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Mary-Ann Constantine and Éva Guillorel, *Miracles and Murders: An Introductory Anthology of Breton Ballads*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi + 230 pp. CD, maps, plates, bibliography, glossary of places in French and Breton, index, and list of songs on the CD. £55.00/\$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-726619-9.

Review by Jennifer J. Millar, The Open University.

It would be hard indeed to bypass a work which, sensationally, offers its readers, in the first line of its title, the opportunity to become immersed in miracles and murders. Yet, in this introductory anthology of Breton ballads (*gwerziou*), this is precisely what Mary-Ann Constantine and Éva Guillorel deliver to their readers: a journey through a Breton landscape where multiple rapes, serial murders, and forced marriages seem to abound, where banditry thrives, and where religion provides a backdrop which never quite counters the supernatural elements which are part of the fabric of everyday life. This is, nonetheless, a serious work of collaborative scholarship which not only aims to introduce Anglophone readers to the *gwerziou*, the erstwhile orally transmitted ballads which have long constituted a rich vein of Breton cultural heritage, but which sets them in the historical, geographical, linguistic, musical, and cultural contexts which best elucidate their contribution, past and present, to Breton cultural identity. Moreover, a closer acquaintance with the ballads collected in this volume reveals that its seductive title pales into insignificance in the light of the dramatic strangeness and violence of the narratives contained in the actual song texts which have been selected for scrutiny.

The authors nonetheless combine a range of specialties which they bring to bear effectively on the tragic, vivid narratives of the ballads. Mary-Ann Constantine has published widely on Breton folklore and her work at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies means that she is in a unique position to trace connections between Breton and Welsh oral traditions. Éva Guillorel, too, as Associate Professor in Early Modern History at the Université de Caen, with an interest in oral cultures, language, and the historical connections of the Breton ballads, is well placed to trace the actual events which gave rise to the *gwerziou*.

The *raison d'être* of the work is based on the recognition that English-language translations of Breton *gwerziou* are “restricted and rare” (p. 3), and that exposure to Celtic literature is uncommon in the English-speaking world. At the heart of this study are thirty-five *gwerziou* which are presented to the reader as individual case studies in which the song texts appear in a dual-language format which juxtaposes the original Breton with an English translation of each ballad. Ballads which are associated with particular melodies are introduced with the relevant musical transcriptions and recorded musical versions of some ballads can be found on the CD

which accompanies the anthology and which draws on the sound archives of Dastum (Rennes), the organisation which safeguards, collects and disseminates Breton oral heritage. Each case study sets out to evaluate the *gwerz* by addressing a range of issues. The provenance, literary or narrative techniques and historicity of the ballad are considered, and each case study is supported by dedicated explanatory notes which seek both to ground the study in relevant academic debate and to identify the previous studies or controversies which have informed its renewed reading by Constantine and Guillourel. In addition, the authors, whilst avoiding in-depth musical analysis, nonetheless turn their attention to performance details and to some of the individual performers who have given life to the *gwerziou*. Thus, the reader is given a sense of the *gwerz* as a vibrant and evolving folk genre.

This methodology can, however, best be illustrated by considering one of the most striking ballads in the collection, “Love and Leprosy: Iannik Kokard” (pp. 122-6), an example of the genre which resonates with the tragic themes typical of Breton laments. The eponymous hero of the narrative, a dashing young man and the darling of the girls of the neighbourhood, declares his intention to marry Mari Tili whose dowry includes “seven farms /And a bushel of silver” (p. 122)—an obvious attraction. His parents, however, refuse to give their permission for the marriage on the grounds that Mari is a *kakouses* (an unclean woman). Undeterred, Iannik travels to the local *pardon*, a religious festival, with his beloved. However, when the couple stop for refreshment at her mother's house, Mari learns that Iannik is already married and her mother then utters a thinly-veiled instruction to give the young man “his last rites” in revenge. In a travesty of the Eucharist, he then drinks infected red wine and succumbs to leprosy, the “uncleanness” which his parents had warned about, whilst Mari disturbingly admits that she has already infected eighteen men.

Constantine and Guillourel illuminate this shocking story by linking its provenance to Prosper Proux, who originally collected it in Trégor in 1863, and thence to publication in François-Marie Luzel's *Gwerziou Breiz Izel: Chants et chansons populaires de la Basse-Bretagne* (1868-74). The possible historical origins of the ballad are also traced, since, as with many of the *gwerziou*, specific place names are mentioned; the *pardon*, for example is to take place at Le Folgoët. Ploumilliau and Morlaix are also directly mentioned. The authors are thus able to tentatively link the lament to the existence of actual Breton leper colonies in the fifteenth century and to posit an early date for the *gwerz* based on the disappearance of leprosy from the region at the end of the sixteenth century. Whilst the narrative is thus geographically and historically thoroughly contextualised, its contemporary significance in the light of the AIDS virus is also noted and this clearly opens up the possibility of the continuing evolution of this particular *gwerz* and of its retention in the performance repertoire. In addition, the reader is alerted to the influence of the *gwerz* on the wider arts since it is identified as the inspiration for Henry Bataille's play, *La Lépreuse* (1896). The commentary omits to mention the opera of the same name by Silvio Lazzari (Opéra Comique, 1912) which was based on that play, or Anatole Le Braz's poem of 1901. [1] [2] These additional works nevertheless provide valuable evidence of the impact of the *gwerz* from which they derived and of its disseminative power as it traversed genre divides.

English-speaking readers and folklorists who are familiar with the French translations of the *gwerziou* as they appear in Hersart de la Villemarqué's *Barzaz Breiz* (1839) may, in addition, question why the ballad “Le Lépreux” which appears in that collection and which presents a similar narrative of attempted, wilful infection, albeit differently gendered, is not mentioned in the explanatory notes which accompany the text of “Iannik Kokard” or the list of studies to which

the reader is directed at the end of the ballad. La Villemarqué significantly refers to the version of the ballad collected by Prosper Proux in the third edition (1867) of the *Barzaz Breiz* and thus establishes a link between the variants of the narrative which would seem to invite further scrutiny.[3] Elsewhere in the anthology, links between the contents of the *Barzaz Breiz* and the ballads which are evaluated are, however, noted, and, indeed, the authors pay due attention to the excitement which greeted the appearance of the *Barzaz Breiz*, to its role in generating initial interest in Breton folklore, to the renowned controversy which ultimately questioned the authenticity of its contents (pp. 5-8) and to the discovery of La Villemarqué's original collecting notebooks by Donatien Laurent which, in turn, allowed for a reappraisal of their contribution to Breton cultural heritage.[4]

The fact that this is an "introductory anthology," however, acknowledges its incomplete nature and hints at the possibility of future collections of translated Breton ballads. Herein, perhaps, lie both its strengths and weaknesses. Since it does not set out to be a definitive, complete study, it would be unfair to critique this collection by acknowledging the existence of the many *gwerziou* which are not contained in the volume and which indeed may still await discovery or academic interpretation. Moreover, the very nature of an oral tradition which only attracted the attention of serious folk-song collectors and academic commentators in France from the early nineteenth century onwards, and which continues to evolve, brings its own ambiguities and complexities for the academic researcher. Changing performance contexts and preferences, variant dialects, interactions between oral and broadside (*feuilles volantes*) traditions, and between *gwerziou* which may have been enthusiastically but "romantically" collected and those which have been subjected to the "scientific" methods of retrieval which pertain today are all issues which are addressed in the comprehensive, explanatory introduction to the ballads, and in the valuable outline of the editorial policy which precedes the main body of the work.

Nevertheless, the rationale for the selection and ordering of the particular *gwerziou* which were included in the anthology is less clear and, whilst the authors provide a thorough general overview of the subject matter of Breton *gwerziou* and, indeed, note the fascinating prevalence of the restless journeying and "constant movement" undertaken by many of the protagonists in the laments (p. 26), the meaningful connections between individual ballads are only tentatively traced in the introductory discussions which precede the ballad texts rather than reflected in the order in which they subsequently appear. Although the ballads in the anthology are loosely linked by the overarching murderous or miraculous content of the narratives, an order which places emphasis on relevant, distinct strands of Breton identity, or on linked content, would, nonetheless, be useful for the researcher. For example, the sea as a living force features in many of the literary and musical works which are concerned with Breton cultural heritage and thus a consecutive grouping of all of the *gwerziou* which deal with the sea in the collection would arguably illuminate that particular element of Breton belonging effectively and cumulatively. This reviewer would also have welcomed some indication of whether this introductory work was published in anticipation of additional volumes, and, if so, what the proposed direction of any subsequent anthology would be.

Musicologists may also, as the authors acknowledge (p. 24), challenge the emphasis on the primacy of the word in the anthology and seek to illuminate the musical elements in the case studies and the abbreviated examples on the CD in order to pursue the revelatory connections between music and meaning. Students of identity may, similarly, also seek additional clarification or amplification of the links between Breton identity, selective amnesia, collective memory and

the narratives of the tragic laments. However, these minor criticisms arise uniquely from the very wide nature of the academic appeal of this anthology and, indeed, the breadth and diversity of the narrative content of the *gwerziou*. The major strength of the work resides in its undoubted value as a scholarly resource with the clear potential to stimulate an extended range of academic enquiries. The ballads will be of interest to folklorists, ballad scholars, ethnomusicologists, linguists, students of literature and, indeed, all those with an interest in cultural identity. The unwitting testimony which the ballads contain relating to historical social conditions, class, religion, and gender roles is also likely to promote further research, as is the extent to which the *gwerziou* were disseminated and absorbed into other artistic genres in such a way that they fuelled a sense of national as well as of regional identity.

More importantly, though, the widely accepted notion that the menacing impact of globalisation and consequent cultural homogeneity have provoked a renewed and defensive interest in “smaller,” local identities and cultural heritage indicates that *Miracles and Murders* will attract a much wider, general readership. The provision of these scholarly, literary translations into English of the Breton ballads thus has the potential not merely to enrich the pursuits of academic researchers, but also to stimulate the imagination of all those who look to the past, or to a Celtic heritage, to reinforce a sense of belonging in this modern age. In achieving this dual appeal, Constantine and Guillourel will undoubtedly succeed in their aim to “give the Breton *gwerziou* a new lease of life” (p. 29).

NOTES

[1] Silvio Lazzari, *La Lépreuse* (Paris: Max Eschig, 1909).

[2] Anatole Le Braz, “La Lépreuse,” *Poèmes votifs* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1927).

[3] Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué, *Barzaz Breiz: Chants populaires de la Bretagne* (1867, repr. Paris: Éditions du Layeur, 2003).

[4] Donatien Laurent, “La Villemarqué et le Barzaz-Breiz: Naissance de la littérature orale,” *Ar Men* 18 (1988): 30–49.

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