The Beggar, the Minister, the Farmer, his Wife and the Teacher
Legend and Legislative Reform in Nineteenth-Century Denmark

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Recent studies of traditional storytelling recognise narrative as embedded in performance context. These studies generally include a keen awareness of the social, political and economic forces shaping the communities in which the storytellers lived. The authors rightfully reject the idea of stories as "survivals," and instead emphasise the more immediate dimensions of performance. Yet there is at times an unsettling historical component to many legends that seems to resist this type of synchronic analysis – the stories are not only set in the relatively distant past, but also address very specific concerns regarding social, political or economic organisation that seem to have little or no currency in the storyteller's contemporaneous environment. How, for example, from a stance privileging the immediate performance and social contexts, are we to understand a story such as the following told by Birte Jens Christensen, a sixty-three-year-old small holder and clog maker, to Evald Hansen Kristensen, in May 1888:

1 This article is the first in a planned series of articles on "Legend and Legislative Reform in Denmark." The second article in this series, "Will Work for Food: Legend and Poverty Legislation in Nineteenth Century Denmark" is forthcoming in a special issue of *Western Folklore*. An earlier version of the current article was presented at the 5th Celtic Nordic Baltic Folklore Symposium on Folk Legends, held in Reykjavik, Iceland in June 2005. Research for the project was supported by a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Many of the ideas were developed during the inaugural year of the "Wilcreek Canyon Advanced Seminars in Folklore", a collaborative project of the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, Los Angeles.


3 This recording and translation are made from Kristensen's field diaries, rather than his published collections. In this and subsequent transcriptions, I have not expanded any of the abbreviations, nor corrected any of the obvious spelling mistakes found in the manuscript. The story was published in *Jyske Almanak* II, 201 (Kristensen 1891-1894: II, 76-77) with some minor changes to the story. This and subsequent transcriptions and translations from Kristensen's collections are my own.

(The manor lord ordered every man on the farm to drive half a cord of wood to Hobro, and Skjel-Jens refused. Then the bailiff came one afternoon when they were baking and threw them out of their house, they had eighteen living children. And they threw all of their possessions and the children’s clothing out. They put the husband in jail; he was supposed to be there for two months, but he didn’t want to go home again, because he had a real bitch of a wife at home and all these children, and so he stayed and half a year later he died there in the jail. They took a really nice grate for roasting herring, and the old lady said, “Yeah, you take that, Satan will roast your soul on it in Hell.” She said to Rommedal, the foreman, that she’d go to København and talk to the king about this. He said he could accomplish more with his writing in two hours than she could accomplish in København in two years. She really did travel to København and also managed to talk to the king, but didn’t get anything out of it. He answered that he wasn’t the absolute monarch. He was in fact, but he probably believed that he wasn’t the only one who made decisions. It was strange that Jens wouldn’t drive, he had two large, strong horses, but it was his old lady’s fault. She said that she had eighteen children and that she could have eighteen more, if she could have made them.)

Along with the obvious ad hominem directed at the arrogant and nasty wife, the story appears to be a straightforward critique of the harshness of the manorial world and its cruel punishments, the unfair burden of villeinage, and the fickleness of the autocratic rule of a confused yet absolute monarch whose refusal to intervene on behalf of his subject confirms his complicity with the landed aristocracy.4 In this regard, the

4 Christiansen (1996) provides an excellent overview of daily life on a manor.
story could be interpreted as an example of the low-level narrative critique that represented the only true revenge that peasants could exact on their lords and ladies and an economic system that kept the peasants closely tied to their manor farm. That would certainly be a suitable interpretation if Bitte Jens had been a tenant living on a manor farm seventy-five years earlier. But he was not.

By the time Bitte Jens told this story, the absolute monarchy had already been abolished; the iron hold of the manor farms on the local economy had been smashed; the capricious practices of villeinage and incommensurately harsh punishment for the breach of one-sided leases and contracts based on a biased legal system were receding quickly into the fog of the "bad old days"; and Jens himself owned his own house and land. What reason, then, for Bitte Jens to tell such an anachronistic story? Should we abandon the lessons of recent folkloristic theory and understand this story as a survival of those "bad old days" passed on uncritically by a tradition bearer as if it were a sack of potatoes? Should we consider it as a form of negative nostalgia, a reminiscence of times thankfully past? Is it an attempt on the part of a narrator to reveal the depths of his local historical knowledge to a visiting folklorist? Or are there other possible reasons for Bitte Jens not only to remember but also to tell this particular story?

Some of the answers to these questions may lie in the political dimensions of storytelling and the specific political behaviour of individuals living in complex and rapidly changing societies. In stories such as this one, the appeal to the historical is neither an uncritical passing on of old stories, nor a nostalgic revisiting of times past; rather, it is a rhetorical device deployed by an individual engaged in a negotiation of ideological stances with other community members on questions of considerable contemporaneous import. In his study of Bolivian copper miners, Michael Taussig notes that "Societies on the threshold of capitalist development necessarily interpret that development in terms of precapitalist beliefs" (Taussig 1980: 11). Although Taussig writes about a very specific case—and a very late meeting of two disparate systems of economic production—the underlying idea that people apply earlier modes of understanding to contemporary problems as they negotiate both possible solutions to and their own attitudes towards those problems holds true for most communities including late-nineteenth-century rural Denmark. Indeed, people often interpret any type of development in terms of earlier beliefs. Legends that illustrate the success or failure of those beliefs consequently have the
potential to create significant meaning for the tradition participants. These stories can also be used to shape public opinion and, in so doing, influence both local and national legislative initiatives. Such an approach helps our understanding of the political deployment of narratives situated in the historical past as part of the traditional expression of rural Danes poised on the cusp of rapid industrialisation, rampant urbanisation, the advent of free market economics and the acceptance of democracy.

Change was the name of the game throughout the nineteenth century in Denmark. Although many of the changes at the level of government organisation and national expenditure had little impact on most of the rural population, certain other large-scale legislative initiatives fundamentally altered the contours of everyday life for everyone from day labourers to the indigent, the small holders and the farm owners, and all the way on up to the manor lords and the aristocracy. Perhaps most important among these changes were those related to the educational system, church organisation, poverty assistance and land apportionment. Other developments in health care, transportation, communications, conscription, inheritance, civil rights and commerce also reverberated throughout these small rural communities. It would be misleading to suggest that individuals in these communities only expressed their thoughts about change through narrative. On the other hand, it would be equally misleading to propose that their stories — and their narrating of events that took place prior to these changes — had little to do with their emerging understanding of the implications of these changes and their attempts to influence the direction and scope of those changes.

Church and Education

Developments in the Danish educational system went hand in hand with changes to church organisation throughout the nineteenth century (Nørr 1981 and 1994). The two institutions had already been tightly linked since the beginning of the eighteenth century (Nørr 1981: 27-35). Not surprisingly, an early goal of the Danish educational system was to provide children with the tools to become good Lutherans, rather than specifically teach skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic that would make them

5 These reforms, as well as other legislative reforms, will be considered in significantly greater detail in later articles planned for this series.
productive citizens (Steensberg 1964: 1, 225; and Nørre 1981: 136). The local parish ministers who ran the schools were also agents of central government control: they were required to study in København, and they were appointed through the central bureaucracies of the church that operated under the authority of the Crown (Steensberg 1964: 1, 226).

Two significant events during the first half of the nineteenth century—the passage of a school law in 1814, and the passage of the constitution in 1849 that separated the close connection of church and state—fundamentally altered the role of the minister, and precipitated a shift in power relationships at the parish level (Nørre 1981:223-227 and 1994: 31-67). At the start of the nineteenth century, the minister was a powerful local political figure, and a clear representative of the central authority of København. He not only held sway in spiritual matters, but also in secular matters, the most prominent of these being the local schools (Nørre 1981: 56-62). In contrast, by the end of the century, the minister’s position had been stripped of much of its secular power—he no longer controlled all local administrative functions and was, in fact, not guaranteed a seat on many local governing boards (Nørre 1994: 78). The religious landscape had shifted as well, leaving many ministers with diminished control even with regard to local religious practice.

The national school law promulgated in 1814 mandated free and accessible schooling for all children, both in towns and in the countryside, from the age of seven up through to the age of confirmation. The law marked an important change in the organisation of schools in Denmark that had, since the mid-eighteenth century, relied almost entirely on the good will of the aristocracy to educate their peasants (Bjørn 1990: 158). Whereas there was no central control of these earlier schools, the initial control of the new local schools was situated firmly in the hands of the Lutheran church. The local minister (who was, of course, appointed by the bishop) appointed and oversaw the work of the degu, who served as both parish clerk and teacher. Despite this early centralisation of school control in ecclesiastic hands, the appropriate locus of this control was persistently debated during the ensuing decades (Nørre 1994: 31-67). By the second half of the century, with a series of legislative reforms that returned more power to local administration, ecclesiastic control of the schools was substantially diminished. All the same, the ecclesiastic oversight of the Danish schools was not eliminated until the school reform laws of 1933 and 1949 (Nørre 1994: 16).
Paradoxically, many school teachers preferred the oversight of the ecclesiastic officials to local officials, as they felt that the ecclesiastic officials would not fall prey to the caprices of local parish politics, particularly with regard to curriculum and the appointment of teachers (Nørr 1994: 116-117). In contrast, most local parish boards and the farm owners who sat on those boards preferred local control of all aspects of the schools. A series of reforms, first in 1856, and more importantly in 1876, led to a curious bifurcation in school control, with parallel bodies – one ecclesiastic (skolekommission) and one local (sognæråd) – running the schools: the ecclesiastic bodies controlled curricula and teacher qualification, while the local boards controlled the purse strings; teacher selection took place through a convoluted process making use of both boards. As Eric Nørr notes, “1841-99 foregik der på skolens område en magtkamp, hvor kirkelig indflydelse og statslig styring stod over for en stigende kommunalisering af skolen” (from 1841-1899, there was a power struggle concerning the schools, where the influence of the church and the control of the state stood opposite an increasing localisation of the schools: Nørr 1994: 15). The vigour of the debate over the control of the schools and the ongoing legislative compromises that appeared no constituency – including an utterly obscure “clarification” from 1871 – led to inefficiencies in the school system and its governance. Consequently, these inefficiencies insured that stories about earlier school-related events would maintain a high degree of relevance for tradition participants throughout much of the century.6

Understanding these ongoing problems with the schools, including the struggle over their control, should, in turn, inform the analysis of stories about schools and teachers and allow for a more nuanced understanding of what these stories might have meant to the people who told them. Stories about schools were common, attesting to the importance of these issues.7 For example, journeyman miller Peder Johansen told the following two linked stories of early teachers in his home town of Svejstrup.8

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6 Inefficient systems lead to increased storytelling. If a system is efficient, problems are solved in a manner consonant with prevailing cultural ideologies and, consequently, there is nothing to talk about. A properly addressed problem does not rise above the common threshold of reportability (Robinson 1981). A discussion of legislative efficiencies can be found in Tangherlini, forthcoming.
7 Kristensen collected so many stories about schools and school teachers that he was able to anthologise them in two separate volumes, alongside the many stories that were included in other collections (1892 and 1899a).
8 Originally published in Jyske Afdelings VI, 639 (Kristensen 1891-1894: VI, 255).

(The parish clerk in Sveistrup, Niels Ring, was so harsh, one time he punished a young girl by hiking up her skirt and putting her bare bottom up on a glowing hot wood-burning stove so long that her skin was half burned when she came back down. But then he got too old and the children teased him, they filled his chair with pins. He was first a servant for the manor lord at Venge farm, and he appointed him to the position. He’s the oldest parish clerk that I know about. The next parish clerk was Søren Jul. He was a clever man, but strict, and when he got angry he’d throw all the boys together in a heap and then he’d walk all over them with his leather-soled clogs and then he’d yell, “You goddamn wolf children!” But regardless of how strict he was, they still played tricks, they did, those boys. One of them was called Mads, he’d been born up at his great-grandmother’s house. So one day he’d gotten off to a bit of a lute start, and when he got to school, he wasn’t even finished with his breakfast, since he arrived chewing on a cheese rind and a piece of bread. When he gets to school, the parish clerk had just started the lessons. Then his desk mate, Niels Rebslaer, sees his chance and while Mads is sitting there chewing on the cheese rind, he reaches out and shoves it down his throat and so Mads is sitting there and couldn’t get the rind either up or down. The other children began to laugh and the parish clerk couldn’t control them. “What’s going on?” he asks them gruffly. Immediately, Niels Rebslaer jumps up and says, “It’s Mads, he’s ingenious (he’s got a rind stuck in his throat)!”. Regardless of how strict he was, the parish clerk couldn’t help laughing, but they both had to go and get spanked anyway.)
Peder himself professed to have an uneasy relationship with institutional learning and, in particular, ministers and parish clerks. When he was praised by a local teacher for being well read, he responded: "lidt har man vel samlet sig efterhaanden, men min Lærdom takker A nu hverken Præst eller Døgn for" (you learn a bit after a while, but I thank neither minister nor parish clerk for my learning: Plovgaard 1956: 110). The portrait of the teachers he paints in these two stories not only supports his own resistance to this type of institutional authority, but also reflects two important aspects of the contemporaneous debate over the organisation of the schools and, particularly, the choice of teachers. The "old" system relied on patronage despite the inappropriateness of many of those candidates. Niels Ring's abuse of the children, narratively manifest as a young girl, stands as a stark reminder to the danger posed by a system that placed individual benefit above community well-being. Presumably, a teacher appointed by the local parish board and subject to local oversight would be far better for the local children's welfare, and help insure the prosperity of the community in the future.

The students' narrative victory over the two teachers—in the first case, by simply playing tricks on this aging representative of the "old" system and, in the second case, by getting the rhetorical upper hand (but the physical bottom hand so to speak)—accordingly proposes an ideological rejection of the "old system" of patronage and centralised control. The children, in this context, can be seen as representatives both of the "new system" as well as of local initiative and cleverness. This position aligns well with the narrator's own professed mistrust of school teachers and ministers, and his own problematic relationship with the institutional aspects of the Lutheran church, despite his profound faith. Many of his other stories also endorse a political ideology that echoed an important aspect of the Venstre party's political platform: local solutions for local problems.

The second major change affecting the power of the minister was the constitution of 1849 that separated church and state, and fundamentally altered both the role of the minister in local politics and the role of the church in local communities. The impact of the debate surrounding the church and the schools as a result of the constitution should not be underestimated. Nørre points out:

... i den følgende lille halve snes år (efter 1848-9) blostrede den offentlige debat om kommunalreform, skolerreform, og nyt kirkestyre som ikke på noget

(… in the decade or so after 1848-49, public debate concerning community reform, school reform and a new church administration bloomed as it did at no other period in the nineteenth century. One truly had a feeling that the constitution offered wide-open opportunities for reform in the areas of school and church.)

Although the role of the Lutheran church was not diminished as a focal point of organised religious activity, numerous competing theological branches were suddenly given much freer reign and their adherents were able to agitate for both the establishment of independent churches and for the appointment of specific ministers to their parishes. An earlier regulation in 1841 that released people from the requirement of attending church in their own parish had already begun challenging the basis for the absolute spiritual authority of local ministers in their parishes (Nørø 1994: 31 and 62-67). At the same time, significant constraints had been placed on the minister in aspects of local governance. As Nørø laconically notes: “præsten ikke længere skulle være sognepave, men kun menighedens tjener” (the minister was no longer to be the parish pope, but rather simply the congregation’s servant: Nørø 1994: 78).

Within this context of decreasing secular power for the office of appointed minister, as well as the significant split in the spiritual direction of different groups within the broader Lutheran community (not to mention the noticeable and successful missionary work by groups such as the Mormons and Baptists), stories that described the failings of a minister in a particular spiritually charged endeavour – the conjuring of a ghost, for example – took on an additional dimension (Tangherlini 1999). Performances of these stories in post-constitution Denmark did not solely take narrative aim at the institution of the minister. Rather, given the changes in the contours of the religious landscape, these stories, variants of which had also been collected in earlier periods, set their sights on specific ministers or classes of ministers: the overly pious, the utterly irreverent, the officious, the populist, the “foreigner”. Thus,

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9 Along with many legends about ministers that appeared in his published legend collections, Kristensen anthologised stories about ministers in an additional collection that focused exclusively on the church (Kristensen 1899b).
the contemporaneous performances of these stories played into the newly-emerging questions concerning the spiritual direction of local churches. As with the debate over education—and many of the other political debates of the late nineteenth century—the main ideological question in these cases was one of local control.

Poverty Assistance\textsuperscript{10}

Poverty assistance was another area in which significant legislative change had considerable local impact. The impact was not uniform across the rural populations, and individual concern with the structure of poverty assistance broke across the significant class divide between farm owners and small holders, a divide that found overt organisational expression at the end of the century in the split between Venstre and Den Radikale Venstre. Prior to the Reformation, care for the poor was a social good, the responsibility for which had accrued to the Catholic Church. In post-Reformation Denmark, the plight of the poor took a significant turn for the worse. Attempts to institute national poverty assistance laws had already begun in the early eighteenth century, with a law from 1708 that outlawed begging, and instituted a system based on the principle of local support for local poor (Jørgensen 1940: 5). A major deficiency in the law that contributed to its ineffectiveness was a reliance on voluntary aid. The land reforms of the latter part of the eighteenth century also made common practices such as omgangsbespisning, a form of regulated begging, impractical (Jørgensen 1940: 11). A law from 1803 attempted to correct the problems with the earlier legislation to provide a degree of consistence in poverty assistance across the country, and to spell out more clearly the responsibilities of local communities for such assistance. Regrettably, the law was riddled with inefficiencies and, coupled to fundamental changes in social, political and economic organisation, subject to on-going revision and reform up through the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

By the mid-nineteenth century, the wealthier farm owners were con-

\textsuperscript{10} The topic of poverty legislation is explored in greater detail in the second article in this series, "Will Work for Food: Legend and Poverty Legislation in Nineteenth Century Denmark", forthcoming in 

\textsuperscript{11} A discussion of legislative efficiency can also be found in the second article in this series (Tangheleini, forthcoming).
cerned with the ever-mounting tax burden that emerging social welfare programmes brought with them. They were also concerned with an erosion of the hard-fought gains in local control ushered in with the kommunalereform of 1867. Accordingly, they promoted policies that placed strict local controls on the amount and the type of poverty assistance available, preferring in-kind assistance to monetary assistance. Furthermore, they proposed exacting standards for assistance eligibility, and encouraged legislation that would limit assistance to “locals”; some proposals included residency tests of up to fifteen years, before a person was eligible for local assistance (Jørgensen 1940: 65-67). Elites in the market towns and growing urban centres (particularly København, but also Århus and Aalborg in Jylland) were equally worried that newly arrived, unskilled labourers and their families would quickly overtax the skeletal poverty assistance programmes that existed, and were equally adamant about the concept of “local support” for “local poor”. Since most urban poor were new arrivals, a model that denied residency to people who had lived in a place less than five years was attractive. The underlying goal of the urban elites was to send the poor “back to where they came from”, namely the rural parishes. Conversely, the small holders and day labourers were concerned less about the tax burden associated with poverty assistance, and more about the availability of such assistance and long-term impact on civil rights, as poverty legislation routinely included sanctions against marriage, inheritance and voting for those who were receiving or had received poverty assistance. Concurrent with these concerns were calls for programmes to provide support for the elderly, and assistance for certain classes of the poor (primarily single mothers and their children; and people forced into poverty by calamitous events in local or global economic markets). Since small holders were far less able to absorb the brunt of economic down-turns, they were keenly aware of the need for a system that could proffer short-term assistance without any of the social stigma or onerous legal restrictions that accompanied long term poverty assistance. Accordingly, small holders and day labourers tended to support policy proposals that reflected a far more charitable stance with regard to the poor.

These widely varying perspectives on the problem of poverty were addressed time and again in the storytelling of farm owners, small holders and day labourers alike. By choosing particular stories, and by resolving those stories in a manner consistent with their own ideological position,
narrators commented directly on the contours of the problem as they saw it and legislative proposals for remedies. Interestingly, many of these stories did not focus on contemporaneous aspects of rural poverty and its landscape of despair, but instead cast a retrospective glance toward a time when poverty assistance laws were just taking shape. For example, Kirsten Marie Pedersdatter, the daughter of a farm owner, but the wife of a small holder, told numerous stories about beggars that reveal many of the competing concerns of the two distinct rural social classes, the farm owners and the small holders. By the time that Kirsten Marie told her stories to Kristensen in 1890, beggars had essentially disappeared from the Danish landscape down from a high of approximately 60,000 in 1735 (Villadsen 1944: 44). As such, beggars had become more of a conceptual category, serving as a very specific allomotif for the more general motifemic slot of outside threat (Dundes 1964). Rather than posing a real, contemporaneous physical, social and economic threat, beggars represented the potential for economic breakdown and illustrated in the clearest possible sense the free rider problem that could arise from increasing urbanisation, and the increasing ranks of the ever poorer husmand class if local controls and local privilege were not clearly asserted. Indeed, there was a definite sense among the farm owners that “foreign” wanderers and beggars could play a large destabilising role in the local economy. Kirsten Marie makes this destabilising threat abundantly clear in one of her stories:12

12 Originally published in Danske saga III, 1566 (Kristensen 1980: 315).
where there was supposed to have been a farm that was called Tuesgård. The dip there is still called Tuesgård. "We’re going over to Tuesgård." There was nothing to see there except the cobblestones. People had to move closer together because there were so many beggars and gypsies, and move into town. Now they are spreading out again. A girl said that at her father’s place, he lived in Rejstrup, a couple came in one night and asked for lodgings. They took out some hay and made a place for them on the floor in the living room. When they woke up in the morning, there were 17 people there. Among them, there was one who always said, "God, let me be devoured by cancer." My mother said that the last time that she saw her, she walked around with her fingers in her throat. She couldn’t drink without it pouring out of there.

Here, the honest farmers and their livelihood are threatened not by a contemporary problem but rather by the disease-ridden and ever-multiplying foreign poor of the past.

Other stories depart significantly from the conservative ideological stance that one finds in most of Kirsten Marie’s stories. For example, small holder and lathe-turner Jens Peter Pedersen tells a story that explores other aspects of poverty assistance, particularly the changing role of the minister in helping alleviate poverty in the emerging market economy.

En præst i Harridslev, Ravn, solgte Korn til fattige Folk og h. plejede altid at sige, naar h. måtte den 1ste. Skj. op. Den regner jeg ikke. S. kom der en Mand og vikle have Korn hos ham. Da han nu havde sagt det sædvanlige ... svarede Manden: Det skal Faar rigtig have Tåk for og s. gik h. med dem. Da h. senere kom for at ville have mere Korn, sagde Pr. da h. måtte den 1ste. Skp. s. siger vi to.

(A minister in Harridslev, Ravn, sold grain to poor people and he always said when he measured the first scoop: “We won’t count that.” Then a man came and wanted to get some grain from him. When he’d said the usual, “I won’t count that,” the man answered, “For that father should have lots of thanks,” and then he went off with it. When he came back later and wanted some more grain, the minister said, as he measured the first scoop, “We’ll say two.”)

This story encapsulates many of the conflicting views of the rural poor at the end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there was great suspicion that many of the poor were free riders, getting something for nothing. On the other hand, there was a strong movement against the earlier, paternalistic poverty assistance help that robbed the recipients of

3 Originally published in Danke sag IV, 1027 (Kristensen 1980: 324).
such help of their dignity and their rights as citizens. The minister's sale of grain falls outside official public assistance to the poor and may simply be part of his own attempt to reconcile aspects of Christian charity with making a living in the new market economy. Interestingly, the minister successfully combines the two while commenting on the free rider problem.

In another series of stories, Bitte Jens explores a different aspect of rural poverty, namely the maltreatment of the poor at the hands of the wealthy, and the unwillingness to help the poor, even in death:

Der var en hun bandt hendes ene Ben i Vejet og lavede sig et Par Krykker og gik omkring og tiggede. De kaldte hende Sidsel Hæls, fordi hun havde bundet hendes Hæl op i hendes Røv. Det var Skik dengang at kjære omkring med de fattige og det skulle den, der havde Stakkelsfjælen. Det var en Sødefjæl der var s. meget Løsning tæet ud i, og naar en Mand havde kjært, s. flyede ham den til hans Nabo. Men s. kunde det jo ikke gaa an at dh. Sidsel stille sig an paa de Egn, hvor de kjendte hende, og s. var hun da kommen til Store Restrup at tigge. Forvalteren spurgt hende om hvor hun var fra og hun bekjendte, at hu var fra Aarestrup og s. skrev h. til Kalmar og gjorde lidt Nør ad ham for det h. [saa] vilde lae saadan nogle gaa omkring og tigge og s. fandtes der ingen her paa hans Gods der var saadan Krøblinger, men endelig fik de det opdaget at det maatte være hende og s. kom hun ned og ride Træhesten, hun laa der s. længe, til hun var nær bleven øde; det var ogsaa en behagelig Kommen til for et Kvidfolk. Strægs derefter blev Kalmar syg og h. døde. Da de kom til kirkeporten med ham, da kom Sidsel Hæls og sagde, te nu vilde hun ønske, te ha maatte vaagne i Helvede og det sagde hun baade højt og rele, saa de kunde høre det alle sammen. Naar en Tigger havde gaaet her i Byen omkring og krævet, s. skulde de kjære dem til nærmeste By. S. havde hver By saadan sin Stakkelsfjæl. Det var en gl. Skrædder fra Rold der døde her inde ved vore Nabo og den Mand der bandt henne i den Grød her vesten for h. var Odersmand. Nu skulde den [Ma] By, hvor de døde, koste deres Begravelse Den Skr. var Broder til Sognefugleden i Rold og h. gik om og [to] syede for Folk, men til sidst gik h. og tiggede, de kaldte ham Roldskædderen, h. var sky for Kvidfolk. Et Sted h. [gik] sad påa Bordet og syede og Børnene stod paa Gulvet og basede et Barn, og Moderen var ude at melke lige i Tiden, s. fik de Vuggen vælt og den kom oven paa Barnet, og Skr. var ikke Karl for at turde gaa hen og hjælpe Barnet op igen, for det det var et Figebarn. Da Mod. kom ind sagde hun kun de du da ikke have gjort der såre Barn den Tjeneste at have rejst Bissen op, det kunde jo have ligget og kvaltes. Men h. svarede Vild a rør ved de it (skidt), nej s. Gu vild a [et] ek. Havde det (skidt) været et Drægebarn s. var det noget ander. Kold


(There was one who tied one of her legs up, and made herself a pair of crutches and went around begging. They called her Sidsel Hæls because she'd tied her heel up to her ass. It was the custom back then to drive around with the poor and the one who had the "poor board" had to do that. It was a seat plank with a large number of loads counted out on it, and when one man had driven, he'd hand it off to his neighbour. But this here Sidsel couldn't do this in the areas where they knew her, and then she'd gone all the way over to Store-Restrup to beg. The foreman at the manor asked her where she was from, and she admitted that she was from Årestrup so then he wrote to Kalmar and teased him a bit that he allowed people like that to go around begging. There weren't any cripples like that on his manor. Finally they figured out that this had to be her, and so she wound up being forced to ride the wooden horse. She was there for so long that she'd almost died, that was a nice welcome for a woman. Soon after that, Kalmar got sick and died. When they got to the church door with the body, Sidsel Hæls came and said that she wished that he'd wake up in Hell, she said it loud and clear, so that everyone could hear. When a beggar had gone through a town and asked for alms, then the townspeople were supposed to drive them to the nearest town. Each town had their own "poor board." There was an old tailor from Rold who died at our neighbour's house, and the man

15 The trohest or wooden horse was a torture device consisting of a wooden plank held up by four posts. The victim was placed on the plank to "ride" it, often with his or her ankles chained.
who lived in the farm to the west, he was an alderman. Now, the town in which he died had to pay for his burial. The tailor was the brother of the parish bailiff in Rold, and he went around sewing for people, but by the end he just went about begging, they called him the Rold Tailor. He was shy around women. At one place, he was sitting on the table sewing and the children were standing on the floor rocking a baby, while their mother was out milking at the moment, and they tipped over the cradle and it landed on top of the baby. But the tailor wasn’t man enough to go over and help the little baby up, because it was a girl. When the mother came back in she said, “Couldn’t you have done the baby a favour and picked the cradle up, it could have lain there and suffocated?” But he answered, “Nah, I won’t mess with that shit, no sirree. If that shit had been a boy, then it would have been a totally different story.” Kold-Jen’s old mother wanted him to sew a dress for her, and she wanted him to measure her. But he answered, “Get out of here, I can make it fit you.” She wanted it to be a bit nice and pretty and she stood and wriggled her shoulders. But he said, “Get out of here,” and he didn’t want to touch her. He could get all of the town’s dogs to follow along behind him in a line and he patted them and called out to them, “Are you coming over here, my friend, you are my only friend in the world. Do you remember the time I helped you out when you’d stolen all those wonderful herrings, I knew it, but I didn’t say anything?” Then he lay there and died at Hjorde-Jens’s, and then he went over to Old Per, that was his neighbour, and he got him to help him carry him out and they placed him up next to a stone wall that was pretty tall, and tied his bag on him, and put his staff in his hand. It was early in the morning before dawn. When daylight came, Hjorde-Jens came out and found him there and went over to the alderman, they called him Truukræn, and told him that. “Well,” he says, “that’s really bad,” and he told his farmhand that he should harness the two grey horses to a dung wagon and go over and get him and then they drove him over to Rold over to the parish bailiff’s farm. “I’ve brought your brother,” said Truukræn, “he’s dead.” Well, then they could take him with them again, and bury him. But then Truukræn jumped off the wagon and took hold of the one dung board and Byrri-Niels took hold of the other, and then they dumped the tailor out of the wagon with his bag, and his basket and his things, and he fell down onto the ground, and then they jumped back up into the wagon and rode off. When they got to Tryssø, they could hear that they were beating on the drum in Rold, they were going to gather and talk about what they should do with the tailor."

Although all of these stories are set in the historical past, they bring to the fore the contemporaneous debate concerning local care for the poor. In the first story, Kalmar’s punishment of Sidsel is unusually harsh, yet

16 Since Jens apparently knew Truukræn, the events described here can not have happened earlier than the 1820s, even though the system of assistance described here ended in the first decades of the century (Jørgensen 1940: 11).
with her harsh words at his funeral, Jens is able to comment on that
treatment, endorsing a far more charitable stance towards the poor than
that endorsed by the manor lord’s employee. In the second story, a simi-
larly progressive ideological approach toward the poor emerges. Labelling
the tailor a beggar is somewhat unfair, since his use of the poor board
clearly indicates that his “begging” is being supervised by the local authori-
ties through omgangsbespisning, a system that had been long abandoned
by the time Bitte Jens told the story. Although the lengths to which
Hjorde-Jens and subsequently Truukrøn go to avoid paying for the tailor’s
burial are almost morbidly comical, these actions also stand as a critical
commentary on the inhumane aspects of the existing poverty laws.

Land Apportionment
Along with the dissolution of the stavskæld in 1788 that allowed far
greater mobility for the rural population (and may well have temporarily
swollen the ranks of the wandering poor), the reapportionment of land
from the 1780s on and the attendant partitioning of fields had a profound
impact on the organisation of rural society. In the initial years after reap-
portionment, not only were significant numbers of new farms established
(with a land valuation of over one barrel of bartkorn), but a veritable ex-
ploration in the number of small holdings occurred, creating within a very
short period an entirely new rural class: the husmand or cotter class. Farm
buildings were moved out onto the newly-reorganised fields, and the
once closely-knit rural communities were dispersed. Social networks nec-
nessarily had to be reconfigured, and the earlier collectives – fælleskabet –
that governed how and when the fields were to be sown, and as such con-
trolled the rhythms of farming life, were dissolved. Individual initiative,
capitalist ambition and vagaries such as birth order, inheritance and
weather patterns contributed to the clear formation of classes and sub-
classes within the rural populations (Johansen 1979).

The reapportionment of fields was essentially completed in Jylland by
mid-century, and opportunities to create new farms and small holdings
changed character considerably (Bjørn 1990: 15-20; and Johansen
1979: 24-38). One of the major pushes of the 1860s was to convert
heath into arable land, and various incentives were offered to get people
to move onto these very poor plots (Hvidt 1990: 26-29). The result of
land reclamation policies of this sort was that the total area of heath de-
clined from 7,400 km² in 1860 to 3,100 km² in 1914, with the majority of this decline occurring in Jylland (Dybdahl 1982: 88). As a result, 100,000 new small holdings were established in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the vast majority of these were on earlier heath lands (Hvidt 1990: 311). While the ranks of the small holder class swelled, their standard of living dropped precipitously, in part because many of the new small holdings were burdened with excessive debt, and were insufficient in size to support a family. In addition, huge fluctuations in grain prices in an increasingly globalised market exacted a heavy economic toll on these very small holdings. Consequently, many of these new land owners found themselves engaged in subsistence farming. By way of illustration of the disparities of production in the agrarian economy, in 1885, 900 large holders cultivated 40,000 barrels of *hartkorn* (average: 44.5), while 73,000 farm owners cultivated 290,000 barrels (avg. 3.9) and 188,000 *husnænd* cultivated 40,000 barrels (average: 0.2) (Hvidt 1990: 311). These figures do not capture the hundreds of thousands of day labourers, lessees and hired hands that formed the bottom layer of the rural economy.

Along with changes in the organisation of farms, a regulation passed in 1838 began the process of dismantling the villeinage system, and gave farmers as well as small holders significantly more control over their time and household economy – but also eliminated the reciprocity that was built into the villeinage system (Villadsen 1944: 129). This loss of reciprocity was not so much a problem for the farm owners, but had a significant impact on the small holders, who lost access to better equipment and teams of horses. In most cases, in-kind obligations were replaced by cash payments. By 1847, there were only 3,600 farms that still had villeinage obligations to manor farms (compared to 65,000 a century earlier), and the practice had disappeared completely from Denmark by the mid 1880s (Villadsen 1944: 136). Villeinage for small holders and lessees was further reformed through a law in 1848 that set clear limits on the terms of rental contracts (Bjørn 1990: 334). While farm owners benefited immediately from the dissolution of the villeinage system, the short-term results for small holders were mixed.

By the mid-nineteenth century, new farms could only come into being on the coat-tails of others' misfortune, while new small holdings were often carved out of either failed farms, or previously uncultivated land. Although new small holdings were being created up through the mid-
nineteenth century, many of these new *husmandsbrug* had woefully inadequate resources to support a family, let alone allow for excess production. Conversely, farm owners found themselves in the enviable position of being able to consolidate failed farming endeavours, and at the same time take advantage of a mobile, yet utterly underemployed rural proletariat – young men and women without any land who, because of sheer numbers, kept the rural labour supply high, even as demand remained relatively low. When technological innovation crept into many of the farms (and not the small holdings), the demand sank lower and, as the divide between farms and small holdings became a chasm, the ranks of the rural proletariat exploded, leading to widespread migration to the cities, emigration to other countries and a rise in the number of those on poverty assistance. By the end of the nineteenth century, the political concerns of farmers and small holders, as already mentioned, were in many cases diametrically opposed.

This tension between farmers and small holders is clearly apparent in a story told by Bitte Jens that nevertheless focuses on events in the distant past:  

*Omkrt. Egh. og Stub. har der været store Grave. Dg. Mylius fik fat i deher Grde lod h. indløse i Papierne, dede dersom der var noget af deres Ejendom der laa ham til Hinder maatte h. have lov til at tage det. S. tog h. Engene og gav dem noget Hedevekerki for dem. De gl. Fæstere havde ogsaa Lov til at græsse deres Kreaturer i Skoven. Men det blev dem forhøjen. Sk. skulde være i Hegne. Da de gl. Fæstere s. var uddøde tog h. alle Engene fra dem. og s. blev groftede og vandede. H. vilde have haft det hele skulde have været en stor Herremand og smaa Arbejdsfolk.*

(Around Egholm and Stubberup there were big moats. When Mylius got ahold of these farms, he included in the papers a clause that allowed him to take possession of any of their property that hindered him. Then he took the meadows and gave them heath instead. The old copyholders also had permission to graze their animals in the woods, but he forbade them that as well. The woods were to be fenced in. When the old copyholders had died off, he took all the meadows from them, and then he dug ditches and irrigated them. He wanted it all to be one big manor lord and a lot of small workers.)

Although the events described hearken back to the bad old manorial world, the underlying concerns are surprisingly contemporary – farm

17 Originally published in *Domike kogn* IV, 149 (Kristensen 1980: IV, 56).
consolidation threatens the livelihood of small holders like Bitte Jens, and the best lands are taken by the wealthier farmers often through trickery and manipulation. The small holders are instead sent off to work on the heath and denied access to the forests, with a concomitant decline in their standard of living.

A slightly different evaluation of the economic outlook and the potential for upward mobility comes from Kirsten Marie Pedersclatter, who, of course, came from an upwardly mobile family herself, and who considered herself a member of the farm owning class:18


(There is a little manor farm near Æbletoft, which is called Bogensholm, and there was a man who was called Count-Niels; he was from Æbletoft and he was supposed to be a buffoon at a party there. He’d been invited to be the fool there. So they were sitting there and had some punch, and he buys the farm for a pittance. “We can write it on a piece of rolling paper,” he says. The next day he went to an attorney and he said, “Yes, we can certainly use this.” Then he got the farm and later wound up owning a large part of Æbletoft.)

Here, the seeming buffoon – even ascribed an amusing “title” by his tormentors – is able to turn the judicial infrastructure against the large land owners and through this clever and sophisticated manipulation seize the title in a rightful manner. The losers are clearly the aristocracy, and in this context it is certainly interesting to note the increasingly chilly relationships between the farmers and the landed gentry in the late nineteenth century. Ørsted’s økstjøberede forfatning (Privileged Constitution) in 1854 had brought the country back towards absolute monarchy and subsequently the provisional governments of Estrup starting in 1877 had turned the clock back on land reforms handing significant concessions to the merchant class and the aristocracy (Hvidt 1990: 75-76 and 283-286). These events enraged the farm owners who had naively aligned themselves with the merchants and large landholders in

18 Originally published in Jyske Almanol; Tilfangbind, II, 149 (Kristensen 1900: 53-54).
the first decades of post-constitution Denmark. By the end of the century, the farm owners had reclaimed their political ascendancy, and the break with the large landholders characterised both the political and economic landscape:

Kampen mellem bønder og godsejere var ikke alene politisk. Der var også et element af landbrugsfaglig kappestrid mellem de knap 500 herregårde og de godt 70,000 bondegårde [...] da den politisk animositet med godsejere steg, skærpedes også bøndernes vilje til at konkurere på produkter (Hvidt 1990: 300).

(The fight between the farm owners and the large land owners was not solely political. There was also an element of agricultural competition between the 900 or so manor farms and the well over 70,000 farms [...] as the political enmity toward the large land owners increased, the farm owners’ will to compete for market share also increased.)

At the same time, there was an increasing rift between the farm owners on the one hand and the small holders, day labourers and the serving classes (farm hands and hired girls) on the other. It is in this context that the seemingly amusing story that Kirsten Marie tells takes on a significant, contemporaneous political tenor, and can be seen as another, albeit somewhat oblique, exploration of the ongoing tension between these classes and the apportionment of land.

While both Jens’s and Kirsten Marie’s stories could have considerable narrative currency irrespective of when they were told, it is particularly interesting to consider these stories – and all of the stories considered here for that matter – in the context of the changing organisation of rural Denmark. In a well known series of articles, Stanley Fish proposes the notion of “interpretive communities”, and suggests that:

...communication occurs within situations and [...] to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place; and it is within the assumption of these purposes and goals that any utterance is immediately heard (Fish 1982: 318).

The assumptions and practices of the interpretive community are directly related to social, economic and political organisation as well as the general contours of local tradition. These assumptions and practices necessarily change over time, and accordingly, the range of ways in which a
member of that community could hear (or tell) a particular story also changes over time. Tradition participants in late-nineteenth-century Denmark formed a different interpretive community to that of the interpretive community of the early nineteenth century or the late eighteenth century. Each of those communities would have told and heard these stories in ways that aligned with their assumptions and practices. Even seemingly anachronistic stories might well have a contemporaneous political dimension and the participants of that tradition would have immediately understood that dimension of those stories. A story about a mean manor lord mistreating his tenants was likely to be heard as both that and a reflection on the contemporaneous problems concerning land apportionment, quality of land, taxation and divergent economic trajectories based on the vagaries of market forces, environment and plain dumb luck.

There are, of course, numerous other legislative developments throughout the nineteenth century that had significant impact on social, political and economic organisation in Denmark. Many of these developments changed fundamentally the way in which people moved through the environment, interacted, communicated, created (and lost) wealth, and formed social units such as families and communities. These developments, as with the major changes discussed here, were often debated, however indirectly, in the ongoing give and take of storytelling.

Conclusion

Finally, one can return to Bitte Jens’s opening story, but now approach it from a significantly different perspective. The story engages many of the challenges facing not only a tenant farmer under the manorial system of the eighteenth century, but also those facing a small holder at the end of the nineteenth century. The demands of villeinage – and Skjel-Jens’s flat refusal to play along – resonate with the late-nineteenth-century abolition of that system. The story prefigures the ultimate rejection of the manorial system in favour of a system based on free choice and individual responsibility, both fundamental values affirmed in the constitution of 1849, and reaffirmed in the ensuing decades during the endless debates concerning the economic organisation of rural Denmark. Skjel-Jens’s resistance also resonates with late-nineteenth-century attempts by large landholders to consolidate farms and force “old school” contracts onto the ever poorer small holders.
The imprisonment and subsequent death of Skjel-Jens, whose name gestures toward the process of land partition and subsequent strife over land valuation, plunges the family into poverty and, consequently, into the middle of the debate over assistance to the poor.\textsuperscript{19} Interestingly, in the later decades of the century, the previously unquestioned, inconsistent punishments of the manor lords were taken out of local birkeret and consolidated in a far more consistent mantler – fines, rather than imprisonment, became the norm for this type of breach, and the story as such acts as a contrastive example to newer, more liberal policies concerning civil torts. Somewhat amusingly, Jens's decision to remain in jail frees him from the prison of his marriage, but it also consigns his wife and children to the whims of the local poverty assistance board. As Jørgensen notes in his study of poverty assistance, one of the main classes of poor were "enkeltpersoner eller familier som pga. svagelighed, mange børn, tiltagende alder, el. lignende årsag ikke var i stand til at tjene så meget som var tilskråkkkelig" (individuals or families who, because of weakness, too many children, advancing age, or the like are not able to earn as much as they need: Jørgensen 1940: 234). One of the most significant debates in the last decades of the nineteenth century concerning care for this class of poor was how to care for their children. Should they be housed along with strangers in the big new fattiggårde (poor farms) or should they be placed in foster care, and thus possibly put at risk of exploitation by unscrupulous foster parents? In either case, the goal was for the children to attend school and become productive citizens (as opposed to solely good Lutherans), and not fall through the giant cracks of truancy and forced child agricultural labour that were an ongoing problem.

An individual's stories should be understood not only in the immediate performance context but also in the broader ethno-historic context. Stories that seemingly have little to do with contemporaneous debate – and the examples presented here are firmly rooted in past practices and social structures – often mask a fairly complex engagement with that debate. Rather than simply ascribing the stories to the more generalised context of "folk belief", it is necessary for folklorists to resist this normalising tendency. Instead, folklorists must probe the boundaries of meaning. Without falling prey to the intentional fallacy, they must ad-

\textsuperscript{19} The name Skjel (Skel) means "divide", as in the divide between newly apportioned fields. One can only surmise that the nickname refers to a story about a field divide in which Jens figures.
dress the ways in which stories create meanings for both narrator and intended audiences — the interpretive community. A deep understanding of the political contours of the everyday life of the communities in which storytellers and story listeners worked and lived provides a rich interpretive background for this type of analysis. It is of paramount importance to recognise that when a person tells a story that is rooted in tradition, he or she often does so for very contemporaneous reasons, ones that are more often than not linked to the political debates of the day.

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LEGENDS AND LANDSCAPE

Articles Based on
Plenary Papers Presented at
the 5th Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium,
Reykjavik 2005

Ed. Terry Gunnell

UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND PRESS
REYKJAVIK 2008