

Folk Literature and the Invention of Tradition: The Case of the *Barzaz Breiz*

Since its publication in 1839, the Barzaz Breiz has influenced the development of nationalism, folklore studies, and ethnography in Brittany. Presented originally as a collection of oral ballads, the work was later shown to consist of composite texts subject to extensive rewriting. As with the Kinder- und Hausmärchen and Poems of Ossian, the authenticity of the Barzaz Breiz has been the subject of extensive scholarly controversy, particularly within France. This paper summarizes the history of scholarship about the Barzaz Breiz and argues that it is best understood as a key element in the ongoing construction of Breton identity.

Keywords

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOLK POETRY and the development of nationalism in Europe has been well documented. There are almost as many cases of folk epics—supposedly collected during the nineteenth century from the peasantry but later shown to be “fakelore,” “invention of tradition,” or subject to literary embellishment—as there are nations on the continent. Macpherson’s *Ossian*, the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (KHM), and the Finnish *Kalevala* represent the best-known examples.¹ In this paper, I document a parallel case from Brittany, the *Barzaz Breiz*, a collection of Breton ballads published in 1839 by Théodore Hersart, vicomte de la Villemarqué.² While earlier folklorists and historians may have viewed the significance of these works primarily in terms of debates about distinguishing genuine from spurious oral tradition, contemporary researchers understand that tradition is always invented, in the sense of being in flux, creative, and subject to multiple influences. In this paper, I provide an overview of the history of the *Barzaz Breiz* and the scholarship about it, in order to demonstrate how this work, like others of its kind, remains relevant to contemporary folkloristic concerns. Specifically, I suggest that the *Barzaz Breiz* has enduring importance by virtue of its contribution to the continuous process of identity construction in Brittany. The ongoing significance of the work is encapsulated by the

ELLEN BADONE has a joint appointment as Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

following quotation from Breton author Yann Queffélec in an interview published in 2015:

We ought to kiss the feet of La Villemarqué, who combed the countryside in the nineteenth century to collect large numbers of extremely ancient popular songs, published in his *Barzaz Breiz*. He passed on to us a whole fabulous literature of poetry, histories, tales. In it [the *Barzaz Breiz*] we find historical accounts, reveries, lessons on life and death, a collection of extremely rich materials. Without him, an entire swath of our history and our literature would probably have disappeared. (quoted in Milin 2015:113)³

The Barzaz Breiz: Chants Populaires de la Bretagne

With the exception of studies by Mary-Ann Constantine (1995, 1996, 1999, 2007, 2014) that focus in part on Welsh connections, the majority of scholarship on the *Barzaz Breiz* has been carried out by researchers based in France—and more specifically in Brittany, the northwestern region of the country that was characterized by the widespread use of the Breton language until the mid-twentieth century.⁴ The 1st edition of the *Barzaz Breiz*, published in 1839 by La Villemarqué as a two-volume work, presented a collection of songs made by the author purportedly from oral sources in Lower Brittany. The author organized the materials in the collection into three sections: “Chants historiques,” “Chants d’amour,” and “Chants religieux.” The song texts, printed in French and Breton, included short explanatory introductions and subsequent notes. The introduction to the work as a whole discussed Breton oral poetry as a continuation of a medieval Breton bardic tradition, with roots in the bardic tradition of the Celtic regions of the British Isles (Laurent 1989:20). 12 pages of music including 28 melodies followed the ballad texts (Gourvil 1959:311).

In the 2nd edition of 1845, the *Barzaz Breiz* included 30 new pieces added by the author to the collection and 19 new melodies (Gourvil 1959:321). The 3rd edition of 1867 differed from the previous two editions in that the Breton texts that had previously been presented on separate pages facing the French translations were now placed in small print at the bottom of the page below the French texts. Unlike the previous two editions, the 1867 edition comprised only one volume (Gourvil 1959:325) and included several new ballads as well as 27 new melodies (Gourvil 1959:326). Along with the addition of new texts and the deletion of certain others, the three editions of the *Barzaz Breiz* differ in terms of their introductory and concluding materials (Gourvil 1959:309–27).

The 1st edition of the *Barzaz Breiz* won immediate critical acclaim, both within France and internationally. George Sand praised the work, and selections were adapted and translated into English, German, and Polish between 1841 and 1859 (Gourvil 1959:327–9; Laurent 1989:5, 11). La Villemarqué, only 24 years of age when the *Barzaz Breiz* was first published, was awarded the Légion d’honneur in 1846, elected to the Institut de France in 1858, and, on the nomination of Jacob Grimm, was elected as a foreign member of the Royal Academy of Berlin (Laurent 1989:23).

The controversy surrounding the authorship of the songs published in the *Barzaz Breiz* dates from the appearance of the 3rd edition. Folklorists who had worked in Brittany since the publication of the 1st edition had been troubled by their own inability to collect the same pieces published by La Villemarqué (Laurent 1989:23–4). In particular, the polished, literary style of the songs in the *Barzaz Breiz* contrasted with the more rudimentary texts collected and published by folklorist François-Marie Luzel in his collections of ballads and songs from the Trégor region of Lower Brittany (Luzel 1868–1874). On many occasions, La Villemarqué was invited to reveal his sources and to provide other researchers with access to the transcriptions of the ballads he claimed to have collected (Laurent 1989:23–5). While there is evidence that La Villemarqué allowed some close associates to see these materials, he never made them publicly available. Moreover, he never publicly attempted to refute those who claimed that he was himself responsible for writing the pieces in the *Barzaz Breiz*, and he provided no published contribution to the discussion of the work's authenticity (Laurent 1989:24–6). It is probable that La Villemarqué hesitated to acknowledge his own role in producing the texts in the *Barzaz Breiz* since such a confession would have embarrassed those who had elected him to the Institut de France and would have tarnished his scholarly reputation, which was primarily based on the *Barzaz Breiz* (Gourvil 1959:220).

As a result of La Villemarqué's silence, the controversy surrounding the *Barzaz Breiz* remained unresolved throughout his lifetime. Not until 1959 did a systematic and detailed study of the *Barzaz Breiz* appear, based on research carried out over almost 50 years by the Breton historian and folklorist Francis Gourvil (1959). Gourvil concludes that while the *Barzaz Breiz* might have been loosely based on materials from Breton oral tradition, these materials were subject to much reworking by La Villemarqué before publication. Gourvil quotes a letter written by the folklorist Luzel stating that La Villemarqué himself had "confessed" that he had "arranged, reworked, completed, constituted the texts with the aid of many versions" (quoted in Gourvil 1959:203). Gourvil advances the hypothesis that La Villemarqué and his mother, who shared and nurtured his interest in Breton songs, collected texts of ballads in their home parish of Nizon that were transcribed in Breton with the aid of the parish vicar (Gourvil 1959:37, 344–5, 347). Gourvil provides a detailed consideration of the possible popular sources for 32 of the *Chants historiques* published in the *Barzaz Breiz*. Where feasible, he compares La Villemarqué's published versions of the ballads with versions collected by other researchers.

Gourvil concludes that while some of the pieces in the *Barzaz Breiz* can be linked to variants extant in the oral tradition of early nineteenth-century Brittany and hence may have originated in an actual work of collection, none of these were published in the form in which they must have been performed (1959:483). Moreover, Gourvil argues that La Villemarqué changed details of the ballads such as proper names and place names as well as historical references, to give the texts the appearance of great antiquity. In Gourvil's view, La Villemarqué had consulted the diverse works of classical and medieval history cited in his notes on the ballads during his period as a student at the prestigious École des Chartes in Paris. Indeed, Gourvil maintains that the *Barzaz Breiz* was a project conceived by La Villemarqué in Paris, and its emphasis

both on the literary qualities and antiquity of the Breton songs was a response to Parisian rather than Breton preoccupations (1959:18).

Gourvil's work appeared to offer a definitive resolution to the controversy surrounding the *Barzaz Breiz*. In 1964, however, the Breton ethnologist Donatien Laurent, who later became director of the Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest, obtained access to La Villemarqué's notebooks and personal papers, which had been housed at the La Villemarqué family estate in southern Finistère.⁵ Laurent's doctoral thesis, completed in 1974 at the Collège de France, consisted of an analysis of a major portion of these materials. In 1989, Laurent published a book based on his thesis but designed for a wide scholarly and nonacademic readership.

Like Gourvil's earlier study, Laurent's volume was published by a local press in Brittany. The book is handsomely illustrated with numerous photographic reproductions of pages from La Villemarqué's handwritten manuscript, in addition to full-page color prints of paintings by nineteenth-century artists depicting daily life in Brittany in La Villemarqué's time. The main body of the book consists of the texts in Breton with French translations of all the songs discovered by Laurent in manuscript form in the earliest and longest of La Villemarqué's notebooks. The song texts are introduced by a discussion of La Villemarqué's place in the historical context of folklore research in Brittany and a description of the methods employed by Laurent in deciphering the notebook. The third section of Laurent's book evaluates La Villemarqué's sources and the question of the authorship of the *Barzaz Breiz*, primarily through consideration of five texts that have been considered especially problematic by previous researchers. Laurent provides a detailed comparison between the manuscript versions of these texts and the versions published in the 1st edition of the *Barzaz Breiz*, demonstrating La Villemarqué's role in editing and rewriting the texts.

On the basis of his analysis of La Villemarqué's manuscripts, Laurent concludes that La Villemarqué did indeed collect popular songs in Lower Brittany during the 1830s (Laurent 1989:39–41). He maintains that with few exceptions, all of the texts published in the 1st edition of the *Barzaz Breiz* can be linked to handwritten texts in La Villemarqué's field notebook. However, it is the "constituent elements" that exist in the manuscript texts rather than the "exact letter" of the published forms (Laurent 1989:283). While the published songs are based to varying degrees on the field notebooks and may incorporate lines or parts of lines from these handwritten manuscripts, the texts were subject to considerable rewriting by La Villemarqué before publication. As in the KHM, *Poems of Ossian*, and the *Kalevala*, the songs in the *Barzaz Breiz* are composite texts (Laurent 1989:22).⁶ As Laurent demonstrates, La Villemarqué's editing frequently involved simplification and pruning of the texts by the removal of repetitive or trivial passages. Lewd or anticlerical references were also excised, as were sections critical of the nobility (Laurent 1989:291, 315).

According to Laurent, La Villemarqué envisaged the task of preparing a text for publication as a work of restoration (1989:25). Rewriting was necessary to recover the original pristine versions of songs that had been debased from their origins in a medieval bardic tradition through centuries of oral transmission (Laurent 1989:315). For La Villemarqué, therefore, texts collected in the field represented incomplete,

poor-quality reflections of their ancient originals, in need of editing to make them conform to the canons of literary and artistic good taste current in his own social milieu (Laurent 1989:315).

Aesthetic considerations figure prominently in Nelly Blanchard's (2006) study of the *Barzaz Breiz* from a literary-critical perspective. She places La Villemarqué in the context of broader networks of European Romanticism and demonstrates his awareness of both British and German figures, such as the Grimms, Macpherson, and Sir Walter Scott, involved in the Romantic valorization of folk tradition (Blanchard 2006:223). In addition to aesthetics, Blanchard focuses on the themes of metaphysics and politics in the *Barzaz Breiz*, treating it as a text that gives insight primarily into the worldview, values, and character of its author, La Villemarqué (2006:13, 273–9).

The Barzaz Breiz and Breton Nationalism

In tracing the genesis of what he terms “the *Barzaz Breiz* effect” (Guiomar 1992:552), Breton historian Jean-Yves Guiomar points out that the underlying premise of the 1st edition of 1839 was that since the Armorican peninsula had retained the ancient Celtic language abandoned by the rest of Gaul (which had been Romanized), Brittany had historically served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of values that were nonclassical in origin but nonetheless lofty and important to the incipient French nation and thus indirectly to the modern world (529). Relative to the 1st edition, a more Breton nationalistic perspective is introduced in the 2nd and 3rd editions of the *Barzaz Breiz*, in which it is implied that “since France had denied its Celtic dimension, the role of Brittany was to be the sole interpreter of this dimension, alongside, or rather against France” (529). With the addition of new, more militantly Breton nationalistic texts to the 1845 edition, La Villemarqué sought to provide evidence for the existence of strong anti-Frankish or anti-French sentiments among the rural populace in Brittany from the fifth century AD to the nineteenth century (528).

Part of the impetus behind the publication of the *Barzaz Breiz* lay in La Villemarqué's desire to rehabilitate the image of Brittany and the Breton language in response to external denigration (Tanguy 1977:109). La Villemarqué envisaged his work as a counter-argument to the judgments of critics such as Dom Taillandier, who saw the ancient Bretons as “barbarians ‘who did not cultivate the muses at all, and their language, to judge by that of the present-day Bretons [was] a coarse jargon that does not seem to be able to lend itself to the measure, to the sweetness and to the harmony of verses’” (quoted in Tanguy 1977:109). In the view of Breton linguist Bernard Tanguy, La Villemarqué sought through the texts in the *Barzaz Breiz* to provide evidence contradicting such negative stereotypes and to challenge French cultural hegemony (1977:109). In the introduction to the 3rd edition, La Villemarqué deplores the fate of the Bretons, shared by all other “*petits peuples*” incorporated into larger neighboring nations: “Everywhere, ostracized, they have long been banished from the domain of science; and even today, when they no longer whimper under the tyranny of the sword, intellectual despotism has not yet delivered them from its yoke in all parts of Europe” (La Villemarqué [1867] 1963:xii).

Clearly, the *Barzaz Breiz* can be read as a product of sentiments of national or cultural inferiority, an interpretation advanced by scholars for *Ossian*, the KHM, and the *Kalevala* (Dundes 1989:48–9; Ellis 1983:3). As Guiomar has observed, even at the height of the controversy about the authenticity of the *Barzaz Breiz* during the nineteenth century, Breton scholars on both sides of the issue recognized that “above and beyond a scientific battle, it concerned a symbol, that the work’s fame reflected back upon an entire province that had too often in the past been depicted as barbarian and ignorant” (Guiomar 1992:549–50).

The sense of national deficiency that gave impetus to La Villemarqué’s work was in part linked to a major scholarly debate in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France concerning the origins of the French language and of French literature. The majority of early nineteenth-century scholars held that French was formed from Latin with no Celtic or Gaulish components, since these would have disappeared during the Roman conquest (Guiomar 1992:529–30). A smaller group of scholars advanced the hypothesis of Celtic origins, which was given additional credibility by the research of Abbé de la Rue on the contributions of Normandy and Brittany to French literature (Guiomar 1992:530–2). The work of de la Rue, a professor of history at the Université de Caen, served as an inspiration for La Villemarqué (Guiomar 1992:532; Laurent 1989:20–1). Whereas the south of France, with its troubadour heritage, had been assigned a primary role in the formation of French literature, this theory of southern origins had difficulty accounting for the important Arthurian Round Table cycle (Guiomar 1992:530). By the 1830s, scholarly support had increased for the view that this cycle was Anglo-Celtic in origin and had derived from traditions common to Great Britain and Brittany (Guiomar 1992:532). However, in the absence of manuscripts from Brittany or historical references to the bards who might have composed them, this hypothesis—which elevated Brittany to a position of national importance for the French literary heritage—remained unsupported (Guiomar 1992:534). It was in an effort to fill this void that La Villemarqué began his work on the *Barzaz Breiz* (Guiomar 1992:534; Tanguy 1977:105–6).

In 1838 La Villemarqué undertook an ultimately unsuccessful research mission to locate possible ancient Breton manuscripts in British libraries (Guiomar 1992:540; Tanguy 1977:87–8). However, this absence of textual sources was accommodated by the logic of the conceptual model for Breton origins that he developed. As Guiomar points out, the nineteenth-century historical movement known as *Bretonisme*, of which La Villemarqué was a leader, came to adopt the view that the Armorican peninsula, the geographical location of present-day Brittany, had been completely depopulated during the fourth and fifth centuries at the end of the Roman period. Subsequently the region was re-populated by Christian Celtic immigrants from Great Britain who had been displaced by the invading Saxons (Guiomar 1992:541–2). Accordingly, since the Welsh and the Armorican Bretons belonged to the same race, the ancient Welsh manuscripts necessarily belonged equally to the Breton tradition (Guiomar 1992:541). Following this conception of Breton history, the modern population of Brittany had retained the druidic and bardic traditions of the insular Celts who had resisted the Germanic Saxon invaders, whereas this Celtic heritage had been lost throughout the rest of Gaul owing to the influence of the Germanic Franks (Guiomar 1992:542).⁷

More than a historical school, nineteenth-century “bretonisme” encompassed “a global vision of society” that rejected the values of classical antiquity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution in favor of ultramontane Catholicism, a romantic view of Eastern anti-rationalism, and a decentralized model of French society in which regional liberties would predominate over Paris-based state power (Guiomar 1992:544). The *Barzaz Breiz* attracted adherents to “bretonisme” and served as a “prism through which the ideological and historical conceptions of that milieu of Breton intellectuals were refracted” (Tanguy 1977:321). In turn, bretonisme gave rise to the Breton movement for cultural and political nationalism that developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Guiomar 1992:554). Owing to the importance of La Villemarqué and the *Barzaz Breiz* for bretonisme, Guiomar argues that “one cannot say that the Breton movement was born solely from the *Barzaz Breiz*, but without a doubt, one can say that without the work, the movement would not exist” (1992:554). By the same token, pointing to the relatively modest popular success of the work, Guiomar suggests that “without the assistance of the Breton movement, it is not certain that the *Barzaz Breiz* would be remembered” (553).

One nationalist historian has described the *Barzaz Breiz* as “the breviary of the Breton patriot” (Danio, quoted in Reece 1977:26). The work evoked strikingly similar responses among both the right-wing Breton nationalists of the early twentieth century and the left-wing nationalists of the post-1968 era. At the beginning of the twentieth century, nationalist leader Camille Le Mercier d’Erm traced his convictions to the *Barzaz Breiz*:

Reading it, Le Mercier d’Erm thought that he heard the authentic voice of his people singing and he came away from the experience convinced not only that there was a Breton nation but also that he belonged to it. (Reece 1977:26)

Likewise, the Breton nationalist and socialist Morvan Lebesque wrote in 1970:

What an essential revelation the *Barzaz Breiz* was for me in the bilingual edition of Perrin. This time, no author: the Breton people raised themselves up before me. Wars, riots, injustices suffered or vanquished . . . ah, what matter if learned hands have harmonised a few lines in places. They could not have invented the cry of fifteen centuries . . . the joys, the sorrows, the rebellions of that nation reduced to silence; only a collective genius, a will to live running from age to age gave these poems their images, their dramatic rhythm. . . . If only for such a work, no-one had the right to stifle the still living language of this people. . . . And I understood that through a language that the powers that be foully called a local idiom, I had rediscovered an immortal culture—above all and inspiring everything, my *nation*. (1970:29–30)

Here, Lebesque underscores the Herderian legacy of the anonymous folk poet as voice of the nation. Likewise, Lebesque confronts—and dismisses as unimportant—the question of the authenticity of the *Barzaz Breiz*: for Lebesque as for Le Mercier d’Erm, the work is unquestionably expressive of the essential spirit of the Breton people. Lebesque’s perspective also reflects the influence of what Richard Handler has termed the metaphor of the nation as a “collective individual,” a metaphor common to

many nationalist movements, in which the nation is reified and perceived as a living, struggling, and enduring organism (Handler 1988).⁸

The history of scholarship on the *Barzaz Breiz* provides a clear illustration of the impact of a nationalist ideology on ethnography and folklore scholarship. It is not without significance that the two major works about the *Barzaz Breiz* have been written by Breton scholars and published in Brittany by Breton presses, and in both cases, publication was subsidized by the *conseils généraux* of the Breton *départements*. The studies by Gourvil and Laurent are both motivated by a strong sense of the importance of the *Barzaz Breiz* for Breton identity. Gourvil distances himself from the nationalist impact of the *Barzaz Breiz*, largely as a result of his perception that the nationalist sentiments inspired by the work ultimately led to the collaboration between Breton nationalists and the Nazi forces of Occupation during World War II (1959:544–5). In contrast, Laurent's volume does not directly address political issues. However, the tone of the work suggests a vindication of La Villemarqué that implicitly legitimates both the heritage of Breton oral tradition and the cultural and political movements within Brittany that trace their origins to the *Barzaz Breiz*. While the language of the body of Laurent's text is more circumspect, the dust jacket summary proclaims that "La Villemarqué actually did an admirable work of collecting, the first to be done in France; he really and truly saved the memory of the Breton people" (Laurent 1989).

The Relevance of the Barzaz Breiz for Contemporary Folkloristics and Ethnography

There are clear parallels between the *Barzaz Breiz*, Macpherson's Ossianic poetry, the *Kalevala*, and the Grimms' KHM. Moreover, as Blanchard (2006:225) points out, La Villemarqué corresponded with the Grimms and was influenced by the currents of Romanticism throughout Europe that glorified folk poetry as the expression of the autochthonous spirit of the people. Yet the *Barzaz Breiz* is significant not simply as an addition to the catalog of nineteenth-century so-called "literary frauds." Like *Ossian*, the *Kalevala*, and the KHM, the *Barzaz Breiz* remains relevant to contemporary folkloristics and ethnography. The debates surrounding these and related works raise issues of both theory and method that remain central to the concerns of folklorists and ethnographers in the twenty-first century. Here my argument complements those of Bauman and Briggs (2003) and Stewart (1991). Stewart suggests that there are "enduring problems in the history and philosophy of representation" that have found expression in both the period of the *Barzaz Breiz* and in the postmodern era (1991:5). In particular, Stewart (1991:6–7) argues that a nostalgic awareness of temporal discontinuity that provided part of the inspiration for the eighteenth-century literary imitation of folklore remains a preoccupation of postmodernism, as does the sense of a "shifting relation between subjectivity and writing" (Stewart 1989:45).

One set of issues raised by the *Barzaz Breiz* concerns the question of representation. Representation begins in the field with the transcription of culture and continues after fieldwork with the inscription of culture into texts for publication. Numerous ethnographers and folklorists working with orally transmitted materials emphasize the importance of exactitude in transcribing such texts and in recording the details

of the context of their performance (see, for example, Tedlock 1983). Audio and visual tapes permit contemporary researchers to record and repeatedly re-experience performances, facilitating transcription in ways that were impossible during La Villemarqué's lifetime. Yet the essential dilemmas of transcription remain unchanged: how to capture the nuances of pauses, tone, and emphasis in a written text and how to write down oral performances in languages that are nonstandardized and nonliterary. As Clifford suggests, the process of transcription does not simply "collect," but in essence "produces" native texts (1990:51): "Transcription, which as a kind of copying appears to involve the least transformation, is in no way a direct or innocent record. . . . And transcription always raises questions about *translation*" (58).

Unlike La Villemarqué, contemporary folklorists and ethnographers eschew retouching, correcting, and rewriting texts obtained from the field directly in the words of "native" respondents. Yet even today in the inscription of culture, there is inevitable sorting, interpretation, and exclusion of contextual detail as the writing process moves from the small notebooks used to record events as they take place in the field to more ample accounts in field notes that often take the format of a diary, to the published articles and books produced often many years after the fieldwork has been completed (Sanjek 1990). La Villemarqué intentionally altered his texts to conform to the literary standards of good taste of his time, a process disavowed by present-day ethnographers and folklorists. Yet, as Geertz (1988) and many others have shown, there remains an implicit, unrecognized process of editing and rhetorical crafting in ethnographic writing. The Romantic impetus that gave rise to the *Barzaz Breiz* shares much in common with present-day movements in anthropology, folkloristics, and literary studies that reject the Western canon and valorize the voices and literatures of disenfranchised peoples. Nonetheless, the contemporary approach differs from that of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in according greater importance to indigenous voices. Paradoxically, for La Villemarqué, as for Macpherson and the Grimms, folk literature was not considered worthy of publication without literary embellishment (Stewart 1991:111–3, 119). Indeed, for La Villemarqué, the interest of nineteenth-century Breton popular ballads derived chiefly from his belief that they represented the vestiges of an earlier elite bardic tradition that, if not literate, was demonstrably literary. La Villemarqué summarizes his disdain for Breton ballads in their unedited popular form in his description of Luzel's *Gwerziou Breiz Izel* as "a bouquet of unhealthy weeds that even a donkey would not want" (La Villemarqué, quoted in Laurent 1989:25). As Gourvil points out, proponents of the *Barzaz Breiz* have argued that La Villemarqué's texts are much more valuable literary works than the "authentic banalities" collected by Luzel and others (1959:553). Yet in altering the texts he published, La Villemarqué suppressed the actual voices of the rural Breton culture that he sought to glorify. Significantly, citing *Ossian* and the KHM as cases in point, Bauman and Briggs (2003) discuss in detail how contemporary relationships of social inequality continue to be legitimated by a Romantic construction of modernity (associated with print technology and literacy), which is contrasted with its Other (associated with the spoken word and an ideology of orality).

The dichotomy between literacy and orality also has implications for the issue of authorship. Following Foucault ([1979] 1984), the *Barzaz Breiz* may be viewed as a

transitional text on the margins of modern conceptions of authorship, in which the legitimacy of literary works derives from their connection to a specific author. Prior to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, named authorship was believed to lend credibility to scientific texts but assumed little importance for literary works “since their ancientness, whether real or imagined, was regarded as a sufficient guarantee of their status” (Foucault [1979] 1984:109). Although the ballad texts in the *Barzaz Breiz* are presented as anonymous items of folklore whose authenticity is guaranteed by their antiquity, La Villemarqué’s name is definitely attached to the work, and as Laurent’s research has demonstrated, La Villemarqué can unequivocally be considered the author of the texts in the modern literary sense of the term owing to his reworking of the materials collected from oral sources. The case is further complicated by the fact that La Villemarqué presented the *Barzaz Breiz* as a scientific work, but one whose value depends precisely on the anonymity of the folk who composed its texts. More generally, as Geertz (1988:7–9) and others have suggested, this intricate balancing on the margins of scientific and literary discourses has been characteristic of ethnography as a genre since its inception, and continues to mark ethnographic writing in the twenty-first century.

Situated as it is on the border between science and literature, the *Barzaz Breiz* also evokes reflection about the interplay between oral and literate traditions. In literate societies where works of folklorists and ethnographers are widely accessible and have been in the public domain for generations, the extent to which it is possible to collect “pure” orally transmitted materials uninfluenced by previous scholarly works is difficult to ascertain. Present-day ethnographers can only speculate about the possibilities for interplay or feedback between Breton oral tradition and the *Barzaz Breiz* since its original publication in 1839. Nonetheless, La Villemarqué clearly sought to insert or reinsert the ballads he published into the Breton popular domain. While the *Barzaz Breiz* was intended for an educated readership throughout metropolitan France and abroad rather than for an audience in rural Brittany (Gourvil 1959:36), at the time of the 2nd edition in 1845, La Villemarqué published a pamphlet entirely in Breton, entitled *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz*, containing three of the ballads in the *Barzaz Breiz*. Gourvil presents evidence from a letter written to La Villemarqué by the Abbé Henry, one of La Villemarqué’s mentors and Breton instructors, that indicates that the goal of the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz* was to popularize the songs of the *Barzaz Breiz* and to ensure that they would be both known and performed among people of the “humble” classes (1959:316–7).

La Villemarqué and the Abbé Henry planned to have the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz* sold at fairs and local *pardons*, or patron saints’ festivals, where other ballad broadsheets were commonly circulated.⁹ However, according to Gourvil, the pamphlet would have held little appeal in the Breton countryside because of its standardized, literary language (1959:317). La Villemarqué’s correspondence indicates that several years after its publication, he still possessed numerous copies, which he gave out freely to mendicants: “Every winter, singers come to me and I send them off with their arms full of the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou* which they sow in the *montagnes d’Arrez*” (La Villemarqué, quoted in Gourvil 1959:318). Paradoxically, the Monts d’Arrée is considered by present-day researchers to be one of the regions

of Lower Brittany where oral tradition has been maintained in its most authentic form.

While Gourvil concludes that the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz* had little impact on the popular milieu, it remains the case that La Villemarqué attempted to introduce or reintroduce the songs in the *Barzaz Breiz* to the “folk” and ensure that these songs would be sung. From the present-day vantage point, it is impossible to gauge the degree to which this attempt succeeded or to discern the impact of the *Barzaz Breiz* itself (as distinct from the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz*) on the repertoires of Breton popular performers. Hence, the extent to which what is now considered genuine Breton oral tradition was in fact shaped by the *Barzaz Breiz* remains an open and ultimately unanswerable question.¹⁰

Without a doubt, however, the *Barzaz Breiz* has contributed to the process that Richard Handler terms the “objectification of culture” in Brittany, or the reification of culture as a natural, bounded entity with inherent properties or traits (1988:14). Referring specifically to Quebec, Handler argues that folklorists seeking to preserve elements of Québécois rural life objectified Québécois “folk culture” by isolating it as a discrete category for study and display. In the process of objectification, Handler argues that previously “unmarked” categories of behavior are demarcated as significant, and existing categories are assigned new significance as “traditional.” As these new understandings are adopted by the “folk” themselves, “folk culture” is inevitably altered and reconstructed as “tradition” (Handler 1988:77).

The same process of cultural objectification that Handler documents for Quebec can be traced through the history of folklore scholarship in Brittany beginning with the *Barzaz Breiz*. La Villemarqué’s work gave impetus to later folklore research in Brittany and contributed to the conscious structuring of “Breton folk tradition” as an object for scholarly interest. Likewise, ordinary people in Brittany have become aware, largely as a result of the work of researchers following in La Villemarqué’s path, that Brittany is a region rich in orally transmitted popular traditions of song and narrative that reflect a historically rooted national identity. Although ballads published in the *Barzaz pe Ganaouennou Breiz* and the *Barzaz Breiz* may have been disseminated into Breton oral tradition and thus may have changed that tradition at the level of content, the real impact of the *Barzaz Breiz* on Breton folklore lies at a deeper, definitional level. Ultimately, as Postic et al. (2003) have emphasized, the *Barzaz Breiz* has acted as a catalyst for the process of identity-formation and for later scholarly work on Breton oral tradition. Through its contribution to the objectification of Breton culture, the *Barzaz Breiz* has had its most profound and lasting influence.

Conclusion

For over a century and a half, since its original publication, the *Barzaz Breiz* has been read within and outside of Brittany. The aesthetic appeal of the *Barzaz Breiz* from the nineteenth century to the present has rested on the assumed popular character and antiquity of the work (Gourvil 1959:550). In Brittany, there is a direct relationship between the *Barzaz Breiz* and the development of Breton ethnography and folklore studies. Scholars like Gourvil (1959) acknowledge the role of La Villemarqué as a

precursor whose interest in Breton oral traditions led later researchers to undertake more systematic and rigorous studies in Brittany (Laurent 1989; Postic et al. 2003).¹¹ The influence of the *Barzaz Breiz* on the development of Breton nationalism and on the images of Breton culture held by both Bretons themselves and by outsiders has been critical. Likewise, although difficult to state with certainty, the *Barzaz Breiz* may have shaped the subsequent development of oral literature in Brittany through a complex dynamic of feedback between oral and literate traditions.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, ethnographers, folklorists, and historians seeking to evaluate the *Barzaz Breiz* can dismiss it as fakelore or invented tradition (Dorson 1969; Hobsbawm 1983). Alternatively, following a less essentialist approach that understands culture as emergent, fluid, and negotiated, debates about whether to characterize the *Barzaz Breiz* as spurious oral poetry appear unproductive. As Dundes suggested in his own now-classic discussion of fakelore and nationalism, rather than rejecting productions like *Ossian*, the KHM, or the *Kalevala*, “it is far better to accept the fact that fakelore may be an integral element of culture just as folklore is” (1989:53). Regardless of its authorship, the *Barzaz Breiz* has *become* the authentic voice of the Breton people because it has been accepted as expressive of that voice by generations of people within and outside of Brittany. Indeed, the work can be interpreted as a key symbol of Breton identity, providing through its texts and commentaries a representation of Brittany and Breton culture for Bretons themselves and for outsiders. Likewise, Laurent’s book about the *Barzaz Breiz* fulfills a similar symbolic role for contemporary readers, creating an image of Brittany that incorporates, in collage-like fashion, texts in the Breton language, pictorial images of rural life in Brittany during the Romantic era, and iconic reproductions of song texts in La Villemarqué’s handwriting, which link present-day readers to the voices of anonymous rural singers in the past.

As a literary work and symbolic creation, the *Barzaz Breiz* has filled for generations the role of mirror, reflecting Bretons to themselves and to others. The frequent association in European history between emergent movements of national or ethnic self-consciousness and literary works with roots in oral tradition—such as the *Barzaz Breiz*, *Poems of Ossian*, and the KHM—suggests that such mirrors are a critical element in the process of ethnic and national self-definition.

Notes

1. The extensive literature on this topic in history, anthropology, and folklore studies includes, but is not limited to, Bauman and Briggs (2003); Burke (1978); Dundes (1989); Ellis (1983); Gay (1997); Hobsbawm (1983, 1990); Honko (1990); McGlathery (1988); McKean (2001); O’Halloran (1989); Porter (2001); Thiesse (1999); Thomson (1951); Trevor-Roper (1983, 2008); Wilson (1976); and Zipes (1988). See also Abrahams (1993); Bauman and Briggs (2003); and Bendix (1997) for analysis of the relationships between Romanticism, authenticity, and the development of scholarship in anthropology and folklore studies. As one of Alan Dundes’ former students, I would like to acknowledge that the present essay was inspired by his seminal article “The Fabrication of Fakelore” (1989).

2. See Badone (1992, 1993, 1995) for earlier versions of the present paper.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French in this paper are by the author.

4. Thiesse (1999:120–31) reviews the French-language scholarship on the *Barzaz Breiz*. In addition to Constantine’s work in English, Glencross (1995:119–43) discusses the place of the *Barzaz Breiz* in French Romantic scholarship concerning the origins and diffusion of the Arthurian legends.

5. Although previous researchers, including Gourvil, had sought access to these manuscripts unsuccessfully, Laurent was given permission to study them, in part as a result of a fortuitous link of friendship between his father and a cousin of the La Villemarqué family (Laurent 1989:33).

6. See Dundes (1989) and Thiesse (1999) for discussion of these three examples. For the KHM, see Bauman and Briggs (2003); Ellis (1983); McGlathery (1988); and Zipes (1988). For the *Kalevala*, see Gay (1997); Honko (1990); and Wilson (1976). For *Ossian*, see Bauman and Briggs (2003); McKean (2001); O'Halloran (1989); Porter (2001); Thomson (1951); and Trevor-Roper (1983, 2008).

7. It should be noted that this model of Breton origins, put forward by La Villemarqué in his 1847 "Essai sur la langue bretonne," represents a reversal of his earlier view that the Bretons represented the vestiges of the continental Gaulish race (Guiomar 1992:542; Tanguy 1977). For discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates concerning Breton origins as the backdrop for Breton militancy in the second half of the twentieth century, see McDonald (1986). Similarly, Dietler (1994) considers these debates in terms of their significance for the field of archaeology, in which La Villemarqué was also influential, and discusses the symbolic role of the Celt in the discourses of identity-formation at the regional (Breton), national (French), and supranational (European Union) levels.

8. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to address the broader issues of nation-building at the level of the French state, which Ford (1993) argues took place during the nineteenth century through the interaction between local culture in Brittany and national-level institutions. I would suggest that the processes documented by Anderson (1983) involving the construction of nationalist ideologies were at work simultaneously in both the regional (Breton) and national (French) domains. As Ford (1993:230) suggests, however, ultimately over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a broadly based and highly successful Social Catholic political movement in Lower Brittany that sought to advance regional economic and cultural interests within the framework of a decentralized French republic absorbed much of the popular support that might otherwise have been expressed for ethnically based nationalist movements advocating Breton separatism.

9. On the importance of broadsheets circulated by *colporteurs* for the dissemination of popular songs in early nineteenth-century Brittany, see Ford (1993:111–5).

10. Citing correspondence by members of the La Villemarqué family who sought to authenticate La Villemarqué's work after his death, Laurent notes that several singers in the area of Nizon, the location of the La Villemarqué family manor, knew or remembered having heard versions of the songs published in the *Barzaz Breiz*. Laurent advances and rejects the hypothesis that the source for these individuals' recollections was the *Barzaz Breiz* itself (1989:285).

11. See also Meyer (2003:413) for discussion of the role of the *Barzaz Breiz* in more generally promoting the development of regionalism and regional cultures in France.

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Information about Contributors

Ellen Badone is Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at McMaster University. Her research in Brittany and southern France has focused on topics including death and dying, illness and healing, popular Roman Catholicism, and pilgrimage. Her publications include *The Appointed Hour: Death, Worldview and Social Change in Brittany* (1989); *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (1990; editor); and *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (2004; co-edited with Sharon R. Roseman).

Sheila Bock is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Much of her work focuses on African Americans' vernacular responses to health disparities. Her research interests also include performance and differential identity, foodways, the intersections between folklore and popular culture, and the multivocality of ethnographic research. She has published her work in the *Journal of Folklore Research*; *Western Folklore*; *Journal of Folklore and Education*; *Western Journal of Black Studies*; *Journal of Medical Humanities*; *Health, Culture, and Society*; *Diagnosing Folklore: Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma* (ed. Trevor J. Blank and Andrea Kitta, 2015); and *Comfort Food: Meanings and Memories* (ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, 2017).

Olivia Cadaval has curated numerous Festival programs, websites, and exhibitions, and has produced curriculum enrichment materials. She has worked extensively on documentation, public programs, and education projects in the Latino community of Washington, DC. She has published books, articles, book reviews, and a catalog, and has produced the bilingual website "Assembling the Festival Program: Colombia." She holds a PhD in American Studies and Folklife from George Washington University.

Ulla Savolainen is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She holds a PhD in Folklore Studies (University of Helsinki, 2015). Her doctoral dissertation focused on the life writings of former Karelian child evacuees in Finland and the poetics of reminiscing. Her current ongoing work, part of the "Livingmemories: Living Together with Difficult Memories and Diverse Identities" (SA: 294292) research project, is oral history research on the internment, and its aftermath, of German and Hungarian citizens during 1944–1946 in Finland after the war with the Soviet Union, exploring memories and narratives of individuals (usually children of German fathers and Finnish mothers) who were minors during the internment. The study addresses issues of silence, agency, and the interplay of personal or private and collective or public memory work and also takes into account the reception of the law of reparation (in Finland 2014).

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