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ORAL LITERATURE IN BRITTANY: A SHORT HISTORY OF BRETON COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS

Fañch Postic

1. An archaeological perspective, at the whim of scholarly culture

Until recently, an understanding of oral literature depended on the interpretations of scholars and whatever they intended to inform us about it. It is often in the medieval texts, or under the form that western medieval literature gave to older motifs, whether of native or eastern origins, that one discovers the sources of many tales (lyrical tales, folktales or legends) such as those that were collected during the 19th century: lays, the *exempla*, the *Roman de Renart*, and the courtly romances.

Are the *lais* (lays) the source of a certain number of historical laments known in Breton as *gwerziou* which, in France, are so closely identified with Brittany? The ethnologist Donatien Laurent spent years of his life studying the links between the *lais*, “short narrative poems in Breton, held to be ‘true events’ and composed to preserve the memory of significant adventures or incidents” and the *gwerziou*, also viewed to be “accounts of real events, lyrical poems, which are ideal for fixing, memorizing and permitting the careful transmission of stories which the singer believes to be ‘the truth’” (Laurent 1989: 7). He proposes the hypothesis that “this practice of composing narrative lyrical ballads about significant events — whether real or supposed — suggests that the origins of the *gwerziou*, and this form of recording past events, are an ancient phenomenon in Breton tradition and must be viewed as an inheritance of the medieval lays” (ibid.).

Until the second half of the 18th century, popular culture was largely ignored and was even viewed with contempt by the Breton elite. There are a number of examples such as Noël du Fail’s description of a 16th century *veillée* (an evening vigil) in the Rennes region, an evening gathering where tales and legends were told (Milin 1974) or Bertrand d’Argentré’s allusion in his *Histoire de Bretagne* (1582), to the verses still sung in his day about the looting of the town of Yaudet, near Lannion. D’Argentré wondered whether this may have been an echo of a Viking raid on the town in 836. Another example is a verse from a wassailing song that was preserved in the manuscript of Dom Le Pelletier’s *Breton dictionary* (1716). The most notable exception is the famous “Mother Goose” rhymes published by Charles Perrault in the very last years of the 17th century (Perrault 1697).

2. The 18th century: The discovery of popular culture — a European movement in the shadow of Romanticism and the search for the Celtic past

In the second half of the 18th century, the first movement to focus on popular culture arose in Scotland and from there spread throughout Europe. In 1760, the Scotsman James Macpherson published the poems allegedly composed by the third-century bard Ossian, whose manuscripts he claimed to have found. The collection of poems was a great success throughout Europe and was translated into many languages. Ossian was considered at the time to be the “Celtic” equivalent of the great Greek poet, Homer (MacPherson 1760).

Very quickly, in different countries, people began to actively search for traces of this bardic poetry. This craze quickly spread to Germany where, from the 1770s, the writer Herder called for the collection of German popular songs. The Ossianic poems inspired the works of the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm whose influence on European collectors of the 19th century was to be so important (J. Grimm & W. Grimm 1812, 1815)

In France, one of the initiators of this movement was the Breton soldier, author and historian, Théophile Malo de la Tour d’Auvergne (1743–1800). Since original manuscripts could not be found, he proposed the idea that it was the peasantry that had unwittingly preserved the memories of the past and that, in order to find their original form, one needed to rid these raw sources of the impurities that resulted from a long period of oral transmission:

Le seul dépôt de nos connaissances relativement à nos origines et à nos antiquités, n’a donc pu consister que dans des traditions, et ces traditions qui, du temps des Druides, pouvaient se perpétuer par le moyen des vers qu’on faisait apprendre à la jeunesse, durent nécessairement s’altérer à mesure qu’elles s’éloignèrent de leur source.

(de la Tour d’Auvergne 1796: 23–26)

The source of our knowledge about our origins and our ancient past can therefore only reside in these traditions which, during the time of the Druids, was perpetuated in verse which were taught to the youth and that were unavoidably altered with the passage of time.

And when La Tour d’Auvergne died in 1800, his ideas were taken up and developed by the *Académie celtique* that was founded in Paris in 1805. Its first president was Jacques Cambry (1749–1807), a native of Lorient. He is the author of *Voyage dans le département du Finistère*, published in 1796, which gives the account of a mission carried out in 1794–95 that contains a wealth of information about daily life, beliefs,

legends and songs. For that reason, Jacques Cambry is thus considered to be the father of ethnography in France.

The projects of the *Académie celtique* changed directions as a result of the excesses of Celtomania to which it occasionally fell victim. However, their efforts would not prove to be entirely useless.

3. 1815–1839: Precursors and popularisers — aristocratic collectors

Following Cambry's example, Canon Joseph Mahé (1760–1831) published a work about the department of Morbihan in 1825 which made him one of the very first to take an interest in popular music and he even called on others to undertake similar work. There are 40 popular secular melodies in his collection, only a small number of those he had collected and whose manuscripts have fortunately been preserved (cf. Becker 2017). This work is undoubtedly based on surveys he carried out towards the end of the 18th century (Mahé 1825).

Aymar de Blois de la Calande (1760–1852), a member of the *Académie celtique*, wrote a manuscript during the 1820s about a song concerning the heiress of Keroulas which is remarkable for the period (Laurent 1976, 1992).

Originally from Callac (Côtes d'Armor), Barbe-Emilie Guitton, Lady of Saint-Prix (1789–1869) also collected many Breton songs and a few tales, especially around her home town. Her notebooks are now preserved at the Abbey of Landévennec (cf. Le Rol 2013, 2019). Among these first collectors was Ursule Feydeau de Vaugien (1776–1847) who is none other than the Viscount Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué's mother.

Jean-Marie de Penguern (1807–1856), a lawyer from Lannion deserves a special mention. He collected about 600 songs which were published posthumously. After his death, his manuscripts were much sought after. Most of them are now kept in the *Archives nationales* in Paris (cf. Blanchard and Le Bihan 2008, Postic 2015).

Nevertheless, these unedited collections were only known to a small circle of initiates who occasionally exchanged their most significant discoveries. Starting in the 1830s, it was the popularisers who brought a few of these songs — in the form of French translations — to the attention of the general public. This is especially the case of Émile Souvestre (1808–1856). The articles he wrote about Brittany in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1833–34 played an important role in raising awareness that there existed in Brittany a form of poetry set to music which, in France, scholars had long been searching for in vain. Up until that point, they had had to content themselves with the French translations of foreign collections (Souvestre 1835, 1836, cf. Plotner and Blanchard, 2007).

4. 1839: Le Barzaz-Breiz de La Villemarqué (1815–1895)

Initiated to ballad collection by his mother, de la Villemarqué began to collect popular songs in his native Cornouaille in 1833 which he copied down in his notebooks.

Very quickly, he decided to bring these songs together in one collection. For the publication of these songs, he followed the principles that were then in vogue, most notably the model established by Claude Fauriel for his *Chants de la Grèce moderne*, published in 1825. Published in 1839, the *Barzaz Breiz* is the first book in France to have concentrated solely on popular ballads. Two other editions were published in 1845 and 1867. Convinced that there once existed ancient versions of these songs, de la Villemarqué searched for them and, because he could not find the manuscript sources, decided that the best way to find the original versions was to reconstruct them by combining different versions of the songs that he had collected. For him, there was no question of publishing them as he had actually recorded them. This would have been viewed as being in poor taste by the sophisticated readers for whom the book was intended and who were unprepared to read the genuine modern versions.

In 1866, in the review of a collection of songs by Jérôme Bujeaud, La Villemarqué recalled the editing principles that were dear to him:

J'aurais voulu son bouquet moins gros et composé de fleurs choisies. C'est un des plus grands agréments des anthologies ; si l'on n'y prend garde, le médiocre y étouffe le bon, et alors le public lettré, d'ailleurs peu disposé en faveur de l'art populaire, se récrie, et non sans raison. Au jugement de la critique, le goût et la discrétion doivent être notre première qualité à nous autres faiseurs de bouquets rustiques, et on ne l'exige pas seulement dans le choix de ce qui compose nos bouquets, mais dans le lien, dans le ruban, si j'ose dire, qui les noue. Entre le ruban et les fleurs, elle veut une certaine harmonie.

(de la Villemarqué 1866: 1275–1278)

I would have preferred his bouquet to have been smaller and composed of selected flowers. This is one of the greatest charms of anthologies; if one is not careful, the mediocre stifles the good, and then the educated public, which is little disposed to favor popular art, will decry it, and not without reason. In the judgment of the critics, taste and discretion must be our first quality for us rustic bouquet makers. And we demand that this should not only be in the choice of the composition of our bouquets, but in the clasp, in the ribbon and, I dare say, the one who ties them. Between the ribbon and the flowers, a certain harmony must reign

Villemarqué's conception of traditional songs thus focussed on the aesthetic and the literary, not on scientific criteria. After 1867, his method was criticized and became the object of a heated controversy (cf. Postic 2015, the quarrel surrounding the *Barzaz Breiz*).

5. 1866: François-Marie Luzel (1819–1895) — beauty vs reality

The year 1866 marked a turning point in France with regard to the manner in which oral documents were collected and published. This was expressed by Gaston Paris who, in the brand-new *Revue critique d'histoire et de la littérature*, reviewed the collection of J. Bujead:

Nous ne voulons pas aborder le côté esthétique du sujet [...] Venons-en au côté scientifique. Il y a encore des personnes qui s'étonnent de voir ce gros mot à propos de choses en apparence si frivoles et vulgaires ; mais il n'en est pas moins vrai que la poésie populaire a un intérêt scientifique des plus grands, tellement qu'une science à part est en train de se constituer autour d'elle.

(de la Villemarqué 1866, op. cit.)

We do not want to deal with the aesthetic aspects of the subject [. . .]. Let's go directly to the scientific dimension of the question. There are still people who are surprised to see this uncouth word applied to things that are, on the surface, frivolous and vulgar; but it is no less true that popular poetry is of the highest scientific value, so much so that a full-fledged science is being constituted around it.

It is therefore appropriate to undertake “a pious work of salvaging” and publishing “new texts” in order to finally be able to begin a comparative study with the collections brought together in other European countries. G. Paris underlined what “in the current state of science”, one could ask of publishers of popular songs:

[...] d'abord, bien entendu, une fidélité scrupuleuse ; non seulement il n'est jamais permis de modifier les textes qu'on recueille, mais il ne faut pas suppléer des lacunes faciles à combler sans en avertir le lecteur, et il n'est même pas admissible de refaire [...] une chanson à l'aide de plusieurs versions. En second lieu, on doit donner autant que possible toutes les variantes, surtout pour les chansons épiques ; [...] Troisièmement, nous demanderons la musique, c'est-à-dire, [...] la mélodie simplement notée, sans accompagnement ajouté et sans aucune modification. [...] Enfin, il est très utile d'indiquer le village où on a recueilli une chanson, de dire si on l'a entendue souvent, et même de faire connaître de quelle personne on la tient : l'âge et le sexe ont ici de l'importance.

(Paris 1866: 302–312)

Firstly, of course, one must be scrupulously faithful when reproducing the text; not only should one never modify the texts that one collects, but one must not fill the gaps without first warning the reader, neither is acceptable to rework [...] a song by comparing it to other versions of it. Secondly, one must provide, in as much this is possible,

all the variant versions, especially for epic songs; [...] Thirdly, we ask that the music, that is to say [...] the melody, be simply noted down without adding any accompaniment and without any modification. [...] Finally, it is very useful to indicate the village where a song was collected as well as to say whether it was heard often and even to indicate the name of the person who furnished the song; the age and sex of the informant also have their importance.

Gaston Paris, born in 1839, the very year of the first edition of *Barzaz-Breiz*, is part of a new generation of scholars which was at the origin of a new way of analysing historical, literary and philological research.

François-Marie Luzel (1821–1895), one of the principle opponents of de la Villemarqué, was the first collector in France to apply the principles of this new critical school in his *Gwerziou Breiz Izel*. Until that time, the focus had almost exclusively been on the *gwerziou*, songs to which the singers attached a real historical and aesthetic value. Luzel expanded the field of investigation to folktales and legends and, starting in the years of 1867–68, amassed an abundant collection before moving rapidly to all genres encompassing oral literature.

6. 1870: Paul Sébillot (1843–1918) – Folklorists and the golden age of collecting

It the 1870s, there was an increasing number of collectors in Brittany and in France, especially now that there existed specialised academic journals in which they could publish their documents and studies: *Revue Celtique* (1870), *Romania* (1872), *Mélusine* (1877), *Revue des traditions Populaires* (1886) to which one can add the *Bulletin de la Société archéologique du Finistère* (1873) and the *Annales de Bretagne* (1886).

One sometimes hears about a golden age of collecting in France which continued up to the First World War. “Folklorists”, as they were often called, were, for the most part, well-educated men of letters searching for archaisms, survivals of the past or interesting curiosities in the collective memory of the peasantry. They accumulated data which they attempted to classify in an empirical manner. With the exception of Luzel, they were not preoccupied with the preservation and maintenance of the popular culture which they felt was threatened with extinction.

In France the most influential man of this period was, without any doubt, the Breton Paul Sébillot. Born in 1843 in Matignon in the Côtes-d’Armor, he contacted Luzel in 1875 who encouraged him to begin collecting, having initiated him to the principles that he had himself adopted. Sébillot was not content with realising an impressive collection in his native (non-Breton-speaking) eastern Brittany and publishing the results of his harvest of works and works of synthesis. He also elaborated the first research tools (e.g. questionnaires, bibliographies) and in 1881, launched *Littératures populaires de toutes les nations* (‘Popular literatures of all the nations’), one of the largest French collections of oral literature (41 volumes from 1881–1903). He

also created the *Société des Traditions Populaires* and, in 1886, a journal by the same name which, for over thirty years, published the work of numerous collectors. He also organised international conferences in Paris and entertained relations with European colleagues. The four volumes that he published between 1904 and 1906 under the title of *Le folklore de la France*, and in which he gathered 15,000 documents /facts, was a very laudable attempt to classify popular traditions. Even if his methods and his viewpoint are obviously no longer those that are used today, one can say that Sébillot laid the groundwork for modern French ethnology. (cf. Postic, ed., 2010).

Brittany occupied a prominent place in this movement and, in 1893, Paul Sébillot concluded that, of the collections of oral literature carried out in France, the source of nearly half of the material collected until that time had been obtained in Brittany.

7. 1918–1939: Between the two World Wars — a pause in collecting

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence of the Breton movement. Inspired by the Welsh, the neo-druidic movement was founded in 1899, sparking an interest in a rather trivialised form of Breton popular culture. In 1905, the singer and songwriter Théodore Botrel (1868–1925) organised the first folk festival in Pont-Aven, known as the *Fête des Ajoncs d’or* (‘The Golden Gorse Festival’). The collectors of this period are also sometimes singers who perform as part of these festivities.

With a few exceptions, the First World War put an end to the great period of collecting popular traditions in Brittany, as well as in France. Between the two World Wars, France lagged behind most other European countries where folklore studies remained an important field of research. It must be said that, at the time, this subject suffered from academic neglect in France. Consequently, the discipline was not taught at the university level, which could have brought it greater legitimacy.

Furthermore, in Brittany, the interest of Breton intellectuals shifted from folklore towards the language, literature and politics. The manifesto written by Roparz Hémon and Olivier Mordrel, in the first issue of the *Gwalarn* review was significant:

Pour la première fois une revue bretonnante présentera exclusivement à des lecteurs instruits des articles faits pour eux, susceptibles de les intéresser au même degré qu’une page tirée de n’importe quelle publication d’une capitale européenne, au lieu de contes enfantine et de poésies poussives à l’usage d’illettrés.

(Hémon & Mordrel 1925: 1)

For the first time, a Breton journal offers articles which are written for them and that are susceptible to interest them to the same degree as a page taken from any publication of a European capital, instead of children’s tales and boorish poems for illiterates.

8. 1939: A scientific mission through Western Brittany

Research in folklore studies did not resume in France in a scientific context until 1937, under the pressure of European scholars who very much regretted France's absence from folklore studies. That year, the *Congrès international de Folklore* took place, followed by the creation of the *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* in Paris. It is understandable that some members of the Breton movement did not view the mission initiated in 1939 by the new Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions in Paris very favourably considering it to be an emanation of the French academic institutions.

A small group of scientists were united around this brand-new museum, the immediate objective of which was to begin fieldwork. In July 1939, Western Brittany was chosen for an experimental mission where subject-matter was certainly not lacking. The *Mission de folklore musical* travelled throughout the Vannetais region and part of Cornouaille to collect tunes and songs but their work was to be interrupted by the war (Falc'hun 1943, Le Gonidec, 2009).

Different missions were undertaken during the Second World War in connection with the *Musée national des Arts et Traditions Populaires*. After the war ended, the scientific missions of the museum succeeded one another with the support of the Breton movement. It is thus not surprising that the museum organised its first temporary exhibition in 1951 on the theme "Brittany: Popular Arts and Regional Ethnography". The Breton cultural movement organised courses to introduce young people and teachers to the Breton language and popular culture and to undertake field surveys, the results of which were sent to the museum authorities.

9. 1960: Ethnologists

Thanks to the contributions of numerous ethnologists, the 1960s—1970s marked a new phase in the study of oral literature. The critical analysis of the collections and their context owes a lot to the contribution of ethnology to this field. In Brittany, Donatien Laurent made a groundbreaking contribution to the knowledge of oral literature, especially regarding poetry set to music and the genesis of the *Barzaz Breiz*. In 1964, he had the good fortune to obtain access to the handwritten notebooks of La Villemarqué that contained the data he used to develop his work.

10. 1970: Collecting in the context of the revivalist movement

Moreover, initiated into collecting thanks to courses in popular culture during the 1950s and 1960s, some scholars and cultural activists engaged in fieldwork to collect the traditional repertoires of music, songs or storytelling that at the time could have been recorded on magnetic tapes.

The fundamental work of the 1950s and 1960s, amplified by the events of May 1968, contributed to fostering and nourishing the spectacular revival movement of

the early 1970s in which many young musicians set out to collect airs and songs that could enrich their repertoires. In 1972, the Breton association *Dastum* ('Collect') was created, its objective to preserve and inform of the data that have been brought together over the years.

Today, a considerable number of individuals and organisations are tirelessly pursuing their work in heritage preservation, which began two centuries ago. Indeed, Brittany has always been at the forefront of this movement and boasts an exceptional collection in the field of oral heritage studies.

Conclusion: The necessity for critical analysis

An enormous task of analysis and study of all the documentation that has been accrued awaits and there are many questions that remain unanswered: what choices were made in undertaking these collections and what were their objectives? Consciously or unconsciously, were certain approaches favored and, if so, were others consequently neglected, or omitted? Did scholars set out to confirm hypotheses they had proposed beforehand?

Critical reflection is thus indispensable and, for the most part, this work has yet to be done and can only invite us to be as cautious and modest as possible.

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