

The Lyke Wake Dirge: Hosen and Shun

Simon Rosati

► Key words

Lyke Wake Dirge;
Folk song; Paganism;
Christianity; Shoes;
Hosen and Shun; Shoon;
Yorkshire; Cleveland

▼ Abstract

This is the first of three articles considering elements of the folk song *Lyke Wake Dirge* (Roud 8194). It concerns itself with the first element, *hosen* and *shun* (legwear and footwear). It describes ways in which writers have made connections between paganism and the shoes mentioned in the song. It concludes that the song is Christian, echoing the gospel of Matthew.

The Lyke Wake Dirge: Hosen and Shun

The *Lyke Wake Dirge* (Roud 8194) is a song that describes the journey of the soul of a recently dead person as it attempts to make its way to heaven. The lyke is the corpse, as we still see in the lychgate outside English churches, and in German *Leiche*. The wake is a ceremonial watching over the dead person, long abandoned in England but more familiar in Ireland. A song for the dead is a dirge, with the word ‘dirge’ deriving from the Latin *dirige*, the first words of the matins ceremony for the dead, said in the presence of the corpse (Duffy 2022: 369). It was first recorded in writing by John Aubrey in around 1686 in his collection later published as *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* (1972: 176-178). Aubrey’s informant said the song was sung ‘about 60 yeares since at Country vulgar Funeralls’ in Yorkshire, which gives a date of 1626 or so. This is the text given by Aubrey:

This ean night, this ean night;
Every night and awle:
Fire and Fleet and candle-light
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

When thou from hence doest pass away
Every night and awle
To Whinny-moor thou comest at last
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

If ever thou gave either hosen or shun
Every night and awle
Sit thee downe and putt them on
And Christ receive thy Sawle

But if hosen nor shoon thou never gave nean
Every night, &c:
The Whinnes shall prick thee to the bare beane
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

From Whinny-moor that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Brig o'Dread thou comest at last
And Christ &c:

From Brig of Dread that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last
And Christ &c:

If ever thou gave either Milke or drinke
Every night &c:
The fire shall never make thee shrink
And Christ &c:

But if milk nor drink thou never gave nean
Every night &c
The Fire shall burn thee to thy bare bane
And Christ receive thy Sawle

The first of the three obstacles the soul of the departed has to pass is Whinny-moor, and that is our concern here. The moor is full of thorns which will cut the feet and legs. If the dead person gave 'hosen or shun/shoon' in life, they will receive them again and will pass the moor unhurt. Hosen refers to legwear, with a wider meaning than the modern hose (cf. German *Hose*, trousers), and shun or shoon means shoes.

We find this idea of shoes in Nordic tradition. It occurs in the Icelandic *Saga of Gisli*, dating perhaps to 1230 (Faulkes 2001: xv). A man called Vestein has been murdered and as his body is being prepared for burial one man remarks (Faulkes 2001: 22):

It is a custom to tie Hel-shoes on men which they should walk in to Valhall.

Hel, or Hell, is the Nordic realm of the dead. There is no suggestion that it is a place of punishment. Quoting this passage, Wylie (1855: 152) calls them death-shoes. Hardwick (1872: 181) says (see also Kelly 1863: 115):

According to Mannhardt and Grimm a pair of shoes was deposited in the grave for this very purpose [to pass the thorny moor]. In the Henneberg district, on this account, the name *todtenschuh*, or "dead shoe" is applied to a funeral. In Scandinavia the shoe is named *helskō*, or "hel-shoe".

There is clearly, then, a pagan association to the shoes in the *Lyke Wake Dirge*. The Rev. John Atkinson was the incumbent (parish priest) of Danby in the North York Moors, in the Cleveland district where the *Lyke Wake Dirge* was found, from 1847 to 1900. His 1891 book *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish* lays considerable stress on the Danish connections of the area, for example when talking of local burials (p 231):

But at least we know that, among our Scandinavian ancestors at least, the hell-way and the hell-shoes and the difficult and perilous passage to be essayed by the dead were as constantly thought of and provided for as the occurrence of death itself.

He also mentions a woman buried with a pair of brogues, among other useful objects (p 215).

There is in all this, however, no idea of reward for having lived a good life. Let us look at some Catholic (pre-Reformation Christian) examples. One close parallel is in the Norwegian poem, or ballad, *Draumkvæde*, the vision of one Olaf Åsteson. It is of uncertain date, but clearly pre-Reformation. Liestøl (1946: 130) dates it to the mid-thirteenth century. Barnes (1974: 102) dates it to the 16th century or earlier. In the poem, or ballad, Olaf falls asleep on Christmas Eve and wakes up at Epiphany, during which time he has a vision which resembles the events in *Lyke Wake Dirge*. Relatively early in the text, as reconstructed by Moe, we read (Liestøl 1946: 10):

First I went forth with my soul,
I went through briar and thorn,
and torn was then my scarlet cloak,
and the nails from my feet were torn.
 The moon it shines,
 and the roads do stretch so wide.

Towards the end of the text, we read (p 15):

Blest is he who in this life
gave shoes to the needy poor:
he will not have to walk bare-foot
on the sharp and thorny moor.
 Tongue shall speak and truth
 reply on Judgment Day.

The shoes are clearly a specific reward for good behaviour. Shoes also occur in the *Vision of Gottschalk* (Gardiner 1993: 108):

Gottschalk, a peasant from Holstein, lies as if dead from Christmas Eve 1188, until the fourth day of Christmas. During his trance he is guided through the otherworld by two angels. He is shown a tree of shoes, which are awarded to the merciful so that they might walk across the thorny moor unharmed. Initially Gottschalk is not given shoes, and after his return to life he bears the marks of his punishment. At one point, however, one of his guides takes mercy on him and returns for a pair of shoes.

This is less specific, mentioning merciful behaviour rather than actually giving shoes, but is similar.

Blakeborough (1898: 123) suggests something more specific, and frankly comical:

the soul on approaching Whinny Moor would be met by an old man carrying a huge bundle of boots; and if amongst these there could be found a pair which the bare-footed soul had given away during life, the old man gave them to the soul to protect its feet whilst crossing the thorny moor.

Scott (1931: 398) quotes a manuscript from Cleveland in the Cotton library in the time of Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603):

it is good to give a pair of new shoes to a poor man, for as much, as after this life, they

are to pass barefoote through a great launde, full of thornes and furzen, except by the meryte of the almes aforesaid they have redemed the forfeyte; for, at the edge of the launde, an ould man shall meet them with the same shoes that were given by the partye when he was lyvving; and, after he hath shodde them, dismisseth them to go through thick and thin, without scratch or scalle.

In the eyes of some Protestants, it does not matter whether the belief is pagan or Catholic, as it is mere superstition in any case. Tylor (2016: I, 495) says the *Lyke Wake Dirge* is 'like some savage or barbaric legend'. He also mentions it in comparison with the Hindu belief that:

he who gives water or shoes to a Brahman will find water to refresh him, and shoes to wear, on the journey to the next world

Or as Ward puts it (1817: II, 79), haven given shoes to a bramhun, 'he will not suffer from the heat of the ground'. It would seem that, to Tylor at least, Catholics and Hindus are savages. Scott (ibid.) calls the song 'a sort of charm' that 'the lower ranks of Roman Catholics' believe in their 'fondness' (credulity), an attitude that Pittaway (2016) describes as 'patronising'. Barnes (1972: 42) quotes a satirical Swedish poem from the 1580s:

Teach your flock to believe in the gates of hell and *gillebro* [the Brig o'Dread], across which they needs must go barefoot upon the many iron pincers, unless they give you a pair of shoes with as much money in them as they can hold; in that case nothing shall harm their feet, although their purse must suffer a knock.

Barnes also quotes some words added to a manuscript of *Draumkvæde*, possibly in 1842 (p 155):

the old Norwegian heathens and Papists had accepted the transmigration of souls in the most mystical, fanatical, superstitious and horrifying portrayals and terrifying images.

There are problems with such statements. First, to many in the West today, all religious belief is superstition, undermining Protestant claims. Second, many Catholics no doubt did take such stories literally (and many continue to believe in Purgatory), but the idea that no one could think figuratively is absurd. Nor should the idea that the song is 'rooted in a recognizably northern landscape' (Marshall 2002: 139) concern us: where else would it be set? Third, and most important, the idea of receiving a reward in kind for good behaviour is Biblical. It may be found in Matthew 25: 31-46, describing the Last Judgment:

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the upright will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the King will answer, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." (Verses 34-40, New Jerusalem Bible)

This is, of course, figurative. Scott mentions that very similar words are used in the Russian [Orthodox, not Catholic] funeral service. Here we have clothing, not just the shoes of Nordic tradition, so the hosen make sense in this context. In the version of *Draumkvæde* given by Jonsson (1967: 203) the need to give shoes, rye, corn and bread are mentioned, and then:

Happy he who on this earth
Clothes gave to the poor,
Never in the Other Life
Mockery need fear.

One presumes that the mockery would be for being naked. Jonsson calls these five stanzas "The Beatitudes" with strange features from medieval belief in the other world' (p 197), yet they are perfectly Biblical.

It is also easy to forget that Matthew's gospel dates to around 80 or 90 AD, far older than any evidence of Nordic pagan tradition. The early Scandinavians were great travellers and could easily have been influenced by ideas from Christian lands.

The Christian churches have always incorporated older beliefs, including local deities, and holy places. The song may indeed incorporate pagan ideas, though some people have surely been too keen to minimize Christian influence. Atkinson (1891) is so keen on the old Danish, pagan, influence on his Cleveland parish that he refuses to accept any Anglo-Saxon presence before the Viking settlement (p 260). He also, in his history of the area, jumps from 1432 to 1626 (pp 292-293), thus avoiding the need to address the Reformation and the presence of Catholicism in Cleveland.

The version of *Lyke Wake Dirge* given in Aubrey and Scott is clearly Catholic. Blakeborough (1898: 123-124) gives a later version from the same area, from around 1800, without Purgatory. One may question whether that is enough to make the song acceptably Protestant, given the continuing stress on good works (Catholic) as opposed to faith alone (Protestant). Hutton (1995: 93) suggests that this continued to be quite widely found in post-

Reformation folklore. Moorman (1919: 103-106) gives another version, also without Purgatory, and without reward:

'T were a dree [gloomy] neet, a dree neet, ower Whinny-moor to trake [wander],
Wi' shoonless feet, ower flinty steanes, thruf monny a thorny brake (p 105; Moorman's
glosses)

In any case, Blakeborough points out that Whinny Moor is 'mythical' (p124).

One modern reaction to this story is the poem *Whinny Moor* by Blake Morrison (published in the *London Review of Books*, 2 April 1987). The poem starts by quoting the words of Blakeborough above, about meeting an old man with a bundle of boots. The poet has spent the day walking another area of Yorkshire moorland, not Cleveland, is still some way from his goal, is very tired, and comes across a man in a car:

He glanced, disbelieving, at my plimsolls,
frayed and holy with a flapping sole.
He was a rep for Peter Lord, he said,
nodding behind him at the bootful of boots.
'Ah've worked in shoes near alf a century
an sin all t'flippin lot go reet down'll.'

Later, Morrison thinks about how he left the area as a young man, wonders why he has come back, and finally imagines a voice telling him:

*So thank thi lucky stars yon ol divel's
gi'en thi some pumps to get ell out again
an shift thisen sharpish to t'nearest stickle
afore tha's eaten up by t'worms or us.*

All but barefoot on a Whinny Moor and saved by an old man with a bundle of boots – but in this world, and his, quite correct, kindness was to himself.

We may wonder whether people really believed that the newly dead needed a pair of shoes and trousers to reach the otherworld destination safely. We may regard it as superstition. Yet all sorts of items are placed in coffins in Britain today. A quick glance at the Internet shows that photos, letters, flowers and teddy bears are all permitted, but that, for cremations, bottles of alcohol, leather goods, coconuts (sic), e-cigarettes and mobile phones are not. One infers that all these have been considered at some time. Episode 4 of series 5 of the British TV drama *Death in Paradise* (2016), *A Personal Murder*, starts with someone receiving a text message from a phone just buried with a dead man; being buried with one's

phone is clearly quite usual.

The point of the song is simple, and stark. Your deeds in this world will affect your lot in the next one, a kind of instant karma. It may be seen as harsh, even cruel, when sung at the time of death, at a wake in the dead person's house, but it could also be reassuring, depending on the stress given to the good deeds. Good deeds may not be rewarded in this world, nor bad ones punished, but it is difficult to think that virtue may never be rewarded.

Bibliography

- Atkinson, J. (1891) *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish*. London: Macmillan.
- Aubrey, J. (1972) *Three Prose Works*. Ed. J. Buchanan-Brown. Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press.
- Barnes, M. (1974) *Draumkvæde*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Blakeborough, R. (1898) *Yorkshire Wit, Character, Folklore & Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire*. London: Henry Frowde.
- Duffy, E. (2022) *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*. New edition. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Faulkes, A. (Ed.) (2001) *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*. London: Everyman.
- Gardiner, E. (1993) *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell: A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge.
- Hardwick, C. (1872) *Traditions, Superstitions and Folk-Lore*. Manchester: A. Ireland.
- Hutton, R. (1995) "The English Reformation and the Evidence of Folklore", *Past & Present* 148/1, pp 89-116.
- Jonsson, B. R. (1967) "The Dream Ballad", in *European Folk Ballads*, Ed. E. Seemann & D. Strömbäck, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, pp 196-203.
- Kelly, W. K. (1863) *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folk-Lore*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Liestol, K. (1946) "Draumkvæde. A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages", in *Studia Norvegica Ethnologica & Folkloristica* Vol. I. Oslo: H. Aschehoug.
- Marshall, P. (2002) *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moorman, F. W. (1919) *Yorkshire Dialect Poems (1673-1915) and Traditional Poems*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
- Morrison, B. (1987) "Whinny Moor", in *The London Review of Books*, Vol.9 No.7, 2 April 1987.
- Pittaway, I. (2016) *The Lyke-Wake Dirge: the Revival of an Elizabethan Song of the Afterlife*. <https://earlymusicmuse.com/lyke-wake-dirge/>
- Scott, W. (1931) *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Ed. T. Henderson. London: Harrap.
- Tylor, E. B. (2016) *Primitive Culture*. Two volumes. Mineola, New York: Dover.
- Ward, W. (1817) *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos*. Third edition. Two volumes. London: Baptist Missionary Society.
- Wylie, W. M. (1865) "The Graves of the Alemanni at Oberflacht in Suabia", in *Archaeologia, Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity*, Vol.36, Issue 1, pp 129-160. London: Society of Antiquaries of London.