

The Cauld Lad's Cousins-German

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The casual reader coming across “The Cauld Lad o’ Hylton” in Katharine Briggs’s *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* might well be somewhat perplexed. In the first of the two versions presented by Briggs (B, 1, pp. 425-427), the eponymous spirit, aware that plans are afoot to banish him from Hylton Castle, proceeds (my italics) “*to amuse himself* in the dead of night ... with chanting *in a melancholy strain* the following *consolatory* lines: “Wae’s me! Wae’s me!/The acorn is not yet/Grown upon the tree/That’s to grow the wood/That’s to make the cradle/that’s to rock the bairn/That’s to grow a man/That’s to lay me!” In fact, despite this prophecy, he *is* then banished, or rather “paid off”, by being left a gift of clothing that causes him to depart immediately.

The second of Briggs’s two versions follows the same pattern, but lacks the first version’s commentary, which I have already quoted, putting certain words in italics. These deserve further consideration, as does the Cauld Lad’s ditty itself. It is understandable that this is chanted “in a melancholy strain”. Whether or not the Cauld Lad “amuses himself” by chanting the lines, they can hardly be said to be “consolatory”, speaking, as they do, of a far distant and uncertain redemption. But is “redemption” the right word? In the last line of the ditty he speaks of being “laid”. In other words, he here sees himself as a ghost, rather than as the brownie suggested by the gift of a suit of clothes that is calculated to speed his departure.

In short, the Cauld Lad’s ditty seems to fit awkwardly into a framework that is otherwise “normal” – “house spirit banished through gift of clothes”. Briggs herself gives us motif numbers for everything except the Cauld Lad’s mournful lines beginning “Wae’s me”, and it is only on proceeding to Westwood and Simpson’s *The Lore of the Land* that we find a clue to their interpretation, in the notes to “The Cauld Lad o’ Hilton” (pp. 238-239 and 862). That clue is a reference to the German legend entitled “The Frog with a Golden Key”, which is no. 18 in *Folktales of Germany*, edited by Kurt Ranke and translated by Lotte Baumann (pp. 34 and 204). According to the legend, collected in 1923 at Kurtscheid near Neuwied in the Rhineland, an enchanted girl asked a man she meets by chance to free her from the spell she is under. She will appear to him as a frog with a golden key in its mouth. In order to free her, the man is to remove the key with his own mouth. He fails, and the girl cries out in despair: “On this mountain there is an oak tree; an acorn will fall down. Out of this a tree will grow. It will be cut into boards. A cradle will be made out of them. The child that will be rocked in it will deliver me. I have to remain here until then.”

A closely related but much more detailed version from Fränkisch-Crumbach in the central Odenwald, first published in 1853, tells us a little more about the key-motif. A white lady (“weisses Frauchen”) appears to a boy as a snake with a bunch of keys in her mouth. If the boy takes these from her mouth into his own, they will provide access to a treasure that will make them both happy for the rest of their lives. Distracted by strange sights and sounds and the timidity of his father, in whose company he is, the boy fails, and the lady cries out in despair that she cannot now be redeemed until an oak sapling growing in a place she names is big enough to be made into a coffin (Petzoldt, pp. 163-164). More we are not told.

Compare, however, a version recounted about 1920 by Frau Arnold-Gisler of Bürglen in the Swiss canton of Uri (Petzoldt, p. 97), in which a woodcutter at his work is followed all day by a little bird that now sings joyously, and now droops head and wings in sorrow. It reveals that it is a soul in purgatory (“arme Seele”), and is full of sorrow when it thinks of the great lengths of time it has spent in penance. But it is full of joy when it thinks of its imminent redemption. “Behold this pine sapling,” it says. “When it has reached its full height it will be felled and sawn into boards. These will be made into a coffin for an innocent child. When this comes to pass, I shall be redeemed.” The essential optimism of this variant, along with the fact that the human onlooker is not guilty of any omission that might cause the spirit’s suffering to be prolonged, marks it as closer than many counterparts to the legend’s medieval origins (cf. Röhrich and references there).

The coffin we encounter in the two last-summarised variants, rather than the more usual cradle, is also an archaic feature of some significance for the history of the legend, many other modern versions of which have been recorded in germanophone regions. A few have also been recorded in slavophone areas to the east. Elsewhere it is little known. It originates in the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* of the apocryphal gospel according to Nicodemus and the legend of the Holy Rood-Tree (Ranke, 1971, pp. 204-244). In the Motif Index it is D791.1.3, “*The deliverer in the cradle*. Enchanted person can be delivered by child rocked in a cradle made from an oak sapling after it has grown great.” No British representatives are listed against that motif number (Thompson, 2, p. 91), nor does Friedrich Ranke mention any in his groundbreaking essay of 1911 entitled “*Der Erlöser in der Wiege*” (“The Redeemer in the Cradle”). Apart from the German and Slavic representatives referred to above, he mentions one from France and one from Sweden, with none from Denmark (Ranke, 1971, p. 208).

Our concern at this point in this brief note is to point cautiously and with some hesitation to where the Cauld Lad’s lament, mere fragment that it is, might fit into its European context, and indeed, to where it might well not fit. This we do by matching its words as closely as possible to those of a Continental variant or variants. *Pace* the Motif Index, many kinds of tree are mentioned there, pine-trees being for instance popular in southern Germany and the Alps (some twenty examples), and lime trees in eastern Germany (more than fifteen) (Ranke, 1971, p. 235). One might add that some texts do not mention the kind of tree at all. Thus in a Wendish variant from Mühlrose, originally published in 1934, the foreman of a brick works is visited on three nights in succession by a little grey man, whom he is to follow to some unspecified place. The foreman steadfastly refuses, whereupon the little man laments: “Now I must once more wait until a tree has grown from which boards are cut and from these a cradle made. Whoever is rocked in the cradle will be able to redeem me” (Schulenburg, p. 123).

In a dialect version from Tamins in Grisons, recounted in 1942 by a certain Jakob Kieni, the tree is a walnut. A young lad called Teu (Matthew) is late going home one night, and by the Lavoï torrent he sees a spirit called the Lavoï maiden, who asks him to redeem her by remaining there overnight. All kinds of strange and terrible things will happen, but if he is undeterred and holds out till morning, she will be free, and a treasure will be his. He fails to

stand firm, and she bewails the fact that she must now await another redeemer. To the right of the bridge there stands a great walnut tree. From the tree a nut will one day fall. When this becomes a tree and is felled, and when from its wood boards are cut, and from these a cradle is made, then the first innocent child to sleep in it will be able to redeem her. But as for Teu and his kin, they will die out. And so they did, towards the end of the 1870s (Büchli, 2, p. 823).

Our brief excursion into arboreal aspects has so far neglected the oak. In fact, of all the trees mentioned in our legend, the oak features most often, occurring as it does in over forty variants (Ranke, 1971, p. 235). Our search has been far from exhaustive, but sifting through the variants that are to hand and mention oaks, we light on one from the eastern Eifel (Vordereifel), not far, incidentally, from Kurtscheid in the Rhineland, where “The Frog with the Golden Key” was collected. In this variant from the Vordereifel, first published in 1906 (Petzoldt, pp. 96-97; cf. Ranke, 1971, pp. 206-207), a solitary coachman driving along a lonely road in the dark attracts the attention of a jack o’ lantern – a spirit, one might add, that German folklore often associates with souls in purgatory (“arme Seelen”). This hops from one of the coach horses to the next, all the time getting closer to the terrified coachman. As he begins to reach civilisation, he gains courage and begins to slash at it with his whip and to utter imprecations, causing it to depart amidst pitiful lamentations: “If only you had prayed a paternoster, I would have been redeemed. As it is, I must wait until at this spot an acorn is planted. Once it has grown into a tree, this will be felled, and from its wood a cradle will be made. The first boy-child to be laid in the cradle will become a priest, and the first mass taken by this priest will redeem me.” If we ignore the beginning and end of this lament, we find that, like that at the end of “The Frog with the Golden Key”, it has much in common with the mournful words uttered by the Cauld Lad.

Here, to conclude with, is a version ending with a lament that is not unlike those just mentioned. It was collected at Allemühl in the Odenwald, and was first published relatively recently, in 1958 (Assion, Lehr, and Schick, p. 110, no. 194). A man from Allemühl was out at night. At the forest edge he heard someone sneeze, and said “God help you!” as the custom is. Whoever it was in the forest sneezed again, and the man replied as before. When, however, a third sneeze came, the man got angry, and shouted: “May the billy-goat help you!” Then whoever it was in the forest responded: “If you’d replied as you did just now, I would have been redeemed. As it is, I shall have to wait a long, long time, for the sapling has not yet been planted that will grow to be an oak. From its wood a cradle will be made, and the first child to lie in that cradle will be able to redeem me” (cf. Sartori, pp. 1082-1083).

Of course the Cauld Lad’s ditty provides us with little to go on, and ours have been little more than shots in the dark. What we can say is that we have here a fragment that clearly belongs under Motif D791.1.3. Formulaic and hence memorable as the fragment is, it is perhaps a relic of a complete variant, the rest of which has disappeared. Another possibility is that it was “planted” by some learned antiquarian familiar with the relevant Continental traditions. Or perhaps it somehow migrated from Europe as a formula that attached itself to the figure of the Cauld Lad, who has attracted a whole bundle of traditions that need to be disentangled. Indeed, there are some that are still little known, and have certainly not entered

the Motif Index. One of these tells us that the Cauld Lad used to row people across the Wear in a ferry boat tethered, when not in use, near Hylton Castle. Sometimes he would take his passengers only half way and then vanish, leaving them to fend for themselves. Later he would reappear, and return them to where they had first embarked. At this point, he would charge them for the trip (Reynolds, pp. 9-10).

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