

## **‘Les orphelins sur la tombe de leur mère’ at the Crossing with Flemish Tradition**

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The French and Flemish/Dutch traditions of the widespread European ballad narrative on the theme of the dead mother’s return to her children unfold the plot according to two respective narrative strands with distinct emphases. While such neat patterns justify a conceptualization of cultural tradition along ethnic and linguistic lines, the presence of ‘hybrid’ texts more accurately manifests the dynamic reality of cultural phenomena in terms of evolving process and continuum. This paper focuses on three texts recorded in the north-east of France and the Walloon region of Belgium, yet showing closer affinities to the neighbouring Flemish tradition. In the light of the two textual traditions, the unilateral adoption in these three texts of Flemish motifs and their enhancing effects suggests deliberate selection rather than mere geographical proximity or bilingualism as an explanation for their hybridization.

Departing from the supposedly original Nordic ballad narrative ‘Moderen under mulde’ (‘The Buried Mother’) (*DgF* 89), in which a revenant mother revisits her neglectful husband and/or his vicious new wife in order to restore her children’s right to her misappropriated inheritance, the French type, ‘Les orphelins sur la tombe de leur mère’ (‘The Orphans Sitting by their Mother’s Grave’),<sup>1</sup> in common with ‘Tjanne/Barbel’, its Flemish counterpart, has the children revisit the grave of their mother after she has abused them.<sup>2</sup> Yet apart from sharing this central motif, the two traditions develop a consistently distinct narrative, with particular emphases of their own. Thus, on comparing the respective records, there appears the puzzling phenomenon of three texts composed in French but drawing on the Flemish tradition. In illustration of the cross-cultural and linguistic fluidity of sung narratives, this paper examines the ‘hybrid’ nature of these three texts with reference to both traditions and proposes a tentative explanation for their mixed kinship.

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Laforte, *Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*, vol 2 (Québec: Presses de l’université Laval, 1981), p. 142 (B-37).

<sup>2</sup> In a paper entitled ‘A Ballad’s View of Mortality and Remarriage’ presented at the 43rd International Ballad Conference of the Kommission für Volksdichtung, 3–19 October 2013, Stellenbosch, South Africa, I considered the specific traits of the Flemish versions of this ballad type versus the Danish ones, and did so in the light of contributions from the social sciences relating to death and remarriage in continental Europe and the Nordic countries.

## The corpus of texts

All the sources, whether in French or Flemish/Dutch, were collected from oral tradition. Those from the French-speaking tradition consist of thirty versions, the regional diversity of which yields a fair representation of the type:

### France (eighteen versions)

- **Provence** (one version)  
'Les ourphelins': Damase Arbaud, *Chants populaires de la Provence*, vol. 1 (Marseille: Laffitte, 1971 [1862–64]), pp. 73–76.
- **Département du Nord** (one version)  
'Les enfants de la morte': le comte Théodore de Puymaigre, *Revue de l'Est*, 5 ([Metz] 1868), 117–18; le comte Théodore de Puymaigre, *Folk-lore* (Paris: Emile Perrin, 1885), pp. 108–21.
- **Bretagne** (two versions)  
untitled: Paul Sébillot, 'Prières et poésies enfantines', *Revue des traditions populaires*, 7.11 (1892), 232.  
'Les trois orphelins': Lucien Decombe, *Chansons populaires avec musique recueillies dans le département d'Ille-et-Villaine* (Rennes: La Découvrance, 1994 [1884]), pp. 286–88.
- **Alpes** (one version)  
'Les trois orphelins': Julien Tiersot, *Chansons populaires recueillies dans les Alpes françaises (Savoie et Dauphiné)* (Grenoble: Falque et Perrin, 1903), pp. 96–97.
- **Nivernais** (four versions)  
'Les trois petits enfants': Achille Millien, *Chants et chansons recueillis et classés par Achille Millien avec les airs notés par J.-G. Pénavaire*, vol. 1 (Paris: Leroux, 1906), pp. 50–53.
- **Pyrénées-Vendée** (one version)  
'Les trois pauvres petits': Sylv. Trébucq, *La chanson populaire et la vie rurale des Pyrénées à la Vendée*, vol. 2 (Bordeaux: Feret, 1912), pp. 198–99.
- **Lorraine** (three versions)  
'Il était une complainte de trois enfants', 'Je sais une complainte de deux petits garçons', 'Je sais une complainte de trois petits enfants': Raphaël de Westphalen, *Chansons populaires de Lorraine*, vol. 1 (Metz: de Westphalen, 1977), pp. 69–71.
- **Haut-Vivarais** (one version)  
'Les trois orphelins': Joannès Dufaud, *Chansons anciennes du Haut-Vivarais*, vol 2 (Lyon: Dufaud, 1981–88), p. 63.
- **Orléanais** (one version)  
'Complainte des trois orphelins': Maurice Chevais, *Chansons populaires du Val de Loire* (Paris: Hengel, 1925), p. 174.

- **Auvergne-Velais** (three versions)  
untitled: Victor Smith, 'Chants du Velay et du Forez', *Romania*, 4 (1875), 108–18 (pp. 108–10).

**Walloon region of Belgium** (six versions)<sup>3</sup>

- **Charleroi region** (two versions)  
'Complainte de trois petits enfants': *Gazette de Charleroi*, 21 December 1933.  
'La complainte des enfants martyrs': sent by an anonymous correspondent to Arille Carlier in 1934.
- **Namur region** (three versions)  
untitled: Johann Wilhem Wolf, 'Une complainte wallonne', *Messenger des sciences historiques de Belgique* (1844), 338–42 (pp. 340–42).  
'Les trois petits enfants': *Wallonia* (1913), pp. 262–63.  
untitled: 'La Corbeille wallonne', *Gazette de Charleroi*, 4 May 1934.
- **Perwez** (one version)  
untitled: 'La Corbeille wallonne', *Gazette de Charleroi*, 2 February 1934.

**Switzerland** (four versions)

- 'La complainte des trois petits enfants': Edgar Piguet (ed.), *Les chansons populaires recueillies dans la Suisse romande sous les auspices de la société suisse des traditions populaires par Arthur Rossat*, vol. 2, pt 2 (Lausanne: Fœtisch, 1931), pp. 9–13.

**Canada (Quebec)** (two versions)

- 'Les orphelins sur la tombe de leur mère': Conrad Laforte et Carmen Roberge, *Chansons folkloriques à sujet religieux* (Québec: Presses de l'université Laval, 1988), pp. 278–80.

My corpus for the Flemish/Dutch tradition consists of the six published versions out of a total of twelve known records (with variants). These six include all the texts collected from French Flanders (France) and West Flanders (Belgium), all of which, given their immediate geographical proximity to the three 'hybrid' texts, are of direct relevance to the present inquiry:

**Bailleul-Cassel, French Flanders** (one version)

- 'Ah Tjanne': Edmond de Cousse-maker, *Chants populaires des Flamands de France* (Lille: Giard, 1930 [1856]), pp. 211–13.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Roger Pinon† for graciously putting these sources, drawn from his personal papers, at my disposal, and to the Centre d'histoire des sciences et des techniques de l'université de Liège, which houses his personal library and papers.

**Bruges, West Flanders** (one version)

- 'Barbel': Ad.-R. Lootens and J. M. E. Feys, *Chants populaires flamands avec les airs notés et poésies populaires diverses recueillies à Bruges* (Antwerpen: K. C. Peeters-Instituut voor Volkskunde, 1990 [1879]), pp. 107–10.

**Ypres and surrounding area, West Flanders** (two versions)

- 'Van Tjannetje' / 'Van Tjanneke': Albert Blyau and Marcellus Tasseel, *Iepersch Oud-Liedboek: Teksten en Melodieën uit den volksmond opgetekend* (Brussel: Koninklijke Belgische Kommissie voor Volkskunde, 1962), pp. 106–13.

**Moerkerke, near Bruges, West Flanders** (one version)

- untitled: Magda Cafmeyer, 'Babetje van de kosters vertelt over Damme', *Biekerf*, 58 (1957), 203–099, 232–42 (pp. 238–39).

**North Brabant province, Netherlands** (seven versions)

- 'T was des nachts om twalef uren', etc., collected 1967–78: Peter Louis Grijp and Ineke van Beersum (eds), *Onder de groene linde: 163 verhalende liederen uit de mondelinge overlevering opgenomen door Ate Doornbosch* [*Under the Green Linden: 163 Dutch Ballads from the Oral Tradition Recorded by Ate Doornbosch*] (Amsterdam: Meertens Instituut, 2008), p. 53.

### Three French 'hybrid' texts

Consideration of all the above texts of the French and Flemish/Dutch traditions has revealed three 'hybrid' texts composed in French but showing closer affinities with neighbouring Flemish records from French Flanders and West Flanders.

Of these three cultural/linguistic 'mutants', the first was collected and published by Johan Wilhem Wolf in the antiquarian journal *Le messager des sciences historiques* in 1844. There he writes that he heard 'this beautiful "complainte" from the lips of an elderly Walloon woman from around Namur; a woman who assured him that she heard it from her grandmother, who herself told her that it was older than she could say'.<sup>4</sup>

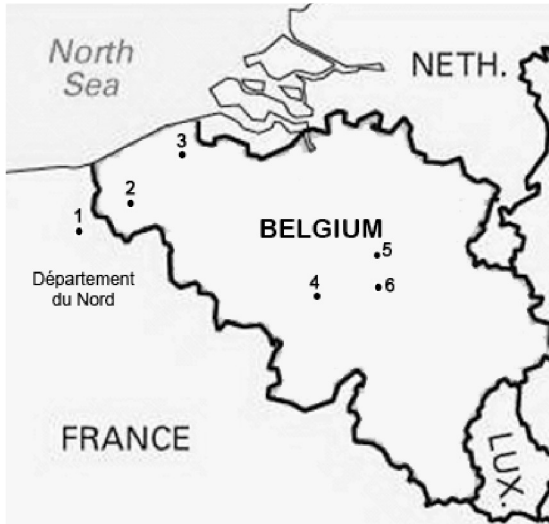
The second hybrid, entitled 'Les enfants de la morte', was, as far as we know, collected in the Département du Nord by a certain M. Al. Favier and published by le comte Théodore de Puymaigre, first in the *Revue de l'Est* in 1868 and subsequently in a chapter titled 'Chants Flamands' in his book *Folk-lore* in 1885.

The third, unpublished hybrid, entitled 'La complainte des enfants martyrs', was received from an anonymous correspondent of Arille Carlier who noted it in Cour-sur-Heure, south of Charleroi, in 1934.

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<sup>4</sup> Johann Wilhem Wolf, 'Une complainte wallonne', *Messager des sciences historiques de Belgique* (1844), 338–42 (p. 340) (my translation).

Figure 1 shows the geographical locations of the three hybrid texts (Namur, Département du Nord, Charleroi area) and their immediate Flemish neighbours (Bailleul-Cassel, Bruges, Ypres) and French-language neighbours (Namur, Charleroi, Perwez).



**Figure 1.** 1. Bailleul-Cassel, 2. Ypres, 3. Bruges, 4. Charleroi, 5. Perwez, 6. Namur

Besides geography, history throws its own light on the close relationships of French- and Flemish-speaking cultures in this area. From the Middle Ages until the French conquests of the seventeenth century, the ancient provinces of Flanders and Hainaut, which belonged to the southern Low Countries, extended west of the current Belgian–French border and included the Département du Nord, where one of the hybrid texts was recorded. This territory lies in the continuation of the linguistic border that divides Belgium horizontally into Flemish-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. Thus for centuries the population of the northern part of the Département du Nord, known as ‘maritime Flanders’, spoke Flemish as the vernacular language until the gradual imposition of French and the law of 1850 that prohibited regional languages in France.<sup>5</sup> Its southern part, sometimes known as Walloon Flanders, on the other hand, has always spoken French or

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<sup>5</sup> Stefaan Top, ‘Chants populaires des Flamands de France (1856): A Contribution to Comparative Folksong Research, France/Belgium: Flanders’, in *Ballads and Boundaries: Narrative Singing in an Intercultural Context*, ed. James Porter, Proceedings of the 23rd International Ballad Conference of the Commission for Folk Poetry (Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore), University of California, Los Angeles, June 21–24, 1993 (Los Angeles: UCLA, Department of Ethnomusicology & Systematic Musicology, 1995), pp. 315–24 (pp. 315–17).

other Walloon dialects. The cultural mix of this border area is reflected in its traditional songs. Canteloube, who cites the version recorded in Bailleul-Cassel in his *Anthologie des chants populaires français*, writes that 'Flanders is one of the most differentiated regions of France'.<sup>6</sup> Having established the geographical proximity and/or mixed cultural background of the three hybrid texts, let us examine the French and Flemish tradition of our ballad for other clues to their hybridization.

### 'Les orphelins sur la tombe de leur mère'

As its various titles suggest, the ballad plot in the French tradition takes the children as its focus and emotional core. It is also striking that, across its regional diversity, the French corpus consistently follows a single strand of motifs, which I will illustrate with one of the versions collected by Victor Smith from a group of lacemakers from the Velay region in central France. Whereas the narrative unfolds in just eighteen single verse lines, the collector comments that each is sung and repeated one if not several times, which gives the song far more amplitude than appears on the page:

Ecoutez la complainte de trois petits enfants,  
Leur mère était morte, leur père est marié.  
Il a pris-t-une femme à l'âge de quinze ans.  
Le plus jeune des trois frères du pain n'a demandé  
L'a pris par sa main blanche, dans le feu l'a jeté.  
Le plus grand des trois frères courir, le va lever,  
– Oh! Lève-toi, mon frère, petit Jean, mon ami,  
Nous irons chercher notre mère, qu'elle vienne nous nourri.  
En leur chemin rencontrent Saint-Pierre et Jésus-Christ.  
– Où allez-vous, les trois frères, mes trois petits enfants?  
– Nous allons chercher notre mère, qu'elle vienne nous nourri.  
– Relève-toi, Denize, va nourrir tes enfants.  
– Je n'ai pas la puissance de me pouvoir lever.  
– Puissance je te donne, puissance pour sept ans.  
Au bout de la septième, elle s'est mise à pleurer.  
– Quoi pleurez-vous, ma mère, que tant vous chagriner!  
– Je suis venue de terre, de terre pour m'en aller.  
Pleurez pas tant, ma mère, il faut bien tous y aller.

[This is the complaint of three little children, their mother had died and their father remarried with a woman aged fifteen. When the youngest one asked her for bread, she took him by his white hand and threw him into the fire; the eldest rushed to his help, calling him tenderly by his name and telling him

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Canteloube, *Anthologie des chants populaires français* (Paris: Durand, 1951), p. 11.

that they would go and ask their mother to come and feed them. On their way to the churchyard they met Saint Peter and Christ:

– Where are going, you three brothers, my three little children?

– We are going to our mother, to get her to feed us.

– Rise, Denize [the mother's name], go and feed your children.

– I don't have the strength to rise.

– That strength I will give you, strength for seven years.

At the end of the seventh, she began to cry.

– Why are you crying, my mother, why such grief?

– I rose from earth, to earth I must return.

Don't you cry so, my mother, we all have to go there.]

The mother crying when her new lease on life runs out and her children comforting her are a constant pair of motifs in the French versions. Whether the children tell her they will accompany her back to her grave or reassure her that they are not going to starve,<sup>7</sup> they do so with perfect serenity. So, as the plot unfolds, from the children crying for their mother to their mother crying for *them* – that is, as they exchange responsibility for each other – the French texts, by focusing on the children as agents and enacting the successful resolution of their bereavement, serve as a demonstration of adult maturity. The counter-example of the father failing to protect his children from his over-young and abusive second wife,<sup>8</sup> supports this interpretation. The narrative sometimes grants more comfort to the mother and her children: as they accompany their mother back to her grave, the earth opens up,<sup>9</sup> or Jesus Christ calls them up to Paradise.<sup>10</sup>

### 'Tjanne'/'Barbel'

That the three earliest scholarly Flemish folk song collections assembled from oral tradition (de Coussemaker, 1856; Lootens–Feys, 1879; Blyau–Tasseel, 1902) all include versions of our ballad speaks for its deep roots in tradition. By way of an introductory comment on his version, de Coussemaker states that the ballad 'is known throughout Flanders' and judges its substance as well as tune to be 'very old, as appears from certain melodic turns'.<sup>11</sup> His account of it as 'yet another very beautiful and moving saga' of the Flemish repertoire finds an echo in Sabbe's praise of it as 'one of

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<sup>7</sup> Achille Millien, *Chants et chansons recueillis et classés par Achille Millien avec les airs notés par J.-G. Pénavaire*, vol. 1 (Paris: Leroux, 1906), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Julien Tiersot, *Chansons populaires recueillies dans les Alpes françaises (Savoie et Dauphiné)* (Grenoble: Falque et Perrin, 1903), p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Raphaël de Westphalen, *Chansons populaires de Lorraine*, vol. 1 (Metz: de Westphalen, 1977), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Tiersot, *Chansons populaires*, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Edmond de Coussemaker, *Chants populaires des Flamands de France* (Lille: Giard, 1930 [1856]), p. 213.

its most remarkable and insufficiently known pieces'.<sup>12</sup> Stalpaert concludes from his survey that its various records attest to the persistence of its theme in Flemish folk tradition.<sup>13</sup>

If not all five Flemish versions, the four recorded from West Flanders were collected from women who had spent their youngest years, if not most of their lives, in lacemaking school. To illustrate the Flemish plot line, I will cite a version recorded by Blyau–Tasseel from a couple of accomplished lacemakers from around Ypres. Contrary to French tradition, the ballad in Flemish is named after the mother, 'Barbel' or 'Tjanne', or its more endearing variants such as 'Van Tjannetje' or 'Van Tjanneke', and places her rather than the children centre-stage. In its three fullest versions, the narrative opens with a dialogue evoking the distance between herself and her husband:

'En wel, Tjanneke,' zeide hij, 'Tjanne,  
En waarom en zing je gij niet meer?'  
– 'En hoe zoude ik nog kunnen zingen?  
Bij drij dagen en drij nachten 'k en leven niet meer.

[‘Well, Tjanneke,’ he said, ‘Tjanne,  
And why don’t you sing any more?’  
‘And how could I sing still?  
Three days and three nights from now and I will no longer be alive.’]

She then goes on:

'Wel, Tjake,' zoo zeide zij, 'Tjake,  
Ach! en trouwt toch met geen ander vrouw,  
Want gij zultere van dage tot dage  
Van langs om meer zijn inne den rouw.'

[‘Well, Tjake [her husband],’ she said, ‘Tjake,  
Ah! don’t you marry another woman,  
'Cos you’d only be the worse for it  
From day to day.’]

In the Lootens–Feys version, recorded from a middle-class lady from Bruges, she asks her husband not to marry an evil woman as their three innocent children would die of grief, after which she herself dies and a thousand angels take her to heaven. Nevertheless, in a motif common to all versions, the husband remarries two or three months after her burial, or even sooner. The following night, the youngest child is heard to cry out and the

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<sup>12</sup> Maurits Sabbe, *Wat Oud-Vlaanderen zong* (Antwerpen: S.V. 'Lectura', 1920), p. 42 (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Hervé Stalpaert, 'Uit de dood verzezen moeder verzorgt haar kinderen', *Biekorf*, 75 (1974), 343–52 (p. 352).



second wife responds with a thrashing that fells him to the ground. She then summons his eldest brother to quieten him, and he picks up his little brother and comforts him tenderly but bitterly, as again in the Blyau–Tasseel version:

– ‘Dodo, Sisse-Jantje, mijn broertje,  
't en is ons eerste fraai moedertje niet meer.’

[– ‘Sleep, Sisse-Jantje, my little brother,  
That is not our first sweet mother any more.’]

The ballad then continues in narrative mode:

Maar tsnuchtends al van van te vieren  
Zagen wij de drij kinderen gaan  
Naar het graf van hun eerste fraai moedertje:  
Daar bleven zij stille staan.

Ze lazen daar en ze baden,  
Ze vielen op hunne kniën,  
En zij riepen naar God den Vader:  
't was al om hulder eerste fraai moedertje te zien.

Door het lezen en het bidden  
Het graf sprong open in drij'n,  
En daar zagen ze hulder eerste fraai moedertje,  
Gelijk of zij in haar leven zoud zijn.

Ze heeft haar jongste kind opgenomen  
En geleid ja naar haren borst;  
Ze heeft het een zuige gegeven,  
Gelijk in leven de moeder zoud doen.

Ze heeft haar middelste kind opgenomen  
En geleid ja in haren schoot;  
Ze heeft het eens een kussen gegeven,  
Gelijk in leven de moeder zoud doen.

Ze heeft haar oudsten zoon bijgeroepen:  
'Gaat en bedelt gij nu je brood.  
En als de menschen u zullen komen geven,  
Doe altijd reverentie en zeg: 'Godde loon' 't!

'Als de menschen naar u komen vragen:  
'En aan wien heb je dat geleerd?'  
Je zegt: 'Naar Tjannetje, mijn eerste fraai moedertje,  
Als heur graf in drijen spleet;  
'k Hope, dat zij is al bij God den Heer,  
Met alle twee haar kinderen kleen.'

[But already at four the next morning  
We saw the three children go  
To the grave of their first sweet mother:  
There they stayed quietly.

They read and said prayers  
They fell upon their knees,  
And they called to God the father:  
It was all to see their first sweet mother.

Through their reading and praying  
The grave it opened in three  
And there they saw their first sweet mother,  
As if she were living.

She took her youngest  
And led him to her breast;  
She gave him to drink  
As a living mother does.

She took her second son up  
And put him on her lap;  
She gave him a kiss,  
As a living mother does.

She called to her eldest son:  
'Go and beg your bread.  
And if the people give you some,  
Always make a deep bow and say: "May God reward you!"'

'If the people come to ask you:  
"And who taught you to do so?"  
Say: "Tjannetje, my first sweet mother,  
When her grave split into three;  
And I hope she is with the Lord  
With her two little children."' ]

Then, in this version the eldest son replies that he dare not go, and asks his mother to come and beg with him, the two of them together. She answers that her limbs have turned to ashes and, closing her eyes, she bids her son adieu:

'Adieu, mijnen lieven zone,  
Adieu tot in der eeuwigheid!'

[Farewell, my dear son,  
Farewell till eternity!]

And just as quickly, the son himself passes away and two angels come down from heaven to take up his soul.

In the Lootens–Feys version from Bruges, however, the son does exactly as his mother instructed him and goes begging at the king's gate. His exemplary conduct reunites him with his mother and his younger brothers:

En de zoon keerde hem omme,  
En hij ging wel zijnen gang.  
Maar 's nachts omtrent den twaalf uren  
En de zoon gaf zijne geest.

[And the son turned round,  
And went his way.  
But around twelve that night  
He passed away.]

Interestingly, the remaining two Flemish texts, recorded from Ypres by Blyau–Tasseel and from Moerkerke by Cafmeyer, parody the 'tragic' plot. Dispensing with the father's remarriage, the stepmother, and even the children, they relate that a woman who had recently died arose from her grave at midnight and went knocking at her husband's door. Opening the door, he sees her standing in her shroud and their ensuing exchange occupies the rest of the text:

'Lieve man, lieve man, en verschrik je niet zeere:  
'k ben hier gezonden van God den Heere.'  
– 'Ben je hier gezonden van God den Heer?  
Waarom is 't, dat gij nu nog wederomkeert?'  
– 't Is omdat je men kinders zou leeren en wijzen,  
En brengen tot den paradijze;  
't Is omdat je men kinders zou wijzen en leeren,  
En brengen tot den weg des Heeren.'

[ 'Dear husband, dear husband, don't be frightened,  
I am sent here by the Lord God.'  
– 'Are you sent by the Lord God?  
What is it that brings you back again?'  
– 'It's so that you would raise and teach my children  
And thus bring them to paradise;  
'Tis so that you would raise and teach them  
And lead them in the path of the Lord.']

Having delivered her message, she concludes:

'Adieu, lieve man, en nu gaan ik voorwaar,  
Nu trek ik naar het hemelsch land;  
En nu trekke ik naar de hemelsche glorië,  
Met alle mijn geloovige zielen schoone.'

[Farewell, dear husband, and now I am leaving you,  
Now I'm going to the heavenly land;  
And now I am leaving for the heavenly city,  
With all my dear Christian souls;  
And now I'm going to the heavenly glory,  
With all my lovely Christian souls.]

### The French ballad hybridized

From this overview of what the French and the Flemish traditions of the ballad type have to offer, let us see what the three hybrid texts – Namur (Wolf, 1844), Département du Nord (de Puymaigre, 1868), Charleroi (Carlier, 1934) – have made of their bicultural heritage. *Table 1* shows the common structural elements of the Flemish and the French plot lines, their respective motifs, and the combination of these in each of the three hybrid texts. The initials Fl (for Flemish) and Fr (for French) indicate the presence in each of the 'hybrid' texts of motifs pertaining to each tradition.

All three hybrids draw quite heavily and consistently on the Flemish motifs. Bold initials (**Fl** or **Fr**) indicate where this is no mere 'borrowing' but an enhancement of the original motif. Such enhancements find their best illustration in the husband–wife dialogue that opens Wolf's and de Puymaigre's texts, and that constitutes the most distinctive motif of the Flemish texts. Wolf's text develops this prelude to the drama from just two lines in Flemish to a full five stanzas, thus making explicit the disharmony between the couple:

Le roi et la roïne  
Revenant de matines,  
Le roi se met à table,  
Mais la pauvre roïne se met à pleurer.

Il répond à son épouse:  
Mon Jésus, ma roïne,  
Pourquoi est-ce que tu pleures?  
Mets-toi donc à table  
Et fais donc comme moi.

Ingrat, comment veux-tu  
Que je fasse comme toi?  
Je n'ai plus qu'un jour à vivre,  
Car je vois à mes mains,  
Que je m'en vais demain.

Et je vois à mes doigts,  
Que je m'en vais tout droit,  
Et je vois à mes yeux,  
Que je m'en vais aux cieux.

**Table 1.** Common structural elements and their presence in 'hybrid' French ballads

| <b>Flemish tradition</b>   | <b>common to both traditions</b>                           | <b>French tradition</b>  | <b>Namur</b> | <b>Département du Nord</b> | <b>Charleroi</b> |
|--|--|--|--------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| dialogue between dying mother and her husband                    |  |  | Fl           | Fl                         |                  |
|  | mother dies<br><b>(EARTHLY SEPARATION)</b>                 |  |              |                            |                  |
| father's hasty remarriage  |  |  | Fl           | Fl                         |                  |
|  | children mistreated by father's new wife<br><b>(FAULT)</b> |  |              |                            |                  |
|  | children visit their mother's grave                        | children meet Jesus Christ on their way  | Fr           | Fr                         | <b>Fr</b>        |
| children's fervent prayer at their mother's grave                |  | Christ orders mother to rise and grants her time to raise her children                   | Fl           | Fl + Fr                    | Fl + Fr          |
|  | children are comforted by their mother<br><b>(MIRACLE)</b> |  |              |                            |                  |
| mother tends to her youngest and teaches her eldest graciousness |  |  | Fl           | Fl                         | Fl               |
|  |  | mother cries when her time is up; children comfort her and go with her back to her grave |              | Fr                         | Fr               |
|  | <b>HEAVENLY REUNION</b>                                    |  |              |                            |                  |
| 'if asked, say it was your dead mother who taught you so'        |  |  | Fl           | Fl                         |                  |

Mais ingrat, si je viens à mourir,  
Ne prenez pas Hélène.  
Car elle est trop villaine;  
Prenez y Marguerite,  
Mes pauvres enfants seront soignés.

[The king and the queen  
Coming back from matins,  
The king sits at the table,  
But the poor queen starts crying.

He answers his wife:  
My Jesus, my queen,  
Why then are you crying?  
Come sit at the table  
And just do like me.

You ungrateful husband,  
And how would I do like you?  
I've only got one day left to live,  
'Cos I can see from my hands,  
That I'll be gone tomorrow.

And I can see from my fingers,  
That I'm going right away,  
And I can see from my eyes,  
That I'm going to heaven.

But, you ungrateful husband, if I come to die,  
Don't you take Helen,  
For she is too evil;  
Take Margaret,  
My poor children will be well taken care of.]

Following this dialogue of the deaf, the husband remarries not 'three days or three months later', but

Mais le jour de l'enterrement,  
Avec Hélène il fut couché;  
Et le jour de son service,  
Avec Hélène il fut épousé.

[But on the day of the burial,  
With Helen he was lying;  
And on the day of her service,  
With Helen he was married.]

Nor could the dying wife's concern about her children and her husband's gross indifference to them be more explicit than in the de Puymaigre text, which opens with her plea to her husband:

– Ah! Jacque, si je meurs, ne te r'marie donc mie,  
Nos trois enfants, eh! que deviendront-i?  
– Va, va, meurs y toudi [*toujours*], n'te r'tourne point de mi [*ne t'inquiète pas de moi*].  
Le jour de l'enterr'ment, Jacque il a eu un ban [*publication de mariage à l'église*];  
Le jour de son servic' Jacque il se remarie.

[– Ah! Jacque, if I come to die, don't you marry again,  
Our three little ones, eh! what would become of them?  
– Well, you die first and never mind me.  
The day of the burial, Jacque had the banns ready;  
The day of her service, Jacque he married again.]

More generally, too, what characterizes the three hybrid texts is their accentuation of all traits, positive as well as negative. Thus besides hitting the baby, the new wife additionally threatens the eldest child, in de Puymaigre's text:

A la première nuit qu' 'sa femme' couche avé lui  
Me plus petit des trois, la tet' [*le sein*] il lui demandit.  
Elle se retournit, un soufflet lui donnit,  
Elle dit au plus grand: – Rapais' moi cet enfant,  
Si tu ne l'rapais' pas, j'vas t'en donner autant.

[On the first night that 'his wife' slept with him  
The youngest of the three he cried for milk  
She turned back, a thrashing she gave him,  
She said to the eldest: – you keep that child quiet,  
For if you don't, you'll get as much.]

And the eldest child, picking up and comforting his brother, quite literally echoes his counterpart in the Flemish version cited above when he declares:

– Taisez, taisez, mo frère, ce n'est mie là no mère:  
No mère elle est dans l'terr', la bas dans l'cimeutière,  
S'il plaît au Dieu de gloir', demain nous l'irons voir.

[Hush, my little brother, that is not our mother;  
Our mother she is in the earth, over there in the cemetery,  
Please to God, tomorrow we'll go and see her.]

As for Carlier's version from Charleroi, it brings the children's innocence, and their stepmother's heartlessness, to a climax by having them call her 'maman' when they ask her for bread:

Le plus jeune lui demande: (*bis*)  
'Maman, un petit morceau de pain.' (*bis*)

[The youngest asks her: (*bis*)  
'Mother, a little piece of bread.' (*bis*)]

And their dead mother's insistence that they call their stepmother 'maman' also enhances the Flemish motif of the 'real' mother teaching her children unflinching respect for her poor replacement:

'Quand elle vous donnera à boire,  
Vous direz: "Maman, merci."  
Quand elle vous donnera du pain,  
Vous lui baiserez la main.'

[When she gives you to drink,  
You'll say: "Thank you, Mother."  
When she gives you bread,  
You'll kiss her hand.]

As if to enhance the miracle itself, all three hybrids combine the French motif of the children's encounter with Christ on their way to their mother's grave with the Flemish one of their fervent prayer. The effect, again, is nothing less than graphic, in Wolf's text:

Et dans leur chemin  
Ils ont rencontré  
Notr' Seigneur Jésus-Christ,  
Et il leur fut demandé:  
Où allez-vous, mes enfants?  
Répondez d'un cœur ouvert.

Il lui fut réponse:  
Nous allons versotr' pauvre mère,  
Versotr' mère dans la terre,  
Dans la terre qu'elle pourrit.

Arrivant à la tombe  
Ils se mettent à genoux,  
Et la prière fut si bonne,  
Que la terre s'est ouverte,  
Et le cercueil s'est détaché  
Et le drap se décousait.

[And on their way  
They met our Lord Jesus Christ,  
And he asked them:  
Where are you going, my children?  
Answer with an open heart.



They answered him:  
We're going to our poor mother  
To our poor mother who is in the earth,  
In the earth where she is rotting.

Coming to the grave,  
They all fell on to their knees,  
And their prayer was so good,  
That the earth opened up,  
And the coffin was released  
And the shroud was torn open.]

As in the Flemish texts, this mother suckles her baby from her grave, tends to the second child, and sends the eldest off. Here, though, she makes it clear that the eldest child has passed the age of innocence, which means, as Wolf explains in a note to his text, that, unlike his younger brothers, he cannot join her in heaven yet.<sup>14</sup> To top it all, she requests his utmost forbearance, because instead of sending him begging from door to door, she sends him back to his tormentors:

Enfant, tu es pécheur!  
Retournes toi chez toi,  
Servir ton barbare de père  
Et ta barbare de mère.

Et quand elle te donnera de l'eau,  
Tu ôteras ton chapeau,  
Et si elle te donne du pain,  
Tu lui baiseras la main.

[Child, you are a sinner!  
Go back to your home,  
To serve your barbarous father,  
And your barbarous mother.

And when she gives you water,  
You will take off your hat,  
And if she gives you bread,  
You will kiss her hand.]

And how clever this mother is, too, for such humility and endurance not only qualifies her eldest child for heaven but at the same time teaches the stepmother a lesson:

Et si elle demande qui t'a si bien appris,  
Tu diras: C'est ma pauvre mère,

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<sup>14</sup> Wolf, 'Une complainte wallonne', p. 342.