***Grimm’s Fairy Tales***

***Chapter 6***

### ***The Good Bargain***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Synopsis:***

A dumb peasant loses out each time he tries to earn himself some money. Although a Jew and soldier plan to trick the peasant out of a reward from the king, the peasant actually outsmarts them both through dumb luck.

This is the story of one person's stroke of good luck. The peasant earns money and a good coat as a reward for his ability to outsmart both a Jew and a king. The story bears the common marks of a fairy tale, as it includes talking animals as well as a king and princess.

***Summary:***

* A farmer tosses money into a pond so frogs can count it and gives his slaughtered cow to dogs so they can sniff it. He's not the brightest crayon in the box.
* The farmer goes to the king to complain about the behavior of the frogs and dogs, which makes the king's daughter laugh. Apparently the king has promised her hand to whoever makes her laugh.
* The farmer doesn't want another wife, though, and manages to say so in the most insulting way possible.
* The king says he'll give the farmer "five hundred" if he comes back. Thinking it's money, the farmer promises some to a guard and the rest to a Jew.
* Turns out the king meant lashes, so now the Jew's whining about the pain, but the king thinks it's funny so he gives the farmer some actual money.
* Wanting revenge, the Jew slanders the farmer in front of the king, but due to some trickery, the Jew is beaten again and the farmer feels like he's finally made a good bargain. Because other people's pain is hilarious (and at the time, so was casual and offensive anti-Semitism).

***Critical Study:***

Well, readers, if anyone thought that this journey through the 242 tales in *The Complete Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (ed. Zipes, 1987) was going to be all princesses and talking birds, that gentle time is over now. I said we’d be going in order, without skipping, and that means running into several unsavory aspects of not only the tales themselves, but the worldview that gave birth to those tales. We’ve reached “The Good Bargain”, the first of two tales that “feature anti-Semitism in its most virulent form,” according to Maria Tatar in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*.

“The Good Bargain” is about a simple-minded farmer who, through his own ignorance, gives away the money he’s paid for a cow, and then the meat of another cow. When he goes to the king to complain, the king’s daughter laughs at his story, and the king offers to give her in marriage to the farmer because he makes her laugh. The farmer refuses, and says he’s already got a wife. The king, angry, attempts to trick the farmer again—he tells the farmer to return in three days’ time to receive “five hundred in full measure.”

Upon leaving the palace, the farmer makes a deal with a soldier and a money-changing Jew for them to receive the “five hundred” for him. When all three return to the palace, the soldier and the Jew are given five hundred lashes, divided between the two of them, and the king is amused enough by the farmer’s turn of fortune that he promises him as much treasure from his hold as he can carry.

In a nearby tavern, the Jew and the farmer cross paths again. The farmer complains that because he had to fill his own pockets, he doesn’t know how much money he has, and wishes that the king had doled the money out himself. The Jew tells the king what the farmer said, and the farmer is ordered to report.

When the Jew goes to the farmer to tell him this news, the farmer laments that his coat is not nice enough to wear in front of the king, and the Jew, wanting badly enough to see the farmer punished, gives him his own coat to hurry him along. Standing in front of the king, the farmer claims that the Jew has lied, and will say anything—even that he’s not wearing his own coat. The king finds this logic somehow sound enough to send the farmer away with his money and the Jew’s coat, and to give the Jew more lashings in the farmer’s place. The farmer, satisfied, remarks that he has finally made “a good bargain.”

In *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (2012 edition), Maria Tatar has more to say about the later, and more violent anti-Semitic tale “The Jew in the Brambles”, than about “The Good Bargain”, but speaking to the inclusion of both of these tales, she does comment on their oddness in a book whose mission was to reflect “the ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’ of the folk.” “Nothing like these tales exists in the other major nineteenth-century collections of German fairy tales,” she writes, although Jewish stereotypes like this, as we know from other literary examples, had deep roots in European society.

Not only is this a glumly cynical tale and an uncomfortable look at prevailing anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Germany, but, as blogger Helen Barry mentions on her site [Gallimaufry](http://gallimaufry.typepad.com/blog/2013/01/the-good-bargain.html), “the comedy has not worn well either.” All told, it’s a hard tale to draw a writing response from. Ignoring the more uncomfortable aspects of this tale is akin to cowardice. But how to handle such a subject in a ten-minute freewrite? In the end, my response ended up being more about my feelings that the tale and the stereotypes in it exist at all, rather than anything specific in the tale. What about you–when you run into a story that leaves a bad taste in your mouth, what thoughts go through your mind?