The Flowering Thorn

Mckean, Thomas

Published by Utah State University Press

Mckean, Thomas.
The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9249.

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Recapturing the Journey:
Cruxes of Context,
Version, and Transmission
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Historical investigation is one of the classic ways of reading between the lines of ballad texts. Outside the contexts of performance and the text itself, a wealth of detail can be gained about the composers, their milieu, and, through interpolation, about the audience as well. Narrative songs, like any other cultural artifact, are products of their own time and place. Sheila Douglas’s essay on “Rosie Anderson” draws us into this world—in this case, a scandalous eighteenth-century divorce—and shows how emotion, cultural ethos, and popular opinion combine to create not just the ballad text itself but an evocative, sometimes-explosive means of cultural communication.

The communicative power of ballads means that they have always adapted to changing circumstances; indeed, songs from closely related languages have crossed boundaries quite easily (Nigra [1888] 1957: 262; Nygard 1958: 13; also see Shields 1994: 607–13). For this and other reasons, a generic connection has often been assumed between songs that may, upon close inspection in their respective languages, have only a few common cognate features, for example, names, or one or two features of plot development (Nicolaisen 1992). There are difficulties in finding equivalents not only internationally but within single language groups as well, bringing into question the tacitly supposed internationality of the European ballad tradition (Nicolaisen 1991). The creation of the well-known type indexes (for example, Grundtvig, Child, Aarne, Christiansen, and Jonsson) prompted this circular problem: The types are defined with reference to the fixed set of available data; any subsequent data, then, must be inserted into these categories. “Often enough, this similitude has been so superficial that it did not even indicate a real analogy” (von Sydow 1977: 44). Certainly, songs do cross culture and language barriers but usually between languages that are linguistically or geographically very close (Shields 2000), perhaps even spoken by a single singer (von Sydow 1977: 22). This natural, common type of metamorphosis is turned on its head when a writer sets out methodically to translate a ballad tradition, as did Alexander Gray. In Larry Syndergaard’s essay, the languages involved—Danish and Scots—while related, are not close, and the translator must take an overt linguistic, and consequently cultural, position with interesting repercussions for the inherent meanings explored by textualists.

David Atkinson’s “George Collins ‘in Hampshire’ addresses problems raised by postulated genetic relationships among ballad types. Of more use, he suggests,
are examinations of denotative, metaphorical, connotative, and textual detail to build up a picture of a song in its native environment, where it is at its most meaningful and resonant. But what of a song that has journeyed across time and space, “from France to Brazil via Germany and Portugal”? While the variants of “George Collins” are geographically tightly focused, we now move outward to look at the way a narrative song, “A Filha do Rei da Espanha,” moves, breathes, adapts and survives in the world at large (J. J. Dias Marques). To follow the wildlife analogy a little further, we see how a song makes a home for itself as it moves, acquiring features specific to each environment, in some senses native to all and none of them.

Finally, we explore “The White Fisher,” a rare ballad that touches the delicate edges of society’s moral code, dealing with an illegitimate birth and its attendant difficulties. The song is only found in eastern Aberdeenshire in Scotland; could this also be the ultimate regional source for it? Julia C. Bishop’s analysis of the few remaining examples yields layers of meaning and explores the subtle variations in text, even within the versions of closely related singers.

Perhaps the overarching theme of this section may be described as change and adaptation: how a flexible, multiform tradition adapts itself to differing environments—sometimes social subsets of its native territory—to ensure its own survival.

References


