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Your Handsome Prince”: From Fairy-Tale Motif to Modern  
Proverb

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## **“You Have to Kiss a Lot of Frogs (Toads) Before You Meet Your Handsome Prince”**

### **From Fairy-Tale Motif to Modern Proverb**

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During the past twenty years or so, the question concerning the origin of the motif of a princess kissing a frog has been raised in a number of exchanges among literary scholars and folklorists, including Charles C. Doyle, Donald Haase, Maria Tatar, Hans-Jörg Uther, Jack Zipes, and me. The question is, Does the motif come from the Grimm fairy tale “The Frog King” (KHM 1, ATU 440), which may have influenced the modern proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs (or toads) before you meet your handsome prince”? All of us have tried to solve this matter, with my friend Don finally writing to me on February 7, 2012: “It’s still a mystery to me, but the kiss must have occurred first in one of the 19th-century English translations, don’t you think?” This conjecture makes considerable sense in light of the fact that there is no kissing scene in the Grimm tale. This also explains why much of the scholarship on the fairy tale is mute regarding the transformation of the frog into a prince by way of a princess’s kiss (Röhrich, “Das *Froschkönig*-Märchen”; “Mit dem Froschkönig ins Bett”). In fact, a kiss is actually mentioned only in those studies that present modern parodic adaptations of the fairy tale in prose or rhyme, but such compilations do not offer any explanations for where the kiss motif comes from (Mieder, “Modern Anglo-American Variants”; Röhrich, “Der Froschkönig und seine Wandlungen,” “Froschkönig,” “Der Froschkönig: Das erste Märchen der Grimm,” “Der Froschkönig: Rezeption”). In the two encyclopedia articles I have written on “The Frog King” I do mention the infamous kiss. However, the more detailed research shared in the present essay will show that my earlier claim—that in most English versions of the tale the frog is kissed by the

princess—no longer holds (Mieder, “The Frog King,” “Frog King”). Moreover, my current research supports the hypothesis that the motif of the kiss originates in the proverb and not the tale. As it turns out, that kiss is much more complicated than scholars have assumed.

The most comprehensive study of “The Frog King” is Lutz Röhrich’s detailed and richly illustrated book *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen! Das Grimmsche Märchen Nummer Eins in seinen Wandlungen* (Dare to Kiss the Frog! The Grimm Fairy Tale Number One and Its Variants”), whose catchy title must have surprised quite a few of his German readers. After all, they know of no kissing scene in the actual Grimm fairy tale. However, by 1986 the modern American proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince” had become a common loan expression translated into German. And this resulted in a wave of often sexually allusive cartoons, comic strips, slogans, aphorisms, advertisements, and literary reworkings that eventually had their effect on the German fairy tale. Because Röhrich knew that his German readers had started to link the new proverbial wisdom with the traditional fairy tale, thereby replacing the scene of the princess throwing the frog against the wall with her actually kissing it, his provocative title was perfectly reasonable. His remarkable book also gives at least a partial answer to the vexing question of how the kiss motif became associated with the “Frog King” fairy tale.

Röhrich reprints the texts of the fairy tale as it is cited by the Brothers Grimm in their manuscript from 1810, in the first published version of 1812, and the final rendering in the seventh edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of 1857 (Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 76–81). In all accounts the disgusted princess grabs the ugly frog and throws him against the wall, thus liberating herself from his ever more demanding advances. The sexual undertones of this scene in the princess’s bedroom are more obvious in a variant of the tale that the Brothers Grimm published as number 13 in the second volume of their collection in 1815. Here the frog sleeps at her feet at the foot of her bed for two nights in a row. On the third evening the frog sleeps under her pillow, and when the princess wakes up in the morning, a handsome prince stands in front of her. In this case it would take little imagination to think that there actually was a kiss bringing about the transformation. Be that as it may, when the Brothers Grimm brought out the one-volume second edition of their fairy tales in 1819, they decided to keep the wall-throwing variant at the expense of the sexually more explicit variant that in 1822 was relegated to a scholarly volume of notes and variants (Rölleke, 3: 15–19). Because Wilhelm Grimm in particular modified the fairy tales from edition to edition so that they would be more appropriate for children, it is no surprise that the pillow variant was deleted from the Grimms’ canonized collection.

We will never know whether or not the Brothers Grimm did come across a variant of “The Frog King” that contained a kissing scene, but such a rendering might well have been in circulation in their time. Two German folklorists have in fact collected dialect variants that include the kissing scene and that Lutz Röhrich had not come across. In 1891 Ulrich Jahn published the fairy tale “De Koenigin un de Pogg” (The Queen and the Frog) that he had recorded orally from an informant. Here the frog explicitly requests a kiss from the princess, who in desperation covers her eyes with a cloth and puckers up (Jahn, 31–34).<sup>1</sup> Another variant in a Northern German dialect was recorded in 1897 with the title “Der Froschprinz” and published by Siegfried Neumann in 1971. Once again the frog asks the beautiful girl for a kiss, and when she indulges the creature, she finds a handsome man standing in front of her (Neumann, 154–56). And there is a third East Prussian variant, “De Kreet” (The Toad), that Hertha Grudde collected from oral tradition and published in 1931 in which a toad asks for a kiss. Even though the girl thinks she is going to die, she kisses the ugly creature and, following a loud bang, a prince suddenly appears in front of her (Grudde, 54–56; also in Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 98–99).

A fourth Pomeranian variant of “Der Froschkönig,” collected in Poland and published in 1935, is also of much interest because it combines the kissing scene with the wall-throwing scene to a certain degree. Here the princess wants to fetch water from a well for her sick father, but a large frog will not permit it unless she kisses him first. When she is afraid to do so, the frog suggests that she hold a handkerchief in front of her mouth so that she will not feel his cold wetness. Later, when the frog wants to sleep with her, she throws him against the wall, and in the morning she finds her handsome prince (Moser-Rath, 53–56; also in Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 104–107). Finally, there is also a versified and illustrated account, “Die beiden Schwestern” (The Two Sisters), from 1881 by the popular German author and artist Wilhelm Busch. In this case a frog begs a young girl to kiss him. The first kiss tastes just awful, but the green frog turns blue. The second kiss tastes much better, and the frog takes on more colors and becomes larger. The third kiss is accompanied by a loud noise, as though cannons were going off. A large castle appears and a prince stands in front of its door (Busch, 5: 24–33; also in Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 92–94).<sup>2</sup>

What these variants with the kiss show is that fairy-tale scholars should make much more use of other collections. The Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* is but one resource among many. Of course, it is not known whether these variants predate 1810, when Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm registered “The Frog King” for the first time. In fact, Hans Jörg Uther is most likely correct when he observes that the transformation by way of a kiss appears in “Frog King” variants only toward the end of the nineteenth century

(Uther, *Handbuch*, 3). Regardless, one thing is certain: such variants had little, if any, influence on spreading the kiss motif across Germany or even beyond. It is doubtful that German immigrants would have disseminated these variants in the United States, and the kiss motif in the Anglo-American tradition of the fairy tale must have had a different origin. In fact, as I show, the popularity of the kissing scene in Germany today most likely also has nothing to do with these little known variants. Rather, what these early variants from the oral tradition do show is that the fairy tale might well have had a rather sexual beginning that was pushed aside in later periods as social mores changed and the fairy tales' audience changed, from adults to innocent children.

The concept of the transformative power of a kiss is, of course, well documented in mythology and folklore. Jacob Grimm refers to situations where someone "in some disgusting shape, as a snake, dragon, toad or frog, has to be kissed three times" (Grimm, 3: 969), and there are certainly folktales "that relate to transformation of Princes into beasts, and their release through woman's love. . . . It [the animal] can be released on one condition only—that a fair maid shall kiss it on the lips" (Baring-Gould, 74).<sup>3</sup> Lutz Röhrich also stresses the fact that variants other than that of the Brothers Grimm fall much more in line with the so-called animal bridegroom cycle of fairy tales (ATU 425), where the princess must first show love to bring about the animal's transformation—that is, she has to kiss the frog or at least let him sleep next to her for three nights (Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 40). Little wonder, then, that Hans-Jörg Uther in his revised edition of *The Types of International Folktales* (2004) states that "in some variants the frog is disenchanted by means of a kiss, marriage, from being decapitated,<sup>4</sup> etc." (1: 262).

Although German scholars such as Walter Scherf reduce their analysis of "The Frog King" to the wall-throwing scene without any mention of the kiss variants (133–38),<sup>5</sup> others have gone too far in overstating the prevalence of variants where the transformation of the frog comes about as a result of the princess's kiss. I have already admitted to having done so myself in my encyclopedia articles, but D. L. Ashliman commits the same overgeneralization, although his precise comments regarding the kiss versus the wall variants are worth noting:

In many instances the same tale type is told with different conclusions, indicating that individual storytellers have dared to mold stories to their own needs and views instead of always conforming to a received standard. Possibly the best example of this is offered by the various versions of "The Frog King" (A-T 440). In most traditions the princess turns the frog into a prince by kissing him or by sleeping with him for three nights. In other words, she converts him by doing

what *he* wants, by accepting him as he is. A minority position has also been recorded, the first tale in the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Here the princess refuses to allow the frog into her bed, but rather throws him against the wall, apparently intending to kill him. Precisely this self-assertive act, performed in direct violation of her father's will, converts the frog into a prince. (Ashliman, 149)

Bruno Bettelheim, in his psychological interpretation of "The Frog King" from the Brothers Grimm collection, makes a curious and definitely erroneous comment on the wall-throwing scene: "In most versions [the transformation] happens after the frog has spent three nights with her. An original version is even more explicit: the princess must kiss the frog while it lies at her side in bed, and then it takes three weeks of sleeping together until the frog turns into a prince" (287). His footnote refers to the original manuscript of the Grimms from 1810 published in 1927 by Joseph Lefftz, but there is of course no kissing scene mentioned there (see Lefftz, 53–54).

Other generalizations about American versions abound. The text printed for advertising purposes on the dust cover of Röhrich's *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, which I am certain was not written by Röhrich himself, reads: "But for Americans it would be unimaginable that the frog would be thrown against the wall: The wet kiss brings about the transformation, nothing else" [my translation].<sup>6</sup> In light of the fact that isolated German variants of "The Frog King" have a kissing scene, it seems odd to attach any special American notion to it. And yet Maria Tatar, in the annotations to her beautifully illustrated English edition, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (2004), makes a somewhat similar claim: "Anglo-American versions have replaced the act of violence with a kiss, a symbolic gesture that has led to the widely disseminated maxim 'You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince'" (10). And let me add a somewhat earlier observation by David M. Siegel and Susan H. McDaniel to this:

The climactic scene in which the frog is thrown against the wall is changed in many English translations to the princess kissing the frog, resulting in his return to human form. Kissing does not appear in the original Grimm story and is not the version known to German youth. It is, however, the magical moment known best to American children, and the youth of many other Western societies. It is, in fact, an aphorism known to many young women, that one must kiss many frogs to find one's prince. (Siegel and McDaniel, 559)

Although I am delighted that these scholars mention the modern frog proverb, let me also react with the proverbial and somewhat cautionary phrase

“Hold your horses!” Not so fast, for things are usually not quite as simple as they seem.

First of all, it is correct that the German youth hold steadfast to the wall-throwing variant. The Grimm editions on the market include only the wall-throwing variant, and a search through dozens of newer fairy-tale books for children in Germany has not resulted in the discovery of any versions where a kiss takes place!<sup>7</sup> Literary adaptations in the form of poems by such modern German authors as Franz Fühmann, Peter Grosz, Gerhard C. Krischker, Inge Meyer-Dietrich, and Frank Zwillinger all maintain the wall-throwing scene as well,<sup>8</sup> and this is also the case with short prose adaptations by Peter Heisch, Barbara König, Johann Friedrich Konrad, Karin Struck, and Heinrich Wiesner.<sup>9</sup> All of this makes it surprising that the “frog” proverb caught on relatively quickly in Germany.

But it is not true that the kissing scene has become prevalent in the Anglo-American book market. The widely disseminated *Folk-Lore and Fable* (49) anthology, edited by Charles W. Eliot in the Harvard Classics Series and reissued numerous times in the following decades, includes a faithful translation of the Grimm variant with the princess throwing the frog against the wall. The same is true for Brian Alderson’s *Brothers Grimm: Popular Folk Tales* (59) and Jack Zipes’s *Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (4). And Amy Ehrlich, who adapted “The Frog Prince” for American children in her *Random House Book of Fairy Tales* (1985), writes: “No longer could she [the princess] bear it! Catching hold of the frog, she threw him with all her might against the wall. ‘Now, will you be quiet, you ugly frog!’ she screamed” (99). Diane Goode provides an appropriate drawing of the princess hurling the frog against the wall. And wouldn’t you know it, here are the final two stanzas of Gwen Strauss’s poem “The Frog Princess” (1990) retelling the self-liberation of a woman:

Three weeks  
the puffed up thing [the frog]  
slept beside me.  
I dared not move  
or even breathe.  
In the dark, I watched it  
pant, a hollow smudge  
on my pillow.

At last I slept and when I woke  
my hand touched him.  
Shock, then rage  
got me hurling him

towards a wall; that's how I got  
my Prince to explode from frog.  
(26)

Having the frog sleep three times or even for three weeks on the bed brings to mind the variant “Der Froschprinz” (The Frog Prince) that the Grimms included in their collection in 1815 with the slight title change from “The Frog King.”

As it happened, Edgar Taylor, the first English-language translator of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, preferred this variant and included it eight years later in his popular edition of *German Popular Stories* (237–39), thereby spreading a slightly more suggestive version as well as the more appropriate designation of “Frog Prince” among English readers. Martin Sutton has traced the history and importance of this translation, which contains the frog sleeping on the bed of the princess for three nights: “When she opened it [her bedroom door], the frog came in and slept upon her pillow as before till the morning broke: and the third night he did the same; but when the princess awoke on the following morning, she was astonished to see, instead of the frog, a handsome prince gazing on her with the most beautiful eyes that ever were seen, and standing at the head of her bed” (Taylor, 209). Sutton did not need to preoccupy himself with a possible kissing scene in his valuable study “A Prince Transformed: The Grimms’ ‘Froschkönig’ in English” (1990), but the frog sleeping on her pillow might have led Anglo-American readers to “dream up” a kiss between the frog and the princess.<sup>10</sup> Be that as it may, Sutton is absolutely correct in stating at the end that this variant conquered the Anglo-American book market. Iona and Peter Opie’s well-received edition of *The Classic Fairy Tales* (241–44) includes it with the title “The Frog-Prince,” and Berlie Doherty’s close retelling of “The Frog Prince” in her *Classic Fairy Tales* (191–204) for young readers holds onto this “pillow” variant: The third night the princess

put the frog on her snowy-white pillow. . . . The frog just gazed at her and gulped and blinked. And that night the princess dreamed of the deep, dark well and the red roses that trailed over its mossy walls, and woke up to such a strong scent of roses that she thought for a moment she was in the garden. She lay in her bed half awake and half asleep, watching the sun as it rose in the sky like a golden ball. “Princess,” said a quiet voice, and she sat up startled. Standing by her bed was a young man with bright, smiling eyes. (201–202)

The illustrations by Jane Ray add to the charm of this innocent account, where there is once again no sign of any kiss.



So where does this leave us? Clearly, the two Grimm variants of “The Frog King” and “The Frog Prince” in German or English have had no influence on the spread of the frog-kissing motif. The same is true for the few German variants that do include the kissing scene because they never reached any noticeable distribution or had currency in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. And it is simply not true that variants of the fairy tale with a kissing scene have replaced these two Grimm variants.

But I am happy to add a small and significant caveat! Although I have not found any German fairy-tale book of any type that has the kissing scene in “The Frog King”, I have finally, after years of searching, succeeded in locating two American children’s books that do include such a scene. First of all is Linda Yeatman’s retelling of “The Frog Prince” in her *Treasury of Bedtime Stories* (42–45), with illustrations by Hilda Offen. Even though Yeatman uses the title of the pillow variant, the transformation takes place on the first night that the frog spends in the princess’s bedroom:

“Oh, Frog,” she exclaimed, “I suppose now you have come to sleep in my bed. Very well, a promise made has to be kept, my father says. You may sleep on the end of my bed.”

The frog, however, jumped on her pillow and sat there, cold and damp, waiting for the princess to get into bed. Reluctantly she edged under the covers.

“Please kiss me,” then croaked the frog.

Now the princess did not want to break her word, nor did she want to kiss the frog. “If I do it quickly, that should be all right,” she decided. As her lips touched the frog’s smooth skin, she felt it change. Suddenly there before her was a handsome young man. (44)

Bill Adler’s plot summary of “The Frog Prince” in his pedagogical *Tell Me a Fairy Tale: A Parent’s Guide to Telling Magical and Mythical Stories* (49–50) poses a conundrum: “She [the princess] had to allow the frog to eat off her plate, sit by her side, and sleep in her bed! In the beginning, she hated this. But she was won over by the frog’s kindness and gentle manner. One day she kissed the frog. The frog turned into a handsome prince, released by the beautiful princess from a witch’s curse.” What printed version might Adler be summarizing here? Or is he simply letting his imagination run wild, as it were, by thinking of Yeatman’s widely distributed retelling of 1981 but not remembering it in every detail?

In any case, here is my second treasure, namely, “The Frog Prince,” as retold by Wendy Wentworth and charmingly illustrated by Scott Gustafson in their children’s book *Classic Fairy Tales* (94–103).<sup>11</sup> This story is based on Taylor’s translation of the Grimm variant. At first it looks as though the

princess will throw the frog if not against the wall, then at least out of the room, but then she shows her kinder side and decides on her own (!) to kiss the frog:

So she picked up the frog with her finger and thumb, carried him upstairs, and put him in a corner, and when she had lain down in her bed to sleep, he came creeping up to her, saying, "I am tired and want to sleep as much as you. Pick me up, or I will tell your father."

The princess's patience with the frog was nearly at an end. In anger, she picked him up once more and was about to throw him through the doorway. Then, remembering her father's words, she stopped, and dropped him onto the pillow instead.

"Ahh," said the frog, as he snuggled down into the silken sheets, "don't you love sleepovers?"

The princess, pulling the covers over her head, curled up on the farthest edge of the mattress, with her back to the frog—and went to sleep.

And that is how it went for the next three days and nights. The princess did all the things that a princess usually did, but she was always accompanied by the little frog. But a strange thing happened during those three days after the princess had made her promise. The princess actually grew fond of the little frog.

On the evening of the third day, the strangest thing of all happened. Before blowing out the candle as they prepared to go to sleep, the princess leaned over and kissed the frog good-night.

In a twinkling, the frog ceased to be a frog at all. He became a handsome young prince with beautiful, kind eyes. (Wentworth, 100, 102)

This is indeed a marvelous retelling of the old fairy tale without any violence or disgust but simply natural and innocent friendship leading to liberating love.

And since we are dealing with miraculous fairy tales here, it is not surprising that I can list a third relevant version, Wendy Jones's recent retelling of the second Grimm variant, "The Frog Prince," in her *Fairy-Tale Princess* (21–29) with wonderful illustrations by Sue Blackwell:

On the third evening, the frog fell into the soup and that made the princess laugh. She carried him to her bedroom, where she washed and dried him. Then she placed him carefully on her pillow, blew him a kiss and said, "Goodnight."

In the morning, the princess awoke hoping that the frog might still be there. And he was! As the first rays of sunshine came through the window, the frog gave a huge leap to the end of the bed and as he landed, he turned into a handsome prince. (27–28)

This British children's version might not mention a real kiss, but it does show the beginning of true love that can bring about transformations in magic fairy tales with their ever-present hope for a better world. However, let me stress once again: there appear to be no such kissing retellings in German fairy-tale books for children, and the three Anglo-American texts that I have found simply do not justify the generalization that American fairy-tale books in particular contain the kissing scene!

We are back to the ultimate question that has bothered some of my fairy-tale scholar friends and occupied me off and on for at least two decades: Where does the perception of the kissing scene's prominence in America come from, and how did this scenario travel to Germany in the form of a loan translation of the proverb "You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince"? To answer this question in earnest, let me cite a few contextualized references to kissing frogs from the twentieth century that do not necessarily have any direct connection with "The Frog King" or "The Frog Prince." If this first text by Angelo Patri (1925) from a short newspaper account titled "Our Children" at the time of Christmas were to refer to an extant variant of "The Frog Prince," it has yet to be found:

No. I'm not a bit afraid of deceiving children by telling them the jolly old Saint [Santa Claus] is on the way. I've told them the broom stick is a prancing steed who will carry them up to the clouds where the sun children frolic; I've told them the fairies dance on the tops of toad stools; I've shown them the enchanted frog asleep under his stone, waiting for the princess to kiss him. And it's been such fun. And it never cost me the faith of a child yet. Rather it brought it to me. (4)

This strikes me as though Patri, the author, is telling us that he enjoys inventing far-fetched stories for children and is not relying on actual folk narratives.

My second reference is a passage at the beginning of the chapter "The Inner World of Childhood" from Frances G. Wickes's psychological study *The Inner World of Childhood* (1927). Although "The Frog Prince" fairy tale (according to the Taylor translation) is mentioned, the kiss comes into the picture only when the author refers to the tale cycle of "Beauty and the Beast," where kisses do play a role:

Here we may trace the analogy between this type of phantasy and the old fairy tale. The Frog Prince must be taken in the maiden's lap in his form of ugly frog. Beauty must kiss the Beast while he is yet a beast, and recognize the love and kindness that has shone through his beastly outer self. It is only when we feel ourselves accepted as we

really are, our whole selves with both the good and evil, that we can find true release of our feeling selves. Through feeling ourselves acceptable to one whom we love we can also accept ourselves. (174)

The third reference, from the July 3, 1935, issue of the British satirical magazine *Punch*, has the title "The Princess and the Toad" (1935), and it is the third one-page account in a series of "Impossible Stories." It is clearly based on "The Frog King," including references to Dunkelheim, Germany. Although it deals with an utterly homely princess, whose kiss does not transform the ugly toad into a prince, it is clearly an explicit, though invented, variant of the fairy tale in which the kiss plays a major role. But I doubt that this grotesque story is based on one of the German dialect variants of "The Frog King," and I assume that its author, "V. G.," most likely took the fairy tale and combined it with the kiss motif of the animal bridegroom cycle. Here are the most relevant sections (about one-sixth) of this invaluable reference:

Once upon a time there was a Princess who was renowned for her bad looks. She was as plain as a pikestaff, whatever that may be, and no Prince in all the principedoms of the world would look at her. . . .

So, the Princess, though ugly without, was lovely within; and it was therefore not astonishing that when she met a toad in her boudoir, or, as the Germans call it, her *Gelounge*, she gave orders that it should be taken away and cared for and given food, drink and shelter. . . .

[In a dream her Fairy Godmother tells her that the toad is a prince and that to release him from his terrible spell, he must be kissed. So she goes out to find the toad.]

The Princess blanched. Could she kiss him or could she not? . . . "To-day," said the Princess, "I am going to kiss you. . . . I know that you are a prince in disguise and I am determined to release you from your cruel bondage so that you may be free again to go wherever you please. Come here!" . . .

The Princess leant forward . . . and planted a kiss on the toad's forehead. . . . "Rise, Sir Prince!" cried the Princess, curtsying to the floor. . . . Nothing had happened. . . .

The Princess and the toad are still living happily at Dunkelheim. They really get on admirably, as each thinks the other the ugliest creature in the world. (24)

The mythological and folkloric motif of kissing an ugly animal to release a human being from a spell seems to come almost automatically to mind when modern readers and writers are confronted by "The Frog King" or "The Frog Prince" fairy-tale variants.

This can also be seen in a dance drama for schoolchildren that Truda Kaschmann adapted from the Grimm fairy tale in 1937. The description of the little play reads in part:

The frog jumped out of the well, looking very ugly in his mask and cape, and did his frog dance of leaps, jumps, and rolls. . . . When the princess asked the ugly frog to give her the ball he showed her that he wanted a kiss before he returned the golden ball. Her dance of excitement followed. . . . The jester again tried to cheer the princess with a very funny dance. He made two of the maids of waiting kiss the frog, but the frog insisted upon a kiss from the princess! . . . The princess danced cautiously around the well. Although she was very much afraid, she finally kissed the frog courageously. He gave her the golden ball and immediately turned into a charming prince. (Kifer et al., 309–310)

Given the inclusion of motifs not found in known variants of “The Frog Prince” (masks and cape, the dancing, the jester), we might assume that this is a free adaptation and is not taken from an extant kiss variant of the fairy tale. Likewise, I would argue that the following excerpt from Angela Thirkell’s novel *Love Among the Ruins* (1948) is also an intentionally altered recollection of the Grimm fairy tale:

“Do you suppose,” said Clarissa to Captain Belton, “that he is the frog prince?”

She looked towards the frog, who had sunk into a kind of trance, broken from time to time by a lightning flash of his tongue as a mutton chop or a roast quail sailed past him disguised as an insect.

Lucy Marling, remembering her Grimm, drew nearer.

Captain Belton’s mind went back to the day at Holdings when Clarissa found the remains of the gilded ball in the little pool.

“King’s daughter, fairest,” he said to Clarissa, “let me eat from your golden plate and drink from your gold cup.” . . .

“You’ll have to kiss the frog if he is to turn into a prince,” said Leslie. . . .

“Here he is,” said Leslie, who by a masterly flank movement had captured the frog and bore him dripping to land. “Quick, Clarissa.”

Clarissa shrieked in a ladylike way and clung to Captain Belton’s arm. The frog, remembering his grandmother’s warning against allowing human girls to kiss one, as they were apt to turn one into a prince and one could never get back to the green slime of the pond, hit out with his hind legs, described a parabola in the air and dived under the lily pads. (249)

These four texts from the first half of the twentieth century are flights of the imagination and are not based on a traditional folk narrative of a princess kissing an enchanted frog.<sup>12</sup> I also very much doubt that they have had any influence whatsoever on the following two modern literary references. In fact, it might very well be possible that they were not only once again allusions to the kissing of enchanted animals in general but also, and this is more than likely, that they were influenced by the modern proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince.” Here is first of all a frog-kissing scene from Gary Larson’s *There’s a Hair in My Dirt! A Worm’s Story* (1998), albeit without his hilarious drawings.<sup>13</sup>

Harriet thought she saw something move in the tall grass near her feet. Dropping gracefully to her knees, she almost put her hand on a small slug that was wandering by. Recoiling in disgust, she cried, “Stay away from me, you slimy little thing!”

And then, seeing the real object of her desire, she lunged forward and came up with her prize. “Hello, Mr. Frog!” she said, laughing. “Should I kiss you and see if you turn into a prince?”

Fortunately for Harriet, she *didn’t* kiss this little creature, for it wasn’t “Mr. Frog” she was holding, but “Mr. Toad,” and like most toads (and some frogs), this one packed a powerful, sometimes lethal, toxin in its skin.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the slug slime was actually quite harmless, if perhaps a bit gooey.

Kissing out of your species is not really recommended, Son, but if you have to, always choose a gastropod over an amphibian. (n.p.)

The next text comes from the third chapter of E. D. Baker’s juvenile novel *The Frog Princess* (2002), which is in part based on “The Frog Prince,” with the addition of the kissing scene and a wonderful twist where the young woman becomes a frog:

“Gee,” said the frog, looking flustered. I don’t know. All I asked for was a kiss.”

“You want a kiss? Fine! I’ll give you a kiss. I’d rather kiss you than Prince Jorge any day!”

I knelt on the ground at the edge of the pond. With a mighty leap, the frog landed on the ground beside me and puckered his lips.

“Wait just a minute,” I said, drawing back.

The frog looked distressed. “You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

“No, no. it’s just that . . . well, here.” Fumbling in the small pouch attached to the waist of my gown, I found an embroidered

handkerchief. I reached out and gently patted the frog's mouth clean. "You had dried fly feet stuck to your lips," I said, shuddering. "All right, let's try again."

This time the kiss went without a hitch. I leaned down, puckered my lips, and closed my eyes. . . . The frog's lips felt cool and smooth against mine. The sensation wasn't too unpleasant. It was what happened next that took me by surprise [she changes into a frog!]. (27–28)

It is noteworthy that the Walt Disney animated musical fantasy comedy film *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) is loosely based on this novel for young readers, ingraining the act of kissing a frog once again into the minds of millions. Had Walt Disney created an animated film based on "The Frog Prince" some decades ago and added the kissing scene, we could today say that it was that film that spread the kiss motif everywhere. Alas, this was not the case!

But it was also not necessary, because by the third quarter of the twentieth century the frog-kissing motif had become ubiquitous in the United States; people often simply assumed that the motif was present in "The Frog Prince" of the Brothers Grimm as well. Over the years I have collected numerous modern poems that rely on it. My earliest find was Stevie Smith's appropriately titled book *The Best Beast* (1969), which includes the lengthy poem "The Frog Prince" with the following beginning:

I am a frog,  
 I live under a spell,  
 I live at the bottom  
 Of a green well.  
 And here I must wait  
 Until a maiden places me  
 On her pillow,  
 And kisses me.  
 (14)

Such poems as John N. Miller's "Prince Charming" (1969), Anne Sexton's "The Frog Prince" (1971), Phoebe Pettingell's "Frog Prince" (1972), Robert Graves's "The Frog and the Golden Ball" (1975), Robert Pack's "The Frog Prince (A Speculation on Grimm's Fairy Tale)" (1980), Galway Kinnell's "Kissing the Toad" (1980), and others followed suit,<sup>15</sup> with these well-known poets assuming that their modern interpretations of the fairy tale were based on the Brothers Grimm.

This is also the case for cartoonists, who with their clever drawings and pointed captions allude to an *imagined* variant of the fairy tale with the kissing scene, often adding a rather obvious sexual message. The illustrations usually show a beautiful woman (princess) whose kiss does not result in transforming an ugly frog into a handsome man (prince). Even without the images, the following statements make it clear that kisses do not always result in miraculous transformations or bring about the desired change:

"You call that a kiss?" (*Penthouse*, December 1978: 22)

"Thanks for the kiss, but I'm not the prince. A poacher got him." (*Field & Stream*, April 1979: 188)

"Any girl crazy enough to go around kissing frogs deserves what she gets." (*Playboy*, September 1978: 100)

"I started out looking for a prince, but now I just like to kiss frogs."  
(*Good Housekeeping*, January 1980: 186)

"A kiss would work wonders." (greeting card from Pen & Inc., 1981)

"I may kiss an occasional frog but never a turkey." (Short Ribs comic strip, *Bloomington Herald-Telephone*, December 15, 1981: 19)

"You kissed better when you were a frog." (*Good Housekeeping*, September 1984: 198)

"Kiss me! I don't smoke." (antismoking advertisement, *Muskegon Chronicle*, November 11, 1984)

"Do you have any stories where the princess kisses a frog, and he turns into a Beagle?" (Peanuts comic strip, *Burlington Free Press*, January 10, 1992: 5D)

"If you don't kiss him, how're you gonna know if he's a prince?" (Dennis, the Menace cartoon, *Burlington Free Press*, October 22, 2003: 3C)

One could perhaps argue that poets, cartoonists, and copywriters for advertisements and greeting cards might want to reread "The Frog King" or "The Frog Prince" from time to time, but such a request is absurd because the kissing-scene motif has established itself so solidly in the mind-set of the general population in the United States.

In Germany, on the other hand, the "old" Grimm variant has remained much more intact, with the kiss motif appearing in poems, prose, aphorisms, advertisements, headlines, cartoons, and greeting cards only toward the end of the 1970s, clearly through the massive influence of the Anglo-American media. One of the earliest German examples is a political cartoon with the caption "Kiss me, and I change into a handsome Chancellor" (1979), with a later reference being "Now I have already kissed more than a hundred frogs, but a prince was not among them!" (1995).<sup>16</sup> Little wonder, then, that it also did not take



long for the modern American proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince” to get itself established in translation in Germany. But is this relatively new proverb a remnant of “The Frog King” or “The Frog Prince” fairy tales as the Brothers Grimm recorded them? My research would suggest that this is not the case. The proverb most likely is not even based on a retelling of one of these variants that contains the kiss motif, because the earliest such variant found thus far appears only in 1981 in Linda Yeatman’s *Treasury of Bedtime Stories*.

It would rather be my educated conjecture that the proverb, although growing out of the general notion of a beauty having to kiss a beast, emerged in the context of the feminist movement during the 1970s, when women no longer felt it necessary to marry. It should, of course, also be remembered that the proverb’s message is quite different from that of the animal bridegroom fairy-tale cycle. The folk narrative princess is not really out to find a suitable husband as such, but she is surprised to wind up with a prince. The proverb instead argues that men are in general no good or at least that it takes a lot of “disgusting” trials for a woman to find the right man. This is not to say that by now people conceive of a link between the fairy tale and the proverb, including such folklorists as Maria Tatar, Charles C. Doyle, and me. After all, about ten years ago I had stated quite categorically that “this type of unromantic reflection also resulted in the reduction of this particular fairy tale to the new American proverb ‘You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet a prince’ [1978] and its variant ‘Before you meet the handsome prince you have to kiss a lot of toads’ [1990]” (Mieder, “Sprichwörtliche Schwundstufen des Märchens,” 263; and “Fairy-Tale Allusions,” 154). And this is what Charles C. Doyle, Fred R. Shapiro, and I have said about this proverb in our *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012) not much more than a year ago, choosing as our paremiographical lemma the variant “You have to kiss a lot of frogs (toads) to find a prince” followed by a number of contextualized references:

Most often the proverb refers to the difficulty of a woman’s finding suitable male companionship, but it can apply to other kinds of searches as well. The prevalence of the *toads* form of the proverb is surprising, given the fact that the popular tale to which it alludes is nearly always referred to as “The Frog Prince”; perhaps, in the popular mind, toads better exemplify extreme unattractiveness. (89)

From what has been said, I find this latter formulation much more appropriate. In other words, the proverb is not so much a reduction of the fairy tale but rather an imprecise allusion to or reminiscence of it.

Because of space limitations, we could cite only five contextualized references (i.e., where the proverb is quoted as part of a longer text) from between

1976 and 1980, having found the earliest printed variant in the *Coshocton* [Ohio] *Tribune* of February 10, 1976: “Before you meet your handsome prince, you’ll probably have to kiss a lot of toads.” Many more examples of this by now popular proverb from printed sources of all types (including headlines, slogans, cartoons, greeting cards, and T-shirts) can be found in my International Proverb Archives at the University of Vermont, with new references being added constantly, among them also the variants “Before you discover your handsome prince, you have to kiss quite a few toads” (1977), “Before you meet the handsome prince, you’ve gotta kiss a lot of toads” (1979), and “You’ve got to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince!” (1982). German references are included as well, of course, with the proverb in English appearing for the first time in a German collection of graffiti, slogans, and sayings in 1983 as “You must kiss many frogs before you’ll find your prince” (Rauchberger and Harten, 30–31). Another English text was recorded in a collection of German graffiti about twenty years later, attesting to the fact that the English language plays a considerable role in Germany as the international lingua franca: “You’ve got to kiss a lot of toads before you find your prince!” (Beck, 42).

The American proverb was quickly translated into German as well, with the earliest German reference found thus far appearing in a similar collection of one-liners in 1984: “Bevor du deinen Prinzen findest, mußt du eine Menge häßliche Frösche küssen” (Before you find your prince, you have to kiss a lot of ugly frogs; Glismann, no page given). As with any new proverb that establishes itself, the new frog proverb circulates in a number of variants in Germany: “Man muß viele Frösche küssen, bis man einen Prinzen gefunden hat” (One has to kiss many frogs, until one has found a prince; 1986); “Man muß viele Frösche küssen, bevor man einen Prinzen findet” (One has to kiss many frogs, before one finds a prince; 1988); “Bevor du einen Prinzen findest, mußt du viele Frösche küssen” (Before you find a prince, you have to kiss many frogs; 1990); “Wer einen Prinzen sucht, muß viele Frösche küssen” (Anyone who searches for a prince has to kiss many frogs; 1991); “Du musst viele Frösche küssen, bevor ein Prinz dabei ist” (You have to kiss many frogs until a prince is found among them; 2000); “Man muss 1000 Frösche küssen, um einen Prinzen zu finden” (One has to kiss a 1,000 frogs in order to find a prince; 2003); “Du musst schon eine ganz schreckliche Anzahl von Fröschen küssen, bis du endlich einen Prinzen findest!” (You really have to kiss an awful number of frogs until you finally find a prince; 2004); and “Wer einen Prinzen will, muss viele Frösche küssen” (Anyone who wants [to have] a prince, has to kiss many frogs; 2004).<sup>17</sup> A standard German form is slowly but surely developing, and there is no doubt that it belongs to quite a number of proverbs that have been taken over from the stock of American proverbs (see Mieder, *Spruchschlösser (ab)bauen*, 285–340).

In conclusion, then, there is no doubt in my mind that even though a few dialect variants of “The Frog King” fairy tale from the second half of the nineteenth century have a kissing scene, the by now widespread frog-kissing motif entered German culture only during the past three decades by way of the modern American proverb “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your handsome prince.” Because of the incredible influence of the mass media, Germans as well as Americans (also the British, of course) are superimposing the kissing scene onto the old fairy tale, and this is happening even though I have not yet found a German version of the fairy tale that has exchanged the wall-throwing scene with a kiss. As I have shown, in the United States the first rendering of the fairy tale with the kissing scene appeared only five years after the first recording of the proverb! That this change is also happening in Germany can be seen from the caption of a political caricature from 1983 that connects the wall-throwing motif with the kiss motif: “and he [the West German politician Franz Joseph Strauß] changed, without someone having kissed or thrown him against the wall, into a political prince from the East.”<sup>18</sup>

But here is the quintessential reference to prove my point. In a poster catalogue of German caricatures about Germany’s unification, the following explanatory comment was added to a caricature of Chancellor Helmut Kohl from 1991 with the caption “Froschkönig verkehrt” (Frog King reversed): “In the German fairy tale of The Frog King the frog changes into a prince by way of a kiss of the princess. Here [in this caricature], in view of a (female) Michel [German stereotypical figure] (of the East), Chancellor Helmut Kohl turns from a rich prince back to a poor, ugly frog”<sup>19</sup> (Keim, n.p.). There are obviously plenty of Germans who simply think that the kissing scene is in fact in the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm! In fact, when Ulrich Freund asked Germans in 2000 how a frog can be changed into a prince, half of the respondents answered by a kiss, and the other half answered with the traditional thrust against the wall (23). My own ad hoc field research among Germans and Americans in 2012 showed that by now most informants think that it is the kiss by the princess that changes the frog into a prince. This is indeed a remarkable development, because the respondents include specialists!

But for me, as a fairy-tale scholar and paremiologist, all of this shows the cultural might of a proverb that came into being not as the reduction of a fairy tale but at best as an imaginative allusion to one of the most favorite fairy tales of them all. Of course, the prevalence of the kiss motif in most of the modern reminiscences or *Schwundstufen* (remnants) of the fairy tale in literature and the mass media is most likely also a form of a *Selbstberichtigungsprozeß* (process of self-correction) (Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 65; see also Anderson, 3–5, 43–45), that is, a return perhaps to an early original variant of

“The Frog King” fairy tale in which the kiss was the original motif that was pushed aside in later times to deemphasize the natural sexuality of the folk narrative.

### Notes

1. A modern German translation of this dialect text can be found in Volkmann and Freund (5–7).
2. I thank Hans-Jörg Uther for drawing my attention to this text.
3. I owe these two references to Charles Clay Doyle.
4. For a variant with decapitation instead of wall throwing or kissing, see “The Well of the World’s End,” which Joseph Jacobs included in his collection *English Fairy Tales* (150–53). When the frog asks a girl to chop off his head, she refuses, “but when the frog said the words over again, she went and took an axe and chopped off its head, and lo! and behold, there stood before her a handsome young prince” (154). This is clearly a rare and rather gruesome variant.
5. See also the excellent feminist interpretation of this scene by Ursula Heindrichs, 13–15.
6. “Aber für Amerikaner wäre unvorstellbar, daß der Frosch an die Wand geworfen würde: Der feuchte Kuß bringt die Verwandlung, nichts sonst.”
7. I would like to acknowledge the help of Claudia Pecher, whose expertise in fairy tales and children’s literature has not led me to any publications that include the kissing scene in the retelling of “The Frog King” in its entirety.
8. For the poems, see Mieder, *Mädchen, pfeif auf den Prinzen*, 23–27; and Mieder, *Märchen haben kurze Beine*, 116–17 and 121–22.
9. These short prose texts are included in Röhrich, *Wage es, den Frosch zu küssen*, 129–31, 135–39, 142–45, and 149–57. See also Mieder, *Grimmige Märchen*, 54–57 and 59.
10. It is surely of interest that W. A. Clouston in his early article “The Story of ‘The Frog Prince’: Breton Variant and Some Analogues” (1890) includes the tale “Penny Jack” in which the roles are reversed and the transformation is brought about by a kiss. A large frog asks Jack to kiss him (her?) and he obliges twice. When Jack meets the frog the third time at the fountain, the frog is “hideously swollen up with poison; but, when kissed a third time, a spell is broken, and the frog becomes a beautiful princess, who thanks Jack, and tells him that a charm had kept her in the ugly form he had seen in the fountain, until a ‘virgin’ young man of twenty years should kiss her thrice” (494). This is actually an English translation of a French text collected by M. F. M. Luzel from a Breton informant and published in 1888. I see no way for this obscure kissing scene to have had any influence on the frog-kissing motif of today!
11. I owe this significant variant to my library colleague Sarah Paige. I also would like to thank Barbara Lamonda and her colleagues from the interlibrary loan office at the University of Vermont for their help in obtaining several publications.
12. It is with much appreciation that I acknowledge the fact that my good friend Charles C. Doyle discovered these four invaluable references. That we help each other with our various projects is a manifestation of our long-lasting friendship.

13. I owe this reference to my former student Thomas Bartowics.
14. Gary Larson is onto something here, as being in contact with the toxic skin of frogs or toads can lead to hallucinations; see Siegel and McDaniel, 560–62.
15. For these poems and others, see Mieder, *Disenchantments*, 23–41, and Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation*, 13–22.
16. “Küsse mich, und ich verwandle mich in einen wunderschönen Bundeskanzler!” (*Nebelspalter*, June 1979: 10), and “Nun hab ich schon über hundert Frösche geküßt, aber ein Prinz war nicht dabei!” (*Neue Post*, August 24, 1995: 64). For dozens of German texts and illustrations, see Mieder, *Märchen haben kurze Beine*, 115–41. For Anglo-American examples, see Mieder, “Grim Variations,” 92–95.
17. For these references and more, see Mieder, “Aphoristische Schwundstufen des Märchens,” 161–62; and Mieder, *Märchen habe kurze Beine*, 115–41.
18. “Und verwandelte sich, ohne dass ihn jemand geküsst oder an die Wand geschleudert hätte, in einen ostpolitischen Prinzen!” Cited from the Swiss satirical magazine *Nebelspalter*, no. 32 (August 9, 1983): 7.
19. “Im deutschen Märchen vom Froschkönig verwandelt sich der Frosch durch den Kuß der Prinzessin in einen Prinzen. Hier im Angesicht eines (weiblichen) Michels (Ost) wird Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl vom reichen Prinzen wieder zum armen, häßlichen Frosch.”

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