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The Nessus Shirt in the New World:  
*Smallpox Blankets in History and Legend*

Stories of disease-infected blankets deliberately given to Native Americans surfaced after the first European contact and continue to circulate. The vitality of the "smallpox blanket" story is ensured by documented examples of germ warfare but also by its resonance with the classical Nessus shirt and other poison-garment/de-liberate-contamination themes. The moral tension embedded in such tales derives from ambiguous definitions of the Other and boundaries of ethical behavior toward enemies. Analysis of historiography's role in the development of the smallpox blanket story helps clarify its relationship to the classical Nessus shirt and other poison-garment legends. The conclusion describes an emerging blanket story from the Amazon rain forest.

*When All Was Lost*, Shakespeare's Mark Antony cried out, "The shirt of Nessus is upon me!" Milton referred to "the envenomed robe" in *Paradise Lost*, Thomas Carlyle avoided hypocrisy as he would "poisonous Nessus shirts," and T. S. Eliot wrote of "the intolerable shirt of flame." Their audiences understood these allusions to death by poisoned apparel, a compelling image in folklore and literature since classical antiquity and one that crops up in urban legends today (Motif D1402.5. Nessus shirt burns wearer up; Baughman 1966:Z551, "Poison dress"). It seems safe to say, however, that such literary allusions to the immolation of Heracles and others by gift robes that had been poisoned by their enemies are no longer widely recognized. In the United States, another allusion has replaced the "Nessus shirt" as a popular symbol for a treacherous gift that destroys from within. Consider this passage from a recent mystery novel by an African American woman: "He held [the will] gingerly, as though it were one of those smallpox blankets the early settlers gave to the Indians" (Neely 1993:56).1

Like the now-obscure Nessus shirt, the "smallpox blanket" symbolizes something purposefully and covertly contaminated, to be avoided at all costs. But the mere mention of the blankets also works as a shorthand censure of Europeans' treatment of native people in the New World. For example, when a Nation of Islam speaker visited the SUNY-Buffalo campus in Amherst, New York, early

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in 1994, he mentioned that the town’s pre-Revolutionary namesake, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, had given infected blankets to Indians to wipe them out. His remarks stimulated lively debate on the Internet group alt.folklore.urban. Amherst was also criticized by a legal scholar involved in Indian rights at a 1989 “tribal lands” conference at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and by participants in a Native American Internet discussion in April 1994. That the accusation of intentional poisoning with contaminated blankets is perpetuated by non-Indians as well as Indians is a significant clue to its meaning. The cultural criticism inherent in allusions to the “blankets” continues an essential theme of poison–garment tales.

The smallpox blanket story may be based on historical fact, and it gains credibility because of its plausibility. It takes on the character of a contemporary legend because details such as time and place are mutable, it relates shocking events that counter accepted values, it is perpetuated by believers and nonbelievers, interpretation is controversial, and each retelling usually entails moral judgment. As Bill Ellis reminds us, legend–telling may be seen as “communal exploration of social boundaries” (1990b:31) and contemporary legends are “emergent structures” that gain meaning from “their effect on the audience and on the conversational context in which they appear.” After a “vogue of structured, familiar” narratives, legends may “decay” into a stage of “paraphrase” that “summarizes typical narrative content but does not attempt to replay the story’s events” (Ellis 1990a:33–34). This kind of canonization process is evident in literary allusions to the classical Nessus shirt and appears to be at work in the case of the smallpox blanket story. References to the blankets today are usually condensed declarations of belief, as in Barbara Neely’s metaphor and in the following examples of written and oral statements by historians and ordinary people, Indians and non-Indians:

In the old days blankets infected with smallpox were given to the tribes in an effort to decimate them. [Deloria 1970:54]

The conquest of Mexico was accomplished by a “handful of Spaniards and one Negro with smallpox” whose bedding was given to natives. [Washburn 1975:105; cf. Hopkins 1983:206 and Stearn and Stearn 1945:18]

The U.S. Army sent contaminated blankets to Native Americans [to] control the Indian problem. [Ramenofsky 1987:146–148]

Some colonists . . . deliberately fostered smallpox’s spread [to] break the Indians’ resistance and facilitate European settlement. [Hopkins 1983:236]

The U.S. government distributed smallpox blankets to Native Americans through frontier trading posts run by the Army—a deliberate, carefully planned, massive genocide. [Kevin T. Keith, Washington, D.C., alt.folklore.urban, 8 March 1994]
Whites sold the Indians blankets with smallpox germs to wipe them out. It really happened—what about Jeffrey Amherst! [Kathy St. John, Madison, Wisc., personal communication, 27 April 1993]

I’ve heard that natives in the rain forest were given disease-ridden clothing to clear them out of land that whites wanted to develop. [Elizabeth Bobrick, Middletown, Conn., personal communication, 17 September 1993]

The Brazilian upper classes . . . amused themselves [by scattering smallpox-infected clothing for natives to find]. [Lévi-Strauss 1971:51]

I think I read somewhere that Spanish explorers ordered a black slave with smallpox to roll in trade blankets before they were given to natives in Latin America. [Billy G. Smith, Bozeman, Mont., personal communication, 6 February 1993]

It’s awful—we traded infected blankets to the Indians. I heard about it in history class. [Nathaniel Ober, New Ipswich, N.H., personal communication, October 1993]

Everyone knows about the “smallpox blankets.” There are documented cases. [Tom Wessel, Bozeman, Mont., personal communication, 1980]

Diseases, especially epidemics, have long inspired rumors and lore about deliberate transmission. Using a contextual approach, contemporary folklore scholars have recently begun to interpret the cultural meaning of AIDS legends in which one individual maliciously infects another (Fine 1987; Goldstein 1992; Smith 1990). In the AIDS stories, biological sabotage occurs through intimate interpersonal contamination (so far, clothing has not been implicated), but the complex themes of paranoia about “Others,” moral responsibility, blaming victims, and even the capacity for cultural self-criticism, along with “fatal gift” motifs display some relevant parallels to smallpox-blanket beliefs.

In the blanket tales, contamination fears link disease with gifts of personal attire from strangers. As in the AIDS legends, meaning is established through the historical context (see esp. Smith 1990). That garments containing deadly, viable smallpox virus were actually given—sometimes intentionally—by Europeans to Native Americans is undeniable and well documented. In the context of unresolved cultural conflict, recrimination, and remorse, the historical reality of the smallpox holocaust among Native Americans—coupled with the plausibility of planned genocide—has converged with suspicion, rumor, and belief in ways that recapitulate themes and motifs associated with the classical Nessus shirt and other poison–garment tales. This resonance invites us to compare the blanket story with legends about clothing as a secret weapon in other times, places, and cultures. In pursuing such a broad body of beliefs over space and time, it is helpful to recall Robert Georges’s concept of historical legends as empirically untestable “metaphorizations” of basic, underlying “relationship sets” (1971:18); his comments may also help explain why disease is explicit in the historical blanket tales but figurative in the “burning” robes of the classical legends. The multiplicity of sources, from classical tragedy and history to
modern novels, oral narratives, television dramas, and Internet discussions, requires a synthetic approach along the lines discussed by Timothy Tangherlini in his survey of theoretical methods applied to historical legend (1990:esp. 375–379).

I begin with the notorious incident, long a staple in United States history books, in which the British commander Amherst ordered his men to infect Indians by presenting them with blankets used by smallpox victims. This event of 1763 reifies the disturbing idea, widespread in folklore, that a gift of clothing could be a murder weapon. But the notion of deliberate poisoning of natives by Europeans predated the Amherst incident; such stories began to surface with the earliest arrival of Europeans in the Americas. New blanket stories continued to emerge in the 19th and 20th centuries as settlers pushed West, and versions still circulate today among whites, Native Americans, and Blacks. Next, to understand how the smallpox blanket came to express the message of the Nessus shirt in the New World, I analyze classical and other poison-garment legends to identify the common characteristics of such tales. Striking parallels come to light when we compare the contexts and elements of poison garment tales with those of “objective” and legendary smallpox accounts. Historical realities and changing historical interpretations of European–Indian contact play strong roles in the development of the smallpox–blanket legend. By arousing conflicting emotions about situations fraught with ambiguity, poison-garment tales pose a powerful challenge to cultural definitions of the Other and redefine the boundaries of ethical behavior toward enemies.

**Germ Warfare at Fort Pitt, 1763**

One name is repeatedly linked to the story of the smallpox blanket: Jeffrey Amherst. In 1851, Francis Parkman was the first historian to document Lord Amherst’s “shameful plan” to exterminate Indians by giving them smallpox-infected blankets taken from the corpses of British soldiers at Fort Pitt in 1763 (Parkman 1991:646–651). The feasibility of the documented plan, whether or not it was successfully carried out, has given credibility and moral impact to the fears expressed in all poison-garment tales. The Amherst incident itself has taken on legendary overtones as believers and nonbelievers continue to argue over the facts and their interpretation.

During the Indian resistance to British imperialism in the Great Lakes area (Pontiac’s Rebellion, 1763–1764), Amherst brought up the idea of germ warfare in writing to Colonel Henry Bouquet (their correspondence is preserved in the British Museum). Scholars dispute the handwriting, signatures, chronology, authenticity, responsibility, and outcome. According to some, Amherst was only recommending biological warfare when he suggested in a letter sometime in 1763, “Could it not be contrived to send the small pox among the disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem [sic] in our power to reduce them.” Bouquet wrote back in July, “I will try to inoculate [them] with some blankets that may fall in their hands, and take care not to get the

Others stress that Amherst issued a direct command: “Infect the Indians with sheets upon which smallpox patients have been lying, or by any other means which may exterminate this accursed race” (Utley and Washburn 1977:98; Wright 1992:136–137). Still others quote Amherst thus: “You do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as try every other method that can serve to extirpate this excrable race” (Knollenberg 1954:492–493; Parkman 1991:648).

Most historians agree that smallpox did “make havoc among the tribes” that summer and that such a conspiracy—if it occurred—was heinous, but assigning guilt is controversial (Parkman 1991:648–649). In 1954, Knollenberg tried to exonerate Amherst and Bouquet, by citing the diary of a trader named William Trent, who recorded that “two Delaware Indians . . . suspected of treachery” visited the fort in June 1763. Trent wrote, “Out of our regard for them we gave them two Blankets and a Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect.” In 1955, “new” evidence forced Knollenberg to retract his defense of the fort’s commanders.5 In 1993, Francis Jennings depersonalized blame by stating that Fort Pitt “rescued itself by infecting its besiegers with smallpox . . . thus starting a terrible epidemic among the Delawares.” Amherst “sent word to authorize” germ warfare, Jennings concludes, but “the men in the fort performed the operation before Amherst’s message arrived” (1993:298–299).

The ongoing controversy over the Amherst episode alone would be enough to ensure the legendary status of the smallpox blankets (alt.folklore.urban, March 1994). But murder through a gift of poison clothing had already been imagined by both Europeans and Indians long before Amherst’s famous order. Lore and hearsay about deliberately poisoned clothing may have inspired ostensive undertakings at Fort Pitt and elsewhere. In Jennings’s words, “There seems to have been a backwoods tradition of this sort of germ warfare” (1993:298–299).6 A colonist’s letter of 1752 is widely quoted by historians: “‘Twere desirable that [smallpox] should break out and spread . . . among the Indians. It would be fully as good as an army” (Shurkin 1979:114–115; Stearn and Stearn 1945:42–43).

Tales of Poisonous Gifts in the New World before 1763

Smallpox is said to have been more deadly than all other infectious diseases combined, killing millions around the world for thousands of years until its virtual eradication by 1980. Waves of smallpox decimated and in many cases exterminated entire peoples with each successive arrival of Europeans in the western hemisphere. The new disease was exceedingly virulent in a population with no natural immunity to the disease, killing multitudes within days or even hours after contact with the newcomers or their goods. Moreover, experts agree that the virus can survive for years in textiles, and blankets were major trade items.7
The magnitude of the smallpox epidemics encouraged Indians and non-Indians alike to assign meaning and agency to such catastrophes. Because disease ravaged their people soon after encounters with the newcomers (who were mysteriously immune), the Indians often suspected deliberate poisoning. The Spanish, French, and English, in turn, encouraged suspicion among Indians and non-Indians, by blaming one another and various outsiders, for spreading the contagion and by their own threats to send smallpox. Indian survivors often tried to take revenge on those they held responsible. The French tried to avert revenge by the survivors of an epidemic in 1758 by giving a million livres’ worth of trade blankets to “cover the dead” and by claiming that the English had sent the disease (MacLeod 1992:48–49, 51; see also De Voto 1947:281; Ewers 1958:65; Ewers 1973:110; Heagerty 1928:58–63; Hopkins 1983:236; Simpson 1980:40; Stearn and Stearn 1945:23–24, 77–79, 102; Wright 1992:102–104).

The first text by a non-European to describe smallpox’s devastation among the Inca in 1493 suggests intentional infection. According to that account (written in 1613 by a Peruvian Indian), Spaniards had sent “a messenger in a black cloak” who presented the Inca king with a small locked case. The messenger then excused himself and withdrew, saying his orders specified that “only the Inca [king] should open it.” The box’s contents flew out (“like...scraps of paper”) and brought “the smallpox plague.” Within days multitudes died, “covered in burning scabs” (Wright 1992:73–74). A tradition of the Ottawa Indians around the Great Lakes (published in 1887) has eerily similar details. In 1757, after they had helped the French fight the British, the Indians were sold a tin box, which was not to be opened until “after they reached home.” Inside was another smaller tin box, and another containing successively smaller boxes, until the last was opened to reveal “nothing but mouldy particles.” A “great many closely inspected” the contents, and “soon there burst out a terrible sickness among them” (MacLeod 1992:50). According to Jesuit records, a Canadian tribe was ravaged by smallpox after they received a gift of “clothes in the French fashion” from the king of France. The survivors attempted to “reciprocate” by sending an Indian child’s costume as a gift to the king’s own son. Conscious of the Indians’ resentment and aware that clothing could be infectious, the Jesuits refused, fearing that the costume “may carry even the slightest contagion” (Heagerty 1928:26; Stearn and Stearn 1945:27).

Blanket Legends, 1763–1994

Stories of treacherous gifts of contaminated goods continued as settlers, and smallpox, moved west. One oft-repeated tale concerned a trader who invited Indians to a peace parley but then gave them a keg of rum wrapped in a pox-infected flag, telling them not to unwrap it until they reached their village. Heagerty dates the incident to 1770 and identifies the man as a fur-company agent in Minnesota who had been robbed earlier by the Chippewa. He cites local Indian belief of the 1920s: “Indians to this day are firmly of the opinion that the smallpox was...communicated through articles presented to their
brethren by the agent” (1928:44–46). The story of the fur trader named McDougall who threatened Pacific Northwest Indians with a corked vial of pox is well known, but his first name (James or Duncan) and the year of the incident (1811–1812, 1814, or 1815, with similar incidents dated to the 1830s and 1869–1870) are uncertain. Columbia River bands associated smallpox with a black-and-white calico shirt belonging to the first white man in the area, while tribes of the Southwest and West in 1861–1862 attributed smallpox to a blanket sold by traders to a Kiowa man who “refused to relinquish it” (Bancroft 1884:176; Feer 1973:35; Shurkin 1979:187; Stearn and Stearn 1945:38, 44, 77, 79, 99, 102). In northeastern Montana, Indians believed that rival Metis (immune mixed-blood bands) tried to spread smallpox as they migrated west between 1860 and 1870.

Speaking of “the rumor and folklore created by the epidemic” in the West, Bernard De Voto remarks that the blanket story has the “quality of legend and reappears at Fort McKenzie and, in fact, nearly everywhere else” (1947:295, 281). Indeed, the “blanket story was widely circulated on the frontier, with several versions told and retold” (Jensen 1972:19). One version claimed that Jim Beckwourth, a Black mountain man adopted by the Crow tribe of the upper Missouri River and whose exploits became legendary, “had procured an infected blanket and sold it to the Blackfeet, the enemies of his adopted people” in 1837–38 (the year smallpox swept through the northern plains). This “same infected blanket turn[s] up in two other contexts, attributed to two other villains,” notes De Voto (1947:296). Nevertheless, the story became “firmly established” in the “Beckwourth legend,” laments his biographer Elinor Wilson. It “spread rapidly, snatched up for use” in the memoirs of Beckwourth’s white contemporaries. They claimed that this “unsavoury ruffian without honor,” took infected clothes from a St. Louis steamboat and gave them to the Blackfeet. A missionary stated that it was “Beckwith [sic] . . . a negro [who] gave the small pox” to “20,000” Indians. According to other memoirs, when the famous scout and trader "Blanket’’ Jim Bridger heard the Piegans’ chief complain that his people “were all perishing from the small pox . . . given to them by the whites,” Bridger protested that “it had been brought” by his rival “Beckwourth, a Negro.” “Blame the Negro,” Bridger told them, “not the whites!” (Wilson 1972:80–83).

According to Native American activist–historian Ward Churchill, the U.S. army at Fort Clark on the upper Missouri River gave the Mandans gifts of “smallpox–laden blankets” that had been “gathered from a military infirmary in St. Louis, where troops infected with the disease had been quarantined.” Contradicting accepted medical practice, the “army doctors ordered the Mandans to disperse once they exhibited symptoms.” The ensuing pandemic “claimed at least 125,000 lives” among the Plains nations (Churchill 1994:34–36, quoted by Michael Wolf, alt.folklore.urban, 9 March 1994). Other versions have blamed the Plains epidemics on a disgruntled former fur company employee, a resentful boat passenger named Bill May, a Blackfoot Indian, a mulatto passenger, and a Mandan who crept aboard to steal a blanket from a steamboat.

In his memoirs, White Eagle (a.k.a. Doc Bill Allen) recounts a Crow legend of eastern Montana, which he attributes to his friend Plenty Coup, a Crow chief. Plenty Coup offered two versions of an etiological legend associated with Skeleton (or Sacrifice) Cliff above what is now Billings on the Yellowstone River. He described the arrival of a mysterious plague of stinging red spots and “fire in the veins” that wiped out all but 16 warriors, who then rode their horses over the cliff in despair (or alternatively, as a sacrifice to save the remaining Crow people). “Many snows ago a paleface miner was drifting down the [Yellowstone] . . . at the Fort called ‘Union.’ Suddenly this strange sickness came upon him, out there alone. . . . He took off his clothes, for his body burned, and he longed for the touch of cold water. He bathed in the river and lay down. . . . An Indian of the Blackfeet tribe found him there dead and took his clothes and put them on and rode into his village. Soon most of the Blackfeet . . . died, and then the Sioux, and finally the great Crow warriors” (Wagner and Allen 1933:200–211).

Smallpox—blanket lore also appears in 19th- and 20th-century fiction, anthropological literature, and in present-day media. After reading several articles about the transmission of disease through personal garments and silks imported from foreign lands, Nathaniel Hawthorne published an allegory about smallpox in 1838 (Hawthorne 1987; Newman 1979:173–178). “Lady Eleanor’s Mantle,” set in the early 1700s in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, tells of a smallpox outbreak after a splendid cloak woven by a dying woman is worn to a ball by the vain and haughty Lady Eleanor. The disease spreads from the wealthy classes to the poor people scorned by Eleanor. Eleanor, who is the last to die, ends up horribly disfigured and filled with remorse. The pestilence subsides after a mob burns her effigy draped in the robe. In the 1930s, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss reported with disgust that by 1900 the Indians of Brazil had been methodically wiped out by weathy Creoles whose “favourite pastime had been to call at the hospital for the clothes left behind by those who had died of small-pox; these they would then strew, along with other presents, along the lanes still used by the natives” (1971:51). In her historical novel based on oral histories collected in the 1930s, Sioux ethnologist Ella Deloria tells how smallpox raged among several tribes after a bundle of infected blankets was dropped in their territory by the U.S. army. Discovered by scouts, the robes were exchanged as gifts among the Indians until they were finally associated with the sickness and burned (Deloria 1988:187–188, 196, 209).

In an episode of the CBS television series “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman” (January 1994), infected blankets are given to Indians in a genocidal scheme devised by General Custer. Dr. Quinn is “wrapped up in a medical and emotional crisis” after the “blankets she encourages the Cheyenne to accept from the Army prove to have been infected” (TV Guide 1994:57). In a plot twist, the military commander selfishly keeps the best robes for himself and so is the last to die. The names of Custer, Columbus, General Sherman, General
Edward Cornwallis, as well as Amherst were linked to genocidal blanket schemes in the March 1994 alt.folklore.urban discussion, as participants debated the plausibility, facts, and meaning of the idea that Europeans deliberately sent their enemies poisoned garments.\textsuperscript{12}

**Classical Poison-Garment Legends**

The smallpox-blanket legend describes fatal attire offered as a gift by an enemy, but controversy often surrounds the murderous intent or identity of those responsible. The first ambiguity serves to obfuscate the moral issue itself, while the second shifts blame to, for example, a “renegade” who acts alone. The same situation and similar ambiguities pertain in the earliest known legends about poisoned garments given to Heracles, Glauke, and Harmonia. As they survive in ancient Greek and Latin literature, the legends feature combustible robes and metaphors of contagion. A famous account of the plague in Athens by the ancient historian Thucydides raises the possibility of a reciprocal influence between descriptions of contagious epidemics and legends about poisoned garments in antiquity.

**The Nessus Shirt of Heracles**

According to myth, Heracles shot the centaur Nessus with an arrow poisoned with the blood of the Hydra, as Nessus was abducting Heracles’s wife Deianeira. The dying centaur advised Deianeira to collect blood from his wound (or to take his blood-soaked tunic) and save it in an airtight container. If Heracles ever strayed, he claimed, she could win him back by imbuing clothing with the substance as a love charm. When Heracles took a younger wife years later, Deianeira reluctantly anointed a tunic, locked it in a chest, and sent it to Heracles, instructing that no one should touch it but her husband. After the messenger left, Deianeira was horrified to notice that a bit of the treated wool had fallen on the courtyard, where it immediately incinerated the stones. Meanwhile, Heracles proudly donned the new robe to perform a special sacrifice. As soon as the material became warm, profuse sweat broke out and the poison began to corrode his skin, eating into his flesh as his blood “hissed and bubbled” (Motif F1041.5. poison of Hydra corrodes skin). Roaring and running in agony, Heracles tries to rip off the garment, but it clings so that flesh tears away with it. Looking at his ravaged body, he despairs of his lost beauty and strength and resolves to die. One tradition says that the robe caused Heracles such torment that he plunged into a stream, but the poison only burned more fiercely. Other versions say that Heracles, racked by “the hidden pestilence,” threw himself on a flaming pyre at Mount Oeta and was burned alive. Deianeira killed herself in remorse. Sophocles based his tragedy *The Trachinian Women* (440–420 B.C.) on popular legends of Heracles’s demise. Since antiquity, the stream Thermopylae, a hot spring near Mount Oeta, has been regarded as the site of the tragedy and the waters considered to be a cure for inflammatory
afflictions, including skin conditions. The lair of the poisonous monster Hydra was linked to malaria in antiquity, and Nessus’s place of death was associated with sickness and biological warfare.

Glauke’s Poison Dress

Euripides’ tragedy *Medea* (431 BC) was based on well-known legends about the barbarian sorceress who helped Jason win the Golden Fleece near the Black Sea. Jason married Medea but later abandoned her to wed a young Greek princess (called Glauke or Creusa) at Corinth. Knowing of the girl’s vanity, the distraught Medea poisoned a wedding gown, placed it in a sealed casket, and sent it to the bride-to-be, ordering that only Glauke should touch the gift. The princess immediately donned the finery. Pirouetting before a mirror, she suddenly cried out, staggered, and fled in panic as the gown began to burn. Her violent activity ignited more flames, and the clinging gown “melted the flesh from her bones.” Consumed by an unquenchable “devouring fire,” Glauke dashed headlong into a fountain outside, but water was no relief. Her father and all of the guests were also engulfed by flames and perished along with Glauke.

Harmonia’s Robe

Several ancient writers refer to the legendary robe (and/or necklace) of Harmonia, which brought bad luck to each of its successive owners. The god of fire and technology, Hephaestus, avenged his wife Aphrodite’s infidelity (with the war-god Ares) by crafting a beautiful robe that he secretly “dyed” with strife and misfortune. Kadmos, the Phoenician, then gave it to Aphrodite’s daughter by Ares, Harmonia, as a wedding gift. Several legends chronicle the disasters that befell Harmonia’s progeny as well as the misfortunes experienced by a series of vain women each of whom received the dress from an enemy. According to tradition, the robe was stored at Delphi, only to be stolen in the fourth century B.C. and given to a woman who was then consumed by fire in her house at Oeta, the site of Heracles’s pyre.13

The Plague at Athens

Thucydides, writing between 431 and 404 B.C., described the effects of an epidemic that devastated Athens in 430. “The plague, so they say, originated in Ethiopia [and] spread from there to . . . the territory of the king of Persia.” Because the plague appeared suddenly in Athens during the first year of the Peloponnesian War, Athenians believed the Spartans were responsible for biological warfare. Victims were assailed by “inflammation, red pustules, fever, and burning sensations” so intense that “people could not bear the touch of even the lightest linen clothing.” They suffered a “desperate feeling of not being able to keep still” and “flocked around the fountains.” They wanted “most of all to plunge into cold water. Many of the sick plunged into water-tanks,” but there
was no relief from the “unquenchable” burning. This terrible epidemic (un-
known, but commonly identified as a virulent form of measles or smallpox)
spread rapidly by contact with the dying, and people recalled “cases of similar
disease elsewhere.” Despair and irrationality seized the victims as corpses began
to pile up in the city. Many Athenians indulged in “profligate behavior.” The
poor surreptitiously threw their dead onto funeral pyres built by the rich (Thuc.
Shurkin 1979:chap. 2).

The parallels (“burning alive,” unquenchable fire, intolerable clothing, watery
plunges, panic and despair, suspicions of poisoning by enemy Others) to the
legends about burning robes are notable.14 Keeping in mind Georges’s remarks
about the metaphorization of relationship patterns in historical legend (1971:18)
and in view of the resonance between the historically based smallpox blanket
tales and poison-garment lore, it seems safe to say that experiences of contagious
disease influenced the Nessus shirt tales and that historians participated in the
development of legends about biological weapons. The idea of contagious
transmission is implicit in the classical legends. Nessus’s blood is infected by
blood from the Hydra, and his “infection” is transmitted to Heracles through
clothing; first Glauke burns up, then her father and all the guests; toxins were
sealed in containers as in other disease legends; and transferable misfortune was
communicated to each successive owner of Harmonia’s robe. It is noteworthy
that Sophocles selected highly technical medical language of his day to describe
Heracles’ agony. Classical commentators point out, for example, that the word
anthos (for “pustules” caused by the poisoned cloak; Sophocles The Trachinian
Women lines 999, 1089) was normally used only in contexts of clinical diagnoses
(Liddell and Scott 1940:s.v. anthos).15 Thucydides used the same clinical terms
to describe the plague.

Medea was presented on the Athenian stage in 431 B.C., The Trachinian Women
between 440 and 420 B.C. Both plays drew on older oral legends familiar to
their audiences. It is not necessary to untangle the chronological influence
between those who wrote about the Nessus shirt legends, such as Sophocles and
Euripides, and the historian Thucydides. Nor can we ever know whether
biological sabotage or an epidemic inspired the legends of poison garments. For
our purposes the point is that by the later fifth century B.C., descriptions of
burning diseases and burning robes in history and legend assimilated language,
imagery, and themes in ways that parallel the history, literature, and legends
about smallpox’s arrival in the New World.

Postclassical Poison-Garment Legends

Murder by poisoned raiment is a widespread folk motif. King Arthur, for
example, received from an enemy a mantle that was intended to burn him to
coals, but it killed the messenger instead. A legendary Hindu queen in India
killed a Muslim invader with a poisoned cloak that caused agonizing fever and
“burned” flesh from the bone (the site of the victim’s pyre was associated with
malaria). According to numerous European traditions, poisoned clothes and bedding were secret weapons used especially by women and "foreigners" (Crooke 1926:195; Thompson 1928:34–39, 89, 145, 198–227). When smallpox first arrived in Madagascar, outbreaks were linked to a shipment of old uniforms from Europe, and then to expensive shawls stolen from the dead relatives of local prosperous families. The fancy shrouds were placed on corpses for funeral display before burial and then supposedly resold to unsuspecting victims by local grave-robers (Hopkins 1983:189).

Resold grave goods also figure in "poison dress" narratives collected by folklorists in the United States since the 1930s. Tales typically describe a young woman's sudden death at a dance. The newly purchased gown, suffused with embalming fluid, poisons the girl when the fluid enters her pores as she dances vigorously in a hot hall. It turns out that the dress had been previously worn by a corpse at a funeral and that her relatives (usually of another race, class, or ethnic group than the victim) returned it to a supposedly reputable store, where it was resold to the young woman (Baughman 1945, 1966; Brunvand 1984:114, 1987, 1992).

The Smallpox Blanket as a Poison-Garment Legend: Themes and Variations

Consideration of classical and later legends about contaminated clothing make it clear that the smallpox blanket tale belongs to the family of poison garment legends. This hypothesis is confirmed by a review of some of the themes common to blanket stories and poison-garment tales. Unique aspects of the blanket stories can often be explained by reference to performance context.

"Burning" Imagery

Flames and burning are hallmarks of poison-garment stories. Literal or symbolic fire consumes victims, and its extraordinary nature is manifested when water cannot extinguish the heat. Fevers and inflammation are universally described in terms of burning and vice versa; perspiration, hectic activity, and seeking water are related symptoms. Heracles suffered profuse sweating; both he and Glauke were seized with panic as an unnatural fire consumed them; their garments became intolerable, clinging and tearing away flesh; and desperate plunges into water were futile. Fire consumed Glauke, her father, and all the assembled guests; Heracles on his pyre, as well as the last owner of Harmonia's robe, and the plague victims in Athens. In Hawthorne's tale, fire consumes Lady Eleanore's effigy wrapped in the deadly mantle. Even the modern U.S. stories of dresses contaminated by embalming fluid consistently include allusions to heat, perspiration, and vigorous activity (Baughman 1945, 1966; Brunvand 1987).

Similar imagery marks the accounts of smallpox in the New World. The words of Alexander MacKenzie in western Canada in 1801 are typical: "small-pox . . . spread . . . as fire consumes dry grass" (Simpson 1980:3, 31–33, 92; cf. Brooks
Blazing, raging, scalding, and invisible fire are recurrent phrases. "Unable to bear the heat of the fever," Indians "rushed into the Rivers and Lakes," recalled Thompson during the Canadian expedition of 1784–1812 (Heagerty 1928:46). Burnet, writing of the epidemic of 1816 among Texas Indians, wrote that "under the maddening influence of the disease [and] severe paroxysm" of "fever, they would rush to the water and plunge beneath it. The remedy was invariably fatal" (Ewers 1973:111). "Seeing themselves disfigured," their "handsome face[s] grotesquely ruined" in mirrors, they "threw themselves with . . . madness into the fire," wrote Adair about the Cherokee in South Carolina in 1738 (Wright 1992:103). Like the clinging Nessus shirt, blankets adhered to and "flayed" the skin of smallpox sufferers (Simpson 1980:8; Stannard 1992:chap. 4). As the disease "blazed through the Mandans," men "destroyed themselves," some "rushing into the river for relief from fever" while one "rolled in ashes of the fire" and scores were seized by "uncontrollable panic" and "frenzy" (Chardon and Catlin, along the upper Missouri River, early 1800s, in De Voto 1947:442–443, 285–286). Many died throwing themselves into streams, and throughout North America afflicted Indians resorted to customary sweat lodges followed by a jump into ice-cold water (Ewers 1958:65–66; Shurkin 1979:208; Wagner and Allen 1933:200–211; Washburn 1975:105–106).

Dangerous Clothing

Perhaps because clothing touches the skin and serves as a permeable boundary between "us" and "not us," apparel often prompts magical thinking (see Ackerman 1991:68–69). Clothing can protect, but, as an extension of Self, our "second skin" is also vulnerable to real or symbolic harm. The many indexed motifs and beliefs that concern dangerous attire attest to the pervasive power of such fears. Novel clothing from an outside source raises questions about its origin, safety, and the motivations of its provider. The acquisition of new attire, especially for important occasions, elicits anxiety about wearing something auspicious. Moreover, cultural disapproval of ostentation can call up the idea of retribution for vanity and greed, even as new, attractive clothing is admired and sought.

Deceptive Gifts

Like Pandora's box, a fatal gift seems valuable but is really a curse. A mysterious receptacle often figures in disease legends. For example, a widespread AIDS subtype features a package containing a miniature coffin that is not unwrapped until the victim is at home (Goldstein 1992:23–25, 30, 33–34). In India, cholera legends collected in the 1920s describe a strange tribe's gift of a sealed bamboo pipe to visitors; when the recipients return home they release the fatal contagion in their own village (Hutton 1921:263). The airtight chests of the Heracles and Glauke legends are echoed in the mysterious box the Spaniards gave to the Inca
in 1493, the tin box the British sold to the Ottawa in 1757, the keg the trader
gave to the Chippewa in 1770, and the stoppered vials of smallpox which appear
in 19th-century legends.17

In classical antiquity, giving duplicitous gifts (such as the Trojan horse) to
rivals was sometimes acceptable, but such acts—especially by barbarians or
women, or against unsuspecting innocents—could also generate strong criticism
(see Grmek 1979). The consumer deception in the 20th-century poison dress
stories is disturbing to us because it imparts a sense of betrayed trust. Smallpox-
blanket lore is powerful because it gives expression to our fears about corrupt
gift exchange and inhumane weapons of war. Double-crossing in war and trade
has evoked controversy since antiquity, but biological sabotage, especially
against unprepared civilians and outside of battle, elicits visceral revulsion, a
reaction that Euripides and Sophocles evoked in their plays about Medea and
Deianeira. As Jennings observes about the Amherst strategy, “smallpox does not
distinguish between warriors and noncombatants” (1993:298). Even when the
deceit seems to avenge earlier wrongdoing, the inhumanity of carrying out such
a diabolical plan ultimately calls up popular outrage. It is this response that
endows deliberate contamination tales with their potential for cultural self-criti-
cism (see Fine’s 1987 discussion of revenge for social wrongs in AIDS tales; see
also Campion-Vincent 1993).

Blaming the Other

Contamination fears are traditionally directed toward strangers and Others
(Campion-Vincent 1993). This is especially evident in legends about the mali-
cious transmission of disease, as, for example, in the AIDS narratives (Leavy
1992:6–13, 27; Smith 1990:134–136). In the classical legends, blood from the
nonhuman creatures the Hydra and Nessus killed Heracles. Deianeira and Medea
were barbarian women who poisoned Greeks; a foreigner gave Harmonia the
robe that was later employed by warring enemies; during the plague, Athenians
blamed Spartans, Persians, Ethiopians. In poison-garment legends of Europe,
India, South America, the United States, and elsewhere, those who are Others
in terms of race, culture, nationality, ethnic group, religion, gender, status, class,
ethics, and so on, are held responsible for contaminating clothing.

Stories of contaminated garments often arise when mutually distrustful groups
exchange goods. For example, when relations between Mongolia and China
deteriorated in the 1960s, rumors began to circulate among Mongolians about
the perils of “famous Chinese natural silk,” valued for making fine clothing.
Bolts of silk designated for export to Mongolia were believed to be “specially
poisoned” to kill “our people” (Czubala 1993:5). In the case of the smallpox
blanket, outsiders bent on conquest did bring devastating disease to the New
World, and their gifts of attire were a sometimes deliberate vector of lethal
infection, a fact that verifies the anxieties expressed by poison-garment tradi-
tions. Blacks and Indians have used the tale to criticize whites, while stories that
name, say, an Englishman or a Black help alleviate the collective guilt of white

Identifying with the Poisoner; Blaming the Victim

In poison–garment tales, then, morally ambiguous situations cloud accountability for an undeniably despicable act. It is striking that both Sophocles and Euripides chose to retell the legends of Glauke and Heracles in ways sympathetic to the poisoners, by focusing on the circumstances that led them to such horrendous acts. Hephaestus, Nessus, Deianeira, and Medea were victims who sought revenge. Medea, Deianeria, and Hephaestus were clearly wronged by their spouses; after Deianeira was tricked into poisoning Heracles she killed herself in despair. Heracles made Nessus suffer with the same poison that would ultimately torment him.18 But the victims are not blameless—Heracles, Glauke, and the women bribed by Harmonia’s robe were vain, proud, selfish—yet the gruesome revenge exceeds their crimes. Similar ambiguity exists in modern AIDS stories in which victims and antagonists are both involved in “irresponsible” sex (Fine 1987; Goldstein 1992; Leavy 1992:4; Smith 1990; cf. Thucydides’s criticism of irresponsible behavior during the plague). The 20th-century poison–dress tales also play on moral ambivalence by allowing us as consumers to identify with unscrupulous shoppers who return used goods for credit as well as with the unsuspecting (but vain) consumers who are victimized by such exchanges.

Efforts to explain, deflect, or minimize the colonists’ guilt are prominent in historical accounts of smallpox. Non-Indian writers deplore Amherst and his colleagues’ justification of their scheme to wipe out “Vermine,” “Brute[s]” with no “Claim to the Rights of Humanity” (Knollenberg 1954:491; Parkman 1991:647), but then they insist that calculated infection of Indians was unlikely due to ignorance about epidemiology, or they plead in euphemistic language that “voluntary acts by whites” of the “introduction of smallpox” among the Indians were “possibly not all malicious,” perhaps fostered by frightened, frustrated, or desperate whites. Kent called the Amherst policy “a little episode,” a “blot on the careers” of “ordinarily humane men” (Kent 1955:763; see also Brooks 1993:24–26; De Voto 1947:296; Hopkins 1983:246; McConnell 1992:195; Stearn and Stearn 1945:44; Wright 1992:75). Moreover, historians consistently remark that the Indians themselves made their “situation worse than it needed to be” and hastened their own extinction, singling out sweat lodges and forced plunges into icy water as fatal shocks that ensured native mortality (Shurkin 1979:64, 87–88, 113–114, 208; see also Heagerty 1928:63–64; Hop-
kins 1983:10, 33, 116, 206, 237; Linderman 1930:112; Simpson 1980:39–40). In North America, sweat baths supposedly “unlock[ed] the pores” and made death inevitable, whereas high native mortality in South America was attributed to the “use of oils and grease, which closed the pores” (Stearn and Stearn 1945:30, 41, emphasis added). 19


Some Native American legends about smallpox implicate Indians as the carriers of contagion or as victims of their own greed. As noted earlier, in the Wyandot tradition an Indian was paid by whites to uncork a bottle of smallpox among his people, while Indians of the upper Missouri River blamed other rival tribes for deliberate poisoning. In her novel, Deloria describes her people as “coveting” new blankets to replace traditional hides. The blankets cause a “mad scramble” when they are brought by Indian scouts into camp, and proud owners exchange them as gifts of honor (Deloria 1988:187–188, 196). Highwater’s novel about a smallpox epidemic does not mention smallpox blankets, although Indians’ pride in appearance, ostentation, and desire for European goods are subtly implicated (1984:27–28, 72).

By blaming Others, identifying with antagonists, and impugning the victims—whether it is done unconsciously, in an effort to be evenhanded, or to present Indians as actors rather than passive victims—historians reproduce the alternating currents of ambivalence that have run through poison–garment tales since antiquity. Compassion for victims is tinged with hints about their own duplicity, greed, vanity; meanwhile, identification with the perpetrator evaporates in the ghastly outcome. Conflicting emotions create moral tension and enrich meaning—this is why the deaths of Heracles and Glauke were potent subjects for tragedies in antiquity, and it ensures the impact of poison–garment tales today. Tragedy has been described in terms of “catharsis,” a kind of truce between pity and fear, compassion and criticism (Mulroy 1993). But the enduring parallels between the ancient legends and the smallpox–blanket tale suggest that tragedy’s power may actually flow from the same open-ended energy that drives contem-
porary legends: a deplorable act sparks moral friction but instead of a truce, a moral dialogue ensues, demanding and yet denying resolution of opposing emotions and interpretations.

History and Performance Strategy

Close attention to the historical context can help account for some variations between the smallpox-blanket tale and other poison-garment legends. A key difference is verifiable historical truth: European outsiders did bring a new epidemic that wiped out much of the Native American population; infected textiles could bring death; some outsiders did consciously use these as a weapon. The surviving versions of the classical and many other poison-garment tales are fully developed, individualized narratives focusing on legendary personages, and we can only speculate about the influence of real events. The blanket beliefs concern historical events and actors and focus on collective, anonymous victims. The Beckworth and Crow legends show that fuller blanket narratives once circulated, and the “Dr. Quinn” television episode may signal a return of personalized blanket narratives with developed plotlines. But most people who retell the smallpox-blanket tale simply state or refute the conviction that infected blankets were knowingly and widely distributed by many to destroy a multitude of nameless victims. This lack of individual detail may reflect the paucity of surviving legends and records from the victims’ point of view and the way that historians tend to dismiss “unverified” rumors (Stearn and Stearn 1945:80): “There is no reason to go into the rumor and folklore created by the epidemic” (De Voto 1947:295); and “The history of smallpox seems to attract dubious stories” (Brooks 1993:18).

The anonymity of the masses of innocent victims infected by smallpox blankets conforms to historical fact, but it can also be a powerful performance technique. Even the classical versions depersonalized the victims to some extent. For example, Medea’s victim is never named by Euripides and her terrible death in the poison robe takes place off-stage, as do the deaths of the guests. In Sophocles’s treatment of the Heracles legend, the warrior’s torment is described by witnesses (Euripides Medea lines 1156–1203; McDermott 1989:n. 5; Sophocles The Trachinian Women lines 739–812). Likewise, viewers of the 1993 film Schindler’s List felt that the decision to portray “faceless, nameless” victims was a more effective way to convey the tragedy of the Holocaust than individualizing them would have been (New York Times 1994).

As we have seen, historians’ participation in the development of the blanket legend is crucial: they document and yet problematize historical events, justifying popular belief in the ubiquity of the blankets; they incorporate typical poison-garment motifs and perpetuate ambivalence about responsibility. The essential role of historical texts in the blanket legend supports the idea that historiography, literature, and popular legend formation were similarly intertwined in the development of the classical Nessus shirt.20
An Emerging Poison-Garment Tale in the Amazon

In a process that is at once imaginative and rational, legends commonly articulate worst-case scenarios. When alien cultures trade material that intimately touches the skin, it is logical to fear that something offered by a stranger or enemy could be an insidious weapon. A predictable catastrophic train of thought ensues: beautiful clothing worn next to the skin would be a particularly treacherous weapon. Clothes might be poisoned with a deadly substance or tainted by contact with the dead. Poison would attack through the pores, aided by body heat and perspiration. If burning alive is one of the most horrid deaths imaginable, then the worst poison might figuratively or literally combust, resulting in the torment of having either one’s skin or one’s “second skin” in flames (see Ackerman 1991:69). One would panic, tear away clinging cloth, seek cold water or purifying pyres, and ultimately be reduced to embers. To inadvertently cause such a death would bring profound remorse (as experienced by Deianeira, Hawthorne’s Lady Eleanore, and Dr. Quinn); to intentionally cause such a death exceeds acceptable human behavior.

The sudden appearance of a highly contagious, deadly epidemic of “invisible fire” in an ambiguous context, in which outsiders offer gifts of attire, exerts strong pressure to explain a worst-case scenario in terms of a poison-garment legend, as seems to be occurring in an emerging legend of South America. In the early 1990s, a group of American “ecotourists” in Brazil’s rain forest heard Chief José Luiz of the Xavante tribe describe the destruction and dispossession of his people. As one of the group recounted the chief’s story in Outside magazine in late 1992, “In 1954, when he was eight, an airplane flew over his village [Parabubure]. A huge bale fell from the sky: blankets and clothing. Within days most of the villagers were spotted and feverish, and within a month half of them were dead. Measles—José Luiz learned . . . years later, working . . . in a mission hospital. It was two decades before he returned to Parabubure” (Buchanan 1992:82).

A few months later, Buchanan’s story in Outside was reprinted in Utne Reader, with a slight but—for legend scholars—very significant change. The last sentence now reads: “Suspecting that his village was intentionally infected, he didn’t return to Parabubure for two decades” (Buchanan 1993:82, emphasis added). When I called the Utne Reader to track down the source of that transformed last sentence, the editor told me that the author had revised the wording himself (Elizabeth Larsen, personal communication, 19 February 1993). But when I contacted the author, Buchanan denied making the change, although he remarked that he and others in the group “were struck by the “chief’s story,” which “seemed strange, almost like a legend,” like “something that might have happened in the 1800s to Indians in America.” When they tried to question the chief further through the interpreter, “he became vague” (Rob Buchanan, personal communication, 21 February 1993). Indeed, the mysterious addition of the authorless clause captures the Xavante story at the very moment of its transformation into an emergent contemporary legend. The new wording
bestows closure and meaning on the Xavante tragedy, by completing the worst-case scenario of a poison-garment legend. It sets forth a shocking but credible proposition for belief: that land-hungry strangers conspired to send gifts of contaminated clothing to destroy unsuspecting victims with a burning disease.

The reappearance of the classic poison-garment themes in this modern colonial context shows how congruent circumstances can call forth old stories, setting in motion trains of thought that evoke intense but conflicting emotions. The most compelling and long-lived stories are morally complex. Like the “cathartic” tragedies of Heracles and Glauche, like the modern cautionary legends of dresses made lethal through consumer fraud and the unsettling rumors of deliberate infection by AIDS victims, and like the smallpox-blanket story’s acknowledgment of the tragic, ambiguous effects of colonization, this emerging poison-garment tale retold by non-Indians reinforces distrust of Others as contaminating strangers, but the crime it describes is so reprehensible in treachery and scale that it can shock us into glimpsing ourselves as the Other bearing fatal gifts.

Notes

I have benefited from the comments of William Hansen, Bill Ellis, Billy G. Smith, Michael P. Wolf, and the Journal of American Folklore’s anonymous readers. As always, Josh Ober’s aim is true.

1Barbara Neely’s novel concerns a Black cleaning woman who uncovers a scheme by rich whites to cheat her friend out of his land, a plot that makes the metaphor especially apt. I thank Michelle Maskiell for bringing Neely’s book to my attention.

2The alt.folklore.urban discussion took place on 8–15 March 1994, under the subject heading “Deseased [sic] Blankets given to Indians”; participants ranged from Nova Scotia to Georgia, Tennessee to California. Alan E. Mays kindly provided me with the file. I thank Peter d’Errico for information on his remarks at Smith College, and John Homer Hoffman for a copy of the Native American Internet discussion of biological warfare against Indians, April 1994.

3Alan Dundes has noted folklorists’ neglect of “longstanding and widespread” Native American legends about settlers who “intentionally introduced smallpox . . . by means of infected blankets or ‘uncorking a bottle’ ” (1993:xii). A study of exclusively Native American smallpox legends, especially modern narratives, would be valuable. Much of the published material is reported by non-Indians, or recollected or reconstructed at a later date. I indicate these conditions whenever possible for Indian legends cited in this article. Wright (1992:101–102) addresses the problem of native “voice” in historical accounts; see also Hand on collecting Indian folklore about interactions with Europeans (1971:220).

4Cf. Langlois’s structural approach to AIDS tales (1991), and Stanley-Blackwell’s etiological treatment of leprosy lore (1993). In the folklore gathered by Stanley-Blackwell, Acadians in eastern Canada attributed their leprosy to bales of clothing retrieved from shipwrecks of foreign vessels, to Turkish garments offered by shipwrecked sailors in exchange for natives’ hospitality, or to foreign sailors’ laundry washed by local women. In no case was infection by these outsiders deliberate; instead leprosy was seen as an ironic result of “neighborliness” toward strangers (1993:34–35). I am grateful to Alan E. Mays for this reference. See also Leavy’s 1992 study of literary metaphors of disease from the Black Plague to AIDS.

5Knollenberg asserts that the epidemic had already reached the Indians before the letters were written and questions whether clothing could transmit smallpox. Other evidence points to Captain Simeon Ecuver (endorsed by General Thomas Gage), who requisitioned and personally “gave [the Indians] a present of” infected articles (Knollenberg 1954:491–494, 489–490; cf. Hopkins 1983:246; Shurkin 1979:115; Stannard 1992:chap. 4). Even the infected articles cannot be pinned down.
Wright mentions sheets and blankets (1992:136); Jennings (1988:447–448) refers to two blankets and two handkerchiefs; Trent (Knollenberg 1954:491, 494) and Utley and Washburn (1977:98) speak of two blankets and a handkerchief; whereas an official report of Ecyer’s “parley” only “mentions giving [Indians] Provisions and Liquor” (Knollenberg 1954:491). In 1955, Kent refuted Knollenberg’s exoneration of Amherst by quoting damning trade-company documents that state that “2 Blankets 1 Silk Handkerchief & 1 linnen djjtjo” were officially “taken from people in the Hospital to Convey the Small-pox to the Indians” in June 1763 (Kent 1955:763). I am grateful to Tom Wessel for references to the Knollenberg–Kent debate.

Amherst and other colonists may have been familiar with classical and other poison-garment tales that circulated in Europe at that time; in America, rumors of Amherst-like incidents may have inspired some to attempt similar plans. On ostension, in which people enact or imitate folklore in real life, see Ellis 1989.


Smallpox scabs and dust are highly contagious (note 7). The earliest vaccines consisted of smallpox material transported overseas on scraps of paper or threads, and letters from afflicted places were often fumigated in an attempt to decontaminate them (Shurkin 1979:187; Steam and Steam 1945:51, 60–61). In 16th-century China, dried smallpox scabs were sealed in vases for inoculation (Hopkins 1983:114–115). These practices mean that deliberate infection could have been contemplated and carried out. For early folk knowledge of vaccination and smallpox material as a trade item, see McNeill 1976:esp. chap. 6.

9In 1763, the year of Amherst’s order at Fort Pitt, many California Indians died of smallpox after a Spaniard gave infected cloth to “an aborigine” (Steam and Steam 1945:44). Another anecdote describes Chippewa and Sioux “near Hudson Bay” who contracted smallpox after they had attacked “white families” and stole “their clothes” in 1780 (Heagerty 1928:44–46). Hopkins locates a similar incident on “the Plains” in 1783 (1983:236, 246). A participant in the alt.folklore.urban list recalled hearing that blankets had been given to “the Miniconjou” in “what is now Minnesota” and to the “Wampanoag and Narragansett nations” (Michael P. Wolf, 8 and 9 March 1994). Examples could be multiplied.

10Ben Kline Reminiscence, 1925–1931, as told to V. VanDen, Special Collections 942, Folder no. 1, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena. I thank Travis Annette, a student in the history department at Montana State University who is part Metis, for this reference. I am grateful to Billy Smith for bringing Annette’s research to my attention.

Allen, a dentist-blacksmith who became a hunter-scout and “honorary Crow” in Montana in the latter half of the 19th century, published his memoirs in 1933, a year after Plenty Coups died. Allen does not specify when he heard the versions of this tale from his friend, and he may have added anachronistic details. We know that smallpox arrived on the upper Missouri River in 1800 and again in 1837–1838; Plenty Coups was born in 1848. Fort Union was built at the confluence of the Missouri and the Yellowstone rivers in 1828, and it was dismantled in 1868. Miners began to arrive in Montana in the 1850s. These facts suggest that Plenty Coups heard the tale as a boy during the 1850s. Allen writes that he settled in the new town of Coulson before Billings existed (Coulson was established in 1876, Billings in 1882). Soon after his arrival, Allen noticed “fluttering
banners” atop so-called Skeleton Cliff and climbed the bluff, where he came upon the remains of a hundred Indians wrapped in tattered trade blankets. It was “two years” later that “the young Indian” told him two smallpox legends associated with the site. In the same conversation, Plenty Coup referred to “Custer’s men,” who were in the region between 1873 and 1876; so we may guess that the conversation took place in 1878–1879, when Plenty Coup was 30 years old. Folklorist B. A. Botkin reprinted Allen’s narrative in 1951 (Botkin 1951:721–726). A third version of the legend, recalled by Plenty Coup when he was 82, was recorded by his biographer F. B. Linderman (1930:111–112).

Thanks go to Bill Ellis, Véronique Campion–Vincent, Kay Graber, and Alan E. Mays for suggesting Hawthorne, Lévi–Strauss, Deloria, and “Dr. Quinn,” respectively.

The synopsis of the death of Heracles is based on Sophocles The Trachinian Women lines 555–806, and the first-century-B.C. authors Diodorus Siculus 4.36–38; Apollodorus 2.7.6–7; Strabo 9.4.8; and Ovid Metamorphoses 9.101–250. See also Pausanias 10.37–38 (second century A.D.) and Rose 1959:209–210, 219, 229. For Glauke, see Euripides Medea lines 774–1222; Diodorus Siculus 4.54; Apollodorus 1.9.28; and Frazer’s commentary on Apollodorus (Frazer 1967); see also Rose 1959:204. For Harmonia’s robe, see Rose 1959:185, 190, 194–195; Apollodorus 3.4.2, 3.6.1–2, 3.7.2, 5–7; Frazer 1967:317, 354–355, 386; Diodorus Siculus 4.2.1, 4.65.5, 4.66.3, 5.49.1; Pausanias 5.17, 8.24.8, 9.41.2; Athenaeus 6.22.

Like the Athenian playwrights, the novelists Hawthorne (1987) and Highwater (1984) use contagion/combustion metaphors and poison-garment motifs in their historical tragedies about smallpox. Hawthorne’s deadly mantle is a supernatural embodiment of poisonous vanity and hatred of the Other, which generates an epidemic and ends in symbolic purifying fire and remorse. Highwater portrays the epidemic as a raging conflagration pressed by a mysterious, terrifying blaze, and ominous fires accompany its relentless spread. Victims, disfigured as though by fire, crave water, and many drown in rivers (1984:5–16, 9, 27).

Classicists see the playwright’s use of medical terms as a literary ploy to “highlight realism,” rather than as a clue to disease as an inspiration, however. For other disease metaphors and language, see Sophocles The Trachinian Women lines 445, 491, 544, 784, 981, 1001, 1084, 1104, 1120, 1260; Jameson 1969:64, 68; Easterling 1982:199; Long 1968:133–135). A related word, anthrax, also draws together fire and disease, since its ancient (and modern) meaning refers to both a glowing coal and a malignant carbuncle, as of “smallpox” (Liddell and Scott 1940:s.v.), an association that brings to mind Motif S112.4, murder by live coals hidden in a cloak (India), and the Arthurian episode in which a mantle reduces victims to coals.

Motifs D1402.5. (Nessus shirt burns wearer up); D1402.0.1.2. (holy man’s cloak burns person up; India); D1402.30. (magic coat kills; Africa); D2061.2.2.5. (murder by abuse of victim’s clothes); D2061.2.2.5.1. (murder by boiling victim’s gloves); H1516 (attempt to kill hero by poisoning clothing); S111.6. (murder with poisoned robe, consumes wearer; Greece, India); S111.2. (murder with poisoned lace); S111.7. (murder with poisoned slippers); S112.4. (murder by live coals hidden in garments); cf. C782.1. (taboo against selling used clothing); Hyatt 1965:nos. 15247, 10828–10834, 10852 (taboos about old and new clothes and those of the dead).

Motifs C321 (Pandora’s box); C915 (contents of forbidden receptacle released); C915.1. (troubles escape when forbidden casket opened); and A1337.0.1.1. (disease brought to man in box). Bill Ellis pointed out the relevance of this motif.

This ironic motif, K1613 (poisoner poisoned), also applies to the arrogant villains in Hawthorne’s story and in the 1994 “Dr. Quinn” television episode. In modern AIDS legends, the poisoned becomes poisoner, setting off a chain reaction of victim–contaminators that reverberates with the Nessus/Heracles relationship. For passages sympathetic to poineers see Sophocles The Trachinian Women lines 1–51, 103–111, 436–489, 531–587, 705–722; Jameson 1969:66–67; Euripides Medea lines 1–258, 432–519, 767–807; Elliott 1969:97.

High mortality was due to nonimmunity. By associating smallpox mortality with “ineffective remedies” and with frenzy, panic, irrational wandering, flight into the wilderness, or “close living conditions” or other behavioral factors, some historians, perhaps inadvertently, imply that Indians could have protected themselves from the epidemic and thereby trivialize the unstoppable advance

Timothy Tangherlini’s discussion of theoretical approaches to problems of historicity in legends and rumors is especially helpful here (1990:375, 370–379), as is Paul Smith’s treatment of historical precedents in 17th-century historical and fictional texts in relation to modern legends of deliberate AIDS infection (1990). Francis Brooks discusses the literary quality of the early historiography of smallpox in Latin America (1993).

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