The Flowering Thorn

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Published by Utah State University Press

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

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From France to Brazil via Germany and Portugal: The Meandering Journey of a Traditional Ballad

J. J. Dias Marques

For Samuel G. Armistead and Jackson da Silva Lima

During research on the popularity of the Middle Ages in nineteenth-century Portugal, I read a book published in 1848 by Gomes Monteiro, a translated anthology of German romantic poetry with a wide sampling of poems with medieval or folk themes, among which was the following by Ludwig Uhland (Text 1):

**A Filha do Rei de Espanha**

A filha do rei de Espanha
Um ofício quis tomar,
Escolheu ser lavandeira,
Quis aprender a lavar.

And the first chemise
She went to the river to wash,
The ring from her ivory finger
Did slip and fall into the sea.

E na primeira camisa
Que foi ao rio lavar,
Seu anel do ebúrneo dedo
Deslizou, caiu ao mar.

The princess was delicate
And she began to weep.
A knight was riding by
Near the place where she was.

—Vós chorais, gentil donzela?
Quem vos pudera anjoar?
—Um anel de ouro que eu tinha
Caiu-me ao fundo do mar.

—Art thou weeping, gentle maiden?
Who could ever do thee harm?
—The golden ring I was wearing
Fell deep into the sea.

—Que me dareis, Linda moça,
Se vosso anel for buscar?

—What wilt thou give me, pretty girl,
If thy ring I seek and find?
—Um beijo da minha boca
Não vo-lo posso negar. 20

—A kiss from my mouth,
That, I cannot deny.

Já se apeia o cavaleiro,
Nas ondas vai mergulhar, 22
E no primeiro mergulho
Nada consegue tirar, 24
E no segundo mergulho
Viu no fundo o anel brilhar, 26
E no terceiro mergulho
Triste se foi afogar. 28

From his horse the knight alights
And in the waves he dives,
And at the first dive
Nothing can he find,
And at the second dive
He saw the ring in the deep so bright,
And at the third dive
Alas! The knight did drown.

A infanta era mimosa,
E começou de chorar: 30
—Oh! mal haja o meu mister,
Oh! mal haja o meu lavar! 32

The princess was delicate
And she began to weep:
—Woe! Cursed be my craft!
Woe! Cursed be my going washing.

At once this text brought to mind a ballad I knew from the Brazilian oral tradition, “The King of Spain’s Daughter.” Let us look at the oldest of its known versions, collected by Ester Pedreira in 1949 in the state of Bahia (Text 2):

A filha do rei da Espanha
Um ofício quis tomar, 2
Ofício de lavadeira,
Foi para o rio lavar. 4

The king of Spain’s daughter
A craft did wish to take,
The craft of washer woman,
To the river she went washing.

Logo à primeira camisa,
Que a donzela foi lavar, 6
O anel caiu do dedo,
Foi para o fundo do mar. 8

At the very first chemise
That the maiden went to wash,
The ring fell from her finger,
Fell deep into the sea.

A donzela, arrependida,
Largou-se ali a chorar. 10
Passou logo um cavaleiro
Por ali a transitar. 12

The maiden was remorseful
There and then she burst out crying.
At once a gentleman turned up
Who was walking nearby.
—Por que choras, bela moça, —Why do you cry, pretty girl?
Por que estás a chorar? 14 Why are you crying?
—Meu anel caiu do dedo, —The ring fell from my finger,
Foi para o fundo do mar. 16 It fell deep into the sea.

—Dize o que me dás, bela moça, —Tell me, what will you give me, pretty
Que o teu anel vou buscar. 18 For I’ll fetch you your ring. [girl,
—Um beijo da minha boca —A kiss from my mouth
Dou-te, não posso negar. 20 I’ll give you, I couldn’t deny it.

Deu o primeiro mergulho He made the first dive
E nada pôde encontrar; 22 And nothing could he find;
Deu o segundo mergulho He made the second dive
E nada pôde buscar; 24 And nothing could he fetch;

Deu o terceiro mergulho, He made the third dive
Foi para o fundo do mar. 26 And drowned deep in the sea.
—O mar que levou meu amor —May the sea that took my love
Também me queira levar. 28 Take me as well.

(Pedreira 1978: 30)

There are, of course, some differences between Monteiro’s text and this one which I will examine later. Nevertheless, the version we’ve just seen proves beyond a doubt that the source of the Brazilian ballad “The King of Spain’s Daughter” is Monteiro’s Portuguese translation of the German poem by Uhland.

I decided to try and trace the journey of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” from its origin until it reached the Brazilian oral tradition.1 After some research, I arrived at the following conclusions: At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the German writer Adelbert von Chamisso lived in Paris for a while, and, since he was interested in oral poetry, he gathered some folk material for a book he had in mind (Chamisso 1839: 256–7, 262), a project that never materialized. One of the items he gathered was a French version of the pan-European ballad “The Diver,”2 a ballad then unknown.

It so happened that, in 1810, the German poet Ludwig Uhland was also living in Paris and became friendly with Chamisso (Uhland 1911: 184). And, because Uhland was also very keen on oral poetry,3 Chamisso showed him the French version of “The Diver,” known in France as “La Fille du roi d’Espagne,” he had in his collection of folk material.4 That version is as follows (Text 3):
La fill’ du roi d’Espagne
Veut apprendre un métier. 2
Ell’ veut apprendre à coudre,
A coudre ou à laver. 4

A la premièr’ chemise
Que la belle a lavé,
L’ anneau de la main blanche
Dans la mer est tombé. 8

La fille était jeunette,
Ell’ se mit à pleurer.
Par de-là il y passe
Un noble chevalier: 12

—Que me donn’rez, la belle,
Je vous l’ aveindrai? 14
—Un baiser de ma bouche
Volontiers donnerai. 16

Le ch’valier se dépouille,
Dans la mer est plongé; 18
A la première plonge
Il n’ y a rien trouvé. 20

A la seconde plonge
L’ anneau a brandillé,5
A la troisième plonge
Le ch’valier fut noyé. 24

La fille était jeunette,
Ell’ se mit à pleurer.
Ell’ s’ en fut chez son père:
—Je ne veux plus d’ métier. 28
(Chamisso 1839: 258)

Uhland liked this ballad very much and, in that same year (1810), he translated it into German.6
In 1812 Uhland published this translation in an almanac, together with a few other poems, and gave it the title “Die Königstochter.” Later on, in 1820, “Die Königstochter” was published again, this time in the second edition of Uhland’s *Gedichte* (Text 4):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Die Königstochter</td>
<td>The King’s Daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Des Königs von Spanien Tochter</td>
<td>The king of Spain’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ein Gewerb zu lernen begann.</td>
<td>Began to learn a craft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie wollte wohl lernen nähn,</td>
<td>She wished to learn to sew,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waschen und nähn fortan.</td>
<td>To wash as well as sew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und bei dem ersten Hemde,</td>
<td>At the first chemise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das sie sollte gewaschen han,</td>
<td>That she should have washed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Den Ring von ihrer weißen Hand</td>
<td>The ring from her white hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hat ins Meer sie fallen lan.</td>
<td>Into the sea did fall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie war ein zartes Fräulein,</td>
<td>The girl was very delicate,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zu weinen sie begann.</td>
<td>She began to weep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da zog des Wegs vorüber</td>
<td>There rode along the way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ein Ritter lobesan.</td>
<td>A noble knight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Wenn ich ihn wiederbringe,</td>
<td>—If I get it back for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was gibt die Schöne dann?</td>
<td>What will you, fair one, give?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Ein Kuß von meinem Munde</td>
<td>—A kiss from my mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ich nicht versagen kann.</td>
<td>I could not deny.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Ritter sich entkleidet,</td>
<td>The knight gets undressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er taucht ins Meer wohlan,</td>
<td>And dives into the sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und bei dem ersten Tauchen</td>
<td>And at the first dive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er nichts entdeken kann.</td>
<td>Nothing can he find.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und bei dem zweiten Tauchen,</td>
<td>And at the second dive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da blinkt der Ring heran,</td>
<td>The ring twinkles bright,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und bei dem dritten Tauchen</td>
<td>And at the third dive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ist ertrunken der Rittersmann.</td>
<td>The knight is drowned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was, no doubt, in Uhland’s *Gedichte* that the Portuguese Monteiro read “Die Königstochter,” and from there he translated the poem, together with seven other texts by Uhland, which he also included in his anthology.

This anthology was, as we have seen, published in 1848, and this was the door through which “The King of Spain’s Daughter” passed into the oral tradition. The ballad was no doubt picked up from that publication (or else from a journal where it might have been republished) and then put to music, its medium of access into the oral tradition. It does in fact look likely that the traditionalization of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” occurred, not because someone memorized it from a written source and then transmitted it through recitation, but rather, because the text was transformed into a song, perhaps sung with piano accompaniment in bourgeois homes and later circulated among the poorer classes. To support this hypothesis, it is worth mentioning that the seven traditional versions of this poem which have music we know about are all sung to the same tune. This seems to indicate that the diffusion of this ballad started with it already in song form and not simply as a text to which contributors later added a tune: If that were the case, we would surely find different tunes throughout the different versions.

Before we briefly analyze a couple of the Brazilian versions of “The King of Spain’s Daughter,” I should mention that that this ballad probably existed first in the Portuguese tradition. This is, at least, what a small fragment collected by Leite de Vasconcellos before 1941 (the year of his death) seems to indicate (Text 5):

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A filha de um rei de Espanha
aprendeu a *lambandeira* 2
..............................

A primeira camisinha
qu’ ela ao mar foi *lambandar* 4
..............................

(Vasconcellos 1960: 662)
---

Sie war ein zartes Fräulein, The girl was very delicate,
Zu weinen sie begann. 26 She began to cry.
Sie ging zu ihrem Vater: She went to her father:
—Will kein Gewerb fortan! 28 —I no longer want a craft!
(Uhland 1908: 249–50)
These lines clearly echo some from Monteiro’s translation, which seems to indicate that his text had already begun to pass into the Portuguese tradition and would have reached Brazil already in its oral form. In any case, it is undeniable that it was in Brazil that “The King of Spain’s Daughter” really became traditional, as it is in Brazil that it appears in several different versions.

If, as we have noticed, Text 2 is still very close to Monteiro, it is also true that we can already find some variations in it, showing the beginning of the poem’s process of traditionalization. Given space limitations, I will outline only one of the transformations: the added sentimentality, very typical of oral balladry, at least in the Luso-Brazilian tradition. In fact, Monteiro’s translation (like the German text and, indeed, the French version) ends with the princess weeping, not for the young man’s death, it seems, but for the loss of her ring. In Monteiro’s text, therefore, only the boy appears to be in love (or at least attracted); the princess does not. On the contrary, in the oral text, the princess appears to reciprocate the youth’s love and, at the end, she cries in despair, declaring her love for the knight and wishing to follow him in death:

—O mar que levou meu amor
Também me queira levar.

—May the sea that took my love
Take me as well.

In the other oral Brazilian versions I could find, the process of traditionalization is already more advanced. I will briefly examine two versions.

Let us start with the one collected by Jackson da Silva Lima in 1974 in the state of Sergipe (Text 6):

A filha do rei da Espanha
Foi aprender a lavar,
Na primeira camisa
Sua jóia caiu no mar.

The king of Spain’s daughter
Went to learn washing.
At her first chemise
Her jewel fell into the sea.

Passando um cavaleiro,
Ela chamou:—Venha cá,
Venha tirar minha jóia
Mode meu pai não falar.

As a rider was passing by,
She called:—Come over here,
Come and fetch my jewel
So my father won’t scold me.

No primeiro mergulho, coitado,
Nada pôde arranjar;

At the first dive, poor boy,
Nothing could he get;
A donzela era mimosa
Logo pegou a chorar. 12
There and then she burst out crying.

No segundo mergulho, coitado,
Logo foi se afogar; 14
There and then he drowned;
A donzela era mimosa
Logo pegou a chorar. 16
There and then she burst out crying.

—Ôi mar, que levou meu amante,
Também pode me levar... 18
Take me as well...
A donzela era mimosa
Logo lançou-se ao mar. 20
She jumped, there and then, into the
sea.

Lima 1977: no. 43.7

The first feature to highlight is a well-known indicator of the process of traditionalization: the decrease in the number of narrative segments. As an example, one can see that the first two quatrains, both in Monteiro and in Text 2 (two exclusively narrative quatrains), become only one quatrain in Text 6. The second aspect is the tragic ending of Text 6: the death of both lovers. This brings to its apogee the sentimental aspect we have already noted in Text 2.

Here is another version, also collected by Jackson da Silva Lima in Sergipe, in 1979 (Text 7):

A filha do Rei da França,
Foi tomar banho no mar, 2 Went bathing in the sea.
A jóia caiu do dedo,
Ela se pôs a chorar. 4 She started crying.

Ia passando um cavaleiro,
Deu com a mão:—Venha cá, 6 She waved:—Come over here,
Venha apanhar minha jóia,
Que está no fundo do mar. 8 Come and fetch my jewel
That lies in the deep sea.

—Se eu apanhar sua jóia
O que é que você me dá? 10 What will you give me?
—Dou um beijo e um abraço,
Vamos pra o fundo do mar. 12 I’ll give you a kiss and a hug,
We’ll sink in the deep sea.

(Lima 1991: no. 16.2)
I would like to underline three elements in this version which show the poem’s growing process of traditionalization: first, the adaptation of the text to the experience and world vision of the singer. In fact, the king’s daughter no longer wishes to learn a craft, certainly not that of washerwoman. On the contrary, she appears at the beach, simply having fun bathing. This transformation is also present in more than half the versions of the corpus, showing clearly that the singers consider having fun at the beach a far more realistic occupation for a wealthy girl.

Second, the text in this version is abbreviated to a mere twelve lines, in contrast to the thirty-two in Monteiro’s text. This reduction is managed by cutting off the final scene, among other processes, a shortening that is probably not the result of the singer’s poor memory but instead the result of her wish to transform the text.

The third observation concerns precisely that wish: Unlike the other versions of the ballad, this one is no longer a tragedy (ending with the young man’s death), nor a double tragedy (ending with the man’s death and the girl’s suicide, as in Text 6). On the contrary, the unhappy love story becomes, in Text 7, a story with a happy ending. And, through the splendid last line (“We’ll sink in the deep sea”), the man’s mortal dive becomes a metaphorical one, not in the dangerous waves of the sea but in those of love, where both lovers (not only the man) will be happily lost in love.

As we have seen, the versions of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” that exist in Luso-Brazilian oral tradition stem, without doubt, from Monteiro. The discovery of the proven origin of any given ballad has a relevance that transcends the scope of that one ballad. In fact, for “assessing the theories of ballad genesis and evolution,” write Andersen and Pettitt, “we need…the original text of a song…as a fixed point of reference for analysis of the later versions which must all ultimately derive from it.” Nevertheless, “these conditions are not fulfilled for any ballad in Child’s collection, and outside it they are also extremely rare.” Hence, the enormous interest, for the Anglo-Scottish tradition, presented by the “journalistic broadside ballads”—ballads published immediately after the crimes, etc., that they narrate and whose printed text is therefore without a doubt the origin of the oral versions of that ballad (Andersen and Pettitt 1985: 139).

At the time when Andersen and Pettitt wrote this, debate on the nature of oral transmission of ballads was raging: Was it a memorial or an improvisational process? So, for Andersen and Pettitt, the main interest of the “journalistic broadside ballads” was precisely offering “reliable empirical evidence” (138) which
could resolve that debate. In fact, they discovered the written origin of one of those ballads and, by analyzing the set of oral versions together with their original, inferred, based on firm premises, that the song “has been preserved in oral tradition by a process of memorisation rather than improvisation” (153).

Leaving aside the memory versus improvisation debate, the importance of discovering the original text of a ballad remains. Only this allows for the truly rigorous analysis of the process of textual variation. Only then is it possible to determine with absolute certainty what the oral process subtracted from and added to the original text; only then can one safely determine what makes up traditional ballad style.

The discovery that Monteiro is the source of all the oral versions of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” is therefore of undeniable interest, all the more since such certainty is almost as rare in the pan-Iberian tradition as in the Anglo-Scottish one. Besides, the fact that the entrance of this ballad into oral tradition cannot be prior to the second half of the nineteenth century shows that a text recently introduced can evolve according to the rules of oral narrative poetry and acquire the same traits as texts that have circulated in the tradition for centuries.

On the other hand, the meandering journey of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” allows us to observe that textual transmission across political and linguistic borders can be far more complex than we sometimes assume. In fact, “The King of Spain’s Daughter” is clearly the Luso-Brazilian form of the pan-European ballad “The Diver,” closest, in particular, to the French form. Contrary to what one might imagine, however, “The King of Spain’s Daughter” has not entered into Portugal orally from France but in written form through two successive translations of an oral text (French > German > Portuguese).

Uhland, who studied and loved oral poetry, would no doubt be happy if he knew that a ballad he liked so much became (thanks to him) traditional in Brazil, where it thrives today, nearly two hundred years after he first wrote “Die Königstochter.”

Notes
My grateful thanks to Isabel Cardigos, who translated this paper. I am also very grateful to the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, the Instituto Camões, and the F. C. T. (Programa Lusitânia) for their support for my participation in the 29th International Ballad Conference.

1. Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman (1978) were the first authors to study “The King of Spain’s Daughter.” Although they were unaware of both Monteiro’s translation and Uhland’s poem, and the specific version of the ballad “La Fille du roi d’Espagne” which is the origin of everything, they accurately pointed out the connection between Brazilian versions and an indeterminate written version of the French ballad.
2. On “The Diver,” see Ullrich 1886. For an extensive bibliography of this ballad’s versions in French, Breton, Italian, Croatian, Greek, and Lithuanian traditions, see Armistead and Silverman 1982: 236 notes 3–7, 231 note 6. A thorough bibliography of the French and Breton versions can now be found in Coirault 1996: 1723.

3. Uhland later published an important collection of old German ballads (Uhland 1844–45). At some point he also planned to organize a collection of translated French (and maybe also Spanish) songs (1911: 200, 203; 1898: 27).


5. “Brindillé” in Chamisso’s text. However, according to George Doncieux, “‘brindillé’ [est un] mot inexistant écrit a tort par Chamisso” (1904: 317), and it should be “brandillé.” In other versions of this ballad, Doncieux notes, one can find the variants “fringué” or “voltigé,” which “expriment aussi un mouvement de l’objet” and verify his proposed correction to Chamisso’s transcription. According to Imbs, “brandiller” means, in fact, “s’animer ou être animé d’un mouvement alternatif, occasion, se balancer,” which makes perfect sense in this context (1975: 897).

6. In his diary entry of 25 September 1810, Uhland wrote, “Nachts Uebersetzung der altfranzösischen Romanze der spanischen Königstochter” [In the evening, translation of the old French romance of the daughter of the Spanish king] (1898: 22).

7. Poetischer Almanach für das Jahre 1812. I was unable to consult this book and learned that it contained some of Uhland’s poems, including “Die Königstochter,” through Scheffler and Bergold 1987: 79.

8. I could in fact ascertain that “Die Königstochter” does not appear in the first edition of Gedichte (1815). Although I was unable to consult the second edition, the list of poems that it contains (including “Die Königstochter”) is available in Scheffler and Bergold 1987: 84.

9. This hypothesis for explaining the entry of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” into the oral tradition was suggested by Jackson da Silva Lima in a personal letter of 26 October 1998, which I gratefully acknowledge.

10. The versions are as follows: a version from Bahia transcribed as Text 2, originally published with a musical transcription, with a sung interpretation on the CD Brincadeiras de Roda, Estórias e Canções de Ninar (Ramalho, Maria and Nóbrega 1983: track 9); and six versions from Sergipe, from field recordings kindly made available to me by Jackson da Silva Lima. Texts here transcribed as nos. 2, 6, and 7 were presented at the 1999 International Ballad Conference, Aberdeen, in their song form, but, for reasons beyond my control, I cannot provide musical transcriptions in this article.

11. To form a really well-grounded opinion on the subject, it would have been necessary to know the music of the eight other versions in the Brazilian corpus of “The King of Spain’s Daughter,” an impossibility since none of them was published with a musical transcription.

12. In Vasconcellos 1960, this version is wrongly classified and placed among the texts of the ballad “Bem Cantava a Lavadeira.” It was because this version was correctly identified in Fontes 1997 that I became aware of its existence. This is the only known version of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” collected in Portugal.

13. With regard to the rules behind the traditionalization of pan-Iberian ballads (probably also applicable to ballads in other languages), see Menéndez Pidal 1968: 59–80.

14. There are fifteen Brazilian versions of “The King of Spain’s Daughter” known to me: two from Bahia (Pedreira 1978; Alcoforado and Albán 1996), nine from Sergipe (six in Lima 1977, two in Lima 1991, and one in Barreto 2002); one from Alagoas, though the singer was dwelling in Sergipe (Lima 1991); and three from Espírito Santo (Neves 1983).
15. That is the conclusion I have drawn, both from listening to the taped text (at the end of which the singer shows no hesitation whatsoever) and because Jackson da Silva Lima did not add any omission marks at the end of the text when he published this version, as he was careful to do in several other versions. Examples (without even leaving the corpus of “The King of Spain’s Daughter”) can be found in Lima 1977: 43.1, 43.4.

16. In fact, there are only three old ballads in the pan-Iberian tradition whose first text is known: “Singing Rides the Knight,” “The Death of Prince Afonso of Portugal,” and “Flérida.” Even with ballads of recent origin (nineteenth and twentieth century), such knowledge is very rare.

References


Recordings

Fig. 1. Bell Duncan. Photo courtesy of the James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1972/001, PH097).