

# Story and History in the Breton Ballads: the Case of *Iannik Kokard*

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Breton literature, for a crucial part of its history, is probably most notorious for its absence. In medieval Europe signs of it abound, but the glimpses we get, round the edges of vision, are merely reflections of something that remains invisible. Works like the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *lais* of Marie de France are the vehicles for these reflections, but offer no more than hints about the vernacular literature on which they claim to be drawing. The case for the existence of this 'invisible' (presumably oral) culture appears strong even when literary convention is taken into account. Yet although 'the indirect evidence shows Brittany participating in the culture of the Insular Celtic world' it seems that Brittany itself never produced the right conditions for this source of European inspiration to surface in a vernacular literary culture comparable to that of Wales.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for its non-appearance have been explored by Caroline Brett, and this complex area is beyond the scope of the present paper. But the absence itself had consequences, for both directly and indirectly it became the impulse behind the discovery of a rich and varied popular culture in Brittany.

From the late eighteenth century, very much in the wake of *Ossian*, several attempts were made to track down a similar kind of native epic in Brittany, cast more and more in the intellectual imagination as a French equivalent to Macpherson's Scotland.<sup>2</sup> The initial search, mainly for manuscripts, was not fruitful, but in the 1820s the epic potential of the Breton ballad or *gwerz* (plural *gwerziou*) was recognized, and collecting began, slowly and for private consumption at first, but with gathering momentum.

It is curious that, although somewhat later than its European counterparts, the discovery of popular literature in Brittany followed the same pattern as elsewhere, in that the first important wave of excitement came from a work which owed as much to the imagination of its author as to any popular tradition. Although not the first publica-

tion to draw attention to the historical possibilities latent in the popular narrative songs, the *Barzaz-Breiz*, or 'popular songs of Brittany', which first came out in 1839, was easily the most ambitious and influential.<sup>3</sup> Its author was Viscount Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué, from near Quimperlé in Cornouaille: he was then aged twenty-four and studying in Paris. Like Macpherson's *Ossian*, the Welsh Iolo Morganwg's bardic forgeries, and to some extent even the stories retold by the Grimms,<sup>4</sup> the *Barzaz-Breiz* was conceived in 'national' terms, as a collection of songs preserving and defining Breton identity throughout the ages, gathered from the lips of the Breton peasantry, translated and elucidated by the editor. It is an astonishing book: using the genuine ballad tradition as raw material, La Villemarqué designed his work to plug the 'gap', and worked his way from early druidism and the sixth-century bards through all the plagues, revolts and invasions that history and imagination could furnish. An apparatus of detailed and erudite notes reiterated the importance of the ballads as historical records. The emphasis, strengthened in subsequent editions, is on the cultural distinctness of the Breton people, their affinity with the Welsh and consistent opposition to the English and the French. The language, particularly of the French translations, is both literary and elegant.

The enthusiasm fired by the *Barzaz-Breiz* led ironically to its downfall, at least as a work of primarily historical significance: the Viscount's publication inspired others to collect, or to transmit earlier discoveries to those who would publish them. Commentaries on individual ballads began to appear in many contemporary reviews and periodicals in Brittany and Paris, and as the century passed it became clearer and clearer that La Villemarqué's claims for the ballad tradition had been decidedly extravagant. Nevertheless, the polemic had ensured the collection of a large body of popular prose and verse, most of it gathered in two large collections.

These are the collections of François-Marie Luzel, who published two volumes of gwerziou and their variants in 1868 and 1874,<sup>5</sup> and Jean-Marie de Penguern, a lawyer and antiquarian who died in 1852 before publishing his very rich collection.<sup>6</sup> Luzel and Penguern are the major sources for versions of the ballad I intend to discuss here; a third important collection is preserved in the notebooks of La Villemarqué, rediscovered in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> These latter usefully open up the geography of the ballad-areas (Luzel and Penguern draw essentially on the same region of the Côtes-du-Nord) as La

Villemarqué's collections draw on his native area of Quimperlé. The notebooks can now also shed invaluable light on the extent to which his own publications were founded in actual tradition.

These collections allow us to define the general characteristics of the Breton *gwerz* tradition, which covers a variety of narrative types. In the words of Luzel: 'Les *gwerziou* comprennent les chansons épiques, qui peuvent se subdiviser en chansons historiques, chansons légendaires, chansons merveilleuses ou fantastiques, et chansons anecdotiques'.<sup>8</sup> Most of these prove to be more European and less 'Celtic' in style than is often assumed: although a handful of cases offer striking parallels in Insular Celtic medieval literature,<sup>9</sup> the majority are either versions of international ballads, or of purely local focus. The prevalent atmosphere is one of superstitious Christianity - the Church and its saints are a continual presence, and the supernatural tends to manifest itself in a Christian context, albeit a highly idiosyncratic one. The protagonists - mainly realistic figures drawn from the peasantry and aristocracy but occasionally fairy-tale kings and queens - play out the usual scandals: abduction and murder, family conflict, broken hearts. The tone, contrasting with the light-hearted tendencies of the neighbouring French tradition, is sober and earnest.

Ballads in general are curiously uncertain things. Although it is often possible to find a date, or at least a period, for the origin of any one composition, they are rarely discussed by critics in that particular context, but tend to be perceived 'outside' time, usually in the company of other ballads. Unlike the English tradition, which included ballad-like vernacular lyrics in manuscripts as early as the thirteenth century,<sup>10</sup> manuscript evidence for the Breton tradition spans a mere hundred and fifty years - yet there seems little reason to doubt that some of the songs first recorded in the nineteenth century were being sung many centuries before that. It is of great value, then, to find ballads with verifiable historical contexts, as these offer the only firm landmarks in the fluid process of oral history. The ballad I want to look at here has a distinctively medieval subject-matter, and may well be a striking demonstration of the longevity of the oral tradition. The questions it raises about the *gwerz* tradition's relationship with the past are as fundamental now as they were last century. La Villemarqué's ideas about the relationship between poetry, history and the identity of a people are still, though perhaps in new ways, useful points of reference.

What follows is a discussion in two parts. An account of the salient features of the gwerz style and narrative technique precedes a brief survey of the social background: the ballad is explored as a poetic, then as a historical narrative. The text of the ballad upon which the discussion is centred is that published by Luzel in the first volume of his *Gwerziou Breiz-Izel*:<sup>11</sup> it is the fullest and most effective of some dozen versions.

Iannik Kokard a Blouilliau,  
Braoa mab kouer 'zo er vro,  
Ar pabor euz ann holl baotred,  
Kalonik ann demezelled.

Iannik Kokard, from Ploumilliau  
Is the finest farmer's son in the land.  
King<sup>12</sup> of all the young men,  
Darling of the girls.

Pa 'z ee Iann Kokard d'all Lew-dreaz,  
Ar merc'hed koant 'lamme e-meaz,  
Ann eill d'eben a lavare:  
- Iannik Kokard 'zo vont aze!

5 When Iann Kokard went to Lew-Dreaz  
The pretty girls jumped up and ran out  
Saying to each other:  
- There goes Iannik Kokard!

Iannik Kokard 'n euz lavaret  
Er ger, d'he dut, p'eo arruet:  
- Ma zad, ma mamm, mar veoc'h kontant,  
Me eureujfe ur plac'hik koant,

Iannik Kokard said  
10 To his parents when he got home:  
- Father, Mother, if you don't mind,  
I want to marry a pretty girl.

Me eureujfe Mari Tili,  
Ur madou-braz 'roer gant-hi;  
Rei 'reur d'ez-hi seiz komanant,  
Ha leiz ar bouezell a arc'hant;

I want to marry Mari Tili:  
They're giving a fine dowry with her.  
15 They're giving her seven small farms  
And a measure full of silver,

Leiz ar veol-vraz a neud-gwenn,  
Ur c'harr houarnet hag un denn!  
Ar C'hokard-koz a lavare  
D'he vab Iannik, eno neuze:

A big tub of white yarn  
A cart with iron fittings and a harness.  
Old Kokard said then  
20 To his son Iannik:

- Mari Tili n'ho pezo ket,  
Rag dac'h ha dimp 've rebechet;  
Dac'h-c'hui ha dimp 've rebechet,  
Rag ur gakouses ho pe bet!

- You shall not have Mari Tili:  
We, and you, would be blamed  
We would be blamed, and so would you,  
For marrying a leper!

- Ma zad, ma mamm, da vihana,  
Ma lest da vont da bardona;  
Ma lest da vont da bardona  
D'ar Folgoat, pe d' Zantes-Anna.

- Mar et d'ar pardon d'ar Folgoat,  
Doue ra rei dac'h beaj-vad!  
Doue ra rei dac'h beaj-vad,  
D'ho tud er ger kezelo mad!

Pa oa o tremenn Montroulez,  
Hag hen o kaout he Gakousez:  
- Iannik Kokard, ma c'harante,  
Na pelec'h et-c'hui er giz-ze?

- Me 'ia da bardon ar Folgoat,  
Dilour, diarc'henn, war ma zroad.  
- Iannik Kokard, ma c'harante,  
Ma lest da vont ganec'h iwe,

Da c'houlenn 'r c'hraz digant Doue  
Ma kouskfomp er memeuz gwele;  
Kousket 'n ur memeuz gwelead,  
Debri er memeuz skudellad.

Euz a Vontroulez da Blouvorn,  
Ez int et ho daou dorn-euz-dorn.  
Mari Tili a lavare,  
Toul porz hi zad pa dremene:

- Iannik keiz, gortoît un tamm,  
Ma 'z inn en ti da gaout ma mamm,  
Da c'houlenn ha 'zo peadra  
Da rei d'imb hon daou da goania.

- Ma merc'hik, me am euz klewet  
Iannik Kokard 'zo dimezet;  
Pa vezo ouz taol o koanian,  
Ma merc'h, goulennit digant-han;

25 - Father, Mother, at least  
Let me go to the *pardon*;  
Let me go to the *pardon*,  
To Folgoat or to Sainte-Anne.

- If you go to the *pardon* at Le Folgoat  
30 May God grant you a pleasant journey!  
May God grant you a pleasant journey,  
And good tidings to your family at home!

As he was passing by Morlaix,  
He happened to meet his *kakousez*:  
35 - Iannik Kokard, my beloved,  
Where are you going like that?

- I'm going to the *pardon* at Le Folgoat,  
Sockless, shoeless and on foot.  
- Iannik Kokard, my beloved,  
40 Let me go with you too,

To ask grace of God  
That we might sleep in the same bed:  
To sleep in the same bed  
And eat from the same bowl.

45 From Morlaix to Plouvorn  
They went, hand in hand.  
Mari Tili said,  
Passing the door of her father's house,

- Iannik, dear, wait a little  
50 While I go in to find my mother  
And ask her if she has anything  
To give us both for supper.

- My daughter, I have heard  
Iannik Kokard is married;  
55 When he's at table eating,  
My daughter, ask him then.

Euz ma laro, mar eo kristenn,  
Roit d'ez-han he groaz-nouenn:  
Roit d'ez-han he groaz-nouenn,  
Un arched a bewar flankenn!

- Iannik Kokart, ma c'harante,  
Anzaovit d'inn ar wirione;  
Anzaovit d'inn ar wirione,  
Ha c'hui 'c'h euz groeg ha bugale?

- Ia, me 'm euz groeg ha bugale,  
Me garrie beza 'r ger gant-he.  
- Iannik Kokard, ma c'harante,  
Evit 'r banne diganin-me;

Na roinn ket d'ac'h a winn-gwenn,  
Gant auenn na zavfe d'ho penn;  
Me diskenno dac'h gwin-kleret,  
Wit ma roi dac'h nerz da gerzet.

P' iee Iannik Kokard da vouit dour,  
Na ouie ket ez oa klanvour;  
Na ouie ket ez oa klanvour,  
Ken a zellas ebars ann dour.

Bars ar feuntenn dre ma selle,  
Gant al laournes e tispenn!  
Iannik Kokard a lavare  
D'he dad, d'he vamm, pa arrue:

- Ma zad, ma mamm, mar am c'haret,  
Un ti-newez d'inn a zavfet;  
Zavet-han d'inn en lez al lann,  
Tost d'ann hent a ia da Zant-Iann;

Grit ur prennestr en he bignon,  
Ma welinn ar prosession,  
Ar baniel braz a Blouilliau,  
O vont etrezeg Sant Kado.

From what he says, if he is a Christian,  
Give him his last rites  
Give him his last rites  
60 And a coffin with four planks!

- Iannik Kokard, my beloved,  
Admit the truth to me  
Admit the truth to me  
Have you a wife and children?

65 - Yes, I have a wife and children,  
And I wish I was with them.  
- Iannik Kokard, my beloved,  
Drink a glass with me.

I shall not give you white wine  
70 In case it goes to your head;  
I shall pour you some fine red wine  
To give you strength for walking.

When Iannik Kokard went to fetch water  
He did not know he was ill.  
75 He did not know he was ill  
Till he looked in the water.

When he looked into the well  
He was falling to pieces with leprosy!  
Iannik Kokard said  
80 To his father and mother when he got  
back:

- Father, Mother, if you love me  
Build me a new house.  
Build it on the edge of the moor  
By the path which goes to Saint-Jean.

85 Make a window in the gable end  
For me to watch the prosession;  
With the great banner from Ploumilliau  
Going towards Saint-Cado.

Ar baniel braz tro ar vered,  
Hag a wes am euz-han douget!

Mar 'm euz-han douget lies-braz,  
N'hen douginn ken brema siouas!

He dad he vamm a lavare  
D'Iannik Kokard eno neuze:  
- Iannik Kokard, d'in lavaret,  
Gant petra ez oc'h bet laouret?

- O eva gwinn, leiz ar werenn  
Digant ur plac'hik a garienn;  
O eva gwinn ampouezonet  
Gant ur gakouses milliget.

Mari Tili a lavare  
En Montroulez pa arrue:  
- Tric'houec'h kloarek am euz karet,  
Hag ho zric'houec'h am euz laouret;

Iannik Kokard, ann diwesa,  
Laka ma c'halon da ranna!  
Ur strill-goad euz ma biz-bihan,  
A laourfe kant, koulz hag unan!

How often I carried it  
90 Around the churchyard, that great  
banner!  
Yes, I carried it many times  
But not any more, alas.

His father and mother said  
To Iannik Kokard then:  
95 - Iannik Kokard, tell us,  
What has given you leprosy?

- Drinking wine, a full glass,  
Poured by a girl I loved;  
Drinking wine, poisoned  
100 By a cursed leper!

Mari Tili said  
When she got back to Morlaix:  
- I have loved eighteen clerks,  
And given leprosy to all eighteen.

105 Iannik Kokard, the last,  
Has broken my heart.  
One drop of blood from my little finger  
Could poison a hundred as easily as one!

## 1 Ballad language and imagery: the poetic narrative

The narrative moves in three distinct episodes which take the hero from his family home, out to the encounter with Mari, and back again. Each episode involves a confrontation, with his parents, with the girl, with the disease, and he seems to submit to all of them. The relationship between Iannik and Mari, on which the action turns, is unclear - the impulses behind crucial actions are never explained, and the characters' thoughts and feelings are open to a variety of interpretations.

Four-fifths of the whole *gwerz* is dialogue, and so virtually all information comes through the characters themselves. This is where the problems of interpretation begin, and even the first 'scene' presents multiple possibilities: we do not know how far Iannik's love is determined by Mari's beauty or the sizeable dowry, or even whether

he knows that she comes from a family of lepers. When he acquiesces to his parents he may or may not be bluffing, and the penitential journey, which takes him past Mari's front door, may or may not be heartfelt: certainly their final words, 'and good news to your family at home', ring ominously in the light of later events. Each interpretation involves a choice, and all these choices can be combined in numerous ways. Most options can be left open, and are best thought of, like dramatic interpretations, as decisions as to how each character should be played. But one or two do constitute genuine cruxes and need a closer examination.

We might ask why, if Mari is a leper, she should be wealthy and beautiful and at liberty to infect Iannik and others with a disease requiring their immediate segregation from society. On one level, a non-literal one, this needs no explaining: her role as a 'belle dame sans merci' gives her a more than human resonance and it is as an embodiment of the disease that Mari has her freedom. Her association with blood reinforces this, and the image is used to startling effect in the poisoning episode. Immediately after Iannik confesses to his marriage, she offers him wine:

Na roinn ket d'ac'h a winn-gwenn,	I shall not give you white wine
Gant aouenn na zavfe d'ho penn;	In case it goes to your head;
Me diskenno dac'h gwin-kleret,	I shall pour you some fine red wine
Wit ma roi dac'h nerz da gerzet.	To give you strength for walking.

As a response to Iannik's confession Mari's words are, though threatening, enigmatic: the full significance of this blood-red wine remains latent until Iannik himself connects his disease with 'drinking wine, poisoned / by a cursed leper!' - and Mari declares that 'one drop of blood' from her little finger could poison a hundred others. The bowl or glass also generates a cluster of images, from the girl's first wish that, as lovers, they might 'drink from same bowl', to the actual drinking of the tainted wine, and subsequent moment of recognition at the well. (Some versions at this point even have Iannik offering his mother the water he has just fetched from the well, with an injunction *not* to drink, inverting Mari's gesture). The images of these simple and ordinary actions are sharpened both by the sparse style of narrative and by each other: they are linked by a kind of visual irony. Unspoken elements also come into play: behind the gesture of the offered cup of wine or blood lies that of the Eucharist.



Mari's 'eighteen' other victims are another intriguing feature. The number is perhaps not, on the face of it, unlikely, but the expression raises the interesting issue of tone. The number eighteen, *tri-c'houez*, crops up frequently in the gwerziou. Guillaume Calvez, for example, defends himself and three women against eighteen armed noblemen and eighteen archers in quick succession;<sup>13</sup> Jeanne Le Iudek dies of love with the words:

Tric'houec'h amourouz kloarek 'm euz bet,	I have had as lovers eighteen clerics;
Fulup Ollier ann naontekvet.	Philippe Olivier is the nineteenth.
Fulup Ollier ann diweza,	Philippe Olivier is the last;
Laka ma c'halon da ranna!	He has broken my heart. <sup>14</sup>

Rather astonishing when first encountered, the phrase loses something of its force after a while: its meaning strikes one less literally, and seems to be pitched somewhere between the offhand French 'trente-six', used in its general sense to indicate abundance, and the more earnest and rhythmical threes and sevens which pattern the folktale tradition. Quite how literally we take Mari's claims depends on how much weight we are expected to give to this little phrase. 'Eighteen' as used by Mari is both specific to her, and impersonal - a kind of floating element that can only be 'true' in a general sense.

To some extent, the problem of tone applies to everything that the characters say. There is a distance in their manner which lends dignity to their words - the use of full names is especially effective - but it is not a language very expressive of states of mind, and it is not particularly natural. There are rarely any indications that characters might be using language ironically, or lying, even though, to make sense of or rationalize certain events we are sometimes required to assume this. Few clues in this respect are offered by the narrative voice. Beyond an opening stanza which introduces its hero, independent narration is restricted to brief statements of action and vital indications of who is speaking: 'Iannik Kokard said / To his father and mother when he returned'. It too employs full names where a pronoun would often be more natural, and when introducing speech almost exclusively makes use of the formulaic *a lavare*, 'he or she said', unqualified by adverbs that could reveal a tone of voice, and so provide external grounds on which to judge the speaker's state of mind.

Perhaps the most bizarre trouble-spot in the ballad appears when

Iannik admits to being already married, a statement which, as Luzel puts it in a puzzled note, 'seems to contradict the request Iannik makes at the beginning to his mother, to let him marry Mari Tili'.<sup>15</sup> The safest response (and that adopted by Luzel) is to indicate corruption and leave it at that. An alternative is to fill in the gaps with explanations, based, for example, on the 'absent' tones of voice - he may be teasing, bluffing or testing her in some way, and the 'marriage' may not be real. If on the other hand what he says is taken as fact, then we may have to think about the structure of the gwerz itself: how much time elapses between the first and second scenes? The ballad's silence on this point makes the gap flexible, and between Iannik's declared intention of going to Le Folgoat and his encounter with Mari there is just about time for an invisible drama, in which Iannik (who is after all the 'darling' of the local girls) is obliged (by his parents? because a girl is pregnant?) to marry elsewhere. As an interpretation this is obviously strained, but it does highlight the importance of what is *not* said in the ballad.<sup>16</sup>

Iannik's wife-scene does have a parallel in another gwerz. In *Ervoanik Prigent* a young man returning with treasure to his home in Tréguier is lured into the house of an evil nobleman: the daughter of the house takes a fancy to him, and asks if he is married. The gwerz reports, as though the hero were acting on a whim:

Ma karje Ervoanik bout laret  
Na oa bet biskoaz dimezet,  
'N dije rekouret he vuhe  
Hag he vadou 'n dije iwe.

If Ervoanik had wanted to say  
He had never been married  
He would have saved his life  
And all his wealth.

Met kontrol hen euz bet laret,  
Laret 'n euz ez oa dimezet:  
- Hirie tri bloaz oann eureujet  
N'on bet met tri de gant ma fried.

But he said quite the opposite,  
He said he was married:  
- Three years ago today I was married,  
I have only spent three days with my  
wife.<sup>17</sup>

It never becomes apparent whether this wife really exists. Instead the gwerz suggests that the truth or untruth of the statement has little to do with the essential business of getting the answer right. In situations like these it is almost as if characters are not entirely 'responsible' for what they say: the language they use, this shared idiom peculiar to the gwerziou, does not seem to give them much choice. Rather

as cliché is used in normal conversation - substituting a precise individual response to a situation with a more systematized general 'coinage' - so too these shared plot-elements can be seen as interchangeable between narratives, providing not only the emotional response but the situation itself. To push the analogy a little further: if clichés are thought of as substitutes, and sometimes even disguises, for 'real' feelings, then the floating elements can be thought of as standing in similarly for 'real' events. They are at the same time absorbed into and independent of the story they are in. Indeed, like the gap, they are open to different interpretations: one tends to only half believe them.

Iannik's 'wife' then, real or otherwise, is essentially a reason offered by the narrative for the events it goes on to describe. There are eleven other versions of *Iannik Kokard*, and a brief glance at some of them will make it clear that reasons of this kind are among the story's more fluid features. Sometimes one version will offer an 'explanation' that is as unconvincing as another version's gap, the kind of superficial gloss that occurs in rewritten fairytales or romance,<sup>18</sup> while another version can miss out entire chunks of the narrative altogether.

### *The other versions*

The other versions divide very roughly into two main groups, with a single twentieth-century version standing some distance from them. They vary greatly as to length and completeness but most have some new detail or slant to offer. Those in the first group do not differ greatly from our version here, but some of them add a few more details about Iannik's mysterious marriage: in a couple of cases, under question, he protests that he was married 'against his will', while a final stanza adds that, when he was sent to the house on the moor, 'his wife's heart broke in pieces' - which makes this wife look plausible enough, except that this is another favourite gwerz ending, another 'floating element'. In the other versions, moreover, there is no mention of a wife, and Mari's anger is sparked by Old Kokard's insult to herself and her family: a simple and effective reason, only marred by the fact that the ballad has her fiercely denying that she is a *kakousez*, while threatening to infect Iannik, and everyone else, with leprosy. Another version implies that Iannik brings his misfortune upon himself since, after he has met Mari at an inn, they 'eat from the same bowl and sleep in the same bed': the wages of sin,

especially sexual sin, is leprosy.

The second group tends to agree with the 'insult' explanation where it bothers to give reasons at all. But it is most striking for its presentation of Mari. Instead of beginning with the request to marry her, Iannik actually asks his parents not to send him to market:

Iannik Kokard a lavare

D'he dad, d'he vamm, un dez a oe:

- Ma zad, ma mamm, mar am c'haret,

D'ar marc'hajou n'am c'hasfet ket,

Balamour da Vari Tili ...

Iannik Kokard said

To his father and mother one day:

- Father, Mother, if you love me,

Don't send me to market,

Because of Mari Tili ...<sup>19</sup>

Tragic events in gwerziou are very often preceded by this kind of scenario, where a master or parent insists on the protagonist fulfilling a task that bodes ill (boarding a ship that is doomed to sink, going to fetch water near the château of a dissolute Count). Mari is depicted as a kind of temptress, her table piled with food - she is highly reminiscent of the Jew's Daughter who tempts the child with apples in the ballad of *Little Sir Hugh* (Child no. 155):

'Ve war ann daol un doubier wenn

Ur beseled amann melenn

Hag un dorz a vara michenn

Hag en hi daou-dorn diou werenn

On the table is a white cloth

A dish of yellow butter

A loaf of white bread

And in her hands two glasses.

Gant-hi 'n hi daou-dorn diou werenn

Unan gwinn-ruz, un'all gwinn gwenn .

She holds two glasses in her hands

One of red wine, one of white ...<sup>20</sup>

In this single image of the woman holding the two glasses, one white, one red, is crystallized all the action of the poisoning scene of the previous versions. It is narrative at its most compressed and resonant, where meaning works on the level of iconography.

Rather in contrast to this, two particular versions stand out as anomalies. The first has a curious history: it is the only nineteenth-century version of the ballad not found in the big collections of either Penguern or Luzel. It turned up in La Villemarqué's papers, sent to him by Prosper Proux, a relatively well-known poet from Guerlesquin, near Morlaix. Although he seems not to have had much respect for the unlettered poetic tradition, he nevertheless obliged his aristocratic friends by sending them material from time to time.<sup>21</sup> In

plot and detail the version resembles those of the last group, with Mari as the wayside temptress and Iannik as her victim: in style however it is clearly something else. For a start, it is suspiciously full of adverbs - people speak 'angrily', words are 'spiteful' - and characters have a tendency to philosophize. The description of the disease is especially graphic:

Pa za yannic da guerc'het dour  
Na vuoie ket e voa klanvour  
Mes ben ma troas var e giz,  
Clogorennou kement a piz,  
Var e groc'gen a voa savet  
Ma voa un drue e welet.

When Yannic went to fetch water  
He didn't know he was ill,  
But as he retraced his steps  
Pustules the size of peas  
Had come out on his skin  
He was wretched to see.

Ar c'haez mantret gant ar glac'har  
D'e dad a d'e vam a lavar:  
- Doue en deus va c'hastizet  
Balamour na meus ket sentet  
Ouzoc'h da viken, mam a tad  
Deus toul an or me a gimyard

Miserable, stunned with pain,  
He said to his mother and father:  
- God has punished me  
Because I disobeyed.  
From the porch of the door I say goodbye  
To you forever, Mother, Father.

Ar c'hakous paour, var an douar  
Ne neus na mignon na kar  
Ar beleg dezan a ziven  
Tostaat en toues ar gristenien  
Kerhet dour deus ar feuntenyo  
Evit ar bed e zeo maro

The unhappy leper on earth  
Has neither friend nor kin.  
The priest forbids him  
To approach the company of Christians  
To fetch water from the well  
In the eyes of the world he is dead.

Hanvel siouas deus eur c'hy clan  
An oll gant spount a dec'h razan  
E faç skantennek zo euzus  
E halan a zo binyms  
Pa rendt da zoue e ine  
E gorf a vrein lec'h ma c'hourve

Like a mad dog  
All flee before him in fear  
His scaly face is fearful  
His breath is venomous  
When he gives up his soul to God  
His body rots where it sinks.

Etcetera.

This 'improved' version of the gwerz seems then to have been further improved by La Villemarqué, and it ended up being published in a book on leprosy by the historian Francisque Michel.<sup>22</sup>

The other anomalous version was collected in 1980 and, again, a difference in tone sets it apart from the rest. It is fairly long, and, although structurally conforming to the standard pattern, it is greatly changed by the appearance of the two mothers. Iannik and Mari actually marry, despite warnings on both sides that the other party is 'no good', and after a while Mari's mother suggests poisoning Iannik, chiefly because he is so hopeless that no one will talk to him (a kind of social leper in fact):

He mamm un devezh devoa de'i laret:	One day her mother said to her:
- Me karj Yannig Kongar na n'eo netra -	That Yanig Kongar ( <i>sic</i> ) is good for nothing,
Na na dalv ket ur c'hlasker bara.	Even a beggar would do better.
Ma pije pelloc'h 'me'i gortozet	She said - If you'd waited longer
Gwelloc'h 'vitañ pije kavet.	You could have found better than him.

Iannik is poisoned (Mari explains that he was only her second choice of husband anyway, the first choice having rejected her) and returns home to his mother to tell her that she had been right all along, before being rather inexplicably taken off to a leper house near Ploumilliau. The language is decidedly chatty: something fundamental seems to have slipped. The relationship between Iannik and Mari is no longer at the heart of things, but serves rather as an excuse for ideas about marriage, voiced mainly by the two mothers.<sup>23</sup>

## 2 Ballad and fact: the historical narrative

So far we have looked at the more fluid aspects of the ballad - the continual impulse towards re-interpretation and explanation, the differences between versions, and the way the form and style themselves invite a multiple response. But it is not all change. What tends to shift is the how and why behind the events - the reasons for and the method of Mari's poisoning of Iannik, but not the fact of the poisoning itself. In fact, certain aspects of the gwerz seem determinedly resistant to change: in looking at them, we shall need also to look at the world outside the ballad.

Three areas in the gwerz present firm starting points for investigation. There is the account of the 'new house' to which Iannik will be banished, and there is the list of items in Mari's dowry - a list so intriguingly stable from version to version as to require some eluci-

dation. Most importantly there are names, of people and of places, consistently situating the events of the ballad in a highly specific area.

*The house on the moor*

Although the subject is still open to debate, it seems likely that leprosy had withdrawn from Brittany by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It left a varied legacy, most visibly in churches and chapels where a variety of niches and windows were constructed to allow lepers to participate, at a distance, in the mass; and perhaps in the bizarre 'croix des lépreux' - stone calvaries where the pillar of the cross is adorned with raised bumps, apparently representing boils. Toponymy is a further reminder, with village and field names marking the sites of old colonies or leper chapels after they have disappeared. There are also written sources: various episcopal and ducal acts of the mid-fifteenth century describe general separation procedures practised since the twelfth century, while local archives preserve reports of individual 'trials', often with tellingly detailed accounts of the expenses incurred. Travellers to the province left descriptions, first of the disease, later of the beliefs and attitudes it had bequeathed.

The construction and maintenance of leper houses corresponding to the 'new house on the moor' built for Iannik is well attested in Brittany. A series of accounts from the fifteenth century in Morlaix list expenses incurred in the separation of one 'Katherine Pencat', described as 'mésele': a sum is allocated 'pour abiller et réparer sa maison à la maladerie', and provision is made for blankets, utensils, straw and firewood.<sup>25</sup>

The 'maladerie' in these accounts is a hamlet made up entirely of leper-houses, this particular one situated to the north-east of Morlaix. The accounts even include a sum paid to the inhabitants of this hamlet for 'welcoming' Katherine Pencat into their midst - a sinister echo of Bérout's Iseult or Henryson's Criseid. Communities such as these seem to have been the norm in Brittany, rather than large leper-houses or hospitals which became familiar in towns. Many of the leper-villages can still be identified, often situated tellingly on parish borders, by their names: La Madéleine, La Maladrerie, Le Clandy,<sup>26</sup> and sometimes La Corderie, 'The Ropemakers', which brings us to the second point, the dowry.

*The dowry*

Two things are especially interesting: the *boezel* or scoopful of silver, and the tub of *neud gwenn* or white yarn. Eight out of the twelve versions of the ballad mention both items together (and two of the remaining four are in any case lacking the dowry episode). It is interesting therefore to find them side by side in a mandate concerning lepers, issued by Pierre II in 1456:

Item au regard des *caqueux*, *malornez* et *ladres* quels doivent estre séparéz des aultres gens et doivent demeurer ès maladreries, vivre du mestier de cordage et de faire mesures de bois à bled ...<sup>27</sup>

[Item concerning *caqueux*, *malornez*, and *ladres* which must be separated from other people and must remain in the leper colonies, earning a living by making rope and wooden grain-scoops ...]

Both occupations are described as 'anciennement accoutumés', and appear to have been associated with lepers from an early stage. The white yarn and the *boisseau*, then, may offer a kind of hint, even before Iannik's father says it aloud, of the taint on Mari's family.

This taint is embodied in the word *kakous*, a word with a curious semantic history. The leper and the maker of ropes became so associated that the word (and the same applies to *laour*) came to mean both. Even when the disease had vanished from Brittany, the colonies, and the stigma attached to their inhabitants, had not. Ropemakers, 'caquins', became a class peculiarly set apart, who continued to practise the old trade, to bury their dead in their own churchyard, and to marry amongst themselves. The strength of feeling against these people can be gauged from a series of riots which took place, when the *caquins* were trying to re-integrate in the late seventeenth century: at Pluvigner for example, a funeral cortège attempting to bury a *caquin* in the parish rather than the *caquin* churchyard was attacked by a crowd of two or three hundred people, the bearers wounded, and the body dumped on the roadside beyond the village, where it remained for three days. It is often clear in the legal proceedings that follow such riots that the protestors are by no means driven by notions of leprosy or contagion - the *caquins* are



simply perceived and mistrusted as a race apart.<sup>28</sup>

In fact lepers and then caquins in Brittany seem to take the place filled elsewhere (or, in Brittany, earlier) by Jews. Exactly the same superstitions surround them - the belief that their babies were born with a special caul over their heads, or that the men suffered the 'flux of blood' on Good Friday.<sup>29</sup> A telling detail appears in the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Breton text known as the *Destruction of Jerusalem*: three boatloads of Jews escape from the ruins of the holy city to become the 'three plagues of Brittany'. These plagues are the Normans, the English and 'those who make halters, who are called *cacous*'.<sup>30</sup> The prejudice against caquins, though it diminished in its violence, lingered in parts of Brittany well into this century.

If Mari Tili is believed to come from such a family then this in itself is reason for Kokard's abrupt response to Iannik's request. (It also indicates, incidentally, how she might come to be roaming the countryside instead of confined to a colony, and explains her beauty, evidently unmarked by disease, and her association with blood). *Iannik Kokard* would read very much like a gwerz about caquins - such gwerziou do exist<sup>31</sup> - rooted in prejudice and taboo and perhaps composed during a period, say the early eighteenth century, in which feelings against the caquins ran high, were it not for the unmistakable presence of the disease.

It would of course be dangerous to argue that the association between the caquins and their leper ancestors had entirely vanished from popular consciousness - although it must be said that it frequently looks that way. There is, strictly speaking, no reason why the gwerz could not have been composed well after the disease had ceased to be a fact of everyday existence. I would like, however, to propose reasons for pushing the possible composition date back still further, and, perhaps more importantly, to reveal some of the most striking characteristics of the gwerz tradition.

### *People and places*

Great importance is attached in the ballad to names. Not only do the two principal actors have both Christian and surnames, but the places involved are situated with some precision. The area described in the gwerz also defines the area in which it was collected: the known informants were from places close to Morlaix and Ploumilliau. All twelve versions are clear that the hero comes from Ploumilliau. Next to Ploumilliau itself is a little hamlet suggestively called Le Clandy,

mentioned in some versions, while further above are the chapel of Saint Cado and the hamlet of Saint Jean. The Lieue de Grève is nearby on the north coast.

By good fortune, Kokard - spelt Coquart/Cocard or a variant - is a comparatively rare name for the Côtes-du-Nord area, and is therefore all the more distinctive when it does turn up. Parish registers for Ploumilliau start in the mid-seventeenth century, and reveal that a family named Kokard is already there in 1640. The earliest mention for the name however is 1550-51, in a rent payment received from one 'Guillaume Coquart pour son convenant': the 'convenant' is a *komanant* or smallholding. Later rent acts offer more precise clues as to the whereabouts of this Coquart farm: it is situated in the hamlet of St Jean Brézéhan, the *Zant-Iann* of the ballad, just north of the bourg of Ploumilliau.<sup>32</sup> The little chapel of Saint Cado still stands at a junction halfway between the hamlet and the bourg:<sup>33</sup>

Ma zad, ma mamm, mar am c'haret,  
Un ti-newez d'inn a zavfet;  
Zavet-han d'inn en lez al lann,  
Tost d'ann hent a ia da Zant-Iann;

Father, Mother, if you love me  
Build me a new house.  
Build it on the edge of the moor  
By the path which goes to Saint-Jean.

Grit ur prennestr en he bignon,  
Ma welinn ar prosession,  
Ar baniel braz a Blouilliau,  
O vont etrezeg Sant Kado.

Make a window in the gable end  
For me to watch the procession;  
With the great banner from Ploumilliau  
Going towards Saint-Cado.

The banner and procession refer to the *pardon*, or Saint's feast day, a highly important community occasion. Iannik's isolation, a watcher from a window, is sharply focused against this familiar background of village activity.

The Tili family is rather harder to pin down, mainly because the name is not uncommon for the area, but also no doubt because events are narrated from a Ploumilliau perspective. The different versions of the ballad, although they do not state where Mari lives, imply that it is in or around Morlaix: she meets Iannik on the road heading west to Le Folgoat. Some versions situate her father's house at Plouvorn. Genealogical tables show a handful of Tili families in all three parishes of Morlaix in the late 1500s and into the seventeenth century. The very earliest is a Mari Tili who appears as a godmother at six separate baptisms between 1542 and 1548. Although she is the only

Mari I can find, it is hard to believe that the heroine of the ballad would have been everybody's first choice as godmother.<sup>34</sup>

We can prove, then, that families of the name of our two protagonists could be found in exactly the right places in the mid-fifteenth-centuries, and that there are abundant signs that leprosy had a high profile in the region from at least the fifteenth century. It is unlikely that there can ever be total certainty in the matter, but we cannot now ignore the possibility that the *gwerz* of this dramatic encounter, stark and stylized as it is, may be telling a real story: history.

It would not be the only instance of this happening. There have been other cases where greater certainty is possible. An eighteenth-century murder case recorded in the *gwerz* of *Louis le Ravallec* can be corroborated in detail by local archives: indeed the *gwerz* is likely to prove the fuller account.<sup>35</sup> A late medieval shipwreck at Penmarc'h off the west coast still figures in the repertoire of local singers, with the precise circumstances of the wreck and the names of the drowned still remembered. These are verifiable events. Add to this the unlikelihood of a purely invented *gwerz* using the name of a readily identifiable Ploumilliau family, and the possibility strengthens further. The *immediate* nature of the *gwerz* tradition was La Villemarqué's most fundamental claim for the historicity of his *Barzaz-Breiz*: 'les poètes vraiment populaires sont, en général, contemporains de l'événement, du sentiment, ou de la tradition ou croyance religieuse dont ils sont l'organe ...'.<sup>36</sup> Only his more grandiose perception of the Breton people and their history prevented him from finding in such local 'événements' a sufficient and worthy cause.

## Conclusion

Although the exceptional nature of this particular *gwerz* should be stressed, there are broader conclusions to draw. The separate filters of literary and historical analysis suggest two fundamental characteristics of the *gwerz* tradition: the impulse to change and the impulse to preserve. The two, though opposite, are not exclusive. In the first section we saw how a single version offered several possible interpretations, and how the style and structure of the *gwerz* itself encouraged open-endedness. The effect, multiplied indefinitely by the existence of other versions, works against the notion of a 'true' account of events: characterization is fluid to the point of accommodating quite different ideas of the personality and motives of people involved.

But some things do not change: the names of people and places. Both of these are, at least until this century, virtual constants, in the gwerz as in real life; they are also very closely linked. They are the pegs on which stories of this kind hang - first as news, then gossip, finally as 'tradition'. Like the Scottish ballads which recorded the feuds of local families, the 'historical' Breton ballad is a medium for recording news.<sup>37</sup> And despite obvious tendencies towards the sensational shared with all news coverage it is a medium which, through its formal 'distancing' language and through its practical demonstration that perceptions of events are forever changing, lends a dignity to those events that is hard to match.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Caroline Brett, 'Breton Latin Literature as Evidence for Literature in the Vernacular A.D. 800 - 1300, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 18, Winter 1989, 1-25. The quotation is from p.19.

<sup>2</sup> Donatien Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz: la mémoire d'un peuple*, Douarnenez 1989, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Hersart de La Villémarqué, *Barzaz-Breiz: chants populaires de la Bretagne*, Paris: three significant editions, of 1839, 1845 and 1867.

<sup>4</sup> See Prys Morgan, *Iolo Morganwg*, Cardiff 1975; John M. Ellis, *One Fairy Story Too Many: the Brothers Grimm and their Tales*, Chicago and London 1983.

<sup>5</sup> *Gwerziou Breiz-Izel: chants populaires de la Basse-Bretagne*, 2 vols, Lorient 1868-1874 (hereafter GBI).

<sup>6</sup> This latter has been partially published by the Breton folklore society Dastum, as *Dastumad Penwern: chants populaires bretons de la collection de Penguern*, Rennes 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Partially published by Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz*.

<sup>8</sup> GBI I, v. The non-narrative lyric is known as the *son*.

<sup>9</sup> See especially two articles by Donatien Laurent: 'La gwerz de Skolan et la légende de Merlin', *Ethnologie française* 1:3-4, 1971, 19-54, and 'Enori et le roi de Brest', *Cahiers de Bretagne occidentale* 6, 1987, 207-24.

10 See David C. Fowler, 'Ballads', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, vol. VI, ed. Albert E. Hartung, New Haven 1980, pp.1753-1808.

11 *GBI* I, 252-58. The version was collected at Plouigneau in 1863. The English translations of the gwerziou are mine. What follows is condensed from a detailed study of this ballad and its various versions that I am preparing for my Ph.D. dissertation; I should like to thank Donatien Laurent for his help and encouragement.

12 *pabor* means literally 'bullfinch'.

13 *Guillaume Calvez*, in *GBI* II, 114-23.

14 *Jeanne Le Iudek*, in *GBI* I, 407-17.

15 *GBI* I, 256 note.

16 In the 1890s, a young Parisian playwright, Henry Bataille, decided to dramatize this version of the gwerz: he too was faced with the problem of Iannik's phantom marriage. Luzel had discouragingly implied that the corruption at this point would render the text useless, but the confusion seems only to have encouraged him:

What attracted me was precisely the enigmatic obscurity of an otherwise authentic text, where for want of a few lines there was no connection between the act of love and the act of hatred ... (Henry Bataille, *Théâtre complet*, 2nd ed., Paris 1923, I, 14).

His solution was to have Iannik, dazed by wine and fatigue, duped by Mari's mother into telling a lie, to 'test' the girl's love, which the mother knows will incite her to poison him. Here the wife is a figment, but the lie provides a real enough motive for revenge. Though Bataille's inclination to sweeten the character of his heroine by heaping blame on her evil mother is rather regrettable, his recognition of the scene's pivotal nature and the attraction of its very silences deserves some credit.

17 *Ervoanik Prigent*, in *GBI* I, 464-75.

18 See Anne Wilson, *Traditional Romance and Tale: How Stories Mean*, Cambridge 1976.

19 *GBI* I, 264-65. Collected at Plouaret, date unknown.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Proux, in fact, sent Luzel the main version discussed above; its style, however, gives no reason to suspect the kind of 'interference' suggested here.

<sup>22</sup> Francisque Michel, *Histoire des races maudites*, Paris 1847. Michel notes his gratitude at being able to use this source 'discovered most recently by M. de La Villemarqué in the town of Ploumilliau'.

<sup>23</sup> It should be emphasized that this rendition is by no means typical of twentieth-century versions of previously recorded gwerziou: this piece seems best understood as the singer's idiosyncratic interpretation of a gwerz only half remembered. Normal practice tends to be much more conservative.

<sup>24</sup> Alain Croix, 'L'histoire d'un trait de mentalité: les caquins en Bretagne', *Annales de Bretagne* 86, 1979, 553-64. But the problem of precisely defining the disease has led to diagnoses as late as the nineteenth century: [Dr] Aubry, 'La lèpre et les lépreux en Bretagne', *Bulletin de la Société d'Emulation des Côtes-du-Nord* 33, 1895, 128-43.

<sup>25</sup> Excerpts from these accounts are published by R.F. Le Men in 'Les lépreux et les cacoux de la Basse-Bretagne', *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère* 4, 1876-77, 138-52.

<sup>26</sup> In Breton *Ar C'Hlan-di*, literally 'the house of the sick'. The name appears in some versions of *Iannik Kokard*, see below.

<sup>27</sup> J. Trévédry, 'La lèpre en Bretagne au XV<sup>ème</sup> siècle: caquins de Bretagne', *Bulletin de la Société Polymathique du Morbihan*, 1903, p.193 note 2.

<sup>28</sup> On the 'caquin' phenomenon in Brittany, see Alain Croix, 'L'histoire d'un trait de mentalité', and Louis Elegoët, 'Les caquins de Kerandraon, en Ploudier', *Cahiers de Bretagne occidentale* 6, 1987, 97-106.

<sup>29</sup> On the interchangeable role of Jews and lepers in medieval Europe in general, see R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, Oxford 1987.

<sup>30</sup> R. Hémon and G. Le Menn, *Les fragments de la Destruction de Jérusalem et des Amours du vieillard*, Dublin 1969. The quotation is from fragment A 267.

<sup>31</sup> *Ar C'hakous* ('The Caquin') is published by H. Le Carguet, in 'Traditions populaires sur les épidémies dans le Cap-Sizun: la lèpre', *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère* 20, 1893, 3-11. Another version, from the Penguin Collection, appears in *Annales de Bretagne* 5, 1890, 482-85. Neither contains any reference to leprosy.

<sup>32</sup> Archives Départementales de Saint Briec, Registers H504, H511 and H613.

<sup>33</sup> In the 1940s it still contained 'les statues anciennes de Saint Cado [et] de trois pèlerins montrant leurs ulcères'. Ulcers and skin diseases in general are

known as the 'mal Saint Cado'. R. Couffon, 'Répertoire des églises et chapelles du diocèse de St Brieuc et Tréguier: deuxième fascicule (Lanvallaz - Saint Hervé)', *Mémoires de la Société d'Emulation des Côtes du Nord*, 1940, pp. 382-83.

34 The commonness of the name is evident from the fact that a Mari Tili is the heroine of another and quite unrelated ballad in Luzel (*GBI* II, 518-23).

35 Donatien Laurent, 'La gwerz de Louis le Ravallec', *Arts et traditions populaires* 15:1, 1967, 19-79.

36 *Barzaz-Breiz* (1867), p. xxxii.

37 See David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk*, London 1972.