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Voices of Laughter in Norwegian Ballads

OLAV SOLBERG, BØ I TELEMARK

When the Norwegian ballad collector and poet Jørgen Moe in 1847 recorded the legendary ballad and visionary poem *Draumkvædet* (TSB B31) from living tradition, he noticed that the singers did not always consider the ballad as serious through and through. In his report he writes as follows:

In addition to this comes, that the deep, mysterious *Draumkvæde*, when it is sung in merry company where the frothing bowl of ale has been passed around for a while, it necessarily incites to parody and so in this way is supplied by stanzas, where the caricature of the stanza just sung, is given. This is in any case the only way I can explain the many travestying stanzas, which are, by most singers, naïvely inserted in between the poem's most audacious stanzas [...]. These heterogeneous matters should of course be excluded, in order that one line of thought – by means of the ordering of the stanzas – be attained [...].¹

Moe gives examples of what he calls 'travestying stanzas':

I have been up under the sky
and down to the headlands of the sea,
he who wants to follow in my steps
should not dance in socks.²

In Moe's example it is of course the formula 'dance in socks' in the fourth line that makes the stanza travestying or parodying; it creates with one stroke a trivial situation, a situation of little importance. Since the listeners are expecting an expression in line with the seriousness of the ballad's theme, the formula may have a comic function. We might also say with a formalistic phrase, that the formula functions 'unfamiliarizingly' (Shklovsky). It 'deautomatizes' our perception of the story.

The 'merry company' that Jørgen Moe refers to, and where he probably heard both this parodic *Draumkvæde* stanza and others, was no doubt a wedding, to which

¹ Moe, Jørgen: *Indberetning fra Cand. theol. Jørgen Moe om en av ham i Maanederne Juli og August 1847 med offentlig Stipendium foretagen Reise gjennem Thelemarken og Sætersdalen, for at samle Folkedigtninger*. In: *Tradisjonsinnsamling på 1800-talet*. Norsk Folkeminnelags skrifter 92. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1964, p. 55: „Hertil kommer endnu at det dybe, mysteriøse *Draumkvæde*, naar det synges i det lystige Lag, hvor den fraadende Ølskaal en Tid er gaaet om, nødvendig ægger til Parodi, og saaledes bliver suppleret med Stropher, hvori Vrængebilledet af den nys afsungne gives. Paa anden Maade kan jeg i al Fald ikke forklare mig de mangfoldige travesterende Stancer, der af de fleste Sangere godtroende insereres mellem Digtets dristigste Stropher [...]. Disse heterogene Stoffer skulle naturligviis udsondres, og en Tankegang Digtet igjennem, ved Strophernes Ordning, opnaaes [...].“

² Moe, Jørgen: *Indberetning*, p. 57: „Eg hev vore 'punde Skijy/ Aa neatt paa Havsens Oddar –/ Den som mine Fotspor ska fyge,/ Han maa inkje dansa paa Loddar.“

he and his travelling companions were invited. But other variants of *Draumkvedet* too, written down by other collectors, contain stanzas that break with the seriousness of the ballad. From Moe's comments we can see that he holds such stanzas to be heterogeneous and false; they „should of course be excluded“. He ascribes the singers of such stanzas no ability to distinguish between right and wrong, cf. the adverbial 'naïvely'. The same attitude, not untypical of the 'nation builders' of the 19th century, is expressed by the learned philologist and ballad scholar Sophus Bugge, in his characterization of one of the female *Draumkvede* singers (Anne Skaalen); she is „unreliable and not trustworthy, she may well have been making up something herself, here and there“.³

The 'voice of laughter' that is so clearly audible in the stanzas that Moe collected in 1847, is it a 'new voice' – that is, 'new' in the 18th and 19th centuries? Is that voice created by „unreliable“ singers like Anne Skaalen and the parish clerk Nils Sveinungsson? In the latter's version of *Draumkvedet* there are several stanzas with a distinctive comic and parodic character. Do such stanzas turn up in the ballad tradition simply because the tradition itself is waning, and the singers no longer take a serious text about an existential matter in earnest? Or have we, on the contrary, to do with a well established principle of composition in the Scandinavian ballad, with room also for a comic and parodic perspective?

One may probably answer both types of questions in the affirmative. The reason why an oral tradition sinks into oblivion, is first and foremost that the tradition bearers no longer see it as important, essential; it follows therefore that the tradition in question is no longer entitled to the same interest and respect as before. In the final stages, parody may arise as an expression of the following attitude: 'This is something which we do not take quite seriously any more'. On the other hand, we can see from ballad texts that are much older than Moe's version of *Draumkvedet* that they give plenty of room to parodic passages; and some texts may even be comic through and through.

There is in my opinion little reason to doubt that the voices of laughter in the Scandinavian ballad are quite as old as the voices of seriousness; but the former voices have often been suppressed when the ballad texts were written down. It looks like the transition from oral tradition to writing, implies not only a fixation but a narrowing down of the subject matter as well. Written genres seem to create expectations of what a ballad should look like. This is probably one aspect of the question of „Vokalität“. In oral tradition, the meaning is both in the text and in the context, whereas in a written genre, the meaning is only in the text.⁴

It is therefore much more problematic to apply terms of interpretation like 'the hermeneutic circle' and 'the intention of the text', in connection with oral literature

³ Quoted from Blom, Ådel Gjølstein (ed.): *Norske mellomalderballadar 1. Legendeviser*. Serie B: Skrifter LXVI. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1982, p. 127: „[Anne er] upaalidelig og ikke sanddru, hun kan vel have lavet noget hist og her paa egen Haand“.

⁴ Schaefer, Ursula: *Vokalität. Altenglische Dichtung zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit*. ScriptOralia 39. Tübingen: Narr Verlag 1992, pp. 57-58.

than with written literature. In order to make it probable that one has reached a valid interpretation of 'the intention of the text',

the only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole [...] any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.⁵

But what does „internal textual coherence“ imply? One can be fairly sure that a ballad singer being part of an oral tradition will have a different opinion of what is a valid or a correct internal coherence in a text, than a modern reader.

I will return to the voices of laughter in *Draumkvedet* and some other ballad texts, not only to situations or scenes where the voices of laughter are loud and clear, but also to situations where laughter seems to be only one possible reaction among others. But let me first say something about that ballad group which more than other ballads portray comic scenes: *the jocular ballads*. According to the survey in *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad*, the group of jocular ballads does not constitute too impressive a part of the ballad genre; 77 ballad types out of a total of about 840 types.⁶ However, evidently comic passages are to be found in ballads that are traditionally placed in other ballad groups, not least among the ballads of heroes and giants. Furthermore, there are also jocular elements in the substantial group of ballads of chivalry, for instance in *Ridderen i hjorteham* („The knight in stag's disguise“, TSB A43), the oldest version of which dates from about 1500 (in an originally Norwegian manuscript).

In my own dissertation about the Norwegian jocular ballads, *Den omsnudde verda* („The World Turned Upside Down“) (1993), I stressed the variety of the texts. There are, for instance both relatively realistic – and obviously fantastic – songs. Most ballads portray confrontations between two protagonists, very often one individual of each sex, whereas others deal with animals, birds, fantastic monsters – or single individuals. The formulas play an important role, as they do in other ballads. To a certain extent, the same epic and ornamental formulas are used in the jocular ballads, (for instance „so-and-so sat at his table“, „so-and-so came riding in the courtyard“, „so-and-so saddled his dappled grey steed“). But more specific are formulas that are exclusively applied in jocular ballads. Such formulas have the mark of quite coarse comic effects and what might be called *grotesque realism*, (for instance „so-and-so skinned a mare“, „so-and-so lifted his scruffy cowl“, „so-and-so ran the crow on the farm house's floor“). I have taken the term *grotesque realism* from Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Rabelais and the European history of laughter. The technique of grotesque realism is especially manifest in connection with the portrayal of the body and bodily functions, and unlike ballads of chivalry, the jocular ballads focus on the 'low' aspects of the body (stomach, bowels, sexual organs). The jocular ballads

⁵ Eco, Umberto: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992, p. 65.

⁶ Jonsson, Bengt R., Svale Solheim and Eva Danielson (eds.): *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad*. Oslo etc.: Universitetsforlaget 1978, p. 15.

systematically seek to degrade individuals and values which are normally placed in higher positions.

Speaking of *Draumkvedet*, it is no doubt the one Norwegian ballad that ballad scholars in general have been most interested in, and it is also well known among most people. There exist about 50 variants of the ballad, but many of them are quite fragmentary. The best texts are those that were sung by two women from Telemark, Maren Ramskeid and Anne Lillegaard. On the basis of their variants and in comparison with prose visions from the Middle Ages, such as *The Vision of Tundal*, *The Vision of Gottskalk* and *The Vision of Thurkill*, the ballad scholar Moltke Moe a hundred years ago (1899) put together his restored *Draumkvede* version of 52 stanzas. This version has been accepted by anthology editors as well as by most people, even if it is a literary version, „a poem by Moltke Moe“, to quote the poet Georg Johannesen. *Draumkvedet* tells the story of Olav Åsteson's dream vision of heaven, and especially of hell. In the shape of individuals, he sees the souls who have sinned being punished in the afterlife, „in the other home“. There they must be responsible for the sins they have done in this world. After having fallen asleep on Christmas Eve, Olav awakens on the thirteenth day of Christmas and immediately goes to church to tell his dramatic story to the congregation. In his ballad study *Om Draumkvædet och dess datering*, Bengt R. Jonsson has convincingly argued that *Draumkvedet* belongs to the oldest phase of the Scandinavian ballad history, that is to the decades around 1300.

Of course *Draumkvedet* is no jocular ballad. But as we have seen, the *Draumkvede* tradition contains several examples of parodic and comic stanzas. My point here is to argue that these stanzas are not necessarily signs of a degenerated tradition of the 19th century, but that they are in fact quite as old as the other stanzas, and that there ought to be room for them in our understanding of the ballad. It seems likely that there have always been singers like Nils Sveinungsson who juxtaposed and mixed the serious with the comic, as well as there have been singers like Maren Ramskeid. In her central version of *Draumkvedet*, she has included two linguistically incongruous stanzas in Danish, rather in the style of a psalm and with a religious subject matter; probably to strengthen the impact of religious seriousness, something which *she* must have felt was important. Olav Bø has argued that some of the stanzas in the *Draumkvede* tradition, among them the comic ones, are simply so-called „gamlestev“, single stanzas in the same metre as the four lined ballad stanza. But in practice, it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish between *stev* stanzas and ballad stanzas in a song like *Draumkvedet*, with its vague epic thread.

The scene in *Draumkvedet* where Olav Åsteson rides to church to tell his dream may be a point of departure for a discussion of the voice – or voices – of laughter in the ballad. The priest stands at the altar reading when Olav arrives, so he takes his stand in the church door:

Now you stand at the altar
 reading out your text,
 while I stand in the church door
 here I will tell my dream.⁷

In connection with Karl-Heinz Göttert's discussion of „Sprechgesang in Liturgie und Epenvortrag“, where he stresses that „jedes mittelalterliche *dicere* oder *sagen/sprechen* ist [...] zweideutig“,⁸ one might ask if we have to do with *talking/reading* or *singing* in the Draumkvede scene. A modern reader will no doubt associate expressions like *hold forth*, *read out*, *tell* with speech, but on the other hand, *Draumkvedet* has always been sung, as far as we know. Some of the Draumkvede variants even make use of more than one refrain, and thereby more than one melody; thus Maren Ramskeid's variant has three different refrains and accordingly three different melodies. By one and the same presentation, the singer will then make use of two or even three different melodies. After having sung the minstrel stanzas, the singer will change refrain and melody when he or she reaches the scene where Olav Åsteson tells his dream. The singer may also make use of another refrain and another melody at subsequent turning-points in the plot. It looks like the expression *tell (my dream)* is to be associated with *song*, maybe in opposition to the priest's *reading*. From certain jocular ballads we understand that it is quite useless for a priest to 'read the text' to somebody; an attempt will always result in comedy. *The evil wife* („Den vonde kjerringa“, TSB F33) tells the story of a young man who has had the bad luck to be married to an old hag. She both strikes, kicks and bites so that he cannot sleep at night. At last the young man goes to see the priest, hoping that his learning will make her change her ways, but all is in vain:

The priest took out his large book
 and sat down to read her the text,
 the evil woman took her crooked stick
 and hit the priest across his nose.⁹

The scene with Olav Åsteson and the priest has been interpreted as a confrontation between the two. Thus the folklorist Svale Solheim maintains that the priest and Olav Åsteson represent two diametrically opposed understandings of Christianity. The preaching of the priest is traditional, superficial and even essentially false; but representing the ecclesiastical hierarchy, his place is still at the altar. Olav's place in the church door is modest, but nevertheless it is his dream story, where he stresses

⁷ Blom (ed.), *Norske mellomalderballadar*, p. 116. Variant by Maren Ramskeid: „No stænde du før altraren/ å læg ut texten din/ så stænde æg i kyrkjedyinni/ fortællje vil æg dra[u]mæn min“ (verse 6).

⁸ Göttert, Karl-Heinz: *Geschichte der Stimme*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1998, p. 170.

⁹ http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/tekster_html/f/f030_001.html: „Presten tok si store (lille) bok,/ aa sette sei tel aa læsa,/ kjærringa tok sin krokete kjepp,/ slo presten over næsa.“ (verse 6). [The special URL is not directly accessible; start from <http://www.dokpro.uio.no> and follow the links into the ballad archive (Editor's note).]

the importance of social Christian values, that counts. One may object that the stanza in question is just an example of the characteristic technique of contrasting, so common in the ballad style, something we can see in the following stanza from the ballad *Jon Remarsson* (TSB D360):

Tonight we will drink our fill
if we can get the beer,
tomorrow we will sail the sea
if the wind will blow.¹⁰

Furthermore, in the Middle Ages the church door seems to have been a usual place for the priest to stand as well, at least when he had to inform the congregation of important matters. This can be seen in a pastoral letter written by the bishop of Oslo, Eystein Aslaksson (1395), in which he comments on certain fees that the priest is entitled to: „And if there is somebody who will not pay these [fees] to the priest [...] then the priest shall go and stand in the church door and give the said person a respite of three weeks to pay his debt“.¹¹

Still we may interpret the scene as a confrontation between Olav Åsteson and the priest, but in a somewhat different way. Some interesting Norwegian official documents from the Middle Ages show that there at times must have been a hard struggle about *the word* in church. In 1319, bishop Audfinn of Bergen, for some reason, dismissed the canon Grim Ormsson at the Apostle church in town. The canon would not put up with the dismissal voluntarily, and on All Saints Eve, just as the bishop had completed his sermon at High Mass, before he had taken off his sandals and before the other canons were able to start singing sext, Grim Ormsson stood up in front of the stairs leading up to the high altar, and read in a loud voice an appeal and a protest („jta quod ante horam qua decuit provocacionem suam importune legendo cum clamore valido inchoavit“). Grim Ormsson was punished for his behaviour, in fact he was excommunicated later on.¹²

There is documentation that bishop Audfinn of Bergen took an interesting initiative the year after as well. The bishop had then forbidden people to go on pilgrimages and thereby honour the woman who pretended to be princess Margaret, the daughter of king Eirik Magnusson (1280-1299). The woman in question who said that she came from Germany and was the king's daughter, was burned at the stake as a fraud, in 1301. In order to announce the ban, bishop Audfinn sent one of his priests, sira Arne, to read a letter of prohibition in all the churches in town. But in one of the churches it came to fighting between sira Arne and another priest, who tried to stop the reading and take the letter from him („lagðe hæimftughar hendr .a.

¹⁰ http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/tekster_d/d360_004.html: „I aften så ville vi drikke,/ úm mé kann øli få,/ imorgó so ville mé sigle,/ úm vinden den blæse må!“ (verse 8).

¹¹ *D[iplomatarium] N[orvegicum]* IX. Oslo: P. T. Mallings Forlagshandel 1878, pp. 188-189: „En æf nokor er þen er preste wil æi þettæ vtgera [...] þa maa prester ganga j kirkiudyr ok sætia honom þriar fimter til sinnar skyldu.“

¹² DN IV, p. 127.

sira Arna [...] ok villde með valde [...] taka av sira Arna þau samu bref“).¹³ Most probably the bishop was right not to acknowledge the woman, but still he was unable to prevent ordinary people from believing in her sainthood. A chapel was built in Bergen in her honour, and a ballad was composed that takes her side, the side of „the False Margaret“, as she was called. The Norwegian 16th century historian Absalon Pederssønn Beyer refers to the ballad, but in the Norwegian ballad tradition only a couple of stanzas are preserved. Luckily, copious Faeroese variants of the ballad are preserved.¹⁴

Both in *Draumkvedet* and in the two preserved documents we can observe that people have felt it was important to speak for themselves, to raise the voice and make themselves heard, especially in a place like church. The church room was not only an official arena; everything that was said in such a place borrowed power of God's own words. But even this power did not always suffice *outside* the church room. When somebody – probably in or around Bergen – composed a ballad about princess Margaret, not in the role of a fraud, but as an innocent victim of noblemen greedy for power, it was presumably a popular protest, and in any case an unofficial one.¹⁵ Even several hundred years after what happened, a marked voice of protest can be heard in *Margretu kvæði*, the ballad telling the story of „the False Margaret“ (*Frúgvín Margreta*, TSB C22). The relationship between political events in Norwegian history around 1300, documents from the time and a popular ballad – and the lasting impression of this relationship makes one think of Stephen Greenblatt's term *social energy*: „It is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape and organize collective physical and mental experiences“.¹⁶

Can the *Draumkvede* scene with Olav Åsteson and the priest standing in different places in church be interpreted as comic? In principle, the answer to this question must be yes, because „humour is an area, where a binary structure is necessary. Comedy is the result of contrasts meeting“.¹⁷ The Norwegian jocular ballads show this fully (old husband against young wife, old wife against young husband, rich farmer against poor cotter). Still, the contrasts in *Draumkvedet* and in the official documentary texts are different, because the subject matter is religious, and not least because the confrontations take place in church. It does seem quite likely that those who witnessed the church episodes in 1319 and 1320 felt alarmed and uneasy – but on the other hand they may as well have burst out in laughter when the two priests came to blows, and thereby fell through as spiritual leaders and role models of be-

¹³ DN VIII, p. 87.

¹⁴ *Føroya kvæði. Corpus Carminum Færoensium* III, A Sv. Grundtvig et J. Bloch comparatum. København: Ejnar Munksgaard 1945, pp. 189-197.

¹⁵ Solheim, Svale: *Historie og munnleg historisk visetradisjon*. In: *Norveg. Tidsskrift for Folkelivsgransking. Ny serie av Ord og Sæd* 16 (1973), pp. 96-115.

¹⁶ Greenblatt, Stephen: *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000, p. 6.

¹⁷ Lindhardt, Jan: *Tale og skrift. To kulturer*. København: Ejnar Munksgaard 1989, p. 38: „Humor er et felt, som i regelen forudsætter en binær struktur. Komik består i at modsætninger mødes“.

haviour. Maybe we can say that the confrontations in church have a comic potential, even if every listener or reader will not necessarily interpret them as funny.

Let us now return to Nils Sveinungsson and his version of *Draumkvedet*. In the stanzas below we can see that the contrast between Olav Åsteson and the priest is part of a comic situation, with criticism being raised against the parish clerk and the priest. The magnificent belt worn by the protagonist impresses the clerk and the priest to such an extent that they forget what they really should be doing. In other words, the servants of the church are no better than everybody else:

I walked into the church
as people fell on their knees,
when the parish clerk my belt did see
he forgot to pray to God.

The priest stood at the altar
with his learned tongue,
as he my belt did see
he forgot both to read and to sing.¹⁸

It should be mentioned that Nils Sveinungsson's version of *Draumkvedet* is composed by stanzas sung by several singers, and therefore is no 'personal' variant. The quoted stanzas do in fact belong to another ballad, a jocular ballad called *Mit belte* („My belt“, TSB F46).¹⁹ Still there is no doubt that several singers in the 19th century, must have felt that stanzas like these were not out of place in the otherwise serious *Draumkvedet*. The voice of laughter was not to be totally suppressed. Since no variants of *Draumkvedet* were recorded before the 19th century, it is impossible to settle the question whether or not comic stanzas in the *Draumkvede* tradition are just a 19th century phenomenon. But the fact that voices of laughter in ballads are much older than the 19th century, speaks in favour of comic stanzas being just as old as the ballad itself.

Before leaving *Draumkvedet*, I would like to point out another comic stanza in the *Draumkvede* tradition. It was sung by several singers (and is also to be found in Moltke Moe's restored version):

It is hot in hell,
hotter than anybody can think of,
there they put a kettle of tar to the boil
and stuffed into it a nasty priest.²⁰

¹⁸ Blom (ed.), *Norske mellomalderballadar*, p. 114: „Egh gjæk mæg i kyrkja eend som fokje på knæ monne falle/ som Klockaren på mit belte såg/ han gløymte på Gut å kalle. // Præsten som framfø altare sto/ alt mæ see lærde tonge/ ret som han mit belte såg/ han gløymde både læsa å sjonge“ (verses 10 and 11).

¹⁹ Landstad, Magnus B.: *Norske Folkeviser*. Norsk folkeminnelag. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1968, pp. 647-649.

²⁰ Liestøl, Knut, and Moltke Moe (eds.): *Norsk Folkedikting. Folkeviser I*. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget 1958, p. 32: „Der er heitt i helvite,/ heitar hell nokon hyggje;/ der hengde dei 'pivi ein tjørkjetil/ og brytja ned-i ein presterygg' e“ (verse 45).

As we can see, the stanza gives vent to aggression and satire, turned against priesthood. Thematically, the stanza's content should be viewed in connection with the widespread medieval criticism of priests, who were supposed to be wolves in sheep's clothes. First and foremost they were thought to be fond of the female sex and supposedly let no opportunity pass to seduce unsuspecting women, married or not. The Danish jocular ballad *Munken i Vaande* („The monk in distress“, TSB F41) deals with this subject matter. In his role as a confessor, the monk (probably a mendicant) tries to seduce a farmer's wife, but she and her husband cooperate to drink the monk under the table and beat him up. Finally he manages to escape:

The monk jumped out of the window
and over the deep ditches,
never did I see a poorer monk
have a worse night than he.²¹

The priests also had the reputation of being greedy both of money and of power, something to which songs, tales, legends and other traditional genres do testify – „the priest's sack will never get full“, as the saying goes. On such a background, the priest evidently deserved to be punished in the same way as the sinners he himself doomed to hell.

I will now turn to the jocular ballads, but still concentrate on what may be called *religious laughter*, especially in connection with the confession – one of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. After having confessed, each individual sinner was supposed to be given peace of mind and soul, but the jocular ballads do in fact challenge the whole system. Many jocular ballads portray the individual as a prisoner in the bureaucratic and suppressing grip of the church. One of the Norwegian jocular ballads that focuses on the confession, is called *Kjerringa til skrifte* („The wife at confession“, TSB F73). The point is that the protagonist has killed her husband (or a sailor, or a nobleman); in other words she has committed a deadly sin. She feels of course an urgent need to confess and atone for her sin, but it turns out that this is not so simple – nobody will take the responsibility of relieving her of her sin and punish her. First she turns to the parish clerk, but he sends her to the priest, who sends her to the bishop, who sends her to the pope, God's own representative and St Peter's successor on earth. One should think that the matter could be settled then, but that is not the case:

O dearest pope, will you hear my confession,
'cause I have beaten a sailor to death.

O no, I cannot punish you,
'cause Satan he is over me.

The wife she saddled her grey sow,

²¹ Gr  ner Nielsen, H. (ed.): *Danske Sk  mteviser efter Visehaandskrifter fra 16.-18. Aarh. og Flyveblade*. K  benhavn: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri 1927-1928, p. 160: „Muncken vd aff vinduet sprang/ offuer de dybe graff;/ aldri saae ieg en vsler munck,/ en v  re nat monne haffue“ (verse 8).

then she rode to Satan's place.

O dearest Satan, will you hear my confession,
'cause I have beaten a sailor to death.

And Satan he roasted the wife on a spit,
so that she lost seven pounds of fat.

The wife she saddled her grey sow,
then she rode home to her own place.²²

According to Bakhtin, medieval laughter is an expression of a new and free historical consciousness of that epoch.²³ Furthermore, Bakhtin maintains that laughter made it possible to conquer medieval man's fear of the devil, and transform the devil into a comic figure. But the question is if laughter was not something more ambivalent, to quote Aron Gurevich:

It is doubtful whether laughter can conquer fear of the devil [...] but medieval consciousness [...] also found [in the forces of evil] another side: it saw them as humorous, pitiful and even good-natured fools, humiliated by saints and angels. The frightful not only repelled; it also greedily attracted.²⁴

Especially tales and legends portray the stupid and comic devil, but in *The wife at confession*, Satan does not seem to play any directly comic role. Rather we have an example of carnevalistic, inverted comedy, in the sense that the world is turned upside down. The pope is perhaps still lord of Christendom, but he must bow to the lord of Darkness.

The difference between a jocular ballad like *The wife at confession* and *Draumkvedet* is evident. In a jocular ballad, there are more linguistic signs to point out that the dominating voice is that of laughter, and the signals of comedy are much stronger than in an ordinary ballad. Also the linguistic signs stressing that we are dealing with comedy are more varied. Even quite linguistically neutral words may in such a context create expectations of laughter, and all doubt may safely be set aside after having read the opening stanza:

The wife she saddled her grey sow
she said: turi uri ullan dei,
then she rode to the priest's place

²² http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/tekster_html/f/f073_003.html: „Å kjære du pave du straffe me vel/ før e ha trølla ein sjømann i hæl. // Å nei e kann kje straffe de e/ for fan'en han e no over me. // Å kjeringa sette se på gossin grå/ rei ho se te fan'ens gål. // Å kjære du fan du straffe me vel/ før e ha trølla ein sjømann i hæl. // Å fan'en han to' kjeringa å sett'o på spett/ so steikte'n utu'n sju punn feitt. // Å kjeringa ho sette se på gossin grå/ rei ho heim te sin eien gål“ (verses 8-13).

²³ Bakhtin, Mikael: *Rabelais och skrattens historia*. Uddevalla: Bokförlaget Anthropos 1986, p. 81.

²⁴ Gurevich, Aron: *Medieval Popular Culture. Problems of Belief and Superstition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, p. 193.

sam turi uri ullan dei.²⁵

The standard formula which is used in so many ballads of chivalry, stating that a person of standing is saddling his or her dappled grey steed, is here changed, but still recognizable. The effect is of course parodic, the 'low' sow, an animal usually associated with mud and dirt, is elevated to the status of a riding horse. Finally, the refrain of nonsense indicates clearly that we are dealing with a jocular ballad. When the wife is punished by Satan, she is 'degraded' to a piece of meat, and consequently 'roasted on a spit' so that she loses seven pounds of fat. The punishment seems to be thematically related to the *Draumkvede* stanza about the priest who is boiled in a kettle of tar, and even so to medieval ideas of hell as a place of punishment, where people are forever burned in sulphur and fire. Usually hell is a place of no return, but the wife rises above this fact. In fact she attains her goal, and in spite of degradation she is not only portrayed as a comic figure. It is also possible to see in her a popular hero who never gives in, and who finally beats the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In *The wife at confession* the voice of laughter seems to be ambivalent in the way that the protagonist is both a foolish jester and a popular hero.

As already mentioned, in most jocular ballads we find two protagonists or two chief groups of individuals who are opponents in a struggle or in a verbal dispute, cf. the Old Norse *senna* in several Eddaic poems. At the core of the struggle may be a competition which implies knowledge (the posing of riddles, for instance) or other forms of resourcefulness, but there is also a lot of physical fighting going on. Seemingly, jocular ballads are in line with the general mental approach to fighting that is stressed by Walter J. Ong in his discussion of the psychodynamics of orality.²⁶ In jocular ballads both fighting and violence in general have a comic function, and it is always the losing party that is ridiculed. The losing party does not manage to keep pace with the winner's vitality, either physically or mentally, and often seems to freeze in a locked position. In his study of laughter Henri Bergson comments on this phenomenon: „The position of the body, the gestures and the movements of people are comic in just the same degree as the body makes us think of something purely mechanical“.²⁷

This is illustrated in a jocular ballad called *Reven og bonden* („The fox and the farmer“, TSB F64) which I will comment on briefly. As in *The wife at confession*, a sort of confession is also at the core of this text, but the title shows that of the two protagonists only one is a human being. The other one is a fox; he appears in the familiar role as trickster or clever hero, the way he is portrayed in *Le roman de*

²⁵ http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/tekster_html/f/f073_003.html: „Å kjeringa ho sette se på gossin grå/ – Sa' o turi uri ullan dei –/ rei ho se te prestens gål. / – Sam turi uri ullan dei –“ (verse 1).

²⁶ Ong, Walter J.: *Muntlig och skriftlig kultur. Teknologiseringen av ordet*. Göteborg: Bokförlaget Anthropos 1990, pp. 57-59.

²⁷ Bergson, Henri: *Låtten. Ein etterrøknad um meiningi i det komiske*. Transl. of *Le Rire* by Ola Raknes. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget 1922, p. 22: „Kroppsburden, faktone og rørlene åt menneskja er lättelege i plent same munn som kroppen fær oss til å tenkja på eitkvart reint mekanisk“.

Renard, in fables and tales. The ballad tells the story of a farmer called Niels Fiskar, who has to go to a feast, and he hires the fox to look after his geese when he is away. As anybody would expect, the fox eats all the geese – but surprisingly he admits what he has done when the farmer returns. Then the farmer changes position and acts both as judge and executioner:

O have you now eaten all my geese,
you will not make your escape alive.

As a final wish, the fox asks to be allowed to give away presents to save his soul from punishment in purgatory:

Your lady I will give my teeth
she has such trouble chewing bread.

Your children I will give my skull,
they do so often fall to the ground.

To yourself I will give my skin,
I don't think you will shoot me this evening.

And to the priest I will give my tail,
he has so much to tell his flock.²⁸

Of course the fox comes out on top; he talks and talks to make the farmer forget what is going on, and then he escapes. The farmer seems to freeze mentally speaking, his mind is not quick enough to follow the fox's tricks. But of course neither the farmer nor his family are among the cunning ones. The farmer's wife, ironically called 'lady', is so old and worn that she cannot chew bread; old age is often portrayed as something comic in jocular ballads. The children probably get so little care and food that they are tottering on their legs all the time, and often fall to the ground. And the farmer himself is such a bad shot that he will miss a captured fox.

In connection with the priest and what he tells his flock, his sermon seems to be about as much worth as the fox's tail, in other words an effective degradation of a servant of the church and his office. His sermon, words that should be inspired by the Holy Ghost, are associated with quite different, 'low' parts of the body. A degradation of the confession seems to be the main theme of the ballad; instead of focusing on spiritual matters, the text concentrates all energy on body and substance (teeth, skull, skin, tail). We may interpret the struggle between the farmer and the fox as an allegory, where the important thing is the parallel between the fox and the priest, both doing their best to seduce simple souls.

One might say that the voices of laughter in *Draumkvedet* constitute a kind of subtext in an otherwise serious ballad. In my opinion, the voices are clear enough to

²⁸ http://www.dokpro.uio.no/ballader/tekster_html/f/f064_002.html: „Aa hev du naa ete upp Jæsan fe meg/ so sko du kje sleppe livans ifraa meg./ Din Hustru so giæv eg mine Tænnar/ ho lie so vont fe de broue Atyje./ Dine Børn giver ieg min Skalle/ di lyte so ofte i Golve falle./ Niels Fiskar so giev eg min Feld/ eg trur kje han skivte den Reven i Gvæl./ Aa Presten giæv eg min Hale/ han mone so mykid for Almugen tale“ (verses 7, 9-12).

be heard, but their strength and direction are not of the same kind. The tone is partly critical and satirical as in the stanza about the priest who is boiled in a kettle of tar, in other stanzas the tone seems to be more good-humoured and parodic. The jocular ballads on the other hand, do cultivate laughter so to speak; it is expressed in the struggle between two protagonists, portrayed in dramatic scenes. But both in *Draumkvedet* and in jocular ballads, it is evident that the voices of laughter are meant to be something more than just entertainment; it is not just 'joking for joking's own sake' – but an alternative form of expression, central to ballad poets and their audience.

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