

For a major television network to thumb its nose at an ongoing lawsuit is the modern equivalent of dragon-slaying, and thus NBC has risen greatly in my esteem. For those who have not yet heard, the pet-product retail website, Pets.com, has filed a defamation and trade libel suit with the US District Court in San Francisco against comedy writer Robert Smigel, who created the hand puppet Triumph the Comic Insult Dog for *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (NBC. Weeknights at 12:35 am ET).

The 15-page lawsuit requests unspecified damages and legal costs. It alleges that Smigel spoke through his puppet and other representatives to accuse the Pets.com Sock Puppet mascot of being a shameless copy of Triumph, a crude rubber Yugoslavian rottweiler with an indistinct central European accent. Triumph debuted on *Late Night* in 1997, preceding the Pets.com tube sock by two years.

One of Pets.com's pivotal pieces of evidence, according to the Los Angeles Times, is an appearance that Triumph made on Comedy Central's *Daily Show* in March this year. In the comedy segment, Triumph says of the Pets.com puppet: "He's a rip-off artist, man."

Pets.com says: "We felt

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A Triumph of dragon-slaying

however, why they have filed a defamation lawsuit.

According to news reports, the Pets.com complaint ostensibly claims not only that their company has been libelled, but that their mascot, referred to in official documents as "The Pets.com Sock Puppet", has suffered calumny as well.

NBC is not named in the lawsuit, but initially took the precaution of "muzzling" Triumph, as Conan said, for several weeks. But it appears they could suppress their laughter no more: NBC finally decided to let Conan rip away on Thursday May 5's episode of *Late Night*, resulting in one of the greatest rewards to my insomnia.

Conan read from the legal complaint, which claims Triumph attempts to create an "unsavoury mental association" between itself and the Pets.com puppet. The document describes Triumph as "a rubber dog that wears a gold bow tie" and often conducts acts of a sexual nature on female dogs. To which

first time in the lawsuit, to thundering applause, and addressed Pets.com: "I hear your stock is going down. When you go down the toilet, I will drink from it."

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Two programmes this week deal with creative uses for forensics. *Murder Rooms: The Dark Origins of Sherlock Holmes* is a well-crafted BBC mystery based loosely on the recently discovered diaries of Dr Joseph Bell, Arthur Conan Doyle's real-life medical college professor. (PBS. Two parts, on Thursday May 18 and 25, at 9pm ET. Check local listings.)

Bell, the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes, is depicted as the most ridiculous yet irresistible of mad scientists. "I believe that a crime can be solved the same way as a disease, using the same techniques," he says. "The charlatan is always the pioneer. The quack of yesterday is the professor of tomorrow."

Like Barry Levinson's

Holmes stories that Doyle might have written if he had been a screenwriter.

But whereas that earlier film presented a Candyland Victorian Britain and was on the whole a tacky add-on, *Murder Rooms* is just as Doyle would have wished: morose, sordid, and deeply sceptical about human nature - particularly with regard to Americans.

An American anthropologist finds other outlets for forensic medicine in the forthcoming documentary *Cannibalism in the Canyon*. The programme details the gruesome task of determining whether the Anasazi Indians of the ancient American Southwest practised cannibalism. (PBS. Wednesday, May 17, at 9pm ET. Check local listings.)

Dr Christy Turner searches through piles of preserved Anasazi bone fragments for cut marks consistent with those made on other animal bones used for food. Other tests are conducted, involving fossil scatology, some of which I would prefer not to have seen.

Turner expresses great disappointment towards his colleagues who pussyfoot around the subject: "It's such a disturbing fact that few scientists - until recently - were willing to investigate [cannibalism]."

Perhaps more disturbing