
Editors and contributors Pauline Greenhill, professor of women’s and gender studies at the University of Winnipeg, and Diane Tye, professor of folklore at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, effectively collaborate in this compilation of thirteen essays that probe the intersections of sex, sexuality, and gender with folklore. Their intent is to trouble tradition, to disrupt dominant patriarchy, and to question the presumptions and beliefs that underlie cultural norms. How better to do this, they ask, than through drag? Belied by the color photo of a queen on the cover, the concept of drag they deploy is not necessarily conflated with gender; rather, it is more broadly “the representation of oneself as another” (1). These essays clearly reveal the extent to which hegemonic heteronormativity is maintained and the gender binary is policed through repetitive performances of folk and popular traditions. The thread that weaves these seemingly disparate tales together is the “drag” element in each: that-which-is-not-as-it-appears calls itself out as opposite and, in doing so, reinforces and verifies the accepted and trusted norm.

Tye’s essay, “What’s Under the Kilt?,” focuses on the obsession our contemporary culture has to be reassured that men who wear Celtic kilts really do have male genitalia under their frocks. In a culture which dictates that only females wear skirts, Tye suggests the ancient tradition of kilt-wearing threatens to transgress gender rules and question their stability. She argues that a counter tradition of male kilt-wearers overtly displaying their manhood—even to the point of revealing their masculine parts—has risen to answer this problem, for they have no desire to be mistaken for female—or worse, cross-dressing men.

“Three Dark Brown Maidens and the Bromtopp,” co-authored by Greenhill and Marcie Fehr, enters ethnicity, along with gender, into the drag component. They describe the New Year’s Eve tradition of the Bromtopp in rural Manitoba Mennonite
villages in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as similar to that of Christmas mumming in Newfoundland: “it has been variously explained as a ritualization of social relations and solidarity, and expression of otherwise repressed hostilities, an indication of fear of strangers, and a dramatization of socioeconomic relations or sex/gender roles” (17). The Bromtopp—so called for the name of the drum used to provide accompaniment—was a ten to fifteen minute singing performance staged by a dozen or so young men in various households as they made their rounds through their community. Their singing of and dancing to a traditional song was felt to bring good favor on the household; in turn, they were given money and often alcohol, which fueled this rather bizarre break from strict Mennonite behavioral norms. Many members of the troupe cross-dressed to appear as women, but, as the authors stress, were careful to not do so convincingly enough to pass as female or to be judged physically attractive. Greenhill and Fehr argue that this was done to “control and repress trans expressions as well as to fortify internalized homophobia” in a culture that placed a high value on gender roles, heterosexuality and marital fidelity (29). Often troupe members performed ethnic drag, wearing costumes, masks and using blackface to mimic First Nations, Asian or Jewish stereotypes. This was done as a means of constructing identity by the recently immigrated Mennonite community, reason the authors, “of posturing the self as known in relation to the mysterious, even incomprehensible other” (35). They articulately meld their analysis of this folk practice with theory by concluding that the seemingly privileged white male Bromtopp performers were actually suffering an acute identity crisis and that through their ritualized performance they were constructing and maintaining their social system of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Lest the reader assume that the other eleven essays are similar variations on ethnic or gender drag being deployed in folk tradition to construct or reinforce identity, consider another seasonal example, “Sexing the Turkey” by LuAnne Roth. In her exploration of the turkey as represented in a few examples of popular culture, Roth suggests that the boundaries between humans and animals (turkeys, here)
may not be as absolutely rigid and that, in fact, turkey sexuality implicates human sexual behavior. The editors label this “transbiology,” arguing that it is yet another instance of drag, when animals masquerade or transform as humans and humans as animals. In her analysis of the horror film trailer Thanksgiving (2007), Roth manages a queering of transbiology as she claims that Thanksgiving is a repetitive, ritual enactment of violence—directed at the turkey—meant to reinforce patriarchal domination. In this macabre film’s final scene, a huge platter sits on the holiday table, bearing “instead of a roast turkey, a man’s supine body—knees spread, feet bound, flesh roasted...a young man’s head stuffed into the turkey's neck hole and an apple stuffed into its mouth [and] one last shocking glimpse of the aproned killer standing at the head of the table and copulating with the body” (167). This, claims Roth, demonstrates the violence associated with the ritual surrounding the turkey, where it is killed, “dressed,” roasted and then carved—by a man.

As Roth seemingly intended, this volume is unsettling at times. It is also groundbreaking, as I hope the examples I described have demonstrated, in its analyses of a multitude of folk and popular culture themes through the lens of drag. The editors have skillfully selected a variety of essays that interpret traditional and contemporary cultural expressions and performances within a framework of gender and sexuality theory. Unsettling Assumptions should be on the bookshelf of everyone interested in the intersection of gender and folklore.

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