and manuscripts (Koehler 189).
7. Karoline Stahl's tale "The Ungrateful Dwarf" had already been published when selected by the Grimms for the 1837 edition. The brothers renamed the tale "Snow White and Rose Red" (*KHM* 161) and revised the text so that its narrative framework more closely resembled orally transmitted tales. They also claimed Stahl as an anonymous source (Koehler 187). For more on Stahl and other female authors who "collaborated" or consulted with the Grimms, see especially Bacchilega, Jarvis and Blackwell, Koehler, and Korneeva.
8. For a translation of "Rumpelstüncchen," see Zipes, "Spinning with Fate" 46. Rölleke published the German version from the handwritten collection of 1810 in *Die wahren Märchen der Brüder Grimm* (The True Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, 25–26).
9. Though not including "Rumpelstiltskin"/"Rumpelstüncchen," Vanessa Joosen overviews the Ölenberg manuscript, the Grimms' early alterations, and additional secondary literature on the manuscript (100).
10. Heinz Rölleke points to *Gargantua* as the source for the eventual title of "Rumpelstiltskin"; though not a fairy tale, Johann Fischart's parodic text catalogs a game entitled "Rumpele stilt oder der Poppart" (Noisy Man with a Limp or the Goblin; III, 1222, 955).
11. Harry Rand explains his derivation of "crumpled stalk" thusly: "This object, or condition, resolves both word roots. Rumpled, a detumescent penis deflates the stalk; a rumpel[ed] stiltskin describes a soft penis" (41). Rand ties the name to the physical attributes and actions of the character by examining the tale under a psychoanalytic lens that modifies Sigmund Freud's phallic interpretation of the tale. Rumpelstiltskin (the flaccid penis) enters the maiden's chamber (vagina), yet does not consummate the deal of procuring the child because "he just could not perform" (116). The female protagonist correctly guesses the name only after Rumpelstiltskin gives it away by saying it out loud in an instance of "premature ejaculation" (149–50).
12. Specific references and citations will refer to Maria Tatar's translation of "Rumpelstiltskin" (1857) in *Classic Fairy Tales* (125–30).
13. In contrast, Ann Schmiesing's study of the tale's incorrect guesses concludes that Wilhelm likely heightened the maternal interests of the queen with an eye on his readership, an audience unlikely to sympathize with a mother's willingness to bargain away her child.
14. Donald Haase and Roni Natov likewise designate Rumpelstiltskin as a dwarf.
15. For secondary treatment of Kahn's thesis, see Röhrich (271–72).
16. German citations will refer to the final edition: *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm* (1857), 1980 (I, 285–88).

17. The third male character, the messenger, is not represented in table 1 but conforms to the established pattern.
18. Original German (1857): Als nun das **Mädchen** zu ihm gebracht ward, führte er in eine Kammer, die ganz voll Stroh lag, gab **ihr** Rad und Haspel und sprach ... (I, 285). Translation: When the **girl** arrived at the palace, he put **her** [**it**] into a room full of straw, gave **her** a spinning wheel and said ... (126) (bold added).
19. It should be noted that the neuter gender and its pronouns are not acceptable forms for nonbinary Germans today.
20. See Schmiesing (305–06) for the full discussion.
21. That the Grimms seem to assume a masculine body despite the grammatically neuter noun is most strongly suggested in “Die drei **Männlein** im Walde” [“The Three Little Men in the Wood”]: Wie es [das Mädchen] aber draußen war, sprachen die drei **Männerchen** untereinander [...] Da sagte **der erste**....] **Der zweite** sprach.... **Der dritte** sprach.... (I, 93). The masculine noun *Mann* only implied here is explicitly stated when the anaphoric formulation repeats itself later in the text: “Da sprachen die kleinen **Männer** untereinander....” (I, 94) (bold added). *Männchen* occurs twice in “Snow White and Rose Red” to designate what is otherwise called a *Zwerg* (“dwarf,” masculine) and indicated with *er*.
22. Michael Cunningham’s “Little Man” from the collection *A Wild Swan: And Other Tales* postulates such a scenario in its sympathetic retelling from Rumpelstiltskin’s perspective. Discussion of “Little Man” as providing new models of masculinity is found in Brian Attebery’s “Reinventing Masculinity” (122–25). For a queer perspective critiquing the nuclear family, see Jeana Jorgensen’s analysis of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers,” which is a tale that appeared in the 1812 edition but in later editions multiplied into “The Twelve Brothers” (*KHM* 9), “The Seven Ravens” (*KHM* 25), and “The Six Swans” (*KHM* 49).

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