

Women as performers and agents of change in the Italian ballad tradition

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What is lost when performances of orally-transmitted traditional songs are transcribed and published as written documents? This question arose for me as a result of the lack of connection I found between my experiences as a performer of Italian traditional songs and the ways in which the subject was treated by academic folklorists, among others, whose analyses tended to be centred in the content of the written documents. In particular, the concern of the written academic tradition with the “problem” of variation seemed to presuppose that staticity was normal, and yet my experience as a performer was that the unfolding of each performance in a unique context led inevitably to differences in the details. And all those differences were explainable in experiential terms; for example, I might sing in a different key depending on the current state of my voice, or I might leave out part of a song because I felt uncomfortable with the performance situation, or because I was singing with other people who knew a different version of the song. I came to believe that the reason academics expected uniformity between performances was related to the normality of exact reproduction in

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the print media, and that in order to understand variation in the documents of an orally transmitted performance tradition it was necessary to ground the analysis in an awareness of the actual conditions of performance of the songs: even though the particular experiences that would explain the form of each document are no longer accessible, an awareness of the types of experience affecting performance seemed to me to lead to very different ways of interpreting and approaching the documents as a body of data. In particular, the written documents could no longer be seen as self-sufficient items of information, but rather represented a series of incomplete records of random moments in the continuing process of performance within an otherwise unwritten oral tradition.

Over the past century and a half, a huge body of documentation of European oral traditions has been assembled mostly at the instigation of intellectuals. Their interests ranged from the Romantic search for an authentic poetic voice, to providing political support for nationalist discourses, to the desire to uncover and validate working-class culture. The diverse aims of the collectors and transcribers have been reflected in the form and contextual detail of the documents. Especially in the early years of collecting activity, the main focus of collectors was the verbal content of oral performances; transcribers paid very little attention to the performers themselves or to non-verbal aspects of the performance. The traditions were conceived of as belonging to "the people" in the abstract; because it was impossible to identify a single author, it was assumed that individual performers functioned as unconscious extensions of a collective racial or national consciousness. Accordingly, the written documents were thought to constitute all that was knowable or relevant; writing was thought to capture the essence of the

tradition. Can such incomplete and fragmentary records answer the kinds of questions that interest researchers and theorists today? In this paper I will attempt to show how such material can be drawn upon in addressing what has been called "the problem of change in oral transmission", with particular reference to the role of women as performers in the Italian ballad tradition.

In Italy, as in other European countries, women as a group have formed the major resource for collectors of ballad material from the oral tradition. Despite the seeming relevance of this fact for the development of theories of transmission, surprisingly few scholars have acknowledged the possibility that women may act as agents of change, although most have included passing mention of women as performers in their field data. I will be exploring the reasons for this omission, departing from analysis of field data on performers drawn from a corpus of 478 published and unpublished versions of one Italian ballad, *Donna lombarda* (the corpus is extensively analysed in Barwick 1985).

The ballad, versions of which have also been collected in France, Switzerland and Canada, has been most frequently performed by women, ranging from the domestic servants Domenica Bracco and Teresa Croce, whose songs were noted down in the 1840s and 50s (many of their songs are published in Nigra 1974), to a group of Romagnan schoolgirls recorded in 1980 (a recording of their performance is published in Bellosi, Magrini and Sistri 1980). Map 1 shows the distribution of the ballad in peninsular Italy, while Table 1 gives the figures for performers of *Donna lombarda* by sex.

The large proportion of the sample for which the sex of the performer is unknown (222 versions, or 46.4% of the total) is an indication of the

MAP 1

Distribution of Donna lombarda in Italy

Provinces of peninsular Italy in which Donna lombarda has been collected are shaded black. Hatching indicates that insufficient information exists to positively identify from which of several provinces in a region (i.e. Puglia and Venezia Giulia) a collected version comes. Blank areas indicate the absence of collected versions of Donna lombarda.



TABLE I
Distribution of performers by sex

Area	Female performer(s)	Male performer(s)	Mixed group	Sex unknown	Total
<u>Italy, by region</u>					
Piedmont	12	4	-	14	30
Liguria	-	2	-	-	2
Lombardia	8	5	2	3	18
Trentino-Alto Adige	-	-	-	2	2
Veneto	17	6	1	24	48
Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Istria, Dalmatia	13	5	3	18	39
Emilia-Romagna	16	4	-	29	49
Tuscany	98	10	-	85	193
Le Marche	1	1	-	10	12
Umbria	-	-	-	6	6
Latium	6	-	-	15	21
Abruzzo	3	1	-	6	10
Molise	-	-	-	1	1
Campania	-	1	-	2	3
Puglia	2	1	-	-	3
<u>Canada</u>	20	7	-	4	31
<u>France</u>	4	(1)	-	4	8
<u>Switzerland</u>	-	2	-	-	2
Total pre-1920	46	21	-	124	191
Total post 1920	154	29	6	98	287
GRAND TOTAL	200	50	6	222	478

lack of interest by most collectors in the performers, and means that the overall ratio of females to males is to be treated with some caution. The figures for that part of the sample for which sex of performer is known show that females outnumber males four to one (200 females to 50 males), with a small number of versions performed in mixed groups (this is a frequent performance practice in the North of Italy, but is not strongly represented in the sample because of collection practices of working with one performer). There is reason to believe that the proportions of females to males in the anonymous part of the sample may differ significantly from the above, because male informants were probably more likely to be noted by collectors on account of their comparative rarity as well as their greater social standing.

An apparently decreasing percentage of male performers over time is revealed by comparison of total figures for versions collected before and after 1920 (male performers furnished 31.3% of the pre-1920 versions for which sex of informant is known, compared to only 15.3% of the same group collected after 1920); however, because this phenomenon takes place in the context of a falling proportion of anonymous versions (which constitute 64.9% of the "old" sample as opposed to 34.1% of the "new" sample), it is difficult to gauge the real extent of the fall in the proportion of male performers. Such a fall may be due to the greater effect on men's traditional lifestyles of socio-economic factors associated with industrialisation, i.e. men's proportionally greater participation in the industrial workforce reduced their opportunities for performing, which often accompanied the agricultural activities continued and even taken over by women of the community (see the discussion on this point in Sanga and Sassu 1977, p. 1). Some scholars (e.g. Knight 1984) have argued that the imbalance of the sexes as ballad performers is

mainly due to this factor, but in this sample the preponderance of women even in the pre-1920 figures indicates that the ballad has always been mainly performed by women.

The albeit sparse collection information available on the performance situation and on the channels through which the performers learnt the song throws some interesting light on the differing modes of performance and transmission associated with male and female performers. Versions performed by men have been most frequently collected in exclusively male public performance situations. The *osteria* or tavern, in Northern Italy an almost exclusive male domain, appears to have provided the performance space for four versions sung by all-male groups, as well as for four solo versions by men; the guitar accompaniment of two of the latter versions is a further indication of formal public performance. Another version was recorded by an all-male folklore revival group that draws most of its material from the *osteria* repertoire. All these versions have a notably less complex narrative than versions performed by women, in fact, only two of these *osteria* versions include the complete story of the ballad. Another group of versions collected from men in an exclusively male context were obtained from soldiers during the 1914–18 war; these, too, are fragmentary and often ametrical, but in these cases there is strong evidence that the collector's carelessness may have contributed (Barwick 1985).

So many performers, both men and women, claim to have learnt the song through the family that it is clear the principal channel of transmission is in the domestic sphere, the woman's domain. The fact that mixed group singing is led by women (see the discussion on women's organisation of group singing activities in Sanga and Sassu 1977, p. 1) and that it often

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takes place on those public occasions associated with the female domains of kinship and religious observance (weddings and feasts), in conjunction with the observation that men lead the singing of ballads only when women are not present, suggests the speculation that the ballads belong to the female domestic domain, and are in a sense “owned” by the women of the community. It should be noted that, although there are several documented cases in which women sing solo in the presence of their husbands, the reverse is never the case. Similarly, young women defer to the older women; for example, in three instances in which there are several generations present, it is the mother or grandmother who sings first.

In most cases in which the place of collection has been recorded, women sing their songs in the home, usually to accompany domestic activities; there are several references to the song being used as a lullaby despite its “adult” subject matter. Field collection in domestic situations emphasises the transmission of the ballad between women in the same family: two versions from Puglia are sung by mother and daughter; two from Piedmont by grandmother and grand-daughter (with the mother present); in two separate versions from the Veneto, a mother is accompanied by her daughter. Two sisters-in-law disagree on the narrative development of the song in another Veneto version, indicating the conflict of different family traditions within the virilocal family. Women also perform the song during communal domestic or agricultural work (activities mentioned by performers include sewing, spinning, basket-weaving, and the husking of corn). Visiting between households was another occasion for ballad singing (one performer reports having learnt *Donna lombarda* from an aunt who used to come and sing while the girls of the family were sewing).

From the early years of this century, the industrialisation of women's domestic activities in the *risaie* (ricefields) of the Po valley and the *filande* (silk mills) of Lombardy and the Veneto brought women together outside their home communities; the mingling of women who had migrated from many regions for short-term work produced characteristic ballad types, because the women were encouraged to sing to keep the rhythm of their work (this practice has subsequently died out with more recent forms of industrial organisation). When the women returned home, these songs interacted with the "native" versions. For example, one Emilian woman, Licia Ghielmi, knew two versions of *Donna lombarda*, one learnt from her mother and one learnt in the ricefields of Piedmont. The latter has a characteristic *risaia* melody, but many narrative features of the text clearly derive from her mother's version, which she also performed (Conati 1976, pp. 50-51).

But the migration of women to work was only one way in which women acted as transmitters of songs outside of their own domestic situation. A potentially more important factor, largely overlooked by theorists of change in the tradition, is the movement of women at marriage, often to the home of their husband's parents. Given that the ballad is mainly transmitted in the domestic sphere, this practice, not uncommonly allied with marriage outside the woman's home community (i.e. the combination of virilocality and exogamy), must be an important factor in understanding changes undergone in the process of transmission. Figures on the extent of marriage outside of the native village are difficult to obtain, but the pervasiveness of the practice is perhaps indicated by such anecdotal evidence as the note in Gasco and Matteucci (1981, p. 106) that the majority of married women in one Piedmontese village were born and brought up elsewhere. Until re-

cently, collection practices meant that personal details of performers were rarely noted; this means that only sketchy information is available on the channels of transmission of individual versions of *Donna lombarda*, but the little information available on the movement of singers indicates that women were indeed more likely than men to be living away from their birthplace.

In this sample, fifteen versions were sung by women who had moved from their birthplace: in ten cases the movement was within the same province, in another three it was within the same region, while in only two did the translocation cover greater distances (from Emilia-Romagna to Venezia Giulia, and from Tuscany to Latium). In none of these cases was a reason given for the movement, although in three it appears that the performer was acting as housekeeper for a relative who was a priest. The only two documented case of men who had migrated involved movement to find work in industry.

Six versions are associated with women doing seasonal work away from their birthplace. Four are performed in or said to derive from the *risaia*, but one of these is not a typical *risaia* version, and was learnt by the performer from her mother. Another performer was reported to have a *flanda* repertoire, but since other collections of *flanda* songs do not include *Donna lombarda* (e.g. it is not present in Bollini and Frescura 1940), it seems likely that this version, too, derives rather from a family repertoire. The final instance of transmission by a woman doing seasonal work was a version learnt by a male performer from a woman named Maria from Tuscany, who had come across the Appennines to Emilia for the harvest in 1921.

Versions collected from children are almost always performed by girls (only one instance is cited of a boy performing the song). For children, as for adult performers, mothers and grandmothers are most frequently cited as

sources of the song, emphasising the familial orientation of domestic transmission, although in one or two cases the schools seem to have provided the locus of transmission. One version, collected in Tuscany from a ten-year-old girl, was reportedly learnt from a group of girls from another town, while another schoolgirl from Romagna knew two versions of *Donna lombarda*, one learnt from her grandmother, and the other from a schoolmate. There are another six versions collected from children, for two of which the mother's origin outside of the place of collection is noted; children figure so prominently in the sample partly because many compilers of song collections used school teachers to collect songs. Several references are made to *Donna lombarda* being used to accompany the children's game *girotondo* (e.g. in Portelli 1972, p. 34).

All the evidence clearly supports the concept of women being the principal agents of transmission of the ballad, both within the family because of their role as educators of the young, and between families and larger groups because of the practice of moving at marriage. It is not only the movement of women that is important here, but also the fact that such social practices brought together under the same roof women who had learnt different family traditions. Out of this conflict between the various versions arose a proliferation of different variations and combinations of the elements of the song, depending on the dynamics of a particular performance situation. One can imagine, for example, that a new bride would be more likely to adapt her version to that known by the mother-in-law or other influential women in her new situation, and that in later life, when she might come to be head of the household, the intervening years might lead to her forgetting the details of the version she had learnt first in her own mother's household. It is no-

table that in all the cases in which *Donna lombarda* has been recorded from more than one member of the same family, there are significant differences in the versions performed, with the greatest divergences occurring between women who are relatives by marriage rather than blood relatives. In this way, we can understand that any one performance is likely to be the result of the unstable conflict between a number of different versions, and so the actual realisation in performance is inherently variable. Far from being a stable, conservative haven from external pressures to change, the domestic household functions in these cases as a generator of innovation in the tradition through the exchange of women members between households, and the resultant bringing together of different, potentially conflicting, performance traditions. Why has this factor been ignored or undervalued for so long?

The chief reason seems to be theorists' acceptance of androcentric definitions of society and the community. The commonsense picture of the village community in Italy being made up of a number of households at the bottom level of the public (political) hierarchy extending upwards into frazione, comune, province and region obscures the relationships between households, villages and regions on the private or domestic level. The difficulty in obtaining information on domestic life is directly attributable to the predominance of conceptual structures centred in the public domain: women have been written out of history because of their association with the domestic sphere and its subordination to the public world of men.

This problem has been addressed by some theorists of popular culture. Burke (1978, pp. 49–50) acknowledges that women's culture in early modern Europe was different from men's culture, but because his methodology confines him to written evidence, he cannot help presenting in his turn a picture

of early modern Europe as primarily constituted of men. It can be argued that historians and critics are in effect complicitous with the androcentrism of earlier generations if they do not attempt to explore the dimensions of what is not written down, which includes the silent history of women and domesticity. The mere acknowledgement of the silence of the documents on the subject of women and the domestic domain does not excuse Burke's own silence, nor does it save him from falling into the same errors as his predecessors: thus, in his chapter on "Transmission in popular culture", he writes:

In village communities where a majority of families remained from one generation to the next, living in the same houses as their fathers and grandfathers . . . *it is reasonable* to assume a good deal of cultural continuity. In this kind of community, oral traditions were probably stable . . ." (Burke 1978, p. 84; my emphasis).

This assumption is only reasonable in terms of a logic that defines human communities as made up of male-headed households, with women, children and servants having a secondary social identity through the male head. It is the *men* of the family who lived in the same houses as their fathers and grandfathers: only unmarried women would have continued to live in their father's house. As Gasco and Matteucci point out:

Histories of virilocal communities are therefore histories from which a group of women who have contributed to the formation of the community are absent, while another group of women are present who have only been members of that community for a

certain part of their lives. Such historical reconstructions cannot really contain the 'history of the women of the community'; the practice of virilocality structures the relationship between women and the community group in such a way that in many cases women participate in two communities, but are complete members of neither group, so that they represent a mobile element of passage. (1981, p. 106; my translation).

The identification of "the community" with its location (in male-controlled property) thus obscures the movement of women, which effectively links the male-headed family groups. If we look at transmission from the women's perspective, it is *not* reasonable to assume that oral traditions were inherently stable within a community; even though women might move only once in their lives, and even though that move might be only from one house to the next, or from one village to another, the sum total represents a huge and silent undercurrent of movement beneath the comparatively static surface of male movement in a rural village society (and of course, even that movement has been understated, but that is another story).

The apparent blindness of conventional scholarship to the social dimensions of the phenomenon is clearly the result of accepting the definition of the domestic domain as private in nature, so that the movement of women is reduced to a series of private arrangements between individuals. Women's lack of control over property and the practice of taking the family name of the husband are a legitimation of this viewpoint by officialdom, a legitimation that renders difficult the appreciation of any other point of view, since it is the public records of property and name that are often the only written records of the lives of ordinary people in past centuries.

An indication of the failure to integrate any understanding of the social importance of the domestic domain into the methodologies of the scholarly establishment lies in the recourse by some critics to a publicly acknowledged itinerant figure to explain the “problem” of change in the oral ballad tradition. For example, Giovanni Bronzini, writing in the 1950s about the domestic ballad, theorises:

The ballad is created and passed on without a fixed link to any particular sphere of popular life, even if the *cantastorie* represent the most qualified vehicles, and the fairs the most common occasion for its creation and transmission (Bronzini 1971, p. 163; my translation).

The *cantastorie* were travelling salesmen who drew crowds to buy their wares in the fairs and marketplaces by singing songs and proclaiming the latest news. However, in form, subject matter and melody the *cantastorie* songs were quite distinct from traditional domestic ballads. On stylistic grounds alone, there is ample reason to doubt the claimed primacy of the itinerant singer in transmission of the ballad, a doubt that is confirmed by an appreciation of the social dimensions of the collective movement of women (who, individually, are neither public figures nor habitually itinerant). In the present sample, only one or two versions of *Donna lombarda* show signs of interaction with the *cantastorie* tradition; the vast diversity within the corpus in melody, narrative and dialect must be explained as part of the process of domestic performance.

Yet as recently as 1980, Bruno Pianta has displayed the same bias as earlier theorists in his characterisation of the public performer as always innovative and the domestic performer as above all imitative, from which

he deduces that major change in a ballad tradition must derive from public performance (the contradictions inherent in his arguments on this point are discussed in detail in Barwick 1985, pp. 42–44). The continuing influence of the “commonsense” view of transmission, with its ideological bias in favour of androcentric models of public performance, necessitates a reformulation of theoretical models of linguistic and cultural change to incorporate the importance of domestic performance.

A large part of the “problem” of change in oral tradition has lain in the formulation of the question in terms of transmission models, which assume an unchanging object of the process of transmission; examination of the variation that does occur demonstrates conclusively that an orally-transmitted song cannot be adequately described as an object (Barwick 1985). Centring the analysis in the material conditions of performance, on the other hand, reveals that variation is an inevitable by-product of the process of production, so that a song itself can be considered as a process, its realisation in any one performance contingent upon the historically determined material and social context. In the case of the domestic ballad, that context cannot be understood without taking account of the largely undocumented histories of women, domesticity, and the experiences of women as performers.

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