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Meaning of Folklore

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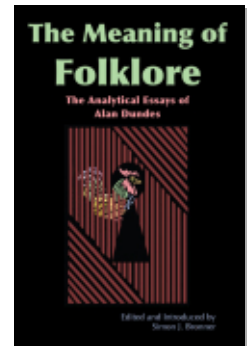
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THESES ON FECES: SCATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

(A) The Folklore of Wishing Wells

(B) Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia

(C) The Kushmaker

Introduction

I should advise readers that the present rubric of “Theses on Feces,” along with the previous headings of “Grouping Lore” and “Medical Speech and Professional Identity,” are mine. They thematize sets of exemplary essays that Dundes wrote. In the present case, my title denotes his frequent references to scatological themes in folklore. The significance of this feculent topic is more than the taboo or censorship commonly surrounding its frank, if disquieting discussion. As a central image rendered in folk speech, humor, and ritual, it has raised, precisely because it is socially and psychologically unsettling, crucial cultural questions about symbolic and functional ties to human development, religion, sexuality, gender, and cognition. In his work on folkloristic uses of fecal symbolism and traditions, Dundes often cited a cross-cultural classic by John G. Bourke, entitled *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* (1891). It was bold for its open treatment of the begrimed subject, although its scientific subtitle downplayed its sensational contents: A Dissertation upon the Employment of Excrementitious Remedial Agents in Religion, Therapeutics, Divination, Witchcraft, Love-Philters, etc., in all Parts of the Globe. Dundes was also drawn to Freud’s foreword to Bourke’s volume (1913), in which Freud summarized the importance of feces in human development. He described an infantile state of interest in bodily secretions and the pleasure derived from excretion. He observed that not only are children proud of their defecations, but they also “make use of them in asserting themselves against adults.” Dundes used Freud’s thesis—that children view feces as symbolic, assertive “gifts” to adults. He expanded on Freud’s signification of feces in human thought and folk expression in relation to male appropriation of procreation (“womb envy”), symbolic functions of defilement and toilet training, and the anal-erotic cultural personality (see book-length analyses in Dundes 1984a, 1997d, and 2002c).

As children grow, Freud theorized, their fascinations with feces are repressed. The child, according to Freud, “learns to keep them secret, to be ashamed of them and to feel disgust at their objects.” Referring to the use of projective systems to deal with this repression, Freud proposed that “the interest which has hitherto been attached to excrement is carried over on to other objects—for instance, from faeces to money, which is, of course, late in acquiring significance for children. Important constituents in the formation of character are developed, or strengthened, from the repression of coprophilic inclinations.” Freud made a connection between excremental and sexual instincts in children, a link which is later “divorced” and “remains incomplete.” Another scatological/sexual tie that Freud postulated is the existence of an anal erogenous zone, which is associated with the infantile stage, and remains with a person, but is repressed later in life. In Freudian theory, this repression of a created anxiety is sublimated through symbols that are embedded in fantasies, such as folklore. Dundes avowed more than Freud the sublimatory function of scatological imagery in folklore.

Freud commented on folklore not only as material, but as a “method of research” and found in Bourke’s tome that folklore study, although different from psychoanalysis, “has reached the same results as psychoanalysis.” Freud declared that folklore “demonstrates the persistent and indeed ineradicable nature of coprophilic interests, by displaying to our astonished gaze the multiplicity of applications—in magical ritual, in tribal custom, in observances of religious cults and in the art of healing—by which the old esteem for human excretions has found new expression.” For Dundes, the symbolic equivalences of money, mud, and the color brown to feces, and of smearing and dropping to excretion—all apparent in folklore—opened up interpretative possibilities. (See his use of the mud/feces equation in the last chapter on the earth diver myth.) These projections were, he proclaimed, “keys” to solving “puzzles” of meaning in the content of folklore. He recognized that not all readers would agree, especially early on in his career, but as he found repeated examples of fecal symbolism in rituals, beliefs, and narrative, he became more assertive.

An example is “The Folklore of Wishing Wells” (1962f), one of Dundes’s first publications. It appeared, not in a folkloristic journal, but in the psychoanalytic outlet of *American Imago*, which was friendlier to his interpretative stance. Unlike Bourke, whom he cited as being preoccupied with exotic “primitive” examples, Dundes examined the ritual of dropping pennies in wishing wells, one of the most prevalent modern folk practices. It had primarily been interpreted literally, as giving money in exchange for a wish, but Dundes asked, as he often did, why the offering should take the forms it does. Having established a symbolic equivalence of money to feces, he linked “dropping in water” to developmental concerns for maternal attention. A *key* detail, to borrow Dundes’s rhetoric, is the tradition of children throwing the coin in the well. Navy lore, in contrast, has the fictional story of a fecal “kush” being thrown overboard by an adult. That developmental shift led Dundes to interpret telling stories of the “kush” as a subversive act, in defiance of strict military (paternal) discipline (1980c). As a former Navy man, Dundes related this to the formal context of the ship, and the role of folklore as a social outlet. (See his recollection of joketelling during his tour of duty in *Cracking Jokes* [1987c]).

“Here I Sit” also dealt with one of his experiences—going to bathrooms in Berkeley, where his folkloristic antennae picked up an abundance of written lore. He noted that they were much more common in facilities for men, rather than women, raising gender questions about the praxis of writing verses and sayings he called “latrinalia,” to distinguish it from the more general term “graffiti” for any wall markings. The *key*, in this essay, is the

behavioral correlation of latrinalia to fecal “smearing,” within the context of male bathroom inscriptions (1966b). In a rejoinder (Dundes 1963) to an article by Parker (1963), Dundes presaged this interpretation by commenting on that critic’s “facetious parenthetical admission that he has repressed desires to play with faeces” (note the rhetorical equivalence of play, facetious, and faeces). “This could well explain,” Dundes quipped, “his pleasure in mudslinging, which for a member of Western culture, at any rate, is very probably a derivative of a general infantile impulse to smear” (Dundes 1963).

Ever since Dundes’s latrinalia essay was originally published, it has been cited as a benchmark interpretation of bathroom graffiti. See Gonos, Mulkern, and Poushinsky 1976; Stocker et al. 1972; Birney 1973; and Longenecker 1977. While the above citations are mostly of men’s facilities, for an exemplary look at a woman’s bathroom as “community,” see Gordon 2003. For other interpretative essays on folklore using Dundes’s scatological theses, see Fleisher 1981; Mechling 1984a and 1984b; Carroll 1987; Klein 1993; and Bronner 2007.

The Folklore of Wishing Wells

ALTHOUGH THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL noteworthy attempts to apply psychoanalytic theory to myth, there are other areas of folklore which have thus far not been much studied psychoanalytically. One of these areas is that of superstition. This is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that Freud himself suggested the possible origins of such superstitions as bad luck ensuing from the groom's forgetting the ring (i.e., the groom does not really want to marry) or bad luck augured by one's stumbling across a threshold.¹ However, aside from studies such as Ernest Jones' "The Symbolic Significance of Salt in Folklore and Superstition," there are comparatively few extended analyses of superstitious beliefs and customs.

One superstition which appears to lend itself to psychoanalytical treatment is the one involving wishing wells. According to the modern version of this belief, a person is assured of good luck if he drops a small coin, usually a penny, into a well.² An English film (1945) entitled: "Wishing Well Inn" was based upon this popular practice and the film and song "Three Coins in a Fountain" are familiar to most Americans. Actually the custom is of considerable antiquity, dating back at least to Roman times.³ In many instances, objects other than coins were deposited. These objects included stones, pebbles, shells, broken plaster, glass beads, buttons, needles, pins, and nails.⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of the variety of objects, the idea of making an offering to obtain good luck was apparently the same. Often the good luck desired was in the nature of a cure of a disease. The wishing well custom is widespread in continental Europe⁵ and in the British Isles.⁶ Curiously enough, it is even reported among North American Indians and for example, the basin of an Arapaho spring is supposed to have contained beads and wampum.⁷ Whether the Indian instances are attributable to acculturated diffusion or to polygenesis is difficult to determine. In any event, it suffices for present purposes to say that the practice of throwing a penny into a well in order to ensure good luck or to make a wish is well established in American and European folklore.

The question is now raised, why do people part with something of value, albeit only a penny, in the hope of being granted a wish? There are superstitions whereby one may make a wish without making an offering, e.g. after seeing a shooting star or passing a loaded hay wagon. But in the case of the wishing well custom, the offering must be made in order for the wish to come true. Many persons, otherwise extremely economical will forsake reality by discarding perfectly good money. Some of these persons are not particularly superstitious; it is almost as if there were some form of pleasure involved in the simple act of throwing a penny into a well. Despite the supposed present-day scientific mindedness, the fact that some charity fund raisers have constructed wishing wells in order to collect contributions attests to the extraordinary appeal of the custom. Perhaps the etiology of this custom can be revealed through psychological analysis.

There have been a number of attempts to explain the custom. The eminent English folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland noted that the custom has interested students of folklore ever since folklore came to be studied.⁸ However, statements like that made by Robert Charles Hope in which he says that wishing wells are a curious survival and that their origin must be looked for in remote antiquity are of little value since historical origins are by no means necessarily identical with ultimate origins.⁹ As a matter of fact, most folklorists have tended to explain the custom on the basis of animism. According to this view, there was early the belief that each well had a guardian spirit. Mackinlay, who held this view, claimed that "From a belief in guardian spirits to a belief in the necessity of offering gifts to them is an easy transition."¹⁰ These gifts or offerings were thus an expression of good will and an obvious attempt to propitiate the spirit of the well. Lewis Spence considered that the ancient practice of throwing coins into wells "must be interpreted as an act of placation or sacrifice to the spirit residing in the well."¹¹ Apparently although the guardian spirit is to be feared, this fearful spirit will accord good luck or the granting of a wish to the ritual participant. With regard to those wells renowned for curative powers, a difficulty arises which was noted by Hartland. On the one hand, there are articles left as offerings to the presiding spirit and on the other hand, these articles contain the disease of which the participant desires to be rid. Hartland comments that these two explanations appear to be mutually exclusive.¹² It seems unlikely that so undesirable an object would be well received as a propitiatory offering by an intelligent spirit. The weakness in all previous explanations is that the origin is not ultimate (Hartland suggested that the custom was an act of ceremonial union with the spirit but he gave no motive for such an act) and that the specific use of money is not made especially relevant. An explanation seeking the ultimate origin of the custom would have to explain the presence of the spirit and also the reason for the pecuniary offering. There may indeed be an "easy transition" from a belief in spirits to the necessity of offering gifts to these spirits as Mackinlay contended but the transition remains to be seen.

Essentially there are two material objects involved in the action of an individual engaging in the custom: the well and the offering, which is usually a penny. Part of the key to the puzzle is provided by the very materials of folklore. The well is a frequent womb or maternal symbol. To employ the bowdlerized language of folklorists, there is a motif¹³ T 589.6.4, "Children laid to come from a well." There are sufficient examples of *Kinderbrunnen*¹⁴ in European folklore to discourage the common criticism leveled against psychoanalytic interpretations, namely of cleverly selecting and stacking evidence. Interestingly enough, one well in Lancashire is described as having been constructed in the form of a horseshoe.¹⁵ The significance of the horseshoe as a female genital symbol is discussed in Jones' important essay on folklore.¹⁶ If the well does represent the womb, it requires no great imagination to identify the guardian spirit of the well as the mother. However, there is still the question of the nature of the offering.

There is general agreement that money is a symbolic equivalent of faeces.¹⁷ Although one might disagree with Ferenczi when he claims that folklore confirms the "phylogenetic origin of symbols"¹⁸—a cultural relativist would settle for repeated ontogenetic symbolism encouraged by consistent transmission of traditional symbols contained in each generation's cultural legacy—his account of the ontogenesis of the symbolism of money is both clear and convincing. There is additional contemporary evidence of this symbolism. A modern slang expression popular among federal employees including servicemen emphasizes the symbolic equation. The employees refer to the activity of payday as "the

eagle shits.” One is also tempted to conjecture that the passion of some children (and adults) for the parlor game Monopoly and similar games springs from the same source. In any event, there is some reason for assuming that the penny is odorless, dehydrated fecal material. It is also noteworthy that Ferenczi’s progression from faeces proper to money passes through intermediate stages of stones, pebbles, glass marbles, buttons, and so on. This variety of objects is strikingly similar to the various offerings deposited in wells. Assuming the symbolic validity of the two material objects involved in the wishing well custom, that is, the well and the offering, one can from the latent level elucidate the manifest content of the superstition.

The Freudian reconstruction of infantile life includes a consideration of toilet-training. It has been noted that the child is encouraged by the parents, usually the mother, to part with the precious excrement. As Reik said, “we owe to Freud the discovery that the child regards faeces as a present, a mark of affection to be offered to a beloved person.”¹⁹ The pleasure in defecation is depreciated or denied and the child is persuaded to yield his “savings”²⁰ or treasure to his mother either for promised rewards or under threats of punishment. The pattern of making a fecal offering in return for either the good will of the mother or the avoidance of punishment is thus established quite definitely in the lives of most children in Western civilization. If the child-parent relationship is the prototype of man’s relation to deity, then one would expect to find the gift of faeces to the parent reflected in the adult’s offering to deity. Actually, Bourke reported a number of instances in which a devotee defecated on the altar of a deity. For example, the Assyrian Venus supposedly had offerings of dung placed upon her altars.²¹ The fact that fecal material is originally conceived as being an efficacious means of ensuring the attention and love of the mother, makes it reasonable that human ordure would be an important ingredient in love philters. As a matter of record, excrement has historically been used in the preparation of such philters.²² If this same infantile pattern does underlie the wishing well superstition, then it is understandable that some well spirits are regarded ambivalently. On the one hand the spirit of the well must be given the penny in order for the participant to avoid the spirit’s punishment and on the other hand, the spirit of the well may reward the individual who is willing to sacrifice something valuable. Hartland’s point is also clarified in that it is now comprehensible how something disagreeable, to be gotten rid of, could still be a proper type of offering. Incidentally, one reason why the superstition has continued to flourish in modern times may be the ever-increasing number of standard plumbing fixtures. In most American homes, for example, the child is taught to put his treasure in a half-filled “white well.” The etiology does not, however, depend upon comparatively recent innovations in household plumbing facilities. The custom definitely antedates flush toilets.

The psychoanalytic perspective would appear to illuminate some of the details of the wishing well practice and related practices. For instance, it is significant that in several cases, it is stipulated that the coin offering must be dropped by a child.²³ In a curious Shropshire wishing well custom, the votary must throw a handful of water at a particular stone in the back of the well. If all the water lands upon the stone without touching any other spot, the votary’s wish will be fulfilled.²⁴ This action may represent the parental reward for the exact control of the excretory process, in this case, urination. Another interesting detail is the frequent occurrence of rag-bushes with wishing wells. The rags were presumably part of the clothing of the votary. It is possible, although by no means demonstrable, that the rag-bushes stem from the same source as the coin offering. When a very young child produces his gift for his mother, more often than not, the mother accepts the offering with a

soiled garment. Thus, in this light, it is reasonable that a more complete propitiatory ritual would include both a fecal and cloth offering. The fact that in later childhood only the former offering is welcomed (provided it is properly placed) whereas the latter is not, might account for the comparative rarity of the rag-bushes. The reason why the faeces undergoes symbolic transformation while the cloth does not might be the societal prohibitions against anything relating to excrement.

While it is doubtful that many folklorists will accept the above etiological hypothesis, perhaps some psychoanalysts may. In any case, regardless of the validity of this particular study, it is to be hoped that both folklorists and psychoanalysts will devote some of their professional energies towards revealing the rationales underlying one of humanity's most fascinating mental products, superstitions.

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Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia

ANY AMERICAN MALE WHO HAS ever had an occasion to enter a public bathroom such as one found in a railroad or bus terminal has surely observed at one time or another one of the many traditional inscriptions found on the walls of the facilities.¹ In some quarters, e.g. in the rest rooms of some bars and cafés, one finds the custom has been institutionalized in that a small slate and an accompanying piece of chalk are hanging on the wall. This allows individuals to write freely and at the same time it saves the establishment the expense of continually repainting walls.

Despite the widespread distribution of these inscriptions and despite the fact that many of them are demonstrably traditional, one looks in vain for extended collections of published texts and for any rational discussion of them or the practice of writing them. Most histories of the water closet (e.g. Pudney, Reynolds, Wright) do little more than recognize that such traditions exist. Typical is the remark made by poet John Pudney, author of *The Smallest Room*, who bothers to say (1954:130), "I must here resist the temptation urged on me by several men of letters to quote more freely from this poetry of the smallest room." Certainly there can be no doubt as to the antiquity of the genre. In the chapter devoted to latrines of John G. Bourke's classic *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, one finds references to the obscene poetry written in Roman latrines (1891:136). What little evidence is available in print does attest to the age and international spread of this popular form of written folklore. Gershon Legman, an authority on erotic folklore bibliography, mentions (1964:254, 451) *The Merry-Thought or The Glass-Window and Bog-House Miscellany* of 1731 with the only known complete copy at Oxford. In the important journal of obscene folklore, *Anthropophyteia*, one finds a handful of brief collectanea, e.g. one entitled "Skatologische Inschriften" or ones by Fischer and von Waldheim, which indicates the presence of the form in modern Europe. A fair sampling of Mexican examples appeared in a chapter "Grafitos en Los Comunes" in Jiménez' best-selling *Picardia Mexicana*. The classic study of the form in America was made by Allen Walker Read who privately published it in 1935 under the euphemistic title, *Lexical Evidence from Folk Epigraphy in Western North America: A Glossarial Study of the Low Element in the English Vocabulary*. The title page of this eighty-three page monograph announced that the circulation was restricted to students of linguistics, folklore, abnormal psychology, and allied branches of the social sciences. Professor Read's term "folk epigraphy" raises the question of what to call bathroom wall writings.

The term graffiti is too broad in that it includes all kinds of inscriptions and marks placed on walls. Moreover, the walls may be any walls, not just bathroom walls. Professor Read included in his compilation everything he saw on walls during an extensive sight-seeing trip made in the western United States and Canada in the summer of 1928. Much of his material is traditional in form only, but not content. The various homosexual

rendezvous requests with listings of dimensions and telephone numbers are clearly the traditional in form and are surely worth studying as indicators of one of the obvious functions of men's rooms in a culture which forbids homosexual activities. However, the specific content of these assignation attempts is often idiosyncratic. The folklorist is primarily interested in those mural inscriptions which are traditional in both form and content. Thus while he or she may record the *hapax logomena* or one-time occurrences, he or she is more concerned with those which have multiple-existence, that is, those which are found with almost exactly the same form and wording in many different places. Obviously, a one-time occurrence may become traditional in time, but the vast majority of the nontraditional graffiti are much too localized to diffuse easily. For the traditional inscriptions, I propose the term *latrinalia*. This is preferable, I think, to the closest thing to a folk term, "shithouse poetry" inasmuch as not all *latrinalia* is in verse or poetic form.

Before examining the nature of *latrinalia* in America and discussing its significance, I should like to comment briefly on the failure of American social scientists to study this kind of material. It is curious that it is perfectly permissible to investigate the graffiti of the past, say the graffiti of classical cultures, but it is not equally acceptable, academically speaking, to study the graffiti of our own culture. The rationale is apparently that it is safe to study the "once removed" whether once removed in space or time, but not so safe to study what is all too readily available in one's immediate environment. Perhaps one of the reasons why individuals are attracted to the discipline of anthropology is that the "once removed" framework is provided. Archaeologists, practicing "dirt archaeology," are free to dig into the bowels of the earth searching for buried treasures among the remains of what men of the past produced. In this connection, archaeologists have even begun to indulge in the analysis of coprolites. Physical anthropologists are free to examine every part of the human body in great detail. Ethnographers can perfectly properly go into the "field" and voyeuristically observe exotic customs, the analogues of which they might be embarrassed to watch at home in their own culture. (One is reminded of the folk definition of anthropology: the study of man . . . embracing woman!) Even the unusually great concern with the finer points of kinship may reflect an abiding and fundamental curiosity about basic family relationships. That ethnographies reflect the culture of the ethnographers as much as the people described cannot be doubted. Germane to the present study is the lack of data in standard ethnographies on defecation and urination. When, where, and how are these acts performed? When and how precisely is toilet training for infants introduced? One can read an entire ethnography without ever coming upon any reference to these daily necessities. The study of humainty must include *all* aspects of human activity.

Since ethnography, like charity, should begin at home (how can we possibly perceive the bias of our accounts without fully understanding our own culture?), the study of *latrinalia* is clearly a legitimate area of inquiry. One must not forget that it is humans who write on bathroom walls and humans who read these writings. As one writer has put it (Reynolds 1943:171-172), "Stereotyped and crude, our lavatory inscriptions are the measure of our social fixations; and that enterprising anthropologist who is said to be collecting photographs of them in all parts of the world should reveal more of the truth than all of the bombastic historians who will so soon be clothing our grotesque society with dignified phrases and political stercorations, representing its present antics as studied movements, to be explained in terms of high principles and rational conduct." So then let us proceed with our essay in hard core ethnography!

In American culture, anything which leaves the body from one of its various apertures is by definition dirty. The transition is immediate. Saliva is not defiling until it leaves the mouth. Similarly, nasal, ear, or eye secretions (with the possible exception of tears) are not offensive until they are removed from the body. The emitted materials are frequently as disgusting to the emitter as to others. Few Americans would be able to drink a glass of water into which they or someone else had just expectorated or even drooled. It is true that French or soul kissing allows for swapping spits, but in this case, the saliva is encountered while still inside the mouth and it is presumably not deemed dirty. A more mundane example would be the removal of partly masticated food from the mouth. Since by definition anything which emerges from the body is dirty and disgusting, an unchewed morsel may present a social problem. Does one grasp it with the fingers or with an eating utensil? Is there any sense of embarrassment at removing the morsel in front of others and realizing the removal is being observed? How does one dispose of the chewed bit of gristle? Is it placed surreptitiously on one's plate and perhaps concealed with a convenient lettuce leaf? Of course, there is nothing inherently dirty. Humans, not nature, make dirt and one can say that dirt, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the beholder. The concept of dirt is part of culture and as such it falls into the province of the cultural anthropologist.

One of the few places where dirt may be displayed and discussed in American culture is the bathroom, private and public. Bathrooms, generally speaking, are status symbols and not infrequently houses are measured in part by the number of bathrooms they possess. It is in the home bathroom that the boy is taught to deposit his feces and urine. Here is one place where he is allowed to manipulate his genitals and expose them to view, either his own view or the view of others. Not only are the genitals and buttocks exposed, but the products of micturition and defecation may also be observed. Later, in public rest rooms, the child soon learns that he must make public what has hitherto been private. He must urinate alongside strangers and in the course of so doing, he may observe the organs of others in the act just as these other individuals may observe him.

Despite the overt behavior, the culturally prescribed pretense that such activities do not exist, as manifested in the taboo against referring directly to them, continues. The large number of euphemisms attest to that. The private family idioms of the home, e.g. to go potty, to do number one (urination) or number two (defecation), to wee wee, to make a poo, etc., cannot be used in the public context. Children in school are taught to "excuse" themselves. (Note that to "excuse oneself" may carry the sense of apologizing!) The ironic part is that the child must go through the public confessional act of raising his hand to tell the teacher and all of his peers that he wishes to answer a "call of nature." The child soon learns the gamut of farfetched euphemisms ranging from "washing" or "freshening" up to "seeing a man about a dog," going to "shake hands with the head of the family," or trying to do something about the fact that one's "back teeth are floating." (For an extended discussion of such euphemisms, see Pudney 1954:20-37 and Sagarin 1962:69-74.) Note that the term lavatory literally refers to cleaning and thus to sinks, not toilets. Yet the word lavatory has become almost taboo and is now substituted for by newer euphemisms (Reynolds 1943:179). Once in the school bathroom, however, the behavior cannot be anything other than to the point. It is in the public school bathroom (termed boys' and girls' "basement" at my secondary school in Pawling, New York, though the rooms were not located in the basement) that important social interactions take place. Boys meet there to discuss the problems of the day while girls similarly go there to gossip. It is in many ways a place of comparative freedom from the normal restraints imposed by the

adult world. The necessity of some sexual exposure no doubt contributes to the bathroom's role as a place of sanctioned license. It is in public bathrooms, particularly men's rooms, that one finds latrinalia.

The variety of latrinalia forms includes: (1) advertisements or solicitations, normally of a sexual nature; (2) requests or commands, often concerning the mechanics of defecating or urinating; (3) directions, which consist of false or facetious instructions; (4) commentaries, either by the establishment or by clients; and (5) personal laments or introspective musings. These categories are not hard and fast and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A sampling of each of the categories should serve to illustrate the nature of American latrinalia.

The majority of advertisements are probably not traditional in that individuals simply write their own names and telephone numbers. Furthermore, in view of the paucity of published materials, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not a number of items have appeared elsewhere. Typical "want ads," which may or may not be traditional, include:

1. For a good blow job, call 777 2024
Bill, don't call, it's me, Bob.
2. I'm big. 9" long, 3" round, and ready to go.
(In another hand) How big is your prick?

In view of the nontraditional content of most latrinalia advertisements, I will proceed to the more common traditional category of requests or commands. The following are usually placed near men's urinals:

3. Don't throw cigarette butts in the urinal—
It makes them soggy and hard to light.
4. Please do not throw butts in the urinal.
Do we piss in your ash trays?

This is strikingly similar in style to the private swimming pool sign which reads:

1. We don't swim in your toilet
Please don't piss in our pool.

The pool sign reflects, of course, the fact that Americans do in fact urinate in swimming pools (just as American infants urinate in their baths)!

A large number of urinal latrinalia specifically ask for care in aiming the stream of urine. Typical examples of this "toilet training" tradition include:

5. We aim to please
you aim too please
6. It is our aim to keep this place clean.
Your aim will help.

These are often written by the management. A common request urges men to stand close to the urinal to reduce the chances of spillage.

7. Stand up close. The next man might have holes in his shoes.
8. Stand close, the next person may be barefooted.
9. Stand up close. The next fellow may be a Southerner
And be barefooted. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)
10. If your hose is short
And your pump is weak
You better stand close
Or you'll pee on your feet.
11. Old rams with short horns please stand up close. (Fort Lewis, Tacoma, Washington, circa 1945; cf. Read 1935:20)

An appropriately localized version from New England is as follows:

12. Puritans with short muskets step up to the firing line. (Damiscotta, Maine, circa 1950)

Another example of latrinalia which is posted by the management rather than the customers is one found in diners' restrooms:

13. If you shit here, eat here.
We don't want just the tail end of your business.

Occasionally, there are *blason populaire* latrinalia:

14. Shake well. Texas needs the water.

For the special case when a man urinates into a toilet rather than into a urinal, special instructions may be found:

15. Be like brother
Not like Sis
Lift the seat
When you take a piss. (New York City, 1924)
16. Be like Dad and not like Sis
Pull your lid before you piss. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)

Some commands are concerned with toilet flushing.

17. Flush your toilets for Wichita's sake. (Hutchinson, Kansas, circa 1958;
cf. Read 935:20)
18. Flush twice: L.A. needs water.
19. Flush hard. It's a long way to the kitchen.

This insult to the chef is a reversal of the conception that man is a dirt-making machine which transforms food into feces. This conception is illustrated by a latrinalia verse in French which was found in Oxford, England, in 1947: "Ici tombent en ruines les merveilles de la cuisine." In the above text and the following, the "natural" procedure is reversed as feces becomes food.

20. Don't flush the toilet. The next man might be hungry. (Chicago, 1960)
21. Please flush the toilet. We want the niggers to starve to death. (A Missouri café, 1965)

There is also some instruction designed to keep the toilet seat clean.

22. Here is the place we all must come
To do the work that must be done
Do it quick and do it neat
But please don't do it on the seat.
23. Boys we all must use this throne
Please keep it clean and neat
Shit down the hole God damn your soul
And not upon the seat. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)

The reference to "throne" recalls the euphemisms in other cultures which speak of going to the place where the king goes on foot or alone (Pudney 1954:97). A common American fantasy technique designed to minimize one's awe of a great personage is to imagine that individual at stool.

24. For those in a hurry
With no time to sit
Please lift the lid
For a more direct hit. (Women's restroom, Berkeley, 1963)

This may refer also to the practice of many women of not actually sitting on a toilet seat but of squatting over it.

One commentary complains about the nature of men's clothing as opposed to women's clothing with special reference to defecation.

25. Women women what a blessing
You can shit without undressing
But we poor men we sons of bitches
We must strip or shit in our britches. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)

The influence of television programs and such contemporary events as demonstrations by civil rights groups (e.g. the Congress of Racial Equality) is evident in some commands.

26. Smile, You're on Candid Camera.

This is usually written on the inside of the door of the toilet stall.

27. Stay seated. This is a Core shit-in. (University library, Berkeley campus, April, 1964)

Some commands or requests are bitter parodies:

28. Support mental health or I'll kill you.

In the “directions” category, one finds mostly parodies. In the following text, the accuracy of the first line and of the order of the remaining lines was questioned by the informant. It is, however, an excellent example of a latrinalia verse of the “how-to-do-it-yourself” variety.

29. If you want to shit at ease
Place your elbows on your knees
Place your hands upon your chin
Work your asshole out and in. (cf. Read 1935:51, 73)
30. Directions to get to Texas: Go west until you smell shit, that’s Oklahoma.
Then, go south until you step in it—that’s Texas. (Manchester, New Hampshire, circa 1953)
31. In case of atomic attack . . .
1. Put your hands over your ears
2. Put your head between your legs
3. Kiss your ass goodbye. You’ve had it.
32. In case of attack, hide under this urinal.
Nobody ever hits it. (Great Lakes, Illinois, 1951)

There are also false directions which are really a form of what folklorists sometimes call a catch. Repeated many times, each time in smaller writing is the line: “If you can read this come closer.” Then at the bottom right below a miniscule version appears the line: “You are now shitting at a 45° angle.” In similar vein is the sign on the ceiling over the urinal which says, “While you’re reading this, you’re peeing on your shoes.”

The content of the latrinalia commentaries varies. Some are unexpectedly intellectual.

33. “God is dead.” Nietzsche
“Nietzsche is dead.” God

However, not many commentaries have this kind of sophistication. Few American latrinalia verses are as philosophical, for example, as the following latrinalia verse popular in Spain:

En este lugar cerrado
donde viene tanta gente
hace fuerza el más cobarde
y se cagy el más valiente. (cf. Jiménez 1960:124)

The majority of American commentaries stay close to home. An “x” marked high over the wall of a men’s urinal is accompanied by the explanatory line:

34. Anyone who can piss this high ought to be a fireman.

One wonders if there is any insight here into the psychological rationale underlying the motivation to become a fireman. (Note the slang term “hose” for penis and see text 10 in this paper.) One recalls the desire of many small boys to grow up to be firemen and the custom of adolescent boys of urinating on campfires to extinguish them (cf. Bettelheim 1962:166–167).

35. You are holding the future of America in your hands.

Here is a reminder during the act of urination that the same organ is one used for reproduction. Note the pseudo-patriotic responsibility to procreate.

One common commentary deals with the very real problem of those last drops of urine which all too often drip down into one's pants or down one's leg.

36. You can wiggle, jiggle, jump or dance
But the last three drops go down your pants.
37. No matter how you dance and prance
The last two drops go down your pants.
38. You can shake and shake as much as you please
But there'll still be a drop for your B.V.D.'s.

An English version has a different rhyme for the same message:

39. However hard you shake your peg
At least one drop runs down your leg.

The "shaking" is also found in other latrinalia.

40. You are now shaking your best friend
And he stood up for you on your wedding night. (Camp Maxey, Paris,
Texas, 1945)

However, the shaking act can be suspicious if carried on too long. Excessive manipulation of the genitals could be construed as masturbatory activity:

41. If you shake it more than three times, you're cheating. (cf. Read 1935:68)

There are other anti-masturbation verses.

42. Be a man, not a fool
Pull the chain, not your tool.
43. This is a teepee
For you to peepee
Not a wigwam
To beat your tomtom.

Another topic of commentaries is the cleanliness of toilets.

44. No need to stand on the toilet seat
For the crabs in this place jump forty feet. (cf. Read 1935: 40, 44)
45. It does no good to line the seat
The crabs here jump fifteen feet.

The last verse reveals the practice of putting sheets of toilet paper on the top of toilet seats as a means of avoiding contact with the seat. This folk custom has recently become formalized by the presence of paper seat cover dispensers.

There are occasional political latrinalia. Here are several demeaning presidential candidate Barry Goldwater:

- 46. When I look down, I see Goldwater.
- 47. Urine is goldwater; the only benefit is derived from the comfort of its removal.

Mathematics, the language of science, has exerted some influence:

- 48. The heat of the meat is inversely proportional to angle of the dangle.

The heat of the meat, that is, the state of sexual excitement, is directly proportional to the degree of erection. The greater the erection, the less the "angle of dangle." The internal rhyme in this last verse shows the poetic quality of latrinalia. (Poetic features are found in other obscenity. One thinks of the alliterative folk alternatives for saying "I've been screwed," to wit: to be "fucked by the fickle finger of fate" or to be "dangled by the diddling digit of doom.")

Another latrinalia comment on sexuality occurs in the folkloristic form of a toast:

- 49. Here's to the hole that never heals
The more you rub it the better it feels
All the water this side of hell
Can't wash away the codfish smell. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)

The language of advertising can be found too. A borrowing from a Ban deodorant advertisement was found in November, 1965, on a prophylactic dispenser in a Shafter, Nevada, restroom:

- 50. It takes the worry out of being close.

By far the best poetry is to be found in the personal laments or introspective musings category. One of the most popular of these is:

- 51. Here I sit broken hearted
Tried (Came) to shit and only farted. (cf. Read 1935:50)

The sadness is actually economic inasmuch as one ordinarily pays to use many public toilets. One must make a small deposit before entering the toilet stall. The "failure to get one's money's worth," an important theme in American culture, is explicit in some versions.

- 52. Here I sit broken-hearted
Paid a nickel and only farted.

This last verse has a traditional response:

- 53. Don't cry brother
You had your chance

I didn't have a nickel
And shit (in) my pants.

There is also a combination of both verses:

54. Here I sit broken hearted
Tried to shit and only farted.
But think of the man who took the chance
Tried to fart and shit his pants.

There are other examples of American latrinalia with the introductory opening formula "Here I sit."

55. Here I sit in stinking vapor
Some sonuvabitch stole the toilet paper.

56. Here I sit in silent bliss
Listening to the trickling piss
Now and then a fart is heard
Calling to the coming turd. (Los Angeles, 1918; cf. Read 1935:51, 81)

57. Here I sit in solemn bliss
Listening to the dribble of piss
And now and then a fart is heard
Then followed by a thundering turd. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945)

These last two verses are obviously cognates and are related to the versions from Lake Tahoe and Visalia, California, reported by Read (1935:51).

Noteworthy is the sound aspect of the process of elimination. Most people are ashamed of anyone's hearing the sound of their urinating or defecating. Even the sound of a toilet flush is embarrassing to some. The whole philosophy of pretending that the activity doesn't exist is of course threatened by the possibility of someone's hearing the unavoidable telltale sound. The listener, as opposed to the voyeur, is depicted in the following verse:

58. Sam, Sam, the janitor man
Chief superintendent of the crapping can.
He washes out the bowls and picks up the towels
And listens to the roar of other men's bowels. (cf. Read 1935: 39)

The sound is also involved in some of the onomatopoeic euphemisms, e.g. "tinkle" meaning to urinate.

Some latrinalia explore the motivations for visiting bathrooms.

59. Some come here to sit and think
But I come here to shit and stink. (Camp Maxey, Paris, Texas, 1945; cf. Read 1935:21, 49, 74)

60. Some come here to sit and think
 And some come here to wonder
 But I come here to shit and stink
 And fart away like thunder.

A comparison of the last two reveals how a two-line verse may be expanded into a four-line verse. In the following verse, the expansion utilizes a different rhyme scheme:

61. Some people come to sit and think
 Others come to shit and stink.
 But I just come to scratch my balls
 And read the bullshit on the walls.

All these latrinalia texts are representative and they should serve to illustrate the nature of this on-going mural tradition. However, these materials raise a number of questions. Probably the most intriguing questions about latrinalia are psychological. Why are they written at all and why in bathrooms? Why are they so much more common in men's rest rooms than in women's rest rooms?

There has been little theorizing about the psychological functions of latrinalia. Reynolds (1943:170) has stated that generations of lavatory wall writers simply write for the pleasure of breaking a taboo, presumably the taboo of referring to body elimination activities. Allen Walker Read suggests that latrinalia probably results from many different motivations. Nevertheless, he notes (1935:17) that, "A principal reason is the well-known human yearning to leave a record of one's presence or one's existence." If this is correct, the question remains, what is the psychological significance of a yearning to leave a record of one's presence?

Allen Walker Read has also observed (1935:17) that writing latrinalia was the same order of activity as the carving of initials or names on trees. Interestingly enough, psychoanalyst Ernest Jones tried to explain the latter custom in his famous paper on "Anal-Erotic Character Traits." Jones hypothesizes (1961:432) that it may possibly be a derived and sublimated form of what he terms a "primitive smearing impulse," the desire that infants allegedly have to handle and manipulate their feces, a desire whose fulfillment is invariably forbidden by toilet-training conscious parents. People who carve or write their names are leaving a memento of themselves which may injure and spoil something beautiful (1961:432). Although Jones makes no mention of latrinalia, I suggest that it may well stem from the same impulse to smear feces or dirt on walls. Dirty words are dirt by themselves, independent of the dirtiness of their referents. Certainly this theory would explain why the writing was placed on bathroom walls in particular. The fact that much of the content of latrinalia does refer to defecation and urination would tend to support the assertion that there is some relationship between the acts of writing on walls and playing with feces. Farfetched as this may sound to some, *it is precisely the explanation given by the folk!* In one of the best known latrinalia verses, the rationale for writing latrinalia is as follows:

62. Those who write on shithouse walls
 Roll their shit in little balls
 Those who read these words of wit
 Eat the little balls of shit.

Here is an explicit equation of the act of writing on walls with the manipulation of one's own feces. It could not be said any more plainly than "Those who write on shithouse walls roll their shit in little balls!"

From earliest childhood, the American is taught to deny his anus and its activities. The smearing impulse is redirected to suitable substitute activities: working with modeling clay, finger paints, or throwing mud pies (cf. Ferenczi). Using words, dirty words, some individuals finally do give vent to the impulse to sully walls. Since "dirt" is supposed to be deposited in the clean white receptacles found in bathrooms, what more flagrant act of rebellion than to place symbolic dirt on the very walls surrounding the receptacles!

While Freudian explanations are not popular in anthropological and folkloristic circles, the fact that the folk confirm the Freudian explanation must be taken into account and explained by anti-Freudians. The independent congruence of analytic and folk or native theories does, it seems to me, present a reasonably convincing argument. Noteworthy also in this connection is the fact that the second couplet of the above mentioned metafolkloristic text corroborates another psychoanalytic insight into toilet ritual. It has been suggested (Abraham 1948:385; Fenichel 1953:374) that the popular practice of reading while at stool is essentially an act of incorporation designed to balance the material which is lost through defecation. (The common rationale for such reading is the desire not to waste time. By reading in the bathroom, one can save time and make it more productive. Additionally the reading also permits and encourages the prolongation of the defecation act.) Thus "eating" the dirty words compensates for the evacuated fecal dirt. Once again, the folk apparently agree with the explanation: "Those who read these words of wit eat the little balls of shit."

A more recent localized bit of latrinalia appearing in Berkeley supports the writing-feces equation:

63. Don't write on our walls
 We don't shit in your notebooks.
 The Regents
 What's found in our notebooks is shit anyway
 The Students
 (Main Library, U.C. Berkeley, 1965)

The equation of defecation and writing is not limited to American culture. Apparently in parts of Bulgaria, one who has gone to the "thinking place" is described as "thinking" or "writing" (Pudney 1954:25). The writing-defecation equation suggests that the academic motto "publish or perish," an oicotypal example of what might be termed the alternative structure proverb (cf. "do or die," "put up or shut up," "fish or cut bait," etc.), may be "shit or get off the pot" in symbolic disguise. One might remember that scholars are first supposed to amass great quantities of data from which they are expected to "get stuff out regularly" (Dundes 1962c). (Cf. the notion of weighing the output on the scales at the end of the year.)

The suggested anal erotic basis of writing may also explain why men rather than women write latrinalia. According to current theory, men the world over suffer from pregnancy envy (Bettelheim, Dundes 1962a:1038). In essence, men are envious of women's ability to bear children and they seek to find various substitute gratifications, e.g. couvade behavior, having an intellectual "brainchild," calling-their pet project their "baby," etc. Bettelheim has assembled a good deal of convincing anthropological evidence to document the pregnancy

envy hypothesis. However, although Bettelheim does cite (1962:128) the instance of the Chaga men's practice of stopping up their rectums as a form of symbolic pregnancy, he does not see that males commonly use their anuses to provide substitutes for parturition. Feces, like babies, are produced by the body. When a man defecates, he is a creator, a *prime mover*. Women produce feces too, but since they *can* produce babies from within, there is less need for women to emphasize this type of body product. That women have less need of fecal substitute activities is suggested by the fact that few women indulge in sculpture, painting, blowing wind instruments, etc. (cf. Jones 1961:435, n. 4). Certainly in American culture, it is men who are more concerned than women with creative feces metaphors. It is usually men, not women, who are "full of it," who are "BS artists," who tell "cock and bull stories."

In American culture, the emphasis is on productivity and the male must *make* much more than feces. He must *make* something of himself and he must *make* a living. The word "*make*" is itself indicative of the productive component of defecation. An infant may be told to *make water*, *make weewee*, *make B.M.*, or just plain *make* (Sagarin 1962:47, 52). As an adult in a "man's world," he tries to *make* money or *make* time. Once he is successful, he may be told that he's *got it made*. "Time is money," the proverb says, but both time and money are symbolic fecal substitutes (Brown 1959:277; Carvalho Neto 1956:125-148; Ferenczi; Dundes 1962a, 1962b; Jones 1961:425-427) as folk speech and other folklore so abundantly attests (cf. to be filthy rich, to be rolling in it, to have money up the ass, to make one's pile, to have time on one's hands, to *pass* time or *piddle* the time away, etc.). Time and money can be saved or hoarded; time and money can be spent or wasted. In American ideal culture, saving is valued. Think of all the money and time *saving* devices enjoyed by Americans. Yet in American real culture, prestige accrues to those who spend or waste time and money. If a man wants to *make it big* or *make a splash*, he has to produce, to put out. He can't *sit tight*; he can't *sit on his material*. Even God, a masculine figure, is termed a *maker*, which is entirely appropriate in view of the anal nature of man's creation, that is, man's being molded from dust or dirt (Dundes 1962a:1046). (Note also that the "fart-thunder" linkage so patent in the latrinalia hints at an infantile origin of thunder gods as Róheim [1952:515] almost says.)

The *make* metaphor also applies to genital matters. A man is expected to *make out*, to *make* a woman and to *make* love. The couching of genital affairs in anal terms is paralleled by the whole concept of dirty words in American culture. Dirty jokes, for example, are largely genital, not anal in content. Yet jokes about sex are called "dirty jokes." The word on the sign at Berkeley was an obscene word which no false acrostic, "Freedom Under Clark Kerr," could disguise, but it was thought of as a dirty word (cf. the filthy speech movement—no pun on movement intended!). One reason why genitality is considered to be "dirty" may be guilt by association. The organs concerned are recognized and identified first as producers of urine, that is, as producers of dirt. Later it is discovered that the sexual act is performed by the same dirt-producing instrument. This situation has been summed up by Yeats in his poem "Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop" when he wrote: "But Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement." Here is dirt by association.

The desire to make one's mark or to leave something *behind* for posterity is also very likely involved in the writing of latrinalia. Defecation as a technique to mark a place for identification is found not only in folk tales (Freud and Oppenheim 1958:38) but among other forms of primate life who apparently demarcate territorial boundaries through urination and defecation (Harrisson). The goal is also perhaps to achieve notice and immortality by producing dirt. A final example of latrinalia bears on this:

64. To the shithouse poet
 In honor of his wit
 May they build far and wide
 Great monuments of shit.

One wonders about the significance of leaving great stone memorials. Many great men have taken an active part in designing and building that which was to remain after they had departed. There is the obvious phallic significance of some monuments. The Washington monument is certainly appropriate for the father of our country. But the majority are massive pieces of stone, often in the shape of little rooms or houses. (Writing on these walls involves epitaphs rather than latrinalia.) The psychology of making one's mark, of leaving some memorial behind, may be related to American males' desire to successfully compete with females who can "make" children as their form of immortality.

For those who may be skeptical of the theory that the psychological motivation for writing latrinalia is related to an infantile desire to play with feces and to artistically smear it around, I would ask only that they offer an alternative theory. For those who doubt that the greater interest on the part of males in latrinalia *is* related to anal creativity stemming from pregnancy envy, I would ask the same. It is all too easy to elicit destructive criticism. We know that latrinalia exists. What we want to know is why it exists and what function it serves. One day when we have more information about the writers of latrinalia (and perhaps psychological projective tests administered to such writers) and when we have better cross-cultural data, we may be better able to confirm or revise the present attempt to answer the questions.

Note

1. This paper was presented at the 1966 meeting of the California Folklore Society at Davis, California. I am indebted to many of my students and colleagues for contributing examples of latrinalia. Unless otherwise indicated, all materials were collected from men's rooms in Berkeley and the surrounding Bay Area in 1964. I am especially grateful to psychologist Nathan Hurvitz who provided all of the items from Paris, Texas. My thanks also to Sam Hinton for his suggestion that the paper be entitled "Ars(e) Poetica." Explanations of the meaning of most of the slang terms appearing in the latrinalia may be found in the works by Read and Sagarin cited in the list of references for this paper.

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C

The Kushmaker

IF FOLKLORISTICS IS EVER TO become an academic field of inquiry truly respected by members of other disciplines, folklorists must do far more than simply collect and classify data. Yet despite the growing number of folklorists trained at university graduate centers offering advanced degrees including the doctorate in folklore, the vast majority of published articles in professional periodicals (and *Festschriften!*) continue to consist of little more than pure descriptions with occasional forays into classification and typology. The essential question of what a given item of folklore might *mean* is typically ignored. I am convinced that unless or until questions of *meaning* are addressed by folklorists, they will inevitably remain second-class citizens in the world community of scholars. Field collection and the construction of classificatory schemes may well be necessary means to the end of interpreting possible meanings of folklore, but if that end is not achieved, folklorists cannot claim to have progressed much beyond the nineteenth-century antiquarian mentality, according to which the primary goal was to record vestigial exotica surviving from earlier ages.

The plight of folkloristics is exemplified by the state of current knowledge of the tale of the kushmaker, Richard M. Dorson devotes a paragraph in his *American Folklore* (1959) to the tale:

One of the most popular folktales of the last war dealt with the “Kush-Maker.” A draftee in the Navy states his occupation as a “kush-maker”—or ketch, splooch, kaplush, gleek, ka-swish, kloosch, squish; the designation varies in every telling. Not wishing to show ignorance, the CD assigned the man to duties in the hold, where he remained until the admiral came to inspect the ship. Running down the ship’s roster, he spied the kush-maker, and demanded an explanation. The kush-maker is summoned forth, and makes elaborate preparations for the display of his special skill; in the end a complicated steel sphere is hoisted over the ship’s side, or even lowered from an airplane, into the water below, making the sound of “kush,” or its equivalent. Curiously, a comparable tale, attached to a blacksmith, is credited both to Davy Crockett and Abraham Lincoln.¹

Although Dorson gives us a useful synopsis of the tale’s plot, he offers no explanation whatsoever of the tale’s function or meaning. If it was truly “one of the most popular folktales” of World War II, the obvious question is why? What is the point of the story? What is the meaning, if any, of the tale?

Dorson was not the first to report the tale. Agnes Noland Underwood in her 1947 article “Folklore from G.I. Joe” ends her essay with a fine account of Murgatroyd the Kluge Maker.² No commentary on or analysis of the story is provided by Underwood. Similarly, William Hugh Jansen in his brief 1948 note entitled “The Klesh-Maker” does little more

than report texts, although to his credit he did discover an apparent parallel to a tale attributed to Davy Crockett.³ Supposedly Davy Crockett was in the Tennessee legislature opposing a bill designed to create a county. Near the end of the debate, he rose to make the following speech:

Mr. Speaker,—Do you know what that man's bill reminds me of? Well, I 'spose you don't, so I'll tell you. Well, Mr. Speaker, when I first come to this country, a blacksmith was a rare thing; but there happened to be one in my neighbourhood; he had no striker, and whenever one of the neighbours wanted any work done, he had to go over and strike till his work was finished. These were hard times, Mr. Speaker, but we had to do the best we could. It happened that one of my neighbours wanted an axe, so he took along with him a piece of iron, and went over to the blacksmith's to strike till his axe was done. The iron was heated, and my neighbour fell to work, and was striking there nearly all day; when the blacksmith concluded the iron wouldn't make an axe, but 'twould make a fine mattock; so my neighbour wanting a mattock, concluded he would go over and strike till his mattock was done; accordingly, he went over the next day, and worked faithfully; but towards night the blacksmith concluded his iron wouldn't make a mattock, but 'twould make a fine ploughshare; so my neighbour wanting a ploughshare, agreed that he would go over the next day and strike till that was done; accordingly, he again went over, and fell hard to work; but towards night the blacksmith concluded his iron wouldn't make a ploughshare. but 'twould make a fine *skow*; so my neighbour, tired of working, cried, a *skow* let it be—and the blacksmith taking up the red hot iron, threw it into a trough of water near him, and as it fell in, it sung out *skow*. And this, Mr. Speaker, will be the way with that man's bill for a county; he'll keep you all here doing nothing, and finally his bill will turn out a *skow*, now mind if it don't.⁴

Whether or not Davy Crockett actually told the story, we do know that the tale goes back to at least 1833 and that it illustrates “much ado about nothing.” The version attributed to Abraham Lincoln makes use of a different sound-word in the punchline:

I was not more successful than the blacksmith in our town, in my boyhood days, when he tried to put to a useful purpose a big piece of wrought-iron that was in the shop. He heated it, put it on the anvil, and said: “I'm going to make a sledge-hammer out of you.” After a while he stopped hammering it, looked at it, and remarked: “Guess I've drawed you out a little too fine for a sledge-hammer; reckon I'd better make a clevis of you.” He stuck it in the fire, blew the bellows, got up a good heat, then began shaping the iron again on the anvil. Pretty soon he stopped, sized it up with his eye, and said: “Guess I've drawed you out too thin for a clevis; suppose I better make a clevis-bolt of you.” He put it in the fire, bore down still harder on the bellows, drew out the iron, and went to work at it once more on the anvil. In a few minutes he stopped, took a look, and exclaimed: “Well, now I've got you down a leetle too thin even to make a clevis-bolt out of you.” Then he rammed it in the fire again, threw his whole weight on the bellows, got up a white heat on the iron, jerked it out, carried it in the tongs to the water-barrel, held it over the barrel, and cried: “I've tried to make a sledge-hammer of you, and failed; I've tried to make a clevis of you, and failed; I've tried to

make a clevis-bolt of you, and failed; now, darn you, I'm going to make a fizzle of you"; and with that he soured it in the water and let it fizz.⁵

So we have a twentieth-century tale with possible if not probable nineteenth-century analogues. What else has folkloristic research achieved with respect to the kushmaker? In 1963, Jan Brunvand included the tale in his comprehensive shaggy dog story classification scheme published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. In this scheme, we find:

D500. *The Kush-Maker*. A Navy man says he is a specialist. a "Kush-Maker" (also Klesh, Gluck, Gleek, Ka-Swish, Kloosch, Squish, Glug, Spleoch, Blook, Kaplush, and Ding-Dong.) A great deal of time and many tools and materials are used up until he announces that he has made one. A large fantastically-shaped box is dropped overboard and it goes "Kush!"⁶

Thanks to Brunvand, the kushmaker can be neatly filed in folklore archives under D500 in the Shaggy Dog Story section. But texts, nineteenth-century analogues, and classificatory designations are no substitute for content analysis. That seems obvious enough. Yet what I have surveyed for the kushmaker is not unlike what folklorists have achieved with respect to the vast majority of folk-tales and legends. If one examines the Aarne-Thompson tale type index, for example, one can easily see that relatively few of the tales have double asterisked references following the plot summaries. (Double asterisked bibliographical references indicate that a substantial monograph or article has been devoted to a particular tale⁷) This fact confirms the paucity of analytic studies devoted to the meaning of tales.

Before suggesting a possible interpretation of the kushmaker, let us present a typical version of the story rather than relying upon composite or synoptic summaries. The following text was collected in 1975 from a Chief Petty Officer in the U. S. Navy, stationed in San Diego, California.

Well, sure I've heard about a cushmaker. It goes back God knows how many years when a new crew of a ship were reporting. One by one they would walk up the gangplank, salute the American flag, and report to the OOD [Officer of the Deck] for duty. You know, the same way it's done today. Well, the first man walked up the plank, saluted the flag, and reported, "Chief Boatswainmate Smith reporting for duty, sir." The second I think was quartermaster. This went on and on until a man came up, saluted, and reported, "Third Class cushmaker Jones reporting for duty, sir." Well, the OOD was really surprised and couldn't think what the hell a cushmaker was, but decided not to show his ignorance so he passed him on board. Each man then had to report to the Executive Officer with his orders and then be assigned his station. Well, old Jones reported to the XO as a cushmaker, and that XO, just like the OOD, thought he just might have forgotten what a cushmaker was so he just told him to get to work. So every day Jones would go into one of the forward compartments, close the door, and go to work. Most of the officers eventually knew there was a cushmaker on board, but none of them wanted to admit they couldn't remember what a cushmaker was and ask him what he was up to; they all left him alone. Well, this went on till his two year tour on the ship was about up. Finally the Captain decided that he couldn't stand it any more and sent for Jones. "Well, Jones," said the Captain, "you're a cush-maker." "Yes sir," said ol' Jones. "You've been on board almost two years now; so what the hell have you been doing for two years as a cushmaker!!"

“Making a cush, sir.” “A cush!! WHAT IS A CUSH!!” “I’ll show you, sir,” said Jones and he took off. In a couple of minutes he came back topside with the strange contraption. He said, “Look sir,” and dropped it overboard. It hit the water, “CUSH!!!”⁸

This version is representative. In other Navy versions, it is the annual inspection of the ship by the admiral which provides the occasions for the kushmaker to demonstrate his skills. Typically the kushmaker has insisted upon obtaining tons of scrap metal which he claims are needed to do the job. The enormous mass of scrap is deposited on deck and then attached to a boom. At the magic moment when all hands are assembled to pay homage to the visiting admiral, the signal is given, the boom swung out over the side of the ship, and the mass of scrap is let go into the water where it produces the sound “kush” or some such sound.

Clearly on one level, the story involves a parody of military life. The whole military chain of command is lampooned. No one is willing to admit that he does not understand something and everyone passes the responsibility to his immediate superior. This “buck-passing” behavior is common enough in military, government, and other large institutional establishments. In addition, the kushmaker plot provides a social commentary on the large amount of waste motion found in so many military maneuvers. Anyone who has spent any time in the military knows full well how much effort and energy is devoted to doing things for show, to impress admirals and inspecting officers. “Spit and polish” has long been a traditional part of military life—though not always in time of war! But I believe there is more to the story than a comical, literal reflection of military hierarchy and values. There is, after all, an element of fantasy in the story. Besides the unrealistic acceptance of the kushmaker’s statement of his specialty, there is the elaborate playing out of the whole long process of making a kush. What then is the significance, if any, of kushmaking?

I suspect that the story is an anal erotic fantasy. Specifically, the plot revolves around a projection of an infant or small child defecating in front of a parent or parent surrogate. This explanation would provide a reason why a simple act of dropping a useless object into water could be part of an attempt to please an authoritarian figure such as a captain or admiral. An infant is taught to part with a valueless body product, his feces. At the same time, the very process of toilet training tends to give value to the feces. The infant soon learns that releasing its feces pleases his parents in some way. So the valueless material seems to have great value.

The words used in the punch lines of the story tend to support this interpretation. The expression to “make a gush” or “kush” is reminiscent of parent-baby talk for the act of defecation. In households where such a term is used, an infant might well be told to “make a gush” and he might well receive lavish praise from a parent or authority figure for having successfully made a gush. Certainly there are numerous onomatopoeic words found among the various folk circumlocutions for urinating and defecating. A female term for urinating, for example, is to “go tinkle.” In this context, the use of “make” in kushmaker may also be relevant. The verb “make” frequently has a definite anal association as in such idioms as to “make a B. M.” [bowel movement], “make a poo,” or just plain “make.”⁹ The initial phoneme /k/ in “kush,” or the phonemic cluster /kl/ in “klesh” or “kluge” is not so strange in the light of such Latin terms as *caecare* and *cloaca* and their derivatives in related languages (cf. “cul,” meaning end or backside). In 1978, a word “kludge” or “kloodge” was used to refer to an unlikely conglomeration of items intended to fix something in

an unusual way. Chewing gum, rubber bands, or clothes hangers might be employed as a means of temporary repair. The finished product works, but it is called a “kludge.” In computer science, a kludge is a program which is four or five times as long as it should be. The word thus implies waste products or waste motion. Something useless has been made useful (in the case of the repair idiom) or a computer program contains material which could have or should have been eliminated! The word “gush” in English means to issue with force, to have a copious flow of something—for example, blood or tears. It conveys a connotation of emitting suddenly, forcibly, or copiously. The adjective “gushy” connotes something messy.

The word “cush” in American slang means money. According to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, “cushy” means money easy to obtain.¹⁰ The money-feces equation is well established: consider, for example, such American idioms as “filthy rich,” “to have money up the ass,” or the reference to payday in the military as “the day the eagle shits.”¹¹ A cushy job supposedly refers to a kind of sinecure where one has comfort and is left alone, free from cares and responsibilities. (The kushmaker would appear to have a “cushy” job.¹²) Making money is therefore symbolically equivalent to making feces. In fact, one does not literally make money, but rather earns money. The use of “make” in connection with money is therefore a metaphor and hence susceptible to interpretation (cf. the discussion of “make” above).

If there is any validity to the hypothesis that making a kush is a symbolic equivalent of defecating, what does this add to our understanding of the kushmaker story? First of all, there is the initial detail that no one seems to know what a kush is. In American society, one finds a strong tendency to deny one’s body, and specifically to deny one’s need to eliminate waste products. A host of euphemisms is employed to refer even to bathrooms. Even “bathroom” seems crude in some circles despite the fact that the reference to “bath” is already circumlocutory, just as “lavatory” literally refers to cleaning rather than urinating or defecating. Most of one’s visits to a bathroom or restroom are not concerned with either bathing or resting. At parties, one often tries to slip off unobserved to urinate or defecate. When one returns, one hopes that his absence has not been noticed or at least that his reason for being temporarily absent has not been guessed. It may also be of interest that some individuals are particularly embarrassed by the sounds made by urinating or defecating. Such individuals have been known to turn on water faucets in a bathroom sink so as to “drown” the sounds made by urination or defecation (or perhaps also to pretend that the reason for going to the bathroom was only to “wash” or “freshen up”) The importance of the sound “kush” in the punchline of the kushmaker tale makes sense in this context. In the version of the kushmaker presented here, it may be significant that the Executive Officer and other officers “might just have forgotten what a kushmaker was.” This implies that they knew once, but have forgotten (or repressed) this information. Adults have all experienced toilet training, that is, making kush, but they have probably forgotten all about it inasmuch as it occurred early in their lives. The point is really that in American culture one does not admit that one urinates and defecates. Thus when the new recruit tells the interviewer that he is a kushmaker, the interviewer does not know what to make of this. Even if the interviewer did recognize the activity, he presumably would not admit it. It is ultimately only to please the captain or admiral, the highest-ranking figures in the local military power structure, which forces the kushmaker to make a kush. Normally one can deny the activity and others can overlook the activity, but a powerful father figure can demand anything, even that a kushmaker make a kush.

In the light of the present argument, we can better understand why the kushmaker seeks privacy. In Dorson's summary, the kushmaker is assigned to the ship's hold, that is, to the veritable bowels of the ship. Wherever the kushmaker is sent, he normally works in private. At the end, the kushmaker is obliged to do in public what he has hitherto done only in private. Certainly the living quarters in the military force individuals to urinate and defecate more or less in public. What an individual may have done in the privacy of his bathroom at home before entering the military, he must now do in mass bathrooms, perhaps under the uncomfortable scrutiny of fellow sailors.

We can also appreciate those versions of the tale in which the kushmaker specifically sends for s(crap). It is significant, symbolically speaking, that waste materials often form the mass which is to be dropped in the water. On older Navy ships in the 1940s and 1950s (when the kushmaker story was told), one did not always have flush toilets. Rather one sat on one of several wooden seats set upon a long trough. A stream of flowing water ran along the bottom of the trough to carry off the feces. For that matter, even with modern flush toilets, one can still hear the splashing noise of feces entering the water (cf. the range of sounds used in the kushmaker tale: splooch, kaplush, and so on).

The elaborate making of a kush at the request of a captain or admiral also fits well into the general set of fecal metaphors found in military usage. Strict military discipline is often referred to as chickenshit (cf. a chicken colonel used in the army). Enlisted men in the Navy (as in other armed forces) are sometimes treated like children. They are told when and what to eat, when to go to bed, what to wear, and just about when to urinate and defecate. Whether they are "shit on" by higher ranking individuals or forced to suffer because of being on someone's "shit list," or just stuck eating "shit on a shingle" (chipped beef on toast) for breakfast, enlisted men usually have to take it rather than dish it out. If the enlisted man is treated like a child, then why would it not make perfect sense for him to combat the system by using a childish device—such as making a great big kush for the admiral-father figure? Since so much of what the admiral or power structure asks the enlisted man to do seems to the enlisted man to be pointless and a complete waste of time and effort, it is only fair that the admiral be duped into watching a lowly enlisted man make a huge kush, thereby forcing the admiral in turn to be stuck wasting his time and effort. In addition, there seems to be a common tradition of imagining authority figures in the act of defecation. Even presidents and popes cannot ignore calls of nature. Thus an old idiom in French for going to the bathroom is "*aller où le roi va pied*" (to go where the king goes on foot)¹³ has analogues in many European languages; for example, in German, "*Ich gehe dahin wo der König zu Fuss hingeht.*" The kushmaker story could represent the individual's revenge on the whole military system. The waste motion involved in accumulating a huge mass of material to be dropped over the side is very likely a metaphorical expression to the effect that Navy ritual (including inspections) is a bunch of shit. The strict military rank hierarchy is reversed. It is the admiral or captain who carries out the kushmaker's orders (for example, by obtaining the necessary materials). There may even be a hint that any admiral who does not know what a kush is—that is, doesn't know "shit from Shinola" (a brand of shoe polish)—richly deserves being made a fool of.

Regardless of whether or not one finds the above speculative interpretation of the meaning of the kushmaker at all plausible, one should at least realize that there are details of the story which require explanation. Kushmakers do not exist in fact, only in fiction. Fiction in the form of folkloric fantasy can and should be interpreted. Why should we laugh at the image of a captain or admiral watching a mass of material fall into water? What is the

point of a story whose punchline consists of a nonsense sound such as “kush?” These are precisely the kinds of questions that must be addressed if one wishes to try to understand the kushmaker. And these are the kinds of questions that folklorists must seek to answer if folkloristics is to progress beyond data gathering and classification.

Notes

1. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 271.
2. Agnes Nolan Underwood, “Folklore from G.I. Joe,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1947): 285–97. Murgatroyd the Kluge Maker is found on pp. 295–97.
3. William Hugh Jansen, “The Flesh-Maker,” *Hoosier Folklore* 7 (1948): 47–50.
4. *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett of West Tennessee* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1833), 79–80. Dorson points out that the story does not appear in Crockett’s autobiography. See Richard M. Dorson, “Oral Styles of American Folk Narrators,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: John Wiley, 1960), p. 47, no. 10.
5. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), p. 150. Sandburg cites two texts. The first version, included here, was collected by Horace Porter. See General Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Co., 1906), 414–15. A second version reported by U. S. Grant ends with the exasperated blacksmith acting as follows: “Then with his tongs he lifted it from the bed of coals, and thrusting it into a tub of water near by, exclaimed with an oath, ‘Well, if I can’t make anything else of you, I will make a fizzle anyhow.’” Fizzle is a slang term meaning failure still in current use. In the context of the argument to be advanced in this paper, it may be noteworthy that “fizzles” can be a slang term for flatus. See G. Legman, *No Laughing Matter: Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, 2nd Series (Wharton, New Jersey: Breaking Point, 1975), p. 863.
6. Jan Harold Brunvand, “A Classification for Shaggy Dog Stories,” *JAF* 76 (1963): 67.
7. Stith Thompson neglected to discuss this convention in his “Preface” to the Second Revision of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (FFC no. 184; Helsinki, 1961). In his introduction to the *Motif-Index*, however, he does note that “Special studies are indicated by two asterisks; valuable lists of variants by a single star.” See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 23.
8. This text was collected from Chief Petty Officer George T. Green on 30 November 1975 by Johnny Green and Pamela Yazman, two undergraduate folklore students at the University of California, Berkeley. Chief Green had served in the Navy for twenty-two years and he said that he had heard the kushmaker story many times over the years and had himself told it on numerous occasions. He also indicated that sometimes a man on a ship is called a cushmaker if he has rather clever ways of getting out of work. The word in such cases is definitely not a compliment.
9. Edward Sagarin, *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), pp. 47, 52. See also Alan Dundes, “Here I Sit—A Study of American Latrinalia,” in *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 190.
10. Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, comps., *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), p. 135.
11. For an anthology of essays on this subject plus an excellent introductory essay entitled “On the Psychoanalysis of Money,” see Ernest Borneman, *The Psychoanalysis of Money* (New York: Urizen Books, 1976). Included are classic studies by Freud, Ferenczi, Abraham, and others.
12. See the discussion of the connotations of “kushmaker” in note 8 above.
13. A French text is cited, for example, in *Bibliotheca Scatologica* (Leipzig: Zentral-antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1970), p. 111. (This is a facsimile of a book published originally in 1849.)