***Grimm’s Fairy Tales***

***Chapter 9***

### ***The Twelve Brothers***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Synopsis:***

After thirteen sons, a king has a daughter. He has threatened to kill all of his sons if the new child was female, so all of his sons have gone into hiding. As the girl grows up she learns about her brothers and goes in search of them. She finds her brothers but picks twelve enchanted flowers, which causes the boys to turn into ravens. The sister must not speak or laugh for seven years for her brothers to be turned back into humans. Her mother-in-law convinces the girl's husband to have the girl put to death. Just as she is about to be burned at the stake, the seven years expires and her brothers rescue her.

This is a story of the love that can develop between siblings even when these siblings aren't raised together. Supernatural effects include the transformation of the brothers into ravens as well as their retransformation into humans after their sister's seven years of silence.

***Summary:***

* A king and queen have twelve sons. The king for whatever screwed-up reason says to his wife that if their next child is a girl, he's going to kill the boys so she can inherit the whole kingdom. Okay then.
* The king's a proactive kind of guy, so he has twelve coffins made just in case.
* The queen, who's super-sad and cries all the time, eventually breaks the news to her youngest son.
* The kids, obviously, freak out. They devise a system where the queen'll raise a different colored flag based on the gender of the newborn so the kids know whether to flee or not.
* Surprise! It's a girl! The boys run off into the wilderness and angrily vow to kill every girl they meet since a girl cost them everything, almost their lives. Yeah, that sounds *totally*fair.
* The girl grows up not knowing she had siblings, but eventually finds her brothers' shirts and asks whose they are. Her mother spills the truth, and the girl goes off to find her brothers.
* She shows up: youngest brother is like, who are you? She's also like, who are you?
* Luckily she brought the twelve shirts along so they recognize each other. He tricks the other brothers, who are out hunting, into agreeing not to kill the next girl they meet. Family reunion. Everyone's happy. (So it's not like an *actual*family reunion in that sense. Those things are way more fun on paper.)
* One day the maiden accidentally picks some enchanted lilies, which turn her brothers into ravens. Oops. An old woman advises her that if she spends seven years silent, neither speaking nor laughing, that she can change them back. So she finds a tree to sit in and spins silently for a long time.
* A king comes hunting and sees this beautiful maiden sitting in a tree. She also has a golden star on her forehead, like ya do. He asks her to be his wife, and she nods. Close enough.
* The king's mother is a grinch so she begins to say evil things about the maiden. The king doesn't listen for a while, but eventually has to give in, listen to the accusations, and sentence her to death.
* Luckily, the seven years are almost up. As the maiden's bound to the burning pyre, the twelve ravens come swooping in, touch down, and turn into her twelve brothers.
* Now the maiden can explain why she had to be quiet. The king's mother is killed instead and everyone except her lives happily ever after.

***Critical Study:***A king and queen live happily with their 12 sons. When the queen becomes pregnant again, the king says that if the new baby is a girl, her brothers will have to be killed "so that she alone inherits the kingdom." He orders 12 coffins to hold in waiting in case he needs them.

Benjamin, the youngest boy, asks why his mother is distressed. She shows him the room where the coffins have been hidden and explains the dreadful fate the brothers may face.

Benjamin proposes that the boys run away instead, and his heartbroken mother suggests that they wait in the woods until the baby is born. If it's a boy, they can return home.

Unfortunately, the child turns out to be a girl. The brothers head deep into the forest, where they find an enchanted hut. They decide to live there, agreeing that Benjamin will stay home and keep house while they hunt for food. Angry that their fate has been caused by a girl, the brothers agree to kill the first girl who crosses their threshold. This arrangement lasts 10 years.

Back at the palace, the little princess grows up "kind of heart and fair of face," with a gold star on her forehead. One day she happens to find 12 shirts. "Whose are they?" she asks. Sadly, her mother tells the girl about the circumstances of her birth.

Straightaway the girl decides to find her brothers. She sets off through the woods, finally ending up at the enchanted hut herself. When she explains her mission to Benjamin, they realize they're brother and sister. Each is delighted to have found the other. When the other brothers come home, Benjamin makes them promise not to kill the first girl they meet. They agree, and he introduces them to their little sister.

Things continue happily until a day when the girl finds 12 lilies and decides to pick them for her brothers. As she plucks, her brothers turn into 12 ravens, and the enchanted hut vanishes. Then the girl catches sight of an old woman who says her flower-picking has turned the brothers into ravens forever. The princess can only disenchant them if she maintains an unsmiling silence for the next seven years.

Determined to free her brothers, the princess seats herself inside a hollow tree and begins spinning. For some time, she lives there undisturbed, but one day a king discovers her while hunting. He proposes marriage on the spot, and the unsmiling princess nods her assent. They travel to the king's home for a splendid wedding and then live happily for several years.

Unfortunately, the king's evil mother tells him the queen is "nothing but a common little beggar." She asserts that there must be something wrong with a woman who never laughs. The mother harps on this for so long that she finally persuades her son that his silent wife is evil. He sentences the queen to be burned at the stake.

On the appointed day, the queen is bound to the stake. Just as the flames reach her clothes, the seven years of her bargain end. The 12 ravens fly down and turn back into her brothers. They put out the fire and free their sister, who is now free to talk and laugh.

The king is overjoyed to learn that his wife is innocent after all. But his mother is sentenced to be killed by being put into a barrel of boiling oil and poisonous snakes.

The youngest son in this family is named Benjamin "after the Bible." In the Old Testament, Benjamin is the youngest of Jacob's 12 sons. Since Jacob also has one daughter, it seems likely that the story is a conscious echo of Genesis.

The fairytale Benjamin is "always around his mother," and once the 12 sons have escaped, they decided that since Benjamin is "the youngest and weakest," he should be the one to stay home while his brothers hunt. This turns out to be lucky for Benjamin—he's the first to meet their sister—but it seems like a dig at his masculinity, and it's not clear why the narrative makes a point of mentioning it. Perhaps having spent so much time with his mother has made Benjamin a better housekeeper than his brothers.

Once the sister arrives at the enchanted hut, she and Benjamin become almost like spouses, happily taking over the domestic arrangements while the 11 other brothers hunt. Notice how satisfying the siblings' life is now! "Everything [is] cooked in a tasty way" with herbs the sister has gathered. The house is always clean, and the beds are made up with fresh sheets.

There's poignancy in this fictional domestic interlude. The [Grimm](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Grimms-Fairy-Tales-Selected/author/) siblings—five boys and one girl—became orphans when Jacob, the eldest, was only 23. He was ill-equipped to take charge of the sad little family. There was neither enough money nor enough to eat. Fifteen-year-old Lotte, the only girl in the family, helped as much as she could. "Lotte irons and mends all that is necessary," Wilhelm wrote to an aunt, but he added that sometimes she couldn't keep up with the work. Jacob said sadly, "Oh, if only our mother were still alive. Since her death our house has become uncomfortable because there is nothing that binds us together, and there is no longer any order at mealtime." When the Grimms write about happy parentless households in "[The Twelve Brothers](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Grimms-Fairy-Tales-Selected/the-twelve-brothers-summary/)" and other stories, perhaps they're trying to shore up their own sad memories.

It's unusual to have an evil king in a Grimm tale. The Grimms evidently found the concept interesting enough to write two versions of this story. In this one, the king wants his sons killed so his daughter will inherit enough to live comfortably. In the other, his reason is obscure. "If it is as I have said, then they must die. I would rather cut off all their heads than have a girl among them." This seems even less rational than some of the evil females' motivations in the stories.