

**Roberto ZAPPERI (Translated by Brian WILLIAMS), *The Pregnant Man* (Revised and updated 4th ed. Social Orders v. 3, Chur, Harwood Academie Publishers, 1991, pp-ix+246 ISSN 0275-7524)**

**John Shaw**

Volume 16, Number 2, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083387ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083387ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

**ISSN**

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Shaw, J. (1994). Review of [Roberto ZAPPERI (Translated by Brian WILLIAMS), *The Pregnant Man* (Revised and updated 4th ed. Social Orders v. 3, Chur, Harwood Academie Publishers, 1991, pp-ix+246 ISSN 0275-7524)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(2), 162–165. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083387ar>

continued interest in homosexuality outside of prison, however, as little more than conniving by Miner to lure young men into a life of crime. Consequently, a reading of *The Grey Fox* offers many details about Miner but explains little of the significance of his life and that of other outlaws in terms of the social and gender relations of their era.

Nolan REILLY  
The University of Winnipeg  
Winnipeg, MB

---

Roberto ZAPPERI (Translated by Brian WILLIAMS), *The Pregnant Man* (Revised and updated 4th ed. Social Orders v. 3, Chur, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991, pp. ix+246 ISSN 0275-7524).

Part of the growing interest in the sociological aspects of folklore is the extent to which oral narratives, along with proverbs and riddles, reflect "such familiar topics as the economic and power relations within the society, family structures...or the ideological and value systems, whether agreed upon (?) or disputed" (Finnegan:122). Among the traditional cultures of Europe, major popular narratives such as the Finn Cycle of Gaeldom or the Kalevala have been viewed as containing such meaning(s) which were constantly reinforced and validated through the telling; but what of the shorter, humbler items such as anecdotes, fables, and proverbs? In his singular study of the theme of the pregnant man in the folklore and popular literature of Europe from medieval times, Zapperi attempts to address this and a host of other questions.

The approach is interdisciplinary in a sense that goes far beyond the well-known tale-type/folklore motif studies in its exploration of the varied aspects of the pregnant man theme. In addition to folktales the field of study encompasses church history, theology, medieval studies, law, women's studies, philology, psychiatry, and cultural and sexual politics. The text is supplied with appropriate illustrations and a well-chosen, wide-ranging select bibliography.

The opening scene is in Germany in the latter part of the eleventh century, where the Church, through the "Gregorian Reformation" moved to "impose its own rules on a society which professed Christianity, but which governed itself in family matters and sexual issues on the basis of an ethic which was not yet christianised at all" (p. 8). The new family ethic, whose object was to consolidate christianisation throughout the most humble (and numerous) levels of society, propounded a family hierarchy which came to be firmly established by the 15th

century, starting with the father and descending to the mother, the male children, and finally the female children. From early on, this and associated hierarchies were reinforced among the unlettered through church iconography which made clear the role of women in the divine order by replacing the creation of Eve in Genesis from Adam's rib by her emergence from his side in an act of male parturition.

The rest of the book is devoted to an analysis of the frequently bizarre representations in oral and written folklore, church iconography and pictorial art that arose from the imposed social order. The pregnant man, with origins linked to the new version of the birth of Eve, first appears as a man afflicted with dropsy in the twelfth-century cathedral of Monreale (Sicily) and emerges in the recorded folklore of the region as the pregnant priest in short, burlesque anecdotes containing a decidedly anticlerical tone. This development was by no means isolated; the author demonstrates the popularity of the motif in the folklore of the High Middle Ages in Europe and through selected narratives which are summarised and then analyzed, often perceptively, as a form of derisive popular commentary on the imposed power relationships and the symbolism supporting them. Not surprisingly the church was swift to respond with tales of its own—in this case variants of two Aesopian Fables contained in German manuscripts at least as old as the twelfth century—designed through ridicule to combat the folklore commentary of the peasant majority. Within a century the immensely popular collection of exempla, the Legenda Aurea, was pressed into service in the church's struggle against this form of popular resistance. The story dialogue which followed sets the stage for an analysis in the second and third parts of the book based on oppositions/conflicts: Christianity versus Folklore; Father versus Son; Noble versus Serf; Town versus Country, etc. Interspersed are excursuses dealing with sexuality and psychiatry (e.g. Christianity and Castration) which are difficult for the non-specialist reader to assess but nevertheless thought-provoking.

Of greatest interest to folklorists are the sections dealing with orally transmitted folktales. These are taken from Italy, Denmark, Finland, Russia, and France, with the most interesting materials drawn from the Finnish Folklore Archives and published here for the first time. The examples and accompanying commentaries provide substantial support for the author's thesis, though it is not clear how selective he has been and to what extent the wider field of evidence provided by the other variants within each tradition would confirm it. Included also are analyses of exempla, an early German verse-tale and tales from Boccaccio's Decameron. Sources for all tale variants given are listed in a useful separate section. The overall impression from the folklore material is one not unfamiliar in our own time, where peasant cultures with their own longstanding traditions attempt to accommodate to an imposed foreign order which rapidly comes to regulate the most intimate details of the daily lives of the vast majority.

It is the book's preoccupation with the politics of christianisation associated with the theme which doubtless accounts for some of the surprising omissions, and the handling of the folktale material cannot be termed rigorous. There is no mention of the tale-type or motif classifications fundamental to folktale scholarship, particularly with reference to the important role of AT 1739 (The Parson and the Calf = J2321.1) in the tales studied from Northern Europe. Some worthwhile cross-cultural comparisons concerning male pregnancy are drawn with Amerindian and African societies, but the obvious parallel of the *couvade*, so well-known to anthropologists and appearing closer to home as the *cess noiden* of the Irish Ulster cycle, is passed over. Zapperi's views on the effects of imposed Christian ideology are outspoken, with references to "the very real ideological terrorism which the Church had been operating for centuries" (p. 140) and the "tragedy of christianisation" (p. 87) that was the conversion of Scandinavia, with barely a word on the humanistic virtues (or otherwise) of the indigenous Germanic religion and society it superseded (see Turville-Petre ch. 13).

In spite of this it would be short-sighted to dismiss the study as an anti-christian diatribe, for analyses aside, the documentation from the various sources on its own is certainly convincing. There is ample reason to believe, too, that the new ideology of the family and social order with its mandatory emphasis on a relational rather than an individual style of perception brought about a change in native European thought at a fundamental level (Campbell: ch. 6), and that the same conflict recorded in the upper levels of society in the church's Condemnations of 1277 has left its own social documents from the life of the unlettered masses in the form of tales and proverbs. The work should be regarded as innovative, suggesting directions in folklore research and interpretation that should inspire further, perhaps more rigorous, studies. Firstly, folklore items cannot be studied apart from other aspects of a society since they often contain an intimate reflection of larger ideological issues. Furthermore, in this instance at least, the interplay between the oral and the written has been shown to be a close dialogue which lasted over centuries. Finally, whoever reads this book cannot help but reflect on just how political folklore can be.

### Bibliography

AARNE, Antti and Stith THOMSON,  
1961            The Types of Folktale, A Classification and Bibliography. *FF Communications* 184. Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

CAMPBELL, Joseph,  
1969            *The Flight of the Wild Gander*. New York, Gateway Editions.

---

FINNEGAN, Ruth,  
1992 *Oral Traditions and Verbal Arts*. London, Routledge.

TURVILLE-PETRE, E.O.G.,  
1964 *Myth and Religion of the North*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and  
Winston.

John SHAW  
Inverness, Scotland

---

Neil ROSENBERG (ed.), *Transforming Tradition : Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993, pp. xiii+ 340, ISBN 0-252-01982-2).

The concept of a "folk revival" is popularly regarded as a twentieth-century North American phenomenon, but in fact it is neither recent nor New World; folksongs were being collected and studied more than 200 years ago in both the British Isles and in continental Europe; the Grimm brothers began gathering and publishing traditional tales in 1812. The assumption behind any "revival" is that something (folksongs, folk music, folk tales, storytelling) is fading away and needs to be rescued. Why has the term "revival," with all of its religious connotations, been so important? Allan Jabbour, in his foreword, suggests that our need for seeking out a music that would

*express simultaneously our quest for cultural roots, our admiration of democratic ideas and values, our solidarity with the culturally neglected, and our compulsion to forge our own culture for ourselves (p. xiii).*

Many of the 15 contributors to this anthology have been directly involved, as performers and scholars, in the folk music revival that reached its peak (or one of its peaks) in the 1960s. The various articles communicate reflective energy that swings, sways, and balances between subjective and objective, passion and dispassion. One of the concerns that arises in every contribution, as a central theme or a faint echo, is the contrast between what is considered to be "authentic" material from oral traditional and "revivalist" reinterpretation by performers and folklorists.

The various contributors have their own unique interests and approaches, and a single review cannot do justice to the wide range of opinions expressed here.