

## **Oral ballads as national literature: The reconstruction of two Norwegian ballads.**

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My childhood perception of the Middle Ages has many origins, but the two most important ones were probably the Prince Valiant comics by Hal Foster and the Norwegian ballads. I am defenceless against the images evoked by these sources. Even though I know that Prince Valiant is a romanticised jumble of elements from different epochs, these are often the images that surface when I think about the Middle Ages. The pictures summoned up by the Norwegian ballads are much more diffuse. As a child I never saw an illustrated edition of Norwegian ballads, but they remain just as firmly etched into my imagination as Prince Valiant.

I soon realised that the Prince Valiant comics were inaccurate. Prince Valiant was supposed to be a Norwegian prince from Thule, and the events in many of the episodes printed in the early 1950s took place in Norway. However, the landscape, ships, weapons and architecture did not fit in with what I had learned from other sources.

The ballads, on the other hand, seemed more authentic, which was why I was so disappointed when as a high school student I learned that the Norwegian ballads were not genuine medieval works, but had been transcribed by folk song collectors after 1840. I was even more disappointed when, while studying folklore at the University of Oslo, I discovered that the ballads I had sung as a child could differ greatly from those transcribed by the folk song collectors.

Most folk ballad research has been focused on how the ballads evolved through an oral tradition and on the relationship between the ballads and the Middle Ages. I find it just as interesting to examine the ballads' evolution and significance in the present century. Therefore, in this paper I shall take a closer look at one of the scholars involved in folk song reconstruction and his work with two Norwegian ballads. It is well known that folk song collectors and scholars reconstructed the texts of ballads before they were published right up to the middle of this century. This work was considered to be so important that Professor Moltke Moe (1859-1913) devoted valuable time to reconstructing ballads instead of publishing original material in a scholarly edition patterned on Grundtvig's *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* or Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. We might ask what motivated him to undertake this task and what principle he was applying. Why have ballads been given the form they have today in our songbooks and phonograms?

### **The Dream Vision of Olav Åsteson**

"Draumkvedet", The Dream Vision of Olav Åsteson, or literally "The Dream Song" is a ballad identified as TSB B 31 in the Scandinavian ballad catalogue. <sup>1</sup> It is a cultural treasure in Norway, and is generally regarded as a medieval poem, even if no version of it is known before the 19th century. The most important and one of the earliest transcription of "Draumkvedet" dates from the 1840s. It was the version sung by Maren Ramskeid, which was noted down by Pastor M.B. Landstad. Maren Ramskeid lived in Telemark, a mountainous area in the central part of southern Norway, where folk-music traditions are still flourishing.

"Draumkvedet" is a ballad about Olav Åsteson, who falls asleep on Christmas Eve and sleeps through all twelve days of Christmas, only to awaken on the thirteenth day (Epiphany). He then rides to church, where he sits in the doorway and tells of what he has dreamed. His dream is a vision in which he makes a pilgrimage along the path trodden by the dead: through deep marshes and over thorny heaths to Gjallarbrua, the bridge leading to the Kingdom of the Dead. On the other side of the bridge he beholds purgatory, hell and the blissful souls in Paradise. He also watches the battle between Christ, St. Michael and the angels, and the Devil and his army. Finally, he witnesses the Day of Judgment, when St. Michael weighs each soul on a pair of scales.

Landstad was naturally intrigued by this folk song and immediately went about trying to find other variants of it. He had no difficulty finding fragments of the ballad, but tracking down more complete versions was quite another story. Maren Ramskeid had sung 30 stanzas, but most singers knew only a few. Moreover, these fragments tended to differ greatly, both from one another and from Maren Ramskeid's version. What is more, most of the singers only had a vague idea of the story of the ballad. According to a local saying, that there was no one who was so stupid that he didn't know some stanzas of "Draumkvedet", but nor was there anyone who was so smart that he knew the whole ballad.

When Landstad published his collection of Norwegian folk songs in 1853, he included a reconstruction of "Draumkvedet" comprising 60 stanzas, which he had selected from many variants. He also included the version sung by Maren Ramskeid. Landstad of course noted that the theme of the ballad had been taken from pre-Reformation Catholicism. St. Michael and purgatory do not figure in Norwegian Lutheran Protestantism. However, there are elements in "Draumkvedet" that date even further back in time. The bridge to the Kingdom of the Dead is called "Gjallarbrua", which is the name of the bridge to Paradise in pre-Christian Norse mythology. Moreover, the devil is called Grutte Gråskjegg, which is one of the names used for Odin in Norse mythology. Therefore it was conceivable that "Draumkvedet" dated as far back as to the earliest days of Christianity in Norway, the eleventh century, when the Christian faith existed side by side with Norse mythology.

Some years later, Sophus Bugge, another great folklorist and scholar, called attention to the similarity between "Draumkvedet" and medieval visionary literature. He saw a particularly strong resemblance between "Draumkvedet" and the vision experienced by the Irish nobleman Tundall in 1149. This vision was noted down shortly thereafter and later translated to many European languages, including Old Norse. Literary members of the Norwegian court carried out this translation in the thirteenth century. 2

However, "Draumkvedet" did not begin to arouse interest beyond folklorist circles until the 1890s. Norway had been under the rule of Denmark until 1814 and been part of a union with Sweden until 1905. Thus, nationalistic feelings ran high in Norway in the 1890s. A great deal of importance was attached to strengthening the Norwegian identity, and there was thus a need for products that demonstrated the richness and quality of Norwegian culture. Professor Moltke Moe of the University of Oslo lectured on Norwegian ballads at the beginning of the 1890s, and included his own reconstruction of "Draumkvedet", which comprised 52 stanzas. All of these stanzas are to be found in the original transcriptions, but many of them and whole passages were only to be found in the repertoire of a single singer. Moltke Moe changed the order of the stanzas and a number of words, rendering the language more archaic. In his lectures, Moltke Moe placed "Draumkvedet" in an historical and European perspective. As he was well acquainted with Irish visionary literature, it is not surprising that his reconstruction underscores the similarity to Tundall's vision.

Moltke Moe's reconstruction has been "Draumkvedet" as we know it since the turn of the century. His was the version reproduced in schoolbooks and anthologies, and the one analysed and commented on in literary histories. Moltke Moe's version was also the one that was translated to other languages. "Draumkvedet" soon became a national cultural treasure, which inspired painters, musicians and writers.

Before examining the reasons why "Draumkvedet" has achieved the status of a national cultural treasure, I would like to say a few words about the aspects of the ballad that make it an unlikely candidate for such status. First of all, "Draumkvedet" has only been documented in a small area in northern Telemark, i.e. it was not known throughout the country. This is hardly surprising. Folk poetry is rarely national in character, but takes on the local colour of the community in which it originates, while it is international in terms of type and genre. The story of "Draumkvedet" is also told in an archaic dialect, which is not automatically understood by all Norwegians. Indeed, many of the words were incomprehensible to those who sang the ballad. Thus, most Norwegians need extensive linguistic guidance in order to grasp the tale told in "Draumkvedet". Furthermore, the worldview on which the ballad is based and the medieval Catholic mythology seem quite remote to modern-day Norwegians. This means that the average reader needs a detailed explanation of the cultural background in order to understand the story.

Another factor that undermines "Draumkvedet's" status as a "genuine" national treasure is the fact that there is some doubt as to whether it is an epic ballad at all. In the area where "Draumkvedet" originated, there was a well-established tradition of lyrical monostrophic folk songs known as *stev*. The *stev* is a typical short, four-line form which has been extensively used for improvisation and which was often characterized by proverbial words of wisdom and distinct images. The various stanzas of "Draumkvedet" have the same form as a *stev*, and many of them are also to be found as independent *stev*. All the melodies associated with "Draumkvedet" are *stev* melodies as well.

Even though these *stev* are monostrophic and used as separate stanzas in an oral tradition, several *stev* having the same theme are sometimes sung in the form of a conglomerate ballad, known as a *stevrekke*, or series of *stev*. These series rarely have an epic story line or a fixed form. The order of the stanzas is haphazard, depending on the singer's memory. One such series of *stev* is sung as if it is being told by a ghost. A dead man explains what it is like in the grave, and in this sense this *stevrekke* is very similar to "Draumkvedet". A few of the best singers of "Draumkvedet" were aware that the stanzas of the ballad should be sung in a particular order, but most of them had no idea of what this order was. To them "Draumkvedet" was a conglomerate series of *stev*, independent single stanzas with a common theme.

Many Norwegian folk songs are humorous, and these are the songs that have been most popular and commonly known. Although many of the humorous songs have elements that indicate that they are very old, these songs have never been regarded as national cultural treasures. "Draumkvedet" is not humorous and it deals with the eternal question of life after death. The fact that the text is enigmatic and difficult to grasp has obviously not been a problem. It simply underscores that this is a ballad from a different age with a different way of thinking. Moreover, Moltke Moe did not hesitate to draw parallels with well known literary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* when emphasizing the literary value of "Draumkvedet".

The most important reason why "Draumkvedet" became a literary treasure is probably its historical context. In the Middle Ages, Norway was an independent kingdom, and in the 1200s Norway was at the height of its power and probably the leading cultural influence in Scandinavia. Since "Draumkvedet" contained elements from both Norse mythology and medieval Catholicism, it represented a link between the present and the "Golden Age" of Norway. It was also important in this context to link "Draumkvedet" to the visionary poetry of the Middle Ages. In his reconstruction, Moltke Moe emphasized the similarity to the Irish nobleman Tundall's vision, thereby also underscoring the connection with the Norwegian court, where the vision was translated to Old Norse. During the nationalist era, scholars were consistently preoccupied with how old "Draumkvedet" could be, never how young it might be. In Norway the Reformation was the result of an order handed down by the authorities, rather than a popular protest movement. Therefore, the Catholic mentality lived on long after the Reformation, especially in isolated areas such as northern Telemark, where "Draumkvedet" was discovered. On the basis of this, it is possible to argue that "Draumkvedet" could be as young as the seventeenth century. As I mentioned earlier, we have no evidence of "Draumkvedet's" existence prior to the 1800s. 3

### **Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux**

Moltke Moe's reconstruction of Draumkvedet was done by collecting material from many different singers. Analysing another Norwegian ballad, Roland og Magnus Kongen, Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux (TSB E 29), will show his working principles even more clear. This ballad lends itself especially well to this kind of analysis because there is so little original material available. All we have is one more or less complete transcription of the ballad. It is taken from a manuscript written around 1800 by Lavrans Groven, a peasant who lived in Telemark, the same area where Draumkvedet was found, and this transcription has 27 stanzas. 4 When folk song collectors began to transcribe Norwegian ballads some 40 years later, there were only fragments to be found, so very few of the transcriptions are more than a couple of stanzas. Therefore, Professor Moltke Moe used Groven's text as his main basis when he reconstructed the ballad around 1900. This is the reconstruction we know from songbooks and folk singers' repertoires. 5

If we compare Lavrans Groven's manuscript and Moltke Moe's reconstruction, we see that the two texts differ in many respects. In the introduction to his reconstruction, Moltke Moe writes that Groven's text is fragmentary and full of holes. However, when we read Groven's text, we can see that there is a definite epic thread. It begins by telling about Roland and his warriors travelling to a heathen land. We then hear about the heathen king who decides to fight against Roland. The account of the battle itself is quite brief. The heathens try to take the sword Dvergedolg from Roland, but to no avail. Finally Roland blows the horn Olifant. King Magnus (Carolus Magnus) hears the sound and comes to the rescue, but by then Roland has been slain. When the king reaches Roland's side, the dead man opens his fist and allows the king to take the sword. The king does battle against the heathens and is victorious. The ballad closes with the king grieving for Roland, but in the end he conquers his grief.

Moltke Moe structures the ballad differently by dividing the story into seven scenes or episodes. The first two are about the journey to the heathen land and the heathen king's decision to do battle with Roland. These episodes comprise stanzas taken directly from Groven's text. However, then comes the battle scene, which Moltke Moe has expanded and made into the climax of the ballad. He divides the battle scene into three episodes; the heathens attack Roland and his warriors three times. Moltke Moe constructs the three battle scenes by repeating the same stanzas, but varies it, creating a sense of epic drive from scene to scene.

Each of these episodes begins with a stanza that describes the horde of heathens, followed by a stanza that portrays Roland's terrible struggle using drastic images. Then comes a stanza in which the warriors bid Roland blow his horn to summon the king, but Roland refuses. In the third and last battle scene, he finally blows the horn. In episode six the king arrives at the battleground only to find Roland and his warriors lying dead. He sends out men to fetch Roland's sword, but they are unable to free it from his grasp. Only when the king himself comes does the corpse relax its grip. Episode seven depicts the king's grief. These stanzas are taken directly from Groven's manuscript, but the stanzas describing how the king conquers his grief are not included. Thus, Moltke Moe has created a well-structured ballad in which there is a balance between the episodes. He has exploited the motifs of the horn Olifant and the sword Dvergedolg in particular. In Groven's text Roland simply blows the lur without any further ado. In Moe's reconstruction he refuses twice to summon aid, but blows the horn the third time. But then it is too late. In Groven's text it is the heathens who seek to take the sword from Roland while he is alive. In Moe's reconstruction it is the king's men who try to get the corpse to loosen its grip on the sword. Moltke Moe had to invent quite a lot himself in order to make his reconstruction of the ballad work. For the most part Moe makes use of familiar ballad formulas (commonplaces), but many of the stanzas have been considerably rewritten and two of them are entirely his own invention. In all three of the battle scenes he uses the same stanzas from Groven's text, but varies them in order to create a sense of epic intensity.

In addition to the new stanzas, he has made some changes in the language. Lavrans Groven's text from 1800 is written in the same dialect that we find in Draumkvedet, and at that time there was no convention for writing norwegian dialects, so Groven's text is difficult to read even for people with a well developed linguistic ability. One might expect Professor Moe to make the language of his reconstruction more easily accessible, but that is not the case. On the contrary he makes the language even more archaic by replacing modern words with older ones. And just as he invents new stanzas, he also takes the liberty of making up new words. The first time the reconstructed ballad was published in a classroom edition (Liestøl and Moe 1912) he had to use four pages to explain the words of a ballad of 28 four-line stanzas. It is clear that he felt it was more important for the ballad to give an impression of great age than for it to be easily understandable.

I will give an example of how words were made up. In the opening stanza of Groven's text the king says:

Seks mine sveinar heime vere	Six of my swains stay at home
Gjøyme de gulli balde	hiding the shiny gold
Dei andre seks på heidningslande	The other six [go] to the heathen land
Røyne de jønne kalle.	trying the cold steel.

The word sveinar (swains) was not appropriate to Moltke Moe. A king should not call his chosen men servants. So he changed it to Seks mine jallar heime vere (Six of my earls stay at home). In a footnote he explains the word jallar as a plural form of jall, the ballad word for old Norse jarl (English: earl). But this word jall is nowhere found in Norwegian ballads. In modern Norwegian we still write and say jarl as in old Norse. Moltke Moe may have been inspired by Faeroese ballads where the word has the form jallur. But they pronounce it jador so the word jall is Moltke Moe's own construction.

An examination of the stanza form reveals a similar phenomenon. The rhythm of old Norwegian folk songs is usually quite free. In old recordings, we can hear that the text is allowed to dominate both the stanza form and the melody, so that there is melodic variation from stanza to stanza. This seems quite strange to the modern listener, who expects the melody to create a regular pattern into which the text is made to fit. The textual rhythm in modern editions of ballads is therefore often tightened up so that they are more singable. Although Moltke Moe also standardised the rhythm in his reconstruction, in several places he also altered the stanzas to something that was even more difficult to sing. In this stanza the last line of Moes version is changed so that it is hardly singable at all, without adding any special meaning:

Groven:

Kunne me inkje skatten kons	If we can not get our taxes
ta dessa l�ando f�a	from these countries,
s� sk�a me up p� Rusarvodden	we will on Roncevaux
� sl�ss uti dagine tv�.	fight for two days.

Moe's last line:

sl�st i dagane tv� og trj�.	Fight for two and three days.
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The fact that Moltke Moe took so little interest in rhythm and singableness gives us some idea of his view of the ballads. He did not regard them primarily as songs, but as literature. Universities too have their oral tradition, and there is an anecdote about Moltke Moe, which tells that when he was noting down folk songs, he insisted that the singers dictate the text without singing the melody. He regarded melody as a complicating factor. It goes without saying that it is much more difficult to dictate the text of a folk song than to sing it. I cannot swear to the truth of this anecdote, but it is quite strange that when writing about ballads, Moltke Moe always explains how they should be read, but never how they should be sung.

As with *Draumkvedet* Moltke Moe's aim was to establish a national culture, and the ballads were to be presented as literary works Norwegians could be proud of. The ballad of Roland is particularly well suited to such an aim. It is clear that the Norwegian version of the ballad takes its motif from the European legends about Charles the Great and Roland. And it is not unreasonable to surmise that the ballad was based on *Karlamagnus saga*, a prose translation of the French *Chanson de Roland*. The translation was done at the Norwegian court in the mid-1200s. Thus, this ballad can also be used to link our own time with what was considered to be a golden age in Norway in the late Middle Ages.

The ballad of Roland was valuable to Moltke Moe, not as a popular folk song transmitted between Norwegian peasants in the 1800s, but as a relic of a golden era in Norwegian history. The ballad had to be lifted out of its temporal and social context and linked more closely to the age of chivalry. That the motifs of the sword *Dvergedol* and the horn *Olifant* were elaborated in Moltke Moe's version surely has to do with the fact that these motifs are clearly associated with medieval legends. This also explains why Moltke Moe was concerned about making the language more archaic rather than more easily accessible. When he invented new words, he took words from Old Norse and tried to imagine how they would have sounded if they had survived into the 1800s. *Lavrans Groven's* text is probably also related to the *Karlamagnus saga*, but it is marred by its loose structure.

On the other hand would Moltke Moe discard any stanza that did not have the right medieval and heroic taste. One stanza tells that Roland could know his soldiers at the battle because they had blue or red collars on their uniforms. This sounds rather modern and the stanza was naturally omitted by Moe even if this is the stanza known by most singers.

However, Moltke Moe succeeded. We must admit that his reconstruction reveals a sure grasp of poetry. Moreover, while Groven's language lacked the same sureness, Moltke Moe, with his professorial authority, was able to give his text an aura of authenticity.

Moltke Moe's reconstructions were hailed as the authentic versions. They have been included in literary anthologies and on university syllabuses and are considered to be one of the treasures of Norwegian literary history. The ballad of Roland is still occasionally to be heard, accompanied by a Faroese melody, on the radio, on phonograms and in concerts, while Lavrans Groven's genuinely authentic version is known only to a handful of folklorists. Despite the many questions concerning its origin and authenticity, "Draumkvedet" is heard more frequently. And was selected as the basis for the largest theatre production staged in connection with the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994.

1) Jonsson, Solheim and Danielson, *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballads*. Oslo 1978

Landstad, M. B., *Norske Folkeviser*. Christiania 1853

2) Liestøl, Knut, *Draumkvæde: A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages*. *Studia Norvegica* No. 3, Oslo 1946 and Barnes, Michael, *Draumkvæde: An edition and Study*. Oslo 1974

3) Alver, Brynjulf, *Draumkvedet*. Oslo 1971

4) Blom, Ådel Gjøstein and Bø, Olav, *Norske balladar i oppskrifter frå 1800-talet*. Oslo 1973

5) Liestøl, Knut and Moe, Moltke, *Norske Folkeviser fra middelalderen*. Kristiania 1912

## **Draumkvedet**

A selection of stanzas from Illit Grøndahl's translation of Moltke Moes text in Liestøl's *Draumkvædet: A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages*.

1. Come list to me, and I will tell  
Of a lad so brave and strong;  
I'll tell you of Olav Åsteson  
Who slept a sleep so long.

2. He laid him down on Christmas Eve  
And fell asleep full fast,  
And he woke not till Epiphany,  
When folk to church did pass.  
For it was Olav Åsteson who slept a sleep so long.

3. He laid him down on Christmas Eve  
And slept without a break.  
And he woke not till Epiphany,  
When the birds their wings did shake.  
For it was Olav Åsteson who slept a sleep so long.

5. Before the altar stands the priest  
And long he reads the prayer.  
Olav down in the porch he sits  
And tells his dreams out there.  
    For it was Olav Åsteson who slept a sleep so long.

7. I laid me down on Christmas Eve  
And fell asleep full fast,  
And I woke not till Epiphany,  
When folk to church did pass.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

10. I have been up to the clouds above  
And down to the dyke full dark.  
Both have I seen the flames of hell  
And of heaven likewise a part.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

12. I am tired and travel-worn  
With thirst I am aglow,  
Waters I hear but cannot reach,  
For under the earth they flow.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

16. First I went forth with my soul,  
I went through briar and thorn,  
And torn was then my scarlet cloak,  
And the nails from my feet were torn.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

18. Came I then to Gjallar Bridge,  
So high up in the air.  
With red gold it is decked above  
And the pinnacles gold so fair.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

19. The serpent strikes, and the dog he bites,  
And the bull stands on the path;  
These three things are on the Gjallar Bridge  
And all are fierce and wroth.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

21. Gone have I over Gjallar Bridge,  
Did hard and steep it find.  
Waded have I the miry march,  
Now are they left behind.  
    The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

22. Waded have I the miry march  
Where never a foot finds hold.  
Crossed have I also Gjallar Bridge,  
My mouth filled with grave-mould.  
The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

24. Then I came to those lonely lakes,  
Were the glittering ice burns blue;  
But God put warning in my heart,  
And thence my step I drew.  
The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

27. Then I turned to my right hand,  
Where the Milky Way does rise,  
And over lovely lands I saw  
The shining paradise.  
The moon it shines, and the roads do stretch so wide.

29. Came I to the pilgrim's church,  
No one knew I there,  
But only blest godmother mine  
With gold on her fingers fair.  
In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

30. There came a host from out the north,  
It rode so fierce and fell.  
And first rode Grim the Greybeard  
With all his crowd from hell.  
In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

32. There came a host from the south, -  
The best t'was in my sight, -  
And first rode Michael, lord of souls,  
Upon a charger white.  
In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

35. It was St. Michael, lord of souls,  
He blew his trumpet clear:  
"And now must every living soul  
To judgement forth appear!"  
In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

36. Then every sinful soul did shake  
Like aspens in the wind,  
And every single soul there was  
Wept sore for every sin.  
In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

37. It was St. Michael, lord of souls,  
He weighed them fair and even, -  
He weighed in scales the sinful souls  
Away to Christ in heaven.

In the trial-porch shall stand the seat of doom.

52. Now give ye heed, as best ye may,  
all men, both young and old:  
for it was Olav Åsteson,  
and this the dream he told.