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Contemporary Legend and Linguistic Structure

Robert Zola Christensen and
the "Vandrehistorie"

THE DEBATE OVER the genre affiliation of contemporary legends has tapered off in recent years. Attempts at defining (as opposed to characterizing) aspects of this kind of short told-as-true narratives have been moved to the back burner, in favor of work that both focuses on the collection of these narratives and analyzes the possible meanings created by them for the narrators themselves, their listeners, and to an ever increasing degree their readers. This gradual tapering off in genre debates may be attributable in part to Lauri Honko's (1968) important work on genre and the goals of genre distinctions, in part to an increased focus by folklorists on fieldwork situations in which context and performance have become important components in understanding why people tell the stories that they tell, and in part also to technological advances that allow for archival procedures not based solely on hierarchically ordered systems.

Debating genre affiliation is, of course, a classic area of discussion in the field of folkloristics, perhaps most fa-

mously initiated by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in their early nineteenth-century writings. Their now classic distinction between the fairy tale and the legend (1816-18, foreword) has had profound impact on the study of both of these genres. In the context of contemporary folkloristics, debates over genre and sub-genre were quite heated up through the 1980s. Alan Dundes's (1977 (1980)) seminal essay on "Who are the Folk?" provided some of the impetus for the continued discussions of genre, as modern expressions that did not necessarily fit into the genre slots developed on the basis of earlier collections became widely recognized as part of the folkloric spectrum. As part of this rethinking of genre in general, and genres in specific, the legend also came under continued scrutiny. In turn, short, believable narratives in contemporary tradition came to be labeled "urban" or "contemporary" legends. While terms such as "contemporary legend" and "urban legend" are frequently used in English language scholarship, both of these terms through their use of the word "legend" acknowledge the generic affiliation of these contemporary narratives with narratives considered to be "legends" recorded during the past several centuries.

Although debate over genre affiliation has gone into a slumber for the time being, like the rumor of Orléans that rears its head from time to time, it is not entirely dead (Morin 1982). This summer Robert Zola Christensen, assistant professor at Center for dansk, Syd-

dansk Universitet in Kolding, defended a Ph.D. dissertation at Institut for nordisk filologi, Københavns Universitet, entitled *Vandrehistorien – en litter genre* [The Migratory Story – A Literary Genre]. The dissertation is based on ten years of work on texts of contemporary Danish legends. Made up mainly of articles, and two monographs, it is an interesting compendium of Zola Christensen's work, including a response to my critical review of his popular book, *Det døde barn i hoppegynge* [The Dead Child in the Baby Bouncer] (Zola Christensen 1998; Tangherlini 2000).

Indeed, much of the first part of the oral defense held on June 29, 2001, focused on Zola Christensen's characterization of folkloristic scholarship on legend and legend performance. Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg, acting as the main opponent, raised numerous objections to Zola Christensen's work. Among the most important were concerns about Zola Christensen's incomplete representation of folkloristic approaches to the interpretation of folk legend. Zola Christensen's contention that folklorists see in legend an expression of a common folk morality, for example, ignores the more nuanced approaches to legend and performance that characterize this scholarship. Rather than expressing such a common morality, legends are often tactically deployed as part of a rhetorical negotiation of the ever-changing cultural ideology present in any society. Other questions were raised about collection methodology, in part because of Zola Christensen's brash dis-

missal of the possibility of ethical field research yielding worthwhile results (2001, 91-92).

In large part, the objections raised should be seen in context of the primarily textual approach that Zola Christensen brings to his material. This approach is perhaps best exemplified in the monograph *Snylteren* [The Parasite], which exhibits a sophisticated linguistic and structural approach to contemporary legend. At the same time, the work reveals an unfortunate resistance both to folklore scholarship that tries to answer the vexing questions of why a person may tell a particular story in a given situation and to the pressing need for Zola Christensen to augment his collections of written surveys and other written submissions (often collected by anonymous institutions such as newspapers) with rigorous fieldwork (2001, 76). Since Zola Christensen insists on the orality of the contemporary legend, it is incumbent on him to consider transcripts of field recordings. Without such recordings, the elaborate methodology he develops for the analysis of contemporary legends remains largely unproven for oral narratives. Consequently, conclusions he reaches concerning the use of language in orally performed narratives cannot be accepted. For example, when he writes, "Det er med andre ord rimeligt at antage, at vandrehistorien også i en autentisk situation indeholder færre typiske talesprogstræk end f.eks. den mere hverdagsagtige, konversationelle fortælling" [In other words, it is reasonable to assume that

the contemporary legend, in an authentic situation, contains fewer typical characteristics of spoken language than, for example, a more common conversational story], this is in fact *not* a reasonable assumption based on the extent of the empirical material considered (2001, 97). Of course, one may want to consider Zola Christensen's work with written texts (not transcripts of oral performances) as akin to a laboratory experiment in a controlled environment – the hypotheses developed here could easily be tested in the field. I believe the results of such field testing of these hypotheses will lead to an even deeper understanding not only of what people choose to tell, but also how they choose to tell it, and the hypotheses – not conclusions – that Christensen & Christensen (2001) propose may well be proven.

Zola Christensen's engagement with legend in contemporary Denmark spans most of a decade. In a series of articles in *Tradisjon* (1995), *Nord Nytt* (1997; 1999), *Kritik* (1996), and *Danske Studier* (1996a; 1996b), he agitates against the generic classification of "vandrehistorier" as legends (albeit contemporary), advocating a position that merges both historical and linguistic arguments. In most of these articles, Zola Christensen would like "contemporary legends" or, in his terminology, "vandrehistorier" to be seen as a genre apart, as he notes in an article in *Nord Nytt*: "selvom de to teksttyper ligner hinanden, så er vandrehistorien alligevel på afgørende punkter så forskellig fra folkesagnet, at vi må behandle det som en genre for sig" [even

though the two types of texts resemble each other, the *vandrehistorie* is so different from the folk legend in decisive ways that we must treat it as a separate genre] (1997, 153). He goes so far as to suggest that the combination of “contemporary” or “urban” with “legend” results in an oxymoron (1996a, 133). This position relies on the notion that legend (and folklore in general) is not something that we find in contemporary settings or in urban environments, a view that has long been abandoned by all but the most conservative folklorists.

Because of his narrow interpretation of “sagn” [legend] or “folkesagn” [folk legend], Zola Christensen proposes the emic term “vandrehistorie” as a substitute for other possible choices in the Danish language such as “moderne sagn,” “nutidssagn,” or “samtidssagn.” He characterizes this proposed genre in his earlier works as a “litterær genre” (*Tradisjon* 1995) and, in more recent work, as a “litterær, mundtlig narrativ” [literary, oral narrative] (*Snylteren* 2001). In part, Zola Christensen argues that, given the broad acceptance of the emic category “vandrehistorie” among Danes, it would behoove scholars (in Denmark) to adopt this terminology as a synonym for the “contemporary legend” sub-genre. The academic application of the term “vandrehistorie” is of course problematic, given the history of the use of the term “migratory tale” in folklore. As part of his argument in favor of adopting the emic term, Zola Christensen proposes that scholarly use

of the emic category would make collection easier, since scholars and the general public would be speaking the same language (potential informants know to what the researcher is referring) (1996a). This argument, however, has little force, since ethnographers and folklorists have for years been able to collect narratives from informants without having to explain to them the differences between emic and etic genres.

In an interesting shift from his earlier position, Zola Christensen most recently defines the sub-genre of the “vandrehistorie” as a “mundtlig traderet, (mono)-episodisk genre, der forekommer i (relativ) uformel samtale og henviser til en (prætenderet) faktisk begivenhed, der på fortællertidspunktet ligger bagude som et afsluttet forløb. Vandrehistorien bliver (i reglen) fortalt som sandfærdig, selv om den (sandsynligvis) ikke er det. Fortælleren af en vandrehistorie er (som oftest) ikke den person, der har overværet eller oplevet det fortalte indhold... Som narrativ er vandrehistorien struktureret på en sådan måde at den munder ud i en pointe. På et tematisk niveau handler vandrehistorien ofte om de tabubelagte og foruroligende sider af menneskelivet” [orally transmitted, (mono)episodic genre, which occurs in (relatively) informal conversation, and refers to a (supposedly) factual occurrence that, at the time of telling, exists in the past as a completed event. The *vandrehistorie* is (usually) told as true, even though it (most likely) is not. The teller of a *vandrehistorie* is (most frequently) not the person who witnessed or experienced the told con-

tent... As a narrative, the *vandrehistorie* is structured so as to conclude with a point. On a thematic level, the *vandrehistorie* often concerns taboo or disquieting aspects of human life] (2001, 12). Apart from the structural notion that these narratives conclude with a point – a characterization that applies to most conversational narratives – there is little in this definition that separates them from the synthetic characterization of the legend I first proposed in the early 1990s and which is now well-accepted as reflective of the genre's most well-known characteristics (Tangherlini 1994, 22; Tangherlini 1992). Interestingly, this recent definition of the “vandrehistorie” genre marks a significant change in Zola Christensen's earlier work with the genre (1997), accepting to a certain extent that contemporary legends are indeed legends. What Zola Christensen perhaps rightly is proposing, then, is that the “vandrehistorier” are a diachronically marked sub-genre of the legend. As such, he asks us to acknowledge that legends in contemporary tradition are reflective of the social and cultural context(s) in which they are performed: as social and cultural contexts change, so too do the narratives that people tell. Indeed, he mentions in a 1999 article that “vandrehistorien og folkesagnet med en vis ret kan betegnes som sammen fænomen – til stadighed præget af den samfundsmæssige udvikling betragtet på forskellige historiske trin” [the contemporary legend and the folk legend can be considered the same phenomenon to a

certain extent – constantly influenced by societal developments considered at different historical stages] (1999, 22). Since the legend genre is still one that can be deployed in narrative settings to create meaning both for the tellers and the listeners/readers, it continues to be a popularly employed genre.

In his early articles, Zola Christensen proposes a distinction between “folk legend” and “vandrehistorie” based not so much on formal features of the narratives, but rather on when they were told (1997). Folk legends for Zola Christensen are those legends collected primarily in rural settings during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked in their internal world by “ældre og mere landligt inventar” [an older and more rural inventory] (1997, 157). He goes so far as to suggest that the “folk legend” died along with the fairy tale (1997, 153) – deaths which are greatly exaggerated, as could be easily proven with a short foray into the field. In contrast, “vandrehistorier” are legends collected in the recent past and anchored in “en moderne, urbaniseret verden med hvad dertil hører af moderne rekvisitter” [a modern urbanized world with the appropriate modern accoutrements] (1997, 153). Fortunately, Zola Christensen tacitly concedes the impossibility of these earlier distinctions in his 1999 article, entitled “Vandrehistorien: Et moderne folkesagn og dets beslægtede genrer” [Vandrehistorien: A modern folk legend and its related genres], concluding that “vandrehistorien i et diakront perspektiv er et moderne folkesagn” [in a diachronic perspective, the

“vandrehistorie” is a modern folk legend] (1999, 31). However, there may be a distinction worth salvaging here. Whereas most folkloristic discussion of legend is focused on transcripts and records of face-to-face interaction between fieldworker and informant, Zola Christensen’s analyses are based entirely on stories written down by others and sent to him – as such the materials that he analyzes are not so much records of oral narratives, but rather informants’ written records of stories they have read or heard.

While the distinction is not clear, it may well be that the term “vandrehistorie” could be used to acknowledge the “literariness” of Zola Christensen’s stories, not because it is a feature of these stories when told in a conversational setting, but rather because it is one of their features in the collection he has at hand. “Moderne sagn” could then be reserved for transcripts of field collections. This solution, however, simply adds more confusion and it seems prudent, in scholarly circles, to use the term “moderne sagn” (or its close correlates, “nutidssagn” and “samtidssagn”) to describe both field records and the written records that Zola Christensen has studied. When addressing an audience of non-scholars one could certainly use the emic designation “vandrehistorie.”

However, if the distinction between “vandrehistorie” and “moderne sagn” obtains, and if we recognize that Zola Christensen’s work is based primarily on written records that represent a separate transmission conduit for these

narratives, then the work *Snylteren* stands as an intriguing structural engagement with a series of short, literary texts (Christensen’s “vandrehistorier”), the conclusions of which could well be tested against transcripts of narrative performances = “moderne sagn” (Dégh & Vázsonyi 1973). Zola Christensen’s unfortunate protestations against ethnographic fieldwork aside (2001, 91-92) – protestations that reveal either a reluctance to attempt fieldwork at all, or a misunderstanding of ethnographers’ own understandings of the limits of fieldwork ever since the influential release of *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) – *Snylteren* holds out the promise of augmenting the tools available to scholars not only as they explore the expository and linguistic structure of these narratives, but also as they ask the difficult question of why people choose to tell the stories that they tell.

Snylteren stands as the culmination of Zola Christensen’s first ten years of work on the genre from his decidedly literary perspective. Written in conjunction with his wife Lisa Christensen, a linguist, the work reflects an increasing scholarly maturity. Zola Christensen still seems resistant to the idea that these stories might be told for particular rhetorical ends, preferring the position he advanced in his article in *Kritik* (1996c), in which the *jouissance* of the well-structured plot that seduces its reader (and writer) acts as the main motivational factor behind the story. Nevertheless, the general focus of *Snylteren* on the linguistic structure of these short nar-

ratives holds significant promise. The analysis is based entirely on written records, primarily sent to Zola Christensen or printed in newspapers over the years, and as such is at a remove from the study of oral traditions. The detailed analyses of verb tenses at the core of the work may not obtain for transcripts of verbal performances (*Snylteren* proposes rather grandly that they will), but that could be an area of significant future research. Indeed, it may well be that these stories have decidedly different characteristics dependent on the medium of transmission.

As Zola Christensen's collections expand, it would be prudent for him to abandon his unfortunate position that it matters little who is doing the telling (or the writing), and to include the contextual data – the meta-data – that allow one to make increasingly nuanced distinctions between types of narrators and types of performance media. *Snylteren* should be seen as an important contribution to our ever-increasing understanding of how people tell stories. If the research continues with field recorded narratives and a consideration of the transcripts of these recordings, it is likely that our understanding of the legend genre – and the complex interactions between written and oral expressions – will be greatly expanded.

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