Analysis of Rumpelstiltskin

Attention:

“Nein, etwas Lebendes ist mir lieber als alle Schätze der Welt!”

Ladies and gentlemen, that is perhaps my favorite line from any folktale I’ve ever heard.

Literally translated to English, it means “No, some life is dearer to me than all the treasures of the world!”

And it comes from the story of Rumpelstiltskin collected by the brothers Grimm and published in 1812.

Purpose:

Today I want to present you with an analysis of the value system present in the story of Rumpelstiltskin…

Preview:

To do that, I will provide you with a brief summary of the story,

followed by its historical, regional, and cultural contexts.

Next, I’ll discuss previous interpretations of Rumpelstiltskin,

and, finally, I’ll offer my own analysis of the story through a brief discussion of characters and narrative.

Summary:

Rumpelstiltskin is the story of a poor miller’s daughter who’s brought to the king and charged with the task of spinning straw to gold.

But, because she can’t do it, she must ask a gnome who ultimately agrees to help in exchange for her first born child.

When all the straw is spun to gold, the miller’s daughter is married to the king and has a child.

When the gnome returns to claim his prize, she begs for mercy and he allows her three days to guess his name. If she’s able to do that, he promises that she can keep her child.

Employing a spy, she manages to discover his name, and upon hearing it, the gnome (Rumpelstiltskin) tears himself in half.
History:

Although the best known English version of the tale of Rumpelstiltskin comes from the book *German Popular Stories*, published in an 1823 translation of the original German *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812), there are actually many different versions throughout Europe dating back to Johann Fischart’s *Rumpele stilt oder der Poppart* in his translation of Francois Rabelais’ *Gargantua, Geschichtkitterung* published between 1575 and 1590.

So, we’re talking about a folktale that goes back in history at least to the Middle Ages.

Literature:

As with any folktale, there are many previous interpretations of how the events of the story relate to the value system of the culture that produced it.

Annotated texts like Maria Tartar’s *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* provide context and background on particular features of the story while more explicit readings, such as Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*, provide more comprehensive interpretations.

Popular themes for analysis in Rumpelstiltskin include social class, gender, and race.

Transition:

Now, let’s talk about character and narrative…

Character Analysis:

Miller: poor, powerless, and vain (und um sich ein Ansehen zu geben)

King: rich, powerful, and greedy (sein Herz war nur noch Goldgieriger)

Miller’s Daughter: poor, powerless, and beautiful.

Rumpelstiltskin: outside of the economic system (…wie ich an einen höhen Berg um die Walddecke kam wo Fuchs und Has sich gute Nacht sages…), powerful (he can spin straw to gold), and overconfident (Heute back ich, Morgen brau ich…).

Narrative Analysis:

Miller: positive (his daughter becomes queen)

King: positive (he gains a lot of gold and marries a beautiful woman)

Miller’s Daughter: positive (she becomes a queen and keeps her child)

Rumpelstiltskin: negative (he must give up the child and he kills himself)
Conclusion:

What is the value-system of Rumpelstiltskin?

The miller’s daughter is valued by the king for her fictional ability to spin straw to gold. Based on the historical context and the story itself, we can conclude that both “spinning” and “gold” are valued.

Spinning, however, may have additional metaphorical connotations beyond the obvious act of making fabric.

Spinning may represent productivity.

Spinning may represent female fertility.

Gold represents gold, but may also represent life.

Despite their flaws of vanity and greed, the miller and the king are rewarded at the end of the story. The only one who suffers is Rumpelstiltskin. He suffers because…

He’s an outsider in a social context that values the bonds of family and kinship. Furthermore, he represents a direct threat to these values because he seeks the queen’s child for purposes that are uncertain.