

## Introduction to “The Princess and the Handmirror”

We are born undiscovered, and become who we are while we see ourselves through others’ eyes as well as our own.

Since all humans are imperfect, the reflection we see of ourselves can never be exact.

Everyone who is important in our lives sees us, but also has wishes and expectations about who we should be and how we should interact with them. And because the reflection has the power to change the one who gazes at it, those expectations become a part of our true natures.

Neither do we see ourselves fully, for although we experience ourselves from the inside, that experience is filtered through the lens of our own wishes and expectations about who we are. And those wishes also become a part of us.

Each of us becomes a riddle wrapped in an enigma, ever searching for our true natures, through the successive approximations that we call our lives.

In our dreams at night, we experience a Looking Glass version, a reflection in our trickster natures.

To live our dreams, to fully know and become who we are, may require that we dream our real life and then interpret that dream.

I performed an experiment in self-knowledge that I would like to share with you today. I turned my life into a fable. I have no doubt that this story is of more interest to me than it possibly could be to anyone else. Although it may help somewhat to imagine the protagonist as Miss Piggy.

So if you find yourself zoning out while I read it, please use that time productively to imagine your own story as a mythic tale. What beautiful sights would you see? What genies would grant you wishes? Which monsters would you overcome, and how would you do it?

And now, “The Princess and the Handmirror.”

## The Princess and the Handmirror

Once upon a time, there was once a young Princess whose favorite possession was a handmirror. On the frame of the mirror, the back and the handle, were fantastic swirling blue and purple designs. On the front, the mirror itself glistened like the moon reflected in a pool. When the Princess looked in the mirror, she could see that her face was as smooth as glass.

One day the Forbidding Queen asked to see the Princess' mirror. The Princess felt very proud as she handed it to her. But the Queen was careless and dropped the mirror. "Oops!" was all she said, as the Princess collected the glass pieces and ran, angry and afraid, from the castle.

That afternoon, the Princess did the best she could to reassemble her mirror, but she was very young. In a clearing near the castle she found a tree with beads of sap she could use to glue the bits together. But when the Princess looked in the mirror her face was all askew, with her ears and her nose mixed up and her eyes pulled together. When it grew dark and she could no longer see herself, the Princess returned to the castle with her head bowed low.

Over the years the Princess would glance at her mirror now and then, but what she saw there was not herself, and she quickly put it away. And then when she was seventeen and old enough to seek her fortune, the Princess saddled her white horse Loki and put her broken mirror in the saddlebag. She rode off without a backward glance at the castle or the Forbidding Queen.

In a clearing not far from the castle, the Princess met the Grey Knight. "Good Princess, I challenge you to battle," said the Knight. "If you win, you may have my jewels, which will enable you to live in the style of a Princess. If I best, you, you may still have these jewels, but you will do as I say."

"Sir Knight, I accept your challenge," said the Princess, who, after all, was dreadfully young. The battle was over quickly, and the Princess found herself sweeping the Knight's castle floor and sleeping in the cinders of the fireplace, with no Fairy Godmother in sight. One day the Gray Knight picked up her mirror and tried to gaze at himself, but the mirror seemed to leap from his hand and cracked on the floor.

"Oops!" said the Knight.

"You have broken my mirror!" said the Princess.

"Of what consequence is that? You are who I say you are: a reflection of me."

And so the Princess rose from her chimney at midnight, put her jewels around her neck, saddled Loki, and slipped out the gate.

But as she left his castle, the Knight opened an upstairs window and called after her, "Guard your jewels well, you will meet someone who will try to take them from you."

When she stopped in the forest to rebuild her mirror, her ears and nose were in the right place but her eyes were still askew. After a time, saddened, she put the mirror away.

On she rode through days and months, until she met the She-Cyclops, who grabbed the Princess' jewels away from her and used them as play baubles.

"She-Cyclops!" shouted the Princess up to the very tall monster. "You are no Cyclops! You have two eyes, you just keep one of them shut!"

And the She-Cyclops roared and grabbed the Princess' mirror, and threw it on the ground.

"Oops!" yelled the monster, so loudly that the trees shook. And when the mirror broke, it broke into such tiny pieces that they swirled in the air and lodged in the Princess' skin, and she picked up the mirror frame as she ran and ran into the woods, leaving behind her jewels.

"Your horse! I want your horse too!" bellowed the She-Cyclops, but Loki was already running to the Princess, who leaped onto his back and kept riding, with the bits of mirror still lodged in her skin. And the tiniest pieces became the glue that held the rest together. And the Princess looked in the mirror and said, "This looks a little like me. Better." But still she put the mirror away.

At last the Princess came to a bridge where lived a fat old Troll with a long white beard. He wore an ornate coat in the manner of Frank Baum, and waited all day for ladies to cross his bridge, which was built from the bones of maidens.

You may not pass, he said, until you allow me to look into your mirror.

Very well then, said the Princess, I will not cross this bridge. I will find a way around.

Take enough detours, said the Troll, and the detours become your life.

Well. Alright, said the Princess, you may take one look.

And the Troll bowed low, and took the mirror from her hand. "Oops," he said, opening his fingers, and the mirror fell and broke on a rock. He picked up the wooden mirror frame.

"Ah but you see," said the Troll, "how I polish the blue and purple swirls on the back of your mirror. You didn't need those glass bits, did you?"

And as she watched the Troll polish the back of the mirror, so skillfully that the swirls seemed to move under his hand, the Princess entered a trance, in which she loved the Troll with all her heart, and cared nothing for the broken glass at his feet.

But then she happened to glance at the glass. For just a moment one shard reflected the light of the sun into her eyes. Startled, she was blinded for a second and then knew what to do. She grabbed the broken pieces of mirror and took the wooden frame from the Troll. And then the Princess quickly tied herself onto her horse and slapped his hindquarters to make him run across the bridge. Her ears filled with the sound of maiden bones crunching under horse's hooves, and the tears that streamed back from her eyes. When her moment of sanity ended she and Loki were far on the other side. She still cried for

the Troll, even while she knew her love to be the love of a mouse for a cat. And she used her tears as glue to reassemble her mirror. But she did not bother to gaze at the mirror, lest she be disappointed.

The Princess had many more adventures, and overcame many monsters with the crooked light of her cracked mirror. One day, tired and hungry, she came to a cozy cottage in the woods and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” cried a voice. “You are welcome here, my dear. After all, this is your home.”

Puzzled, the Princess walked into the room, and found it cozy, with a warm fire, and pictures on the walls that looked familiar.

“I do not have a home,” said the Princess, “and if I did, it would be a castle.”

The woman who stood in the room gave her a merry smile, and said, “Let’s sit together and have some tea, and you can show me that mirror of yours.”

“May I hold it as I show it to you?”

“Of course,” said the woman. “It is your mirror.”

And so they sat together with the tea things in front of them, and gazed at the glass. And the woman said, “It can never be exactly as it was before it was broken, but this last time, you put the mirror together in your own image. The seams in the glass match the wrinkles in your face.”

“Wrinkles! Do I have wrinkles?”

“Oh yes, my dear. A long time passed while you and your mirror took your journey.”

“But it didn’t feel like a journey! It just felt like a bunch of detours.”

“Well, as the Troll said: If you take enough detours, the detours become your life.”

“You know the Troll?”

“Of course. And the Grey Knight, and the She-Cyclops. And I know you, and that you have changed from a Princess to a Queen.”

“If I am an old and wrinkled Queen, and my adventures ended, does that mean my life is over?”

“No. Not at all. Because the stories of the adventures are the stories of your life. And now it is time to tell the tale. And the telling will be the greatest of adventures.”

The Princess – no, the Queen - needed to think about that. And so she set the mirror down next to the tea things, with the glass side down to protect it. And the blue and purple design swirled until it seemed to say, “Once upon a time...”