2202235 Reading and Analysis for the Study of English Literature
Semester II, 2011
Thursday, December 15, 2011
Weekly 1

People

1. Last semester we encountered "The Two Ravens," or "The Twa Corbies" as it's called in Scottish, an example of the popular ballad. Popular, meaning "the property of the people."[1] Folk tales such as the Snow White stories we are reading this first week, like popular ballads, many of our earliest samples of English and even our latest urban legends perpetuated by chain e-mails, were created in a process shaped by the people. Consider how much of this description of the popular ballad also applies to folk stories of the kind that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected and edited in nineteenth-century Germany and why:

> The ballads are all anonymous. Their authorship has long since been forgotten. They are often thought to be the product of a homogeneous group composing under the impulse of a recent occurrence or a common emotion. This is not impossible; indeed, the process has been observed today. In a collection of ballads sung by the Maine lumberjacks the editor quotes one of the men, from whom he obtained the ballad, as to their origin: "Well," he said, "I will tell you. Something happens. Then, at night, when the fellows are gathered around the fire, some one [sic], who can sing better than the rest, starts a song, and the rest chip in. Each adds a little, some make changes and additions, until the song is made. Probably one hundred and fifty took part in making that song." One need not think that all ballads have had such a communal origin. Most were undoubtedly composed by individuals. But they soon became common property; and since they were not written down but carried in the memory and transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation, they have undergone changes through repetition by many singers until, as we have them today, they are truly the product of the people.
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> This popular transmission of the ballad is responsible for most of its other special characteristics. The simple stanza forms, the frequent refrains, the repetition of stock phrases and often of whole stanzas, the complete objectivity and impersonality of the narrative, the brevity which results from telling only the essential points in the story and leaving the rest to the imagination—these are obviously the effects of folk transmission. The folk characteristics are equally apparent, such as the frank acceptance of the supernatural, the simple-minded credulity that is content with gross improbabilities in the plot, the lavish reference to gold, silver, and precious stones to heighten the effect, and the blunt representation of tragedy and death unsentimentalized.

2. A motif in folklore, Stith Thompson says,

> must be more than commonplace. A mother as such is not a motif. A cruel mother becomes one because she is at least thought to be unusual. The ordinary processes of life are not motifs. To say that "John dressed and walked to town" is not to give a single motif worth remembering; but to say that the hero put on

[1] "The Popular Ballad," *English Literature: A Period Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Baugh and George W. McClelland (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954) 171.

> his cap of invisibility, mounted his magic carpet, and went to the land east of the sun and west of the moon is to include at least four motifs—the cap [D1067.2], [D1361.15], the carpet [D1155], the magic air journey [D2120], and the marvelous land [F771.3.2]. Each of these motifs lives on because it has been found satisfying by generations of tale-tellers.

As you reread Grimms' "Little Snow-White," make a list of its motifs and compare them to other stories in this week's list. What do you think of Thompson's categorizing Snow White as "Other Tales of the Supernatural," a different type from Basile's "The Three Citrons" which is classified as "Supernatural or Enchanted Wife (Husband) or Other Relative"? Which motifs remain throughout all the versions? What might the set of motifs retained or discarded by each tell us about that version of the story and the people that created it?

3. Those of us who have only been exposed to Disneyfied versions of Snow White and like fairy tales are often shocked at the violence and earthiness of unbowdlerized versions. It is even more eye-opening to learn, as Maria Tatar suggests in her *Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, that the brothers *added* violence to the stories to teach morals to children. Apparently, the more the main characters "are victimized by the powers of evil, the more sympathy they elicit and the more captivating they are for children" (21). By contrast, what cultural or moral function might the story have, if any, presented as Disney did in 1937 while the United States was buckling under the Great Depression?

4. Angela Carter writes in her essay "Notes from the Front Line" of a self-awakening that changed her writing:

> I…became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to be, or expected to be—I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice. And I found most of my raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination.

Consider also her claim: "I'm interested in myths—though I'm much more interested in folklore—just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree." Read the description below of an attitude about women's beauty and think about its implications in connection with Carter's comments above about what the western imagination—its myths and folklore—creates.

> A writer in early 1930, boosting the beauty business, started off a magazine article with the sentence: "The average American woman has sixteen square feet of skin." He went on to say that there were forty thousand beauty shops in the country, and that $2 billion was spent each year on cosmetics for women—but this was insufficient: "American women are not yet spending even one-fifth of the amount necessary to improve their appearance." He then gave an itemized list of the "annual beauty needs of every woman": twelve hot-oil treatments, fifty-two facials, twenty-six eyebrow plucks, etc.[2]

What ideas are imprisoning? How do these ideas, concepts or beliefs bind or lock us from being ourselves or from thinking freely? How does Carter's short story, by working from and against these myths, attempt to demythologize them?

5. How does Carter's choosing to follow the version of the tale where Snow White is the child of her father's desire, which the Grimms rejected, define differently the relationship

[2] Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century: A People's History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) 204.

between the three characters? Compare the Grimm mother's line "Would that I had a child as white as snow" with the Carter father's "I wish I had a girl as white as snow." What possible second meaning is introduced for the verb "to have" with this shift in speaker?

6. How does Snow White figure throughout most of "The Snow Child"? How is she presented in the narrative compared to the Count and Countess? What is suggested by the way she is thought about, talked at, spoken for (pun intended), or acted upon?

7. Though magic is a given in fairy tales, it has its functions. In a consciously critical parody of such tales, perhaps it is even more worth looking into. What is the point of magic in Carter's retelling of Snow White? What is unrealistic about wishing for something and then getting it? How is the Countess's coverings flying off her in moments of vulnerability fantastical? In what way is a fish swimming in cold weather unreasonable? Is a rose bush "all in flower" in midwinter unnatural? What about the girl's reaction when she pricks her finger and "bleeds; screams; falls" or the Count's desiring the girl at this point, or the rose having bite?

8. Look at instances of transformation in the story ex. from thought to thing, from things to person, from person to parts of things. What is the significance of the clothes swapping between Countess and girl, how one is transformed from naked to "furred and booted" while the other from "wrapped in…glittering pelts" to "bare as bone" and almost back again? Trace the metamorphoses of the girl. Does it makes sense that these circumstances are her origin and her end? How might we characterize the various changes in each stage of the Count's relationship with his wife?

9. The leftover feather at the end of the story harkens back to the bird, the raven, at the beginning. Why is the bloodstain compared to "the trace of a fox's kill" rather than recalling the blood-filled hole? Why might Carter suggest the spoil of hunting here?

10. If Carter's version of Snow White calls attention to the latent sexuality in the folktale, what previously unremarkable aspects of the story does Garner's version comment on?