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The Grimm Brothers as Editors

In almost all circumstances, copying the work of others has a strongly negative connotation. In fact, from a very early age, children begin to understand the consequences of mimicking others' original ideas. It is not uncommon for a little girl to sneak across the street with a neighbor to pick flowers even though her parents had specifically instructed her to stay in their own yard. Upon confrontation, this little girl will likely defend herself by saying, "Well, Jessica was doing it too!" The little girl's parents would then say, "Will you always just do what Jessica does? If Jessica jumped off of a bridge, would you jump off too?" This phrase is used time and time again to illustrate the fact that copying someone else is certainly not something that is to be rewarded. Why is it, then, that there is so much controversy over defining the term "author?" Copying or stealing the ideas of others is obviously wrong; therefore, it is fair to assume that no professional would claim to be the creator of a work that is essentially copied from another source. A writer cannot be deemed an author unless the work is entirely new and unique. This means that his or her piece of writing is original enough to be easily distinguished from any similar piece; both the plot and characters must be significantly original.

The Grimm brothers are sometimes referred to as authors of modern fairy tales. As childhood logic suggests, the Grimm brothers cannot rightfully be given credit for the original establishment of these recreated tales. The Grimm brothers refer to themselves as collectors rather than authors; however, this is also an inaccurate label. While the Grimm brothers did set

out to simply collect and compile Germanic tales, they ended up altering these stories in unique ways. They took on the role of editors as they made significant changes in the tales; however, these changes did not alter the basic structural outline of the stories. In their attempt to collect and preserve tales that represent Germanic culture, the Grimm brothers have emerged as successful editors whose works define the fairy tale genre as it is known today.

The Grimm brothers made significant changes to the stories they gathered, thus elevating their status from simply collectors to that of editors. These changes are especially evident in the different versions of “Hansel and Gretel.” In fact, the first major difference can be found in the title itself; this fairy tale was originally called “The Little Brother and the Little Sister” in the Olenberg Manuscript. As the title suggests, the brother and sister were originally referred to as “little brother” and “little sister.” The Grimm brothers are responsible for naming the children Hansel and Gretel. This is a modification that changes the overall characterization of the protagonists in the tale. By giving the children names, the Grimm brothers make it easier for readers to sympathize with Hansel and Gretel as specific characters as opposed to the more generalized “little brother” and “little sister.” Another change the Grimm brothers made in the characters of “Hansel and Gretel” is found in the mother figure. In the original 1810 version, the children’s birthmother suggests that her children should be exiled to the forest and essentially be left to die. The Grimm brothers go on to eventually replace the term “mother” with “stepmother” (Ashliman 3). This lack of a blood relationship makes it slightly more acceptable to readers for a motherly figure to abandon her own children. The influence of the Grimm brothers’ decision to change the character from a mother to a stepmother is also found in modern literature, as the stepmother has grown to take on a stereotypically antagonistic role. Though the Grimm brothers were indubitably the collectors of the stories, their alterations in the characters

show that the brothers did not limit themselves to strictly harvesting; thus, their label cannot be limited to strictly collectors.

In addition to modifying the original characters of the tales they collected, the Grimm brothers altered the stories' plots. A classic example of this alteration process is found in the ending of "Rapunzel." In their 1812 edition, the Grimm brothers end the tale with Rapunzel saying the following: "Tell me, Mother Gothel, why do you think my clothes have become too tight for me...?" (Zipes 33). This line implies that Rapunzel has been involved sexually with the young prince. In order to censor for a more delicate audience, the Grimm brothers omit this innuendo in their 1857 edition (33). This obvious change in the ending alters the entire conclusion of this tale; therefore, the Grimm brothers did not portray the tale as it was originally told. The Grimm brothers should not be given, under any circumstances, the simple label of collectors. The extensive amount of modifications in both character and plot clearly elevate their status to that of an editor.

It is evident that the Grimm brothers did more than solely collect tales; however, the brothers did not make enough alterations to be considered true authors. The term "author" implies that a person has completed an original piece of work. The Grimm brothers did not create any of their fairy tales; instead, they replicated the concepts of previously told stories. In the Olenberg Manuscript's 1810 version of "The Little Brother and the Little Sister," the basic plot is as follows: two hungry parents abandon their children in the woods, therefore there are fewer mouths to feed; the children eventually encounter a house of bread that is inhabited by a cannibalistic witch that used the house to bait children; this witch is eventually burned to death by these same children that she intended to cook and eat. The brothers add many details to the plot including the emotional motivation behind the siblings' journey. In the Grimm brothers'

1857 version, the fear that both children encounter upon recognizing their parents' shocking plan of abandonment is the driving force behind Hansel's decision to drop stones as a strategic plan to find his way home (Ashliman 3). Had it not been for his fear, Hansel would have simply assumed that his parents would guide him home; thus, there would be no reason for Hansel to devise a plan to guide himself home. Feelings of distress and loneliness also manifest themselves in Gretel's character as she believes her brother, and only companion, will be eaten by the evil witch (9-10). By adding details such as these, the Grimm brothers advance the plot in a manner that appeals to the emotions of the audience; however, the overall structure of the story remains unchanged. A distinct difference in characterization can be found when comparing "Good Bowling and Card Playing" (1812) and "A Tale about the boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was" (1857) (Zipes 35-37). The protagonist in the 1812 version of this tale seems to be completely heartless as he witnesses extreme horrors and partakes in cruelty without any sign of regret or hesitation (35). This same character was modified by the Grimm brothers, and his seemingly heartless nature is made acceptable to readers because of the fact that he does not have the capability to experience fear (37). This alteration makes it possible for readers to sympathize with the character, despite his foul actions and lack of sentiment. However, this character is still the same basic person with just a minor quirk; thus, the Grimm brothers cannot claim that the character is their own original creation. The Grimm brothers add details to the plot and characters, but they do not stray from this basic outline; thus, they cannot rightfully be considered the original creators, or authors, of this piece. Instead, the Grimm brothers simply edit the contents to appeal more to their target audience.

Throughout history, the Grimm brothers have gained support and recognition for their work related to fairy tales. Although they set out to simply collect and preserve these stories in

an effort to raise a sense of unifying nationality in the Germanic culture, the Grimm brothers have become iconic symbols of fairy tales as an entire genre. Their collection of fairy tales has evolved into countless movies, plays, and an infinite amount of written varieties. The brothers may have failed to achieve their original goal of solely collecting these tales; but, in their failure, the Grimm brothers developed as editors who have shaped an entire category of literature. The success they have had as editors certainly compensates for their failure to complete their original plan. The Grimm brothers used the basic structure of the tales they collected to outline a structure for their own unique recreation of these same tales. While the brothers did make significant modifications to the stories they collected, the basic structure of the original tales remains preserved in these new varieties; thus the Grimm brothers are labeled as editors as opposed to authors. Because of the Grimm brothers' creative modifications, the fairy tale genre continues to stand out as a universally prominent part of literature still today.

Essay 1: Analytical Argument

This paper will give you an opportunity to use writing as a means of discovering and organizing your thoughts. Analytical argument is the type of writing most often asked for in written academic assignments.

Analysis: Analysis is not the same as description. It is description with a point: it makes a statement (takes a stand). You will need a strong thesis statement, because that statement is your **argumentative stance**. For this assignment, you do not need to present the points that might be made by someone who disagrees with your perspective. You *may* refer to the opposition if it gives you an easy way to begin—but such references are not necessary.

How to Begin: First, think over the material we have covered and choose a topic. The next step is to make a list of evidence and examples from class discussion or from the text. (You might consider using colored “flags” or sticky notes to mark the places in the text where the examples occur.)

Once you have assembled your evidence, analyze it and notice the patterns you have found. Develop a thesis that makes a point about something you have discovered by grappling with the material. (If something surprised you, or changed the way you thought about the fairy tale, that moment of understanding might be a good place to start.)

Assignment: Write a 3-5 page paper (double-spaced) analyzing the material we have discussed in class. **You may choose your own topic, or you may choose one of the suggestions below.**

Option 1:

In the entry for “Brothers Grimm” in *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, the anonymous author(s) refer confidently to “the fact that the brothers were *collectors* of folk tales, not their authors” (7 Sept. 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothers_Grimm). After analyzing the early and later versions of the tales we have studied, **do you agree or disagree with this quote?** (It is possible to defend either side successfully; it is also possible to “sit on the fence”—but you must have a clear, well-reasoned argument that explains why you are unwilling to come down on either side. Perhaps you see the Brothers as editors?)

Note: you may need to explain (define) what you mean by “author” or “collector” or “editor.”

Option 2:

Between 1806 and 1812, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm began collecting German literature and folklore. At the outset of this enterprise, Jacob summarized the brothers' intentions in a circular (letter); the circular is reprinted in "The Origins and Reception of the Tales" (26-28). In the circular, the younger Grimm brother makes it clear that the Grimms intended to collect and faithfully record material that reflects the "hidden beauty" passed on by their "honest ancestors" from the "old and true origins" of Germanic literature. He suggests that "[a]s soon as one has a great familiarity with the contents of this folk literature (*Volks poesie*), one will gradually be able to evaluate the alleged simplistic, crude, and even repulsive aspects more discreetly" (27). **In your opinion, did the Grimms succeed in their goal of collecting representative Germanic tales?** Consider to what extent the tales we have studied are "Germanic." What effect(s) did the Grimm's desire to present the material as a "paternal heritage" of the German people have on the brothers' presentation of the tales?

Note: Please do not use outside sources for this essay--it is not a research paper. The task is to make sense of the original source material you have been given. You will probably feel as though you are discovering/imposing order where you are not sure there is any. Uncomfortable? That feeling may be unavoidable with this assignment. I'd like to see what you can do without anyone telling you what to think.

No Works Cited or References page is needed.

Use MLA "in-text" citation format if you are citing the versions of the fairy tales we have discussed in class. For example, if you write "...in the Grimm's 1810 version of 'The Little Brother and the Little Sister,'" I will assume that you are referring to the handout, and no other citation is needed. **Consult our text, A Pocket Style Manual, section 32a** (pages 120-123) **for proper in-text citation form.**

IMPORTANT: The author of the chapter called "The Origins and Reception of the Tales" is Jack Zipes. The chapter is from a book titled *The Brothers Grimm*. You do not need to include all of this information, as you may assume the material is known to your reader. An adequate first citation might be: "As Jack Zipes points out in 'The Origins and Reception of the Tales'..."(33). In references to this work later in your essay, you may use either the author's last name OR the chapter title and the page number--you do not need all of the information.