

The Witch in the Alehouse

Imaginary Encounters in Cultural History¹

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One rainy autumn afternoon, while reading early modern murder pamphlets, I happened upon Johane Harrison, a witch. It was not her I was looking for. It was the “cruel and bloody” fate in 1602 of a family that first caught my attention.² The parents had been killed together with their young child, but there was some release in how the gruesome story ended: an older child of the family, a tortured girl who had witnessed the horrible events and whose tongue the murderers had cut out, eventually succeeded in using sign language to help catch two of the killers, the widow Annis Dell and her son George. The pamphlet proceeded to speak about their trial, sentencing, and execution. And there it could have ended, had the anonymous writer not decided to take up another case, dealt with at the same assizes in Hertford. Enter, Johane Harrison.

The second story begins with Johane getting caught as a witchcraft suspect, and some magical implements that eventually helped condemn her being found in her home. And it ends with – a joke. The whole passage only takes five quarto pages. The joke, unexpectedly, has its own subtitle, the only one in the

1 An earlier version of this article has been published in Finnish in *Ihmistieteet tänään*. Ed. Anneli Meurman-Solin/Ilkka Pyysiäinen. Gaudeamus: Helsinki 2005.

2 The title of the anonymous pamphlet displays its sensationalist viewpoint: *The most cruell and bloody murther committed by an Inkeepers wife, called Annis Dell, and her sonne George Dell - - With the seuerall vvitch-crafts, and most damnable practises of one Johane Harrison and her daughter - - who were all executed at Hartford the 4 of August last past. 1606*. The jest on Johane Harrison is on sig. C4-C4v; quotations below are from these pages.

book: *How the witch served a Fellow in an Alehouse*. It was customary for early modern English writers to mark jests with such titles, both in published jest books and in their own joke collections. The narrator in our pamphlet calls his anecdote a “homely tale”, claiming he only tells it because it made the whole crowd laugh at the assizes when it was presented as evidence in Johane’s witchcraft trial.

The joke is not very amusing, or even very original. For a modern reader, it rather seems deadly serious. What is so funny about a rather sympathetic old woman being sentenced to death for sorcery? Or about her being verbally attacked by really quite unpleasant, badly drunken yobs in an alehouse? But having started my academic career by studying fools and laughter, somewhere at the back of my brain I hear an echo of Robert Darnton suggesting that it is exactly when we do not seem to be getting a joke that we should dig into “a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it”.³ This is why I want to share the joke with you, and, while telling it, I am asking you to think about cultural history and how we practise it. What should I have done with the witty witch in the alehouse? How was I to make sense of her?

From our contemporary perspective, Johane Harrison’s trial could just as well have been conducted behind closed doors. I petitioned the past to let me listen in and pose my own questions to the witnesses. The past summarily declined my request. The real Johane Harrison or the records of her trial were not shown to me; whatever happened in the court room was declared classified. Instead, I got to hear clamour and commotion of other kinds: jests and stories, ballads and demonological treatises, sensational pamphlets and manuals for good Christian living. The past was helping me get the joke.

This is the story of that process – an attempt to describe what doing cultural history feels like. It is not my intention to interpret the pamphlet or even the witch joke in the traditional historical way, but reflect upon the historian’s experience of the historical operation.

I will present my story as a romance in the early modern mode, a quest divided into four movements, based on metaphors of what happens in the study of past cultures: these four will be encountering, arguing, imagining, and telling. All of these happen in history. We all do them when doing history. We all need to travel to archives and libraries to find and read our texts. We need to work towards understanding them in context, turn them from arbitrary scraps of vellum to meaningful traces of the past. We need to use our imagination to

3 DARNTON, 1984, p. 81-82.

construct that context, the past world that we ourselves can never inhabit. And then we tell our stories.

But let us start by looking at the joke.

Encounters

“There was an honest Fellow, and as boone a companion dwelling in *Royston*, one that loued the pot with the long necke almost as well as his prayers; for (quoth he) as I know one is medicinable for the soule, I am sure the other’s phisick for the bodie. It was this Fuddle caps chance with 3 or 4 as good Malt-wormes as himselfe, and as sure, where the best lap was to be found, together as 4 Knaues in a payre of cards, to be drinking, where this Witch came in, & stood gloting vpon them.”

This is how I first met our protagonists, the witch Johane and the nameless knave – a fuddle-caps, a malt-worm. They ran into each other in an alehouse, surrounded by the general rowdiness of their friends and neighbours. This is surely nothing unusual: in early modern England, there was an alehouse in every corner, and foreign visitors noted that even women could visit them unaccompanied by their menfolk.⁴

The content of my historical anecdote, then, is an encounter. A man and a woman meet head-on, and challenge each other. Their encounter escalates into a row that will eventually have serious consequences. But are we historians not faced with an encounter every time we set about reading the past? Encounters in the past generate speech and stories that reach our present as texts and traces, traces that allow the historian to witness the encounter as a third party, as an eavesdropper or a recipient, an addressee of a communication. While I am reading, Johane, the malt-worm and I form a triangle over time – but some of what happens is controlled by yet another, a fourth party, the anonymous author who has set the joke in print.

It is not uncommon – if not all that usual either – that encounters and conversations in alehouses are mediated across four centuries. What is a bit out of the ordinary is the linguistic informality and immediacy with which the characters and events of the story present themselves to us.

4 CLARK, 1983, p. 127, p. 131.

This is not a coincidence. Our text is not innocent. It will try to position us as readers. Even if Johane appears to be the main character in the jest, the text does not, for example, oblige us to feel empathy for Johane or understand her situation. Even the drunken man remains in the distance. Early modern humour often presupposed lack of pity and empathy, but there is more to this than just historical callousness. The text receives its reader on its own terms. It says what it wants to say and decides on its own what it is about. The historian's task is to figure out what the question is that the text answers. At the same time, however, we can try and fool the text into answering whatever it is that we want to ask. Our questions come unashamedly from the present, as attempts to unravel a foreign system of meaning.

For instance, as a gender historian, I am always on the lookout for different configurations of women and men. Like many women's historians of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, I tend to read against the grain: I will doggedly seek for women who do not declare their presence. Mostly I am confronted by silence, but I know that this silence does not indicate an absence of people – rather, their voices have been silenced. Our jest, too, only shows Johane as a surface, an instrument for triggering laughter. I am reading Johane against the strictures of the text, as a reluctant subject, if I imagine that by encountering her I can learn something about early modern women.

The historian's normal response in this situation would of course be to look for more evidence, and since we are dealing with a trial, a visit to the relevant archives might reveal a different, maybe a more truthful, story of Johane. This time there was no need to reserve flights to Heathrow, however, for the witchcraft historian Marion Gibson has already discovered that no court records can be found to support the jest. There were two witches called Stokes convicted at the assizes in question, and who knows but they could have transformed into the Harrisons while being transferred into print and anecdote, but the episode depicted in the jest was not reported in court. The likeliest solution is that the writer and printer of the pamphlet just added the jest on the remaining empty pages of their book – the number of pages in early modern quartos was always divisible by four. Maybe they thought it would enhance sales: comedy and horror in one neat package, how could it not sell?⁵

Who, then, am I meeting when I think I am meeting Johane? An author who has no name, or a woman who never existed? Is the joke finally on me, if I think I can, as a historian, use Johane as an informant from the past?

5 GIBSON, 1999, p. 62, p. 98-99, p. 151-152.

Arguments

“Now this Good-fellow (not enduring to looke vpon a bad face, but his owne, especially when he is Cup-shot) called aloude to her, Doe you heare Witch, looke tother waies, I cannot abide a nose of that fashion, or else turne your face the wrong side outward, it may look like raw flesh for flies to blow maggots in. Stil as the Witch was ready to reply, hee would crosse her with one scuruy Iest, & between evey Iest drinke to her, yet sweare, God dam him, she should starue ere she should haue a drop on’t, since the pot was sweet hee’d keepe it so, for should but her lips once looke into the lid on’t, her breath’s so strong, & would so stick in the cup, that al the water that runs by *Ware* would not wash it out again.”

Our cup-shot good-fellow sounds quite a repugnant creature, even if in his own culture he may even have been a fairly typical fellow. Most of us, surely, at this stage, would wish that Johane were able to make a complete fool of him.

Yet the expressions used to describe the drunkard – honest fellow, good-fellow, boon companion – are not unfriendly or disparaging. Boys will be boys. There may be mild disapproval in the air, but at the same time also understanding, even admiration. The witch is only presented as the Other; she is seen only negatively, as old and ugly, threatening, irritable, impatient, as a woman who cannot take a joke.⁶ The text forces its readers to side with the drunkard, not the old woman, whatever the reader’s own opinion or interpretation. If early modern women wanted to resist this interpretation of themselves, they had to quarrel with the jest, both the pamphlet text and their patriarchal culture. Yet by entering the controversy and siding with the witch, they would also have landed in trouble: they would have turned into quarrelsome hags, and given in to exactly the kind of patriarchal definition of women they wanted to deny. Johane, it seems, could not give a damn.

“At last the witch got so much time to cal him, Doest thou heare good friend (quoth she?) What sayst thou ill face (quoth he?) Mary I say (quoth she) that thou throwst in thy drink apace, but shall not find it so easie comming out. Nay, as for the comming out (answerd the fellow) I throwd it in aboue, & it shal

6 Even if not all old and ugly women were witches, and not all witches were old and ugly, the typical image of the witch was of a woman past her attractive and fertile prime. See for example GASKILL, 2000, p. 39-40.

come out beneath, & then thou shalt haue some of it, if thou wilt, because I am in hope it will poyson thee.”

In early modern culture, where theoretically, at least, the sexes were defined consistently, carefully and hierarchically, women’s and men’s arguments received much of their meaning through the traditional gendered positions of the speakers. In this jest we travel upon the surface of the body (and inside it as well), from high to low, from face to stomach and beneath, from man to woman. Male and female voices are positioned in a debate in this cultural setting. Gender was certainly one of the most central battle grounds of early modern culture. And by looking at gender, we might even envision culture itself as an argument, as a battle for power of determination and action, as a battle for cultural space.

I can reveal in advance that Johane will not come out on top in this battle. Even if the man’s grotesque threat does not quite materialize, on a symbolic level he gets his will. Johane’s fate is sealed by her entering the argument with the drunkard in the first place, and particularly by her uttering what could be interpreted as a curse. Unruly women, and men who were lessened by them, are standard figures in Renaissance humour, but Johane’s zesty rejoinder brings up a chilling truth about the comedy of gender. On the flip-side of all the fun, a woman was not to rise against a man, for while doing so, she also rose against divine order, and breaches of divine order had to be punished. We have already defined Johane as a witch. What would be more natural than to see the attack on men as inspired by the devil, as sorcery and witchcraft?

Let us transfer this metaphor onto the level of historiography. Could we liken all of early modern culture to a court session? This was a space for arguing a point of view, negotiating interpretations, and for the presenting of cases, doubts and provisions. David Sabeau has characterized culture as an “active argument”, as a series of confrontations, disputations and controversies. Just as Johane and the drunken fellow condensed their culture in their squabble, daily life emerges from perceptions, understandings, and interpretations that are manifested in ordinary things and practices. Culture is a battle ground where trajectories of power clash. As a negotiation, culture is not just any kind of speech. It consists of power over life and death, as in Johane’s and the drunkard’s case. Culture consists of reflection and interchange – of arguing, in both

senses of the word, with the help of all the symbolic arsenal in our possession, with gestures, expressions, colours, styles, and spaces, but most of all words.⁷

Sometimes, however, a shared conclusion, judgement, or sentence cannot be arrived at. For example, it would be foolish to imagine that the sentence proclaimed on Johane in the jest would have been an unequivocal truth shared by everybody, even if it were how the story ended. For contemporaries, too, trials were places for controversy, places for presenting, defending, and, if possible, reconciling accounts and interpretations of what had happened, and the conclusion inscribed in the records only represents one possible, if hegemonic, closure. So I, too, refuse to close up my account just yet. Cynthia Herrup indeed suggests that even if sentencing is the clearest point in the history of a trial, it is the weakest point for a historian to focus on. It obscures more than it reveals. More than anything, it offers a solution when we should carry on questioning.⁸

When a historian living in our present encounters texts from the past, and imagines she also encounters the people these texts evoke, she too is driven into an argument. Reading the jest, I quarrel with the past about the justification of my interpretations. We squabble over language. The past often attests that I do not understand it at all. I affirm that, on the contrary, the past just will not answer my questions. The past comes back, stating that it has every right to answer its own questions and leave me busy with whatever meaningless task I happen to fancy. The past does not need to care about my pursuits. What can I say? Either I need to change my question or make do with the answer. The past offers to change me, to push the limits of my understanding, in order to make its answer an answer to a correct question. The past and I play word games: it is not so much about whether it can answer; it is about whether I can come up with a good question.

This is also why a historian cannot act as a judge upon the past. But she can demand the past to offer evidence for its views or at least to present its own story. Often she hears various different stories, and her task is to write an interpretative summary. Unlike in a trial, she does not have to conclude with an acquittal or a guilty verdict. Her task is to present a truthful account. That process – and even that story – may contain wrong steps and dead ends, false statements and alternative endings.

7 SABEAN, 1984, p. 94-95; DOLAN, 1994, p. 4; BELSEY, 2001, p. 15-17; DENING, 2002, p. 7.

8 HERRUP 1999, p. 6, p. 146.

Quarrel, communication, dialogue. My colleague Sakari Ollitervo has suggested, perhaps somewhat playfully, that it is not uncommon that a historian's attitude towards the past is a tiny bit amorous.⁹ This is more than just being passionate about your job. Like a loved one when you are arguing, the past will resist you, it will keep the historian from understanding, it will protest that she has no way of knowing, and at the same time it will reveal something of its own way of making sense and meaning. Like a beloved, the past will give you the silent treatment. It will answer by withholding, offering too little to go on, scant evidence and stubborn defiance. Like a lover, the historian will have to give the past space to mumble and withdraw. She may ask again when she has calmed down, with different words, in different ways. The past is another, and must be allowed to remain so; it can never become like me, or be exactly what I would wish. (Like any writers, we historians must also reflect on the language we use; this is creative writing after all, and our readers too deserve some attention. While talking about lovers and beloveds, then, I ask myself: was that overly pathetic? Will I alienate my academic audience with all this love talk, all this "feminine" emotion? I deleted it once. Then pressed 'undo'. Well, even Leopold von Ranke thought the past was his mistress.¹⁰ But let us stay on course.)

One of the most common metaphors historians use about their encounters with the past is silence. The past comes towards us as a silenced voice, a whisper at most. Or as sign language, like that of the girl whose tongue Annis and George Dell had cut out. Some talk about past voices as an echo: they repeat faintly and after the fact something that may have originated in what we are studying. Or the same metaphor may emerge in visual form. Simon Schama, for example, says history is chasing shadows: we will always be doomed to summon what has already slipped around the corner, out of sight and out of hearing. Often, the sound and silence from the past emerge by turns. Every clamouring moment is followed by a split and a silence, a chronological break that will separate it from what comes after. And from us, listeners and witnesses of those moments.¹¹

Consequently, historians may talk about themselves not just as creative writers but as creative listeners. That is why the past is also likened to clamour,

9 OLLITERVO, 2002b, p. 20.

10 For history as romance and melodrama, see also SMITH, 1998, p. 116-120.

11 SCHAMA, 1991, p. 320; SPIEGEL, 1992, p. 207-208; CRESSY, 2000, p. 1-2; SCOTT 2001, p. 291.

to cacophony, to an unmanageable wealth of sound and voice. For David Cressy, the past whispers and beckons, rants and raves. According to Greg Dening, it reaches us as white noise, a hum we cannot disregard but never actually physically hear. It is accompanied by the buzzing and purring of centuries, where generations of historians, novelists, philosophers, and other observers will comment, explain, and distort what was said in the first place.¹² Nothing in history happens alone, without its effects. The historian must either quieten down to listen to silence, or strive to distinguish different and temporally distinct voices one from another, and from the confusing racket of all past voices. (Sometimes, of course, historians should desist from over-extending a metaphor. I will continue anyway.)

The historian's stance is interrogative. Her way of listening is active; the past must be pushed to answer, in order to make its narratives intelligible to us. Her productivity can only be measured by how sharply she can ask and how patiently she can listen. Rushing in to explain before the past has had the chance to answer is not good practice. The historian's task is to take steps towards a space of understanding, and you can only get there by arguing with the past.

Historiography's mode is argumentation. Historians mediate their interpretations, argue with other historians and tease the past for its own way of arguing and argumentation. We let the past argue for its case, but will always follow it with our own obsession to explain what we think it means. We will account for the past's accounts, we will argue on the basis of its arguments. The past gives us evidence, and we will give evidence for it, when letting it tell its own story, or at least the story we think it is telling.

Fantasies

“Then with this greeting away goes the Witch in a chafe, & the fellow sits down to follow his drink, but as the end of all drunkards, is either to ming or to sleepe. So out goes this fellow, & drawing his Gentleman Usher against a pale side, finds me a top of his nose a red lump as big as a cherry, & in his belly felt such a rumbling, as if the Tower of *Babell* had falne about his eares: of the sight thereof draue his hart to an ague, & his tongue to an alarum and out he cries, the

12 CRESSY 2000, p. 1-2; DENING 2002, p. 3-4.

Witch, the Witch, the Witch, I am vndone, I am vndone: O God, women of *Royston*, helpe, helpe, the Witch, the Wicth [sic], I am a man spoyled, helpe, I am vndone. At that word help, the Witch, in comes one of his fellowes runs in hast, & asked him what they should helpe, the Witch? Oh (quoth he) to the galloves, for I am vndone by her.”

The aleworms imagined Johane to be a witch, so a witch is what she became. The events narrated in the jest and the evidence found in Johane’s home proved not only that she was a witch, but also testified to witchcraft being an active force threatening early modern people’s lives. Witchcraft was real. We like to think that it was real because it was imagined as being so. Truth and imagination do not contradict one another.

In early modern culture, the power of the imagination was envisioned differently from how we might approach it; this might help us find a place for imagining in our jest, too. Imagination, or fantasy, one of the faculties situated in the brain, did not create its images out of nothing. Instead, its function was to process information brought directly by the senses. Fantasy was what first received and then presented the existing world to the higher faculties of the human mind.¹³ Let us imagine it: the brawling men saw Johane, the horrible hag, they heard her curse, they witnessed her witch-like behaviour. Through their fancies they understood Johane to be a witch; and they turned her into a fantasy. Johane cursed the drunkard; a red lump appeared in his privy member. Where there is an effect, there is a cause.

In cultural history, we are in the habit of emphasizing that culture offers the tools, resources, scripts, and meanings for human action. But I have noticed with my students that this sort of language sometimes puzzles; it is felt as static, unimaginative. One of the students battled me for years about the term ‘script’: “we’re not just saying our lines, we’re writing them!”, she used to say. Fair enough. So we should probably keep reminding ourselves that cultural scripts are forever malleable, forever open to individual reworking; they are not set down by a divine playwright who consigns us to our parts. Culture, and all of us in it, produce, move, and create; culture is born out of clashes and battles, out of poetic and performative acts. We come back to David Sabean, then. The war between Johane and the drunkard makes Johane a witch, and Johane’s cursing of him makes the cherry red lump appear in his gentleman usher. The possibility of witchcraft becomes manifest in this exchange. God and the

13 See for example PARK, 1988, p. 464-471; SARJALA 2001, p. 85.

Devil, too, battle in this scene, and manifest themselves to believers. A man and a woman, too, see one another, and make one another, in this epic battle.

Culture is performative and practical. Like a witch casting a spell, humans cast their culture in their actions. People are always agents and subjects of their time and place. Cultural representations, too, are by nature dialectical: they are shaped by culture, but they also shape their culture. Our witchcraft jest is not only a static reflection of early modern social relations, it is one of the places where they were shaped; it is a product of its culture, a work that portrays it, a performance that pierces its way into culture. A “shaping fantasy”, as Louis Montrose would perhaps put it, a story of creation, a genesis.¹⁴

As a historian I will call on the past to be creative with me, to allow me to shape its fantasies, to give me reasons for why they are so. Usually, we cloth this work of creation in truth claims in our writing, and present such claims as proof of our skill and professionalism. But sometimes a historian’s powers of creation, even when powered by the past, will get a shape both more visible and more symbolic: remember how Natalie Zemon Davis inscribed in the prologue of *Women on the Margins* her imagined squabbles with her main characters.¹⁵

Our histories are not fantasies in our contemporary sense, then, but they are imaginative for having been born out of creativity. Perhaps they are products of fantasy in the early modern sense: information processed into knowledge, worked into meaning. We too are creatures of culture, and working with meaning is easy as breathing. Robert Darnton indeed likens culture to the air that living beings breathe. They cannot not breathe. They know they are breathing, but do not think of every breath they take. Similarly, their lives are supported by the meanings their culture allows them to create or subscribe to.¹⁶ Historians, moreover, see the world as temporal: they cannot breathe anybody else’s time, or live on anybody else’s meanings.

Instead, we need to imagine the kind of air the people of the past were breathing. We imagine a past world so as to situate in it the stories that we read. The past, for us, is a product of our educated imaginations, but in order to be historians, our fantasy has limits and rules that we operate by. Our imagina-

14 See Louis Adrian Montrose on Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Nights Dream* as both a fantasy for and a location of Elizabethan culture. MONTROSE, 1983, p. 61-62.

15 DAVIS, 1995, p. 1-4. For the place of the historian’s imagination in her scholarly texts, see also Davis and Robert Finlay debating *The Return of Martin Guerre*, FINLAY, 1988; DAVIS 1988.

16 DARNTON, 1984, p. 99.

tion is bound and powered by the signs, sources and evidence the past hands down us.¹⁷

In order to meet Johane, then, I will imagine her turning towards me. I must picture her representing her culture, so that she could talk to me, not just talk back at the drunkard and his bunch of ruffians. This is something rather typical of the cultural history of the recent two decades. We have trusted on the power of the anecdote and the detail, we have looked for the connections and contexts that will help make sense of the details. Culture has been seen as the invisible web of meanings where every past person and episode is woven into. Johane will become understandable when she throws my way a thousand other stories from her time. It is simple: we acquire as much information as we can, we read as many sources as we can find. The more we read, the wider the panorama that a story, a person, or a bunch of evidence can be situated in. We can only imagine the possible when we can set it some limits.¹⁸

Or is it? Simple, I mean. The downside of imagining a culture is that often imagination is partisan. It is guided by prejudice, by loose associations and assumptions, within cultures as well as between them. Anthropologists and post-colonial scholars of different breeds have reminded us that the basis for a Western understanding of the world is an “othering” eye, an attitude built on the fantasy of the other – and particularly on an imagery of threat, hostility, and exploitation, turning the unknown into an enemy. In this spirit, what is seen as truth can come out as a convenient, convincing set of beliefs; knowing becomes hegemonic control. The aim of postcolonial criticism, of course, has been to write itself out of these hegemonic categories and listen to other voices with the same amount of respect as we listen to our own – to think other-wise, to think differently.¹⁹

Perhaps we should think about this in more detail in relation to historical scholarship and historical otherness, too. Colonisation happens not just spatially, but temporally as well. We also create “ethnographies” when looking

17 Mary Fulbrook discusses the still current demands for empiricism in the light of the recent developments in historical theory, particularly postmodern and post-linguistic turn history. See FULBROOK, 2002, p. 94-97; see also PIHLAINEN, 2002.

18 Carlo Ginzburg’s path-breaking *Cheese and the Worms* and Natalie Davis’ equally influential *The Return of Martin Guerre* have often been seen as the foundational works of microhistory. GINZBURG, 1980; DAVIS, 1983. On the place of anecdotes in the work of new historicists, in many ways parallel to cultural historians, see GALLAGHER/GREENBLATT 2000, p. 28-31, p. 49-74.

19 My formulation comes from Bill Schwarz, SCHWARZ, 1996, p. 10. See also KAARTINEN, 2004.

into the past, and sometimes describe past otherness in our own image.²⁰ The medievalist Catherine Brown writes in her wonderful essay that we have invented the Middle Ages as our own dark continent, in order to be able to define ourselves against it. It exists as a mirror image to our present. Yet for someone living in the Middle Ages, the ‘now’ of living was then, irrespective of us and our needs, and before the Middle Ages was created. What happens to the concepts of being ‘there’ and being ‘here’, Brown asks, when we try to travel to see the Middle Ages? There is nothing strange about the medievals doing things differently; the necessary auxiliary question is, what are we doing with that difference?

Could we then think about the past in another way? Brown suggests that thinking differently should happen exactly where the medieval ‘now’ and the twenty-first-century ‘now’ intersect: in the space of reading. For her, the space of reading is the occasion where the horizons of the past and the present have permission to fuse. ‘Now’ and ‘then’ play together in that space, but in a more complex way than we are used to thinking. She would like to allow the Middle Ages to tickle our skin. She wishes to read in a poetically intellectual way, *per artem*, not just *de arte*, enjoying the work of creation, not just gathering information. The work of history is an art, and a craft, and a task we can imagine the past to bestow on us, when we meet with it, within time. In this vision, the foreignness of the past does not remain on paper, it becomes the animated temporality we live in, and it can present its demands to us; and the historian is no longer outside time in her own little presentist bubble but a partaker in a temporal conversation. Brown insists that we cultural researchers live in the centre point of our concepts and categories: in the middle, taking part in the past and the present, on the side of the subject and the object, acquiring information for the sake of knowledge, and creating knowledge for the sake of love.²¹ I will echo Brown with Greg Dening: we read to live; reading for us is life.²²

I suspect we are again just about to get lost in a fantasy. Let us return to our joke, and conclude it.

20 MODEL, 1997, p. 482-484; BROWN, 2000, p. 547; DAGENAIS/GREER, 2000, p. 438.

21 BROWN, 2000, p. 547-549, p. 563, p. 567. Sakari Ollitervo reads Hans-Georg Gadamer’s thinking in a parallel way: OLLITERVO, 2002a, p. 161.

22 DENING, 2002, p. 3.

“Well, yet out he runs, where for that night she would not be found, but the next morning meeting her in a lane, his pain rather increased, than lesned, & there fasts his ten commandments vpon her, he almost scratcht out her eyes; nay, left her not till he brought her to the towne, where for this and the rest, she was apprehended, and she and her daughter, with *George Dell* and his Mother, worthily suffered death the 4 of August.”

Imagine the scene: the gallows in Hertford. Surrounded by a crowd gathered to witness an execution. Four criminals: Johane and her daughter, George Dell and his mother, hanged by the neck until dead.²³ Strange as it may seem, is this not one of the grounding scenes of Western culture? We have been obsessed with dead people, hanging on a cross, hanging in the gallows. Images of control, and of redemption. This time, God’s punishment for the Devil’s doings, as serious as it gets, while at the same time the scene wraps up a jest, abruptly and in the middle, almost with a hint of hysteria.

The monster mother Annis Dell, murderer of children, and her son George, her accomplice, were sentenced to death at the Hertford assizes in 1606. Just as in the pamphlet. A witch called Stokes was also sentenced. A witch called Johane Harrison was not sentenced, but she died anyway, at least in the world of illusion that is the *The most cruell and bloody murther*. This is what we happen to know – but what was it that really happened? The task of cultural history is to consider this, then move beyond what happened, to show how and why it was, or could have been, possible. A cultural historian will look at how, what with, by what means people thought and acted in the past.²⁴ The jest upon Johane being made a witch will give us a wealth of information about early modern culture; the question of whether or not Johane – or witchcraft – actually existed, can only tell us marginally little.

Stuart Clark, who has written not just on witchcraft and demonology but also on the uncertainties of knowledge, takes us forward: in a historian’s theory the meaningful behavioural and cultural patterns of the past consist, exactly and without remainder, of what they were then thought to consist of. It is not particularly helpful to an analysis of the past that held witchcraft to be real that we moderns tend not to believe in Devil’s active participation in the

23 According to Malcolm Gaskill, this scene is what confirmed the reality of witchcraft for early modern spectators. When you have once witnessed a witchcraft hanging, you will not forget, and you find it that much harder to doubt. GASKILL, 2000, p. 40.

24 I am following Clifford Geertz here, GEERTZ, 1983, p. 58.

world. The historian must be guided more by intelligibility and meaningfulness than by what we at this particular moment happen to regard as “reality”.²⁵ Similarly, we need not consider Johane to have actually lived and breathed in order to understand something of how witches were known, or of what the realities of witchcraft were, in the early modern period. What we are trying to find is a past sphere of relevance.

We also ask our readers to imagine a past. This is why we try to provide them with means of access; historians love quotations. Narrativist theorists of history, led by Roland Barthes, have critically commented that direct quotations in historiography create a “reality effect”, an unfounded illusion of presence over time. With quotations we claim that the past is present in our texts, although in truth we have no access to it. But pointing out what our technique is, I tend to think, does not vacate our practice of further meanings.

And there are more things to quotation and evidence, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I know you got it; when did an early modernist ever get by without at least one reference to Shakespeare.) We need our quotations, our details, and then of course our thick descriptions, in order to converse with the past and show how that conversation proceeds to those who want to converse with us. Historiography is communication: we talk with the dead (or maybe *at* the dead), and we hope to talk to those who will come after. We record our steps, so anyone can follow.

Many aspects of quotations may of course seduce the historian: ancient language, its particular words and expressions, its quaint logic, its different mode of argumentation. She may even believe that it is the authentic past that is given voice in her text. Whether that belief is justified or not, the purpose of quoting is at the very least to refer to the past having existed independently of our writing and offer the reader a possibility to recognize its otherness. We are after all dealing with something that we cannot finally control, however much we may like to think we can represent it. Historians wish to carry on a conversation in a doubled voice, convey the voice of the past in conversation with their own, however reluctant a participant the past may be in this discussion. The sense of quoting is in showing the reader how the writer talks with the past, not present the past as if in itself. If we do not wish to act as interpreters between what is ours and what was theirs, engage in conversation with the past, we talk like madmen and idiots, alone.

25 CLARK, 1997, p. 396.

For “empirical” or “practising” historians interested in narrative and theory, such as Michel de Certeau, or, more recently, Mary Fulbrook, and for philosophers of history, such as Paul Ricœur, historiography is always both researching and writing, both a creative investigation and a narrative, and these two need not be considered separately, as modes that exclude one another. And this is exactly the way in which we can look towards the past: I cannot send my soul to submerge in what has already vanished. That may be the realm of the novelist not bound by historiography’s games. I can only stumble upon curious coincidences and see flickering shadows of dead worlds. By all accounts, that should be enough.²⁶ My job as a historian is to make time visible, to show the difference.

I am exaggerating the difference between history and fiction, of course. The historical novelist deals with the same problems as anyone dealing with history. For the narrator of Margaret Atwood’s novel *Cat’s Eye*, examining her own past, time more and more started to acquire a shape: it was something that could be seen, like “a series of liquid transparencies”, one on top of another. She did not look to the past backwards along a temporal trajectory, but downwards through it, as if through water. When researching this kind of past, she says, “[s]ometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.” Maybe nothing in the passage of time is completely lost, even if we cannot see it for all the water.²⁷

Perhaps outrageously, as some may think, I will suggest that Hans-Georg Gadamer performs a somewhat similar visual sleight of hand with his famous metaphor of merging horizons. Gadamer does not look into water, but along its surface as far as the eye can see (he does not actually say a word about water, of course – but he is verging towards the poetic here...). In his metaphor of historical understanding, the historian glances at the horizon while standing on the shores of time. The past will respond with offering its own horizon, its own trajectory of understanding. In the conversational, hermeneutic process of interpretation, the fusion of these horizons is the gesture that enables understanding.²⁸ He is not saying a historian or her time fuses with the past, as some crit-

26 SCHAMA, 1991, p. 235.

27 ATWOOD, 1989, p. 3. There are psychoanalytic undertones in the personal history created by Atwood: perhaps we could think that the unlost that is seen through watery films is more like subconscious than temporal distance. On the lost, retained and reclaimed in autobiographical writing, see for example STEEDMAN, 2001, p. 75-77. But the resemblance to historiography can surely be evoked as well.

28 GADAMER, 2000, p. 302-307.

ics have misunderstood; rather, it is in reaching towards the other, in the space of reading if you will, that understanding can take place. Perhaps the difference to Atwood is not as great as we might at first assume: in these horizons, water and sky, the past and the present, meet at a point that is once removed from both. The historian's time is a hindrance to, and a condition of, understanding. Only time makes history and historiography possible.

Stories

While Johane's story is undoubtedly a jest, it also has another literary frame: legal practice, or even the trial transcript. The author of the jest presents it as a witness statement, narrated at the assizes, and written down, in the end, by him. Even if he does not try to claim it comes directly from a court record, the performative context of the jest deliciously mixes genres, and points in the same direction many historians have recently moved: to treat texts from law courts as narratives, as linguistic formations where the way of telling is just as revealing as that which is told.

Natalie Zemon Davis, for example, showed in *Fiction in the Archives* how letters of petition, with all their legal frames and structures, were cultural constructions, narrated and narrative, true stories unable to present an absolute truth. In terms of form these stories followed legal models, in terms of content they presented details that would enable court officials to find for the petitioner, to understand from his point of view. Despite these formal requirements, the statements also represented the victim's or the witnesses' interpretations of what had happened. The experience of crime was always informed by cultural knowledge about the nature and definitions of crime and the law.²⁹

Even if Johane's story is not, despite its author's framing, really a witness statement, it does present one possible experience of crime. It is a stylized and distanced version of a criminal event, but it seeks to portray itself as direct and truthful. This is what we do with language.

It is of course meaningful that Johane's sorcery was told expressly as a jest. We can look at the form and know immediately it is a joke. It is preceded by a funny subtitle that promises humour. Its structure follows the formula familiar

29 DAVIS, 1987, p. 17-35; see also DARNTON, 1984, p. 82; MAZA 1996, p. 1495-1498. In early modern studies, social historians using court records have been by far the most enthusiastic narrativists.

from early modern jest books; it is the same structure early modern listeners would have encountered in an alehouse, or told by the fire, as entertainment. The witch, for example, delivers her own punchline, which the man interprets as a curse, and the scene is followed by the materialization of the witch's promise. The jest is pointedly vernacular, filled with exclamations, curses, and funny turns of phrase. Where the pamphlet has previously been governed by a powerful narrative voice, the jest emulates spontaneous dialogue. Its male figures are characterized by playful designations and the woman is drawn up as a visibly repulsive figure. And the contents, of course, play on the very basics of early modern humour: the stereotypically humorous characters are complemented by sex and gender in all their meanings, with hidden and revealed body parts, with euphemisms and much, well, frankly, pissing about.³⁰

I could, then, try to understand Johane's jest as humorous by pointing to any number of themes that would situate her in her cultural context. I could talk about gender, women's weaknesses and failings, or the problem posed by powerful women, or the inappropriateness and funniness of unruly, or elderly, or ugly women. I could talk about sexuality, male honour, male strength, or all the fun about bodies and procreation, sexual organs and their various uses. I could talk about the power of words. I could look at how evil, death, or the fear of damnation could be controlled by laughing at their faces. These would all be central features in the early modern way of making sense of the world.

I could also refer to how jests and funny stories were particularly appropriate for discussing the great topics of everyday life. The themes and events of the story direct, perhaps even force, the author to choose his genre: how could you resist presenting this sort of subject matter as a joke? But actually, interpreting the jest according to historiographical protocols is not what I am on about here. I am trying to portray the historiographical experience, not so much what this particular encounter led me to conclude. And what I want to ask is: what happens to a historian, when she experiences an early modern jest?

The literary historian Frances Dolan has prompted us to think about the material consequences of stories. Narratives not only live within fiction, they live in the world.³¹ Reports on individual lives as well as fictional stories rep-

30 See also GIBSON, 1999, p. 151-152, who locates these initially incongruous features in standard witchcraft discourses of popular literature, where selling more copy was typically a higher aim than sticking to the truth.

31 DOLAN, 1994, p. 3.

resent something, the echo of their once-upon-a-time – they were constituents of their own complex of meanings, and they continue constructing it now, when we read them. Johane Harrison, whether fictional or real, was sentenced to death. The joke on her was possible. But along the last four hundred years, contours of jests have changed irrevocably. We laugh at a different Johane now.

On the other hand, what if Johane was a real person whose archival appearances have just disappeared or been destroyed? Maybe she was witch Stokes, but the court scribe just did not see it as necessary to write down the jest the crowd heard and laughed at? The genre again sets limits on our view: it is difficult to take a jest seriously, when its narrative form expressly asks us to take it lightly. A joke is too slight a form to carry the cloak of truth. But let us turn the question around: perhaps the contents and the characters in our story really do force their way of telling – as in the true Roman seduction story of Innocentia, found and retold by Thomas Cohen, that follows faithfully the form of a *novella* even if it can only be encountered in court archives.³² Cohen's *novella* and Johane's jest are ways of seeing, modes of understanding that events themselves may summon. Whatever we think about, we can only ever think culturally.

“People think in terms of narratives”, says Michael MacDonald, yet another historian who has taken seriously the challenges posed by narrative analysis. According to MacDonald, we can understand the past by following how and what kinds of stories people told about their experiences, to themselves and to others: “Historians must attend to the ways that people told and lived the stories of their lives and how they understood the stories of others’ lives. Stories are really all we have to reconstruct the inner lives of people in the past; stories are what they were made from in the first place.”³³ The story of Johane is of course a description of possible events, but at the same time it is an attempt to tell a story, to follow a genre, to choose tropes, characters, actions, plot, structure, sequence, voice and focalization, and whatever elements we may want to see in a narrative, in the way the author felt represented his intentions best, served his story best, and might appeal to his readers the most. Johane and the drunk are written as jest; the intelligibility of the joke is based on the author’s and his prospective readers’ shared understanding of what constitutes humorous characters and incidents. But these are necessarily historical

32 COHEN, 2003, p. 56-57.

33 MACDONALD, 1992, p. 37, p. 61.

aspects in the story. If we try to see the jest as humorous, we crash into a wall of otherness, and we may need to make certain adjustments, to stretch our cultural resources, to see the funny side. Johane's story may not be, and perhaps should not be, funny to us.

It is not uncommon to see cultural research likened to understanding a proverb, a poem, or a joke. The past, or indeed any foreign culture, when it appears to us, may seem vaguely familiar, but is also always in need of active deciphering. A joke, a proverb, or a poem can be understood only if the interpreter shares some of the contextual logic and the epistemological frame the text is situated in, its means of expression and its ways of constructing knowledge. Can you hear it echo again? In his essay of *The Great Cat Massacre*, Robert Darnton proposed that our inability to laugh at eighteenth-century apprentices torturing cats measures our distance from the studied past. Something in the episode persistently slips from our grasp. The foreign culture remains opaque and resistant. For Darnton, this is where serious cultural study must start.³⁴

I sent the witch joke to some of my friends via e-mail, and asked them to tell me whether they laughed. Most did not. One friend exclaimed frustratedly that she could not even recognize what she was not getting. Those who did laugh were all used to working with the past in one way or another. Historians indeed laugh at a lot of jokes others may not find funny in the least. We cannot discount the possibility that all historians are a bit strange, of course, but they, like anthropologists and other cultural scholars researching the other, also have more experience of opening their minds towards what is strange and foreign. That strangeness always hints at how it should be encountered and understood, and it is a necessary part of a historian's skill that she can take the hint.

But what happens to a historian when she starts to habitually laugh at jokes that no one else finds funny? And moreover, when we take a dive into otherness in order to understand a past joke, does the joke turn on us? Getting the joke requires that we understand causes, effects and connections. The more unfunny jokes we read, the more strange types we meet, the deeper we penetrate into that strange culture. We can never of course leave our own culture completely behind. But the location of understanding, the crux where horizons meet, can be pushed back towards the past.

So, what happens to our sense of humour? Do we begin to live in between two cultures, as intuitive members of the past culture as well? If we understand

34 GEERTZ, 1983, p. 70; DARNTON 1984, p. 81-82.

what they are saying – if we “instinctively” laugh at their jokes – are we not partly immersed in their culture? Historical study, like any cultural study, consists of acts of experience where we encounter another reality. The past will change us. When we study the past, discuss it with others, write about it, tell its stories, it will change us. It will enter us and change our frame of mind. And to some extent, we may be admitted in, as partial members, to another culture. Otherwise, we would not laugh.

As David Cressy sees it, the most fruitful strategy for a historian could be “a double set of negotiations, a nested epistemology, involving present and past”. In his scheme, we would listen to what history has to say. At the same time, we would hone our own methodological doubts and sharpen our gaze to perceive where the story of the past collides into the strange and the impossible, when it does not arrange itself neatly, or when it drowns in ambiguities of its foreign world, its complexities and opacities.³⁵ Since I have been referring to humour all along, let me still say this: laughter is most often born out of the strange and the incongruous, out of the perception of what does not fit. So, studying the past could be likened to getting the joke on another level, too: as with good comedy, encounters with the past can make us feel that our senses somehow betray us. Reality jerks out of place. We get the past like we get a troublesome joke, a little after the fact, after first giving it some thought. And when we have got it, we look back just a tiny bit ashamed: how come I did not get that right away?

Michel de Certeau indeed said that historians always return to what they did not get. Perhaps we should not even try talking about what looks self-evident.³⁶ We can only pose an honest question when we do not already know the answer.

Perhaps our failings should be seen as strengths, then. Our artistic ambitions may struggle against the rules of scholarly practice in our texts, when we cannot fill the gaping holes in our understanding. The aesthetic aims and empirical requirements of our stories create the sense of our play. The final proof of a historian’s skill, the final justification for what we do, is truthfulness, as

35 CRESSY, 2000, p. 26-27. Kim Hall writes about something rather similar when she requires, in a more political context, that those studying the forgotten peoples of the past, black Europeans for example, should include in their academic arsenal a ‘strategic anachronism’, a conscious oppositional stance towards past wrongs, shaped by current ideologies. HALL, 1995, p. 261.

36 DE CERTEAU, 1988, p. 39.

Greg Dening has written.³⁷ For all historians, and for some novelists, history has a very practical significance. Here I will return to Margaret Atwood, and her films of water.

History is, finally, what we are made by: “The past no longer belongs to those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.”³⁸ In cultural history, we read to live. We look for the other, in order to be shaken and changed by it. We look for what has changed, in order to find change possible. We tell stories, to share the wonder.

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37 COHEN, 2002, p. 15-16; DENING 2002, p. 22.

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