

Perchta the Belly-Slitter and Her Kin: A View of Some Traditional Threatening Figures, Threats and Punishments

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Schweig, oder die wilde Berta kommt! (Grimm 1974, 268).

Del lavor delle feste, il diavolo si veste (Büchli 1990, 791).

Every land save feyther's was called hag-begagged, to keep us childer in proper bounds belike (Madox-Brown 1876, vol. 2, 252). [1]

Abstract

In the contemporary folklore of Austria, Frau Perchta (active during the twelve days of Christmas) is depicted as the rewarder of the generous and the punisher of the bad. But the punishments she inflicts, such as ripping out a person's guts and replacing them with refuse, do not seem to fit the crime. This paper links Perchta's behaviour, and that of other bogeyman figures, to their historical context. Initially Perchta was the enforcer of communal taboos, hunting down those who spun on holidays or who failed to partake sufficiently in collective feasting (a propitious act designed to ensure future plenty). However, with the growing involvement of peasant women in the market economy (particularly for textiles), Perchta's role changed to the punisher of the lazy. Yet Perchta's previous roles survive, in attenuated form, in each new incarnation.

Tracing Lost Links between Legendary Punishment and Offence

As any schoolgirl knows, the Danaides, fifty daughters of a fabled king of Argos, murdered their bridegrooms on their wedding night, and were condemned to pour water into sieves for all eternity. Less well known is the precise background to this punishment. In fact, the perfidious brides are vainly attempting to carry water to a nuptial bath that was never prepared for them (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 2, 69–70 and vol. 7, 1665; Ranke and Brednich 1977ff., vol. 3, 267–70). Carrying water in a sieve or the like is a motif that does occur in at least one of the stories about Frau Perchta, but it is only marginal there. More important is that, if we seek, there turn out to be cogent reasons for the incongruous-seeming punishments meted out by Perchta and her kin, just as there are for that inflicted on the Danaides.

Who is Perchta?

Who is, or was, the Frau Perchta of southern German and Austrian folklore? A short answer might be that, like our own Father Christmas or the Italian Befana,

she is a mysterious figure said to be at large at one time or another during the Twelve Days of Christmas, receiving offerings, rewarding those who conform to certain norms, and looking askance on those who do not. On the whole, Perchta is a sinister figure, who punishes the slovenly, the idle, the greedy, the inquisitive. Refractory children, and even adults, are in danger of having their stomachs ripped open by her. She will then remove the contents, even the intestines, and replace them with refuse. Just occasionally we glimpse a different side of Perchta's nature. Among the Slovenes she was a tall, powerfully built woman living in the groves and mountain chasms, but also in the depths of lakes in summer. In winter she withdrew to the inside of mountains, where, like Frau Holle, she made the snow. In the winter months she also occupied herself with spinning, and when the shepherds brought flax to her in summer, she blessed their flocks. The shepherds claimed often to see her walking above the steepest slopes at twilight, a golden spindle in her hand (Schmidt 1889, 414).

Romantic and Post-Romantic Mythologisation of Perchta

Not surprisingly, a tendency to mythologise has frequently characterised attempts to interpret a figure as mysterious as that of Perchta. Thus, in a recently published dictionary of folklore, we read: "She is thought to have originally been a goddess, like her northern counterpart Hulda, perhaps the earth-goddess Erda, but her mythical aspect declined with the advent of Christianity, and she was transformed into a witch or hobgoblin" (Jones 1995, 64).

At the back of such accounts lies, ultimately, the influence of Jacob Grimm, notably in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, four editions of which appeared between 1835 and 1878. Seeking to retrieve lost mythologems, the sole evidence for which were the reflexes produced by the distorting mirror of Christianity, Grimm believed he could descry a group of benign mother goddesses, who in Germanic times taught humanity the secrets of agriculture and household economy, and especially the peaceful arts of spinning, weaving, and tending the hearth. One such goddess was Perchta, dim memories of whom the common people had retained right up to the present (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 88). Her very name, which meant "shining one," testified to her former status, and to her relationship with classical deities such as Selene, the no less refulgent moon goddess, as well as Diana or Artemis (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 207 and vol. 3, 88). Not less importantly, there were also links with the northern pantheon. Another manifestation of Perchta was known as Stempe, a name for which Grimm persuasively suggests an etymological link with the "stamping" and other oppressive activities associated with such nightmarish figures. At the same time, he rather less convincingly postulates some sort of contamination with the name of a Germanic goddess Tanfana or Tamfana mentioned by Tacitus, thus providing Perchta alias Stempe with the same sort of Teutonic pedigree as that attributed to her north German counterpart Frau Holda or Holle. For were not Holle's names cognate with those of Scandinavian sorceresses and spirits of the woods known as Hulla, Huldra, Huldre (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 225–31)?

Grimm's speculations were to have far-reaching consequences, only to be touched on more or less at random here. Mannhardt, developing Grimm's ideas soon after the mid-nineteenth century, saw Perchta and Holda as heathen

personifications of natural forces. For Elard Hugo Meyer, writing about the turn of the century, the Scandinavian goddess Frigg was behind Perchta, Holda, and their sibling Fru Frick. Evidence of the link was provided not only, presumably, by the apparently related name Frick, but also by the spindle or distaff common to all three. At the end of the 1930s, Kranzmayer was still arguing that Perchta harked back to Germanic pre-literary tradition. In his work published in the 1950s, Josef Hanika contended that the Perchta of custom and legend had direct links with a pre-Christian supernatural figure, and that her alleged belly-ripping activities were a relic of prehistoric initiation rites (Kellner 1994, 329–31). As late as the 1970s, Beitzl divines behind the name Perchta a Germanic figure, “for which we admittedly have no evidence” (Beitzl 1974, 75). Wolfram also refers to the lack of pre-medieval evidence, but perceives “characteristics that cannot be other than pagan in the figures of Percht and Holle” (Wolfram 1980, 111). It is only scholars such as Rumpf (1973; 1976; 1980; 1991) and Kellner (1994; Ranke and Brednich 1977ff., vol. 10, 721–7) who, with their tenacity and intimate knowledge of the daunting terrain, can point out a way through the thickets. Even with such help, the well-meaning but ill-equipped traveller can still no doubt lose his way and come to grief.

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes

Save for a brief quotation from a dictionary of folklore, I have so far neglected Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Among the most recent to be recorded are those of Hilda Ellis Davidson (1993) in her *Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*. Davidson makes interesting comparisons, hinting at possible parallels between Perchta’s wagon or plough and English Plough Monday ceremonies, or between Perchta’s association with spinning and St Brigid’s affinity with the same activity. Some of the customs associated with Perchta, processions and visitations for instance, are also seen as similar, if not related, to the activities of the saint’s representatives, the *biddies*, fantastically arrayed youths who might visit Irish houses and terrify children on the eve of St Brigid’s Day, 1 February.

The gist of Davidson’s account seems to be that Perchta and Holle may be seen as belonging to a group of minor goddesses, a status to which their names bear witness, since *Perchta* appears to come from an adjective meaning “bright” or “glorious,” and *Holle* from one meaning “merciful,” “benign” (Davidson 1993, 113–7). Recent research suggests that such an interpretation of *Holle* stems from misreadings of medieval Latin texts, which in fact contain a word meaning simply “demon” (Kellner 1994, 339–40).

Interpreting Perchta’s Name

Our main concern is, however, with Perchta. On the face of it, her name is easy to interpret. Above all, she is associated with Twelfth Night and Epiphany, 5 and 6 January. *Epiphany* is a term denoting the earthly manifestation of a deity (Blackburn and Holford-Strevens 1999, 21). In eleventh-century German, the concept “feast of Epiphany” or “theophany” in the sense of “manifestation of Christ” is rendered by the loan translation *giperehtennaht*, in which the second element, *naht*, means “night,” and the first is a form of *giperaht-*, which means

“manifest” (Reps 1950, 259; Karg-Gasterstädt and Frings 1973, 881). The root of *giperaht-*, with its prefix *gi-*, is an adjective *beraht*, *peraht*, cognate with and meaning much the same as the English word *bright*. Whereas the word *bright* lives on in English, its German counterpart in time became obsolete, surviving, however, as a linguistic fossil in such compounds as *bërhtâbent/bërhtnaht*, literally “Manifest(ation) Eve/Night,” and *bërhtac*, literally “Manifest(ation) Day”, for 5 and 6 January. The true meaning of these being no longer understood, they were intuitively reinterpreted along the lines of “Eve/Night of Perht” and “Day of Perht,” with what was historically an adjective now being taken for a proper name (Lexer 1979, 190–1; Goebel and Reichman 1999, 1356–7). Thus, in the thirteenth century we first encounter a figure referred to as “Domina Perchta” (Rumpf 1991, 61ff.). The word at the back of *Perchta* is, incidentally, *pace* Kellner, etymologically unconnected with its near-homonym and possible usurper *Pracht*, meaning “noise” and, later, “pomp, splendour,” although the question is perhaps permissible as to whether that word came to influence ideas about Percht (Kellner 1994, 331–2; Lloyd and Springer 1988ff., 545–6). The spontaneous generation of Perchta is entirely in harmony with a general medieval tendency to personify feast and fast days. The linguistic and other evidence will, however, not bear the weight of a prehistoric divinity. As has recently been said, the extrapolation of Germanic traditions from considerably later texts is a procedure fraught with difficulties (Ranke and Brednich 1977ff., vol. 5, 1072). There is no conflict between such a statement and the one that Perchta, while extending her influence into new spheres, has also attracted and absorbed some traditions that are older than she herself is (Ranke and Brednich 1977ff., vol. 10, 725).

Such Names Result from Personification of Feasts and Fasts

If Perchta has been the subject of much speculation, so has her Italian counterpart, Befana (Manciocco 1995; Bagliani 1996). In fact, the latter’s name derives rather comparably from the Italian for “Epiphany” (Battaglia 1962, 142–3; Prati 1970, 120; Meyer-Lübke 1972, 256, no. 2879; Blackburn and Holford-Strevens 1999, 22). The names of many of Perchta’s other kin are no less transparent, and possibly the majority may be seen as personifications of feast-days or fast-days. In Alemannic areas, we have Frau Faste, who watches over the Ember Day fasts in December, from the 13th December, St Lucia’s Day, onwards. A German name for Ember-tide was *Fronfasten*, in which *Fron-* means “overlord’s,” the general sense being “fast during which feudal dues became payable.” The first element became obsolete much as did that of *bërhtnaht*, and popular etymology again brought about a personification, reinterpreting *Fron-* as *Frau*. The Frau Faste born of this process had much in common with Frau Perchta (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 2, 1232–4; Kluge 1989, 234). Another word for Ember-tide was *Quatember*, whence for instance the name Quatemberca, belonging to a Slovenian counterpart of Frau Faste (Rumpf 1991, 29). Then there is the Lower Austrian Pfinzdaweibl, the “Thursday woman,” thus named because Thursday was once a Sabbath-like day of rest under her vindictive jurisdiction (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 1, 572–3 and vol. 2, 333). And so one might continue. [2] Perhaps, however, it will be

sufficient to point to a parallel English tendency to personify red-letter days. This is discernible in figures such as Lazy Lawrence or Barnaby Bright (Wilson 1970, 31 and 448–9; Smith 1996).

Stories about Perchta

As a sequel to these observations, I shall now consider some material from a fairly recent survey of Austrian traditions relating to Perchta. The material was collected by Richard Wolfram around the mid-twentieth century, and published in a commentary dated 1980. The commentary accompanies maps showing the distribution of beliefs about Perchta (Wolfram and Kretschmer 1979). Commentary and maps form part of the *Austrian Folklore Atlas (AFA)*. Here are three stories collected by Wolfram from Gröbming, about seventy kilometres to the south-east of Salzburg.

The first is “Percht and the Prying Farmhand.” It tells how a farmer’s wife and her helpers prepared the best room of their house for the visit of Percht and her train of unbaptised children at Twelfth Night. Inquisitive, a farmhand crept into the great stove and spied out through a hole into the room. On arriving, Percht told one of the children attending her to block the hole. When, having espied nothing, the lad crept out of the stove following Percht’s departure, he was blind. On the advice of a hermit, he took up the same position in the stove exactly one year later. Returning as was her wont, Percht then commanded the same child that had stopped the hole to unstop it, whereupon the lad regained his sight.

Next, “Percht and the Cottager.” Following an addition to his already numerous family, a poor cottager went out at night in search of a godfather for his newly born child. He encountered Percht and her company of children. One of them was wearing nothing but a wretched, ragged little undergarment. Full of compassion, the man said: “Oh, you poor *Zodawascherl!*” Percht responded: “Since you have given the child a name, much good fortune will be yours.” Percht and her company vanished, but the man found a rich sponsor, to the lasting benefit of the whole family.

Our third story is “Percht and the Farmhand.” Percht was on a journey with her company of children who had died unbaptised. The way was uneven, and her carriage lost a wheel. Arriving on the scene, a farmhand was asked for help. He saw that a linchpin had broken. He put the wheel back and secured it with a new linchpin, which he carved from a piece of wood. Percht commanded him to keep the shavings as a reward. Afraid to refuse, he put a few in his pocket, and they turned to gold (Wolfram 1980, 20).

Such Stories and Motifs Not Exclusive to Perchta

So close are substance and tone of these twentieth-century Austrian traditions to ones presented by Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie* and elsewhere, that he, or for that matter one of his nineteenth-century folklorist contemporaries or successors, could well have been the source (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 226–29; 1974, 267–8, nos. 268–9; 1994, 302–3, nos. 267–8; Petzoldt 1978, 98–9, no. 160). For them, such lore was fraught with primitive significance. Grimm himself saw the punish-

ments meted out by Perchta as “strange and archaic” (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 226). The carriage of Frau Perchta, or the plough that sometimes took its place, harked back to those of Mother Earth. Perchta’s characteristically sudden appearances were a sure sign of her divinity, as was her dominion over elves and dwarves, warlocks and witches, and even the souls of unbaptised infants. “All these things smack of heathendom,” he remarks (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 234).

In fact, the present-day student of folk narrative will recognise many of the themes that find expression in the *AFA* material, and will perhaps allow that, although there are doubtless archaic elements here, there is little that “smacks of heathendom” in the way that Grimm meant. For instance, all three accounts of Perchta and her company of unbaptised infants echo in one way or another the story of the mother who in a dream or vision sees her dead child along with others, and is warned by it that her tears are depriving it of rest (Petzoldt 1978, 76, no. 126). As far as we know, this was first told by the Dominican Thomas Cantimpratensis in 1260, presumably to discourage excessive mourning. It was translated into German by Geiler von Kaisersberg about the beginning of the sixteenth century, and, entering popular tradition, it will then have become associated with Frau Perchta. Her words implying that, through being given the name of *Zodawascherl* the child of the second story has been redeemed, are similarly Christian in tenor. *Zodawascherl* means “ragged little mite,” and parallels from well beyond the confines of Austria spring to mind (Rumpf 1991, 31–3). Compare the Scottish story in which a drunkard without forethought redeems the ghost of an unchristened child by jocularly addressing it as “Short-Hoggers,” *hoggers* being footless stockings of the sort the child is apparently wearing (Briggs 1970–1, vol. B 1, 566).

Far from being miraculously intact repositories of prehistoric numinosity, stories such as Richard Wolfram’s thus rather demonstrate the tendency of migratory motifs and legends of diverse origin, some admittedly archaic in tone and perhaps ultimately in substance, to cluster around characters and events with which they have a thematic affinity (Rumpf 1991, 31ff.). Perchta’s carriage that the farmhand repairs can hardly be demonstrated to be the carriage or plough of Mother Earth. There is no doubt, however, that in Mecklenburg what is in effect the same story is told of Wauld the Wild Huntsman and his carriage (Petzoldt 1978, 143–4, no. 234), and the worthless-seeming reward that turns to gold is of course widely known (Rumpf 1991, 33). When in Wolfram’s story about the prying farmhand that person is blinded for a year, the removal and restoration of sight are not a prerogative of Perchta’s, but a power vested in many supernatural entities, including the Wild Hunt (Meier 1983, 135, no 151.2), of which Perchta, like diverse other figures, can be the leader (Kellner 1994, 281–318, especially 314). Not only can Perchta make you blind, she can also cause, and cure, usually again after a year has elapsed, other physical afflictions, such as head and back pains or lameness (Wolfram 1980, 46). What is archaic in all this is the idea that illness and injury can be inflicted by supernatural agencies. Whatever numen is cast in the appropriate role depends on the personnel to hand. Linguistic evidence can sometimes be adduced. Take the Scottish *elfshot* for various diseases of cattle and humans, its Norwegian counterpart *ålvskoten* meaning “lame,” or the still current German word for lumbago, *Hexenschuss*, literally “witches’ bolt” (Honko 1959, 46; Wright 1970, vol. 2, 247–8).

So far, we have touched on Perchta's affinity with unbaptised infants, the Wild Hunt, and related motifs. None of these is exclusive to her. Sometimes she will attract motifs that are even more obviously not "hers," as when she is exorcised by means of eggshells set up on the hearth as if they were saucepans, a subterfuge generally used to get rid of changelings (Petzoldt 1978, 236–7, no. 236). As has been hinted, she likewise shares with a number of otherworldly beings the ability to inflict and remove blindness or lameness. To view such attributes in their wider context can help explain them.

Some Punishments and Their Possible Link with Spinning

Although the motifs and attributes so far examined are by no means exclusive to Perchta, some less familiar ones might seem to be so. Take her mysterious preoccupation with belly-slitting alias gastrotomy. Where can its origins lie? Can it have something to do with an area of her influence so far hardly touched upon, namely spinning? Perchta ensured not only that those who performed that task were diligent at the proper times, but also that they respected certain restrictions, not working at night, for instance, or on certain high days and holidays. Certainly, her efforts to enforce obedience here quite naturally lead to a punishment that must claim our attention first. Here are two relevant stories, collected in 1867 and 1927, respectively. The first concerns a manifestation of Perchta known as Frau Berta alias Frauberta:

In Ronchi in the southern Tirol, there once came a knock on the door of a house where twelve women were spinning. There stood Frauberta, whom the women addressed as follows: "Greetings to you, Frauberta with the long nose." Frauberta answered: "Behind me is one with a still longer nose." In the end, there were twelve Fraubertas, each with a nose longer than her predecessor's, and they sat down on the chairs the women had meanwhile vacated. When the Fraubertas demanded buckets to fetch water in, the women knew they were in danger of being boiled alive. Instead of bringing buckets, they therefore brought baskets, in which the Fraubertas would be unable to carry water from the river. The women then quickly went home and got into bed with their husbands, where no harm could overtake them (Rumpf 1991, 28).

The baskets intended for use instead of buckets are perhaps reflexes of the sieves mentioned earlier, into which the Danaides were condemned to pour water. More important for present purposes is the implication that by spinning at night the women were defying a strict taboo. Night is the preserve of demons, and therefore not to be encroached upon (Moser-Rath 1963, 267–8; Röhrich 1976, 133). What is still puzzling is the nature of the punishment the women so narrowly escape. My assumption throughout these notes is that the punishments meted out by supernatural figures can generally be expected to suit the offences committed. Where the connection is obscure, we can sometimes cast light by adducing relevant material for comparison. Take the following, not unconnected, story from Carinthia, where the Quatemberca holds sway. As might be expected of a figure whose name is associated with *Quatember*, meaning "Ember-tide," she ensures that women refrain from spinning and related tasks during the Ember Days in December:

In Feistritz, a woman who was preparing to boil and scald her skeins was visited by another woman, a stranger, who offered to help. On going to a neighbour's to borrow a seething-tub,

the first woman was warned not to return home, since it was Ember Friday and her strange visitor might be the Quatemberca. Sure enough, the stranger then appeared at the window of the neighbour's house, saying: "Lucky for you that you didn't come back home with the tub. Had you forgotten that today is Ember Friday? After boiling the skeins, I would have boiled you" (Rumpf 1991, 29)!

I believe that the well-founded motif of boiling alive in the second story throws light on the similar threat of boiling alive in the first, where it is, however, unexplained by the immediate context. For an audience familiar with all the tasks associated with spinning the message would have been clear enough. Like their Feistritz counterparts, the spinning women of Ronchi in our first story will in due course have to boil their skeins. Here they too are in danger of receiving supernatural "help" that will in fact switch to the punishment of boiling alive. Abhorrent this may be by our standards, and if we take it literally, but it is hardly out of place or unexpected in a world where only the most powerful deterrents will ensure conformity to unwritten rules.

What the fictions under consideration convey is that if you spin or perform related tasks on a holiday, you can expect a penalty to match. [3] Boil skeins, and you will be boiled alive. Spin, and your guts will be spun out of your belly. This threat is also quite well documented, and, again, the punishment matches the offence (Wolfram 1980, 46). Is it here, then, that we have to seek the origin of Perchta's gastrotomy? No. Punishment and offence are admittedly congruous, but the connection between them is secondary.

Occasional Lack of Fit between Punishment and Offence

In fact, Perchta's gastrotomic proclivities, no longer fully understood, have been unconsciously adapted in various ways, fittingly or otherwise, by a process akin to the linguistic one of popular etymology. In the most up-to-date material, that provided by Wolfram in the *AFA*, evidence of her concern with spinning is marginal, for the simple reason that such an activity was already largely obsolete when the relevant surveys were made, even if it was resumed for a time after 1945 (Wolfram 1980, 47). She herself lived on, however, her main function now being to discourage such vices as slovenliness, sloth, and disobedience. Putting it differently, such a potent instrument of social control as Perchta had proved to be was too valuable to be discarded.

If we look at the *AFA* map showing punishments attributed to Perchta, we see that, within a fairly narrow band extending southwards from north of the city of Salzburg, and then eastwards through Styria, she is said to cut open the stomachs, usually of lazy or untidy people, and to fill them with domestic refuse, chaff, or splinters of glass (Wolfram and Kretschmer 1979, map 113d). That the punishment of lazy or untidy people should involve unswept dust or refuse makes sense, but why should the refuse be put into their stomachs? Compare another incongruous fact. At Schottwien, about seventy kilometres to the south-west of Vienna, Percht scrapes the tongues of lying children with glass. That also makes sense, in a rather horrible way. Less clear is why the best safeguard against this punishment is to eat a hearty meal (Wolfram 1980, 50).

What we must proceed from is that the common denominators in all this seem to be eating and stomachs.

Feasting and Fasting are Perchta's Primary Concern

Further clues are provided by Wolfram when he tells us that Twelfth Night—and we must not forget here that this and the following day belong to Perchta by virtue of her very name—is traditionally a time for feasting. In Styria there would be nine, that is three times the ritually significant number of three, courses to the feast, and a rather drastic Styrian saying was that it was no proper Twelfth Night (*"foaste Roahnacht"*) unless the chief farmhand gorged himself to the point of throwing up three times. A further saying, or belief, was that on 6 January Perchta's knife could be deflected by a well-filled belly. If at that time she came across an insufficiently rounded belly, she would slit it and fill the aperture with rags (Wolfram 1980, 46). Late medieval texts already contain the advice to eat heartily at Epiphany, lest Percht alias Stempe, whose name we have already seen linked with the "stamping" associated with nightmares, should come and trample the bellies of those who had not done justice to the copious fare provided (von der Hagen 1961, vol. 3, x, xiii and 33–5; Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 230; Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 8, 365; Rumpf 1976, 220–1).

Such texts have been wrongly taken to mean that Perchta threatens those who feast rather than those who fast on this occasion (Rumpf 1980, 71; Kellner 1994, 321). In later accounts, such as those from Orlagau and Voigtland cited by Grimm, we do in fact find Perchta and Werre or Holle ensuring that people fast—that is, eat only the ordained foods—on certain days. Interestingly, the sanctions mentioned also extend to spinning (Grimm 1968, vol. 1, 226–7). This activity seems to have been prominent among Perchta's interests from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, with the ousting of distaffs by spinning-wheels, and, presumably, the growing economic importance of young girls' communal work at the latter (Rumpf 1980, 57–8 and 71; 1991, 38 and 49).

We thus see that, although in the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed well before that, Perchta was invoked in support of the work ethic, but also for the very Christian purpose of ensuring that days of rest and fasting were observed as the Church ordained, an earlier function of hers was to encourage feasting as well as fasting at the proper times, a preoccupation that is, for instance, hinted at in a Tegernsee document of 1483 paraphrased by Rumpf (1991, 78). Of course, it makes sense to eat heartily while this is permitted and food is plentiful. The archaic implication is, however, that abundance of food on feast-days is somehow a guarantee of plenty later on, as reports from many parts of Germany show (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 2, 1048–9). Not to do justice to that abundance is to undermine the guarantee. English has a saying essentially to the same effect: *He who eats goose on Michaelmas Day/ Will never lack money his debts to pay*. Eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday is similarly beneficial. Compare also the widespread superstition that each mince pie consumed between Christmas Day and 6 January ensures a happy month (Opie and Tatem 1989, 178–9, 297–8 and 248–9).

In the twentieth century, when the link between Perchta and her concern with both fast and feast had been largely forgotten (Rumpf 1980, 72), the threat of gastrotomy lived on with changed emphasis, but still as a means of wielding social control. I would also tentatively suggest that where, in south-eastern parts of Austria, Perchta's counterpart Lutzel or Luzia opens the heads of lazy people and fills them with refuse, or cuts knees or, more often, heels, and fills the cuts with salt, we have a group of secondary motifs, developed locally or regionally from the no longer understood one of gastrotomy. Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, I am in no doubt, for reasons now to be set forth, that the threat of gastrotomy, originally meant to discourage undue abstinence or its opposite, is the primary motif.

Belly-Slitters, Belly-Crammers and their Kin in North-Western Europe

Just as many of the legends associated with Perchta are by no means exclusive to her, so it in fact turns out to be with the theme of gastrotomy and related themes. There is evidence of this from regions as remote from Austria as north-western Europe, where sanctions seem to have been attached not only to inappropriate eating on fast-days, but also to undue abstinence on feast-days, Shrove Tuesday alias Fastern's E'en in particular. Thus, in the late eighteenth century, in northern English farmhouses a cock and bacon were always boiled on that date, "and if any person neglect to eat heartily of this food Hobthrust amuses himself at night with cramming him or her up to the mouth with big-chaff" (Wright 1970, vol. 3, 188).

Big, or *bigg*, was a kind of barley, and Hobthrust was a northern Puck or hobgoblin, whose use or abuse of barley chaff may well have been proverbial. For instance, in Mark Lonsdale's late-eighteenth-century Cumbrian dialect poem "Th' Upshot" ("merrymaking got up by subscription on Shrove Tuesday"), concerning a greedy person looking forward to the said feast we are told: *Hobthrust will never have thee to choke with chaff* ("For aw's weel seer [I'm quite sure], Hob Thross'll ne'er/Ha' thee to chowk wa kaff, mun") (*Dialogues* 1839, 204; Gilpin 1875, 72; Wright 1970, vol. 3, 188). Crossing the Solway Firth to Gatehouse of Fleet, we find, dated 1793, a related account referring not to Fastern's E'en, but to Hallowe'en. Fairies and *gyar-carlings* were said to be abroad on that date, and, on meeting anyone they were displeased with, *to stap [them] full of butter and beare awns*; that is, to cram them with butter and barley awns, this latter substance being much of a muchness with the bigg-chaff mentioned above, and with the chaff often used for the same purpose by Frau Perchta. [4] What might incur such supernatural displeasure on the part of the *gyre-carlings* we are not told, but we may safely assume a failure on the part of the victim to eat as the occasion required, especially as butter is mentioned, a food for feasts rather than fasts. Significantly perhaps, from the section of the same account in which there is talk of the Brownie, we gather that he for his part is well able to do justice to his fare: "Sometimes he would work, and sometimes eat, till *he bursted*" (Heron 1793, vol. 2, 227-8; italics as in original).

In Scottish lore, the *gyre-carling* is a powerful ogress reminiscent of Frau Perchta. Just as Perchta was notoriously ugly, and remarkable for her long nose, sometimes said to be made of iron, the *gyre-carling* was a witch of hideous appearance, and she may have been similarly *long-nebbed*, an epithet that means

“long-nosed,” but also has preternatural connotations in Scottish lore (Wright 1970, vol. 3, 647–9). Intriguingly, like Luzia the *gyre-carling* could wound her victims in the heel, using an iron club (Lindsay 1931–6, vol. 3, 12–13). In Fife, Briggs tells us, women were anxious to spin off all their flax on the last night of the year. If any was left unspun, the *gyre-carling* would carry it off before morning. Perchta imposes similar penalties on any female foolish enough not to have spun off her flax by Twelfth Night (Wolfram 1980, 47). To her account Briggs adds that in parts of Scotland it is still considered unlucky to leave a piece of knitting unfinished at the end of the year, although this is “not now with any reference to the Gyre-Carling” (Briggs 1977, 213). At John o’ Groats, that demon was active rather between Candlemas and Fastern’s E’en, disturbing and frightening the whole family with her own spinning if the spinning-wheel had not been put out of action and sained at night. Like Perchta, however, she would also reward spinsters with whom she was pleased (Banks 1939, 161–2).

Proceeding still farther northwards, to the Faroes, we find a counterpart to the *gyre-carling* known as the *grýla*. The *grýla* is associated with Lent, when children who hankered after meat were deterred with a rhyme that translates as follows:

Down comes a grýla from the mountains,
With forty tails,
Bag on back,
Sword in hand;
Comes to cut out the stomachs of the children
Who are crying for meat in Lent (Williamson 1948, 247–8; Jacobsen and Matras 1961, 131).

The aforementioned examples would seem to show that gastrotomy and related punishments are not a prerogative of Perchta. Moreover, now that we see such punishments in what seems to be their proper context of feasting or fasting, the search for prototypes in history and prehistory ceases to be a be-all and end-all. The punishment, having so to speak grown out of the corresponding offence, relates to it perfectly naturally in the here and now. The fact that punishment and offence are homorganic and congruous does not of course make the search for precedents irrelevant. The Striges were reputed to prey on their victims’ intestines, St Erasmus had his ripped out on a windlass, and there are accounts of people who violated trees being disembowelled as a penalty (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 1, 938; Grimm 1955, vol. 2, 269–70; Ranke and Brednich 1977ff., vol. 5, 740–4; Wolfram 1980, 53). Just as Perchta herself may have inherited this or that facet of her character from something in prehistory or history, so the theme of gastrotomy may well have its remote or less remote prototypes. The point is that, seen in its proper, contemporaneous context, it makes sense.

Interpreting the Roles of Threatening Figures

From this it follows that all aspects of threatening figures should, as far as possible, be considered in their proper context; that is, synchronically. That would mean focusing on the actual role of such figures at a particular point in time or period, without, however, abandoning the diachronic perspective where this was relevant. There can be little doubt that since medieval times, when a

figure known as Perchta was first recorded, she has been an instrument of social control. The type of control has, however, varied. At the outset, Perchta's task seems to have been the supervision of feasting and fasting, her preoccupation with which, incidentally, survives according to Wolfram in that, among the Czechs, gastrotomy is a punishment for those who do not fast, whereas in Bavaria and Austria it awaits those who eat too little at the appropriate time (Wolfram 1980, 53). By the seventeenth century, Perchta was more concerned with ensuring that people worked or did not work at particular times. The work that interested her most was spinning, the people performing this being girls and women. Later still, within living memory, as the importance of spinning waned, her influence extended to embrace work of all kinds, and the work ethic and acceptable behaviour in general. The legends and sayings about her, locked into memorable shapes like any other conventionalised poetic utterance, did not necessarily adapt to her changing social role. Hence the essential incongruity of some such utterances, and the difficulties we can experience in interpreting them.

Some Threatening Figures of the English-Speaking World

So far the aim has been not so much to demythologise Perchta—there can after all be little doubt that throughout her recorded history she has been a figure of popular or “lower” mythology—as to make her seem less alien and bizarre. Even her “strange and remote” belly-ripping activities have been shown to have parallels in our own, north-western, corner of Europe, and to be a natural corollary of a preoccupation with feast and fast. Of course, a threatening figure must by its very nature be endowed with extra-normal qualities, but it needs to be emphasised that the English-speaking world also has such figures. John Widdowson's *If You Don't Be Good*, a study of verbal social control in Newfoundland, provides examples in plenty, many of which must ultimately derive from the British Isles. In the interest of further familiarisation of what may still seem outlandish, I shall now try to relate some of Widdowson's arguments and examples to the foregoing.

In his study, Widdowson distinguishes three types of threatening figure. Class A comprises supernatural, fictitious and invented figures; Class B is made up of human beings with unusual characteristics; Class C consists of animals, objects, locations and natural phenomena (Widdowson 1977, 95). Among the threatening figures in Class A is, for instance, Santa Claus. To see him as such may seem strange, but he immediately qualifies when we realise that, in Newfoundland at least, he will take naughty children away in his sack or, in lieu of presents, leave them unpleasant objects in their stockings. Such punitive behaviour is not all that remote from that of Perchta and some of her counterparts or helpers such as Krampus or Knecht Ruprecht. Perchta herself is often portrayed with a basket on her back, from which dangle the legs of bad children she has come to take away (Wolfram 1980, 45; Rumpf 1991, 218). When it comes, however, to gifts consisting of unpleasant objects, she takes the further step, as we have seen, of inserting them in her victims' bellies. Compare also with the Burgenland Luzia's aforementioned habit of opening heads and filling them with rubbish, the

Newfoundland threat that Santa Claus will “put the hammer into” a naughty child’s head (Widdowson 1977, 207–8 and 225–6).

A more general point is that it can be hard to distinguish between members of Widdowson’s Classes A and Class B. Santa Claus is, for instance, a supernatural or fictitious figure, but he can also be translated into everyday reality, as any young father donning red suit and white beard at Christmas will know full well. Newfoundland mummers rather similarly model themselves on supernatural figures (Widdowson 1977, 233–7). In this, and in the fact that they act in socially abnormal ways and look abnormal, they very much resemble the *Perchten*, those lads and men in grotesque disguises who emerge during the Twelve Days of Christmas in parts of Germany and Austria (Rumpf 1991, 94ff.). There is also a parallel with the Shetland *skekkel*s or *grül*iks, the Orkney *gyros* (Jacobsen 1897, 52; Marwick 1975, 106–7), and the Faroese Shrovetide *grýlas*—these last, once presumably disguised to represent the monster of that name, having more recently dressed up as Redskins “or anything else that takes their fancy” (Williamson 1948, 247; Jacobsen and Matras 1961, 131). The monsters that seem originally to have inspired the guisers have, incidentally, much in common. If the *grýla* was a two-legged sheep with forty tails, perhaps reflected in the Orkney *gryllyan* (Marwick 1929, xxxv–vii and 62–3), the Shetland *skekkel* alias *grül*ik was “a monstrous coalescence of horse and rider,” with fifteen tails and fifteen children on each, while the Orkney *gyro* had many horns and several tails (Marwick 1975, 32). [5] In fact, the Orcadians representing *gyros* on Gyro Night, early in February, were dressed up as old women, thus owing less to the mythical horned animal from which they apparently took their name, than to the ogress whose name, *gyre-carling*, is similarly derived (Marwick 1975, 107; Grant and Murison 1929ff., vol. 4, 341–2).

Such Figures and the Social Control of Children

The Irish biddies cited by Davidson are in some ways analogous. They are fantastically arrayed youths who terrify children. However, they get their name from the saint whose festival they mark, *biddy* being a form of *Brigid* (Simpson and Weiner 1989, vol. 2, 176), and they can hardly be seen as mimicking her putative behaviour. Nor can we make the direct link between Brigid and Perchta that Davidson seems to imply (Davidson 1993, 116–7). It is possible that the biddies and their Continental counterparts known as *Perchten* predate both Brigid and Perchta, but on becoming associated with these figures were named after them (Rumpf 1973, 131–2). The most we can say in the present context is that in parts of Europe, the winter months see disguised lads and men processing, visiting houses, and, through their abnormal behaviour, frightening children in particular. Their antics may be modelled on behaviour attributed to local threatening figures, and one function or by-product of such antics may be the social control of children.

Threats, Congruous and Incongruous

We now need to look at some of the actual threats directed by Newfoundland parents at their offspring and recorded by Widdowson. My main aim in

considering these threats will be to show that, although offence and allegedly impending consequences will in principle, as one might expect, be well matched, cultural attrition and/or variation can lead to incongruities, much as when Perchta is, rather confusingly, said to slit the stomachs of idlers and insert the rubbish they have not swept up (Wolfram 1980, 46). The preoccupation with rubbish makes perfect sense in the circumstances; strictly speaking, gastrotomy does not, except to the extent that that is what Perchta is well known for. Where the relationship between offence and punishment has become skewed in this way, a comparative approach can sometimes help us glimpse what the original relationship must have been. Even our view of apparently appropriate punishments can sometimes benefit from such an approach. For instance, it "makes sense" that in Urbersdorf Luzi cuts open the knees of children who will not wash their legs, and then inserts salt (Wolfram 1980, 52). In fact, a process akin to that of popular etymology seems to have been at work, rationalising Luzia's usual activity of heel-cutting, which may in turn, as I have already suggested, derive, by a similar process of unconscious adaptation, from that of belly-slitting.

First of all, some examples of perfect congruity, as when, in Newfoundland, fairies are said to bite off your toes if you refuse to cover your feet in bed, the Boogey Man will hack off your thumb if you suck it, or Cut Arm will do as his name suggests if you wipe your nose on your sleeve (Widdowson 1977, 128, 185 and 201). On the same general principle, but with an inanimate object as agent, a knife will fall on your tongue if you are so rude as to stick it out (Widdowson 1977, 304).

On the other hand, there is slight incongruity in the threat that the little people or fairies will tickle children laughing in church, so that they grow up as giggling morons. Tickling and laughter are of course very appropriately matched. Conceivably, the fairies, like their cousins as far afield as Russia (Warner 2000, 87), were well known for tickling, which in Newfoundland at least was seen as a cause of afflictions such as mindless giggling or a distorted mouth (Widdowson 1977, 129). One might, however, object that fairies hardly belong in church. There is much the same sort of incongruity in the threat that fairies will abduct a child who puts on her clothes inside out, since to do just that is traditionally a protection *against* fairies (Widdowson 1977, 126, 133–4 and 137). In each example, incongruity is perhaps due to the attrition of traditional belief in, and knowledge of, fairies and their ways. This does not mean that a child, relatively ignorant as it must be of the cultural background, will find the threats unconvincing. As experienced by the child, an incongruous threat is not necessarily an ineffective one.

A Comparative Approach to Threats

Much the same applies to the following: "If you go to school and get lousy the lice will carry you to Goose Pond" (Widdowson 1977, 302)! A child living locally and thus addressed would know, or at least quickly learn, that Goose Pond was a real and dangerous place, and the grotesque idea of lice dragging him/her there would make the threat all the more terrifying. A dispassionately inquiring adult must, however, question the link between lice and a pond. Congruity is at least to some extent restored if we take for comparison the presumably cognate

Northern Irish example: "Children are warned that if they do not allow their heads to be combed with a 'fine tooth comb', the podes ['lice'] will make ropes of their hair, and drag them into the sea and drown them" (Wright 1970, vol. 4, 565).

The advantages of a comparative approach are better illustrated by the following Newfoundland example, since rather more parallels can be adduced: "A child was often told that if you ever struck your parents then the devil would make your hand stick up out of the grave, forever" (Widdowson 1977, 110). One parallel is a Scottish saying addressed to anyone who has dealt a blow: "Your hand'll wag abune the grave for this yet." This in turn derives from, or is at least related to, a Clackmannanshire legend about a wicked laird who, having struck a holy father, was found in death to have his clenched fist projecting from his grave, "a punishment sent upon him by heaven." A modern parallel, dated 1984 and originating from County Durham, runs as follows: "The hand that strikes a parent will wag above its owner's grave, and a puppy dog will wee on it" (Opie and Tatem 1989, 186). In fact, parallels are to be found much farther afield, but rather than pursue these we return to Newfoundland, to note another punishment, less congruously reserved for a child that strikes a parent. Here the original perpetrator is Petticoat Luc(e), who is banished to the Red Sea to make ropes out of sand, a task at which she can never succeed. She will, however, return to carry off other naughty children to join her in exile (Widdowson 1977, 154).

Two points are perhaps worth making here. First, banishment to the Red Sea and being condemned to make ropes of sand are venerable and widespread motifs that seem to have attached themselves fortuitously, if not incongruously, to Petticoat Luc(e) (Baughman 1966, 180, Motif E437.2(c); Aarne and Thompson 1973, 369, Type 1174, *Making a Rope of Sand*). Second, whereas what we may call the "plots" of the threats discussed in the previous paragraph are constant, the threatening figures are subject to considerable cultural variation, ranging as they do from the Divine to the Devil. For that matter there need be no threatening figure at all. A threat that runs "Your hand'll wag abune the grave for this yet" is still a threat, even in the absence of any agent.

Are Threats More Durable than Threatening Figures?

Do most traditional threats used for social control lack threatening figures? Were such threatening figures once more common, only to be lost through cultural attrition? To answer these questions properly, one would need to draw a boundary line between threat and superstition, and other forms such as the cautionary legend, a task that cannot be attempted here. All we can say in the circumstances is that threat, superstition and cautionary tale all give expression to taboos, and can do this perfectly well without a threatening figure. There is a common superstition—or is it just a "saying"?—that eating crusts makes one's hair curly. Children of a certain age are, however, more likely to be influenced by a figure known as the Crust Man, judging by his apparent popularity among Newfoundland parents. He will visit a child rejecting crusts and, for instance, make all his/her teeth drop out (Widdowson 1977, 193). This sort of evidence seems to suggest that threats directed at younger, more impressionable, children are the most likely to feature threatening figures. It seems reasonable to assume

that a child that has not outgrown a belief in Santa Claus or comparable figures will also respond to the figures associated with threats.

Hazarding a guess in response to the second question, as to whether threatening figures were once more common, I would say yes. We have already mentioned Briggs's observation that leaving a piece of knitting unfinished at the end of the year, although still considered unlucky, no longer calls up any reference to the *gyre-carling* (Briggs 1977, 213). In such a context, that figure would nowadays seem as incongruous as the Evil One, once invoked in comparable superstitions about leaving thread on wheel or distaff at Christmas (Opie and Tatem 1989, 401).

Primordial Experiences and Deep-Seated Taboos Associated with Threatening Figures

If we take an obviously archaic taboo, essentially remote from biblical and Christian tradition—to wit the taboo against eating blackberries after Michaelmas or the more convincingly heathenish Hallowe'en—threatening figures are seen to be general. They vary from the Devil to the Phooka and fairies (Opie and Tatem 1989, 29; Vickery 1995, 45–6). A west Wiltshire informant tells me that as a child he was cautioned against picking maggoty blackberries, “because the fairies had weed on them.” In my own, north Midland, family the witch has got into them after 30 September.

Straying beyond the strictly prescribed limits of one's own community can be seen as behaviour crying out even more loudly for verbal control. Newfoundland threats have been recorded that discourage such behaviour in children, but the corresponding cautionary narratives feature both children and adults, some of whom return from their experience “in the fairies” suffering from mental or physical injury (Widdowson 1977, 124–8; Narváez 1991, 336–68). While fairies are generally at the back of such experiences in Newfoundland, people who went astray in England were *pixy-led*, *pouk-ledden*, or, proverbially, led by Robin Goodfellow (Briggs 1977, 330–1 and 333; Wright 1970, vol. 4, 531 and 635; Wilson 1970, 681). In Germany spirits such as the Buschmutter, Rauhe Else or Rübzahl are or were to blame, and in Russia the *leshii* or wood-demon can still be cited (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 4, 776–8 and 1370; Warner 2000, 81–6). The primordial experience, profoundly exciting but potentially terrifying, of straying into the unknown is almost bound to be associated with alluring yet threatening figures. In the absence of these, it is “it” that leads astray. Russian is truer to the underlying experience, in which the lost person is so to speak out of control, when it says, impersonally, “in the forest there takes place leading astray” for what we would express personally, if also, significantly, in the passive, as “I/we etc. get lost in the forest” (Warner 2000, 86). German can also somewhat comparably on occasion refer to an impersonal “it,” or “a magic,” that causes disorientation (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 4, 776–8).

Conclusion

The main aim of these notes has been to draw some Continental traditional punishments and threatening figures, with the cautionary narratives and sayings

clustering around them, into the orbit of anglophone experience, thus, it is to be hoped, making them less remote and a little more comprehensible. Many webs have been woven around such figures over the decades, and around the punishments they are said to mete out. To pull the webs aside can help us glimpse the figures beneath as they really are. Such attempts must not of course be allowed to damage the figures themselves. Familiarisation must not breed contempt. For this author at least, Perchta and her kin remain potent figures, charged with significance. Their essential mystery remains untouched by the necessary task of demystification.

Notes

- [1] *Begagged*, or rather *begaged*, with the second syllable pronounced as that of *engaged*, is a west-country word meaning “bewitched” (Wright 1970, vol. 1, 226).
- [2] It is hard to agree with Rumpf in her contention that the name *Posterli*, belonging to a German–Swiss manifestation of Perchta, contains the Slavonic element *post*, meaning “fast” in the sense of “abstinence from food” (Rumpf 1976, 233; 1991, 33). The root is surely a native one (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 5, 1793–4 and 1796, footnote 278).
- [3] Apparently related stories are not hard to find, and would probably be worth bringing into the equation (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 1, 569 and vol. 2, 1232–3; Müller 1978, vol. 2, 157–9, no. 720 and vol. 2, 244, no. 868).
- [4] Compare such Scottish sayings as *A wamefou’s a wamefou* [“bellyful”], *were’t but o’ bear-caff* [“barley-chaff”], or *It is a’ butter and bear-caff*, meaning “gross flattery” (Grant and Murison 1929ff., vol. 1, 70, vol. 2, 335 and vol. 10, 33). In connection with Perchta’s chaff, it might be worth mentioning the Iserlohn custom of presenting with a dish of hay and chaff the member of the family who got up last after the longest night of the year, 21 December. This date, marking the beginning of the Christmas period, was the feast of Thomas, who in popular belief had much in common with Perchta and Luzia (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 3, 1299 and vol. 8, 763–8; Beitl 1974, 801–3). There were traditions that one should eat heartily so as not in the following months to starve to death and, like mince pies, the ring-shaped cakes baked and eaten then brought luck (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927–41, vol. 8, 764).
- [5] Compare the Icelandic motif G219.8.1: *Witch with fifteen tails* (Boberg 1966, 140).

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