MODERN LEGENDS AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Henrik Lassen & Tom Pettitt

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Cover illustration: Detail from Heinrich Kiev's "Eiswalzer" (*Simplicimus*, 1911-12), repr. in *Simplicimus, 1896 - 1914,* ed. Richard Christ (Berlin, 1978), p. 306.

Preface

The Introduction to this collection, 'The Contemporaneity of the Contemporary Legend', and Henrik Lassen's 'Contemporary Legends and Traditions of the Past ...', were initially presented to a meeting of the Research Forum of Odense University's Centre for Medieval Studies in September 1995. They are here joined by Tom Pettitt's 'Alien Encounters ...', which derives from a lecture in the extra-mural 'Lost Horizons' programme of the British Studies Group, Odense University, delivered in Odense and Aalborg in November 1994. All three studies have the character of reports on work in progress under the auspices of wider ongoing research projects in the field of traditional narrative.

While both authors agree that the genre of narrative studied here is most appropriately designated the 'contemporary legend', the term 'modern legend' figures in the title of the collection partly for the sake of alliteration, mainly as it remains common in much research and informal discussion.

Warhafftige vnd erschröckliche newe Zeittung/von einer sehr grossen/langen/vnnd zu vnsern Zeitten vnerhörten Schlangen/so inn disem 1590. Jar/bey Tettwang/am Bodensee/sich haltend/gefunden worden.

Es ist disen Sommer her/Günstiger Leser/von einer erschröcklichen langen Schlangen/inn der Herrschafft Tettwang/ein vngleich lautend geschrey/hin vnnd wider vnder dem Volck/(als wie auch von dem wunderlichen Trauben) auffgesprengt worden/da einer diß/der ander jenes fürgeben. Dieweil ich aber im verschinen Augstmonat/in meinen geschäfften fürgeraiset/habe ich gründtliche kundtschafft vnd warhafften Bericht eingezogen/wie hernacher zuvernemen.

Ob dem Stättlin vnd Schloß Tettwang/einer halben stund wegs/hat es zwischen dem Tettwanger Wald vnd Ackerfeld/auff einer höhe/etliche Weyher vnd Vischteuch/bey deren Weyhern einem/genant der Schwand weyher (stost an einer seitten gegen auffgang der Sonnen an obgemeltem Wald/so ein lauttere dicke Einöde/mit der andern seitten an die Straß auff Wangen zu/vnnd an andern Weyher vnnd Ackerfeld) haben jre etliche Bawrsleut/dise Frülings vnnd Sommerzeit her (wie auch andere vor etlich wenig Jaren) so wol im wasser/als herauß am Land/ein langen Schlangen/zu etlichen malen vnd vnderschidlichen zeiten/nit ohne sondern grossen schrecken gesehen/vnd vnder disen zeigen jr etlich an/das dise Schlang sehr schröcklich an zusehen seye/vnd so groß vnd lang wie ein Wißbaum/damit man das Hew pflegt zusamen zubinden/habe auff jrem haubt ein Schauppen/wie ein Pfaw/oben vnd an den seiten aschenfarb/vnden am bauch wie sonst ein andere Schlang gefarbet. Dise Schlang hat ausserhalb dem wasser am land jr wohnung vnd narung vnder faulen/grossen/abgehawnen Eychbäumen/die sie gleich mit hölern oder löchern (wie ein Fuchs) durchgrabet/wie dann ich M. Jacob Horrenstein/solliches alles selber gesehen/disen vergangnen Monat Augusti den 22. diß. Von sollicher Schlangen art zeigen die Gelerten an/dz sie genandt werde Celydrus/das ist ein Eychschlang: auch Hydrus vel Serpens torquatus/auff Teutsch ein Hecken oder Ringelnater/jr speiß ist Visch vnd Frösch/vnd da sie dieselbige nit mehr bekommen/begeben sie sich herauß ans land/vnd schaden dem Vich vnd dem Menschen mit jrem schlagen/vnd geben solche Schlangen einen vergifften vnleidlichen gestanck von sich/vnd da sie einen Menschen antreffen/oder jemand jrer recht vnnd in der nähe ansichtig wirdt/so vergifftet der Mensch sich seiner selbst/wirdt am Gesicht verblendt/taub vnd wütig/auch stellen solche schlangen dem menschen seinem leben nach. Solches bringt auch mit diser Schlangen zum theyl das werck vnd die erfarnus/wie hievon die Bauren (inn diser Gegent wohnent) besser wissen zusagen/dann etlich gestorben/etlich noch bey leben seind. Wie es aber endtlich mit solcher giffigen Schlangen einen außgang haben werd/wirdt es alles die zeit mitbringen. Der gütige Gott wölle vns daruor vnd andern schädlichen Thieren bewahren vnd behüten.

Zu Augspurg/bey Bartholme Käppeler Brieffmaler/im kleinen Sachssen gesslin.

The Giant Snake of Tettwang. Woodcut by Bartholomäus Käppeler, Augsburg, 1590, repr. in *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut 1550 - 1660*, ed. Walter L. Strauss, vol. II (New York, 1975), p. 491.

Introduction:
The Contemporaneity of the Contemporary Legend

Tom Pettitt

By the late 1960's 'Folklore', in both senses of term -- the lore itself and the study of it -- was generally reckoned to be a thing of the past in England. To the extent that folklore comprised, as it was then largely thought to comprise, the culture of ancient times (be they primeval or medieval) surviving in the backward regions of provincial England, then folklore was dying as their backwardness was annihilated by technology, transport, and mass communications. It was increasingly difficult to find ancient gaffers mumbling folk ballads over their mulled ale in the chimney corners of rural hostelries, or little girls in white dresses dancing on the village green of a May Day morning (a Victorian invention anyway). And to the extent that the study of folklore -- more properly folkloristics -- lacking a professional, institutional basis, was very much the business of people fortunate enough to have sufficient free time and/or sufficient energy to pursue it independently of the business of making a living, then folkloristics too was struggling amidst the confusion of Britain's post-war, post-colonial decline.

All the more striking therefore was the revolution in folkoristics in the late 1970's and 1980's, with the establishment of folklore departments and postgraduate folklore programmes at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield, producing a generation of young, energetic, but above all academically trained folklorists. And in a parallel -- and perhaps not unrelated -- development it was also appreciated that folklore itself was still to be encountered in the modern, urban, technological world. Our civilization too has folk song, folk rhetoric, and folk narrative; living traditions, transmitted orally, and performed under informal, domestic and social, auspices. We may have lost Grimms' *Märchen* and Child's ballads, and tales of ogres, saints and wizards, but we still have, or we have acquired, less formal, conversational genres: jokes, rumours, personal experience narratives, legends. It is entirely consonant with the true nature of folklore that

living (rather than merely surviving) in a modern context, this material reflects modern conditions. That does not however mean that it cannot at the same time be deployed in the pursuit of understanding medieval conditions and traditions.

The focus of much of this excitement was a variety of legend -- the 'modern', or 'urban' or 'contemporary' legend -- which provided the subject of a series of conferences, now themselves almost legendary, at the University of Sheffield the the 1980's,[1] and to which a journal (*Contemporary Legend*) and a newsletter (*FOAFTale News*) are now specifically devoted. I would claim that this genre, or rather the discovery of it and the appreciation of its significance, rejuvenated Folklore as a discipline, and may ultimately revolutionize the study of traditional narrative.

For reasons to be explained shortly I prefer to call it the *Contemporary Legend.* It involves a short but complete narrative, told as true, as having happened recently and locally to people socially close, if not directly known, to the narrator, and concerning an incident which is unusual enough to be interesting but realistic enough to be plausible. The auspices of performance are normally conversational: the social or domestic circumstances -- the canteen, the family dinner, the cocktail party -- at which news, views and gossip are ordinarily exchanged. Indeed one of the problems of studying contemporary legends is that you do not know they are *legends* when you first hear them; it is not until you hear them again, about somewhere and someone else, or are enlightened on the true state of affairs by a book or by your local folklorist, that their traditional nature is revealed.

The genre, and its viability in our times, may be appropriately illustrated by my own initial awakening to its existence, if with the danger that this will merely re-emphasize the modernity of the legends, and their apparent distance from the Middle Ages; but I reiterate the modernity and the distance are only apparent. My first (by definition unconscious) encounter with the genre was as a teenager, when my mother came home from a meeting of a Women's Association (the British Legion), where a friend had told her of a lady she knew who had lost her handbag at a well-known London department store. That evening she had a phone call saying it had been found, and she could collect it from the customer services department the next day, but when she duly presented herself they had heard of neither her nor her

handbag. Returning home she found her house had been burgled and everything of value removed: the thieves who had taken her bag had found her address and house-keys in it, and had used the phone call to get her out of the way. About the same time a friend at school told me of a man in his town, employed as a driver of one of those lorries transporting liquid concrete in large revolving cyclinders, who thought his wife was having an affair, and finding a flashy car parked outside his house with the window open backed his lorry up to it and filled the inside of the car with liquid concrete -- only to find that it belonged to someone visiting a house on the other side of the street. I have encountered both subsequently told of other times and places, and/or listed in standard accounts of contemporary legends.

Contemporary legends are uncomfortably contemporary; they are all around us; perhaps uniquely a feature of our own social lives which are simultaneously of considerable scholarly significance, and that in several scholarly fields: for folkloristics as a living narrative tradition, faciliting study of the processes of tradition; for cultural studies as a window on modern life and mentality; for narratology as the minimalist narrative genre, the closest narrative can come to mere conversation without ceasing to be narrative.

For the study of folk narrative itself, their initial value is that the mere existence of the contemporary legend prompts some necessary hard thinking, and may prompt some much needed clarification, about the legend as a genre, its classifications, and the terminology we apply to them.[2] Current legend terminology, popular and academic, is chaotic and unsystematic. We speak of local legends, modern legends, saints' legends, supernatural legends, nurserey tales and old wives' tales, and in so doing apply a mixture of criteria: 'local' refers to geographical factors; 'modern' to temporal factors; 'saints' and 'supernatural' to content; 'nursery' to context. But they are different criteria, and any one legend should be classifiable under any or all of these criteria: there must be local legends which are modern (and others which are old); supernatural legends which are local (and others non-local); supernatural local legends which are modern (and others old), told in nurseries or parlours or pubs. I propose to examine some of these criteria and see where 'our' Contemporary legends belong.

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In relation to content, legends can be Christian (about saints, martyrs, miracles of the host), what I prefer to call 'Holy Legends'; they can be supernatural (witches, wizards, elves, goblins, trolls); secular (battles, loves, accidents, escapes). This criterion does not contribute to defining the contemporary legend, which can be Christian, or supernatural, or secular, depending on precisely *what* it is contemporary *with.* I turn therefore to the temporal aspect, and take a longish hard look at the 'contemporaneity' of the contemporary legend.

It is simple enough to agree that 'contemporary' means that two phenomena exist or occur at roughly the same time. The trouble with legends is that there are *three* relevant temporal aspects that might engage in this contemporaneity: the time of the events narrated (when the story happened, or rather when claimed to have happened in the narrative, since the events probably didn't happen in reality); the time of the act of narration (when the story-telling happened); the time of the discussion of the legend (the now of the present discourse). I would assert that when the act of narration is contemporary with (not long before) the discussion of the legend, the the legend is merely *current* : it is still around, as we researchers discuss it, part of the currently living corpus of legends. When the events narrated are contemporary with (said to have occurred not long before) the discussion of the legend, then the legend is *modern*: it is set in the times in which we the researchers live. When the 'contemporary' legends were first encountered by folklorists it was their contemporaneity in these senses which caused the excitement: here were *current* legends (contemporary with the researchers), a living tradition, rather than the dead or dying traditions of conventional folklore; and here were *modern* legends about events in our times and so reflecting us and our lives. And since most of us live in cities they were also *urban* legends about cars, flats, college dorms, babysitters, microwave ovens, pizzarias and pepsicola. Hence the synonyms 'Modern' and 'Urban' legends, although I have suggested that since we live in, and the legends reflect, a largely suburban society, they should perhaps rather be called 'suburban legends'; and since we live in what are increasingly known as '*post*modern' times, they should rather be called 'postmodern legends': the genre qualifies for such supplementary designations reflecting

whatever we choose to call the times and society in which we live, since it is of our times and society.

Be that as it may, as the research field matures it is becoming clear that the essential, definitive contemporaneity of the 'contemporary' legend is a *third* permutation, which does not bind the genre to us and our modern/postmodern times or to our urban/suburban civilization, and which applies when the *act of narration* is contemporary with (occurs not long after) the *events which are narrated* (the time of occurrence assigned to them in the narrative): the contemporary legend tells of events said to have occurred not long before the time the legend is being told. And this is quite independent of the time when the legend is being discussed and studied: There are 'modern' contemporary legends, a narrative told say in 1995 about an event in 1994; there were also 'medieval' contemporary legends, a narrative told say in 1395 about an event in 1394.

More problematic is the chronological tolerance with which the term contemporary, in this context, can be applied: is a legend still 'contemporary' if the events are said to occur five years, twenty years, fifty years, prior to the time it is being told? I suggest, quite crudely, it depends how it feels: A legend is contemporary if the events are felt, by teller and listeners, to have occurred in their own times, in what is felt to be their kind of world. But such relative, *subjective* contemporaneity is probably itself subject to change over time. In our times, times are changing quicker than in the old times. To me (here in 1995) 1985 *feels* contemporary (things were very much as they are now), although I'm not sure about 1975 (we didn't have word-processors and compact discs, for example). Is it patronizing to suspect that 'contemporary' covered a wider time span in the Middle Ages? Would the elderly Chaucer have felt much in his world had changed over the last thirty or even fifty years (in the basic conditions of life, as opposed to the comings and going of mayors and princes)?

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The contemporaneity, in this sense, of the contemporary legend is also related to its position within a typology of legends under another heading, the geographical, in terms of place. The contemporary legend is not a *local* legend in the senses of being told only *in* one place, or told

only *about* one place. It is *migratory*, any one legend at any one time being diffused over much of world, but it is also local in the sense that wherever it is told the events concerned are said to have occurred locally. Just as the alleged time of the events moves forward to stay not too far behind the time of the telling, so the alleged location of the events moves geographically to stay not too far away from the place of the telling. But then this geographical proximity, like temporal contemporaneity, is relative, subjective. The events *feel* local, in the sense of having happened somewhere psychologically close, in the same world as that of the teller and listeners, and psychological closeness is also, one imagines, subject to change over time. For us here in Odense, Copenhagen (three seconds by e-mail, thirty minutes by plane; three hours by train) feels close; for Chaucer Canterbury was days away from London, and may in some ways (food, dialect, mores) have felt a foreign environment.

Taking these two headings, time and place, together, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that the contemporary legend is by definition set in a world which for teller and listeners was not (in the conventional sense), 'legendary'; on the contrary, the events occurred at a time which felt recent, and in a place which felt local. And the events occurred, thirdly, and decisively, *to people like them*. The protagonists of the contemporary legend, are also by definition non-legendary; they are people like the teller and his listeners (people like *us*, if we are talking about modern contemporary legends).

And this is so on account of a further, and I suspect most basic feature of the contemporary legend, its chain of transmission. Of any legend the listeners can ask, how far are we from the events related? And this question can be posed, as already examined, in terms of time and place, but also, more significantly, in terms of *people*. How many people stand, as passers-on of the narrative, between the current narrator, the person now telling the narrative, and the people to whom the events in the story occurred, or who were direct witnesses of it? That is, how long is the chain of transmission of the story? Or rather, since the events probably did not occur (and certainly not in the place and at the time stated, or to the people specified) how long is the *virtual* chain of transmission stated or implied in the narrative itself?

In many legends the chain of transmission is unstated, or very vague, and usually assumed to be quite long ('handed on from father to

son for generations'). But for the contemporary legend the chain of transmission is *definitive*, both in the sense that the genre encompasses an explicit statement of the distance, measured in people (or voices, or verbal texts) between the event narrated and the act of narration, and in the sense that this specified (virtual) chain of transmission is *short*. The conventional phrase is 'a friend of a friend', and the genre is sometimes known as the FOAF-tale, the friend-of-a-friend tale, as the events are said to have occurred to a friend of a friend of the narrator.

This, I believe, is decisive for the character of the genre, and determines its other features: if the events happened to a friend of a friend of the narrator, they can't have happened very long ago, or very far away. But I suspect that this aspect, too, the virtual chain of tranmsission, will have changed over time: in fact I think it will have got shorter. There is clearly a symbiotic relationship between the events narrated and the discursive packaging within which they are presented. If the essence of the genre is occurrences, unusual enough to be interesting, to people ordinary enough to be identified with by narrator and listeners, the chain of transmission must be short and specific enough to achieve that identification, but long enough to pre-empt refutation, for someone listening to the Vanishing Hitchhiker to say of the protagonist, 'I know him; he never picks up hitchhikers'.

The exact length of chain securing this balance will vary according to the society concerned. For us, in a society where we each live in several networks -- of friends, relatives, neighbours, colleagues -- listeners (belonging to one network) can accept they may not know the friend of a friend (in another network) of the narrator. In the future the chain may get shorter still. Perhaps we can anticipate a form where the protagonist is the friend of the narrator, followed by the ultimate postmodern legend being told as having happened to the narrator himself, since in postmodern society no one knows anyone else well enough for a listener to know otherwise than that it might really have happened. Earlier, the chain of transmission will have been longer. In a medieval village, where everyone knew everyone else, and (the records of the bawdy court suggest) knew everything about everyone else's business, listeners might *know* (or feel they knew) every friend of every friend of the teller. I therefore predict, retrospectively, and in conclusion, that *medieval* contemporary legends will have been told as having happened not only a bit further away and a bit longer ago than

our modern contemporary legends, but also as (and as a result of) involving people at several more removes from teller and listeners.

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Notes

1. For the published proceedings see *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend*, vol. I, ed. Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1984); vol. II, ed. Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith & J.D.A. Widdowson (Sheffield, 1987); vol. III, *Monsters with Iron Teeth*, ed. Gillian Bennett & Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1988); vol. IV, *The Questing Beast*, ed. Gillian Bennett & Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1989); vol. V, *A Nest of Vipers*, ed. Gillian Bennett & Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1990), and for abstracts of all the papers given, including those not published, *Contemporary Legend: The First Five Years*, ed. Gillian Bennett & Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1990).

2. What follows largely summarizes, with the benefit of some afterthoughts, my article, 'Legends Contemporary, Current and Modern', *Folklore*, 106 (1995), 96-98.

Contemporary Legends and Traditions of the Past: The Regenerative Approach

Henrik Lassen

In recent years it has become gradually more clear that the defining characteristics of the contemporary legend are much more complex than they initially appeared. Indeed, in the last decade or so it seems that the on-going search for an all-round definition along the lines of the precise and terse one-line genre definitions that ruled the field of folklore in the early decades of this century, has been attempted and subsequently more-or-less given up by many scholars in the field. At the present time most scholars seem content with a pragmatic and open-ended working definition which allows further probing into those aspects of the legend which yield more readily to continued study.

But in spite of the many more-or-less abortive attempts in this direction over the last two decades, the continued search for a simple and viable genre definition has in fact led to a number of fresh realizations about these stories - realizations, at that, which bring this genre into closer contact with the field of Medieval Studies as well as History. First of all, as more and more research into these narratives has been done it has gradually become overwhelmingly clear that Contemporary Legends are by no means as new a phenomenon as was first thought. Initially - which, in terms of Contemporary Legend research tends to mean, roughly speaking, the period from the late sixties till the mid-eighties - these 'newly discovered' stories were most often approached from a *synchronic* perspective. They do, after all, appear to be a uniquely modern phenomenon at first sight, full of microwave ovens, new cars, and computers as they often are. As a result of the thorough synchronic examination of these colorful stories which we have seen, primarily in the 1980s, a number of aspects of the genre have been examined in great detail. The complexities of narrative form, the contemporary pattern of transmission, the equally complex - and largely modern - relationship between the media and the oral tradition, as well as, more broadly, the 'meaning' of these legends in

social, psychological, anthropological, and even literary terms, all of these questions have been and continue to be explored in depth. However, since the early 1980s a few scholars have succeeded in tracing individual legends back in time, so to speak, and it appears by now to have been demonstrated conclusively that although such "modern legends" seem, at first, to be intrinsically related to our own time this is merely another deceptive aspect of a genre of narratives whose surfaces, their narrative motifs, are very quick to change in time, whereas the central plots of these stories, the essential narrative structures that they contain, are surprisingly stable from the vantage of a *diachronic* point of view. As Paul Smith has put it recently, using the image of clothing:

> Each legend provides a 'body' to be 'clothed' in performance, how and when appropriate, in order to provide a vehicle for the discussion of relevant contemporary issues. As a consequence, a narrative may once have been 'dressed' in a way that provided an opportunity to discuss a relevant issue in 1876 in England, but have been 're-clothed', or perhaps even left alone if it is deemed suitably dressed, and re-used in Chicago in 1994 to discuss an entirely different, but pertinent, issue of the day.[1]

Most scholars within the field now hold it to be a fact that the stories which we know today as contemporary legends are often only contemporary in the sense that they are *traditional stories, motivally re-equipped to fit our own time*, so to speak. That is to say that although these narratives in many cases appear to be perpetually acquiring modern 'surfaces' to make their essential points ever-new, they are really no different from the type of narrative which we tend to refer to as historical legends. The difference is mainly in our reception of them. If they are equipped with modern surfaces and told to us as true by a neighbor we expect them to belong to a modern genre; if we receive them in historical garb, in a written version from an old manuscript, for example, we are often blind to the fact that the essential plot structure lurking behind the fanciful contemporary apparel of convincing fact is in many cases the same. In other words, people in twelfth century Naples, for instance, probably told each other much the same type of stories - even sometimes precisely the same story - as we

do, but these stories must have 'looked' a little different, and certainly felt a little different, because in order to be effective stories they were firmly localized exactly in Naples, in the twelfth century[2].

Localization in space has long been a recognized feature of legend dissemination, of course - the so-called Finnish-geographical school excelled in this approach from early in this century and onwards - but the fact that legends can also be seen to become localized in time is a comparatively recent realization, it would seem. Timothy R. Tangherlini, borrowing from Carl Wilhelm Von Sydow's terminology, has referred to this phenomenon as a process of "synchronic ecotypification", and speaks of what he calls the "historicization" of individual legends.[3]

One of the main results of this comparatively recent realization about the continuity of individual legends over centuries - even millennia - is that the discovery of this type of living tradition right here, in the middle of our own world by modern science (that is to say: folklorists, anthropologists, psychologists, literary scholars, and whoever else happened to come across these striking, oral narratives in their own civilized world), this discovery now tends to be viewed as, in essence, rather the rediscovery of the real legend phenomenon behind the impenetrable residue of almost 200 years of restrictive and inductive legend collecting. A problem apparently caused by a time-worn bias on the part of the folklore theorists-cum-collectors in favor of the obscure, the esoteric, and the traditional, in combination with a deep-seated unwillingness to accept as authentic folklore the popular, the well-known, and the modern.[4] It is interesting in this connection to note that Jacob Grimm, who was in fact the first to explore the significant distinction between legends (*sagen*) and tales (*märchen*) in print, described the legend genre in the following words as early as in 1808:

> Je mehr ich diese Volkssagen kennenlerne, desto weniger ist mir an den vielen Beispielen auffallend die weite Ausbreitung derselben, so daß an ganz verschiedenen Örtern, mit andern Namen und für verschedene Zeiten dieselbe Geschichte erzählen gehört wird. Aber an jedem Orte vernimmt man sie so neu, Land und Boden angemessen und den Sitten einverleibt, daß man schon darum die Vermutug aufgeben muß, als sei die Sage durch eine anderartige

> Betriebsamkeit der letzen Jahrhunderte unter die entlegenen Geschlechter getragen worden. Es ist das Volk dergestalt von ihr erfüllt gewesen, daß es Benennung, Zeit und was äußerlich ist, alles vernachlässigt, nach Unschuld in irgendeine Zeit versetzt und, wie sie ihm am nächsten liegen, Namen und Örter unterschiebt, den unverderblichen Inhalt aber niemals hat fahren lassen, also daß er die Läuterung der Jahrhunderte ohne Schaden ertragen hat, angesehen die geerbte Anhänglichkeit, welche ihn nicht wollen ausheimisch werden lassen. Daher es im einzelnen ebenso unmöglich ist, den eigentlichen Ursprung jeder Sage auszuforschen, als es erfreulich bleibt, dabei auf immer ältere Spuren zu geraten, wovon ich anderwärts einige Beispiele bekannt gemacht habe.[5]
>
> [The better I get to know these folk legends, the less do I see anything strange in the many versions and the wide distribution of them, which is to say that *the same story can be found in different places, with different names and told for different times.* But in each place it seems so new, so adapted to the location and so much a part of the local customs that, for that reason alone, one must give up the notion that the legend has been carried in past generations by a different urge. People have been preoccupied with the story to the degree that they have ignored names, time, and setting and innocently transported it to a time they know and endowed it with names and settings they know, something which has never changed its indestructible essence [Inhalt]. This has survived the usage of centuries without damage as a result of an inherited preoccupation with it, which has prevented it from losing its familiarity. Therefore it is just as impossible to find out in detail what are the origins of each legend, as it is positive to encounter still older traces, of which I have shown some examples elsewhere.]

It is, perhaps, a pity that the field of folklore research had to wait almost two hundred years before reacting on this astute observation of what is surely one of the cardinal aspects of the legend genre.

However, such endless motival surface changes are, obviously, a more complex phenomenon than it might seem off-hand, and it would certainly be wrong to say that the phenomenon is anywhere near to being thoroughly understood at this point, even if the field does appear

to have finally returned to Jacob Grimm's original observation of the deceptively protean character of these traditional stories. As the knowledge of this phenomenon spreads it is, however, clearly beginning to influence the status of legends as primary source material in cultural studies and even to some extent in the field of history.

One recent example is Niels Ingwersen's argument, in an article in a recent volume of the *Scandinavian Studies* journal, that the legend - unlike other oral narrative genres which are bound by more strict conventions and are therefore, in his view, much less temporally amphibious - "offers an open, experimental universe which one can equate with unpredictable, even tragic, *history*" (my italics).[6] Ingwersen further has it that,

> The storyteller [in telling a legend] eschews the universality of the magic tale and the fabliau and often takes pains to assure the audience that what is being related is authentic. The illusion or convention of the legend being oral history is insisted on by citing well-known locations, non-formulaic names of characters and dates, and by stressing the reliability of the narrator from whom the present teller heard the story.[7]

After this short but pithy summary of a few key characteristics of the genre, Ingwersen goes on to say that the wealth of ever-changing, precise, and localized in-depth references which tend, in performance, to frame the legend's much more stable "main story,"

> ... [cannot be] eliminat[ed] entirely ... for legends would thereby lose the sense of fiction that is needed: that whatever we tell has happened and could happen to us; in short the feeling or illusion that the text is *a response to history* (my italics).[8]

In other words, according to Ingwersen it is exactly because legends are inherently *local* (in terms of both time and space), because they appear in each performance to deal with a set of *specifics* (that is, names and locations well-known to the listeners, problems and situations which hold special significance to both teller and listeners; what appears to be *facts*, in other words), it is because of these indispensable specifics that we perceive the legend to be a different phenomenon from the fictional

tales and the fabliaux whose attraction appears to rest, instead, in the pronounced universality of their themes. Ingwersen's point here is, as he puts it, that "the legend is not a response to a universal question about life, but to some *explicit situation* that requires a reaction" (my italics).[9]

But dealing with a legend from a historical point of view can, obviously, be a very tricky business. In fact, it might be said that the primary goal of the historian would be to avoid the legend altogether, rather than to look it up. One should, of course, be aware of the pronounced tendency for versions of these stories to become localized in time and space to the extent that they are all but indistinguishable from factual accounts. They are often - indeed they *must* be, if they are to retain their effect - very believable accounts, containing any number of factual details, and since the telling of legends often appears, as Ingwersen points out, to spring from a popular need to contextualize and explore historical reality in the form of specific recent phenomena of an entertaining or (perhaps even more often) a threatening nature, such stories most often end up resembling very convincing accounts of what appears to be historical fact. This central - and essentially social - function of the legend can, therefore, be extremely deceptive if legend versions are not spotted as such. If they are accepted unchallenged and become primary source material for historians their true status as fundamentally open-ended narrative experiments with historical reality, rather than their ostensible status as accounts of (recent) historical truth, may very well be effectively concealed by their deceptively contemporary surfaces. Surfaces which are, of course, specifically meant to make them seem factual and convincing. But the effect works both ways, usually: most often the contemporary legend *can* be quickly identified as such, exactly because of the essential similarity to other versions of the same legend decked out in the different 'clothing' of another location or time. One thing to watch out for in particular is, in fact, accounts featuring *too much* detail, what amounts to a suspicious plethora of specific information. This, in combination with events strikingly out of the ordinary should make alarm bells ring instantly.

There is, for example, the story of the heroic farmer in Jutland - near Lemvig as a matter of fact, locals will still point out the specific location for you, I'm told - who was appointed native guide and pathfinder by the Swedish invaders in the 16th century, and who, in a

thick fog, led an entire troop of dragoons over the edge of a steep slope and into the ice-cold waters of the North Sea where they all drowned, including the farmer himself. There is certainly no irrational element in the story *per se* which would instantly make us think of it as fiction rather than fact. Such a chain of events could very well have taken place. That, of course, is the point and the attraction of the legend.

It is, however, enlightening to compare the above local legend with the widespread Norwegian contemporary legend from WW II of the bus driver who was forced at gun point to become a temporary driver for the German army at some time during the occupation, and who one day deliberately drove a bus full of soldiers over a cliff. Not a single man survived, of course.

If not exactly very useful in terms of factual historical incident - actually, the existence of the legend itself tends to make us suspect that such a chain of events probably never really took place anywhere - such heroic legends speak volumes about the loyalties of the patriotic "folk" involved in their distribution and certainly attest quite specifically to the general hatred of the occupying forces in each of these historical situations.

As 'folk experiments' within oral history such stories spring, obviously, from pure wish fulfilment rather than from a more objective need to convey historically factual knowledge. We might call it a form of 'folk propaganda', perhaps. In this way, contemporary legends tend, despite their impressively extensive underpinnings of factual detail, to carry the general message that, 'this is what reality can, or even should be like under certain circumstances,' rather than the specific message that, 'this is what reality is, or was like in one particular case.' Indeed, the very presence of such stories can be argued, as Ingwersen does, to represent a basic need, on the part of both narrator and listeners, to reflect upon and deal with the historical reality of their own time and place. From a historical perspective, then, the legend can be said to represent a significant interpretative impulse on an ethnic level. And read as such, employed as such, I should think that a contemporary legend version certainly can function as a very useful and valuable historical source.

This being the case, what kind of work has been done, specifically, from the diachronic perspective? What kind of results does this theory of the legend as a stable entity in time, clad in varying contemporary

costumes of specific, albeit temporary, effectiveness lead to, and how can they be of use in understanding medieval affairs, medieval tradition? If the legend is really, as Ingwersen submits, a virtual window to the past in the sense that legends can provide us with a unique opportunity to access an ethnic view of history, then what kinds of realizations are in store for us?

Perhaps the most promising approach in this connection is to regard the legend as, in a sense, a narrative prism which, due to the extreme temporal stability of its central plot, allows us to highlight the contemporary importance of the fleeting details in which this plot is clad in the various versions. In other words, because the contemporary motifs appear to be necessary for the narrative to be fully effective, we may safely regard them as particularly potent in this respect at the specific time and in the specific location in which the legend version in question belongs. A contextualized comparison between such potent surface details from various times and places therefore allows us to infer quite precisely a number of things about the particular contemporary concerns of the 'original users' of the legend versions in question.

For example, in one of the first studies of a particular contemporary legend from a diachronic perspective, Bill Ellis shows how the legend of the "Castrated Boy" has been in existence since classical times, and that "in form and in function it was identical to the contemporary [i.e. modern] variants".[10] Ellis also demonstrates that the evil antagonists in this legend change over time along with the changing social and political conditions.

In its modern version, mainly found in North America, the legend in question concerns a small boy, six or seven years old, who is allowed to go to the washroom in a shopping mall on his own for the first time. After waiting for him apprehensively for a long time, his mother finally cannot stand it any longer and decides to investigate. In the washroom, she finds her little boy unconscious in a pool of blood on the floor, with his pants pulled down. He has been castrated by African American youths (or, as the case might be, Mexican American youths or drug-crazed Hippies), as an initiation rite to a street gang.

Ellis demonstrates that in ancient Rome, in the second century AD, such spectacularly shocking ritual treatment of kidnapped, small boys was popularly believed to be routinely perpetrated by Christians as a

part of their initiation rites. In medieval times, however, the religious slur made possible, so to speak, by the legend, was attached, instead, to the Jews, who were said to need the blood of a Christian child for mixing into the Passover bread. According to Ellis, the earliest medieval variant is the case of William of Norwich from 1144, and several comprehensive bibliographies on the history of this particular belief about the Jewish Passover rites attest to its widespread currency in the Middle Ages.[11] Such striking changes of the identity of the antagonists in the popularly believed legend are, of course, revealing in terms of the changing popular attitudes to different ethnic, religious, or political groups.

As early as in 1976, Shirley Marchalonis pointed to the similarity of the contemporary legend - common in the 1950s - of the "Spider in the hairdo" and the different medieval exempla involving a vain woman who spent too much time adorning her hair, and so one day had, as G.R. Owst puts it, "the devil descend ... upon her head in the form of a spider, gripping with its legs.... Nothing would remove the offending insect, neither prayer, nor exorcism, nor holy water, until the local abbot displayed the holy sacrament before it".[12] Marchalonis points out that the modern, and quite secular version, which involves, of course, the tragic and rather messy death of a girl with an unhygienic beehive hairdo full of spiders, "is still an exemplum although the didacticism is implicit and cleanliness has replaced godliness as the operative force".[13] In the same article, Marchalonis mentions two other, somewhat similar instances of modern and medieval versions of the same story and concludes that,

> The passage of time and the difference in ideas and beliefs have caused these ... stories to change, or to adapt to different worlds.... perhaps the most striking thing about an examination such as this is the evidence it offers of the vitality of folklore and its ability to adapt and change as the world in which it functions changes .[14]

Although the surface details are, of course, noticeably different, it would seem that we can infer quite a few things about the form, the social uses, and the attitudes to the beliefs involved on the part of the medieval storytellers and their audiences. By a combination of the available first-hand descriptions as well as analyses of these very aspects

of modern legend performance *and* secondary historical sources pertaining to the particular medieval motifs in question, new insight into medieval tradition should be possible. In other words, we may very well find a variation of the so-called *regressive method* of culture studies to be of particular value here.[15]

On this basis, I have in my own research attempted to trace, diachronically, a single legend (in that the central plot remains unchanged over time) or, as some scholars prefer to put it, a legend complex (in the sense that numerous motifs in many different combinations are necessarily involved). This story concerns an inventor who presents a strikingly useful invention or a vastly improved product of some kind to a powerful ruler or, as the case might be, a powerful company, in the hope that he will be rewarded and that the world may benefit from his discovery. The inventor, however, ends up losing his invention - and sometimes even his life - because it is in the interest of the powerful person in question to suppress the invention so that his own vested interests will not be hurt.

It appears that the story was commonly known in Rome in the first century AD in a version where the invention in question is a cup, a bowl, or a flask made out of flexible glass which will not break and which can be hammered and bent at will. In the classical versions, Tiberius ordered that the unfortunate inventor - on his own admission the only man who knew the recipe for the material - should be executed so that gold would not lose its value. Several versions from this period can be found, including a very sceptical one by Pliny the Elder, and the legend is mentioned numerous times by learned writers throughout the Middle Ages. We even find it in the *Gesta Romanorum*, which suggests that through its use as an exemplum, the story would sometimes penetrate to the oral level. However, in contrast to the classical versions - the existence of which clearly indicates that the legend was in contemporary oral circulation at the time - all of the medieval versions that I have so far located explicitly refer back to the Roman versions and are not "historicized" in any way, except for a few insignificant details, so it would certainly seem that in the Middle Ages the story circulated in the form of a historical, rather than a contemporary legend. But I am still hoping that one day a *bona fide* contemporary medieval version will turn up, a version truly independent of the 'Roman' versions.

In early modern times, a late 17th century French version exists with Cardinal Richelieu in the role of Tiberius, so to speak, and in this century the story has been in constant circulation 'starring' such wondrous, but ultimately suppressed inventions as unbreakable light bulbs and head lamps, cars which will go 80 miles on a gallon of gas, magic pills which turn water into gasoline, cloth which cannot be destroyed, computer chips which work fifty times faster than ordinary chips, and so on.[16]

Lately a few other researchers have concentrated on tracing individual legends or legend complexes in time in this fashion. From a Medieval Studies point of view, Peter Burger's study of "The Maculate Conception," which he gave at the 12th International Conference for Contemporary Legend Research (Paris, 1994), is probably among the most interesting.[17] In this paper Burger discusses several different legends and rumors about unwanted pregnancies where the woman has somehow been impregnated in a fashion other than the ordinary, direct one. The most common of these legends, hinging on the presence of spermatozoa in bath water, is compared, first, to the 2nd millennia BC Zoroastrian myth that a 15 year old virgin will conceive the world Saviour as a result of bathing in a lake that has preserved the seed of Zoroaster. However, Burger points out that this myth appears to be independent of what he calls the 'modern' tradition of legends involving impregnation by bath water, a tradition which seems to have established itself firmly in the Middle Ages. Such pregnancies resulting from a quick dip in fertile waters are described by, among others, the Arab scholar Averroes in the twelfth century, as well as by Giles of Rome in the thirteenth century. Burger finds that the popularity of the narratives centred around this belief seems to have reached its peak in the Renaissance but also that the belief is, in fact, still encountered in oral tradition today in several guises.[18] As Burger puts it,

> ... sixteenth and seventeenth century writers on sexuality seem to have been as concerned with the possibilities of impregnation without bodily contact as the contemporary lay public with the possibility of catching Aids from doorknobs, mosquito bites, spoons and knives, or toilet seats.[19]

By an exacting process of comparisons between different obscure scholarly sources, mostly from the early modern period, Burger concludes that even though, "as so often, we do not know what the common people thought about this for lack of sources.... *we can infer the existence of an oral tradition*" (my italics).[20] Since this situation as regards primary sources about the common people and their traditional customs, beliefs, and narratives, appears to be typical for much of the Medieval period as well as for the earliest part of the modern period, such an approach would seem to hold a great deal of promise.

A good example of the implementation of just such a regenerative approach to the tradition of the past is Adrienne Mayor's article "Ambiguous Guardians: The 'Omen of the Wolves' (A.D. 402) and the 'Choking Doberman (1980s)."[21] In this article, Mayor compares the use of a strikingly similar narrative motif (an "ambiguous animal guardian and severed hands") in two different cultures separated by 1500 years, and convincingly demonstrates how the "similarities help us tease out meanings that may be submerged in each story, while the tales' differences clarify the values that are threatened in each culture."[22] The well-known modern legend in question concerns a woman who, upon returning home to her apartment one day, finds her pet Doberman writhing on the floor, obviously choking on something. Quickly, she rushes the dog to the vet, and returns home alone. As soon as she enters her apartment for the second time, the phone rings and the vet tells her in no uncertain terms to get out of her apartment quickly, because he has found two human fingers lodged in the dog's throat. Soon after, when two police officers arrive, they find a bleeding criminal (often a member of a minority) hiding in the woman's apartment. Mayor compares this story to Claudian's fifth-century account of an ominous event which was said to have occured as the Visigoths were invading the Roman Empire. After some Roman defenders were attacked by a pair wolves, the beasts were cut open and each was found to have a human hand in its belly. This event was taken as a sinister harbinger of disaster for the Empire, and soon produced wide-spread rumors and panic in Rome.

Mayor shows how the central conflict between "surface optimism and underlying pessimism" in both narratives "arises because the emotional impact of each rumored tale hinges on the unresolved, ongoing nature of the threat."[23] However, a telling and central

difference between the traditional use of the motif in question in the two eras which Mayor's comparison brings to the fore, is that this threat appears to be experienced as being directed at different targets. As Mayor puts it,

> Despite the variations in emphasis and complexity of symbols dictated by context and time, the motifs, characters, themes, plots, and outcomes of the 'Omen of the Wolves' and the 'Choking Doberman' coincide quite closely. Both express concern about theft, safety, security: in both, people find their property a 'burden.' Notably, however, the modern legend stresses individual fears while the ancient legend is concerned with the public realm. The modern woman keeps a watchdog and returns alone to her private residence after shopping; ... Claudian makes much of Rome's *collective* wealth, which is vulnerable despite massive city walls and other security measures.[24]

In a more recent article, Mayor applies the same method to the motif of "poisonous gifts," particularly in the form of garments or blankets.[25] Drawing on an wide variety of versions - from the 'Nessus shirt' of antiquity, including variants found in plays by Euripides and Sophocles, over the still-popular accounts of European settlers deliberately giving Native Americans disease-infected blankets, to the modern legends involving various instances of the malicious transmission of AIDS - Adrienne Mayor suggests that,

> ... the enduring parallels between the ancient legends and the smallpox-blanket tale suggest that tragedy's power may actually flow from the same open-ended energy that drives contemporary legends: a deplorable act sparks moral friction but instead of a truce, a *moral dialogue* ensues, demanding and yet denying resolution of opposing emotions and interpretations. (my italics)[26]

Because a few actual instances of 'smallpox blankets' being given to Native Americans as gifts have been demonstrated by historians to have solid roots in real events, Mayor's analysis establishes, interestingly enough, that,

> ... historians' participation in the development of the blanket legend is crucial: they document and yet problematize historical events, justifying popular belief in the ubiquity of the blankets; they incorporate typical poison-garment motifs and perpetuate ambivalence about responsibility. The essential role of historical texts in the blanket legend supports the idea that historiography, literature, and popular legend formation were similarly intertwined in the development of the classical Nessus shirt.[27]

One must, in other words, take care to tread very carefully when employing one or more aspects of such narratives in the service of cultural studies or history. Such moral dialogues have a marked tendency to go unresolved and the presence of the questions which are raised by them are in themselves often more illuminating than the answers which they invite. However, with the proper attention there is no reason why the apocryphal motifs and the diachronically pervasive narrative structures of popular belief should not provide an engaging opportunity for the historian to access the set of the popular mind of an age, so to speak.

Although, as we have seen, the tricky changes which take place over time and space with regard to the surface motifs of these legends can, from a practical point of view, present no end of difficulties when it comes to tracing such stories in time - in the cases, that is, where such a pan-historical presence of narrative structures *can* be discerned - these motif changes may also be, then, the most interesting aspect of the legend from the point of view of cultural history studies, since they often reflect quite precisely important changes in the 'folk' world view.
For instance, as early as in 1981, Jaqueline Simpson demonstrated that some modern contemporary legends, when examined in a diachronic perspective, exhibit what she calls, "a clever transformation of an old, rural, supernatural motif into modern, urban, rationalized form".[28] Simpson shows how the contemporary legend about "The Robber Who was Hurt" is quite clearly a modern variant, again, of a very old story. In this legend, an elderly lady equipped with a handy red-hot gas poker burns the hand of a robber disguised with a stocking mask over his head just as he is attempting to force his way into her apartment, only to find - when, immediately after the incident, she hurries upstairs to borrow a telephone and call the police - a flustered woman who tells her, "No, I

can't let you in. My husband has just come in, and he's burnt his hand!"[29] Simpson cites several medieval variants of this motif, all of which concern witches wounded while conducting their witch business in the form of a hare or a cat, and who have their real identity revealed afterwards by the tell-tale presence of the wounds received while they were in animal form. In some of these variants the wound is even administered by a red hot poker. We might add to Simpson's list also the classical version in Petronius, where a werewolf is speared in the neck by a slave defending his master's sheep. The next day this slave finds his badly wounded master in bed with "a doctor looking after his neck."[30] Simpson demonstrates that the same type of shift from an essentially numinous motif to a more rational one has taken place in the legend known as "The Severed Fingers," which, in the modern version, usually concerns a hooligan or a biker losing a few fingers in the nefarious attempt to stop a car driven by an innocent party. Whereas these modern versions - reminiscent, also, of the contemporary legend known as "The Hook" - are full of very modern antagonists, the older versions concern, again, witches or hostile water spirits who get their extremities cut off when trying to immobilize carts or boats in the night.[31]

This same rationalization process of the particular motifs of a given legend taking place over time is also shown at work by Timothy R. Tangherlini in a recent article on continuity and change in the Danish legend tradition. In this article, Tangherlini draws on psychoanalytical theory and terminology when he claims that,

> While legend remains preoccupied with human interaction with the Other, perceptions of the Other exhibit distinct change. The major area of change in perceptions of the Other has been a move away from supernatural actants to human actants. Ethnic minorities comprise the major group of the human Other in contemporary tradition.[32]

Drawing on this handy concept of a cultural 'inner realm' versus an unsafe 'outside realm' inhabited, in the main, by "the Other", Tangherlini compares three categories of interaction with the Other, namely: (1) sexual contact with the other, (2) the Other's attempt to disrupt the food of the inner realm, and (3) narratives in which the

Other attempts to maim, hurt or kill. With the help of elaborate examples of both modern and older narratives (typically 19th century variants from the collections of Evald Tang Christensen) from all three categories, Tangherlini identifies a very convincing narrative continuity on the plot level combined with a distinct shift on the motival level from a supernatural or numinous Other, to a concrete, in most cases human and foreign Other - Palestinians, Turks, people from Greenland. For instance, the contemporary legend (cum rumor) of a Chinese restaurant or a pizzeria owned by foreigners which allegedly serves food containing rat meat or other disgusting substances is shown to be intrinsically related to earlier stories warning of the threat posed by supernatural beings. As Tangherlini puts it:

> In earlier legend, trolls, *bjergfolk, ellefolk* and the like would tempt the unwary farm hand with ordinary looking food. This food, however, was often poisonous or in other ways hexed to appear normal when in fact it was not.[33]

Similarly, Tangherlini shows that a century ago it was *ellefolk*, and not immigrants of Turkish or far-Eastern extraction, who stole dogs and cats from innocent people in order to cook and eat them....[34] Tangherlini concludes, on the basis of this analysis of the motival changes in traditional Danish narratives, that,

> In early agrarian Denmark of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were few threats to the ethnic homogeneity of the Danes.... Because the ethnic threat was highly abstract in this earlier context, the role of Other was assigned to supernatural beings.... When the ethnicity of the Danes became threatened in a concrete and observable manner through the influx of large numbers of non-ethnic Danes, the reaction was to assign these groups the nonhuman role of the Other in tradition. In this manner ... the exclusive nature of legend helps preserve Danish ethnic identity through delimitation of the ethnic borders. *The legend tradition acts as a means for codifying the ethnocentric values of the tradition participants* (my italics).[35]

Although these observations from Tangherlini - whose perspective is, of course, primarily that of a Contemporary Legend scholar from UCLA, rather than that of a Danish social scientist - may not exactly be wonderful news to most Danes, the above passage is, I should think, telling as an example of the type of insights that a close, diachronically contextualized look at the legend tradition of a given area at a given time can provide us.

Insofar as sufficient sources can be located for such a project to be at all possible, I believe it to be entirely probable that this type of approach can provide insights into medieval culture too, and quite probably insights of an equally specific nature.

Notes

1. Paul Smith, "Contemporary Legends: Prosaic Narratives?", *Folklore* , 106 (1995), p. 99. Paul Smith has used this handy metaphor a number of times before: "Many of the stories [are] 'modern' only in the sense that they [have] been recently collected and [are] clothed in modern dress." Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, "Introduction - The Birth of Contemporary Legend", in *The Questing Beast - Perspectives on...* , eds. Bennett and Smith (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 20.
2. An example of what appears to be a fairly good example of a Danish contemporary legend from the eighteenth century (and quite possibly the seventeenth as well) can be found in *Skalk*, No. 6 (1995), 18-19.
3. Timothy R. Tangherlini, "From Trolls to Turks: Continuity and Change in Danish Legend Tradition", *Scandinavian Studies* , 67 (1995), 32.
4. See, Bennett & Smith, op.cit., pp. 21-2: "It is the contemporaneity of the form, of the performance and the functions, not the so-called modernity of the subject matter, that today more clearly defines the field. The field is as exciting and innovative today as it was in the heady days when scholars thought they had discovered an entirely new phenomenon. The only difference is that now we have learned the sobering (but, nevertheless, liberating) truth of the old adage 'the more

things change, the more they stay the same'. As folklorists, we should, of course, have known this all along."

5. Jacob Grimm. "Gedanken, wie sich die Sagen zur Poesie und Geschichte verhalten". (Originally in, *Zeitung für Einsiedler*, 1808), in *Die deutsche Literatur - Ein Abriß in Text und Darstellung*. Band 8: Romantik I, eds. Otto F. Best and Hans-Jürgen Schmitt (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun., 1984), p. 147. Translated by Aldis Lægdsgaard Lassen.
6. Niels Ingwersen, "The Need for Narrative: The Folktale as Response to History", *Scandinavian Studies* , 67 (1995), 82.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 87.
10. Bill Ellis, "De Legendis Urbis: Modern Legends in Ancient Rome", *Journal of American Folklore*, 96 (1983), 200.
11. Ibid., p. 203; note 2.
12. Shirley Marchalonis, "Three Medieval Tales and their Modern American Analogues", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* , 13 (1976), 174. Original quotation by G.R.Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 170.
13. Ibid. p. 175.
14. Ibid. p. 181.
15. This term was originally coined by the French historian Marc Bloch. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe.* (Aldershot, England: Wildwood House, 1978), p. 81.
16. Henrik Lassen, "'The Improved Product' A Philological Investigation of a Contemporary Legend", *PEO - Pre-Publications of the English Institute of Odense University* , No. 82 (October 1995).
17. Burger, Peter. "The Maculate Conception: Legends of Impregnation and Childbirth". Unpublished paper, 1994.
18. Ibid., pp. 2-3.
19. Ibid., p. 3.
20. Ibid., p. 6.
21. Adrienne Mayor, "Ambiguous Guardians: The 'Omen of the Wolves' (A.D. 402) and the 'Choking Doberman' (1980s), *Journal of Folklore Research*, 29, No. 3 (1992), 253- 268.
22. Ibid., p. 255.
23. Ibid., p. 262.
24. Ibid., pp. 258-59.

25. Adrienne Mayor, "The Nessus Shirt in the New World: *Smallpox Blankets in History and Legend*", *Journal of American Folklore*, 108(427):54-77.
26. Ibid., pp. 69-70.
27. Ibid., p. 70.
28. Jaqueline Simpson, "Rationalized Motifs in Urban Legends". *Folklore* , 92 (1981), 203.
29. Ibid.
30. Michael Heseltine, ed., *Petronius*, translated by Michael Heseltine (London: William Heinemann, Ltd.,1969), pp. 135-39.
31. Simpson, op.cit., pp. 206-7.
32. Tangherlini, op.cit., p. 32.
33. Ibid., p. 48.
34. Ibid., pp.50-1.
35. Ibid., pp.59-60.

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Alien Encounters: Medieval Perspectives on the Modern Contemporary Legend

Tom Pettitt

The Contemporary Legend and the study of medieval cultural history can be juxtaposed in a variety of ways. Defined as a legend told not long after the events concerned were purported to have occurred, by a narrator claiming to be socially close to those to whom the events were purported to have happened, the genre is not restricted to a particular period. There are 'modern' contemporary legends current among us here in the late twentieth century, but there will also have been contemporary legends in circulation in the Middle Ages: a circumstance which invites juxtaposition of the two research fields. Study of modern contemporary legends, based as it is on a living tradition, may provide us with a supplementary avenue of approach to medieval legends and society; and as Henrik Lassen has demonstrated, many a current contemporary legend, its basic features rightly identified, may have medieval antecedents. But conversely Medieval Studies may also have something to offer the student of contemporary legends. Some narratives which are currently contemporary ('modern') legends may have modulated from other genres of narrative, or have taken over their role. As one of the very few forms of sustained, structured oral narrative persisting with any viability in modern tradition the contemporary legend is the inheritor, or must do the cultural work (in oral contexts), of many other forms of traditional pre-modern narrative: epic, fabliau, fable, fairytale, ballad, etc. It should therefore be of some interest to seek to place the contemporary legend more generally in relation to medieval narrative and mentality, or in other words to assess what pre-modern narrative, and its study, can tell us about the modern contemporary legend. What follows is an emphatically exploratory and speculative excursion into this area.

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If we were to classify modern contemporary legends in terms of the conventional typology of medieval narrative genres, they might at first sight seem best qualified as fables or exempla, to the extent, as can be argued, that they are cautionary tales, designed to warn against behaviour which breaches conventional wisdom, conservative role models, or orthodox morality (picking up hitchhikers; eating at fast food outlets; casual sex). But this depends on an interpretation of the legends' function which might not win universal consent, and in purely narrative terms a stronger case could be made for the view that most of them are analogous to either fabliaux or romances.[1]

The fabliau was a brief, lively narrative about people of the lower classes (peasants and craftsmen) succumbing to the lower human impulses (greed and lust) and entertainingly succeeding or suffering in some way often related to the lower parts or baser functions of the body.[2] The form is most familiar to the English-speaking world in the guise of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, in which a would-be lover, who asks for a kiss through a window on a dark night, realizes too late that the girl has presented her anus not her mouth. A little later, he returns to ask for more, only now intent on revenge and wielding a red-hot plough-coulter. This he thrusts into the anus presented through the window, but on this occasion it belongs to the rival who has been enjoying the girl's favours, and it looses a fart which knocks him off his feet.[3]

Few if any modern legends can match this physiological elaboration or narrative complexity, and the upshot (as indeed often in the fabliau itself) is more often embarrassment than bodily harm, but their downward focus is very similar. There is the man who smokes in the toilet and suffers extensive posterior burns when he ignites the cleaning fluid recently poured in it; a motif that can be extended into a more substantial narrative if we are told why he was there (he was supposed to have stopped smoking) and what happened afterwards (he broke his leg when the ambulancemen laughed so much they dropped the stretcher). There is the man who strips naked in anticipation of a romp with the secretary who has taken him home, only to be surprised by colleagues and friends who have secretly foregathered to celebrate his birthday; the woman surprised under similar circumstances only in the company of a dog and a jar of peanut butter; the other woman who slept naked in the caravan on the way home from holiday and emerges

sleepily only to realize that it had just stopped for a traffic light and was now moving off without her; a third woman who found her husband lying with his head in the cupboard under the kitchen sink at last fixing a faulty pipe only to find, when she fondles him sexually and the figure smashes its head into the sink, that it was actually the plumber. Closer to the sustained narrative of the fabliau is the story of the husband who came home late and drunk after the office Christmas party. He falls asleep on the sofa, and to embarrass him his children sever the head and long neck of the turkey in the fridge and place it protruding from the flies of his trousers. His wife faints as she comes down stairs to find the cat over him and apparently munching his penis. In the world of the fabliau-legend, life is full of such embarrassing pitfalls: steal a package of meat at a supermarket, and it'll be a dead cat; steal a car, there'll be a dead grandmother on the roof-rack; if you're having an affair, don't keep super-glue in the house; never fart without checking that you really are alone.

There is then a category of modern contemporary legend thematically analogous to the medieval fabliau, but which qualifies as contemporary legend rather than fabliaux (which were told of, but not necessarily by, the lower classes) through being told as true and as about people like us. Their narrative impact therefore stems largely from the encounter between ordinary people and 'lower' aspects of life which are usually kept (literally or metaphorically) hidden, but which circumstances conspire to expose or emphasize: the sexual organs and their functions; the digestive tract and its products; the living body and dead bodies.[4]

In the modern contemporary legends analogous to medieval romances the protagonists, again by definition people like us (friends of friends), can hardly match the calibre of Lancelot and Gawain, but the dangers they face (fear, injury and death) are commensurate with the romance world, and are inflicted by antagonists as alien to conventional suburban society as dragons, elves, wizards, giants and wicked queens were to Camelot: the criminally insane, the sexually deviant, the ethnically minor, the returned dead, drug addicts and hippies, the incurably (and contagiously) ill, the unclean.[5] Perhaps more to the point, these interactions take place within the same two basic scenarios with which romance heroes encounter the alien: the excursion and the incursion. In the former the representative of the civilized world, like

Yvain in Chrétien's *Knight of the Lion* or Gawain in the second part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, goes out into the wilderness to encounter the alien on a deliberate quest for *adventure*:

> Many a cliff must he climb in country wild;
> Far off from his friends, forlorn must he ride;
> At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed
> 'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,
> And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must. ...
> Now with serpents he wars, now with savage wolves,
> Now with wild men of the woods, that watched from the rocks,
> Both with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides,
> And giants that came gibbering from the jagged steeps.[6]

In current contemporary legends we can identify the modern equivalent of this wasteland as areas outside the home and the immediate suburban environment where strangers and their ways are encountered: the highway, the lonely lane, the underground railway, the cemetary, the shopping precinct, the amusement park or tourist attraction, or even the restaurant. On the highway our friend of a friend may pick up a hitchhiker who turns out to be a ghost (having been killed in an accident at the spot where they met) or a murderer dressed as a harmless old woman (suspicion aroused by hairy forearms and confirmed by a bloody hatchet in her handbag). In lovers' lane a necking couple can panic on hearing, on the car radio, of an escaped, one-armed maniac, and on arrival home find a torn off hook dangling from the car doorhandle; or if the car won't start the boy, having gone to fetch help, will be found at dawn hanging from a tree above it, the girl having spent a night of terror inside listening to what turn out to be his feet bumping on its roof. The underground is terrorized by a maniac who pushes people under oncoming trains, the cemetary by a monster with iron teeth; at the shopping precinct a woman may have her ankles slashed by a maniac under her parked car, or her son be castrated in the mens' room by an ethnic youth to qualify him for membership of a street gang. At the amusement park or tourist site a child may be abducted and found days later with organs removed for transplants. In department stores there are poisonous creatures hidden

in imported goods; in restaurants or fast food outlets there are rats in the pizza or mice in the cola.

In the incursion form the alien threat penetrates into the castle to meet the protagonist on his home ground. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens with an event of this kind, as Arthur and his court are about to enjoy their Christmas banquet:

> There hurtles in at the hall-door an unknown rider,
> One the greatest on ground in growth of his frame:
> From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and thick,
> And his loins and his legs so long and so great,
> Half a giant on earth I hold him to be ....[7]

In the present context the concept of romance might be extended to include the more exotic episodes of earlier, heroic literature, for instance *Beowulf*. The incursions of Grendel and Grendel's mother into the (in context) familiar world of the mede-hall have very much the feel of the wilderness penetrating its walls, and it is from just such a wilderness, we are told, that they come: 'an unvisited land among wolf-haunted hills, windswept crags, and perilous fen-tracks, where mountain waterfalls disappear into mist and are lost underground'. And when, modulating to the excursion form, Beowulf and his company go out into this alien world, they find a lake with 'swarms of reptiles in the water, and strange dragons groping in the depths; while monsters, serpents and fierce brutes ... basked upon the slopes of the cliff'.[8]

In modern contemporary legends incursions into the home environment (a domestic or institutional residence) can be by creatures of the natural wild (insects in the stomach or unkempt hair, the latter causing death by boring their way into the skull), but are more often of the urban jungle beyond polite suburbia. Burglars may infiltrate the residence hidden in a sofa, or may be revealed (fainting from loss of blood) when the household Doberman proves to be choking on severed fingers. Children can be bloodily put to death by drugged babysitters, or by intruders while the babysitter is watching television downstairs (not sufficiently disturbed by phone-calls urging her to look to the children upstairs). Strange scratching sounds in a near-deserted college dorm will have been made by a room-mate seeking to escape a murderous intruder. Inviting an attractive partner home for sex the

friend of a friend may awake in the morning to find the visitor gone, leaving only the message (in lipstick on the bathroom mirror), "Welcome to the AIDS Club".

Modern urban legends of the romance, 'alien encounter', variety are therefore part of a substantial and lengthy tradition of narratives confronting the inhabitants of the civilized world with the wilderness and its denizens beyond its pale.[9] A given society uses narratives, it would seem, to tell itself stories about the monsters and threats that most concern it: dragons and wildmen in the medieval wilderness; ogres in the mounds outside early-modern villages; maniacs in lovers' lane in suburban America.[10] What distinguishes the contemporary legend from romance is the identity between the civilization within the narrative and the civilization within which the narrative is told, making it a particularly direct register of such concerns. Sociologically oriented British research emphasizes the role of modern contemporary legends as a reflection of fear and anxiety: they 'articulate in narrative form the fears, anxieties, and submerged desires of our time',[11] but do so, moreover, from the perspective of the type of people narrating and narrated of in the legends, in relation to what are perceived as external threats:

> The wishes and fears expressed through these legends are usually those of a particular social grouping and are articulated informally, as part of conversation. ... This context and mode of performance are also of considerable significance in terms of rumour legend as a means of transmission of belief. The shared symbols, values and attitudes which underlie any subcultural grouping also, to a great extent, define the threats to it which are felt to be inherent in the wider culture.[12]

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There is evidently good reason, and strong historical precedent, for seeing the modern contemporary legend as registering the forces and situations, considered alien and threatening, to our modern (or postmodern), urban (or suburban) society. But as Mark Rose notes, in the study whose title this article (unconsciously) purloined, and speaking of the 'alien encounters' characterizing much science fiction,

the alien is not so much an independent realm, as a projection of something within ourselves.[13] Many a monster clawing at the windows of the space-ship may really be a manifestation of the suppressed passions of those inside. A medievalist is less at home with *The Forbidden Planet* than *Beowulf*, and we have already appealed to Grendel as a medieval antecedent of the threatening alien of the modern contemporary legend. But as the poem is at pains to explain, Grendel's race is not indigenous to the wilderness; it was originally expelled from human civilization, as representing something that civilization defined itself in opposition to: 'This unhappy being had long lived in the land of monsters, because God had damned him along with the children of Cain. For the eternal Lord avenged the killing of Abel. He took no delight in that feud, but banished Cain from humanity because of his crime. From Cain were hatched all evil progenies: ogres, hobgoblins, and monsters, not to mention the giants who fought so long against God'[14] -- and, we can now add, hairy-armed hitchhikers and maniacs with hooks. It is surely no coincidence that 'our' monsters go for people doing such quintessentially suburban things as necking, shopping and watching television, while Grendel is specifically enraged by that quintessentially heroic sound, the 'glee' of warriors and bard in the mede-hall.[15]

Some modern contemporary legends therefore merit the name 'urban legends' not so much because of their urban setting as because they have us urbanites encounter, dangerously and disturbingly, precisely the things we have expelled or suppressed to make urban life possible, or what in another context have been called 'the contained outsiders-who-make-the insiders-insiders (the mad, the criminal, the sick, the unruly, the sexually transgressive)'.[16]

But this perspective applies as appropriately to the fabliaux legends as to the romance legends: the sexual organs and their functions, the digestive system and its products, the naked body and the dead body, dirt and contamination are likewise all aspects of life whose existence is normally suppressed in the social and domestic intercourse and discourse we consider normal and proper.[17] They belong with the destructive urges of the creatures of the periphery as matters or subjects our suburban, metropolitan civilization has chosen to suppress, control, expel or hide: they are not -- to use three words all evocative

of and etymologically derived from, town life -- urbane, polite or civilized.

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The vulgar, the impolite and the uncivilized have been expelled to an outer wilderness, the darkness on the edge of town, encountered through the romance excursion or incursion, or to an inner wilderness, the bathroom and the toilet, from which they errupt in the fabliau-legends. Inner and outer wildernesses are physically and thematically linked by the sewers, concerning which, of course, we meet a legend which effectively epitomizes the functions here suggested for the contemporary legend, although this one is more strictly a rumour (a statement of alleged fact backed by explanatory validation): the idea that there are alligators in the sewers of New York. Bought small as pets (from the Florida Everglades) and flushed down toilets when they became a nuisance, they live happily on the rich sludge of the sewage system.

This is not specifically a New York story (they have been reported from other towns) except perhaps insofar as New York is the quintessentially urban environment. Nor is it an alligator story so much as a sewer story, for there are analogous rumours of other animals in sewers: cats in Montreal; pigs in London.[18] The common denominator seems to be the domesticity (however temporary) of the animal which has escaped into the sewer, and it is this which probably gives the rumour the disturbing quality its popularity seems to suggest (rather than more distant analogues such as the journey to the otherworld).[19] The pigs are reared for food and so effectively part of the domestic establishment; the cats and alligators are kept as pets: animals yet members of the household, an ambiguous status which seems to reflect a variant of human-animal relations peculiar to fairly recent times.[20] Rats, however many and however big, wouldn't have the same effect: they *belong* in the sewers (their incursion thence into homes would be a different legend); nor would animals in some underground system not associated with human sewage (like the cats in the *subways* of New York[21]); it is the combination which is effective. The pet cat and pet crocodile and domestic pig have been close to us, part of our environment, but have reverted to the wild, and, moreover, to a

wilderness which is composed of what we have quite literally expelled to make civic urban life civilized and urbane: the sewers and their human waste products. We have built them under our cities to take away the filth (having first defined it as filth), whose production is precisely what reveals us as kin to the animal world.

Such rumours will not thrive in a mental environment where human waste products are not psychologically problematic, or in a physical environment (like the medieval village or town) in which filth, including human excrement, is collected in piles (middens) outside the cottage door, or left to rot in the middle of the street. Roman civilization was emphatically urban and urbane, its sewers correspondingly large and efficient, and therefore (I confidently, retrospectively, predict), like ours, rumoured to be infested by escaped pets of one kind or another. Much of the alien filth probably crept back into the community (and the pets withdrew from the sewers) as civic sanitation gave way to the golden age of the medieval midden. While Roman York had sewers large enough for a man to walk in, the Anglo-Scandinavian inhabitants of the same city, according to archaeologists, 'were actually living on their own midden heaps, a dump of fly-blown rotting vegetables and flesh'.[22] If there were no legends of escaped pets in medieval sewage systems it was mainly because because filth was evidently not embarrassing and not separated from normal living as effectively as possible.[23]

Nor was sex. A civilization which could happily portray Christ on the cross with an implied but emphatic erection[24] would not share many of our anxieties about the body and its functions. If Bakhtin is right in his assertion that what he calls the carnivalesque spirit manifested in Rabelais was indeed also operative in carnival, this suggests that at least among the medieval antecedents of the people who now tell contemporary legends (people like us) the grotesque body was not a problem.[25] Nor, one imagines, was the deviant mind: there were village idiots, but even if figures of cruel derision they remained in the village, rather than being isolated in institutions. By the writ *de idiota inquirendo* a king could grant the income of the land of someone judged insane to the individual who would undertake custody of his person: it may have been a cruel way of procuring household jesters, but they remained part of the household.[26]

Nonetheless, medieval culture probably had its own notion of deviance, of something unacceptable, personally or socially indwelling, that was expelled only to become an alien threat, and therefore probably the stuff of medieval narratives, including contemporary legends. The medieval treatment of lepers, Jews and beggars, separated into their own parts of the city, suggests as much, and indeed such groups were precisely the subject of hysterical rumours about well-poisoning and child-kidnapping.[27] As Michael Camille has suggested, this concept of the alien on the margins of civilization is reproduced literally in the grotesques on the margins of even the most pious medieval texts.[28]

Essentially medieval also is the image of the wilderness beyond the city wall and the gates of the farmstead. Older Nordic cosmology distinguished emphatically between the Mithgarthr of the gods and civilization and the Utgarthr of the giants, who (as the *Edda* reported) could sometimes launch threatening incursions, and this was mirrored in medieval Scandinavian concepts of homestead and community by a sharp distinction between the known world within the pale, *innangards*, and the untamed world *utangards*.[29] The latter is the world of the wild man, alien in his savage way of life and his disregard for civilized proprieties and sexual norms.[30] But alienated rather than intrinsically alien: medieval culture was alert to the animal side of human nature,[31] and virtually constructed the image of the wild man to project such uncivilized urges away from the city.[32] The forest-dwelling outlaw of later medieval legend may also owe something to this tradition. Nor is it surprising that in the 'savages' encountered beyond Europe, Englishmen 'were especially inclined to discover attributes ... which they found first, but could not speak of, in themselves'.[33]

The specific concerns (social and mental deviance and embarrassment) of our modern contemporary legends probably emerged concurrently with the development of modern sensibilities: presumably in conjunction with the eighteenth-century literature associated with 'sensibility' and the activities of the societies for the improvement of manners, the cleaning up of cities, and the development of institutional care for the criminal and insane. But other outlets (perhaps I mean inlets) were evidently necessary as well. Bakhtin has suggested that in the early modern period carnival catered to this alternative emphasis on the lower man, and it has been

powerfully and persuasively argued by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White that later on, when carnival in turn was suppressed, what we might term the carnival diaspora is to be found in fairgrounds, in urban slums, and even in the hysterias of Freud's patients (in the most urbane of urban centres, Vienna):

> It is striking how the thematics of carnival pleasure -- eating, inversion, mess, dirt, sex and stylized body movements -- find their neurasthenic, unstable and mimicked counterparts in the discourse of hysteria.[34]

Fantasy literature has similarly been diagnosed as responding to 'a desire for something excluded from cultural order',[35] and our vulnerability to blues music and its rhythmic descendants has likewise been explained by the subconscious lack of what we have expelled:

> European-American racism has used African America as a screen on which to project repressed emotion, particularly sex and aggression. ... whites are attracted to black music as a means of expressing aspects of themselves they cannot adequately express through music from European roots.[36]

And among the narrative symptoms of the modern sensibility and mentality seeking to cope with the threat of the wild and the embarrassment of the body we also find the modern contemporary legend, both the romance encounter with the wilderness outside, and the fabliau encounter with the wilderness within: Modern respectability has opened a space between man and nature which has been bridged by some fascinating narratives.[37]

Notes

1. For texts and discussions of the contemporary legends appealed to in what follows, see standard surveys such as J.H. Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (New York, 1981); *The Choking Doberman* (New York, 1984); *The Mexican Pet* (New York, 1986); *Curses! Broiled Again!* (New York, 1989); Paul Smith, *The Book of Nasty*

Legends (London, 1983); *The Book of Nastier Legends* (London, 1986), and Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, *Contemporary Legend. A Folklore Bibliography* (New York, 1993).
2. There are now several anthologies of the medieval French genre in translation, for example Larry D. Benson & Theodore M. Anderson, ed. & trans., *The Literary History of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (Indianapolis, 1971); Paul Brians, ed. & trans., *Bawdy Tales from the Courts of Medieval France* (New York, 1973); R. Harrison, trans., *Gallic Salt. Eighteen Fabliaux translated from the Old French* (Los Angeles, 1974). For a succinct account of its generic characteristics see Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Los Angeles, 1969), ch. III.
3. Conveniently available in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, 6th edn. (New York, 1993), vol. I.
4. In 'Medieval French Fabliaux and Modern Urban Legends: The Attraction of Opposities', *Béaloideas,* 57 (1989), 133-49, at pp. 147-48, Grace Neville includes the recurrence of motifs such as 'nudity, dismemberment and multiple corpses' among several similarities between the two genres, but goes on to suggest they evoke 'awesome, frightening, difficult themes' such as 'procreation, birth and death', which the narratives help us to come to terms with (by making them objects of fun). The thesis I develop here focusses more on the animal in man and the embarrassment its exposure evokes, rather than fear.
5. Standard accounts of the medieval romance as a genre include J. Stephens, *Medieval Romance. Themes and Approaches* (London, 1972); W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London, 1987).
6. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Marie Borroff, ll. 713-23, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, vol. I.
7. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Borroff, ll. 136-40.
8. *Beowulf*, trans. David Wright (Harmondsworth, 1957), pp. 59 & 60.
9. On the medieval literary history of the wilderness see Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance. Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge, 1993).
10. On relatively recent shifts in the identity of the threatening alien (from supernatural (troll) to human (immigrant)) see Timothy R.

Tangherlini, 'From Trolls to Turks: Continuity and Change in Danish Legend Tradition', *Scandinavian Studies*, 67 (1995), 32-62.

11. David Buchan, 'The Modern Legend', in *Language, Culture and Tradition*, ed. A.E. Green & J.D.A. Widdowson (Sheffield, 1981), pp. 1-15, at p. 13.

12. Georgina Boyes, 'Belief and Disbelief: An Examination of Reactions to the Presentation of Rumour Legends', *Perspectives on Contemporary Legends*, ed. Paul Smith (Sheffield, 1984), pp. 64-78, at pp. 64-65.

13. Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters. Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 6, 'Monster'.

14. *Beowulf*, trans. Wright, p. 29; cf. also p. 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 29. It is also a slightly disturbing thought that Grendel can only be destroyed by a hero who has not fully suppressed the monstrous in himself; see my 'Beowulf: The Mark of the Beast', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 77 (1976), 526-35.

16. Peter Stallybrass & Alon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986), p. 22, citing Foucault.

17. The standard anthropological study of changing attitudes to filth is Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

18. For evidence and discussion of the cat and pig analogues see Thomas Pettitt, 'The Hampstead Hogs: Internationalizing an American Legend', *Foaftale News*, 38 (December 1995), 2-3. The alligator legend is discussed from a different perspective by Kenneth A. Thigpen, 'Folklore in Contemporary American Literature: Thomas Pynchon's *V* and the Alligators-in-the-Sewers Legend', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 43 (1979), 93-105, who also supplies (at p. 97) references to analogous infestations in Chicago and Pittsburgh. See also Hal Morgan and Kerry Tucker, *Rumor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 149-53; Loren Coleman, 'Alligators-In-the-Sewers: A Journalistic Origin', *JAF*, 92 (1979), 335-38.

19. Which it would nonetheless be interesting to pursue; the theme is comprehensively illustrated in *The Journey to the Otherworld*, ed. H.R. Ellis Davidson (Cambridge, 1975).

20. On the emergence of pet-keeping see Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir. Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley, 1994), and on the topic more generally Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The*

English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

21. Robert Daley, *The World Beneath the City* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 13.

22. Martin Carver, *Underneath English Towns. Interpreting Urban Archaeology* (London, 1987), pp. 33 & 98.

23. Interestingly it has been suggested that a class of (reasonably contemporary) medieval legends which has bishops expelling dragons are in fact allegories of their instituting drainage works (i.e. sewers) which checked the incidence of disease (the latter perhaps linked to the dragon image via the snakes which evidently infested early drains). See Peregrine Horden, 'Disease, dragons and saints: the Management of epidemics in the Dark Ages', in *Epidemics and Ideas. Essays on the historical perception of pestilence*, ed. Terence Ranger & Paul Slack (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 45-76, at pp. 73-74.

24. Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York, 1983), pp. 82ff.

25. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, 1968); see also Stephen Greenblatt, 'Filthy Rites', in *Learning to Curse. Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London, 1990), ch. 4.

26. William Willeford, *The Fool and his Sceptre* (London, 1969), p. 133; Willeford's ch. 8, 'The Fool, the Boundary, and the Centre' is generally relevant to this discussion of the alien on the periphery of society. See also Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton, 1984); Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London, 1935).

27. Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 132. As the Book of Revelation (Authorized Version, XXII. 15) put it: 'Without [the city] are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie'.

28. Camille, *Image on the Edge*; see also the useful review (by Jean-Claude Schmitt) in *Annales*, 48 (1993), 1619-22.

29. Aaron Gurevitch, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joyce Howlett (Chicago, 1992), ch. 11, 'Semantics of the Medieval Community: 'Farmstead', 'Land', 'World''. For the history of the forest and its impact on medieval mentality see Roland Bechmann,

Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages, trans. Katharyn Dunham (New York, 1990); Robert P. Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago, 1992); Jacques Le Goff, 'The Wilderness in the Medieval West', in *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1988), pp. 107-131.
30. For the wild man see R. Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Timothy Husband, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York, 1980). The centaur, inherited from Roman tradition, had a similar reputation; see Elizabeth A. Lawrence, 'The Centaur: its History and Meaning in Human Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27 (1993-94), 57-68.
31. Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within. Animals and Bestiality in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994).
32. *The Wild Man Within*, ed. E. Dudley & M.E. Novak (Pittsburgh, 1972), particularly Hayden White's 'The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea', on pp. 3-38.
33. Winthrop Jordan, *The White Man's Burden* (New York, 1974), pp. 22-23 (cited in Benzon, 'The United States of the Blues').
34. Stallybrass & White, *The Politics of Transgression*, p.182; the whole of chapter 5, 'Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnivalesque' is relevant to the present topic, as is ch. 3, 'The City: the Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch'. Freud, sewers and alligators are juxtaposed, honestly if unconvincingly, in Michael P. Carroll, 'Alligators in the sewer, dragons in the well and Freud in the toilet', *Sociological Review*, 32 (1984), 157-74.
35. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981), p. 176; see also Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard (Ithaca, 1968), p. 158.
36. William L. Benzon, 'The United States of the Blues: On the Crossing of African and European Cultures in the 20th Century', *Journal of Social and Evolutionary System*, 16 (1993), citing Abstract as posted on internet bulletin board bbebop. There is an odd consonance here in the novels of Thomas Pynchon: while *V* (Philadelphia, 1963, pp. 43 & 111-123) adequately documents his knowledge of the alligators in the sewers (its protagonist gets a job hunting them), *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York, 1973), pp. 63ff. has a sequence in

which a man wriggles into the sewers through a toilet, only to find a strange underwater world in which a blues band is playing.

37. I anticipate with interest juxtaposing the speculations offered here with L. Pfister's '"Man's Distinctive Mark": Paradoxical Distinctions between Man and his Bestial other in Early Modern Texts', in *Telling Stories*, ed. E. Lahmann & B. Lenz (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1992), pp. 17-33, which explores some literary manifestations of the breakdown of the medieval distinction between the human and the animal.

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nr. 8 *Marsken rider igen* **- Om mordet på Erik Klipping, Rumelants sange og marsk Stig-viserne, 1990.**
Jens E. Olesen: Kongemord og fredløshedsdom.
Reinhold Schröder: Dâvon sing ich ü diz liet. Rumelants strofer i anledning af Erik Klippings død.
Leif Søndergaard: Meningsdannelse og mytedannelse i marsk Stig-viserne.
Iørn Piø: Hvem skrev den lange Marsk Stig-vise? Skitse til en arbejdshypotese.

nr. 9 *Griseldistemaet gennem tiden*, **1992.**
Michel Olsen: Griselda - Omskrivninger og værdiforskydninger.
Marianne Børch: Chausers Griselde: menneske eller urmenneske.
Leif Søndergaard: Folkebogens fascination - Griseldis gennem 400 år.
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