A Signing Wife
Peter Christen Asbjørnsen

Translated by Simon Roy Hughes

Introduction

Previously appearing in a periodical (*Hjemmet og Vandringen. En Aarbog for 1847*), 'A Signing Wife' (Norwegian title, 'En Signekjerring') was published in the second volume of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen's solo project, *Norwegian Hulder Tales and Folk Legends* (*Norske huldreeventyr og folkesagn*) in 1848.[1]

The form of the texts in these volumes is somewhat surprising for what from the title appears to be a collection of folklore; each text consists of a frame-narrative within which are embedded a number of legends of the Norwegian gallery of preternaturals. Asbjørnsen developed the structure of his texts from the technique Thomas Crofton Croker used in *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), the German translation of which he had borrowed a number of times from the university library in Christiania in the 1830s/40s.[2] He improved on his source model, however, such that 'all critics agree that *Norske huldreeventyr og folkesagn* far surpasses its predecessor both in form and content'.[3]

Although the texts in the collection are discrete, some of the frame-narratives are related through characters who appear in more than one text. The signing wife in the text under consideration is one such character; in 'Taters' ('*Tatere*'), Margit's husband Truls has had the signing wife Gudbjør arrested, and, predictably, she whiles the time in the sheriff's gaol by telling legends to her cellmates.

'A Signing Wife' is one of the few texts that do not feature the first-person narrator mentioned above. Marte Hvam Hult reflects on Asbjørnsen's decision to write these texts without his narrator's intrusion:

> It simply would not have been believable to insert the enlightened personage of the frame narrator into the context of a dim and dark hovel where a peasant woman waits for a wise woman to perform lead casting to diagnose her baby's illness, or into a county jail where Gypsies are planning their escape.[4]

Gudbjør is not merely a figment of Asbjørnsen's imagination, however. On the contrary, '[p]ure imagination was not Asbjørnsen's strongest side'; he got around his limitations by using the comprehensive travel journals he maintained on his collection tours, mixing his notes on persons and events to produce the situation and effect he required.[5]

Truls Gjefsen writes that Asbjørnsen had already begun collecting legends in 1835, but was disappointed with the irregular, random contributions of his acquaintances. He therefore spent his summer walking around Ål and the surrounding district, with the express purpose of collecting folklore from the local population, the first of a number of collection tours he undertook during his career.[6] As far as I am able to ascertain, the legends that Asbjørnsen collected, unlike the folktales that he began to publish in collaboration with Jørgen Moe in 1841, remain in manuscript form in the archives. This is an unfortunate situation; it appears that interest in folktales has overshadowed the humble legend.

It is thus hardly surprising that there is no catalogue of Norwegian legends that corresponds to Ørnulf Hodne's *The Types of Norwegian Folktale* (1984), which makes working with the legends difficult. Such work will remain unsatisfactory until Asbjørnsen and Moe scholarship turns to the cataloguing, publication, and analytical treatment of Asbjørnsen's notebooks and manuscripts.

The challenges presented by *Norwegian Hulder-Tales and Folk Legends*, the questions surrounding the orality and literariness of the frame narratives, and the provenance of the legends as published, may all be addressed with further work in the archives, and publication of source material. Until that work is undertaken, we are left with texts such as 'A Signing Wife', which leaves us with more questions than answers.

A Signing Wife

A distance from the king's road,[7] in one of the villages in the midst of Gudbrandsdalen, there lay, a few years ago, a smallholder's cabin on a mound. Perhaps it is still there. It was a mild April: the snow was thawing, brooks bubbled their way down through the hillsides, and the ground had begun to show some bare patches. The thrush scolded from the forest; all the clearings were full of twittering birds – the signs indicated an early spring. In the stout birch and tall rowans which stretched their bare branches out over the cabin roof in the glittering sunshine, some busy tits were flitting, whilst a chaffinch sat atop of the birch, singing with its whole heart. But it was unpleasant and dim inside the log cabin. A middle-aged woman was in the throes of blowing fire into some branches and raw firewood sticks she had placed beneath the coffee pot on the low stove. When this was eventually successful, she straightened herself and rubbed the smoke and ashes out of her stinging eyes. She did not look particularly bright.

"Folk say this casting does no good," she began speaking, "for the child does not have rickets, they say, but that it is a changeling.[8] There was a furrier here the other day, and he

said the same, for when he was small, he saw a changeling out in Ringebu, and it was as willowy in its body, and as feeble as this."

While she spoke, the expression on her plain face was so guarded and worried that it was easily understood that the furrier's statements had fastened themselves well in her superstitious mind.

She spoke to a course-limbed woman who was approaching sixty. She was unusually tall, but where she sat she looked rather small; she had this quality to thank as the reason folk had attached the nickname Longshanks to her name, Gudbjør. In the company of the Taters she had travelled about with, she was known by other names. Grey hair stuck out from beneath her scarf, her face was dark, with bushy eyebrows and a long nose, bulbous at the root. Her low forehead and the breadth of her face across her cheekbones suggested little ability; but that did not agree with the obvious expression of cunning in her small, clever eyes, and the lively peasantry that characterised her wrinkles and facial expressions. Judging by her clothes, she had come from one of the villages in the north, and her behaviour and her whole demeanour signalled 'signing wife', or at least an itinerant troublemaker, who could be impertinent and bothersome or mild and flattering, according to the situation.[9] While the smallholder's wife spoke and tended the coffee pot, Gudbjør sat, gently rocking a hanging cradle in which there lay a restless child. Calmly and confidently she answered the smallholder's wife's words, even though the sharp glint in her eyes and the twitches of her mouth showed that she did not like the furrier's explanation at all.

"Folk," she said, "they speak about so much they do not understand, my dear Marit Rognehaugen, they talk in both weather and wind. And it may well be that the furrier understands sheepskins, but rickets and changelings he does not understand—so say *I*, and I shall stand by it, too. I should think I understand changelings, for I have seen enough of them. The changeling he spoke of was, I suppose, that of Brit Briskebråtån at Fron, for she had a changeling, I remember, and I suppose it was about this one that the furrier spoke, I should think. She got him straightway she was married, for first she had a beautiful child; but it was swapped for a troll-child, as angry and horribly wild as the devil himself. Never would he speak a word, but only eat and scream. She had no heart to beat it or mistreat it, though; but however it was or was not, they managed to teach her to make some noises and cook something up, so they got him to speak, and then she understood well enough what sort of fellow he was. So she bade the jutul[10] go with him to hell, and called him a firebrand from hell, and a troll-child, bade him go whence he had come, and began to beat him about the head with her besom, and that well enough. But when she did so, the door flew wide open, my mother, and in came one, even though she could see no one – preserve me, no – and snatched the changeling to itself, and threw her own child in, on to the floor so hard that it could hardly cry – or perhaps that was Siri Strømhogget. It was like an old wind-dried fellow; perhaps he was loose in his joints, but he did not resemble your child any more than my old bonnet.

"I remember it well; it was at that time I was in service at the sexton's, it was one day at lunch-time – then I saw him more than once, and I remember well how she got him, and how she got rid of him again, too. It was often spoken of at the time, for this Siri had come here from the village. She was young and served at Kvam, and I remember her well from when she was at home in Gampeskjelplassen with her parents. After that, she came out to Strømhogget, and was married with Ola, the son there. When she lay in confinement the first time, a stranger woman came into the cabin and took the child – for she had recently delivered – and laid another in its place. Siri would up to have her child back again, and she tried with all her might, but she could not move from the spot, for she was paralysed. She wanted to scream for her aunt, who was outside, but she could not manage to open her mouth, and so frightened was she that she could not have been more frightened, even if they had stood over her with a knife.

"The child she had received was a changeling, that was easy enough to understand, for he was not like other children; he did nothing but scream, as if there were a knife in him, and he hissed and struck out around himself like a hulder cat, and he was angrier than original sin.[11] He ate all the time. She did not know at all how to be rid of him, but then she decided to ask a woman who knew better, I would think, for she said that she should take the child and lay it on the rubbish heap and beat it with a decent birch switch, and she should do this three Thursday evenings in a row. Yes, she did this, and the third Thursday evening, there came flying a woman over the barn roof, and the woman threw a child into a pile of sawdust, and took to herself her own. But at the same time, Siri received such a rap across her fingers that she has the mark from, even today, and that mark have I seen with my own eyes," added Gudbjør, to really confirm her story was the truth. "No, this child here is no more a changeling than I am a changeling. And how would it have happened that they should have switched it?" she asked.

"No, I can't understand it, either," said the smallholder's wife, innocently, "for I have had castoreum in the cradle, and I have fired over him, and crossed him, and I have fastened some silver in his shirt, and a knife has stood above the door, so I don't know how they should switch him."

"Gosh! They have no power, then—cross me, no then! I know enough about it," the signing wife began to speak again; "for out in the villages by Kristiansbyen, there I knew a wife who had a child she complained so much about.[12] She crossed and fired over it, as best she had learned, both with castoreum and otherwise, for there was surely a lot of enchantment and devilry—God protect my mouth nevertheless—there in the village. But then there was a night she lay with the child before her in the bed, and her husband, he lay against the wall. Just as they lay, he awoke, and there was a reddish light in the cabin, just as when one sits, raking through the embers. Yes, there was one sitting there, raking in the embers with the fire poker, too, for when the husband looked over there, there was an old man over by the hearth, raking in the embers, and he was so terrible that there was

no end to it, and he had a long beard, too. When it was properly light, he began to reach and reach with his arms, after the child, but he could not come loose from the stool he sat on. His arms, they grew so long, yes, so long that they reached out into the middle of the room, but from the hearth he could not come, and he could not reach the child. He sat like this for a long while, so the man was wholly terrified where he lay, and he knew not what he should do. Then he heard a noise by the window.

"'Per, come now, then!' it said.

"'Oh shut your mouth!' replied the man who sat by the hearth. 'It has been tumbled for the child; I can't get him.'[13]

"'Then you can come out again, then, I know,' it said outside. It was the wife who stood there to receive it.

"No, look at this beautiful little boy, here," the signing wife cajoled, taking the child just as it awoke. It struggled against the caressing of the stranger wife, and pulled faces at her exaggerated, sweet expressions; "he is as pale and clear as an angel; he is a little soft in his joints – that he is – but when they say he is a changeling, then they lie about him, of course they do, yes! No, mother, it is rickets!" she said confidently and decisively, turning to the mother. "It is rickets!"

"Hush, hush! I think there is some knocking on the wall. Oh God, Truls is coming back!" said the smallholder's wife, afraid that her husband would find her drinking coffee and chatting with the signing wife. She flew across and had the door open to take a look; but there was nothing to see but a tabby cat, which sat on the step, drying its wet paws after a spring hunt in an alder bush. Truls it was not, but on the wall in the sun sat a green woodpecker, pecking and hacking to awaken the sleepy insects from their winter hibernation. Just like that, it turned its head, as if it were looking for someone; but it expected nothing more than an April shower.

"Is someone there?" asked the signing wife. "Well," she said, when she had received no for an answer, "then let the door stay open, so we may have some good of the sun, and so that we may see your husband when he comes; for he will come on this side, I suppose."

"He went with the sled for a load of leaves for the goats," replied the smallholder's wife. "But I am so afraid he will come upon us. Last time he asked when you had been here, he grew so mad that there was no moderation, and then he said that I should have some shillings to go to the doctor with; he did not want to know about such nonsense and supernatural cures, for he is so well-learned. He does not believe in such, since he went around the village with the school master."

"To the doctor? Puh!" said the signing wife, spitting. "Well, it would appeal to some, to seek out that bigwig in their need. If one does not come with gold and costly gifts," she continued, complaining, "then they chop and bite as if they were dogs and not folk. How was it when Gjertrud Kostebakken lay with death in her throat and in such pain of labour for the third day, do you think? By no means would he come out to the

unfortunate woman, for he was at a Christmas party at the magistrate's, and neither would he go until they threatened him with the bishop and the governor. He might just as well have not bothered, either, for when he came to those parts, the woman was dead. No! Go to the doctor for such a child with rickets, the devil would do so, yes. God protect, you can go for my part," she added, mockingly, "but can he help more than this … then never let me give anyone health again in this life. They cannot do anything for rickets, for their books say nothing about it; they have no helpful advice for the one who is sick, and they know it themselves, too, which is why they give neither powder, nor ill-tasting drinks, nor any such devilry for it. No, there is no answer other than casting, but they do not know how to do it.

"Put the casting crucible on, my mother," she began on another tack, "for it is soon high day. If we have cast twice, then we can cast a third time, too, or it might go ill on the way. The child has rickets, but there are nine kinds of rickets in the world. Yes, yes, I have told you this, and you saw then that he had been subject to troll-rickets and water-rickets. For the first Thursday it was a man with two great horns and a long tail—that was troll-rickets. Last time it was a mermaid—yes, you saw her just as she was depicted—that was water-rickets. But now it is Thursday again, and now we shall see what it will be when it is cast again. It is the third time that is decisive, you know. There you have the child," she said, reaching it out to the wife. "Let me have in me this drop of coffee, and I will set to."

When the coffee was drunk, and the clinking china put away "with thanks and honour," she went in contemplation over to the hearth and took out a snuff-horn.

"Since last Thursday," she said, "I have been in seven church parishes, scraping lead from the church windows during the night, for the church lead ran out last time. It can weary both soul and body," she mumbled to herself. Then she took the snuff-horn and shook down into a casting spoon some of the lead she said she had collected with so much trouble.

"You have, I suppose, fetched some north-running water at the height of the night?" she asked further.

"Yes, I was by the mill stream last night; that is the only north-running water for a long distance," replied the smallholder's wife, taking out a covered pail, out of which she poured some water into a beer bowl. Over that was laid a slice of malt bread through which was bored a hole with a darning needle. When the lead had melted, Gudbjør went to the door, squinted up at the sun, then took the melting spoon and poured the running lead through the hole, slowly down into the water, while she mumbled over it some words that could be heard approximately like this:

I conjure for treachery, and I conjure for rickets;
I conjure it gone, I conjure it away;
I conjure it out, I conjure it in;

I conjure in weather, and I conjure in wind;
I conjure in north, and I conjure in west;
I conjure in south, and I conjure in east;
I conjure in earth, and I conjure in water;
I conjure in rock, and I conjure in sand;
I conjure it down in an alder root;
I conjure it into a foal's foot;
I conjure it into Hellfire;
I conjure it in north-running water;
There it will tear, and there it will rend;
But harm to the child it shall not be.[14]

As predictably as could be, the glowing hot lead hissed and spat as it went into the water.

"Listen to the enchantment, you; now it must out," said the signing wife to the other, who stood with the child on her arm and appeared to glance about her both fraught and afeared. When the slice of bread was removed, it was seen that the lead had formed into a couple of figures in the water. The signing wife stared at them for a long time, and considered them, with her head on one side. Then she nodded and said:

"Corpse-rickets, corpse-rickets! First troll-rickets, then water-rickets, then corpse-rickets. One of them could have been enough!" she added, shaking her head. "Yes, now I see how it has happened," she said aloud, turning to the wife of the house. "First you travelled through a forest, before a mountain, while the troll was out; there you said Jesus' name. Then you came over a water; there you said Jesus' name over the child. But when you came to the churchyard – was it before the cock crowed? – then you forgot to do it, and the child caught corpse-rickets."

"In Jesus' name, how can you know that?" exclaimed the smallholder's wife. "It is true, every single word you say. When we travelled home from the pasture, we were late, for some sheep had been separated from us, and the night fell already when we were in Heimseterlia, and once I thought I saw a light from away in the forest, and I sort of heard a gate open in Vestnabben – there they say there are mountain folk – 'Jesus' name, then,' I immediately said over the child. At the time we crossed the river, I heard a scream so terrible that – 'Jesus' name, then,' I said over the child – but the others said it was just a northern diver that screamed at bad weather."

"Yes, it was probably so, as long as it was a northern diver," said the signing wife; "when it cries at an infant, the infant gets rickets."

"I have heard this; I thought this was worst at the time," the other confessed. "But when we came to the churchyard – it was past the deepest night – there the oxen turned

mad for us, and the cattle of the folk on the farm were no different, and there was such trouble with the livestock that I forgot to stop to bless the infant!"

"That is where he caught it, mother, for it is corpse-rickets from the churchyard. Look for yourself in the bowl there: here there is a coffin, and there is a church tower, and in the coffin lies a corpse, spreading its fingers," said the signing wife soothingly, as she interpreted the mysterious symbols the lead had become.

"Hm, hm, hm, that is some advice!" she mumbled again, but loudly enough that the other could hear it.

"What is some advice?" asked the smallholder's wife, glad and eagerly.

"It is some advice—it is bothersome, but it will do," said the signing wife. "I shall put together a swaddled child, and I shall bury it in the churchyard, so the dead think they have gained the child; and God help me if they understand aught else! But it depends on inherited silver. Do you have any inherited silver?"

"Yes, I have a couple of silver marks I got when I was christened. I have not been able to bring myself to touch them before, but since it concerns a life, then – " said the wife, beginning to look in the draw of an old chest.

"Yes, yes. One of them I shall lay in rock, the other in water – the third I shall bury in consecrated ground, where the rickets was caught – I must have three," said Gudbjør, "and some rags, to make the swaddled child from."

She got what she wanted. A manikin was soon sewn together as a swaddled child. The signing wife arose, took the doll and her staff, and said:

"Now I go to the churchyard to bury it. The third Thursday from today I shall return – then we shall see. If there is to be life, then you can see it in the child's eyes; but if it is to die, then you shall only see the answer. Then I will go north to Joramo. I have not been there for a long time, but they have sent word for me for a child who merely has troll-rickets; it is a small matter. I shall drag him backwards beneath a strip of grass turf, and he shall return to folk."

"Indeed. Indeed!" said the smallholder's wife. "Joramo? That is in Lesja, isn't it? Preserve the cross, that is a long way away!"

"Yes, it is a long journey, but it is where I was born and bred," replied the signing wife. "I have wandered a little and gathered a little since I was there. Back then were better times for Gudbjør," she said with a sigh, sitting herself on the bench. "But there in Joramo there was a changeling," she continued, something half-forgotten rising in her memory as she looked backwards towards her childhood. "My aunt's great-grandmother, she was at Joramo in Lesja, and she had a changeling. I never saw him, for he was dead and gone long before I was born, but my mother told me about him. He looked in his face like an old, weather-beaten fellow. In his eyes he was as red as a roach,[15] and he stared in the dark like a tawny owl. He had a head as long as a horse's head, and as thick as a head of cabbage, but his legs were like a sheep's legs, and his body looked like year-old cured meat. He did

nothing but howl and cry and scream, and if he got anything in his hands, then he threw it in his mother's face. He was constantly as hungry as a village dog; everything he saw he would eat, and he ate them nearly out of their house. The older he got, the meaner he grew, and there was no end to his screaming and crying; but never did they get him to speak a single word, even though he was old enough to. He was the most loathsome troll anyone had ever heard of, and they had such unspeakable trouble with him, both night and day. They sought advice both here and there, too, and the woman was advised to do both this and that. She did not think that she had the heart to beat and strike him, however, before she was completely sure it was a changeling. But then there was one who taught her that she should say that the king was coming. She should make up a warm fire in the hearth and break an egg. The shell she should put on the fire, and the stirring stick she should stick up the chimney. Yes, she did this. When the changeling saw it, he raised himself up in the cradle and glared at it. The woman went out and peeped through the keyhole. Then he crept out of the cradle on his hands, but his legs remained lying in it, and he stretched himself out, and he grew so long, so long that he reached across the cabin floor, right up to the hearth.

"'No,' he said, 'now I am as old as seven falls of wood in the Lesja forest, but never have I seen so large a stirring stick in so small a cauldron at Joramo.'

"When the woman saw this and heard what he said, she had enough; then she knew he was a changeling, and when she came in again, he crept together into the cradle, like a serpent. Thursday evening, she took him out and beat him well and good on the rubbish heap, and then it cracked and sounded around her. The second Thursday evening went the same way; but then she heard it say, as if beside her, and she understood it was her own child:

"'Each time you strike Tjøstul Gautstigen, then they strike me, back in the mountain.'

"But on the third Thursday evening, she thrashed the changeling again. Then came a woman flying with a child, as if she were burned.

"'Give me Tjøstul back; there you have your pup!' she said, and threw the child to her.

"The woman reached out her hand to catch it, and she caught one of its legs; this she kept in her hand, but the rest she never saw, so hard had the mountain woman thrown."

While she told this, the woman of the house sat so restlessly and nervously that Gudbjør finally had to notice, even though she was very preoccupied with her presentation.

"What is going on?" she asked. "Oh, your husband is coming," she said, looking out the door; and solemnly she added: "It is not for Gudbjør to stay on your bench; but be not afraid, mother—I shall go down by the churchyard, so he doesn't see me."

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Translated by Simon Roy Hughes

Notes

1. 'En Signekjerring' has been published in English translation once before, as 'The Witch', in H. L. Brekstæd's *Round the Yule Log: Norwegian Folk and Fairy Tales* (Sampson Lowe, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1881); however, the fidelity of the translation to the original leaves a lot to be desired.
2. Truls Gjefsen, *Peter Christen Asbjørnsen: diger og folksæl* (Andresen & Butenschøn, 2001), 100.
3. Marte H. Hult, *Framing a National Narrative* (Wayne State University Press, 2003), 68.
4. Hult, *Framing a National Narrative*, 119.
5. Gjefsen, *Peter Christen Asbjørnsen*, 165.
6. Gjefsen, *Peter Christen Asbjørnsen*, 100ff.
7. There are a number of historical king's roads (*Via Regia*) in Norway, the earliest of which were opened in the early 17th century to facilitate the movement of stone and timber. The one referenced here appears to be *Den Trondhjemske kongevei*, which connects the two most important cities, Oslo and Trondheim.
8. Used these days to denote juvenile vitamin D deficiency, 'rickets' has formerly been used to denote any number of diseases that cause weakness in children. The Norwegian word 'svekk', which also has been used to denote rickets, has a similar history.
9. The Norwegian cunning folk were known as *signefolk*, where *signe-* denotes making the sign of the cross, a central feature of their cunning arts.
10. Jutul: related to the Old Norse "*jotunn*," which denotes a race of giants in opposition to man and god.
11. The *huldufólk* of Norway are a hidden folk, analogous to fairies in the lore of other regions.
12. Kristiansbyen: 'Christian's town', i.e. Christiania ('Kristiania', following a spelling reform in 1877), the name of the capital city of Norway from 1634 until 1924.
13. Tumbled, i.e. the child has been blessed with the sign of the cross.
14. Instead of manipulating the wording, to retain the rhyming couplets of the original, I have chosen to maintain the lexical content of the rhyme. The Norwegian is as follows:

    «Jeg maner for svik og jeg maner for svekk;
    jeg maner den bort, jeg maner den vekk;
    jeg maner den ut, jeg maner den inn;
    jeg maner i vær, og jeg maner i vind;
    jeg maner i syd, og jeg maner i øst;
    jeg maner i nord, og jeg maner i vest;
    jeg maner i jord, og jeg maner i vann;
    jeg maner i berg, og jeg maner i sand;
    jeg maner den ned i en olderrot;
    jeg maner den inn i en folefot;
    jeg maner den inn i helvetes brann;
    jeg maner i nordenrinnendes vann;
    der skal den ete, og der skal den tære;
    til mén for barnet skal den inte være.»

15. Roach: the fresh-water fish.