

## The Tooth Fairy: Perspectives on Money and Magic

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As an embodiment of magical munificence, the tooth fairy is second only to Santa Claus in the folklore of American childhood. Juvenile belief in the figure is as widespread and durable as belief in old Saint Nick, and the iconic elements of the accompanying ritual—the pillow, the unseen visitor, the transformation of the tooth into money—are as stereotyped in popular culture as the stocking by the chimney or carrots for the reindeer. So firmly does the tooth fairy dominate juvenile fantasy life, in fact, that discovering the “truth” about this shadowy benefactor constitutes a major negation rite in the prepubertal passage out of innocence: to say that someone “still believes in the tooth fairy” defines him as quaintly naive.

But while Santa Claus does not want for scholarly attention, the tooth fairy has been largely neglected. Psychologists (Blair et al., Prentice et al., and Scheibe and Condry) have provided useful data on her place in children’s cognitive development. Rosemary Wells of the Northwestern University dental school has investigated popular representations and conducted a pioneering survey on custom details (1981). “Ethnodontist” William Carter and his colleagues have produced an extremely useful catalogue of dental folklore. The contributions of folklorists, however, have been scant. Leo Kanner’s classic monograph does not mention the custom at all, and later American researchers do so only in passing. Even though American archives find elements of the custom dating from early in this century, no concentrated attempt has yet been made to trace the figure’s genealogy, explain how she grew from folk belief to national custom, or analyze her contemporary functional significance. I will address those three issues here.

### I: An Uncertain Genealogy

Relying on Katharine Briggs’s standard work, Rosemary Wells concludes, by weight of omission, that the dental sprite is “America’s only fairy”—a creature “never referred to in European literature,” and equally absent from Old World folklore (1981). True enough if you are looking for her by name. Seek a “tooth fairy” in European indexes of folklore motifs and you will come away disappointed. Nor are contemporary European children—with the odd exception in

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Americanized Britain—familiar with the figure or the ritual. Wells is certainly right. The stylized ritual of pillow-tooth-and-money is not only American, but of recent vintage; the archives support her reasonable guess of about 1900 as a starting point (1981).

But even though the spoor is faint, European precursors, if not prototypes, do exist. I have been no more successful than Dr. Wells in identifying a clear line of descent, but I have found European customs which suggest the tooth fairy ritual. Let me discuss a few of them briefly in an order of ascending probability.

A. The tooth coin as an example of “fairy gold.” Among the commonly cited attributes of English and Irish fairies are their affluence and accompanying generosity: the pot at the end of the leprechauns’ rainbow and the fairies’ double payment of a debt to humans suggest a broad tradition of philanthropic pixies. With this tradition in mind, Jacqueline Simpson suggests that the tooth fairy exchange may derive from an old British custom of rewarding industrious servant girls with “fairy” coins, left surreptitiously in their shoes as they slept (1973).

The structural similarities are clear enough—domestic hygiene is rewarded by a mater familias acting on behalf of a phantom donor—but one critical element, the lost tooth, is conspicuously absent. In addition, the line of descent from shoe to pillow is inconveniently broken since the tooth fairy doesn’t reach England until the 1960s. This first candidate thus seems more parallel than precursor.

B. The tooth as placation or self-defense. Both Irish and British folk traditions are rich in doleful stories of fairy changelings: healthy infants who are exchanged in their cradles for sickly, inconsolable pixie clones. Although it may seem churlish to suggest so, there are structural links between the tooth fairy ritual and folk practices designed to foil such kidnapers.

Since teeth have long symbolized imperishability, they function worldwide as talismans against evil. Might not the tooth of an innocent child, set near it as it sleeps, be seen both as a kind of “guard-all” and, more complexly, as a surrogate sacrifice—a *pars pro toto* consolation for spirits who seek to snatch the child itself?

This notion, whimsical, as it may seem, is lent credence by two peculiarities of the tooth fairy ritual. One appears in the most common variant of the custom, in which the tooth, instead of being placed beneath the pillow, is set near the bed, in a glass or on a plate, after having been sprinkled with salt. As Ernest Jones’s classic monograph pointed out fifty years ago, salt—probably because of its “magical” preservative properties—has since antiquity symbolized purity, protection, and eternal life. One need not accept Jones’s Freudian conclusion to appreciate the significance of salt as a shield from evil, and indeed it is specifically mentioned by

the Radfords and by Vance Randolph as a bane against malevolent pixies.

The second peculiarity is that other typical pixie banes also suggest the pillowed tooth. Iron has been used for centuries as a means of protection against evil—both in its familiar horseshoe shape and in the form of a cross or a knife. To guard sleeping children against evil fairies, one source suggests a knife under the pillow—and no less an authority than Katherine Briggs makes the link to the tooth fairy explicit when she cites a knife held in the mouth! (1981).

Furthermore, surrogate offerings have been made to water spirits throughout northern Europe and the British Isles, and between at least one water spirit and the tooth fairy there is a linguistically suggestive missing link. I mean Lancashire’s most famous “nursery bogey,” the “cannibal witch,” Jenny Greenteeth.

Typically, this demon lurks in stagnant ponds, awaiting the arrival of careless children, but in spite of—or perhaps because of—her gruesome nature, she is also sometimes enlisted as a way of eliciting obedience (“Go to sleep now or Jenny Greenteeth will get you”) and as a kind of free-floating dental assistant. She serves this latter function because the pond scum known as Lesser Duckweed (*Lemna minor*) is thought to resemble green teeth (Simpson and Vickery). As Rosemary Wells has pointed out, modern dentists enlist the tooth fairy for the same hygienic purpose, and in some families the going rate for a baby tooth is reduced for each cavity the tooth contains (Muro).

C. The Italian “tooth fairy”: Marantega. Throughout most of Italy, the Christmas season benefactor, corresponding to northern Europe’s Saint Nicholas, goes by the name of Befana. Gaunt and toothless, she resembles the stock crone figure of popular legends, yet unlike other witches, she can be kindly to children: it is Befana, the Old One (*La Vecchia* or *La Strega*) who dispenses presents to the deserving at Epiphany.

The Venetian version of this witch is Marantega, and Marantega displays generosity not only at the Christmas season, but also when children lose teeth (Riegler 1920). A shed tooth is placed under the child’s bed or under its pillow, and in the night Marantega—thinking, perhaps, of her own toothlessness—exchanges it for a coin. Again, the lines of descent here are faint, and admittedly the American archives hardly hint at an Italian connection. I mention the Venetian figure, even as a dark horse candidate, because the similarity of detail is so remarkable. There is also a possible linguistic link in that occasionally tooth fairy citations name a “witch” rather than the more conventional fairy.

D. French connections. Similarly isolated, and similarly provocative, parallels appear in French archival material. Recall that Wells has traced the American custom to about the turn of this century; at least two Gallic tooth rituals are roughly contemporary. The first, from 1887, has the child

put the tooth beneath its pillow, and the exchange for money or a toy being accomplished by no less a figure than the Virgin Mary (Daleau). The second, from 1902, has a "good fairy" as the benevolent dental agent, with the reward being not money but candy (Carter et al.).

Chronology favors these French connections, but again the genealogy is hazy. In contemporary French ritual, moreover, it is a mouse, not a fairy, who takes the tooth: in a recent dictionary of French superstitions, the fairy agent is relegated—one might say banished—to uncivilized "Anglo-Saxon" countries (Lasne and Gaultier). And, although French Canadian children do offer their teeth to a *fée* (Des Ruisseaux), it is unclear whether she reached Quebec by way of New York or Le Havre.

E. The tooth fairy and the "tooth mouse". Finally, the folklore figure whom I consider, in spite of surface dissimilarities, to be the best candidate for the title of *Urfee*: the ubiquitous European "tooth mouse."

Shed teeth are offered to animals in virtually every region of Europe, with the commonest recipients of the teeth being crows, birds in general, and rodents. In the most widespread version of the custom, the child places the tooth in a mouse hole, or behind furniture, or near the hearth or oven; and, with a doggerel formula, asks the mouse to exchange the lost tooth for a better one.

Disciples of Max Muller in the 1920s saw this ritual as a survival of offerings to fire gods. They linked the mouse, quite ingeniously, to the sun, and thus explained at one stroke the three commonest methods of tooth disposal: whether the child hurled the tooth into the air, threw it into the fire, or offered it to a mouse, the common element was sun worship (Lindsay). In more recent psychoanalytical interpretations, the mouse becomes a phallic symbol, the surrender ritual an act of compensation, both mirroring and dramatically resolving the Oedipal fantasy (Lewis and Russell).

As charmingly provocative as such readings may be, I would suggest, *pace* Occam, that the obvious utility of the mouse is homeopathic. Whatever they may signify metaphorically, mice in fact are small rodents with great incisors and the good sense to nest in warm, dark places. One surrenders milk teeth to these rodents in the hopes of getting better, that is rodentlike, teeth in return. The logic is preserved, though inverted, in the companion belief that you should never leave your fallen teeth where a dog, or a pig, might come upon them—unless you want dogs' or pigs' teeth in return.

At first glance, the candidacy of the tooth mouse seems less solid than that of Jenny Greenteeth, the Virgin Mary or Marantega. But for three reasons I prefer this to the others. First, the range of the custom. The shilling in the shoe, Jenny Greenteeth, Marantega, even the French Virgin—all appear locally, isolated. The tooth mouse, on the other hand, ranges from

the Baltic to the Mediterranean, and also makes frequent appearances in both Americas (Svanberg and Rooth). The sheer body of evidence allows for numerous intersections—on both sides of the Atlantic—where the mouse could have, in effect, sprouted wings.

Second, there are hints in exchange formulas that hard molars and hard cash can be confused. In most formulas, the child asks the mouse for a "better" tooth, and sometimes for a "tooth of iron." Occasionally, however, he demands a more *valuable* tooth—one made of silver or gold (Svanberg and Rooth). From iron tooth to gold tooth to gold itself does require only a modest leap of logic.

Third, not only is there evidence, as we have seen, of the switch from mouse to fairy in 19th century France, but there is also what Carter lucidly calls a "credible mechanism" for explaining the shift. That mechanism, identified in Francois Loux's fascinating *L'Oare et la Dent*, is a popular fairy tale, "La Bonne Petite Souris," written by Madame D'Aulnoy at the close of the 18th century. In this tale, a nameless "good queen," imprisoned by a nameless "bad king," befriends a mouse which is impressed with her kindness. The creature turns out to be a fairy, and she not only frees the queen from her imprisonment, but also knocks out the wicked king's teeth, hides under his pillow to torment him, and eventually has him assassinated by his palace guard. A 1928 translation of the D'Aulnoy story depicts the fairy quite explicitly as a smiling rodent—with wings!

Does this prove that the tooth fairy was once a mouse? No. But, within range, chronology, and that "credible mechanism" on its side, it's the best candidate I have found. It's interesting to note that three modern children's authors seem to agree. A 1976 "history" of the tooth fairy uses the same mouse-to-fairy format as D'Aulnoy; in Lucy Bate's popular *Little Rabbit's Loose Tooth*, the fairy is a rabbit with wings; and in Stephen Kroll's *Loose Tooth*, the children and the fairy (that is, their parents) are bats. Perhaps the collective authorial consciousness is finally picking up on D'Aulnoy's insight.

## II. From Folk Belief to National Custom

The tooth fairy makes isolated appearances in the United States as early as the turn of this century, but she only becomes nationally established after the Second World War. The term "tooth fairy" is first indexed in popular literature in 1949, when a Lee Rogow story by that title appeared in *Collier's* magazine. Rosemary Wells takes this as evidence that the custom was "ingrained" by that time; given the sparseness of citations from before the war, it's as likely that the story spurred, not just registered, a developing tradition. In both North America and Great Britain, "ingraining" only really happens in the 1960s; the best evidence for this is Wells's own observation

that the first encyclopedia mention of the custom was Alan Dundes's 1979 article in *World Book*.

But why the 1950s? Why this sudden spurt to prominence of a long-practiced but obscure folk tradition? Or, to phrase it as a query about genre: What transforms the tooth fairy, around midcentury, from a relatively obscure folk belief into a national custom? Let me suggest three factors.

1. Postwar affluence. In my informal "field research" for this paper, I asked my father-in-law, who grew up in rural Arkansas in the 1920s and 1930s, whether his family had practiced the tooth fairy custom. "We were too poor," he told me. "Nickles were hard to come by. You certainly wouldn't waste one on a tooth."

It's a telling comment, and I think representative. Jacqueline Simpson has suggested that before the 1960s in Great Britain, wealthy households probably knew the custom, but poorer ones could not afford to (Hand). That is a useful speculation about America too. It seems likely that the greater availability of discretionary income during the postwar boom may have contributed to the spread of the custom.

2. The Cult of the Child. Childhood, as Philippe Aries and others have reminded us, is a relatively recent invention, and the notion of catering to one's child is recenter still. That notion enjoyed a heyday in the years just following World War II, when James Dean was canonized for being misunderstood, and all "good" parents knew (because Dr. Spock told them so) that their proper role was to serve their children's needs, among them the need to fantasize and to feel loved. The dominance of this new, child-centered view of the family certainly made the 1950s fertile ground for what Wells calls "a symbolic ritual of replacement, born in sympathy, propelled in love and sustained in warmth and care" (Dent).

3. Media encouragement. In an instructive survey of European fairy traces in the *New World*, Wayland Hand calls publication an increasingly significant factor in the consolidation of folk traditions in modern times. The history of the Grimm brothers' tales, not to mention the dime novelists' Pecos Bill or the Santa created by Clement Moore and Thomas Nast, bear out his observation. With regard to the tooth fairy, it may also be underlined by Madame D'Aulnoy's tale and, in the 1950s, by Lee Rogow's short story in *Collier's*.

More significant than these print examples, however, is the example of the movies. I do not think it is merely coincidental that the decade immediately preceding the proliferation of the tooth fairy custom saw the release of four feature films in which female pixies play a central role. In 1939, American children saw Billie Barnes, as a shimmering Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, teach Judy Garland the true meaning of home. A year later, in the Disney version of Carlo Collodi's tale, the "Blue Fairy" taught Pinocchio about truth. In 1950, Disney's Cinderella was rewarded for her

selflessness by a "fairy godmother" who, like, D'Aulnoy's character, works magic with mice. And in 1953, the most pixielike of all our fairies, Tinker Bell, was saved from death by the eternal boy, Peter Pan. All of these films reached massive audiences. It does not stretch logic too far, I think, to suggest that their influence may have helped prepare the ground—in concert with Dr. Spock and the gross national product—for the "nationalizing" of the custom (Carter et al.).

### III. From Magic to Money

Functional analyses of the tooth fairy custom, up to now, have been provided only by developmental psychologists, interested in the meaning for the individual child of this quintessentially domestic ritual. The tooth exchange has been seen, as a consequence, as a psychodrama of fantasy management or of condolence (Blair et al., Prentice et al., Scheibe and Condry, and Wells 1981). To my knowledge no one has explained the social utility of the ritual, or noted how with precise theatricality it validates specific economic behavior.

That the ritual "models" economic behavior, however, is clear from the psychological evidence. Clinical students of the custom agree that it is supervising parents, not peers, who introduce the belief to young children (Balir et al. and Prentice et al.). The tooth fairy is an adult creation. Given the "lesson" of the ritual, this is not surprising. For the economic message of the custom is an adult and modern one: "Produce and Sell." This message may be contrasted to the infantile (one might say "primitive") message "Produce and Hoard."

In a primitive, which is to say pre-exchange economy, one may legitimately expect reward for production, and for accumulation of product. We see this static economics in ancient Scandinavia, where children were rewarded when they *cut* a tooth. The Nordic "tooth fee" functions appropriately in a hoarding economy, where the mere possession of goods is a sign of value.

The market system, on the other hand, cannot function without the continual surrender of hoarded goods: free exchange is its lifeblood. And in such an economy the pithy quaintness of a "tooth for a tooth," even if it's iron (or gold) for bone, *must* give way ultimately to cash payment. That is the logic of both monetization and the free market, and it is the social lesson that parents teach (albeit unconsciously) when they direct their charges to place their teeth under the pillow.

Moreover, the tooth fairy custom, like any other free-market ritual, is constantly affected by broad market forces. Nothing so clearly shows how the ritual models behavior than the fact of tooth exchange inflation. Between 1900 and 1975, Rosemary Wells has found, the "going rate" for a lost

tooth rose from 12 to 85 cents (Wells 1983). Granted, that's still a relatively modest sum, but if the ritual were as innocent as is commonly supposed—if it were merely a vestige of sacrifice or an enactment of parental concern—then a nominal price would point the lesson quite as well. That the fairy's bill consistently rises along with the consumer price index suggests an integration of the custom into domestic economy that belies its common presentation as a "caring" game.

Or rather, it is a caring game—managed by parents who understand the importance, in a market economy, that their kids know the value of a buck. Wells has it right: The exchange ritual, she admits, has a "mercenary aura." It reflects a "reassuring image of good capitalist values" (Muro 45)

Thus magic itself—whose essence is transformation—is itself transformed. We move from an image of the generic "good" fairy, turning bone teeth into nominal nickles, toward an image of the "tooth" fairy (now a specialist), predictably exchanging molars at the market rate. With the encouragement of mortgage-carrying parents, children now grow more than mere teeth: they "grow" the system by putting their products on the market.

The process of market cooption has long been understood with regard to everybody's sugar daddy, the American Santa. The tooth fairy holds a shorter and less visible pedigree than that saint of the second fiscal quarter, but her economic function, in today's society, differs only in degree. In a sense, I suppose, she may even be seen as more rationalized, less personal, than the Christmas sprite. Santa, after all, still brings presents, while the tooth fairy translates everything into cash. The message of Santa Claus may be seen as a relatively humanized one: "being good" will get you Barbies or a Rambo doll. The tooth fairy's message is more direct: anything—even your own body—can, if you work it right, be turned to gold. That, in its final, reductive wisdom, is precisely the necessary magic of free enterprise.

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