

ON ALAN DUNDES' "DEVOLUTIONARY PREMISE": A COMMENT

Professor Dundes' recent paper about the devolutionary premise in folklore in the Journal of the Folklore Institute (VI, 1 [1969], 5-19) has many fascinating aspects. His main thesis is that changes brought about in folktales, legends, ballads, and other forms of folk tradition are not necessarily proofs of decay. Professor Dundes might have found excellent ammunition in a recent paper by Max Lüthi, "Urform und Zielform in Sage und Märchen" (Fabula, 9 Band, pp. 41-54). In this paper the author demonstrates the fact that the best versions of a legend or a folktale are often of recent origin. They are mostly the result of a very long development in folk tradition.

In the so-called legend of the scythe, a horse is constantly harassed by a werewolf or a nightmare. The farmer puts a scythe upon the back of the horse. Next morning the farmhands find their master dead by the side of the horse. He himself was the being that had been riding the horse in the night. There are many other versions of this legend, but to a modern mind at least, this particular variant is the best one. And Professor Lüthi is of the opinion that this version is of recent origin. There are several hundred variants of the folktale of the hidden life (Aa-Th 302). A Russian version tells that the giant is killed only when the egg where his life is hidden is thrown on to his head. There is a great group of folktales and legends in which the dominating motif is that a man, a woman or a supernatural creature is killed by himself. The different forms of this theme are very often of recent origin. They don't always represent what the older Finnish scholars called the "urform." I think that Professors Dundes and Lüthi may agree on vital points here.

We cannot, however, suppress the fact that changes in folklore are sometimes for the worse. Details are forgotten and misunderstandings arise. This happens all the time. The famous Norwegian Draumkvaedet ("The Dream Lay") from the middle ages tells of a visionary who in ecstasy visits the beyond. However, this lay was collected only in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This ballad had been exposed to what the Germans called "zersingen." It was only a beautiful ruin. Many of the variants were only fragments, others were full of misunderstandings. Commonplaces from other ballads had penetrated the variants of this song (see Knut Liestøl, "Draumkvaedet," A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages; Studia Norvegica, No. 3 [Oslo, 1946]. See especially Olav E., "Draumkvaedet og gamle-stevet," Norveg, V [1955], 77-104. English summary.). Many similar examples may be added, but I hope to have made my point.

A question that Professor Dundes does not raise is: How have these changes which have been mentioned here been brought about? To answer this somewhat difficult question properly we must concentrate on the tellers and singers. We must study their methods more closely. I want to remind my readers of a book that by now has turned out to be a classic of its kind, namely Linda Dégh's Märchen, Erzähler und Erzählgemeinschaft. Dargestellt an der ungarischen Volksüberlieferung (Berlin, 1962*). She has investigated a folk group in Kakasd, Hungary. This special folk group had preserved very much of their old ways. Dégh found that the tellers of this group regarded themselves as creative artists. They had in stock a

lot of motifs that they put into their folktales when it pleased them to do so. It happened often that a person told his folktales differently from time to time. And the most renowned tellers had their own repertoires that were considered their own property. Their social background, their experiences, their outlook, whether it was religious or not, colored their renderings of the folktales. We must learn to know the tellers and their milieu to evaluate the tales. Behind the curves, the statistics, the frequency analyses that show the interplay of motifs and changes in the structure of the folktales there are human beings, there are gifted and less talented tellers. If we get a firmer grasp of this aspect of the problem of changes in folktales and legends, we shall be better equipped to understand the dynamics of these changes as we meet them in folk tradition. Many tradition bearers were proud of their art. They liked telling tales, as we know from Ireland. Changes are not always the result of misunderstandings, but are sometimes made unintentionally by the tellers. From what we know now, changes in folktales and legends may be for the better and for the worse. So many complicated factors are involved and one can hardly discuss them in a short comment.

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OUR RIGHT READERS WRITE

Gentlemen:

Thank you for your letter of February 20 and the copy of FOLKLORE FORUM [II, 5; September, 1969]. It was an interesting issue and the comments on Dr. Kirk were most curious, a fine example of short-sighted interpretations combined with enlightened observations. Best wishes to you.

Cordially,
William Odell
Assistant to Russell Kirk

P. S. Dr. Kirk has been away lecturing incessantly but still was able to give your little "communication" attention.

CORRECTION

We neglected to note that the original manuscript, with full informant data, of "The Riddle Repertoire of a Massachusetts Elementary School," by Meryl Weiner (FOLKLORE FORUM, III, 1) has been deposited in the Indiana University Folklore Archives.