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## Horsing Around with the Frame: The Negotiation of Meaning in Women's Verbal Performance



In the summer of 1944 my grandmother, Beatrice Hanson, went with her father to see the sulky races at the Bangor fairgrounds. The events that ensued provided for a lively wrangle between father and daughter as they vied to pick the winner. Forty-two years later Beatrice remembered vividly the events of that afternoon and in a highly structured and thoroughly entertaining narrative related them to me, her folklorist-granddaughter, who recorded the story for later transcription and analysis. What happened that day, why it proved so memorable, and what happened to the story during the process of intergenerational transmission provides a case study in the variability of meaning in personal narrative performances.

Whether we speak of a cultural performance or an individual's oral history, performances involve reflexivity; they are occasions set aside for the display of the collective or individual self to the self.<sup>1</sup> But these special occasions do not simply invite contemplation of the world outside performance, the given order of things, preexisting, fixed, capable of being comprehended on its own terms. Instead, they select, organize, and stylize elements of our experience in a pattern of significance. Thus, they do social work—solidifying, transforming and/or challenging our understanding of our selves and our world.

On the level of the individual, performances of personal narratives constitute a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present their "selves" to an audience.<sup>2</sup> While we pragmatically assume that events have a separate and prior ontological existence to the narratives constructed from them, the relation-

ship between action in the world and stories about that action is often considerably more complex than our pragmatic understanding allows. For instance, in feudal societies men perform their identities with an eye toward being evaluated by an audience, in other words, with an eye toward being *talked about*. Indeed, the expectation that an act will be commemorated in verbal form becomes, as it were, the moving force for subsequent events. Finally, speech itself becomes a mode of action, a demonstration of the honorable nature of the speaker, and it too is formulated so that it will be memorable.<sup>3</sup>

Although the degree to which individuals and social groups construct a poetics for social action certainly varies, it seems important to recognize that identifiable patterns in our personal narratives are neither completely given by events occurring in some separate and prior reality, nor are they completely imposed by our distanced selves reviewing a previously unpatterned existence. If we are artful rememberers of life, we are also artful life performers. And to complicate matters further, much of our action/performance is verbal; we present, construct, and reflect our identities through talk.

Performance theory, then, which concentrates on the emergent aspects of individual and collective self-representations, offers an exciting perspective for feminist scholars interested in revaluing women's traditional arts. Without denying the constraints of socially reified gender ideologies on women's expressivity, performance theory recognizes the individual's active role in constructing a sense of self and, in the process, transforming social ideals.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, most studies of verbal art and of the performance of identity have focused on the words and deeds of men (Bauman, "Performance and Honor," 147). This focus is partly due to the fact that many societies recognize a division between the public male and private female spheres. Since public performances are more accessible to the outside observer, and since traditionally these have been deemed more important, it is these performances that have most often been studied.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, in societies like our own, where sex role divisions traditionally have been strong, there is a tendency to view masculine and feminine traits as contrastive or even antithetical to one another. Therefore, the terms performance, honor, and manhood are understood to stand against nonperformance, shame, and femininity.

Women and their arts have been trivialized as a result, yet the notion that women do not perform undercuts the notion that identity is constructed through social action. With the rise of a feminist ideology that revalues women's traditions, we are beginning to challenge this image of the nonperforming woman.<sup>6</sup>

Pursuing the idea of ourselves as artificers of identity, we can view the performance of a personal narrative as a meaning-constructing activity on two levels simultaneously. It constitutes both a dynamic interaction between the thinking subject and the narrated event (her own life experience), and between the thinking subject and the narrative event (her "assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence").<sup>7</sup> As performance contexts change, as we discover newly appreciative audiences, and as we renegotiate our sense of self, the narrative will also change.<sup>8</sup>

Now, since these newly appreciative audiences who help to shape (indeed may be catalysts for) narrative performance may be folklorists, we must inquire what we, as folklorists, do with the narratives performed for/before us. Like other audience members, we enjoy a skillfully told tale. However, some of us also collect records of the performances in order to *study* them. Oral personal narratives occur naturally within a conversational context in which various people take turns at talk, and thus are rooted most immediately in a web of expressive social activity. Folklorists identify chunks of artful talk within this flow of conversation, give them physical existence (most often through writing), and imbed them in a new context of expressive or at least communicative activity (usually the scholarly article aimed toward an audience of professional peers).<sup>9</sup> Thus, we construct a second-level narrative based upon but at the same time reshaping and reframing the first.

Like the original narrator, we simultaneously look inward toward our own experience of the performance (our interpretive shaping of it as listeners) and outward toward our audience (to whom we must display a degree of scholarly competence). Presumably, the patterns upon which we base our interpretations can be shown to inhere in the "original" narrative, but our aims in pointing out certain features or making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations may at times differ from the original narrator's intentions. As

folklorists, then, we “appropriate” another’s text. This is where issues of our responsibility to our living sources become most acute.

My own work with my grandmother’s racetrack narrative provides a vivid example of how conflicts of interpretation may, perhaps inevitably do, arise during the process of intergenerational transmission. In order to examine the limits of our claims as scholars to exegetical authority over the texts we collect, I offer you a record of the dispute between narrator and collector over this story’s meaning. Starting with the narrator’s performance of the text, I will look at how Beatrice frames the story in narration. Then, I will present my interpretive reframing of it, her response to my interpretation, and my response to her response. “It’s wheels within wheels,” as my grandmother would say. This account foregrounds the emergent quality of meaning in narrative performance. More important, it cautions us to become more reflexive about our own scholarly practices.

To contextualize my grandmother’s story, let me offer a brief overview of the narrative and narrated events. Beatrice Hanson is known in her community for her storytelling skill.<sup>10</sup> I first heard the following story on an auto trip I took with my grandparents in the winter of 1985 when, passing the Garden City Race Track, we began to discuss horse racing. During a Christmas visit the following year, I asked my grandparents to allow me to tape record some of their stories about early twentieth-century life in Maine. As the conversation moved toward horses and horse racing, I specifically requested this story. The recording took place in my grandparents’ dining room. Beatrice, her husband Frank, my sister and brother-in-law, Susan and Mutasem Tel, and I were present.<sup>11</sup>

Beatrice was born in 1908 in Brooks, Maine, population 700. Her mother, Cassandra Badershall Austin, whom Beatrice characterizes as a hard, grimly religious woman, was the daughter of a congregationalist minister. Her father, William C. Austin, was an ambitious, hardworking man involved in a number of different business enterprises. He held a permanent job as an R.F.D. carrier but also cut and sold lumber, and worked as an independent builder and realtor. Thus, Beatrice places her family in the town’s lower-upper or upper-middle class (along with the doctor, the pharmacist, the

minister, the lawyer and a few better-off merchants.) Though the following narrative portrays Bea and William Austin in lively combat, Bea often stresses how much she loved and admired her father.

After an unsuccessful marriage to Harland Besse, the youngest son of a wealthy local family, Bea divorced her husband early in the 1930s, left her two young daughters in the care of their paternal grandparents, a necessity that still saddens and troubles her today, and enrolled in Farmington Normal School in order to become self-supporting as a teacher. There she met her present husband, Frank Hanson, and after a courtship of four years, during which time they both attended the University of Maine and Beatrice received a master’s degree, she married him. Shortly after their marriage, Frank was called to serve overseas in the Second World War. During his absence, Beatrice, now reunited with her daughters, taught high school. It is at this period in her life that the present story is set.<sup>12</sup>

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KATH: Well you told me a story once about going to the county fairs with your father /(and betting.)

BEA: /Yea, and betting on the horses. You want me to tell you that story? [Kath: yea.]

## Preface

### *i. Setting the Scene*

Okay. It was during the war. Frank was gone. He was overseas and . . . now this was early nine—this was early nineteen forties, p’rhaps nineteen forty-three, probably, or forty-four.

And in *those* days, you dressed *up* to go to the fair. Ladies dressed up. So I got . . . I did—I had a pale, uh, eggshell colored . . . gabardine dress with gold—big gold buttons down the side—it was quite smart. And I had a huge, pancake, black hat, great big flat black hat, and black gloves, knee—uh elbow . . . gloves—black gloves. Got myself all dressed up and off we went to the fair.

And right in front of us sat **Hod Buzzel**, who had gotten me my divorce, and whom I *hated* with a passion, and his son, who was county attorney, and he was just as bad as his father in another way—he was a snob. But Father knew them both very well.

ii. *Background: The Evaluative System*

So, what you do . . . you go early enough to buy the *score* book, uh the score card—it's not a card, it's a book. And it has every race listed in it, page after page; there're maybe gonna be six or eight races that afternoon. And, it lists *all* the horses, and you have to study it; the horses, the dri—the owners, the drivers, uh . . . whether the horse is a male or a female, whether it's a trotter or a pacer, uh what races it has run this season and where it *finished*; first, last, if it started second and came in first, if it started second and came in last, whether it broke—that means uh broke into a gallop, which is not allowed. They must trot or pace.

FRANK: Not only is it not allowed, it—it isn't efficient either.

BEA: No! It slows 'em *down*.

FRANK: /It isn't efficient. It slows them down.

BEA: /They have to slow the horse *down* until they can get him back into his stride, and he'll bou—he'll lose the race because he's gonna lose so much time. But this, this, score—these score—these sheets—these pages in this book—will tell you *all* of that about each horse, so you *sit* there, and you *study* this, see? And you *compare* what this horse has done against what this horse has done because the **same** horses go around to **all** the fairs, you see. So they're always *competing* with one another. So *then* you decide which horse you think is going to . . . perhaps win. Or, you know, be—be good. But you *wait* because they're going to come out, the horses are going to come out and the sulkies with their drivers, and they're going to do what they call "*scoring*." Which is driving *up* and down, *back* and forth, *on* the track in front of the grandstand. And you have a chance to s—see them.

FRANK: Just—just at a walk.

BEA: No. no. They *pace* along and trot along, but not fast. [Frank: yea.] Not fast. [Fr: yea.] But they-[Fr: yea, yea.]-they're moving. [Fr: yea.] And you have a chance to study the horses.

iii. *Personal System*

Well, I used to have it all (giggles) I had a lot of things I looked for, I—the neck had to be not too . . . thick. I didn't like it if it was—came down so that the neck was too thick. I, I wanted uh **slim** uh **fore** legs, and hips where they joined the body, but very strong **hind** legs, coming—tapering down . . . to slim and so forth. I didn't like too big a belly, and oh there were other things I looked for in the horse . . . em

KATH: Now this is just your own personal . . .

BEA: /Yes. This is my own personal judgment [Kath: system. /Okay.] And um, very definite too it was. And then, I would look at the drivers. As I saw them. I didn't—if it was an old old man, uh, he was too old. He was either driving for fun, uh . . . that was just probably it.

FRANK: Or ow—owned the horse and wouldn't let anyone else drive (laughing.)

BEA: Well, exactly! Or owned the horse and wouldn't le—that, that's right.

If he was *too* young, he was too young. He had to be . . . (laughing) somewhere in between where he would be—he would have enough experience to take a chance, and he would have driven enough so that he would know something about what he was doing.

And if I could find a *horse* that right pleased me, and a driver that pleased me that were together . . . *there* would be my choice, you see?

So, this particular afternoon . . . I *found* that. Now it didn't—that didn't happen all the time, by any means, but I found the—perfection, as far as I was concerned, and I was absolutely *convinced* that *that* horse was going to win.

iv. Race Structure

Now in *those* days, they ran what they call "*heats*," h-e-a-t-s. In other words, the same—horses in race number one raced again later in the afternoon, a second heat. And they might race *again* at the end of the afternoon in a third heat. So you're going to see the same horses **racing** three times.

I. The First Heat

i. In the Grandstand

So I bet, the first—*Father* didn't want me to bet money. Cause I'd lose it. So he and Buzzel, and the young Buzzel, they'd talk over what they thought was going to win, and then he'd say, "D'you pick a horse?"

And I'd say, why I'd say, "Yes, I have." And uh it's horse number . . . two. "And the name is" . . . oh, I can't remember . . . "Lyn Star."

And the driver is a young man from Freedom, Maine, and his *father* is also driving in the same race, uh somewhat older horse. So, I was aware of this too.

So, I said, "Yes, I have, I've picked this horse, Lyn Star."

"Ohhh, that horse that 'at ah that horse hasn't done anything. That horse won't do anything."

I said, "Well that's my choice."

Father said, "Oh, don't bet on that horse. You—you'll just lose your money."

I said, "That's the horse I'm betting on." So, I—I bet my money on that horse.

Now the first heat . . . (long pause) uh, turn it off cause I've got, I've got, to [Tape recorder turned off while Bea thinks for a moment].

ii. On the Track

So the first heat, the ho—the ho—*Father* and Buzzel were betting on another horse named . . . **Black Lash**, and, my horse—the way the race started, my driver . . . fell **right in**

**behind** the lead horse, as they went around the first curve, which *isn't* the best place to be because if *he's* up next to the rail behind a horse ahead of him next to the rail, and there's another horse on his *right*, toward the center of the track, he **may** get boxed in. [Kath: and he won't be able to get around]. That's right. And in order to get out at all if he's—if he can get a chance to get out, he's got to go out and around, you see, and he's got to go so much farther.

So, I wasn't too happy to see this happening! But, the **old man** was in the lead, so that was help—encouraging. He, instantly, went right out and took the lead right off quick with his little horse. So away they went round the track, and my driver just *loped along* behind them and didn't do a damned thing that I could see—he was just loping along. He was staying where he was, but but he was doing nothing. While the old man was really pushing his horse out in front there. And the other drivers were scattered around, and they came up, and they were racing about neck and neck with my guy, til they got *coming in* the sec—they go twice around the track. And **coming around** on the second lap, they're going to come around the final curve and on down towards the, uh, finish line.

And about that time, that's where you make your drive, really, uh, the excitement began! Because my driver i—the old man, this is neat, the old man pulled over to the right enough to allow his *son* to go through on the rail, which made the horse on the right, the third horse, have to pull out, to get around the old man! See? Which he *did* do. He had speed enough, but, my horse won by a nose.

iii. In the Grandstand

So I—of course said to Father, "*There! See?*"

"Oh, well that was a *freak*, that was a freak. That should never have happened. That, that there should never have happened at all!"

Well, so, by that time young Buzzel wasn't saying much of anything.

## II. Interlude

So, there're a couple of other races come in there and ah uh ah I didn't—one of them I didn't bet on at all because I couldn't find anything I liked the looks of, and the other one I said to Father, "There's no horse here that I really like but I'll bet two dollars, with *you* if you want me to." And I think Father won that two dollars, I don't remember, from me, something like that.

## III. The Second Heat

### i. In the Grandstand

But then up comes my horse. And [Kath: This is the second heat]. This is the second heat. So, they're talking about it's Black Lash will *surely* win. Black Lash was the one who went out around and almost *did* win. And, uh, they're still putting their money on Black Lash.

But Father was gonna be decent to me, and he said, "Look, now, if you want to bet," he said, "bet on Black Lash, and uhm, I—I'll take your horse or I'll pick some other horse, but you take—cause *that's* the horse that's go—that's gonna win."

I said, "No, no, I'm sticking with mine."

"But that was a freak thing! That will not happen again—that horse doesn't have the speed!"

I said, "That's alright. I'll stay with that horse."

"Well don't bet any money! You'll lose it!"

I said, "No, I'm gonna stay with that horse."

Well, and he didn't want me to. And he was getting ready to go down and bet. So, he and Buzzel went down.

Young Buzzel turned around and said, "Do you want to bet on that horse?"

I said, "Yes! I do, but I've never gone down and placed a bet. My father always does it."

He said, "I—I'll place it for you."

So I said, "Alright. I want *three* two-dollar tickets on this horse."

## ii. On the Track

*This* time, they drove it ex—the *same* race, the *same* race . . . the father leading, exactly as they had before, but *this* time my horse and Black Lash, it was nose to nose, it was a photo finish, and it was a tie. See? So you got money, some money, but the money was divided.

## IV. The Third Heat

### i. In the Grandstand

Finally comes the third heat.

Father said, "What are you going to do on this one?"

I said, "I am **betting on my horse** (pounds on the table with each word) . . . and I am betting ten bucks on that horse. It's gonna win."

Father had a fit. *He* had a fit. And he tells everybody three miles around in the grandstand what a fool I am too. [Laughter]

He'd say, "Listen to that! Now listen to that! *She's* gonna bet on that horse—you know perfectly well, that horse is never gonna win—these have been two freak finishes. That's crazy!"

Well anyway. *He* wasn't gonna take my money down! So off he and Buzzel went, so young Buzzel turned around, and he was grinning, and he said . . . uh "Do you wanna bet?"

I said, "Yes. Here's my ten bucks. Go down and put ten dollars on that horse to win." Which he did.

### ii. On the Track

*That* race, they'd started out exactly the same way, but before they were around the track the one time, the old man's horse was done. He had gi—he had given his *all* and he had nothing more to give, and he simply dropped back and came trailing in half of a—'round the track behind everyone. *That* leaves my horse and Black Lash to *race*, to really race! I didn't like that (laughing) too much. But, as it turned out, my driver, because of the way the races had been run, had **never really** had to **push** his horse. He *did* this race, and he left Black Lash so far behind that

by the time he came under the wire, Black Lash was just about coming around the final curve.

iii. In the Grandstand

And I threw my pocketbook in one direction, and I threw my gloves in another direction, and my score book went in another direction, and I jumped up and I hollered, to everyone, "You see what know-it-all said! *That's* my father!" [Laughter]

And finally one man said to my—to me. No, he said to my father, "You know, she *really* enjoys horse racing, doesn't she?" [Laughter]

(Laughing) And people around collected up my belongings and brought them all back to me, and I pocketed my money. And I had had a wonderful time.

KATH: And how long did it take for your father to speak to you again?

BEA: (laughs) Father didn't care to discuss the race. He didn't care to discuss that race much, that afternoon. He hadn't had too good an afternoon.

As one can easily perceive, this story is highly structured in its presentation of the narrated events. After a brief setting of the scene, which orients the audience in time and place, Beatrice explicates in detail the established system for evaluating horses and drivers and, more briefly, the processional order of the race important for an understanding of subsequent dramatic developments. I have presented this material as a preface because it provides normative information about horse-racing and precedes the description of the specific race that constitutes the core of the memorable event. The lower intensity in narrative delivery, a consequence of its intermediate status between conversation and dramatic monologue, is discernible from the fact that this part of the narrative provides more openings for contributions from listeners than the ensuing parts. On one level it constitutes an accommodation to the contingencies of the narrative event, providing information to an audience presumed to be ignorant of sulky racing conventions.

Yet the preface does not function simply as background elaboration;

it also orients the audience to a particular point of view; it emphasizes that the race should be understood as an opportunity for race-goers to exercise their evaluative skills in order to predict an eventual outcome. Phrases like, "you go early enough to buy the score book," "so you sit there and you study this," "so then you decide . . .," "but you wait, because they're going to come out," "and you have a chance to study the horses," all emphasize the seriousness with which the narrator regards this preliminary evaluative activity. Indeed, in Beatrice's view, the race really constitutes two equally important contests, that of the viewer pitting his evaluative and observational skills against a future outcome (symbolized in a later stage by the betting transaction) and that between the horse-and-driver teams on the track. Of course, these two aspects of horse racing are intimately connected, since the aim of the first is to align oneself with one or another of the contestants on the field. Yet Beatrice's attention to this preliminary activity, in contrast to the brevity of her description of the structure governing the actual races, urges the listener to focus on *this* aspect of the event.

Stylistically, the attention to chronology in the unfolding of this psychological activity and the use of the second person pronoun invited the audience to enter imaginatively into this portion of the narrative. Indeed, voice quality and the use of suspense (delaying the report of her decision) indicate that this part of the narrative functions as something more than simple report. Although couched in normative terms, the description also serves to depict the initial stage of the particular event to be recounted.

Beatrice then moves to an elaboration of her own personal system for picking a horse. This section too is described in normative terms, but it explains at the same time how Beatrice will arrive at her particular choice on this particular day. Most important, the explanation functions as an assertion of identity, a claim to competence by the narrator in judging horses and men. Notice, too, that in her own system Beatrice attends much more closely to the observable qualities of horse and driver than to their past records. She depends on her own judgement rather than on information provided by the operative social system, the "reputation" of contestants encoded in the racing book (which elaborately documents their past performances).



Finally, Beatrice states the result of these cogitations. She announces that *that* day she found the perfect combination of horse and driver. Here she reasserts her own discriminative powers as well as underscoring the unusual quality of this particular race. She acknowledges that finding perfection was not always possible when attending the races. Indeed, skipping forward to the body of the narrative, to the section I have marked "interlude," one can see Beatrice again emphasizing, by contrast, the peculiar nature of the contest narrated, as she summarily reports the outcome of a second, intermediate race where "I couldn't find anything I liked the looks of."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in her framing of the narrative Beatrice identifies the significance of the event narrated, its memorability, as the unique coming-together of a perfect horse and driver that produced an absolute conviction on her part as to who would win the contest. Furthermore, since this conviction was proved correct by the subsequent running of the races, the narrative functions to support or illustrate Beatrice's sense of self as a competent judge of horses within both the narrative and narrated event. In effect, her narrative constitutes a verbal reperformance of an actual evaluative performance at the track.

If one turns to an examination of the specifically narrated events, one finds they are also memorable because they exhibit an inherent potential for structural patterning. Horse racing itself is a consciously structured event that exhibits rules and standard procedures. Sulky races are presented in a series of three heats. Each heat, from the perspective of the audience, involves three stages: selecting a horse and placing a bet, observing the race proper, and collecting on one's winning tickets. With regard to the particular race narrated, an additional structural element is provided by the repetitive strategy employed by the father-son team upon whom Bea has placed her hopes. Dramatic tension is produced by the variable way in which this strategy is played out on the course.

As a superlative narrator, Beatrice recognizes and exploits this potential, drawing parallels between the observed contest and the contest between observers, who have aligned themselves with different horse and driver teams. Thus, she structures her narrative by alternating the focus between a dramatic reenactment of events in

the grandstand and a description of the actual race as it unfolded before the observers. Within this structure, the cooperation between the father and son on the racecourse provides a contrast to the conflict between father and daughter in the grandstand. On the racecourse, the father's waning ability to assist his son in winning the race functions both to increase the tension and, ultimately, to allow the son to show his true merit by winning the final heat unaided. In the grandstand, *her* father's mounting opposition to Beatrice's independent betting serves as an obstacle to the daughter's demonstration of merit.

Indeed, the verbal contest that ensues between father and daughter gradually builds toward a public performance, providing a secondary focus for the larger audience, and resulting in a realignment of allegiance. This other focus is based on the thematic contrasts between youth and age, reputation and intrinsic merit, observable in the contest between the horses, Black Lash and Lyn Star. When her father (tacitly) refuses to place her bet before the second heat, young Buzzel, whom Beatrice has previously described as an antagonist, and who has been betting with the older men, offers to place the bet for her. In effect, he bets on Beatrice in the contest developing on the sidelines.

With the third heat, Beatrice's father catapults their private argument into the public realm by appealing directly to the surrounding audience, calling for their support in his condemnation of Beatrice's "irrational" loyalty to Lyn Star. The issue now becomes one of saving face for Bea, of vindicating her self by demonstrating the unjustness of her father's calumnies. Thus, like the horse and driver she bets on, she must contradict the public record. She does so loudly and publicly when her horse wins by a long shot. Fittingly, the final word in this contest is attributed to an impartial observer, who symbolically pronounces her victory over her father.<sup>14</sup>

This reading of the story complies with a second, explicitly-stated assignation of meaning by the narrator, for the conversation surrounding the narrative event consists of a series of humorous stories and anecdotes about Maine characters, mostly older men, known for their intransigence and willful refusal to modify idiosyncratic (my grandparents would add, idiotic) attitudes and behaviors—despite appeals



to their reason or better selves—that inconvenience or victimize dependent family or community members.<sup>15</sup> However, in most of Frank's and Bea's stories of this type, the suffering younger characters must resort to clever subterfuge in order to induce their elders to change. *This* story, by contrast, represents a youthful victory in an open and publicly declared contest, the tactics of subterfuge being relegated to minor characters, helper figures, both on the course and in the stands.

As a folklorist used to identifying traditional patterns, I am struck by this story's formal approximation to the folktale. The repetition in threes; the appearance of a stranger, whose reputation is unknown, on the contest field; the supernatural helper (the old man on his *little* horse is striking in this regard); and, with respect to the verbal contest, the placement of incrementally greater obstacles in the path of the protagonist by an antagonistic father figure, all help to formulate the story in a recognizable pattern. Therefore, we can postulate that patterns inherent in the events narrated are identified and perhaps reshaped by the application of an available aesthetic model. However, I would emphasize that this story does not constitute a modern-day version of any particular folktale; it remains a personal narrative concerned with constructing identity.

As a feminist, I am particularly sensitive to identifying gender dynamics in verbal art, and, therefore, what makes the story significant for me is the way in which this self-performance within the narrated event takes on the dimension of a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment. While my grandmother disagrees with this reading, I see my interpretation of the story within the context of my own concerns as a legitimate reshaping, because it brings to prominence an identifiable subtext within the narrative, and because it attends to elements not fully developed in the narrative that reach out to the larger context of Beatrice's life experience as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Literally and symbolically, the horse race constitutes a masculine sphere. First, racing contestants, owners, and trainers are male (although female *horses* were apparently permitted to compete). Second, while women obviously attended the races, indeed "ladies dressed up" to go to the races, they are granted only partial partici-

pant status. While they are allowed to sit in the grandstand as observers (and, having dressed up, one assumes, as persons to be observed), they are not expected to engage as active evaluators in the essential first stage of the racing event. Notice that in the opening scene Beatrice maintains a peripheral status in the social activity in the grandstand. She dislikes the two Buzzels intensely, with whom her father is chummy, and does not participate in the male "huddle" before the first heat.

Moreover, even at the very beginning of the story Beatrice informs her audience that her father did not want her to bet. Betting is inherently a risk-taking activity. Men take risks; women do not. This dimension of meaning is underscored in the second heat when Beatrice, the narrator, ironically recounts that her father was going to be "decent" to her, in other words, was going to behave according to the model of gentlemanly practice, by offering to bear his daughter's risk and bet on her horse for her.

Finally, while Beatrice knows how to judge horses, her father customarily places her bets, and when he refuses in the second and third heats to do so, the male, young Buzzel performs this task for her. Even Beatrice, who constitutes an anomaly among women of her community because she knows the evaluative code, is reliant upon men to complete her participation in the racing event.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, as the verbal contest develops, Beatrice displays greater and greater assertiveness as a gambler. Not only does she refuse to align herself with the mens' judgement, but she raises the ante as well by placing more and more serious bets on her choice. From an insignificant bet in the first heat (and here, it bears recalling that in racing parlance a two-dollar bet is called a "lady's bet"), she proceeds in the second and third heats to bet six and ten dollars respectively.

In portraying the intensification of the contest, Beatrice, the narrator, endows Beatrice, the gambler, with an increasingly emphatic voice. Her tone in addressing her father moves from one of calm resolution before the first and second heats—"That's the horse I'm betting on," and "No, I'm gonna stay with that horse"—to heated insistence before the third heat—"I am *betting on my horse*" (punctuated by the narrator's pounding on the table). Moreover, Beatrice's tone in addressing her ally, young Buzzel, moves from a

polite expression of wish in the second heat—"Alright. I want *three* two-dollar tickets on this horse"—to an outright command—"Go down and put ten dollars on that horse to win."

Finally, if one looks at Beatrice's post-heat comments, one can detect a move from simple self-vindication in the first heat—"There! See!"—to a retaliatory calumny of her father's reputation, delivered in narration in a loud, disparaging voice—"You see what know-it-all says! That's my father." Thus, at the story's finish Beatrice has moved herself from a peripheral feminine position, with respect to the larger male sphere of betting *and* talk, to a central position, where her words and deeds proclaim her equal, and indeed superior to, her male antagonist. Symbolically underscoring this repudiation of a limiting feminine reputation, Beatrice flings away the accoutrements of her feminine costume—her gloves and her pocketbook.

Her father, who has been quick to point out the element of chance in Beatrice's earlier minor victories, and who the narrator has allowed a retort in both the first and second heats, is at this final juncture effectively silenced in the narration. However, my own audience interjection helps to shape the narrative in this way, as Beatrice, picking up on this thread, offers the coda—"Father didn't care to discuss the race."<sup>17</sup>

To conclude, if on one level the story operates as an identification of self as a competent judge of horses, on another it functions to assert a sense of female autonomy and equality within a hostile male sphere. Furthermore, with regard to the protagonist's life experience, one can view the narrative as a metaphor for a larger contest between Beatrice and her social milieu. As I mentioned earlier, Beatrice was divorced at a time when divorce was not common among women of her social class. This unconventional act, and her attempt to become economically independent were greeted with a certain amount of social and familial censure. For instance, Beatrice recalls, when her mother entered the date of the divorce in the family Bible, she included the note, "Recorded, but not approved." Although Beatrice's husband was tacitly recognized by the community as an unfit husband—irresponsible, alcoholic, a spendthrift, and a philanderer—

Beatrice was expected to bear with the situation in order to protect her own and her husband's families' reputations.

Indeed, from my grandparents' accounts, unhappy marriages in this society were common. Frank relates that, during menopause, it was not unusual for women to be institutionalized because their behavior became erratic and unstable. His own grandmother suffered severe psychological strain, was committed to a psychiatric hospital, and, while there, crossed her name off her marriage certificate. In a slightly more active form of resistance, Beatrice's grandmother, after injuring herself while doing heavy farm work, took to her bed, where she stayed for years. However, when her husband died, she got up, moved in with her son, and led a normal, active life. Beatrice's mother effected a psychological separation from both her husband and family by retreating into a strict, moralistic, and, in Bea's view, hypocritical religiosity. For Bea's predecessors, then, a woman's socially acceptable response to an unhappy marriage was to remove herself from the marriage without actually effecting a formal, public separation. This invariably involved turning a blind eye to the vagaries of men. Bea states that women were expected to uphold religious values and family reputation while men were understood to be subject to wild but acceptable natural urges. As Frank says, in the ideology of marriage at that time "you weren't supposed to be happy."

By divorcing her husband, Beatrice transgressed social decorum and was effectively branded disreputable. In the present narrative the appearance of Hod Buzzel, the divorce lawyer, provides a link between Beatrice's performance and status at the races and her previous loss of reputation in the larger social sphere. Thus, we can view Beatrice's relation to the men's huddle in the grandstand as a metaphor for her relation to her community.<sup>18</sup> She must prove in the face of strong opposition the rightness of not playing by the rules, of relying on her own judgement and acting as an autonomous individual.

Yet, as I mentioned before, Beatrice had, by the time the race occurred, remarried. In the very beginning of her narrative she refers to this fact, explaining why Frank was not with her at that time. This

reference suggests another association between the events of the race and Beatrice's broader life experience. In fact, in the post-narrative conversation Beatrice describes the conditions surrounding her second marriage. Both she and Frank had just finished college. They had no money and very few prospects. Frank, from Rumford, was unknown to Beatrice's community. He had no reputation with them. Six months after their marriage, Frank was called to serve in the Second World War. Beatrice states that she had no idea whether he would return or be killed. Considering these facts, one can say that, in marrying Frank, Beatrice was relying on her own judgement of the intrinsic qualities of the man, not on external trappings or community opinion.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Beatrice's taking a chance on Lyn Star can be seen to stand for a remarriage that was anything but secure.

Although her family and community were not opposed to her remarriage, Beatrice recalls expressed doubts, given her *own* reputation, about the couple's success. Her mother, for example, wrote a letter to the new bride in which she counselled, "Do *try* to be happy. Remember, Frank has never been married before." Judging from the present moment, I am struck by how fitting Lyn Star's victory is as a symbol for Beatrice's long, successful second marriage. I would suggest, then, that the latent associations of this narrative to circumstances critical to the narrator's life, even if not consciously highlighted in the narrative, may enforce its memorability.

What is essential to emphasize, however, is that this is *my* framing of the racetrack narrative, informed by contemporary feminist conceptions of patriarchal structures that my grandmother does not share. Indeed, Beatrice, after reading an initial version of this paper, expressed strong disagreement with my conclusions. Let me quote a portion of the fourteen-page letter she wrote to me concerning the story:

Not being, myself, a feminist, the "female struggle" as such never bothered me in my life. It never occurred to me. I never thought of my *position* at all in this sense. I've always felt that I had a fine childhood. It seems, now, that I must have had a remarkable one. To begin with, I had a very strong father figure. Surrounded by the deep and abiding love of my Grandmother Austin (whom I adored); the clear, unfaltering knowledge of my father's love and his openly expressed pride in

me and the definite disciplines set by my grandmother which provided the staunch and unchallengeable framework in which I moved, I knew absolute security. (The disciplines were unchallengeable [sic] because I never had the least desire to challenge them. I would have done anything not to disappoint Grandma or make her feel bad, and I was so very happy and secure that only an idiot would have tried to upset the situation).

In consequence of all this, as I grew older, the inner strength which that sense of security had built in me, served always to make me feel equal to anyone, male or female, and very often superior. Feminism, as such, was of no moment to me—none at all. Privately, it has always seemed ridiculous, but that's neither here nor there. It makes no difference to me what anybody else thinks about it.

So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation. You've read into the story what you wished to—what pleases YOU. That it was never—by any wildest stretch of the imagination—the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. The skeleton remains, but it has become your story. Right? How far is it permissible to go, in the name of folklore, and still be honest in respect to the original narrative?

Beatrice brings up a crucial issue in oral narrative scholarship—who controls the text? If I had chosen to collect the folktales of the Trobriand Islanders, or worked among the illiterate mountain people of our own country, I could perhaps have overlooked the question of my intrusion into the texts I collect. But my grandmother is an educated, articulate woman who is quite capable of reading, responding to, and resisting my presentation of her narrative. Indeed, my own and my grandmother's work provides a radical example of how each of us has created a story from our own experience. While I agree that the story has indeed become *my* story in the present context, I cannot agree that my reading is dishonest to the original story.

Beatrice embraces an idealist model of textual meaning that privileges authorial intentions. It *makes sense* for my grandmother to read the story in this way. From my own perspective, however, the story does not really become a story until it is actualized in the mind of a receptive listener/reader. As *my* consciousness has been formed

within a different social and historical reality, I cannot be honest in her sense of that word. I offer instead a different reading, one that values her story as an example to feminists of one woman's strategies for combatting a limiting patriarchal ideology. That Bea's performance constitutes a direct opposition to established authorities reveals how gender ideologies are not wholly or always determinative of female identity.

Nevertheless, despite my confidence in the validity of my reading as a feminist scholar, personally I continue to be concerned about the potential emotional effect that alternate readings of oral narrative may have on our living subjects. While Bea and I have discussed our differences of interpretation at length and have come to an amicable resolution about how to present them, such discussions with our sources are often overlooked or unreported by folklore scholars. Lest we as feminist scholars unwittingly appropriate the words of our mothers for our own uses, we must attend to the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, meanings generated by our framing or contextualizing oral narratives in new ways.

### Notes

1. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: The Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1987), pp. 121–32.
2. Barbara Myerhoff, "Life History Among the Elderly," in *A Crack in the Mirror*, eds. Jay Ruby and Barbara Myerhoff (Phila.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), pp. 99–117.
3. Richard Bauman, "Performance and Honor in 13th Century Iceland," *JAF* 99 (1986), 131–50. Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985). Taken to an extreme, human beings' attempts to approximate in their own lives and experiences aesthetic models leads to the adoption of highly artificial behaviors and a self-conscious emplotment of one's action in the everyday world. See Iurii M. Lottman's work, "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture," in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, eds. A. D. Nakhimovsky and A. S. Nakhimovsky (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 67–94.
4. For a discussion of the dialectic between individual behavior, changing environments, and social ideals of women, see Beverly Stoeltje, 'A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Women," in *Women and Folklore*, ed. Claire R. Farrer (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1975), pp. 25–41.
5. For a discussion of the sexist bias in folklore scholarship generally see Marta

- Weigle, "Women as Verbal Artists: Reclaiming the Sisters of Enheduanna," *Frontiers* 3: 3 (1978), 1–9.
6. Recent feminist studies in folklore have generally accepted the division of spheres by gender and looked at women's distinct performances and performance styles. Stoeltje describes how new opportunities effect a transformation in social ideals for women in an adaptive process that in turn affects individual women's behaviors. Roger Abrahams recognizes an opposition between the bad man of the streets and the respectable female guardian of home and church in his "Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women," in *Women and Folklore*, ed. Claire R. Farrer (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press), pp. 58–80. Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser identify a feminine artistic style of indirection and subversive resistance to an oppressive male order in women's writing ("The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature," *JAF* 100 (1987), 412–25. Rachele Satzman sees women's use of masculine folklore forms within their own gender group as a form of expropriation for use rather than an acceptance of a belittling female identity ("Folklore, Feminism, and the Folk: Whose Lore is It?" *JAF* 100 [1987], 548–62).
  7. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1977), p. 111; Bauman, *Story, Performance, Event* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).
  8. However, I would argue that while narrative performances will always be self-conscious reworkings of past experience, they focus upon event clusters that are memorable *because* they are particularly amenable to aesthetic patterning.
  9. Of course, we may also bring folk performances to the attention of a wider audience by placing performers on display at festivals or writing for a general public. These acts also effect changes in the narrative, as Bauman demonstrates in his article on a Texas storyteller (*Story, Performance, Event*, pp. 78–101.)
  10. Throughout her life Bea has performed semi-professionally as a pianist, an actress, a director, and an English teacher. In addition, she is an accomplished writer, having received numerous awards and honors for her one-act plays. Currently, she and her husband, Frank Hanson, both retired from college teaching, perform programs of dramatic readings to church and social groups in the New Jersey area.
  11. During a visit the following summer my grandmother showed me a letter written to Frank the evening after the events narrated here took place (August 6, 1944) in which the whole incident, including the explanation of the procedure for judging a horse, is recorded. She also gave me a copy of a chapter of an unpublished autobiographical novel, written over a period of twenty years (circa 1950–1983), that presents the same event. Although a comparison of Beatrice's oral and written versions would make an interesting study, in this paper I will restrict myself to a consideration of the oral performance I have recorded on tape.
  12. The following represents a verbatim transcription of an oral narrative I recorded

from Beatrice Hanson in December, 1986. Folklorists interested in performance exclude nothing from their transcripts, not the false starts, the stalling words "uh," "um," or other oral phenomena associated with the oral form of presentation. I understand Bea's oral narratives as most closely approximating the written form of a dramatic monologue, like that delivered by a messenger in which actions occurring offstage are reported to an assembled audience in a play. Therefore, I have employed several punctuation marks that need explanation:

- A. Italics indicate stressed or emphatic delivery.
  - B. Bold-faced words indicate emphasis with a corresponding slowness of delivery, a kind of hyperarticulation.
  - C. Dashes indicate the addition of a new syntactic unit, without pause, to a continuous flow of speech. This often occurs when the speaker abandons an initial syntactic pattern for a more suitable one.
  - D. Audience comments that do not serve as complete transformations from the monologic to the dialogic interaction, but rather constitute narrative undertones, are included in brackets within Bea's text. All other punctuation marks correspond to general transcription practices and should be read accordingly. I have divided the narrative into acts and scenes, determined by thematic chunks as well as shifts in temporal or geographical focus.
13. In the conversation following the narrative, she mentions another race at Tobson that she and Frank attended years later where none of the horses looked like much of anything to her. Significantly, Tobson does *not* provide the material for a narrative, but is mentioned in passing as a contrast to the race we are considering here.
  14. Beatrice's attention to correctly reporting the addressee in this interchange can be viewed as an attempt to faithfully recount the narrated events. However, as it creates greater poetic closure to have this speaker affirm Beatrice's merit *to her father*, thereby demonstrating the total victory of youth over age, the self-correction may be viewed as part of the artful shaping of events narrated.
  15. The "New England Character" has formed the subject of a variety of literary treatments. One of the best I have read is Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story, "The Revolt of Mother," in *The Revolt of Mother and Other Stories* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1974 [1891]).
  16. In a narrative that immediately precedes *this* narrative in the conversation, Bea lovingly describes how, as a child, she was allowed to accompany her father, who owned race horses, when he visited the training rounds. Thus, she knew many of the horses, trainers, and drivers who travelled the county fair circuit. Emphasizing the exceptionality of this experience, she remarks, "Though I could not go fishing with my father on Sundays, or hunting with him on any day of the week, for some strange reason he took me with him, mornings" to watch the horses being exercised. Thus, the narrator explains that her knowledge of horses is based on the unusual circumstances of her youth.
  17. In a previous telling of the story, Beatrice relates that during the car ride home

her father did, in fact, discuss the race with her, specifically a curious development in the first heat not included in the present version of the story. In the earlier version, Beatrice explains that an unnecessary move by one of the other drivers opened up a space that allowed the father to move over and let his son come through on the rail. In that version the elements of chance and luck in Beatrice's success receive more emphasis than in the version discussed here. (Unfortunately, I do not have a taped record of the earlier oral performance.)

18. It is important to note that Beatrice's father was one of the few people who was supportive of her during this period. As an antagonistic father-figure at the race course, he symbolizes outraged society; as a man, he cannot be so conceived.
19. In contrast, Beatrice's first husband was the youngest son of a wealthy local family. Although she had private doubts about marrying him, she was considered by her community to have made a good catch.