

"The Supernatural"

Friday 26 to Sunday 28 March, Leeds Trinity University College, Horsforth

ABSTRACTS

Saturday 27th

Jacqueline Simpson (Folklore Society), "**The Ambiguity of Elves.**" The three most popular writers of fantasy in Britain are Tolkien, Terry Pratchett and J. K. Rowling. All three include elves in their books, but their elves are very different from each other, though each writer has selected elements from traditional folklore. There has been moral ambiguity in the concept of "elf" from Anglo-Saxon times onwards, as also in the later term "fairy." Whereas Christianity divides the supernatural world into sharply opposed forces of good and evil, elves and fairies represent a morally grey area. This may explain why belief in them still had a function in Christian societies. Clear-cut moral divisions do not reflect the way we experience life, where good luck and misfortune strike at random.

Ariella Feldman (University of Birmingham), "**Jane Eyre: Fairy and Witch Power – A Study of Gender.**" In my current analysis of allusion to eight types of folklore in Charlotte Brontë's (1816-1855) creative literature, I study the inter-relationship between popular belief and customary consciousness and gender in her novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). She addresses the problems inherent in Victorian patriarchy by devising a code or system; the fairy and witch motif are symbolic of female power and as such are seen to subvert narrow cultural definitions of Victorian femininity. In their construction as beings living apart from the control of fathers and husbands and the indirect control of organised patriarchy or paternalism, Brontë creates a feminised literary landscape. Furthermore, the novel's use of folklore appears to invert conventional gender relations as the hero identifies the heroine as fairy/witch. Hence, literary folklore contributes to Brontë feminist critical readings of rebellion against the 'separate spheres ideology' characterising mid-Victorian society. In this paper, I firstly, provide an overview (or the context) of my thesis and the secondly, proceed with a broad analysis of Brontë's treatment of gender from a folklore perspective. For this analysis I outline Brontë's methodology: source material is drawn from both literary tradition and her local cultural world. I briefly consider her reliance on folklore for her study of gender consciousness across her fiction and then argue for a more radical treatment of fairy and witch feminisation in *Jane Eyre*.

Mikel J. Koven (University of Worcester) and **Gunnella Thorgeirsdottir** (University of Sheffield), "**Televisual Folklore: Rescuing *Supernatural* from the Fakelore Realms.**" According to interviews with the series' creator, Eric Kripke, *Supernatural* was from the start a conscious attempt at showcasing what Kripke felt was a uniquely American "mythology," urban legends. The notebook the Winchester brothers carry, inherited from their father, is not just a guide to demon hunting, but also a mini-guide to American contemporary folklore, urban legends in particular, like the file boxes behind Mulder's desk, the literal "X-files," which Leslie Jones saw as being almost an encyclopedia of urban legendry. John Winchester's notebook specifically and the series' use of folklore more generally, are what folklorist Richard Dorson called "fakelore." Fakelore, at least as Dorson intended it, was the intentional invention of "folksy"-like "lore" often for commercial or advertising purposes. It might look like folklore and sound like folklore, but it was Lore-light: similar flavor, but none of the contamination of

authenticity. *Supernatural*'s use of folklore would, from a conservative Dorson-inspired view, likely be saddled with the sobriquet of "fakelore". Such a labeling is neither fair nor accurate. Juwen Zhang, in "Filmic Folklore and Chinese Cultural Identity" offers an alternative approach to Dorson's dismissive "fakelore": Zhang argues that certain films (his examples come from Chinese cinema, but we can apply these ideas to American television), while certainly "faking" their lore, or at least altering "authentic" customs for dramatic and ideological purposes, firstly, do so for a purpose, and in any analysis, rather than simply dismissing such constructions as "inaccurate" must be analyzed semiotically. But secondly, that such "fakelore" can sometimes re-enter the cultural matrix, as folklore. The adoption of Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* by contemporary Pagan communities is one example (see Koven 2008). What *Supernatural* does, in its context of entertainment and science-fiction/horror, is to self-consciously play with the folklore of storytelling. The series writers developed a metatextual matrix with the material; the supernatural belief traditions, the television show, and the audience's own experience of storytelling (whether from folklore or popular culture). This matrix is made explicit in the episodes themselves beginning with the intertextuality of "The Monster at the end of this book" in season four where the brothers are forced to question their own reality as they find out they are the heroic characters from a series of books, culminating in "The Real Ghostbusters" from season five when the brothers attend a conference based on those books and find themselves LARPing to the aforementioned stories. Zhang's "filmic folklore" becomes our 'televisual folklore' in regards to *Supernatural* when we recognize the series' self-conscious using of folklore, not to create an artificial "folksy"-like narrative, but to present the legends under contemporary scrutiny regarding its veracity. This is the processes that legend tellers and their audiences have undertaken since storytelling began. *Supernatural*, we argue, does not try to take ownership of the lore, or Kripke's version of it, as definitive or copywritten entities (as Disney does) but recognizes its function as variants within the larger folklore context. Televisual folklore may not seem to follow the same rules as "traditional" folklore, we would however argue that it serves the same functions as the more traditional ways of transmitting folklore and as Bruce Jackson noted "the verbal and imaginative referents we utilize in ordinary face-to-face encounters are as likely to come from our separate-but-shared media experiences as anywhere else."

Nickianne Moody (Liverpool John Moores University), "**Contemporary Urban Fantasy and the Lessons of Folklore.**" This paper is based on research which has examined the evolution of paranormal romance fiction as a marketing category in Britain across high street and internet retailing. Through textual, contextual and empirical research, the findings have focussed on the representation and narrative resolution of domestic violence and experience of violence in the commonplace diegesis of urban fantasy. This fiction frequently debates relationships between women, violence and the social order and it chooses to do so by a particular use of the supernatural. The supernatural in this fiction is often governed by the discovery or knowledge of folklore and the structure and substance of the folktale. Urban fantasy is a rapidly growing commercial genre which in relation to the supernatural often transplants traditional rural knowledge to contemporary social environments. For example in the ur-text of paranormal fiction, Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series, the narrative diegesis turns relatively quickly from the undead to faerie and a wealth of other supernatural creatures. These adversaries have to be bested using narrative traditions from the folktale, before they can be defeated. Like the vampire, the faerie and their kin are often figured in narratives of undead society. The perils of the supernatural found in gift-giving, oath-making, trading and bargaining, and the effects of glamour on mortal men and women intrude into everyday life in this fiction. Moreover the inclusion of the supernatural passes comment on gendered power, individual autonomy and the boundaries of community. The supernatural considered by these

narratives offers a range of different moral alignments, questions the relationship between the city and nature, as well as the desire for power exhibited by its heroes and heroines. This paper considers the relevance and appeal of reintroducing the supernatural for contemporary audiences.

Maureen James (University of Glamorgan), **“Tatterfoals, Will-o-the-wykes, and the Old Lad: Exploring the Supernatural Beliefs in Lincolnshire.”** This paper presents an update of ongoing doctoral research on the context, content and authenticity of a set of stories collected in the Carrs (fenland) of North Lincolnshire by Marie Clothilde Balfour and published in *Folklore* in 1891. These stories contain a wealth of references to the supernatural which has been compared with other folkloric evidence within the county. Research has revealed that the various flatlands of bog, saltmarsh and fen found in Lincolnshire were very prone to the supernatural activity which was put down to the evil intents of the 'will-o-the-wykes' and other ghostly creatures like the 'Tatterfoal' who lure unsuspecting wayfarers into streams, swamps, rivers or water-holes, and the 'Dead Hands' that pull people under. The wetlands were also home to various species of birds whose ominous calls could herald bad luck or even death. Reference will also be made to the theory that frequent use of opium as well as presence of uncorrupted bog bodies which were periodically found in the peatlands may also have increased the fears. It will also be mentioned that as a consequence Lincolnshire people are still found today carrying keep-safes in their pockets or handbags.

Peter Robson (University of Sheffield), **“Thomas Hardy’s Ghosts.”** Thomas Hardy was born and brought up in an isolated hamlet in Dorset in the middle of the nineteenth century and was, like his father and grandfather, a traditional musician. He drew on his youthful experiences and on family and local tradition to supply numerous references to folklore of all kinds in his subsequent writings. Hardy's poems and fiction contain a number of references to ghosts, some of which are drawn from his imagination. This paper considers those of his ghosts which are based on actual Dorset traditions, such as the d'Urberville coach, and sets these examples in the context of their traditional counterparts. References to ghosts in Hardy's non-fictional writings are also explored, as is his own attitude to ghost belief and his experiences of the supernatural. My aim is to show, through the example of this genre, how Hardy, despite writing in fictional terms, may nevertheless be regarded as a source for the study of local tradition.

Paul Cowdell (University of Hertfordshire), **“I have believed in spirits, from that day unto this...”** Accounts of the event differ, but in 1866 the Charles Haskell crashed into the nearby Andrew Jackson, which sank with the loss of all hands. The following year, on the Haskell's first return to the fishing ground, 26 ghostly sailors from the Jackson clambered aboard and crewed the ship. With variations, the oral narratives largely conclude with the Haskell becoming a “ghost ship,” on which no sailor would serve. In 1874 local poet Harry Marcy published a ballad about this story: at the end the narrator says that since these events he has believed in spirits. The ballad attained broad oral popularity, and retained this element in various versions. I will look here at the different oral narratives (legend and ballad), and their differing emphases, to explore the relationship between ghost narratives and beliefs. Using previous work on the interplay of oral and literary versions of songs I will consider the different representations of ghost belief present here. I will indicate some of the complexities in the relationship between oral and literary narratives, and highlight certain problems in a straightforward use of literary sources to reflect popular belief.

David Clarke (Sheffield Hallam University), **“I know what I saw: The Supernatural Content of the MoD ‘UFO files’.”** Since May 2008 I have been working as consultant to The National

Archives for the release of the Ministry of Defence's archive of "UFO files". This collection contains 180 files containing more than 8,000 individual accounts of "UFO sightings" reported by members of the public to official agencies in the UK since the end of WW2 (Clarke 2009). In addition the files contain 30,000 pages of correspondence describing conspiracy beliefs, legends and rumours relating to "unidentified flying objects" and official policy formulated in response to public and press inquiries. A recent survey suggests that 25% of the US population report "UFOs"/anomalous lights but very little research has been conducted into this area of extraordinary experience (Dewan 2006). The ongoing programme of UK file releases presents a unique research opportunity into this neglected area of supernatural experience and belief. The proactive opening of the files to outside scrutiny, made possible under the UK Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), has attracted national and international media interest and extensive public engagement with the TNA website (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufos>), which has received 2 million downloads to date. In this presentation I will summarise examples of "personal experience narratives" sampled from these files and highlight the potential importance of their contents to scholars in the field of folklore and contemporary legend. [Clarke, David (2009): *The UFO Files: The Inside Story of Real Life Sightings*. Kew: The National Archives. Dewan, William J. (2006): "A Saucerful of Secrets!: An interdisciplinary analysis of UFO experiences." *Journal of American Folklore* 119 (472), 184-202.]

Sunday 28th

David Hunt (Folklore Society) "**Perception of Time in Folklore: Transitions between Mortality and Immortality.**" This paper deals with the folk perception of real time, in which events proceed in sequence and the new-born child inevitably proceeds towards old age and death; and their perception of 'timeless' time, where nothing happens, time stands still. This second type of time will be designated as dream-time. Examples of dream-time could be: in the Garden of Eden, Paradise and Hell, souls awaiting birth, the sleeping king waiting to return, the situation of vampires and ghosts, turning to stone, the achievement of immortality. Principles of structural anthropology were used in an attempt to study the common features in the transitions of folk heroes or heroines from one form of time to the other. A common factor in crossing this boundary appears to be the simultaneous crossing, or immersion in, another boundary. This secondary boundary is often the 'skin', the boundary between me and the rest of the world, and it may be crossed in the form of entry of food, wounds, sex, or exit of blood lost, words uttered, or applications to the skin of potions, clothes added or removed. Another important secondary boundary is often the surface of the earth, the boundary between the world above (life) and the underworld below (death). The bounds of the family, and even of the home and community, are other secondary boundaries that feature in such time transitions.

Gideon Thomas (Folklore Society), "**Lady Margaret was standing in her own room door...: The Roles and Meanings of Revenants in a Selection of Traditional Ballads.**" This presentation will address the occurrence, meaning and roles of particular revenants in a selection of traditional ballads (*James Harris, The Unquiet Grave, The Cruel Mother* and *The Suffolk Miracle*, amongst others). The supernatural will be examined in terms of its contact with human beings, and the special circumstances of revenants which are known to the human protagonists of the songs will be addressed. I will comment on the types and behaviours of the revenants, as well as the contexts of different versions of the ballads I discuss. As the songs I focus on are found in the oral traditions of England and Scotland, and, in some cases, the United States and Canada, I will also look into the differences in the existence and role of the undead in Old- and New world traditions.

Irene Petratou (Panteion University of Athens, and Kapodistrian University of Athens), **“Supernatural References in Advertising : The Case of ‘Supernatural Women’.”** The notion of the Supernatural woman is expressed through an extensive number of configurations and forms that are directly related to a world of Fantasy and Myth. Women with unique and magical powers are frequently revealed through different popular narratives that attempt to provide answers or comfort to the mysteries of life and death. Nowadays, the Supernatural woman adopts unusual forms in different fields of the contemporary life. The current study explores one of the most popular fields of modern society, where She appears; more specifically, the world of advertising and the domain of printed advertisements. A content and semiotic analysis of advertisements of numerous female magazines around the world will be presented in this study. Specifically, visual references to the Supernatural woman will be presented as they are seen in printed advertisements of various feminine products, such as cosmetics, jewelry and clothing. The outcomes of this study explore how elements of the supernatural woman (i.e. appearance, special powers etc) are used to communicate to the modern woman that she can become a Special woman. Finally, the study examines how the interaction of the supernatural and the mass media can help us address crucial folkloric and social issues.

Jeremy Harte (Bourne Hall Museum), **“An Echo Arose from a Suicide's Grave: The Crossroads Ghost in Fiction, Folklore and Fact.”** In 1970 a young woman went into trance and relived the last moments of Kitty Jay, the seduced servant girl of darkest Dartmoor, right up to the moment when she tied the fatal noose round her neck. Amazingly, this was all backed up by an obscure book. Unfortunately, the book was a historical novel and the real existence of Jay is open to doubt. From Ophelia to Shakespeare's sister, female suicide has been an inspiration for storytellers and authors alike. The brutalities of crossroads burial were visited on vulnerable bodies in the most public way; even after the prohibition of the legal process in 1823, it lingered in the popular mind, a stake in the highway that could be tripped over but never ignored. Folklore, a second court of appeal, began to stress the innocence of those who had been convicted of self-murder, and literature provided alternative scripts. When Poo-Bah announced that 'blighted affection' had killed his little bird, he was echoing a folk cliché about suicide that had long been adrift from any mooring in historical facts.

Jonathan Roper (University of Tartu), **“Charming in the Mareti Gorge.”** This paper discusses healing charms used in the Mareti gorge, a multi-confessional area in the south-west of Georgia, based on fieldwork conducted there in 2007. The presentation is supported by video documentation.