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**The comedy of paradox: Mythic and medieval tricksters in
narrative**

Kraus, Jo Anne, Ph.D.
City University of New York, 1990

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THE COMEDY OF PARADOX: MYTHIC AND MEDIEVAL

TRICKSTERS IN NARRATIVE

by

Jo Anne Kraus

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York.

1990

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FOREWORD

I set out on this project many years ago when, drawn initially by the compelling trickster of the Winnebago Indian tales, I found a similar appeal in medieval literary characters appearing in works ranging from popular comic tales to courtly romances and heroic epics. Were these various characters participating in the same ambivalent comic reality? And if so, how was such an amoral self-interest as the trickster exhibited to be reconciled with the Christian values of medieval society? My Master's thesis, written under the supervision of Professors Frederick Goldin and Paul Oppenheimer of City College, approached this subject -- comparing the Winnebago trickster with Old French fabliau characters, Arthur of the Alliterative Morte Arthur, and Beroul's Tristan to show the ambivalent, comic energy these medieval characters expressed. However inconclusive this initial attempt at defining a medieval trickster, it whetted my appetite in a way that proved impossible to ignore.

After several years of work in the department of Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate School when this interest lay fallow, I dug it up again as potential material for a doctoral dissertation. However, by this time the works

of interest to be explored ranged even wider than before, and my interest in the comic trickster figure was wedded more specifically with that of the epic hero. I hoped to explore what seemed to me a vital connection between the trickster and the hero. I considered briefly the wisdom of taking on a project that could easily swallow the rest of my life, then plunged in to reexamine the Winnebago figure in the company of the more or less known tricksters of Medieval Europe -- Loki of Old Norse mythology, Renart of Le Roman de Renart, and Eulenspiegel of late medieval German origin. These would define the trickster figure; a second part would examine heroes both tragic and comic: Grettir of Grettir's Saga (bearing some relationship with the Scandinavian mythology), Guillaume d'Orange (whose heroic stature in the chanson de geste cycle is clearly parodied in the Renart cycle), Hagan from the Nibelungenlied, and Arthur of the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Two years later the project was whittled down to include only the comic hero, Guillaume d'Orange. Two years later still, I sadly lopped off the epic hero altogether, despite my exceeding fondness for Guillaume d'Orange.

The book as it exists today still sits uncomfortably poised between its impossibly large scope and its necessarily restricted size. What I have attempted in this exploration of the trickster figure is an examination of four intriguing characters -- Wakdjunkaga, Loki, Renart, and Eulenspiegel -- all of whom are defined by their traditions and their

storytellers at the outset as socially marginal characters due to their trickery and deceit, and their otherwise absurd or outrageous behavior. Yet all fundamentally amuse and interest as well as anger and disgust both the fictional societies within the stories and their audiences/readers outside the fiction.

All are traditional figures in the sense that they owe their present existence either to the transcription of oral tales or verse of indeterminate age (Wakdjunkaga and Loki) or borrow their names or character types from traditional materials (Renart and Eulenspiegel). Wakdjunkaga and Loki are both mythological figures whose activities bring about transformations in the earliest days of the world, though neither are deities in the sense of being worshipped. Renart and Eulenspiegel are both the creations of individual authors, although the twelfth-century conteurs of Le Roman de Renart and their precursor, Nivardus, owe a debt to the fabulous fox of Aesop and other fables. Eulenspiegel too owes his early sixteenth-century manifestation at least in part to earlier unknown versions whose existence can be posited from Low German vocabulary present in the Middle High German version by "N," and from analogous motifs evidently borrowed from earlier Schwank books and other anecdotal comic tales.

In either case, each of the narratives dealt with here must be treated as the product of a particular storyteller in

a particular cultural milieu. Loki presents the most problems in this regard, being one figure in a complex mythology compiled from sources ranging vastly in style and age rather than the single protagonist of a cycle. I have tried to avoid the snares of positivistic scholars who seek to discover an "original" figure, although I am left with the task of giving definition to the character of Loki from the scattered references made to him.

The figure I examine exists always in a narrative context, either within stories given meaning by their mythological context or within a cycle composed of many episodes revealing the actions of a central figure; whether he functions within a mythology or in an independent cycle, the narrative form is essential to his definition. The trickster I put forward is a product of the imagination manifest in narrative, which can grant him the fundamentally contradictory nature that is symbolic of the deeply ambivalent though ultimately positive and comic reality of our own paradoxically material and spiritual nature.

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INTRODUCTION: THE TRICKSTER

The purpose of this dissertation is to determine the existence and explore the meaning of several trickster figures in the stories of cultures from which and within which Medieval Christian culture developed. My concern is two-fold: first to examine in a somewhat broad and general way the imaginative possibilities the trickster figure seems to embody. As most scholarship on the trickster has been conducted initially by anthropologists and ethnographers, whose work has then been interpreted by religionists, I will look first to these disciplines for my initial definition of the trickster before turning to my second and primary concern, the examination of this figure in a medieval, narrative context. Other disciplines subordinate or even ignore the trickster's role in narrative -- the way he seems both to shape and to be shaped by it. Yet the trickster I am defining exists in narrative and must be considered as a literary construct if he is to be fully understood. Before exploring the medieval trickster characters, however, it seemed helpful to examine a figure from a mythology whose

stories are still german to a living culture. Thus we look to Wakdjunkaga of the Winnebago tribe of North America for our first example. The best preserved mythology from pre-literate, pre-Christian Northern Europe is that of Scandinavia, and the trickster figure there is Loki, the subject of the third chapter. The popular literature of the high Middle Ages is filled with tricky characters, due perhaps to the resurgence of folk culture (as Jacques Le Goff and Kathleen Ashley would argue) or at least to the documentation of popular literature in vernacular manuscripts.¹ The vast cycle of stories in Le Roman de Renart introduces to twelfth-century France a trickster par excellence, whose popularity and significance are attested to in numerous manuscript traditions and innumerable references in other literature both secular and ecclesiastical. Several centuries later in Germany another popular trickster, Till Eulenspiegel, emerges from the jest book tradition. Renart and Eulenspiegel are the subjects of the last two chapters. The choice here is clearly somewhat arbitrary, but I have started with what seemed to make the clearest case, to draw the most self-evident conclusions about the meaning of these figures for their times, and for all time.

¹ See Jacques Le Goff, Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 153-188. Also Kathleen Ashley, "The Guiler Beguiled: Christ and Satan as Theological Tricksters in Medieval Religious Literature," Criticism Wayne State (1982): 126-137.

The Trickster: A Theoretical Review

The world has long known tricksters, but only in the recent past has Western Culture, with its predominantly post-Reformation assumptions concerning right and wrong, seriousness and frivolity, productivity and sloth, and its resultant intolerance for a nature blatantly self-interested, irreverent, and wastefully playful, begun to discover for itself the significance of the trickster who figures in the mythologies or folktales of most non-Western, "traditional" cultures.

The term "trickster" as it is used here was first coined to refer to a figure in the oral tales of Native American mythologies,² a figure whose prominence and popularity made it impossible to ignore. Whether animal or human in form, this figure everywhere exhibits common traits, the most essential being the playing of tricks: a creature of desire, he (the trickster is almost always male) attempts to get what he wants (but is not permitted to have) by deceiving others. Such a trickster is "deceitful, cunning, amoral, sexually hyperactive, taboo-breaking, voracious, thieving, adventurous, vainglorious -- yet not truly evil or malicious -- and always

² Mac Linscott Ricketts attributes the coining of the word to anthropologist Daniel Brinton in Myths of the New World, (Philadelphia, 1868). See Ricketts' entry under "Tricksters: North American" in Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 15 (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 50.

amusing and undaunted."³ Common to the various manifestations of this Native American trickster are culture-hero aspects (his acts such as the theft of fire are beneficial to man though the act itself is motivated only by self-interest) and creator/transformer aspects (his acts transform the world, though again they are accidental results of his activities). He is sacred inasmuch as he is a part of the primordial beginnings and possesses magical powers, including sex-changing and shape-shifting; but he is not a living divinity, having left this world once his presence was no longer required, though he lives still as society remembers him, recalling his actions and their benefits in story. The response to these stories of the trickster is predominantly that of awe and laughter.⁴

Theories on the nature of this figure from the start have centered on the ambiguous coupling of contradictory

³ Ricketts, Encyclopedia of Religions, 15:49.

⁴ Various sources attest to this response. I quote only a few: Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1972), "The reaction of the audience in aboriginal societies to both him and his exploits is prevailingly one of laughter tempered by awe" (xxiv). E.E. Evans-Pritchard, The Zande Trickster, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) says that whether tales are of a culture-hero nature or gratuitous tricks, they "are told and received, so far as I could observe, in exactly the same way and with the same amusement..." (32). Robert Pelton explores the humor evoked in various ways by four different West African tricksters and defines laughter as essential to the meaning of this figure. See The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) especially 44, 55, 127, 217-222.

characteristics. Early theories searched for the origins of the trickster in a resolution of this essential ambiguity: either the original figure was a high god whose character degenerated as a belief system lost meaning or conversely a demon who became comic as his powers became less threatening. Franz Boas countered such theories, proposing the original figure instead to be the primitive, ambivalent trickster and the culture-hero/transformer elements as a later development. Such theories were applied to examinations of similar figures in other cultural manifestations by scholars in the fields of anthropology, history of religion, and psychology, and new theories evolved. Anthropologists seek through the trickster to understand how early, traditional cultures define and reveal themselves. History of religion scholars, concerned with "those images, actions, and symbols that both express and define the extent and character of the world, especially those that provide the cosmic framework in which human life finds meaning and the terms of its fulfillment,"⁵ focus on the trickster's role in mediating between the divine and the human. Psychologists see in the trickster the revelation of a universal aspect of the human psyche, both collective and individual. All these studies have contributed valuable insights into the nature of the trickster figure.

It was Paul Radin, with his study of the Winnebago

⁵ Sam Gill, Native American Religions (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1982) 11.

trickster and the accompanying commentary by Carl Jung, who evolved Frazer's theory into what has been until recently the most accessible and frequently cited definition of the trickster.⁶ Radin, whose work will be examined more thoroughly in the following chapter, posited a general theory of the trickster based on the Winnebago trickster, Wakdjunkaga, whose cycle of tales included few episodes of a culture-hero/transformer nature and also showed, through the ordering of episodes, a kind of evolving education of the hero. The trickster seemed to be differentiating himself from the world around him although the progress was not strictly linear. With Jung, who saw this figure as preserving and objectifying a collective "shadow in its pristine mythological form," (202) Radin assumed Wakdjunkaga to be a manifestation of a very early, perhaps the earliest, expression of man's "undifferentiated psyche" struggling with itself. Those episodes which concerned this trickster's beneficial actions of establishing physical or social realities were secondary additions to the essential story of a being, motivated by fundamental desires, wandering aimlessly in search of definition.

Karl Kerényi, working from the Winnebago model and his own expertise in classical mythology, sees the trickster

⁶ Radin's, The Trickster, includes an introduction by Stanley Diamond and commentaries by Karl Kerényi and C.G. Jung. References to any of these authors' works in this collection will henceforth be indicated by page numbers only.

figure as an early recognition of the "shameless untruthfulness [which] is shown to be a property of the world" (176). Reminding us of the highly ordered and "exceedingly strict" nature of archaic societies, Kerényi defines the trickster's role thus:

Nothing demonstrates the meaning of the all-controlling social order more impressively than the religious recognition of that which evades this order, in a figure who is the exponent and personification of the life of the body: never wholly subdued, ruled by lust and hunger, forever running into pain and injury, cunning and stupid in action. Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function...of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted. (185)

This trickster figure, however, is not a deity and must be distinguished from a trickster-god such as Hermes who, as a god, cannot be a "spirit of disorder."⁷ Hermes goes beyond the boundaries as an opener of ways, taking man into those ways of experiencing the world that are beyond "the scientific view." Art, love, sleep, death -- these are the domain of Hermes.

Norman O. Brown views Hermes, the trickster, somewhat differently, suggesting that his oldest function is that of trickster-magician, and showing the link between Hermes'

⁷ "To be a god means to be a creator of a world," says Kerényi, "and a world means order. The trickster-god...is a transpersonal source of a particular life-style and way of experiencing the world" (190).

association with words and language and the magician's skill of binding with an oath.⁸ Hypothesizing still further that the name Hermes (meaning "the stone heap") connects this god with the piles of stones which were boundary markers, Brown argues thus: As boundaries were the places where one met strangers, and "Intercourse with strangers was surrounded with magical safeguards," so "the magic art of dealing with strangers is well calculated to inspire the concept of the trickster-magician" (34-35). Furthermore, as boundaries were also places of trade, "Hermes the god of the boundary-stone became the god of trade and craftsmanship, and consequently, a culture hero and 'giver of good things'" (38).

However speculative Brown's logic, his perceptive association of trickster with magician, one positioned there where human lives intersect, where strange meets familiar, has also been noted by others working with trickster figures in very different contexts.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of the trickster is useful here only in its most general suggestions. Proposing that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution," he posits the trickster as one means for resolving opposition, the mediator "between

⁸ Norman O. Brown, Hermes the Thief (New York: Vintage, 1947). Brown says of the connection between trickster and magician, "By and large the primitive mind makes no distinction between trickery and magic" (18).

two polar terms."⁹ As such the trickster "must retain something of that duality -- namely an ambiguous and equivocal character" (226).

Mac Linscott Ricketts, in a 1964 dissertation, examined a broad spectrum of Native American tricksters and concluded that Radin's limiting his definition to one "pure" trickster figure had resulted in a unnecessarily limited theory of the trickster. "A more typically native collection of trickster stories," Ricketts posits in a later article drawn from his unpublished dissertation, shows conclusively "that the trickster-transformer-culture hero is in origin a unitary figure, despite his complexity."¹⁰ Ricketts own theory is based on a central opposition as proposed by Paul Radin (Primitive Religion, 1957) between two kinds of religious experience. The common man of popular culture accepts the world-as-is, and relies primarily on the power that resides in man, rather than on help from a divinity. The shaman/priests, on the other hand, see the world-as-is as inadequate and rely on spirits, and the relationship established with them, to provide power for life and its needs (330-31). The trickster, Ricketts posits, is set in opposition to the shaman magician, and represents a humanistic

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, vol. 1, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) 224-226.

¹⁰ "The North American Indian Trickster," History of Religions 5 (Winter, 1966) 334.

religious stance which sees man himself as working to master the universe through struggle, survival, imagination, deception, will, foolish imitation, and blunders... that is to say, by being himself.¹¹ The trickster is then the "embodiment of a certain mythic apprehension of man" (336) that places religious value on craftiness and blundering.

Laura Makarius, whose work has also been substantially with Native American tricksters, sees the essential ambivalence of the trickster arising from a social structure - - the taboo.¹² Makarius determines the fundamental girder holding society together to be the taboo of blood. If we accept this assumption for the sake of her argument, the logic proceeds as follows:¹³ That which underpins the social order (i.e. the taboo) holds tremendous power. But this power can

¹¹ Ricketts defines the main types of Native American trickster myths as: 1) Theft of Fire, where the trickster outwits a superior being to obtain a valuable substance. His success often entails injury, either to himself or to the world which is henceforth transformed. 2) Vanquishing of superior being afflicting mankind. 3) Parodies of shamanic experiences or rituals. 4) Bungling host, where trickster tries to imitate others in everything and often fails, but keeps trying.

¹² Makarius has continued to develop this theory in a succession of articles and in a book, Le Sacré et la violation des interdits (Paris: Payot, 1974). The quotes here, unless otherwise specified, are drawn from the first of these articles "Le mythe du 'Trickster,'" Revue de l'histoire des religions 175 (1969): 17-47.

¹³ It is not within the scope of this work to argue the validity of this assumption. As Robert Pelton notes, however, there is "difficulty in identifying a notion as complex as that of taboo so narrowly with the 'danger of blood'" 244-45.

only be harnessed (whether for good or ill) by breaking the taboo. The magician, the one entrusted by society with the role of violating the taboo, turns evil to good; the subversive is made exceptional. This is the fundamental ambivalence which the trickster, whom she sees as a mythic projection of the magician, represents. He is made "the founder of the ritual and ceremonial life of his society" (25) and finds his only reason for existing in the mythic universe of story (26).

Makarius counters Paul Radin's theory on two points: First, while Radin sees the trickster as essentially asocial and taboo-breaking as a result of this nature, she says the taboo-breaking function is fundamental and his asocial status is the result (26).¹⁴ Second, rather than being man's earliest objectification of his own unsocialized nature, the trickster must be supposed to appear only when society is coherent enough to dare to violate its taboos (45).

This is interesting theory and works quite well when applied to aspects of the tricksters Manabozo (Algonquin), Maui (Polynesian), and Legba (Yoruban), but it is of questionable value as a general theory inasmuch as it ignores

¹⁴ In two later articles, Makarius explains that this functionary must be solitary and asocial because such an action taken by the whole group would jeopardize social stability and thus defeat its end of procuring positive power for the group. See "Ritual Clowns and Symbolical Behaviour," Diogenes 69 (1970): 54 and "The Crime of Manabozo," American Anthropologist 75 (1973): 668.

so many other characteristics of tricksters -- central among them their comic function. Makarius accounts for the laughter arising from the trickster only by saying that his knowledge of magic allows him to play tricks and to laugh and make laughter at the expense of others;¹⁵ and furthermore, that if the trickster's violations do not succeed, he becomes a figure of ridicule (46).

Makarius is not concerned with the story context within which the trickster exists and has meaning. Her search is for the original impulse within society that would give rise to such a figure, and she looks to the society, not literary form for an answer. Thus in a later article where she examines the symbolic function of the ritual clown in Native American cultures, she can posit the clown to be the "earthly counterpart of the trickster" who has "in ritual the role of evoking the violation of taboo, hypostasied in myth" (Ritual Clowns 46) Violation of taboo is the raison d'être of clown and trickster, she states, and their comic function is only a secondary result: "the mechanism of certain symbolical modes of behaviour accompanying the violation of taboo has endowed

¹⁵ The original is no aid to the logic here: "Le trickster est bien nommé, car il connaît le trick, le tour essential de la magie, et c'est cela qui lui permet de 'jouer des tours' et de rire et faire rire aux dépens des autres" (40). Later in "Crime of Manabozo," she says: "He is rightly called the trickster, because he practices the trick of magic, the violation of taboo. And it is quite understandable that -- while he plays tricks and provokes laughter at the expense of others -- he who knows the secrets of efficacious magic should also be the one ...to impart the most useful knowledge" (669).

the trickster with features of burlesque and assigned to the clown the task of merry-making" (53)¹⁶

Her only acknowledgment of "burlesque and merry-making" (by which she seems to mean the nonsensical behaviors characteristic of clowns -- backwards speech and actions, social obscenities, etc.) is the reference to the contrary behavior as a source of amusement (64). She notes that clown acts "inspire both hilarity and fear," (56) but her concern is with the fear, the danger and power residing in these acts, with emphasis on the "systematic disobedience" that would be characteristic of breakers of taboo (62). Such a mode of expression symbolizes a reality that cannot be expressed directly: the mind wants to suppress violation and society must reject it. But some "force," which she calls "tradition," needs to preserve the act or the memory of the act of violation of taboo. Out of this pull of opposing needs come the symbolic, fictional figures of clown/trickster.

Ricketts too fails to deal satisfactorily with the comic aspect of the trickster. He sees the comic element present in people laughing at themselves: the trickster becomes a way of dealing with failure, an antidote against tragic despair. This interpretation ignores the laughter that also comes in celebration of the trickster's success! Ricketts

¹⁶ She states at the outset of the article that the figure of the clown has "little to do with the jocularity assumed to be his unique purpose..." (45).

acknowledges two poles in this "worldly religion" of humanism which the trickster represents: one is acceptance of the world-as-is; the other is the acknowledgement of the world as possibility. The trickster tales, he says, "reveal...the experience of the self-transcending quality of the human mind" (344). Surely the recognition of this awesome human potential, which Ricketts acknowledges in the trickster, also produces a joy that triggers laughter as readily as absurd foolishness -- the glee of the open-ended nature of the world as possibility.

One of the main problems with such scholarship as we have briefly examined is that it limits the trickster in a way the stories do not. Only if one finds a source for the trickster as divinely resilient and creative, as earthly ambivalent and "messy" as the trickster himself, will the solution begin to fit the puzzle. Robert D. Pelton, clarifying and enlarging on Ricketts, integrating and in a real sense transcending the contributions of scholars such as Radin, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Makarius and others, comes close to an understanding that accounts for the trickster. Working with four West African trickster mythologies to interpret their meaning in their specific cultural contexts, he is nevertheless determined not to reduce the trickster "to a set of ideas, qualities, and themes and thus to fail again to understand why his tales should be amusing or even interesting to so many human

beings." ¹⁷

It is as difficult to summarize the scope and intricacy of Pelton's study as it is to integrate fully the enormous contribution of his work for trickster studies, but an attempt must be made. This means extracting Pelton's insights and conclusions from the very specific contexts within which he draws them to apply them to a more general definition, a dangerous process which Pelton himself (and current scholarship in general) warns against. The task as I see it, however, is not to define a fixed character type, but rather to recover the imaginative possibilities lost when Western religion all but severed its own connection with humor. We look then to cultures where the sacred and the profane, the serious and the comic, the fundamental contradictions of human reality are still embraced as a whole to discover the possible meanings of one narrative figure that himself seems to reside at the very beginning and center of human life where these contraries coexist.

If one can force Pelton's definition of the trickster to a single point of departure, it seems to be the drives or desires that move the trickster into action. He "moves for the sake of movement" and the very randomness of the movement sets him in opposition to "cultural or cosmic order" (226). Yet by pushing at and beyond the boundaries of this order, he

¹⁷ The Trickster in West Africa 20.

"forces responses that reveal possibilities hidden within the existent world... [revealing] that the limits of this world can become horizons" (88). In fact, "forcing responses" is characteristic of the trickster; he is "relentlessly social" (37) inasmuch as his primary act of trickery of necessity keeps him always interacting with others, and he shows a "persistent itch for intercourse" of all kinds (50). Of Ananse, the Ashanti trickster, Pelton says that he "transforms by no plan except the shape of his own urge to realize the act of dealing, yet because this drive necessarily creates intercourse, he establishes the social geography of the world in the very process of playing out his own inner design" (225).

Pelton's primary interest is human society, how it integrates and explains aspects of experience to provide social harmony and psychic wholeness. Society, "where worlds collide," brings lives together, intersecting boundaries, in a way supportive of harmony both for the individual and for the group. The structures, ideally, are there to facilitate movement without the end product of conflict and destruction, to provide passage from dissolution to reintegration again and again.¹⁸ These structures, however, can themselves become fixed forms, limiting

¹⁸ Pelton follows the model of "the system shattered and renewed" as put forth by Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, 1966.

experience, blocking passage. The trickster, with his insatiable desire for intercourse, brings his activity -- the wild, absurd, revolting, contrary-to-rule activity that shatters boundaries -- right into the center of society where such forces can be acknowledged to renew (make new, fresh, flexible) the social order.

An image fundamental to Pelton's discussion is that of the two poles of center and periphery, and the forces and intersecting lines that mediate between the two and tie them together into a whole. Not a static wholeness, however, but an active unity ever renewed, destroyed only to be reborn. The trickster, who moves from the outermost boundaries to the center and back again (driven not by obedience but by self-interest¹⁹), functions as one such mediator, but he is not simply the structural component of Levi-Strauss's theory, the third element resolving a fundamental duality. Rather he "wrests intercourse from the destructiveness of unresolved opposition," (89) he claims negation for society, (251) he "negates negation and thereby gives birth to a dialectic whose aim is not synthesis, but a never-ending juggling of thesis and antithesis" (37).

Pelton argues that we must assume a striving after wholeness in premodern societies. Making the trickster part

¹⁹ Pelton uses this idea in reference to Ananse, who shapes society, "Yet in all these things the force that moves him is not obedience but self-interest" 40.

of a dualistic system as Ricketts has done, Pelton argues, "undercuts [Ricketts own] argument that in the trickster's very open-endedness lies his true coherence" (10). Pelton sees the trickster as participating in a divine reality, not as the anti-shamanic figure in absolute opposition to the gods that Ricketts proposes, but as a part of the high god's (or the primordial) plan. As Pelton demonstrates with Legba, the Yoruba trickster, his duplicity is his divinely created role and the conflicts he embodies are "those which make human life possible" (76). Legba "domesticates conflict" (76).

Pelton puts a positive spin on the tired and overly simplistic theory of such a figure's function as that of releasing inhibitions, allowing man a temporary escape from rules and restrictions. "The trickster," he says, "brings out in the open conflict, lust, and dread that they might become agencies of communion, not disunion" (243). That is to say, he functions not to discharge and thus remove the power of such experiences, but to help us find ways of integrating those experiences, of harnessing their power for life. Pelton here approves Makarius's "excellent case for the simultaneous rupture and healing of the social order," (244) her acknowledgment of both the absolutely fixed nature of boundaries and the equally important need to violate boundaries (246).

Where does the trickster's comic function fit into his discussion? Irony and delight are Pelton's key words in

accounting for the humor-making process of the trickster and the response to his stories. As multiformity in a single being, the trickster "embodies the symbolic process" where two or more things are united. When a unity is made from "the unexpected coexistence...of two contraries," we experience "the shock of irony (and of recognition) [which] comes not only from uniting them, but also from seeing that the act of uniting them is not a mistake."²⁰ The societies that he studies each embrace this ironic imagination that the trickster embodies with delight, Pelton finds.

The trickster, then, symbolizes the very manner in which traditional peoples try to seize the contradictory and the anomalous just as he embodies one mode of the seizure. His messiness and metaphysical ambiguity reveal that the 'cool' society seeks to open itself to the wild, not to construct a pure and impermeable order. His presence -- in story, dance, phallic image, divination, or 'soul' -- represents a ceaseless informing of structure with rawness and formlessness and a boundless confidence that such a process is truly constructive.
(252)

The laughter the trickster provokes by the surprise of incongruity can itself be a liminal experience, says Pelton, taking one beyond a given order by the incongruous reversal of that order so that, upon return, a new order can be perceived (219-222). This function of laughter will be further examined in the concluding chapter.

²⁰ Pelton here (259) is quoting from William Lynch, Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1973) 84-85.

The Trickster: A Working Definition

What definition can we derive from these studies that provides a working hypothesis with which to examine other narrative tricksters? First, the trickster, as he appears in traditional societies seems to reveal an awareness of and acceptance of a fundamental paradox: the dualities of man's incorporeal and material nature, of imagination and instinct, of what Ricketts calls the "world as possibility" and the "world-as-is." The contradiction in these two awarenesses resides in one being, the trickster, whose primary action embraces both. He is compulsively active and self-interest determines his movements; he is moved by desire (whether that of instinctive need or of pleasure). The agon that makes order from otherwise random movement is the contest inherent in the trick. Faced with a desire for what is forbidden, the trickster contrives a means of obtaining what he wants; he determines reality to be as he wishes it by asserting it with persuasive force (verbal and visual manipulation). This is the imaginative act to perfection; as one who "plays" tricks, he participates in the production of culture.²¹ But his

²¹ It is Johan Huizinga's theory that play is essential to the establishment of culture. The two basic aspects of play are the contest or game (with rules fixed) and the representation of something (as in ritual performance or make-believe). "Culture," says Huizinga, "arises in the form of play, ...it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs -- hunting, for instance -- tend in archaic society, to take on the play form. --It is through playing that society

desires are almost without exception direct expressions of primal needs: he searches for food, shelter, and sexual gratification, he seeks to thwart his natural enemies, and he insists on the freedom to pursue these needs regardless of others. He is animal nature asserting itself -- the material, natural world defending its interests.

Human reality is experienced as multifaceted, and whatever structures human society builds must account for this diversity of experience if they are to endure. This is the second aspect of the paradox we experience through the trickster: the everpresent reality that the play of oppositions is essential for life. In a traditional society the social structure is of necessity "exceedingly strict" (Kerényi). The taboos are fundamental and absolute in maintaining an order that defines and sustains the group. However, the rules by which a group orders its existence must remain meaningful in the face of "historical pressure" (Pelton), the changes wrought by passing time and mortality.

To remain resilient society must find ways of incorporating those experiences excluded by or suppressed by its structure, to somehow take into account the whole range of human feelings -- the wild, the anomalous, the chaotic, whatever threatens order and harmony. Ritual, one way traditional societies

expresses its interpretation of life and the world." Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon, 1950): 46

incorporate such aspects of reality, is an enactment, a playing out of an experience too powerful or dangerous to be permitted in ordinary life, in a play sphere where the rules are fixed either by time limits or by a prescribed form or both. As the enactment of the forbidden, ritual allows the participants to experience or to act out what would otherwise destroy social harmony. The sacred clowns of Native American cultures, with their contrary behavior, their folly, their flaunting of social prohibitions, can only be permitted to act in a ritual context.²²

Story is another way humans imaginatively explore and give form to an awareness that cannot be safely lived out in the context of everyday, and the fictional trickster is such a creative rendering. Many of his behaviors resemble those of the sacred clown or buffoon, but the narrative context adds other dimensions that strengthen and reinforce the comic meaning of the reality he represents. Thus the study of the trickster as a literary character and of the form of the stories told about him as a mode of communicating meaning, can add to our understanding of the trickster already defined as a socio-religious phenomenon. This perspective is particularly essential when studying trickster figures in early literatures such as that of Old Norse where there is scanty evidence from which to discern social and religious

²² See Gill 77.

structures. We turn our attention, then, to an examination of the trickster in narrative.

WAKDJUNKAGA: THE WINNEBAGO TRICKSTER

As noted earlier, Native American mythologies redound in trickster tales and such tales serve a similar general function. Sam Gill says these tales, generally recited for children, are told more frequently than creation tales, and "doubtless serve extensively to introduce and define elements of the world view to members of the culture."¹ The world view thereby defined sees reality as made up of "many dynamic and conflicting elements" and defines its rules and boundaries "not by dogmatism, but by permitting infringement" of those boundaries, as such forces and oppositions are inseparable from human life (26).

Moreover, many of the same tales are found in mythologies of tribes throughout the continent. This fact permits one to identify those traditional elements that persist despite other influences at work within a given culture over time. For our purpose, the study of a single Native American trickster, Wakdjunkaga of the Winnebago tribe, is enriched by this reference to a common tradition, those elements which, whatever the impulses to shape or reshape the body of tales,

¹ Native American Religions 27.

must be included. While any one trickster is the specific creation of a given culture, here there is also a pattern implied by the necessity of tradition, a pattern that insists on the primacy of the narrative trick and the comically paradoxical reality the trickster embodies.

In 1956, ethnologist Paul Radin published The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology, his translation of and commentary on the Winnebago trickster cycle as recorded in 1912 by a Winnebago, Sam Blowsnake, who was told the story by an older Winnebago raconteur whose "property" it was.² The cycle, here composed of 49 episodes, recounts the adventures of Wakdjunkaga, "the tricky one."³

In the first three episodes of the Winnebago trickster cycle, a chief four times prepares himself for the warpath. The first three times he leaves the preparatory feast before it is concluded and cohabits with a woman (thus breaking two taboos) and he does not go to war. The fourth time he stays

² "Among the Winnebago the right to narrate a given myth, that is, a waiken, belongs...either to a particular family or to a particular individual. In a certain sense it is his 'property,' and as such often possesses a high pecuniary value" Radin 122.

³ For my purpose, this retelling is treated as a text, though as all students of the oral tradition are well aware, no oral "text" is fixed except as fundamental plots, themes, and characters are passed on. There is great variety in the way these elements are combined and the personality of the raconteur plays a significant role in the selection and in the performance of the episodes. See Radin 122-24, and Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970): 1-12.

through the feast and afterwards picks up his warbundle, but once he and his warriors have set off in boats, he returns to shore and smashes his boat, saying to it, "You cannot fight! Why should you come along." Next he throws down his warbundle and stamps on it with similar words. His warriors, disgusted with his "wickedness," leave him and he continues on alone, speaking to "all objects in the world."

In the fourth episode Trickster (the raconteur first uses Trickster as a proper noun in this episode) tricks and kills an old buffalo to eat him; in the fifth, his left arm starts a fight with his right one, which holds the knife for skinning the buffalo, and gets wounded; in 6-8 he borrows two children from a father, then kills them by neglecting to follow the manner of feeding prescribed by the father (Trickster is hungry and feeds the children when he wishes to eat). The father, intending to kill Trickster, then chases him to "the end of the world" where Trickster jumps into the ocean to escape death. In episode nine, Trickster swims aimlessly in the ocean inquiring of the fish where he can find the shore, unable to see that he's been swimming along it all the while.

In 10, unable to catch fish to eat, Trickster bloats himself on "fish soup" made from water that fish have swum through, then catches a dead fish floating by and buries it to preserve it for later eating (a double absurdity, notes Radin).

After initiating a pointing contest with a dark figure whose "arm" is extended, Trickster discovers he's competing

with a tree stump and says, "Indeed, it is on this account that the people call me the Foolish One (Wakdjunkaga). They are right."⁴ Then he walks away. Episodes 12-14 show Trickster enticing a flock of ducks with his songs into a festal dance, wringing their necks, preparing to roast them, then leaving his anus to guard the food while he sleeps. Foxes approach and three times the anus expels gas to drive them off; the fourth time the foxes eat the meat. When Trickster awakens to find his food gone, he burns his anus to punish it, then cries, "Ouch, ouch...Is it not for such things that they call me Trickster." He then finds pieces of fat and eats them only to discover they are portions falling off his own intestines. Again he proclaims himself correctly named Wakdjunkaga, and he reties his intestines -- thus they are wrinkled today and his anus has its present human shape.

In episode 15 Trickster awakens to find a banner floating in the air above him. Discovering it to be his penis topped by his blanket, he softens the organ and coils it into a box which he carries on his back. In episode 16 he sends his gigantic penis into the water to have intercourse with a chief's daughter who is swimming there. When an old woman finally dislodges the penis by poking an awl into it, Trickster laughs and complains that she's spoiling his

⁴ Radin says the word wakdjunkaga means "the tricky one," but the etymology of the word is unknown and it may simply mean "one-who-acts-like-Wakdjunkaga" (132).

pleasure.

In 17 Trickster persuades Turkey-Buzzard to take him for a ride; this ends with Trickster being dumped off in mid-air and falling into a hollow tree. Episode 18 has Trickster escape the tree by tricking some passing women into thinking he is a racoon. He persuades them to undress and stuff their clothes into the hole to keep him there until they come back. Once they leave, he comes out and walks away. The point seems to be that he has caused them to act shamefully by undressing in public.

The next three episodes (19-21) form a connected sequence of events. Trickster lives comfortably with a fox, nit, and jay until winter comes and they can find no food. So Trickster decides to disguise himself as a woman and marry the chief's son in whose home he will find food enough. Making a vulva from elk liver and breasts from kidneys, Trickster dresses in female clothes and has intercourse with his three friends to get pregnant. Then he goes to the village where he finds favor with the chief's son and marries. Three times Trickster gives birth to sons. The third son cries and cries (episode 21).⁵ An old woman four times discerns his desire (for a white cloud, a piece of blue sky, blue leaves, and roasting corn) and the tribe symbolically satisfies him.

⁵ Radin notes, "It is not usual for Winnebago children to cry. Continuous crying implied something serious and had to be interpreted" (57).

This seems to indicate the four seasons of the year passing by. Eventually Trickster's female organs rot off and when his disguise is revealed, he runs off with his three comrades.

In episode 22, Trickster returns to his own wife and son and stays there until his son is able to take care of himself. Then Trickster resumes his travels: "I used to wander around the world in peace," he says with comic irony. "Here I am just giving myself a lot of trouble." (Radin notes (57) that the proper behavior would see the son setting off on travels, not the father.)

Episodes 23-25 utilize a "theme found throughout aboriginal America, the talking laxative bulb" (140). A bulb tells Trickster that he who chews it will defecate. Trickster, curious and unbelieving, takes up the challenge. At first he only expels gas -- lightly, then more and more violently. Amused by the power of his expulsions, he coaxes a whole village onto his back, then blows them hither and yon, laughing uproariously. Still the laxative bulb's threat is unrealized -- until suddenly he begins to defecate. Soon the quantity of his excrement becomes so enormous that he falls into it, and, blinded by his own filth, he runs in search of water. He knocks painfully into trees and asks them where he can find water. Eventually he reaches water, but the narrator comments that "if the trees had not spoken to him, he certainly would have died." In episode 26 Trickster, while cleansing himself in the water, notices plums reflected

from the tree above. Mistaking the reflection for the real thing, he dives for the plums and knocks himself unconscious on a rock.⁶ When he comes to, Trickster declares himself a stupid fellow.

What follow in episodes 27-46 (nearly half the cycle) are "more or less the typical adventures of all North American tricksters" (141). In 27 he uses the plums he has gathered to trick racoon women out of their house. While they hunt plums, he eats their children, then (28) gets a female skunk to dig him a large hole with two entrances. While she does this, he stands behind her commenting on her "round vulva" - - apparently a gratuitous bit of sexual play. Into this hole he lures the racoon women who return to find their children dead (29). By blackening his face in disguise, he is able to persuade the women that Trickster, the culprit, went into the hole. When they enter to catch the offender, Trickster sets fire to grass in both ends of the hole and kills them.

In episode 30 Trickster prepares the racoons for roasting, but is distracted by a squeaking noise from above and goes up to attack the tree branches making the sound. His arm gets caught and before he can free himself, wolves

⁶ Radin comments that this incident is probably of European origin, but does not explain (141). Certainly this is a common motif. Stith Thompson lists as a common fable "Wolf dives into Water for Reflected Cheese." (The Folktale, 218, 481) The same motif is used in Branch 4 of Le Roman de Renart where Renart, seeing his own reflection in the well, mistakes it for that of his wife, Hermaline, and jumps in.

happen by, find the meat, and eat it (episode 31). Trickster blames the tree for his grief, gets loose, and chases the wolves. As he runs along he hears loud drumming and war whoops (32). Thinking to join in the fun, he tries to find where the noise is coming from but sees nothing, although the noise gets louder. Finally he discovers the source -- an elk's skull full of flies. Undaunted, he tries to enter the skull to join in the celebration. The flies tell him to say, "Neck become large," and by so doing, he gets his head in. But the flies leave, the neck opening shrinks, and Trickster is stuck. In a plan to get humans to free him from the skull, he lies by the water, covered in his racoon skin blanket, waiting for the dawn when women will come for water (33). He presents himself to the women as a sacred elk-spirit and tells them that to receive blessings for their village they must get an ax and bring offerings. The women return with others from the village and split the skull open: "Behold! There they found Trickster laughing at them." Nevertheless, Trickster keeps his promise and gives them the skull out of which efficacious medical tools are made.

In episode 34 Trickster catches Hawk in revenge for a trick Hawk once played on him. Disguised as a dead buck-deer, Trickster lures Hawk down for food and when the bird starts to eat Trickster's soft rectum, he catches its head and squeezes tight. With the bird dangling from his rectum, Trickster walks on (35). Bear sees and envies Trickster his

beautiful tail plumage, so Trickster releases Hawk and tells Bear he will similarly prepare his rectum for a tail. Instead he cuts Bear's rectum and pulls out his intestines, killing him. While preparing the meat to boil, he sees Mink coming toward him (36). Trickster challenges Mink to a race on the ice; the loser will serve the winner the bear meat. Mink tricks Trickster (who falls in the ice and cannot get out) and eats the meat. Trickster eventually gets out, swearing revenge, and sets out with a hunting dog to catch Mink (37).

In 38 and 39, unable to catch Mink, Trickster wanders on when he hears a singing voice observe that Trickster carries a penis and testicles in his pack. Annoyed, Trickster empties his box and reorganizes:⁷ testicles back and underneath, penis with its head on top. The chipmunk who has been making these comments runs into a hollow tree. Trickster, wanting to kill it for teasing him, sends his penis in after the chipmunk, probing the hollow tree, but to no avail. When he pulls the penis out again, it has been chewed off. Trickster then kicks the log to pieces, flattens the chipmunk, and finds the pieces of his penis (39). But his lamentations are short-lived since he decides to make useful food plants out of the remaining pieces -- artichokes, beans,

⁷ Radin notes that Trickster's annoyance that another can see what he is carrying is an example of the humorous motif of his "pretended ignorance" (59). See also #5 where birds talk to Trickster and he pretends not to hear them.

rice, etc. Not needing the box anymore, he disguards it and goes on his way with a normal-sized organ. The narrator comments here that Trickster is better off like this.

In episode 40 Trickster proposes a contest with Coyote to see who can scent a human village the quickest, and thus gets the benefit of the coyote's keen nose. When he discovers a village, he remains and marries, then moves his family off by themselves.

The next four episodes (41-44) are the traditional tales of "the bungling host" in which Trickster, using social conventions to his advantage, goes visiting in order to get fed by his host. During his visit, he asks his host for instructions in obtaining such food, then he asks his host to visit Trickster's home in return. When the guest arrives, Trickster intentionally bungles the instructions, and no meal is forthcoming until the guest himself provides it ("inconceivably bad manners," says Radin, 59). By such tricks, Trickster's family manages to eat throughout the winter.

Episodes 45 and 46 concern trickery for revenge, but here Trickster has moved back into the village where people are delighted to welcome him -- good-natured, entertaining fellow that he is. In the first trick, Trickster persuades Mink to court the chief's daughter, then feeds him fish oil so that during the night Mink defecates all over the girl. Trickster laughs heartily at this. Next he flatters Coyote (himself

a trickster in Native American lore) on his strength and enlists his help in pulling away a "dead" horse by tying the horse's tail to Coyote (there is the assumption here that the horse meat will feed them).⁸ When the horse wakes up, Coyote is dragged behind him, and he feels so ashamed that Coyote is still shy of people today and his mouth twitches.

The final episodes (47-49) have Wakdjunkaga recollecting his purpose on earth (to help mankind) and he actually rearranges geographical features on earth to better suit man's habitation. In the last episode (49) Trickster eats his last meal on earth (leaving the imprint of his buttocks and testicles in the rock), then dives into the ocean and goes up into the heavens to a world under the one where Earthmaker lives. Here only in the cycle does Trickster appear as a deity.

Before turning to an analysis of the narrative, some information crucial to understanding the cycle must be provided. First, while trickster tales do not always take cyclical form, this literary pattern is apparently favored by the Siouan tribes, of which the Winnebago is one.⁹ However,

⁸ This story assumes a long standing rivalry between Trickster and Coyote which is not part of this cycle, and we are told Coyote wanted to trick Wakdjunkaga and that Wakdjunkaga found out about it.

⁹ Radin says that the close kin of the Winnebago as well as their non-Siouan neighbors "had a marked tendency to group the adventures of their heroes into large units, into cycles" (119). Even among western Siouan tribes, far removed from the Mississippi valley tribes, one finds narrative cycles (121).

the arrangement of episodes within the cycle can vary significantly even from one raconteur to another. Certain episodes, themes, characters evidently cannot be omitted and "the accepted theory everywhere is that a myth must always be told in the same way," although raconteurs, highly gifted and valued members of the tribe, have considerable liberty at times and, according to Radin, fidelity of language is not a demand. "In fact, an audience generally preferred and valued a raconteur in terms of his own style and phrasing" (122-23).

Second, this trickster cycle belongs within the mythological group of tales the Winnebago call waiken, "what-is-sacred," as opposed to worak, "what-is-recounted." Waiken are never tragic whereas worak have to end tragically. Radin says, "The heroes of a waiken were always divine beings, and divine beings among the Winnebago were regarded as immortal unless they belonged to the category of evil beings" (118).¹⁰

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade distinguishes between "true stories" and "false stories" in societies where myth is still alive. The "true stories" among the Pawnee Indians do not include the adventures of the coyote trickster. "Thus," says Eliade, "in the 'true' stories we have to deal with the holy and the supernatural, while the 'false' ones on the other hand are of profane content, for Coyote is extremely popular in this and other North American mythologies in the character of a trickster, deceiver, sleight-of-hand expert and accomplished rogue." Myth and Reality (New York: Harper, 1963) 9. Trickster tales, however, are certainly not always profane: Wakdjunkaga is part of the sacred lore. Radin notes that waiken can become worak, but it never works the other way round (118). It is my experience that this ambivalent character can have the potential for inclusion in sacred or profane, in the same way he straddles other boundaries.

When Radin inquired concerning the attitudes of the Winnebago to Trickster, he found them to differ on whether Trickster is to be considered good or evil.¹¹ The more conservative, traditional members of the tribe numbered among his supporters, asserting that for all his mischief, he was a positive force. Trickster's detractors were found particularly among those members of the more recent, Christian-influenced Peyote rite, who tended to see Trickster as the evil doer, the devil responsible for man's evil ways.

There is no reason to think that Wakdjunkaga cannot have been viewed in both ways simultaneously within the culture.

Such a symbolic, sacred figure contains many levels of meaning. Mary Douglas, reminding us that "all live religions are many things," distinguishes frequently between the levels of public practice and private belief.¹² The culture will provide the "standardized values of a community...a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered," for the sake of harmony (38-39). But a private person may revise this pattern according to his understanding of reality. Moreover, no one member of society can be expected to perceive or express all the meanings of such a figure at once. Some may see him one way; some another.

¹¹ Radin refers to attitudes polled between 1908 and 1918. See "The Attitude of the Winnebago toward Wakdjunkaga," 147-51.

¹² Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (London: Ark, 1984) 166. See also 169-70, 39, 88-89, etc.

Mary Douglas also acknowledges the opposing tendencies in the same religious culture: i.e. the symbolic, ritual stance that embraces the anomalous and looks at the full reality of experience directly, and the social stance that rejects that which does not fit within the structure and prefers to avoid or deny unpleasing aspects of reality (169-74). MacLinscott Ricketts defines a similar opposition in religious culture between the popular man-centered stance and the priestly spirit-centered stance. How a mythological figure like the trickster is interpreted is subject to such a complex of factors.

In addition, translating a symbol from one culture to another, leaves one susceptible to misreading. This is certainly true, for example, when the modern, analytical mind attempts to seek an intellectual consistency where none may be intended.¹³ Sam Gill, wrestling with the problem of interpreting the religious symbols of Native Americans, gives examples of his own attempt to elicit interpretation from Hopi

¹³ Mary Douglas confronts the same issue in her chapter on "Primitive Worlds," where, after defining the essentially personal nature of the universe for the primitive, she warns that such a cosmological view is not perceived by individuals as a fixed, self-consistent philosophy and does not mean a primitive cannot distinguish between persons and other objects in nature. "To ask an Azande whether the poison oracle is a person or a thing is to ask a kind of nonsensical question that he would never pause to ask himself. The fact that he addresses the poison oracle in words does not imply any confusion whatever in his mind between things and persons. It merely means that he is not striving for intellectual consistency and that in this field symbolic action seems appropriate" (89).

tribal members and his inability to understand the symbols as "explained" to him (59-61). He concludes that decoding individual symbols does not render an adequate understanding because the background for such symbols is so full of a meaning he, with his different life experience, is not privy to, and also because it is not, finally, in the nature of a symbol to be decoded.¹⁴ But,

While one cannot decode the message of religious symbols, they serve to make life itself significant, and they do so by their ability to grasp, to express, and to engender the transcendent, as well as the paradoxical and inexplicable. If one could completely and efficiently explain what a symbol communicates, the symbol would be unnecessary; but precisely because that cannot be done, the symbol is significant and creates significance. (81)

To understand the significance of Wakdjunkaga, then, we must assume him to be a religious symbol inasmuch as his tales are waiken, sacred lore, and as such a symbol to represent levels of meaning irreducible to a simple statement of function. We must assume the possibility of multiple individual interpretations, while confronting the comically

¹⁴ Mary Douglas provides another example to help to understand the gap in experience: The primary difference between modern and primitive, according to her, is the high level of differentiation the modern world is capable of and strives for. Our experience, as a result is "fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated" (69). Whereas in a primitive culture "all the major contexts of experience overlap and interpenetrate, [thus] nearly all their experience is religious, and so...is all their most important ritual" (68). "For many primitive cultures, the field of symbolic action is one. The unity which they create by their separating and tidying is not just a little home, but a total universe in which all experience is ordered" (69).

paradoxical reality he represents that unites the community in laughter.

Third, without enumerating all the examples, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of satire in the cycle. Radin's notes on the narrative point out the many instances where Wakdjunkaga's behavior parodies or contradicts acceptable practice. When one realizes the importance of the Warbundle Feast with which the cycle begins, for example, the radically taboo-breaking nature of Wakdjunkaga's actions are clearer. Radin says, "The warbundle was the most prized of all Winnebago possessions," and further that "To be a successful warrior was the highest ideal of a Winnebago, and it was in the warbundle rites that this ideal received its greatest glorification" (117). But the opening scene of the cycle is so full of paradox that it becomes humorous:

The chief of the tribe, one who by definition cannot lead a warparty, is there represented as inviting people to attend a warbundle feast, and, although everyone knows he cannot go on the warpath, everyone must attend because a chief must be obeyed. The latter leaves in the middle of the ceremony and is found cohabiting with a woman, something which is absolutely taboo for one about to lead a warparty. Finally he starts, but shortly after destroys the warbundle, the most sacred of all Winnebago possessions. (151-52)

This is not satire in its bitter, destructive form of social criticism, but in its healthful function of making the audience laugh and through laughter gain the freedom to see clearly for a moment the arbitrary nature of all social order. Radin says of Wakdjunkaga, "Laughter, humour and irony

permeate everything Trickster does. The reaction of the audience in aboriginal societies to both him and his exploits is prevailingly one of laughter tempered by awe" (xxiv). Radin sees laughter as the primary function of the satire in the Winnebago cycle that makes a sacrilege of sacred customs. Though he doubts this satire belonged to the original cycle, he nevertheless assumes the satiric use to which such tales are to be put to be very old. "We have here...an outlet for voicing a protest against the many, often onerous obligations connected with the Winnebago social order and their religion and ritual. Primitive people have wisely devised many such outlets" (152). This is one function of laughter in the cycle; others will be explored later.

In his prefatory remarks, Radin states his position on this material to be as follows: the trickster myth, found throughout literatures both simple and complex, has "persisted with [its] fundamental content unchanged. -- For few [such myths] can we so confidently assert that they belong to the oldest expressions of mankind" (xxiii). The trickster literatures of Native American mythology "must be regarded as [the] earliest and most archaic form" and the Winnebago version is of particular interest because, unlike other versions where the trickster is identified as an animal (coyote, raven, hare, etc.), secondary characteristics which should not be equated with the animal itself, this cycle gives this figure, who "posseses no well-defined and fixed form,"

the shape of "an inchoate being of undetermined proportions, a figure foreshadowing the shape of man" (xxiv). "Is this," asks Radin, "a speculum mentis wherein is depicted man's struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition or consent?"

Radin's work with the Winnebago mythology led him to propose an original, primordial trickster who was not so much a culture-hero as:

an ageless and Priapus-like protagonist... strutting across the scene, wandering restlessly from place to place, attempting, successfully and unsuccessfully, to gratify his voracious hunger and his uninhibited sexuality. (167-68)

Using as a model the Winnebago mythology where there are two trickster cycles [one of Hare, which follows the type of creator, culture-hero, with Hare being born of a virgin, working to transform the world, and playing fewer tricks; and a second of Wakdjunkaga, where the role of trickster dominates and that of benefactor is limited], Radin concludes that mythologies including both elements together are "mixed," and that this mixture is a secondary development. Where in such mixed cycles trickster episodes outnumber culture-hero incidents one leaves out the "secondary" additions and elaborations, one finds a trickster cycle similar to that of the Winnebago.

Radin's claims for a "pure" trickster cycle ab origine with Wakdjunkaga as its model are no longer generally accepted, and the composite nature of the trickster is

regarded as fundamental to his meaning.¹⁵ But Radin's analysis of the Wakdjunkaga cycle itself is somewhat harder to discredit. It is Radin's theory that this Winnebago cycle demonstrates the gradual transformation of Wakdjunkaga from an elemental, undifferentiated being into a figure biologically and psychically like man. By the end of the cycle "a new figure is revealed to us and a new psychical reorientation and environment have come into being" (168).

His analysis is as follows:

Radin says the first three episodes, where Wakdjunkaga separates himself from society by abusing his role as chief and violating the ceremonies in preparation for the warpath, are found uniquely in the Winnebago cycle, and are almost certainly a literary device -- an in medias res used to reduce

¹⁵ I have not presented the intricacies of Radin's logic as it is now generally considered invalid. Radin himself acknowledges that most Native American mythologies include the mixture of culture-hero/transformer/trickster:

"The overwhelming majority of all so-called trickster myths in North America give an account of the creation of the

earth, or at least the transformation of the world, and have a hero who is always wandering, who is always hungry,

who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him, and who is highly sexed. Almost every-

where he has some divine traits. These vary from tribe to

tribe. In some instances he is regarded as an actual deity,

in others as intimately connected with deities, in still others he is at best a generalized animal or human being subject to death" (Radin 155).

Wakdjunkaga to his real essence, his primitive self, by having him break ties with human society (132-33).¹⁶

The next seven episodes (4-10) Radin sees as presenting this essential trickster for whom no ethical values exist, who is undifferentiated, instinctual, completely unanchored and isolated from men and nature. He brutally kills a buffalo; makes his right arm fight and wound his left; in self-interest disobeys a father's instructions, killing the children he promised to care for; runs from the angry father; swims blindly in an ocean seemingly without boundaries, and absurdly bloats himself with "fish soup" so that he cannot eat the dead fish (usually not considered edible) he finds.

Beginning with episode eleven, Radin finds in Trickster a slowly developing consciousness. When he realizes his pointing contest has been with a tree, he calls himself "Foolish One," indicating "an awareness of the nature of what he is doing." (55)

Again (episode 14), after he burns his anus in punishment, he cries that he is aptly named¹⁷ and soon after, when he finds he has been eating his own intestines, he again acknowledges his foolishness. Trickster is shown to be "emerging out of complete isolation and lack of identity," both psychically

¹⁶ Radin says no other trickster myth-cycle begins this way with a chief preparing for warpath ceremonies, etc. (132).

¹⁷ "Wakdjunkaga" is understood to mean "the tricky one" and includes concepts of both foolishness and cunning.

and biologically, says Radin (135). His intestines now are of human size and his anus is the shape of man's.

The next two episodes (where he finds his enormous, erect penis and sends it out for intercourse with a princess) concern his sexual education, says Radin, who notes that "in all other specifically trickster myths, lust is his primary characteristic," and announces itself earlier in the cycle than here (136). Because the Winnebago narrator has placed these episodes so relatively late, Radin sees his conscious intent to show sexuality as a stage in developing awareness.

Episodes 17 and 18 (where Trickster, tricked by a buzzard, in turn tricks women) do not fit into the tentative logic Radin has established so far in the ordering of episodes, so he terms them an "interlude," acknowledging 17 to be a well-known trickster theme (137).

Episodes 19-21, where Trickster transforms himself into a female and marries the chief's son, are adventures that Radin says no trickster cycle omits (although the usual motive for the sex change is revenge, not hunger). During these events, which Radin sees contributing to Trickster's general sex education, so many taboos are broken that the atmosphere is "something of a wild phantasmagoria," approaching insanity. From such outrageous behavior, says Radin, Trickster can only run away and after this "the raconteur...[brings] his narrative to a full stop" (138-39). He does this by showing Trickster returning to his own wife and son for a short spell

of domesticity (episode 22) before he sets off on his wanderings again.

Radin sees the adventure with the talking laxative bulb (episodes 23-25) as the resumption of Trickster's biological education. He defies nature and illustrates the result thereof. But, as Radin comments of episode 26, "Knowledge concerning himself and the outside world comes...slowly" (141).

After the "reflected plums" episode, Radin says the literary and psychological organization of the myth cycle breaks down. But episodes 27-37 are traditional ones that cannot be omitted. The next two episodes (38-39) conclude Trickster's sexual education and voice "his final protest at becoming a mature male," says Radin (142). Instructed by a voice (that of a chipmunk), he first angrily arranges his genitals in proper position, then attacks the chipmunk, who cuts his penis down to normal human size. Here, instead of eating the discarded pieces as he did with his intestines, Trickster uses them to make food for man, thus consciously assuming the role of benefactor.

Episodes 41-44 ("the bungling host") are again traditionally necessary to the Native American trickster cycle, even if they (and the previous episode where Coyote leads Trickster to a village) do not develop the narrative structure Radin is establishing here. Radin does see in episode 44 (where Trickster attempts to shoot deer with gas

from his anus and instead blows to pieces rocks, trees and a sacred hill) Trickster's "last act of defiance against the world of nature with which he had, until recently, been on such intimate terms" (145).

Episodes 47 and 48, according to Radin, are secondary additions to the cycle, representing "largely the influence of the most sacred of all Winnebago narratives, the Origin Myth of the Medicine Rite" (145). In this myth, Wakdjunkaga is sent down to earth to help mankind which is about to be exterminated by evil beings. Although the story has it that Trickster fails miserably, his name remains connected with the medicine rite. Nowhere else in the cycle does Trickster perform such pure culture-hero functions, says Radin, and the final episode where Trickster is associated with the function of a deity is the unique instance of a deification that, along with the culture-hero function, is more prevalent in other Native American cycles.

I think we must acknowledge the ordering of episodes that highlights the "transformation" of Trickster, and the uniqueness of this organization certainly points to its being the artistic invention or development of Winnebago raconteurs, which Radin calls "literary remodelling and reinterpretation," and holds to be unquestionably secondary (146). Yet several factors are not adequately accounted for in Radin's analysis and these must be considered.

First, despite the clear culture-hero functions of the

less tricksterish Hare cycle, several episodes suggest this function still clings to Wakdjunkaga. Radin explains these episodes in two ways: episodes 14 and 38, where Trickster's actions accidentally transform his anus and penis into normal-shaped human organs, are part of Trickster's "biological education" as well as contributing to the formation of man. Certainly the episodes have been used in this double way, but if the ordering is secondary as Radin claims, the primacy of the actions themselves as associated with Trickster nevertheless remains. Episode 33, where Trickster contributes medicines to the people whom he has tricked into freeing him from the elk-skull, Radin dismisses as a necessary narrative antidote to the blasphemy of the "elk-spirit" impersonation (153). In the conscious decision to make beneficial foods out of the parts of his penis (also #38), Radin acknowledges Trickster to be functioning as a culture-hero, but the equally conscious recognition of his beneficial purpose in episodes 47-49, Radin sees as secondary additions.¹⁸ However much Radin tries to reduce the significance of these episodes, a perspective perhaps shared in some way by the raconteur, these elements contradict a simple, "pure"

¹⁸ Radin does allow for the possibility that these episodes are not secondary: "...To judge from the fact that there seems to have been a difference of opinion among the Winnebago two generations ago, and one which was definitely not of recent origin, as to how he was to be evaluated, it may very well be that people always interpreted him and his activities in two ways" (145-46).

trickster as posited by Radin.

A similar, and even more striking inconsistency exists within the narrative ordering Radin uncovers, for within the conscious artistic structure of the Winnebago cycle there is a counter force at work that tends to break down the order Radin has established. First, while the organization of episodes may suggest a progression, the action within the episodes themselves shows little change in Trickster. Even Radin's comments acknowledge that Trickster's growth at best is very slow and subject to frequent setbacks. In the "anus recognition" episodes (12-14) -- the beginning of Trickster's biological education -- Radin says that Wakdjunkaga still does not "accept responsibility for his actions" (135). After his "sexual education" in episodes 19-21, Radin acknowledges, "He always remains his old primordial self. He has not learned very much yet and has forgotten even less" (138). After his brief return to the role of a normal, socialized father (episode 22), Wakdjunkaga leaves to wander around the world again, showing his "protest against domestication," says Radin (140). Again Radin's comment on episode 26 is that Trickster learns very slowly. His anger at the chipmunk also shows how reluctant Trickster is to accept his human form (142).

One might deduce "learning" or transformation from the fact that Trickster never makes precisely the same blunder twice, and from his few references to his own foolishness, but while the specifics are not the same, the types of blunders

he makes repeat throughout. Instead of swimming "blindly" in search of the shore, due to his escape from the threat of death posed by one whom he defied (#6-8), in episode 25 we find him running blindly to find water, due to the threat of death posed by his immersion in his own excrement (the result of defying nature). And if he loses his food to foxes in #14, he likewise loses it in #31 and in 36. If he has a pointing contest with a tree in an early episode, he attacks a squeaking tree branch in #30 and tries to enter an elk skull in #32. Moreover, while he acknowledges his own foolishness, what emerges is not a well-socialized human, but a successful trickster. If one examines the narrative, a second general pattern appears: while in the first half of the cycle, Wakdjunkaga is more often victim than victor, in the second half this is reversed. In episode 4, Trickster kills a buffalo, but in episodes 6, 12, 16, 17, and 20, the tricks lead to reversals of fortune for Trickster. In episodes 5, 11, 23, 30, 36 and 38, Trickster initiates challenges which he ultimately loses. In episodes 10, 14, 26 and 32, his actions are just foolish and cause his discomfort. However, he is victoriously tricky in episodes 4, 18, 23, 27-29, 33-35, 40-46, and his tricks here are not qualitatively different from the earlier ones. I can honestly see little indication of learning going on here, unless it is on the part of the audience.

Second, in contradiction of Radin's theory, many episodes

that are commonly a part of the traditional Native American trickster myths do not fit logically into this educational transformation he proposes. Episodes 17 and 18, both well-known themes, Radin merely calls "an interlude" (137). Episodes 27 through 46, "more or less the typical adventures" of all Native American tricksters, also break up the educational sequence Radin has established. These "interruptive" episodes, along with the first ten episodes that establish Trickster as an unsocialized, instinctual being, make up more than two-thirds the total number of episodes in this cycle. Radin does not attempt to explain the narrator's artistic purpose in including these episodes except to say that such traditional material cannot easily be left out.

Whether or not Trickster's evolution is essential to the Winnebago mythology, it is also apparent that these "interruptive" episodes actually constitute the nucleus of the body of tales, the material without which Wakdjunkaga would be more fool than trickster. These episodes include the many tricks he plays (successfully and unsuccessfully) in order to get food, the gratuitous contests he proposes, the attacks he makes on whatever displeases him, and the sexually or anally inspired tricks he plays for revenge or simply for fun (the women tricked into undressing, the tribe coaxed onto Trickster's back when he is breaking wind, etc.). The educational development of a trickster, moreover, would seem

to lead ultimately to a heroic role (whether or not this is realized in the cycle) rather than contributing to his essential trickster nature, for what differentiates this character from others is precisely his resistance (not so much by will as by nature) to such a transformation. His tacit refusal to become fully conscious, socialized, subject to tribal ethics, constitutes the narrative material most resistant to change and most perennially interesting to mankind, as evidenced by the widespread circulation of these story motifs.

If Radin believes the biological and pschical transformation of Trickster to be inherent in the original cycle, he also recognizes this to be but one element contributing to the active, fluid nature of the trickster who "represents not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within each individual," and who, as such, contains infinite potential - - "the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man" (168).

This is closer to my own perception of the trickster, though I would say it is not so much the promise of differentiation that makes Trickster compelling as the way he combines the instinctual life force, with its physical limits, with the imaginative power that transcends these limits: he embodies the paradox of finite and infinite realities and

plays with this opposition to unite both in human life.¹⁹ To realize this we must look at yet another pattern in the narrative.

One could observe a general movement in the cycle from Trickster's initial rejection of the community to his later acceptance in episode 45, where he is welcomed back as a good-natured fellow, but this does not indicate a simple progression of the individual from unsocialized to socialized, for Trickster remains a trickster. The real pattern is a movement of leaving and coming back which is repeated several times in the cycle. First (1-3) Trickster breaks taboos and wanders off, having been rejected by his warriors. His random interactions with humans following this result from his desires for food and sex (see 6-7, 16, and 18). It is also the desire for food that makes him disguise himself as a woman and enter a village (19-20), and the response to him when his real identity is disclosed is shame and disgust. He flees the village and settles down to a normal married life (22) which produces no stories. But the need to move drives him out again in rejection of the normal community life. What follow are a long series of trickster episodes during which time he again randomly interacts with people to fool them (23

¹⁹ The Oglala trickster, Iktomi, is actually the offspring of the Rock and the being called "Winged One." He does good but his form is queer and so his beneficence is laughed at. Thus he laughs at others, even laughing at his own punishment. Banished to earth, he goes there to befriend animals and make fools of mankind. See Radin 165.

and 33) but plays most of his tricks on animals. It is interesting to note here that the times Wakdjunkaga himself laughs at others (16, 23, 33), he is laughing at groups of people. Again wanting the comforts of human community, he tricks Coyote into helping him find a village (40), but after marriage and a child, he moves his family away from the group ("he left for another place where he lived alone," 40). Now follow the episodes in which Wakdjunkaga decides to "go and pay a few visits," and tricks his hosts into providing his family with food throughout the winter (41-44). After this he decides to go back to the village (45), and is welcomed with shouts of delight. His role in the village is that of entertainer, and it is said he likes to accompany the young men when they go courting. Two episodes follow in which Trickster plays tricks of revenge, apparently with the help and to the amusement of villagers. After a long stay here, we are told he again decides to leave and go about the earth again, now assuming his role as transformer-deity.

One can focus on Trickster's transformation here, or I think with equal validity, one can see a transformation on the part of the community. By episode 45, Wakdjunkaga has a role, a purpose in the community. His antics have gained mankind medicines and food plants, and his mischief is now welcomed for the laughter it elicits. Trickster's unwillingness (to the very end) to stay in one place, to assume a narrow definition of reality, to limit his movements,

has created intercourse between the different realities of nature and society, instinct and intellect, disorder and order. This is the function of the trickster as Robert Peilton has defined it; the trickster who "represents a ceaseless informing of structure with rawness and formlessness and a boundless confidence [on the part of the community] that such a process is truly constructive" (252).

This brings us back to the role of laughter in this cycle. We have already considered the role of satire to create laughter which momentarily releases one from the "onerous obligations" of the social order. We add to that the obvious (and universal) humor in Wakdjunkaga's absurd behavior: his hands fighting each other, his meal of "fish soup," his struggle to subjugate his enormous penis, the bird tail he dangles from his rectum, his pretended ignorance when he is addressed by others, and the anal humor throughout. Makarius sees in such behavior a reduction of the more fear-provoking, explicitly contrary behavior of the taboo-breaker, but in focusing on the fear created by the action, she ignores the actor who creates laughter not only by his actions but by his immunity to fear -- the actor whose energy for activity is his foremost characteristic and itself creates an image of vitality that transcends fear and death and provokes a laughter of victory.

This image of vitality is also created by the narrative form which reflects the open-ended, restless wandering of its

hero, apparently directed only by his instinctive desires and his ephemeral curiosity. (His normalized behavior does not create stories, as mentioned before; we are merely informed of it.) Even here where a conscious order has been imposed by a raconteur on the more generally random ordering of such episodes, the impulsive nature of the trickster really defines the narrative structure with abrupt turns in the action and no clear sequence of events. Ultimately the form is open-ended; though we have noted some progressions, Trickster remains Trickster, and there is no final cessation of his activities inasmuch as the narrative projects itself into the infinite future. WaKdjunkaga simply moves his energy to another world in the end, leaving a reminder of his nature in the imprints from his buttocks and genitals.

The comedy Trickster enacts and the laughter, tempered with awe, that he provokes are also indications, as Pelton has so persuasively demonstrated with the West African tricksters, of a constructive process at work -- of a vision that optimistically embraces the wholeness, the oneness of human reality despite the oppositions of which it is composed. This is not an easy reality to accept given the perennial struggle it entails, but the figure of the trickster attests to a culture's acknowledgment of the need to seek such a unity of contraries.

Finally Trickster's actions also function to provoke laughter that shakes us out of our ordinary patterns of

thought. Behind our desire to break through or go beyond the limitations of conscious experience may be not only the need to experience a release from tiresome duties and patterns of behavior, but the deeper desire to reach a new understanding, to transcend the commonplace, comfortable, everyday realities we get stuck in.²⁰ According to Joseph Epes Brown, an authority on the Plains Indians, the clown in traditional societies serves precisely this spiritual function:

The role of the clown serves an enormously important purpose in that it opens a door, in a very subtle and effective way, into a realm of greater reality than the realm of the ebb and flow of everyday life. And this is accomplished...by essentially two means. There is first of all the element of shock. Clowns among the Pueblos, for example, in the context of their ritual dance dramas, engage in, among other activities, sexual types of display which normally are quite taboo in such societies, and this causes a rupture with the ordinary everyday pattern of life. It does that by immediately catching the attention; it helps the people forget their petty little concerns about the routines of daily life. It shocks them out of that. Secondly, once that awareness, that alertness and openness, has been achieved through the initial shock, then it is possible to communicate on another level through the use of humor.²¹

²⁰ In her appendix to the poems of Kabir (a provocative 15th century Hindu poet and storyteller) in which she explores the spiritual function of his "upside-down language," Linda Hess relates her discovery of the comic function of a poem she was trying to interpret when the guru reading it to her began to laugh. His response provided the answer she was seeking: the poem's absurd imagery was intended to provoke laughter. "We laugh," says Hess, "as children do at a cartoon, and evoking this childlike state of mind may be one way of breaking habitual thought patterns." The Bijak of Kabir (San Francisco: North Point, 1983) 148.

²¹ "The Wisdom of the Contrary: A Conversation with Joseph Epes Brown," Parabola 4:1 (1979) 55.

The humor, specifically as it produces laughter, prepares the ground "for a real quality of participation in the sacred dimensions of what the rite is all about" (Brown 58). Brown says of Black Elk, the Sioux medicine man who was also a Heyhoka or Contrary -- a kind of sacred clown -- "he understood that there is no access to a deeper spiritual reality if there is not the opening force of laughter present. --It tends to open the heart for receiving a greater value than that of this world" (63).²² Brown sees the humor in the Indian trickster tales functioning similarly. The tales, he says, function on several levels: a moralistic level that "sets the parameters for acceptable behaviour" by presenting the opposite; a higher level where the supernatural events "instruct us that this shifting world of appearances is not really real;" and another yet higher level where the humor evokes laughter and so opens the audience for participation in another reality.²³

²² The Zuni clowns, called "Newekwe," do all kinds of shocking things, says anthropologist Barbara Tedlock. They have "the ability to eat any kind or amount of food and garbage (including human excrement) and to engage in shocking sexual displays without shame." The goal of their clowning she also sees as "to startle and even shock the audience in order to get a response, perhaps a laugh, or at least a gasp of disapproval. In so doing they 'get to the people,' they 'open them,' and release them from internal idle thoughts or worries." "Boundaries of Belief," *Parabola* 4.1 (1979) 72.

²³ Page 61. Brown also reminds us that these tales are dramatically presented by a storyteller who tells these tales in a special context "that lends importance to the telling of them," and acts them out using many devices similar to the clown.

The laughter evoked by Trickster's tales, then, may also function to break boundaries in another way, by releasing the spirit to transcend the bounds of what is ordinarily taken unquestioning to be reality. This function would also help explain the moral ambiguity of the trickster figure, for while his actions may seem foolish, even wicked, and make us uncomfortable, we also perceive in them a mirror for viewing our own foolish clinging to the mundane world, and find in the laughter he provokes in us a jiggling loose of our conscious controls, thereby opening us to the possibility of a new understanding. In this way the trickster may be an agent of the divine.

LOKI: THE TRICKSTER GOD

Implicit in my definition of the trickster is the assumption that this story character embodies at his inception a paradox and thus the potential for all kinds of contradiction. Of course any traditional character, subjected to development over time, may exhibit contradictory ways of behaving once all the stories about him are collected (compare, for example, the starkly grand and tragic figure of Chanson de Roland with the romantic madman of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso), but the trickster's potential differs, for the changes he is put through over time, collecting new attributes as new episodes accumulate, are less likely to alter or even substantially affect his essential core which itself embraces a paradox. Even, as with Wakdjunkaga, when the contradictions cause some puzzlement among twentieth-century members of the tribe, they are ultimately accepted as part of the tradition and the cycle remains intact as a unit, harmonious in its disjunction, unified by its multi-dimensional character, Trickster.

This understanding that the trickster will exhibit contrary qualities simultaneously, both within the individual stories and from story to story, is helpful when one

approaches a figure like Loki, the enigmatic trickster-demon of Old Norse mythology, who does not come to us as the central figure in a narrative cycle, but must be "constructed" from his various appearances in the complex assortment of poetic stanzas and prose tales that constitute our sources for this mythology. The perception of this mythic character has been problematic for the religious and literary historians over the past century and on this account he has received more attention than other Norse figures of similar stature. The discrepancies in his roles -- from sworn brother of Odinn, companion to Thor, comic mischief-maker among the Æsir gods, to father of monsters, malicious murderer (radbani) of Baldr, and ultimate foe of the gods at Ragnarok -- have caused controversy among scholars working to define him and raised questions concerning his role in the mythology. Is Loki a god or a demon? Did all his roles originally belong to the same figure? Are we entitled to define this figure as the composite of all the characteristics he manifests in our sources?

Sources and Methodology:

The oldest material on Loki is contained in poems and prose tales collected almost exclusively in medieval Icelandic manuscripts -- codices dated from the late 13th to late 14th

centuries.¹ The literature itself ranges in age from the late ninth (pre-conversion Iceland) to the thirteenth (post-conversion) century. The poetry is generally divided into two categories called eddic (poetic lays of many forms, found in what we call "The Poetic Edda," which are comparatively simple in style, impersonal in tone, and anonymous) and skaldic (highly formal, decorative poems by court poets). Of the eddic poems, those involving Loki are the didactic-prophetic Voluspá, the flyting poem Lokasenna, the narrative lay Þrymskviða, the legendary saga Reginismál, and two visionary poems that only mention Loki briefly, Baldurs Draumar and Voluspá hin skamma. The skaldic poems are three: Hauströng, Husdrapa, and Þórsdrápa. Many of these poems, eddic and skaldic, are quoted in part in Snorri Sturluson's poetic handbook, commonly referred to as the Prose Edda, a 13th-century Icelandic compilation which constitutes our most comprehensive mythological source.

Snorri Sturluson, 13th-century Christian scholar and politician, divided his work into three separate parts, the first two being irreplaceably essential to the reconstruction of Scandinavian mythology. In the first part, Gylfaginning or "The Deluding of Gylfi," Snorri constructs his (and our) most complete narrative account of Scandinavian mythology

¹ Of the manuscripts, the most significant overall is Codex Regius No. 2365 of the Royal Library of Denmark (late 13th - early 14th century) which is the unique source for most of the eddic poems and contains Snorri's works as well.

within the frame context of a contest of wisdom. Gylfi, King of Sweden, goes disguised as a beggar (Gangleri) to seek knowledge of the Aesir, here prosperous migrants from Asia (descendants of the Trojans) who have tricked the king out of some of his land. Gylfi asks questions of the Aesir, whose answers narrate the whole Norse mythology from creation through the destruction of the world. When the Aesir have no more to tell, they disappear, leaving Gylfi to take their stories back to his subjects. Subsequently, Snorri tells us, the Aesir adopt their gods' names as their own, thus creating the confusion between mythic and historical reality. Both the frame, which provides a loose coherence for a collection of tales, and the euhemeristic interpretation of mythology are characteristically medieval and the creative contributions of Snorri.

In the second part, Skáldskaparmál or "Poetic Diction," Snorri collects and interprets kennings and other poetic diction found in skaldic verse and in the process has preserved both poetic phrases and whole poems, and has narrated stories in explanation of poetic metaphors, etc. The only organizational rule here appears to be that of the list.

Snorri clearly states both in the prologue and at the end of Gylfaginning his intention that these stories not be believed as religious truth; his goal in both parts is to preserve traditional material and to provide a correct way for

Icelandic Christians to understand the pagan mythology upon which their traditional literature is based. Yet Snorri's own deep interest in the mythology is evident in the "almost humanistic detachment" with which he treats his material.² As Anthony Faulkes notes, Snorri "narrates his myths...as myths, entirely without comment and without attempting to use them for any moral purpose" (xxii). Snorri has tried to supply some coherence, but he saw his job less to synthesize the mythology than to collect and artfully recount the traditional tales. For my purposes, Snorri's frame context and other attempts at placing the material within a pagan past have little effect on the tales or on the character of Loki which he portrays with contradictions intact, and I have concerned myself not so much with his larger narrative purposes as with the individual tales themselves.

We find in Gylfaginning a description of Loki and his offspring, and three tales in which he is a major participant in the action: the Asgard builder, Utgard-Loki, and the death of Baldr. In Skáldskaparmál we find four stories involving Loki (myths of Thjazi, Geirrodr, Andvari's gold, and Sif's hair) as well as a description and a geneology.

My approach to this material is syncretistic: I have considered all material on Loki to refer to a traditional character, examining the figure as he exists in the ninth to

² Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Prologue and "Gylfaginning", ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) xxii.

thirteenth-century literature to discover who he is and how he functions. Several facts support my approach. Most important is the fact that the "contradictions" in Loki's role are present in the earliest poems we have. If, for example, one examines the list of kennings for Loki in the ninth-century poem Haustlong, one finds references to him as friend and companion of the gods, as tricky and artful, as a thief, as impulsive, as an air traveler ("Loptr"), as well as geneological references linking him with the giants and with the fathering of the wolf, and a reference to his eventual bondage (see following discussion of Haustlong).

In addition to this, when I examined the literature without assuming that the character of Loki would necessarily be consistent from citing to citing or would even behave like a trickster, I nevertheless found nothing in the particular poems or tales that substantially contradicted the composite picture. More significant yet, to my way of thinking, Snorri Sturluson not only included the whole concatenation of Loki's attributes and actions, but also apparently accepted him as a trickster and made use of this comic narrative function in his collection of tales.

Since there is no chronology established for the events in Norse mythology between the creation of the world and the death of Baldr, I have chosen to order the material to portray the aspects that constitute the central contradiction in Loki's nature -- comic mischief-maker and tragic demon --

separately. This means leaving aside momentarily Loki's darker role as the "contriver of Baldr's death...and Foe of the Gods,"³ which does not seem to fit a trickster like Wakdjunkaga, to look at the poems and tales that most clearly present the amoral, multi-faceted trickster.⁴

Loki:Mischief-Maker

Snorri, whose portrayal of Loki includes a description of the character, introduces him in Gylfaginning as one "reckoned amongst the gods... one that some call the mischiefmonger of the Æsir and the father-of-lies and the disgrace-of-gods-and-men." Then after giving a lineage establishing Loki as the son of a giant, Snorri proceeds:

Loki is handsome and fair of face, but has an evil disposition and is very changeable of mood. He excelled all men in the art of cunning, and he always cheats. He was continually involving the Ásir in great difficulties and he often helped them out again by guile.⁵

³ From Skálds. Trans. Arthur Brodeur, The Prose Edda (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1916) 114-15.

⁴ Jan de Vries, the first to focus on Loki's function as a trickster, defined mischief as "the central point of his character from which different attitudes radiate in all directions...." He, however, finds the need to eliminate the demonic aspects from Loki's original character. The Problem of Loki (Helsinki, 1933) 224.

⁵ The Prose Edda, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: U of California P, 1954) 55. Faulkes edition, 26-27:

Sá er enn talör með Ásum er sumir kalla rógbera Ásanna ok frumkveða flærðanna ok vömm allra goða ok manna. Sá er nefndr Loki eða Loptr, sonr Fárbauda jötuns... Loki er friðr ok fagr sýnum, illr í skaplyndi, mjök fjölbreytinn at háttum. Hann hafði þá speki um fram aðra menn er sloegð heitir, ok vælar til allra hluta. Hann kom Ásum jafnan í fullt vandræði

Loki, son of a giant who nevertheless makes his home among the Aesir, belongs neither wholly to the giants (primordial beings representing chaos and destruction) nor wholly to the gods. He is fair in form and crafty, fickle and deceitful. He gets the Aesir into trouble, but almost as often extricates them from it: his crafty intelligence works for and against them. His activities show him scuttling back and forth (generally on wings -- he is Loptr, "sky-traveller") among various worlds: from the worlds of gods and men (Asgard and Midgard) to the domains of giants (Jotenheim) and the underground dwellings of dwarves.⁶ He

ok opt leysti hann þá með vælræðum.

Of the kennings listed in Skálds., several identify Loki by his blood kinship -- both those who begot him and those whom he begot -- and others identify him by his activities. The remainder name him according to his disposition and place among the gods: "kinsman and uncle, evil companion and bench mate of Odin and the Aesir, foe of the gods, forger of evil, the sly god, slanderer and cheat of the gods." Even with such a strong emphasis on his evil nature, there are suggestions of his close bonds with the gods, his acceptance among them. Kennings referring to Loki's role in Baldr's death and at Ragnarok will be considered in the later discussion.

Skálds. 23: Um Loka

Hversu skal kenna Loka?

Svo oð kalla hann son Fárbauda og Laufeyjar, Nálar, bróður Byleists og Helblinda, föður Fenrisúlfs og Jörmungands, það er Miðgarðsorms, og Heljar og Nara og Ála, frænda og föðurbróður, vársinna og sessa Óðins og ása heimsæki og kistuskrúð Geirróðar, Þjófur jötna, hafurs og Brisingamens og Iðunnar epla, Sleipnis frænda, ver Sigynjar, guða dólgur, hárskaði Sifjar, bólva smiður, hinn slægi ás, rægjandi og vélandi guðanna, raðbani Baldurs, hinn bundini ás, þrætudólgur Heimdallar og Skaða...

⁶ The only locale he is never shown to enter is Niflheim, the world of the dead where reigns his daughter, Hel.

goes sometimes in his own interests, sometimes at the behest of the gods, sometimes under compulsion from the gods or giants. His movement between worlds is facilitated by his ability to change his shape at will. This flexibility further permits him to penetrate the habitats of insect, fish, and fowl (domains of air and water) and extends to include sex-changing: on several occasions he is said to have borne children, and at one time, transformed into a mare, he gives birth to an eight-legged foal.⁷

From this brief summary of Loki's character, we turn to the actual narratives wherein Loki figures, examining first those tales in which Loki is a prominent actor and beginning with his least harmful actions which are the result of impulsive, gratuitous mischief.

In a tale recounted only by Snorri (Skálds.), we find Loki in an act of mischief impulsively cuts off the hair from Thor's wife Sif's head.⁸ When Thor threatens to break every

⁷ See Lokasenna, st. 23 and 33 where Odinn accuses Loki of having given birth to children and played a womanish part, and Njorth echoes the charge; and Voluspá hin skamma, st.14 where it is said Loki ate a woman's heart and "with child he grew from the guileful woman;/thence are on earth all ogres sprung." Trans. Lee Hollander, Poetic Edda (Austin: U of Texas P, 1928) 139. This characteristic of Loki's is presented as shameful and abnormal.

⁸ Only in Lokasenna, where Loki claims to have cuckolded Thor, is Loki connected with Sif, but nowhere are these two myths connected. Edgar Polomé ("Germanic Religion," Ency. of Religion, vol. 5) sees the two myths logically connected however. He cites Odinn's warning to Thor in Hárbarlióð : "With Sif someone sleeps in her bower," (48) and says, "This explains why Loki dared to treat her like a whore (cutting off all her hair), since this was the treatment normally inflicted

bone in Loki's body if he does not repair this damage with hair of real gold, Loki sets off for the dwarf Brokkr. But once the hair has been made (as well as two other treasures for the gods Odinn and Freyr), Loki does not take his leave. Rather he stays to wager his head that Brokkr's brother Sindri cannot make another three such precious objects. Sindri accepts the wager, producing Freyr's magic boar, Odinn's gold ring Draupnir, and Thor's hammer Mjollnir. But each time Sindri works at his anvil, Loki, in the shape of a fly, stings him, attempting to prevent the dwarf from perfecting his work, thinking this way to win the wager.⁹ When the six treasures are brought before the gods, however, Thor's hammer, despite the flawed haft resulting from Loki's interference, is proclaimed the most wondrous and valuable of all the gifts because it will afford the gods protection from the giants.

Loki, finding that he has in fact lost the wager and moreover that Sindri will not accept a substitute for the wagered head, flies off in his magic shoes, attempting to escape payment of the bargain. When Thor catches Loki eventually, the trickster evades death with a clever interpretation of the terms of the wager: the dwarf may have

on adulteresses. Þórr, however, does not believe in the unfaithfulness of his wife and compels Loki to...replace her lost locks" (535).

⁹ Loki repeats a similar action in the story of the giant mason, but there his shape-shifting directly benefits the gods.

his head as agreed but must leave him his neck untouched. The dwarf answers this piece of audacity by sewing the cheater's lips together with a leather thong.

In this tale, Loki behaves like a trickster rogue. While Snorri's stated purpose for recounting the story is to explain why gold is called "Sif's hair," Loki's comic deportment actually carries the narrative. Both the cutting of Sif's hair and the wager appear here as gratuitous mischief. In fact Loki's mischief sets in motion a series of events that ultimately results in six precious gifts to the gods. If, as Edgar Polomé suggests, Loki has actually committed adultery with Sif and cuts her hair to reveal her for the whore she is, it is ironic that this more serious misdeed would prove so useful to the Aesir. Furthermore, Loki is not seriously punished for his roguery but instead is twice permitted to redeem his life. Can this be seen as evidence of Pelton's theory that the socially disruptive acts of the trickster actually function ultimately to promote the communal well-being? We note in passing that Loki also displays here his characteristic skills of shape-shifting and flying "lopt ok log" with magic shoes.

The tale of Geirrodr, related in Snorri's Skáldskaparmál, is also set in motion by Loki's mischief. According to Snorri, Loki, transformed into a hawk, flies "for curiosity's

sake" into the court of the giant Geirrodr.¹⁰ Loki sports with the giant (who first spies, then attempts to catch the bird) until Loki is captured. Put in a chest and starved for three months, Loki finally divulges his identity and promises that in return for his ransom he will entice Thor to the giant's court without his hammer or belt. With this introduction to the story, Snorri provides a motive for Loki's action in the older Pórsdrápa, the late tenth-century poem by Ellif Godrunarson, where it says only that Loki, the father of the Midgard serpent and a ready liar, enticed Thor to set out for Geirrodr's hall.¹¹ Snorri, who has told us initially that Loki will accompany Thor on this trip to the giant, now skips directly to Thor's journey, suggesting the role Loki plays in this adventure only by the detail of Loki clinging to Thor's belt in the mighty river. The remainder of the prose tale concerns Thor's feats, at the conclusion of which Snorri inserts verses from Pórsdrápa. In it the companion who clings to Thor's belt is Thjalfi, and Loki is never explicitly mentioned as accompanying Thor. The poem recounts

¹⁰ Trans. Brodeur 121. Snorra Edda, Eds. Anne Holtsmark and Jon Helgason (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1950): "þvíat Loka hafði þat hent þá er hann flaug einu sinni at skemta sér með valsham Friggjar at hann flaug fyrir forvitni sakar í Geirrøðargarða..." (87).

¹¹ By mentioning the Midgard serpent, the poet sets Loki in opposition to Thor who fights the serpent on various occasions and is killed by it when the two fight at Ragnarok. While Loki's narrative function is the same in the prose and poem versions, Ellif's Loki is more sinister.

Thor's glorious exploits and Loki, who functioned only to get Thor into action, drops from view.

Whether or not Snorri's account of Loki's initial activities is based on a traditional version of the story, the use he makes of Loki here is consistent with his function in several of Snorri's renditions. Loki, out for amusement, gets into trouble without considering the outcome. He is clever in the present moment, foolish or dangerous in the long run. His play creates problems from which he will extricate himself at any cost, as we see in the two stories that follow, where Loki's rash actions cause mischief of a more serious kind.

In the tale of the Asgard builder, Loki's knavery initially consists of giving the Aesir unsound advice.¹² When a mason offers to build single-handedly a giant-proof wall around Asgard (the Aesir stronghold) if he can have Freya to wife and the sun and moon as well, the Aesir agree on the condition that it must be completed in one winter, before the first day of summer, or else the mason must forfeit his reward. The mason requests only that he be granted the aid of his horse Svaðilfari, and Snorri indicates that Loki advised this be allowed.¹³

¹² This story is found fully narrated only in Gylfaginning but is referred to in Voluspá and Hyndaljóðh.

¹³ "...And Loki had his way when that was granted him." trans. Young 66. Faulkes ed. "En því réð Loki er þat var til lagt við hann" (35).

When the stallion proves to be unnaturally quick and strong, and the wall nears completion before summer has arrived, the gods turn on Loki, threatening him with violence if he does not contrive it so that the mason loses the wager. Transforming himself into a mare, Loki lures the stallion away from his master and so halts construction on the wall, saving the Aesir. The mason, a giant in disguise, is subsequently crushed to death by Thor, and some time later Loki (as mare) gives birth to a grey, eight-legged foal, Sleippner, destined to be Odinn's horse and "the best among gods and men."¹⁴

No explanation is proffered as to why Loki advised the mason's use of the stallion; Snorri may simply be following Voluspá in making Loki responsible for the Aesirs' agreement with the giant mason. Voluspá refers to this incident in the context of the rebuilding of Asgard after the war between Aesir and Vanir, and mentions the one "who had filled the air with perfidy/ or promised Oð's wife to the demon race," suggesting Loki without naming him.¹⁵

The Voluspá poet, however, is interested in Loki only as one actor among others in the events that lead to Ragnarok.

¹⁴ Hyndaliódh, stanza 13, mentions Sleippner among the other monsters born to Loki.

¹⁵ Voluspá, stanza 25: "hverir hefði lopt alt/ lævi blandit/ eða ætt jötuns/ Oðs mey gefna." This edition is Sigurdur Nordal's as printed with translation by Paul Schach in the latter's, "Some Thoughts on Völuspá," Edda: A Collection of Essays, eds. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Manitoba: U of Manitoba P, 1983) 97.

It is Snorri alone in our sources who connects Loki's subversive counsel with the birth of the horse Sleippner. He places Loki in a familiar situation: whether the result of a too hasty opinion or of an intentional trickery, Loki's behavior leads to trouble for the Aesir that only he can undo. In Snorri's context, Loki is the logical choice for this latter role on two counts: first he is responsible for the problem; and second he has the cunning and skill needed to find a solution.

Loki's transformation into an animal is a typical characteristic; as we have already seen, he uses shape-shifting readily to extricate himself from difficulty. His giving birth to Sleippner, however, is more unusual. Even Anna B. Rooth, who has challenged the authenticity of Loki's animal and sexual transformations, admits that Loki's seduction of the stallion as a means of explaining how he gave birth to Sleippner is outside the pattern typical among builder legends of this kind and might therefore be an original, authentic trait.¹⁶

¹⁶ "This special guile which explains how Loki came to give birth to Sleipner has not been proved to exist in other variants of the builder legend" (187). See also page 39. Rooth's argument throughout her monograph, Loki in Scandinavian Mythology (Lund: Gleerup, 1961) is that the "kaleidoscopic character" scholars derive from the composite Loki (i.e. the sum of all his various parts) does not represent the original figure. The early figure, she posits, can only be found by stripping away all foreign borrowings or influences. This she attempts to do by examining common folk motifs and stories that might be supposed to be known by the 10th to 13th century Scandinavian poets and raconteurs responsible for our sources. Where she finds a similar plot

The next story to be considered, that of the giant Thjazi, is found in Haustlong the ninth-century poem by Thiódólf of Hvin, and in Snorri's Skáldskaparmál. The narrative plot is briefly as follows:¹⁷ Three Aesir -- Odinn,

or motif elsewhere, she assumes a borrowing in the Scandinavian material. Where no parallels exist, she maintains, one can be fairly certain one has something pertaining to the original figure. By such a method she reduces Loki's authentic traits to essentially two: Loki's association with the net (his capturing of Andvari with a net and his invention of the net before his own capture) and, more doubtfully, his disguise as a woman. Rooth remains ambivalent on the question of the birth of Sleippner and Loki's other births. Although she finds no parallels for this trait, she says, "It is uncertain whether the motif of Loki as a foaling mare is an authentic mythical trait" (41). She also questions more broadly Loki's sexual ambiguity: "Neither ought one to draw the conclusion from Loki's transformation into a mare or his dressing up as a woman that he is sexually ambivalent" (187).

¹⁷ The story of Thjazi told in Haustlong is not the self-contained narrative of Snorri's prose tale. Ostensibly it is composed to describe the figures on an elaborately carved shield. As with other Skaldic poems, it is highly formal, intricately wrought, descriptive, metaphorically complex with its dense language of kennings. Skaldic kennings, while mythological in content, function to fulfill poetic requirements rather than to convey narrative or religious meaning. The kennings in Haustlong, for example, presuppose an audience well versed in the mythology, but they do not themselves work to build a thematic context for the story. Loki is named in stanza 8 alone as frodgum tivi ("cunning god"), ulfs fadir ("wolf's father"), and Thors of runi ("Thor's friend"). The force of such use of references in the poem is both to create a cacophany of overtones and to keep the story reverberating in its larger mythological context.

The story as told by Thiódólf begins with the plundering eagle flying towards the three Aesir where they sit broiling an ox. It is Odinn (named only by kennings) who realizes the reason for the meat's unnatural toughness and he who instructs Loki to divide up the meat to satisfy the eagle's demands. The eagle is next pictured vividly as he snatches the whole ox and eats it from the branch above. The poet emphasizes his odious behavior -- the unfairness, the greed in his actions. Now Loki strikes. His action, following Odinn's

Hoener, and Loki -- are wandering the earth. They find a herd of oxen, kill one, and roast it, but the meat refuses to cook. When a giant eagle in the tree above demands a portion in return for permitting the meat to roast, the three Aesir agree. But when the eagle snatches the whole ox, Loki strikes him with his staff. At this, Loki and the staff stick fast to the eagle (the giant Thjazi) and Loki is borne aloft in a tortured flight. Only when he agrees to lure the goddess Idunn and her apples of youth out of Asgard does Thjazi release him. However, once the apples leave Asgard, the gods begin to age rapidly, and they threaten Loki's life if he does not rescue Idunn.

Donning Freyja's falcon coat, Loki flies to Thjazi's castle, transforms Idunn into a nut, and carries her back to Asgard. The giant pursues them in eagle guise and, upon entering Asgard, is burned to death.

Snorri's recounting is a self-contained narrative clearly intended to be entertaining. He makes Loki the focus of the tale throughout, and although the frame of the story places

order for him to serve up the portions, is justified and the kenning used suggests this: he is called "diúp-hugaðr" (deep-plotting) and "guardian of war-spoils" as he strikes. But as Loki is held fast to Thjazi, the poet refers to him as "sá er ǫll regin eygja, / ǫndurgoðs í bǫndum" -- "that one whom the gods all glare at in chains," thus linking Loki's present bondage with his final bondage, his part in the rape of Idunn with his part in the murder of Baldr. Edition and trans. in O.E.G. Turville-Petre, Skaldic Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 10. In such a way the kennings in the poem call up the whole history and character of Loki.

Loki firmly among the Aesir, the subsequent events show him acting on his own.¹⁸ His sudden angry blow sets in motion a chain of events that keeps Loki at odds with the Aesir until, having retrieved Idunn and facilitated the giant's death, he redeems himself by amusing Skaði, Thjazi's vengeful daughter, thus saving the gods from further trouble. Apart from the opening lines, Snorri's tale shows Loki to be an impulsive, self-serving trickster. As the tale ends we see Loki, the buffoon, nearly mutilating himself by tying a cord between the goat's beard and his own genitals. As the two play at tug-of-war, Loki falls screeching into Skaði's lap and the giantess, laughing, relinquishes her plans for revenge.¹⁹

The pattern in all three tales thus far has Loki first threatening the gods' security, then restoring, even improving their lot. This might seem to indicate the mythic, taboo-breaking role of the magician that Makarius proposes, except for the clearly impulsive, self-serving, accidental nature of Loki's actions which show no conscious or willed benevolence. The benefits are accidental results of the trickster's nature.

¹⁸ The frame for this story is an exchange of stories between Bragi, an Aesir, and Aegir, a magician who has ventured to Asgard. In Asgard the Aesir hold a festival in his honor and Loki is listed among the twelve Aesir judges named and seated on high.

¹⁹ Haustlong does not include this episode with Skaði, although Turville-Petre reminds us that Snorri may well have known more of the poem than the stanzas he quotes in Skálds. See Skaldic Poetry 9.

In the story of Andvari's gold, told in Reginismál and by Snorri (Skálds.), Loki's impulsive killing of an otter initiates a sequence of events that ends much later in legendary history with the fall of the Niflungs. This alters somewhat the pattern of the above stories in that while Loki's actions first threaten, then save the Aesir, the consequences for the world of men are disastrous, though Loki is only indirectly responsible for the trouble that follows.

The stories in both sources follow the same basic narrative line: Odinn, Hoenir, and Loki happen upon a waterfall where they see an otter eating a salmon. Loki throws a stone at the otter, killing it. Reginismál suggests that the Aesir are pleased with Loki's action ("The gods thought they had made a lucky catch and flayed the otter..." Hollander, Poetic Edda 253). Snorri says nothing of the Aesirs' response, only "Loki boasted in his catch that he had got the otter and the salmon with one blow" (Brodeur 150). In both versions the gods take the otter with them to a farmhouse (Hreidmarr's) where they ask for lodging and show what they have brought to eat. Hreidmarr and his sons instantly bind the Aesir, telling them the otter (Otr) was son and brother to them. They demand a wergild for ransom -- the otter skin must be filled entirely with gold and brought to them. At this point in the narrative, the two stories differ somewhat. Snorri says Odinn sent Loki to the dwarves to fetch gold. Loki catches the dwarf Andvari (who was a fish

in the water) and forces him to give up all his gold. The dwarf tries to hide one gold ring with which he could again multiply gold, but Loki sees it and takes this too. At this, Andvari lays a curse on the ring, and Loki, undaunted, agrees to transmit the curse and leaves for Hreidmarr's home.

Reginismál adds a detail: Loki borrows a net from Ran, the sea goddess, and so catches the fish/dwarf.²⁰ This event is followed by five stanzas of dialogue between Loki and Andvari: Loki threatens Andvari with death if he does not deliver the gold; Andvari identifies himself; two gnomic stanzas follow in which Loki poses the question of what will happen to one who does not tell the truth and Andvari answers; then Loki takes the gold and Andvari lays his curse on the ring.

In Snorri's version, Odinn wants to keep the ring and he pays Hreidmarr all the gold but this. But Hreidmarr sees one whisker of the otter uncovered and demands more, so Odinn reluctantly parts with the ring. Once the Aesir are freed, Loki delivers the curse: the ring and the gold will be the destruction of those who receive it.

Nothing is mentioned in Reginismál about Odinn's intent to keep the ring. The focus here, in keeping with the frame context (Regin is telling young Sigurd the history of the

²⁰ Reginismál, found in Codex Regius, contains a prose introduction, which scholars assume to be the work of a 13th-century redactor, and other narrative insertions which tie together the stanzas of dramatic dialogue. Loki figures in the first two dialogues; the first with Andvari, the second with Hreidmarr.

treasure and the need for vengeance), is on the curse itself. Loki indicates that the curse will carry on through generations yet unborn and Hreidmarr first wishes he had never taken the gold, then, as greed overtakes him, chooses to hoard it away and expels the gods from his house.

Loki's impulsive action in this tale has far-reaching consequences for men, but the gods are left untouched -- they merely transmit the curse with the ransom. Loki has been the chief actor here: he kills the otter and extorts the ransom gold from the dwarf, using his wily intelligence on Odinn's behalf. However, the curse of the Niflungs is not so much Loki's fault as the result of Hreidmarr's own lust for the gold.

Only three more stories remain that do not touch on Loki's darker role as the enemy of the Aesir: the story of Utgard-Loki in Gylfaginning, Þrymskviða in the Poetic Edda, and the late 14th-century tale of Sorlapattr in Flateyjarbók.²¹ The first two show Loki as Thor's companion in forays against the giants.

The role Loki plays in Snorri's recounting of the trip to Utgard is relatively insignificant. The tale concerns a time when Thor's mighty strength appeared insufficient against a giant's magical powers, and Loki refers to this incident also in Lokasenna, attempting to shame Thor with it. In

²¹ Flateyjarbók is a manuscript book from the 14-century written in the Flatey Monastery in Iceland.

Snorri's tale Loki is mentioned merely as having accompanied Thor on his journey to Utgard where he encountered the giant Skymir. Only in Utgard, when the king Utgard-Loki challenges the travelers to show their arts, does Loki speak up. First to accept the challenge, he claims to eat faster than anyone else and this challenge is taken up by a man called Logi. Loki and Logi consume the food with equal haste, but at the end Loki has left the bones while Logi has consumed meat, bones, and trencher. Logi is proclaimed the winner. Likewise Thjalfi and Thor enter contests and lose them. When Thor admits that he's been put to shame, Utgard-Loki reveals the true contestants of the Aesir to have been powerful natural forces: Loki strove against fire, Thjalfi raced against thought, Thor drank the ocean itself and battled the Midgard Serpent and old age. Thor intends to take revenge on the deceitful king, but in that instant Utgard and its inhabitants utterly vanish, so Thor journeys on.²²

²² Hilda Davidson remarks that Utgard-Loki is "also a Loki of the outer-regions...a giant of tremendous size and power, but his power is not really greater than that of Thor: it depends largely on his cunning and capacity to perform sight-deceiving magic." This figure is similar to the bound giant in Saxo and she intimates that the Utgard-Loki may once have been related to the Asgard Loki who ends up bound and terrible. Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 182. M. Ciklimani, on the other hand, sees this tale as "from beginning to end...an unrelieved putdown of Porr" (55) and makes this a case in point in defense of her reading of Snorri's treatment of myths, which she sees as making light of the seriousness of what is at stake here. "...Several myths are, despite the gravity of the mythic situation, humorous. They are no longer dramatic events but delusive mythic scenes viewed from the secure perspective of a sophisticated and tolerant Christian." Snorri Sturluson

In Prymkviða, a verse narrative found in Codex Regius, Thor again appears in a comic light and Loki is his clever companion. Thor awakes enraged to find his hammer missing and, not daring to seek out the giants unarmed, he calls for Loki. The two go to Freyja, who loans Loki her coat of hawk feathers and off he flies to Jotenheim. When he arrives, the giant Thrym asks for news of the Aesir, and Loki in turn requests information on the whereabouts of Thor's hammer. Thrym admits to having hidden it and says he will only return it if Freyja will be his wife.

Loki flies home, and Thor, comically impatient for the news, wants Loki to tell all even before he touches ground. Freyja, of course, will not hear of wedding a giant, so the gods take counsel. Heimdallr suggests Thor himself go disguised as the bride and wearing the great Brising necklace. Thor is outraged at the suggestion, but Loki sensibly persuades him to go lest the giants gain the advantage. The two set off: Thor as Freyja, Loki as her handmaid. What follows is pure burlesque: Thrym is unsettled by his "bride's" appetite and fierceness of expression; Loki ("ambætt fyrir") supplies the witty excuses for Freyja's odd appearance. When Thrym has Thor's hammer brought out to hallow the bride, Thor can contain himself no longer and he kills the giant and his kin. "Sva," says the poet, "kom Odins sonr endr at

(Boston: Twayne, 1978) 58.

hamri." So Odinn's son got back his hammer.

Loki appears in both these essentially comic tales as the willing companion of Thor, and nowhere in them does he act on his own or to the detriment of the gods. Here the same Thor who elsewhere threatens Loki with severe punishment or death enlists Loki's aid and relies on his advice and his wiles. We see Loki once more more in Freyja's feather coat, although it seems more a means of travel than a disguise since Thrym identifies Loki at once as one of the Aesir, and later we see Loki disguised (not sexually transformed) as Thor's handmaid. These weakened attributes may derive from the same demythologized perspective as that which casts Thor in a comic light. On the other hand, nothing Loki does here contradicts aspects of his character in other tales. His mischief is harnessed in service of the gods. He is recognizable, if somewhat less potent or sinister. One characteristic is added here -- Loki's gargantuan appetite, a not uncommon attribute of the trickster figure.

Only one myth remains that in no way associates Loki with monsters or death: Loki as the thief of the Brising necklace. There are references to the myth in two of our oldest poems, Husdrapa and Haustlong. The fourth stanza of Husdrapa reads thus:

Ráð-gegninn bregðr ragna-rein at Singa-steini
frægr við firna slóegian Fárbauta maog-vári:
móð-aoflugr ræðr móeðra maogr haf-nyra faogro
(kynni-ek) áðr ok einnar átta (mæðar þáottom) ...

[The skillful renowned Warder of the Path of Powers

(rainbow bridge) wrestled with Loki, Faarbaute's most wily son, at Singastone, before the sturdy Son of Nine Mothers (Heimdall) won the fair necklace of stones. I set this forth in my song. ...]²³

In stanza 9 of Haustlong, the poet calls Loki "Brisings ...girðipjófr" (CPB 1:15), the thief of the Brisinigr's necklace, and Snorri in Skálds. lists one periphrase for Loki as "þjófr Brisinamens," telling briefly also where he quotes the above passage from Husdrapa that "Ulfr Uggason composed a long passage...on that legend, and there it is written that they were in the form of seals." (Brodeur 113)

The only place a story is told of Loki's theft of the necklace is in the late, generally suspect prose tale, Sorlabattr, found in Flateyjarbók.²⁴ The story is briefly as follows: Four dwarves have made a precious jewel. Freyja wants it and is willing to sleep with each dwarf in turn to get it. Loki ("ekki mikill uóxstum" in the role of a small, clever bonhomme who takes on difficult services for Odinn) finds out and tells Odinn, who then constrains him to steal the jewel. This Loki does by taking the shape of a flea (only thus can he penetrate Freyja's stronghold) and biting Freyja's neck while she sleeps. When the goddess wakes, she discovers her jewels missing and demands their return. Odinn

²³ Corpus Poeticum Boreale, Eds. Vigfusson and Powell, vol.1 (London: Russell, 1965) 24. Translation provided under original text.

²⁴ I have used the text provided by A.B. Rooth (Loki) for Sorlabattr. See 48-55.

agrees on the condition that she provoke an eternal war between two powerful kings.

While drawing on several traditional characteristics, this rendering is considered by scholars to be a late invention and of little true mythic value. It shares several superficial features in common with Snorri's tale of Sif's hair (adultery, Loki's theft of a goddess's prized possession and his taking the shape of a fly/flea) but in this later tale Loki has shrunk to miniature size and relative narrative insignificance. No longer does his mischief motivate the tale; rather he's a telltale who acts on Odinn's behalf and disappears from the action once he's accomplished his task.

These last three tales all more or less reduce Loki the trickster to a relatively harmless role -- that of clever companion to or servant of Thor and Odinn. He is essentially devoid of the ambivalent moral status that has elsewhere kept him scuttling back and forth between Aesir and Giants, and more particularly, he no longer clearly exhibits the motive of self-interest that makes his facile, contriving mind dangerous to others. With these omissions we lose our sense of Loki's potential for harming the Aesir gods and he loses the freedom and flexibility so essential to the survival of the trickster. For the trickster must ultimately owe allegiance to no one but himself if he is to remain potent and effective.

In the myths summarized thus far, Loki cannot be

considered a foe of the gods. His activities make trouble for the Aesir and giants alike, but the consequences of his actions are also frequently beneficial for the Aesir. In several stories he functions as the provider: he is responsible for the six treasures the dwarves make the gods (Thor's hammer being one); he gives birth to Sleipnir, Odinn's horse; he obtains the wergild for Hreidmarr; twice he frees the gods from the threat of giants. However, as Radin noted in his discussion of the culture-hero aspects of the Native American trickster, these benefits provided are usually accidental rather than intentional. Jan de Vries likewise points out that Loki's usefulness is frequently a by-product of his getting something for himself or getting himself out of trouble.²⁵ Nevertheless, the Aesir do employ Loki as a messenger/negotiator. His shape-changing body, his resourceful, imaginative mind, his quick tongue -- these too are useful to the gods. He is entrusted to get back Sif's hair, to retrieve Idunn and the apples, to negotiate between the Aesir and the giant mason, to fetch the gold needed to ransom Odinn, Hoenir, and himself (which he extorts rather than bargains for), and to discover the whereabouts of Thor's hammer. However, as Loki is fundamentally self-serving and essentially a coward (he engages in verbal, not physical, combat and runs from danger whenever the threat is to

²⁵ Problem of Loki 264-71.

himself), plans entrusted to him may very well go awry.

Loki's narrative role is not that of the trickster Wakdjunkaga, the central figure in a cycle of tales, whom we see wandering randomly through the universe seemingly creating stories from his own natural vitality -- his urge to be active. For one thing, Loki is but one among mightier gods in these Old Norse tales. Yet even though the stories considered thus far do not concern his most highly dramatic function as foe of the gods, he exhibits a curious prominence, figuring in many stories and tending to dominate the narrative. In the myths of Sif's Hair, Thjazi, and Andvari's Gold, Loki first initiates the action, then takes center stage in playing out or elaborating the consequences of his actions. Loki also voluntarily initiates the action in the myths of Geirrodr and the Asgard Builder (through curiosity and mischief in one, bad counsel in the other) and in Þrymskviða he acts at Thor's behest to set the story in motion.

It is interesting to note the differences in Loki's narrative roles in these tales depending on whether he accompanies Odinn or Thor. When he appears with Odinn, he seems to act with Odinn's tacit approval and Odinn's role in the plot either remains very minor or disappears entirely. In both "Thjazi" and "Andvari," where Loki accompanies Odinn and Hoenir on their wanderings, his impulsive striking of eagle and otter is on behalf of his comrades as well as himself: he attempts to defend their supper against the

predations of the eagle/giant in one and to provide a meal of salmon and otter in the other. However, what constitutes the story in both these tales is the way Loki complicates the situation: by betraying the gods in order to save himself in the first; by robbing a dwarf and so extracting with the wergild a curse in the second. What is the nature of the relationship between Loki and Odinn that makes Odinn seem so tolerant of Loki's mischief?

Many scholars have commented on the apparent sympathy between these two characters and their resemblance to each other in other ways. For example, both are connected with wolves: Loki fathers one, Odinn keeps two wolves, Geri and Freki, as table companions. Both work magic, are shape-shifters, and don disguises to deceive others. Snorri lists names for Odinn that resemble those for Loki: he is Helblindi ("One who blinds others"), Saör ("Changeable one"), and Bölverkr ("Worker of evil") as compared with Helblindi as Loki's brother (Skálds. 14), Loki as pölva smiður ("Forger of evil"), and mjök fjölbreytinn ("Changeable of mood" Gylf. 33/38).²⁶ Turville-Petre also notes that "Both were sex-changers and deceivers" and says in the conclusion of his chapter on Loki, one cannot "dismiss the hypothesis that

²⁶ See Gylfaginning 20:26-55 for a list of Odinn's names; Skálds. 16 for Loki.

Loki...[was] in origin, an aspect of Odinn." ²⁷

And, of course, as mentioned above, Loki accompanies Odinn on two of his wanderings. The traveling trio, which includes Hoenir, has no stated purpose in either tale and it is Loki's activity that generates the stories. However, a distinction must be drawn between Odinn's impulse to wander and Loki's, and it is essentially the distinction between what may appear to be the similar activities of shaman-magician and trickster.²⁸ Dumézil has defined Loki as "l'intelligence impulsive" whose mental activity takes him in all directions, and we have noted in the initial description of Loki his ability to transform himself physically into mammal, fowl, fish, and insect as an entrance into other worlds of experience.²⁹ Yet Loki nowhere journeys in search of meaning or knowledge; neither does he go in search of any experiences that are likely to cause him pain. He never journeys to Niflheim, for example. He is curious but it seems a curiosity borne of the need to keep busy, to avoid passivity or boredom, rather than a curiosity to learn. His

²⁷ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North (New York: Holt, 1964) 144, 146.

²⁸ The shaman travels between worlds -- heaven, earth, underworld -- experiencing realities inaccessible to the conscious mind; gaining wisdom which he reenacts or reveals, often in esoteric, secretive, contradictory seeming ways, for other men.

²⁹ Georges Dumézil, Loki: Les dieux et les hommes (Paris: G-P Maisonneuve, 1948) 273 ff.

exploration is random and produces no apparent growth beyond the possible extension of his powers of adaptability -- expanding his knowledge of how to keep himself active and alive.³⁰

Odinn, on the other hand, like the shaman-magician, travels between worlds and explores in a quest for wisdom, to bring the mysteries and ultimate knowledge of the higher world into the lower world. He pushes the limits of the conscious, rational, material world (he is connected with poetry, magic, and death) in order to know and understand all experience.³¹ And herein may lie the reason for Odinn's apparent tolerance of and sympathy for Loki. The trickster, the one who pushes the limits for the sake of movement, may facilitate the journeys of the All-Father in quest of new experience.

³⁰ S.A. Barnett cites various experiments showing that insects, rodents, and higher animals alike have the impulse to wander randomly or seek out a new path or environment, to explore new objects, etc. Some of this is apparently "an imperative need for external stimulation" (38) which in animals can be shown to "contribute in an important way to the development of intelligence...[i.e.] the ability to adapt behavior to circumstances." Instinct and Intelligence: Behavior of Animals and Man (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 41.

³¹ Note Odinn's dealings with Mimir to gain a drink from the well of wisdom, Gylf.; his shape-changing and adventuring to drink Kvasir's blood ("poetry"), Skálds.; Hávamál, the runic poem, where Odinn, hanging from the World Tree learns the secret wisdom of the runes; Valbrudnismál where Odinn travels to Jotenheim to test the wisdom of a giant against his own; Baldrs Draumar where Odinn questions the volva in Hel about the future, etc.

See also Davidson's chapter on "Odinn as Shaman," in Gods and Myths 140-49.

Furthermore, it would seem in character for the far-sighted Odinn to accept Loki since he would understand that Loki's function -- his life energy that keeps him in motion -- cannot be ignored without causing even greater trouble. So in Lokasenna we will find it is Odinn who admits Loki to the banquet, acknowledging his sworn pledge always to include Loki as his drinking companion (stanzas 9-10).

If Odinn lets Loki into the banquet in Lokasenna, Thor drives him out. Although Loki is called Thor's friend ("Þors of runi, Haustlong 8:5) and accompanies Thor as henchman on the god's journeys to Jotenheim, Loki's relationship with Thor in general proves less accommodating. Thor, giant killer, defender of Asgard, functions frequently in the tales to curb Loki's excesses and punish his misdeeds. This fits Thor's religious function as a god who not only protects the Aesir from chaos and destruction but defends mankind's civilization, the rule of law and order, as well.³² But though Thor has vitality and strength, he lacks subtlety and mental acuity, and he exhibits no sense of humor beyond the gruff high spirits of the warrior in combat. Loki provides these missing elements, acting as the catalyst that sets the giant killer in motion. Thus we see Loki acting on Thor -- baiting, goading, coaxing the mighty champion. But when Thor raises his hammer in earnest against Loki, the trickster runs

³² See Davidson, 91 ff.

for his life.

In the narrative it is interesting to find that except for one tale (Sif's Hair), whenever Loki shares the action with Thor, Thor either dominates the action or drives Loki out. In "Geirrodr" Loki initiates the action but "disappears" once Thor is on the road to Jotenheim. In Brymskviða, Loki serves Thor by playing the comic role to Thor's straight man, the clever mind behind the dominating figure of Thor. In Utgard, Loki's role is very minor; he travels with Thor but distinguishes himself only briefly as one of the three contestants. Even in the tale of Sif's Hair Loki is finally caught by Thor and punished with the god's help. It is Thor in Lokasenna who runs Loki off and later, according to the prose colophon, it is he who catches the shape-shifting Loki who has turned himself into a salmon to escape his doom. Thus Thor, the vital man of action himself, welcomes Loki's mental energy, but, as the defender of order, appears essentially unsympathetic with the destructive potential of Loki's unbridled life force.

The most complete picture we get of Loki the trickster is from Snorri's two works, Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál. But is the portrait found here primarily a result of Snorri's art? His desire above all to tell a good story to entertain his readers? The mythological authenticity of Snorri's representation is not of fundamental concern here. As Sigurður Nordal reminds us, neither Snorri's mythology nor the

older mythological poems provide an accurate idea of the early Scandinavian religion.³³ We can, however, observe the literary significance of the Loki character, and here Snorri is certainly helpful. As a poet, Snorri undoubtedly took some liberties in synthesizing as he compiled and in developing, embellishing, rounding out the stories as he narrated them in prose.³⁴ Certainly the trickster, who can be counted on to provide the initial impulse to action, to get the story started merely because he desires movement, is useful to the storyteller. His interference needs no lengthy preparation and no justification beyond that of the trickster's nature. Without a doubt, whether Snorri inherited the material or invented it himself, he does utilize Loki in this way.³⁵ Snorri also trades on the comic potential

³³ See Nordal's introduction to Jean I. Young's translation of Snorri's Prose Edda, 12.

³⁴ "There is no reason to believe...that everything in Gylfaginning is derived from ancient tradition, whether oral or written. Snorri was a Christian and had only a scholar's and an artist's interest in mythology; he was preserving it for antiquarian not religious reasons. In Heimskringla he treated even his historical sources with a certain freedom, and clearly he would not have felt it wrong to depart from or expand his sources in Gylfaginning too if artistic or other considerations required it, and he would probably not have felt inhibited from inventing new stories or drastically altering old ones if he saw fit," says Anthony Faulkes in the introduction to his edition of Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning, xxvii.

³⁵ The following stories in which Loki's interference is responsible for the major actions of the plot are found only in Snorri: "Asgard Builder" and Loki's precise role in Baldr's death (Gylf.); Skaði's vengence in the "Thjazi" myth (Skálds.). He is also the sole source for certain attributes: Loki's physical beauty; Helblindi as his brother;

in Loki's behavior: his gratuitous buffoonery in "Sif's Hair" when he wagers his head then tries to escape punishment; his clowning at the conclusion of the "Thjazi" myth; his "horse play" in the "Asgard Builder" myth.

But Snorri also took his job of historian sufficiently seriously to compile for preservation traditional material without attempting to reconcile all the contradictions. So we find that he also heightens and elaborates Loki's demonic role in the mythology. It is in Snorri alone that we read of Loki's jealousy, of the mistletoe, of the hardhearted refusal to weep for Baldr, thus twice condemning the bright god to death.

Loki: The Demon

The story of Baldr's death is recounted by Snorri in Gylfaginning as follows:

Baldr, beloved son of Odinn and Frigg and most favored among the gods, has been granted immunity from all creatures and things. The gods, taking advantage of his invulnerability to amuse themselves, have him stand where they can cast darts and stones at him. Baldr's immunity infuriates Loki who, disguised as a woman, goes to Frigg to ask her if all things have indeed sworn not to harm Baldr. "All but the tiny mistletoe," says Frigg. Loki then takes

his curiosity in the "Geirrodr" myth; Loki's eating contest in Utgard; Loki and Heimdallr killing each other at Ragnarok.

a mistletoe twig and persuades the blind Hoð, who is not participating in the sport, to throw the twig according to Loki's instructions. . . This Hoð does and Baldr, pierced through, falls dead to the ground. Snorri's narrator, the "High One," comments, "This was the greatest misfortune ever to befall gods and men" (Young 81).³⁶

The Aesir are said to agree at once on the perpetrator of this deed, but because the sanctuary is holy, they may not take vengeance.³⁷ After Baldr's funeral, the gods send Hermoð down to Hel's domain to plead for Baldr's release. Hel agrees on the condition that all things on earth weep for him. Messengers are sent to perform this task, but they meet a giantess calling herself "Thökk" who refuses to comply. "It is thought," says the narrator, "that the giantess there was Loki, Laufry's son -- who has done most harm amongst the Aesir" (Young 84).³⁸

When Gylfi, the Aesirs' guest whose curiosity has prompted the story, asks what vengeance was taken, the narrator supplies the following tale:

³⁶ Faulkes ed. "ok hefir þat mest óhapp verit unnit með goðum ok mǫnnum." (46)

³⁷ Note Snorri provides this same excuse for the gods' tolerance of the wolf Fenrir, although twice giants are killed in Asgard.

³⁸ Faulkes ed. "En þess geta menn at þar hafi verit Loki Laufeyjarsón er flest hefir illt gert með Ásum" (48).

Loki, feeling the gods' wrath, runs away to hide on a mountain top in a house that looks in all four directions. Here Loki takes his exercise by swimming in the waterfalls as a salmon, but he is always aware of his danger. Anticipating how the gods might catch him, he fashions a net from a piece of twine, then burns the contraption to destroy it. Still the Aesir find him and, seeing in the ashes a trace of his invention, they devise a trap for him. Loki evades them several times, swimming between rocks, leaping over the net, etc., but Thor eventually catches him by the tail. (Thus, according to the narrator, the salmon tapers towards the tail.)

Once Loki is trapped, he is put in a cave where he is bound with the entrails of his own son, which become iron and hold him fast to the rocks. The giantess Skaði fastens a poisonous snake over his head so that the venom drips onto his face. Presumably she is taking revenge on him for his role in her father's death, although Snorri does not comment on her actions. Sigyn, Loki's faithful wife, holds a bowl over his head to catch the venom, but each time she leaves to empty the bowl, the poison causes Loki such agony that he heaves in his bonds and the earth shakes from his struggle. Here he will lie until Ragnarok.

The tale of Loki's binding elicits Gylfi's question about Ragnarok. The High One's answer elaborates the final days of the gods. Violence, wars, and immorality of men precede

cataclysmic events. Frosts devastate the earth, earthquakes tear it asunder, sun and moon are swallowed by wolves, and the stars vanish. Then the wolf Fenrir breaks loose and the great serpent lashes in the sea, causing a tidal wave that launches the death ship Naglfar. The sons of Muspell, with Loki, Fenrir, and Hel in company, ride to war on the plain Vigrið against the gods of Asgard. Heimdallr awakens the gods with a great blast on Gjöll, and the Aesir arm themselves. In the ensuing battle Odinn is swallowed by Fenrir but his son Viðar kills the wolf; Thor battles the Midgard Serpent and each slays the other; Freyr falls against Surt, the fire giant; Loki and Heimdallr kill each other; and finally the victorious Surt burns heaven and earth. After this wholesale destruction, however, a new earth emerges from the sea and a new age of peace and prosperity will ensue.

Nowhere in our sources except in Snorri's tale do we find Loki directly implicated in the death of Baldr, although there is evidence to suggest that this role does not originate with Snorri. In the 10th-century poem Voluspá, the brief recounting of Baldr's death (stanzas 32-34) is followed by the description (st. 35) of Loki bound, implying by logical juxtaposition a connection between the two events. A contemporaneous poem, Baldrs Draumar, mentions only Hoð as the one who slays Baldr although in the final strophe the sibyl tells Odinn to cease with his questions, saying that the bound Loki is breaking his chains and Ragnarok approaches -- thus

also suggesting linkage between the two events. Haustlong refers to Loki as "sá er ǫll regin eygja ǫndurgoðs í bǫndum" ("that one whom the gods all glare at in chains" Turville-Petre, SP 10), but it alludes directly neither to Baldr's death nor to the doom of the gods. However, as such skaldic poems assume an audience thoroughly versed in the traditional material, the mere mention of Loki bound could have been sufficient to call up the entire eschatological picture. Loki's own charge in Lokasenna that he is the reason for Baldr's absence from the hall would seem indisputable evidence of his guilt:

ek því ræð es þú riða sérat

siðan Baldr at saolom (verses 114-115)³⁹

(my rede wrought it that rides nevermore

hitherward Bald to hall. Hollander, PE 96)

Despite this evidence, some earlier scholars such as Eugene Mogk and Jan de Vries argued that Loki's role in Baldr's murder was a latter-day borrowing from Christian mythology or an imaginative error or the intentional creation of Snorri. The contradiction between comic trickster, fickle companion to the gods, and demonic arch-enemy of the gods seemed insupportable. As a result, theories of Loki's origins tended to be polarized: either he was essentially demonic and his lighter trickster nature resulted from a

³⁹ CPE, vol.2 is used for all original quotations from Lokasenna.

demythologization process whereby he lost potency, or he was a trickster first and became a devil only with the influence from popular Christian demonology.

More recent scholarship has tended either to explain how these various attributes might co-exist in Loki or to examine the evidence and leave the controversy open.⁴⁰ Georges Dumézil, in particular, has defended Snorri's version of Loki's treachery as contradicting neither other traditional sources nor Loki's nature (Loki). It is his contention that Loki neither represents an incarnation of evil nor is transformed into a devil in the mythology (see pages 151-52). He sees Loki's change from the relatively harmless mischief of, for example, cutting Sif's hair to the inexpiable act of instigating Baldr's murder as one of level, not of nature. Dumézil attempts to establish his theory in essentially two ways: working first to demonstrate the faulty methodology of Mogk and his followers, he then turns to the comparative method. In the heroic Nartes of the Caucassian legends, Dumézil finds an analogous type in Syrdon -- one of the

⁴⁰ Turville-Petre, for example, very judiciously examines the sources and weighs the possible interpretations of Loki and finally leaves the debate unresolved. Although he thinks it likely that the bound Loki "was derived from Christian legend," he also finds the buffoon character of Loki hard to reconcile with "the father of the death-goddess, of the World-serpent and evil monsters of every kind..." Myth 144-45. Davidson finds Loki "evidently an ambivalent character" and acknowledges the "gradual blackening of his reputation" to be "perhaps the most difficult of many problems connected with Loki" (176-77).

Nartes, but not a hero.⁴¹ Syrdon serves his Nartes comrades (waiting on tables, running errands, giving them counsel, getting them out of tight spots) although they frequently mistrust him. He is said to be of diabolical origins; he is capable of metamorphosis; he takes special pleasure in unearthing secrets; he accompanies the heroes to the battlefield but is never seen in active combat; "il est malin...le malin par excellence" (174). Finally he uncovers the secret of the beautiful hero Soslan's invulnerability (a type analogous to Baldr) and betrays him, giving the secret to his enemies. When he taunts the dying Soslan, the Nartes kill Syrdon and bury him at the feet of his victim. (See Dumézil's summary, 174-76). The parallels are remarkable, though the Nartes are heroic, not sacred characters, and superhuman but not divine. Both Loki and Syrdon, notes Dumézil, are underlings in their respective social orders who are too intelligent to be repressed or ignored, who commit all sorts of mischievous and subversive acts, and who eventually commit such heinous crimes that they must suffer the ultimate punishment.

While Dumézil cannot place Loki in his schema of the tripartite functions of Indo-European culture,⁴² he finds Loki

⁴¹ For the comparison of Syrdon with Loki, see pages 225-89.

⁴² Of course, says Dumézil, the gods are not limited to the three social functions of the human world (267).

"illustre, pour une part, une 'situation' tellement fréquente et naturelle qu'elle pouvait passer pour nécessaire et régulière" (267). The "situation" is a psychological type whose primary characteristic Dumézil defines as "l'intelligence impulsive," and he draws a marvelous picture of this being whose mental activity goes in all directions for its exploration -- refusing to stay within circumscribed social limits, exploring the taboos (especially the sexual and the occult) as well as the virtues.⁴³ Dumézil finds this strange natural force of cerebral activity sometimes irreplaceably in demand: Lóki represents

"la marche de certains esprits, rapide et même trépidante, tournée vers l'image et l'acte plus que vers la réflexion, joyeuse et étourdie, brillante dans l'immédiat et ruineuse à longue échéance; bref, cette variété d'intelligence dont les rouages chargés de la conservation sociale...doivent à la fois rechercher les services aussi souvent que l'imprévu les assaille et redouter constamment les caprices et les malices. Quand il est encadré dans l'ordre social et y collabore (frère serment et compagnon de route d'Odinn, guide et servant de Thorr, bouffon chargé de désarmer par le rire la femme de Njördhr ou de lever la menace qui pèse sur Freyja, conseiller, messenger, négociateur, factotum des Ases), Loki introduit dans cet ordre social un élément de fantaisie de vie, de fertilité qui n'est pas sans danger, mais qui, en général, finit bien et qui, en tout cas, est irremplaçable. Mais quand il ne suit que ses propres impulsions ou les introduit dans ses tâches publiques, il met tout en péril ou fait scandale ... (272-73)

The danger Loki poses is realized when he instigates the murder of Baldr, an act Dumézil sees as befitting his complex,

⁴³ See pages 268-274 for his treatment of this impulsive mental activity.

ambiguous nature. The myth of Baldr shows Loki, impulsive and self-serving, doing one more perilous thing -- mischief on a grand and catastrophic scale.

Dumézil's definition of the function of "impulsive intelligence" as irreplaceable in the social order is analogous to the trickster's function as portrayed by Snorri in these Old Norse myths. For it is Loki's role to inject life into the static perfection of Asgard. The composite picture of Asgard as depicted by Snorri is that of a bright, ordered world, a sanctuary of harmony and peace. Unlike Mount Olympus where gods and goddesses are depicted in pursuit of their own interests at the expense of creating conflict and resentment between deities, the gods of Asgard direct their energies against unwelcome intruders or seek out their foes in other worlds. Even in the poetry when, as in Hárbarzljóðh, Odinn and Thor engage in competitive verbal combat, they do so outside of Asgard (Thor is on his way home from fighting giants) with Odinn disguised as a ferryman. The activities within this sacred space are portrayed as static, self-perpetuating, eternal: for example, all the gods but Odinn feed off the same boar day after day, the feasts and games of their assemblies are harmless good fun; the Einherjar, Odinn's warriors, drink mead from one goat's teats daily and play at war games with no ill effects.

Only Loki's residence in Asgard provides a catalyst to action from within, and so, we are told, when anything is

amiss, the Aesir suspect Loki at once. He cuts Sif's hair, seduces Idunn from Asgard, counsels the gods to accept the giant mason's horse, lures Thor to Jotenheim, steals the necklace from Freyja, and persuades Hoð to throw the mistletoe at Baldr.

Snorri imputes to Loki the motive of jealousy to explain why he would wish for Baldr's death, thus making Loki's action a conscious choice for someone else's misfortune. If this motive is ignored (and motives are of little concern elsewhere in these tales), one can see that, true to character, Loki has once again introduced into the static play of the gods (who might remain forever throwing their missiles at Baldr) an action that propels the story forward. Once again Loki is "sagna hroerir," the mover of men, or, as Anna Holtsmark has interpreted this kenning from Haustlong (stanza 9), "the one who starts off the stories."⁴⁴ Following Baldr's funeral, there is only the story of Loki's attempt to escape punishment. Once Loki is caught and bound, the stories stop. There is only the final calling down of the curtain -- Ragnarok.

Loki's function as the catalyst for action, the one who foments conflict, whose compulsion for interactive movement introduces disorder, breaking down the static perfection of Asgard, suggests the trickster's function proposed by Robert

⁴⁴ Turville-Petre explains Holtsmark's reading of the word "sagna" as the genitive of "saga." See Skaldic Poetry 10.

Pelton, the movement which, by bringing anti-social forces into the center where they can be acknowledged, serves to renew and transform the social order. But Pelton, who makes only brief reference to Loki, sees this trickster as ultimately choosing destruction and chaos; he is removed from the center and no longer mediates between order and disorder. Pelton concludes his final chapter thus:

The trickster is wonderful because he is the image of that yearning -- that driving energy of inclusion which is itself an image of final boundlessness -- which sets the social order in motion and keeps it spinning, which holds heaven and earth in balance, which names the nameless and speaks the unspeakable. The figure of Loki bears witness that this force, in its mythic as in its fleshly embodiments, can run amuck, can choose a nothing that is not no-thing, that is chaos. (283-84)

This seems to me the obvious conclusion to draw from Snorri's rendering of the mythology, to make Loki finally a demonic power, but it is not the conclusion one necessarily reaches from the older poems of Voluspá and Lokasenna, as an examination of them will show. Moreover, the tragic sense of the Germanic peoples resides in their heightened awareness that time moves all things towards an end, and even the gods are subject to such fate. In this context it is ironically inevitable that the trickster who propels life (and the narrative) forward pushes towards death and destruction. He is ultimately the agent of Fate. In Voluspá this is Loki's role.

There is not in this universe the sense of "final boundlessness" that Pelton refers to, but there is a humor that triumphs over implacable Fate. As E.V. Gordon points out, the Nordic hero "was not made gloomy by facing the evil of life so sternly; he had the cheerfulness of the man who feels that he is a master of life."⁴⁵ "The hero," says Gordon, "was in truth a champion of the free will of man against fate, which had power only over material things. He knew that he could not save his body from destruction, but he could preserve an undefeated spirit, if his will were strong enough" (xxx). In Lokasenna Loki, the impulsive trickster, faces impossible odds to demonstrate the comic resilience of man's will over his inevitable fate.

Loki: Agent of Fate

According to Snorri, Baldr's death is "the greatest disaster ever brought to pass."⁴⁶ This statement, along with his treatment of Loki's acts and the fact that no stories intervene between Loki's capture and the three years of wars and winters that usher in Ragnarok, suggests that Loki is largely responsible for the doom of the gods. The murder of Baldr is the beginning of the end. In this chronology Snorri

⁴⁵ An Introduction to Old Norse, 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957) xxxii.

⁴⁶ (Gylf.46:7-8) "ok hefir þat mest óhapp verit unnit með goðum ok mǫnnum" (Faulkes 46).

follows Voluspá, the very important and difficult poem from the tenth century, in which a sibyl ("volva"), summoned by Odinn, recounts before the gods the broad sweep of divine history from the earliest creation to Ragnarok. But if Snorri places the blame for the gods' downfall on Loki's shoulders, Voluspá portrays Loki as but one of those who contribute to a breakdown from within Asgard.

The poem alludes to Loki's actions only three times in its sixty-five stanzas.⁴⁷ The first is in stanza 25 where reference is made to his role in the bargain the Aesir made with the giant mason :

Þá gengu regin öll
 a rökstóla,
 ginnheilög goð,
 ok um þat gættuz,
 hverir hefði lopt alt
 lævi blandit
 eða ætt jötuns
 Oðs mey gefna

Then all the ruling powers, the most holy gods, ascended their thrones and took counsel as to who had filled the air with perfidy or promised Od's wife to the demon race.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Scholars have speculated that Loður, referred to in st. 18 as a partner with Odinn and Hoenir in the creation of the first man and woman, might be Loki, but no one pretends to have very convincing evidence for this.

⁴⁸ Nordal's edition translated by Schach in Schach's, "Some Thoughts on Völuspá," 97.

Only with the aid of Snorri's story do we understand "hverir hefði lopt alt" to refer to Loki. But this stanza is followed by one that stresses the gods' role in this event, rather than Loki's.

Þórr einn þar vá
 þrunginn móði,
 hann sjaldan sitr,
 er hann slíkt um fregn;
 á genguz eiðar,
 orð ok soeri,
 mál öll meginlig,
 er á meðal fóru

There Thorr alone slew, swollen with rage --
 he seldom sits idle when learns such things.
 Oaths were broken, pledges and promises,
 all solemn vows that had been exchanged.
 (Schach 97)

Paul Schach notes the difference here in emphasis between Snorri and Voluspá: "Whereas Snorri stresses Loki's cunning deceitfulness, the author of Voluspá strongly emphasizes the moral turpitude of the gods. Indeed this is a major cause of their downfall" (96).

Recent interpretations of the poem agree that these stanzas point to the causes of Ragnarok. Turville-Petre sees the "elements of decay" that lead to Ragnarok presented in Voluspá as existing "almost since the beginning of time," but with the series of events in stanzas 21-26 -- the burning of Gullveig, the war between the Aesir and Vanir, and the broken

covenant and violence surrounding the promise of Freyja to the giant mason -- "the tempo increases." ⁴⁹

Régis Boyer, who does a close internal reading of the poem, sees these stanzas as central not only to the content, but also to the form of the poem. He builds from the original ordering of stanzas in Codex Regius an interpretation that sees in both form and content, "a movement of ascent and descent...arranged in such a way as to illustrate by every possible means the essential vision and belief that fate is the supreme power, responsible for everything, toward which all things aim, and according to which everything is ordered."⁵⁰ He focuses particularly on the seven stanzas 21 through 27 as establishing the distant causes of Ragnarok: "In stanzas 21-27 Voluspá suggests that inexpressible perjuries have been committed, one of which...is the story of the high treason of which Loki is guilty at the time of the building of Asgardr" (123). Boyer notes the significance of such perjury "given the kind of mentality in which honor, conceived of as a reverence for the supreme divinity and power of

⁴⁹ Myth 280. S. Nordal says in his edition of Voluspá that according to the author of the poem, "The gods have tricked the builder, and he is slain without just cause. In the poem the oath-breaking becomes the main point and Loki's expedient is nowhere mentioned." He sees Snorri's tale as incohesive: "Loki's counsel is unnecessary. Thor could have killed the builder without it." (50)

⁵⁰ Régis Boyer, "On the Composition of Völuspá," Edda: A Collection of Essays, eds. Robert Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Manitoba: U of Manitoba P, 1983) 119.

destiny, was the summum bonum. Whoever breaks his word, which is to say his honor, literally loses his sanctity. And this is just what the gods have done, thereby causing the doom of creation, which now falls into decline" (123).

The second mention of Loki appears in stanza 35. In Boyer's pyramid, which represents diagrammatically the form and content of the poem, stanzas 1-27 form the ascent and concern the creation of a world governed by fate and the distant causes (st. 21-27) of the doom of that world. Stanzas 28-31 turn from past to present tense and concern the power of fate; Odinn has come to learn from the volva of the impending doom. This Boyer makes the apex of his pyramid. Stanzas 32-62 make the descent. With the vision of Baldr's death in stanzas 32-34, Boyer sees the immediate cause of Ragnarok.

Although nothing in the poem directly links Loki with this crime, the vision of the bound Loki (stanza 35) that follows immediately after the vision of the dead Baldr connects them by juxtaposition:

Hapt sá hon liggja
 undir hvera lundi,
 lægjarn líki
 Loka áþekkján;
 Þar sitr Sigyn
 þeygi um sínum
 ver vel glyjuð.

She (I?) saw a captive lying at Hveralundr,
 similar in shape to baleful Loki. There
 sits Sigyn, not very joyful, by her husband.
 (Schach 100)

In Boyer's pyramidal diagram, this mention of Loki stands almost directly opposite that in stanza 25 (indirect causes of Ragnarok) as one of the immediate causes of the doom that is described beginning with stanza 36.

In the last battle of gods and giants, Loki appears (stanza 51) for the third and final time in the poem.⁵¹ The wolf has broken free, the great serpent writhes, the death ship is loosed and:

Kjóll ferr austan,
 koma munu Múspells
 um lög lyðir,
 en Loki styrir;
 fara fífls megir
 með freka allir,
 þeim er bróðir
 Byleists í för.

A keel sails from the east; Múspell's hordes
 will cross the sea, and Loki steers. All the
 demons will come with the wolf, and Byleist's
 brother will be in the host.

(Schach 104)

⁵¹ Perhaps one should count as a fourth mention the line in stanza 54 where the wolf is called "megi Hveðrungs," the latter being likely one of Loki's names, which Turville-Petre translates as "the roarer."

If one follows Boyer's reading of Voluspá, fate is revealed in the poem as "the dynamic principle, the motor of the evolution of the universe," (119) and the poet's purpose is "to celebrate the power which...owes no more to paganism than to Christianity: ineluctable Fate" (132).

It is interesting in this context to note that Loki's three appearances correspond with the working of fate: the distant causes, the immediate causes, and the final consummation. In each case he is the agent of fate -- the one who sets in motion events that lead to the gods' downfall -- but the poet does not focus the responsibility for Ragnarok on Loki; the gods are not passive victims of Loki's actions. In the first instance, Loki provides the Aesir with unwise counsel; he mixes the air with darkness ("hverr hefð lopt alt/lævi blandit"), but it is the gods, who heed his advice and break their oaths to the giant, whom the poet emphasizes. Next we see Loki bound in punishment for his part in Baldr's death, but it is Hoð, the blind god, who casts the mistletoe and he alone is slain ("sent to Hel") in punishment for the deed.⁵² Finally, with the dissolution of order and the world in tumult, Loki's bonds also dissolve and he steers the ship in company with his monster children as part of the enemy host.

⁵² Regis Boyer notes that crimes such as fratricides and hordomr "...are absolutely inexpressible in the mental and moral universe of the ancient North." (127)

What is the nature of this fate Boyer defines as the central message of the poem? He defines it as both "supreme power, responsible for everything," and that "according to which everything is ordered." Are we to understand this as a predetermined destiny beyond the control of the gods, or does fate represent the laws of the universe to which the gods too are subject and which, when broken, bring inevitable catastrophe, thus suggesting as Boyer and others have done that the gods have helped bring this doom upon themselves?

The poem Voluspá is didactic inasmuch as it considers, in retrospect, a series of cause-effects in the creation-establishment-duration of the world, but the tone is not one of moral condemnation or judgment. The past -- fate -- is being recalled, reviewed. From this perspective its pattern can be discerned, but in the actual living of life fate shows itself as accidental events which no man (or god) can foresee or prevent. Fate represents the unpredictable nature of the world, both internal and external, and so is impersonal, implacable, impossible to avoid. Hilda Ellis-Davidson points to the Norsemen's understanding of fate as a recognition on their part of the constant threat such accidents of nature posed to their security. They acknowledged the "remorseless power" of such everpresent potential for disaster and "knew that the gods whom they served could not give them freedom from danger and calamity, and they did not demand that they should" (218). She focuses on the external threats of cold,

floods, volcanoes, but in her presentation of the independent, headstrong Norseman whose counsel of moderation meant not taking "himself or even his gods too seriously" (217) we see the realistic awareness of human nature as well. Greed, hatred, jealousy, pride...these in excess could threaten life just as surely as natural cataclysms. A sense of proportion, a strength to endure adversity, a sense of humor, these were man's best weapons in the face of destruction and misery.

No character in the mythology better demonstrates the fickle, unpredictable, unforeseen aspect of life than does Loki. His impulsive actions, his disregard of natural cause and effect invariably lead to surprising consequences. He strikes the marauding eagle, Thjazi, resulting in the rape of Idunn, Thjazi's death, and a more far-reaching consequence, Skaði's revenge on the bound Loki. Loki's cutting of Sif's hair leads to the gods' acquisition of six valuable treasures -- among them the hammer most feared by the giants. His counsel that the mason's offer be accepted (deemed wise in the present moment, unwise in retrospect) puts the gods in an impossible position where they must break their word or perish. It also produces (according to Snorri) the eight-legged horse "best among gods and men." When Loki kills a feeding otter, thereby bagging supper for himself and his companions, he triggers a long sequence of events upon which the legendary history of the Volsungs is built. When, despite all Odinn's wisdom, Loki plots the death of Baldr, the

consequence is a series of deaths (Baldr, Nanna, Hoð) that precludes the final demise of the gods.

We are reminded again in these stories of the accidental benefits of Loki's residence in Asgard as well as of the trouble he causes. Loki as the amoral trickster may well function as the agent of fate, serving to remind both the gods and the men who serve them that, however strong or good, they are nevertheless subject to this unavoidable power.

If Loki is seen as an agent of fate, this role may also help explain the animosity between Loki and Heimdallr that Snorri refers to. In Skálds. one periphrase for Loki is "þratudologur Heimdallar," "Wrangling foe of Heimdallr" (Brodeur 113), although such a relationship is mentioned only briefly elsewhere. Snorri mentions Loki's struggle with Heimdallr for the Brising necklace (where both took the form of seals) and refers to the stanza in Husdrapa. This and the reference to the final battle of Heimdallr and Loki constitute all we know of their "wrangling," apart from the hot words they say to each other in Lokasenna where all the gods are at odds with Loki.⁵³ Furthermore, it should be noted that Loki actually fights physically with no one else (whether god or man) in the entire body of mythological tales. Thor threatens Loki, but from him Loki inevitably runs; Odinn generally sides with rather than against Loki; Freyr and the

⁵³ See Lokasenna stanza 47 and my discussion which follows.

rest of the Aesir/Vanir are not shown to interact individually with Loki. Who, then, is Heimdallr that he should be pitted against Loki?

Heimdallr's mythological function is problematic. Davidson says that although "we have a good deal of material about this god...he does not fit into any recognized category among the divinities" (172). Turville-Petre says, "Heimdall appears to be an ancient god, whose memory had faded by the time the extant sources were composed" (Myth 154). He is conceived of in Voluspá and Rigsbula as the father of mankind; he is associated with the ram and the sea (born of nine mothers whom scholars sometimes identify as the wave daughters of Aegir, sea god); he is said to be able to see into the future (see Þrimskviða st. 15); Voluspá says Heimdallr's "hljóð" is hidden under the World Tree with Odinn's eye and Mimir's well (stanza 27). Turville-Petre prefers the interpretation of "hljóð" to mean "ear" or rather "hearing" than the once commonly accepted "horn" taken to be the Gjallerhorn, thus putting Heimdallr on a level with Odinn as one who has sacrificed a sensory organ for wisdom (Myth 149).

Heimdallr's clearest designation is as the guardian of Asgard. Snorri describes him in Gylfaginning as "the white god...great and holy. -- He lives in a place called Himinbjorg, by Bifrost. He is the warden of the gods and sits there at the end of heaven to guard the bridge from the cliff giants" (Young 54). Furthermore he is said to need

almost no sleep and to have incredible powers of vision and hearing as befits a watchman. His trumpet blast can be heard throughout the worlds.

Boyer notes also Heimdallr's association with fate in Voluspá.⁵⁴ Heimdallr's name appears three times in the poem in stanzas 1, 28 and 45 (Codex Regius ordering). The first stanza begins "Hljóðs bið ek allar/ helgar kindir,/ meiri ok minni/ mögu Heimdallar;" here Heimdallr as the father of mankind corresponds with the origin of time, the ordinance of fate.⁵⁵ The mention in stanza 28 of Heimdallr's "hljóð" comes at that point in the poem concerning the "active forces of fate," both as direct subject (see stanzas 28-31) and because of its position in the poem where past tense turns to present and distant causes of fate turn to the immediate causes. In his last appearance (stanza 45), Heimdallr signals to the gods with a blast on his horn that their fate is upon them.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Boyer seizes on the timing of Heimdallr's mention in this poem as indication that he is taken here to be, as Dumézil has proposed, a personification of the World Tree and "therefore the incarnation not only of Yggdrasil and Mimir with his well, but of the fate of the world" (125). This point remains obscure to me and less than persuasive.

⁵⁵ "Hear me, all ye hallowed beings,
both high and low of Heimdall's children:
thou wilt, Valfather, that I set forth
the fates of the world which as first I recall."
(Hollander 2)

⁵⁶ en mjötuör kyndisk
at inu galla
Gjallarhorni
hátt blæss Heimdallr,

This association of Heimdallr with fate fits his role of watchman and may help explain his position in opposition to Loki. Heimdallr the watchman, trying to anticipate and hold off the doom he knows must come, would naturally have his eye on Loki, the agent of that fate, and counter him whenever possible.

There is another aspect of Loki's story that suggests his connection with fate. While Hoð is slain in revenge for Baldr's death (Vol. 34 says Odinn's one day old son avenged Baldr's death), Loki, who to modern eyes bears the greater responsibility for the crime, is only bound. Snorri gets round this by not mentioning Hoð's punishment at all and explaining that although "all were of one mind about the perpetrator of that deed [Loki]...no one could take vengeance; the sanctuary was so holy."⁵⁷ Why is Loki merely bound? I would suggest that this fact shows him to be as essential to the cosmology as his monster children with whom the Voluspá poet clearly links him in stanzas 50 to 54.

This raises another fundamental attribute of Loki's for examination -- one that perhaps more than any other calls into question his right to be perceived as an amoral trickster rather than a demonic foe of the gods. From our earliest

horn er á lofti.
Voluspá 45

⁵⁷ Trans. Young 81. "ok váru allir með einum hug til þess er unnit hafði verkit. En engi mátti hefna, þar var svá mikill griðastaðr" (Gylf. in Faulkes 46:10-11).

written sources Loki is represented as the progenitor of monsters, more precisely those three (Fenrir the wolf, Jormungand the serpent, and Hel, goddess of the dead) so essential to the cosmic system depicted in Old Norse mythology, and who, like him, are a part of the universe not to be destroyed until the all-consuming devastation of Ragnarok, where Odinn will fight the wolf and Thor the serpent.

The stories of the engendering of these monsters have not survived (if they ever existed) but references to Loki as their father are numerous. In the oldest extant poems, Haustlong and Ynglinga-Tal by Thiódólf of Hvin, Loki is called the father of the wolf Fenrir and of Hel.⁵⁸ Voluspá makes no explicit mention of Loki as father of monsters but in stanza 51 he is linked by juxtaposition with Fenrir in the company of monsters at Ragnarok. In Lokasenna Odinn refers to Loki as "Ulfsfæður" and later Tyr tries to shame Loki by mentioning the binding of Fenrir (see stanzas 10 and 39). Voluspá hin skamma says: "Gat Loki the Wolf with Angrbotha/ and Sleipner he bore to Svathilfari;/ but of all ill wights most awful by far/ is Byleist's brother's baleful offspring" (Hollander 138). This latter creature likely refers to the serpent. The poem claims further that Loki ate the heart of an evil

⁵⁸ Haustlong verse 30 refers to Loki as "Ulfsfæðr;" Yng. names Hel as "Loka mæ'r" in stanza 27 and "Hveðrungr mæ'r" in st. 24. According to Turville-Petre, Loki was "given the name Hveðrungr which probably means 'the roarer'" (Myth 128).

woman, from which union all monsters are sprung.⁵⁹

Pórsdrápa makes reference to Loki as "logseims faðir" which Turville-Petre translates as "father of the rope of the world" or the serpent (Myth 128). But, as usual, it is to Snorri that we are indebted for much of our information. In Gylfaginning he says Loki had three monster children by the giantess Angrboða -- the wolf, the serpent, and Hel -- and he tells how the gods dealt with these monsters who were prophesied to bring them great harm. Furthermore he lists among the traditional periphrases for Loki, "föður Fenrisúlfs og Jörmungands, það er Miðgarðsorms, og Heljar og Nara og Ala" (father of Fenrir and Jormungand, the Midgard Serpent, and of Hel, Nari and Vali. Skálds. 23).

Various scholars have attempted to explain Loki's connection with monsters. Jan de Vries in The Problem of Loki (1933) conceded Loki's connection with demons and the realm of the dead to be very old, although his explanation of this relationship relies on the commonly observed kinship between Loki and Odinn:

We arrive at the conclusion that Loki, according to the oldest kennings, is closely connected with Odinn and at the same time with several demoniac beings belonging to the realm of death. Here, of course, there is no contradiction. But we get the impression that in the course of time, Othin and Loki developed in two opposite directions, Othin becoming one of the chief gods, Loki

⁵⁹ Hollander 138-39. Embedded in Hyndluljóðh after stanza 28 are the fifteen stanzas (29-44) comprising all that we know of the poem Snorri quotes in Gylf. as "Voluspá hin skamma," the shorter Voluspá. In Hollander's translation of the separate poem, these stanzas are numbered as 13 and 14.

on the contrary remaining in close connection with a couple of demons. This may be the reason why he stays on a level between gods and demons. (197-98)

Georges Dumézil (1948) acknowledges Loki's aspect of parens monstorum but does not attempt to explain it (see 119-20) saying only, "Il met...au monde des êtres étranges, généralement redoutables aux dieux," etc. (see 166).

Anna Rooth (1960) finds Loki's evil character as father of monsters, particularly as depicted by Snorri, a clear borrowing from the medieval clerical tradition, and thus not an authentic trait of Loki's. She cites the popular medieval debates (going back to Isidore of Seville) over the origin of monsters and in particular Cain's role as father of monsters and other abnormalities (analogous to Loki's link with deformed brothers Byleistr, "lame," and Helblindi, "blind"). She notes also similarities between the Midgard Serpent and the Leviathan: Thor hooks the one (Þórdrápa), and Christ the other. Both monsters are cast out by the supreme god.⁶⁰ Therefore, concludes Rooth, "This concept of Loki cannot...be regarded as an authentic trait of the original Loki figure."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Snorri says Odinn "flung the serpent into the deep sea which surrounds the world" (Young 56) Gylf. 34:12 "...þa kastaði hann orminum í inn djúpa sæ er liggr um öll lönd..." (Faulkes).

⁶¹ See her discussion, 162-75. She also finds a counterpart in Finnish lore where a female, Louhi, has demon children and some of these demons represent illnesses or physical impediments.

However, Rooth does not talk specifically about Loki's connection with Fenrir as a borrowing and when it comes to another abnormal but benevolent progeny of Loki, Sleippner the eight-legged horse, Rooth concedes the Sleippner incident to be without parallel and possibly original with Loki (39).

E.O.G. Turville-Petre (1964) acknowledges Loki's paternal connection with monsters to exist in the earliest written sources, but does not attempt to explain it directly. While he admits certain aspects of the demonic Loki are likely borrowed, ⁶² he thinks Loki might have derived as a negative aspect of Odinn in which case the connection with monsters might be original with him.⁶³

Hilda Ellis-Davidson (1964) says with regard to Loki as father of monsters:

In this way, Loki is connected with the darker elements in the northern mythical world, and this tie is at least as early as the skaldic poets of the ninth century. It has been explained by some scholars as a derivation from medieval works on demonology.... We cannot however rule out the possibility that the kennings which link Loki with the monsters are founded on genuine heathen tradition even though they have a vague general resemblance to learned speculation on the origin of

⁶² He suspects, for example, that Olrik (1922) was right in supposing that the bound Loki, one day to break loose, was foreign to Norse mythology (see Myth 145).

⁶³ Turville-Petre notes that while "Snorri said it was Loki who caused most evil,...according to Helgakviða Hundingsbana II (str. 34), Odinn causes all evil" (Myth 146). There is also, he says, a link between Odinn and the wolf. "Since the wolf is a beast of death and war, Odinn probably appeared in this guise, representing his most evil and sinister aspect" (60).

monsters and devils.⁶⁴

Davidson's position that in spite of some Christian influence, Loki's role as father of monsters may well grow from the Old Norse material itself seems finally the most reasonable hypothesis to work from in attempting to explore the more important question of what this linkage means. Is the source of monsters himself a demonic being? Is Loki fundamentally a monster rather than an amoral trickster?

Several things suggest that despite his parenting of deadly monsters, Loki's own moral status remains essentially ambiguous. First, the monsters Loki engenders or gives birth to all derive from his couplings with giants or abnormal partners (the stallion, the wicked woman's heart).⁶⁵ Thus their monstrosity does not derive solely (or even primarily?) from Loki but from his associations with monsters. Neither does he associate with his offspring except at Ragnarok. When he has children with Sigyn, his wife, they are presumably normal male children: Nari and Vali are

⁶⁴ Gods and Myths 178. Davidson carries this hypothesis further than I will go by suggesting that Loki was originally the bound giant -- or a shadow side of Odinn -- and only later became the comic character of Snorri, etc. See 181-82.

⁶⁵ The eight-legged horse, Sleippner, may also share a connection with death. Davidson notes that an eight-legged steed is frequently the animal that bears the shaman on his otherworldly journeys (142-43); Turville-Petre develops the horse's connection with death in the Old Scandinavian lore and burial practices (Myth 56-57).

mentioned in story only as they figure in the binding of Loki.⁶⁶

Second, though the wolf Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent, and Hel are pitted against the gods at Ragnarok, they are not the causes of that fate. The gods know through prophecy that the wolf will slay Odinn and the serpent will slay and be slain by Thor, yet they do not destroy these creatures: the wolf is held captive in Asgard; the serpent is flung into the sea that surrounds the world.⁶⁷ Hel is given her own domain to rule, Niflheim. Like the natural forces of destruction which they represent, these monsters may be held temporarily in check, but they cannot be overcome. The scavenger wolf, long associated with death on the battlefield, represents violent death.⁶⁸ The serpent encircling the earth represents the power that shakes the earth, causing tidal waves and flooding seas. Hel, who guards the underworld, represents sickness and death. Such elementary forces are unavoidably present

⁶⁶ The Aesir change Vali into a wolf who tears apart his brother Nari. Loki is then bound to the rock with the entrails of his own son. This is the vengeance the gods take on Loki.

⁶⁷ Polomé sees the serpent as the boundary between form and formlessness: "The islanders and the people along the shore believe that a universal ocean surrounds the earth, with an unfathomable abyss at the horizon and a huge snake curling at the edge to hold the world together." Ency. of Religion 5:523.

⁶⁸ Turville-Petre says, "Since the wolf is a beast of death and of war, Odinn probably appeared in this guise, representing his most evil and sinister aspect." (Myth 61)

in the world, as the ruler of Asgard well knows, and wait to close in upon Asgard when the force of order weakens.

I must emphasize that such forces are natural and amoral in character. Nor can firm lines be drawn in this mythology between the various worlds. Not only Loki and the wolf, but giants also make their home with the Aesir. As Turville-Petre says, "The differences between gods and giants were not fundamental. Odinn was the son of a giantess, and even Thor, the arch-enemy of giants must have had giant blood in his veins if he was son of Odinn....This implies that the dualist system, according to which gods were good and giants bad, developed late in Norse heathendom" (Myth 144). Davidson too points to the interconnectedness of the different worlds:

The rich symbolism of roads and bridges, dark holes and caves leading to the underworld, the open burial mound, the journey through the air in bird form, all this emphasizes the belief in a passage between worlds for men and other beings. The creatures of the depths are strongly and vigorously portrayed in the myths. The giants, sometimes monstrous and sometimes fair to see, the wolf held in bonds, the ancient dragon in his den, the serpent encircling the world, are never long forgotten. They are continually contrasted with the realm of the gods, the shining heavens with their bright dwellings. The underworld...is the abode of darkness and death, threatening always to destroy the ordered world of light and overrun the inhabited earth. Yet at the same time it is the place from which new life comes and to which the gods may look for their new brides. (212)

Loki, like his monster children, is indispensable to this world and cannot be eliminated from it. When his existence poses too great a threat, he is bound to a rock where, no longer able to dissipate his unbridled life energy in action,

his contortions shake the very earth, gigantic in their force.

Loki: Comic Bravado

There remains but one more major source to be considered in our examination of Loki, the flyting poem Lokasenna, generally thought to be contemporaneous with Voluspá. A prose frame, very likely a late addition, sets a context: the Aesir gods (except Thor who is away) are gathered in Aegir's hall for a drinking feast.⁶⁹ Aegir's servants, much praised by the company, enrage Loki, who cannot abide to see others favored, and he kills one of them. The gods drive him out and resume their drinking. Loki then returns to the hall and addresses Eldir (the dialogue stanzas now begin), asking what the gods are talking about. Eldir (about whom nothing else is known) rebuffs him saying, "They talk of weapons and might in war...and speak no kind words of you."⁷⁰ Loki enters nonetheless, expressing his intent to make trouble ("ioll ok afo foeri-ek Ása sonom..." 3:3) and appealing to the gods (who sit quietly) to give him drink after his long journey. When Bragi responds saying there is no seat for Loki --the gods

⁶⁹ See my later discussion of the prose frame.

⁷⁰ The Poetic Edda, trans. Henry Bellows (New York: ASF, 1923) 152. The original text for Lokasenna is from Corpus Poeticum Boreale v.2, 100-110.

Of vaðpn sín dóema ok um vígrisni sína
sigtiva synir:

Ása of Alfa es her inni ero
mangi es þer í vorði vinr. (st. 2)

don't want him -- Loki appeals to Odinn:

Mantu þat, Óðinn, es við í ár-daga

blendom blóði saman?

aolvi bergja letztu eigi mundo,

nema okkr væri báðom borit. (st.9)

Remember, Othin, in olden days

That we both our blood mixed;

Then didst thou promise no ale to pour,

Unless it were brought for us both.

(Bellows 155)

Odinn acknowledges this by telling his son Viðar to let the "Wolf's father" in, thus both honoring his word and expressing his disapproval. Once admitted, Loki strikes the first verbal blow, insulting Bragi, who in turn offers gifts to dissuade Loki from "rousing our great ones to wrath" (Bellows 156). But Loki refuses his gifts as worthless and calls him "least brave in battle."⁷¹ When Bragi is aroused, his wife Idunn steps forward and cautions him not to further provoke Loki. Loki then turns his venom on Idunn, calling her a whore. So it goes throughout the fifty-six stanzas until Thor arrives. Gods and goddesses, and their servants, one by one address Loki, countering his charges and trying to defuse the potentially explosive situation. One by one Loki hurls abuse at them. The men (Bragi, Njorth, Tyr, Freyr and his servant Byggvir, Heimdallr) he accuses of unmanliness --

⁷¹ "Asa ok Alfa, es her inni ero,
þu ert við víg varastr,
ok skiarrastr við skot." (13:3-5)

cowardice, weakness in battle strength, cuckoldry, and in Odinn's case, "arga" -- taking a woman's role. The women (Idunn, Gerfjun, Frigg, Freyja, Skaði, Sif, and Freyr's servant Beyla) he accuses of infidelity and incest. Although their main purpose is to contain and deflect his verbal abuse, the gods in turn make accusations, calling Loki a liar, a spiteful troublemaker, and unmanly or womanish. This latter insult is one of the worst in Old Norse culture. Odinn says Loki milked cows as a maid under the earth and "þar born of boret,/ok hugþak þat args aðal" (st. 23) and Loki returns the charge in stanza 24 ("ok hugþak þat args aðal"). Njorth responds to Loki's charge (that Freyja has slept with all the gods including her brother) saying that although a woman may take men for lovers, Loki should not dare to show his face for he's borne men's children (st. 33). When Thor returns, he addresses Loki each time as "raog vættr," ragr being a metathetical transposition of arga. Three times Loki braves Thor's threats, insulting him with his more comic adventures among the giants, but the fourth threat of death at Thor's hands sends Loki off with the concession: "enn fyr þer einom mun-ek út ganga,/ þvi-at ek veit at þú vegr" (64:3-4). "Before thee alone do I now go forth/ For thou fightest well, I ween" (Bellows 172). This is followed by something between a prophecy and a curse: Aegir, says Loki, will serve no more such feasts and fire will burn everything within the hall.

A prose colophon concludes the poem, although once again

scholars frequently consider this of later origin than the dialogue stanzas. It says briefly what Snorri recounts more fully: Loki hides in Franang's waterfall in the shape of a salmon, but the gods catch him, bind him with his own son's bowels, Skaði fastens a poisonous snake over the bound god, his wife Sigyn protects him by holding a bowl over his head, but when the poison drops on him he writhes and the earth shakes.

Since many of the charges Loki and others hurl at each other are elsewhere substantiated in poems and tales, scholars have considered Lokasenna to be an authentic mythological repository and one of our most valuable sources of lost material. Thus in addition to examining Loki's function in this dramatic dialogue, we look also to see whether we learn any new facts about Loki here.

Who is Loki shown to be in this poem? He is set against the Aesir as nowhere else except in the accounts of the death of Baldr (Snorri) and of Ragnarok. He is intent upon doing injury and the gods' responses make it clear they expect nothing but trouble from him. He means to incite them either to verbal or physical violence, the latter being taboo in this sanctuary.⁷² Loki is clever, quick-tongued. He takes on the whole company of gods like a heroic warrior might take on an enemy army singlehanded. In stanza 9 he calls himself

⁷² See Turville-Petre, Myth 130.

Odinn's blood-brother (the practice of mingling blood and swearing oaths of fidelity being a common one among Scandinavian warriors), thus confirming the special connection between the two evident elsewhere. Furthermore, Frigg's response in stanza 25 ("Orlaogom ykkrom skylit aldregi/ segja seggjom frá/ hvat ið Æsir tveir drygdut á ár-daga." Ye should never talk of your old doings before men, of what ye two Anses went through in old times. CPB II 104) to Odinn and Loki's mutual accusations of sex-changing reinforces the suggestion elsewhere that Odinn and Loki shared this practice in common also.

Apart from the mention of sex-changing in Lokasenna, this characteristic is referred to in only two other sources. Voluspá hin skamma says in stanza 14 (following that stanza quoted earlier, which charges Loki with monstrous offspring) that Loki gave birth to a child after eating a wicked woman's heart. Snorri tells of Loki taking the form of a mare and giving birth to Sleippner. Loki's disguises as a female in Brymskviða and as the giantess Thökk in Snorri's story of Baldr's death cannot count as sex-changing although they suggest his ability to adapt himself to that role. The repeated charges of Odinn and Njorth in Lokasenna (Odinn refers also to an unknown myth of Loki living under the earth eight years as a milkmaid in st. 23), then, are the best substantiation we have for this characteristic.

What do Loki's incursions into the female experience

indicate? Like Wakdjunkaga he seems possessed of an energy that is inimical to boundaries. Although he is defined as essentially masculine and the charges of "arga" are made to shame him,⁷³ Loki is never shown to be the passive homosexual this charge would imply. In fact, for all that Loki may have "played a woman's part," his own claim in Lokasenna (unsubstantiated by other sources) is to have seduced several goddesses. In stanza 40 he says that Tyr's wife bore him a son; in stanza 52 he claims to have bedded Skaði; in stanza 54 he reminds the virtuous sounding Sif that he once took her

⁷³ It should be mentioned concerning these charges that the exchange of such insults in a public assembly is not unique to this poem. Although Lokasenna's poet appears to base all the insults on myths known to his audience, he was also following an oral tradition of song-combats or word duels which Gilbert Highet characterizes among other things as "relentlessly personal and outrageously scurrilous" and performed before an audience in a public display (Anatomy of Satire, 152-53). Joaquin Pizarro, working more specifically with the charge of ergi or nið as defined by Noreen, Almqvist, and Strom (see below), gives several examples from ecclesiastical history of the use of this as the supreme insult, and notes as common to such examples: 1) that such insults are made in public assembly, 2) that a ruler (bishop, deacon, secular king) is charged with bearing children or playing the female role in a love relationship, and 3) that bloody revenge follows swiftly upon the heels of such an insult. Such insults were "traditional both in real-life quarrels and as an element of oral anecdote," says Pizarro (153). See "On Nið against Bishops," Medieval Scandinavia 10 (1979) 149-53.

Folke Strom defined ergi as a "personality type that was regarded as deeply contemptible" (i.e. cowardly and unmanly) and gave its more concrete physical application of "passive homosexuality" to be a "symbolic representation." See "Nid, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes," The Dorthea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College, London, 10 May 1973 (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974).

from Thor.

The Loki we see in this poem, potent in his knowledge of others' past misdeeds and failings, is witty and quick in his retorts as he tries to draw the Aesir into combat. He shows no concern at all for how this company perceives him, entering the banquet against their will, never even attempting to deny their accusations against him, heedless of their warnings until Thor, who has elsewhere struck down enemies in the hallowed sanctuary of Asgard, threatens to strike him. Then he departs, fleeing finally to hide from the punishment that awaits him, trusting once more in tricks and disguises to protect him.

Until the recent interpretation of Heinz Klingenberg, Lokasenna was generally considered to stand outside whatever chronology existed in the mythology, the work of an irreligious pagan poet who sought either to rail at the gods or to amuse his audience at their expense -- a Norse Aristophanes, some have called him.⁷⁴ Klingenberg, however, has constructed a convincing interpretation of the poem that shows the Lokasenna poet to be himself presenting both thematically and dramatically a portion of the divine myth of

⁷⁴ Jan de Vries called it "A highly amusing scene in the family of the gods..." (The Problem of Loki 175); Dumézil said "La Lokasenna est un jeu rhétoriques qui a été possible, en droit, à toutes les époques du paganisme" (Loki 158); Turville-Petre says, "The author of Lokasenna, certainly not a devout pagan, seems to dethrone the gods and judge their conduct as he would that of an immoral neighbour in whom inversion was unmanly" (Myth 132).

the world's end, a myth which Klingenberg places chronologically between the death of Baldr and the binding of Loki. Dismissing the prose introduction as "a late misunderstanding...in contradiction of the poem itself," Klingenberg suggests the real setting for Aegir's feast is a gathering of the gods for a preliminary trial to decide Loki's fate as the murderer of Baldr.⁷⁵

Not one to sit and wait quietly while the gods decide his punishment, Loki takes the offensive, forcing his way into the assembly. It is his intention, suggests Klingenberg, that with insults and abusive language he can goad them into

⁷⁵ Klingenberg's hypothesis follows that of A.G. van Hamel ["The Prose-Frame of Lokasenna," Neophilologus, 14 (1928-29) 204-214]. Van Hamel argued that the prose introduction "Frá Egi ok goðum..." represented a pre-existing tradition but was mistakenly applied to the text of Lokasenna. Loki could not have been in the hall, been expelled, then returned for reentry, for he presents himself as having travelled a long way and asks what the gods speak of inside, etc. Van Hamel proposes the following scenerio: "...The implied meaning of st.2 can only be that the gods are contemplating an armed attack on Loki just now. Loki must recently have committed some special and exceptionally loathsome crime which prompted the gods to direct action. Nor can there be any doubt as to the cause of their menacing attitude. The crowning crime of Loki's career, the treason against Baldr, has been perpetrated (st. 28) before the quarrel with the gods, which is the subject of Lokasenna. Yet punishment has not been inflicted..." (206).

Klingenberg bases his reading of "Egisdrecca" as a judicial assembly upon an internal reading of the poem, backed by the uses of this concept in two later poems, Hymiskviða and Grimnismál, both of which he finds to draw conceptually on Lokasenna. See Hym. st. 39 where "drecca olpr at Egis" is synonymous with "þing goða" in the same stanza; and Grm. st. 45 where Odinn invokes "all the gods on Egir's bench, at Egir's feast" to witness his suffering at King Geirrodt's hands and to pass judgment (trans. Klingenberg 149).

revealing their plans. Thus he draws the gods one by one into verbal combat, hoping to provoke in anger a pronouncement of judgment.⁷⁶ Once he discovers what fate they intend for him, he will use his wits to devise a means of escape.⁷⁷

Klingenberg's analysis fits the conditions of the poem very neatly. Read in this light, the poem becomes not a comic-satirical dialogue initiated by a spiteful Loki who revels in others' discomfort for his own pleasure, but an intense drama of survival. The gods, deep in mourning for Baldr, feel both great anger and a strong desire to keep order and proceed lawfully with Loki's judgment and punishment. Loki, with the desperate wit and fury of one who has nothing to lose, fights for time -- either to exculpate himself or, if he must fall, to bring the house down on top of him. In the background looms Ragnarok.

The drama lies in the gradual movement toward the moment when Skaði, in uncontrollable wrath, reveals Loki's fate, but the poet controls the pace by first increasing, then breaking the tension briefly with milder, even somewhat comic stanzas,

⁷⁶ We learn from their early responses that Loki has only verbal abuse to fear in return: Eldir says the gods can wipe Loki with foul words too (st. 4); Bragi says he would strike Loki's head off were he not in Aegir's hall (st. 14). Loki is physically safe as long as Thor is absent.

⁷⁷ The prose conclusion Klingenberg acknowledges as an established part of the mythology and chronologically suited to the end of Lokasenna, although it and other prose explanations scattered throughout the dialogue are likely late additions.

then building again to an emotional climax which escalates with each reference to Loki's fate. This technique works both narratively and dramatically: narratively it keeps the gods from violating the sanctity of the place by momentarily cooling their anger; dramatically it checks the forward thrust -- extending the quarrel, developing it, deepening the drama.

The interchange with Bragi sets an important tone, but it is not until stanza 21 when Odinn responds to Loki's insult to Gefjun that Loki's fate is referred to. This is an oblique reference: Loki must be mad, says Odinn, to rouse Gefjun who knows men's fates as well as he does himself. Instead of deterring Loki, this veiled threat whets his appetite. He knows he is getting somewhere and he turns on Odinn. The exchange between the two of them reduces Odinn to Loki's level and breaks the intensity, but it builds again as Frigg joins in. She mentions Baldr, conspicuously absent from the hall, and draws from Loki his brazen admission of guilt, to which Freyja responds (st. 29):

OErr ertu, Loki, es þú yðra telr
 líóta leið-stafi:
 oerlaog Frigg hygg-ek at aoll viti,
 þótt hon sialfgi segi.

Drunk art thou, Loki, telling all your horrors. I ween
 Frigg knows the fate of all men, though she say it not.

CPB

Frigg, she is saying, knows Loki's fate but will not disclose it.

When Loki now insults Freyja, she tells him he'll soon be sorry: "thou wilt go home a sadder man," a weaker threat that diminishes the intensity somewhat. The next interchanges with Njorth (sts. 33-36) are milder since Njorth counters Loki's insults with praise for his own son Freyr, but as Tyr enters the fracas (also with praise for Freyr) the scene heats up again. Loki jeers at Tyr's loss of a hand to the wolf Fenrir; Tyr counters with Loki's loss of a son -- the wolf lies bound until the fall of the gods (st. 39). This not only raises the specter of Ragnarok, but also alludes to the parallel punishment Loki will suffer. Freyr responds by drawing the parallel more clearly. Loki, says Freyr in stanza 41, will suffer a fate like to that of the wolf if he continues his abuse. As Loki's fate begins to be defined, Loki too focuses on disasters to come: Freyr, he says, lost his sword and will miss it sorely in the final battle.

Now Freyr's servant, Byggvir, jumps in and the effect is comic. Byggvir threatens what he would do if he were Freyr, and Loki says in effect, "Who is this little worm?" Byggvir puffs out his chest, announcing his name and pride at being present, and Loki cuts him down to size with characteristic sarcasm (stanzas 43-46).

Heimdallr now steps in, calls Loki drunk, and asks him to leave off. Loki silences Heimdallr, referring to his fate

as watchman for the gods, insinuating that Heimdallr's role is a dull and passive one.

Suddenly Skaði erupts, spelling out Loki's fate in graphic detail (st. 49):

Létt es þer, Loki! Munattu svá lengi
leika lausom hala;
þvi-at þik á hiaorvi skolo ins hrím-kalda magar
gaornom binda goð.

Thou art easy now, Loki, but thou shalt not long
Go tail-away; for the Gods shall bind thee on swords
with the guts of thy rime-cold son. (CPB 108)

It is hard to understand what brings Skaði's wrath to the boil like this unless one hears behind the relatively controlled tones of Heimdallr and Loki their mutual awareness of the impending disaster. One might also understand the intensity of their interaction in light of the traditional animosity between these two who will kill each other in the final battle.

Once Skaði has revealed his fate, Loki's performance takes on an increased element of bravado. "So you bind me with my son's bowels," he says, "I killed your father." We remember here, as Klingenberg has noted, that not only does Skaði have her own reasons for revenge in the murder of Thjazi, but she also, according to Snorri's story, wished to marry Baldr. Skaði responds to Loki with chilling words (st. 51): " From my hearth and home there shall ever come cold counsels for thee." ("frá mínom veom ok vaongom skolo/ þer æ

kaold ráoð koma." CPB 108) To this Loki responds that Skaði was softer of speech when she invited him into her bed.

The tension is diminished briefly as Sif steps forward offering Loki a cup of mead, and Beyla (wife of Byggvir) announces the entrance of Thor who "will quiet those who revile gods and men here" (st. 55, CPB 109)

In comes the god who wields a deadly hammer and uses it readily when provoked. To his initial threat to behead Loki, Loki counters with a reference to the final battle, but here Loki's charge (that Thor will go less fiercely to fight the wolf that swallows Odinn) is surprising. According to other sources, Thor will not fight the wolf; he will be engaged in a death struggle with the Midgard Serpent. Klíngenberg simply calls this "a piece of slander" and "blasphemy" on Loki's part, but dramatically it serves to check temporarily Thor's threat to act violently, by introducing a surprise. Loki follows up Thor's next two threats by reminding him of his shameful inadequacy when he encountered Skrymir (Utgard-Loki). But when Thor re-establishes himself as potent and dangerous by referring to his hammer as "Hrúgniss bani mon þer í hel koma/ fyr Ná-grindr neðan" ("The killer of Hrúgni [who] shall strike thee dead and [send thee] down under the gates of the Dead" CPB 110), Loki says he's done and acknowledges Thor's might. As he departs, however, he curses Aegir's hall, envisioning the whole of it in flames as it will, in fact, be when the end comes.

As I read the poem, Loki has gained in stature here and is closer to the heroic mode. His single-minded purpose in provoking the gods focuses his usually scattered energy to a brilliant intensity. Moreover, the context of impending disaster -- Loki's doom as well as that of the Aesir -- strips the tone of facile comedy and gives it something akin to the irony of tragedy.⁷⁸ Loki reveals his own malevolence, but he also casts a dark shadow on the characters of the gods and goddesses.⁷⁹ Yet Loki is not tragic -- neither as villain nor as hero. Though he might be understood to have won the verbal combat,⁸⁰ he finally runs from Thor's threats,

⁷⁸ M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij would perhaps dispute this. In a paper which distinguishes between "directed laughter" (laughter directed at an object, i.e. ridicule) and "non-directed laughter" (laughter whose object is "mirth"), Steblin-Kamenskij cites Lokasenna as an example of non-directed laughter: a "contest in bragging, vilification, and ridicule composed to provide entertainment and provoke mirth." He sees in ancient comedy an intent to provoke laughter as sufficient justification. This may well apply to Lokasenna and other of these tales where the irony of the life/death paradox can only be dealt with in laughter and the trickster trades on such paradoxes. See "On the History of Laughter," Mediaeval Scandinavia 10 (1979) 162.

⁷⁹ Klingenberg emphasizes the function of the myths enumerated "which reveal through the character and consistency of their selection that the era of Odinn is destined for ultimate destruction." (153) He sees "the overriding idea of Lokasenna" to be "the end of the world. It is not only the confrontation of the gods with Loci, the future ragnaroc-demon that signals the end. Bonds of blood-brotherhood are broken. The destruction of kinship ties, fratricide, hordomr mikill are the prescriptive signs of the end of the world" (152).

⁸⁰ Hollander notes that Loki's curse in stanza 65 "may be thought to have been fulfilled, leaving him the victor." (Poetic Edda 103, n.58) He may also be considered the victor, if as Huizinga says, in verbal juridical battles "it

concerned, as the trickster always is, ultimately with his own survival. And his behavior throughout is characteristic of the trickster with his back against the wall. Not one to await passively the judgment and punishment of the gods, Loki acts first, trying to trick them into revealing their plans, boasting all the while of his subversive activities. When Loki has found out what he needs to know (Skaði's revelation of his fate), the poet conveniently provides him with a hasty exit as he runs from Thor. In the waterfall he hides, having changed himself into a salmon. When he is caught and bound, his energy, forceably restrained with no other outlet, causes earthquakes.

CONCLUSION

We have seen Loki in the narratives as a mischievous prankster, a shape-shifter, a clever, self-serving intelligence in search of activity -- heedless, impulsive, humorous, fickle, useful, and dangerous. He takes life moment by moment, staying physically and mentally flexible -- alternately defensive and aggressive, accomodating and opportunistic, manipulative and manipulated, but always active. His role in the mythology is that of the trickster.

My own understanding of the trickster figure is that his

is not the most meticulously deliberated juristic argument that tips the balance, but the most withering and excoriating invective" (Homo Ludens 84).

mythological function is inseparable from the narrative in which he is manifested. When we see the trickster in action for ourselves, he is compelling. Loki, scholars agree, was never worshipped as were Odinn, Thor, Freyr, Freyja, and Frigg. It was not his function to intercede for man, grant divine protection, or impart wisdom. But the reality he embodies is essential and must be acknowledged; the vitality, the energy, the life force he represents shows itself in action, and the vehicle for this is the narrative. This perhaps better than anything else explains the differences in tone between the representations of Loki in "enumerative" poems such as Voluspá, Voluspá hin skamma, and Baldrs Draumar, which develop "the conceptual element...at the expense of epic narration" and where Loki is the demonic bound giant, foe of the gods, and the narrative tales of Snorri and poems such as Brymskviða which are self-contained stories whose primary function is to engage the audience directly in the events recounted.⁸¹ Lokasenna which, according to Klingenberg, employs the enumeration of myths in service of both a conceptual and and epic purpose, weds the trickster with the

⁸¹ The distinction between these two types of eddic poetry is proposed by Heinz Klingenberg (134-36). In the enumerative type the purpose is primarily didactic; in the narrative, the purpose is primarily entertainment. Both perspectives on the material of mythology can exist side by side without being mutually exclusive. As Paul Radin notes, primitive man doesn't need coherence among the tales. There are just different ways of telling the story. See also de Vries, Loki 290.

demon. We see the magnetic force of this character as the drama builds, while we witness the devastating, destructive potential he manifests. In Lokasenna as in other narratives, Loki lives intensely in the present, ignoring the consequences of his actions. He demands only the freedom to live on his own terms; when this freedom impinges seriously on others, he becomes dangerous and must be controlled. But to bind this force is also hazardous. Only when Loki is inexorably bound does he become the foe of the gods.

While Loki is free to act, he creates adventures and provokes laughter. Between the creation of the universe and its destruction, he provides out of his own momentum a good share of the entertainment, the activity, the vitality in the mythological tales. In this mythology, which is driven by the tension between the forces of order and chaos, Loki exists close to the center, always precariously positioned -- a blessing and a threat to the Aesir and giants alike. With his shape-shifting, his winged travel, his clever tongue, he negotiates back and forth, mediating between the two opposing powers vying for control, but he belongs wholly to neither world. Like the giants his vitality can cause destruction and chaos, but unlike them he is not set in opposition to the Aesir. He lives among the Aesir as companion and friend -- a necessary element in the pantheon -- but unlike the gods, he is not committed to perpetuating order for the benefit of mankind. He belongs only to himself and puts his survival,

his freedom before all else.

But in this universe where all are subject to fate, the trickster's survival is not a certainty. He may be fate's agent -- the vital catalyst of events, the unpredictable element within the world of light and order like the unruly joker in a card deck who changes the rules of the game -- but he cannot on this account escape implacable Fate. Like Odinn, whose awareness of life and death, past and future cannot prevent the death of Baldr; like Thor who, champion of law and order, himself breaks oaths and violates the sanctity of Asgard; Loki's efforts to stay alive will bring about death. The stories come to an end. We are told that a new order was born from the rubble of the old, but it never gave rise to a mythology. New stories about the old Scandinavian gods, like Sorlabattr, fill out, elaborate, create from the old characters stories set in the old chronology, fictions constructed not out of deep belief, but for amusement out of an intrigue with the world that has passed. So new stories may be told of Loki, but unless he embodies the dangerous force, the essential vitality of the trickster, he appears but a slender shadow of the character in the myths.

RENART: THE COURTLY TRICKSTER

Renart the fox, the trickster-hero in Le Roman de Renart, a twelfth-century French cycle of beast tales, is unlike the tricksters of the previous chapters in that he does not figure in a traditional mythology. Rather the cycle of twenty-eight "branches" which he dominates was composed by various (and essentially anonymous) authors,¹ and was considered popular, profane literature. The tales or "branches" feature a character drawn both from folkloric and literary traditions,² but nevertheless "created" inasmuch as the conteurs who compose his tales recreate or adopt the character of Renart to suit their purposes. A tradition also develops within the Roman, however, so that Renart's nature, though subject to

¹ The numbering of branches throughout this chapter refers to the ordering of the A manuscript as edited by Ernest Martin, 1882-87, several branches of which have been more recently published by Jean Dufournet, Le Roman de Renart (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970). I have followed the text of the Dufournet edition for Branch II/Va. Any references to the editions of other manuscripts (B, C and M) will be clearly indicated.

² The fox figured in fables in Indo-European folklore and some of these motifs have been retained in the Roman. The literary precursors were Latin works: Ecbasis captivi (c.940), an allegorical poem; and Ysengrimus by Nivardus of Ghent (c.1155), a genuine beast epic.

stylistic variations, is kept fairly constant. Inventive, playful, with a genius for the impromptu, Renart the fox is seldom taken off guard and can adopt any role at will.³ A consummate performer, his subtle flattery, his facile logic, his compelling stories make victims of most who cross his path although his reputation as a deceptive rogue is well known in the animal kingdom. He joyously gives himself over to his desires, finding no law so binding that it cannot be broken, no friendship so dear that it cannot be sacrificed to the whim of the moment. Although his behavior is that of a loner, fundamentally free of social and moral restraints, he is nevertheless a high-ranking baron at court, rising in Branch XI ("Renart Empereur") to the position of regent in King Noble's absence. In fact he interacts with all levels of life in this animal world, consorting with snails, crickets, birds, rabbits, cats, badgers, boars, bears, wolves, and humans. If he is frequently a feared predator in his associations with these creatures, he is also preyed upon: he tricks Ysengrin the wolf, Brun the bear, even Noble the lion king, but these animals are greater and stronger than he and only his wit and fleetness of foot preserve him from the

³ See Branch Ib where Renart becomes first a dyer, then a viol playing jongleur from "Bretaing;" Branch X where he gathers herbs to become a learned doctor from Salerno; Branch XI where he persuades a bird that he is a priest and can "baptise" his fledglings and later becomes king; Branch XII where he and Tibert perform the mass; Branch VI where he is a master at sword play; Branch XXIII where he is a magician, etc.

danger presented by larger carnivores and the hunters' dogs (a constant threat). He steals from farmyards and traveling merchants, he catches rodents, fowl, and fish when he can, but he is himself one of the smaller animals and these same take his side in judicial battles. He gains access to the church as a monk or a penitent and wins over hermits, friars, abbots; in fact the church within the fiction is generally less severe in its judgments of him than secular society.⁴ But finally no one is entirely immune to his charms or safe from his wiles.

Such a composite, drawn from the whole body of the Roman de Renart, however, serves more to suggest the potential of the trickster fox than to define precisely who he is and what he represents in specific tales by the variously talented conteurs who have composed and recomposed them. Add to the ambiguities of the trickster the whole complex of impulses Renart evokes in the conteurs, which range from the comic to the cruel, from playfully parodistic to bitterly satirical, and the task of examining the figure of Renart in the Roman becomes staggeringly difficult. It has twice been attempted: Lucien Foulet's still unrivaled study of the entire cycle

⁴ For example, in Branch VI Brother Bernart asks Noble to have mercy on a sinner and takes Renart to a convent where he shows himself to be an expert at monkery though (on account of raiding the hen house) he is eventually turned out. Branch IX has a penitent fox crying for a confessor; the hermit who hears his confession tells him to go on a pilgrimage to Rome.

(1914), which established a chronology for the branches and examined each branch as well as the critical theories propounded up to that time concerning the lineage and history, meaning and function of these tales; and the more recent work by John Flinn (1963) which examines Le Roman de Renart, its precursors and successors, in an attempt to establish the important function of satire throughout the medieval Reynard literature. Both of these works endeavor to fit Renart into his epoch, to make sense of this contradictory, troublesome presence in the Christian Middle Ages. It is a measure of Foulet's wisdom that, despite the biases of his time, he finds himself sufficiently persuaded by the comedy in the work to be able on some level to accept the contradictions, the amoral nature of these tales as inherent in and essential to them, although he attributes this to the naivety of an age that could not always take things seriously enough.⁵

Flinn, on the other hand, essentially discounts the importance of "simple comedy" in his search for the satirical elements in the cycle.⁶ He both traces episodes, events, and

⁵ Lucien Foulet, Le Roman de Renart (Paris, 1914). "Le moyen âge est un grand enfant qui ne prenait pas très volontiers certaines choses au sérieux" (534). He also cites the presence of Renart among sacred images in the procession sponsored by Philippe IV (1313) as evidence of the "...étrange rapprochement, où nous retrouvons une fois de plus cette alliance naïve du sacré et du profane que depuis la Réforme nous ne comprenons plus" (533).

⁶ John Flinn, Le Roman de Renart (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1963).

motifs in the Roman to historical events, and examines mention made of Renart and renardie in other (mostly later) literature, secular and sacred, to show how Renart became an abstract symbol for hypocrisy, malice, evil. This he takes as a primary indication of how people understood these tales.⁷ Flinn's contribution adds to our understanding of the historical context behind the literature more than to the Roman itself, and his limited focus does not account adequately for the phenomenal success and proliferation of these tales. Nor, perhaps more indisputably, does it account for the fact that a modern reader with little knowledge of the Middle Ages, can read these tales in translation⁸ and find them wonderfully funny.⁹

⁷ Flinn seems to me to confuse the branches of the Roman with the ways they were interpreted or utilized in records from the 13th and later centuries. Because they became tools for satire and Renart became a symbol for evil, he sees this as the "unconscious" intent behind the originals. See pages 114-118.

⁸ I refer to testimony by two friends, one a children's librarian and the other an elementary school principle, both of whom have used the recent translation of Le Roman de Renart (published by Oxford University Press) with school children with great success.

⁹ Neither do the satirical elements account for the Renart trickster. His energy adds an interest in and of itself. For example, the vespers with Tibert (Martin, Branch XII), whose interest Flinn says "...est tout entier dans la parodie de l'office..." (88). For a modern reader only vaguely familiar with the precise form of the divine office, this tale nevertheless holds a comic interest second to none in the Renart cycle, and the comedy comes in large measure from the picture presented of Renart and Tibert intensely (and competitively) involved (as are children who "make believe") in acting out a ritual as form whose meaning concerns them not at all. Their only thought is to act convincingly -- to

Another somewhat more recent study has attempted to examine the panoramic picture of the Renart character from the epic Ysengrimus through French and Middle Dutch versions to The History of Reynard the fox as translated by Caxton in 1481. In his doctoral dissertation of 1970, Diederik Spillemaeckers has chosen to trace the changes in the fox's character by examining a single episode (Li Plaid in the Roman) as it is treated in five different versions of the medieval beast epic. He voices throughout his awareness of the danger of taking an episode or lines of verse out of context, but his study suffers not so much from a misuse of the specific context as from a sketchy understanding of the larger context to which the details belong. With such limitations of size placed on his study, his hypotheses tend to be general and suggestive, based on opinion and supposition rather than on demonstrable fact.¹⁰

perform well -- and this they do with great energy, to our amusement.

¹⁰ Reynard the Fox: The Evolution of his Charater in Select Medieval Beast Epics. diss., Michigan State University, 1970. Mr. Spillemaeckers, with no evident awareness of the trickster archetype, wrestles with the contradictions in Reynard which he cannot understand. For example, he asks why Reynard is "devilishly clever" rather than "divinely clever" (14). He answers his own question with the simple observation that man always seems to find evil (the struggle, the conflict, etc.) more interesting, more enigmatic, than good. Later he notes that "Reynard may simply be evil so that he can survive" (88). In a brief epilogue he compares Reynard with "picaresque heroes" such as Eulenspiegel and Lazarillo de Tormes and considers them similar types -- the "rogue hero" -- who continued to fascinate readers once Reynard had been worn out from over use. He suggests four reasons for the interest: the "rogue hero" leads an

Whether one works large or small with the Renart material, it seems very difficult to render a satisfactory treatment of the trickster character in the entire Roman de Renart. How one, given a single chapter in which to examine the Renart character, is to present a valid and useful treatment of this trickster while keeping him securely within the larger historical and literary context to which he belongs, is the question with which I have wrestled. Having initially studied the whole Roman de Renart, I began to collect from the twenty-eight branches Renart's many attributes for a composite picture, aware, however of the danger of my own predisposition toward reading as ambivalent or even positive what many critics have seen as destructive and negative in this character. As with Loki, the need to locate Renart morally has frequently led scholars to judge him as evil.¹¹ His disregard for social and ethical norms, his willingness to tell any story in service of his own desires, his flagrantly malicious pranks have earned him the name of arch-hypocrite and devil. Nevertheless, however wicked or false he may be, within the Roman he is never finally hanged,

adventurous life, the romantic elements fulfill the reader's fantasies, his identification as "evil" is attractive, and his struggle for personal freedom and survival against formidable odds engages the reader (173-74).

¹¹ Jean Dufournet says in his introduction to Le Roman de Renart: "Farceur plutôt sympathique au début, surtout en face du brutal et grossier Isengrin, le goupil devient un personnage odieux et méchant avec les animaux comme avec les paysans, il finit par incarner le Mal" (14).

flayed, stoned, or burned -- punishments with which he is threatened. Clearly his continued existence serves some essential purpose both within a given tale and from tale to tale; and his ability to survive (however ludicrous or fantastic his escape may be) itself becomes a convention, attracting authors to continue the cycle. The challenge seems almost to become a question of how bad Renart can be and still escape execution (that is, remain essentially comic)?¹²

To uncover this essential purpose, we must consider in the Roman the intentions of each tale's author, for Renart is not a mythic character as it is generally defined. Though he enters the Roman with the force of folkloric tradition behind him, each author also adopts him as the vehicle for conveying a particular understanding. Such an intent can only be discovered by careful textual analysis, and this means, for my purpose, severely restricting the material to be examined. This is harder to do than it might seem, for anyone acquainted with the whole Roman de Renart perceives Renart's potential in a way that is difficult to ignore. Whatever branch one is reading resonates with echoes from the other tales. My solution to the dilemma of choosing which of more than twenty branches to work with has been a somewhat arbitrary but essentially practical one.

My concern with the trickster in the narrative cycle led

¹² No author within the Roman consciously abandons the comic mode, although the comic talents vary considerably.

me initially to favor one of the more complex branches. Although many "branches" are single, self-contained narratives (i.e. Branch IV, "Le puits"), several are composed of various episodes sometimes apparently loosely strung together, sometimes more carefully crafted to further a central narrative. Branch II, which together with its continuation Va is considered by Lucien Foulet to be the earliest of the branches, is such a "collection," beginning with a series of more random adventures and ending with the development of a significant action.¹³ Its chronological position would

¹³ Foulet has established his chronology for Le Roman de Renart essentially by noting which tales presuppose a knowledge of another tale and by correlating events within the branches with historical ones. Both because of the many tales that assume as past events the happenings in Branches II and Va, and because the author of Branch II opens his tale by telling us that now we will hear a new conte, he assumes these branches to initiate the cycle. "Pour la première fois, au lieu de comparer son récit avec les autres parties de l'histoire de Renard, le trouvère met en regard de son poème d'autres oeuvres de la littérature contemporaine." (39) This war that the author promises us is the motivation for most of the tales in the Roman. Foulet also reunites Branches II and Va by showing how the author of Branch II had a clearly worked out plan which is abruptly dropped at the end of the branch (Ysengrin and Hersent go home when the prologue has promised us a "war"). We anticipate the escondit (Br. Va) but it doesn't follow. Foulet's hypothesis is that either the author died without finishing his tale, or the end of the tale got separated from the beginning in the manuscript compilation. He establishes the authorship of Branch II by showing how Branch I (which cites "Perrot" as the one who started the story) can only refer to the prior story of Branch II (see pages 230-31). Moreover, the ending of Va does not resolve Ysengrin's complaint (Renart absconds without swearing an oath) and so legally the trial must be reconvened as it is in Branch I. Foulet considers the branches to be composed between 1174 and 1177.

Recently K. Varty and A. Lodge have questioned Foulet's thesis particularly with reference to the unity of Branch II/Va. ["Pierre de Saint Cloud's Roman de Renart: Foulet's

suggest that it set the tone as well as establishing a style, form, and matière for the tales that follow, many of which seem clearly to continue and even imitate the work of this author. Whatever he becomes later, in this early work Renart is the ambivalent, amoral trickster -- equally natural fox and feudal baron, a positive life force and a dark, threatening presence. This fact plus the lively intelligence and humor revealed in the branch make it a logical choice for my study. An examination of Branch II/Va will demonstrate one use to which the trickster narrative has been put and, I hope, shed light on other branches of the Roman.¹⁴

Thesis Re-examined," Jan Goosens and Timothy Sodmann, eds., Third International Beast Epic, Fable, and Fabliau Colloquium (Köln: Böhlau, 1981) 189-95.] They cite the "disparate episodes of the branch" and the "hard fact...that in none of the medieval manuscript collections are II-Va presented as a single unit" (193). On this second point they are misleading. The B ms. edited by Roques does not have all seven episodes of Branch II (A ms.) together, but it very significantly joins one of these episodes (Tiecelin the crow) with the adultery and rape and these latter with the "Escondit." Roques has numbered these 7a and 7b and says, "Ces épisodes étaient sans doute déjà groupés dans le plus ancien poème français de Renart dissocié par la suite; l'arrangeur de la collection B...a intelligemment reconstitué sur ce point un ensemble que la tradition ne lui donnait plus." Le Roman de Renart, Branches VII-IX, (Paris: Champion, 1973) iii. I address the disparate nature of the episodes in my chapter by showing both the artistic unities they contain, and the necessary randomness which itself becomes a convention in later branches (see especially Branches XI, XIV, and XVII).

¹⁴ For example, an examination of Branch XI, generally considered a particularly mediocre pastiche both of other branches of the Roman de Renart and of the chanson de geste, in light of my interpretation of Branch II/Va illustrates how Renart's nature within a few decades has become so fixed in its inconsistency that an author can permit Renart's identity

What follows is a careful examination of the complex, comic strategy of Pierre de Saint-Cloud, whose purpose in this tale is to reassert and acknowledge a central paradox in medieval society, the ambiguity of the real/ideal nature of humankind, and to embrace its life-giving contradiction through his comic trickster-hero, Renart.

BRANCH II

Branch II/Va consists of seven short episodes, in which Renart is out for what he can get, and a longer episode (Va)

to fluctuate wildly from human to animal and from chivalrous to traitorous without feeling the need to explain, sympathize with, or blame his behavior. In Branch XI ("Renart Empereur") Renart is portrayed first as the gentleman beast concerned with his family's well-being then suddenly, without warning, as the trickster taking revenge for no apparent reason, then as the welcome guest of Ysengrin and Hersent, then (although he has just eaten amply) as the predator fox that gobbles up smaller animals without scruple; at one moment he is the chivalrous fox "hardis...et de fier corage" (1911), beloved servant of the king, and the next he is a traitorous baron concerned only for himself. In the end Renart commits the highest treason, taking over the kingdom (and the queen) which King Noble has left in his safekeeping, and warring against the rightful king upon his return from combat with pagan invaders. When after a lengthy battle Noble finally captures Renart, he does not kill him as he intends; rather he gives in to Renart's plea for mercy on the grounds that Renart once healed the king's illness ("Renart Mire," Branch X) and excuses the traitor, pardoning not only this but all "le mesfet/ Que il m'a en cest monde fet" (3367-68).

The few scholars who have deigned to give Branch XI their attention would seem to agree that Noble's clemency serves no purpose within the narrative except to get Renart off the hook (with this the long, bloody battle comes to a perfunctory conclusion and peace is reestablished), and that the convention reigns here at the expense of art or meaning. In fact, this "second-rate" work exaggerates ad absurdum many features found in Branch II/Va, and a comparison of the two would no doubt lead to valuable insights on both works.

in which Ysengrin brings his complaint against Renart before the court of Noble, the lion king. The prologue that begins Branch II states the subject matter of this branch as the war between Renart and Ysengrin, yet of the seven short episodes preceding the "Escondit," only the last two concern Ysengrin. In the first five, a hungry fox attempts through trickery to catch three birds: Chantecler the cock, an unnamed titmouse, and Tiecelein the crow; he persuades a hermit to keep his dogs tied, and, in a spiteful mood, he tries to make trouble for Tibert the cat. These episodes, linked only by the character of Renart and certain common themes, have nothing directly to do with the conteur's intention as stated in the prologue. What then is Pierre de Saint-Cloud's purpose? Pierre begins his prologue promising his readers a conte -- the story of enmity between Renart and Ysengrin, two barons.

Seigneurs, oï avez maint conte,
 Que maint conterre vous raconte
 Comment Paris ravi Elaine,
 Le mal qu'il en ot et la paine,
 De Tristan que la Chievre fist,
 Qui assez bellement en dist
 Et fabliaus et chançons de geste.
 Romanz d'Yvain et de sa beste
 Maint autre conte par la terre.
 Mais onques n'oïstes la guerre,
 Qui tant fu dure de grant fin,
 Entre Renart et Ysengrin,
 Qui moult dura et moult fu dure.
 Des deus barons ce est la pure
 Que ainc ne s'entrainerent jour.
 Mainte mellee et maint estour
 Ot entr'eulz deus, ce est la voire.
 Des or commencerai l'estoire.
 Or oëz le commencement
 Et de la noise et du content,

 Par quoi et por quel mesestance

Fu entr'eus deus la desfiance.¹⁵

The prologue indicates two important things: first Pierre has no explicit moral purpose in telling the tale. We have heard tales of Paris and Helen, of Tristan and Yvain, of chansons de geste and fabliaux, and here is a new conte of "desfiance" for our entertainment. Second, he reveals in the prologue his comic intent. Though he does not mention here that the barons are animals, the audience, appealed to as educated in the literature of the day, certainly knows who Renart and Ysengrin are, and his implication of dark romantic enmity in the animal world immediately provokes a smile.¹⁶ Then he demonstrates already in these opening lines a universally recognized comic technic -- the facile pulling together of disparate elements, the abundance of images, the juxtaposition of the great stories of illicit love and its pains -- tales Trojan and Arthurian -- with fabliaux, these latter mentioned in the same breath with chansons de geste.

¹⁵ I have used the Dufournet edition of the A text originally edited by E. Martin throughout for Branch II/Va.

¹⁶ In many respects Pierre de Saint-Cloud uses the earlier animal epic, Ysengrimus, as a point of departure. L.G. Donovan argues that Branch II/Va is more nearly an adaptation of Ysengrimus: "There seems little doubt...that the earliest of all branches written in the vernacular, Branch II, takes its motivation and most of its procedures from the Ysengrimus which was written some twenty to twenty-five years earlier." "Ysengrimus and the Early Roman de Renart," Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies 4:1 (1983): 36. The changes from one to the other, however, are significant as my discussion will show.

Next we are back to the romance of Yvain and "maint autre conte par la terre." From high to low, from serious to absurd, from specific to general, he moves briskly treating them all as but preliminary to the great tale yet to come. His straight-faced demeanor purports a seriousness of intent belied by the absurdity of the content. While the images of rape, adultery, trickery, and warfare contained in these literary allusions on one level prepare the reader for what is to come, they are inappropriately grand for Pierre's subject matter. By exaggerating the seriousness of his matière (note his twice repeated assertion of the truth of his story in verses 14 and 17), he sets the comic tone for what follows. This kind of comic exaggeration is also evident in his use of disparaging epithets for Renart, which ironically emphasize a wickedness out of proportion to the actual events narrated.¹⁷ It is with just such a pair of epithets that Pierre de Saint-Cloud opens his tale:

Il avint chose que Renars
 Qui tant par fu de males ars
 Et qui tant sot toz jors de guile

¹⁷ Jean Rychner remarks the similar function in the prologue to Branch IV ("Puits," vv. 17-30) where the conteur "vante la fourberie, la ruse et la malignité de Renart. En d'autres termes, il grandit son héros." This, says Rychner, is what Renart is known for and he must be shown to outdo himself. He also notes the teller's affection for his hero evident here and throughout the branch. "Renart et ses conteurs ou le style de la sympathie," Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature 9 (1971): 312.

S'en vint traiant a une ville. (23-26)

Cloaked in the darkly ominous tone of the prologue, the trickster fox approaches a village. The graphic description which follows is of a lush, domestic paradise -- the well-garnished, well-secured farmyard of a peasant, Constans des Noës. The ample list of meats, grains, and fruits stocked here suggests, however, not only an earthly paradise but also a stuffed, self-satisfied world protected against the predations of the hungry and needy.¹⁸ Here Renart comes "pour son dedit," but he finds it secured against him. Already in these first few verses Pierre has introduced a moral ambiguity, an ambiguity that pervades the whole of Branches II and Va. Renart is a rogue ruled by self-interest, but the same principle prevails in "paradise."

However well fortified the farm of Constans de Nöes may be, Renart, a persistent and tireless hunter, eventually finds a broken stake and sneaks in, hiding under a cabbage. The hens see the shaking cabbage leaf and fear a predator has entered the garden, but Chantecler the cock dismisses their fears disdainfully: "Mais estes ci tout asseür," he says (100), "Trives avez." A truce has been proclaimed and no fox or

¹⁸ Marc Bloch, Feudal Society vol.2 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) notes that among those things listed as prohibited by the "Peace of God" movement's efforts were "to carry off peasants' livestock" (414). Ironically, the peasant's greed exhibited here is also contrary to universal peace.

"putoiz" would dare enter (111).¹⁹ To these proud assurances, the narrator adds, "Rien ne douta, si fist que fox" (121).

One of the themes that unifies the whole of Branch II is the self-deception inherent in idealism, or the vanity of believing oneself secure from danger in this world where, to borrow a stock phrase from Branch IV, "tout est en aventure"--anything can happen (v.106). The poet stresses repeatedly the cock's vain sense of security, both building his central theme and dramatically heightening our anticipation of the cock's impending doom:

Qu'il n'a paour de nulle riens
 Que li face goupilz ne chiens
 De nulle riens n'avoit peür
 Que moult cuidoit estre aseür.
 Moult se contint seürement. (115-19)

The word "asseurer" or some form thereof is repeated every time Chantecler falls back into the delusion of safety. Only after his terrifying dream-vision (which conveys to him a sense of imminent danger although he does not understand the images he sees) is Chantecler's self-assurance shaken, and he hurries to Pinte "con cil qui point ne a'aseure." (166) She tells him the horrid beast in his dream is a fox, but he

¹⁹ Here more explicit reference is made to the "Peace" proclaimed. See also Renart's interchange with the titmouse which follows. Pierre, as with many other such allusions, does not develop this reference into a clear theme. He merely pulls it in for resonance and for the immediate comic effect -- to spice the soup, as it were.

arrogantly rejects her interpretation ("A fable est li songes tournez" 275) and goes back to sleep. Now Renart, seeing that the cock "fu aseurez," prepares to grab him. But the cock awakes just in time to escape. Having failed to capture Chantecler by force, Renart must now rely on "engin".

In the scene which follows, we watch Renart employ his powers of persuasion to convince the wary cock that he meant no harm and is indeed glad for the safety of his "cosin germain." The dialogue between cock and fox, the one suspicious, the other gracious and self-assured, is high comedy. The remainder of this story, the best known of all Renart tales, can be briefly summarized. Renart manages to convince the cock to prove himself worthy of his father, Chanteclin, by crowing with both eyes shut, and so catches him and runs off to the laments of the hens and the fury of the farmwife. A second comic dialogue ensues between the cursing husband, who blames his wife for the state of affairs, and the defensive wife. Meanwhile Chantecler, hearing the pursuit behind the fleeing fox, persuades Renart to address his pursuers with a "cocky" retort. Renart, who too can be fooled, falls for this and upon opening his mouth, loses his prey. Chantecler, from a tree branch, taunts the bitter Renart. Both cock and fox now utter morals in recognition of their foolish vanity before Renart, hearing the hounds close behind, flees for his life.

Throughout this tale, Pierre has intentionally devised

biblical echoes to tempt a simplistic moral reading of the tale. The farmyard is a paradise penetrated by the devil fox (though here the female spots the danger and the male falls prey to vanity) who leaves this small world in total confusion as he flees. Chantecler's repudiation of his "cousinage" with Renart is accompanied by "Renart parjure, alés vos ent!" (457), an echo of Christ's words to Satan in the wilderness. This is a comic technique the author uses frequently in these episodes to parody both the contemporary beast fable and the general allegorical tendency of the age that seeks a pattern in all things in conformity with sacred truth. In fact, no corresponding moral can be drawn from these echos.

The matter of cousinage Renart invents as a way of assuring Chantecler that he meant no harm when he tried to catch the cock provides one clue to Pierre's real message. If Renart calls Chantecler "cosins," the cock seems equally willing to pretend to this relationship:

"Renart cosin," says Chantecler, "Volés me vos trere a engin?" (319-20)

"Certainly not!" says Renart. "D'une char some et d'un sanc." (321-23)

When similar words are used in the New Testament, they refer to a spiritual kinship, a common humanity, rather than physical blood ties, and if this is what Renart means, there

is truth in what he says.²⁰ Both animals use "engin et art" to trick the other, both are fooled by appeals to their vanity, both utter proverbs in recognition of their folly. That Chantecler damns Renart's cousinship ("Dahez ait vostre cosinage"⁴⁵⁵) at the end does not make him any less a participant in the action of the story. If the early part of the tale focuses on the folly of Chantecler, the latter part focuses on his cousin, Renart. Says the narrator, "N'i a si sage ne foloit./Renars qui tot le mont deçoit/Fu deçoüs a cele foiz" (429-31).

The balance maintained here between the two tricksters is characteristic of all the following episodes in this branch. Renart acts here in a world that is no innocent victim of his pranks. He moves among animals who are his "comperes," gifted with protective instincts and a cleverness rivaling his own. In the following episodes a titmouse (who we are told is neither "fole ne lorde," 562) not only does not fall victim to Renart's flattery, she actually teases him into revealing his deceit; later Tibert, who is temporarily beguiled by his own hatred of Ysengrin into pledging a truce with Renart, spots the trap Renart has laid for him and with a little luck eventually pushes the fox into it; later still Tiecelein the crow, flattered but never quite free of his

²⁰ We are one with Christ when we drink his "blood" and eat his "body" in the Eucharist, and through Christ we are one with each other. See I Corinthians 10:16-17.

suspicious, escapes death at the last moment, losing only a cheese and a few feathers to Renart. In each episode this balance of power exists between the two antagonists, creating a dramatic tension that contributes to the liveliness of action and dialogue, and undercutting a moral implication that Renart brings into an otherwise innocent world the element of evil. Moreover, if the animals Renart tries to trick must stay alert and look to their own safety, so must the fox, who at the end of every episode is fleeing from his arch-enemies, the dogs.

Foulet complained of the arbitrary, capricious ordering of these episodes as a weakness in the poem, but the randomness is essential to the meaning of the work. For, so the conteur would have it, this is precisely the nature of the life Renart leads. If Renart approaches the farmyard of Constans de Noës with a predetermined plan of action, it is the only time he can afford such a luxury. Once inside the fence, he lives entirely by his wits, making what he can of the opportunities he is given. Having eventually lost the cock, his hunger and the pursuing dogs and peasants drive him on; chance determines where he will find himself next and who will be his prey. It so happens to be a titmouse. One senses (and one is meant to sense) that it might have been anything.

The author underscores this randomness with his use of the formulaic phrase "Atant es vos..." as the only transition

between episodes or sudden turns in the action.²¹ As Renart flees the hunters at the end of the titmouse adventure, "Atant es vos un convers" (602). This little episode puts Renart in such peril that the narrator, who up to this point has not openly sympathized with his hero, seeming rather to enjoy the game of thrusts and parries between his characters, now allows Renart a success. Caught between the hunters' dogs and those of the hermit, Renart is in real trouble and the conteur's concern here is phrased in words very like those used when Chantecler was carried off in the fox's mouth:²²

Poor a de pedre s'escorce
 Se plus n'i vaut engin que force.
 Molt dote perdre . . . gonele
 S'auques ne li vaut sa favele. (617-20)

He persuades the hermit that he has a bet with the pursuing dogs, and that the holy man must not deny him his right to win

²¹ Two things are to be remarked concerning this transitional phrase. The first is Pierre's use of this phrase which is limited to important turns in the action. Compare this with the use of the same phrase in Branch XI ("Renart Empeur") where it does not define episodes but is used almost redundantly to suggest a shifting of focus, a flurry of activity in the narrative. The second was pointed out by Prof. Frederick Goldin, who suggested that a dialogue was perhaps being set up here between this conte and the chanson de geste that makes frequent use of the same formulaic phrase. This is certainly true, although, as with other allusions to and echoes of genres, it is not followed through as consistent parody.

²² "Or est Chanteclers en peril, / S'il ne reseit engin et art" (418-19).

the wager fairly. The hermit agrees and Renart, still fleeing the hounds, runs on, jumping a ditch to lose his pursuers. Now, the narrator says, Renart knows well how to change directions and he doesn't wait for a companion; and while Renart makes his way alone, Pierre takes a moment to sympathize:

N'est merveille s'il est lassez,
 Car le jor out foï asez;
 Si a trové mauvés eür.
 Mais qui chaut? ore est asoür.
 Asés a grant travail eü
 Por ce qu'il li est mescoü.
 Par ce que il s'en va fuitis
 Manace molt ses enemis. (657-64)

Verse 660 represents the trickster's stance exactly -- "What does it matter? Now he is safe."²³ To escape is the essential thing; all else can be negotiated. But Renart is after all tired and hungry. While he bemoans his "aventure," he looks ahead and sees Tibert the cat disporting himself. In a thoroughly bad temper, Renart growls at Tibert who has greeted him good-humoredly; then realizing he has nothing to gain by challenging Tibert, who is plump and well fed while Renart is famished, Renart changes his tune. He is out of

²³ An interesting comparison might be drawn between the use of the phrase "Mais qui chaut?" in the Roman de Renart and in the chansons de geste.

sorts because of his war with Ysengrin, he says, and he wants Tibert to join his side and pledge a truce. Tibert readily agrees. Now Renart ("qui est de male vie/ Nel laissa onques a hair" 720-21) prepares to trick his newly sworn ally. He challenges the gamester cat to race his horse on a long, dirt stretch where Renart knows there is a hidden trap. The cat is hot for it and, says Pierre, "Renars fu un vis maufez/ Qui le vost en folie enjoindre" (742-43).²⁴

Once Tibert discovers the trap (as he does just before he falls into it), the game becomes one of fox and cat each secretly trying to outsmart the other, but they are stalemated, too evenly matched in their attempts to outwit each other, until "Es vos tant/ deus mastinz qui vienent..." (779). Once again Fate, in the form of dogs, intervenes, and she throws the winning hand to Tibert, who, as cat and fox flee together, strikes Renart so that he falls into the trap in which he meant to catch Tibert. Pierre

²⁴ I have noted above the use of epithets to exaggerate the fox's wicked nature. It is interesting to note also the consistent way Pierre uses Renart epithets, both here and in the preceding episodes, to call attention to Renart's roguish nature as a means of announcing a trick about to occur. With Chantecler, Pierre used an epithet just before Renart first pounced on the cock; with the titmouse one epithet ("...qui molt sot de bole" 537) anticipated Renart's trick as the bird flew down to kiss him, and another ("Renars fu cointe et senez," 580) preceded Renart's clever response to the titmouse as he prepared to flee the approaching hunters (an action which belies his earlier promise that a universal peace has been proclaimed). One function of such epithets, then, is to heighten dramatic tension by suggesting a deception in progress.

unabashedly gives Tibert his support here. Renart was a bad companion who betrayed his pledged truce and he deserves his fate:

Molt l'a Tibers bien honoré,
 Quant el braion l'a enbatu
 Ou il aura le col batu.
 Ci a meveise conpaignie,
 Car vers lui a sa foi mentie. (796-800)

But once Tibert races off, shouting, "Encontre vezié recuit," the conteur turns back to his hero, encouraging our sympathy: "Or est Renars en male trape!" (809). Still the fox too has his lucky breaks; the blow from the farmer meant to kill him merely breaks his leg and the trap, freeing him to flee once more the jaws of death. As he runs, Renart is "dolenz" and "liez" -- sad that his foot is broken, happy that he has escaped.²⁵ As his hero limps away, Pierre once again sympathizes:

Que d'un que de l'autre matire
 S'en est tornés a molt grant peine
 Si conme aventure le meine. (840-42)

Thus chance leads Renart, but what with one difficulty following another, he's had a hard time of it. It is with some relief that we find Renart at last coming upon a place

²⁵ The juxtaposition of these contraries, suffering and joy, is common to love lyrics, and such usage humorously suggests here Renart's noble nature.

where he can rest; and he would stay there too, we are told, if he didn't need to eat. As episode follows episode, a sense of interest builds for this unscrupulous rogue who rebounds from one near disaster after another with his spirit unbroken, ready to try again. After all this time he has still not eaten! We are ready for for a change of fortune, and this beautiful spot, unspoiled by man ("Que la gent n'ont geres hanté" 847), suggests a fresh start for Renart.²⁶ So it happens that while Renart rests, adventure finally brings some good fortune his way.

Tiécelin the crow, one of Renart's "comperes...de viez" (915), who has not eaten all day, is out "en aventure de lui prendre...ce que gel vi tendre/ jaunet et de bone savor" (887-89). He steals a cheese from a dame who, given the nature of this world, is not properly on guard, and who like the wife of Constans de Noës can only cry, "Lasse, con m'est mal avenu!"

But those who are out for adventure must be prepared for adversity as well as good fortune, for fortune changes from minute to minute. So it happens that Tiécelin flies with his cheese to the very tree under which Renart reposes. Now the

²⁶ Fritz Peter Knapp sees this as a locus amoenus. "Quelques procédés du comique dans l' épopée animale du moyen age," Comique, satire et parodie dans la tradition renardienne et les fabliaux, Actes du Colloque des 15 et 16 Janvier 1983 (Göppingen: Kummerle, 1983) 94. This calls to mind another one of many parallels one discerns between Renart's adventure with the cock and with the crow.

conteur acknowledges the arbitrary, capricious law of nature that assigns now this fortune, now that:²⁷

Ajorné furent a cel ore
 Renarz desos et cil desoure;
 Mes tant i out de dessevraille
 Que cil manjüe et cil baelle. (897-900)

Pierre returns once again to the theme of false security. The crow has every reason to feel that he is safe "desoure". Isn't he high in a tree with his booty? Once secure, one tends to become careless. Suddenly, a piece of his cheese drops to the ground where the fox lies. Renart, seeing the crow above with the cheese, flatters him into "singing" -- the same strategy he used with the cock -- so that the crow ("Onc n'en sot mot" 942) drops the whole cheese.

Now, signalling another trick, Pierre calls Renart:

Li lecheres, qui trestoz art
 Et se defrit de lecherie... (945-46)²⁸

²⁷ Dufournet notes the comic play in line 897 on the word "ajorne," a legal term meaning to assign in justice (p. 209).

²⁸ This is the second time he has called Renart "lecheres," the first being in the Chantecler episode just after Renart lost the cock for the second time. In both instances Pierre plays with the multiple meanings of the word, using it ironically to contrast Renart's ravenous hunger and desire for what is before him with the image of the debauched gourmand which the term calls up. Such name calling is not only an example of tongue-in-cheek humor but also serves to heighten the sense of drama: by emphasizing the enormity of Renart's loss in the first instance ("Li lecheres fremist et trame..." 444); by calling attention to Renart's great hunger in the second.

Employing yet another strategy, Renart attempts to lure the crow down where he can be caught. Feigning disgust for the cheese, he begs Tiécelin to come down and remove it as he cannot remove himself on account of his broken leg. The strategy works, but the crow, wary throughout, is quick enough to escape with only the loss of a few tail feathers, after which he willingly relinquishes his rights to the cheese, cursing himself for his folly in trusting Renart. Renart, complaining only that the cheese is small, gulps it down, declaring it the best he's ever tasted. Never were Renart's affairs in worse shape, says the narrator, but as there's nothing more to be gained by complaining, Renart is off again through the woods.

If we look at what the action has shown us thus far, we find two contradictory messages. These first episodes certainly show the limited effectiveness of Renart's cunning in the world of his fallible but also canny comperes. Moreover, Renart's very nature as predator-thief subjects him to continual pursuit by peasants and dogs. Thus the action would suggest the trickster gains little for all his trouble. But, the action also shows us a character who, however "dogged" by Fate, never succumbs either physically or mentally to the strains of the fugitive life. Even after a brush with death, the exhausted, famished, and now injured fox is "liez," happy to have escaped without serious dismemberment. His stamina and pluck are admirable, and, as these episodes have

shown, trickery is sometimes essential for survival. Finally Renart wins our sympathy by dint of his wit, energy, resourcefulness, and persistence in these early episodes.²⁹

This may recall Loki's heroic stance in Lokasenna or Wakdjunkaga's frequent reversals of fortune that make up the first half of the cycle: certainly it is the comic perspective that reveals itself in a series of more or less random events -- victories, failures, sudden reversals. Unlike tragedy, where all events are seen as part of a pattern leading to one end, in comedy the random nature is the pattern. With comedy one is never sure which way he'll end up, but the longer the story goes on, the more confidence one has that whether down or up, the random pattern that is life continues.

In these episodes, Pierre has portrayed a trickster who lives by his wits, is hungry, deviously clever, and out to get what he can, never knowing from moment to moment what luck or misfortune may present itself, and as quick to take advantage as to dodge trouble. Renart roams through farmlands and woods, a restless energetic presence, breaking in upon peaceful, relatively static scenes of animal life, bringing

²⁹ L.G. Donovan sees Renart's lack of success in these early episodes as an adaptation from Ysengrimus, reversing the initial success of Ysengrimus in that beast epic (where the wolf unfairly wins a ham from Reynard) which was intended to make the reader "unfavorably disposed toward the wolf." In the Roman Renart is crafty and should not lose in these encounters but he does. The wolf is thickheaded and shouldn't win but he does. Donovan does not pursue this thought to suggest that Renart's defeats are guaranteed to win him sympathy, but this point might follow from his logic (36).

intensity and vitality, stirring up trouble.

Pierre has developed the interdependent themes of the foolishly vulnerable idealist and the caprices of Fortune,³⁰ and has revealed his own interest in frustrating (with inconsistency and comic reversals) a simple moral reading of these episodes. Moreover, it should be noted that Pierre is curiously consistent in his treatment of verbal deception: it is a double-edged sword, cutting both ways. Certainly in these episodes Renart gains little for all his persuasive efforts, and in the Tibert episode he is soundly denounced for his bad faith.

At the end of each episode our sense of justice -- the justice that does not simply grant victory to the cleverest or the strongest, but makes all alike subject to Fortune's antics -- is satisfied. Furthermore, if we know the truth of who Renart is, so in the end do his comperes. Each episode ends with a sense of completion; only Renart remains on the loose, his energy, self-interest, perseverance in the face of obstacles driving the narrative on.

Now, at line 1032, Pierre introduces a change. The narrative movement has heretofore been episodic, adventures happening as Renart runs through fields and woods. Now, we are told, Renart happens upon a "fosse obscure," and, "onc

³⁰ The hermit who is fooled by Renart may be taken as another example of one gulled by Renart's appeal to his sense of right as a man of God.

n'en sot mot," falls in. With this movement downward, which already hints metaphorically of ambiguous sexual complications, the mood darkens. The narrator comments, "...li avint une aventure/ De quoi li anuia et poise" (1032-33). Here begins his quarrel with Ysengrin, the war "Qui tant fu dure et grant fin" as promised in the prologue.³¹ Pierre seems with this stance to promise a moral context and the corresponding linear plot that ends with tragic resolution. In fact the narrative form becomes more nearly linear but the moral context is intentionally obscured.

The action can be briefly summarized as follows: Renart finds himself in the middle of a room belonging to "son anemi." When he sees Hersent, who lies nursing her cubs, he hides himself behind the door. Hersent, seeing the light from the door, looks up, glimpses the red fur, and knows instantly who it is. Laughing, she calls to Renart and beckons the reluctant fox to come near, calling him "compere" (a reversal of Renart's similar use of familiarities earlier with cock, titmouse, etc.) and accusing him of neglecting her.

Silent at first, Renart responds to her accusation by saying that since Ysengrin jealously accuses him of loving Hersent, he has not dared come around. Hersent retorts that

³¹ Car par ce commença la noise
Par mal pechié et par dyable
Vers Ysengrins le connestable. (1034-36)

if Ysengrin has spread such a false rumor, she'll punish him by making it come true. She invites Renart to be her lover ("je vous tenrai pour ami" 1110) and he, albeit fearful of the wolf's return, joyfully accepts ("Renars en demaine grant joie" 1114). Once he has had his pleasure with her, he takes possession of the den in a fit of masculine triumph, roughing up her cubs, calling them bastards, urinating on them, eating everything he can find, throwing things around, and acting like one "qui ne se doute de nului" (1132). Then anticipating Ysengrin's return, he sneaks off, leaving Hersent to hush her outraged cubs. Shortly after, an unsuspecting Ysengrin returns to find his den a mess and his cubs eager to tell the tale of his shame.

When Ysengrin hears what his cubs report, he nearly faints from anger, then howls at Hersent; but she is boldly indignant and scorns his anger, telling him that she will take an oath to declare her innocence. This satisfies Ysengrin on one condition -- that she help him catch his enemy, Renart.

The wolves remain on the lookout for Renart, and one day sighting him, they give chase. Renart heads for his den, and Hersent, increasing her speed, follows him right into the hole. But there she gets stuck halfway in and Renart, finding her hind end helplessly exposed, rapes her. Ysengrin finds them in this ludicrous posture, and Renart pulls back and declares himself innocently trying to push her free. Renart runs off and Ysengrin, after a lengthy struggle, frees

his wife and they turn homeward.

The summary thus far could simply be another, lengthier trickster episode. Renart twice turns a tricky situation to his advantage and leaves behind him the ambiguities of Hersent's marital infidelity. But Pierre here not only exposes the ideals of marriage to comic abuse but also sets up a problem of human complexity between three characters, one that begs resolution. The random, episodic adventures give way to a novelistic form in which the motives behind the actions will be explored and a solution will be attempted: first the solution of quick revenge, then, when that fails, a solution by law (Branch Va). But unlike a romance such as Tristan where ambiguity is tragically resolved, here the ambiguity is comic and perpetuates itself inasmuch as the ending will leave us right back where we started.

How does this work? First, Pierre, whose interest in justice has been previously noted as a carefully maintained balance of antagonists, here presents a tale so deliberately ambiguous that our sense of justice is severely strained. Where in previous episodes the audience could see truth for itself and Pierre's comments frequently anticipated and interpreted events, here the audience is deliberately left in the dark and Pierre refrains from commenting.

First of all, the element of suspense has been heightened and the reader enters the obscurity of the cave as surely as Renart. The story has left the relatively simple world of

the animal kingdom, where the fox's predations are after all essential to his survival, and the outcome of events in this sexual context cannot be anticipated. Also a background -- an earlier animosity -- is suggested but not made clear. Renart perceives that this den belongs to "son anemi," and Hersent accuses Renart of neglecting her which he attributes to her husband's jealous rumors.³² Is her accusation merely the creation of a seductress? Apart from the literary allusions in the prologue to adulterous passions in conjunction with the prophesy of a war to come between Renart and Ysengrin, there have been no other hints thus far of an illicit romance between Renart and Hersent.³³

Renart's position has also changed inasmuch as he, formerly the aggressor initiating the action, now plays an essentially defensive role. He, like his earlier victims, must weigh Hersent's offer of pleasure (an appeal to his vanity as well as his appetite) against the dangers inherent in the situation.

Added to this is a change in the author's relationship to his narrative, for he now essentially suspends the function

³² In a real sense Ysengrimus lies in the background of the entire cycle of Renart stories. There Renart raped the she-wolf when she chased him into his hole. Except for this indication of sexual intimacy in an earlier and quite different work, there is no known background to suggest the truth of what Hersent says. See the following discussion of the episode in Ysengrimus.

³³ See v. 700 ff. Renart excuses his bad temper as due to his bitter war with Ysengrin and solicits Tibert's help.

of the first person narrator who is personally involved in the action, commenting on and interpreting the movements of his characters. Where, for example, in the Chantecler episode Pierre tells us the cock is a fool for not being afraid, that he'll regret his actions if Renart catches him, that he needs to employ trickery to escape, and that Renart himself is not immune to folly; where in the titmouse adventure we are told that Renart is a deceiver and that the bird is no dimwit; where in all the following adventures we have found the narrator stepping in to warn, sympathize, or interpret, here he is essentially silent, no longer mediating directly between his characters and his audience/readers. Events are related vividly and dramatically in the style characteristic of Pierre de Saint-Cloud, but where we might expect him to intervene, he does not.³⁴

Furthermore, with minor exceptions, this silence continues through the rape episode and into the plaint of Ysengrin (Branch Va), and is really relinquished only once Renart receives his summons to appear for the oath-taking. The effect of this silence is a deliberately contrived ambiguity: events appear at once closer and less morally determined as the reader, no longer guided by the narrator,

³⁴ None of the epithets used so liberally before to signal a trick or inform us of Renart's intention appears here. While the epithets do not reflect the narrator's actual moral evaluation of Renart, they make the appearance of doing so and here even this ironical voice is quiet.

is left to decide for himself what is happening and how the situation should be judged. Such ambiguity also prepares in the reader a keen interest in the judgment scene that follows in Branch Va.

Even where Pierre does comment, his meaning is obscure. In lines 1032-36 where the narrator, introducing the episode of adultery, says that the quarrel between Renart and Ysengrin was begun "par mal pechié et par dyable" he does not indicate who is at fault. Even if this phrase seems to apply to Renart at the outset, by the conclusion of the affair, Hersent is cast in the more dubious light. Renart's abuse of Ysengrin's home and cubs may seem unduly malicious, but in fact it never weighs heavily in what follows.³⁵ The focus remains fixed on the adultery and here Hersent's behavior appears to be the worse of the two guilty partners. She has invited Renart in, she has seduced him, and once Renart leaves, she tells her cubs to say nothing of what they've seen. Their subsequent condemnation of her is scathing:

"Quoi, diables? nous noierons
Renart le rous que tant heons
De mort, qu'avez ci receü
Et nostre pere deceü,

³⁵ Ysengrin adds it on to his claim when he sees he's not getting very far with the rape charge against Renart. Brun also raises it as something that demands reparation when Brichemer and Baucent cast doubt on the legality of Hersent's testimony as third person witness.

Qui en vous avoit sa fiancée?
 Ja, se Diex plaist, tele viltance,
 Que nous sommes si laidengiez,
 Ne remaindra ne soit vengiez." (1143-50)

She is the devil who has invited the enemy into their home and deceived their father who trusted her. This is followed by an almost sympathetic portrait of Ysengrin, returning home laden with food for his family after a long day of hunting to be greeted with a tale of shame and outrage. But Ysengrin too is foolish. His folly lies first in his false security, for he returns home expecting no trouble: "D'autrui damage ne li chaille!" (1162). When the cubs eagerly report their shame, Ysengrin explodes with a volley of curses first at Hersent, then at the absent Renart ("cilz rous, cilz puanz, cilz vilz lechieres, cilz garçons..." 1182-83). Yet Ysengrin accepts her denial of wrongdoing and her willingness to do his bidding, changing suddenly from rage to pacified satisfaction ("Ses mautalens fu trespassez" 1206), and insisting only that she further prove her good intentions by helping him to catch Renart.

At precisely this point in the narrative, Pierre comments: "Or s'en gart, si fera savoir." (1210) To whom is he referring? Since Ysengrin and Hersent have just agreed to go after Renart, one might assume this warning is intended for the fox. Four lines later the wolf utters the same dire threat to Renart, "...fous fera, s'il ne se garde" (1214), but

in the intervening lines the poet shows us an Ysengrin "baus at haitiez," surging suddenly with self-confidence. If Pierre has indeed intended sympathy for his hero in line 1210, his warning casts in an ironically comic light the wolf's identical threat. Following as it does Ysengrin's willful self-delusion concerning Hersent, we sense rather that it is the wolf who should be on guard, and events will prove this to be correct.

There is another possible reading for line 1210.³⁶ Since it follows directly upon Ysengrin's veiled threat to Hersent that her credibility depends on how she comports herself in this matter, the line could also be taken to refer to the she-wolf. Two other comments the author makes in these episodes of adultery and rape refer to Hersent: the comment at lines 1191-92 mentioned above, and the comment as Hersent heads for Renart's hole where she will get stuck: "La fist Hersent trop que musarde" (1254). If this earlier warning at line 1210 is taken to refer to Hersent, the second comment sounds like its fulfillment. Ysengrin's echo of the narrator's warning now takes on a double irony, suggesting that the wolf, by applying the same warning to Renart, has mistaken the application: that is to say, he is watching the wrong party.

³⁶ The B manuscript, edited by Roques, avoids the ambiguity I am about to suggest here by making the pronoun reference masculine: "Or se gart, qu'il fera savoir" 5886.

The introduction to the rape episode which follows directly after this line is also ambiguous. Pierre refers to the adventure that befalls Ysengrin as "estrange/ Ainsi comme la voie change" (1217-18). Jean Dufournet adopts G. Tilander's reading of this line which sees "la voie" as referring to the place where Renart changed direction and lost Ysengrin, his pursuer.³⁷ Another reading is perhaps more in keeping with the theme of "aventure" Pierre has emphasized thus far. We are told that Ysengrin is now always on the lookout for Renart, but that before a week has passed, something strange happens: "La avint aventure estrange/ Ainsi comme la voie change" ...just as the route changes, or as these things happen.³⁸ We are reminded of line 1032 ("la li avint une aventure") when Renart chooses to enter an unknown cave. Such opportunities present themselves; it remains only to be seen what one will make of them.

In Ysengrin we see another example of the fool who ironically believes himself secure because he is watching fastidiously; only, of course, he is watching the wrong party since it is Hersent who betrayed him before and, because of a foolish choice, will betray him again. Or perhaps more to the point, it is his own willing self-delusion that betrays

³⁷ Dufournet 218.

³⁸ For another figurative reading of the word "voie," see line 302 where Dufournet translates "...s'il nel manjue [Chantecler], Dont a il sa voie perdue." to read "He has wasted his time," 188.

him. Ysengrin suspects his wife, but he chooses to accept her word that she is innocent because it maintains his honor and justifies his grudge against Renart. Actually Hersent never precisely denies her guilt; she merely says she will deny it on her oath if this will satisfy him.³⁹ This willingness he accepts as sufficient proof (he will not accept the same from Renart at the end of this episode).⁴⁰

Renart is no such fool, as Pierre suggests with two brief comments in the following lines. Ysengrin comes to a place where he thinks to ambush Renart. Pierre describes the field and says with double entendre, "La savoit bien Renars la voie" (1224). This is a way Renart knows well, i.e. both a good place to look for him and a place where Renart's familiarity gives him the advantage over the wolf. The fox has come in search of food. The wolf, catching sight of him, lowers his head and howls. But Renart, who never takes his safety for granted ("qui point ne s'afia" 1232), is off in a flash.⁴¹

³⁹ "Sire, fait elle, vous diroiz:/ Courouciez estez, n'est pas droiz/ Que vous moustrez ici vostre ire,/ Que, se me lessiez escondire/ Par serement ne par joïse,/ Jel feroie par tel devise/ C'on me feïst ardoir ou pendre,/ Se ne m'en pooie desfendre;" (1193-1200).

⁴⁰ Already here the judicial instrument of oath-taking is shown to be of little value. Whose oath was to be believed? It clearly did not settle matters once and for all, especially when one had other reasons or occasions for mistrusting the swearer.

⁴¹ I use here the B ms reading of the line for its grammatical clarity. The Martin edition reads: "Renars qui point ne s'i fia."

The two wolves give chase, but they are unable to catch him. Renart takes the "voie estroite" and Ysengrin "la plus droite" (1239-40): Hersent now speeds up, wanting to join Renart ("Qui a Renart se voudra joindre" 1242). Renart, seeing her so hard in pursuit, races for his home "Malcrues," then seeing "s'amie" so angry (1252), he decides to enter his den. Now the narrator comments "La fist Hersent trop que musarde," because she runs full speed into the hole after him, and because of her larger size and the force with which she enters, she gets as far as her waist and no farther. Nor can she retreat: she is stuck fast in Renart's hole.

Hersent's situation here is left emotionally ambiguous. She has agreed to help Ysengrin catch Renart, but what of her own inclinations? Lucien Foulet cautioned against reading the verb "se joindre" as indicative of Hersent's desire for Renart.⁴² But this reading also served Foulet's interpretation of Hersent's sole emotion concerning Renart as anger, an interpretation needed to avoid what he saw otherwise as a contradiction between Pierre's version and his primary model, the Ysengrimus by Nivardus. In fact, as Kenneth Varty

⁴² Foulet (164) notes the following similar constructions which do not indicate sexual desire: Roman de Renart, II, v. 742-44, "Renars fu un vis maufez, / Qui le vost en folie enjoindre. / Tibers s'apareille de poindre." XV, v. 360-62, "Mout menace Tybert et jure / Qu'a lui se voudra acoupler, / Se jamais le puet encontrer."

has shown, Foulet's reading of Nivardus is in error.⁴³ Contrary to Foulet's assertion that in the Ysengrimus Hersent is faithful to her marriage vows during the rape, the text actually quotes Hersent who "warming to the game, said:

"Reynard, you give a polished demonstration of that with which your public reputation credits you. If you had as much strength as skill, you'd be declared a trusty servant with the ladies; I'd hardly have to be urged to enter your house if only your doorway were a little wider." History relates that she enjoyed the sport and so the adulterer cuckolded his uncle."⁴⁴

In Nivardus there is nothing to suggest the she-wolf's fondness for Reynard prior to the actual enjoyment of the rape: Reynard goes to Ysengrimus's lair not accidentally but intentionally and he urinates on the cubs as a way of getting back at his enemy. Their mother, hearing their groans, finds them dirtied and determines to catch the fox, who has fled. She calls to him that he's behaving boorishly by not giving her a kiss in thanks for her hospitality. Although, as Jill

⁴³ Kenneth Varty, "Love, Marriage and Family Relationships in the Ysengrimus and the Roman de Renart," Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies 4 (1983): 39-52.

⁴⁴ "Illa iocum cupiens 'Reinarde, facetius,' inquit,
 'Publica que de te fama fatetur, agis.
 Si tibi, qualis inest industria, robur inesset,
 Verna penes dominas assererere probus.
 Vix egomet cogenda tuos intrare penates,
 Ianua si paulum latior esset, eram!'
 Gausam scriptura refert his lusibus illam
 Et mechem patrum zelotipasse suum."

From the recent edition/translation by Jill Mann, Ysengrimus: Text with Translation, Commentary and Introduction (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1987). Book V, l.818.11-18. See p. 461 fn. for manuscript treatment of these lines.

Mann points out, there are sexual implications in the kiss, Nivardus's real interest is in the reversal of hospitality conventions.⁴⁵ And the wolf's real intention is to trick Reynard back to her hole so she can punish him. Instead he throws dirt and stones at her provoking her to pursue him through the woods to his home where she gets stuck in his entryway. The narrator soundly rebukes her for acting rashly (Book V, 801-812). Reynard verbally insults her, then rapes her.

Pierre's tale, on the contrary, clearly indicates Hersent's adulterous interest in Renart, so that her anger and humiliation during the chase and the rape are psychologically much more complex. She is undoubtedly angry, but anger does not cancel (and can indeed be fueled by) desire. So when husband and wife set out to catch Renart, one senses the conflicting motives in Hersent. She desires Renart but can't have him; moreover he has escaped the predicament that their adultery has landed her in (Hersent seems as inclined as her husband to deny her own responsibility in the situation, preferring instead to see herself as the victim), so she is also angry at Renart. Does not her ability to outdistance her husband also suggest her greater eagerness, the strength

⁴⁵ Mann, 39.

of her desire?⁴⁶ She wants to reach Renart first, and seeing she's lost sight of her husband, she runs all the more swiftly, right into Renart's hole.

When Renart, taking instant advantage of the situation, mounts her from behind, Hersent makes it clear that she is not a consenting partner this time: "Renart, c'est force et force soit" (1282). She is taking a legal position here, but there is no reason to doubt her displeasure. Her dignity is wounded. In addition, she is in physical pain, wedged tightly in the hole, being pushed from behind. But Renart, never known for his compassion, has none for the equivocating wolf, and conducts the rape with characteristic energy and pleasure, taunting her "par felonnie:" "Dame Hersent, you say you don't desire this and that I do it only to vaunt myself. I won't deny it: I'll do it again and again, say it again and again...more than ten times" (1286-94). And he recommences until "Ez vous...Ysengrin," who happens upon the "marriage."

The episode ends uneasily: the carefully maintained balance of earlier episodes has been upset. Ysengrin says "Toute est aperte l'aventure" (1325) and certainly Renart's actions are clear enough. In fact, only the trickster's role

⁴⁶ Donovan reads the eagerness and speed of Hersent in pursuit of Renart as motivated by her need to prove to Ysengrin her innocence. In order to do this, "she is required by Ysengrimus (sic) to pursue Renard with a maximum of effort" (36).

is clear throughout. His only motive is self-interest, while Hersent and Ysengrin are caught in a web of denial that purportedly serves the ideal of marriage -- the faithful union of husband and wife. Unlike Renart's earlier victims, they cannot admit their foolishness even to themselves. Hersent tries to cover her role in the adventure, passing the blame onto another, thus betraying not only her husband and children but also her lover. When she races into Renart's den, we doubt her motives, as does the jealous Ysengrin. Yet at the end of the episode, she is still claiming to be the innocent victim. She will not accept the poetic justice at work that has made the shameless hussy of the adultery episode suffer the shame of humiliation.

Neither will Ysengrin, the fool who refused to admit his wife's adultery, acknowledge her share of the responsibility in making the rape possible, although he looks "ses ieux voiant" upon a forced repetition of the earlier intimacy. Both wolves are willing to see only injustice in their suffering and will not accept blame for the vanity and self-deception that are the root of their troubles.

Renart's presence threatens the status quo, but the vulnerability is within the system. The ideal ignores the more ambiguous material world where fundamental bodily functions -- copulation, urination, defecation -- cannot be

eliminated.⁴⁷ Here they are subjects for comedy; Renart takes pleasure in flaunting his freedom to violate marriage laws, and moreover, apparently suffers no serious consequences for his action. Can we read Renart's abuse of Hersent and Ysengrin as a carnivalesque thrashing for stupidity, dishonestly, and rigidity? Is this the triumph of a life urge to procreate over marriage laws that assume sexual interest can stop or limit itself to one lawful partner? Is this a parody of the idealized Tristan romance (alluded to in the prologue) where King Mark time and again all but catches the lovers in "flagrant délit" but each time, in an agony of love, doubt, and suspicion, feels he hasn't sufficient evidence to act decisively?⁴⁸ Is it merely the fabliau theme of the obtuse cuckold in animal garb? It is characteristic of Pierre's comic technique to suggest all these possibilities at once, but to refuse to limit himself to developing a single "message."

The theme of double language, the discrepancy between words and intentions, is also present here. In the early

⁴⁷ Pierre does not spare us the crudely humorous details of the effort it takes for Ysengrin to free his wife. Hersent, whose tail is pulled to get her out, defecates in her husband's face (1365-73).

⁴⁸ See Jean Subrenat ["Le Roman de Renard et la parodie littéraire," Comique, satire et Parodie dans la tradition renardienne et les fabliaux. Actes du Colloque des 15 et 16 Janvier 1983: 125-38] where he traces the parody of the Tristan romance through branches II, I, VI, and XVI.

episodes, Renart cloaks his desire in flattery appealing to a desire in his victim, but the victim soon sees the danger of believing the trickster's words and laments his folly. When Renart enters Hersent's den, he finds himself in the position of victim, but he shows himself adept at reading such a double language accurately. Perceiving the desire in her rebuke-cum-invitation, he invents an excuse (Ysengrin's jealousy) that exposes it, allowing her to use vengeance as a cover for her true desire for the fox. Both play at the same game, but there is a significant difference between them: while Renart cares nothing for the consequences of his behavior beyond his physical safety, Hersent needs to keep up the appearance of fidelity. As a female, she is vulnerable in a social system that allows her no independence; her connection with her husband is vital to her well-being. Given this fact, her behavior is foolish and she will suffer for it.

Renart, who has enjoyed himself at their expense, may seem to have unjustly escaped any punishment for his behavior, but the story is not over. Renart has tangled with a wolf who is unable to forget and unwilling to forgive or risk handling the matter privately. Thus Ysengrin chooses in Branch Va to follow Hersent's advice to file a complaint against Renart at the court of Noble the lion king.

BRANCH Va

With Branch Va Pierre turns to a second possible resolution to the conflict between Ysengrin and Renart and tests the effectiveness of the rule of law. Surely here the moral ambiguities can be made clear and judgment be pronounced.

Branch Va begins as Ysengrin, who in his heart continues to blame his wife for what Renart has done, erupts in a jealous fury at Hersent. But she angrily denies her guilt ("n'i ai mie tant mesfet" 269) and proposes that they settle "tot cest contrere" with a judicial combat at Noble's court. Ysengrin, assuming his reputation and rank will give him the right to "prove" Renart's guilt in a trial by combat, agrees. At court he addresses King Noble and the assembly, charging that justice is weak and truth has become fable,⁴⁹ and more particularly that the marriage laws enacted by Noble are defied by Renart. "Renars est cil qui toz mals seme,/ Que il m'a honi de ma feme," he says (325-26).⁵⁰ He calls on

⁴⁹ "Rois, justice va enpirant:
Verités est tornee a fable,
Nule parole n'est estable..." (316-18)

⁵⁰ Throughout this branch the characters within the fiction use the same forms for expressing themselves as the narrator has used in Branch II, but for very different purposes. Note the possible confusion between the narrator's opinion and that of the character Ysengrin in lines 295-98. Here, in line 325 Ysengrin uses an epithet for Renart that is identical in form to that used by the narrator throughout the early episodes in Branch II, but it plays a function very different from the one Pierre employs because Ysengrin means to accuse Renart of a heinous crime and so tries to color the

Hersent to bear witness and she fabricates an elaborate story, thus herself turning truth to fiction. She tells how Renart has pursued her since she was a maiden, increasing his attentions since she was married, and how she constantly rebuffed him until the day he caught her in his hole and surprised her with rape while her husband watched.

Ysengrin, whose only serious fault so far is his choice to believe his wife innocent, now makes himself her accomplice in perjury by confirming her story with a "Voire voir, sire, je le pris Seignor Renart" (356-57). Now what kind of justice is possible? What we see is a comically varied array of perspectives on the affair, none of which accurately reflects what the reader knows to be true.

King Noble, sensing a love affair between Hersent and the fox, smiles a little after hearing this testimony and with gentle good-humor cross-examines Hersent to reveal the contradictions in her story. He is not convinced that Ysengrin should be granted the battle he seeks, especially if it is a case of amor.⁵¹ "Sachez," says the narrator, "volentiers le guerpist/ Envers Renart de sa querele/ Dont

court's perception of Renart with these words. In Brun's tale which follows, the bear imitates not only the use of epithets but the storytelling itself which very much resembles that of Pierre, but again which functions differently.

⁵¹ Following Philippe de Beaumanoir (c.1280-83) on the customs of war, Foulet notes that while the law excuses a private war as a result of murder, the same does not apply for rape (174).

mesire Ysengrins l'apele" (430-32). Nevertheless Renart will be treated according to the manner of his court -- "Par jugement et par reson..." (442). Noble now turns to the papal legate, Musart the camel, and asks him how ecclesiastical law would render such a case.

Musart responds without hesitation⁵² in a Franco-Latin jargon: according to the Decretals, Renart should be interrogated and if he cannot exonerate himself he should be punished severely -- either forfeiting his entire property or being stoned or burned at the stake. The legate follows this judgment with another fifty lines of advice to the king on what behavior befits his position as God's representative, but Noble's response is to completely ignore the camel's counsel and return to the issue of amor, empowering his barons to deliberate and find a solution to this problem: "Se cil qui est sopris d'amor/ Doit estre de ce encopez/ Dont ses conpainz est escopez" (502-4).

As the barons convene to debate the matter, the focus sharpens to exclude the laws of both church and courtly love and center on the issue of which system of secular justice should prevail: the traditional justice that based its judgments not on examination of the facts, but on oaths taken

⁵² "Musart" meant scatterbrain, simpleton, fool, one who was thoughtlessly rash. The word appears again in subsequent lines as the name of the papal legate who advises the king, and as L. Foulet defines it here: "...c'est au moyen âge un étourdi qui agit sans réflexion et perd son temps assez sottement à des choses qui n'en valent pas la peine" (225).

by plaintiff and defendant, or on ordeals appealing to divine justice; or the newly reintroduced Roman law of jurisprudence that based its judgments on facts examined and supported by human logic.⁵³ More simply put, it is personal honor versus impersonal truth.

Three animals dominate the debate and they represent three typical perspectives. Brichemer the stag, deferential, courteous, "voiseus," (855) is the moderate voice of common sense. Brun the bear, hot-headed and opinionated, sides entirely with Ysengrin, the victim, and represents the traditional rule of honor. Baucent the boar, struggling to interject objectivity, calls for equal representation of both plaintiff and defendant, and represents the impersonal fairness of jurisprudence. Objections are raised by Brichemer to Hersent's testimony (the wife of the plaintiff cannot be a principle witness because she is subject to her husband and will say whatever he wishes); by Brun to Renart's reputation as establishing the unreliability of his testimony (he "proves" this with an elaborate tale of how Renart tricked him⁵⁴); by Baucent to the validity of an emotional "conte" as

⁵³ See M. Bloch, Feudal Society, vol.2 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 359-74 on judicial institutions. Also R.W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953) 92-98.

⁵⁴ The story is related with a verve rivaling the best Roman de Renart conteurs. In fact it begins in a direct imitation of Branch II:

Renars qui molt par est haiz,
Avoit dejoste un plassiez
Une riche vile espiee.. (611-13)

evidence. "Molt seroit sages qui sauroit/ Juger d'un conte..." he says sarcastically (773-74), and insists that Renart's side must be heard.

The debate is at an impasse. Baucent sums up a central problem with a system of justice that relies on reputation instead of fact: while each man thinks himself honorable ("Chascun si se tient por prodome" 561), such an opinion does not constitute fact. But if Baucent points out the weaknesses in the traditional justice of oral custom,⁵⁵ Brun instinctively senses the flaws in a system of justice dependent on

The story in brief is as follows: Renart goes hence and makes a great killing, after which the peasants plant traps everywhere so that he can no longer approach the farm in safety. Renart is distressed -- then he thinks of the bear so large and visible. If the two would go together, chances are that Brun would attract the wrath (and blood lust) of the peasants and Renart would escape unnoticed. So he comes to Brun with the offered bait of a jar of honey on Constans de Nôes' farm. Together they go, lying in wait until they can proceed safely under the cover of night. But Renart sees hens and can't stop himself. His plunder raises a noise from the hens, and soon the farmer and company are in pursuit. Brun remains in terror while Renart flees. "Are you abandoning me?" asks the bear. "Every man for himself -- get moving," says Renart, adding that he'll go ahead and prepare the hen for supper if Brun will but tell him what sauce to make. Brun apparently does not move, or moves too late, for the sticks descend and the last half of the tale elaborately describes his beating and eventual escape.

Note however that Brun is not impartial in his telling. The motives Brun imputes to Renart cannot possibly be known to him; and above all Brun's self-pity and self-deception are all too apparent.

⁵⁵ Bloch comments on oral, traditional practice versus written law: "...it was a matter of memory and practice. The means of proof were rudimentary and easily applied. The court seldom heard evidence, and when it did, confined itself to recording the statements of witnesses rather than examining them" (v.2, 360).

oratorical skill and abstract reasoning. He knows Renart can manipulate this process and persuade others of his innocence if he is allowed to defend himself. If Renart goes free, he says, all are at risk: "Dont sai je bien: justice est morte" (842).

Dant Brichemer brings the argument to an end by reverting to the simpler solution of traditional justice: let Renart take an oath as he promised Ysengrin he'd do, for both sides must be heard and peace attempted before a "man" is brought to punishment.⁵⁶ Furthermore, in lieu of Noble the king ("Se li rois n'est en ceste terre,/Devant qui cist ples soit tretiez" 872-73) let Roonel the mastif, whose reputation all will agree is that of "Bon home et vrai" (877), administer the oath.⁵⁷

The relief with which the barons, after much heated discussion, settle for Renart's original offer to take an oath, is comic. The attempt to strive for an ideal fairness

⁵⁶ The word used here and elsewhere with reference to the characters in this plaint is "home."

⁵⁷ This sudden suggestion of Noble's absence is a surprise. Foulet finds a possible explanation for Noble's departure in contemporary 12th century events if Noble and Musart are meant to parody King Louis VII and Cardinal Pierre de Pavie. These lines might then be a reference to the cardinal's attempts to get King Louis to go on a crusade. However, this reference to or dependence upon events outside the narrative would be a radical departure in style from what has gone before in Branches II/Va. It seems to me rather a "deus ex machina" invention to interject a new element and change the static debate (for which Noble's laissez-faire attitude is partly to blame) to a situation with potential for action.

through the judicial process has failed to produce results. The lengthy deliberation has merely raised issues left unresolved. The sudden introduction of Noble's absence is apparently a deus ex machina device to replace the sympathetic king with a magistrate whose natural antipathy to the fox can give rise once again to action, to new twists of plot.

When Brichemer deferentially presents this solution to the king, Noble is delighted:

"Ja, par le seinz de Bauliant
 Ne fusse si liez por mil livres
 Con de ce que j'en sui delivres." (930-32)

He approves the plan, sets the day for the oath, and appoints Grinbert to inform Renart. Grinbert promptly performs this duty and Renart, receiving the message with equanimity, says he asks for nothing better. With the static impasse of the debate broken, the conteur also breaks his silence, stopping the narrative now to utter a warning to Renart:

Or li convient qu'il se demeint
 Plus sagement que il ne seult,...

But, he also tells us, Renart isn't worried:

Mes ne lessa qu'il ne s'orguelt:
 Ne li chaut queres qui li hace,
 Ne se porquiert ne se purchase,

Comment pregne li siens aferes. (964-69)⁵⁸

Now that Renart has reentered the narrative, it regains the spirit and momentum of the earlier episodes of Branch II. The game is up for grabs, and Pierre de Saint-Cloud once more allows the narrator to participate freely in the story, interjecting comments of sympathy, caution, and censure when Renart is on the scene.

"Justice est Morte"

The need for the warning in lines 964-64 soon becomes clear as Ysengrin, taking the law into his own hands, devises a strategy with Roonel, the magistrate mastif, to catch Renart whether or not his oath absolves him. Roonel will pose as though dead and Renart will be forced to take his oath on the teeth of this "dead" dog. If this fails to trap him, an ambush of one hundred dogs hidden nearby will certainly catch the rascal. With his plan in place, Ysengrin goes through the forest collecting allies: BricheMER, Brun, Baucent, and Tibert are mentioned along with Musart and other animals from the south (leopards, tigers, monkeys). But Renart too has his supporters -- the smaller animals indigenous to northern woodlands (badgers, squirrels, weasels, beavers, rats, birds). The two hosts gather; there also lies Roonel, his hidden troop

⁵⁸ "He does not abandon his vain self-confidence:/ It makes no difference who hates him,/ He doesn't trouble or torment himself/ With how to handle this affair." (966-69)

of dogs awaiting service.

Pierre does not comment on whether or not the animals allied with Ysengrin are privy to the trap he has devised. It appears that Brichemer, who instructs Renart to step forward for the oath, is unaware of the deception. He tells Renart to "Come forward and swear on the teeth of Roonel that you've never deceived Ysengrin."⁵⁹ Renart moves quickly as if to take his oath, but, says the conteur:

Toz jors sot molt Renart de guiche,
Onc n'en sout tant ne cherf ne biche.

Bien aperçut qu'il iert guetiez... (1135-37)

Ever alert to danger, Renart has spotted something. He jumps back and Grinbert, who has perceived the traison, defends Renart's hesitation saying Renart can't proceed because the crowd presses too closely. Brichemer calls for the others to give way "...tant qu'il puist venir et aler" (1171). Renart, who "n'a cure de sejourner," now flees for his life, and Pierre with characteristic irony calls him "li mau trechere" (1175, 1179). The earlier episode with its parody of due process now gives way to outright burlesque.

⁵⁹ "Renart, fait il, vos qui devez
A Ysengrin fere escondit
Einsi con li baron l'ont dit,
Aprochez vos au serement,
Si le fetes delivrement....
Vos jurerez desor la dent
Seint Roënau le rechingnié,
Qu'Ysengrin n'avez engignié
N'en tel manere deçou:... (1118-1122, 1126-1129)

The army of dogs races after the fleeing Renart. In a parody of the epic catalogue of warriors that runs to nearly two hundred lines, Pierre names more than eighty dogs, frequently citing their masters or outstanding deeds as well. This list, itself humorous in its length and detail, is followed by the narrator's comic understatement: Now Renart is really running, and one shouldn't blame him for this, for need makes the old woman trot.⁶⁰ Renart, much hated, is really hard-pressed this time, he says a few lines later, and although he usually manages well, now Renart's in such trouble that no jests can get him out of it: his pursuers want only his skin.⁶¹ Renart is back where he started, harassed by the fate that has dogged him since the first episode in Branch II. Branch Va ends abruptly as Renart, alive but battered and exhausted, reaches his den.

Three systems of law have been appealed to. Noble, the arbiter of courtly love, would excuse Renart, though ironically he is misreading the situation since this is not the idealized adulterous love of the romance. Musart, chastizing Noble for his leniency, upholds Christian law which

⁶⁰ "Et se Renars s'en va fuiant/ Ja n'i doit l'en nul mal noter,/ Que besoing fet vielle troter" (1252-54).

⁶¹ "Toz jors est bien Renart chouï/ Mes or li est si mescoü:/ Ne li ourent mestier ses bordes,/ Que n'en volassent les palordes" (1261-64). I follow G. Tilander's reading of "les palordes" as "touffe de poils" rather than Meon's reading of palorde as a scribal error for "falourde." See note for line 5582 in Fukumoto, Harano, and Suzuki edition of C/M mss., vol. 2: 413.

finds adultery and rape morally reprehensible and deserving of the severest punishment, though ironically he completely ignores Hersent's role in the affair. The confusion of secular systems, all of which assume the truthful testimony of one or more of the parties involved, makes it impossible for the barons to arrive at a concensus.

In a real sense Pierre assumes our vicarious participation in this trial. Are we who have witnessed the events for ourselves better able to pass judgment? Should Renart be excused? Should he be severely punished? Should he face the wolf in single combat?⁶² Should Hersent be condemned? Should either of these parties be permitted to testify since neither can be trusted to swear truthfully? How can this matter be resolved? If we try to answer this question we find we have ourselves been led into a trap. Initially amused and detached, we have been enticed into this

⁶² D. Spillemaeckers makes the observation that Renart does not fare well in armed combat. Renart is "cowardly in combat, certainly never heroic. Reynard in fact will go to any length to avoid a fight" (12). In Branch XI ("Renart Empereur") Renart does do battle with Tardif the Snail who is fully armed while Renart has only a drum and a falcon upon him. He kills the snail absurdly by drumming ferociously in his ear.

In fact the trickster, although antagonistic by nature, is curiously averse to warfare. Wakdjunkaga's first act is to reject the warpath; Loki too fights only with words and runs from the sword; Eulenspiegel, after a brief stint in the Count of Anhalt's troops, leaves because "er het nit guten Lust, alles Tag mit den Feinden zu fechten" (episode 22). Their energy is not brute force; their challenge to death is not the warrior's heroic code, but an attempt to outwit death by escaping it.

fictional world where Ysengrin's stubborn insistence on revenge pushes the plot on toward an anticipated resolution, but in a world where, as Ysengrin complains, "Nule parole n'est estable," where self-interest rules beneath the guise of ideal behavior, one can only fall back on trickery. But where does trickery get you? In the end we are back where we started -- in the woods where all animals need some cunning and deceit to survive, but where survival itself, finally, is the only hard won prize for much effort.

I have said there is no explicit moral here, but is there an implicit one? The events in the narrative have suggested that trickery and cunning are essential tactics in this animal world of self-interest, but they do not get one much beyond subsistence. The two dominant themes likewise leave us with this ambivalent reality. The first theme, that of the necessity for self-honesty concerning one's own nature, is demonstrated again in Ysengrin and Hersent who unwisely rely on their reputations to secure them a justice to which they are not entitled. Paradoxically, it is the trickster Renart, the threat to others' security, who himself most consistently exhibits this awareness, his "honesty" deriving from his indifference to risk and insecurity and his detachment from all external evaluations of his behavior.⁶³

⁶³ It should be noted that the minor characters of Pinte and the titmouse are both prudent females whose awareness and good sense offsets and balances in some measure the blatant imprudence of that other female, Hersent. K. Varty has also suggested the comparison between Pinte and Hersent: "Both

The second theme of the double nature of words Pierre continues to develop throughout Branch Va. What happens in this world dependent on verbal truth: where words can't be trusted? The peace proclaimed, pledges of allegiance, marriage vows, judicial oaths, and even sacred oaths are frequently deceptions masking one's true intentions of serving oneself. This theme is almost certainly "borrowed" from the Ysengrimus where the split between words and deeds is a central subject of the poem.⁶⁴ A brief comparison between the function of this theme in the two works helps to clarify Pierre's intent. In her brilliant introduction to her recent edition/translation of Ysengrimus, Jill Mann examines the myriad ways this earlier satirical beast epic explores the split between words and actions to reveal the clerical "wolves" in the real world who "act as if words can substitute for reality" (76) and whose language of peace and love merely camouflages the ugly reality of their greed and self-interest. In Ysengrimus the elaborate verbiage of the characters and the narrator, the primary substance of the poem, all but overshadows the action (the non-verbal "reality") which is

wives..., Pinte and Hersent, play the role of advisor to their husbands. Pinte offers sound advice, but it is rejected, fairly brusquely, with dire consequences. Hersent's advice is questionable...(Is it too far-fetched to suggest that Pierre de Saint Cloud is also offering his listener-reader a couple of portraits of stupid husbands for comparison and contrast?)." ("Love, Marriage and Family..." p. 47)

⁶⁴ See Jill Mann, 58-77.

relatively simple.⁶⁵ The language within the action functions to disguise the real action in the fiction (i.e. the wolf's intentions, the animals' justifications of their treatment of the wolf, etc.) just as the words of clerics conceal their true interests from the people. "Within the poem, the streams of moral sententiae, elaborate metaphor, and pseudo-logical 'proof' are non-serious, merely the instruments of an elaborate game. Outside of it, they speak admonishment to the predators who treat language and morality as just such a game, as a rhetorical fiction which may be used to camouflage a brutal reality" (Mann 76). The plot, as L.G. Donovan summarizes it, "...begin[s] with [the wolf's] successful theft of hams from the fox, then proceed[s] through progressive stages of degradation: he loses his tail, his hide, is mangled by the rams, kicked by the horse, beaten by the monks, loses his foot in a trap and finally is eaten by a herd of swine" (35). The action illustrates the destruction of the greedy predator Ysengrimus, the trickster-surrogate for the clerics, who is caught in his own fictions time and again and is finally destroyed. Thus both the action and language play in Ysengrimus serve to locate and criticize the rapacious, deceptive behavior of real-life clerics. "Justice is restored...the oppressors are oppressed," says Mann (25).

⁶⁵ 'Reality' in Ysengrimus is non-verbal, says Mann. "...Words are a mere overlay on this reality, at best unnecessary and at worst misleading" (62).

Donovan sees the change of emphasis between Ysengrimus and Branch II/Va -- from anti-hero wolf to clever fox -- as "carried out...by using the same underlying principles that we find in the Ysengrimus itself," (35) but he ignores an important difference; for while the wolf is successively maimed and mauled until he is finally devoured, Renart on the contrary wins as often as he loses and finally escapes. The fox does not represent, as Ysengrimus does, a cruel power to be overcome, but rather represents the ambivalent reality of self-interest that is both necessary and dangerous. Moreover, where the wolf's actions are determined by his satirical function and can be fully understood only in reference to a reality outside the fiction, Pierre's tale is not a satire, the fiction itself is a self-sufficient reality. And though Pierre plays with the split between words and deeds -- a common medieval concern given the fallen nature of language in this world -- though truth is turned to mockery, the result is comedy, not the apocalyptic vision of Ysengrimus which punishes the chief deceiver, thus correcting within the fiction this abuse of power.

Surprisingly, deceitful language does not triumph in Branch II/Va. We have noted this earlier in Branch II, and in Va the same phenomenon is observable. The false testimonies of Ysengrin and Hersent do not win sufficient credence at court to get Ysengrin the judicial battle he wants; nor after all the talking is Renart exonerated. The

judgment is finally referred to God by means of an oath swearing, but as Pierre is careful neither to blaspheme God's justice nor to abandon his own control over the plot, the matter will not be left to God. Ysengrin, unwilling to take his chances with divine justice, takes matters into his own hands, falsifying the ordeal. But Renart will not suffer the full injustice of being punished by this fraudulent application of the law; nor, however, will he swear a false oath (which he is certainly prepared to do). Truth has been turned to mockery, but finally what is "truth" in this story? Whose perception of reality is true in an absolute sense? Even the audience is at a loss to know how to judge these rascals. Words may not be reliable in a world where everyone manipulates them in his own interest, but the result is comic chaos, not tragedy. In fact much of the best comedy in Branch II/Va comes in the dialogues between antagonists, where language is contentious, inventive, and deceitfully persuasive.

John Flinn sees in Pierre de Saint-Cloud's treatment of the plaint "...un profond respect... pour la procédure de son temps, et sa satire des jugements de Dieu se révèle par conséquent comme un sincère désir de perfectionner un système auquel il est très attaché" (40). Certainly Pierre exposes the confusing hodge-podge of systems -- both secular and ecclesiastical -- that co-existed at this time. But it is hard to read here a critical intent, a desire to perfect this

society and I suspect Flinn's impression of "profound respect" comes at least in part from the way the ideal of justice remains intact throughout this spoofing. For Pierre does not debunk the ideals of justice, or of love, or of truth; rather they sit somewhere above the action, visible but unattainable -- abstract, only remotely connected with the level of material concerns of this world. He is exploring a world where these ideals simply are not realizable, where the material animal nature reigns.

Given this perspective, Pierre turns his eye, ironical, amused, upon all aspects of his society, reading, as it were, the whole of what goes on around him with comic interest and appreciation. The list of subjects which he draws into his comedy includes, in addition to the judicial system (which gets the most extensive treatment), things secular and sacred. Among the latter are biblical images (i.e. the earthly paradise) and scriptural quotations;⁶⁶ his irreverent treatment of a hermit (Renart calls him a "seins hom"), a papal legate, the holy relics. He spoofs literary conventions of epic, romance, and fable, the interpretations of dreams, female-male relations between spouses and lovers; and his

⁶⁶ See, for example, verses 1239-40 (Branch II) where "Renars courut la voie estroite/ Et Ysengrins court la plus droite." The straight and narrow way of righteousness divides into two paths here, one narrow, one straight. Neither gets one far. There is a moment of amused recognition in the biblical image so aptly altered to characterize the two foes.

comic portrayal extends to all social levels -- villains, barons, and kings.

The comic absurdity everywhere in Branch Va is hard to convey in a summary. It is found in Ysengrin's assumption that his trouble (actually with Hersent) can be resolved in court; in his proclaiming a private shame for all to hear in the name of defending his honor (Renart has reminded him that this can be settled quietly); in Noble's fond idealization of rape as courtly amor; in the self-interest that attempts to pass for justice; in the relief with which the debate is dismissed in favor of action; in the unquestioned acceptance of Roone's death and sainthood; in the ridiculous imbalance between the large, predatory animals that amass behind Ysengrin and the small woodland creatures allied with Renart. Finally the tragic "guerre,/ Qui tant fu dure et de grant fin" that has been promised in the prologue is itself merely an aborted attempt at revenge -- a laughing mockery of war, with one hundred "warrior" dogs chasing, but not catching, the frenzied fox.

Branch Va, then, sees the attempt to render Renart's behavior in a moral context fail: he remains amoral, beyond the scope of judgment. The double irony here is that, as Noble saw at once, the deed was hardly worth such effort in the first place, and, second, that the effort itself proved fruitless due to the dominating power of self-interest behind the law.

The Trickster Fox

Who then is the trickster here whose presence dominates the whole of Branch II/Va, whose "adventuring" (alternating quest with flight) is the motivating force of the narrative, who "après tout est l'invisible metteur en oeuvre de toute cette comédie?" (Foulet 212).⁶⁷ And how does he fit the definition of mythic trickster put forth in earlier chapters? The distinction between folklore (as secular fiction) and myth (as sacred story) must be at least briefly addressed if we are to consider the function of a popular literary trickster like Renart. Myths, stories that define the origins of nature and society, express the relationships between the natural world, humans, and gods, such that a culture can understand and preserve its own structure. They convey through symbolic images a society's most valued rendering of reality, past and present.

The mythic trickster represents fundamental paradoxes of human existence and serves to acknowledge the necessary creative function of such paradoxes. Whether he represents the taboo-breaking function of the magician, the simultaneous need for freedom and limits, or the materially instinctual and spiritually imaginative nature of man, he is a life force both destructive and beneficial, an ambivalent reality that is

⁶⁷ Foulet says of Branch Va, "Absent ou présent, c'est toujours de lui [Renart] qu'il s'agit" (212).

ultimately positive and comic. It is in acknowledgment of such a comic ambivalence that Pierre composes Branch II/Va.

The official mythology of the Middle Ages is Christian as interpreted by the Church. But this "official culture" was in a real sense imposed on an indiginous folk culture which never completely died out. According to Jacques Le Goff, who traces the split between ecclesiastical and lay/folk cultures, the "higher" more rationally based ecclesiastical culture essentially blocked the "lower" folkloric culture that always threatened it from underneath.⁶⁸ "The real cultural gap was between the fundamental ambiguity and equivocation of folklore (belief in forces which were both good and bad at the same time and, in general, a basic ambivalence in the cultural apparatus) and the 'rationalism' of ecclesiastical culture...: separation of good and evil, true and false, black and white magic, with Manichaeism as such being avoided only by dint of God's omnipotence" (157-58). What Le Goff sees happening in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is a "folkloric reaction" to this ecclesiastical suppression, which involved all stratas of lay culture and "burst upon Western culture" (158). The immense popularity of a work such as Le Roman de Renart would seem to attest to a contemporary hunger for a vision of reality that incorporated this ambiguity.

⁶⁸ Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages 156-158.

Thus, while Renart is not, strictly speaking, a mythological figure, and he does not function within the "higher" Christian mythology,⁶⁹ he plays a necessary function in addressing an imbalance, a corrective to a system that attempted to order everything according to a moral hierarchy. The idealism, the striving for purity so essential to medieval thought, which attempted to find a logic, a truth that could not be contradicted, led (as it always will) to contradiction. As Mary Douglas says, "Experience is not amenable" to such

⁶⁹ Renart exhibits some of the characteristics of a mythological trickster. In a very late branch (XXIV) Renart figures in a pseudo-mythic tale of creation, where he comes into being by a creative act of Eve, who produces wild, destructive animals while Adam produces domestic ones. In II/Va and elsewhere in the Roman he breaks fundamental taboos. He rapes Hersent in Branch II and later in Branch Ia he rapes the queen herself. He profanes the sacred office of Vespers in Branch XII, mocks holy orders in Branch VI, and eats his confessor in Branch VII. But perhaps most integral to the well-functioning of this society is the faith that bonds man to man and keeps the hierarchy in place. Renart breaks faith repeatedly, lying to and betraying others. His words cannot be trusted but he uses them with such consummate skill that he is believed even by those most suspicious of his intentions.

As Pelton has said of the four West African tricksters, so one can say of Renart that he "sets his own desire in opposition to a cultural or cosmic order, but...moves for the sake of movement itself." (226) While Renart does not oppose God Himself, he frequently hinders God's representatives on earth. The desire that motivates Renart is initially often hunger, but once he is in action, he may trick others for no reason other than his desire to play out his eternal contest with the world (i.e. Tibert and Hersent). Though not a culture-hero, once he cures King Noble of a irremediable fever (Branch X) and in a very late branch (XXII) he take the disagreeable looking female organ and repairs it to give it its current shape. Thus one senses that his conteurs have felt his potential to take on such a role.

idealism.⁷⁰ Life, which in Christian terms was to be lived by a rule of law that denied the equal values of man's physical and spiritual nature, needed to be reestablished in its material home, the body. For "As life is in the body, it cannot be rejected outright. And as life must be affirmed, the most complete philosophies...must find some ultimate way of affirming that which has been rejected" (Douglas 164). This is the comic, positive function of the double vision of a poet like Pierre de Saint-Cloud, which helps to heal a basic split in society.

The central opposition of his "double vision" is the paradox of man's real and ideal nature. If Pierre's trickster is successful it is because he, the poet, refuses to separate the two contraries by passing judgment on one or the other. He presents a hero who mediates between the oppositions by being both at once. Renart is limited and unlimited, instinct and imagination. Perhaps Renart's most important quality is his complete residence in the moment at hand. Renart, the ultimate realist, is true to his own nature, and while this may seem to limit him to his instinctual animal nature, paradoxically it gives him the tremendous freedom to see things as they are and to be anything he chooses; his powers of imagination seem unlimited because he never experiences the conflict or disjunction of

⁷⁰ Purity and Danger 166.

the other courtly animals who must deny or disguise (and so are victim to) their natural desires in order to fit within the idealistic codes of society. Renart desires only to be himself and thus paradoxically is free to create the reality he desires.⁷¹ The fact that his fictions draw his victims willingly into his reality (constructed of desire) suggests that if Renart represents anyone in the real world, it is the poet, the conteur who tells his tale, the magician who makes truth from fiction. Like Renart, the conteur's very life depends on his seducing his listeners, his drawing them into his fiction. Many critics have remarked this resemblance in the Roman de Renart between the fox and his creator, and at least one scholar attributes Renart's impunity to the artistic necessity that keeps the fox, like his author, free from punishment for the continued creation of fiction which though a "perversion de la parole de vérité," also satisfies our need to explore in language realities unexperienced in ordinary life.⁷² While Pierre de Saint-Cloud does not identify himself

⁷¹ In the service of this, the trickster can be wholly resident in the moment at hand. John le Carre comments on the technic of his confidence man, Rick Pym, to this effect: "The art of it was to forget everything except the ground you stood on and the face you spoke from at that moment." The Perfect Spy 98.

⁷² Jean Scheidegger, "Les jugements de Renart: Impunités et structure romanesque," La Justice au Moyen Age: sanction ou impunité (Aix-en-Provence: CUERMA, 1986) 344. See also Rychner's earlier article on "Renart et ses conteurs." Roger Dragonetti plays at length with the confusion of truth and desire in Renart literature and draws the parallel between conteur and character: "L'art du conteur feint l'enseignement moral, la dénonciation, pour mieux détourner de son dessein,

with his hero fox as overtly as many later conteurs, in a real sense he himself is also a kind of trickster who draws us into his fiction, invites us to examine a problem with the anticipation of resolution, then abandons us abruptly with the dilemma unresolved. Is there an implicit warning here against mistaking the world of desire for the real world, an error of which Renart himself is rarely guilty and which his presence reveals in others? Pierre refuses to say, leaving the ambiguity unresolved for his audience to wrestle with.

As long as Renart is present, there is movement, a story to tell, a movement horizontal and circular. The episodes take Renart only to the end of a trick, leaving him back where he started, ready to try again. But the image that stays in the mind long after this branch is finished is that of the fox running pell-mell over the ground and through the woods,⁷³ and it is this horizontal movement that connects, like beads on a string, the brief episodes in Branch II. When with the rape and judgment the narrative becomes sequential, a vertical

secrètement complice de celui de Renart, le lecteur, éveillé sans doute, mais en rêve et captif à son insu des charmes du récit dont le seul but est finalement cette promesse de bonheur qu'offre sans cesse le 'paradis' du langage poétique." ["Renart est mort, Renart est vif, Renart regne," Critique 34 (1978): 793-94.]

⁷³ Unlike Loki, who has magical properties and can fly, Renart is firmly attached to the ground. This limit is emphasized implicitly in Branch II where the fox tries three times to catch birds who can escape upwards. Even Tibert the cat can climb trees and poles, which he does in subsequent branches.

dimension is added. The animals are now striving for an ideal justice: growth and resolution are "anticipated." But this judicial process, spinning round and round, goes nowhere. Is Pierre satirizing the system of justice or is he perhaps here too suggesting that there can be no final moral solution to the ambivalent reality the trickster represents?

The Comic Function:

The narrative form defined above represents the comic, ongoing cycle of life, but there is another way to define the comedy in this branch and other branches of the Roman de Renart that shows more clearly its centrality in the Christian Middle Ages. Conrad Hyers, working specifically with humor's relation to religion, defines three levels of humor. The first he designates "the humor of innocence," which is "a projection into that paradisaical state of carefree abandonment, prior to the division of the world into holy and unholy."⁷⁴ Here the chaos before differentiation contains the potential for order and wholeness; it is "the chaos of infinite potentiality and creative possibility," (214) and so is unthreatening, evoking innocent delight. The second level is that of ambivalence, "the comic stance in the midst of

⁷⁴ M. Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," in Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective, ed. C. Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) 213.

duality and contradiction" (218). Here it is "not so much a humor that transcends the dichotomies and tensions of existence in a holiday of innocence, as a humor that moves within those dichotomies and tensions in comic reflection of them" (218). He examines two comic stances of ambiguity: that of prophetic iconoclasm, which guards against the absolutism of the sacred to keep it from becoming inhuman and tyrannical (223); and that of Promethean rebellion, "which takes the freedom of invading and handling the sacred in ways that would ordinarily be taboo" (229). The laughter evoked by both these stances keeps the threat they pose from meriting punishment: "laughter has a kind of immunity that outright aggression and trespass do not" (230). The third level, that of "confidence," is "for all of its levity and frivolity, ...an affirmation of light rather than darkness at the heart of reality, of meaning rather than absurdity at the center of the mystery of Being" (237). This is a return to chaos with the implicit understanding that order comes from chaos and that there is purpose and meaning in the creative process.

Branch II/Va demonstrates all three levels at work. The first episodes in the animal world where amoral Fortune governs evokes the laughter of innocence. The exaggeration of Renart's wickedness is used to emphasize the comic inappropriateness of such moral terms. Nothing too serious happens and the actions assume the quality of play.

With the sexual complications of the adultery and rape,

we enter the comedy of ambivalence. We are projected into a world of tensions and dichotomies where only our laughter immunizes us from the dangers and heresies to which we are subjected, allowing us to experience the ambivalence of reality.

Finally, as the world returns to chaos at the end of Branch Va, the laughter is that of confidence. The attempt at a chivalrous, ideal solution has shown us the meaning of striving for the ideal and we understand better the essential struggle to make order and the fertile chaos from which it is derived. It is, as Hyers says, "an affirmation of light rather than darkness at the heart of reality."

EULENSPIEGEL: THE TRICKSTER AS BUFFOON

Laura Makarius and others have suggested that the Native American sacred clown and the trickster (the former earthly, the latter fictional) serve similar functions. With the tale of Eulenspiegel, the distinction between earthly and fictional comes even closer because the fictional Eulenspiegel portrays the life of a buffoon, an historical reality in Medieval Europe. One fact in particular makes the buffoon closer to the trickster than other clowns. As the following description will show, buffoonery was a life long occupation, not limited to stage or ritual; to "record" this life is to give it the narrative form of the cycle, and to reveal not individual acts of trickery and foolery alone, but the greater meaning and function of such an existence to embody the paradoxes of reality.¹

¹ Francesca Sautman has proposed the necessity for considering the relationship of medieval fool to trickster, "Les métamorphoses du fou à la fin du Moyen Age," Pour une mythologie du Moyen Age (Paris: École Normal Supérieure, 1988) 197-216. Such a project demands a book-length study of its own, but my own sense is that, while sharing an essentially ambivalent status, the fool (court or ritual) can be distinguished from the trickster fundamentally by his costume, appurtenances, and generally well-defined role which makes him immediately visible and identifiable. The trickster, on the other hand, lacks this absolute definition and cannot always be recognized for who he is until he has played a trick. Moreover, while the marginality of the fool/clown is fixed by

The Historical Buffoon:

The historical buffoon shares many features in common with secular and sacred clowns and fools, but unlike the stage clown or ritual fool who consciously assumes his role, the court fool who is either mentally or physically deficient, or the sacred clown whose spiritual vision reveals to him his fitness for this role, the buffoon as he appears in classical, medieval, and Renaissance times was apparently born to his part, assuming the role of clown at an early age inasmuch as it was his nature to avoid responsibility and amuse himself by entertaining others with his pranks.² This personality type is still familiar, but the profession of buffoonery is only possible where a society permits the disruption of the ordinary in this way and is secure enough to willingly tolerate a rogue who conducts life purely on his own terms. For where the stage clown keeps the boundaries between fact and fiction safely drawn, and the sacred clown operates within ritual confines, the professional buffoon's job is precisely

his role, the trickster's flexibility (enhanced by his clearly fictional state) permits him entrée in all sorts of social situations until, by his asocial acts, he is ejected. This flexibility, indefiniteness of character, etc. is essential to his function as I will argue in the conclusion.

² I am indebted throughout this brief discussion of the professional buffoon to Enid Welsford's researches on this subject. The Fool: His Social and Literary History (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

to erase temporarily the barriers between the ordinary and the marvelous.

At his lowliest, the buffoon was a parasite living off the resources of others; a vagabond wandering from town to town, court to court, using jests and general foolery to procure food and shelter. If he managed to attract the interest and patronage of a wealthy lord, he might secure a position as entertainer-in-residence, and in this capacity might rise to some fame and even accumulate significant material possessions.³

As a performer, the buffoon engaged in practical jokes and crude, often sadistic, horseplay; he ridiculed individuals and institutions through mimicry and battles of wit; he even abused himself (i.e. by eating gargantuan amounts of food, or matter unfit for human consumption) to amuse others and, by arousing their passions for folly, sometimes provoked their abuse of him. This latter mistreatment he either suffered or deflected, depending on how nimble were his feet and his wits. In his audacious roquery, he walked a thin line between what could and could not be tolerated, and his success apparently depended precisely on his ability to maintain this precarious balance. He had to be controversial -- to challenge, contradict, threaten the audience's sense of what was right

³ At Eulenspiegel's death, people suspect he has hidden wealth as a result of his buffoonery (see episodes 90, 92 and 93).

and proper, to turn life upside down and inside out. According to Welsford, his primary function was to "break down the barriers between himself and his patrons so that they too inhabit for a moment a no-man's-land between the world of fact and the world of imagination...[to] draw out the latent folly in his audience" (28). If he ceased to rouse his audience to participate, or if society was no longer responsive to or tolerant of this function, the professional buffoon died the death of the neglected and forgotten. If, on the other hand, he became too brutal or threatening, he could lose the sympathy of the audience and so endanger his own life.⁴

For the buffoon this interplay with the audience is essential: "he is nothing at all apart from the companions who enjoy and encourage his antics," says Welsford (28). But though he must stay aware of the audience's response, he must also disregard it. He must be conscious and unconscious, performing for others while doing exactly as he pleases. "The psychological situation is at times curiously subtle," Welsford observes. "As soon as the buffoon rises above the lowest rank of the parasite willing to endure anything for the sake of a good meal, he must develop a self-awareness

⁴ Welsford cites, for example, the stories told of the legendary buffoon, Nasr-ed Din, which become increasingly brutal until one story has him killed by a friend's trickery. The audience lost sympathy with him, she suggests (33). Although Eulenspiegel manages to evade the attempts at harming him, he is nearly hanged by the angry citizens of Lübeck who have had enough of him (episode 58).

incompatible with total empty-headedness, yet not so acute as to produce a change of habit, or to turn his folly into a temporary superficial pose. For genuine buffoonery is not synonymous with acting. The buffoon gives most pleasure, by being most himself" (27).

The professional buffoon appears to have in common with the trickster the following characteristics: his life consists essentially of playing out his own nature, of acting on impulse with no apparent regard for his effect on others (though in actuality his very life depends on this effect), of playing practical jokes and acting absurdly to amuse and shock his audience, of wandering restlessly from place to place in search of both sustenance and adventure (the one dependent upon the other). What seems to distinguish the two primarily is the purpose of performing which makes the buffoon so dependent on his audience and the consciousness of dependence which this suggests. In fact, though, the audience's willingness to allow this exhibition of life "beyond the pale" creates a kind of make-believe or sacred space around the buffoon which allows him to exist on his own terms much like the trickster in fiction. The "mythical buffoon," as Welsford calls the historical buffoon's fictional counterpart, makes this resemblance to the trickster even more striking. To examine this relationship, the narrative cycle of the legendary Till Eulenspiegel, a professional buffoon who supposedly lived and played in fourteenth-century Germany,

serves as our case in point.

Whether or not Eulenspiegel actually lived, the cycle of stories "brought together and described" ("zusammenbringen und beschreiben") by the anonymous author "N" and first published by Johannes Grieninger in 1515 under the title of Ein kurtzweilig Lesen von Dil Ulenspiegel,⁵ evinces an original imagination at work. As Paul Oppenheimer has persuasively demonstrated, this narrative, "more than a compilation and...much better organized and with a higher degree of psychological sensitivity than one might at first suspect," belongs to the world of fiction (261). Nevertheless, Eulenspiegel's antics, apart from his apparent voluntary control of his bowels that permits him to void himself at will, are no more outrageous than those of real buffoons recorded in historical accounts; he is a "real" man in a realistically depicted society.

The cycle comprised of 95 episodes⁶ has a chronological frame, beginning with the birth and christening of the young

⁵ I have used throughout the edition by Wolfgang Lindow, published by Philipp Reclam (Stuttgart, 1966) for the Middle High German and Paul Oppenheimer's translation into English of the 1911 edition by Edward Schroder of the same 1515 manuscript: A Pleasant Vintage of Till Eulenspiegel (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1972).

⁶ The title page in the 1515 edition gives the number of episodes as 96, but, as Lindow notes, number 42 is missing. Nevertheless, Lindow has kept the original numbering, skipping number 42. Oppenheimer has renumbered the episodes following number 41 to reflect the actual rather than supposed sequence. I have followed Lindow's edition.

Eulenspiegel, following through eight more episodes with some mischief from his youth until, in episode 9, he wanders off from home and sets out on his own. Episodes 10 through 88 are organized thematically and convey no specific sense of chronological narrative time until, in episode 89 we are told that Eulenspiegel felt old and tired. He goes into a rapid physical decline from this point on (though his sense for trickery remains acute to the end), dying in episode 93. Two episodes following this (94-95) comprise the antics of his corpse after death and the last (96) contains his epitaph as engraved on stone.

Who is Eulenspiegel? His strange nature is revealed already with his christening, when after being properly baptized, he is first dropped in the mud by drunken godfathers, then washed off by women. Thus, says the narrator, he was baptized three times in one day. Until age three his playful nature ("da macht er vil Spils") is limited to ape-like tumbling on cushions and grass. Thereafter, he begins to apply himself consciously to mischief, humiliating his father by mocking the neighbors, so that the family has to move (2). Of an age to learn a trade and provide for his poor, now widowed mother, he prefers to learn foolish tricks, tormenting her with idle acrobatics (3) and taking revenge on neighbor boys for their jeering so that he must hide in the house for several weeks for fear of reprisal (4). When his mother complains that they will starve, he "comforts" her with

a literally applied proverb (5), and then provides bread for their table by tricking a baker (6). In episodes 7 and 8 he is tricked by a stingy farmer and takes revenge on him, and in 9, after drinking too much at a church festivity, he falls asleep in an empty beehive, only to be carted off by unwitting robbers (whom, with a well-known folk motif, he sets to fighting each other) and to escape in unfamiliar surroundings. "Also gieng er einen Weg uß..." says the narrator, and thus begins his life of wandering from place to place.

In the eighty episodes that follow, Eulenspiegel wanders from town to town throughout the Holy Roman Empire, hiring himself out as assistant to tradesmen of all sorts for purposes of earning a living and of playing pranks, tricking also doctors, scholars, market merchants, innkeepers, and farmers, and playing the professional buffoon with kings, dukes, counts, bishops, abbots, and priests. He gains entree everywhere, sometimes imposing himself by force of personality, sometimes by subterfuge, sometimes responding to an invitation, but wherever he ventures, he seems compelled like a self-appointed Contrary to turn things upside down.⁷

The nature of Eulenspiegel's pranks can be summarized in several categories. As Oppenheimer observes, a large

⁷ I refer here to the Native American clown, the Siouan Heyhoka whose name means "Contrary" and whose function is "to seize on any occasion and use it in an imaginative, unusual way," to do things that break with traditional norms. Joseph Epes Brown, "The Wisdom of the Contrary," Parabola 4.1 (1979) 56-57.

percentage of the tales turn on the trick of taking words literally, with Eulenspiegel doing as he's told, thus "show[ing] others...how language deceives as well as reveals" (253-54).⁸ As the perplexed and frustrated shoemaker in episode 43 says, "Du thust nach den Worten, nit nach der Meinung." Later a tanner identifies his ill-intentioned apprentice as Eulenspiegel because "er pfeleget alles zu thun, als man ihn heisset." (56:163) This motif appears most frequently when Eulenspiegel serves as assistant to an artisan master⁹ who takes unfair advantage of him -- making him work long hours, or do the hardest, dirtiest jobs while the master takes his leisure. Eulenspiegel invariably revenges himself on these masters by misinterpreting their instructions and so destroying materials and wasting time for which he is to be paid.

Often the declared impetus to take a job comes from cold or hunger, the need for shelter and sustenance, but Eulenspiegel is only partially motivated by considerations of

⁸ For example, in episode 20, a baker wants Eulenspiegel to work into the night but stingily refuses to provide him with a lamp. When Eulenspiegel asks how he is to work, the baker says, "...bei dem Mondschein." Eulenspiegel obligingly sifts flour out the window "with moonlight." When the angry baker says, "Du wilt den Tüffel holen! Gang an Galgen und hol Dieb harein," Eulenspiegel literally goes to the gallows and brings the corpse of a thief, etc.

⁹ The list of craftsmen served includes bakers, barbers, brewers, carpenters, furriers, shoemakers, smiths, tailors, tanners, and woolweavers. However, Eulenspiegel's literal rendering of figurative speech is not limited to this context.

survival. For once he's taken in, he deliberately sets out to wreak havoc, whether or not the treatment he has received seems to warrant it.¹⁰ More important to Eulenspiegel than material necessities is "truth" -- he has an "incessant need to reveal human reality as clearly and absurdly as possible" (Oppenheimer 264). This preoccupation with what Oppenheimer defines as "linguistic philosophy," he notes is peculiar to Eulenspiegel in the genre of jest-books. Yet it is interesting to find that this concern, similar to that of our trickster, functions to reveal a fundamental human paradox: as defined by Oppenheimer, the paradox that though a purely propositional use of language would resolve conflicts caused by assertional language, we are not creatures of pure logic and can not live without a language that asserts an emotional and psychological reality.¹¹ To this end, Eulenspiegel repeatedly tests social and linguistic conventions to reveal the truth and falsehood in accepted wisdom.

¹⁰ If Eulenspiegel's "Schalckheit" seems unduly harsh in some of these episodes, it may be because he is not responding merely to the individual situation, but to a general practice that permits masters to treat their apprentices more like machines than humans. The unspoken assumption here almost seems to be that a master in need of an assistant is one who has been deserted by previous help because of the too strenuous or unfair requirements of the job.

¹¹ "The artist," says Oppenheimer, "(and most men probably attempt to become artists at least in their conversational lives) is...perhaps more concerned with a proposition's being right than with its being 'true:' a revealing appropriateness to some given psychology is what counts" (277). For a fuller study of this subject, see the Appendix to Oppenheimer's translation of Eulenspiegel.

But Eulenspiegel is not the usual teacher, for when another, having learned this linguistic lesson, applies it to the teacher himself, the result is not praise. In episode 45 a bootmaker's boy takes Eulenspiegel's use of jargon (he asks them to "lard" his boots) as he thinks the buffoon himself, in a similar situation, would take it -- literally. Eulenspiegel's response to this is first a laugh, then he rams his head and shoulders through the window, smashing it, to ask another question: "What sort of fat did you use?" Thus having taught one lesson, he now teaches another: "Don't expect rogues to do as you expect." Another kind of trick, related to this "truth-revealing" function, is that of bringing down "wise" or vain folk. In episodes 11-13, Eulenspiegel torments a priest's maid because she is ugly (one-eyed) and nevertheless seems to think rather highly of herself. In number 15 as the welcome guest of a Bishop, he sets out to fool a learned Doctor, who cannot abide fools, by disguising himself as a medical doctor ("Artz") and treating the Doctor to a cure for his presumption of superiority.¹²

¹² Eulenspiegel gives the Doctor a strong laxative and further with farts and other excrement makes the Doctor really ill. "Ihr sehent," says the Bishop to the Doctor later when he returns saying his doctor was not one of Artzney but one of Leckerei, "daz einer wol durch Narren weiss würt gemacht, dann der Artzet ist Uelenspiegel gewesen, den hon Ihr nit kant und hon ihm geglaubt. Von dem seind Ihr betrogen worden. Aber wir, die sein Narrei annamen, kanten ihn wol. Aber wir wolten Euch nit warnen, nachdem und als Ihr so weiss wolten sein. Und niemant ist so weiss, er sol Thoren auch kennen. Unnd wann niendert kein Nar wär, wabei wolt man dann die Weisen kennen" (15:48).

Eulenspiegel challenges university scholars in episodes 28 and 29, and when they pose him questions impossible to answer, he tricks them by answers which, because they cannot be disproved, must stand as true. In episode 69 Eulenspiegel tests the respectability of a bath house calling itself by the pretentiously euphemistic name of "Hus der Reinikeit" (House of Cleansing) by cleansing his insides, which amounts to shitting on the floor of the bath. His means of tricking or humiliating others, as in this last episode, often includes use of excrement or otherwise revolting matter.

While many of his tricks are addressed to righting wrongs done to him personally or suggested to him by reputations (institutional or individual) of greed or ill-temper (in which, as Oppenheimer points out, Eulenspiegel's desire for justice seems to make him almost moral, 270), there is also considerable gratuitous trickery, some of it undeniably sadistic. Several times he tricks farmers at market out of their goods for no apparent reason except his love of taking advantage and creating commotion. He cheats a farm woman at market out of her hens (36), a farmer out of the cloth he's just purchased (68), and a whole score of milkmaids out of their milk (70) with tricks typical of a quick-handed confidence man. He ruins the fur pelts of a kind hostess by pretending to know how to wash them (30), leads town watchmen on a chase which ends with their bones broken due to Eulenspiegel's intentional accident (32), beshits the plums

of a gracious old farmer on his way to market (88), and sets up another "accident" in the cloister of Marienthal (which has taken in an old, tired, apparently repentent buffoon) that causes physical harm to a venerable old prior (89). In incidents 32, 88, and 89 the cause of the trick is admitted to be none other than Eulenspiegel's impulse to do mischief. The author says in 32 that after a long stay in Nürnberg without incident, Eulenspiegel's nature reasserts itself: "da kunt er von Natur nit lassen, er müst da auch ein Schalckheit thun" (32:95). In 88 Eulenspiegel himself admits his nature: "Der Schalck wär wol Schlahens wert," (88:252) and in 89 the abbot soon realizes that Eulenspiegel has not renounced his nature ("er sein alten Dück nit lassen wolt," 89:254).

In other episodes such as 47 (where he boils a brewer's dog named Hops instead of the plant by the same name apparently only because he has been left alone by his assistant for half an hour) or 82 (where he skins an innkeeper's dog whom Eulenspiegel, to humor the dog's indulgent mistress, has permitted to eat bits from Eulenspiegel's plate) he makes a point by literal application of a word or stated custom, but the severity of his means is sadistic.

It must be noted also that some of Eulenspiegel's tricks are motivated by his competitive urge to win. This fundamental desire to win, as Johan Huizinga points out, has nothing to do with gain; or rather the only gain is in the

winning itself and the reputation that accompanies it.¹³ Eulenspiegel is quick to sense a challenge, and invariably takes it on, even when the challenge is implicit, not explicit, or was not meant seriously. For example, his banishment by the Duke of Lüneberg he takes as a dare, and episodes 25 and 26 show him testing legal terms in a manner that could cost him his life. The jeers of children (episodes 3-4 and 49) arouse him to play tricks, and the competition of another fool leads him to actually eat his own excrement in the attempt to win the contest (24). It is said that Eulenspiegel dislikes children (see 21 and 81), and when a female fool in the house of the landgrave is alert to Eulenspiegel's otherwise successful trick (27), he quits the place in a hurry. In general he leaves his most serious competition (children and other fools) alone.

How is Eulenspiegel received? The word most commonly used for him is "der Schalck" and his acts are most often termed "die Schalckheit," both by the narrator and by those who have been his victims. The radical term conveys a range of meanings from playful to severe, thus Eulenspiegel is a wag, a rogue, a knave, and a scoundrel and his acts are considered anything from harmless mischief to devilish

¹³ "The competitive 'instinct' is not in the first place a desire for power or a will to dominate. The primary thing is the desire to excel others, to be the first and to be honoured for that." Homo Ludens 50.

villainy.¹⁴ But his actions are also frequently called adventures ("daz Abenteuer") and he rouses genuine curiosity in his audience who wonder what they can learn from him and want "daz er etwaz Abentür macht."¹⁵ Thus his reception, ranging from amusement to anger, shows considerable ambivalence.

Sometimes, as with the people of Magdeburg (14) and the King of Poland (24) where his actions are invited, Eulenspiegel's reputation precedes him: his "victims" know beforehand with whom they are dealing. Those who are genuinely open to the reality Eulenspiegel represents seem able to tolerate his tricks with relative equanimity. This is true of the three bishops (episodes 15, 63, and 87), the two kings (episodes 23, 24), and assorted others such as the smith's family (40) who want to be told something "true," and the feasting citizens of Bremen who good-naturedly relinquish their claims on their host when he bastes the roast with butter melting from his ass (72). However, sometimes those

¹⁴ Other terms commonly applied to Eulenspiegel's deeds are: "die Thorheit" (his mother's view, 3:14), "ein seltzam Spil" (the neighbors, 3:15), "Ulenspiegels Büberei" (a stingy farmer, 7:24), "sein Gaucklerei" (narrator, 18:56), "allerlei Gükelspil" and "seine Bossheit" (narrator, 31:92), etc. Frequently the term "Schalckheit" is preceded by a modifier such as "böse" (38) or "gute" (55) which marks the speaker's perception of the trickery as clever or wicked, etc.

¹⁵ Episode 23:69. See also episode 14 where the people of Magdeburg gather to see Eulenspiegel do "etwaz Abenthür," and episode 24 where Eulensp. is made a welcome guest because the King of Poland "hät ihn und sein Abenteuer vor lang gern gesehen und gehört," etc.

who appear to welcome Eulenspiegel are angry when what he does fails to match their expectations.¹⁶ This is true of some citizens of Magdeburg who gather to see Eulenspiegel fly (hoping for an exhibition of black magic) and find he is not foolish enough to try what he cannot do (14), and also of some tailors who assemble to learn something important to their trade only to find they already know the "wise thing" Eulenspiegel has to impart (50).

At least twice those who recognize Eulenspiegel try to outwit him: the bootmaker's boy takes Eulenspiegel's orders for having his boots greased literally as Eulenspiegel himself would do, and the bootmaker gets his windows broken for his pains (45); and a tricky priest twice eats the sausages Eulenspiegel has prepared for himself and finds the second time he's eaten soap with the meat (37). In both cases they find that Eulenspiegel doesn't take kindly to treatment in kind and they are the worse for their attempts.

In several cases those who attempt to trick Eulenspiegel accept the justice of trickery as his repayment for their ill treatment of him, as when an innkeeper intentionally farts in the room where Eulenspiegel is to sleep, then finds the next morning that Eulenspiegel has shitted on his table. The innkeeper thinks a shit for a fart is fair recompense and

¹⁶ Here Eulenspiegel reveals the foolishness of their expectations: they delude themselves to believe the improbable can happen.

treats Eulenspiegel well after this (79).

Finally there are those who recognize Eulenspiegel as a buffoon and want nothing to do with him. Such folk, whether dukes, doctors, or innkeepers, find one cannot escape Eulenspiegel by refusing his company.¹⁷ He insists on making his presence felt, on confronting others until they, albeit unhappily, are forced to acknowledge his existence.

Some folk, seeing a stranger in town, demonstrate a tentative openness to Eulenspiegel by asking him the question "Who are you?" or "What kind of work do you do?"¹⁸ Sometimes the question is asked in innocent interest as when a female innkeeper asks what he does, only to hear that Eulenspiegel's job is not "ein Handwercksgesell" but rather "to tell the truth" ("...ich pfleg die Warheit zu sagen"). (30:89) This delights her until he calls her "squint-eyed woman," which angers her momentarily until she sees it is the truth, though others refuse to say it, then she laughs and bids him welcome. In episode 64 a rich merchant finds Eulenspiegel lying on the grass and stops to ask "was er für ein Stalbruder wär und was sein Handel wär." Here as elsewhere Eulenspiegel receives the question as an invitation for him to pretend to be what they would like him to be, and he promptly invents an occupation he thinks they will find useful, using this

¹⁷ See, for example, episodes 15, 25-26, and 77.

¹⁸ The question is generally phrased "was für ein Gesell wär?"

opportunity to gain entree.¹⁹

Finally there are those who are unsuspecting and completely deceived by Eulenspiegel's presence. Such is the case with the Landgrave who hires Eulenspiegel, the "great painter", to do a mural for him ((27); the wives who buy his relics when he goes disguised as a pardoner (31); the old Jewish scholars who buy his "Prophetenbeer" (35); the market women from whom he "buys" wares (36 and 70); the blind men (71); the farm women who offer him food (75 and 76); and the old farmer who befriends him only to have his plums ruined (88). Their responses upon being tricked are rarely anger. They are most often a surprised acknowledgement of what has happened, and a regret that they encountered a trickster. The Landgrave of Hessen says, "Nun sehen wir wol, daz wir betrogen seint, und mit Uelenspiegel hon ich mich nie beküern wöllen. Noch dann ist er zu uns kumen."²⁰ The honest old farmer's response when he sees what Eulenspiegel has done to him is such a direct, unbiased recognition of reality that even Eulenspiegel admits the shame of it. "I helped you according to God's will and this is the shame I received," says the man,

¹⁹ This desire to gain entre, one of Eulenspiegel's most consistent characteristics, is discussed later in this chapter.

²⁰ "Now we certainly see that we have been tricked, and I never wanted to be troubled by Eulenspiegel. Yet he has come to us" (27:81).

and the rogue replies, "Der Schalck wär wol Schlahens wert."²¹

Although there are exceptions, the way people respond to Eulenspiegel frequently seems related to their social class. The aristocracy, still secure in their power, for the most part admits him willingly as a professional buffoon -- perhaps, as Welsford suggests, aware that his fooling will keep them free from the sin of presumption, and also no doubt confident in their authority to reward or punish Eulenspiegel as they choose. They give him the freedom to be himself and the wherewithall to live comfortably. However, this author's intention clearly is not merely to recount amusing stories of a professional buffoon, for when Eulenspiegel is thus safely contained, he loses his mission and the stories cease, as when much time is passed over in silence with the words "and Eulenspiegel stayed with the king until the king's end" (23). Thus relatively few episodes concern the aristocracy, unless these noblemen find Eulenspiegel unacceptable.²² When, for example, the Duke of Lüneberg forbids Eulenspiegel to enter his territory on pain of death, Eulenspiegel defies the ban and rides through whenever he goes that way, twice confronting

²¹ "Vor der Stat lag ein kranck Mensch, der sah gleich als der, der hie stat, dann daz er ander Kleider anhet. Den fürt ich umb Gots willen für daz Thor. Derselb Schalck hat mir den Schaden gethon," says the farmer, once aware of Eulenspiegel's disguise and the deception he perpetrated (88:252).

²² The fact that there are few episodes where members of the aristocracy do become the butt of Eulenspiegel's jokes must also reflect either "N"s respect for this class or, perhaps, his fear of seeming in opposition to those in power.

the duke directly with the meaning of the terms of the banishment (25 and 26).

The middle class is in a more precarious situation, depending as they do on buying and selling to secure their lives with the necessary cash. The tradesmen invite Eulenspiegel in primarily to serve this need of earning money, and they often willingly abuse him to make a profit or earn some leisure time. But they can ill afford his destruction of their property and usually send him off in anger. The innkeepers see Eulenspiegel both as a source of revenue and as a possible source of entertainment, a way to amuse their guests. Depending on which of these impulses dominates, he may be ill or well treated.

The peasant farmers tend most often to mistake his identity and they seem also the most vulnerable to and the most easily damaged by his trickery. For the most part they are portrayed as simple folk who do Eulenspiegel no harm, but whose very gullibility is an irresistible temptation to the trickster. Eulenspiegel's associations with the innocent good-nature of these earthy folk, however, account for his one true defeat (episode 67, when the old farm wife finds and successfully conceals Eulenspiegel's purse) and his most unmerited knavery (episode 88, where an old farmer sacrifices his time and comfort to help what he thinks is a helplessly ill man and is rewarded by having his produce destroyed), suggesting perhaps an implicit respect on the part of the

author for this humble class.

Paul Oppenheimer says somewhat curiously of Eulenspiegel that "clearly [he] understands two facts about the human condition; first that it requires metaphors and dishonesty; and second, that liars such as himself, are not always interested in the truth" (268). The central question one poses, it seems to me, after reading Eulenspiegel's adventures is precisely what is he interested in? Is there any one reality that he represents which encompasses his preoccupations with "truth" and justice, his concerns for his own freedom and survival, and his gratuitous playfulness and meanness?

The predominance of episodes where Eulenspiegel's tricks turn on the literal interpretation of a common phrase or a proverb, or where they expose the foolish vanities and senseless inhumanities of his society, clearly indicates the author's interest in using the trickster as a tool for satire. But, as Oppenheimer observes, "this author seems to have been torn...between conflicting desires to write both a 'pure' Schwankbuch and a 'pure' satire. For N.'s sensibility seems constantly to vacillate between the sort of pure jest or Schwank that, finally, lacks the moral and philosophical perceptions of conscience, and serious mockery, of the sort to be found in high satires..." (261). This apparent contradiction in N.'s purpose, however, is subsumed under the all-consuming purpose of Eulenspiegel's life as revealed in

this narrative cycle, for what gives the episodic "middle" tales (10-88) their unity is not just the thematic emphases, but the consistency with which Eulenspiegel acts -- the way his insistence in establishing his own contrary reality takes precedence over everything else he does. For even while he wants to reveal "truth" or establish "justice," he also revels in doing exactly the opposite of what is expected of him. And, as episode 45 demonstrates, when the lesson of literal truth has been "learned," Eulenspiegel is compelled to demonstrate his primary truth another way.²³ His fundamental intent seems to be to shock, astonish, abruptly jolt his fellow humans out of their complacency, to break through the operational assumptions, and, as his name implies, holds a mirror whose reflection shatters the ordinary appearances by which one normally conceives reality.²⁴ Thus where one wants him to do something fantastic, he'll do something quite ordinary (14); where one wants him to produce goods for sale, he'll produce destruction and waste (20, 39, 40, 43, etc.);

²³ Note also in episode 40 where Eulenspiegel recognizes the smithy's consignment of Eulenspiegel to "eat shit" as what he's done to others: "Du hast dich verrent und hast daz vil ander Lüten gethon. Mit dem Maß würt dir wider demessen" (121). But his next thought is how to get back at the smith, despite the fact that it means he will be out in the cold, out of work and shelter. What he does is to forge all the smith's tools together, then exit, leaving his mark -- an owl and a mirror -- on the smith's door with the words "Hic fuit". In this way he makes his presence irrefutably known.

²⁴ Like the owl, whose knowing mien suggests wisdom but whose habits are nocturnal and contrary to human habits, Eulenspiegel is the wise contrary who holds the mirror.

where one wants to hear something new, he'll tell something long known (41, 50); where one wants him to stay away, he'll come (27, 39, etc.); where one wants to trick him, he'll counter with a baser trick (7-8, 37, 40, 45, etc.); where one wants him to confess to his sins, he confesses the things he never did (91).

As human society tends to rely on euphemisms, on abstract notions of truth and justice, on socio-linguistic forms that distance people from their material bodily natures, Eulenspiegel's pranks are concerned to make just such a reality undeniably visible. Thus he lives at a subsistence level, always aware of hunger, tricking others to get food but also to demonstrate their greed when they ignore another's hunger while assuaging their own.²⁵ When people have come to expect excellent food, he serves them dreck (see 37, 44, 72, 76, 86) or shits on their food (10) or on their dining tables (69, 79). Likewise he exposes his and others' asses (2, 84) and exhibits the bodily functions of the excretory system including regurgitation (37, 86), nasal dripping (75, 76), and excrement (10, 12, 15, 16, 24, 35, 69, 72, 79, 81, 85, 88, 90, 92).

This remarkable ability to void himself at will, as mentioned earlier, is Eulenspiegel's only really fantastic

²⁵ Food and feasting are prominent in episodes 5-7, 11, 18, 22, 33, 36-37, 44, 60, 61, 64, 66, 72, 75-77, 80, 82, 85-86.

quality. Moreover, the dominant role his use of excrement plays in the tales sets this cycle apart from other jestbook cycles of the time.²⁶ Eulenspiegel uses excrement in primarily three ways: First, he treats it as food by intentionally confusing the two, as in 10 where he confuses "Henep" hemp with "Senep" mustard, 24 where he eats his own shit and invites another fool to imitate him, and 72 where he bastes a roast with butter from his ass. Second, he uses purgation as curative as in 15 where he "cures" the Doctor by making him self-loathing; 16 where by a deception he "cures" a child whose mother thought it was constipated; 35 where "Prophet berries" made of shit are a spiritual cure to enlighten Jewish scholars; 69 where he cleanses himself by shitting in the bathhouse; and 90 where a pharmacist administers a strong laxative to the sick buffoon. In these last two cases in particular, the third function, a punitive-jesting one, is also evident, for his intention in the bathhouse is really to reveal and punish the pretensions of the master; and in episode 90 Eulenspiegel revenges himself on the pharmacist by shitting in the book whence came the cure. In two more episodes the reason for shitting is to pay back a fart (12 and 79) and the jest is acknowledged in good

²⁶ Oppenheimer notes that the anal preoccupation here seems to replace the more common sexual interest in other cycles such as Des Pfarrers vom Kalenberg and Pfaffe Amis, and furthermore, that most of the excremental tales fall into the category of tales with no known antecedent (256-57).

humor by the offenders. In later episodes excrement is used more clearly to punish: in 81 the impoverished innkeeper exhibits sloth and despair and Eulenspiegel's pile of excrement seems intended to acknowledge and punish this attitude; in 85 by shitting in the bed of a priest who has received favored treatment, Eulenspiegel "corrects" the landlady's partiality; in 92 he punishes the greed of a priest who hopes to inherit some of Eulenspiegel's gold.

Wakdjunkaga, the Winnebago trickster, shares this preoccupation with the demands of the body, and more particularly the anal interest. He expels gas to drive off competitors, burns his anus in punishment when it fails to defend his property, challenges nature by eating a laxative bulb in defiance, uses flatulence to blow a whole tribe away for his own amusement, falls into his own excrement, catches a hawk in his rectum in revenge for an earlier trick played, tricks a bear into having his rectum cut out, and administers a laxative to shame a courting Mink.²⁷ Like Eulenspiegel he uses anal functions both to amuse himself by tricking others and for revenge, but he shows also a naive curiosity about his body and displays a sense of playful exploration that is not characteristic of Eulenspiegel, who seems driven here and elsewhere to assert his nature as a necessary corrective to reality as it is ordinarily conceived more than to play out

²⁷ See chapter 2 for summaries of episodes 12-14, 23-25, 34-35, and 45.

his nature.²⁸ In fact, this compulsion of Eulenspiegel's, clearly attributable to his author, more than any other characteristic sets him apart from the tricksters examined earlier, not as a quality inimical to the trickster (for the trickster's nature always forces itself on society to the profit and annoyance of the latter) but in the almost missionary zeal with which it is manifested.²⁹

What are we to make of this "excremental vision?"³⁰ Oppenheimer suggests that excrement replaces the more common role of sex in other jest-cycles, but this does not get us very far. Mary Douglas, countering Norman Brown's theory (Life Against Death) that primitive cultures use excrement in the production of magic as an infant uses his bodily productions as a source of gratification which compensates for loss and separation fears, finds primitive culture's predominant response to excrement is to condemn it.³¹ She

²⁸ I think here of Huizinga's assertion in Homo Ludens that true play is "a thing by itself" (45)... "outside the sphere of necessity or material utility..." (132).

²⁹ Note the times Eulenspiegel returns to play another trick on someone he has already left in devastation, as though he determined to make sure they don't think he only shows up once (episodes 43, 46 and 82, 83). This also applies (without the element of destructiveness) to his double testing of the duke (25-26).

³⁰ Oppenheimer borrows the term from Norman O. Brown's chapter on Jonathan Swift in Life against Death (Middleton, 1959). See Oppenheimer 256.

³¹ Purity and Danger 118. She follows, for example, Radin's view that Wakdjunkaga illustrates by his defecation a destructive abuse of nature.

views it as symbolic of the "danger of margins" phenomenon which can be briefly summarized as follows: "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins [because] if they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experiences is altered. [Thus] all margins are dangerous" (Douglas 121). As bodily margins are often used to represent social margins, they too are powerful and dangerous. She finds, moreover, that cultures whose "rituals...most explicitly credit corrupt matter with power are making the greatest effort to affirm the physical fullness of reality;" and that "...cultures which frankly develop bodily symbolism may be seen to use it to confront experience with its inevitable pains and losses. By such themes they face the great paradoxes of existence" (120).

Douglas encourages us to look for cultural analogies where anal eroticism is present and find its meaning there. If we apply this to Eulenspiegel's anal and excremental preoccupation, a pattern is suggested. First, we take bodily orifices to represent the boundaries, the margins of the body (see Douglas 121-22). They function to facilitate movement between external and internal realities. Food, air, water, etc. go into the body; mucus, farts, excrement return to external matter. Excrement in particular is the by-product of food (that other chief preoccupation of Eulenspiegel), what is rejected after eating, what the body does not use. If then Eulenspiegel serves it as food, medicine, a social

corrective, is he not suggesting that what has been rejected is of essential value.³² If so, the analogy then reads: the body social has rejected that which is essential to life and health, and the rejected matter must be reclaimed. This, in fact, fits very well with what Eulenspiegel is about. He lives to demonstrate what others refuse to see, what they would define out of their lives.

Returning to the missionary zeal with which Eulenspiegel proclaims his message, we note that the "getting of a desired but forbidden object" rarely applies as a motive to Eulenspiegel in material terms. Unlike Wakdjunkaga, Loki, and Renart, he never merely steals what he desires; he insists on a response to his trickery and often provokes it deliberately at considerable risk.³³ In this sense survival also is only a partial consideration for Eulenspiegel, though as in other trickster cycles it still plays an important narrative function, leading Eulenspiegel from one town to the next in search of new jobs, new patrons, and new devilry and also forcing him to move on for fear of reprisal where his tricks cause outrage. In many episodes Eulenspiegel "burns

³² Interestingly enough this point is made literally in the book End Product: The First Taboo (New York: Urizen Books, 1977) where the authors Dan Sabbath and Mandel Hall list all the valuable vitamins and minerals that remain in shit, both human and animal. See "The Feast of Fools," 249-268.

³³ There are a few episodes where Eulenspiegel is himself the only one (apart from the reader) aware of the trickery. See episodes 31 and 38.

his bridges behind him" and, the narrator says, he "kam nit wider" (see conclusion of episodes 10, 13, etc.). In a few episodes he must go in disguise for fear of what will be done to him (see particularly 31).

Yet finally, despite the almost "moral concern of many of Eulenspiegel's adventures," he remains essentially amoral.³⁴ However much the author wished to make Eulenspiegel a tool in service of justice, he also added a liberal dose of episodes in which Eulenspiegel's actions cannot be explained or excused. The message finally seems to be that Eulenspiegel's tricks like the whims of fortune fall on the good and the bad alike. He mistreats all classes, ages, and sexes.³⁵ The reader's sympathy for Eulenspiegel is a fragile balance of

³⁴ Oppenheimer sees his behavior as almost moral. "For what is unique about Eulenspiegel (in contrast to the sources of his tales...) is that, far from simply playing tricks on the naive, innocent, and gullible (though he does this too), he often sets out to deceive the dishonest, harsh, cruel, stupid, conceited, obnoxious, boring, and unjust. If his behavior is generally negative and sometimes sadistic, it is also, in this sense moral: for a full exposure to his adventures affords us the rare pleasure, unobtainable in life but possible in art, of seeing wrongs perfectly righted and punishments perfectly suited to crimes" 270.

³⁵ I have not mentioned yet Eulenspiegel's apparent aversion to women, which seems to have to do with their sex as well as their social vulnerability. He abandons his poor mother, three times punishes the maids of priests whom he seems to suspect of furnishing priests with sexual favors, completely dupes the wives who buy his indulgences, ruins the pelts of an hospitable innkeeper, burns the ass of another innkeeper who reports gossip, kills the pet dog of an overly indulgent innkeeper, again rebuffs his mother on his death bed, and taunts with sexual indecency the beguine who attends him in hospital. See episodes 11, 13, 30, 31, 38, 41, 67, 84, 90, 91.

empathy and disgust, amusement and outrage. But whatever the response, Eulenspiegel is granted impunity by the author, and frequently by the characters who are his victims. Several times his life is threatened; once the citizens of Lübeck even have him on the scaffold, but a trick sees his release. When he falls sick, he is given a respectable hospital bed, his death is not attended by threats of hellfire, and he is given as proper a burial as his contrary nature will permit. In a way, his whole life operates in an amoral sphere where his nature is what it is. He never changes from early infancy to death. When he goes to Rome to test out the saying "Gang geen Rom, frummer Man, kum herwider nequam" ("Go to Rome, pious man, come back worthless" Opp. trans.), and has an audience with the pope, we are told he comes back the same person as before (34).

Eulenspiegel exists as a messenger, but his life itself is also the message.³⁶ He lives to present us with a reality best expressed by the smith's boy in episode 39: "An solich Companion ist nit vil zu gewinen. Wer Ulenspiegel nit kent, der hab nur mit ihm zu thun, der lert ihn kennent." You can't gain much from such a companion. Whoever doesn't know Eulenspiegel has only to deal with him to learn to know him. And to know Eulenspiegel is to relearn the lesson that society needs fluidity at its boundaries in order to remain healthy;

³⁶ I think here of the traditional immunity granted the messenger.

to confront the paradox that destruction renews life, that waste must be plowed back into the ground for growth; in short, to acknowledge the fullness of reality which is itself paradoxical.

CONCLUSION

The basic narrative form for the trickster tale is the perennially popular anecdote wherein one character triumphs over another by deceit. But although trickster tales can be found individually, our concern here is with the collections of stories that have gathered around a single figure, either as stories in a larger mythology or in a cycle where one trickster becomes the protagonist of many episodes. For while many behavioral characteristics of the trickster in the cycle may apply to a trickster in the single anecdote, it is not until one studies the trickster hero in a larger context that the full significance of this character becomes apparent. Where the focus of the isolated trickster episode, for example, is on the action (with typical motifs such as contests won by deception, deceptive bargains, escape by deception, capture by deception, deception leading to self-injury, etc.) and the trickster seems essentially a type defined by narrative necessity, the trickster within a mythology or in a cycle, by repeatedly playing out such behavior, appears to determine rather than be determined by the narrative. The repetition of such motifs portray a figure whose energy, whose incessant activity, whose curiosity

seems to impel and define the narrative, both within the individual episodes and from story to story. With tricksters like Wakdjunkaga of the Winnebago Indians, Renart of twelfth-century France, and Eulenspiegel of fifteenth-century Germany, the cycles appear to grow from their continual activities. They make things happen, setting the world around them in motion as they wander here and there pursuing their desires. Loki in Old Norse mythology also is the catalyst for many of the adventures that fill the time between the creation of the world and the final cataclysmic events (dependent also on Loki's actions) that bring that world to an end.¹

¹ Anna B. Rooth, a structuralist who sees the plot or motif as the original, traditional element of the story and the folk character as essentially an agent defined by the necessity of the action, counters the hypotheses of Dumézil, Kerenyi, Radin and others who see in the trickster character a type whose nature represents the embodiment of a spiritual or psychological reality. In her examination of Loki (Loki in Scandinavian Mythology, 1961) she dismisses the "kaleidoscopic character" of the trickster as primarily a creation of scholars, and attributes the growth of story cycles to "an associating mode of narration" that leads man to link anecdote with anecdote, rather than to the compelling, flexible nature of the central figure to whom these stories accrue. There is no reason, however, to suppose that the action has more claim than the trickster figure in compelling the association of story with story. Take the natural fox, for example, which "creates" stories in the course of living out its normal functions. Might it not well claim its share of the responsibility for the magnetic trickster figure that grew into the anthropomorphic hero of the Roman de Renart? Moreover, while the protean flexibility characteristic of the trickster figure may result from the "kaleidoscopic" accumulation of roles within a story cycle, it could be argued with equally valid logic that a cycle grows because of the flexibility of its central character, for flexibility is the necessary attribute of a figure for whom survival is the sine

What are the fundamental characteristics of this trickster figure? The trickster can be most readily identified as one who tricks others, but once the trickster figure of a cycle is examined, his tricks and deceptions seem secondary rather than primary to his definition. For what strikes one more forcibly after studying the cycles of stories is the trickster's compulsive activity and his strong instinct for survival. Constantly on the move, he searches for food, shelter, and sexual gratification, and he seeks to thwart his natural enemies. In so doing, he disregards the natural or social laws that might limit his energy or deny him his desires or freedom of movement, thus he steals from others, or deceives, traps, beguiles others into providing for him.

Anarchical as he is, he rarely, if ever, seeks wealth or fame or even happiness in an abstract sense. His concern is not with setting himself up socially or preserving a particular identity. Wakdjunkaga rejects the role of chieftain initially and later the peaceful role of family head; Loki shows no interest in upstaging the higher gods in Asgard; Renart never aspires to a position of dominance except in one branch, Renart Empereur, where he becomes the regent of the animal world at King Noble's insistence and characteristically abuses the role. Eulenspiegel cares nothing for the royal status of his patrons beyond the

qua non and his survival within one tale makes possible his adventuring in the next.

essential physical comforts of food, clothes, and bed which their wealth can provide.

The trickster's primary interest is not in setting himself up but in bringing others down. This freedom he insists upon. He "brings down" those who are inert, unaware, self-satisfied, dishonest, those whose lives are based on false or worn out assumptions or who perform their duties mechanically, heeding the form while ignoring the content. He throws out a perpetual challenge to the world around him, forcing society to break out of its ordinary mode and reexamine itself.

But in this process, he also preys upon the apparently innocent, and in these pursuits he can seem merciless and brutal. Wakdjunkaga, for example, tricks racoon mothers into a hunting expedition, boils and eats their children while they are gone, places a child's head on a stick to fool the returning mothers, and then tricks and burns the avenging women and prepares to eat them too (episodes 27, 29). Renart tricks, traps, and mutilates the bear, dog, and wolf who are his sworn enemies, but he also rapes King Noble's queen and stones the king himself (Branch 1a etc.). Eulenspiegel's most sadistic tricks are played on animals, but the human victims of his pranks do not escape serious physical injury. Loki is an exception here not in nature but in the frequency with which he acts harshly cruel, and his role in the killing of Baldr does result in punishment, although he is not

executed.

Yet despite his tricks, his destructive behavior, his deliberate violation of society's most sacred codes, the trickster is not evil. This amoral aspect is evident most notably in his peculiar impunity: he escapes serious punishment for his mischief, and despite his asocial behavior, he curries favor with nobles, chiefs, kings, and high gods.² As a vital spirit, a life force, and the embodiment of physical and social urges, he is both welcome and unwelcome - - essential and disturbing.

Added to his constant activity is the trickster's incredible adaptability: he can be supremely flexible both physically and mentally. This fluidity or flexibility of nature, which accounts for not only the multiplicity of skills characteristic of the trickster but also the magical abilities of the mythic tricksters to change shape and sex, also facilitates his survival. Makarius, who defines the trickster as a mythic projection of the magician, sees magical ability as the trickster's original attribute inasmuch as it is the magician who risks danger and garners power by violating fundamental taboos. But if one looks not to the

² Makarius, following always her theory of the trickster's essential role as mythical taboo-breaking magician, explains his impunity as the result of society's ambivalent response to him: while they find his act of violation abhorrent, it is nevertheless essential for the social good. They hate him but cannot do without him. See Le sacré et la violation des interdits, 248-50.

hypothetical origins of the figure but to the figure itself, such magical power seems but one aspect of this character, and seems rather to accompany (though not necessarily as a secondary attribute) his innately indefinite nature which cannot be limited to one mode of being: he is finally neither wholly sacred, nor human, nor animal, and he experiments with all animate states of being. With the mythic characters of Wakdjunkaga and Loki, the line between mere disguises and actual transformations is not always clear. One notes Wakdjunkaga's disguises as a song carrier, as a dead deer-buck, and his transformations into a child-bearing woman and an elk spirit; Loki's disguises of attending maid and bird, and his transformations into bird, insect, mare, and maid. With Renart and Eulenspiegel, the transformations are less supernatural, although both are so able to "be" whatever they choose that they pass ordinary human capacities for disguise. Note Renart's ability in the larger cycle to pass himself off as minstrel, doctor (who cures his patient), cunt-maker, angel, priest, etc.; and Eulenspiegel's similar flexibility in taking on social roles and professions.

This flexibility or adaptability goes hand in hand with the insatiably social nature that Pelton has observed. Tricks of necessity demand interaction between two or more beings, and the trickster's actions always place him where his impulse toward movement intersects with the lives of others. To gain entrance into the lives of others, he will take on

whatever form or disguise best serves his purpose.

Moreover, informing everything that he is and does is the trickster's sense of play. However necessary trickery, disguise, and deception may seem for his survival, they can also be used gratuitously to stir things up and to keep others on their toes merely for the amusement they afford. This need for novelty, for new stimuli, is primary to man and other animal life. Play, which A. L. Kroeber defines as "wasteful but pleasurable bodily activity performed for its own sake," provides essential activity to fill leisure time; a "pleasurable outlet for excess energy."³ It is often in play that the trickster manifests his unceasing activity, challenging the sleepy, the unwary, the self-satisfied with his tricks and games, providing what is frequently an unwelcome stimulus to enliven the world around him.

³ A. L. Kroeber, Anthropology: Biology and Race (New York: Harbinger, 1963) 28-29. S. A. Barnett in Instinct and Intelligence (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1967) cites various experiments demonstrating that insects, rodents, and higher animals alike have the impulse to wander randomly or seek out a new path or environment, to explore new objects, etc. Some of this is apparently "an imperative need for external stimulation" (38) which in mammals can be shown to "contribute in an important way to the development of intelligence...[i.e.] the ability to adapt behavior to circumstances" (44). Kroeber notes apropos of this that where the requirements for survival leave no leisure time, such exploration is not gratuitous play. However in some birds and in most mammals such play is gratuitous and is not connected with feeding or reproduction (28). Johan Huizinga takes the position that play in animals is not instinctive in the sense that it serves a utilitarian purpose; play is superfluous and is freely chosen, that is to say, animals play because they enjoy it (Homo Ludens 8).

THE COMEDY OF ENERGY

Primary to the trickster is his tremendous drive and energy; he moves, as Pelton has said, for movement's sake. Such energy and vitality as the trickster exhibits in the narrative is itself essentially comic. In her discussion of the great comic forms, Suzanne Langer notes this "close relation between humor and the 'sense of life.'... The pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy."⁴

Bernard Spivak's study of the vice figure in medieval morality plays attests also to the comic ambivalence inherent in a dramatic display of vitality.⁵ Noting the medieval tendency to portray evil as comic, Spivak traces the transformation of the vice figure from ethically evil to dramatically ambiguous as this allegorical personification vigorously acts out his nature to the amusement of the audience. From the "image of baseness [which] allowed [man] contempt and laughter for the nature of evil by depicting it as rudely physical and bestial, a mirror of what is lowest, because least spiritual, in human nature and in the universe," (121) paradoxically, the comic vice figure became dramatically

⁴ Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (New York: Scribners, 1953) 327, 339.

⁵ Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (New York: Columbia UP, 1958). See especially his fourth and fifth chapters on the morality play and the emergence of the vice figure.

superior to the virtues to which he was ethically inferior.⁶ The elemental force which he exemplified, though considered evil, nevertheless gained such comic power that it became "theatrically fascinating," in its own right (122).

Trickster tales must also be considered generically comic in that the "hero," though not always triumphant in the full sense, always manages to survive.⁷ In fact, although the trickster may be beaten within an inch of his life, the final threat of death is not realized and the general sense is that the trickster enjoys an extraordinary impunity in the world of the story while he himself wreaks havoc on others.

The laughter the trickster evokes is not therefore only the laughter of ridicule. We laugh also at his indomitable energy, at his wit that allows him to triumph over others, at his willingness to tackle the indifferent universe with its random, accidental nature, to pick himself up, however foolish he looks, and try again.

But the trickster character, whether the hero in a cycle of stories with only a vague chronology or the deity or demi-

⁶ Spivak says, "... their theatrical achievement was at the opposite pole to their ethical intention. -- By its very nature, the morality plot was put into motion by [the vices'] aggression and sustained by their intrigue, leaving very little to the other side except to unpack its heart with words" (123).

⁷ As a generalization this statement has validity. Some tricksters do perish, but as a rule, they survive against impossible odds. Loki perishes only when the whole world is destroyed.

god in a mythology with a fixed beginning and end, does not develop in the narrative; he does not learn from experience. He collects attributes, accruing skills, changing forms, applying new disguises, but he does not grow. No experience alters his essential core of self-interest.

If the trickster survives but does not develop from episode to episode, is he not eventually doomed to a futile repetition of his actions? Certainly in a long cycle like the Roman de Renart the trickster can become almost mechanical in the hands of less talented conteurs, who lead Renart puppetlike through adventures that essentially repeat his earlier actions. And while Wakdjunkaga does not repeat himself in specifics, motifs repeat: Twice while he is preoccupied, others steal his food; three times he takes revenge on the thieves; twice trees are treated as human, etc. Does the trickster who is resistant to change become a mere clown or fool, the comic type defined by Henri Bergson as representing the mechanical aspect, "movement without life?"⁸ Does his energy drive a body that can only respond to biological urges, or a mind that can only respond by deception? Bergson has defined the automatism of the comic that stands in opposition to Life, the élan vital, the everchanging, elastic energy that is the "complete negation of repetition" (81). Bergson's life evolves in a linear time; "it never goes backwards and never repeats

⁸ Henri Bergson, "Laughter" in Comedy (New York: Doubleday, 1956) 61-190.

itself.... A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics -- whether real or apparent is of little moment -- which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical" (118).

Behind this distinction between the living and the mechanical is Bergson's platonic insistence on the separation of spirit and matter -- the one a shaping, supple, vital principle; the other an obstinate, inert, mechanical principle. "This soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates.... Matter, however,...would fain immobilise the intelligently varied movements of the body in stupidly contracted grooves, stereotype in permanent grimaces the fleeting expressions of the face..." (78-79). We laugh, he would have it, when we see "inert matter dumped down upon living energy" (93) or the mechanical, non-living aspect in the living, and this laughter functions to humiliate the comic character (who is physically or mentally rigid, habitual, unaware, mechanical rather than alert, adaptable, alive) and to keep us aware of our own tendency towards inertia, acting to check our own eccentricity or inelasticity.

But the trickster as defined thus far is also infinitely elastic, energetic, alert to his own interests and those of others around him if they impinge on his freedom. Yet he is

also driven by biological urges that suggest the automatic, unthinking response to stimuli characteristic of the clown and this makes him appear foolish at times. Because the trickster does not recognize the dualism of spirit and matter, the two are inseparably merged in his character. This is nowhere more evident than in the Winnebago trickster, Wakdjunkaga, who incarnates the life force in a rudimentary human form and exhibits both automatic, instinctual behavior and creative adaptability. He is both victor and victim as he explores the world around him, and both roles provoke laughter. We laugh not only at the puppetlike actions of his body but also at the challenge he continually throws out to the world around him, at what Suzanne Langer calls the "image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."⁹

THE COMEDY IN NARRATIVE FORM

The ambivalent nature of the trickster is what makes him

⁹ Feeling and Form 331. Langer, defining "an important comic personage...essentially a folk character" which she calls "the buffoon," actually calls him "the personified élan vital; his chance adventures and misadventures, without much plot, though often with bizarre complications, his absurd expectations and disappointments, in fact his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life, coping with a world that is forever taking new turns, frustrating but exciting. He is neither a good man nor a bad one, but is genuinely amoral, -- now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move" (342).

so difficult and so attractive. No absolute moral values can be attached to him. Vital and alive, he neither grows nor ages nor seriously confronts the limits of human mortality. He is outside linear time, and the narrative structure of the cycle reflects this. Nancy Freeman Regalado has observed the non-linear, episodic character of the trickster narrative, which she attributes to the nature of the trick as "morally ambiguous and unresolved."¹⁰ "As events in a narrative, ...tricks do not seem to lead to the end of a story, to a denouement, but only to the end of each trick," says Regalado, because, unlike heroic tales which may be episodic but are governed overall by the narrative thrust of a heroic necessity, the only necessity motivating the action in a trickster tale is the protagonist's insatiable desire for a forbidden thing.¹¹ In the absence of a strongly sequential narrative structure, where events are linked irreversibly by a cause and effect that points to a final conclusion, trickster stories (composed of individual tricks linked primarily by formulaic transitions) tend to break apart into separate episodes. Regalado notes that the renarration of tricks (so pronounced in Renart) is one technic authors use

¹⁰ Nancy Freeman Regalado, "Tristan and Renart: Two Tricksters," L'Esprit Créateur 16.1 (1976): 34.

¹¹ Regalado defines a trick as "narratively speaking, what we may call the getting of a desired but forbidden object. In an exploit, a heroic deed, on the other hand, the hero desires an object which it is legitimate for him to win" (34).

to overcome this episodic fragmentation.¹²

While Regalado's contribution to our understanding of the narrative structure of trickster cycles is valuable, by focusing her discussion on the tragic Tristan, she omits any overt recognition of the comic nature of this material. Although she stresses the amorality of the trickster (she notes both the many, ambiguous synonyms in Old French for the words "trick" and "trickery," etc., and the lack of a moral judgment pronounced on the trickster's actions), her terms suggest a negative aspect approaching immorality. The trick results from an insatiable desire for the forbidden; the narrative goes nowhere; Tristan's ambiguous and irresolvable desire for Iseut (both physical and spiritual in nature, socially forbidden and spiritually necessary) ends in death. By implication, either the trickster is stuck, unable to move beyond the narrative necessity of the trick, the forbidden desire, or the paradox he represents is irresolvable and tears life apart.

But if the non-linear structure of the narrative reflects the amoral, unresolved nature of the trick, it simultaneously expresses the unfinished, ongoing cycle of life (both biological and social) that the trickster as comic spirit represents. For the contradictions residing in this figure,

¹² "Retelling keeps the story going and helps to give a feeling of order to the sometimes random sequence of episodes" Regalado 37.

who is vital but does not grow, are inherent in all comedy, whose fundamental concern is with life as Becoming -- becoming as the eternal ongoing process of life continuing itself -- rather than with the ideal of life moving toward completion and perfection. In fact the trickster is set in opposition to that which is stable, fixed, completed, and trickster cycles frequently begin with a rejection of or disruption to the official culture that represents this established order. Wakdjunkaga's first action in the Winnebago cycle is to sluff off his sacred duties as chief and strip down to his essential nature before venturing out aimlessly into the world around him, guided only by his bodily desires, his interest of the moment. Pierre de Saint-Cloud begins the Roman de Renart with Renart breaking into a secure, paradisaical farmyard, creating conflict and disorder. The end of the episode has the fox fleeing with a cock in his mouth, pursued by noisy, angry peasants. The cycle of Till Eulenspiegel commences with the infant's baptism, a holy rite turned farcical when his drunken godfathers plunge themselves and the child into the mud.

The trickster's role of destroying a fixed order is reminiscent of the function of laughter as Bergson defines it -- to destroy the rigid and lifelessly mechanical and thus renew vitality and adaptability, but in Bergsonian terms this is the role not of the comic character (the clown whose behavior provokes our laughter) but of the comic spirit in us

that laughs at mechanical, habitual behavior, at forms that continue to operate long after the life is gone out of them. Our trickster, however, is undeniably material. For him the material life of the body is life: eating, drinking, excreting, copulating, moving about, surviving -- these are his primary interests.¹³

Mikhail Bakhtin defines the imagery of this comic "material bodily principle" as "grotesque realism".¹⁴ The term "grotesque," Bakhtin traces to its origin in fifteenth-century Italy where during the excavation of Roman baths, strange ornaments, called "grotesca" (from the Italian word "grotta) were found" (31-32). These ornaments

"...impressed the connoisseurs by the extremely fanciful, free, and playful treatment of plant, animal, and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other. The borderlines that divide the

¹³ It is important to note, however, that drinking spirits does not figure significantly in the trickster literature I've examined. This may be because the freedom from inhibitions mankind gains from strong drink is permanently present for the trickster. He could only lose his acute alertness and this would reduce him to utter foolishness and make him a victim.

Note also in the following chapters that emphases differ from culture to culture. Wakdjunkaga emphasizes all the bodily functions. Renart is forever in search of food, Loki wants activity, Eulenspiegel uses defecation freely as a means of communicating with others. All but Eulenspiegel express a lively interest in sex, etc.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984). Grotesque realism, says Bakhtin, concerns itself particularly with "those parts of the body that are open to the outside world" -- the mouth, belly, bowels, and genitals that link the inner and outer worlds (26). Trickster literature as noted above also focuses repeatedly on lower body functions, a source of laughter and a means by which we acknowledge the unity of matter and spirit that sustains life.

kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed. Neither was there the usual static presentation of reality. There was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleting character of being. This ornamental interplay revealed an extreme lightness and freedom of artistic fantasy, a gay, almost laughing, libertinage." (32)

Bakhtin cites also L.E. Pinsky's definition of grotesque imagery as that in which "... life passes through all the degrees, from the lowest, inert, and primitive, to the highest, most mobile and spiritualized; this garland of various forms bears witness to their oneness, brings together that which is removed, combines elements which exclude each other, contradicts all current conceptions."¹⁵ What Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism," whether in plastic art forms or literature, exhibits this playful combination of contraries that expresses the unity behind duality, the oneness of becoming.

While grotesque realism celebrates this "triumphant, festive principle," its essential process is that of "degradation, that is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (21). Such debasement is destructive, but it is also regenerative and deeply positive. "Grotesque realism," says

¹⁵ L.E. Pinsky, Realism of the Renaissance (Moscow, 1961) 119-120, as quoted by Bakhtin in Rabeleis, 32.

Bakhtin, "... seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born.... Old age is pregnant, death is gestation, all that is limited, narrowly characterized, and completed is thrust into the lower stratum of the body for recasting and a new birth" (52-53).

What does this imagery mean for trickster literature? Assuming the necessary adaptation from spatial to temporal form, many aspects of the grotesque as defined in these Roman ornaments are present also in the trickster cycles. Although narrative form is predominantly linear, selecting and arranging events chronologically with one event dependent upon and building toward subsequent actions, trickster cycles are composed of a series of events essentially independent one from another. Each episode brings us back to the starting point: the trickster initiates a contest or confrontation which he either wins or loses but always survives. The next episode sees him relatively unaffected by the outcome and ready to try again. Thus there is the sense that the action is never finished, is always beginning afresh. In truth this cyclical, open-ended form itself causes some discomfort because of our inherent expectation that narrative must go somewhere, that events must lead to some dénouement or final catastrophe. And it is interesting to observe how

raconteurs and authors of these tales struggle to weave the episodes into a narrative whole, and how the indomitable figure of the trickster baffles them, refusing to be subordinated to linear form.¹⁶

In fact, trickster cycles resist final closure.¹⁷ The Winnebago cycle concludes with Trickster eating his last meal on earth, diving into the ocean and then going up to the heavens. There he is in charge of another world just like that of Earthmaker's, in which he presumably lives on, creating new, never-ending stories. Renart "dies" twice in the late branch "La mort et procession de Renart," which in essence ends the cycle. First his deep swoon is mistaken for death, and he is being buried when he awakes suddenly and attacks Chantecler. The two fight a duel and again Renart is left for dead. However, once more he escapes and by a trick manages to convince the court that he is dead and buried. "In this way," says Kenneth Varty, "Reynard died, yet lived to dupe and plunder many another day."¹⁸

¹⁶ Note in the previous chapters the "biological education" of Wakdjunkaga which gives a vague sense of chronology or development, the renarration that gives Renart a past and provides a sense of continuity, and the struggle in medieval Christian Iceland to make Loki the demon whose past antics all add up to Ragnarok.

¹⁷ Norse mythology does not have this cyclical form. The world of gods and giants is fated to end, and Loki with them. According to *Voluspa*, however, mankind will be reborn out of the ashes of even such an ultimate destruction as Ragnarok.

¹⁸ Kenneth Varty, Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1967) 86.

Eulenspiegel does actually die, but the bier itself takes a tumble on the way to the churchyard, and the body gives the beguines who are burying him so much trouble ("he could not simply lie down in his grave like other Christians") that they decide he is telling them to bury him belly first.¹⁹ Thus Eulenspiegel continues his antics even after death.

Not only does the episodic cyclical form convey the sense of an unfinished, still creative universe; the incessant wandering of the trickster also reinforces the impression of life without fixed boundaries. As he roams aimlessly, pursuing his desires, the trickster interacts with all levels of life. This is particularly true of Wakdjunkaga, who does not discriminate between plant and animal life or distinguish between man and beast, and whose intermingling with all creation reflects the Indians' holistic respect for the world around them. This characteristic is also evident in the Old Norse mythic world where the borderlines between the worlds of Asgard, Midgard, and Jotenheim are penetrable by the gods and especially Loki, with his special flexibility of the shapechanger. Renart and Eulenspiegel too exhibit the propensity for wandering, for infringing the boundaries of social class, for disregarding the fixed assumptions of the "stable world."

¹⁹ A Pleasant Vintage of Till Eulenspiegel 233. "...er möcht nit liegen in dem Grab als die andern Cristenmenschen" (Ein kurtzweilig Lesen von Dil Uelenspiegel, 265).

Trickster tales also display the playful, fantastic quality Bakhtin describes as characteristic of the grotesca. The trickster himself, of course, is playful with his pranks, bargains, and disguises, his comic hyperbole, his incongruous discourse, and gratuitous mischief. But the narrative form, with its sense of the impromptu, its meanderings and abrupt turns in direction, its changes in pace, style, and genre, is also playful.

THE COMEDY OF PARADOX

We have noted the comedy inherent in the trickster's ceaseless energy and vitality, and in the open-ended form and "grotesque realism" of the narrative, all expressions of the triumph of continuing life over the finality of death. In actuality, the comedy of grotesque realism, with its playful combination of contraries, is the comedy of paradox and the trickster is its symbol. Precisely what paradox he embraces theoretically depends on the specific cultural manifestation, but some fundamental oppositions (such as the oppositions of spirit and body, of the infinite possible and the finite

given, of order and chaos, of individual and collective²⁰) seem universally resident in this figure. Nor can a single trickster figure be limited to one such opposition. As Makarius has noted, "One could say that each quality or fault attributed to him automatically calls up its opposite."²¹ It is the play of oppositions, oppositions springing from the profoundly ambiguous human mind itself,²² that is the essence of the trickster and gives rise to the comedy so central to this character.

To understand the comedy of paradox will require a very brief examination of the psychology of humor. Studies generally agree that humor (and its reflex, laughter) is fundamentally the intellectual response to the perception of incongruity. The co-existence of contraries, however

²⁰ It is interesting that Makarius finds the latter opposition as a fundamental contradiction expressed by the violation of taboo: "The dialectic that penetrates into the very cleavage between the actor and his role should not surprise us, for the violation of taboo is situated at the focus where inner contradictions meet, since it expresses in the elementary terms of tribal life the fundamental contradiction of human existence, namely the contradiction between the individual and society" (Ritual Clowns 68).

²¹ "Le Mythe de Trickster," 18.

²² Pelton, taking a position already introduced by Ricketts, makes this point persuasively: he proposes the trickster figure to be modelled on the "experience of the human mind in its imaginative operation as itself radically ambiguous, essentially anomalous, inescapably multivalent -- facing both out and in, linking above and below, animal-like and godlike, social cog and individual solitude, shaped and shaping, part of all that is but only as a subject knowing its own apartness" (258).

uncomfortable, is a fact the human mind cannot escape; moreover we perceive the necessity of it for life, the dynamism and power resident in the tension. The sudden and unexpected recognition of this co-existence causes both a shock of fear and a thrill of acknowledgment, the tension from which (the emotional response) is released in laughter when the perceiver can accept, even delight in the incongruity.²³

Humor assumes both an underlying order and a threat to that order.²⁴ The jolt caused by the perception of incongruity is a disturbance of equilibrium that will result in fear unless it is perceived as only momentary or ultimately unthreatening. But as Conrad Hyers points out, the very departure from order, which is essential to humor, itself presupposes that order: "If comedy were to take irrationality and absurdity as ultimate, this would prove its own undoing."²⁵ Absolute chaos provokes terror rather than laughter.

²³ According to one researcher, "However much the opinions of theorists differ, on this one point nearly all of them agree: that the emotions discharged in laughter always contain an element of aggressiveness. --Humour...must contain a basic ingredient that is indispensable: and impulse, however faint, of aggression and apprehension." See A. Koestler, "Humour and Wit," Encyclopedia Britannica Macropaedia, 15th ed., 6 and the remainder of the article where the intellectual and emotional structures of humor are examined. Also Mahadev Apte, "Humor in Religion" in his book Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 151-176.

²⁴ Ency. Brit. states that humor "must contain...an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension..." (6).

²⁵ Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and Comic," 235.

Humor, then, assumes the order from which it departs. The state of laughter can itself be considered what Pelton, with his psycho-social model of the passage from old forms into new, calls a liminal state. The old order exists by excluding whatever does not fit. It is closed to what is unacceptable, but a fixed closure does not permit the intercourse, the movement, the fluid exchange essential to life. When the old order confronts new elements needing to be incorporated or acknowledged, there is a period of disruption out of which a new order will emerge. Traditional societies have ritualized this process with rites of passage, providing a time and place for the disintegration (symbolic or real) that must precede reintegration and a renewed order. Humor seems to be one important way humans create the ambivalent liminal state that assures this health-giving process. In laughter one enters a momentary liminality where old assumptions are thrown together with new, unacceptable propositions in disarray. Laughter, which biologically triggers a release of tension (sometimes tapping "vast stored amounts of emotion" Ency. Brit), frees us momentarily from fears of disorder which keep us bound to the old order and allows us in that freedom to regain our potential for a new, clearer vision.²⁶

²⁶ Bakhtin sees laughter itself as inimical to fear. Noting the fear and intimidation in official medieval culture, he sees laughter as the only way man could free himself from it. "Laughter...overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and

The trickster embodies the deeply ambivalent and fundamentally optimistic reality of the liminal state. By blurring common distinctions, shattering assumptions, violating taboos, creating physical and social disorder, and acting aggressively, he creates fear. But paradoxically the act of destroying also makes possible the renewal of the established order against which he moves. Pelton has said, "Laughter is somehow the key to Ananse's power" (55). He sees in it the people's "delight that he has broken through unnecessarily rigid boundaries to seize for society the forces of incoherence" (44). Makarius has noted the necessity that the violator be an individual, otherwise the chaos and danger would involve all society and the beneficial purpose of harnessing power would be defeated.²⁷ This individual aspect also creates a comic absurdity of the trickster; the vision of one lone figure so energetically opposed to what he cannot possibly control is itself laughable. Moreover, the trickster is safely contained in narrative form, which along with the performer of his tales, conveys a comic intention.

authority. It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man. It was not only a victory over the mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden" (90).

²⁷ "The violation of taboo...derives its effectiveness from the collective recognition of taboo and has therefore to be individual and exceptional, for if perpetrated by all members of the group concerned, it would defeat its on ends..." (The Crime of Manabozo 668).

What shocks the characters within the story into fear and rage, rather startles the story's audience out of its complacency and into laughter and merriment. Though the experience he creates is imaginary, it is nevertheless concrete and real in its effect -- laughter; laughter that recreates rather than destroys, or recreates through destruction. The trickster's acts may create fear, but they also create laughter, which as Bakhtin has said, is inimical to fear.

The predominant response to these tales is awe and laughter, laughter which frees man from those "emotions that dim the knowledge of life" (Bakhtin 174). For the free expression of laughter, the trickster must remain amoral: the negative aspects of his character must be balanced by and even finally subordinated to the positive life force he represents. When the function of the trickster tales begin to shift from the lively fun of burlesque to the darker, more sardonic humor of satire, the ambivalence essential to this reality is weakened. "The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life," says Bakhtin, and "when the grotesque is used to illustrate an abstract idea, its nature is inevitably distorted" (62). Concrete matter with the liveness of spirit, the trickster fearlessly walks a tightrope between pleasure and pain, folly and wisdom, mirth and misery, life and death, balancing the contraries, embracing the paradox that is life.

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