A review of

Human Frailties and Faculties: Social Relationships in English, Persian and German Folktales

Naomi Foyle

The fundamental similarities between so many world folk and fairy stories is one of the most astonishing elements of these oft-called 'wonder tales'. Certainly, for scholars and fans alike, this phenomenon raises profound questions about origins, cultural influence and the universality of human experience. *Human Frailties and Faculties: Social Relationships in English, Persian and German Folktales*, Davood Khazaie's thoughtful and engaging comparative study, while wisely agnostic on the issue of mono- or polygenesis, contends from the outset that, whatever the journeys these tales have taken, they reflect humanity's 'common knowledge and experience'. Exploring topics ranging from the personal and familial to legal and religious, and strong in his application of the Derridean notion of the 'eccentric centre' – which deconstructs the relationship between 'centre' and 'periphery' – Khazaie offers valuable insights into cultural specificities, especially regarding the Persian stories. Overall, though, he presents a persuasive argument that the tales under discussion, in slippery and subversive fashion, transmit down the generations and across continents, in Maria Tatar's resonant phrase, 'the eternal truth of mental life'.

The book's themes amply demonstrate the psychological and political range and contemporary relevance of the tales. In closely argued and well-evidenced chapters, Khazaie addresses our shared human condition in relation to silliness (the 'Looking for a Wife' ATU tale type); violence ('The Juniper Tree'/'Bolbol-e ssargašteh/The Wandering Nightingale'); mourning ('Death of the Hen'/'Flea in Tandoor'); power ('The Table, the Donkey and the Stick'/'Qalagg-e va mard-e bbaqali:kar/The Crow and the Bean Gardner'); stubbornness ('The Silence Wager'/'Wife Recovers What Husband First Found and then Lost'); and justice ('A Pound of Flesh'/'Series of Clever, Unjust Decisions'/'The Chaste Wife'/ 'Divan-e-Balkh/The Court of Balkh'). While touching throughout on the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque, his primary approach is a deconstructive one. In clear, conceptually rigorous prose, the book illuminates the quintessentially 'decentrating' nature of each tale, in which a person or idea conventionally deemed to be 'central' is thrust to the 'margins' – and vice versa.

Throughout, Khazaie examines the tales through the lens of topics from Islam to satire to children's literature, and addresses contemporary concerns including gender, race and mental illness – empathically reading comical elements of exaggerated grief, for example, as now recognised mental health conditions. The representation of women in the tales is closely explored, revealing some interesting differences. In the English and German 'Silence Wager' tales, for example, husband and wife are presented as equally 'stupid and stubborn', the wife to the point of allowing herself to be sexually assaulted to win a bet; the Persian variants, however, although reliant on stereotypes of the 'talkative woman', upend gender conventions with their figures of a 'feminized man' and a bold, clever wife. They also lack the sexual abuse or frank humour of, especially, the German tales. These differences might be related to traditional Islamic social codes, which stress modesty and also accord women power in the home – in relation to the 'silliness' tales, which involve a man's need for a bride, Khazaie notes the traditional role of Persian women as choosers of their sons' brides – who would, after all, come to live with them – thus exercising a degree of familial control their medieval European counterparts will not have enjoyed (insisting as I do on including England in Europe!).

In general, Khazaie demonstrates that Islam has influenced the Persian tales to a far greater degree than Christianity has done the European stories, where only the image of a millstone invokes the Bible. In contrast, the long Persian tale of 'Divan-e-Balkh/The Court of Balkh' is a satire on corruption in Shariah courts. Here, Khazaie suggests that the average listener would have understood the legal injustice visited on the Jew, Simeon, to be one of many outrages perpetuated by the lascivious and self-serving *qazi* (judge). Such a context is absent from the two anti-Semitic European 'Flesh-bond' ballads presented, lending support to the argument that, historically, Muslim societies have made far more of a place for Jews than Christian countries. Khazaie also notes that the judge's sexual congress with a young man is considered in the tale an 'evil deed' in relation to Islam: the scene, in which the *qazi* exploits a youth who comes seeking the release of his inheritance, creates room for modern queer readings and rewritings of the tale.

All the Abrahamic religions have been corrupted by patriarchy, a process that has tragically fossilised in Iran. At the time of writing, women and men in the country, Kurds and Persians alike, are risking their lives to challenge the country's oppressive gender restrictions. Although such protests are often assumed by Europeans and Americans to be a demand for Western-style human rights, Khazaie's study highlights a long tradition of Persian feminist revolt, embodied by the defiant heroine Šahr-ašub. Her name, literally meaning 'City-Riots', was formerly bestowed upon girls and women whose beauty was so great it was said to be capable of causing riots; Šahr-ašub, Khazaie observes, uses not just her beauty, but also her cunning, courage and physical strength to defend herself from the machinations of the *qazi* and other men who seek to possess her: she escapes being stoned to death because the people refuse to kill her, and assists in the overthrow of the corrupt regime, being ruefully acknowledged in the end by the judge as, truly, 'one who disturbs the system of power in the city'.

Despite their intriguing differences, the tales chosen overwhelmingly present a riot of resemblances which thoroughly justify Khazaie's contention that we hold in common far more than that which divides us. Fascinating and well-referenced, with a solid set of appendices, bibliography and indices, *Human Frailties and Faculties*, despite some teething issues, is no doubt already proving a solid resource in the field. Seemingly a PhD thesis, the book, especially at the start, over-relies on long quotes from established scholars, and the Introduction rather skates over the difference between a fairy tale and a folktale; but as the chapters progress they build an impressive sense of authority. Its decentration of Eurocentric readings of classic tales being rooted in a comprehensive overview of academic methodologies, the book would make an excellent set text for comparative folklore classes. No doubt Davood Khazaie is deepening his deconstructive approach in current work, while his lucidity of expression suggests he would be a strong speaker, not only at academic conferences, but also at literary festivals, where these timeless tales, with their compelling events, captivating details, and radical message of human unity, richly deserve to be aired.

Author: Davood Khazaie.

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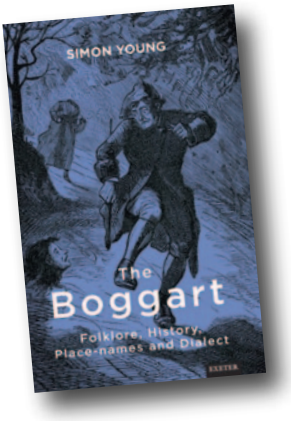

A review of

The Boggart: Folklore, History, Place-names and Dialect

Katherine Langrish

In this fascinating, extensively researched account, Simon Young champions 'Britain's most understudied supernatural being', the Boggart – and makes a good case for it also being one of the most misrepresented. His stated aim is to 'reconstitute beliefs for one place (Boggartdom) and for one period (1838-1914) using contemporary or near contemporary documents'. He is well-situated to do this, having created *The Boggart Source*

Book, a free online research base of thousands of words of Victorian and Edwardian boggart-lore drawn from books, articles, newpapers and broadsides. Additionally, in 2019 he conducted an online 'Boggart Census' which gathered 1,100 responses recording 'snapshot[s] of the boggart folklore that a given man or woman had grown up with, from 1920 – 1970'.

This large database has enabled a localised mapping of boggart placenames and encounters. Plotting boggart toponyms on 19th-century maps, along with boggart personal names linked to specific locations or dwellings, Young charts the distribution of the boggart in the territory he calls 'Boggartdom' – Lancashire and West Yorkshire, with outliers in Lincolnshire and Cleveland – and places it in a wider north-western context with its relations the Dobbie of north Lancashire/Westmorland and the Cumberland Boggle: names which Young suggests do not indicate separate types of supernatural creature, but are instead 'regional reflexes of a similar generic bogie'.

Studying boggart names and lore in actual topographies has led Young to some interesting conclusions. For example, 'Boggart Holes' and 'Fairy Holes' are both to be found in the landscape, but Young finds that fairy placenames are associated with wild, natural features such as crags, streams and wells, while boggart toponyms tend to be situated on the liminal (and in the 19th century, badly lit) outskirts of towns and villages, marking halls, houses, barns, lanes, crossroads, bridges, tunnels, mines and railways. 'Fairies dominate the supernatural physical geography of the north,' he writes. 'Boggarts are, on the other hand, part of supernatural human geography.' This is a fascinating distinction, further illuminated by Young's remark that if fairies 'offer a mirror to human society' (since their activities resemble ours), boggarts 'are not the mirror, rather the shadow of their victims.' His account is full of tales and references which fully uphold his contention that boggart encounters were regarded as fearful or terrifying. In the early to mid-1800s, the Kidgrew Boggart haunted 'the canal tunnel, the mines and the countryside' around the Staffordshire village of Kidsgrove, manifesting sometimes as a dog, sometimes as a 'flickering light' and sometimes as a headless woman. Locals explained it as the ghost of a woman murdered on the canal. References to supernatural horrors such as fireballs and revenants, haunted houses and lanes, and even a bleeding bridge near Colne demonstrate the polymorphic range of the boggart as a 19th-century phenomenon: 'an ecosystem' as Young puts it, rather than 'a species'.

Investigating the etymology of the term, he finds that 16th- and 17th-century definitions of 'boggart' glossed it as a 'bugbear', 'phantasm' or 'Spirit that frights one'; while for 19th-century regional writers familiar with the word the most common definition was 'ghost' – followed by 'hobgoblin' 'bugbear', 'spectre', 'apparition' and 'spirit'. In their contemporary context most of these terms were generic, like 'troll' in Scandinavia, and referred to many kinds of frightening solitary supernatural entities. This is likely to come as a surprise to many, including myself, who first encountered boggarts in 20th-century children's fiction and in the work of the great Katharine Briggs. Her entry for 'Boggart' in the *Dictionary of Fairies* describes: 'A mischievous BROWNIE, almost exactly like a poltergeist in his habits' and characterises Brownies themselves as little men with shaggy heads who emerge at night to do farm work and housework in return for bowls of cream.

So how did a catch-all term for frightening things – 'demons, ghosts, hobs, shape-changers, water monsters and will o' the wisps' to name but a few – become narrowed down to indicate only a goblinesque house spirit? Young points to a folktale known as 'The Pertinacious Cobold' in which the activities of a mischievous brownie drive a farmer to leave his home. After the 19th-century folklorist Thomas Crofton Croker published two Irish versions, an anonymous Yorkshire correspondent sent a boggart variant to the *Literary Gazette* (16 April 1825). Croker reprinted this in *Fairy Legends* (1825) and later plagiarised and wrote it up for John Roby's *Traditions of Lancashire* (1829), altering its Yorkshire names to Lancashire-sounding ones. Both books were influential, and 'at a national level, the tale came to be associated with boggarts', spreading the impression that a boggart was a type of naughty brownie. This impression was strengthened when the Victorian children's writer Mrs Ewing wrote *The Brownies* (1865), in which a race of tiny, nimble domestic sprites are called 'brownies' when they are 'useful and considerate' but 'boggarts' when they are bad. Mrs Ewing urges children to be helpful brownies, not naughty boggarts. Lord Baden-Powell took both the point and the name for the younger Girl Guides, and the boggart = brownie equation became fixed in the public imagination.

During the 20th century, boggarts in children's fiction kept very much in line with the helpful/mischievous house-hob image, notably in William Mayne's *Earthfasts* (1969) – my own first meeting with a fictional boggart – and Susan Cooper's *The Boggart* (1993) and later sequels about a Scottish boggart which emigrates to Canada in a family's computer. Then came J.K. Rowling's *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), in which Harry Potter and his friends learn how to deal with a boggart, depicted as 'a shape-shifting creature that … assumes the shape of the victim's worst fears'. Young slyly suggests that in this, Rowling may be closer than many a modern folklorist to the 19th-century boggart, since 'there is at least a sense of fear and horrid potential'.

However that may be, Rowling's boggart seems to have had little impact on 21st-century representations of the boggart, now widely seen as a nature-guardian; we learn of national parks, gardens and trails, such as the Pendle Sculpture Trail, which use stories and even models of green, goblinesque nature-boggarts to encourage children to learn about wildlife. Young is relaxed about this, for as he says: 'Supernatural creatures and human ideas about them very properly have a life of their own.' Nevertheless it would have been a shame to have lost the back-story of the boggart's long career in supernatural terror. Detailed, scholarly, packed with great tales and interesting speculations, *The Boggart* is a ground-breaking study that rescues and re-establishes the scary boggart of the 19th century.

Author: Simon Young.

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