This is one of the recurrent female trickster-type stories that is told throughout Europe (AT501).

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


Once on a time there was a poor man who lived in a hut far away in the wood and got his living by hunting. He had an only daughter, who was very pretty, and as she had lost her mother when she was a child, and was now half grown up, she said she would go out into the world and earn her bread.

“Well, lassie!” said the father, “true enough you have learned nothing here but how to pluck birds and roast them, but still you may as well try to earn your bread.”

So the girl went off to seek a place, and when she had gone a little while, she came to a palace. There she stayed and got a place, and the queen liked her so well that all the other maids got envious of her. So they made up their minds to tell the queen how the lassie said she was good to spin to a pound of flax in four-and-twenty hours, for you must know the queen was a great housewife and thought much of good work.

“Have you said this? Then you shall do it,” said the queen, “but you may have a little longer time if you choose.”

Now, the poor lassie dared not say she had never spun in all her life, but she only begged for a room to herself. That she got, and the wheel and the flax were brought up to her. There she sat sad and weeping and knew not how to help herself. She pulled the wheel this way and that, and twisted and turned it about, but she made a poor hand of it, for she had never even seen a spinning wheel in her life.

But all at once, as she sat there, in came an old woman to her.

“What ails you, child?” she said.

“Ah!” said the lassie, with a deep sigh, “it’s no good to tell you, for you’ll never be able to help me.”

“Well, never mind, child,” said the old woman, “if you’ll call me Aunt on the happiest day of your life, I’ll spin this flax for you, and so you may just go away and lie down to sleep.”

Yes, the lassie was willing enough, and off she went and lay down to sleep.

Next morning when she awoke, there lay all the flax spun on the table, and that so clean and fine, no one had ever seen such even and pretty yarn. The queen was very glad to get such nice yarn, and she set greater store by the lassie than ever. But the rest were still more envious,
and agreed to tell the queen how the lassie said she was good to weave the yarn she had spun in four-and-twenty hours. So the queen said again, as she had said it she must do it. But if she couldn’t quite finish in four-and-twenty hours, she wouldn’t be too hard upon her, she might have a little more time. This time, too, the lassie dared not say No, but begged a room to herself, and then she would try. There she sat again, sobbing and crying, and not knowing which way to turn, when another old woman came in and asked:

“What ails you, child?”

At first the lassie wouldn’t say, but at last she told her the whole story of her grief.

“Well, well,” said the old wife, “never mind. If you’ll call me Aunt on the happiest day of your life, I’ll weave this yarn for you, and so you may just be off and lie down to sleep.”

Yes, the lassie was willing enough; so she went away and lay down to sleep. When she awoke, there lay the piece of linen on the table, woven so neat and close, no woof could be better. So the lassie took the piece and ran down to the queen, who was very glad to get such beautiful linen, and set greater store than ever by the lassie. But as for the others, they grew still more bitter against her, and thought of nothing but how to find out something to tell about her.

At last they told the queen the lassie had said she was good to make up the piece of linen into shirts in four-and-twenty hours. Well, all happened as before; the lassie dared not say she couldn’t sew, so she was shut up again in a room by herself, and there she sat in tears and grief. But then another old wife came, who said she would sew the shirts for her if she would call her Aunt on the happiest day of her life. The lassie was only too glad to do this, and then she did as the old wife told her, and went and lay down to sleep.

Next morning when she woke she found the piece of linen made up into shirts, which lay on the table—and such beautiful work no one had ever set eyes on. And more than that, the shirts were all marked and ready for wear. So, when the queen saw the work, she was so glad at the way in which it was sewn, that she clapped her hands, and said:

“Such sewing I never had, nor even saw, in all my born days”; and after that she was as fond of the lassie as of her own children. And she said to her:

“Now, if you like to have the prince for your husband, you shall have him; for you will never need to hire work-women. You can sew, and spin, and weave all yourself.”

So as the lassie was pretty, and the prince was glad to have her, the wedding soon came on. But just as the prince was going to sit down with the bride to the bridal feast, in came an ugly old hag with a long nose—I’m sure it was three ells long.

So up got the bride and made a curtsey, and said:

“Good-day, Auntie.”

“That Auntie to my bride?” said the prince.

“Yes, she was!”

“Well, then, she’d better sit down with us to the feast,” said the Prince. But to tell you the truth, both he and the rest thought she was a loathsome woman to have next you.

But just then in came another ugly old hag. She had a back so humped and broad, she had hard work to get through the door. Up jumped the bride in a trice, and greeted her with “Good-day, Auntie!”

And the prince asked again if that were his bride’s aunt. They both said, Yes; so the prince said, if that were so, she too had better sit down with them to the feast.

But they had scarce taken their seats before another ugly old hag came in, with eyes as large as saucers, and so red and bleared, ‘t was gruesome to look at her. But up jumped the bride again, with her “Good-day, Auntie,” and her, too, the prince asked to sit down. But I can’t say
he was very glad, for he thought to himself:

“Heaven shield me from such aunties as my bride has!” So when he had sat a while, he
could not keep his thoughts to himself any longer, but asked:

“But how, in all the world can my bride, who is such a lovely lassie, have such loathsome
misshapen aunts?”

“I’ll soon tell you how it is,” said the first. “I was just as good-looking when I was her
age. The reason why I’ve got this long nose is, because I was always sitting, and poking, and
nodding over my spinning, and so my nose got stretched and stretched, until it got as long as you
now see it.”

“And I,” said the second, “ever since I was young, I have sat and scuttled backwards and
forwards over my loom, and that’s how my back has got so broad and humped as you now see
it.”

“And I,” said the third, “ever since I was little, I have sat, and stared and sewn, and sewn
and stared, night and day. And that’s why my eyes have got so ugly and red, and now there’s no
help for them.”

“So, so!” said the prince, “t was lucky I came to know this; for if folk can get so ugly and
loathsome by all this, then my bride shall neither spin, nor weave, nor sew all her life long.”