

# The Good, the Bad and the Outcast: On the Moral Ambivalence of Folk Heroes

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*This article examines the common traits of popular folk heroes in order to demonstrate their common misconception as powerful individuals fighting against an evil threatening their community. In fact, folk heroes often prove to be tiny, seemingly insignificant aberrations the system, who gain their special status by rebelling against the rules governing their respective societies, thus becoming radical social outcasts whose characters border on the monstrous. Even when heroes are explicitly pitted against apparently evil monsters threatening their societies, their relationships with monsters prove to be highly ambivalent: they have to take on some of the monsters' qualities in order to be able to beat them and the later occasionally even prove to be uncomfortably related to them. In order to prove its point, this paper examines two of the most popular folk heroes in Slovenia: Martin Krpan and King Matjaž as well as a host of heroes and tricksters from across the globe, paying special attention to the worldwide motif of the miser and the thief, where the roles of hero and monster hold a particularly high degree of exchangeability.*

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Heroes are an odd breed. What one intuitively imagines is something along the lines of a superhuman-sized musclemán bravely fighting for the forces of good against an evil entity threatening his community. If, however, we examine the actual line-up of characters playing a part in various folk and tribal myths across the world, we find that they tend to be made up much more variable stock, both morally and physically. While some are truly described as colossal, heroes can also take on the form of tiny, at first sight insignificant glitches in the system. Moreover, while they do tend to be courageous, their bravery is expressed foremost in a willingness to cross the boundaries of the socially acceptable rather than in heeding the expectations of their respective surroundings. Folk heroes often establish their status by breaking the rules – including moral ones – defining the limits of the communities into which they have been born. Because of this, the paths of their lives tend to be balanced on the thin edge between champions and villains, and with their rule-breaking, new rules establishing actions are often not even blessed by altruistic motivations. This article examines certain concrete examples of folk heroes split between the roles of idols and outcasts and takes a detour through the subject of comic characters in tribal religions to demonstrate the proximity between the champions, monsters and fools of our mythologies.

### Rebels without a cause

As is well known, Claude Levi-Strauss began his *Mythologiques* with a randomly chosen myth starring a, so to speak, “Amazonian Oedipus”. M1 is the tale of a boy who sleeps with his mother and is suspected of the act by his father, who tries to cause his death by sending him to all sorts of dangerous tasks, all of them, unsuccessfully, after which the son finally returns to his village after several years and kills his father.<sup>1</sup> Although this myth is but one of many, the similarity of its plot structure to other folk tales could suggest that heroes often attain their elevated status through a transgressive act that ignores the governing rules of their own societies and sometimes even literally obliterates the traditional social order, here embodied by the hero’s father. Furthermore, this rebellion against established social rules secured by paternal authority is apparently the one that gives the hero the power to establish his own rules: a mythical hero often becomes the rule-maker of a new world order. Because many of these tales are set at the beginning of time and discuss the origin of the current state of the cosmos, we thus arrive at the provocative point that social rules as such have at some point been set by a paternal authority figure that attained his status by disregarding hitherto existing social rules and rebelled against a previous figure of paternal authority. This is definitely an unexpected point to encounter in tribal and village societies, which are, by rule, rigid and focused on the importance of respecting authority, hierarchy and tradition; we will later return to the topic of this discrepancy between bowing to authority and the insight into the contra-authoritarian way this authority is seen to have itself established.

Rebellion against prevalent paternal authority is a common staple of mythic heroism, and examples of it can be found in such commonly known places as the succession line for the status of head god in classic Greek mythology, which is basically a tale of sons disposing of their tyrannical, progeny devouring fathers only to later succumb to the same fate themselves. Cronus castrates Uranus to be in turn challenged by his own son, Zeus, who is the first in the dynasty to successfully avoid dethronement. Zeus is a liminal example here, since he in time became increasingly understood as a metaphor for a single universal principle by the authors of classic Hellenism, and thus came very close to the concept of a monotheistic God that was to prevail in Europe with the advent of Christianity. While Greek stories of the gods’ ascent to power appear to promote rebellion against paternal authority, Zeus is a figure at the limit between two world views: some stories promote rebellion against him (the myth of Prometheus is the most paradigmatic one), but many show it to be futile, and a late Hellenistic understanding of Zeus actively discourages it.

It is still an open question, though, whether this makes traditional polytheism more radical than Christianity, for even if pagan heroes tend to be merited for challenging gods while Christian saints only challenge terrestrial authority (conceived precisely as pagan at the beginning of Christianity) by assuming a humbly submissive attitude towards God, this, in combination with actual cultural practices, would still suggest that polytheists only revere rebellion as a mythic story while demanding strict adherence to the rebel’s rules in everyday life, whereas a Christian is allowed to rebel against prevail-

<sup>1</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss: *Mythologiques I: The Raw and The Cooked*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 35-7.

ing rules if this is done in the name of being faithful to a more universal principle. In favour of polytheism, however, it must be noted that the pagan heroes' "rebellion for nothing" could be seen as more radical than "rebellion in the name of God", a point that became much clearer once Christianity outgrew its role as the stubborn faith of outcasts.

Furthermore, paganism is additionally radical (at least on the level of its myths) for its view of the rules it adheres to as capricious inventions of an ancestral rule-breaker, while Christianity sees its chief deity as a wise law-maker and denies Him a rebellious history, supplanting it with stories of creation rebelling against an eternally reigning God. The story of the War in Heavens, between God's and Lucifer's armies of angels, is structurally very similar to the myth of Zeus' battle with Cronus and the Titans, but where the latter is the account of Zeus' violent ascent to power, the former proposes God's rule as a state given *ab initio* and his sons' rebellion as a later diabolical corruption. Finally, while paganism does impose very strict rules on its subjects' everyday lives, it also very often provides them with a festive period where breaking them is actively encouraged and where ordinary people are believed to enter mythical times and take on the roles of their own taboo-breaking mythical ancestors.

We will return to this theme of how a society's conception of its gods and heroes combines with its social rules. At this point, let us strengthen our case by examining some more concrete examples of mythical heroes as morally ambivalent rebels. In Slovenian popular folklore, one of the best known heroic characters is King Matjaž, a mythical king based on the historical Mátyás Hunyada – Korvin of Hungary, who (like similar characters known in other parts of Europe, e.g. King Arthur in England or Wenceslas in the Czech Republic) is said to be waiting dormant together with his army in a cave under a local mountain until the time become ripe for his return to power. Whereas Matjaž's character is currently established in Slovenian national consciousness in a very positive light (he had been hidden into the mountains by God in order to save him from defeat at the hands of an invading army and his return will lead his people into a new Golden Age<sup>2</sup>), Slovene ethnologists have unearthed folk tales that show him as a more ambivalent figure: as an arrogant rebel against God, so overwhelmed by sensations of unheeded power that he challenges God himself to a duel. In this version, his entrapment into the mountain is seen as just punishment for his presumption, and his return at the end of time as a bloodthirsty rampage of an Anti-Christ before the Last Judgment: the stories of Matjaž's army return from the mountain prove strictly analogous to those of the dreaded biblical armies of Gog and Magog.<sup>3</sup>

Although it has often been reasonably argued that this version of the myth is a later addition of the Christian worldview through the lens of which no terrestrial hero can measure up to the power of God and where every earthly act of heroism is seen as too haughty in comparison with the properly humble pose of a good believer, I would argue for a different interpretation. I think that both the version in which Matjaž is a univocally good protégée of God and the one in which he is a univocally bad rebel against Him show signs of the monotheistic split into heroes as purely good or bad. In opposition, I would like to postulate that both stories actually point to a missing third viewpoint in which Matjaž could take on the role of a true pagan hero and be thus simultaneously seen as a

<sup>2</sup> See Zmago Šmitek: *Mitološko izročilo Slovencev*, Študentska založba, 2004, p.190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

brave and possibly problematic rebel against God, the embodiment of the highest possible authority; a rebel whose amoral, established-systems-destabilizing heroism holds the potential for being equally redeeming and dangerous. Like any hero, Matjaž challenges and threatens a stable order: following him down this path can lead to the establishment of a new and better order or to pure destruction, but the risk has to be reckoned with and is ours to take.

### **Heroes and monsters**

It may be useful to compare this dual image of Matjaž's return as either messianic or anti-Christian with the popular Greek visions of Cronus' potential return. In the official mythology of classical Greece, Cronus is presented as a monstrous devourer of children and Zeus as the principle of reason that rightly cast its savage ancestor into the abyss to establish a more rational rule. Nevertheless, the Greeks regularly celebrated a festival called "Kronia" that enacted Cronus' temporary return to govern a new Golden Age. This was a merry, orgiastic celebration that seems to have granted a certain limited right of reign to Cronus' more "bestial" principle of being and even temporarily reversed the roles of hero and monster in the Zeus-Cronus relationship: Cronus was now, at least for a limited time, seen as a hero rebelling against the too-rational rule of law established by Zeus. An analogous festival was celebrated in ancient Rome called Saturnalia, Saturn being the equivalent of Cronus in Roman syncretistic mythology, and Bakhtin argued for the spiritual continuation of the latter's atmosphere in medieval carnival.<sup>4</sup>

It is highly telling that similar festivals were in some cases openly seen as the re-enactment of an era of the reign of the primordial beast whose slaying by the cultural hero meant the first act of creating the world as we know it today. One of the globally most widely spread myths records this victory of a heavenly storm god over a primordial snake or dragon, a myth often used as a background for festivals celebrating the beginning of the rainy season or the time of a harvest, where the sudden abundance of water or food is seen as having been provided by the storm god liberating the material from the monster hitherto hoarding or blocking it. The section of the festival centred on the dragon's temporary reign, however, is very far from celebrating stinginess of hoarding and is also an ecstatic, orgiastic event ambivalently connected to both the hero's slaying of the dragon and to its mad, irrational occupation of the ordered world.

In other words, the role of the monster in these myths is able to take on any one of two very different aspects: it can either play the part of the stingy, hoarding father figure that needs to be slain by the hero or god in order to release the blocked material back into the populace, or it can represent the principle of mad, limitless abundance itself, temporarily flowing over all borders and providing enjoyment until it is finally limited and ordered by the god or hero. The role of the hero and the monster is here obviously not completely fixed and ultimately depends on whether we view the hero as the principle of ordering reason or of anti-hoarding release, but also on whether this release is blamed on the hoarder himself or on a third, releasing party.

Thus, in the case of the proto-Slavic Perun vs Veles conflict, Veles steals Perun's bride/cattle/wheat and Perun retaliates by hitting him with lightning in order to liber-

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, pp.10-14.

ate the stolen goods that finally shower onto the populace. Perun is quite obviously the hero here and Veles the villain. However, is there not a subtle undertone to this story that suggests that, perhaps, if Veles never stole the goods from Perun, the latter might not ever share it with his own people and that only Veles' theft provoked Perun to release the goods to the populace in order to prevent Veles from running off with them? Is Veles' theft not removed from tales of a more ambivalent character, like, for example, Prometheus, stealing fire from the gods to bring it to humanity, merely by Veles' more egotistic motives and the unintentional nature of the goods' release? Moreover, does not even that distinction disappear in folk tales of a young boy stealing something valuable from the castle of a mountaintop or cloud dwelling giant? Is not *Jack and the Beanstalk*, if we are to be utterly radical about the issue, merely a tale with a successful Veles in the role of the hero?

Finally, filling in the blanks between the figures of Jack and Prometheus are characters such as the North-American Tlingit tribe's trickster deity, Raven, who procured water for humanity by stealing it from another, more ethereal bird, the Petrel, who had in turn been hoarding it in his heavenly home.<sup>5</sup> Raven here steals the water for purely egotistical reasons, because he, personally, is thirsty, and the procuring of water for humans is a pure side effect enabled by Raven's gluttony: Raven grabs more water than his beak can carry and spills enough onto the ground to create the Great Lakes of North America.<sup>6</sup> This is by no means an isolated example: North American trickster folklore is full of analogous episodes, while half a world away similar antics are described to have been carried out by West African trickster gods: the Fon tribe trickster, a spider called Anansi, thus hides all the wisdom in the world in a ceramic vessel, but drops it in the process of carrying it up a tree, scattering pieces of wisdom all over the world.<sup>7</sup> In both examples, the ambivalent, comical hero responsible for humanity's acquisition of a certain good previously monopolized by heavenly authorities, is not only a relatively small, insignificant animal, but also carries out its act out of pure egotism: the community-beneficial side-effect is only due to the tricksters' megalomaniac lack of control that causes the goods to spill over. In fact, I believe that this exaggeration on the trickster's part effectively limits the extent of our being able to interpret his actions as egotistic. Tricksters are so disproportionately "full of themselves" to be constantly not only on but already over the verge of exploding; they do not abandon this attitude despite the constant catastrophes to which they inevitably lead them. We could say that tricksters are the proponents of an interesting attitude in which one can afford to be egotistic insofar as one takes this egotism so far that it inadvertently strikes back and generously explodes its contents into the world, providing the megalomaniac with almost painful enjoyment and his surroundings with the latter's productive remains.

This point is further exemplified by a tale told by the descendants of black slaves just outside New York City at the beginning of the 20th century and recorded by Zora Neale Hurston in her pioneering monograph *Of Mules and Men*.<sup>8</sup> The story recounts how

<sup>5</sup> Paul Radin *The Trickster – A Study in American Indian Mythology*, New York: Schocken Books, 1972, p.104.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Hynes & William G. Doty, (eds.): *Mythical Trickster Figures – Contours, Contexts, Criticisms*, Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1997, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Myth quoted from: Campbell Reesman, Jeanne: *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*, Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2001, p. X.

God first created people without any souls, and then made a giant “world soul”, set it in a field, covered it with a blanket and told the people that they would have to wait until the mud they are made of dries completely since the soul would otherwise seep out through the cracks. The people wait for a thousand years and still God is not satisfied with their dryness. No one dares touch the soul resting in the field, the white man, the black man and the Indian all pass it in fear until one day, a Jew grabs the precious item, tucks it under his shirt and runs away with it. Since man is apparently too weak to contain even a bit of the soul, the whole of it is no match for the Jew: it carries him into the air, rips him apart and scatters the soul all over the world. When the Jew’s cries eventually die out beyond the horizon, the people slowly crawl out of the holes they had hidden in and pick up the scattered pieces: some end up with big, some with small chunks, whatever they manage to come across. “Once, when God catches that Jew,” the story concludes, “he will divide things up more equally.”<sup>9</sup>

This is a story that summarizes our problem in a nutshell: in it, the Jew is openly condemned as the scapegoat for the unjust division of goods in the world as we know it, and God is established as the figure that would have set up a fairer scheme if there hadn’t been for the Jew’s meddling. However, the story also makes it implicitly clear that, had the Jew not stolen the soul, we might still be left without any, still waiting for God to be satisfied with our eternally postponed dryness. Who is the hero here then if not the Jew who broke God’s rules and sacrificed himself (the Jew is now, as the story explains, homeless, forever carried around the globe by the world soul) so humanity got at least a bit of soul to begin with? Moreover, can his act really be condemned as egotistic if he concludes the tale as the carrier of an impersonal, world soul that makes him a homeless citizen of the whole world and of nowhere in particular?

These examples of trickster antics have attempted to demonstrate that the hero need not be a particularly physically powerful nor altruistically oriented character: a megalomaniac midget can play the part just as well. Tricksters thus make for interesting connecting joints between seemingly opposite poles in more conventional pieces of mythology: they can expose a classical hero’s (like Perun’s) seeming altruism as a contingent effect of his vindictiveness that conceals a hoarding miser, and they can problematize a self-sacrificing cultural hero (like Prometheus) as possibly motivated by megalomania. However, most importantly, they let us turn a fresh eye to certain situations with seemingly clear-cut hero-villain roles and see them from a very different angle. Heroes always challenge existing rules and can thus be demonised as villains by a reigning ruler; while the ruler’s guarantee of an ordered and safe world always has its flip side in an unjust and oppressive blockade of enjoyment embodied in the figure of an ancient miser to be beheaded by a folk hero. It should be noted, however, that hoarding itself is not the true villainy here either, since it is the precisely the temporary blockade of the free flow of goods and their concentration in one place that enables their sudden, excessive and disproportionate release, i.e. a sudden release intimately connected with enjoyment. The period of this sudden release is celebrated as a return to the dangerous, excessive and ecstatic “Golden Age” before the ordering of the world, be they governed by a primordial mad, jolly monster spraying goods all over the populace or by a hero opening the belly of a stingy goods-hoarder.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Finally, these periods are always temporary and are brought to a close with the destruction of the figure embodying excessive enjoyment. The monster is slain, and characters governing periods of festive abandon are banished: Carnival is burned or drowned, and Green George is eventually sent off again on his eternal wanderings. Mythic consciousness seems to acknowledge that periods of excessive enjoyment cannot go on indefinitely and that the world has to be ordered again by a wise lawmaker, often embodied by the dragon-slayer himself, so society can resume its normal, everyday life. In ancient societies, however, the dragon's head proverbially makes up the buried base of any ordered world, and always awaits its re-emergence at the next festival of excess. Who is then the hero in all this repetition and circulation? Is it the rule-maker who slays the dragon (this very act an example of a typically problematic heroic deed, for the dragon is a deity itself and sometimes features as the hero's parent) and establishes a new world order on the basis of his victim's severed head? Alternatively, is the hero the monster that breaks the rules of the tyrant's world order and opens up the world for a new beginning when the society established by the ruler becomes too rigid? Whatever the answer, the two figures seem to be much more intimately connected than any of us would deem it at first sight.

### **Living on the edge**

A hero nearly as popular as King Matjaž in Slovenia is Martin Krpan, a literary creation of a 19th-century writer based on several folkloric precedents. Krpan is an enormous, superhumanly strong smuggler of salt who is first attempted to be arrested by the royal guards of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but is then, when proven too strong, enlisted to fight a similarly powerful menace threatening Vienna in the form of an enormous Turkish warrior called Brdavs. After several amusing episodes of stomping and eating his way through the precious Viennese court, Krpan fights Brdavs and wins, asking in return only to be left in peace in his smuggling business.<sup>10</sup>

This story again presents the folk hero as a rebel against authority (this time embodied in the Viennese court), as an uncanny double of a villain (Krpan and Brdavs are both lumbering, civilization-threatening giants) and as a stubborn law-breaker who refuses to be rewarded with inclusion into stable society and prefers to keep to his career of a petty transgressor. Furthermore, Krpan's case demonstrates the tendency of heroes to come from the periphery of the places where they carry out their heroic deeds: in this case, Slovenia as the edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On one level, this can be partially explained by the fact of periphery also being a place where the greatest threats to society come from (Brdavs in this case), thus prompting society's need for a peripheral figure as the only possible match for the menace. However, I believe that this explanation falls short in conceiving periphery merely as something completely external to the society that relies on it as the very source of its heroes and villains. The periphery is the source of all meaning for a given society: in this sense, it is transcendental, it cannot be contained in the same system to which it provides meaning. This is the reason the main gods in all societies, including monotheistic ones, are usually seen as having left earth

<sup>10</sup> For an extended study of Krpan and his origins see Zmago Šmitek: *Poetika in logika slovenskih mitov*, Študentka založba, 2012, pp. 251-61.

ages ago and to be currently residing in heaven. However, the gods have to stay in heaven in order for a system to function; it has to refer to them as absent because once gods enter the system they had previously been procuring sense to, they undermine the very system established in their absentia. For one thing, the entry of peripheral gods into a system disrupts social rules. Gods made the rules, so they do not have to respect them. For another, when a god enters into a system based on his absence, the difference between the absolute good and the absolute bad tends to melt away. A god entering a system fuses that system's ideas of law-threatening monsters with that of law-creating heroes, a difference on whose maintenance a system's stability hinges. Hence, the confusion whether a supernatural being entering a system and dissolving all hitherto existing rules is good or bad; hence the dual status of the dragon, Cronus, Carnival or any other ruler of a temporary orgiastic Golden Age. Hence, the need for that same ruler to either move on or be killed and buried at the end of the festivities so a stable system can be re-established in his absence; and hence, Krpan's simultaneously preserving and destructive effect on the Viennese court as well as his uncanny similarity to Brdavs. The hero and the monster of a given system are essentially the same amoral entity, and it is only their banishment at the end of the story that enables the fantasy of having seen off the good part of this phenomenon into heaven from where it watches over the proper functioning of the society its absence enables, and the negative part of it into the underground from where it constantly threatens to disrupt it. The eruption of the chaotic beast and the return of the hero are one and the same, and festivals like Carnival, Saturnalia and Kronia were those that knew it best and continually acknowledged it by celebrating monsters as returned heroes of an orgiastic, chaotic and stable-system disrupting Golden Age.

The folkloric equivalents of Krpan (Löl Kotlič, Hudi Kljukec and Peter Klepec) are all similar to the literary hero in that they fight foreign giants, in two cases out of three in Vienna, and in that all of them also ask to be allowed to carry on with illegal activities similar or identical to smuggling.<sup>11</sup> Two of them, however, Klepec and Kljukec, grossly differ from Krpan in their tiny rather than superhuman size, thus further undermining the image of the hero as a muscular superman and additionally stressing their roles as tiny, peripheral, seemingly insignificant but actually essential disturbances in the dominant social fabric. They share this trait with the animals playing the parts of trickster heroes mentioned above, who are all relatively small in comparison to the big players in the animal kingdom and are regularly pitted against the latter to emerge victorious. This is a trait widely spread in biblical and Greek texts, in examples such as David's victory over Goliath or Ulysses' over the Cyclops and has most often been interpreted as embodying the victory of reason over brute force typical of the founding texts of Western civilization. As can be seen, however, such figures are also not strangers to texts completely outside the West, with the difference however (which I would like to count in their favour) that North American and African tricksters appear not to represent rationality as such but the wild, irrational rampage of cunning that often turns against its carriers as well. Paul Radin, the pioneer of trickster studies and the author of the first monograph on the topic, tellingly defined the trickster as "one who tricks others, and is also tricked himself".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Radin, p. xxiii.



The trickster Radin based his study upon was called Wadjunkaga, and his story was still told among the Winnebago tribe in the 1930s; this was a comical hero who also started his journey by breaking rules: first of all the taboos defining his place as the ritual chief of his tribe (the myth starts by Wadjunkaga summoning his tribe to a war path, which is the domain of the war chief, never of the ritual one; in the continuation of the story, he goes on to break more social taboos by leaving the pre-war-path dinner and does so in order to sleep with his mother-in-law, until he finally abandons his war party in the middle of the forest and sets off on his own), becoming a sort of homeless wanderer disturbing the rules and bringing chaos to every place he visits. Towards the end of the myth, he unwittingly creates a couple of natural phenomena and concludes the story by preparing the world for humanity by banishing evil spirits.<sup>13</sup> Again, the ultimate breaker of taboos becomes the creator of a new world and the establisher of new rules.

Like Wadjunkaga, the Slovenian folklore characters Pust (Carnival) and Zeleni Jurij (Green George) are also imagined as homeless, permanently on the move and only entering the community once a year at the time of their annual celebrations when Carnival causes havoc by disturbing rules governing everyday society. In an interesting folk song, Green George is described as a semi-tragic figure condemned to eternal wandering by being tied to a holy object, a ritual loaf that apparently drags him on his tireless journey in a fashion similar to the Jew carried by the world-soul above.

“George hollers along the creek / with a white loaf / if he eats it, he can’t go home / if he brings it home, the house will explode.”<sup>14</sup>

George’s loaf is apparently conceived as the carrier of a dangerous nomadic charge that can possess its carrier, turning him into an eternal nomad, and that can destroy a stable home if it is allowed to enter. This is a theme that could be connected to both a frequent ritual rule where certain sacred objects must not enter a house through the door but have to be lowered in through the chimney; as well as to the Slovenian superstition advising caution when bringing lightning-struck logs into the house since they could burn the dwelling down if they still contained the primordial serpent the lightning was trying to hit. Finally, we could also tie it to an episode from the Wadjunkaga cycle in which the trickster has the contents of an entire stable village piled up on top of him just to scatter them around by emitting an enormous fart.<sup>15</sup> The pagan sacred appears to be essentially nomadic and thus dangerous to stable cultural structures including permanent dwellings. Similar dangerously sacred figures of eternal wanderers can be found in Slovenian folk superstitions connected to the tenth son or daughter, obliged to leave their homes to wander the world and believed to possess perilously precious magical powers. It is telling that tales from the realm of monotheism usually burden such eternal wanderers with exclusively diabolical qualities, as in the case of Ahasver, the infamous wandering Jew of Christianity.

In polytheistic religions, in contrast, a homeless, placeless, wandering life is usually seen as the ambivalent mark of a hero, god or other supernatural entity. Tricksters are especially shameless in exhibiting this quality of lacking a fixed place in the world order; the abovementioned Raven’s mythical cycle starts when he is banished from his village

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Šmitek 2004, p. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Radin, p.26

in the sky and begins to wander the earth, taking part in creating its present form;<sup>16</sup> the Shinto God Susanowo is also banished from heaven after having played a particularly devious trick on his sister, the Sun, only to spend his life causing more mischief between heaven and earth;<sup>17</sup> the West African Ananse, Legba and Eshu all constantly travel between the two realms as semi-independent messengers of their system's chief deities; Hermes, originally merely one of Zeus's illegitimate sons, elects himself into the Olympic pantheon only to gain a licence to plague the area between heaven and earth with divine authority from his father. Trickster gods also habitually feature – unsurprisingly – as gods of travellers, and their altars are often constructed at crossroads.

Tricksters have traditionally been interpreted as creatures bridging gaps: the gap between heaven and earth, between gods and mortals; gaps between separate paths, between cities, between producers and buyers (they frequently feature as gods of commerce), between good and evil, etc., but, as Lewis Hyde perceptively noted, they are also the creators of gaps, and are often depicted as the originators of the distance between heaven and earth,<sup>18</sup> and at times even as the original inventors of death. If the Bible clearly differentiates between good, rational differentiation of the primordial mass as carried out by God in the first book of Genesis and between bad, tragic, death and pain bringing differentiation between God and his creation brought upon by the original sin in the next two chapters of the same volume, pagan worldviews normally see both as two aspects of the same gesture. Legba, the trickster of the West-African Fon banishes his Mother-goddess from the world by throwing dirty laundry water at her;<sup>19</sup> a Slovenian folk tale shows the cohabitation of God and man as a depressing, stifling symbiosis on a barren Earth that only begins to bear fruit and make man happy when God's spirit leaves it, fertilizing it with his decaying body;<sup>20</sup> a Sumerian creation myth tells the tale of how Enlil had to push his eternally copulating divine parents, Heaven and Earth, apart to make room for children born of their embrace to dwell.<sup>21</sup> Polytheism, in short, appears not to idealize unity nor see differentiation as merely rationally pragmatic ordering but conceives of gaps slashed into oneness as ambivalent: bringing relief, space, life and enjoyment, as well as death, pain, discordance and disproportion.

Mythical heroes of all kinds flourish in this ambivalent space opened by differentiation. They break the strict structures governing their own societies to become outlaws, homeless outcasts lingering on the periphery of their systems to fight liminal monsters as much as central authorities (sometimes the two are one and the same) and to capriciously create new rules for new world orders. If we focused extensively on tricksters in this essay, it is because they are the figures in which the link and difference between heroes and their monsters become truly visible. Tricksters are eternal rebels, constantly at odds with any established world order, and can thus act both as monsters attacking a reigning god's or hero's stable realm (like Veles' robbery of Perun's goods) and as folk heroes challenging a tyrant's authority and unwittingly procuring goods for humanity (from the Tlingit Raven through Prometheus to Jack and other fairy tale heroes). Every

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Hyde: *Trickster Makes This World – Mischief, Myth and Art*, Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2008, p.23-5.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, pp. 181-3.

<sup>18</sup> Hyde, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

<sup>20</sup> Šmitek 2004, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New World Library, 2008, p.243.

hero is a trickster and a homeless monster at heart, riding into a land from far away; a mysterious stranger bent on ridding the populace of a usurping, stingy and rigid authority. Every hero that takes the throne over from the tyrant will have to face the challenge posed to his kingdom by the next approaching wanderer.

Monsters are habitually described as wandering, homeless and peripheral (see the descriptions of Grendel and his mother from *Beowulf* as “dwelling at the borders” and “circulating in their loneliness”<sup>22</sup>), and a king will have to attain some of the monster’s qualities and take to the road if he is to triumph in the approaching face-off. The endless travels of tricksters, tenth sons and daughters, eternal Jews and other monsters serve to remind heroes of their own amoral, misfit origins. Not confined merely to myth, this peripheral essence of heroes is also reflected in such modern genre plots like that of the classic western where passing strangers are enlisted to fight bandits after the sheriff’s death, or of hardboiled detective stories in which criminal cases are always solved by drunken, cynical private investigators rather than the official police force. There is a good reason these mysterious strangers ride off into the sunset before the rescued town could elect them as the new sheriffs; as well as why the Sam Spades and Philip Marlowes never fully cooperate with the police nor end up working for the government. It is the same reason that motivated Krpan to pack up from the court and get back to his smuggling business.

Thus, when monotheisms refuse to acknowledge monsters as the necessarily buried and continually returning basis’ of their stable order and insist on them as diabolical evils in need of utter annihilation, what they are really demonising is not so much nature, lust or animal instinct, as so many theories are quick to claim, but the amoral and headless, difference-based signification at the fundament of all society. A monster, or a pagan hero for that matter, is a mad signifier that only appears arrogant because it acknowledges no final master, and it is this mad signifier that must be stopped, buried, chained to a rock, shut up in a mountain to make stable society (made up of steady signifying chains referring to a stable, absent master) possible on its buried basis. Tribal and folk religions understand, however, that this mad signification, at once terrifying and poetic, must be regularly given free reign so that the rigid rules of stable society can be refreshed and regenerated. Some call carnivals mere safety valves because their existence prevents societies from exploding from the pressure built up in systems that have abided by the same rules too long. However, it is in this sudden release of pressure that the primary state of things before the establishment of an order is also regained and from its mad interactions overflowing with excess that any stable order is made possible. Heroic acts stem from the same core: they overstep the boundaries, cast themselves out from standard society and risk their own monstrosity in order to expose the artificiality and contingency of established rules and open the possibility for the establishment of new ones.

To conclude by posing that final question from the beginning of our essay once more: if tribal religions and folk superstitions really do implicitly acknowledge all this with their mythologies, why do they then demand such strict adherence to rules from their believers? Monotheists appear to be much freer than pagans in their list of urgent daily rituals, even though the heroes of their myths behave more humbly towards their

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<sup>22</sup> *Beowulf*, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 21.

systems' chief deities. However, it is modern atheists, with their cosmopolitan, nomadic lifestyles and simultaneously lax moral attitudes who lead the very opposite of tradition-governed lives typical of polytheistic tribes, while appearing to make an almost perfect fit for the role of a pagan god, hero or at least a trickster. To be sure, world-travelling Westerners have often actually been confused for gods by polytheistic locals: the Inca's and Aztecs' mistaking of their colonizers for deities is the most famous example, but a book of North Indian trickster tales also lists several tribes using the same name for their trickster hero and a white foreigner.<sup>23</sup>

What does this tell us? Are we actually the ones who finally managed to realize the fantasies harboured by the most rudimentary and ancient social organisations? Have we become the fickle gods that were but the stuff of fireplace tales in folks of yesteryear? Perhaps we have truly come closer to that status in reality than they ever dreamt was possible. Travel between territories of neighbouring tribes was impossible in traditional societies, and remains so in some areas of Papua New Guinea; the travels that their gods and heroes made were actually fantastic to them, and are own should seem incredibly more so. However, our radical liberation has also cost us one crucial thing. Because modern society has rendered rules virtually non-existent and because those that do persist (e.g. do not rape, do not kill) are so basic that their breaking would truly cause us to become monsters, we seem to have largely taken away our possibility of leading heroic lives. There are no heroes without rules; no excess without boundaries; no enjoyment without a temporary damming up of instant gratification.

This conclusion, however, I believe, is an illusion, i.e. it is not an illusion that we require limits to gain access to heroism and enjoyment, but it is an illusion that our world is one lacking all rules and structure. Despite the rampant postmodern ennui complaining of "every frontier having already been conquered", there are plenty of implicit, almost invisible rules still governing our seemingly post-historical world. These are the postulated "natural selection" supposedly objectively describing our free market economy; the collective blessed ignorance of environmental and developing world problems dumped into those peripheries by our high standard of living; and the politely dictated cynicism of political correctness that is prevailing ever more in our public communication, to name just a few. These are boundaries that still provide challenges for all candidates for future heroes and tricksters, if nothing else, to fend of truly diabolical monsters once they notice them as well.

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<sup>23</sup> Erdoes, Richard & Ortiz, Alfonso (ed.): *American Indian Trickster Tales*, New York: Penguin Books, 1999, p. xvi (*Veeho* with the Cheyenes) in str. xviii (*Napi* with the Blackfoot), see also Hyde, *ibidem.*, p. 12.

**Dobro, zlo in izobčenec:  
O moralni ambivalenci ljudskih junakov**

Izar Lunaček

Članek vzame pod drobnogled skupne poteze priljubljenih ljudskih junakov z jasnim namenom pokazati zgrešenost njihovega splošno sprejetega dojemanja kot mogočnih posameznikov v borbi z zlom, ki ogroža njihovo skupnost. Ljudski junaki se, prav nasprotno, pogosto izkažejo za drobne, navidez nepomembne motnje v sistemu, ki si svoj izstopajoči status pridobijo predvsem s kršenjem osnovnih družbenih pravil: to jim omogoči preobrazbo v radikalne družbene izobčence, njihov značaj pa vseskozi hodi po nelagodnem robu pošastnega. Celó kadar se spopadajo s pošastmi, izrecno označenimi kot zlimi, se odnos med obema akterjema boja izkaže za skrajno dvoumnega: junak mora vselej privzeti vsaj določene lastnosti pošasti, če jo hoče premagati, pošast pa se nemalokrat izkaže za junakovega sorodnika ali celo starša. V podporo svoji tezi naš članek obravnava oba najbolj priljubljena slovenska ljudska junaka, Martina Krpana in Kralja Matjaža, pa tudi vrsto drugih junakov in sleparskih mitoloških likov z vseh koncev sveta. Posebno pozornost pri tem posveti globalno razširjenemu motivu skopuha in tatu, kjer se vlogi junaka in pošasti izkažeta za še posebej zamenljivi.

