

# FOLK NARRATIVE AND THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

## REFLECTIONS OF DIFFERENT ERAS IN THE TEXTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF *THE OLD FOLK BALLADS OF DENMARK* EXEMPLIFIED THROUGH BALLADS ABOUT THE MEDIEVAL KING VALDEMAR II AND HIS QUEENS DAGMAR AND BENERD

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**Abstract:** The article illustrates that the texts and perceptions of *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark* reflect traces of different eras. Ballads about the medieval King Valdemar II and his queens Dagmar and Bengerd (Infanta Berengária of Portugal) exemplify this. The formations of the narrated figures are medieval but the formations of the narrated plots are from the Renaissance and concern the arrangement of marriage. Their references concern both the traditional narration of the Middle Ages and the social realities of the Renaissance. The public attention to the ballads increased in the Romantic era. Folk narrative researchers launched the master-narrative about the formation and transmission of the ballads from the medieval time of their figures to the Renaissance telling-time of their plots. However, this master-narrative about the ballads as a phenomenon covers for the recognition of their narratives. Today, the ballads are receiving new attention through a canon for the primary school and in other ways. The master-narrative is reused and renewed in order to respond to the cultural conflict caused by the process of globalisation. The aim is to shape a new unity of the population that now includes both the “old” and “new” Danes. This contradicts with differentiated experiences of one of the two main groups within the population, introducing new alternatives for recognising and identifying with the narrated figures and plots in account.

**Key words:** ballads about Dronning Dagmar, ballads about Valdemar II, cognition of folklore, the old folk ballads of Denmark, traditional historical narratives

The formation and transmission of traditional narratives from the perspective of time and space is a central subject within the science of folklore. Furthermore, folk narrative plays an essential part in social and cultural life. An effort of the science of folklore is to uncover how traditional narration reflects and affects the spiritual life and conduct of human beings. The reason for my com-

ments on the subject below is the canon, recently published by the Danish government with guidelines for teaching the subjects of Danish language and literature in primary school.<sup>1</sup> It intends to affect the general notion of national identity among others by means of *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark*. These texts, as well as perceptions of them, reflect traces from different eras that in turn influence new perceptions of the old narratives. The following use of the ballads about the medieval king Valdemar II and his queens Dagmar and Bengerd exemplify this.

### **THE PROBLEM CONCERNING *THE OLD FOLK BALLADS OF DENMARK***

The neo-liberal Danish government has responded to the process of globalisation by launching a set of canons for schools in order to mould the Danes' references to their cultural heritage. The canons point out specific artefacts which modern youth (and others) will have to be familiar with mainly in order to cherish their national identity. Additionally, the canons are meant for individuals because knowledge about our cultural heritage is a necessary tool when meeting the future society. The idea of launching canons involves several implications in relation to concrete parts of the general programmes for teaching. Nevertheless, I will comment on mainly one aspect, namely the canon intended for use at teaching Danish language and literature, including *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark* (Danmarks gamle folkeviser).<sup>2</sup> The term refers to a heterogeneous collection of ballads, written mainly in the period of Renaissance, and supplied by a collection of folklore from the Romantic period. The ballads have existed as an essential part of the folklore of the Danish nation for more than a century by now. The most famous of them are the historical ballads written down mainly in 1550–1600. The ballads have been printed, retold and interpreted in several ways since then and different perceptions have caused many co-constructions as well as several explanatory reports on their formation, transmission, and their reflections of the past.

It is probably impossible to control the fluttering perceptions of the ballads, but the canonisation signals an intention to do just that. This kind of official control is quite troublesome. The reason for the canonisation is an understanding of the ballads that does not consider their narrated plots.

The canonical commentaries promote the Romantic notion that the ballads are representative of the medieval population of the nation. Furthermore, the early evolutionists' reflections on the past as represented in the ballads are taken into account. At the same time, the canonisation relies on well-known

perceptions, which do not fit in with the plots, but instead are influenced by the co-constructions and explanatory frames. It can be said that the outcome of these perceptions is another story. It does not contain the recognition of the narrative of the ballads but includes certain imaginations about connections between the present time and the remote past and about the way how the texts of the ballads have shaped these connections.<sup>3</sup>

The canon is one of many governmental responds to the process of globalisation. In particular, it is part of the public debates about education and about the immigrants' integration into Danish society. However, an outcome of the process of globalisation is the split between the "old" and the "new" Danes with differentiated experiences. These differences cause different and contradicting ways of perceiving the traditional narratives. The modern youth of different cultural and geographical backgrounds will probably be able to recognise and identify with some of the plots of the ballads, such as the plots concerning marriage.<sup>4</sup> Several ballads contain stories of parties discussing the arrangement of marriage in the period of Renaissance. This fact has been ignored in the perceptions of ballads as a national phenomenon but now others are becoming to be able to perceive the plots through simple processes of identification with the narrated figures, with their positions and conflicts. Instead of an intentional unified view, the canonisation of the ballads may thus cause conflicts between the group who does not recognise the plots and the group who does. I will return to this in the final remarks but start with a short introduction of some main traces within the plots and the actual perceptions of different eras that will be commented on below.

## **THE MAIN REFLECTIONS OF DIFFERENT ERAS**

The following remarks are based on my ongoing research concerning the changes of the traditional historical narratives throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The modern science of folklore usually distinguishes between diachronic investigations of the formation and transmission of traditions and synchronic investigations of the processes of identification connected to the telling act. However, a common result of the modern investigations is an acknowledgment of the processes of identification (Hodne 1973 (diachronic); Holbek 1987 (synchronic)).<sup>5</sup> I have added processes of recognition, which are more comprehensive. These are important when reusing the texts of the ballads (Turner 2000).<sup>6</sup>

My aim is to locate the narratives in the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of time and space by a combination of diachronic and synchronic investigations. Some premises for doing so are:

- the transmission of the narratives through retellings is apparently a link to the processes of recognition and identification;
- the retellings of the narratives frequently demonstrate shifts between different forms, usually the narrative alternates between verse and prose as well as between oral and written media.<sup>7</sup>

The narratives about the dynasty of King Valdemar II are included in my research. I have selected narratives about the king, who ruled in the years 1202–1241, and his two queens Dagmar and Bengerd, in order to exemplify the problems caused the conflicting perceptions mentioned above. At the same time, I will point at some possible ways to uncover modern perceptions of the old texts. The research must evidently include the figures and plots of the narratives, their references, meta-narratives and well-known perceptions.

In the following I will mention some aspects affecting the processes of recognising and identification that they concern.

- The figurations of King Valdemar (†1241) and his queens Dagmar (†1212) and Bengerd (†1221), shaped throughout the Middle Ages.
- The plots of the ballads, shaped in the Renaissance and containing a reuse of the figures.
- The first referential frame published with the texts of ballads in the year 1591.
- The master-narrative about the formation and transmission of the ballads and the supplying remarks about the value of the ballads as a source material from the latter half of the 19th century.
- Some modern perceptions of the ballads that illustrate the processes of identification.<sup>8</sup>

## **THE FIGURATION OF THE KING AND HIS QUEENS IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

The figural characteristics and some legends of the narratives of the medieval manuscripts are reused as motifs in the ballads. Sometimes reminisces of the medieval ways for identification processes can be found too. These reuses were of importance when the ballads were written down and have been so ever since because they make the recognising of the narrative tradition possible

and because they emphasise a connection between past and present. It is possible that the form of verse and the melodies were traditional when the ballads first appeared. However, the facts about the melodies remain uncertain and my investigation concerns only the narration.

### **From King Valdemar's lifetime**

King Valdemar II ruled the Danish kingdom in 1202–1241. He was a famous warrior already before his coronation, after which he continued to be a king of warfare, although the bishops warned him by questioning, *What is the use of conquering the world if it harms your soul* (Blatt *et al.* 1958: No. 1202–14/59, 1209/160).

The king conquered the northern part of Germany and Estonia in many battles. Being captured by a German count in 1223, his fortune was changed. He lost the northern part of Germany before his release, and was later defeated several times. He died at the age of 71 after the introduction of a law of Jutland, which later manuscripts referred to as *the Danish law* because of the introductory words, *This country shall be built by law*.<sup>9</sup>

Much writing, mainly of political kind, contests narratives about his doings. Yet, only a few facts became of special importance in later narration:

- The pope forced the king to release an imprisoned bishop who was a contender to the crown;
- Queen Dagmar was the mother of the first son elected to succeed to the throne, but he died;
- Queen Dagmar's successor Bengerd was the mother of three sons who succeeded him.

### **Figurative representation**

The function and aim of narrations about the king changed after his death in 1241, making his reign a thing of the past. The three sons, who became kings, and further descendants of the king ruled during a hundred years of civil wars. The experiences of violence and sufferings of the population after Valdemar's death influenced the narration about him, his queens and his reign forever.

In general, it was considered rather special to narrate about a former king because he was part of an imagined mythical kingdom. Monks made the imagination concrete in their writings about the history of the kingdom. They placed the episodic narratives about the king within the framework of a larger story

about the kingdom between the beginning and the end of time under the will of God. This master-narrative, containing a long list of former rulers, stressed the time-honoured tradition of independency and thereby the right of future independency. It was an evaluation of the practise through which the kingdom confirmed the Christian contract between God, the king and his subjects, and it was an ideological self-defence for the safety of the kingdom in the unsteady medieval world. At the same time, the narration served specific purposes, such as to affect the acts of the present rulers. The collection of narratives about each king contented his doings, the signs from God, the progress of the church and the living conditions of the population during his reign.

The episodic narratives moved between the master-narrative about the kingdom and the level of their own, as well as between the oral and the written media. When the figures had become clear and well known, they were used as starting points for new, seemingly trustworthy episodic narratives.

### **The figuration of the king and his queens**

The figurative representation of King Valdemar was connected to a significant problem of his reign as formulated through the question, *what is the use of conquering the world if it harms your soul?* The phrase referred through the narration to both his warfare and the law that he gave. During the reign of King Valdemar's descendants, the contradiction between war and peace became an ever-increasing problem for the population. The narrated representation of King Valdemar turned into a figure which moved from one extreme to the other, from being a king of warfare to becoming a king of justice and peace.<sup>10</sup> There was a saying that the king had changed his mind and had made the right choice at last. This was peace and the choice of his subjects. The implied message to his descendants was that they ought to have made the same choices that he had.

There emerged a narrative about how and why King Valdemar had changed. It was a kind of *rite de passage* that took place after his defeat in a war waged for the purposes of revenge. It narrates how he fell into deep thoughts and remained standing beside his horse from sunrise to sunset. He had to ask a knight what he had been thinking. The knight had to look up another knight, living in a Swedish forest, in order to get the answer. It was that the king had been thinking about the future in which three of his sons would start fighting against each other and become kings one after another. The king became worried because of this prediction and he adopted law beginning with the words, *This country shall be built by law.*<sup>11</sup>

The interpretation of the king's defeat in war was that it was a warning from God and the narration about the prediction implied that the king had listened to yet another warning. His appropriate reaction revealed his true character.

The king's choice was accordingly to become the father of his subjects instead of being just the father of his sons. In this way, the narration recounts that he was a protector of the population, doing so without blaming him for the doings of his sons. His choice caused a radical split within his family. Thus, the narratives were bound to the sphere of power and social organisation. They became linked to the possibility of making a double identification: one between the narrated king and the present rulers and another between the narrated subjects and the present subjects, who could be the implied tellers. The starting point for the implied narrators was the feeling of loss that the governed crowd suffered after the death of the king, whose period of reign had been referred to as 'the good old days'. The time of the king's death turned into the phrase, *The crown fell off the head of the Danish then*.<sup>12</sup>

The shaping of the figurations of the king and of Queen Dagmar took place within the hundred years of civil wars. The monks who narrated the history of the kingdom told few and simple narratives about Queen Dagmar. She was the mother of the first prince crowned to succeed to the throne and thereby almost a symbol of vast possibilities. They told about her that she had been able to make the king release the bishop from prison. It was a modification of the real story, in which the pope was involved. At the same time, it was a way to praise Dagmar. Another short legend recounted that she had had another name but others had changed it to Dagmar because of her beauty.<sup>13</sup> Her name, accordingly, became associated with piety and it appears that she as if turned into a figure of a godmother of the monks.

Queen Bengerd, who was the mother of the fighting sons of the king, did not get much individual attention in the legends. The narratives mentioned briefly that the king married her and that she died.

The figures of Dagmar and Valdemar were clear-cut. The narratives about them were repeated over and over again throughout the late Middle Ages, during which they did not renew much. A published version of the master-narrative about the kingdom containing several of the narratives about the king, printed in the year 1495, is worth mentioning in relation to this fact.

Narratives that explained the aggressiveness of the king's sons appeared in the last decades of the medieval period. Denmark invaded Sweden at the beginning of the 16th century and the Swedes attacked the master-narrative of the Danish kingdom. They told that Danish kings had always been violent. They told how cruel King Valdemar once was by insinuating that he had caused

the death of the pious Queen Dagmar.<sup>14</sup> However, the king narrated about was popular in Denmark. He had been given the byname Victor. New books about the history of the Danes spread news about him. A narrative about Bengerd functioned as a counter-story to that of the Swedes. It narrates that Queen Bengerd ordered the king to raise the taxes paid by the clergy and peasants. He did not know what to do but the pious Dagmar had become an angel, and could give him advice, which the king also followed. He placed Bengerd in the front of his army when he led it towards the enemy forces. The first arrow from their bows hit Bengerd and the king won a magnificent victory following her death.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, at last the king chose to act correctly. He confirmed the contract between God, the King, and the People, but now fair Dagmar had become his helper and evil Bengerd had become his enemy. The three figures were set in interaction by the narrative. At the same time, the figure of Queen Bengerd had emerged, showing her character to be as ill-natured as the character of her sons. Her figure expressed a parallelism between her and her sons, which allowed the narration to move between them. Previous narratives had related that the sons had raised the taxes and behaved against the welfare of the people. The narration invited the same kind of double process of identification as before but now moved from the former criticism of the king's ruling sons to a criticism of their mother. Later retellings stressed the fact that Bengerd's death was caused by the will of God and thus further manifested the contract confirmed by the king.<sup>16</sup>

### **The plots of the ballads**

The ballads containing reminiscences of previous narratives replaced in new plots emerged shortly after the reformation of the Danish society from a feudal Catholic society to a Protestant one marked by the growth of the estates of the realm. The Reformation in 1530–1535 led to a change in both religion and governmental rules. Narratives about the past changed considerably because of reasons concerning their validity.

- The religious norms used as guidelines to interpret experiences and events lost credibility.
- The independence of the sovereignty weakened due to increased power of the ruling king at the church's expense.
- It became difficult to recognise and identify with the old narratives because the changes brought about new norms, ideals and experiences.

The rulers and the nobles acknowledged the need for a new *History of Denmark* that could ground the new ways in the past. It was difficult to achieve such a history. During the process, the evaluations of the source value of written texts changed. The criteria became empirical and writings from the times told about became increasingly important. Additionally, public debates about old and new manners included many aspects of new ethics and laws such as suggestions for new rules for the arrangement of marriage.

The new academic élite consisted of the clergy, now allowed to marry, and the nobility who discussed and wrote history. They copied the old papers, now regarded as valuable sources, and wrote new stories in new forms and composed psalms in the Danish language. They argued for new ideas concerning the arrangement of marriage and other new ethics, too. They wrote down ballads in circulated ballad books over a couple of generations in 1550–1600.<sup>17</sup> They were modern and innovative but found it important to ground the new ways of placing the individuals and society on a timeline between the past and the future.<sup>18</sup>

## **THE PLOTS OF THE BALLADS ABOUT THE KING AND HIS QUEENS**

The ballads form a heterogeneous corpus, although examples of the connection between the narratives of different ballads do exist. The seven ballads involving King Valdemar contain such examples. One concerns his release from the captivity and tells about the repairing of his subjects upon his return.<sup>19</sup> Another ballad narrates about a mermaid's prediction about Dagmar's faith.<sup>20</sup> Five ballads emphasise the new ethics around marriage by placing the king in new positions as a suitor, as a man who gets married, and has a man who becomes a widower. These ballads are didactic in their address and their ideal is the marriage of convenience, especially based upon behavioural manners in office and public. The ideals are consistent with Calvinistic ideals of the time.

The narratives moved into the sphere of privacy regulated by norms and laws. The aforementioned connection between the king and his subjects is missing or reduced to a minimum in the ballads about marriage. Instead, the figures of the king and his queens turned into role models for the behavioural manners of the wealthy and the common people. The key instrument to achieve this effect was the new positions of the figures as husband and wife. This shaped a new simple process of identification between the figures and the public although the reuse of old figures and legends made the narration remarkably complex.

One ballad tells the story about how Dagmar entered Denmark and married the king.<sup>21</sup> The marriage between Dagmar and the king is contrasted by the marriage between a knight and Dagmar's maiden. The knight asks the maiden's hand, the maiden accepts the knight's proposal and the king approves their wedding, but there are no negotiations with the parents of the maiden as was dictated by the norms of society. Therefore, the story has a sad ending and the maiden dies on her wedding night. However, the marriage of Dagmar and King Valdemar, arranged according to the norm, is a success. The contradiction was obviously didactic and the message was clear, although it did not indicate the acceptable way to behave as a suitor or as parents to the young woman.

Two ballads tell the story about the way the king positioned himself as a suitor when asking for Dagmar's hand. One tells that he sent a knight to negotiate with the parents of Dagmar,<sup>22</sup> and how Dagmar's parents reacted. They talked to their daughter, asked her, listened to her and advised her. Dagmar sailed with the knight to Denmark to meet the king. Dagmar and the king's subjects acknowledge each other and the new couple marries. The second is about the advices Dagmar got from her mother and how she realised them by demanding that the king released the bishop from prison and lowered the taxes.<sup>23</sup> The king had to obey. The effect of Dagmar's strength is to clear the message of the two ballads, which is that the ideal arrangement of marriage is based on agreements between the involved persons who have to assure each other about their ability to act according to the norms of the society.

Today, the two most famous texts are about the king becoming a widower twice. The title of one text is *Queen Dagmar's Death*, and it is linked through references to the other, entitled *Queen Bengerd*. *Queen Dagmar's Death*<sup>24</sup> is a ballad about how Dagmar dies in childbirth. The newborn son survives, but the story is about the last wishes of the dying queen and the king's reactions to these. She wishes that the king would name the newborn son as his successor, and choose the loyal and pious woman who helped her during the delivery as his next wife. She advises him to stay away from Bengerd whom she describes as *verne*, "a bitter youth". The king refuses to marry the women suggested by Dagmar and she is ordered to leave with the ringing bells of heaven.

*Queen Bengerd*<sup>25</sup> tells a story about the king while he is married to Bengerd. The king is in trouble because his wife wants him to raise the taxes. The king does not know what to do but Queen Dagmar appears as an angel and advises him to place Bengerd in front of his army, which he does. Queen Bengerd is the first to be hit by the enemies' arrows. The peasants rejoice over their creativity in the happy end. It is implied that they can do so without fear because Bengerd has been punished from above for being covetous.

*Queen Bengerd* is a distinct co-construction of the legend told during the years of the Reformation. However, the version of the legend invites two ways of identification. One is the old way that is linked to the social organisation of the society. The second way has appeared because of the connection with the ballad about *Queen Dagmar's Death*, which is obviously dependent on the Bengerd's legend. The king should not have chosen Bengerd but the woman suggested by Dagmar on her deathbed. Her wishes can be interpreted as an ideal Christian wedding contract for persons of good behavioural manners in public and private life. However, the figure of the king sometimes made mistakes and the retelling of the legend about Bengerd's death turned into a warning against making the wrong choice. In real life it would have been almost impossible to have a divorce. The process of identification easily leads to the conclusion that every decent man and woman ought to have acted according to the contract suggested by Dagmar.

The plots of the ballads place the figures in new discourses quite different from those of former medieval legends about the king as a ruler. They are about the arrangement of marriage and they contain evaluations of the figures' actions according to the narrated ideals, to be confirmed by the public opinion. Thereby, the narrations of the ballads seem to contain arguments for these (new) ideals rather than a reference to actually established habits and norms.

## REFERENCES IN *THE 100 BALLADS' BOOK*

The ballads about King Valdemar are part of a heterogeneous corpus of handwritten ballads and other verses, written down in the era of Renaissance. The majority of texts about the kings of legends and about historical kings, queens and landowners were published in *The 100 Ballads' Book* ('100-visebogen') printed in 1591.<sup>26</sup> The publisher, priest and historian, Anders S. Vedel collected the ballads by founding ballad books, asking for other books and writing down some of the ballads himself. The ballads about the death of the two queens, Dagmar and Bengerd, are included in his handwritten versions. He had become a widower twice and had reasons for identifying with the king who had had to choose a new wife.

A. Vedel selected and commented on the ballads in *The 100 Ballads' Book*. He preferred historical narratives although he did not retell the ancient story about the kingdom. The historical ballads contained some references to the past era through the reuse of figures and of some legends. The old processes of identification were occasionally included. Vedel added some introductory re-

marks on the history of some printed ballads. In particular, he stressed the connection between the present and the past in his comments, which could make the ballads more acceptable for the readers. The mixing of old and new elements both in the texts of the ballads and in the publisher's introductory remarks may also serve as reflections of the conditions for bringing the feelings and desires of privacy into the public discourse about ethics at the time.

Vedel referred to the new society in the published versions of the selected texts by using expressions such as *nobles, peasants and citizens* or *everyman* 'menigmand' in the texts, par example in verses about the sorrow or the joy of the public. He appealed to the public audience in the ballad that ends with the wedding between Valdemar and Dagmar through phrases about feeling happiness of *all high and low, peasants and citizens* and *everyman*.<sup>27</sup>

A. Vedel introduced some texts as being about ethics although he did not explain the new ideal contract for marriage. Through his introduction, he stressed the didactic purposes of the two ballads about the queen's death by telling that they were about good and evil and *an example for high as well as for low, for the rich as well as for the poor*.<sup>28</sup>

Vedel commented on the validity of the ballads. The discussions concerned two different aspects. One was about tales and ballads: Vedel commented on this in an introduction to a ballad about a mermaid's prediction of the death of Dagmar. He opposed against the public opinion by writing that these ballads exemplified the opposite of the phrase *as we are saying all tales are lies and all ballads are true*.<sup>29</sup> Vedel explained that he did not believe in mermaids but in the words of God. The second aspects concerned the validity of the narratives as empirical source material. He seems to have been uncertain about this. Nevertheless, Vedel launched the ballads as products of the Danish culture by referring to both their language and historical content. He evaluated them according to their ability to connect past and present generations through historical validity. He dated the narration about the past sometimes by mentioning the living time of the narrated persons and sometimes by referring to the 'once'. He told about *Queen Dagmar's Death* that the way she managed to talk to the king at the moment of her death was like a miracle similarly to *what you usually hear about those children who had to be cried up by their parents*.<sup>30</sup> Vedel's fluttering way of connecting the past and the present and the way in which his remarks and texts of the ballads mixed legends, tales and credible historical narration became part of the cause for the success of *The 100 Ballads' Book*.

The book print, followed by increased reprints, strongly influenced subsequent recounts of historical legends, which are clearly demonstrated in later works of antiquarians.<sup>31</sup> Collectors of folklore working in the 19th century did

not find older examples of historical legends and songs than did the antiquarians, and they only collected the versions of few of the songs published by Vedel on the oral singing of unskilled people who seemingly sang newer songs (Jørgensen 2001: 31).

## **THE MASTER-NARRATIVE ABOUT THE FORMATION AND TRANSMISSION OF THE BALLADS**

The dynamic of traditions seems striking in the century which included the medieval and the Early Modern era. The many indications of the dynamic processes through which old narratives disappeared or changed have caused much fascination for the ballads. The early folklorists found that the ballads were voices that had survived from bygone days. Influenced by Romantic theories, they generated a master-narrative about the connection between the medieval era told about in the ballads and the Renaissance era in which they were written down. The theories of the Romantics combined the past, the present and the future through this master-narrative that included an aim to revive and preserve the ballads and other old traditional narratives for the future.

Folklorist Svend Grundtvig, who was the most learned and prominent person interested in folklore, initiated a literary discourse in the public sphere in order to promote the recognition ballads. He discredited *The 100 Ballads' Book* because of Anders S. Vedel's references. Grundtvig wanted the ballads to be recognized as more than popular reading used as ground for retellings. He announced that he wanted to make a sourcebook containing all handwritten versions of autograph books of the Renaissance and supplied by the songs collected through a network of his contemporary collectors of folklore. He argued for the necessity of a sourcebook and published his own theories about the ballads, influenced by the Romantics, in 1847.<sup>32</sup>

Svend Grundtvig produced a master-narrative around the old ballads. His vision was to renew what he regarded as indigenous Danish unity through the use (of the science) of folklore. He dated the ballads to the time about which they narrated. He explained that they contained true values of the spiritual life of the people from an era that shaped the nation. The era was the Middle Ages in which the cultural and spiritual unity of the Danes excelled according to his theory and perceptions of the ballads. He proclaimed that the old texts of ballads were of critical importance in overcoming the still existing spiritual and social split that existed within the population in order to achieve the new unity.

The master-narrative or the scientific frame of Grundtvig developed as results of disputes, and among his theses were:

- Verse had been shaped before prose, which meant that the ballads were older than the legends about the historical persons.
- Songs about historical persons and events were shaped when memory about them was still alive. The memory about the persons was preserved in the songs, which meant that the dating of the ballads was almost the same than the lifetime of the account of the historical persons.
- Transmission of the songs continued through generations as long as the social unity existed, which historians and folklorists of the Romantic period claim was the case in the Middle Ages.

Grundtvig concluded that the ballads had remained the common memories of the Danes throughout the medieval period and that their written versions saved them from forgetting in the times of the Reformation.

Due to the wars between Denmark and Germany in 1848 and 1864, times were difficult. Denmark had lost the southern part of the kingdom and the medieval worries about what use it would be to conquer the world, turned into a new phase and phrase: *what has been lost outwards will be won inwards*” New narrations about the past of the nation containing dreams about the by-gone days appeared and the historians told that King Valdemar had been the one in the triangle of Danish kings in *the era of greatness*.<sup>33</sup> The current of nationalism helped the arguing folklorist to convince the academics and politicians in the capital about the value of the old ballads. They became a national treasure under the name given by Grundtvig, *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark*.

Svend Grundtvig managed to publish the first half of the sourcebook before he died in 1883. Axel Olrik, who succeeded him, expressed evolutionary theories, among them the thesis that prose developed before verse, which, however, did not receive much attention. Historian Kristian Erslev presented the point of view that ballads were of specific value as a source of knowledge about the habits, values and material things of medieval nobles (Erslev 1899: 223–243). He was affected by Grundtvig’s idea about the ballads as representative of ‘the folk of the nation’ but relied on Olrik’s compromise between the theories of the Romanticism and of evolutionism in his dating of the ballads. He doubted the authenticity of the plots but despite this suspicion about the validity, Grundtvig’s theses about the transmission of the ballads from the remote past were kept in mind. The theses of Svend Grundtvig and Kristian Erslev, formed before the end of the 19th century, set the agenda for further discussions about the ballads in the 20th century. The questions were:

- How were ballads transmitted before they were written down? How can they be dated?
- Can the ballads be trusted? How valid are (the plots and) circumstances presented in the texts?
- Who do the texts of the ballads represent as ‘the folk of the nation’ or an élite group?

The point of views of historians and literati searching for empirical facts remained predominant for a long time, but in the 1960s, folklorist Lauridts Bødker claimed that the texts were relics of a subculture group of nobles of the Renaissance (Bødker 1974: 23–36). Contemporary sociology influenced this point of view and it finally became the starting point for yet another investigation of the ballads in the 1990s (Ruus & Lundgreen-Nielsen 1999–2002). Unfortunately, the narration of the historical ballads did not receive much attention. The investigation did not end the discussions about dating and issues regarding their transmission.<sup>34</sup> Presently I am following traces that allow me to promote new perspectives on the figures and plots of the selected ballads, the previous frames of reference and the scientific meta-narrative that influence modern perceptions.

## **PRESENT-DAY PERCEPTIONS**

In the 20th century, the expressions of perceptions of the ballads about King Valdemar and his two queens are found in many retellings of the texts. Prints, radio and oral narratives in schools and other contexts delivered co-constructions, usually in the form of prose. The internet represents yet another media for this purpose.

In earlier currents of nationalism, the descriptions of good and evil queens were widely transmitted. The narrative relates *the king’s choice between two queens described as: ‘the light-haired blue-eyed fair Queen Dagmar’ and ‘the dark cruel Queen Bengerd’*. Their different appearances were a result of their geographical backgrounds. Dagmar was from Bohemia and Bengerd from Portugal. I am not sure when this legend appeared but it can be found at the end of the 19th century and it was widely transmitted during and after the Second World War.<sup>35</sup> A reminder of the democratic current is that elderly people today can still quote the first line of the ballad about her death: *Queen Dagmar is lying ill in Ribe* (a city in southern Jutland close to the German border) which, perhaps, expresses memories about the worries of the children and identification as the king’s subjects.

The present-day perceptions have not remodelled the king's figurative representation. Instead, phrases about his warfare and other reminders of the evaluation of his reign made during the Romantic era can be found. However, the figuration of Dagmar as a godmother has been recurrently used. Narratives about her recount that she was very popular and that the Danish people mourned her death, which is a present addition to the original ballad.

King Valdemar and Queen Dagmar were married in 1205. This fact is marked in 2005 by an extraordinary amount of homepages on the subject on the internet. Furthermore, the anniversary is being used as pretence to events and singings, mainly about *Queen Dagmar's Death*. Many of the homepages have a local background in the city in which Dagmar died according to the ballad (namely, Ribe) or to the city in which she is buried (Ringsted).<sup>36</sup> Other homepages feature copies of the ballad about her death, based on different reprints. Some give little existing historical information about her while others present reconstructions based on the ballads mentioned above. Googling shows the popularity of the three figures this year. A search for the words "Queen Dagmar, Valdemar, Denmark" gave 588 hits, while the search for "Queen Bengerd, Valdemar, Denmark" gave 58 hits. King Valdemar's two queens are buried in the same church in Ringsted, but while a Google search for "Dagmar" and "Ringsted" gave 324 hits, a search for "Bengerd" and "Ringsted" gave only 56 hits. The first line of the ballad *Queen Dagmar's Death*, quoted above, yields 170 references and its refrain – 74. The same figures for "Queen Bengerd" is 3 and 7.<sup>37</sup> The number of hits illustrates the general perception of the narratives, which is that they connect the persons and times told about with "us" in the meaning that they symbolise "being Danish" or "being the locals". Believing in the stories without recognising their plots involves the perception that must be linked to the new current of apparent nationalism in the Danish society, also signalled by the introduction of canons for schools.

Many other aspects of life are more important for the children and their education. It is therefore not necessarily evident that reconstructions of the ballads become formative towards a national identity at all. A group of 12-year-old schoolchildren have already constructed a new narrative based upon the ballads about the death of the two queens. The title of their reconstruction is *Rap about Queen Dagmar* (see *Kidlink*). The children have produced a narrative in which the newborn son of King Valdemar and Queen Dagmar is the main character. The song illustrates how the children identify with other children and how synchronic the process of identification may be. The king represents an unfaithful man married to Dagmar and falling in love with Bengerd while Dagmar is giving birth to a son. The king asks Bengerd to marry him but she hesitates. When Dagmar dies, she makes up her mind and accepts the

king's proposal. In the last verse of the song, she wishes that the king's newborn baby boy would end up in a prison cell. The dramatic end of the song shows the identification point of the children who are narrating the story. The song is performed by modern rappers and is about the divorce of parents and about neglected children left to themselves.

The texts of the old ballads usually do not include children unless the narration concerns marriage. The aspect of marriage is an issue that is of interest for young people of all cultural, social and geographical backgrounds. Arranged marriages are essential components of both the plots of the old ballads and of public debate about ethnic integration in Denmark. It is possible to foresee that some of today's schoolchildren are able to recognise the plots of the ballads and thus perhaps identify with the narrated figures and events. However, the ability to recognise the plots of the ballads is contrasted by the official use of former scientific frames and the aim of the canon for primary schools, which have resulted in the opposite of differentiated processes of recognition and identification.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The act of telling has a unique ability to make the participants feel connected with the narrated other and otherness by the use of few or many, more or less tradition-bound elements fetched from the sphere of narratives as well as real life experiences. The links to processes of recognition and identification are not easy to recognise, which the debates within the science of folklore illustrates, but they influence the telling, perception and function of small and big narratives. The acknowledgement of these processes leads the researcher further to the conclusion that the continuity of the narratives depends on their ability to incorporate changes and on the teller's ability to create these changes. Traditional narratives are not relicts and they are not static: on the contrary, they are perceptive and narrated in alternate ways. The variety and alterations within the narratives indicate dynamic processes in cultural life. Consequently, the traditions must be regarded as fluctuating and complex unities of transmitted elements in ever-changing combinations and relations.

For a researcher it is interesting that globalisation may add possible or even obvious new interpretations to the understanding of *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark*. On the other hand, the new perceptions that may be based on the narrations of the ballads are opposite to the existing perceptions grounded in the Romantic imagination about their ability to make connections between the remote and the present national identity. The connection between the

reuse of traditional narratives and the currently changing society is remarkable. The achievement to create a root by reusing the former creation of eras of change and the existing feelings of rootlessness are linked to each other as well as to several expressions of the modern cultural conflict in Denmark between the “old” and the “new” Danes of different geographical background and religion. This conflict is complex and not easily solved.

The cultural conflict involves, among other things, traditional narratives, the science about them and the researcher’s working conditions. The aim of the science of folklore, which I find is to uncover the dynamic processes of traditional narration, is accordingly in opposition to the aim of politics, which seems to be the reuse of old narration and of the former view about preserved traditions of the nation for new purposes caused by the globalisation. Perhaps the research can make use of the modern innovative perspective to open up for differentiation and future developments as an alternative to the encouragement of the canonisation of *The Old Folk Ballads of Denmark*. Anyway, time will show the outcome of the complex conflict, inclusive of the canonisation that now is on its way from the ministry to the schools, surrounded by the mentioned contradictions that do not make it easier, but perhaps more necessary, to discuss the functions of traditions and the means of modern values.

## COMMENTS

- <sup>1</sup> Undervisnings ministeriet. Alternatively *Kanon i dansk* (<http://pub.uvm.dk/2004/kanon/kap06.html>). The part of the canon entitled “Den fælles kanon” (The Common Canon) consists of folk ballads (three are specially mentioned) and 14 works for primary school. The effects of the canon are publicly discussed and, being sometimes confused by many, suggest to further readings of the works.
- <sup>2</sup> The sourcebook is Grundtvig & Olrik *et al.* 1853–1976.
- <sup>3</sup> Manfred Jahn (2005) refers to the principal formula “seeing X as Y”, in which X is the real world and Y is the phenomenal world perceived and described. It can be said that “the official perception of the ballads = X form a Y that differs or even excludes the X”.
- <sup>4</sup> The named ballads in the canon commentaries are: A part of *Marsk Stig* (another part involving unfaithfulness and rape), *Ebbe Skammelsen* and *Hr. Torbens datter*, all involving aspects of the arrangements of marriage.
- <sup>5</sup> Bjarne Hodne (1973) explained the processes of identification as from the point of views of the tellers; Bengt Holbek (1987) explained them as linked to human psychology.

- <sup>6</sup> Concerning the parable between narrative and realities that includes processes of recognising and identification.
- <sup>7</sup> Mark Amodio (2004) discusses examples of the relations between oral and written narrating and refers to the debate about these, Iørn Piø (1985) about written and oral songs in the 17th–19th century. Archive registry Dansk Folkemindesamling demonstrates that the continuity and changes of the narratives must be regarded in a broad spectrum of different genres.
- <sup>8</sup> I use the terms in a simple way, of importance for me are Paul Ricoeur (1984–1988; 1995) although I have excluded further remarks about the theories and terms. Short overviews of the discussions about terms can be found in David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (2005).
- <sup>9</sup> De Konglige Bibliotek (<http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/41/>), source text *Jyske Lov* (the Jutlandic Law). The introduction was general and therefore the byname “the Danish law” was used a. o. in *Annales Ripenses* in Kroman (1980:261).
- <sup>10</sup> On these ideals for kings see Bagge 1996.
- <sup>11</sup> *Chronica Jutensis* p. 287, *Annals Ryenses* III s. 233 (Kroman 1980).
- <sup>12</sup> *Annales Ryenses* I, (Kroman 1980: 172).
- <sup>13</sup> The earliest of these narratives is to be found in *Annales Ryenses* I (Kroman 1980: 168–169).
- <sup>14</sup> *Oratio Hemmingi Gadd contra danos in senatu anno 1509 habita* (Annerstedt 1871–1876: 53–54).
- <sup>15</sup> Pedersen Christiern (c.1529) *Den danske Krønike* (Brandt & Fenger 1855).
- <sup>16</sup> Added to the telling was that the narrative about Bengerd’s death was widely known (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 929 quotes Erasmus Lætus [Rasmus Glad] 1574, *Rerum Danicarum libri undecim* [Res Danicæ], Frankfurt am Main).
- <sup>17</sup> Source lists and dating of the books in Sønnerholm Erik: D: Kilder overview in Dal & Grundtvig *et al.* (1976: 302–303).
- <sup>18</sup> Lene Jørgensen (2002) analyses an example of making this connection including the processes of identification.
- <sup>19</sup> *Kong Valdemar fangen*, No. 141, five versions c.1553–1591 (Grundtvig 1858–1863).
- <sup>20</sup> *Havfruens spådom*, No. 42, two versions c.1580, 1591 (Grundtvig 1854–1866: 89–92). The text is usually regarded as a spurious narrative; however, it belongs to the group of ballads about Dagmar and Valdemar.
- <sup>21</sup> *Herr Strange og Dronning Dagnars Jomfru*, No. 134, one version c.1555–1559 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 205–207).
- <sup>22</sup> *Dronning Dagmar og junker Strange*, No. 132, four versions c.1570, 1584–1598, 1591, 1622 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 188–201).

- <sup>23</sup> *Dronning Dagmar in Danmark*, No. 133, two versions c.1580, 1591 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 201–207).
- <sup>24</sup> *Dronning Dagsmars Død*, No. 135, three versions c.1580 (Vedel's handwriting), 1591, c.1610–1615 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 207–219).
- <sup>25</sup> *Dronning Bengerd*, No. 139, two versions, c.1580 (Vedel's handwriting), 1591 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 277–383).
- <sup>26</sup> Vedel, Anders Sørensen (1591): *It Hundrede uduaalde Danske Viser / Om allehaande Merkelige Krigs Bedriff / oc anden Seldsom Euentyr / som sig her udi Riget / ved Gamle Kemper / Naffnkundige Konger oc ellers forneme personer begiffuet haffuer / aff arilds tid indtil denne næruærendis Dag*. Ribe, Hans Brun (transl.): *One hundred selected Danish ballads / about all sorts of strange events of war / and other rare tales / which have taken place in this kingdom / from the bygone days until this present day*.
- <sup>27</sup> Vedel's text, No. 132 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 194–196).
- <sup>28</sup> Vedel's text, No. 139 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 283).
- <sup>29</sup> Vedel's text, No. 42 (Grundtvig 1854–1866: 90).
- <sup>30</sup> Vedel's text, No. 135 (Grundtvig 1858–1863: 215).
- <sup>31</sup> Lene Jørgensen's (1981) overview of Danish antiquarian's works c.1650–1850, mainly 1755–1845.
- <sup>32</sup> An overview of Grundtvig's thesis (Jørgensen 2001).
- <sup>33</sup> The expression referring to the empire of Denmark in 1157–1241 as well as myths about “the era of greatness” seem to be connected with distinguishing the medieval period at the end of 19th century, used, among others, by Kristian Erslev (1898).
- <sup>34</sup> The theses of Grundtvig and Erslev are reused by Pil Dahlerup (1998). The contrast between Dahlerup (1998) and Ruus & Lundgreen-Nielsen (1999–2002) illustrates the present use of the former scientific frames.
- <sup>35</sup> Historian Palle Lauring's narration in radio programs and the narrative about the fair and the dark queen are still widely known. Earlier uses date back to the the Romantic period in the 19th century (see also Steenstrup 1897–1904: 751, here associated with their fame).
- <sup>36</sup> Google. The Danish words “dronning dagmar, ribe” gave 525 hits and “dronning dagmar Ringsted” 324 hits. Bengerd is also buried in Ringsted but the number for “dronning bengerd Ringsted” is 56.
- <sup>37</sup> Google. The Danish words “dronning dagmar, valdemar, danmark” and “dronning bengerd, valdemar, danmark”. The result including genealogies for King “valdemar II danmark” is 33,500 hits.

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