

Conrad Laforte and Monique Jutras. *Vision d'une Société par les chansons de tradition orale à caractère épique et tragique*. Quebec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1997. 529 pp. ISBN 2-7637-7537-3

This publication represents a continuation of the intensive examination of the *chanson folklorique* in Quebec which began nearly a half century ago (1953) with Conrad Laforte's work on the *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*. Based at the Archives de Folklore at Laval University, Laforte's research was initially inspired by the increasing awareness of the richness of francophone folk traditions in French Canada, as well as by French classification models and theories dating back to the 19th century (i.e. Jean-Jacques Ampère, Champfleury, Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin, Julien tiersot, Gaston Paris, George Doncieux, Patrice Coirault). Setting aside pervasive ideas of authenticity and origin, Laforte acknowledged the characteristic, indeed defining, characteristic of the *chanson folklorique* – stability and change – and developed a classification system based on the poetic qualities and compositional techniques in song texts. Drawing on more than 60,000 texts from all over the francophone world, these criteria are the organizational framework for the seven categories which comprise the *Catalogue*, one of the most ambitious, comprehensive undertakings in traditional music studies anywhere.¹ The *Catalogue* is found in six volumes published between 1977 and 1987, with important derivative volumes on related song categories (*Survivances médiévales dans la chanson folklorique. Poétique de la chanson en laisse* by Laforte, 1981; *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers* by Madeleine Béland, 1988; and *Chansons folkloriques à sujets religieux* by Laforte and Carmen Roberge, 1988), of which *Vision d'une société par les chansons de tradition orale à caractère épique et tragique* is the most recent.

The book is based on an analysis of seventy-four song texts from the *Catalogue's* second volume (*Chansons strophiques*, II.A), including some 2,000 variants. It is comprised of two large sections, the first of which (by Monique Jutras) is divided in turn into an explanatory introduction, and two extended discussions each of which deals with pervasive ideas in strophic songs of the epic-tragic category : « Offenses et punitions » (pp. 33-99) and « Les relations humaines » (pp. 101-144); this is followed by an anthology of textual and musical renditions of the repertory (pp. 145-512), a bibliography including primary sources (manuscript and printed collections; archival resources) and secondary literature, as well as an index of the song titles.

Borrowing from Vladimir Propp's idea of theory emerging from practice within the context of the *conte*, Monique Jutras explains that a central goal in this study is to gain an understanding of the kinds of worldviews that frame these song texts through an analysis of their themes and literary processes :

Notre démarche, en réalité, est de rechercher ce qui peut structurer les représentations humaines de ce corpus de chansons afin de décrire selon quelles lois ou quelles règles agissent les individus dans ce groupe particulier de chansons (p. 17).

¹ The reader should consult the second edition of Conrad Laforte's *Poétiques de la chanson traditionnelle française* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1993), for information on the history and organization of the *Catalogue*, as well as descriptions of the poetic structures which determine the various song categories.

Aside from the strophic versification of these songs, what distinguishes this repertory is their wide ranging narrative aspects, and their capacity to express a range of human emotions. Both characteristics are often, and typically found within a tragic context. Doomed lovers, overly strict parents, and infidelity are some of the themes which lead inevitably to drastic, tragic acts of deception and violent death in these song narratives. Jutras observes that situations and characters in such stories are well known through history (back to the Middle Ages) in diverse literary genres (legends, novels, plays, journalistic writing), and that is undoubtedly the reason for the large number of international concordances of many of these songs. She notes, for example, that in the *Catalogue*, there are frequent references to French, Belgian, Swiss, Italian, and English versions of songs in this group.

Jutras' discussions of the narratives surrounding offense/punishment contexts, as well as those pertaining to human relationships, are shaped effectively in thematic categories with subheadings. There is also a series of eight detailed figures which capture schematically the essence of the analysis. In reading this study, one is struck by the multiple levels of representation and metaphoric dimensions in these song texts. Jutras comments that whereas it is not the aim of this work to establish ideas of origin or links to a particular social or historical context, nevertheless through systematic analytical processes, one observes cultural and moral values which resonate with histories and literature from the Middle Ages :

L'ambiance chevaleresque dans laquelle nous plongeant des chansons, par l'illustration de scènes fréquentes dans les lesquelles des rois, des nobles se promènent à cheval, guerroyent et se vengent de leurs offenseurs à coups d'épée pendant que les princesses ou nobles jeunes filles se meurent d'amour dans les tours châteaux, n'évoque-t-elle pas un mode de vie particulier aux sociétés du Moyen Âge (p. 141)?

Fifty-three of the musical renditions of the songs are transcribed by Lorraine Carrier-Aubin from recent (the last fifty years) field recordings, and the balance are from printed collections by Achille Millien, Arthur Rossat, Julien Tiersot, Marguerite and Raoul D'Harcourt, and Marius Barbeau. Presented in the order found in the *Catalogue*, each song is provided with full text, variants and concordances, as well as provenance information in the case of the field recording transcriptions. For this reader, the text could be enhanced with information on the criteria for selecting the musical versions. Indeed, as Jutras points out, this study can be regarded as a starting point, and an examination of musical characteristics of the songs would undoubtedly lead to a deeper understanding of this material (p. 144). She also suggests other frameworks for further study, namely literary, historical, ethnographic, linguistic, and psychological perspectives.

Dedicated to Luc Lacourcière, Félix-Antoine Savard, and Marius Barbeau, *Vision d'une société par les traditions à caractère épique et tragique* continues in a most convincing manner the scholarly rigour and passion which is the legacy of these prominent leaders in the research, study, and promotion of Québécois folklore.

Gordon E. Smith