

The Bronze Lady of Sleepy Hollow Compounding the Hybridity of Online Legendry

Daniel Peretti

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Article abstract

Legend scholarship has often focused on how legend translates to behavior in the form of legend trips. This article explores how accounts of a legend trip appear in oral tradition, print culture, and in various platforms on the internet, using the example of the legend of the Bronze Lady of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Relying on notions of hybridity in both folklore and the study of literature, I discuss the hybridization of the legend that occurs online, leading to an analysis of the legend as it has merged the “Get Ready with Me” make-up tutorial video. Based on ethnography and the examination of digital and print texts, this analysis attempts to articulate the affordances of new media and different context for narrative.

THE BRONZE LADY OF SLEEPY HOLLOW

Compounding the Hybridity of Online Legendry

Daniel Peretti

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Setting the Scene

Sleepy Hollow is a village on the east side of the Hudson River about thirty miles north of New York City. When first incorporated at the end of the nineteenth century, it was called North Tarrytown, but the closure of a General Motors factory near the end of the twentieth century led to economic difficulties, and in December of 1996 the residents voted to change the village's name so that its association with Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," for which it is the setting and source, would draw more tourists (Berger 1996; Hadad 1997; Neroulis 2008). Subsequently, the Headless Horseman of Irving's tale and local oral tradition came to dominate the village's iconography (see, for example, the image on the fire truck in figure 2). I went there to study Santa Claus, but everyone I spoke to told me to go to the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery – they expected that I was interested more in local legendry rather than Christmas traditions. I followed their advice and took a guided tour of the cemetery. About half-way through, the guide pointed toward the top of a hill and said that near tombs of famous American figures like the Carnegies and Rockefellers was the site of a statue "where kids like to go sometimes." I thought it had the sound of a legend trip, so after the tour I asked about it. The guide said he would like to be able to help, except he "could never quite piece that one together."



Figure 1. *Recullement, or Grief*, by Andrew O'Connor, Jr. 1903. Also known as the Bronze Lady of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, New York, 2019. Photo: Daniel Peretti.

Asking around town, I soon learned about the Bronze Lady, the local name for a statue sitting outside the mausoleum of General Samuel M. Thomas on a hill toward the cemetery's north end, and the site of a legend trip performed by local residents. Its sculptor, Andrew O'Connor, Jr., titled the statue *Recullement, or Grief* – most likely a variation of *recueillement*, a French term for meditation, contemplation, or perhaps reverence, though no accounts explain the spelling variation. It was installed in 1903. Its model was Jesse Phoebe Brown, who sat for O'Connor many times (Soderman 1995: 34). In a biography of O'Connor, Doris Soderman reports that widow Ann Thomas, who commissioned the statue, wanted “a sort of meditation” but was unhappy with the somber nature of the finished product; she wanted a happier face on the statue. She returned a week later, and O'Connor presented a newly sculpted, cheerful head. She was pleased with the change. O'Connor, however, destroyed the head and told her that he'd just made it to show that he could, but would “never let such a monstrosity out of [his] studio” (quoted in Soderman 1995: 33). There is no more to the story as reported, and Soderman gives no source, giving this account of its creation the feel of a legend in its own right.

One journalist, Robyn Leary, describes the Bronze Lady in the twenty-first century: “The sculpture sits between two stately pines in the north

central section of the fabled graveyard [...]. A shroud covers her wavy bronze locks and a Greco-Roman tunic the rest of her Amazon form. Her forearms are muscled and her hands large and sinewy. There is a forlorn sadness in the slumped shoulders and in the mouth and eyes. Her face is streaked" (Leary 2000). Soderman praises the statue for its life-like appearance (1995: 34), though it is sculpted at "twice-life-size" (Leary 2000). Soderman reports nothing specific about a legend trip associated with the statue, but writes, "It is said that school children who come to this incredibly beautiful cemetery to view the monuments located there, invariably hurry to the small hill where Jesse sits in fair weather or foul" (Soderman 1995: 34).

Ritual, Legend, and Legend Trip in Oral Tradition

Everyone I asked in Sleepy Hollow knew about the statue and had some idea of the traditions surrounding it, but most could not or would not discuss the details. I was able to collect one substantial personal account from someone who had been on the legend trip. I spoke with Assistant Fire Chief John Korzelius (now Chief Engineer) because of his annual role as Santa Claus for Sleepy Hollow. At the end of our interview about Santa, I asked him about the Bronze Lady. Korzelius, a life-long resident of the village, became animated, immediately exclaiming: "Yeah, man, I've done it!" I asked him to elaborate, and I've transcribed his response, edited only to remove my questions and prompts:



Figure 2. John Korzelius in the Sleepy Hollow Fire Department, 2019. Photo: Daniel Peretti.

Okay, so, I don't know what she was doing there, but when we were kids ... so, you had to spit in her eye, sit in her lap, and look through the peep hole. And if you sss... I think it goes that if you saw her in there, something bad was going to happen to you. And of course there's always the story of *Oh, little Mikey did it and broke his arm the next day*. But we, and it's funny you say that, because we were just talking about this at work the other day.

We were talking ab--And I said, "Okay, who did it?" and the majority of us did it. You know, when...you have to be from town, you know, from the village. Yeah, so the thing was, you sat in her lap, spit in her eye, and look the peep hole, and I think it went if you saw her reflection, something bad would happen to you. It was like daring somebody. It was like the flag pole. Triple dog dare you. So of course when we were kids like ten or something and we sat there for twenty minutes debating. *Who's gonna do it? You do it. Naw, you're afraid! No you're afraid!* And finally I was like, 'I'll do it!' Nothing bad happened, at least not at that moment. I survived. I didn't see her.

But there was this story of this guy, Mike. He did it, and when he – and that day or something, he broke his arm. But you know, it could be BS, but that was the story. *Don't you remember, Mike broke his arm? Well, no, but all right*. But it was funny. I can remember to this day. There were six of us sitting there all challenging each other to do it.

Yeah, it was tough to climb up there. Again, when you're small everything seems so big. So you know just climbing up there. And I can remember being really nervous. Like I spit in her eye and I'm sitting down in her lap. And they're like, *Oh my god, he's doing it, he's doing it*. And I'm like, "Oh yeah, yeah." Meanwhile, I'm shaking on the inside. And the final thing is you get down and you look in the keyhole. That took me a long time. I'm sitting there, they're going, *What are you chicken? What are you chicken?* I finally did it. I was so nervous. *Please don't let me see her, please don't let me see her*. And I didn't! So I survived.

I don't know how that got started. I have no idea. I don't know who thought of it. But ever since I can remember that story was always out there. Like I said, we were like ten years old when I decided I got the nerve to go up and do it. And I was the only one! I was the only one who did it out of my group. But the different generations ahead of us, they all said *Oh yeah, I've done it, I've done it*. I don't know how that got started. I don't know why you would spit in the woman's eye and sit in her lap and look in the keyhole. Was she a witch? Was she a...I don't. I'd love to know the backstory.

There's a few of us did. I know I definitely did it. Like I said I can remember sweating, doing it. Cause you want to be big man on campus, but inside you're shaking. You know, the biggest thing was looking into that peephole. It took me a while. I was like, "Uhhhh! Do it do it do it do it to it!" I can remember, I have my eyes closed and my friend busted me, he's like, *Your eye's closed*. Oh, man! So I opened my eye real slow little by little I was like "Oh, she's not there. Woo hoo!" Yeah, I got caught with my eyes closed (J. Korzelius, May 5, 2019).

Korzelius describes a pecking order determined by who is willing to go through with the ritualesque component of the legend trip (Bird 1991; Debies-Carl 2023). Korzelius does not describe the tripartite structure typical of legend trips (narrative, ritual, reflective narrative; Thigpen 1971: 205), but he is recalling events several decades in the past; he remembers the ritual component as the central feature. John and his friends were afraid to complete the ritual, even during the day, in part because of the potential consequences of the performance and in part because of the atmosphere of chilling legendry that adheres to the village through both its age and the prominence of the Headless Horseman. Though Korzelius' recounts the legend trip for the interview, he reveals the valuable contextual information that he has recently discussed the Bronze Lady during downtime with coworkers, a fact of which legend scholars are aware about the transmission of legends, but that is not often recorded (Bennett [1987] points out how difficult it is to record the natural contexts for legend telling). This legend trip is narrated and discussed by adults, perhaps nostalgically, but adults believe it to be performed by children.

The Bronze Lady is in many ways typical of legend trip sites: secluded, unusual, and ambiguous. Legend trips are usually performed by teenagers or older adolescents (Thigpen 1971; Ellis 1983; Meley 1991); variation is usual in these activities, but the younger age reported by Korzelius and in news stories discussed below might reflect a different component of the Bronze Lady: its location adjacent to the village itself. The teenagers on legend trips seek places outside of town in part because of the newfound mobility resulting from having a car, and thus remove themselves from adult supervision (Ellis 2018: 67). Sleepy Hollow Cemetery is less than a mile from the center of town; children can walk to the cemetery without much trouble in less than twenty minutes, and doing so during the day wouldn't arouse much interest from adults. I asked John Korzelius if he had gone to the statue at night, and he was quick to respond: "No, it was during the day. I would never go in, when I was a kid, I would never go into the cemetery at night. No. Because we still believed in the headless

horseman. You know, we're not going to the cemetery at night – are you crazy?" (Korzelius 2019).

The Bronze Lady is also typical of cemetery statues. It depicts a female, which Jeannie Banks Thomas reports as being more common than statues of men. It does not represent any particular woman (though sculpted according to the features of a model) and certainly not a woman associated with the grave by which she sits. It is uncommon in its lack of eroticism, though not unique in this regard. In an analysis of cemetery statuary in *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visible Gender* (2003), Thomas notes that statues of men tend to depict those interred in the graves over which they stand. Statues of women, on the other hand, usually do not do so. Instead, they operate symbolically, representing the abstract act of mourning rather than the individual. As such, many have been placed at men's graves as surrogate mourners, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Thomas 2003: 15) – the Bronze Lady is an example of this practice. Nonetheless, many female statues are assumed to depict a woman buried near them. Korzelius hints at this notion when he begins his account with "I don't know what she was doing there [...]" before focusing on his own experience (Korzelius 2019). The prevalence of surrogate mourner may have waned in twenty-first century America, making a statue such as the Bronze Lady an uncommon sight and all the more ambiguous – thus demanding an explanation. The legendary origin reported by Soderman attempts to account for the sombre expression because the concept of the surrogate mourner has departed from mainstream culture.

Thomas digresses from cemeteries to point out that rites of passage among university students sometimes take place on and around university monuments such as statues of mascots (Thomas 2003: 40). Bill Ellis, who documents fifty-nine haunted graveyards as the sites of legend trips in Ohio, likewise links the legend trip to "participants successful passage of an initiation into manhood," though he also reads them as a rebellious act against "adult law and order" (2018: 64). Sleepy Hollow historian Henry Steiner reports (on twitter and in a personal communication via email) that the Bronze Lady is used by locals as a rite of passage. Steiner doesn't indicate what new status is conferred by completing the legend trip. Other folklorists have noted this aspect of the legend trip before: Kenneth Thigpen's early study of legends and associated trips in Indiana indicates that the initiation is to the "realm of the supernatural" (Thigpen 1971: 205). Patricia M. Meley claims that it is an initiation into a peer group as well as a means for initiating oneself into adulthood (Meley 1991: 18). Elizabeth

Bird, a professor of anthropology, argues that the legend trip in general, at least for young males, becomes a rite of passage into manhood. Working with the legend corpus surrounding a cemetery statue called the Black Angel in Iowa City, Bird draws upon multiple examples of the initiatory aspect in fact being recognized by its performers. In this context, the visit to the Bronze Lady allows young men to “test themselves and their fear of the unknown in a situation that is entirely peer-oriented” (Bird 1994: 203). Trevor J. Blank and David Puglia note that a similar statue – Black Aggie, a seated woman in a cemetery in Maryland, in whose lap teenagers and fraternity brothers sit – also serves as the locus of rites of passage (Blank and Puglia 2014: 45-49). Bird characterizes the male legend trip to the black angel as one in which the participants “must confront danger and avoid showing fear, they must bond with other males but also compete with them” (Bird 1994: 208). The content of the legend itself is almost incidental, leading Meley to write, “the trip itself appears to have functions independent of the legends and may well be the more important aspect in uncovering adolescent motives and behavior” (Meley 1991: 12). Korzelius’s account supports these observations: dares and checks on his performance give away the purpose of the ritual, and he does not narrate a legend.

One interesting facet of folklore as related to statuary is the interplay of the institutional and the vernacular. Statues such as the Bronze Lady require massive amounts of time and money to create and instal; however, they are in accessible to the public, even if the cemetery in which they sit is technically private. In other words, they are institutional, formalized through the union of corporate and municipal processes, processes which are often considered to be anathema to the generation of folklore. But their public nature also invites participatory discourse. They arise and thrive in vernacular performance and discourse. This can occur on both the Internet and in oral tradition, not to mention the adaptation to popular culture in the form of news articles. Perhaps this institutionalized origin contributes to the use of statuary in rites of passage. These rituals perform important symbolic work, at the end of which an outsider has become an insider. It is possible that rites of passage such as legend trips and the university initiations described by Thomas, which are deliberately performed outside institutional frameworks, incorporate monuments such as a statue to borrow some of the statue’s official aura for the rite and thus enhance the initiand’s new status.

The Legend in Print Sources

Few print sources tell the story of the Bronze Lady. For this section, I considered *print* to include those publications that have been released as physical copies (in this case, one book) or that stem from print journalism (two news stories which I have accessed through the Internet). Only one book includes the story: toward the end of *Legends and Lore of Sleepy Hollow and the Hudson Valley*, local author and storyteller Jonathan Kruk includes a section titled “The Whole Place Still abounds with Spirits,” which features the following short comment about the statue: “The Bronze Lady of Sleepy Hollow sits in repose before a mausoleum. If someone sits in her lap, spits in her eye, kicks her shins, knocks on her tomb and looks in, nightmares will plague you for two weeks!” (Kruk 2011: 136). While this is a brief version phrased in the conditional mood – essentially just the statement of a folk belief – there is an earlier, narrative, and more comprehensive print source.

An article in *The New York Times* from October 29, 2000, by Robyn Leary, begins with the following narrative: “The year is 1916. A little girl, 6 or 7, wanders into Sleepy Hollow Cemetery at night on a Halloween Dare. She creeps among tombstones and mausoleums until she is stopped by an unsettling sound. It is a woman crying, softly, bitterly. Frightened yet determined, the girl makes her way toward the sound and arrives at the statue of a seated woman, twice-life-size. The weeping has stopped but when the girl climbs into the statue’s lap and reaches up to touch the face, there are tears under the eyes. The little girl was the grandmother of Emily Storms Arminio, a 10th generation native of Sleepy Hollow, who recalls hearing the tale often” (Leary 2000). The date of 1916 – just thirteen years after the statue’s completion – is dubious, as we will see.

This article feels the most folkloristic of all the stories I found. Its author interviewed four residents of the area, including Arminio. Each gives details, and it is worth quoting these at some length to note variations. The first is Anthony J. Marmo, who remembers hearing about the statue from other children in the 1970s. His account of the beliefs matches those reported by Korzelius, but he also notes another use of the statue and legend: “When we got older, we’d be the ones bringing new kids up. One of us would hide behind the statue and come out screaming if a kid had the nerve to sit in her lap – terrorize him, you know” (quoted in Leary 2000). Marmo is not quite clear about performing it himself, though the pseudo-ostensive use of the site fits with how many legends are applied to the lives of locals.

Leary's second source, Sara Mascia, works for the Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow Historical Society; her account is unique: "People have told me that she weeps because of some tragedy in her life. Of course, you can find scientific explanations for the tears – the sculpture interacting with the environment and all that. What I used to hear when I was a kid was that if you're nice to the statue, she'll take care of you [...]. If you were really brave you would sit on her lap and be taken care of for life" (quoted in Leary 2000). This is a rare instance of a legend trip that is beneficial to the performers (Lindahl 2005); at the same time, the disjunction between Mascia's reported trepidation and the apparently benevolent nature of the statue's spirit seems odd. This can perhaps be accounted for by the nocturnal visits Mascia reports: she and her friend brought candles and flashlights with them when they went on Halloween. Jeannie Galgano, Leary's third source, reports going to the statue in the early 1960s; her account resembles that of Korzelius. She also reports performing the ritual, sitting in its lap, slapping and kicking it, then knocking on the door and looking through the keyhole – all without result: "We did it a couple of times but she never came to haunt us" (quoted in Leary 2000). The final source is Armenio, who reports that after she performed the ritual a tree branch fell and crushed her car.

Six days after Leary's story, the paper ran a correction that reads: "An article last Sunday about legends surrounding a statue of a woman in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery misattributed an anecdote about a little girl's visit to the cemetery on a Halloween dare in 1916. It was a fictional 'ghost story,' not one involving Emily Storms Armenio's grandmother or told by her." The article's author, Robyn Leary, passed away in 2011. *The New York Times* has not responded to requests for further information.

The final print source is Peter D. Kramer's 2021 article about the Bronze Lady for *USAToday*. This article begins with a reference to Washington Irving, labeling the Bronze Lady as secondary or "other" ghost story (Leary's *New York Times* story accomplished this in its headline without mentioning Irving or the Horseman in the body of the story). After a short history and description of the statue, Kramer offers details about the legend trip and evaluates the plausibility of the legend. Kramer is aware of variations in the legend even though he relies on one interview with Sara Mascia, who since being interviewed by Leary is now director of the Historical Society. Kramer quotes her directly for her evaluation of the legend: "Mascia, whose job is separating fact from fiction, won't go so far as to call The Curse of The Bronze Lady a bunch of hooey. 'As far as when it started, how it started,

whether it's real or not, if you believe it's real, it's real'" (Kramer 2021). Kramer uses the ambiguity of belief to conclude the article with a tag: "Not knowing is what kept Sleepy Hollow's most daring teenagers coming back [...]. Sleepy Hollow has become Halloween Central, with lantern tours of the cemetery and performances of 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.' Night time feels a lot safer when there's a lantern tour. But there are people who share the story that, back in the day, they had the guts to sit in The Bronze Lady's lap. And they lived to tell the tale" (Kramer 2021).

The reference to the Headless Horseman and Irving's story seems inevitable now because of the village's name. I have found no versions of the Bronze Lady legend that date prior to 1996, so it's hard to say if the name has played a role in shaping the current accounts. It is possible that headlines about the Bronze Lady legend would have treated North Tarrytown without reference to Irving's "Legend," though interviews with locals might have revealed the connection. It came up in my conversation with John Korzelius, independent of my questions, because it relates to the more general topic at the heart of many legend trips: fear. A woman from Sleepy Hollow, Katrina Van Tassel, told a reporter, "We used to ride our bikes in the cemetery, and we were always scared that the Headless Horseman was going to get us. We really believed it" (Neroulis 2008). As Korzelius admits, his fear of the Bronze Lady as a child arises in the context of his fear of the Headless Horsemen. It's as if there's a society of legendry, in which the characters in the narrative tradition associate with each other in the childhood imaginary.

The Legend on the Internet

A few years before the *USAToday* article, an online magazine devoted to horror and the paranormal, called *The Lineup* (<https://the-line-up.com>), published a story about the Bronze Lady. Jessica Ferri's 2017 article, "The Bronze lady: The (Other) Legend of Sleepy Hollow that You've Never Heard Of" follows mostly the same structure as Kramer's, referencing Irving and giving variants as well as the history of the statue. Ferri seems to be relying primarily on the *New York Times* article, and even quotes the words of Emily Storms Armenio from it. A tag brings the story to a close, "Approach the Bronze Lady yourself at your own peril" (Ferri 2021).

I wanted to get a sense of what forms the legend takes on the Internet. I conducted a simple Google search for the Bronze Lady, from which I learned that there are other Bronze Ladies out there, most prominent among them

is a shop in Florida that has no apparent relation to the statue in New York (<https://www.bronzelady2000.com/>). I narrowed the search by adding “Sleepy Hollow,” and I began keeping track of the first ten results over a few weeks’ time. During the course of the spring and summer of 2023, they remained consistent. One June 3, the top ten hits were as follows:

1. The *USA Today* story by Peter D. Kramer
2. *The Lineup* story by Jessica Ferri
3. A Pinterest page run by *The Lineup* that consists of a few photographs of the statue and a link to (2)
4. A Yahoo!News reprint of (1)
5. The *New York Times* story by Robyn Leary
6. Howard Dale’s blog post from Aheadworld.org that reprints (2)
7. A personal Facebook post with a few photographs and a link to (5)
8. A page on the travel website Tripadvisor.com with one photograph and a brief account of a visit
9. A personal video of a trip to the statue on TikTok
10. A page on the commercial website Pixels.com where you can buy an iPhone case with a photograph of the statue.

Three of these results have the same prose, Jessica’s Ferri’s story from *The Lineup*, which should not necessarily be read as that single story having a vast influence, since the second of them comes from *The Lineup*’s Pinterest page – making it essentially the same source. The statue itself is a visual focus for the topic, and thus three of four that link to the news stories exist for the users to post their own photos (Dale’s blog, Pinterest, and Facebook) and a third, Tripadvisor, also has a photographic component. The statue is visually striking, which means that the subject is of interest to photographers in general (as evident in Pixels.com and Aheadworld.org). The others all include photos of the statue as well. The ease with which users can post photographs to the Internet makes the Bronze Lady a common topic.

In the previous section, I covered the details given on the first seven websites listed above. The eighth offers little information about the legend, but what it includes is interesting. Tripadvisor.com is a site that, as the name indicates, offers help for travelers to find accommodation, food, and activities by reading chronicles of experiences (called reviews) posted by other travelers. As of June, 2023, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery itself has 574 reviews, only one of which mentions the Bronze Lady: user bjay5 writes,

“The Bronze Lady statue is a little hard to find because she sits between two trees with her back to the road. When I first found her, I was surprised to see a man sitting on her lap which I later discovered (thanks to Google) was because of an urban legend that she was haunted and if you sat on her lap, she would give you nightmares for weeks. Can’t say I blame her, if she had to suffer through that indignity over and over for decades” (bjay5 2016). From this account we learn that people perform the ritual component alone, and that it is still performed during the day.

Ninth on the list is a one-minute TikTok video posted to a channel called *Creepyhistoryclass* by user Weronika, from 2022. Over cell-phone shots of the statue and the vegetation surrounding it (noticeable because of the tall and narrow aspect ratio), Weronika narrates the following:

Whatever you do don’t make fun of this statue’s hands--she might curse you. And don’t sit on her lap--you might die or have bad luck for the rest of your life. There are too many creepy stories about this statue. [...] If you grew up around her you definitely heard tales about the bronze lady. Some say they’ve heard her weeping. Others say if you sit on her lap and peek through the keyhole in the mausoleum door, you will see a ghost. If you touch her face either something really good or something really bad will happen to you in the next twenty four hours. Would you dare approach the bronze lady? (Weronika 2022).

This account resembles others seen above, including both more than one variant of the legend trip and details about the statue and its history. The opening line about the hands is a curious addition, which might be explained below. Weronika herself has more than 158,000 followers and has posted hundreds of tiktoks. She has made a playlist of her cemetery videos, of which there are twenty-two. Her video on the Bronze Lady has 392 comments as of this writing, nearly a year after its original posting, and Weronika responds to nearly everyone. Many comment in direct response to the question with which she closes the video; some reply that they wouldn’t (“I stay clear away”), some are almost confrontational (“yes. because I don’t believe in that stuff”), or direct (“yes I would”), but several claim that they would bring flowers to the statue.

The tenth result is a commercial site, Pixels.com, where customers can use their own images to create customized products and artists can make their work available for this use by others. Among the artworks is a photo of the Bronze Lady taken by Colleen Kammerer, which can be printed on cell phone cases (the search result), stationery, tote bags, and wall prints. It was uploaded in 2015. On the page are product details, prices, buttons

to share the product on social media, and ways to customize the case for specific phones. It also features a section called “Design Details”. Upon first arriving at the page, this section shows only “The Bronze Lady – Sleepy Hollow Cemetery...more.” Clicking on “more” reveals a brief description of the statue and its location, along with the following:

Many people find themselves stopping at this location due to a strange noise. Some claim to have heard the weeping, others to have felt the tears of this sculpture, which gazes sadly at the tomb of the Civil War general. If you dare – but beware – knock on the door of the general’s tomb and look through the keyhole, you will be cursed with a bad dream that night (Kammerer 2015).

This legend text is among the shortest I’ve encountered, evocative rather than informative, but it nonetheless includes some ritual instructions.



Figure 3. A screenshot from a YouTube video on the channel *Stream News* titled: “Sleepy Hollow’s lesser known ghost story The Curse of the Bronze Lady in” [sic].

In this list of search results, there is only one streaming video, but the Internet features several others that include a retelling of the Bronze Lady, and I will examine a few representative examples. I will focus on YouTube in order to keep to a manageable length. Some of these videos are downright strange: a video on YouTube in which a mechanized voice narrates the *USAToday* over a sequence of images unrelated to the statue. It is among the stranger findings of this project. The still shots and video images that accompany the narration are sometimes thematically related to the content (*i.e.*, when detailing Samuel Thomas’ railroad fortune, we see a video of a train moving through trees), but other times there is no obvious connection,

such as when discussing the sculptor, which is accompanied by an image of someone slicing up a beef roast, or when chronicling O'Connor's response to the request for a new face on the statue, the video shows a man choking a woman. The video ends several sentences before the source article ends, with the abrupt and nonsensical phrase, "It could have been the somber look on her face" (Stream News 2023). There are dozens of these kinds of videos on this YouTube channel, each like this one, with views in the low hundreds. It has been active since November of 2020, and has an aggregate of over one million views.

In some videos, narrators approach something like a full performance of the legend trip. Bill Losier (2018) is one example. He sometimes uses voice-over narration, sometimes directly addresses the camera. He also uses visual effects to make the video look distressed, briefly shooting in a first-person style to approach the statue: he is in effect dramatizing the story of the girl as told in the *New York Times*. He takes many details from the *Times* article, as well, including the year 1916 and the little girl who sees and hears the statue crying.

According to legend, if you sat in the lap of the statue, spit in her eye, kick her, and then knock three times on the crypt door, and then look into the keyhole, that when you went to bed that night, you would be haunted by a ghost. The ghost of a woman believed to be the spirit that lives within the Bronze Lady" (Losier 2018).

Losier knocks on the door and puts the camera right up to the keyhole, but shows no video of touching or sitting on the statue.

Comedian Paulie Stags posted two videos about Sleepy Hollow in 2021. The first takes a look at Sleepy Hollow in terms of Irving's story, showing the locations relevant to it, working through the bridges and cemetery. He spends about ninety seconds on the Bronze Lady, giving the background of its creation and location. For a second video, he posted about one minute of the first video, focused on the statue, omitting the historical background. Here is a transcript of the shorter video:

The tales surrounding the Bronze Lady are fantastic and inconsistent, true marks of a good ghost story. Some say if you sit on her lap, she will weep tears of blood. Others, that if you disrespect the statue by slapping or abusing it, you will be cursed for life. And if you approach the General's mausoleum to knock on the door or peer through the keyhole, terrifying dreams will visit you that night. But what I can't get over is how no one is talking about how big her hands are. Seriously these things are huge. I'll bet the bronze lady could palm a regulation NBA basketball.

O'Connor's mistress and muse, Jesse Phoebe Brown, modeled for this work and others, which means there's a bunch of big-handed statues out there creeping on people. Now that's scary (Stags 2021).

This video has, as of this writing, 350 views. Yet the comment about the hands might have inspired others to comment on them as well, such as Weronika, quoted above. We have seen the legend and legend trip combined with video, and Stags gives us an example of combining it with the humor of a stand-up comedian.

Another video, posted in 2020, is the episode "Legends, Myths, & Mysteries...Do You Believe?" of the podcast *Out in Westchester*. The hosts, Liz Radulski and Frank Pelegrino, interview Westchester residents about events and other items of interest to residents and tourists. The channel itself goes back further than the interviews, but has not been very active since 2022. In this particular episode, the hosts interview restaurateur Jules McCue. After covering the backgrounds of their guests, the hosts shift to local history, which leads them to the cemetery. They treat McCue as an expert on the subject of the Bronze Lady, in part because her restaurant, Horsefeathers, features horror and Halloween-themed decorations. McCue gives a brief account of the Bronze Lady legend trip, again in the conditional phrasing of a folk belief:

If you look at her, she, uh, they said that if you sit on her lap, or if you spit on her, and then I heard a few things if you say something to her and then look through the keyhole in the mausoleum that she faces she doesn't let you out of the cemetery or she haunts, there's like different variations of the whole story (Radulski and Pelegrino 2019).

McCue then discusses the creation of the sculpture, which she finds more compelling than the supernatural elements. She prepared for the podcast by reading through material provided by her "friend Jim" at the cemetery – most likely Jim Logan, who manages the property. Visually, the video consists of four people sitting in a booth at the Horsefeathers restaurant, talking into microphones, wearing headsets, without any images of the cemetery itself. It runs for one hour and seven minutes, about twenty of which are devoted to local legends. The only unique element, insofar as the material I have collected goes, is that performing the ritual means being trapped in the cemetery.

One difficulty, from a folkloristic perspective, in studying material on the Internet is the lack of social context. The Internet is its own context, of course, and scholars can analyze that, but what we lack from Internet

research is the context in which the audience comes to view the video or read the story. We know a few things; for example, from the Tripadvisor.com story we learn that seeing someone performing the legend trip can prompt an otherwise uninterested observer to look up details online and then transmit an abbreviated account of the event through a review. But do others come to the site looking for information about the Bronze Lady specifically or for the cemetery more generally? Do they tell the legend to others? Do they make the trip themselves and sit in her lap? Without knowing who views the review, the analysis can't proceed.

Other Internet contexts provide a little more information. The comment sections on YouTube and TikTok show some dialogue, as we saw with Weronika's video; most of the responses to her video are comments, but Bill Losier's video elicited another common response to storytelling of all kinds: the telling of another story. One viewer of his video reports more details of another person's legend trip – a young girl who heard crying and felt the tears. This seems to be taken from the *New York Times* article, but it is paraphrased, so it's hard to assert that definitively. Another viewer reports visiting the statue in 2020 while intoxicated and somehow "disrespecting" the statue; exactly how isn't clear in the language used: "apparently I disrespected the Bronze Lady and took a rock from the road nearby." The result was that "a fucking POLTERGEIST" haunted them for a week, moving objects around their home, strange noises, nightmares, and odd sensations. To assuage the ghost, they returned the rock they'd taken, apologized, and left pennies at the statue ("apparently she really likes pennies"). This is the only reference to an offering or any type of appeasement that I've encountered.

Very few narrators confess to performing the ritual components of the legend trip. As we have seen, several writers and videographers do comment on the morality of performing the various ritual acts during the trip, and always as a negative judgment in reference to disrespect or indignity. Not one video (or photograph) I have found on the Internet includes someone sitting on the statue's lap. Losier puts his camera up to the keyhole, and another video, by Christina Westervelt (2023), shows her knocking on the door, but that's the closest anyone comes. Westervelt recounts details of the statue's creation and the legends about what happens if you knock on the mausoleum's door (bad dreams) or sit in its lap (bad luck). She knocks on the door but won't risk sitting on the Bronze Lady's lap. I would say that the casual way she knocks removes her actions from the ritual frame. She does not indicate whether or not she had bad dreams that night. Neither does

Losier indicate any repercussions from his knocking on the door. No one even touches the statue in any video I have found – deliberately, at least in some cases, because variants of the legend include repercussions for simply touching the statue itself; one visitor worries because her companion places a phone on the statue and comes close to touching it (Bennet-Bradway and Bradway 2019).

This brief survey is meant only to give readers a sense of what exists virtually and to include some of the variation reported by online storytellers. We see in the Internet versions of the Bronze Lady story a delight in intertextuality. Each one refers to another text; some such as *The Lineup*'s Pinterest page do so through direct quotation and hyperlink; others, such as the video on the *Stream News* channel, directly quote another source but omit citation. Others, and a good example here is the Bill Losier's video, paraphrase sources so closely that the connection is readily apparent to someone who has read extensively. In other words, those who tell the story online do their homework.

Hybridity in the YouTube Channel *Uniquely Individually Me*



Figure 4. *Uniquely Individually Me*. A 2021 video on this YouTube channel features a retelling and discussion of the Bronze Lady legend.

For this section, I would like to explore one online site that discusses the legend: the YouTube channel *Uniquely Individually Me*, run by a woman who goes by the name Colleen. In 2019, its operator Colleen started uploading videos of make-up tutorials. A few months in, her love of the paranormal shows up, and in October 2020, she starts telling a memorate prior to her tutorials; soon after she begins incorporating stories she has heard. Before long, she narrates while conducting her make-up demonstration. She labels these videos “Friday Frights,” and the second episode features the Bronze Lady. The Internet affords a variety of different communication methods and contexts. What I’ve focused on in the latter half of this essay are those expressive forms communicated through videography and narrative. One affordance embraced by many Internet users such as Colleen is the ease of creating hybrid expressions. A short example of this is Sleepy Hollow village historian Henry Steiner, who posted a photo of the Bronze Lady to Twitter

on February 5, 2021, with the following statement: “The Bronze Lady of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, one must sit in her lap at night to be properly initiated...” (Steiner 2021). Even a microtext such as single tweet reveals the facility with which the Internet allows for the hybridization of expressive culture: Steiner’s post is simultaneously verbal and photographic. This is of course possible in print media such as magazines and newspapers, but the democratizing facet of the Internet makes hybridity explode in frequency.

When discussing hybridity, culturally focused scholars such as anthropologists will focus on large-scale hybridity, as between nations or tribes (Palmié 2013); alternately, they will focus on the mixture of expressive forms (Bakhtin 1981) – the latter applies to the Internet and *Uniquely Individually Me*. Most hybridity scholars confine their analysis to a single expressive domain, *i.e.*, looking at the union of documentary and fiction film or prose and poetry in literature (Galster 2010: n.p.). Furthermore, much of the scholarship on hybridity – “one of the emblematic notions of our era” (Kraidy 2005: 1) – focuses on global and transnational instances (Bullen and Sawers 2017) or intercultural blending, but in the case of the Bronze Lady, we have instead a hybridity of media and performance as well as a hybrid genre of the legend and the “Get Ready with Me” (GRWM) videos. *Uniquely Individually Me* presents an instance of blending across expressive domains that easily coexist within the same cultural group while most commonly appearing in separate discourses. Instead of transnationalism, the perspectives most readily applicable to the legend-GRWM videos come from the study of literature (Bakhtin 1986) and folklore (Blank 2013).

Scholars have operated under several definitions of hybridity, two of which are useful here: “an unexpected interaction or combination between two or more forms – whether literary, filmic, ethnic, generic, or gendered” (Garane 2018: 1); and “works of art which transgress genre boundaries by combining characteristic traits and elements of diverse literary and non-literary genres [with a precondition for] a thorough examination and transformation of established genre conventions” (Galster 2020: n.p.). Transgressive elements are not as relevant to the legend-GRWM hybrid, since whatever boundaries crossed in the report of the legend trip to the Bronze Lady statue have been offset by the narrators refusing to engage in the ritual elements, sometimes straightforwardly condemning them as Colleen does. Yet the other elements emphasized in these definitions apply: the videos *are* an unexpected combination of two or more forms. Trevor J. Blank explores the hybridity of vernacular media on the Internet

in “Hybridizing Folk Culture” (2013), and he asserts that the Internet is hybrid by its very nature – transforming the three dimensions of the corporeal world into two dimensions online. Even the videos that present only the details of the legend and the cemetery, like Bill Losier’s, are functionally a combination of legend account and video essay, with a splash of dramatization.

Let’s combine this hybridity with notions of the hybrid developed in the study of literature. In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Mikhail Bakhtin articulates the notion of primary and secondary genres, which he applies to speech in oral and written forms. In this conceptualization, a primary genre, which is fairly simple in structure, merges with a secondary, more complex genre (Bakhtin 1986: 61); *i.e.*, written genres such as novels absorb unmediated expressive forms such as oral narrative – although Ray Cashman (2016) demonstrates that the concept can apply to custom and material culture as well, in the case of parades. According to Bakhtin, complex/secondary genres “absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones” (Bakhtin 1986: 62). However, Bakhtin is speaking of the novel, in which verbal genres mix, often through the focalization of a simple genre embedded in the secondary text. Colleen’s style is complex. She often reads from an offscreen prompter, other times extemporizes. She will sometimes put still photographs of her subject on the screen. Every so often she pauses her monologue to focus on the make-up. Her second “Friday Frights” video covers the Bronze Lady. It’s 13:34 long. Here’s a bit of her narration:

Though the statue appears to be more sleeping than threatening, legend has it that she comes to life at night and walks the cemetery grounds, terrifying anyone who enters the cemetery on a dare. Extra creepy. According to lore, as you get closer to her, you will hear the Bronze Lady weeping (Colleen 2021).

“According to lore [...]” Here Colleen traditionalizes her account, a common strategy among those who post these sorts of videos. Bill Losier uses the same strategy in the description of his video on the Bronze Lady: “The narrative I share with you is what was handed down to me” (Losier 2018), distancing himself while acknowledging his debt to tradition. Colleen’s telling is interspersed with significant elements of her own worldview and values, making it much longer than most video versions:

But if you really really like to chance your fate, and you like further insult the statue, like I don't know spit on her or something, you'll apparently be cursed for life. Which I mean you should be cause like why are you disrespecting a statue like that? People who do things like that, especially when it comes to like supernatural stuff, like if you're going in with the attitude like you're gonna be like, *Whatever I can just do what I want, like*, you've gotta expect kinda consequences, because you're disrespecting, you know, something you don't know anything about (Colleen 2021).

My transcription here attempts to capture the flow of her speech; she moves quickly through her narrative and argument, more haltingly through her make-up discussion. She completes the narrative about six minutes into the video, at which point she focuses more on the makeup before discussing the backstory about the statue's commission.

By juxtaposing two vastly different expressive forms, Colleen follows a tradition started by Bailey Sarian, whose YouTube channel features regular segments called "Murder, Mystery, and Makeup Monday" in which she discusses true crime stories while applying makeup. TikTok is another common platform for this type of hybridity, and on both of these platforms the make-up and narrative genres come in great variety. Some like Colleen test specific kits, others like Sarian say little about what they're putting on. All of these videos fall under the broader umbrella of "Get Ready with Me" (GRWM) videos. Sarian started making GRWM videos in 2013, and each has been viewed between 10,000 and about 200,000 times. With her first "Murder, Mystery, Makeup" video (Sarian 2019), that quickly rose to more than eleven million views, and these hybrid creations remain the most popular type on her channel. She began making videos with the theme of Dark History as well, and this hybrid also proves to be more popular than the videos that feature only the application of make-up. In fact, many of her more recent videos forego the make-up component entirely.

Colleen sometimes emphasizes narrative, other times remains silent to apply make-up. The result is usually a separation of the genres, marked by pauses or verbal keying of the shift between them. Other times the shift happens without anything to mark the transition, as in the following statement:

I would like to actually go see it. Obviously I would not interact with her at all. I would just respect her and I'd respect the mausoleum of her husband, and you can even see that this purple is just so muddy, it's just so disappointing because it's so pretty in the palate, but it is just not cool (Colleen 2021).

She moves between the genres fluidly and without changing tone or cadence.

The narrativized makeup tutorial reinforces the notion that the absorption process of generic hybridity leaves no element unaltered. The makeup application is interrupted by the narration, and vice versa. In this way, the videos can become quite long – more than an hour, and much longer than videos of either genre alone, which demands some exploration. Blank is interested in what he calls virtual corporeality: “a state in which a user of new media technology becomes so cognitively immersed in their digitally mediated experience that they perceive them to be just as tangibly ‘real’ as their sense of corporeal embodiment” (Blank 2013: 109). Is there something about the act of transforming the face and body through clothing, hair styling, and makeup that makes such virtual corporeality easier to attain for the viewer, holding the attention for longer periods? Does the combination with narrative – in this case legend – further facilitate this state? This hybrid genre puts the legend into a new context, the expression of which requires complementary skills such as writing and video editing, not to mention the creation of a new community: Colleen’s videos have only double and triple digit views, but it invites engagement: they all have comments. The rest of the channel’s videos receive a similar amount of engagement. This small but loyal audience suggests a high level of devotion.

The GRWM videos hybridize with oral genres – true crime and, in this case, the legend, suggesting a similar conception of the two – to further enhance the experience. The intimacy of the GRWM genre also facilitates engagement. As with other online experiences, this genre blurs the boundary between public and private because of the intimacy of seeing another person before they are ready to present themselves to others, fostering a sense of connection that encourages revisitation through new videos. While this phenomenon could benefit from further research through ethnographic field work, in the absence of that data for the moment I suggest that we pair the virtual embodiment with what Bill Ellis refers to as engrossment – the suspension of disbelief that occurs when audience members are carried away by the telling of the legend and “collude with the storyteller to maintain the illusion of ‘real life’ that [the narrative] projected” (Ellis 1982: 18). Tim Prizer picks up on Ellis’s notion of engrossment and argues that “What is most important, in this case, is maintaining the *illusion* of reality. The legend is thus *presented* (or framed) as reality, but *understood* as fantasy” (2004: 83). Prizer discusses engrossment in terms of how the narrative is framed – Erving Goffman’s term, which Prizer uses for how tellers situate

themselves and present the story, as true. But according to Ellis, the line between reality and fantasy can be less important than the experience of engrossment itself, which can be accomplished in a variety of ways and is context-dependent (Ellis 2004: 69). The recounting of a legend trip, the localization of the story, its proximity making it familiar to the audience, facilitates engrossment and effectiveness. In the case of *Uniquely Individually Me* and the whole of the GRWM genre as hybridized with narrative, the perception of intimacy serves to enhance engrossment.

I would also like to propose that the hybrid nature of the Internet, particularly in cases where legends are transmitted and when they are paired with an intimate genre such as GRWM, fosters an especially effective context for engrossment. We know that belief is in part contextually determined, and a large part of that context is the relationship between teller and audience – or, since that binary distinction often breaks down in the telling of legends, between intersubjective performance partners? Then any relationship between the members of the performance, even parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956; Rubin and McHugh 1987) that result from affective involvement with a media personality, will afford a greater opportunity for engrossment and thus further the process of virtual corporeality. Research on intimacy in television viewing (Cole and Leets 1999) has demonstrated that the recurrent and regular viewing of the same media personality increases the strength of the relationship. YouTube in particular facilitates an abundance of parasocial relationships, and beauty/lifestyle related videos such as the “Get Ready with Me” genre are especially prominent among those types of videos that foster parasocial relationships (Rasmussen 2018). The hybridized nature of the Internet video – on YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms – combined with the imaginatively immersive recounting of the legend trip, is a primed and ready format for transmission, which is only enhanced by the intimacy gained from the “Get Ready with Me” genre. According to Blank, the sense of belonging and connection provided by online communication blurs the binary between public and private (2013: 112). Putting on makeup is not always a private event, but even when done at a salon there is only a small audience, and the notion of performance is still minimal: the process is not intended to be viewed by others – this intimacy increases the efficacy of the parasocial relationship, which scholars have noted is intensified by the disclosure of personal information on the part of the celebrity (Rasmussen 2018: 283). Though studies such as Rasmussen’s don’t explore the effect that the comments section has on these relationships, it seems likely that they enhance the relationship, facilitating repeated viewings, especially

when the vlogger responds. The combination of the account of a legend trip with the “Get Ready with Me” video is an effective synthesis of two otherwise unrelated genres.

Another element of the GRWM videos facilitates engrossment for viewers. The creative act, the process by which an artist fashions physical matter into a finished piece, is rarely treated as an end in itself, and is not normally considered to be the performance; artifact or artwork itself is the goal. However, with the GRWM genre, the audience is treated to the process as the final product, and viewing the process itself is engrossing. GRWM blends material behavior with narrative in a way that enhances both through the creation of what is often called “a look.” It is the union of two processes, narrative and make-up application, that draws in and maintains viewers.

We have seen that the details of the legend are important; people do research because of their own interest and the expectation that others will share that interest with them. The variant I collected from John Korzelius demonstrates a typical report of a legend trip, recalled decades after the fact. It shows a past performer who still wonders about the details, expressing curiosity but no drive to actually dig further than his own experience and that of his coworkers, all of whom are local. For Korzelius, the details of the legend itself were less important than the performance of the ritual elements of the legend trip. The Internet narrators show a great interest in the phenomenon, and as a result the writers and videographers conduct online research that leads them to several of the articles cited above. Though digital media do afford a secondary orality in some ways (Fernback 2003 applies this concept to legendry), those who write and create videos and podcasts about the Bronze Lady spend the time and effort to read through the extant information available. They acknowledge the variation in the folklore, and the history behind the story. Thus transmission via the Internet makes for a qualitatively different text.

Postscript

Colleen revisited the subject of the Bronze Lady, this time making the trip to see the statue in person. Though she does not perform the ritual elements of the legend trip – doing so would go against her own values and concept of respect – she has an experience worth narrating:

When we got up there I was just like so excited. I was up there and for some reason – I really didn’t know why I wanted to do this – but I was

like, let me take a selfie with the statue. [...] And after I took it, I just got this horrible feeling. I don't think the Bronze Lady liked that I took a selfie with her. I don't think she thought it was appropriate [...]. I just kept getting this like horrible nagging feeling in my stomach saying, *Delete the photo delete the photo delete the photo*. And so I did and once I did I felt so much better. And I really think that she was telling me to delete that photo (Colleen 2022).

Taken together, Colleen's two videos take the viewer through all the components of the legend trip delineated by Thigpen, though not in the order Thigpen articulates. In the first video, Colleen tells the story as she knows it. The second video includes a briefer version before including her own experience. After she has finished telling us about her encounter, she shows video and still photos that she took at the cemetery; in essence, we see the legend trip after hearing the account of it, reversing the order that things normally happen in the legend trips. That video does not include the taking of the selfie that provoked such profound anxiety in Colleen, prompting her to delete the photograph. This video, unlike her first on the subject, does not feature the GRWM conventions; she does not put on make-up during her narrative. The hybridity of the two genres makes for entertaining viewing, but as both Baily Sarian and Colleen demonstrate, they can each stand on their own.

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