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Meaning of Folklore

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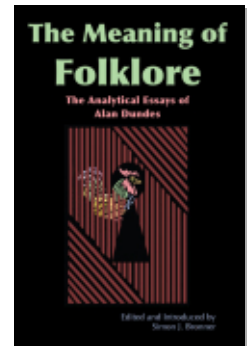
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GETTING THE FOLK AND THE LORE TOGETHER

Introduction

This essay addresses the connection of Dundes's folkloristic perspective with semiotics, concisely defined as the study of signs. The ideas in it became central to his symbolist approach in "Projection in Folklore" (1976a), which was incorporated in *Interpreting Folklore* (1980b), and it stood as a manifesto for a psychoanalytic enterprise within folkloristics. Dundes originally wrote it in 1975 as a presentation to the Charles Sanders Peirce Symposium on Semiotics and the Arts at Johns Hopkins University. The goal of semiotics, to understand how meaning is made and understood, was of special importance to Dundes, evident in his opening verbal salvo: "Folklore *means* something." What it meant, he announced, was often not obvious from a literal reading of folkloric texts; it was indeed often something about something else. The source of that meaning in something else involved anxiety, ambivalence, or ambiguity, contextualized in sociohistorical conditions as well as in psychological development. The title of the essay referred to the polarization between those scholars emphasizing the social basis of the folk, and the predominantly literary approach to the texts of lore. Dundes proposed to bring the two together in the discipline of folklore study, by drawing attention to the mind as a source of projective expression that reflects and creates social organization and interaction.

As a structuralist influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas of signs (the basic unit of language) and signification (the separation of the signified object from the signifier), and the distinction between *langue* (the systematic dimension of natural language) and *parole* (speaking, or manifestations of *langue*), Dundes also related folkloristics to semiotics, interpreting expressive culture as symbolic systems. Dundes's contribution was to suggest applying psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious, and projection, to the study of meaning in a cultural context. "There is patterning and system in folklore," Dundes asserted, "so that the symbol employed in any one given folkloristic (con)text may be related to a general system of symbols." In folkloristic analysis, his preference for the rhetoric of symbol over signs derived from the psychological view that meanings resided not only in language, but also in the entire domain of culture. This view was the background for his statement that "what I am saying is that within a cultural relative system of symbols, the use of a particular symbol may be remarkably consistent. I also hasten to add that symbols may carry multiple meanings."

Dundes presented folkloric examples (jump rope rhymes and wedding rituals) that he interpreted earlier as an anthropological “mirror of culture,” but which, in this essay, he couched as symbolic readings in “projective” processes. He revised the Freudian theory of projection by distinguishing projection that transfers feelings and desires to an external object, so that, for example, male sexual impulses might be viewed in phallic references. Dundes called this projective process one of “more or less direct translations of reality into fantasy.” Projective inversion, on the other hand, described a sublimation or avoidance, where an undesirable wish toward someone else was reversed, so that the statement “I hate him” became “He hates me.” Dundes argued that the projective inversion in the Oedipal plot inverted the son’s wishful thinking to kill the father into the father killing the son. From the viewpoint of the son, blame is placed on the victim (the father), and guilt is avoided. Dundes used this concept of projective inversion to explain narrative details involving incest, murder, cannibalism, and homosexuality, all of which appear out of place if seen as a true mirror of culture (see, for example, “Madness in Method Plus a Plea for Projective Inversion in Myth” in the present volume; also 1989e, 1976b, 1991b).

In the present essay, Dundes referred to Henry Nash Smith’s theory of “virgin land,” which deserves some elaboration because of its use of symbolist approaches in the interpretation of American culture. Smith had argued that even before America was settled, an image of the New World had been developed in narrative and art, comparing it to a biblical garden paradise and mythical wilderness. Europeans imagined the lure of America as a bounty of fertile, untrampled land. The natives did not deserve this plenty, European thinking went, because, using the rhetoric of reproduction, they supposedly did not make the land productive or cultivable. Smith saw a new national identity emerging even among a panoply of settlers, as a result of communicating shared values through the symbolic lessons of folklore, literature, and art. Settlers may not have been aware of the fusion of these values into cognitively held “myths” or folk ideas, but their expressions and actions revealed collectively shared beliefs that were distinct from those in Europe ([1950] 2005). Smith’s theory, then, related to Dundes’s, in representing the importance of folklore in identity-building, at a national as well as a local level, and in positing that the meaning of these expressions and actions had sources in unconsciously held ideas. Dundes made more of the sexual symbolism of the land’s “virginity” than Smith, and related the national mission to penetrate the untouched frontier to updated ideas, such as America’s space program, science fiction, and commercial advertising. (For a connection of Dundes’s ideas to American Studies, see Gürel 2006).

Along with the virgin land of the frontier, race is another constructed American image, Dundes viewed it as one more anxiety-producing problem which was expressed in folkloric form. He pointed out that the constructed binary of white/black in American culture favored the superiority of whiteness. Even celebrated black folk heroes, such as John Henry, drew his critical inquiry into unconscious racism. Dundes contended that in social movements such as the Civil Rights movement, this troubling binary produced humorous responses that testified to the adjustments needed for social change. From a symbolist approach, the elephant jokes which arose during the period combined sexual imagery with the social symbolism of the elephant (representing African Americans). Simon Bronner made the argument that there was a symbolic shift of the elephant to women’s independence, as the feminist movement advanced during the 1970s (Bronner 1988, 125–27). For more discussions of racial (and racist) folklore, see Dundes and Abrahams 1987; and Dundes [1973] 1990. For an alternative reading of the elephant joke, see Oring 1975b.

Getting the Folk and the Lore Together

FOLKLORE *MEANS* SOMETHING—TO THE TALE teller, to the song singer, to the riddler, and to the audience or addressees. A given item of folklore may mean different things to different tale tellers or to different audiences. It may mean different things to different members of the same audience; it may mean different things to a single tale teller at different times in his life. So much seems obvious. But despite the assiduous collection of scores and scores of folklore texts, there has been precious little attention paid to what these texts mean—which is sad and curious, for folkloristics, with semiotics, must ultimately be concerned with meaning.

One difficulty impeding the study of folklore's meaning stems from the fact that a goodly portion of folklore is fantasy, collective or collectivized fantasy. I do not refer here to any Jungian sense of a collective unconscious. When I speak of folklore being collective, I mean that a myth or a folksong is known by more than a single individual—usually many individuals—and it is transmitted from person to person, often over the course of generations. Collective folklore also differs from individual dreams. Dreams appear to be similar to narratives, in part because they are related in words. But folktales, unlike individual dreams, must appeal to the psyches of many, many individuals if they are to survive.

It is my contention that much of the meaning of folkloric fantasy is unconscious. Indeed, it would have to be unconscious—in the Freudian sense—for folklore to function as it does. For among its functions, folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in more usual ways. It is precisely in jokes, folktales, folksongs, proverbs, children's games, gestures, etc. that anxieties can be vented. If people knew exactly what they were doing when they told a joke to their boss or to their spouse (or if the boss or spouse knew what they were doing), the joke would probably cease to be an escape mechanism. People need such mechanisms, which is why there will always be folklore, and also incidentally why there is always new folklore being created to take care of new anxieties—I refer, for example, to the folklore of bureaucracy transmitted so effectively by the office-copier machine.

The unconscious nature of so much of folklore makes the study of meaning difficult, but not impossible. Fortunately, there is patterning and system in folklore, so that the symbol employed in any one given folkloric (con)text may be related to a general system of symbols. This does not mean that I think any one symbol is necessarily universal. In fact, I know of no symbol which is reported from all peoples, just as I know of no myth which has universal distribution. What I am saying is that within a culturally relative system of symbols, the use of a particular symbol may be remarkably consistent. I also hasten to add that symbols may carry multiple meanings.

I intend to illustrate the above by referring to several specific examples of folklore, but before I do so I should like to mention briefly the crucial device of projection. In psychology, projection refers to the tendency to attribute to another person or to the environment

what is actually within oneself. What is attributed is usually some internal impulse or feeling which is painful, unacceptable, or taboo. The individual is not consciously aware of that; he or she perceives the external object as possessing the taboo tendencies, without recognizing their source in himself or herself.

Most of the examples of folklore I shall discuss will be familiar ones, to allow readers to confirm or reject my ideas out of their own knowledge of the culture.

Let us begin with a standard jump rope rhyme.

Fudge, fudge, tell the judge
 Mama's got a newborn baby.
 It ain't no girl, it ain't no boy
 Just a newborn (or "common" or "plain ol," or "ordinary") baby
 Wrap it up in tissue paper
 Throw (send) it down the elevator.
 First floor, miss
 Second floor, miss, etc. (until jumper misses)

What does this rhyme mean? Were we to ask little girls jumping rope to it to give us a full *explication du texte*, what would we elicit? What does "fudge" mean? Why is there a judge? Is it merely, as some might say, a matter of "judge" rhyming with "fudge" or "fudge" rhyming with "judge?"

I think not. Folklore is admirably concise, and I am persuaded that whatever is contained in a folkloric text is meaningful—even if we do not always have full insight into that meaning. Why would individuals bother to remember something and repeat it with such gusto if it had no meaning? It seems clear that if an item remains in tradition, it must have meaning for the carriers of the tradition.

We can see that the jump rope rhyme reflects sibling rivalry. A newborn baby is a threat to the older children, who may resent all the attention paid to it. We know that there is often a wish on the part of older children to dispose of the new baby. Wishful thinking and wish fulfillment, of course, are widely found in folklore. There is more than a hint that Mama has committed a crime in producing a sibling rival. The crime is signaled in the first line, insofar as a judge is to be informed. (And possibly the punishment for the "crime" of throwing the baby away is projected to the judge.)

But why fudge? If one thinks of the color and texture of fudge, *and* is also familiar with infantile sexual theory, one can arrive at a possible explanation. In the days before sex education was taught in elementary school, young children in our culture did not always fully grasp the nature of childbirth. After having been told by a parent that a baby brother or sister was present in mother's obviously expanding abdomen and that it would soon come out to join the family, the bewildered child frequently assumed that this new baby would come out of the stomach area in the same way that material exited from the child's own stomach, namely, via the anus. The equation of feces with babies is reported extensively in psychoanalytic literature, although I doubt that any little girl jumping rope would offer any such interpretation of the possible meaning of "fudge."

Yet there is additional evidence, for cultural symbols rarely occur in unique single texts. Another children's rhyme, though not one used for jumping rope, goes as follows:

Milk, milk, lemonade
 Around the corner, fudge is made.

Gestures accompanying this rhyme point in turn to several areas of female anatomy (breast, breast, genitals, and anus). However distasteful or crude one may find the rhyme, one cannot very well deny the explicit equation of fudge and feces.

Returning to our original jump rope rhyme, we can now better understand the action taken. Wrap it up in tissue (toilet) paper, throw it down the elevator. The new baby is “gift-wrapped to go,” namely, to be flushed down the toilet-elevator. Notice also that the more skillful the jumper, the greater the number of floors, the farther away, the baby is sent. The rhyme thereby provides a most effective way of “passing” judgment or “wasting” a sibling rival, in a symbolic and socially acceptable way—a healthy release of a normal tension.

Children’s projections of parents occur more commonly in narrative form than in rhymes. Fairy tales, for instance, are essentially stories about children and their relationships to siblings and parents. The “step” relationship is a convenient device to allow full-fledged hatred; a girl can hate wicked stepsisters or stepmothers with a clear conscience. Fairy tales with girl protagonists may include not only wicked siblings rivals but also a wicked mother in form of a stepmother or witch. Fairy tales with boy heroes may include the same kind of wicked brothers, plus a male antagonist in the form of a monster (such as a dragon) or a giant. Let me select one fairy tale found primarily in England and the United States to illustrate the nature of such symbolic projection.

Once upon a time, a boy named Jack lived *alone with his mother!* That very opening should give pause to anyone with a psychological bias. In boy-centered fairy tales, the father is often missing or dead—which allows the boy to be “alone with his mother.” (In girl-centered fairy tales, the mother is similarly missing or deceased which allows the girl to be alone with her father.)

As most will remember, Jack trades his milk-giving cow to an old man who gives him some beans in exchange. At the sight of Jack’s beans, his mother insists he throw them out the window. (I shall refrain from commenting on each any every symbol.) The next day, a huge beanstalk is discovered. Jack’s mother begs him not to climb it, but he disobeys. Up in the beanstalk world, there is a cannibalistic giant who often in some vague way is linked to Jack’s father—e.g., the giant allegedly stole Jack’s father treasures. Fortunately, someone up there helps Jack: It is Mrs. Giant. Did it ever strike you as somewhat peculiar that Mrs. Giant would help a total stranger, a young boy, taking sides against her own husband? (In this Oedipal projection, the upper world is an extension of the lower one.) And it may also be worth recalling where Mrs. Giant hides Jack—it is in her oven. (The symbolism of ovens in European folklore is generally quite consistent.)

In any event, the stupid old giant fails to see Jack hiding in his wife’s oven. Finally, Jack rushes down the stalk with the giant close in pursuit. As it happens, down at the bottom of the beanstalk, waiting with a hatchet in hand, is Jack’s mother. Taking the hatchet, Jack cuts down the stalk, which causes the death of the giant, and the story ends with Jack living happily ever after—*with his mother.*

Surely the maternal aid in both the upper and lower world can be understood as a projection of the young boy’s point of view, in terms of an Oedipal struggle against the villainous giant.

From Jack and the beanstalk, I should like to turn to another example of projection. This example is not folklore, but is dependent on folklore and folkloristic associations. Further, it demonstrates the importance of projection, which in my view is such an important device that it may utilize even historical events. The example of projection I have in mind is the first lunar landing. I must insist that nothing of what I am about to present

in any way demeans the real and splendid achievement of landing on the moon. My sole purpose is to demonstrate, if I may, the power of folkloric projection in all of our lives—whether we are aware of it or not.

First of all, we have the name of the lunar mission. It was Apollo. I should stress that it is precisely in the selection of names and symbols that those interested in psychoanalytic semiotics are afforded prime data. It might be erroneous to interpret a detail which is integral to the scientific apparatus, but the choice of the name Apollo is not such a detail. In theory, the mission might have had any one of a hundred names.

The name Apollo is a conscious or perhaps unconscious invocation of traditional mythology, in which Apollo the sun is the brother of Diana the moon. Thus mythologically speaking we have a brother trying to reach or land on his sister. And what are the semantic associations of Diana? One of the most obvious is virginity; Diana is traditionally associated with chastity.

Once the projective metaphor has been pointed out, it is easy enough to see its consistency. Among the principal problems to be overcome in the Apollo missions was gaining enough power to escape the gravitational pull of the earth. The standard term for this power was “thrust.” Keeping in mind that the mythological associations of the earth include “mother,” we have the astronauts trying to get up enough thrust to escape the gravitational pull of mother earth. (I shall not dwell on the symbolism of rockets other than to recall that “to have a rocket in my pocket” can be a euphemistic phrase for masturbation. Cf. “pocket pool.”)

And what were the names of the three astronauts, and who was chosen to be the first man on the moon? Neil Armstrong. Why was Armstrong the first? Was it mere alphabetical order? No, it was not, because in that event, Aldrin would have been first, not Armstrong or Collins. Could it have been the association of Jack Armstrong, the all-American boy, hero of radio adventure serials of several decades past? And could it have been that the name Armstrong was deemed appropriate because it literally refers to a strong body extremity? A well placed television camera allowed all other earthlings to voyeuristically watch as Armstrong’s leg emerged from the capsule and stepped upon the surface of the moon. Certainly it made symbolic sense for the name of the first man to stand on the moon to begin with the first letter of the alphabet. Who can remember the names of any of the men who made the second lunar landing? The point is that the moon could only be violated once. No one cares who the other violators were. It is, after all, only on a maiden voyage that a bottle of champagne is broken over a ship’s hull.

Once on the moon, the astronauts put up an American flag, a common symbolic ritual act for claiming virgin land for one’s mother country (or fatherland). We may have here the same projection which led earlier generations of American explorers into what Henry Nash Smith has so aptly termed the “Virgin Land.” What did the astronauts bring back as souvenirs of their conquest? Pieces of rock. In this context, the whole mission involved going out to get a piece of virgin moon to show off to one’s peers back home—a super masculinity dream come true! Americans surely wanted to get to the moon before the Russians did.

The fantasy I have just delineated is not a universal one; in some cultures the moon is considered masculine. But in American culture the moon is definitely feminine. It even has the maternal associations of a cow jumping over it or being made of green cheese. The maternal associations of the moon hint at an Oedipal projection; and in English the choice of the name Apollo at least permits the possibility of a homonymic pun on sun/son.

So the sun/son who leaves mother earth to be the first to violate the virgin moon (sister, mother) may well be related to American fantasy—regardless of the purely scientific features of the mission.

The lunar mission brings to mind the interweaving of folklore and history. The point is that historical events and personages may serve as anchors for flights of projective fantasy. I believe many historians err seriously in dismissing or ignoring elements which they label as spurious or apocryphal. Folklore, as an item of folk speech—think of the phrase “that’s (just) folklore”—means error, that is, something to be carefully weeded out of otherwise accurate historical source material. As a folklorist, I have learned to respect what the folk say and think about history regardless of the historicity of their words and thoughts. What happened is important, but no less important is what people think happened or what people wished had happened. Folk history may tell us more about folk than about history, but surely that is worth knowing.

The folk history of George Washington, for example, includes his famous confrontation with his father over the chopping down, not of a beanstalk, but of a cherry tree. Actually George, a son in that anecdote, is more celebrated for his paternal role. Why is it, for instance, that George Washington is reputed to have slept in so many beds on the east coast of the United States? Signs proclaim that George Washington slept here, not ate, drank, or visited here. Of course, if he is considered to be the father of our country then the verb choice is apt—as is the particular style of monument erected to honor him.

But can there be any validity to the projections discussed thus far? I can anticipate the most obvious objection: Readers may have watched the lunar landing, and they did not think of any associations of Apollo-Diana, brother-sister incest, etc. They did not think of the lunar landing as a violation of the moon. Any tension they may have felt was strictly due to their genuine concern for the safety of the astronauts.

But sometimes the tension was excessive. Some individuals refused to believe that the lunar landing actually occurred. Rather they assumed that the whole event was simply a fictionalized television program. Several individuals suffered breakdowns evidently precipitated by the successful lunar landing. And here one must reiterate the important point that folkloric projection is often, though not always, unconscious. Rarely is the nature of the projection consciously recognized. I am always amused by would-be critics of the Oedipal reading of the Oedipus story when they claim that the Freudian interpretation is invalid because Oedipus didn’t know that he was killing his father and marrying his mother. That is precisely the point. It is the bringing of the unconscious into the purview of the conscious which is difficult and painful for the psyche. Projection is one of a number of psychological defense mechanisms which provide an unconscious screen or arena for the display of the causes of anxiety; it is for this reason that folkloric projections are so indispensable as tools in the human arsenal for mental health.

One helpful aspect of the study of folkloric projections is the possible play of “literal versus metaphorical.” Sometimes seeing projections as literal versions of metaphors—or, if one prefers, as metaphorical transformations of literal statements—can greatly aid in deciphering the unconscious content of folklore.

Let me illustrate this by briefly considering an important detail of American wedding ritual, the bride’s casting her floral bouquet to the females in attendance. What is the meaning of this act? (I wish to reiterate my firm conviction that semiotics must ultimately be concerned with meaning.) In terms of the literalization of metaphor, the bride, through the ritual act of throwing away her floral bouquet, is signifying her willingness or intention

of being deflowered. Interestingly enough, the flowers once separated from the bride furnish an example of contagious magic—which is analogous to simile, by the way—as the lucky girl who catches the bouquet is said to be the next to marry.

An even better example of the literalization of metaphor in folkloric projections may be found in another genre, namely nursery rhymes. “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; she had so many children she didn’t know what to do.” Now, what possible connection could there be between a woman living in a shoe and her having a superabundance of children?

Upon reflection, we may recall that there is a traditional connection between shoes and marriage. Not only does Cinderella find her prince charming through the perfect fit between her foot and a glass slipper, but in American culture we continue to tie old shoes on the bumpers of cars carrying newlyweds off on their honeymoon.

The mystery of the precise nature of the connection is solved by another version of the Mother Goose rhyme, reported from the Ozarks from the 1890s. “There was another old woman who lived in a shoe. She didn’t have any children, she knew what to do.” (One could easily cite additional illustrations, such as “Cock a doodle doo / My dame has lost her shoe [a real challenge for transplant surgeons] / Her master’s lost his fiddling stick / They don’t know what to do.”) At any rate, the consistency of the symbolism should be apparent. In nursery rhymes, in fairy tales, in post-wedding customs, the same symbolic equation is found. This supports the idea that symbol patterns are culturewide.

I fear I may have done a serious disservice to my thesis by using so many examples of sexual symbolism. Some may think that I have misconstrued the term “semiotics” as being the scientific study of the “seamy.” So I must stress that projection in folklore is not limited to sexuality. Any anxiety producing topic can find expression in projective form. For example, there is projection in the modern urban legend in which a family is obliged to take its old grandmother along on a vacation trip. In a remote area, grandmother dies and the family is forced to curtail its vacation. Strapping the body to the roof of the Volkswagen, the family starts for home. Enroute the family stops for lunch, during which time the car plus grandmother’s corpse is stolen. Sometimes the absence of the body causes delay in probating grandmother’s will.

I have argued that this legend reflects American attitudes toward the older generation and toward death. In terms of wishful thinking, there is the wish that grandmother should die and that someone else should dispose of the body. In terms of the literalization of metaphor, grandmother is “taken for a ride.” The normally unutterable mercenary interest in grandmother’s demise also finds expression in the concern about the delay in probate.

Similarly, there is projection in the standard legend of the medical school prank in which a group of medical students crossing a toll bridge leave a cadaver’s arm holding the coin in the surprised and shocked grasp of the tollbooth attendant. Medical students have anxiety—at least initially—about handling cadavers and probably also about paying their way through life at the expense of the health of their patients. After all, the families of patients are charged for operations whether the operations are successful or not. Doctors have to learn to be dispassionate, objective practitioners, able to leave their patients’ medical problems behind them (e.g., anatomical parts such as an arm), even as these problems literally hold the lucrative financial rewards of medical practice. Notice that in this projection, the fear and shock of taking money from a dead man’s hand is displaced from the medical students to the outside world, the tollbooth attendant.

Racism is another anxiety-producing problem which is expressed in folkloric form. Let us briefly consider the folksong "John Henry." A popular folksong, this ballad tells the sad story of a black steel-driver who wages a valiant struggle against the steam drill. He wins the battle but the victory is Pyrrhic, for in the end John Henry dies. I have had white middle class school teachers tell me they use this folksong in the classroom as an example of African-American folklore. They like the ballad's depiction of the increasingly important issue of man versus machine. This is all well and good, but as a projection, John Henry is little more than the white stereotype of what black men should be. John Henry is strong, doggedly loyal to the white boss, and he dies doing the white man's work. He is, in short, a projection of the ideal "good nigger," completely removed from the rough, aggressive, militant stance of the "bad nigger." He even dies with his hammer in his hand—no threat there to the white womanhood of the south. The ballad of John Henry is thus more part of white folklore about blacks than of African-American folklore, and its continued use in schools promotes the image of the strong, docile, Uncle Tom figure of the black male.

The unconscious aspects of folkloristic projection make its use all the more insidious—and perhaps dangerous—inasmuch as few individuals are aware of the semiotic implications of the projection. Racism is nonetheless virulent for its being unconscious. Many whites may not see the racism in an advertisement for "flesh-colored bandaids" but it is there all the same. A terse bit of African-American folklore conveys a unique indictment of the use of white folklore in classrooms containing black students. There's the young black girl who asks a question of the mirror on the wall. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" And the mirror answers, "Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!" Americans inherited from Europe an entire semiotic of color in which black was evil and white was good. Even a lie, if it's white, is all right. "Black is beautiful" is a conscious attempt by the black community to fight the semantic set of countless words (black-mail, blackguard, blackball, black-list, etc.) which assert the contrary.

Projections are to be found in all types of literature including comics, television, and motion pictures. My discussion today is based primarily upon folklore only because I am most familiar with folkloric data. But popular culture too can and must be understood as projective material. One thinks of the generic "western" with its rugged individual hero, who often has to take the law into his own hands vigilante style, in order to prevail over the "bad guys" and to establish law and order.

Similarly, we might look at *Star Trek*, a popular television program which relates the adventures of an eternally floating bastion of American values in the context of popular science fiction. Typically the space ship makes an uninvited visit to some alien culture which somehow threatens the existence or safety of the ship, (Or the ship itself is invaded by the alien culture.) Often the progress of the space ship is imperiled or stopped. Its leader heroes, of obvious Anglo-Saxon ancestry (Kirk, Spock, Scotty, McCoy), assisted by various assorted ethnic underlings, take whatever action they deem necessary to free the ship. Since the ship's name is "Enterprise," we have an all too thinly disguised projection of what Americans will do in the name of free enterprise. And what does the crew of the Enterprise do? The usual solution consists of converting or destroying the alien cultures. Only after such justifiable homicide can the United Star Ship (= U.S.S. = U.S.) Enterprise return to its set course—in accordance with its "manifest destiny."

Projection can involve placement in the far distant past or the far distant future, which is why one can study projection in myth (the far distant past), or projection in science fiction (the far distant future). The plots and dramatis personae are strikingly similar in myth

and science fiction. In sum it is the projection which is crucial, not so much the time or place or local coloring. It is the removal from reality to fantasy which allows the human spirit free rein to portray its spiritual struggles and to play out its moments of anguish.

Sometimes, however, even fantasy does not afford sufficient disguise for such struggles, not without recourse to what I would call projective inversion. Most of the projections discussed thus far have been more or less direct translations of reality into fantasy. But there are some human problems that evidently require more elaborate disguise.

One of the finest examples of projective inversion in folklore is the one first analyzed by Otto Rank in his brilliant monograph, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, first published in 1909. In this classic study, Rank attempts to explain why the Indo-European hero should so often be born of a virgin mother and why he should be abandoned to die immediately after birth. According to Rank, it is an Oedipal plot from the son's point of view. A virgin mother represents a complete repudiation of the father and especially of his necessary role in procreation. In Oedipal theory, it is supposedly the son who would like to get rid of his father, which would thereby reserve his mother for his exclusive use. But a narrative in which a son deposed or disposed of his father would produce considerable guilt. Thus, according to Rank, the child's wish to get rid of the father is neatly transposed in the myth to the father's getting rid of the child.

Rank called this projection, but I would like to call it projective inversion. The son's wishful thinking is projected in inverted form so that the father does everything he can to kill the son. One obvious advantage of such projective inversion is the avoidance of guilt. The son need not feel guilt for wanting to get rid of his father; to the contrary, the traditional fantasy projects the "crime" and the presumed responsibility for the crime upon the victim. Projective inversion thus permits one to blame the victim. Rather than feeling guilt, the son-hero can justifiably take Oedipal style revenge and kill the villainous father figure.

Let me give an example of projective inversion from modern American legend. The gist of the legend is a report that black youths have castrated a young white boy in a public bathroom. Like all legends, it is told as true, and in fact several years ago (1969) it was reported repeatedly by telephone to various police stations in San Francisco. The legend's sudden popularity was almost certainly related to the discussion of the bussing of school children in San Francisco to achieve desegregation. But historically, one may ask which race has castrated which race? It is surely whites who castrated blacks as punishment for actual or imagined crimes. But in this exemplar of urban folklore, through projective inversion, the whites have metamorphosed their own fears of the stereotyped super-phallic black male into a form where their victim becomes the aggressor. The wish to castrate black males is projected to those males who are depicted as castrating a white boy. This makes it possible to blame the black victim for the crime the white would like to commit.

This raises once again the question of the interrelationship of historical event to folkloristic projective fantasy. Some scholars tend to feel that historical and psychological approaches are mutually exclusive, but I believe this to be a serious error. Frequently a historical event may rekindle an old projection or inspire a new one.

It has been suggested, for example, that the elephant joke cycle of the early 1960s might be related to the rise of the Civil Rights movement of the same period. Elephants, like blacks, are associated by whites with African origins. In the joke cycle, elephants were typically described in terms of color—"Do you know why elephants are gray? So you can tell

them from bluebirds”—and in terms of making phallic leaps down from trees upon unsuspecting victims. “Why do elephants climb trees? To rape squirrels.” The Civil Rights movement aroused longstanding fears among whites that the superphallic militant black male might assert himself with respect to former white oppressors. As mentioned in the analysis of the previous legend, castration, symbolic or literal, is one solution. “How do you keep an elephant from charging? Take away his credit card.” “How do you keep an elephant from stampeding? Cut his ‘tam peter off.”

In the same way, I believe it is possible to show historical roots for other recent American folkloric phenomena. For example, the spate of “dead baby” jokes in the early 1970s provides a challenging instance. “What’s red and hangs from the ceiling? A baby on a meat-hook.” “What’s red and sits in the corner? A baby chewing on a razor blade.” It is never easy to make sense of nonsense, but that does not mean that nonsense has no meaning. These jokes, told by post-pubertal adolescents, may reflect simple sibling rivalry; but that would not explain why this particular cycle became so popular in the early 1970s. Sibling rivalry, after all, has presumably always existed. I would hazard a guess that new techniques of contraception (including the pill), and especially the liberalized laws governing abortion, have generated an increased discussion (and guilt) concerning the “murder” of babies.

Whether not a particular joke cycle or legend derives from a historical impetus is not crucial for the present argument. The issue is whether or not there is a projective aspect to the collectivized forms of fantasy we call folklore. If so, as I believe, then there are important implications for semiotic studies, in which the projective aspect has thus far been almost totally ignored. For example, one of the finest examples, in my opinion, of semiotic analysis is Paul Bouissac’s insightful descriptions of various circus acts. In his essay “Poetics in the Lion’s Den: The Circus Act as a Text,” Bouissac analyzes the constituent elements of a lion act performance. He even describes some of the standard tricks as metaphorical, e.g., the lion walks in the center of the ring to be ridden by the man, or the lion straddles two stools to allow the man to bend under him and carry the lion on his shoulders. Bouissac’s analysis is fine as far as it goes. My point is that semiotics seems to stop with description, classification, and typology, whereas description, classification and typology ought to be beginnings not ends.

Circus acts, like zoological gardens, involve human attitudes toward animals and toward animality—including human animality. Part of the thrill and pleasure in circus and zoo is the implicit struggle of man versus animal. The animals are caged and kept in check, as man’s own animal nature is supposed to be. Yet there is always the possibility, the danger, or the risk one could call it, that the animal will escape the bonds of man, or to put it metaphorically that emotion and passion will escape the bonds of reason. One technique used to keep the animal or animality in check consists of requiring the animal, in this case a lion, to perform human acts. In terms of projective inversion, one is tempted to suggest that although people would like to yield to “animal” desires and to perform animal acts, this is not a guilt-free wish. Hence, through inversion, it is pretended that animals would like to be like humans. The more human the behavior performed by the animal, the more complete the projective inversion. The inversion is hinted at by such sequences as those in which the animal first carries the man, and later the man carries the animal. The latter trick would appear to reverse the normal roles of man and beast.

Whether or not my particular analysis of a lion’s act in terms of projection is valid, the issue, it seems to me, is the necessity of adding a consideration of projection to conventional semiotic analysis. For in my view, psychoanalytic semiotics could be applied to a

wide variety of phenomena, folkloric and otherwise. One could, for example, imagine a projective study of the bullfight. In addition to studying the structure of the bullring or the social hierarchy of the participants, one could also perceive the matador versus the bull as a projection. It is not just man versus animal, culture versus nature, but a projection of traditional male rivalry in Spanish (and other Mediterranean) cultures. In a homosexual battle of masculinity, it is critical just who penetrates whom. If the matador penetrates the bull properly, then the bull becomes feminized (as symbolized by having one or more of his extremities—tail, hoofs—cut off as trophies). As a projective drama, the bullfight is a ritualized cognate of ordinary verbal dueling as found among adolescent youths.

There is great variety in the projective dimensions of even a single item of folklore. Each age and each individual in an age is free to interpret art, music, and literature anew. And so it is with folklore. Each individual who tells a tale or who hears a tale cannot help but project his or her own personality into that tale, which is why the study of projection in folklore cannot be limited to the text alone; the process of projection also occurs in the very act of communicating an item of folklore.

As one example, let us take a text related to me in 1964 by a black male informant from Alabama. "Governor Wallace of Alabama died and went to heaven. After entering the pearly gates, he walked up to the door of a splendid mansion and knocked. A voice inside exclaimed, 'Who dat?' Wallace shook his head sadly and said, 'Never mind, I'll go the other way.'"

First of all, the item is older than 1964; a similar joke was told during World War II with Adolf Hitler as the protagonist, confronted by a heavenly voice with a pronounced Jewish accent. In the present version, the projective aspects include wishful thinking (for Wallace's death) and Wallace's being sent to hell by his own prejudice. The historical fact of Governor Wallace's having stood dramatically at the door of the University of Alabama to deny admission to black students is also relevant—as is no doubt the context of a black informant telling the joke to a white folklorist.

But the joke may function as a projective text for whites as well as blacks. What is understood by individual whites when they hear the stereotyped dialect "Who dat?" Clearly the implication is that a black man is inside the mansion. But individuals differ markedly as to the identity of the black voice. Some think it is God; others think it might be Saint Peter. A few assume it is a doorman or gatekeeper or other menial. The joke itself does not say, and I would argue that it is projection on the part of the interpreter that governs the identity made. Similarly, some whites claim they understood from "Who dat?" that heaven is now integrated, while others assumed that heaven has been completely "taken over" by African Americans. None of this is articulated in the joke proper, but it is part of the joke as semiotic text.

Thus folklore is not only projective material, but it allows if not encourages projection on the part of the participants as the lore is communicated. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that if folklore did not provide a socially sanctioned outlet for projection, it would almost certainly cease to exist. The problem in folkloristics is that while we have literally thousands upon thousands of folklore texts recorded, the projective part of the semiotic text has not been recorded. So it is that we continue to have lore without reference to folk, and that we miss an important tool for the study and enjoyment of some of the marvels of the human mind.