

5 Oral and written traditions in the *Versus de Unibove*¹

The medieval peasantry was illiterate. As a consequence, information about it was recorded by others. Indeed, the images of medieval peasants represent the view of others – the perspective of outsiders. This has its limitations: the images are mostly fragmentary, often misinformed, very often biased.

Yet the testimonies of outsiders may sometimes contain traces of the images the peasantry bore of itself. For oral testimonies of peasants were recorded in writing, and these offer a glimpse of all kinds of forms of oral communication, which was the dominant form of exchange of information in rural areas.² The internal organization of peasant communities, the regulation of important communal affairs, legal administration at a local level, water management, taking care of roads, dikes and ditches – all of it was organized and transmitted orally and stored in the collective memory.

Stories formed part of the wealth of the orally transmitted culture. In them, peasants spoke of their own vicissitudes as well as of those of their ancestors. A human trait, they too felt the need for fiction, which was epitomized in fictitious stories that were told to entertain, relax, or to put up a defence against the harshness of reality. One such story is about the adventures of peasant One-Ox, who first led a meagre and subordinate existence, but eventually emerged as a resilient and clever figure who manages to outsmart his more powerful antagonists.

The story of One-Ox has come down to us in an eleventh-century Latin poem, the *Versus de Unibove*, which was certainly not intended for a peasant environment. It contains all the elements of a view of the Other, in particular a contempt for peasants. But the poem also contains powerful examples of elements drawn from one or several original folktales that unmistakably display signs of a positive self-image of the peasantry. The poem consequently offers a unique opportunity to engage with a self-image of the peasantry embedded in an orally transmitted story and to confront it with its written counterpart, a story told by outsiders. From the text we can thus not only learn something about the peasants' mentality, but also about the clash between theirs and the secular and religious elite's outlook.³

The *Versus de Unibove*: the contents of the poem

The poem tells a story made up of four episodes.⁴

Episode One. A peasant only owns a single ox (whereas two oxen are needed for a plough). Each time he purchases an additional ox, the first one dies. Hence, his neighbours nickname him One-Ox. Then one day, he loses his single ox. So he goes to market in a nearby town and sells the oxhide cheaply. On the way back he makes a small detour through a copse to defecate, and there he discovers three jars filled with coins. At home he borrows a measuring cup from the provost (*praepositus*, probably a local manager of ecclesiastical property). The provost accuses One-Ox of theft, but he retorts he received the money in exchange for the oxhide. Next, the provost, the village bailiff and the priest kill their oxen and go to market with the hides. The exorbitant prices that they charge spark a conflict with their prospective buyers, a bunch of cobblers. They are fined and the hides are confiscated. They want to take revenge on One-Ox.

Episode Two. One-Ox smears his wife with pig's blood. She feigns death. The three vengeful village magistrates enter. One-Ox takes out a horn and blows it while walking around her in circles three times. She pretends to suddenly arise from the dead, whereupon the three magistrates are struck by her unprecedented beauty. Desirous that their wives also regain their youth, they purchase the horn off One-Ox and murder their wives. At their wives' funeral they swear to take revenge.

Episode Three. One-Ox shoves coins up his mare's behind. His three enemies think that she is defecating money; they are willing to forego their revenge if One-Ox will sell them the mare. It is easy to predict the outcome.

Fourth and final episode. One-Ox is to be put to death by the three village potentates. He is allowed a say on how he will be executed, and chooses death by drowning. Tied up and locked in a barrel, he is carried out to sea. However, he slips some money into his pocket and persuades the three villagers to have a drink at an inn. Meanwhile a swineherd passes by with his herd and hears shouts from the barrel: 'I don't want to be a provost.' The herdsman thinks otherwise, swaps places with One-Ox, and drowns. Three days later the trio bumps into One-Ox herding the drowned herdsman's swine. He claims to have found the swine on the floor of the sea. The provost, the bailiff and the priest rush into the sea and One-Ox is rid of his foes.

The author, his audience, the genre

The poem *Versus de Unibove* consists of 216 strophes, each made up of four verses. The poem was written in the eleventh century.⁵ It has come down to us in a single manuscript, in a codex that at the beginning of the twelfth century probably belonged to the monastery library of St. Peter's in Gembloux.⁶ The codex also contains treatises on the theory of music, astronomy, mathematics and philology.⁷ The poem thus belongs to a compilation of

texts that functioned within an intellectual, monastic setting. This provides us with some information about the potential reading audience the author of the *Versus* was addressing.

The author probably originated from the north of the Romance language region, perhaps from Wallonia. Welkenhuysen has made quite a convincing argument to support this idea based on linguistic criteria.⁸ In the *Versus* the stress is often on the last syllable of a word that had the stress on the first syllable in Classical Latin, for example: *bové s emít paupér homó* (strophe 5.1). This is a strain of Latin typically produced in the Romance language region. Because the codex containing the poem probably belonged to the monastery library of St Peter's in Gembloux, various researchers have therefore suggested that the author came from northern France or Wallonia.⁹

Although the author remains anonymous, we can say a few things about his cultural background. He was quite knowledgeable, a familiar face in learned clerical circles, as the eloquent Latin, the numerous quotations from the Bible¹⁰ and the very exceptional, slight command of Aramaic suggest.¹¹ The poem is learned and written in Latin, and breathes a markedly ironic sense of humour. One-Ox's encounter with his adversaries three days after his supposed death may in fact be an allusion to Christ's resurrection. Welkenhuysen suggested that the author was a young monk or a wandering scholar (a cleric who travelled to various schools) based on this blend of clerical erudition and ironic distancing from clerical conventions.

Strophes 2 and 3 contain some information about the social framework the poem functioned in:

*Ad mensam magni principis
est rumor Unius Bovis,
praesentatur ut fabula
per verba iocularia.
Fiunt cibus convivium,
sed verbis exercitia;
in personarum drammate
Uno cantemus de Bove.*

(At the table of a great prince/is told the account of One-Ox;/it is presented as a fabliau/in playful words./Banquets come about through foods,/but literary compositions through words;/in a performance of characters/let us sing of One-Ox.)¹²

Are these *topoi* or do the verses actually contain information that reflects social reality? They at least suggest that the poem was declaimed at a banquet; the verses imply the story (*rumor*) about One-Ox was 'presented' (*praesentatur*). *Cantemus* and *in personarum drammate* may refer to a mimetic performance.¹³ In addition, the words *rumor* and *fabula* are indicative of what a medieval audience perceived as fiction, and *verba iocularia* refers to a comical presentation. Was the *magnus princeps* a prestigious cleric?

Perhaps a bishop? Or was he a secular nobleman? Who can say. Either way, the poem probably underwent a preliminary stage of oral transmission, as a mode of entertainment in a courtly aristocratic milieu.¹⁴

The next stage, in its written form, the poem was most likely intended for a monastic audience. The setting in writing of the text meant the discontinuation of its oral *creation*, so typical of oral tradition. At most, it was now subject to oral *performance*. Well-educated monks probably understood the Latin rendition. The Romance mode of the Latin used in the *Versus* reinforces the impression that the poem was recited.¹⁵

The Poem of One-Ox is considered the earliest fabliau known to us.¹⁶ Fabliaux are short stories in verse,¹⁷ comical works, often displaying a rather histrionic sense of humour; they are usually set in the countryside.¹⁸ Fabliaux also lend themselves to a theatrical transposition. Indeed, the Poem of One-Ox contains any number of themes suitable for theatricalization.¹⁹ Moreover, events depicted in fabliaux are usually quotidian. The same applies to the *Versus*. However, first and foremost fabliaux were composed for an aristocratic audience, which given the vulgar narrative material may run against our expectations.²⁰ This is in keeping with the *Versus*'s claim that the story about One-Ox was recited at a great lord's festive banquet, as Ziolkowski suggested.²¹

French fabliaux flourished from about 1200 until the fourteenth century.²² Most were composed in the north of France, with Picardy making an important contribution.²³ The Latin Poem about One-Ox, as mentioned above, was most probably written down in Wallonia or northern France. Geographically, as Welkenhuysen remarked, this dovetails rather well with the area where the fabliaux originated.²⁴

But enough said about the written, literary, genre-related similarities between the *Versus* and the fabliaux. Can we identify any likeness insofar as oral tradition is concerned? To date, research on the impact of oral tradition in the fabliaux is too cursory to be able to draw generic conclusions, but we can at least reach a tentative evaluation.²⁵ It has been noted that in a number of fabliaux the narrative material is related to similar narrative motifs in oral tradition. The genre apparently was well-suited for the adoption of narrative material, as successful fabliaux needed juicy, humorous narrative material for their colourful presentations. Surely authors familiar with similar narrative material from the oral tradition happily recycled it.

The themes and atmosphere of the *Versus* are related to the fabliaux. However, the likeness between the *Versus* and the later fabliaux is not necessarily related to written literature. The author of the *Versus*, like the creators of the later fabliaux, may instead have drawn his narrative material from oral tradition, selecting it according to the same criteria. More methodical research into derivations from the oral tradition in the fabliaux will therefore help us gain further insight into the Poem of One-Ox.

The succession of narrative motifs and the updating of the narrative material are often mentioned as properties of oral tradition. I would like to

examine whether the Poem of One-Ox exhibits these properties and, if so, whether we can draw any conclusions in regards to the implicit oral origins of the narrative material in the *Versus*.

The succession of narrative motifs

It is unlikely that an orally transmitted story consisting of a succession of motifs²⁶ will be made up of a unitary, comprehensive main storyline and secondary side motifs, as for example in the nineteenth-century novel. Far more likely is a collection of separate motifs featuring side by side.²⁷ According to Walter Ong, oral style is additive rather than subordinative and aggregative rather than analytic, features that would continue to play a part in written literature for a long time to come.²⁸ They are consequently not *exclusively* characteristic of orally transmitted literature.

There is also evidence of successions of narrative motifs in written medieval literature,²⁹ which is not necessarily indicative of oral creation. Writers may simply have been familiar with the procedures of oral tradition because it was the most widespread form of cultural transference. In much the same vein, at the beginning of the railroad era train compartments were built that looked like stagecoaches. More in general, even if the succession of narrative motifs were a predominant characteristic of oral tradition, still this feature cannot serve as a criterion for identifying oral tradition.

The Poem of One-Ox consists of a succession of narrative motifs; this does not necessarily mean the poem derives from an earlier version that was created and transmitted orally. However, if orally transmitted versions of the story were already circulating before the *Versus de Unibove* emerged, they may have consisted of successions of narrative motifs, as so often is the case with oral tradition. In that case, the succession of motifs in the *Versus* was not necessarily invented by the author. I will elaborate upon this below.

Updating narrative material

It has been argued that updating is a dominant feature of oral tradition. Narrators had a tendency to adapt already circulating stories to the new, contemporary outlook.³⁰ Another feature of oral tradition is its tangibility. In general, the narrated material tended to stay close to the human lifeworld.³¹ In written literature the author might adapt the narrative material, even if drawn from oral tradition, to his own lifeworld and 'fill out' the story with concrete details from his own experience. So these are not all-weather criteria. With this in mind, let us consider the contents of the *Versus de Unibove*.

The poem does constantly refer to socio-economic reality, the world of farming, cattle-breeding and commerce.³² One-Ox is a farmer. His plough is drawn by oxen. The notables in his village also work with oxen. In episode one, One-Ox owns an animal that he rides to market, probably the mare

who appears as a marvelous money machine in episode three. He also owns a pig (at least one). Swine-breeding features in the final episode, in the form of the swineherd with his pigs. The swineherd is carrying a bundle of arrows on his back; he may also go out hunting from time to time.

The poem teaches us about the domanical relations in the countryside. There is a village aristocracy: a provost, probably the local manager of a property belonging to a religious institution (*praepositus*), a village bailiff (*maior villae*) and a village priest. The text is unclear on whether they actually work the land. The priest has a couple of servants. The three officials act as intermediaries between the village community and the power structures that it forms a part of, large-scale landownership, public authority and the Church.³³ This aspect is not addressed in the poem, however.

It is impossible to determine One-Ox's exact status. The villagers disparagingly nicknamed him One-Ox, but this only implies that had he not been out of luck, he would have owned two oxen. Obviously oxen, not horses, were still being used to draw ploughs in the area. The three village magistrates also use them.³⁴ According to Genicot's estimation, less than ten per cent of the rural population owned a plough or beasts to draw it.³⁵ We can thus assume that One-Ox and his three adversaries were all members of the well-to-do rural population. One-Ox also owns a horse. All this does not suggest that he was poor.³⁶ If any differences between One-Ox and the village magistrates did exist, then they are immaterial.

There is a daily market in a nearby town. Goods, in this case oxhides, are conveyed the short distance to the market. The cobblers buy the hides directly off the peasants and pay for them in cash. Money plays a significant economic role.

Thus, we encounter a variety of rural economic activities in the poem: swine breeding and hunting, domanical agriculture and an agrarian economy that was at least partly market-oriented. A market economy is emergent where each pursues his own material interests.³⁷

Some elements grounded in contemporary socio-economic reality are indispensable to the plot. An obvious motif is that One-Ox only owns one ox, rather than the requisite two oxen – which turns him into a loser facing the three village magistrates. Money is an essential factor here, which drives the action: in three out of four episodes, a sale is made; the prospect of pecuniary gain is the motor of episode three (about the mare) and episode four: the swineherd is seduced with money, as are the three village magistrates.

The more imaginary elements in the text also bear traces of socio-economic reality. Transformed into a fairy-tale motif, there is the money in the form of the treasure One-Ox finds. By some miracle his mare seems to be able to generate vast sums of wealth. Animals, such as the swine at the bottom of the sea, also feature as fairytale-like sources of prosperity.

What does this teach us about the *Versus's* relation to written and oral tradition? There are definitely traces of eleventh-century social reality in the

Versus. But this says nothing about the story's oral or written genesis. There is no way of knowing whether already existent narrative material was updated, because we lack an earlier version of the same or a related story with which to compare it. And even so, updating narrative material is a dominant characteristic of oral tradition; it can also feature in written works.

One detail was perhaps drawn from older, orally transmitted versions. It was assuredly not a case of updating, but quite the opposite, a clear example of adopting in its entirety an existing motif where some form of adaptation would have been commonsense. It concerns the sea One-Ox was supposed to be thrown into and in which his adversaries drown. None of the other passages in the poem suggest the story was situated anywhere near the coast. Some researchers who studied the *Versus* locate the story inland; a river or a lake would have been more logical. Indeed, this applies to some of the stories that are related to the story in the *Versus* and were orally transmitted before being recorded in writing.³⁸ Is the motif of the sea a petrified residue of older versions? Perhaps. But it is also possible that the poet deliberately retained – or invented – this motif because a sea, so much vaster and deeper than a river, had a far more dramatic effect. Moreover, although the poem is filled with true-to-life details, the author could readily give his imagination free rein. The sea is very much in keeping with the other imaginary elements in his work.

Literary images of peasants

The images used to depict the poem's main character, the peasant One-Ox, partly originate from literary tradition, partly from oral tradition. First, I shall discuss some of the medieval traditions in written literature concerning the peasantry and examine their role in the depiction of One-Ox.

There is a caveat. The author of the *Versus de Unibove* plainly keeps an ironic distance from written tradition and Christian doctrine. For example, the moral in the final strophe – do not pay heed to the advice of cunning enemies – concludes with the solemn statement that the story has illustrated this moral 'for all eternity' (*per saeculorum saecula*) – which is undoubtedly meant to be ironic.³⁹ Bertini is convinced that the punishment thought up for One-Ox – being tied up in a barrel and tossed into the sea – refers to a passage in Revelation (20: 1–3), where Satan is bound and cast into the abyss; this and other evidence suggest, in his view, that the poet intended to portray One-Ox as satanic.⁴⁰ I tend to agree on the first point, but not on the second. How can we be certain that this reference to Revelation was serious? Let us compare it with the meeting between One-Ox and his adversaries three days after his supposed death by drowning in strophe 197. Undoubtedly, this is an allusion to Christ's resurrection, but with a decidedly ironic slant. Indeed, we should never lose sight of the fact that irony may be in play, as may be the case in the literary images of peasants in the *Versus*, which I shall now address.

- 1 The clerical and secular elite's attitude towards the peasantry – the majority of the population – was ambivalent. Members of the elite groups acknowledged they were dependent on the peasants' productivity for their own livelihood, but they often felt far superior to them.⁴¹ The impression is given that as long as the peasants accepted their lower station in society, they may be described relatively charitably. This mechanism perhaps resonates in the poem's depiction of One-Ox, for he is certainly not described in more negative terms than the three village magistrates at the beginning of the poem.⁴²
- 2 Texts written by clerics in the early Middle Ages often contain images of peasants as earth-bound creatures, coarse and ridiculous.⁴³ These are images formed from above and beyond, within circles of clerical *litterati*. The same stereotypes occur in courtly literature, where people who are part of the courtly culture are contrasted with *villains*, uncivilized peasants.⁴⁴ The image is found at the beginning of the *Versus*: One-Ox is an underdog and barely human. In strophe 4 he is depicted as a ridiculous yokel:

*Natis natus ridiculis
est rusticus de rusticis;
natura fecit hominem,
sed fortuna mirabilem.*

(A son of ridiculous sons,/he is a peasant from peasant stock./Nature made him a man/ but fortune a *Wunderkind*.)⁴⁵

Such a scornful characterization may be a *topos*, a vehicle for a *litteratus* to express his disdain for peasants or to meet his audience's expectations. But the poet may also have written these lines purely for their dramatic effect, to emphasize the contrast with the cleverness and fighting spirit One-Ox later exhibits. Later on, One-Ox is called foolish (*stultus*; strophe 22) on only one occasion. After discovering the treasure, he sends his son to the provost to borrow a measuring cup and seems to be acting against his own interests. Further on in the text he calls himself a *pauper*, but only to fool his enemies (strophe 29).⁴⁶

Scatological stories and images are an important component of the negative stereotyping of peasants. Working with animals day in day out, animal manure functions as the material basis; in literary representations, it can be contorted into grotesque proportions. Freedman has amassed a huge number of such images.⁴⁷ Indeed, scatological elements play a prominent part in the Poem of One-Ox – returning to town, One-Ox defecates in the woods; his mare produces manure instead of the promised riches. Once again the scatological element contributes to the negative representation, but positive connotations assuredly also played a part. Manure was not necessarily considered as a putrid source of nuisance, for it was a good fertilizer and thus a source of income.⁴⁸ In episode one, One-Ox discovers the treasure directly

after relieving his bowels, and in episode three there is the suggestion that the animal's belly contains money. Alongside the negative connotations, positive scatological ones that are rooted in orally transmitted folk tradition may thus also play a part.⁴⁹

- 3 Medieval texts also contain a different kind of image of the peasantry. Despite the fact that the secular and clerical elites mostly looked down on the peasantry as uncivilized outsiders, they also realized that the peasantry had effective means to escape its economic obligations and distress, for example sabotage and evasion, which in the literary imagination was translated as unreliability.⁵⁰ Thus, the artful One-Ox, able to survive danger through ingenuity, seems to fit this stereotypical bill. Indeed, One-Ox often exhibits calculating behaviour.⁵¹ He carefully stages his ruses: the supposedly dead woman, the money-making mare. Before he disappears in the barrel, he makes sure he has enough money to get his executioners drunk. With carefully chosen words, he repeatedly plays his opponents for fools and entices the swineherd to take his place.
- 4 Yet another aspect of the elitist image of the peasant, an aspect narrowly interwoven with the previous one, concerns the beast-like peasant who lives outside of culture and close to nature, who is unpredictable and dangerous.⁵² One-Ox bears some of these traits. He is portrayed as a man who abruptly switches from being a passive victim to a master of manipulation when he tempts the provost, the bailiff and the priest to kill their oxen. From then on, he is the one calling the shots.

The nearest parallel to the *Versus* in this respect is the even more fantastic and cruel *Fabliau de Trubert*, about a man who lives outside culture and uses tricks to get the better of his mighty adversary. One-Ox and Trubert have some traits in common; they are both unpredictable and sadistic. Their first act is performed on their own accord, and it is a transgressive act of aggression, enigmatic and therefore sinister.⁵³

Oral tradition

Above, the question was posed whether influences of oral tradition can be found in the *Versus de Unibove*. The fact that the poem contains humorous, everyday narrative material similar to the fabliaux, the succession of motifs, the wealth of factual details, the scatological elements – all these traces have failed to produce conclusive answers. But there is more.

The relationship between the sexes in the *Versus* is in discordance with clerical tradition. In Western Europe the married couple and the nuclear family around it have always been the basic unit, at least as far as our knowledge stretches back. The same applies to the *Versus*. Not only are the two worldly magistrates married, so is the priest. One-Ox and his wife

cooperate closely in the ruse with the resuscitating horn. Cooperation between a husband and wife must often have been everyday practice. Clerical writings remain relatively silent on this matter, however, for it does not dovetail with the medieval clergy's misogynous view of women. Solidarity between husband and wife belongs to the realm of the lay world. As a consequence, stories about it in texts from clerical circles probably stem from oral tradition.

The main character's traits also point to an oral tradition. The ridiculed underdog at the beginning of the poem soon transforms into a resourceful man who settles account with his adversaries through a series of tricks. He is cunning, calculating, constantly promoting his own interests; he is aggressive and cruel and keen on harming his enemies. The story forms part of a 'family' of stories, Type 1535, 'The Rich and the Poor Farmer', in the classification of folktales arranged by Aarne, Thompson and Uther.⁵⁴ The whole family of Type 1535 belongs to a still larger complex, the stories about a trickster. Stories of this kind have been found all over the world.⁵⁵

Although large swathes of the poem are seemingly set in social reality, many elements in the story also touch upon the supernatural, the world of fairy tales.⁵⁶ Does the material of the *Versus* indeed originate from this genre of oral literature?

As said, the story of the *Versus* belongs to a large family of stories. There are similarities between the family members: each bears the underlying theme of a at the onset weak person who, by way of his own cunning, gets the better of one or several seemingly strong characters. In the *Versus de Unibove* the thematic core is elaborated upon in a succession of episodes that have one thing in common, i.e. that the main character fools his adversaries into believing that certain magical objects (a horn, a mare) or certain acts (selling oxhides, climbing into a barrel or sinking to the bottom of the sea) can yield great profits, albeit financially, erotically or socially.

The various versions classified by Aarne, Thompson and Uther as Type 1535 bear some resemblance, but also differences due to processes of addition, wear and tear. Some versions contain less motifs than the *Versus* or motifs that are not in the poem. One example is the version from Westphalia recorded in 1829.⁵⁷ A very poor peasant is forced to slaughter his last cow and he travels to town with its hide. It starts to rain and he covers himself with the bloody hide, turning it inside out. A raven is drawn to the blood, and the peasant catches it. Then the peasant manages to convince an innkeeper that the raven can predict the future. The peasant returns to his village with the money he got for the raven, but he leads his fellow villagers into believing he earned the money with the cowhide. We are already familiar with the outcome: the villagers slaughter their cows, only to have their hopes smashed when they get to market. This version also contains the motif of the barrel and the cattle at the bottom of a river.

Comparing these narrative motifs to the *Versus*, it is clear that the virtually identical first motif occurs in both of them, but the Westphalia variant also includes the motif of the bird predicting the future; the motif in episode two of the *Versus* (the resuscitating horn), and in three (the money-making animal) do not feature in the Westphalia variant, but the narrative material of episode four does. The combination of similarities and differences is incompatible with the properties of written tradition and fits in very well with what is known about the properties of oral tradition.⁵⁸

Important to mention here is that both the version in the *Versus de Unibove* and the related stories consist of successions of narrative motifs. Orally transmitted stories consisting of successions of narrative motifs are naturally unstable.⁵⁹ These kinds of successions have something arbitrary about them; they can easily be expanded or shortened. The various versions of stories consisting of this kind of succession of motifs, can consequently display a strong degree of variation. This also holds true of the stories classified as Type 1535.⁶⁰ The individual narrative motifs may also contain *internal* variations. The resuscitating horn, for example, is sometimes replaced with a flute.⁶¹ But this is variation within certain specific boundaries: the object changes, but the function in the plot remains the same.

Nonetheless, the protagonist's character is a stable element in all the variations. He consistently starts out as a weak character who eventually trumps his adversaries. The protagonist's character is an essential part of the plot in all the versions, as is the case in the *Versus de Unibove*. The characteristics assigned to One-Ox – cunning and cruelty – can thus only to a small extent be explained as literary stereotypes.

The main character's name provides another piece of information indicative of oral tradition. The name One-Ox is only mentioned in the *Versus*, not in other stories related to the *Versus*. A Flemish version, however, does mention the name Eentand (One-Tooth) and a German one the name Einhirn.⁶² As De Meyer notes, they are probably corruptions of the name One-Ox. The fact that the notion of 'one and only one' was still preserved, yet the second element of the name had changed, is in keeping with our knowledge of oral tradition.⁶³

The Poem of One-Ox contains the oldest known written record of four narrative motifs that also crop up in nineteenth and twentieth-century recordings of oral tradition. These narrative motifs – isolated or in combination with one another and, in so far as they are clustered, in varying combinations – appear to have a vast distribution, surfacing across Europe and far beyond its borders.⁶⁴ As has been noted above, the Poem of One-Ox was passed down in a single manuscript, probably produced for the monks of St. Peter's Abbey in Gembloux. It is highly unlikely that this sole manuscript, meant for internal use in a single monastery, was the fount of dissemination of the narrative motifs across the entire region where they were observed in the nineteenth and twentieth century.⁶⁵ The only explanation for

such a vast geographical coverage is an extremely strong oral component in the transmission process.

Thus, the relationship between the narrative motifs in the *Versus* and the versions recorded later on can only be clarified by assuming there was an oral tradition into which the author of the *Versus* as well as the later oral narrators were tapping.⁶⁶ We should not envisage this shared oral tradition to be a fixed spoken text that was conceived at a certain moment in time. Instead, it was a complex of related, orally transmitted narrative motifs from which, at various places and moments in time, unique oral versions could be derived separately.

On the grounds of these arguments, the version in the *Versus de Unibove* does not have the status of an original from which all later versions derived. The poem was seemingly a written rendition based on one or more orally transmitted versions amidst other orally transmitted versions that have been lost, and would seem to be based upon a selection from the narrative material available at the time.

What to say about the narrative material? The vast majority of orally transmitted stories collected by folklore scholars dates back to the nineteenth and twentieth century. A great deal of narrative material dating from the Middle Ages was discovered by learned scholars such as Bolte, Polívka, Wesselski and Hilka. Unfortunately, the findings were never made systematically accessible by means of a motif index for medieval oral tradition. Monographs have been written about some of the Types, in which all the versions from the earliest known to the contemporary examples were collected and analyzed as regards their interdependence. Yet until now, no monograph has been devoted to the repertoire of stories referred to here, i.e. Type 1535. A study appeared in 1942 on sections of the material, the above-cited *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema's in het licht der Romaansche en Germaansche kultuurstromingen* (Flemish Fairy Tale Themes in the Light of Romance and Germanic Cultural Trends) by Maurits de Meyer, which has a comprehensive scope and is still well worth reading. This work is based upon material from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. To date, the chapter on the narrative material in the *Versus* and the related folktales is the most important analysis any folklore scholar has ever written on this material, at least in my opinion.⁶⁷ De Meyer bases his conclusions on a total of 97 versions, 26 of which are from France, three from Wallonia, 17 from Flanders, six from the Netherlands, one from Luxembourg and 44 from Germany.

Is it feasible to place the narrative material of the *Versus* within the larger body of narrative material? Only to a limited degree. It was De Meyer's objective, as is clear from the title of his book, to examine the Flemish narrative material of One-Ox against the background of the narrative material in a large part of Western Europe, whereas research into the Walloon narrative material would be more pertinent. What is more, his study only includes three Walloon variants. That is not nearly enough to base any conclusions

on that are specifically related to Wallonia. One outcome of De Meyer's research is the placement of the narrative material from Flanders vis-à-vis two large groups of stories, both French and German. In this spirit I shall suffice with a placement of the narrative material in the *Versus* vis-à-vis these two groups of stories.

Comparing the results of De Meyer's research with the narrative material in the *Versus*, the following pattern emerges. The narrative motif contained in the poem's first episode, the adventure with the ox, appears throughout the region De Meyer studied, i.e. in France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The same holds true for the final episode, about the escape from the barrel and the defeat of One-Ox' adversaries. (The barrel rather than the sack used to kill One-Ox alludes to German rather than French narrative material. Barrels are quite common in the German variants, whereas sacks dominate the French versions.) The narrative motif in episode two, about the sale of the pseudo-magical musical instrument, is likewise found throughout the region, although not in the same frequencies in France, Belgium and the Netherlands on the one hand and Germany on the other: it commonly features in the French (in De Meyer's documentation, 19 out of a total of 26 researched variants), Belgian and Dutch variants, and uncommon in German variants (four out of a total of 44 variants). However, the motif in episode three, the sale of the so-called money-making animal, appears in France only, and rather infrequently (four out of a total of 26 variants), and only in the northern part of the country. So there is only one region where all four motifs occur in combination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely the north of France.

Above, I already suggested that the author of the *Versus de Unibove* most likely came from the north of the Romance language region, possibly from Wallonia, perhaps Gembloux. This lays to bare a surprising connection. – The region of the poem's origin and the region harbouring an identical succession of narrative motifs in the nineteenth and twentieth century are more or less identical.

It is tempting to conclude that the eleventh-century poet picked up the very same succession of motifs as was narrated eight centuries later on, and that we are observing continuity in a spatial sense⁶⁸ of a cluster of narrative motifs over a distance of eight centuries. But caution is needed. Monks did not live in total seclusion; they at times engaged with the outside world, and could have drawn narrative material from beyond their immediate lifeworld. If the poem did indeed originate in Gembloux, we have to take into account the fact that this monastery communicated with other monasteries in more southerly French regions;⁶⁹ the narrative material may thus have been conveyed from there to Gembloux. What is more, clerics who travelled to various schools, the other category mentioned before in connection with the authorship of the *Versus*, lived in the outside world and were often highly mobile, which could certainly have led to 'cross-pollination'.

Perhaps a more cautious conclusion deserves preference. If we bear in mind that the 'niche' the author lived in may have been wider than his immediate geographical surroundings, perhaps we ought to situate this 'niche' in the region where the succession of motifs characteristic of the *Versus* appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth century, i.e. the north of the Romance language region.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that in view of the predominantly oral nature of medieval Western European culture, it is worthwhile to try and identify the original oral nuclei in written medieval texts. Indeed, written texts sometimes reflect the balance between oral and written literary tradition, and orally transmitted stories may contain the self-images of illiterate groups. Viewed from these research perspectives, what have we learned from the study of the *Versus de Unibove*?

The poem has been passed down in a codex produced in and destined for highly literate monastic circles. It is written in eloquent Latin and in a purely literate verse form. These features are indicative of the world of written literary tradition.

The Poem of One-Ox is closely related to the fabliaux recorded in the north of France from about the year 1200; it is a comic narrative in verse with theatrical aspects and it is situated in the countryside. The similarity in theme and atmosphere can reflect the fact that like many authors of the fabliaux, the author of the *Versus* took his narrative material from contemporary oral tradition. Yet the imagery of the villagers, One-Ox and his adversaries, is denigrating and expresses social distance. The written version might well be based upon a comical story that was recited in a courtly milieu, where the same social distance was expressed.

The Poem of One-Ox consists of four successive episodes. Concatenation is often a feature of orally transmitted stories as well as of early written literature, and consequently is not necessarily an indication of the influence of oral tradition over written literature. Yet because the same clustering of motifs observed in the *Versus de Unibove* also occurs in a number of folk stories recorded later, perhaps we can assess the compositional input of the author. Honemann lays a strong emphasis on his compositional capacity. Suchomski, however, observes that the central two episodes might very well have been omitted without weakening the story's structure. Beyer considers the *Versus* a series of episodes that could have been shortened or elaborated upon; he is of the opinion that the series consists of hitherto separate stories that have been joined together by the author.⁷⁰ In view of the resemblance between the succession of motifs in the *Versus* and that in a number of folk stories recorded later – which was not, as I have stated, caused by the *Versus*'s dissemination – it is unlikely that the author of the *Versus* created them.

Are there any traces of updating in the *Versus de Unibove*, something that is generally common to oral tradition? The poem is situated in the contemporary lifeworld and offers a variegated image thereof, with many concrete details, but for lack of comparative material there is little way of telling whether this is the result of adaptations within orally transmitted stories that circulated earlier, or caused by the author's updating of already existing narrative material in the *Versus*.

The description of the main character partly dovetails with stereotypes the secular and clerical elites employed about peasants, whom they felt were earth-bound, coarse, ridiculous, unreliable, unpredictable and dangerous. However, the image of One-Ox as a formidable character feared for his slyness, a trickster, most certainly stems from oral tradition.

The cluster of narrative motifs is unmistakably indicative of oral tradition. The cluster is related to numerous folk stories with a widespread distribution that were recorded later. The distribution cannot stem from dispersion of the first recorded version, the *Versus*. Instead, a complex of oral sources must have existed, which both the *Versus* and the oral versions registered later drew upon. The resemblances between the story in the *Versus de Unibove* and other stories that were orally transmitted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is a convincing piece of evidence that unambiguously indicates that the narrative material in the *Versus* stems from oral tradition.⁷¹ Within this large repertoire, perhaps one specific succession of motifs was orally transmitted for centuries on end in a certain region, namely in the north of the Romance language region from the time of the recording of the *Versus de Unibove* – and earlier still, because the work sprang forth from an already circulating oral tradition – up until today.

Some features of the *Versus* – the succession of narrative motifs, the quotidian nature of the narrative material and in part the description of the main character – can go back either to oral or written literary tradition. There must have been a substantial crossover between the oral and written tradition at the time of the writing of the Poem of One-Ox. After all, the written version was spawned in a still predominantly oral culture, but it is simultaneously the product of a literate brain. The effect of oral and written tradition alike on such a text does not mean that either came at the expense of the other. The manifest presence of orally transmitted narrative material coincides with an equally manifest presence of purely written literary style features.

We might compare this to what is known as 'over-determination' in psychoanalysis. This term is used when one and the same element in a dream, a specific slip of the tongue or a neurotic symptom is the expression of very different psychological drives.⁷² We can view the simultaneous influences of oral and written tradition over a literary text such as the *Versus* in the same light. The result is similar to psychological mixed symptoms, a compromise that exhibits the signs of heterogeneous tendencies: the poem belongs to written literature, but is no less 'oral' for this reason. In the footsteps of

Bakhtin, we can also identify this phenomenon as the coexistence of various styles within one text, when an author relates to various milieus and micro milieus. Bakhtin's examples from nineteenth-century novels reflect the tensions between the various social layers and value systems.⁷³ The eleventh-century of the *Versus* was also subject to such conflicting influences. His text can be read as a compromise, the result of a clash between languages representing various conflicting social milieus.

A question that will have to remain unanswered is whether the monastic and aristocratic audience at the time actually experienced the *Versus's* cultural heterogeneity and, if so, in what manner – as stimulating, amusing or shocking, or all of this at once. Unless there is another way to broach the question, for in the eleventh century, orally transmitted and written literature may at times have been closely related. We tend to view written authorship and oral transmission as two different traditions, but apparently the author of the *Versus de Unibove* had no qualms in drawing material from both. It is impossible to know how the non-aristocratic audience appreciated oral versions of the story performed in the day. We may, however, assume that the audience enjoyed One-Ox's subversive and rogue-like character and considered him a hero.⁷⁴

The various traditions that played a part in the creation of the *Versus de Unibove* can also be approached from the aspect of *time*. Side by side, various types of durability (*durées*) may be discerned, each with its own duration and very different origins.⁷⁵ The literary forms featured in the *Versus de Unibove* are medieval continuations and transformations of Classical Latin literary traditions. The Christian elements in the poem are part of a long religious tradition, but the frequently ironic use the author makes of them is very much linked to the specific situation in which the work arose. The narrative motifs that occur in the *Versus* belong to a comprehensive, age-old tradition. The fact that the author of the *Versus* shows a certain openness towards the oral tradition of his day can be viewed as part of a tendency that was to become stronger in the course of the twelfth century;⁷⁶ the Poem of One-Ox is a harbinger of it. In this poem, the stereotypical images of the peasantry held by the upper stations of pre-industrial Western Europe are also put into words, i.e. as an inferior and ridiculous creature, who was in some ways weak but also unruly and dangerous. These are images that were to prevail for a long period of time. The setting of the story in the *Versus* is typical of the era when the poem was written: the struggle for material possessions within the social elite of a village, within the larger context of a rural economy that was become more market-orientated, and many other elements taken from contemporary everyday life. The prevailing image of the peasant One-Ox is certainly not purely positive, but he definitely is someone who stands up for himself. This too would seem to be indicative of the period. It reflects a growing awareness on the part of the clerical and secular elite that some of the peasants are not taking part in the social process in a purely passive manner. The folktale also filters through in

which One-Ox is a formidable character who unexpectedly and effectively outsmarts his more powerful rivals. He is a hero. He embodies a longtime recurring fantasy of poor and subordinate groups: the suppressed who reverse roles and defeat the oppressor. This image has stood the test of time: it keeps on cropping up under specific social circumstances.

From the perspective of the *social groups* where it circulated, three layers can be distinguished when reviewing the various forms of the story about One-Ox: the clerical-literary, the courtly aristocratic and the commons. The story probably started out as a folktale or complex of folktales, for an audience made up mostly of peasants. Afterwards it was – again most likely – read out loud in aristocratic milieus in a revised version. Finally, it took on the form which it still has today, a sophisticated, comical poem, seemingly a composition of a young monk or a wandering scholar, light reading for monks. Each audience would have heard one or various versions and interpreted the story in his own manner. The complex imagery regarding One-Ox in the *Versus de Unibove* reflects this variety.

On a micro-scale – if one examines the text in itself – the Poem of One-Ox presents an intriguing mixture of extremely heterogeneous components. Viewed on a macro-scale – in light of more comprehensive contexts in time and social relations – there is once again a perception of heterogeneity, ambiguity and multiplicity.

Notes

- 1 I would like to express my gratitude to Sheila Gogol for allowing me to use her earlier, revised translation of this chapter. I have been working on the *Versus de Unibove* since the 1970s. In 1981 I published “Kerkelijke visies op het volk; de wisselwerking tussen kerkelijke cultuur en volkscultuur”, in: *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 1, ed. D.P. Blok and A. Verhulst (Haarlem, 1981), pp. 406–412, there at pp. 411–412 for the *Versus de Unibove*. In 2005 I published the article “Oral and written traditions in the *Versus de Unibove*”, in: *Narrative Sources: A Gateway Into the Medieval Mind*, ed. W. Verbeke, L. Milis and J. Goossens (Louvain, 2005: *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia Series 1, Studia 34*), pp. 205–229, of which this is a revised version. At that time, I had not yet read Jan Ziolkowski’s article, “A medieval ‘Little Claus and Big Claus’: A fabliau from before fabliaux?”, in: *The World and Its Rival: Essays in Honor of Per Nykrog*, ed. K. Karczewska and T. Conley (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 1999: *Faux titre: Études de langue et de littérature françaises publiées*), pp. 1–37. Two years later, in 2007, Ziolkowski published his interpretation of the *Versus de Unibove* in *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies*, 2nd edn. (Ann Arbor, 2009), pp. 125–163, “True lies and the growth of wonder: An eleventh-century ‘Little Claus and Great Clause’”. He did not cite my article, which had probably slipped under his radar. A comparative analysis of the two articles shows that Professor Ziolkowski and I independently came to the same conclusion on many issues. It goes without saying that I greatly benefited from his insights in *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales* in this revised chapter.
- 2 R.E. Künzel, “Peasants talking: a succinct history of oral and written communication in the Dutch countryside”, in: *Peasants, Clergy and Noblemen: Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside*, ed M. Mostert

- and A. Adamska (Turnhout, 2017: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*), in preparation.
- 3 Various editions of the text were produced for research purposes. Since 1975, the Dutch and Flemish audience has access to an excellent edition and translation thanks to the efforts of Welkenhuysen. Afterwards, Ziolkowski produced an equally meticulous translation in English. *Het lied van boer Eenos (Versus de Unibove): Kluchtig versverhaal uit de elfde eeuw: Inleiding, facsimile-weergave, teksteditie, metrische vertaling, bijlage ter verantwoording en duiding*, ed. and trans. A. Welkenhuysen (Louvain, 1975: *Syrinx tekstuutgaven* 1). Th. A.-P. Klein, “*Versus de Unibove*: Neuedition mit kritischem Kommentar”, *Studi medievali, Serie terza* 32 (1991), pp. 843–886. A. Welkenhuysen, *Latijn van toen tot nu: Opstellen, vertalingen en teksten*, ed. W. Evenepoel et al. (Louvain, 1995: *Symbolae Facultatis Litterarum Lovaniensis, Series A* 18), pp. 281–305, “Het lied van boer Eenos (*Versus de Unibove*)”, improved text edition and translation. The 1975 edition remains indispensable because of the introduction and the appendix, which includes a bibliography, a note on the manuscript, critical notes and explanatory comments. They are quoted here as Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding” (Introduction) and Welkenhuysen, “Bijlage” (Appendix). As regards the text, I have followed the 1995 edition. To be complete, I would also like to mention M. Wolterbeek, “*Unibos*: The earliest full-length fabliau (text and translation)”, *Comitatus* 16 (1985), pp. 46–76; M.W. Wolterbeek, *Ridicula nugae satyrae: Comic Narratives of the Tenth, Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), pp. 73–86, 98–100 and 322–365 (introduction, notes, text and translation). M. Wolterbeek, *Comic Tales of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and Commentary* (New York etc., [1991]: *Contributions to the Study of World Literature* 39), pp. 28–34, 41 and 150–171 (introduction, notes, text and translation). Since then, J.M. Ziolkowski, “A medieval ‘Little Claus and Big Claus’: A fabliau from before fabliaux?”, in: *The World and Its Rival: Essays in Honor of Per Nykrog*, pp. 1–37, with a translation at pp. 15–37; *id.*, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies*, pp. 264–322, “Appendix 3, ‘One-Ox: The Rich and the Poor Farmer (ATU 1535)’”, with at pp. 164–285 a reprint of his translation of 1999. Here, I have quoted from Welkenhuysen’s edition from 1995 and Ziolkowski’s most recent translation.
 - 4 The structure of the poem is as follows: episode one is described in strophes 9 to 66, episode two in strophes 70 to 114, episode three in strophes 120 to 158 and episode four in strophes 160 to 215.
 - 5 Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, pp. vi–vii.
 - 6 Welkenhuysen, “Bijlage”, pp. 5–7.
 - 7 Welkenhuysen, “Bijlage”, p. 6; Klein, “*Versus de Unibove*”, pp. 845–846.
 - 8 Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, p. viii.
 - 9 K.C. Peeters, “De oudste West-Europese sprookjestekst: *Unibos*-problemen”, *Volkskunde* 71 (1970), pp. 8–23, at pp. 19–21, summarizes the hypotheses of previous research. As regards this I follow Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, p. viii. L. Genicot expressed certain doubts over the poem’s supposed origin in Gembloux in his review of Welkenhuysen’s edition (*Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 71 (1976), p. 231). According to Genicot, the term *praepositus* occurs more frequently in Hainault and northern France than in the vicinity of Gembloux.
 - 10 G. La Placa, “I *Versus de Unibove*, un poema dell’XI secolo tra letteratura e folklore”, *Sandalion* 8–9 (1985–1986), pp. 285–305. See also the edition of Klein, “*Versus de Unibove*”.
 - 11 D.A. Wells, “Die biblischen Wörter im ‘*Unibos*’: Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungsforschung und zum Verständnis des Antiklerikalismus im Frühmittelalter”, in: *Kleinere Erzählformen im Mittelalter*, ed. K. Grubmüller et al. (Paderborn,

- 1988: *Schriften der Universität-Gesamthochschule Paderborn: Reihe Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft* 10), pp. 83–88.
- 12 Welkenhuysen, *Latiñ van toen tot nu*, p. 282; Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, p. 264.
- 13 F. Bertini, “Il contadino medievale, ovvero il profilo del diavolo (una nuova interpretazione dei *Versus de Unibove*)”, *Maia* 47 (1995), pp. 325–341, at p. 331.
- 14 This has been argued convincingly by Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 141–144.
- 15 Cf. A. P. Orbán, “Was verraten die Horaz-Zitate in der *Ecbasis Captiui* über die Herkunft des Autors und die Darstellungsweise des Gedichtes?”, *Mediaevistik* 4 (1991), pp. 265–295, at pp. 284–290.
- 16 This was already the opinion of Gaston Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, quoted by P. Nykrog, *Les fabliaux*, 2nd edn. (Genève, 1973: *Publications romanes et françaises* 123), p. 264; see also Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, pp. v–vi. It was fully elaborated on by Ziolkowski, “A medieval ‘Little Claus and Big Claus’”.
- 17 Nykrog, *Les fabliaux*, pp. 245–248; H.H. Christmann, “Fabliau”, in: *Enzyklopädie des Märchens: Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, ed. K. Ranke et al., 15 vols. (Berlin and New York, 1975–), 4 (1984), col. 773–780, at col. 773.
- 18 In addition, fabliaux have the following features in common with the *Versus*: priests dominate as character type; followed by the peasantry (O. Jodogne, *Le fabliau* (Turnhout, 1975: *Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental* 13), pp. 26–27); in the Poem of One-Ox the protagonist is a peasant, and a priest acts as one of his three adversaries. Many fabliaux contain a moral (Jodogne, *Le fabliau*, pp. 15–16, 23); the moral of the *Versus* can be found in the final strophe (216): this story demonstrates once and for all that people should never take the clever advice of their enemies.
- 19 For example the scene where One-Ox walks around his supposedly dead wife’s bed three times whilst blowing his horn, whereupon she, smeared with blood, seems to awake from the dead. Jelle Koopmans drew my attention to this point. This makes it all the more likely that strophes 2–3 are referring to a theatrical depiction.
- 20 Nykrog, *Les fabliaux, passim*, especially pp. 21–28 en 227–228.
- 21 Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 141–144.
- 22 C. Muscatine, *The Old French fabliaux* (New Haven and London, 1986), p. 4.
- 23 Christmann, “Fabliau”, col. 774; Jodogne, *Le fabliau*, pp. 24–25.
- 24 Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, p. viii.
- 25 There is no inventory of the narrative motifs in the fabliaux. Christmann, “Fabliau”, col. 777–778, gives a number of examples of the narrative material incorporated in the fabliaux. An interesting book is P.-Y. Badel, *Le sauvage et le sot: Le fabliau de Trubert et la tradition orale* (Paris 1979: *Essais sur le Moyen Âge* [5]), in which links are drawn between the oral tradition and the contents of one fabliau.
- 26 I use the terms type and motif in the meanings customarily adhered to in folklore research, the term *type* to refer to a story-as-a-whole and the term *motif* to refer to a building stone of a story. I use the term *episode* to refer to the parts of the *Versus de Unibove* cited in footnote 4.
- 27 W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 9th edn. (London and New York, 1990), pp. 37–39.
- 28 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 141–147.
- 29 I would like to thank Erwin Mantingh for the information about this.
- 30 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 46–49, and the literature cited there.

- 31 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 42–43.
- 32 See the penetrating analysis of the market scene by B. Schmeidler, “Kleine Forschungen in literarischen Quellen des 11. Jahrhunderts”, *Historische Vierteljahrschrift* 20 (1920–1921), pp. 129–149, with pp. 129–138 about the *Versus de Unibove*, at pp. 131–133. Afterwards Genicot pointed out the importance of this text for socio-economic historical research in his review (1976) of Welkenhuysen’s edition.
- 33 See the interesting exposé in J.-P. Devroey, *Puissants et misérables: Système social et monde paysan dans l’Europe des Francs (VI^e–IX^e siècles)* (Bruxelles, 2006), pp. 490–499. For intermediaries in the religious sphere E.R. Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966: *Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series*), p. 101. See also here at p. 9 and the literature cited there.
- 34 In the eleventh century, in these parts of Europe, oxen were still ordinarily used to draw a plough, and not yet horses. See L. Genicot, *L’Économie rurale Namuroise au Bas Moyen Âge*, 3, *Les hommes – Le commun*, 4th edn. (Louvain-la-Neuve and Brussels, 1982: *Université de Louvain: Recueil de travaux d’histoire et de philologie*, 6^e série fasc. 25), pp. 255–257; R. Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie jusqu’à la fin du XIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris and Louvain, 1968), 1, pp. 254, 377–378. Strophe 144 contains an inconsistency: when the mare assumed to be able to defecate money awakens, it expects to be put to the plough. But this slip of the pen on the part of the author might well indicate that horses were sometimes used to draw a plough.
- 35 L. Genicot, “Entre l’empire et la France (de 925 à 1429)”, in: *Histoire de la Wallonie*, ed. L. Genicot (Toulouse, 1973), pp. 123–185, at p. 145. The smoky hut of One-Ox in strophe 24 is not necessarily indicative of poverty. Many peasants had houses with stokeholes instead of chimneys. This can be an (ironically intended?) observation from another lifeworld, such as that of the castle or monastery.
- 36 Genicot doubted whether One-Ox was a poor peasant in his review of Welkenhuysen’s edition (1976). A. Borst, *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, 1973, reprint 1986), pp. 97–101, rightly emphasized the antagonism between One-Ox and his adversaries, but erroneously argued that One-Ox was the poorest man of the village.
- 37 As is emphasized by Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, p. 137.
- 38 There are various examples in J. Bolte and G. Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 5 vols. (Leipzig 1913–1932), 2, pp. 1–18, “Das Bürle”.
- 39 J. Beyer, *Schwank und Moral: Untersuchungen zum altfranzösischen Fabliau und verwandten Formen* (Heidelberg, 1969: *Studia Romanica* 16), pp. 78–79, sees the same ironic intention.
- 40 Bertini, “Il contadino medievale”, p. 340. La Placa, “I *Versus de Unibove*”, p. 302, however, is inclined to interpret this as an ironic allusion to the passage in the Bible.
- 41 P. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford, CA, 1999), pp. 15–39, “Peasant labor and the limits of mutuality”, and pp. 143–150, “The domesticated peasantry”.
- 42 As regards the depiction of the village priest, many commentators have been struck by the fact that he is portrayed by far the most negatively out of all the village magistrates. A link is drawn in this regard with the monks’ aversion to the clergy.
- 43 J. Le Goff, “Les paysans et le monde rural dans la littérature du haut Moyen Âge (V^e–VI^e siècle)”, in: *id.*, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge: Temps, travail et culture en Occident: 18 essais* ([Paris], 1977), pp. 131–144. (English trans. “Peasants and

- the rural world in the literature of the early Middle Ages”, in: *id.*, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 87–97.
- 44 E. Faral, *La vie quotidienne au temps de saint Louis* ([Paris], 1938), pp. 115–127. J. Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, 2 vols., 7th edn. (Munich, 1994, in one volume), 1, pp. 79–80.
- 45 Welkenhuysen, *Latijn van toen tot nu*, p. 282; Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, p. 265.
- 46 The word *rusticus* (peasant) has numerous negative connotations that might have added to the impression given here: uncultivated, ignorant, ridiculous. The word *pauper*, which is used in strophes 5, 29, 37 and 120 (Welkenhuysen, *Latijn van toen tot nu*, pp. 282, 285, 286, 295; Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 265, 267, 268, 276) can have any number of meanings. In the *Versus* it is used in the purely economic meaning of “poor”. *Agricola* in strophe 5, where One-Ox wants to plough *sub exemplis agricolae*, has the neutral meaning of “person who farms the land”. For the words *rusticus*, *pauper* and *agricola*, see also Chpt. 3, pp. 59–61.
- 47 Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, pp. 150–156, “Stupidity and excrement”.
- 48 M. Bayless, *Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture: The Devil in the Latrine* (New York and London, 2012), pp. 42–44, with thanks to Claire Weeda for this reference. See there at p. 160 for the relationship between excrements and money in the *Versus de Unibove*.
- 49 Bertini, “Il contadino medievale”, pp. 331 and 337, sees links with the folk culture and refers to Bakhtin’s observations about the importance of the symbolism of the lower body there, alluding to M. Bakhtine, *L’oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance* (Paris, 1970; original Russian edition 1965), pp. 366–432, “Le ‘bas’ matériel et corporel chez Rabelais” (Engl. trans. *Rabelais and his World* (Cambridge Mass, [1968])). Similar ideas can be found in Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, p. 153.
- 50 On tensions in agrarian societies, see Wolf, *Peasants*, pp. 77–95 and J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London, 1985). On images influenced by these tensions, see P. Freedman, “Peasant anger in the late Middle Ages”, in: *Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. B.H. Rosenwein (Ithaca and London, 1998), pp. 171–188 and here at p. 61.
- 51 This aspect is also emphasized by F. Bertini. He however views it as an indication of a more positive evaluation of peasants (F. Bertini, “Il ‘nuovo’ nella letteratura in latino”, in: *L’Europa dei secoli XI e XII fra novità e tradizione: Sviluppi di una cultura* (Milan, 1989: *Miscellanea del Centro di studi medioevali* 12), pp. 216–238, at pp. 222–224 and 228).
- 52 Le Goff, “Les paysans et le monde rural”, pp. 139–140 (trans. *id.*, “Peasants and the rural world”, p. 93); Badel, *Le sauvage et le sot*, pp. 27–30.
- 53 Cf. Badel, *Le sauvage et le sot*, especially pp. 24–25. Jelle Koopmans drew my attention to this parallel.
- 54 A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, 2nd edn. (Helsinki, 1964: FF Communications 184), No. 1535. H.-J. Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, 3 vols. (Helsinki, 2004: FF Comunications 284–286), No. 1535.
- 55 See P. Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York, 1972). See also A. Williams, *Tricksters and Pranksters: Roguery in French and German Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 2000: Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 49), which is rich in material from the later

- Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but see the criticism of L. Perfetti in *Speculum* 78 (2003), pp. 233–235. Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 133–134, presents numerous related figures.
- 56 For instance observed by Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, p. ix.
- 57 Bolte and Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 2, pp. 4–6.
- 58 R. E. Künzel, “Mondelinge overlevering in verhalende bronnen uit de Middeleeuwen: Enige historische en antropologische benaderingen”, in: *Communicatie in de middeleeuwen. Studies over de verschriftelijking van de middeleeuwse cultuur*, ed. M. Mostert (Hilversum, 1995: *Amsterdamse Historische Reeks: Grote serie* 23), pp. 21–38, at p. 32.
- 59 S. Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York, 1946), pp. 165–168.
- 60 Aarne and Thompson have taken into consideration all the versions of a story that were known to them and they have given a sum total as it were of all the motifs that occur in the variants known to them. The motifs they list under I, II and III do not occur in the *Versus*. The parts IVa and b and Va and b correspond with three episodes of the *Versus* (1, 2 and 4). The third episode of the *Versus* (the mare that produces the money) is not registered as part of Type 1535. The version of ATU 1535 also contains narrative motifs that are absent in the *Versus* and does not contain the narrative motif of the money-shitting animal. Uther c.s. point out that stories of this Type are easily connected to stories registered under a different Type. A few examples of motifs: S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, IND, 1932–1936): Motif N 478. *Secret wealth betrayed by money left to borrowed money-scales*; K 941.1. *Cows killed for their hides when high price is reported by trickster*; K 113. *Pseudo-magic resuscitating object sold. Dupe kills his wife (mother) and is unable to resuscitate her*; B 103.1.1. *Gold producing ass*; K 842. *Dupe persuaded to take prisoner's place in a sack: killed. The bag is to be thrown into the sea. The trickster keeps shouting that he does not want to go to heaven (or marry the princess); the dupe gladly substitutes for him*; K 1051. *Diving for sheep. Dupe persuaded that sheep have been lost in river*. An extensive list of motifs featured in or related to the poem in Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 320–322.
- 61 See the survey of the motifs in M. De Meyer, *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema's in het licht der Romaansche en Germaansche kultuurstromingen* (Louvain, 1942: *Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde*, Reeks 6, No. 63), pp. 133–163, “Het Unibos-thema” at pp. 142–145 and p. 153.
- 62 De Meyer, *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema's*, p. 141; Bolte and Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- u. Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 2, pp. 8–10. The meaning of the second element in the name Einhorn is unclear. In addition, numerous other names for the main character appear in different versions, but these are not relevant here.
- 63 A suggestion made by Theo Meder. In addition, as regards the German version with Einhorn, it should be noted that it dates back to 1559 (V. Schumann, *Nachtbüchlein*, ed. J. Bolte (Stuttgart, 1893: *Publikationen des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart*), 1, No. 6, and thus can not have been influenced by the first edition of the *Versus*, dated 1838 (*Lateinische Gedichte des X. und XI. Jh.*, ed. J. Grimm and A. Schmeller (Göttingen, 1838; reprint Amsterdam, 1967), pp. 354–383). This is why the name One-Ox was probably once part of other, unregistered versions that the version with the corrupted name Einhorn goes back to. Since these unregistered versions, as I argue below, are not derived from

the *Versus*, the name One-Ox was probably part of the orally transmitted story that the poem draws on.

- 64 W. Liungman, *Die schwedischen Volksmärchen: Herkunft und Geschichte* (Berlin, 1961: *Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Deutsche Volkskunde* 20), pp. 304–305, “No. 1535. Der grosse und der kleine Klaus”. T. Dekker, J. van der Kooi and T. Meder, *Van Aladdin tot Zwaan kleef aan: Lexicon van sprookjes: Ontstaan, ontwikkeling, variatie* (Nijmegen, 1997), pp. 154–155, “Grote Klaas en Kleine Klaas (*Unibos*)”, and the literature cited there.
- 65 See also Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 130–131 and 157. Even if the manuscript did serve a function as a performance procedure, the range of its influence must have been extremely limited, not nearly enough to explain the later distribution of the narrative material. This is also the case if we assume that various links were lost in the written transmission. Say the Poem on One-Ox goes back to a written example that has since been lost, as Klein posits in “*Versus de Unibove*”, p. 847. Then this hypothetically written *Vorlage* to the *Versus* would similarly lack the capacity to have caused the present distribution of the narrative motifs.
- 66 As also argued by De Meyer, *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema’s*, p. 163, La Placa, “*I Versus de Unibove*”, p. 289 note 14, and Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, p. 131. Only in the early modern period did several authors also put down these tales in writing; cf. De Meyer, *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema’s*, pp. 149–150.
- 67 De Meyer, *Vlaamsche sprookjesthema’s*, pp. 133–163. In this study the conclusions drawn by J. Müller, *Das Märchen vom Unibos* (Jena, [1934]: *Deutsche Arbeiten der Universität Köln* 7) are summarized and numerous improvements have been made. The article by Peeters, “De oudste West-Europese sprookjestekst”, was published afterwards. It is useful as a synthesis, but there is insufficient evidence to convincingly support his argument that Flanders was the region where the *Versus* first emerged.
- 68 This spatial continuity, however interesting it may be, should not tempt us to draw all too grandiose conclusions regarding the continuity of oral transmission and folk culture. H. Bausinger, “Zur Algebra der Kontinuität”, in: *Kontinuität? Geschichtlichkeit und Dauer als volkskundliches Problem*, ed. H. Bausinger and W. Brückner (Berlin, 1969), pp. 9–30, distinguishes four types of continuity of cultural phenomena in his groundbreaking article: in time, in space, socially, i.e. in terms of the ‘bearers’ of the relevant cultural phenomenon, and its function in the culture which it was a part of. This results in 16 combinations. Thus, a cultural phenomenon can occur for a long period of time, but in due course it can form part of the culture of various social groups. This variety results in an equal variety of forms of continuity. In the case of the story about One-Ox, we can identify continuity in time and space. This does not lead to the conclusion that there was always continuity in a social sense, or regarding the function of the story, and we certainly cannot infer the sustainability of a whole culture from continuity in time and space in one story. We can, however, argue in a more global sense that the story about One-Ox and his peers, such as Uilenspiegel, constantly expressed a strong sentiment among subaltern groups, the social relations permitting.
- 69 Welkenhuysen, “Inleiding”, p. VIII, based upon J. Toussaint, *L’abbaye de Gembloux: Les origines et l’âge d’or (940–1136)* (Gembloux, [1972]), pp. 44–55.
- 70 V. Honemann, “*Unibos* und *Amis*”, in: *Kleinere Erzählformen im Mittelalter*, pp. 67–82, especially p. 74; J. Suchomski, “*Delectatio* und ‘*Utilitas*’: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur (Bern and Munich, 1975: *Bibliotheca Germanica* 18), pp. 106–110, “*Unibos*”, at p. 108; Beyer, *Schwank*

- und Moral, p. 74. Suchomski could have explained the fact he observed if he had referred to the structural instability of orally transferred stories that consist of successions of narrative motifs. The same applies to Beyer, who actually out of the three cited authors here, was the only scholar who took the possibility into account that the oral tradition at the time could have influenced the poem.
- 71 In addition, the positive relation between the sexes, the element 'one' in the name of the main character in some versions of the story, and the slight variations within structurally identical motifs in the various versions are valid arguments.
- 72 Several examples in the section on condensation in S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 4th edn. (Frankfurt am Main, 1968: *Gesammelte Werke* 2–3), pp. 284–310, "Die Verdichtungsarbeit" (Engl. trans. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 2nd edn. (Harmondsworth, 1991: *The Pelican Freud Library* 4), pp. 383–413, "The work of condensation").
- 73 M. Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman* ([Paris], 1978, Russian orig. Moscow, 1975), pp. 122–151, "Le plurilinguisme dans le roman".
- 74 As did F. Martini, *Das Bauerntum im deutschen Schrifttum, von den Anfängen bis zum 16. Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1944), p. 9. However, his concept of 'folk' is strongly chauvinistic. Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales*, pp. 151–152, reserves the possibility that One-Ox was both the fool of the privileged and the trickster-hero of the poor.
- 75 The following observations have been inspired by a discussion between M. Soriano and J. Le Goff, E. Le Roy Ladurie and A. Burguière generated by M. Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault: Culture savante et traditions populaires* ([Paris], 1968), which was published in *Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 25 (1970), pp. 633–653, and which was included in the reprint of Soriano's book, 2nd edn. ([Paris], 1977) pp. ii–xxx, especially pp. x–xiii. Cf. also the comment by Le Goff: "L'étude de la culture populaire ou de phénomènes ou d'œuvres imprégnées de culture populaire met l'historien en contact avec un 'temps historique' qui le déconcerte. Rythmes lents, flash-backs, pertes et résurgences s'accordent mal avec le temps unilinéaire dans lequel il est à tout le plus accoutumé à discerner çà et là des 'accélération' ou des 'retards'. Raison de plus pour se féliciter que l'élargissement du champ de l'histoire au folklore remette en cause ce temps insuffisant" (J. Le Goff, "Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse", in: *id.*, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, pp. 307–331, n. 12 at pp. 314–315). English trans. "Melusina: mother and pioneer", in: *id.*, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 205–222, at p. 210 n. 12, text of the note at p. 351).
- 76 Le Goff, 'Mélusine maternelle et défricheuse'.