

ETHICS AND SOCIAL ISSUES IN FOLK BALLADS

SIEF KOMMISSION FÜR VOLKSDICHTUNG
THE 31st INTERNATIONAL BALLAD CONFERENCE

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(FOREWORD)

Since 1966 ballad researchers have met regularly, generally annually, to discuss research themes and results. In 2001 the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Ethnology and European Folklore Institute hosted the meeting in Budapest and the main journal of Hungarian ethnology is publishing the papers. This volume of articles is closely linked to the earlier work, furthering the results and opening new perspectives for future research. In 1966 in Freiburg Rolf W. Brednich set up the working group known as the Kommission für Volksdichtung, as a sub-committee of SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore). It worked under his leadership right up to 1983, when the ballad researchers David Buchan and Stefan Top were elected chairmen. Since 2000 Luisa del Giudice has headed the Kommission. Over the past three decades the members have also been replaced and there has been considerable change in the nature of research and the areas of interest.

The initial goal of the international working committee, after completion of the national catalogues, was to elaborate an international ballad typology. Over the past three decades numerous folk ballad catalogues have been produced, without which comparative studies would now be inconceivable. The programme of the working group also included discussion of the eleven main ballad groups and its appearance in the system of national folklore research. In addition to an overview of the sub-groups within the genre, other scholarly themes were regularly examined. The modern questions of folklore studies appeared in ballad research too. However, a few fundamental themes were not covered, despite the fact that the conference organisers generally proposed three main themes. One of the gaps was the appearance of ethical and moral problems in folk ballads. This was the most widely discussed issue in Budapest, in addition to questions of the performance style, historical evolution and local appearance of the ballad.

It follows from the tragedy-reporting characteristic of the folk ballad that ethical and moral issues appear directly or indirectly, generally in a social context related to the history of the people concerned. Such issues include incest, cannibalism and the dilemma of loyalty or disloyalty. No single genre of folk poetry is capable of covering all aspects of ethics. Indeed, it can be said that scholarly classification is not capable either of tracing ethics in all aspects of folklore. Nevertheless, there are moral issues which typically appear in ballads and this genre is capable of throwing light on de-

tails regarding the essence of traditional morality and behaviour which are hidden parts of folk culture. The concept of justice is relative and its evaluation changes from one period to another. As a result, the ethical attitude of the ballads, the message embedded in the action is barely understandable for today's values and it is only with the help of analysis by experts that we can learn the real meaning.

The manifestation in folk poetry of the reality of mediaeval and early modern society can be found in ritual songs. Some of these were discovered and classified in the 19th century by researchers as ballads and epic songs since the role of rites had faded by then. As a result, the meaning and function of the ballads remained unknown. Researchers revealed the significance and social role of the genre. It was discovered that the ballads were performed at weddings, funerals, calendar feasts and other occasions where they served as a warning or example under the given circumstances. Accordingly, the content conveyed a moral position or social rule, although in indirect form, in the language of poetry and generally embedded in old-fashioned action. Arising from these facts, the present volume contains many new results of interest to experts.

The conference provided an opportunity to learn about areas previously unknown to ballad research. Representatives of new countries joined the working group. Among others, Afrikaans ballads of South Africa and Lithuanian ballads representing the tradition of the Baltic peoples came into the focus of attention for the first time. Moreover, the debate on what form the genre, thought to be of European origin, takes on other continents, was enriched with a Japanese example. It is all the more to be regretted that a Japanese and six other colleagues did not send their papers for inclusion in the proceedings. As a result, the publication cannot give a full picture of the 31st ballad conference.

As the organiser of the conference, I wish to thank the participants who have contributed to the progress of ballad research by making their papers available for publication. I also thank Gábor Barna, editor of the representative journal of Hungarian ethnology, for helping the production of this volume of studies of importance for ballad research.

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