Folk Tale Archetypes

Folktales can be divided into several archetypes. An archetype is a structure or form which has recognizable and consistent characteristics. The most common folktale archetypes can be described as follows:

Cumulative tales:

These are stories where the plot elements are added to. These tales have a repetitive pattern in which the story "accumulates," similar event by similar event. Examples:

Beast tales:

This type involves animals with human traits as the central characters. Examples:

Pourquoi tales:

These tales explain "why" something happens. These tales originated as early humans tried to explain natural phenomena such as thunder or earthquakes. Examples:
Noodlehead tales:

The main character in this type of tale is dazed and confused.
Examples:

Trickster tales:

In contrast to the noodlehead tale, the trickster tale relates the story of some character, usually an animal, who is just too smart for his own good. These tales show how easily people can be fooled, but the trickster will often have his comeuppance at the end.
Examples:

Wonder/magic tales:

The wonder/magic tales are often called fairy tales but not all will involve little beings with wings. These tales are the most fantastic of all, and readers must suspend disbelief to enjoy them. Not surprisingly, these tales are most beloved because they tap into our very human need to imagine the magical. Fairy godmothers, magic lamps, disappearing capes--these are often part of wonder/magic tales.
Examples:
Motifs in Folk Tales

Folktales will often share common motifs--plot elements which appear so frequently that they are easily recognized. You'll be able to think of folktales you've read which have featured the motifs below. Read this list. Note that no one folktale will feature all of the motifs. Still enough motifs will appear in any one folktale to highlight its traditional roots.

The motifs really need no other explanation. You might also add your own motifs if you've found one I've missed.

Common Motifs: A folktale might include one or more of the following:

* a younger brother/sister who is good
* conversely, the elder brother/sister who is mean or evil
* a clever trickster
* a wicked stepmother
* a poor or mistreated younger child
* the use of magical objects
* a marvelous transformation
* a long sleep or enchantment
* magical powers
* an incantation (Mirror Mirror on the wall.....)
* three wishes
* trickery
* the power of naming (think Rumplestiltskin)
* invisibility
* becoming stuck (think of the golden goose)
* the number 3 or 7
* a repetitive phrase
* a journey
* repetitive tasks
* wise/foolish beast
* setting is in the past