

Portuguese Narrative Songs

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Portuguese narrative songs are part of the vast domain of narrative-dramatic oral poetry, still transmitted nowadays, especially among the elder members of rural and isolated communities, not only in Portugal and Spain but also in Brazil, Latin America and in some immigrant communities in the United States and Canada. They are a recent kind of oral and artistic body of texts, rich in number as in literary features. The oldest compositions date back to the turn of the nineteenth century and originate from the semantic and pragmatic schemes of Romantic poetry. Narrative songs were once very popular in Portugal, sung and transmitted by folk singers and blind beggars. The lyrics were registered in manuscript texts, school-books and leaflets (Nogueira 2002, 10-11).

Traditional ballads need to be distinguished from narrative songs on the basis of their subject, ideology, versification and discourse. The songs have more realistic content, relying on formal devices while their greater proximity to the popular author and interpreter better reflects the particular ethos of Portuguese communities. The ballads are composed of fourteen syllable-lines, each divided by a caesura. They have either a single type of rhyme sequence, where only the vowels rhyme, or several where different vowels form the rhyming pattern. The songs, on the other hand, usually have a four-line stanza (though some have five or six) of seven syllables each and an *abcb* rhyming scheme. The social strength or feeling of identity leading to social cohesion, sustained by this literature owes much to the magical power of poetry, whether recited or sung.

Both narrative songs and traditional ballads rely upon recurring couplets. During their performance, something peculiar happens between the singer and the audience, something that comes directly from the intrinsic structural characteristics of narrative song and from the act of actualising the verbal and musical text through voice: a moment of anthropological and sociological consistency, i.e., social identity, some heritage that, as in all oral literature, is shared between the interpreter (whether professional or not) and the audience. There is also cohesion between the song, the verse, the rhyme, the stance and the message of the text.

Sometimes, the text is being created and recited simultaneously. Either way, the text only exists as music and rhythm when there is a living voice that sings or recites, and when there is an audience who listens and recognizes the beauty of this literary moment. We can easily verify such poetic elements in a very popular narrative song about an orphan child who wants to visit her mother's grave and sings her misfortune:

- Tu que tens, ó criancinha, em cima desse penedro? (bis)
- Quero ir ao cemitério, mas sozinha tenho medo. (bis)

- Ó que vais ó cemitério, se tu lá não tens ninguém? (bis)
 - Quero ir beijar a campa da minha adorada mãe. (bis)
 - Então tu já não tens mãe, criança tão pequenina? (bis)
 - Foi tão triste a minha sorte, fiquei no mundo sozinha. (bis)
 Até um irmão qu'eu tinha, que me servia de pai, (bis)
 Foi tão triste a minha sorte qu'até esse já lá vai. (bis)
 (Nogueira 2002, 22-23)

-What do you have, oh little child, on top of that rock? (bis)
 - I want to go to the cemetery, but being alone I am afraid. (bis)
 - Why are you going to the cemetery, if you have nobody there? (bis)

- I want to kiss the grave of my adored mother. (bis)
 - Then you no longer have a mother, you little child? (bis)
 - My fate was so sad, it left me alone in the world. (bis)
 Even the brother I had, who looked after me like a father, (bis)
 My fate was so sad, even he is gone. (bis)

The expressional simplicity of narrative songs does not mean that they lack metaphorical or rhetorical value. Narrative songs are said to be unsophisticated because they do not use the artificial rhetoric of Romanticism but use their own poetics, alien to the language of reasoning, abstract thought or logic. The singers of narrative songs build and rebuild their work using a poetic language learned from oral tradition in order to tell a story, with a plot narrated in simple but aesthetic terms. Narrative songs can comprise a variety of discourses (narrative, drama, poetry) and can also reproduce the many nuances of *voice* (pauses, intonation, tone, 'plebeianisms,' etc.). Narrative songs are very economical in their means of expression; they favour action and dialogue above description, preferring nouns and verbs to adjectives.

The text may even be all or mostly dialogue so that it stages a dramatic scene or a succession of scenes, thus inviting the audience to take an active part in the text's recreation through imagining what is unsaid. The narrative begins *in medias res*, the dialogue gives no indication of the characters' cue, and its usually open ending offers several possibilities left to the imagination of the recipient, whether the text is carried as sound or through writing. The song's poetic form conveys a message and provides an aesthetic feeling that the audience enjoys through the senses.

As they reflect intimate social aspects, narrative songs still offer valid prescriptions to the challenges and aspirations of their few remaining bearers. Such songs used to function as 'news' and 'commentaries' on the principal events occurring in the community, echoing the fears and hopes of its members. Thus they work as an important factor of communal cohesion. Their single scene narrative is geared towards a particular audience and leaves little or no room for interpretation. This is obvious,

for instance, in the two possible endings of a narrative song about an unmarried pregnant girl who is *obliged* to commit suicide after hearing her parents' advice. In one case, the text says:

<p>Ó pais que tendes as filhas, vede e reparaí bem, Quando elas quiserem casar, deixai-as casar também.</p>	<p>Oh parents who have daughters, Listen and pay attention, When they want to get married, Let them get married too. (Nogueira 2002, 41)</p>
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In the other case, it has the girl say:

<p>Raparigas do meu tempo, não tindés pena de mim, Tinde pena duma alma que levo dentro de mim.</p>	<p>Oh girls of my time, Don't feel sorry for me, Be sorry for this soul, That I carry inside of me. (Nogueira 2002, 41)</p>
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These two versions of “Angelina” (Nogueira 2002, 41) illustrate the moral intent exhibited by narrative songs; this explains the frequent occurrence of disturbing and explicit solutions (disturbing, because of their violence to outsiders who live through dissimilar ethos), formalized in recommendations or advice undoubtedly directed to the addressees (the auditorium in context). The wish –the victim’s desire, as the young girl who gets pregnant and must commit suicide due to the rigid values that rule the society in which she lives– to create an alternative universe stands out, although clearly rooted in real concern:

Angelina, Angelina, tanto te cresce a barriga.
Se me deres algum desgosto, mato-te, tiro-te a vida.
- Não se aflija, meu pai, desgosto não lhe hei-de dar,
Ao cabo de nove meses, vou-me deitar a afogar.
- Tira os brincos das orelhas, o cordão do teu pescoço,
Ata tudo num lencinho, deixa à beira do poço.
- Ó pais que tendes as filhas, vede e reparaí bem,
Quando elas quiserem casar, deixai-as casar também.

[- Angelina, Angelina, so fast grows your belly;
If you cause me any displeasure, I'll kill you, take away your life.
- Don't be afflicted, my father, displeasure I will not cause you,
After nine months, I will *lie down to drown*.
- Remove the earrings from your ears, the necklace from your neck
Tie everything in a handkerchief, leave it by the well.

- Oh parents who have daughters, be well advised,
When they want to marry, let them do so.]

- Angelina, Angelina, tanto te cresce a barriga.
Se me deres algum desgosto, mato-te e tiro-te a vida.
- Valha a Deus, ó minha mãe, valha a Deus tanto ralar;
Se eu le der algum desgosto, estou aqui pra me matar.
- Tira os brincos das orelhas, o cordão do teu pescoço,
Amarra tudo no lenço, deixa-o à beira do poço.
Foi para a beira do poço, começou-se a pentear,
À espera da dita hora, que Deus tinha pra lhe dar.
- Raparigas do meu tempo, não tinddes pena de mim,
Tinde pena duma alma que levo dentro de mim.

[- Angelina, Angelina, so fast grows your belly;
If you cause me any displeasure, I'll kill you and take away your life.
- God save me, oh my mother, God save me from such anger;
If I cause you any displeasure, I am here to kill myself.
- Remove the earrings from your ears, the necklace from your neck,
Tie everything in a handkerchief, leave it by the well
She went to the edge of the well and combed her hair,
Awaiting the sad hour, that God was to give her.
Oh girls of my time, don't feel sorry for me,
Be sorry for this soul, that I carry inside of me.] (Nogueira, 2002, 41)

Portuguese narrative songs have love and family as central concerns and deal with them in all possible sorts of scenarios: seduction, rivalry, treason, fidelity in life or even in bereavement. They also portray love situations that in real life would be objected to and even ignored for going against the socially and morally accepted views, such as incest and cross-social or -cultural love relationships. Their narratives apprehend the social reality through a poetic medium that exemplifies, moralizes, and thus means to regulate behaviour. Incest, indeed, is given significant attention and treated with surprising realism and dramatic tension.

My own song collection includes a version of "It Was a Young Girl" that bespeaks of the power of the girl's desire for her brother as she kills her mother for reprehending her as a result of her brother's confession (Nogueira 2002, 13). It also includes a version of the well-known "Goodbye, Whitewashed House", which tells of a man arrested for deflowering his daughter (Nogueira 2002, 82-83).

The characteristic brevity of most of these songs takes nothing from their meaning. The following piece, which combines narration and lyricism, speaks for its relevance to personal and collective experience:

Ero quatro horas da tarde, ai, o Alfredo andava a lavrare,
 Chigou a triste notícia, Maria estava a acabare.
 Tenho pai, tenho mãe, tenho tudo, ai, só me falta o amor da Maria,
 Acabou-se, amor, acabou-se, acabou-se a nossa alegria.

[It was four o'clock in the afternoon, oh when Alfredo went out to plough,
 Sad news came to him, Maria was dying.
 I have a father, a mother, everything, alas, I only need Maria's love,
 It's over, my love, it's over, our happiness finished.] (Nogueira 2002, 52)

The tension between nightmare and rescue, reality and imagination, desire and virtue is the very subject of the *Cancioneiro* (the term refers to the Portuguese song repertoire). Men and women –whether married, noble, devoted, faithful, fortunate or unfortunate– all yield to the power of love, often portrayed indeed as harmful, sinful and fatal. Women, whether malicious or innocent, typically are to carry the fruit (illicit pregnancy) of unfortunate encounters and take up material, moral and social responsibility for it. The discourse on women and sexual transgression likely reflects social fears and prejudices more than natural female ‘perversion.’ The following recitation gives expression to the emblematic figure of the shameful as opposed to the virtuous woman:

A patroa, arrelhada,
 À espera da criada,
 Já com ira daninha,
 Levantou-se a correr,
 Saiu da cama e foi ver
 Se ela estava na cozinha.
 Não a viu, lembrou-se então
 De ir ao quarto do patrão.
 Espreitou toda brijeira,
 Ficou toda arrelhada
 Ao ver estar a criada
 Com o patrão na brincadeira.
 - Eu só te queria ver morta.
 Põe-te já fora da porta,
 Que me causaste ciúmes.
 O meu marido, enfim,
 Era tão sério pra mim,
 Abezou-se a maus costumes.
 Olhem, patroas,
 Devem ter muito cuidado:
 Quem tem criadas

[The teased wife,
 Awaiting the maid,
 Already with erupting anger,
 Got up and ran,
 Left her bed and went to see
 If she was in the kitchen.
 She didn't see her, she remembered then
 To go to her husband's room.
 She went looking for trouble
 And got angry
 when she saw the maid
 With her husband in the game.
 - I just want to see you dead;
 Get out of the door,
 You have caused me jealousy.
 My husband, after all,
 Was so serious for??? me,
 He got used to bad habits.
 Listen to me, ladies,
 You must be very careful:
 That who has housemaids

Anda sempre arrelhada.	Is always uneasy.
São descaradas,	They are shameless,
Nunca fazem coisas boas.	They never do any good.
Entram criadas	They enter as maids
E querem sair patroas.	And want to become mistresses.]
	(Nogueira 2002, 53)

Contradicting the generally accepted idea of a weaker sex or else aspiring to a compensatory function as role models, some heroines come to poetic life in order to revenge and restore their own honour, whether through astuteness (“Seduced young girl convinces her boy friend to marry her,” Galhoz 1988b, 1032) or courage and cold blood (“Seduced young girl revenges her honour,” Galhoz 1988b, 1026). It remains, though, that a majority of narrative songs invert this perspective; women mostly find themselves to be the victims of masculine arbitration. Men remain in control of social identity, family honour and female intimacy (“H. Seduced women,” Galhoz 1988b: 1007-36).

Sexuality with its complex psychological, social and moral implications of course cannot be evaded as an issue, least of all in narrative. Our previous examples apart, the group “Seduced women” reinforces female resignation to male supremacy, which can even lead to suicide (the group of “Suicides” admits several poems about young people who kill themselves for love or lack of it). In a society little inclined to compromise with women’s looseness (especially if this implied loss of virginity before marriage), one could hardly expect many poems to belong to the group of “Adulteresses” or any poems to justify the group of “Seducing women.”

Narrative *Cancioneiros*, like most other songs of oral tradition, are sung by women. The feminine nature of this repertoire can be explained by men’s greater distance from the family nucleus on account of their occupations (farming or other seasonal or permanent work outside the village). Left to their own company, women overcome their fears and express their values by intoning these songs to themselves or to a small (mostly female) circle, due to the gradual disappearance of collective tasks, such as planting, mowing or weeding. My field data, therefore, supports Virtudes Atero Burgos’s suggestion, likely applicable to western European traditions at large, that narrative songs today are essentially poetic expressions of intimacy (1994, 26).

I agree with Maria Aliete Galhoz:

Narrative songs also contemplate satire and jest, banter and malediction, quarrel and parody, but they especially deal with epic and tragic, that is, with life and death. The voices, which sing the particular, become the Voice that assumes the collective. (1988a, 153)

Many narrative songs expose tragic scenes in crude detail, unified by a common theme –death. These are texts which accept wide diversities of orientations, are

performed by men as well as women and victims as well as criminals. They reflect social and psychic tension and tend toward a realistic and Manichean discourse with victims and culprits kept in separate spheres, the ones arousing compassion and the others repulsion (Galhoz 1988b, 1136).

Crimes of passion are current enough, filicides, parricides and marital murders all occur with diverse configurations and motivations; parents kill their newborns to conceal their illicit love, sons murder their parents with their lovers' encouragement, husbands and wives slay their consorts, sons are eliminated by their lovers, and rejected suitors solve their passion with ruthless deaths. At the top of such perversities, one should not be surprised to find acts of cannibalism, the graphic account of which likely reaffirms community values (Galhoz 1988b, 1109-10).

The capital cause of suicide is impetuous passion, and its ensuing disruption in many cases can only be solved by death. Transgression and inevitable self-chastisement, with loss of virginity, are a common binomial in this literature. Compositions like "On August 30th" (Galhoz 1988b, 1155) are structures of meaning that represent an idiosyncratic system, practices and traditional representations of mankind, especially the female one.

The songs categorized under "Other deaths" deal with accidents and diseases like tuberculosis or yellow fever victimizing marriageable boys and girls, recently married couples and children (Galhoz 1988b, 1218). This topic is particularly rich in final lyrical sequences, static moments in which the narrator explores sensations and emotions, a circumstance that clearly shows his subjective attitude, in a confluence of sensorial and cognitive apprehension of the narrated event. Evocation, after all, is a collectivized subjective state:

Lua cheia, quando nasce ao romper da madrugada,
Vai-lhe visitar a campa, ai, onde ela está sepultada.

[When the full moon is born to the break of the dawn, (bis)
It visits the grave, alas, where she is buried.] (Galhoz 1988b, 1222)

These narrative songs, rooted in a Catholic society, present a profoundly Christian vision of suffering, crime and punishment, dramatizing the struggle between Good and Evil and arousing pity as much as awe. Though it may not be explicit in all poems, once the sentence is pronounced by canonical justice, it is unescapable: "Now she will answer / to the tribunal of Pinhel" ("Agora vai responder / Ò tribunal de Pinhel"); "She will be and will be condemned / and with a hundred years, with a hundred years of prison" ("Ela será e será condenada/ e com cem anos, com cem anos de prisão"); "Now I am being deported / with a hundred years plus one day ("Agora vou degredado/ por cem anos mais um dia"); "The chairman of the parish / the guard sent for, telling what has happened / for the culprits to catch" ("O rigedor da freguesiê/ a guarda mandou chamar./ Cuntando o acontecido/ pròs culpados apanhar"); "To Africa

you are going degraded / to Africa you will die” (“Para África vais degradado,/ para África vais morrer”); “Come here to see the murderer / that will answer now” (“Vem cá ver o assassino/ que vai responder agora”); “Thursday one will give audience to the tyrants” (“Quinta-feirê se bai dar/ audiência òs tiranos) (Galhoz 1988b, 1067, 1073, 1074, 1082, 1101, 1113, 1122).

It is assumed that the “Law of Equilibrium” may be re-established by direct transcendent intervention –a recurring motive in the heading “Para-religious”, quite indicative of some of the main characteristics of Portuguese popular religiosity–, and which can be interpreted as proof of the inexorability of divine justice: “The mother, for being so evil, / by a ray she was fulminated / in great punishment of God!” (Galhoz 1988b, 1077).

The group of the “Pastoral” contains compositions that remind us of medieval poems whose characters, a shepherdess and a nobleman, converse with each other. In modern versions the female figure keeps her status, but in a natural process of accommodation the knight is substituted by the “gentleman,” “Sir,” “shepherd,” or simply “lover,” “sweetheart” and “brother” (disguised). This is, I believe, the most homogeneous group from a rhetorical-semantic point of view due to the ingenious movement of the compositions, built in a natural and pleasant style (Galhoz 1988b, 1259).

Linked to the everyday life of their transmitters, these poems privilege universal protagonists, despite the ordinary use of proper names to emphasize the veracity of the report and to facilitate the durability of the memory of the heroes, evoked by their positive or negative acts, or by the situations in which they appear as victims. Some names have even had an unquestionable historical life, like João Brandão or Zé do Telhado, who present, together with individualized features, psychological lines and behaviours applicable to other characters (courage, loyalty, dedication to certain values). Aristotle affirmed that the common people should not be the main topic of literature but those who belong to the realm of the heroic, like Achilles or Ulysses. Today it is known, though, that the common men are the ones who form the essential element of books, readings and oral literary texts, repositories of memory that can influence the direction of the events.

The reading or audition of a narrative ballad is not limited to its simple recreational effect nor ignores its receiver-author’s experiences. This literature is part of the lives of those who *use* it and must be understood within the framework of the quotidian lives of people. As such, these narrative ballads help preserve communal values as well as foster new ways of envisioning and understanding the world.

In spite of offering dates and toponyms, which serve to underline the truth of the chronicle in verse, the intrigue becomes consequently timeless and histories are applicable, in all likelihood, to any time and space. The “Fiancé’s Return” is an opportune example, a paradigm of the loving perseverance that resists any temptation (Galhoz 1988b, 963).

Like any text of popular literature / traditional of oral transmission, the narrative ballad is an open structure that reacts dynamically to the incentives of the dichotomy building legacy / innovation. The opening of the ballad promotes its adaptation, in space and time, to the ethical systems of the community that uses it, without becoming a different poem. Each version continues, potentially, in another version, which means that to any virtual structure, whether theoretical (when the founding text is ignored) or empirical (when the inaugural text is known, generally in a written form), could correspond a perpetual chain of metamorphoses whose movement rests in an incessant destructive-constructive logic.

Each of the versions constitutes the ephemeral manifestation of the same poem, built through the numerous interpreter-authors' collaboration. The function of these transmitters is not drained in the mimetic repetition of the interiorized ballads. These performers alter and accommodate these versions continually to their own tastes and needs, filling the breaks left by flaws of memory or imperfect receptions. As generally happens in all the aspects of literary folklore, the interpreter is successful because he is someone placed inside the group who hears (or creates from previously known models) and uses the reference registered in private contexts and in certain constellations of meanings.

Therefore, there will hardly be an intellectual rupture between the stylistic mechanism and the reference field. The interpreter is not just influenced by the factors integrated in the oral composition, as the multiplicity of forms, the themes, the occasion or the audience. His performance is also constituted by stylistic aspects that work as norms to adopt (prosodic, stylistic and structural models), being at the same time resources sufficiently flexible to provide unique and unrepeatable productions. The style of the poem cannot be separated from the process of performance, for sometimes the poetic composition / variation occurs during the oral recitation.

To conclude, we should not simply complain about the on-going disappearance of narrative songs (and other types of oral literature) for they can survive through written transcriptions, as happens with any other literary text. Therefore, we must increase the number of studies on this specific area of Portuguese (Hispanic and pan-Hispanic) literature and culture, usually forgotten by scholars due to aesthetic, social, cultural and political prejudice. Portuguese literary and musical folklore must be given its rightful place in cultural studies, because it represents the knowledge of a substantial section of our society. This apparently minor field of investigation contains in itself ancestral secrets and an aesthetic value that should be considered as true popular literary art.

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