

Between ‘lost literature’ and ‘unobtainable text’
Some connections between medieval literature and oral literature*

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Anyone interested in oral literature is naturally interested in medieval literature, as there are numerous links between these domains.

My paper will discuss:

the Middle Ages as a crucial reference point for studying oral literature;

the meaning and influence of the Middle Ages for the first collectors in the nineteenth century;

the sensitive issue of establishing a text.

The Middle Ages as a crucial reference point for studying oral literature

It is often in medieval texts that we find sources for the oral legends, tales, songs that begin to be collected in the nineteenth century. There are, of course, important differences (e.g. different conceptions of the supernatural).

We must be especially careful in the case of Brittany; although in the Middle Ages it had a Europe-wide literary reputation there are no extant manuscripts (it is sometimes referred to a ‘lost Breton literature’).

A catalogue of correspondences between *exempla* and archetypal popular narratives was established by Tubach in 1969. In a list of 5400 *exempla* he found 90 concordances. *Exempla* are a new form of preaching that appear at the end of the twelfth century, develop during the thirteenth century, and reach their apogée in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The preachers try to relate to their audience, and so their sermons often use ‘examples’ drawn from everyday life. Therefore the *exempla* may draw on oral sources.

From the thirteenth century onwards, collections of *exempla* were compiled, and these could be used by preachers. This may in turn have contributed to their oral diffusion, and probably influenced narratives handed down orally. They may have played a part in facilitating ‘the penetration of dominant cultural models’, and in generalizing ‘traditions that had been merely local’ (Brémond, Le Goff Schmitt, *Exemplum*).

In the case of collections made from the nineteenth century onwards, it is often difficult to determine which elements have written sources, which oral, and which have both. The ‘Angel and the hermit’ is a good example of the complex interaction between erudite and popular cultures. It was in the Middle Ages that it reached the

* This English-language résumé was produced to help workshop participants follow the paper as it was delivered in French. Please refer to the French version for full details and referencing.

form in which it is to be found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century collections. Four French versions of it have been identified, two of which are Breton. The first was collected by Luzel (from Marguerite Philippe) and the second by Cadic (Mme Euzenat de Pontivy). These are very close to the transcription in Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones vulgares* (thirteenth century) Did it benefit perhaps from the intervention of clerics (*kloareg*)? Were there two separate traditions (oral/popular and erudite/written)?

This story has been making a remarkable comeback since about 2000, thanks to the fashion for guardian angels and the development of the internet (it has appeared in blogs and emails). ‘Things are not always what they seem’, it usually ends with an order not to break the chain.

The *lais* (narrative poems) of the Middle Ages are often thought to be of Breton origin. Some of them contain motifs or episodes that are to be found in supernatural legends (Yonec, Lanval, Eliduc). They are perhaps also the source of a number of Breton *gwerziou*. For example, ‘Seigneur comte’ exists in many versions across Europe. The Breton versions, unlike the French ones, add an introductory episode that tells of the hero’s meeting with a *gorriganez*, that is a sort of fairy, or with death. Donatien Laurent is of the opinion that the song spread from Brittany.

The *gwerz de Skolan*. In the nineteenth century this *gwerz* was compared to a Welsh poem from the Black Book of Carmarthen. These are certainly related, but it is impossible to establish a direct link. Parallel developments? An oral tradition fixed in writing from the thirteenth century in Wales? Ancient lost written source for the Breton versions?

It is interesting that Donatien Laurent’s work on the different oral Breton versions has shed some light on the Welsh manuscript. (See *Ethnologie Française*, 1971.)

Also in the Black Book of Carmarthen is a poem on the submersion of Cantre’r Gwaelod, which brings to mind the famous ‘ville d’Is’ of the Breton coast.

We could also consider examples such as the *Roman de Renart*, the *fabliaux* and other genres when researching such connections.

Sometimes the sources are more surprising, as in the case of a story that is today one of the ‘classics’ of contemporary urban legends. An unsuspecting individual finds a creature (usually in larva or egg form) inside his body, which develops, sometimes killing the host. Vomiting or surgical intervention leads to the expulsion of the creature. ‘The bosom serpent’ has been much studied since the 1970s, and the constituent motifs figure in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. It is currently exploited by literature (Nathaniel Hawthorne), and the moving image (*Aliens*, *X-files*). A Breton version, which seems to be the oldest known version, was identified by Jean-Christophe Cassard. It figures as testimony, in Latin, in the minutes from the canonization of Charles de Blois.

Collectors and medievalists

It is hardly surprising that those who collected and edited oral literature in the nineteenth century were also often interested in medieval literature. La Villemarqué frequently alludes to possible medieval sources for the songs in the *Barzaz-Breiz*.

La Villemarqué and others searched for manuscripts that might have preserved a Breton past. In 1835 he *implied* that he had found an ancient manuscript by Gwenc'hlan, a sort of Breton Ossian. This led to a row with Mérimée, who was falsely accused of stealing the manuscript when inspecting Brittany's ancient monuments for the government. In 1838–9 La Villemarqué spent six months in Wales and England. His participation in the Abergavenny Eisteddfod is well-known, but the official object of the trip (backed by the government) was to consult the Welsh manuscripts at Jesus College, Oxford. In February 1839 he went to Jesus to read the Red Book of Hergest. But he did not have the time – nor sufficient Welsh perhaps – to study it in depth. So he asked John Jones (Tegid) to make him a copy of *Peredur*. All the while La Villemarqué was racing Lady Charlotte Guest to publication.

To some degree it was because of the lack of medieval, or older, manuscript sources that collectors such as La Villemarqué turned to popular memory.

La Villemarqué thought that the *gwerziou* preserved traces of events that allowed the reconstruction of ancient Breton history. His aim was to establish the 'correct' version. This was the methodology of the time.

By 1866, there was great controversy over the authenticity of the *Barzaz-Breiz*. The methodology had moved on. It is less well known that what is referred to as the '*Barzaz-Breiz* row' has its origins in the debate around the editing of Breton mystery manuscripts, with Luzel and La Villemarqué at loggerheads.

From 1866 the debate that began as a clash of Breton personalities moved to Paris with the work of Paul Meyer (*Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature*). It is in 1866 that the 'scientific' principles of editing were first officially stated (by Gaston Paris in the *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature*).

Luzel was the first in France to apply these new principles, in *Gwerziou Breiz Izel*, 1868 (then 1874), a sort of anti *Barzaz-Breiz*, and in his *Contes Bretons* (1870). This lively debate gave birth to a 'new science': 'oral literature'.

An 'unobtainable text'?

The main stumbling block was the establishment of a written text from an oral source. The new school wanted fidelity, whereas La Villemarqué and his supporters wanted to amend texts in the name of taste and literary aesthetics prior to publication. However, even in the work of those who signed up to the new rigour (including Luzel), fidelity is far from absolute.

For a long time, oral documents remained 'texts'.

It was not until 1869 that Luzel provided information on Marguerite Philippe (his main informant). It was not until the development of the 'ethnology of the near' in the 1960s that the conditions of the composition and diffusion of oral literature received attention.

In France Jean-Claude Bouvier, in Aix, proposed 'ethnotexts', or transcription codes (1980). Others soon ventured further, advocating total transcription (including hesitations, silences etc.). But the result is a virtually unreadable text. These texts can end up pleasing neither linguists not the general reader.

Finally, some questions relevant to today's theme:

How do we make the transcription of an oral document intelligible, making it accessible to a wide audience, not just specialists, while keeping its evocative power, and possibly the particularities of its dialect? This involves choices, a certain standardization, and requires careful thought, to find editing protocols which will be useful to all who face the thorny problems of editing narratives collected from oral sources. This question could certainly benefit from the input of medievalists who are similarly confronted with the issues of establishing a text from many sources. Can we establish a parallel between the 'lost literature' of medievalists and the 'unobtainable text' referred to by some oral literature specialists in order to stress the fluid character of their object of study? I simply hope that I will have convinced you, though you certainly were already, that scholars of medieval and oral literature have common interests and face similar questions. Certainly, one can learn from the other.