

Oedipus and Identity in Victorian Cornwall: the Giant Stories

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Abstract

The most important Cornish giant stories are outlined and put into context, especially the story of “Tom and the Tinkeard” which is viewed as a “myth of origin”. The relationship between folklore and social change is explored. The revival is briefly described and set in a nineteenth century European context. The psychoanalytic theory of Oedipus is described and compared with key elements in the Cornish giant narratives. In conclusion, the stories are interpreted as a response to conflict around identity generated by industrialisation and social change.

The stories

In the British Isles, as elsewhere, stories about giants are mostly found in the Highland zone, to the north and west. So we find, for instance, the Fomorians of Tory Island, Ysbaddaden Pencawr in the story of “Culhwch and Olwen”, and the adventures of Cuchullain among the Scottish giants.¹ In southern Britain, Cornwall has always stood out for the number of its giant tales, and within Cornwall itself they are often associated with the far west. Often they are depicted as the “creators of landscape”, features which appear to be artificial yet are beyond the strength of ordinary men,² and this is why the Cornish countryside is dotted with names like the Giant’s Cave at Lemorna, the Giant’s Hand on Carn Brea, and the Giant’s Hedge at Looe.³ Giant’s “Quoits” are particularly common, as at Lanyon, Trevethy and elsewhere, for instance.⁴ The context of the stories thus places the giant firmly in the context of myth of origin, and in the past giants were often seen as a memory of ancient gods.⁵ However this may be, there is no doubt that giants are firmly embedded in the Cornish landscape. For instance, the giants of Trecrobben, commonly named Trencrom, a rough granite hill near Lelant to the west of Carn Brea, built a castle whose four entrances “still remain in Cyclopean massiveness to attest the Herculean powers by which such mighty blocks were piled upon each other”,⁶ and there the giants conducted human sacrifice. Their gold and jewels were hidden in the caves, “in the days of their troubles, when they were perishing before the conquerors of their land.”⁷ Their treasures remain to this day, guarded by Spriggans, or Trolls.⁸ Interestingly, Hunt sets this ancient legend carefully in the new industrial landscape of his own time where:

“Around the towns of Camborne and Redruth are seen hundreds of miners’ cottages, and scores of tall chimneys telling of the mechanical appliances which are brought to bear upon the extraction of tin and copper from the earth.”⁹

Though the old treasures of the giants may be kept safe by the Spriggans, who are considered by some to be the ghosts of the giants, modern man has power to make the earth give up its ancient mineral wealth.¹⁰

The associations with stone, buried treasure, and human sacrifice or cannibalism, are characteristic of the giant and his stories. Stupidity is also a common feature, as in Hunt’s

story of the giant Bolster. Bolster lived on the hill once known as Carne Bury-anacht, the sparstone grave now called St. Agnes' Beacon. He was such an immense size that he could stand with one foot on the Beacon and the other on Carn Brea six miles away, as shown in Cruickshank's striking frontispiece to Hunt's book. Bolster had a wife, and he made her work clearing stones. He fell in love with the beautiful Saint Agnes, who would not reciprocate, and who grew tired of him pestering her. Eventually she asked him to prove his love for her by filling a hole in the cliff at Chapel Porth with his blood. Bolster thought he could do this with ease, and cut his arm to allow the blood to flow. Hour after hour it flowed, but still the hole was not filled because, as the saint had known all along, the hole opened out into the sea, and so the giant died, and the hole at Chapel Porth is stained red to this day.¹¹

Apart from being stupid and gullible, giants were often malevolent, cannibalistic ogres, though by the time these stories were collected they seem often to have degenerated into figures of fun, and, though they emerge from a dark, primeval past they inhabit a recognisably nineteenth century world peopled by tinkers, cobblers, and fishermen.¹² Nonetheless, giants were the aboriginal inhabitants of the land. In legendary history, Brutus, leader of the Trojans who invaded and named Britain, sent his deputy Corineus to govern Cornwall, because "it was there the giants were most numerous".¹³ Giants tend not to be individualised, and are usually anonymous, with the exception of the oddly named Bolster, John of Gaunt, Jack of the Giant's Hedge, Wrath of Ralph's Cupboard, and Dan Dynas of Treryn Dinas.¹⁴ As to their personal appearance:

"What the giants looked like, can be pieced out from the various stories. The great earthworks they lived in seemed naturally the work of huge men. So they ranged in height from Bolster, who could stride a double league – down to Tom of Bowjeyheer in Ludgvan. And he was a mere eight foot. They are said to have dwindled in size from generation to generation."¹⁵

Though often bowdlerised for a child audience, the stories show that giants were dangerous. The Nancledry giant "lived principally on little children, whom he is said to have swallowed whole", and the Trebiggan giant lived on children which he fried on a flat rock. They could be sexually predatory too, as we have seen in the case of Bolster and Saint Agnes; at Treryn one giant killed another, and took his wife.¹⁶ These behaviours, combined with their associations with caves and "castles", suggest an identification with the Freudian Id, "das Es":

"... the instinctual pole of the personality; its contents, as an expression of the instincts, are unconscious, a portion of them being hereditary and innate, a portion repressed and acquired."¹⁷

And in one particularly moving story a foolish but good-natured giant commits murder unconsciously, almost out of love:

The giant of Carn Galva was a gentle character who protected the people from the more warlike giants of Lelant. He was a playful, sociable giant, fond of a young fellow from Choon, who used to visit him. One day they were playing Quoits, when the giant "tapped" his playfellow on the head with the tips of his fingers. At

the same time he said, “be sure to come again tomorrow, my son, and we will have a capital game of bob”.

But the giant’s fingers had gone right through the boy’s skull, and though he tried to save him, it was no use. The giant mourned for his dead friend, but in seven years or so he pined away and died of a broken heart. The logan stone on which he used to rock himself remains at Zennor.¹⁸

Tom and the Tinkeard

The most ambitious giant story is the story of Tom and the Tinkeard, a “droll” and therefore part of the storyteller’s repertoire, which is told by both Hunt and Bottrell. Here is a summary of Hunt’s version:

A lad named Tom once lived in Lelant. Though rather lazy, he was very strong, and didn’t appear so very big a man in those days, when all men were twice the size they are now. Tom finally got a job drawing a brewer’s dray, and on the road to St. Ives he came across a score of men trying to move a fallen tree. Tom got down and lifted the tree unaided. A little further on, the road bent to bypass a giant’s house. Tom carried on to St. Ives, but on his way back he decided to take a short cut through the giant’s gate. After a while he came to the giant’s castle and the giant ran out, shouting angrily “what business have you here?” Tom defied him, and the giant tore up a tree and charged him.

Tom tore out the wheel and axle from his cart and prepared to defend himself. Blunderbuss the giant slipped and was impaled on Tom’s axle. Tom tried in vain to save the giant’s life, and in gratitude Blunderbuss left him his wealth, his livestock, and land, saying “take them all, only bury me decent”. Tom fixed his cart and drove back to Marazion, where he resigned his job at the brewery. Then he and his wife, Jane, went back to bury the giant and take possession of his castle.

The next episode of the droll entitled “Tom the Giant, his Wife Jane, and Jack the Tinkeard”, was, Hunt tells us, often performed as a “geese dance (guise dance)” at Christmastide, a kind of fancy dress dance involving cross-dressing which was apparently unique to west Cornwall. It introduces a new character, a “tinkeard” or tinker who

“wore such a coat as was never seen in the West Country before. It was made out of a shaggy black bull’s hide, dressed whole with the hair on. The skin of the forelegs made the sleeves, the hindquarters only were cut, pieces being let in to make the spread of the skirts, while the neck and skin of the head formed a sort of hood. The whole appeared as hard as iron; and when Tom hit the tinkeard, it sounded, as if the coat roared, like thunder. They fought until Tom got very hungry, and he found he had the worst of it. ‘I believe thee art the devil, and no man’, says Tom. ‘Let’s see thy feet before thee dost taste any more of my blood’. ... The tinkeard showed Tom that he had no cloven foot ...”

Tom took the tinkeard home, they became good friends, and, as Hunt says, “The story ordinarily rambles on”. The tinkeard describes his journey from his distant home across the land of Cornwall:

“In this land there were many giants, who digged for tin and other treasures. With these giants he had lived and worked – they always treated him well; indeed, he always found the bigger the man the more gentle. Half the evil that’s told about them by the cowardly fools who fear to go near them is false.”

The tinkeard never knew father or mother, or had a home to call his own, but had been christened Jack by a travelling tin merchant who took a fancy to him. Jack taught Tom how to plough, and plant a vegetable garden, the first in Cornwall, and showed his wife Jane how to brew beer. He also showed Tom how to slaughter and skin beasts. Various adventures ensue, and eventually Tom and Jane fall out. Jane goes back to her mother and gives birth to a son called Honey, who is suckled by a goat.

In another important episode Tom accidentally uncovers a heap of black and grey stones by the castle wall, while playing Quoits. “By the gods!” exclaims Jack, “it’s all the richest tin!” Tom had never heard of tin, so Jack showed him how to dress it. Later Jack and Jane find a secret room in the castle, containing the bones of the old giant’s wives, along with a hoard of splendid clothes and jewels.

The episodic narrative continues, and includes the defeat of the Lord of Pengerswick, an enchanter who tries to steal the secret of the tin, but is thwarted by Jack. Jack then felt a longing to go back to his distant home on Dartmoor, where he found the giant Dart on his deathbed, and forced him to give up his wealth. Having buried the giant and settled his mother’s affairs, he returned to Cornwall, where he married Tom’s daughter. But first Tom asked him to dispose of a troublesome giant who lived in Morva. Tom and Jack threw quoits at the giant’s house, and when he came out and chased them down the hill he fell into a trap which Jack had prepared in advance. Jack married Tom’s daughter, and young Tom married a Morva girl. At the joint wedding there was a great feast, with wrestling, hurling and Quoits.¹⁹

For all its episodic liveliness, the “Tom and the Tinkeard” saga enacts the origins of a community. Aspects of it are archaic – Jack’s strange coat, for instance, and Tom with his wheel and axle recalls images of the ancient Celtic sky gods.²⁰ Such images take us back to the dawn of European thought. Jack in his hide coat even recalls the “sorcerers” depicted in the caves of Les Trois Frères.²¹ (The discovery and publication of Palaeolithic art accelerated rapidly throughout the nineteenth century and peaked in the early decades of the twentieth). The stories also explain and celebrate some of the key elements of Cornishness: wrestling and tin, agriculture and mining, coming to an end in a communal enactment stretching far into the future, as Margaret Courtney wrote in 1886:

“on the following Monday [i.e. after August 1st] there was formerly a large fair, and although Morvah is a very small village without any attractions, the farmers flocked to it in great numbers to drink and feast, sitting on the hedges of the small

fields common in West Cornwall. ‘Three on one horse, like going to Morvah Fair’ is an old proverb.”

Jack’s discovery and sale of tin was also celebrated at Marazion.²²

Folklore and social change

Robert Hunt foregrounds giants under the section devoted to “Romances and Superstitions of the Mythic Ages”, a title which seems to be influenced by Max Müller’s “Mythopoeic age”, the time when conceptions of the Aryan gods first arose,²³ though Hunt of course does not attribute divinity to the giants at the beginning of his *Popular Romances of the West of England*, first published in 1865, and fronted by Cruikshank’s wonderful illustration of “the giant Bolster striding from the Beacon to Carn Brea”. Hunt’s book was based on a ten month walking tour of Cornwall in 1829, the first such field exploration ever conducted. On his journey he discovered the droll-teller, “an itinerant minstrel specialising in long, rambling, episodic narratives interspersed with song, which he often adapted to local situations”.²⁴ In many ways, Hunt’s groundbreaking research set a benchmark for subsequent folklore collectors in the British Isles. It also created a wide audience for Cornish folklore, and along with Bottrell’s *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, it ensured a prominent place for traditional narrative, and for giant tales in particular, in an emerging sense of Cornish distinctiveness.²⁵

Cornwall endured huge social change throughout the nineteenth century. Widespread hunger resulted in food riots, to which Cornwall was particularly prone. A third of the population emigrated, and the pace of industrial development devastated the landscape and caused thousands of casualties. At the same time, the opening of Brunel’s great bridge at Saltash in 1859, and the gradual incursion of the railways, were beginning to bring further cultural and economic change (though Cornish isolation may have been exaggerated in the past).²⁶ Some economic and political changes were perceived in Cornwall as being discriminatory, even when it came to extending the franchise:

“The uniform £10 householder qualification was designed as a rough-and-ready means of borough enfranchisement for those with sufficient property to be trusted with the vote. ... In high-rated London, working-class voters were not uncommon; in remote Cornwall or parts of Wales even some shopkeepers failed to qualify”.²⁷

As at the imposition of the English prayer book three hundred years before (which the Cornish rejected in the famous words: “We the Cornishmen [whereof certain of us understand no English] utterly refuse this new English”), cultural challenge produced a new assertion of Cornish identity, which took a variety of forms. In the circumstances of the time, political and military resistance were impossible, but the Cornish did assert their independence by turning away from the Church of England to Methodism, the only region in southern England to do so in substantial numbers.²⁸ The high number of food riots might also indicate an autonomist component which could not easily be articulated in Victorian Cornwall.²⁹ Such feelings were certainly powerfully present in early modern times, as the Tudor rebellions attest, and as Richard Carew noted in his 1602 *Survey of Cornwall*:

“... together with the Welsh, their ancient countrymen, namely, now fostering a fresh memory of their expulsion long ago by the English, they second the same with a bitter repining at their fellowship, and this the worst sort express in combining against and working them all the shrewd turns which with hope of impunity they can devise ...”³⁰

Mark Stoye’s books, too, reveal the extent to which a sense of national identity shaped Cornwall’s role in the Civil War, and on into the nineteenth century, in the writings of R. S. Hawker of Morwenstow, for instance.³¹

To a large extent the nineteenth century world was shaped by nationalism. The American Revolution took place in 1783, and the French defeat of the Austrians in 1797 allowed smaller nations to emerge from the shadows of empire; and whatever else it was, 1848, the “springtime of peoples”, was clearly also, and in international terms primarily, an assertion of nationality, or rather of rival nationalities. Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, and the rest asserted their right to belong to independent and unified states, embracing all citizens of their nations against oppressive governments, as did Czechs, Croats, Danes, and others, though with growing misgivings about the revolutionary aspirations of bigger nations, which seemed excessively ready to sacrifice their own.³²

Indeed, smaller national groups ruled by the more successful imperial states often fared badly. Ireland, for instance, lost half its population and much of its ancient culture, due to starvation and emigration during the famine years, and even little Cornwall suffered from mass emigration during the “Hungry Forties” and beyond, hence the frequent food riots, in Helston, Penzance, and elsewhere. Though nationalism was indeed a powerful force, its precise form of expression depended on local circumstances.

The Cornish revival

But interest in the history, language, and culture of Cornwall did grow throughout the century. Polwhele’s seven-volume *History of Cornwall* was published in 1816, and there were others. In 1826 Davies Gilbert published John Keigwin’s version of “Passyon agan Arluth” (“The Poem of Mount Calvary”).³³ Edwin Norris’s edition of the “Ordinalia”, the medieval Cornish masterpiece, came out in two volumes in 1859,³⁴ and attempts were made to gather the fragments of the Cornish language which remained, by Charles Roger of Stonehowle, supported by the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society, Thomas Quiller-Couch, Lord Mount Edgumbe, and others.³⁵ As elsewhere in Europe, cultural self-assertion could develop political implications, and the career of Henry Jenner, the founder of the Cornish language revival, illustrates this.

Of Jenner, his fellow language revivalist A. S. D. Smith (“Caradar”) wrote: “A’n Dasserghyans Kernewek et o tas mur y gerensa dhe Gernow y wlas, py fen-ny, na-ve ef ha’y weres bras?” (To the Cornish Revival he was a father; great was his love for Cornwall his land. Where would we be but for him and his great help?)³⁶

Jenner was born at St. Columb Major in 1848, the year of revolutions. In 1851 the family moved to south-east England, where Jenner grew up. In 1870 he became Junior

Assistant in the Manuscript Department at the British Museum, which seems to have stimulated his philological interests, and in 1873 he read his paper “The Cornish Language” to the Philological Society. In 1875 he toured West Cornwall with W. S. Lach-Szyrma, collecting Cornish language vocabulary. He presented his findings to the Philological Society in 1876. Later he discovered the Cornish “Charter Fragment” at the British Museum. Busy decades as a scholar and administrator followed, and in 1901 he became Vice-President of the new Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak (Celto-Cornish Society). His groundbreaking *Handbook of the Cornish Language* followed in 1904. Though few people can ever have learned to speak Cornish from Jenner’s *Handbook*, it was the first serious attempt to systemise the language, and was therefore the true beginning of the language revival. It apparently lost money, but Jenner was pleased to get a favourable response from clerks, small businessmen, shopkeepers, and workmen – those he described as “the classes that form the backbone of Cornish Methodism”. The book thus appealed to the least anglicised (and Anglicanised) section of the population. And, in addressing the question of language revival, Jenner linked it to the issue of national identity:

“Why should Cornishmen learn Cornish? There is no money in it, it serves no practical purpose, and the literature is scanty and of no great originality or value. The question is a fair one, the answer is simple. Because they are Cornish.”³⁷

The connection became still more explicit when, in the same year as the *Handbook*’s publication, Jenner delivered his speech, “Cornwall: A Celtic Nation” to the Celtic congress, which finally led to Cornwall’s admission to that body. Cornwall was a nation once again.³⁸

Perhaps the most enduring and popular symbol of Cornishness to emerge from the nineteenth century resurgence was Hawker’s rousing ballad “Trelawny”, an outstanding example of the then popular historical ballad genre. Though a Devon man by birth, Hawker acquired a deep love of Cornwall through his Cornish wife and his long years as a parish priest at Morwenstow.³⁹ Much of his literary work was inspired by Cornish history and legend, and though his “Song of the Western Men”, often called “Trelawny”, seems to be unhistorical, it has acquired the status of a Cornish national anthem. His other work is less well known but: “as a poet recounting and reinterpreting a pre-industrial age in an industrial one, Hawker has come to embody the essence of Cornish patriotism.”⁴⁰

Mark Stoye has argued that Hawker consciously manipulated Cornish history “to inspire a return to the good old Cornish values” and to turn back the clock to the day before John Wesley had “corrupted and degraded the Cornish character”, from Hawker’s own High Church perspective. In this sense he represents a continuation or revival of the Cornish identity of the Royalist Army in the Civil War, under the leadership of men like Sir Bevill Grenville, who was a particular hero of Hawker’s and inspired one of his best ballads.⁴¹ This brand of romantic nationalism contributed to the creation of a more hard-edged political movement in the twentieth century.⁴²

Right across Europe, folklore too played its part in the formation of new “imagined communities”. Organic views of development linked the growing folklore collection to notions of national character, in the work of the Finnish scholar Lönnrot, for instance, who

compiled the collections of Karelian stories published in 1835. More influential still were the two volumes of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*) published by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in 1812 and 1815.⁴³ The Grimms' methodology was widely copied, and was closely linked to the ideological position that the folklore of a people was uniquely expressive of its particular history and characteristics. The Grimms themselves came to believe this, and their views influenced other collectors such as the Norwegians, Asbjørnsen and Moe.⁴⁴ In Britain, Hunt and Bottrell were at the forefront of the folklore movement, and they both placed Cornish identity at the heart of their concerns. In the First Series of his *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, Bottrell, who even describes himself as "an old Celt", commits himself to telling the tales of West Cornwall, "the inhabitants of which are also distinguished by peculiar traits of character" and, like Hunt, at the forefront of these tales he places the giant stories. "From the dwellers in the lonely hamlets of the northern parishes have been obtained all the giant stories, and many weird legends belonging to this wild district".⁴⁵ Insofar as folklore was an essential component of the emerging national project, giants were the key to its symbolic success.

Many of the Cornish giant stories involve the overthrow and murder of what is often described as an "old" giant. Most of the aboriginal British giants were said to have been killed by Brutus and his Trojans, though some lingered on in Cornwall, whose new ruler, Corineus, killed the giant Gogmagog in a wrestling match at Plymouth (thus inaugurating Cornish wrestling). At Treryn Castle, "an ancient British fortress", there was a band of giants. A young giant had an affair with the leader's wife, and stabbed the old giant in the belly as he sat dozing in the Giant's Chair, then threw him into the sea. The giant lovers took possession of Treryn and lived there happily for many years.⁴⁶ The giant of Nancledry was a solitary misanthrope who ate children, as did the giant Trebiggan: antipathy between the "old" giant and young men or boys seems to have been common. Tom kills the giant Blunderbuss and inherits his castle, his wealth, and his wife, as we have already seen. The giant of Morva died and left twenty sons to inherit his estate, and a feast was founded in his memory. St. Agnes was driven to kill Bolster to escape his lust, and in a similar story at Goran, an anonymous cannibal giant is tricked and killed by a "doctor". The killing is commemorated in the name of the local promontory, The Dodman or "Dead Man".⁴⁷

Totem and taboo

Freud's seminal book *Totem und Tabu* was published in 1913, and its principal theme is the Oedipus complex, which Freud called "The Nuclear Complex" of the neuroses.⁴⁸ Freud placed it at the heart of his psychology and at the heart of our culture, as Peter Gay has said:

"sibling rivalries, tensions between mothers and daughters, or fathers and sons, death wishes against family members, all seem wicked and unnatural. They offend the most highly prized official pieties, but, Freud drily observed, they are no secret to anyone. The Oedipus Complex, embodied in myths, tragedies and dreams no less than in daily life, is implicated in all these closet conflicts. It is driven into the unconscious, but is all the more consequential for that".⁴⁹

Freud also saw the Oedipus theory as an “attempt to dig down to the most remote foundations of culture”,⁵⁰ and he often thought of himself as an archaeologist of the soul. He told his client, in the famous case of the “Wolf Man”, that “the psychoanalyst, like the archaeologist in his excavations, must uncover layer after layer of the patient’s psyche, before coming to the deepest, most valuable treasures.”⁵¹

In this respect he modelled himself on Heinrich Schliemann, the great German discoverer of the site of Troy.⁵² Freud thought the career of Schliemann so extraordinary because in discovering “Priam’s Treasure” he had found true happiness. “There is happiness only” he wrote “as fulfilment of a child’s wish”, and he often used archaeology as a metaphor for psychoanalysis, in his preface to the famous “Dora” case for instance.⁵³ Seeing himself as a “Schliemann of the mind”, Freud drew on the work of Frazer, Robertson Smith, Tylor, and Darwin to explain the Oedipus complex, the “hidden treasure that lay at the heart of the human psyche”. In doing so he linked past with present, in both content and methodology, and the link was the “Little Hans” case, which linked animal phobia in the present to unresolved Oedipal material buried in the unconscious.

And to do this he told a story. Drawing on Darwin’s conjecture that early human societies were composed of small, familial hordes, Freud imagined an original group of brothers getting together to kill and eat the fierce jealous ruler of the horde, the father.⁵⁴ In doing so they put an end to the patriarchal horde itself, and made a beginning of human history. And having killed the father, they ate him:

“Cannibalistic savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primeval father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each of the company of brothers; and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organisation, of moral restrictions and of religion.”⁵⁵

As often in Freud’s works, the precise status of this theory is unclear: he himself seems to have believed it reflected a real prehistoric event, but this is of course untestable. It is perhaps most fruitfully viewed as a myth of origin, of the type which is commonly found in mythologies across the globe. It is also to be found in the giant stories of Cornwall, and the many parallels between Freud’s myth and Hunt and Bottrell’s will be evident. In the first place, the Cornish giants are often “cannibal savages”, as we have seen, and though cannibalism on the part of their killers may have been repressed or censored by storytellers (in much the same way as the individual “represses” murderous Oedipal impulses directed at his own father), memories of it may be present in the traditional Morvah Feast, described by Margaret Courtney, and perhaps also in the Bolster Day Carnival, invented in the early 1990s, which features a large effigy of the giant and takes place over the May Bank Holiday weekend.⁵⁶ The primal cannibal feast (the devouring of the father) was, as we have seen, the beginning of religion and culture in Freud’s view, and in the stories too. Apart from the institution of feasts and carnivals, we often see that the death of the giant is a catalyst for

change and innovation. As noted above, Corineus's tussle with Gogmagog was the origin of Cornish wrestling, and Tom's encounter with Jack the Tinkeard, after he has killed Blunderbuss, leads to the learning of new skills, such as ploughing, brewing, and the mining of tin.⁵⁷ The title of Hunt's story, "Tom the Giant, and his Wife Jane, and Jack the Tinkeard"⁵⁸ implies that, after killing Blunderbuss, Tom himself becomes a giant, or perhaps that he was one all along. In any case, he inherits the giant's land and treasures, and becomes his symbolic son in terms of the narrative structure. In the Cornish stories too, as if in fulfilment of the Oedipal fantasy, the giant-killer inherits the giant's widow.⁵⁹ In both Freud's and Hunt's stories the death of the giant inaugurates a new age, a transition from the primitive to the civilised – the inception of the arts which make culture possible. The Cornish giant myth thus expresses Freud's seminal "family romance" – the bedrock, in his view, of both individual psychology and culture.

The Oedipal theory has of course been critiqued from various perspectives. Malinowski, for instance, denied its existence among matrilineal peoples, such as the Trobriand Islanders,⁶⁰ and post-Freudian and feminist critics have read the story differently, emphasising the rivalrous anger of fathers towards their sons, and the girl's attempt to resolve the Oedipus complex. If these critics are right, then the theory itself may be a social construct.⁶¹ Why then did this story come to prominence in nineteenth century Cornwall, and what purposes did it serve?

Audience and identity

The issue is complicated by questions of identity and audience, so we must first ask: what was the intended audience for these stories? For as Žižek writes, "in order to interpret a scene or an utterance sometimes, the key thing to do is to locate the true addressee."⁶² Both Hunt and Bottrell wrote with the intention of preserving what remained of a tradition which was felt to be dying, and of validating that tradition by presenting it to an educated audience outside the Duchy itself. As Hunt says in his introduction to the *Popular Romances*, "Hoping to have been successful in saving a few interesting fragments of the unwritten records of a peculiar race, my labours are submitted to the world".⁶³ Hunt and Bottrell are thus attempting to present and interpret Cornish folklore to "the world", in this context, educated Englishmen, who had begun to visit Cornwall in increasing numbers due to the expansion of the railways and the development of tourism. As we have seen, folklore was widely used in the nineteenth century to fashion developing national identities.⁶⁴ This explains the occasionally apologetic or even mocking tone of some collectors (though this is not characteristic of Hunt), as they attempt to distance themselves from their informants and lay claim to the higher status of their readership.⁶⁵

But the stories "in themselves" belong to the repertoire of the droll-teller; that is, they were told within the community, which was itself both audience and narrator, addressee and sender. And on that level, the stories must have made sense to the Cornish themselves, in terms of both their identity and their historical situation.

The Oedipus myth, of course, is about identity, because it is the son's revolt against the father that enables him to become a man in his own right, much as Tom can only come

into his inheritance after he has killed the giant. On an individual level, fairy tales help the child to make sense of these disturbances and the feelings that accompany them. As Bettelheim says:

“The fairy tale suggests not only isolating and separating the disparate and confusing aspects of the child’s experience into opposites, but projecting these into different figures. Even Freud found no better way to help make sense out of the incredible mixture of contradictions which co-exist in our mind and inner life than by creating symbols for isolated aspects of the personality. He named them id, ego and superego.”⁶⁶

Might it not be that, on a communal level too, the stories helped the Cornish to deal psychologically with the drastic challenges to their identity posed by nineteenth century capitalism, which must have aroused profound anxieties, even if Alan Kent discerns in the literature of the period an outstanding vision of industrial confidence and revival identity?⁶⁷ Thus the Oedipal story is transformed from a personal into a communal myth told in a social setting, linking the contemporary community to its past, and affirming its continuity as much as psychoanalysis shapes the structure of the psyche itself: superego, ego, id, etc., one of the truly “big narratives” of the twentieth century, in the western world and beyond.

Notes

1. See James Mackillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 211-212; Lewis Spence, *The Minor Traditions of British Mythology*, London, Rider, 1948, pp. 71-86; Gwyn Jones, and Thomas Jones, trans., *The Mabinogion*, London, J. M. Dent, 1949, pp. 95-136.
2. Jennifer Westwood, and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A Guide to England’s Legends, from Spring-Heeled Jack to the Witches of Warboys*, London, Penguin, 2005, p. 628.
3. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 3rd edn, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, p. 43.
4. Tony Deane, and Tony Shaw, *Folklore of Cornwall*, Stroud, Tempus Publishing, 2003, pp. 66-67. These are often the capstones of ancient tombs. Surprisingly, the Cornish language has no word for “quoit”.
5. See, for instance, Lewis Spence, *Legendary London: Early London in Tradition and History*, London, Robert Hale, 1937, pp. 151-152.
6. Hunt, 1881, p. 51.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Hunt, 1881, pp. 49-50.
10. Deane and Shaw, 2003, p. 65. Spriggans are warrior fairies who can alter their size at will. They are often associated with cromlechs, ancient barrows, and buried treasure.
11. Hunt, 1881, pp. 73-75. My paraphrase, as elsewhere.

12. Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, London, Bellew Publishing, 1967, pp. 62-63.
13. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. A. Griscom, London and New York, Longman, Green, 1929.
14. According to Bottrell (William Bottrell, *Stories and Folklore of West Cornwall*, 3rd Series, Penzance, printed for the author by F. Rodda, 1880, rpt Felinfach, Llanerch, 1996), “Dan Dynas” just means “Den an Dynas”, the “man of the castle”.
15. Barbara Spooner, “The Giants of Cornwall”, *Folklore*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring, 1965), 19.
16. These associations are equally strong in Manx folklore. Castle Rushen has an enchanted chamber which was inhabited by fairies, then by giants until Merlin bound them in spells. People who tried to explore the underground caverns in which they lived would mysteriously disappear. Subterranean passages are said to lead to a beautiful land of giants, and there are also memories of a three-headed Danish giant buried on top of Mount Karrin. See A. W. Moore, *The Folklore of the Isle of Man*, Isle of Man, Brown and Son, London, D. Nutt, 1891, rpt Felinfach, Llanerch, 1991.
17. J. Laplanche, and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London, Karnac Books and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1988, p. 197.
18. Hunt, 1881, p. 61.
19. For all the above, see Hunt, 1881, pp. 55-72.
20. See Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, Gloucester, Alan Sutton, 1986, pp. 39-72, Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1989, Chap. 17, “Male Gods and Daimones”, pp. 175-186, and for the archaisms of the story generally, Brendan McMahon, “The Cornish Giant Myth”, *An Baner Kernewek*, Vol. 85 (August, 1996).
21. H. Breuil, *400 Centuries of Cave Art*, Montignac, Centre d’Etudes et de Documentation Préhistoriques, 1952. Also Annette Laming, *Lascaux: Paintings and Engravings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1959.
22. Margaret A. Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore*, Penzance, Beare and Son, 1890, rpt Penzance, Oakmagic, 1998, pp. 51-52.
23. See Max Müller, *Comparative Mythology: An Essay*, ed. A. S. Palmer, London, Routledge, 1909, first published in *Oxford Essays*, London, John W. Parker and Son, 1856.
24. R. M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, p. 323.
25. William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, 2 vols, Penzance, printed for the author by W. Cornish, 1870 (1st Series), Beare and Son, 1873 (2nd Series), rpt. Felinfach, Llanerch, 1996.
26. See, for instance, Wilkie Collins, *Rambles Beyond Railways*, London, Richard Bentley, 1851.
27. E. J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870*, London, Pearson, 1983, p. 185.
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31. Mark Stoyale, *West Britons: Cornish Identities and the Early Modern British State*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2002, and Mark Stoyale, *Soldiers and Strangers: An Ethnic History of the English Civil War*, New Haven, Connecticut, and London, Yale University Press, 2005.
32. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975, rpt London, Phoenix Press, 2000, pp. 103-104.
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41. Stoyale, 2002, pp. 175-180.
42. See Deacon, Cole, and Tregigda, 2003, Chap. 11, "The Historical Legacy: Nationalism Before MK", pp. 14-25.
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55. Freud, 1955, p. 142.

56. Courtney, 1998, pp. 51-52; see also Deane and Shaw, 2003, p. 155.

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58. Hunt, 1881, p. 60.

59. As in the story of the rival giants of Treryn, for instance (Hunt, 1881, p. 48), and we recall that Tom married Blunderbuss's widow Jane.

60. Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Role of Myth in Life", *Psyche*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (April, 1926), 29-39. But see also Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1984.

61. See, for instance, David Barkan, *The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion in Western Man*, New York, Beacon Press, 1996; Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1978; and Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.

62. Slavoj Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London, Verso, 2008, p. 82.

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64. See also Jennifer Schacker, *National Dreams*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

65. Howells, in his 1831 collection of Welsh folklore, writes: "we rejoice that the beatific rays of wisdom have gleamed through the dark clouds of ignorance and superstition ... and the march of intellect has made its appearance even amongst the mountains and valleys of Wales". Others, such as Jeremiah Curtin in his 1890 book, took refuge in an ironic style, as did Bottrell. The stories were being sent up, even as they were being preserved. See W. Howells, *Cambrian Superstitions*, London, Longman, 1831, rpt Felinfach, Llanerch, 1991; Jeremiah Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, London, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1890, rpt New York, Random House, 1996, and Brendan McMahon, "Cornish Folklore: The Nineteenth Century Background", *An Baner Kernewek*.

66. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p. 75.

67. Kent, 2000, p. 104.