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The psychotherapeutic mapping of a soldier’s suffering: a narrative analysis of the Grimms’ “Bearskin”

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ABSTRACT
The Brothers Grimm introduced into the fifth edition of Children’s and Household Tales a new story, “Bearskin,” that addressed the psychological suffering of soldiers after active service in combat. They took a traditional tale, “The Devil’s Greenjacket,” and combined it with details of a story by Grimmelshausen, changing the protagonist from a young man abandoned by his two older brothers after the death of their father to a soldier returning from war. With this revision, they spoke to two questions of soldiering in their time: how to integrate a warring spirit during peacetime and how to heal a loss of self that comes with returning home from combat. A narrative analysis of “Bearskin” makes explicit the psychological map with which the Grimms wanted every household to be familiar, a description of a soldier’s process of intrapsychically recovering self and interpersonally reconnecting to society.

Key Words: Grimms, integration, narrative, psychotherapy, self

RÉSUMÉ
Les frères Grimm ont introduit dans la cinquième édition des Contes de l’enfance et du foyer une nouvelle histoire, «Bearskin» (Peau d’ours), qui traite de la souffrance psychologique des soldats après le service actif au combat. Ils ont eu recours à un conte traditionnel, «The Devil’s Greenjacket», et l’ont combiné avec les détails d’une histoire de Grimmelshausen, faisant passer le protagoniste d’un jeune homme abandonné par ses deux frères aînés à la mort de leur père à un soldat revenant de la guerre. À partir de ces modifications, ils ont abordé deux questions sur le métier de soldat de leur temps : comment réintégrer un esprit habitué à la guerre en temps de paix, et comment guérir du sentiment de perte de soi qui se produit lors du retour chez soi après le combat. Une analyse narrative de «Bearskin» permet d’expliciter la carte psychologique avec laquelle les frères Grimm souhaitaient voir chaque foyer se familiariser. Il s’agit d’une description du processus intra-psychologique de récupération du soi et de reconnexion interpersonnelle du soldat avec la société.

Mots clés : récit, psychothérapie, intégration, soi, Grimm

In 1857, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm introduced into their definitive seventh edition of Children’s and Household Tales a story that today is not well known. “Bearskin” describes a fearless soldier who returns from war to find himself without work (it is peacetime, and he only knows how to shoot) and without a home (his parents have died, and his hard-hearted brothers have forsaken him).1 Oddly, “Bearskin” did not appear in the first four versions of the Grimms’ collection, beginning with the 1815 edition, but found its way into the fifth edition published in 1843. In the first editions, the Grimms included “The Devil’s Greenjacket,” a story about a foolish young man who squanders his inheritance and then bargains with the devil to wear the devil’s waistcoat, the pockets of which are always full of money, on the condition that he does not wash or trim his hair and nails or pray for 7 years; if he does, he will lose his soul. For the fifth edition of their book, however, the Brothers Grimm rewrote “The Devil’s Greenjacket,” combining it with details from a story by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, “Der erste Bärenhäuter” (“The First Bearskinner”; 1670).2 They turned the foolish young protagonist who undergoes the devil’s ordeal into a soldier back from the war, and they changed the title of their story to “Bearskin.” To what end?

Dedicated to democratizing the princely German states and forging for their society a common cultural identity, the Brothers Grimm (Figure 1) published col-
lections of indigenous folktales and mythology, as well as dictionaries of the German language. In volume 1 of their *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1852), they define the term *Bärenhäuter* (“bearskinner”) as an ambiguous word, often used to reprimand someone as a layabout. They point out, however, that the word may also have had a positive connotation and cite Grimmelshausen, who was a fifteenth-century chronicler of the Thirty Years War. The story the Grimms borrowed from Grimmelshausen for their collection tells of a soldier who, in 1396, when the Ottoman emperor invaded Hungary, escapes from a battle, kills a bear, and wears the skin as a coat, lingering in this animal–human half-state until finally he sheds the skin, bathes in the Rhine, and makes his way successfully back into society.

The Brothers Grimm took up the story by Grimmelshausen and combined it with a traditional folktale to tell of a soldier who returns from a war and, now jobless, falls into despair and finds himself bargaining for his life with a cloven-hoofed trickster. In their version of the story, the soldier puts on the devil’s green jacket because it will provide him with money during the 7-year trial, and over the green jacket he places the bear skin as the cloak he must carry on his back and as the bed on which he must lie. This layering does more than accentuate the stipulations of not washing, not cutting his hair and nails, and not saying the Lord’s Prayer for 7 years. Taking their cue from Grimmelshausen (Figure 2), the Grimms emphasize the soldier’s change of identity by virtue of the trickster spirit’s re-naming him: “You shall be called Bearskin.” The Brothers Grimm’s revised story becomes the chronicle of the test of endurance that the protagonist must undergo to re-enter human society.

By drawing attention to this stacking of clothing and layering of narratives, the Brothers Grimm pull their readers back through time, from the 1800s and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) of their own day to Grimmelshausen and the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), and even further back to 1396 and the Ottoman invasion that Grimmelshausen uses as the setting for his own soldier’s story. Taking up Grimmelshausen’s example, the Grimms use their narrative to account for the etymology of the hero’s name and to reconnect readers with the images embedded in common words.

Jacob Grimm knew that the old Norse language possessed two compound nouns, *berserker* (“bear shirt”) and *úlfhedinn* (“wolf coat”), to describe certain warriors who reputedly entered battle screaming and biting the rims of their shields. These warriors fought in a frenzied state, vanquished foes without being injured, and then fell into deep sleep. They were as strong as bears and as crazed as wolves, and they had the power to render their enemies blind, deaf, or witless from fear. The early medieval chess pieces now known as the Lewis Chessman in the collection of the British Museum corroborate the prevalence of this lore: Made in Norway around 1150 and found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis in
the Outer Hebrides, three of the warders or rooks in the ancient chess set are berserkers, recognizable because they are biting their shields (Figure 3).8

In the Norse sagas, berserkers raped and murdered at will and were often portrayed as villains. For example, in Egil’s Saga, attributed to Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the protagonist Egil Skallagrímsson narrates three generations beginning in pre-Christian pagan Norway and gives an startling account of his grandfather who, after life as a berserker, retired quietly to his farm.5 Egil explains that when evening came, the old man would often become short of temper (become styggr, which means “wary” when applied to animals) and fall into a doze, during which time he was vulnerable to uncontrolled hamrammr (“shape shifting”). Also, in the Völsunga saga, a father and son roam the forests, killing men for plunder to avenge wrongs done to the Volsungs by King Siggeir, but when they chance upon a pair of wolf skins and decide to wear them, they fall into fighting and killing again but without motive, and their transformation into wolves becomes a kind of curse that they cannot control.6

Clearly, the Grimms named their soldier Bearskin in allusion to these berserkers who existed not just in legend but also in recorded history, the berserkers having served as the household guard of King Harald the Fairhaired (who first forged a unified Norwegian state by ruthlessly subjecting several independent kingdoms to his authority; 872–930 AD). Jacob Grimm devoted an entire chapter of the second volume of his Deutsche Mythologie to tracing the theriomorphic notion of man–animal transformations in German mythology back to these Icelandic stories. It is not difficult to extrapolate from these stories of “soldiers who went forth to combat, raging like wolves, biting their shields, in strength equal to furious bears … [fighting in a] frenzy known as Berserksgang/rage,” forward to the later medieval lore of lycanthropy or werewolves, of humans gripped unawares by destructive states of mind.4(p.26)

In the twentieth century, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim classified the theriomorphic element in such tales as the psychological struggle to humanize the Freudian id. Analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung emphasized that, without a strong psychotherapeutic
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container or frame, attempts to abreact or purge soldiers of difficult feeling-states were dangerous; he compared the terrible psychological wounding that an individual soldier might suffer in a personal confrontation with the archetypal spirit of war to the biblical Jacob’s dark night of the soul, wrestling with a terrifying angel.10

Only after the Vietnam War did the American Psychiatric Association introduce into its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III, 1980) the term post-traumatic stress disorder to identify what psychiatrists of previous wars had often labeled male hysteria.11 Veterans, recognizing the social stigma still associated with a psychological disorder, often prefer the neurological diagnosis of brain trauma that denotes a real rather than a phantomlike wound.12,13

In “Bearskin,” the soldier confronts what Grimmelshausen calls a spirit and what the Grimms call the Devil. First, the supernatural spirit tests whether the soldier is indeed fearless, admonishing the young man to “look behind.” As if out of nowhere, a bear attacks, which the soldier shoots, clearly by reflex. The Grimms’ dictionary work would suggest that this bear is itself the theriomorphic expression of the spirit of war.14 So the soldier kills the totemic animal form of his own berserker/soldiering identity, and the spirit subjects him to wearing the carcass for 7 years (Figure 4). What in wartime was his power and his pride is now in peacetime something that alienates him from the human society he served so fearlessly. Wherever he goes, people flee him, repulsed by his identification with the bearskin.

The Brothers Grimm’s revised tale speaks to a twosided problem in their time: the problem of the fearlessness of the soldier, of what to make of a wild warring spirit in peacetime, and the concomitant shadow problem of his brothers’ hardheartedness (when the soldier asks to come home, they answer, “You, soldier, are of no use to us; go and make a living for yourself”). The problem inherent to the heroic protagonist’s psyche shifts in the nadir of the 4th of his 7 years of endurance, when he hears the sound of a bankrupted old man weeping, opens a door to him, and feels empathy. However, the society to which the soldier has returned, the Brothers Grimm emphasize, remains hardhearted.

In the context of war, the soldier has risked his life and survived but as if unconsciously possessed by the spirit of war, alternating like a berserker between pe-

periods of inflated spirited fury and comatose spen testosterone. Now, in peacetime, he risks losing his soul because he can no longer swing back and forth between these two poles unawares but must consciously endure the inflation and deflation of being both a fearless war hero and a homeless vagrant. The Grimms configure the return to society as a necessarily unheroic 7-year rite of passage: slowly building a self that is strong enough to bear (as a verb) itself, to endure the truth about itself, to carry that truth on the back, and to lie in the bed of that one sidedness of self that was also the soldier's heroic ideal, his fearlessness when it rained bullets.15,16

What sustains the individual in such a psychological process? Curiously enough, not only the green coat that for 7 years pays the bills. Just as important is the framework or community that the soldier constructs around him by asking the poor he encounters to pray for him because he is not permitted to pray. And when he meets one of the bankrupted father's three daughters, he breaks a ring in two, giving her one half and keeping the other for himself, and continues on his journey for another 3 years but now with the fragile hope that, both inwardly and outwardly, things may reconnect by the end of the 7th year. No doubt the Grimms knew the etymology of the Greek word symbolon, which literally means to break an object in two to make a transaction with another person, the transaction being completed when they meet again and put the two pieces together. In other words, by the end of the 7 years, the soldier uses a symbol to reconnect intrapsychically the opposing parts of his self, as well as to reconnect interpersonally as a member of his society.

A narrative analysis of “Bearskin” makes explicit the psychological map that the Grimms drew to introduce as fundamental cultural knowledge into their society. They created a story, at once new and yet timeworn, about how soldiers returning from active service must suffer through long and difficult transformations to intrapsychically recover self and interpersonally reconnect to society. An ethical (as opposed to a hard-hearted) society, knowing this story, would commit itself to better assisting those who served it so bravely.

REFERENCES

AUTHOR INFORMATION
Craig E Stephenson is a psychodynamic psychotherapist and Jungian psychoanalyst in private practice and a member of the International Association for Analytical Psychology (IAAP). His books include Possession: Jung’s Comparative Anatomy of the Psyche (Routledge, 2009) and Anteros: A Forgotten Myth (Routledge, 2011). He has lectured internationally and was the 2014 recipient of the Dimitrie Pivnicki Prize, Osler Library of Medicine, McGill University.
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