**Meister Eckhart and the Fisherman’s Wife:**

**Exploring the Mystical Implications of a Fairy Tale Through Apogesis**

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**Abstract:** This essay provides a mystical interpretation of the medieval German fairy tale, ‘The Fisherman and His Wife.’ I seek to show how a deeper understanding of the tale can be achieved through the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart. I begin by recounting the tale, before moving to a section titled Initial Reflections in which I discuss the tale in the context of categorisation, history, variations, translation, and most importantly interpretation. Rather than interpret the tale through either *exegesis* or *eisegesis*, I seek to explain and apply a unique hermeneutic method situated between the two that I call *apogesis*. In the final section titled Eckhartian Implications, I use my method to explore how the tale implies key themes in Eckhart’s work. I conclude the essay by focusing on the significance of the tale’s dramatic peripety and startling dénouement in the light of Eckhartian thought.

**Keywords:** Meister Eckhart,mystical theology, Märchen, fairy tale, interpretation.

More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul, less than All cannot satisfy Man.

William Blake

**Introduction**

This essay brings together a medieval German fairy tale and the medieval German mystical theology of Meister Eckhart. When I first read, ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ in the complete fairy tales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, I was immediately struck by the more subtle and profound implications of the tale, and how these appeared to parallel critical themes in the thought of Eckhart. Responding to that powerful impression, this essay seeks to explore how this is the case. In the process, I am forced to confront the suitability of established hermeneutic methods to achieve this aim, and as a result devise and apply a new method that better serves my purpose. Using the tale as an analogy that helpfully illustrates Eckhart’s thought, I am simultaneously able to evoke deeper meanings implicit within the tale. Given the shared medieval German context as well as the corresponding subject matter, I am confident that my reading is not simply a contrived projection. However, as I will argue, this does not suggest that the meanings I draw from the tale were actually intended by the author(s). Nevertheless, the poetic and symbolic nature of such a tale appears to be designed to leave an impression that resonates long after the story-teller has gone or the book has been put down. Here, where it penetrates the heart and soul, deeper meanings invite to be fathomed and brought to the surface.

**The Fairy Tale**

The *Märchen* (fairy tale, wonder tale, or folk tale) called, ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ (Low German: *Von dem Fischer un syner Fr*u), begins by informing us that the couple live in a pigsty near the sea. This lowly aspect of their life is significant to the whole story. One day the husband (whose name we never learn) is out fishing, and sits patiently with his rod watching the clear calm water. It would seem that his patience is also of key significance. It manifests itself in his general approach to life, but also in the way he responds to his wife’s incessant demands. Suddenly he gets a bite and his line goes down very far below. When he pulls it up, he sees that he has caught a large Flounder. This would explain why the line dropped so deeply, because flounders are demersal fish, which means they live on the sea floor.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This being a fairy tale, the Flounder can speak and says to the Fisherman: ‘Hark, you Fisherman, I pray you, let me live, I am no Flounder really, but an enchanted prince. What good will it do you to kill me? I should not be good to eat, put me in the water again, and let me go.’[[2]](#endnote-2) We get a sense of the Fisherman’s good character when in reply he says: ‘Come, there is no need for so many words about it – a fish that can talk I should certainly let go, anyhow.’[[3]](#endnote-3) The Fisherman puts the Flounder back into the water, and it returns to the bottom leaving a long streak of blood behind it as it does so.

On return, the Fisherman’s wife asks if he brought any catch home. This draws our attention to why he went fishing. It is not a leisure activity – the husband and wife need to eat. He tells her that he has no fish with him, but that he did catch a Flounder who said he was an enchanted prince and that he let him go. The wife is troubled by this, and asks her husband if he wished for anything before returning the Flounder to the sea. The husband is puzzled and cannot understand what he would wish for. This tells us a little more about the Fisherman’s nature – that he is content with his lot. But the wife reminds him that they live in a smelly, disgusting pigsty. This being so, he might have wished for a little hut for them to live in. She tells him to go back and call the Flounder, to explain that they want a little hut. The wife is sure that the Flounder will give them what they want because after all the Fisherman caught him and let him go again. The Fisherman does not want to go, but he also does not want to oppose his wife – so he goes. As a form of typology, there is perhaps a superficial echo of Adam and Eve here.[[4]](#endnote-4)

If we recall, when the Fisherman was first beside the water, it was calm and clear. And when he lets the Flounder go, it leaves a long streak of blood as it swims back to the bottom. This time, as he approaches the sea the surface is not as smooth as it was before, but is also a green and yellow colour. Standing beside the sea, the Fisherman calls out:

Flounder, flounder in the sea,

Come, I pray thee, here to me;

For my wife, good Ilsabil,

Wills not as I’d have her will.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Flounder swims to the Fisherman and asks him what his wife wants. He explains that she thinks he should have wished for something given that he caught the Flounder and then let him go. She does not like living in a pigsty anymore, and wants to live in a hut. The Flounder tells him to go, and adds that: ‘she has it already.’[[6]](#endnote-6)

When the Fisherman returns home, he sees that the sty has gone and his wife is sitting on a bench before the door of a hut.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ilsabil is pleased, and holding her husband by the hand, she takes him inside to show how better their home is now. We learn that the hut has a small porch, a parlour, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a pantry. It has fine furniture, as well as beautiful objects made of tin and brass. It also has a yard with chickens and ducks, and a garden with flowers and fruit. Ilsabil points out how nice it all is. Her husband agrees, and states that they will now live quite contented, to which Ilsabil tellingly replies: ‘We will think about that.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

Ilsabil is indeed content for a week or two, but then she says to her husband: ‘Hark you, husband, this hut is far too small for us, and the garden and yard are little; the Flounder might just as well have given us a larger house. I should like to live in a great stone castle; go to the Flounder, and tell him to give us a castle.’[[9]](#endnote-9) The Fisherman disagrees with his wife, and tells her that the hut is good enough. He sees no reason why they need to live in a castle. In disbelief, she tells him to go back to the Flounder, but the husband refuses. The Flounder has given them a hut, and he does not want to go back to him so soon as it might make him angry. But Ilsabil commands him to go, and so again he goes with a heavy heart because he does not want to oppose his wife.

The Fisherman fears the Flounder’s anger, but throughout the tale there is no sign of this. The Flounder simply gives the wife what she asks for. But while the Flounder does not get angry, with each request we see that there is a change in the environment around the Fisherman, as though it is the surroundings of the natural world that are increasingly upset. It is startling how this old story captures our own predicament. The insatiable wants and demands of the Fisherman’s wife are like those of humanity in general, and we can see how this is continuously altering the balance upon which the world naturally relies and drastically affecting the environment.

Again, the Fisherman calls the Flounder exactly as before. Here we see evidence of the patterns and repetitions that emerge in folk tales. This is not only part of the tradition that sees story-tellers refrain from adding unnecessary designs to the craft, but also gives the hearers certain incidents and sentences they have remembered and want repeated.[[10]](#endnote-10) This time, when the Fisherman approaches the sea, it is purple, dark blue, grey, and also thick like soup. Again, the Flounder appears and asks the Fisherman what his wife wants. Afraid, he tells her about the great stone castle, and the Flounder replies: ‘Go back, then, she is standing before the door.’[[11]](#endnote-11)

Another recognisable pattern emerges in the narrative, for each time the Fisherman returns his wife takes him by the hand and shows him what they have gained. Naturally, everything about the castle is better than the hut. The porch is replaced by a great hall paved with marble. There are servants to open the doors, the furniture is gold, there are wall hangings, carpets, and chandeliers. They have the best food and wine. In a court-yard there are stables for horses and cows, as well as carriages. There is a garden with flowers and fruit trees, while a huge park contains hares and deer. Ilsabil remarks how beautiful it all is. Her husband agrees and says that in a castle they can be content. To which Ilsabil replies: ‘We will consider about that … and sleep upon it.’[[12]](#endnote-12) Along with the pattern of temporary satisfaction, Ilsabil also grows increasingly discontent and continually demands more to make her happy.

When she wakes, Ilsabil looks from her bed over the vast land surrounding the castle. Her husband is beside her and just rousing when she pokes him in the side with her elbow. She tells him to get up and to look at the beautiful country that they could be the King of. However, the husband has no desire to be King. She tells him that if he will not be King, then she will. Again, she tells him to go back to the Flounder in order to make her King. The husband really does not want to go back and ask this of the Flounder, but Ilsabil is insistent and tells him to go this instant. The Fisherman is dejected, and thinks to himself: ‘It is not right; it is not right.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Still, he goes back.

This time the sea is a dark grey colour, it is swelling from below, and has a rotting smell to it. Again, the Flounder appears and grants the wish. Consequently, Ilsabil is King. The Fisherman returns to a palace with guards at the door, there are soldiers with trumpets and drums, while everything inside is made from either marble or gold. In a splendid court Ilsabil sits on a tall throne of gold and diamonds, she is wearing a gold crown, and holding a gold sceptre with her hands covered in jewels. To her sides are many ladies in waiting.

The husband confirms to Ilsabil that she is now King. He looks at her for some time before saying: ‘And now that you are King, let all else be, now we will wish for nothing more.’[[14]](#endnote-14) But Ilsabil answers him in an impatient state of desperation. She knows she is King, but she must be Emperor too. The husband protests that the Flounder cannot make her Emperor, but Ilsabil reminds him that she is King and he is nothing but her husband. He is forced to go and as he does so he anxiously thinks to himself: ‘It will not end well; it will not end well! Emperor is too shameless! The Flounder will at last be tired out.’[[15]](#endnote-15)

When the husband reaches the sea again, it is black and thick like tar, and on account of boiling like a cauldron, it throws up bubbles from below. A fierce wind blows upon the surface, and the water starts to congeal like blood. The Fisherman is afraid. Still, the Flounder appears as before, asks what the wife wants, and then makes her Emperor. When the Fisherman returns, everything is even grander, richer, and greater than before. There are barons, counts, dukes, and princes in the court. The husband eyes his wife again for some time before asking her to be content as Emperor. However, she asks him why is he still standing there? Now she is Emperor, her husband must go to the Flounder because she will be Pope too. In vain the husband complains and explains that she cannot be Pope for there is only one in all Christendom. Ilsabil says this is nonsense. He is to go back to the Flounder.

Reluctantly, the Fisherman leaves for the sea. On the way he feels weak and faint. His body shakes and shivers. His legs tremble with fear. When he arrives, a violent wind is blowing over all the land and leaves fall from the trees. Clouds race past in the sky, and it grows dark. The water has risen and in its state of boiling crashes upon the shore. On the horizon, ships are tossed like corks on the waves. They fire their cannons in distress. Although there is a small patch of blue in the sky, on either side of this it is made red by intense storms. Fearful, the Fisherman stands by the sea and like all the times before calls the Flounder. When he appears, the Fisherman explains that his wife wants to be Pope. Yet again the wish is granted.

On return, all is grander, richer, and greater than before. Now there is a huge church surrounded by palaces. There are crowds of people. Inside, the church is lit with thousands of candles. Ilsabil is clad in gold and sits on an even higher throne. She is wearing three golden crowns. There is ecclesiastical splendour everywhere, while emperors and kings fall to their knees to kiss the shoe of Ilsabil. The Fisherman looks at his wife who is now Pope, and she shines like the sun. He pleads with her that now she is Pope she should let well alone. He tells her that she cannot be anything greater now. Ilsabil is stiff and shows little sign of life, but nevertheless she replies: ‘I will consider about that.’[[16]](#endnote-16) They go to bed, but she lays awake all night consumed with greed and wondering what else she might be.

In the morning, Ilsabil sits up in bed and sees through the window the red of dawn and the bright sun rising. Then she says: ‘Cannot I, too, order the sun and moon to rise?’[[17]](#endnote-17) Her exhausted husband is asleep, but she pokes him in the ribs and says: ‘Wake up! Go to the Flounder, for I wish to be even as God is.’[[18]](#endnote-18) Half asleep, the husband is so astonished that he falls out of bed. He rubs his eyes and cannot believe his ears. Ilsabil tells him that unless she can command the sun and moon to rise, she will not know what it is to be happy. As she says this, there is such a dreadful look in her eye that it makes her husband shudder. He falls to his knees and begs her to reconsider and remain as Pope, for what she desires is not possible. This enrages Ilsabil. With wild hair she tears open her bodice and kicks her husband. She then screams at him to go immediately. Terrified, he puts on his trousers and runs.

Outside, a storm rages just as Ilsabil had done, and the Fisherman struggles to stay on his feet. Houses and trees fall, mountains quake, and great rocks tumble into the sea. The sky is black. It thunders and lightens. The sea is also black and comes in with waves as high as towers. The Fisherman cries out to the Flounder, but cannot hear his own words above the howling wind. The Flounder asks what his wife wants now, and the Fisherman says that she wants to be as God is. Hearing this the Flounder tells the Fisherman to go to her, and that he will find her once again in the pigsty. The tale ends by saying that they are still living there to this day.

**Initial Reflections**

The story above appears as number 19 in what is commonly called in English, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. The original title of the collection in German is, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which translates as, *Nursery and Household Tales* or *Children’s and Household Tales*. The Finnish folklorist, Antti Aarne, arranged the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm into an index of types. Here is a summary of the index:

1. *Animal Tales*: Wild Animals; Wild Animals and Domestic; Man and Wild Animals; Domestic Animals; Birds; Fish; Other Animals and Objects.
2. *Ordinary Folk Tales*: (A) *Tales of Magic*: Supernatural Adversaries; Supernatural or Enchanted Husband (Wife) or Other Relatives; Supernatural Tasks; Supernatural helpers; Magic Objects; Supernatural power or Knowledge; Other Tales of the Supernatural; (B) *Religious Tales*; (C) *Novelle* (*Romantic Tales*).
3. *Jokes and Anecdotes*: Numskull Stories; Stories about Married Couples; Stories about a Woman (Girl); Stories about a Man (Boy); the Clever Man; Lucky Accidents; the Stupid Man; Tales of Lying.[[19]](#endnote-19)

If we look at this index, we can see that ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ potentially matches a number of types. However, our story is only listed as belonging to the category, ‘Supernatural Helpers.’ This perhaps indicates the reductive limitations of such an index. The catalogue by Aarne was later revised and expanded by the American folklorist, Stith Thompson, and then again by the German folklorist, Hans-Jörg Uther. As a result, the catalogue of types is now known as the ATU index and widely used by folklorists. The index further divides tales into sections with a corresponding number. Our fairy tale is numbered 555, and is classified as being about *dissatisfaction and greed*.

The story can also be seen as an anti-fairy tale (*Antimärchen*), because it does not conclude with a ‘happy ever after.’[[20]](#endnote-20) Instead, it can be seen to end tragically in that the husband and wife are sent back to the pigsty. However, my own interpretation from the perspective of Eckhart’s mystical theology seeks to challenge that view. On one hand, it is not simply the case that the world is nasty and cruel rather than magical and wonderful, for the protagonists have brought their tragic situation upon themselves. If not for their dissatisfaction and greed, it could have been different for they were always granted what they wished for. On the other hand, from a mystical perspective, that the couple live in a pigsty need not be interpreted as tragic.

‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ can also be listed in an index that seeks to establish its historical origins. The following chronological classification is said to be adapted from the one supplied by Friedrich von der Leyen in his edition of *Nursery and Household Tales*:

1. *Primitive Belief*.
2. *Hero Sagas from the Period of the Migrations*.
3. *Minstrel Work of the Tenth Century*.
4. *Chivalrous Work of the Middle Ages*.
5. *Oriental Influences*.
6. *Animal Stories*.
7. *Work of the Townsmen of the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*.
8. *From the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*.
9. *Jokes and Anecdotes*.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Our story, is understood to belong to number 4 in the above list, and is typically referred to as a German fairy tale. Given, then, that it is German and originated in the Middle Ages, there is the intriguing (almost likely) possibility that it was known by Eckhart. Referring to this period in his ‘Folklorist Commentary’, Joseph Campbell writes:

There seems to have prevailed a comparative poverty of invention until the twelfth century, when the matter of India and the matter of Ireland found their ways to the fields of Europe. This was the period of the Crusades and the Chivalrous Romance, the former opening Europe wide to the civilization of the Orient, the latter conjuring from the realm of Celtic faërie a wild wonderworld of princesses enchanted in sleep, castle solitary in the forest adventurous, dragons steaming in rimy caverns, Merlin-magic, Morgan le Fay, cackling hags transmuted by a kiss into the damsel of the world. Europe inherited nearly everything of its fairyland from the imagination of the Celt.[[22]](#endnote-22)

We can also note the following three points about the tale: The first is that there are discrepancies of interpretation in some versions. The second is that there are variants of the tale that are very similar to each other. And third, that there have been later reworkings of the tale. For example, regarding discrepancies, D. L. Ashliman explains in his work, *The Fisherman’s Wife and Other Folktales about Dissatisfaction and Greed*, thatthe Brothers Grimm obtained a manuscript of the story from the German painter, Philipp Otto Runge in 1809. They then published it in the first edition of *Nursery and Household Tales* in 1812. However, Johann Gustav Büsching had already published a version of Runge’s manuscript a few months earlier in *Volkssagen, Märchen und Legenden* that contained discrepancies.[[23]](#endnote-23) In terms of variants, the ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ is similar to other Aarne-Thompson type 555 tales. For example, Ashliman refers to the German ‘Hanns Dudeldee’, the Russian ‘The Old Man, His Wife, and the Fish’, the Japanese ‘The Stonecutter’, and the Indian ‘The Bullock’s Balls.’[[24]](#endnote-24) In her, *British Folk Tales and Legends: A Sampler*, Karen Briggs also mentions a British variant, titled, ‘The Old Woman Who Lived in a Vinegar Bottle.’[[25]](#endnote-25) There is also an Icelandic variant called, ‘My Old Woman Must Be Paid.’[[26]](#endnote-26) Finally, the French writer Édouard Laboulaye adapted an Estonian tale called, ‘The Fairy Crawfish.’[[27]](#endnote-27)

In terms of variation or discrepancy, the very same tale can also contain differences on account of translation. For example, the translation I am using says the couple live in a ‘pigsty.’ However, interestingly, Ashliman says:

The couple’s original place of residence, in the Grimm’s Low German, is called a *Pissputt,* also spelled *Pisputt*. Büsching was more cautious, using the truncated spelling *P--pot*). Most translators give this unambiguously earthy word a figurative meaning in English. Thus, one sees “ditch” (Edgar Taylor, 1823); “miserable hovel” (Margaret Hunt, 1884); “hovel” (Lucy Crane, 1886); “miserable little hovel” (Alice Lucas, 1902); “pig-stye” (James Stern, 1944); “chamber pot” (Francis P. Magoun, Jr., and Alexander H. Krappe, 1960); “pigsty” (Ralph Manheim, 1977); and “dirty hovel” (Jack Zipes, 1987). Although tempted to take the low road and follow the original text literally, I have followed instead the more respectable crowd and called a *Pissputt* a “filthy shack.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

The original place of residence, then, is in English a pisspot, and arguably tells us something about the character of both the storyteller and the intended audience. It might also be argued that sanitising this in the name of respectability takes something away from the raw impact and even bawdy humour of the original meaning. It becomes apparent that audience reception inevitably determines what language is used in a tale. This would have most likely left the Brothers Grimm with dilemmas. For example, it is known that although the collection of tales published by the brothers were titled, *Nursery and Household Tales*, the stories when first published were not deemed suitable for children by the public. As a result, the brothers made many changes to the content of the stories and the scholarly information about them so that they would appear more acceptable. It seems that this did indeed make later editions more popular. However, Padraic Colum draws attention to the issue of language in the tales from another angle, namely, dialect:

In High German, the Brothers Grimm noted, a story gained in clearness (that is, clearness for the reader), but it “lost in flavor, and no longer had such a firm hold of the kernel of the thing signified.” They were wise enough not to put all their collection in High German; frequently they retained the dialect of the district where they heard the stories.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Interestingly, in the preface to his translation of Eckhart’s works, Maurice O’Connell Walshe writes:

Eckhart’s vernacular language is the Middle High German of the early 14th century, which is perhaps slightly further removed from the present-day German than is Chaucer’s English from our own. His native dialect was that of Thuringia, but he must have considerably modified his linguistic forms during his extensive travels.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Walshe adds that the Eckhart manuscripts translated by scholars, such as, Franz Pfeiffer and Josef Quint, contain ‘a wide variety of dialectical forms’[[31]](#endnote-31), which have tended to be standardised. Of particular interest here, then, is that Eckhart’s work, particularly his sermons, uses a vernacular language like the fairy tales gathered by the Brothers Grimm.

From translation I move to the question of interpretation. With regard to Eckhart’s sermons and treatises, interpretation is a rich area of study and a particular focus of this journal. And I will duly focus on interpretation here regarding Eckhart’s mystical theology. I am using the analogous form of a fairy tale to highlight and explain some of Eckhart’s ideas and arguments. This, I believe, holds up to scrutiny, given that Eckhart’s language (especially in the vernacular) is extremely poetic and symbolic in its interpretation of scripture. Consider, for example, the many analogies he employs in his work. It would be quite easy to imagine Eckhart himself using this fairy tale to illustrate his own thinking. There is obviously a depth to Eckhart’s thought that a fairy tale like our own can help to expound and elucidate.

However, can it work the other way round? That is to say, does the fairy tale we are discussing actually contain the depth of meaning we find in Eckhart’s work? If it is read as doing so, is this a case of either exegesis or eisegesis? I would suggest that it is neither one nor the other, and that this essay is a tentative exploration to test that theory. On the one hand, then, I do not believe that in my reading I am simply *leading out* a deliberate mystical meaning contained in the text. Put another way, it is not certain that the tale was ever meant to be understood in such a manner. Conversely, my reading is not simply taking mystical ideas that I am then *leading into* the text. That is, I do not think I am simply forcing alien meanings upon the text that do not belong to it. What, then, is the alternative?

Instead, I seek a third way of seeking, perhaps situated somewhere between the two, or a fusion of both, that is guided by a more playful *implication*. This might in turn suggest very subtle differences of meaning in the interpretation of interpretation. So rather than interpreting what is *actually* hidden in the text, I am less prescriptively interpreting what is *potentially* hidden in the text. Accordingly, I contend that the fairy tale ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’ can be inferred to involve a mystical meaning on the basis of what is explicitly stated. Put another way, the text can be understood mystically because such a meaning is entangled in (so as to be associated with and closely connected to) the more evident and superficial meaning. Using the prefix -apo (meaning from, away, away from, off from), I will call this ‘apogesis’, in the sense that my reading is a *leading from* the text. Consider, for example, how the same prefix is used in the word ‘apocrypha’ to refer to things hidden away. To echo Michelangelo, I see apogesis as akin to finding the statue hidden in the stone by a creative method. And to borrow from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneut as mediating agent, fuses the fecund horizons of, for example, past tradition and present culture, to dynamically effect a future meaning. All in all, I am attempting to fuse two horizons in the form of a fairy tale and Eckhart’s mystical theology. But still, can a mystical meaning be read from such a tale?

Campbell asserts that unlike myth, the fairy tale is a form of entertainment. It might borrow motifs from myth, but the story teller’s craft: ‘… is never precisely of the mythological order. His productions have to be judged, at last, not as science, sociology, psychology, or metaphysics, but as art.’[[32]](#endnote-32) This might again reflect the character of the story teller and the intended audience. And in both instances, this is *folk*. However, I assert that a deeper meaning can be implied beneath the explicit surface level, which does not necessarily exclude the arguably more superficial folk meaning. In this way, the tale is perhaps akin to a stained-glass window. Concerning the tale, I am seeking the spirit behind the letter; spirit that is only found in the letter. Again, Campbell writes:

The Indian, Celtic, Arabian, and Medieval masters of narrative to whom we owe the most exquisite of our European tales were the practioners of a craft that strove to reveal through mortal things the brilliance of eternal forms. The quality of their work was not a naturalistical, but a spiritual precision, and their power, “Instructive Wonder.” To us there may seem to be little distinction between such a craft and metaphysics; for we have enlarged the connotation of our term, “metaphysical,” to include everything untranslatable into positivistic discourse. But peoples of the pre-modern type, whether gothic, oriental, archaic, totemistic, or primitive, typically took for granted the operation of a transcendent energy in the forms of space and time. It was required of every artist, no matter what his craft, that his product should show its sign of the spirit, as well as serve its mechanical end. The function of the craft of the tale, therefore, was not simply to fill the vacant hour, but to fill it with symbolic fare. And since symbolization is the characteristic pleasure of the human mind, the fascination of the tale increased in proportion to the richness of its symbolic content.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Accordingly, then, emboldened by such a notion, below I will seek to elicit a mystical dimension of meaning in, ‘The Fisherman and His Wife.’

**Eckhartian Implications**

We are told at the beginning of the fairy tale that the husband and wife live in a pisspot, which our translation refers to as a pigsty. We also get an inkling of the good nature of the Fisherman in that he releases the Flounder he has caught. After he does so and returns to his wife, we learn that they have different opinions about their living conditions. The husband is quite content, which is made evident by his being puzzled that the wife wishes for something better. And for most of us, her wish appears reasonable. They appear to live in abject poverty. The word ‘poverty’ refers to the state of being poor, while the word ‘poor’ means to be possessed of little. But is this necessarily a negative thing?

In his, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, the Stoic and Epicurean philosopher, Seneca, tells Lucilius, the then procurator of Sicily: ‘You should know that anything in excess of nature’s wants is a mere ‘extra’ and is not necessary.’[[34]](#endnote-34) He adds that you simply eat when you are hungry and drink when you are thirsty. It does not matter what you eat or drink. The stomach does not need entertaining, but filling. What, I wonder, would Seneca make of fine-dining or haute-cuisine? The hungry and thirsty, he says, think only of being fed and watered. For if they are starving and thirsty, they despise nothing. They look to the end only, for all else is superfluous. And these things, he continues, as the wise understand, are the riches of nature. In response, Seneca imagines Lucilius will say that this is more akin to poverty than wealth. But Seneca asks whether we can call a person who is not in want of anything poor? Furthermore, he says:

Would you rather have much, or enough? He who has much desires more – a proof that he has not yet acquired enough; but he who has enough has attained that which never fell to the rich man's lot – a stopping-point.[[35]](#endnote-35)

If we recall, when the Fisherman tells the Flounder that his wife wants a hut, the Flounder tells him to go and adds that ‘she has it already.’ On a superficial level we can assume that this means he has instantly granted what the wife wants. However, on a deeper more subtle level, we might read ‘she has it already’ to mean that she already has all she needs. From the point of view of both the husband and wife, this last point might seem rather harsh. But from the perspective of Eckhart’s mystical theology (and Seneca’s Stoicism), it makes perfect sense. This is because Eckhart’s focus is always on God’s perspective, and one area of attention that accords with this is God’s will. In contrast, the central theme of our fairy tale is that Ilsabil, the Fisherman’s wife, wants her *own* will. Eckhart is consistently unwavering in his view when it comes to this issue:

We deafen God day and night with our cries, ‘Lord, thy will be done’, and when God’s will *is* done, we are angry, which is wrong. If our will is God’s will, that is good, but if God’s will is our will, that is far better. If your will is God’s will, then if you are sick you will not desire, against God’s will, to be better – though you *would* wish it were God’s will that you were better. And when things went wrong with you, you would wish it were God’s will that they should go right. But when God’s will is *your* will, then if you are sick: ‘In God’s name!’, if your friend dies: ‘in God’s name!’[[36]](#endnote-36)

We can discern from our fairy tale that Ilsabil is not happy with her lot although it is God’s will. It is the case that on the one hand her will is not God’s will. This is because her will is to live in a hut, while it is God’s will that she lives in a pigsty. On the other hand, it is also the case that God’s will is not her will. She does not want to live in a pigsty. If her will was God’s will, then although she would wish to live in a hut, she would accept God’s will that she lives in a pigsty. In another sermon, Eckhart elaborates on this topic:

... if God did not want what I wanted, then I should want what He does. Some people want to have their own way in all things: that is bad, there is a fault in that. Those others are a little better who truly want what God wants and don’t want anything against His will, but if they should fall sick they would wish it were God’s will that they should be better. These people, then, would rather that God willed according to their will than that they should will according to His. This may be condoned, but it is not right. The just have no will at all: whatever God wills, it is all one to them, however great the hardship.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Eckhart tells us that those who are pleased with God’s will, will prefer what God gives to them over what they might prefer themselves. So, if God gives them poverty, as He has done with the husband and wife, they will prefer this to anything else. However, Eckhart anticipates a concern we might have and says: ‘Now you might want to ask, “How do I know it is God’s will?” I reply: “If it were *not* God’s will for a single instant, it would not be – it *must* always be His will”.’[[38]](#endnote-38) Eckhart then adds:

Now if you really enjoyed the taste of God’s will, you would be just as if you were in heaven, whatever happened or did not happen to you. It serves them right who want anything other than God’s will, for they are always in sorrow and distress. They often suffer violence and oppression, and are always in trouble. And that is just as it should be, for they act as if they were to sell God, as Judas did. They love God for the sake of something else that is not God. And if they get something they love, they do not bother about God. Whether it is contemplation or rapture or whatever you welcome, whatever is created, is not God.[[39]](#endnote-39)

The issue here is that God is given up and sold for whatever it is they desire instead. This then becomes what they love instead of God. But this fact provides an indication as to why Ilsabil is greedy on the one hand and never satisfied on the other. In another sermon, Eckhart explains:

*In* God’s will, all things are, and are something, they are pleasing to God and perfect: outside of God’s will, all things are naught; they are not pleasing to God and are imperfect. A man should never pray for any transitory thing: but if he would pray for anything, he should pray for God’s will alone and nothing else, and then he gets everything. If he prays for anything else, he will get nothing. In God there is nothing but one and one is indivisible, and whoever takes anything but one, that is a part, not one. “God is one” (Gal. 3:20), and if a man seeks or expects anything more, that is not God but a fraction. Whether it is repose or knowledge or whatever else but God’s will alone, that is for its own sake and so is nothing. But if a man seeks God’s will alone, whatever flows from that or is revealed by that he may take as a gift from God without ever looking or considering whether it is by nature or grace or whence it comes or in what wise: he need only care about that.[[40]](#endnote-40)

It is a constant theme in Eckhart’s work that people mistakenly turn to corporeality, multiplicity, and temporality.[[41]](#endnote-41) They want this and that at the expense of God. Being at the expense of God, this and that are nothing because only God truly is. But if they wanted God alone who is one, then they would have everything. In another sermon, Eckhart explains:

I once said, ‘If a man seeks nothing, to whom should he complain if he finds nothing?’ He has found what he was seeking. Whoever seeks or aims at *something* is seeking and aiming at nothing, and he who prays for something will get nothing. But he who seeks nothing and aims at nothing but God alone, to him God will reveal and give everything He has concealed in his divine heart, so that it becomes his own just as it is God’s own, neither less nor more, provided his aim is God alone, without ‘means’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Note here, then, that although Ilsabil always gets what she wants, in Eckhart’s view it always amounts to nothing. Consequently, whatever she wishes for and receives will always leave her dissatisfied. Unlike his wife, the Fisherman is content and does not wish for more. Furthermore, he always disagrees with his wife’s wishes. Thus, each time he calls the Flounder, he says that his wife wills not as he would have her will. And although the Fisherman fears making the Flounder angry, the latter always grants what Ilsabil wills. Throughout the tale, Ilsabil’s wishes trouble the Fisherman. If we recall, on one occasion when the Fisherman is going back to the Flounder, he says: ‘It is not right; it is not right!’ While on another he says: ‘It will not end well; it will not end well.’ In all of these respects, for Eckhart, the Fisherman would represent what he calls the just:

The just are they that take everything alike from God no matter what it is, big or little, nice or nasty, all the same, no less and no more, one thing like another. If you count one thing more than another, that is not the right way. You must go right out of self-will.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Like Ilsabil, the Fisherman is poor in a material sense. However, unlike Ilsabil, he is also poor in spirit. Recall the quotation above that ends: ‘The just have no will at all: whatever God wills, it is all one to them, however great the hardship.’[[44]](#endnote-44) Yet it is this wanting nothing, according to Eckhart’s thinking above, that can provide the Fisherman with all that is God’s own, namely, everything. Eckhart tells us: ‘If a man is to be poor of will, he must will and desire as little as he willed and desired when he was not. And this is the way for a man to be poor by not wanting.’[[45]](#endnote-45) But even this is not sufficient for Eckhart, for he continues:

I have said before, the poor man is not he who wants to fulfil the will of God but he who lives in such a way as to be free of his own will and of God’s will, as he was when he was not. Of this poverty we declare that it is the *highest* poverty. Secondly, we have said that he is a poor man who does not know of the working of God within him. He who stands as free of knowledge and understanding as God stands of all things, has the *purest* poverty. But the third is the *straitest* poverty, of which we shall now speak: that is when a man *has* nothing.[[46]](#endnote-46)

When Eckhart refers to this third and most extreme poverty and says that a man *has* nothing, we might initially think that this would equate to the Fisherman and his wife not even having a pigsty to live in. They must in effect become homeless. There is a case for this interpretation if we think of the universal significance of religious mendicants. Take Jesus, for example, who says that the foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but that he has nowhere to lay his head. However, Eckhart’s straitest poverty is even more extreme than this, for he consistently asserts that it is crucial (and this is a key part of his mysticism) that we even give up our self:

I have often said, and eminent authorities say it too, that a man should be so free of all things and all works, both inward and outward, that he may be a proper abode for God where God can work. Now we shall say something else. If it is the case that a man is free of all creatures, of God and of self, and if it is still the case that God finds a place *in him* to work, then we declare that as long as this is *in* that man, he is not poor with the strictest poverty. For it is not God’s intention in His works that a man should have a place within himself for God to work in: for poverty of spirit means being so free of God and all his works, that God, if He wishes to work in the soul, is Himself the place where He works – and this He gladly does. For, if He finds a man *so* poor, then God performs His own work, and that man is passive to God within him, and God is His own place of work, being a worker in Himself. It is just there, in *this* poverty, that man enters into that eternal essence that once he was, that he is now and evermore shall remain.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Eckhart makes it clear that God is not like anything or anyone. This being so, we have to become nothing in order to become what God is. This is why Eckhart tells us: ‘A man must be slain and wholly dead, devoid of self and wholly without likeness, like to none, and then he is really God-like. For it is God’s character, His nature, to be peerless and like no man.’[[48]](#endnote-48) This can only happen by becoming *one* with God. Through total self-abnegation no likeness or image remains, so that the naked being of God as the Godhead is revealed.[[49]](#endnote-49) In this way, says Eckhart, God and all He has becomes my own, that is, *mine*, for whatever belongs to God now belongs to him:

God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from His own. For the man who has once for an instant looked into this ground, a thousand marks of red minted gold are the same as a brass farthing.[[50]](#endnote-50)

This absolute richness (where everything being one is of equal value) is only received through utter poverty, but this mystical fact is not known by the Fisherman’s wife, Ilsabil. This is a common mistake; hence Eckhart says: ‘People imagine they have more if they have things together with God than if they have God without the things. That is wrong, for all things with God are no more than God alone.’[[51]](#endnote-51) Ironically, and perhaps deliberately, the name ‘Ilsabil’ (deriving from ‘Elizabeth’) means: God is abundance. I said above that when the Flounder first tells the Fisherman to go, and adds that ‘she has it already’, it more literally means that he has instantly granted what she wishes. However, I then suggested that on a deeper level it might mean she already has all she needs. The fact, then, that her own name tells her ‘God is abundance’ arguably adds emphasis to this point. In terms of living from our own as God lives from His own, Eckhart explains:

Put off all that is your own, and make yourself over to God. Then God will be your own, just as He is His own, and He will be God to you just as He is God to Himself, no less. What is mine I have from nobody, but if I have from another, it is not mine but belongs to him from whom I got it.[[52]](#endnote-52)

While in another sermon he similarly tells us:

God must give me Himself for my own as He is His own, or I shall get nothing and nothing will be to my taste. Whoever shall receive Him outright must have wholly renounced himself and gone out of himself: he gets straight from God all that He has, as his own just as much as it is His ... Those who have gone out of themselves and renounced themselves in equal measure will receive equally, and no less.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Again, Ilsabil has not grasped the significance of this. Rather, like most people, she wants things for herself according to her own will. She does not see that this gaining of things ultimately amounts to nothing for all things are nothing without God. To repeat, if she renounces self and becomes nothing but God, she will have all that God has – *everything*. Stressing the point, Eckhart says:

God is unseparated from all things, for God is in all things and is more inwardly in them than they are in themselves. That is how God is unseparated from all things. And man too should be unseparated from all things, which means that a man should be nothing in himself and wholly detached from self: in that way he is unseparated from all things and is all things.[[54]](#endnote-54)

This notion of being unseparated from all things so as to be all things can only happen when man becomes one with God’s oneness, because in truth it is only God who *is* unseparated from all things on account of being all things. Thus, Eckhart asserts: ‘You should wholly sink away from your youness and dissolve into His Hisness, and your ‘yours’ and His ‘His’ should become so completely one ‘Mine’ that with Him you understand His unbecome Isness and His nameless Nothingness.’[[55]](#endnote-55) This brings us to another important theme in Eckhart’s work, namely the distinction between being and life. He constantly says that while your biological father gave you your nature and life, only God gave you being.[[56]](#endnote-56) Eckhart reminds us that when we refer to something that is, we qualify it by saying that *it is* a piece of wood or a stone. But with God, all qualification is removed to reveal a simple ‘is.’ This is why Eckhart is fond of referring to God’s name as ‘I Am He Who Is’ or ‘I Am That I Am.’[[57]](#endnote-57) Being free of all things, God *is* all things as isness itself. For Eckhart, then, nothing is more like God than being itself. Thus, he says:

A master says there is nothing so like God as being: insofar as it has being it is like God. A master says that being is so pure and so lofty that all that God is, is being. God knows nothing but being, He is conscious of nothing but being: being is His circumference. God loves nothing but His being, He thinks of nothing but His being. I say all creatures are one being. … no one can give being save God alone in Himself. God’s characteristic is being. A master says one creature can quite well give *life* to another. Therefore in being alone lies all that is at all. Being is the first name. Whatever is deficient is a falling away from being. Our whole life ought to be being. So far as our life is one being, so far it is in God. So far as our life is enclosed in being, so far it is akin to God. There is no life so feeble but, taken as it is being, it is nobler than anything that ever lived.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Based on this reasoning, Eckhart argues that the person who has the world least, has it the most. Thus, what superficially appears to be a paradox, makes perfect sense when Eckhart say that: ‘No one possesses the world so truly as he who has abandoned the world.’[[59]](#endnote-59) And in that, for Eckhart, only God has being (on account of being *being itself*), he is able to say:

All creatures are pure nothing. I do not say they are a trifle or they are anything: they are pure nothing. What has no being, is not. All creatures have no being, for their being consists in the presence of God. If God turned away for an instant from all creatures, they would perish. I have sometimes said, and it is true, that he who possessed the whole world with God would have no more than if he had God by Himself. All creatures have nothing more without God than a midge would have without God – just the same, neither more nor less.[[60]](#endnote-60)

It is this final point especially that Ilsabil overlooks. For Eckhart, referring to Matthew 19:29, Ilsabil would get back a hundredfold if she gave up everything. But because she wants a hundredfold, she gets nothing.[[61]](#endnote-61)

We see in the fairy tale that the more Ilsabil gets the more she wants. Furthermore, the more she gets the quicker her dissatisfaction. It takes a week or two for her to want more than the hut. Then when she gets the stone castle, the following morning she wants to become king. When she is king the Fisherman looks at her for some time, but she finds that time passes very heavily and is eager to become emperor. But as soon as she is emperor, she immediately wants to become pope. It is only because she does not move and shows no signs of life as pope that she goes to bed and spends the night awake thinking of what else she might be. And as we know, when the morning comes, she wishes to be like God is. It also appears to be quite a brilliant insight within the story that the more dissatisfied and greedier Ilsabil gets, likewise the more the very environment reflects *her own* distressed state. She is the cause of it – just as *we* are the cause of all the world’s problems.

**Conclusion**

This brings us to the conclusion of the fairy tale, which consists of a dramatic peripety and startling dénouement. For when Ilsabil wants to be like God is, the husband and wife find themselves back in the pigsty. This is a surprising turn of events, and for me it is what really makes the story so meaningful. On a superficial level it simply reveals what can happen when you become too greedy – *you might end up losing everything*. But it seems that this ending also implies a much deeper mystical meaning.

To begin with, Ilsabil does not get what she expects. By becoming like God is, she wants to be able to order the sun and the moon to rise. She cannot be happy until she has this supreme power. So why does she end up back in the pigsty instead? Ilsabil’s predicament is a case of misinterpretation that haunts all mystical traditions. The problem is that Ilsabil *as Ilsabil* wants to become like God. This has colossal implications when it comes to understanding mystical union or identity. Consider, for example, the execution of Sufi mystics for stating that they were the one or the reality. The issue here is that rightly or wrongly orthodox followers of Islam took this to mean that the mystic was declaring *themselves* to be Allah.

Eckhart maintains throughout his works that the kind of thing that Ilsabil desires is simply not possible. In fact, as we will see, to become as God is, not only must we rid ourselves of the self, but even God has to go. Ilsabil and her husband end up back in the pigsty because she does not understand what she is asking. What she asks for cannot be given, so she ends up back where she started, which incidentally is God’s will. This is the only time that the Flounder cannot give Ilsabil what she wants. He can give her everything else she has asked for, because they are mere worldly desires. However, Ilsabil wants to be God-like while still being Ilsabil. It is this very wish that prevents her from becoming God. Eckhart says:

Since it is God’s nature not to be *like* anyone, we have to come to the state of being *nothing* in order to enter in to the same nature that He is. So, when I am able to establish myself in Nothing and Nothing in myself, uprooting and casting out what is in me, *then* I can pass into the naked being of God, which is the naked being of the spirit. All that smacks of *likeness* must be ousted that I may be transplanted into God and become one with Him: one substance, one being, one nature and the Son of God. Once this happens there is nothing hidden in God that is not revealed, that is not mine.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Because Ilsabil is seeking God for her *own* profit and thus something with God, she is not truly seeking God.[[63]](#endnote-63) Pure mystical union in the form of identity cannot, for Eckhart, contain any likeness. This is because likeness is not oneness. Hence, he asserts:

If there were no medium between God and the soul, she would at once see God, for God has no medium and brooks no intervention. If the soul were wholly stripped and denuded of all means, God would appear stripped and bare before her and would give Himself wholly to her. All the while that the soul is not entirely stripped and denuded of all means, however slight, she cannot see God; and if there were anything intervening, even of a hair’s breadth, between body and soul, there would never be a proper union between them.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Ilsabil’s error is that she has intentions in the form of wants. Even if her concern were for God alone (and not for herself), this would still be a problem because she is not seeking God naked. To seek God naked there must be no admixture. This means that even God must go in order to reveal the Godhead beyond God, which is another core theme of Eckhart’s mysticism.[[65]](#endnote-65) It is why he says that when we break through and enter the ground or fount of the Godhead, God *unbecomes* (*Entwirt*).[[66]](#endnote-66) This, then, is why he also refers to God as being above being as beingless-being.[[67]](#endnote-67) This is a bare beingness or isness (*Isticheit*).[[68]](#endnote-68) Thus, if we seek God for ourselves, as Ilsabil does, we will never find Him. And it is for this reason that Eckhart famously prays to God to make us free of God.[[69]](#endnote-69) He insists that we must: ‘Strip God of all His clothing – seize Him naked in his robing-room, where He is uncovered and bare in Himself. *Then* you will “abide in Him”.’[[70]](#endnote-70) Going further still, Eckhart exhorts: ‘You should love Him as He is: a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality. And in that One may we eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness.’[[71]](#endnote-71) In this pure oneness of the naked Godhead and ground of the soul, then, there is neither self nor God. This, says Eckhart, is the true man and where all suffering ends.[[72]](#endnote-72) Ilsabil, by contrast, suffers despite getting everything she wishes for. Another quotation from Seneca appears to mirror exactly the predicament of Ilsabil:

Enough is never too little, and not-enough is never too much. Alexander was poor even after his conquest of Darius and the Indies. Am I wrong? He seeks something which he can really make his own, exploring unknown seas, sending new fleets over the Ocean, and, so to speak, breaking down the very bars of the universe. But that which is enough for nature, is not enough for man. There have been found persons who crave something more after obtaining everything; so blind are their wits and so readily does each man forget his start after he has got under way. He who was but lately the disputed lord of an unknown corner of the world, is dejected when, after reaching the limits of the globe, he must march back through a world which he has made his own. Money never made a man rich; on the contrary, it always smites men with a greater craving for itself. Do you ask the reason for this? He who possesses more begins to be able to possess still more.[[73]](#endnote-73)

Seneca’s reasoning here is quite simply that the person who can see that they have enough will never want more, while the person (with the blind wits) who thinks they do not have enough will always want more even if they have everything. And such craving for more, as all the great religions have identified, results only in more craving, for like the vast profits of corporations, more is never enough. And this is why such people, like Ilsabil, remain poor and miserable even though they have more than they need. Let us close with a final word from Seneca that appears to capture the essence of what our fairy tale is about as well as what Eckhart is arguing: **‘**It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.’[[74]](#endnote-74)

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1. The word ‘demersal’ means ‘to sink’, and is a past participle of the Latin, *demergere*, made up of *de* (down) and *mergere* (plunge). Its root is perhaps more apparent to us in the word, submerge. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Jacob and Wilhem Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a criticism of the simple gender distinction between Adam and Eve and a deeper interpretation, see, Duane Williams, *The Linguistic Christ: Understanding Christ as the Logos of Language* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Jacob and Wilhem Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales*, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Some translations refer to a cottage, and we can tell from the description that it sounds like a small cottage. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Jacob and Wilhem Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales*, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 82-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Padraic Colum, Ibid., Introduction, XV. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Adapted from, Joseph Campbell, ‘Folklorist Commentary’, in, *Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 752. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The term ‘anti-fairy tale (*Antimärchen*) was first introduced by the Dutch-German, art historian, literary critic, and linguist, André Jolles, in his book, *Simple Forms* (*Einfache Formen*), 1930. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For a detailed outline of this historical development of the tales, see 754-764 of, *Brothers Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002). I have taken the above listing from, 763-764. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Campbell, ‘Folklorist Commentary’, in, *Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm: Complete Fairy Tales*, 756. In a note to this quotation, Campbell also adds: ‘The youth of Siegfried, Brynhild’s sleep, the sword in the tree and the broken sword, are motifs adopted from the Celtic tradition. The Icelandic Sagas and Eddas were powerfully influenced by the bards of Ireland. In the classification at the conclusion of the present section the tales under heading IV, *Chivalrous Work of the Middle Ages*, represent this body of matter as it was reworked under the influence of twelfth century romance’ (Ibid.). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See D. L. Ashliman, *The Fisherman’s Wife and Other Folktales about Dissatisfaction and Greed* (University of Pittsburgh, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For online versions of the different tales, see: *The Fisherman’s Wife and Other Folktales about Dissatisfaction and Greed*, <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0555.html>. Revised March 22nd, 2013. Accessed 21st February, 2025. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Karen Briggs, *British Folk Tales and Legends: A Sampler*, first published, 1977, (London: Routledge Classics, 2nd Edition, 2002), 40-43. Briggs also notes that over 41 Irish versions have been given in *Béaloideas - The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*, XIV, 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See, Jacqueline Simpson, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (University of California Press, 1972), 60–63. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See, Édouard Laboulaye, ‘The Fairy Crawfish’, in *Smack-Bam, or The Art of Governing Men: Political Fairy Tales of Édouard Laboulaye* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 238-257. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. J. L. Ashliman, ‘The Fisherman and His Wife’, <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm019.html>. Revised October 19th, 2004. Accessed 21st February, 2025. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Colum, Introduction, XIV. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O’C. Walshe, vol. I (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1987), viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Campbell, ‘Folklorist Commentary’, 769. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 770. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Seneca, *The Moral Letters of Lucilius* (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*), trans. Richard Mott Gummere, 3 vols, Letter 119, (London: William Heinemann, and New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, A Loeb Classical Library edition; Volume 1 published 1917; Volume 2 published 1920; Volume 3 published 1925). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Meister Eckhart, Sermon Ten, in *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixty-Five, vol. II, 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Forty-Three, vol. II, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Fifty-Five, vol. II, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See, for example, Eckhart, *Sermon* Fifty-Seven, vol. II, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixty-Eight, vol. II, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixty-Five, vol. II, 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Eighty-Seven, vol. II, 271-272. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 273-274. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixteen, vol. I, 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See, for example, Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Seven, vol. I, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Thirteen (b), vol. I, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Eighteen, vol. I, 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Forty, vol. I, 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Forty-Nine, vol. II, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Ninety-Six, vol. II, 333. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. See, for example, Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Twenty-Three, vol. I, 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. See, for example, Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Thirty, vol. I, 226-227. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Eighty-Two, vol. II, 244-245. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Twenty-Nine, vol. I, 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Forty, vol. I, 284. Note that the first sentence of this passage was condemned in article 26 of the Bull *In agro dominico* of 1329. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. See Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Fifty-Five, vol. II, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Seven, vol. I, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. See Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Eleven, vol. I, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Forty-Two, vol. I, 294-295. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. See, for example, Eckhart, Sermon Forty-Nine, vol. II, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. See Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Fifty-Six, vol. II. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. See Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixty-Two, vol. II, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. See Eckhart, Sermon Seventy, vol. II, 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. See Eckhart, Sermon Eighty-Seven, vol. II. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Sixty-Three, vol. II, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Ninety-Six, vol. II, 335. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. See Eckhart, Ibid., Sermon Fifty-Seven, vol. II, 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Seneca, *The Moral Letters of Lucilius*, Letter 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., Letter 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)