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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
The King of Spain’s Daughter

A filha do rei de Espanha
The king of Spain’s daughter
Um ofício quis tomar,
A craft did wish to take,
Escolheu ser lavandeira,
She chose to be a washer woman,
Quis aprender a lavar.
She wished to learn to launder.

E na primeira camisa
And the first chemise
Que foi ao rio lavar,
She went to the river to wash,
Seu anel do ebúrneo dedo
The ring from her ivory finger
Deslizou, caiu ao mar.
Did slip and fall into the sea.

A infanta era mimosa,
The princess was delicate
E começou de chorar.
And she began to weep.
Cavalgava um cavaleiro
A knight was riding by
Junto daquele lugar.
Near the place where she was.

—Vós chorais, gentil donzela?
—Art thou weeping, gentle maiden?
Quem vos puder anjojar?
Who could ever do thee harm?
—Um anel de ouro que eu tinha
—The golden ring I was wearing
Caiu-me ao fundo do mar.
Fell deep into the sea.

—Que me dareis, linda moça,
—What wilt thou give me, pretty girl,
Se vosso anel for buscar?
If thy ring I seek and find?
—Um beijo da minha boca
Não vo-lo posso negar. 20

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

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

(Monteiro 1848: 95–96)

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

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

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

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

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):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La fille du roi d’Espagne veut apprendre un métier.</td>
<td>The king of Spain’s daughter wants to learn a craft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ell’ veut apprendre à coudre, A coudre ou à laver.</td>
<td>She wants to learn to sew, to sew or go washing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A la première chemise que la belle a lavé, L’ anneau de la main blanche dans la mer est tombé.</td>
<td>At the first chemise that the belle did wash, the ring from her white hand in the sea did fall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La fille était jeunette, Ell’ se mit à pleurer.</td>
<td>The girl was very young, she began to weep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par de-là il y passe un noble chevalier: —Que me donn’rez, la belle, je vous l’aveindrez? —Un baiser de ma bouche volontiers donnerai.</td>
<td>Nearby is riding by a noble knight. —What will you give me, fair one, if I get it back for you? —A kiss from my mouth willingly will I give.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le chevalier se dépouille, dans la mer est plongé; a la première plongée il n’y a rien trouvé.</td>
<td>The knight gets undressed, and dives into the sea; at the first dive nothing does he find.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A la seconde plongée l’anneau a brandillé, a la troisième plongée le chevalier fut noyé.</td>
<td>At the second dive the ring swayed, at the third dive the knight was drowned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La fille était jeunette, ell’ se mit à pleurer; ell’ s’en fut chez son père: —Je ne veux plus d’ métier.</td>
<td>The girl was very young, she began to weep; she went to her father: —I no longer want a craft.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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): 

Die Königstochter  

Des Königs von Spanien Tochter  
Ein Gewerb zu lernen begann.  
Sie wollte wohl lernen nähen,  
Waschen und nähn fortan.  

Und bei dem ersten Hemde,  
Das sie sollte gewaschen han,  
Den Ring von ihrer weißen Hand  
Hat ins Meer sie fallen lan.  

Sie war ein zartes Fräulein,  
Zu weinen sie begann.  
Da zog des Wegs vorüber  
Ein Ritter lobesan.  

—Wenn ich ihn wiederbringe,  
Was gibt die Schöne dann?  
—Ein Kuß von meinem Munde  
Ich nicht versagen kann.  

Der Ritter sich entkleidet,  
Er taucht ins Meer wohlan,  
Und bei dem ersten Tauchen  
Er nichts entdeken kann.  

Und bei dem zweiten Tauchen,  
Da blinkt der Ring heran,  
Und bei dem dritten Tauchen  
Ist ertrunken der Rittersmann.  

The King’s Daughter  

The king of Spain’s daughter  
Began to learn a craft.  
She wished to learn to sew,  
To wash as well as sew.  

At the first chemise  
That she should have washed  
The ring from her white hand  
Into the sea did fall.  

The girl was very delicate,  
She began to weep.  
There rode along the way  
A noble knight.  

—if I get it back for you  
What will you, fair one, give?  
—a kiss from my mouth  
I could not deny.  

The knight gets undressed  
And dives into the sea.  
And at the first dive  
Nothing can he find.  

And at the second dive  
The ring twinkles bright,  
And at the third dive  
The knight is drowned.
Sie war ein zartes Fräulein,  
Zu weinen sie begann.  
Sie ging zu ihrem Vater:  
—Will kein Gewerb fortan!  
(Uhland 1908: 249–50)

The girl was very delicate,  
She began to cry.  
She went to her father:  
—I no longer want a craft!

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):

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

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

(Vasconcellos 1960: 662)
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.\(^{13}\) 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,\(^{14}\) 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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A filha do rei da Espanha</td>
<td>The king of Spain’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foi aprender a lavar,</td>
<td>Went to learn washing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na primeira camisa</td>
<td>At her first chemise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sua jóia caiu no mar.</td>
<td>Her jewel fell into the sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passando um cavaleiro,</td>
<td>As a rider was passing by,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ela chamou:— Venha cá,</td>
<td>She called:—Come over here,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venha tirar minha jóia</td>
<td>Come and fetch my jewel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode meu pai não falar.</td>
<td>So my father won’t scold me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No primeiro mergulho, coitado,</td>
<td>At the first dive, poor boy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nada pôde arranjar;</td>
<td>Nothing could he get;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A donzela era mimosa
Logo pegou a chorar.  
12 The maiden was delicate,
There and then she burst out crying.

No segundo mergulho, coitado,
Logo foi se afogar;  
14 At the second dive, poor boy,
There and then he drowned;
A donzela era mimosa  
The maiden was delicate,
Logo pegou a chorar.  
16 There and then she burst out crying.

—Ôi mar, que levou meu amante,
Também pode me levar...  
18 —Oh, may the sea that took my lover
Take me as well...
A donzela era mimosa  
The maiden was delicate
Logo lançou-se ao mar.  
20 She jumped, there and then, into the
(Lima 1977: no. 43.7)
sea.

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 ex-
ample, 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 The king of France’s daughter,
Went bathing in the sea.
A jóia caiu do dedo,  
The jewel fell from her finger,
Ela se pôs a chorar.  
4 She started crying.

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

—Se eu apanhar sua jóia  
—If I fetch your jewel,
O que é que você me dá?  
What will you give me?
—Dou um beijo e um abraço,  
—I’ll give you a kiss and a hug,
Vamos pra o fundo do mar.  
12 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.\(^{15}\)

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 Pettit 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, oscillier, 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).