

Portuguese Narrative Poetry

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My research concerns Portuguese narrative poetry: *romances* (translatable as “ballads”) and *canções narrativas* (literally, “narrative songs”, which differ from the *romances* because of their versification, more recent origin, and less formulaic language). My interest in narrative poetry is due particularly to fieldwork done in several Portuguese regions during the 1980’s. Hence the rapport that I have always felt with actual praxis and the fact that, in my research, I have always been more concerned with texts in themselves than with theoretical reflection. I have, therefore, never really pondered on what oral literature is, but share the idea that it consists of texts orally transmitted that transform themselves and live in different versions—an idea that I believe is common to most ballad scholars, at least in the Pan-Iberian countries. The fact that I stress the oral characteristics of this literature doesn’t mean that I don’t take into consideration the influence of written literature: (1) on the origin of oral texts (which in Portuguese narrative poetry must derive, in the overwhelming majority, from written texts); and (2) during the process of transmission of oral texts, through the influence of written versions read by the singers in books or broadsides (and which impinge on the oral versions previously known by them).

In Portugal the ballad has always been the focus of attention, whereas narrative songs have been marginalized. The recent book by Nogueira (2002) is one of the very few exceptions to this rule. For that reason the study of narrative songs in all its various aspects is, to my mind, essential, beginning with a catalogue that will enable one to know the scope of its corpus. With regard to ballads, it seems to me that the following three areas need particular attention (the first two applying to narrative songs as well). First is the study of the role of memory in the transmission and consequently the transformation of texts, based on research done in psychology (see Rubin 1995 for a stimulating example). Second, the field would gain from the in-depth study of the relationship between Portuguese narrative poems and their counterparts in the balladry of other European countries (Armistead 1997 is an excellent starting-point). The third area deserving

attention concerns that part of the Portuguese versions of ballads that consists of texts published during the nineteenth century, texts that were considerably tampered with by their editors. It seems to me that it is important to study the editing methods of such authors, attempting to understand the motivation behind their actions. Such study will help to clarify the concept that those editors had of oral poetry, which seems to be common to several authors of different nationalities. In fact, there is a striking similarity between the editing and what lies behind it in for instance the works of Sir Walter Scott, Elias Lönnrot, and Estácio da Veiga (see Zug 1976, DuBois 1995:93-125, and Marques 1997:135-60).

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