

FOLK BELIEF OR ANECDOTE?

ON THE GENRE LOGIC OF *REHEPAPP* BY ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK IN THE CONTEXT OF FOLKLORE GENRES

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Andrus Kivirähk is no doubt the most prolific and valued Estonian author of the 1990s. His breakthrough came with the humour section in a morning newspaper and with his later *Memoirs of Ivan Orav* (*Ivan Orava mälestused*), where the author humorously speaks through the mouth of Ivan Orav, fictitious smith and Estonian nationalist, discussing the pre- and post-war history of World War II in Estonia, and using and mocking popular stereotypes and attitudes towards Estonia's brief period of independence between the two world wars. (Kivirähk 1995). Kivirähk has later published also children's books, plays that have been readily staged and attracted wide popularity, novels, and short stories, bordering on absurdity – in many he has used motifs of folklore and mythology. He is currently the editor of the weekly humour section at a major Estonian daily newspaper.

Kivirähk's novel *Rehepapp ehk November* (*Old Barny, or November*) provides an account of the chronicles of a nameless village throughout the month of November (Kivirähk 2000; henceforth referred to by date and page). The author does not directly point out when the course of events takes place, but the Estonian reader will easily recognize the familiar period of domination by the Baltic German gentry described in the 20th century Estonian Realist literature and 19th century folklore. The novel makes use of – or could be said to be composed of – folktale plots and motifs as well as other genres of folklore. The novel relates to the Estonian literary canon in a fairly grotesque way. *Rehepapp* has been translated into Finnish (Kivirähk 2002), and translations into English and Hungarian will be published shortly.

The reception of *Rehepapp* was very heated: the novel became a best-seller and received many reviews and commentaries in the

press, which, in turn, were also often commented on. Kivirähk was instantly hailed as a new classic among Estonian writers and quotations and expressions from the book entered everyday speech as popular catchwords. The book's protagonist almost became a national hero, and the comments and critique soon ceased to approach the subject from the literary aspect, taking up a more ethno-moralistic discourse. The book's characters were later used in television commercials promoting participation in the voting for the European Union. The actors of the commercials were the same who performed respective roles in the play *Rehepapp*, staged after the book; and so, Aarne Üksküla, the actor cast as Old Barny in the play, has become the face of the character in the Estonian culture.

One of the outcomes of this ethno-moralistic discourse was the birth of the concept '*rehepaplus*' ("old-barnyism"), which in the press acquired the meaning of "*constantly thinking of the easiest way to appropriate something to his own use*". Some critics approached the subject from the self-critical point of view and declared that this sort of conduct has helped the Estonians to survive our troublesome past. Others saw it as a national disaster: as a quality that must be rooted out, as something we must be ashamed of. During the European parliamentary election debate, for example, the foreman of the Estonian liberal party was asked: "Will the European Union be for the Estonians what the Germans' estate was for the Old Barny?" The reply, of course, was negative.

At first it may appear tricky to distinguish between the text of *Rehepapp* and texts reflecting folk beliefs, or between the reality of *Rehepapp* and the reality of folk religion. The world of the book swarms with ghosts, treasure-bearers, or *kratts*, and werewolves, much like in *The Worldview of Estonian Folk Religion* by Oskar Loorits (1948). Kalev Kesküla has considered the novel ethnorealist (Kesküla 2001), Melika Kindel and Kadri Tüür have entitled their review "An illustrated course of folk religion" (Kindel & Tüür 2001), Jaakko Hallas has spoken about the handbook of Estonian magic. Be as it may, Kivirähk seems to have deceived them all – he is telling a humorous story, but is so convincing that makes the listeners go along with it. The best story-tellers have always been good at it.

Texts that shape and transmit folk belief tend to have tragic undertones. Legend, as a genre, describes man's contact with supernatural forces, whereas human beings are usually defeated by supernatural powers confronting them. Although the world of *Rehepapp* appears to rely on legend texts, the occurrence of supernatural motifs is the principal feature resembling legends. The book's characters appear to originate in humorous or folk narratives and the solution of tales resembles that of popular humour. The story how one of the central characters, Muna Ott (lit. 'Ott of Egg') takes up



Photo 1. Estonian writer Andrus Kivirähk, author of the popular novel *Rehepapp ehk November* [*The Old Barny, or November*]. From an Internet source (www.absurdia.fi/andrus_kuva1.htm).

service in hell, is virtually a transcript of a humorous fairy tale (November 5, pp. 32–34).¹ In its poetics and narrative strategies the reality created by Kivirähk is more a humorous and fairy-tale-like² one, rather than a legend-like reality of folk religion.

The Old Nick and other boogies get slackly bashed in the sc. Stupid Ogre tales just like they do in *Rehepapp*. The Stupid Ogre tales usually contain one or two episodes, but can also be narrated in cycles of tens of episodes, or as many episodes as the narrator happens to remember.³ The cycle follows its inner narrative logic, though this is not particularly important, because the stupid Old Nick is still wronged. In this sense, animal tales are analogous to the tales

of the Stupid Ogre – the clever triumph over the stupid and the tales are also narrated in cycles. *Rehepapp* resembles more a western literary novel in that there are several story lines, i.e. too many to remember while narrating a tale cycle.

The parallel with the Stupid Ogre tales is important also because the genre classification of these tales borders on legend, fairy tale and anecdote. Such tales cannot be taken very seriously, though the tales are often, unlike other folktales and entertaining stories, connected to specific locations or popular beliefs, e.g. the devil's fear for wolves or thunder is often essential to the plot of the cycle (see Aarne & Thompson, types AT 1150, AT 1148).

Similarities with legend come from that the story consists of more or less loosely stringed episodes built on each other. Story lines do exist, but the episodes fail to tie the story together: in the reader's mind, the novel is split into single incidents, where the situation logic is more important than the novel's structure, no matter how well considered.

In the Kivirähk's text the issue of credibility is inconsequential. Unlike fairy tales, which are fictitious, legends are believed, or to be more precise, they are believable, they **might** be believed. It is more important to discuss the tales after they have been told, than to believe the tales. In *Rehepapp*, however, all legend motifs form a coherent objective reality, which prompts no discussion. It is rather the tales told by the Snowman, which make Old Barny contemplate. In the book some things appear upside down – in oral communication, fairy tales are told and listened for pleasure, not for obtaining new information, whereas legends are told spontaneously for sharing new information.

The character telling these fairy-tale-like stories, the Snowman, is a treasure-bearer, but unlike ordinary treasure-bearers, which are usually made of old household implements (rusty pails, old brooms, beehives, etc.), it is made of snow. The Snowman's master is Hans, the romantic taskmaster, who hoped that the Snowman will bring him the baron's daughter, whom Hans had fallen hopelessly in love with. Obviously, Hans thought snow to be the only material noble enough for such a purpose. When the snow treasure-bearer was ready, Hans was revealed that, firstly, treasure-bearers can-

not transport people at all, and secondly, the Snowman could not stay indoors because of the material it was made of. The Snowman could only tell stories – and all its tales were fairy-tale-like, romantic, ended unhappily, with a style and tone reminding Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales. In creating the Snowman, Kivirähk appears to have been inspired from the tale type AT 703*, where an old man and his wife mould a child out of snow; the child comes to life, but later melts. Eventually, the Snowman melts as well.

Rehepapp does not present specific locations or topography, which, again, makes it resemble more a fairy tale. There is the village, the woods and the river (and a neighbouring village across the river), there is the sea, and the island of Saaremaa,⁴ and a witch living somewhere outside the village (who is more a witch of folk religion rather than a fairy tale witch). Then there is the church, the graveyard and the manorial estate, and that is it. The readers are not told how the places are related geographically (they are linked by paths, which may be impenetrable and miry, but do not cross), the locations are not positioned relative to each other, but are just points, as if there is no landscape as such. The story therefore lacks the local, ecotypified dimension – it does not have physical basis, which is one of the main characteristics of a legend and a pillar of folk belief. There is, however, a fair number of allusions to the environment: nearly each chapter discusses the bad weather outside and describes the various degrees of nastiness of November weather.

If we look at the text more closely, it becomes evident that the book is guided by at least three different discourses, conditioned by different folklore genres.

The **first** and the most conspicuous of the discourses is the commonplace unmarked reality of the plot, inhabited and expressed by Old Barny, Muna Ott, the witch and other more reasonable characters, whose discourse coincides with that of the narrator. Let us tentatively call it *the Old Barny discourse*. As already mentioned, ogres, ghosts, treasure-bearers and other supernatural beings from almost forgotten beliefs and obsolete legends have been assimilated into the narrative logic and story-telling poetics mostly modelled on popular entertaining genres. The guiding principle of this dis-

course dictates the behaviour of supernatural beings and dafter characters (farmhand Jaan, for instance).

This reality includes some miraculous elements, which have nothing to do with folk religion: Old Barny has a whistle carved of the jaw of the wolf king, which can be used to summon all the wolves in the forest (November 29, p. 194). A similar object is Räägu Rein's magic pouch (November 29, p. 191).⁵ Episodes that follow legend logic remain at the borders of this discourse, e.g.:

(a) Koera Kaarel fails to trick a disease spirit by hiding himself (November 8, pp. 50–53); Old Barny tells a story how his uncle's wife went missing in the woods, because one must not answer anyone's call in the woods (for fear it is a disease calling for a credulous victim);

(b) plague episodes (the plague crosses the water with the unintended aid of a travelling merchant, it is tricked and eventually conquered; November 15–16, pp. 96–108), because the plague was the only thing that was really feared among the villagers of *Rehepapp*;

(c) Räägu Rein kills the taskmaster (November 6, pp. 38–40) and the witch, who had assumed the shape of a pile of dung (November 25, p. 164);

(d) taskmaster Hans pays for the treasure-bringer's soul with his own soul and is killed by Old Nick (November 27, p. 178).

The first two cases reveal that it is much more difficult to fight mythological diseases than it is to fight spirits or the Old Nick. Old Barny's treasure-bearer Joosep says that the Old Nick, who can be fooled easily, does not command diseases. In the third case the legend poetics does not contradict the comic tale poetics⁶ – the smarter character has the upper hand.

In the last case the beginning of the story line is fairy-tale-like, and only the conclusion resembles the legend genre. The Old Nick's victim is a simpleton, who has heard too many fairy tales and believes them; so he has begun thinking within a different discourse. Let us call this **second** discourse *the romantic*, or *Snowman's discourse*. This discourse is constructed of fairy tales and novellae, tales of chivalry, etc. These tales belong to fictional genres (i.e. sto-

ries that do not raise the issue of credibility). Old Barny thinks these tales are silly:

“In fairy tales people do not throw out their hard earned possessions [---] Fairy tales are for telling how the Fox played a trick on the Wolf, or how the Fox stole milk from an old lady. A fairy tale must be edifying, this is why children are told fairy tales.” (November 18, p. 120; two days later, Old Barny claims he does not see the point in the dragon-slaying tale (AT 300), pp. 130–131).

Several folklorists (Heda Jason and Arvo Krikmann, to name only two) have noted that the genres liked by Old Barny and those he himself appears in (anecdotes, animal tales, tales of the Stupid Ogre) differ from fairy tales. In fairy tales the conflicts are between good (e.g. knight, prince, farmer) and evil (e.g. dragon, fairy tale witch, any other monster): the narrator and the audience have sympathy towards the good, who is expected to triumph over the evil. In the conflicts of anecdotes and animal tales, the cleverer character wins. Herein lies the key to the taskmaster’s “mistake”: he became *good*, had lost his *cleverness* to escape from the Devil. When taskmaster Hans suddenly lapses from the second discourse back to the first, the more cunning Old Nick comes and takes his soul and life.

Next to the previously described two discourses, there is also a **third** one, *the upstart-nationalistic discourse*. The upstart estate valet Ints aspires to be like the Germans,⁷ but wistfully speaks of Lembitu, the “Great King” of the Estonians (November 12, p. 76) and Kalevipoeg, the “God” (November 26, p. 172–173). His actions may be interpreted as nationalistic myth creation – he speaks of the ancient time of freedom, when everything was good and nice, and of the injustice that brought this golden era to an end, thus justifying the Estonian villagers’ ongoing thievery from the German manor gentry (mythic time >< historic time).

These discourses within *Rehepapp* are relatively independent from each other – reality is presented very pragmatically (*Old Barny’s discourse*), and the alternatives are two fictitious discourses. The most conspicuous difference between these two alternative realities is that one (*the upstart-nationalistic-romantic discourse*) blends well with the Old Barny’s discourse, while the other one (*the Snow-*



Photo 2. Estonian writer Andrus Kivirähk in an alfresco café in Tallinn. From an Internet source (www.absurdia.fi/landrus_kuva2.htm).

man's discourse) does not. The reason is that the gigantic hero Kalevipoeg⁸ is a known figure among all villagers, as it seems, and the nationalistic discourse proceeds from a periphery of the group of villagers (still from inside the group, though), and has had time to settle. The Snowman's discourse comes from the outside, is shaped during the course of the story told by the author and causes a conflict, being qualitatively new. The clash between the Snowman's discourse and Old Barny's discourse is best seen in Old Barny's conversation with his treasure-bearer (November 27, p. 182). The passage opens with a legend-like introduction into the book's worldview, where Old Barny names and counts his demonic adversaries and explains the importance of cunningness:

"We have nothing to pay for things," the Old Barny replied. "All we have is what we have scooped together. And then we have this

life, which hangs by a spider's thread as it is. The woods swarm with ghosts and wolves, diseases lurk in the bushes, the plague may catch us any minute, and the baron makes his own demands. Our life is stolen, too, and every day we must play tricks to get it back, in order to survive the next day. If we were to pay for all of it, honestly, what would become of us? We wouldn't be here, and you, Joosep, wouldn't be here either, because nobody would bother to bargain the Old Nick for a soul for old brooms and sauna whisks."

In the middle of the passage, the discourse is shifted, which comes as a surprise even to the treasure-bearer:

"They would rather steer a boat along the river, illuminated with torches, they would play tunes and sing to their ladies, and in the meantime they would fight in battles, gallop on horses and die as heroes, and people would sing songs about them and their faces would be carved in stone."

The difference between Old Barny's discourse and the two alternative discourses is that the former is considerably more versatile than its alternatives, which are more homogeneous. The simplest and the most homogeneous discourse is *the upstart-nationalistic* mythic discourse, which includes tales of the noble past of the Estonians. The Snowman's discourse is a little more complicated. It consists of different fictional genres, but the plot, which forms in the clash with Old Barny's discourse, is given a legend-like ending. In the Old Barny discourse, things are usually presented vice versa – everything legend-like is conclude as an anecdote or a fairy tale.

The story line of taskmaster Hans is relatively fairy-tale-like (although the author has turned it into a joke): farmer's son's love for the baron's daughter, a love full of beautiful words and tender feelings, has a tragic end, and tragic in the legend-like way: Hans neither loses his loved one nor dies of unrequited love, but must surrender to Old Nick, against whom he is powerless.

Rehepapp is obviously a text representing folk humour rather than folk religion.⁹ Unfortunately, this is generally less discussed than the striking images and curiosities of folk belief that are chosen to

illustrate the text. Humour (especially in Kivirähk's work) is so natural that there is almost no point in talking about it. Even in this article we have spoken far too little about humour and too much about folk religion.

Comments

¹ Cf. the tale “The Man Heating Hell’s Kettle” (Viidalepp 1967, no. 68, pp. 192–196; Aarne & Thompson tale type 475; henceforth AT, see Aarne & Thompson 1961).

² The term *fairy tale* has been used by the authors in the same sense as by Bengt Holbek in his *Interpretation of fairy tales* (1987)

³ For such cycles, see e.g. *Teenistusleping* (“The Service Contract”), recorded in Karksi, Central Estonia (Kippar 1987, pp. 66–86), which can be disassembled into 17 Aarne & Thompson tale types; *Hans ja vanapagan* (“Hans and the Old Nick”), recorded in Viljandi, Central Estonia (Viidalepp 1967, no. 130, pp. 423–430), also 17 types. The Finnish anthology of Stupid Ogre tales (Rausmaa 1990) presents two cycles as long (no. 2 and no. 11) and a dozen of cycles consisting of seven or more AT types.

⁴ Based on this information Melika Kindel and Kadri Tüür have concluded that the novel is set somewhere in West Estonia, either in Läänemaa County or Pärnu County (Kindel & Tüür 2001, p. 206), although such localisation is probably fruitless.

⁵ Typologically analogous magical agents occur in fairy tales, the most artistic fictional genre of folktale; in Vladimir Propp’s scheme of miracle tales the receiving of a magical agent becomes a natural part of the miracle tale structure (Function 14 “First function of donor: Hero is tested, receives magical agent, donor or helper”, see Vladimir Propp, *The morphology of the folktale*, Austin 1998, pp. 43–48).

⁶ Obsolete religious legends are prone to transform into another genre and become comical tales.

⁷ In Estonian such persons were referred to as *kadakasakslased*, literally ‘juniper Germans’. *Kadakasakslased* were upstart Estonians, who spoke corrupt German and tried to imitate the manners of the German gentry, often to a rather ridiculous degree (Transl.)

⁸ Kalevipoeg is also a figure important both in the oral and the literary culture of Estonia: widely known local legends about the giant were trans-

formed into the Estonian national epic by Doctor Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald in the 19th century and have since been re-interpreted by innumerable writers, artists, composers etc.

⁹ Here is a list of folkloric anecdote plots used by Kivirähk in a manner, which may lead to believe that the author has made them up himself (includes those typed by Melika Kindel and Kadri Tüür, 2001, p. 206). International: 1) bargaining with mock magical objects, in *Rehepapp* Muna Ott's unresolved promise: "if he [the Old Nick] guides me home, then I will give him a magical hat, which the wind never lifts and which covers his horns," with an intention to slam the axe into the Old Nick's head (November 5, pp. 31–32; AT 1539 "Tricksters and Their Victims"); 2) The granary-keeper confuses Imbi and Äрни, to trick a sea cow from them (pretends to be hanged), Imbi and Äрни will argue, whether there were three hanged men along the road, or four (November 13, pp. 84–86; AT 1525D "Stealing by Inversion of attention"); 3) Old Barny deceives the parson to eat hay (November 22, p. 148–149; AT 1775 "The Hungry Parson"); Tales known in Estonia: 4) the episode, where the granary keeper steals baron's grain; when caught, he tells the baron that he wanted to donate some grain to the baron, until chased off (November 27, pp. 178-180; AT 1564** "Old Barny adds to the baron's grain"); 5) Koera Kaarel cut a piece of bread for his farmhand, and the loaf was so thin that had to be held with two hands (November 19, p. 124; "Piece of bread for one or two hands?") The Estonian archived folklore texts of these types or summaries thereof are available on the web site of folk humour by Arvo Krikmann (see <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/index.htm>.)

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