13. Songs his mother taught him: Émile Legrand's collection of lacemakers' ballads
David Hopkin

Abstract: Émile Legrand was the leading scholar of modern Greek in late nineteenth-century France; he also made a collection of songs sung by his mother and her neighbours, all lacemakers, in the village of Fontenay-le-Marmion in Normandy. Lacemakers in many parts of Europe had a distinctive work culture characterized by ballad singing, but this is the only evidence of lacemakers' repertoire from Normandy. I speculate that Legrand's experiences growing up within this culture influenced his career as the progenitor of Akritic Studies.

Keywords: Émile Legrand; Digenes Akrites; Gérard de Nerval; folksongs of Normandy; lacemakers; work culture

The Frenchman Émile Legrand (1841-1903) is best remembered as the progenitor of a sub-discipline in Greek letters – "Akritic Studies". In 1875 he was the first editor of a recently discovered manuscript of the Byzantine epic poem "Digenes Akrites", the border warrior.[1] And he was the first to propose a relationship between this medieval epic and modern ballads concerning the exploits of one Digenes Akritas. Four further manuscripts of the poem were located before the First World War, one of them also edited by Legrand.[2] Scholars still debate their relationship to the oral ballads, whether the written poems' ~~reliance~~ rely on oral precursors, and if they concern any identifiable historical persons.[3] In ways familiar to readers of Joep Leerssen's work, such philological and folkloric erudition has had political repercussions.[4] The poems and songs of Akrites/Akritas were used to bolster the resurrected Greek state's ambitions over the lost territories of the Hellenes, stretching deep into Asia Minor.[5]

Legrand showed little interest in classical Greek, he was devoted to the modern language; in addition to the two Akrites manuscripts he edited hundreds of other texts drawn from manuscripts, early printed works and oral literature, some collected by himself.[6] But the path which led him to the chair of Modern Greek at the Paris School of Oriental Languages in 1887 was tortuous. The son of a village carpenter from Normandy, his parents destined him for the priesthood. He studied at the seminaries of Lisieux and Bayeux, but while he retained a religious sensibility he did not feel a vocation. After ~~completing~~ obtaining his baccalaurcéatc, he moved to Paris and a succession of minor office jobs while editing his Greek texts in the evening. His work slowly earned him the respect of scholars and, after a government paid trip in 1875 to uncover oral and manuscript sources in Greek-speaking lands, he ~~got~~ was appointed to a teaching post. In person Legrand was unassuming, but at a time when language questions stirred violent controversy, he was blunt in his view that the language of modern Greece should be the language that modern Greeks spoke, rather than a resurrected ancient simulacrum~~era~~.[7]

The development of Akritic Studies is an exemplary case for students of romantic historicism and the instrumentalization of culture for nationalist projects. However, in this article I

[1] Sathas and Legrand (eds), *Les exploits de Digénis Akritas*.
[2] Legrand, ~~(~~ed.~~)~~, *Les exploits de Basile Digénis Acritas*.
[3] Legrand's place in Akritic Studies is addressed by Mavrogordato in the preface to *Digenes Akrites*; see Beaton and Ricks, ~~(~~eds.~~)~~, *Digenes Akrites~~: New Approaches~~*.
[4] Leerssen, "Introduction: Philology and the European Construction of National Literatures".
[5] Herzfeld, *Ours Once More*, 116f.
[6] Pernot, the main source for Legrand's biography, lists more than 100: "Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres d'Émile Legrand".
[7] Psichari, "Les Études de grec moderne en France", 236-7. See Mackridge, *Language and National Identity in Greece*.

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~~ponder the origins~~examine a different and less well known facet of Legrand's activity, namely his fascination with vernacular culture and traditional song in particular. Legrand never described his motivations, but I trace their origins to his home village of Fontenay-le-Marmion on the Caen plain. Almost the entire female population of this region were employed making pillow lace. At its height in the 1850s this industry involved 45,000 women in Normandy.[8] Lacemakers could work at home, but in the summer they gathered together in groups on the street: "in the villages, in the towns, nay, even in the cities, you every day see people sitting before their doors working, especially the lace-makers… so inveterate their passion for shewing themselves" wrote a British visitor in 1831. In winter they collected in ~~"~~*paillots*~~"~~, that is among the barnstraw to benefit from the heat generated by the cattle.[9] Their work was accompanied by singing, and this mix of sociability, labour and traditional entertainment meant that lacemakers developed a large, but conservative, repertoire of songs. Lacemakers have an important role in the history of folk-song collecting in many countries, including France. Gérard de Nerval's article on the "Vieilles ballades de France", originally published in 1842 and an important stimulus to collecting projects, was subsequently appended to his novella *Sylvie*: the eponymous Valois lacemaker excites the imagination of the narrator with her ballads, until she takes up the less romantic trade of glove-making, and simultaneously abandons her old songs for charmless airs emanating from the Parisian stage.[10]

A lot could be said about the singing lacemaker as a literary trope.[11] For Nerval, and many others, she represented an ideal of femininity and domesticity, and epitomized ideas about the unalienated nature of labour in the pre-industrial world. However, there is evidence that lacemakers did indeed sing while they worked. In Normandy, journalists, travel-writers and sometimes even lacemakers' themselves mention the practice.[12] Yet the only substantial record of their repertoire is that provided by Legrand.

In 1876, Legrand returned to Fontenay for the summer to work on a collection of Greek folksongs, some of which he had collected himself during his five-months of travel the previous year. Presumably the experience of listening to Greek singers led him to think about songs closer to home – those sung by his mother and her neighbours on the "street of the lacemakers" (now the rue de la République). In October 1876 he noted down forty-nine~~49~~ song texts, without music, which he sent to the philologist Gaston Paris; they were published in the journal *Romania* in 1881.[13] Although "ancient lays" were regularly invoked in Romantic descriptions of Normandy, the only substantial prior work on Normandy folksong was an essay with illustrations rather than a collection.[14] The absence of comparable collections has led some to doubt the veracity of Legrand's testimony.[15] However, all the evidence suggests he was a scrupulous scholar.

Legrand's mother Célina (born in Fontenay in 1818) was the most important source for these songs, providing more than half of them. The other singers were Adelaïde Le Paulmier (Fontenay 1807) with nine songs, Delphine Lacroix with five (probably born in Fontenay in 1834), and then Clélie Péronne (Fontenay 1838), Marie Roger, Blanche Lecarpentier and Marie Dausmesnil each with one, as well as a solitary male informant, Pierre Guillot. Marie

[8] Noé, *L'industrie de la dentelle*.
[9] St. John, *Journal of a Residence in Normandy*, 11, 24.
[10] Bénichou, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique*.
[11] Haxell, "Woman as Lacemaker~~: The Development of a Literary Stereotype~~".
[12] See, for example, the letters of Ernestine Lebatard, a lacemaker in~~:~~ Bossis, ~~(~~ed.~~)~~, *Ursin et Ernestine~~: Amours paysannes en Normandie~~*, 103.
[13] Legrand, "Chansons populaires recueillies en octobre 1876 à Fontenay-le-Marmion", 365-396..
[14] Beaurepaire, *Étude sur la poésie populaire en Normandie*.
[15] In 1920 Lechevrel sought out a singer named by Legrand to see if he could obtain any more songs, but she replied "I don't remember any more": "Le Folklore normand", 375.

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Dausmesnil was the village baker's daughter but all the other women, where they can be identified with certainty, were lacemakers.[16] Neither Legrand nor Paris provide any information about the circumstances in which these songs were performed, but it seems likely that we are eavesdropping on the songs lacemakers sang while working together.

Two of these texts are unknown from any other source, and a couple of others are rare, but the bulk of Legrand's collection was made up of songs that could have been heard in other parts of France~~, and thus can be referred to by Coirault numbers~~.[17] This was not, then, a repertoire restricted to lacemakers: none of the songs make direct mention of the trade. Nor is there any evidence that Normandy lacemakers used "tells" to regulate the rhythm of their work of the kind used by their counterparts in the lace schools of Flanders, the English Midlands and the Erzgebirge (Ore M~~m~~ountains) of central Europe. In one aspect these texts are at odds with what we know of lacemakers' musical tastes in Normandy and in other regions. In 1839 the journalist Emile Souvestre described the lacemakers of nearby Aunay as singing hymns on their doorsteps, but there are no religious songs among those recorded by Legrand.[18] Conversely there were several in which ecclesiastics are engaged in sexual shenanigans – these were mostly sung by his mother. "To love is not a crime,/ God does not forbid it" she claimed in another song, and while it would be a mistake to assert that a singer's words represent their own views, Célina certainly had a pronounced taste for such playful and slightly bawdy material.

Nonetheless, there are some similarities to the kind of songs we know lacemakers sang in other districts. Because lacemaking was sedentary, and because lacemakers rehearsed the same repertoire regularly, they could perform the long, narrative and seemingly historical ballads that were particularly prized by song-collectors. The most striking group of songs are those performed by Adelaïde Le Paulmier, Legrand's oldest informant. By the 1870s she was a widow living with two of her sisters, all lacemakers. She specialized in long ballads, some full of the "lurid, gruesome, clammy or grizzly terrors" that Thomas Wright observed was the preferred singing matter of Buckinghamshire lacemakers.[19] Such songs feel old, even if evidence for medieval origins is quite tenuous.

In her ballad of "Marianson" (Coirault 9904), a ballad of thirty verses, the eponymous heroine is tricked into lending three gold rings that her husband Renaud (the generic name for male protagonists in French narrative songs) had gifted her when he went to the wars, which are then counterfeited. On his return the unnamed villain shows the counterfeit rings to prove his claim that Marianson has been unfaithful and that the boy she has borne is not his. Without more ado Renaud takes the baby and dashes its brains out on the cobbles; he ties Marianson to his horse's tale and drags her from Paris to Saint-Denis, and "there wasn't a hedge or bush that was not marked by the blood of Marianson". Her mother runs after, begging Renaud to return her daughter's bloody body. On her deathbed Marianson produces the real three rings, and thus proves her fidelity. Renaud, overcome with remorse, burns his own face off, and both die within hours of each other.

Such violence was far from unusual in lacemakers' songs. Another example drawn from Le Paulmier's repertoire concerns Marguerite who lives with her mother at the "castle of martyrs" (Coirault 8910). By night Marguerite is a woman, but by day she is a white hind hunted through the forests by her own brother Julien and his men; no explanation is proffered for this metamorphosis. She is finally caught, killed and served as the evening meal: Julien asks where is his sister, and she replies "Sit down, gentlemen, I was the first at the table;/ My

[16] Information gleaned from the État Civil and the Recensements de la population for Fontenay: Archives départementales du Calvados.
[17] Coirault, *Répertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale*.
[18] Souvestre, "Pierre Rivière", 173.
[19] Wright, *The Romance of the Lace Pillow*, 180.

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head is on the serving dish and my organs are cooking,/ and my poor entrails are being torn to pieces by your great dogs." It has been suggested that the song metaphorically relates the story of Marguerite and Julien de Ravelet, incestuous brother and sister from Normandy executed in 1603, though the connection is speculative.[20]

Célina Legrand knew and sung some similar ballads, but her preferred material was lighter: dance songs, songs of love – particularly illicit love – pastorals in which girls trick the boys and the boys trick the girls. Her songs overflow with flowers and fruits to be planted, gathered or plucked. Some are so pared down that their meaning is unclear; others combine lines from a number of different songs, disorientating the reader. Such confusion is often assumed to be the result of faulty memory: the singer – reliant on oral transmission –skips lines and becomes lost. However, Gerald Porter, in his study of English lacemakers' tells, suggests another possibility. Lacemakers' songs are condensed and elliptical because they were performed so often by many members of the same group: "At each performance, the sung part stands metonymically for the whole", the listeners able to fill in the gaps because they too were participants in this communal work culture. For outsiders the songs were meaningless but that was part of the point: comprehension was restricted to insiders, the group of women who shared their working lives.[21]

Singing was a way of passing the time, of enjoying oneself with one's friends and neighbours, and finding pleasure in a repetitive task. In their songs lacemakers travelled to Paris and Nantes, to England and Spain, visited palaces, encountered princes and magicians. These songs were not straightforwardly "escapist" – several focus on the suffering of women –but they introduced fantasy and drama into their toilsome lives. Yet while the settings may have been exotic, the issues addressed were not. A king banishes his daughter's suitor, another king marries his daughter against her will, a Duke departs for war leaving a pregnant, unmarried princess to face the consequences…, strip away the aristocratic titles and these would be familiar situations in any nineteenth-century village. In almost every song some domestic conflict is evoked that pitted daughters against fathers – and occasionally mothers – or wife against husband, or the complaint of jilted lovers. Many songs turn on the vulnerability of women workers, for example as shepherdesses alone in the fields or market-women trying to make a sale, preyed on by men, particularly men of superior rank. Sometimes they find a ruse or clever words through which to escape the threat, sometimes not. One could hardly describe these texts as a manual for inter-personal relationships, but they did allow singers and their audiences to think through some of the difficulties that faced people like them – those who because of their sex or their social position were relatively powerless. In their imagination they could consider the consequences of their choices. In other words, lacemakers' songs were a cultural fit with the lives of working women.

Unlike other villages in the region where commercial lacemaking was defunct by 1900, one could still find groups of lacemakers gathered on the streets of Fontenay even after the Second World War. At some point they had developed a specialism: lace made from human hair used for wigs worn in Paris theatres.[22] The survival of this domestic craft industry – and the associated culture – enabled Marthe Moricet, to collect songs there in the 1950s that Legrand had noted eighty years before.[23] This is an intriguing example of the resilience of a work culture, even when there was no formal institution to uphold it.

The Romantic cultivation of culture depends on a perception of cultural difference. The scholar-cultivator is separated – by class or by time or by distance – from the objects of his or

[20] Brunel-Reeves, "Les États-Unis et la Blanche Biche", 70.
[21] Porter, "'Work the Old Lady Out of the Ditch'", 35-55.
[22] Garnier, "Dans un village du Calvados ".
[23] Michel Boüard, "Marthe Moricet", 86-87. Moricet died before she was able to publish any of these songs, and I have not been able to track down her archives.

her attentions. Unfamiliarity lends such objects glamour. In the case of Legrand, who started his career when klephtic songs were once again inspiring Cretan rebels – just as they had when Claude Fauriel published his *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne* in 1824 – the exoticism of the material must have been part of the attraction. But as cultural separation was also narrated as a loss, so the cultivation of culture could be expressed as a restoration: the alienated scholar – and alienated modernity – was absorbed back into the body of the people through a renewed appreciation of folk aesthetics. Legrand, like many other folklorists of his generation, grew up in a demotic, oral culture, associated with all things maternal and feminine, but from which he was removed by his education. Separated geographically and socially from this culture, his interest in the Greek demotic tradition, and in particular its ballads, was part discovery but also part homecoming. What might appear exotic was simultaneously familiar, and welcoming. Not just his collection of Norman folksongs but his entire career could be interpreted as an attempt to reconnect to his childhood world and its auditory soundtrack, the songs sung by his mother and her neighbours on the "street of lacemakers".[24]

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[24] On other French folklorists who followed a similar trajectory see Hopkin, "Intimacies and Intimations".

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