SAMPLE PROPOSAL

FOR CREATIVE WRITING THESIS PROJECTS

(FICTION)

MA Thesis Proposal

For my creative project, I intend to write four retellings of fairy tales. As I will discuss in the essay on craft, the concept of the fairy tale has gone through many permutations in western society, from oral tales to the collections of the Brothers Grimm to much more recent retellings, many of which are considered "contemporary." The distinction between a "retelling" and a "contemporary fairy tale" is one that seems to be in flux, but for the purposes of this discussion, I will attempt to provide a functional definition of what I mean by the term "fairy tale," based at least partly on anthropological and folklorist considerations, discussing required structural elements and purposes.

After examining Vladimir Propp's thirty-one folk tale motifs and the discussion of fairy tales by others, including Maria Tatar and Jack Zipes, followed by applying these arguments to well-known fairy tales, I have synthesized a definition of fairy tales which indicates the structural elements of the traditional fairy tale include the following: an undefined place-time; archetypal/stock characters; violation of a prohibition or command; some type of magic; a test must be passed by the hero/heroine; and by the end of the tale, all conflicts are resolved. Other features are common, but this is the most functional and universally applicable set of requirements for a story to be considered a fairy tale, although I will discuss this further in the essay on craft.

The purpose of the fairy tale is often debated. Terry Windling and Ellen Datlow believe that fairy tales "[go] to the very heart of truth," speaking of real and vivid emotions (*Snow White, Blood Red*, 4)—a view which is perhaps partly shared by Bruno Bettelheim, who believes that the "struggle against severe difficulties" present in fairy tales reflects the same struggle in reality (8); Tatar suggests that the primary purpose of fairy tales, past and present, has been a combination of entertainment and admonishment; Zipes goes one step further, arguing that fairy tales are used to impose social control. I suggest that the purpose of fairy tales, while ostensibly entertainment, is more fundamentally intended—as Tatar and Zipes suggest—to reinforce traditional or stereotypical cultural values, and a retelling can either serve the same purpose, or act as an impetus toward questioning those values.

In considering these functions and this purpose, it seems that there are essentially three possibilities for retelling the fairy tale. As such, each of the three retelling possibilities can dictate or alter the purpose of the fairy tale. One of the retelling possibilities is to retain every one of the six elements, along with the form of the particular story, meaning that each plot element of the tale is retained; details are altered merely so that they are, as Tatar puts it, "tailored to the cultural context in which they [are] told" (xvii).

The second option is to retain the elements of the fairy tale while altering the form, as the Grimm brothers, Disney, and others have done repeatedly. Alterations in form in these cases seem to serve primarily to amend the tale to a story more suitable to the prevailing culture than the original was. In other words, alterations in wording which retain the form and structure result in the same story, but one whose language and setting is more comprehensible to readers of that time frame, while alterations in form update the *meaning* of the story to one more fitting to the

societal morals and ideas of the time frame in which it is written—or, as Zipes argues in the case of the Grimms, one more fitting to their own ideals.

The third option in the realm of retelling fairy tales involves altering one or more of the structural elements, which can serve varying purposes. For example, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* contains threads of surrealism but the level of actual magical involvement is difficult to determine. Only a few events—e.g., the red mark that transfers itself to the heroine's forehead from the key—are outside the realm of everyday happenings, but the form of the tale is very similar to other tales of Bluebeard's wife. One of the potential effects of altering these elements is that a writer can choose to make a story more "realistic" to readers, as Carter does with the title story of her collection by providing a distinct time and place for its occurrence.

Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, in their anthology series beginning with *Snow White, Blood Red*, have a wide variety of tales from writers, often described as "dark" fairy tales or fantasy. These stories range from those set in the modern day to those set in what we typically consider fairy-tale worlds, and some follow the form very closely while others retain only a few aspects. They say they are writing fairy tales "for adults"—terminology that erroneously suggests that these stories were originally intended for children, rather than that their alterations over the years have converted them solely into stories that dictate moral messages without the ambiguity and uncertainty of the original tales, but that does convey the idea that such stories have meaning and value for people other than the Disney target audience. The stated purpose of the anthologies is simply to revive the idea of the fairy tale, but the writers make various points, including the promotion of feminist ideals and the condemnation of materialism. The varied intentions of the authors in the anthologies is one of the things that prompted my own interest in the realm of retelling fairy tales, as I began to see what could be done with the forms.

I will be retelling several fairy tales, retaining many aspects of the original form but changing the structural elements, with the intention of focusing on the aspects of the originals that are not discussed in depth. As I noted previously, the original forms of fairy tales tend to reflect stereotypical mainstream cultural values in ways that both construct and reinforce societal attitudes. One of my goals in changing the form of the stories I will be writing is to question the validity of those stereotypes and the role that they play in dictating and portraying societal beliefs.

The first story I will be retelling is "Rumpelstiltskin." Although the retelling retains the idea of an unspecified time and place, there is an inclusion of alchemical activities, which gives it a sense of realism and placement in time than the standard "Once upon a time" of the fairy tale. Rather than focusing on the plight of the miller's daughter whose father boasts that she can spin straw into gold, I will make the daughter a more rounded character who dictates her own choices and destiny versus being drawn into various situations through no action of her own. The story will be told from the first-person viewpoint of Rumpelstiltskin, partly because I think it is more interesting to see what the viewpoint is of the "magical helper," and partly because in its original form, the story suggests that those who are different—small, dark, crippled—are necessarily evil. I think that providing a viewpoint character (in contrast to the usual fairy tale vantage point, which might most accurately be described as "limited omniscient") gives the story a great deal more depth. Given that we often think of fairy tales as portraying human nature, I want the characters so portrayed to be comprehensible and I hope sufficiently plausible that the reader can sympathize with them. Instead of sympathizing with the miller's daughter because she is the victim/heroine of the tale, I think a better story could imply questions about who the true villain is, or even whether there is one at all.

"The Frog Prince" is a story that I chose for a number of reasons. For one, the simple version that most people know—the princess finds a frog with a crown on its head, kisses it, and it becomes a prince—is drastically dissimilar from even the version in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. The princess promises to allow the frog to become her companion if he retrieves her golden ball, then attempts to renege on the promise while her father forces her to keep it. Eventually, she flings the frog against the wall in frustration, at which point he turns into a man and they get married. My intention in retelling is to emphasize the improbability of the original version while putting it into a more familiar setting so that readers can more easily identify with it, considering how the father forces the princess to fulfill her promise. This enforced morality leads to her eventual marriage to the previously unwanted frog now that he has become a handsome prince. She gets a husband who blackmailed her with her father's help and he gets a woman who had to be blackmailed into fulfilling her promise: a marriage of equals, but it seems inconceivable that they could be happy ones. According to Tatar, Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation of "The Frog King" shows the princess balancing between the pleasure principle and the superego; given that she "wins" by giving in to her violent urges, I have some difficulty with this view. It seems to me that the story is more of an object lesson in how a woman who accepts favors from a stranger may find herself bound to a much greater degree than she expected.

Hans Christian Andersen wrote a version of "The Ice Queen" called "Little Rudy," which focuses heavily upon the moral interactions and beliefs of the various characters in the story. While I intend to avoid his interminable descriptions of the mountains and the bizarre vacillations between mountain-as-mountain and mountain-as-maiden, the fundamental concept interested me. The Ice Queen is a story where the primary idea is that two women are fighting over a man, something that happens very infrequently in fairy tales. Andersen's sympathy is with

the jilted sweetheart rather than the Ice Queen, but never is the man himself truly condemned. We are expected to feel sympathy when he lies dead before the Ice Queen rather than believe he had any real hand in making events go as they do. I want to tell a version from her perspective, one that presents her as a character rather than something akin to a force of nature.

Additionally, I intend to tell a story that takes elements from several different fairy tales, primarily those in which a virgin maiden is demanded as a sacrifice to save a town or country from the depredations of a dragon. Jack Zipes suggests that fantasy has been instrumentalized to force a top-down value system upon societies. I disagree only with his seeming belief that this is a relatively recent development. One of, perhaps *the*, primary function of folklore and folktales is to reflect and reinforce culture. The myriad tales of maidens sacrificed to dragons or other monsters, maidens who are often but not always rescued by a heroic male figure, reflect society's belief that women are disposable and that their value lies only in their ability to supply dowries and produce offspring. The story I will be telling is from the viewpoint of one such maiden and her reaction to discovering how willing her parents and countryfolk are to sacrifice her for their own comfort, including a self-reflective aspect in which she thinks about how her own response to similar tales was never to feel sympathy for the woman's plight but to cheer for the hero to rescue her.

I am choosing to focus on fairy tales not because I want to retread worn paths, but because I believe that in the common quest for the constantly new and the edgily different, sometimes we don't see the value and the possibilities in what is already there. Windling notes, "It is a relatively newfangled notion to believe that a story's worth (or that of any other art) must lie in its originality, in novelty, in a plot that cannot be anticipated from page to page or an idea that has never been uttered before" (*Snow White, Blood Red* 8). Fairy tales resonate within and

throughout Western society. “Once upon a time” tells every one of us that a story is coming…and the stories I want to tell are the ones that don’t have a happily-ever-after, because challenging is as valid a way to address social norms as reinforcing them.

(**Planned) Works Cited**

Barnes & Noble, Inc. *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales.* New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993.

Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber.* New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling. eds. *Black Thorn, White Rose*. New York: Avon Books, 1994.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling. eds. *Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*. New York: Avon Books, 1995.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling. eds. *Snow White, Blood Red*. New York: Avon Books, 1993.

Lee, Tanith. *White as Snow.* New York: Tor, 2000.

Luthi, Max. *Once upon a time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales.* Trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Perrault, Charles. "Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper." University of Pittsburgh. 1 June 2007. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/perrault06.html>

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale.* Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971.

Tatar, Maria. *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Zipes, Jack. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979.