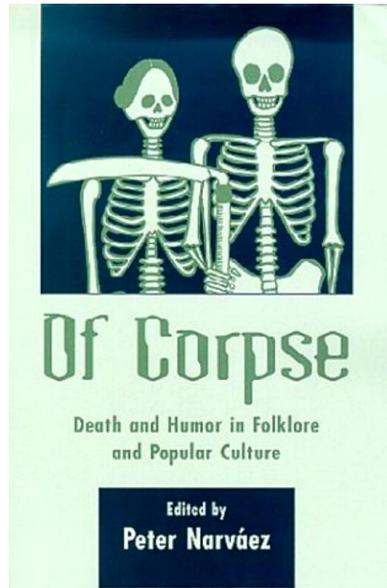


BOOK REVIEWS

OF CORPSE

Of Corpse: Death and Humor in Folklore and Popular Culture. Ed. Peter Narvaez. Logan (Utah): Utah State University Press, 2003. Pp. 310 + notes, references, contributors, index. Paperback.

Peter Narvaez has assembled under the title eleven essays of scholars who have examined the relationship between the two seemingly incompatible areas: death and humor. The authors focus on different aspects of this combined field of folkloristic research: disaster jokes, rites of passage between life and death, festivals where an inherent part are the souls of the deceased (eg. analysing the Day of the Dead in Mexico), and popular culture. Most of the authors are not experts of humor, the approaches stem from their diverse specializations in folklore. Most (though insightful) studies lack reference to any current humor theories (with the always pleasurable exception of Christie Davies's essay). There seems to be a deliberate preference for folklorists, as Elliott Oring and Alan Dundes feature in the list of references more than once. The book is meant for folklorists but hopefully will not stay in this circle, because it has a message to "outsiders" as well.



Contributors to the first section (*Disaster Jokes*) deal with the subject most familiar to contemporary reader – widely circulated disaster jokes. Christie Davies analyses closely the social relations of modern disaster jokes, finding examples from British and Ameri-

can disaster jokes through last 40 years. He concludes that jokes are a counter-discourse to the officially stated opinions in the media, most of all television. Bill Ellis's article is a reprint of the special monograph issue on World Trade Center (WTC) humor unleashed after the terrorist attack on the 11th of September 2001 first published in the online magazine *New Directions in Folklore*. This is a study addressing the hypotheses postulated in a previous article, *A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes*, at <http://www.temple.edu/isllc/newfolk/wtchumor.html>. He looks at the different waves of jokes both in United States and Great Britain and makes suggestions about the electronic distribution of folklore and its effects on globalization of jokes.

Second section (*Rites of Passage*) addresses the way that people in the United States, Newfoundland and Ireland have treated their dead at wakes and at graveyards. Ilana Harlow and Peter Narvaez look back at the tradition of so-called "merry wakes". They maintain that both in Ireland and in Newfoundland, tricksters and blaggards tried to involve the dead person in the activities of the wake to please the soul of the deceased. Harlow concludes that this tradition owes much to the old celtic belief systems. Narvaez focuses on the amusing wakes as a way of holding on to local culture and as an attack towards official religious systems. Richard Meyer presents an article about modern American graveyard humor that describes the change of epitaphs from expressing community values to composing individualized texts that incorporate occupational, recreational etc elements and celebrate life rather than dying or death.

In the third section (*Festivals*) we are brought to the Christian calendar holidays celebrated in the United States, Haiti and Mexico. Jack Kugelmass' essay on the Greenwich Village Halloween parade focuses on the continuum between ritual and festival, suggesting that festival actively questions and challenges the established values. Kristin Kongdon and Stanley Brandes tell the reader in two complementary essays about the literature and visual symbols of the Mexican Day of the Dead. They find the ritual use of sugar skulls, papier-maché skeletons and mock epitaphs to represent the democratic spirit of death that eliminates differences between social statuses. Counter-hegemonic behaviour is also the subject of

research for the fourth essay in this section by Donald Cosentino. He describes how the *Gedes* (spirits) play with firmly founded norms of sexuality and death.

The last section (*Popular Culture*) features research of Lu Anne Roth on the subculture of the Deadheads of the 1960ies and Mikel Koven with a novel approach to vernacular cinema. Both describe the use of traditional symbols, beliefs and folk tales in the narratives of popular culture. Koven states that easily remembered tales represent a tendency towards so-called “neo-orality” that is expressed in modern standard Hollywood box-office hits.

The subject of this book is more about death than humor. Humor is just one of many ways to deal with the inevitable in our lives. Humor allows to demystify death and thus make it more familiar and better accepted. The same can be said to about society in general: humor is a weapon to make a stand against the official discourse that is forced upon us through socially accepted media. The unexpected view-point of humor in combination with death reveals new perspectives about social functions of humor in general.

Liisi Laineste

PASSER MORTUS EST...

***Ynglingite saaga* [The Ynglingasaga]. Translated into Estonian and comments by Tõnno Jonuks. Tartu: Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum. 2003, 87 p.**

This line from Ovid's poem, which I chose as a title for my book report, entered my mind, unexpectedly but intensely, when I was reading about the death of King Dag's sparrow in the Ynglingasaga. While the sparrow of the Roman courtesan was what we today would call a pet, King Dag's sparrow was more like a reconnoitering airplane, which flew out to bring the news to its master, – or like an assisting spirit of a shaman. The sparrow transmitted its messages in the language of birds, of course, though the fact that King Dag understood the language of birds was the least of the miracles in the Ynglingasaga. Children today have certainly heard of Dr. Doolittle or of such skills in local folkloric material.



I wonder if Ovid and his *puella* did anything else upon the news of the sparrow's death, except for writing a poem. Ovid was an intellectual, a decadent even, in the Roman Empire, a man of words. The Northern barbarian, on the other hand, was a man of action, who upon finding out that his sparrow had been killed with a stone, ordered a great army and organized a vindictive plundering raid. The army led by Dag had "killed many people and taken many prisoners", but before he could return to his ship, the King himself was slain. If we believe the speculated dates in the Estonian translation, it may have happened at least four centuries after Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC – ~18 AD) wrote his elegant and enjoyable lines. Certainly, by this time different parts of Europe had progressed

at widely different speed, but the differences gradually began to even out – and, perhaps have become even by now?

The prose part of the sparrow's tale is short, taking up less than a page, and is complemented with a Skaldic verse on the same theme. This laconic, though by no means dry style is used throughout the entire saga. The next tale of Agne, Dag's son, is as brilliant as the sparrow's tale. This tale should, in fact, interest us, the Estonians even more, since the female protagonist of this tale is a Finn maiden – Balto-Finnic Skjalv. The introduction to the tale is characteristic of the Vikings: while landing and marauding in Finland, the Finnish chief falls in the battle, and his daughter and son are taken prisoners. The following course of events points not so much to the comfortable and indolent Rome, but rather to the young and effervescent Israel. The motif of the enemy chieftain's death by the hand of his young wife resembles a motif in the Old Testament. A common Estonian reader would first think of Judith, but someone more acquainted with the Bible might remember the name Jael (Judges 4: 17–22). Skjalv's (or what would the maiden's Balto-Finnic name have been? Skjalv sounds quite awful – and unlikely at the same time) revenge was much more refined. The King died because of his vanity and the ornament, for he was hanged by the fast bound golden necklace (probably thick like that of mobsters) around his neck. This is an significant detail, which often appears in folk tales and archaic written literature. The golden ornaments and Skjalv's insidious approach bading to take care of the ornament, by fastening them tightly enough to be able to sustain the King's weight, was completely unnecessary. When the King was so drunk, as the Saga claims him to be, why then couldn't the maiden hammer the same tent-pole into his head, like Jael, instead of scheming such an intricate plan. Though conducting a relatively simple murder, Jael plotted several cunning to get the commander to trust her. The complicated execution technique in the Ynglingasaga might well serve some unfathomable purpose.

Interestingly, however, this is not the only story where the central character, the King, is *drunk, very drunk, exceedingly drunk, or dead drunk* – far from it. A closer reading reveals that at least half of them were killed while drunk. The weakness to alcohol, which in prehistoric times was available only to noblemen, – what caused that? In modern Estonian society alcohol consumption is said to be

on the increase, but is it caused by current social issues, the climate, genes, or something else?

The sparrow tale, discussed above, included sacrifice and magical transmission of the news, which again is another example of the recurrent motif in the Saga. I would also like to point out the story of Vanlande, and not only because it mentions the witchcraft of our kinsfolk, the Finn people. The tale is more intriguing because of presents a more detailed description than is characteristic of the Ynglingasaga in general. Another interesting detail is that the behaviour of the witch who tortures and finally kills the King resembles that of an incubus, which has been a popular research topic among the Estonian folklorists. The chapter also allows a modern psychological interpretation: when Vanlande, who was at Upsal, felt a great desire to go to Finland, back to his young wife with a small child, he could well have been driven by a mere desire of heart or lust, perhaps also by a sense of guilt. But his friends and councillors said that it was the witchcraft of the Finn people.

Presently, when Neopaganism is sowing its seeds in Europe, even in Estonia, and attracts plenty of media attention, its leaders like to preach and write about the innocent, pacific ancient Estonians, who were brutally killed by the Christians. I agree that what happened in the 13th century, was a bloody mission – but what happened afterwards? Regardless of all the wailing, it is obvious that noone in today's post-Christian Estonia or Europe misses the times of the Sagas, the times of our ancestors. Anonymous readers' response in the WWW may indeed be unpleasant, but would be definitely preferable to the situation where the offender (often the speculated offender!) not only could be killed, but had to be killed to protect one's honour. Reading or hearing about it may sound intriguing, but imagining oneself into the situation? Or, let us consider the story of King Aun, who sacrificed his nine sons, one by one – as we are told in laconic dispassionate sentences.

To sacrifice one's sons to prolong one's own life? The egoism is less gruesome in the beginning, the years gained in return for the blood of the first sons. The extremity of the desire to prolong one's life eventually reaches absurdity – the old king is weak, confined to bed, unable to eat solid food – but he still wants to prolong his miserable existence, sacrificing yet another son. Wouldn't the old

people of today turn to euthanasia instead? There are moral issues behind this choice as well.

C. S. Lewis has compared the Jews of the Old Testament (relying on Psalms) and pagans (relying, among other sources, on Greek and Old Scandinavian literature), and their cruelty, and has concluded that although the Jews appeared to be more vindictive and malevolent towards their enemies, and the pagans were simply brutal and cruel, then the former were guided by clear understanding of truth, while the latter were morally completely indifferent. King Aun's story forces a comparison with Abraham. Abraham's sacrifice, i.e. his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac was a completely different matter than that of King Aun, who sacrificed his sons with no seeming moral dilemma, as if closing a deal with a merchant – 25 crones for a beer? Ten years for a son's life? A jolly good bargain!

The tales of the Ynglingasaga, though bloody and alienating, have been written in a way that allows no later additions (fabrications, etc.). The laconic use of words has given a maximum effect. This is not a mere trick of style. Perhaps the number of such grand tales is a constant figure, perhaps they are created together with the world and may alter only a little in time and space? These are intriguing ideas for a folklorist. I have followed the dissemination of one tale type from the Balto-Finns to Siberia. *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Mayan, shares astonishing similarities with the narrative tradition of the Old World. Later, the invaders may have introduced the Bible to the Quiche Maya, but the analogies with the Siberian material appear to be original.

Knowledge of Christianity and biblical stories may have reached the Scandinavian people during a considerably longer period than they did to the Native Americans. Centuries before the Christianisation of Scandinavia, single monks may have lived among the savage Vikings, but the Vikings could have fallen prisoners in war or during a raid and ended up in the world of the new religion as well; and this could explain the parallels in the Ynglingasaga. The texts are even stylistically close – compare, for example, Chapter 16 (up to the Skaldic verse) of the Ynglingasaga and the analogous verses in Kings or Chronicles, where the reign of one king turns into the reign of another in the same laconic and stereotypical manner. On several instances the text sounds almost like having been

formed on the example of the Bible. Then again, the archaic code may have been the same all over the world – from the nomads of the Middle East to the sons of the North.

Books like the Ynglingasaga are truthful – they contain nothing fabricated or forced to promote the sales, no hint of aspirations to be interesting or unique, even shocking. These gruesome bloody tales have been conveyed plainly and matter-of-factly, without passing moral judgement (here I do not mean moralizing), i.e. in an utterly neutral manner. Fewer words, more to think about.

I would like to express my gratitude to the translator, who has mediated this major Scandinavian text into the Estonian language, and has, in general, done a good job. The translation has been complemented with plenty of comments in the scope of an independent research work. The translation of a text from a distant past is always tricky, for it is not only the language that has to be translated, but also the spirit.

Kristi Salve