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American Folktale as the Guardian of the Folk: Black Bartelmy a Local Legend

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Abstract:

Folk literature serves a variety of purposes within a culture, including education, conveying ethics and values, providing a safe space for emotional expression, and preserving folk history. The term “folktale” refers to prose narratives, and within the context of American folk literature, the “prose narrative” division (comprising legends, myths, and folktales) is well-established. The versatility and richness of American folk culture have contributed to the growth of this form. “Local legends” are a specific type of folktale associated with a particular place, and their circulation is typically limited to specific regions. However, it is common to find similar tales about other places. Local legends may serve various purposes, such as explaining natural phenomena or supporting folk beliefs.

One such local legend is the tale of Black Bartelmy, a villainous pirate whose story is told in the area around Cape Forchu in Nova Scotia, North America. While local legends often feature romantic couples, war heroes, martyrs, or mythical characters, this tale is unique in its depiction of a cruel, deceitful, murderous villain. This paper examines the details of the tale, its intended audience, and the reasons for associating such a character with a particular place.

Introduction:

The American continent is home to a diverse array of folk populations, including different colonizers and early settlers, African Americans, and Native Americans. These groups have coexisted in many parts of the continent, resulting in a rich cultural exchange. As a consequence, the term ‘American Folklore’ encompasses three major divisions: the first comprises the original or root folklore of any given folk group; the second encompasses elements adapted from other groups; and the third includes emergent folklore that has developed over time and spread across cultures through geographical and regional references.

American folklore can be further classified into two major categories based on content. The first category includes folklore related to dances, attire, rituals, medicine and healing practices, ornaments, and tattoos, among other things. The second category encompasses folk literature, including folk songs, rhymes, lullabies, riddles, jokes, folktales, myth tales, and legends. The term ‘Prose Narrative’ was first used by William Boggs in 1949 to refer to three major types of narratives in the prose form; folktales, legend tales, and myth tales. Bascom elaborated on the term as –



“Prose narrative, I propose, is an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art which includes myths, legends and folktales. These three forms are related to each other in that they are narratives in prose, and in this fact distinguish them from proverbs, riddles, ballads, poems, tongue twisters and other forms of verbal art based on strictly formal characteristics.” (The Form 3)

‘Local Legend’ as a sub-type:

Local legends’ is a subcategory within the larger genre of legend tales. According to Leach, “A local Legend is a story that has grown up around some special place to explain some unusual but natural phenomenon...” (Leach 12). Folklorists studying American folklore as a discipline have collected a significant number of local legend tales. One of the reasons for the proliferation of this specific type of tale is the diversity of the continent in terms of its atmosphere, landscape, and altitude. The country encompasses a wide range of geographical features, including deserts, lakes, mountains, forests, rivers, and beaches. As a result, there were ample opportunities for folk to encounter ‘unusual natural phenomena’ and to associate narratives with them as explanations.

The local legend of ‘Spuyten Duyvil’, a Dutch name given to a location near the northern tip of Manhattan Island by the Dutch colony, is associated with a tidewater creek and depicts its ferocious and dangerous nature. The legend tells of ‘Anthony Van Corlaer’, a trumpeter who perished in the creek while performing his duty. Another local legend, ‘Wokun’, originates from the Nova Scotia region of South America and belongs to the Micmac Indians living near the Clyde River. This legend narrates the tale of a rock shaped like a Wokun (a sharp, small-sized knife used by the tribe for hunting and close combat) located within the river’s creek.

Yankee tales, which are popular in a specific region, are also considered local legends. These tales, which feature a person from New England known as a Yankee, are narrated to support the stereotype of New Englanders being smart and cunning tricksters capable of fooling anyone. Such narratives exemplify the basic nature and motive of a ‘local legend’ tale.



Black Bartelmy

The tale that is the primary focus of this research is that of Black Bartelmy. The version of the tale used in this research is published in 'The Rainbow Book of American Folktales and Legends' by Maria Leach. This book aims to showcase the diversity of American prose narratives in terms of their different types. The legend of Black Bartelmy is associated with Cape Forchu on the southwest coast of Nova Scotia in North America. Leach describes the location as follows:

“Cape Forchu is a bleak, treeless, jagged spit of black rocks, originally named Fourchu by the French explorer Champlain for its forked shape. Today there is a lighthouse on it, but 300 years ago it was populated only by gull and gannet. Three miles south of Cape Forchu, where the Atlantic and the Bay of Fundy so treacherously merge, lies a dangerous ledge of rocks, called the Roaring Bull from the sound of its churning waters...” (Leach 268)

This information is crucial for individuals who are not familiar with the location in question. Such details are typically not included in the actual retelling of the narrative, as the intended audience of the tale is primarily the local population of the area. Black Bartelmy is a pirate character with a cruel backstory, including the murder of his wife and children. The tale recounts his encounter with the shore of Cape Forchu while sailing near the location with five hundred treasure chests on board his ship. Faced with a tide, he and his crew took refuge in a cave along with all of their treasure chests. Bartelmy ordered his most loyal crew member, Ben the Hook, to kill the rest of the crew. After they had hidden the chests in the cave, Bartelmy killed Ben himself. He ultimately met his demise in the quicksand near the lighthouse of Cape Forchu.

The tale always concludes with a note about the lighthouse keeper seeing a flicker of light and venturing out to investigate, only to discover the ghost of Black Bartelmy in the quicksand. There are two other widely available versions of this tale on the internet: 'The Legend of Captain Black Bartelmy' retold by Ronald Wolf and 'Black Bartelmy' retold by S. E. Schlosser. Leach's version, as she mentions in her Author's Note:

“This story is based on two anonymous ballads, "The Ballad of the Cape" and "The Ghost on the Roaring Bull," printed and sold in folder form in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, as a souvenir of Cape Forchu.” (Leach 310)



The Ballad's primary function is to distribute news and narratives throughout society. The account of the Lifeboat crew's untimely demise during a rescue operation may have become intertwined with the tale of Black Bartelmy. This addition would have added a tragic dimension to the latter's story. The narrative in question can be bifurcated into two distinct sections. The first section recounts the events leading up to and including the death of Black Bartelmy. The second section describes the location where the incident occurred, which is purportedly haunted by the ghost of the pirate. It is said that the ghost of Black Bartelmy kills anyone who ventures too close to him.

The tale of Black Bartelmy cannot be classified as a conventional 'Scary-Story' or 'Scream'. These types of stories differ from the tale of Black Bartelmy in terms of their intended audience, the time and occasion of storytelling, and most importantly, the motive behind the storytelling. Scary stories are typically told to frighten listeners during events such as sleepovers, night-outs, outdoor camping, and road trips. In contrast, the tale of Black Bartelmy is narrated convincingly to make the audience believe in the story and warn them about the dangers of the location. This tale goes beyond conventional scary stories by instilling fear in the audience and then using that fear to protect them from potential dangers associated with the location.

This particular tale employs the stereotypical image of pirates. While the affirmation of this stereotype can be viewed as a byproduct of the narrative, it does not serve as the central motive of the tale, as is the case with tales such as 'Yankee' or 'Chestnut'. The primary motive behind the circulation of this local legend among the residents of Cape Forchu is to warn them about the dangers of the Roaring Bull and the three-mile-long shore with quicksand. This motive is more closely aligned with the sub-type of 'haunted houses', where tales are told to dissuade individuals, particularly teenagers who may be tempted to explore such locations, from venturing too close to danger. Rather than warning residents about the natural dangers of the Roaring Bull, a supernatural element was incorporated into the tale. The clever choice of an evil pirate character who shows no mercy, even to his crew, leaves no possibility of escape for those who encounter him. The version of the tale published by Leach also includes details about winter storms, which can be interpreted as indirect advice to sailors in the area to avoid sailing near the Roaring Bull during such conditions. Leach narrates-

“Sometimes in bitter winter storm, just at sunset, the keeper of the light will see a flare go up in the direction of the Roaring Bull. This usually happens just as he is feeling his way, hand over hand, along the guideline from his warm house to the tall lighthouse which stands with its feet in foaming



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surf. The tide has always just turned, and the Roaring Bull is just visible, its breakers foaming white on the black water...” (Leach271)

The atmosphere depicted in this narrative is consistent with the gothic elements present in the tale. The use of terror is prominent, and the elements of mystery and uncertainty, as well as the characters, are consistent throughout the story. This terror adds a unique charm to the narrative. As Redcliffe suggests, terror is an essential component of gothic literature.

“Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them...” (50)

The terror and charm present in this tale serve to keep the narrative in circulation and maintain its warning motive. It is a common human trait to fear the unknown, and this fear dissipates as soon as the situation or thing becomes familiar. The ending lines of the tale help to retain the mystery and uncertainty, ensuring that the terror and fear associated with the place remain intact for an extended period.

“At this point high thunderous breakers toss the small boat broadside to the seas; it fills and flounders and every man is drowned. This used to happen periodically off Cape Forchu, they do say, and no one knows when it will happen again.” (Leach 171)

Black Bartelmy is a notorious pirate character from American folklore, known for his cruelty and the many lives he took during his lifetime. Despite his reputation as a ruthless killer, the ghost of Black Bartelmy is said to protect the residents of Cape Forchu by instilling fear in them and preventing them from venturing into the sea during inclement weather. In this manner, the ghastly local legend of Black Bartelmy serves as a guardian to the local population, saving many innocent lives through the fear he inspires.



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