

ABOUT THE "AUTHENTIC" AND THE "SPURIOUS"

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There recently came up some confusion about the distinction between "authentic folk literature" and "non-authentic" folk literature. A discussion seems to be going on about what is "really" authentic and genuine. My humble opinion may add some salt to the discussion (and cloud it still more...):

A text of oral literature (or of other folklore genres) can be regarded as a first order authentic text if its collector (or editor) states that (1) John Doe has recorded (sound- or video-taped) this text (2) during a live performance (3) which was done in front of its natural audience in the "field" (4) from Bill Jones (that is a "performed" text¹) and (5) Bill Jones reported that he heard/learned the story/song from his elders, or neighbours, or from a passer-by; he may maintain that he has composed the work by himself; and lastly, (6) that the audience is used to hear this work from Bill Jones.

Another possibility of obtaining an authentic text, but of the second order, will be for a collector to sit down in front of the performer and ask him to perform without his audience, solely for the benefit of the collector. This will be a "demonstrated" text,² which might differ considerably from a "performed" text.³ To be sure, most collected and published oral tales and songs are "demonstrated" texts.

Both kinds of texts, however, have their problems of authenticity: namely, Bill Jones can fake the text by himself. This he may do, for instance, after he runs out of his repertoire and in order to extract more pay or esteem from the collector, both of which may add to his prestige in his community (which might be fed up with him by that time, or might no longer value its oral-literary tradition due to modernization, and so on). Bill Jones may fake his repertoire in several ways. He might use his grandchildren's story-books or his old almanacs and chapbooks; he may retell the plot of a movie, boldly pretending to have heard it from his grandfather; he may hurriedly "milk" some other narrator of a neighbouring village who has not yet heard of the collector. At the same time he will describe the other performers in his community in derogatory terms in order to keep the collector away from them.

The collector, well aware of these respectable practices and techniques, will try to counteract. He may carefully assess the whole repertoire of Bill Jones and get suspicious upon finding an item which does not fit the picture and is unique in some way. Next, he will examine the style of the texts (if they are sound-recorded; manually recorded texts are rarely of such good quality that the style can be examined). Here, caution is a good advice: a good performer will easily cast the suspicious work into his own style. An additional way of ascertaining that all works recorded from a particular Bill Jones are part of his regular repertoire is to question his audience as to which of the works he performs they like, have often heard, etc. The ranking of the suspicious text will be significant for the collector's judgement of it: if the suspicious is reported as unknown to the audience, or as habitually performed by somebody else and the like,

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¹ After D. Segal in his review of D. Ben Amos and K. Goldstein (eds.), *Folklore. Performance and Competence*. In: *PTL. A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and theory of Literature* (1976), vol. 1, pp. 367-382.

² See note 1. A sub-form of "demonstrated" texts are texts recorded by field linguists. These are very carefully recorded sentence by sentence, so carefully that the poor performer loses all poetic inspiration he may have had. The resulting text is reduced to a bare summary. Such are, for instance, most American-Indian texts collected and published under the auspices of Franz Boas.

³ See Experience of B. E. F. Beck when recording a "performed" epic and then its "demonstrated" variant in chapter 3 of her *The Three Twins. The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982)

suspicion is well founded and the source of the work should be carefully investigated.

If Bill Jones has claimed to have composed by himself the work in question, two possibilities exist. In the case his community favors new compositions, the collector will question the audience whether the work is really Bill Jones' composition and whether he has not "borrowed" the copyright. In any case, Bill Jones has to be known in the community as a composer of works of this kind. If (a) Bill Jones is not known as such and (b) works of this kind are not usually composed afresh in this community, Bill Jones' claim to authorship can be quietly dismissed as bragging and the text's origin has to be looked for elsewhere.

Determination of the ultimate sources of Bill Jones' stories/songs demands long and tedious investigations. Bill Jones' text may or may not have written versions documented since antiquity and running parallel to oral tradition. Careful source criticism is needed to describe this literary context of the works. Yet, the ultimate source (if it shall be found at all) is irrelevant to the question of whether an oral text is authentic, so long as the work belongs to the habitually performed repertoire of an active performer in a community.

That means, we would recommend to consider the usage of the community as a measure of authenticity. Whatever is habitually performed (narrated, sung, recited) in Bill Jones' community is authentic oral folk literature in regard to this community.⁴ In contrast, a preacher's repertoire of exempla, so long as only he uses it, is not part of oral folk literature.

So far for the authentic text. A really spurious text, i.e., a conscious fake, an invention of a text, with or without its social context data, with the intention to deceive, blossoms mainly in two forms: as "folklore" for tourists" and in cultural ethnic revivals. Faking of the social context also occurs, namely when folklore scenes are staged, as in folklore festivals, for instance.

Revivals may often have political aspects: nationalistic movements tend to be accompanied by folklore revivals.⁵ In revivals occur, among others, rewritings of genuine oral works and compositions in writing of original works following the poetic models of oral literature. Both may be done in good faith by renowned poets, but this does not make the works authentic.⁶ If, however, the author claims to have faithfully recorded the respective work from an oral performer, we have a case of an outright fake.

A third possibility of conscious fake would be that of a hard-pressed investigator "amplifying" his data when he runs short of them and of time to collect more. Being staunch believers in the cause of scholarship, we hope that such cases will not occur in the future.

The investigation of the manipulation of folklore materials for propaganda or advertisement purposes forms a separate field of inquiry (in sociology, communication, political science) and does not enter the question of authenticity.

⁴ Taking this definition, German songs, collected in the 19th century in towns from maid-servants who originated in villages, and which were found to stem from 3rd and 4th rate poets of the preceding time, are authentic folk songs of the restricted community of urban maid-servants (see I. Weberr-Kellermann, *Ludolf Parisius und seine altmärkischen Volkslieder* [Ludolf Parisius and his folksongs from Altmark] (Berlin, 1957) and J. Meier, *Kunstlieder im Volksmund* [Artistic songs in the mouth of the folk] (Halle a. S., 1906).

⁵ See lately the discussion by A. Dundes, "Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A reconsideration of Ossian, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the *Kalevala* and Paul Bunyan," *Journal of Folklore Research* (1985), vol.22, pp. 5-18.

⁶ Such rewritings are the Brothers Grimm's texts, the Finnish *Kalevala* as well as the Bengali ballads published by Sen (D. R. B. Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads, Mymesing*, 4 vols., Calcutta 1924-32). In South Slavic culture original works are composed, imitating folk compositions; the most famous is I. Mazuranic's (1814-1890) *Smrt Smail-Age Cenigica* [Death of the Smail-aga Cengic] (1846). Some of the works mentioned became part of the high written literature in their respective societies.

A separate problem raised in discussion is “what is the status of a text once it is recorded on paper or on sound- and video-tape”? Is such a text still “authentic folklore”? To our humble opinion, such a recording is a “photograph” of folklore and the only (!) form in which we can investigate oral texts. To be sure, collections of sound- and video-tape recordings, accompanied by full written records of the whole social context data are as much collections of “butterflies” as are simple manual recordings of texts deposited in the old-fashioned archives.⁷ Both kinds of “butterflies” are necessary for our investigations. Well done, they are authentic materials of both the first and second order (hopefully, that is, depending on the collector’s skill...). The quality of the material (of the “butterflies”) is an important question and here careful textual criticism is necessary to assess the distance of such a text from its live oral original. Published texts form another category. By far most publications of oral-literary works are not scientific (i.e., published “photographs” of oral texts, which have the same status as “archive butterflies”) but are commercial publications. These try to appeal to customers and are correspondingly edited or even wholly rewritten. Some of these publications are refurbished “butterflies”, others pretend to be such and most put up no pretensions at all. In most cases no sources of the texts are given — the editor simply plundered earlier publications. That should not bother the scholar — he will just get used to subject the texts he works with to careful source and textual criticism. Admittedly, that is a nuisance and costs time, but, unfortunately, it is necessary. And, unfortunately, commercial publications form often most, or even all, of the material we have from less investigated ethnic group or even whole regions, especially in non-Western countries (and these, as is well known, form the greater part of the Earth’s surface!).⁸ So, let us not throw out the baby with the bathing water.

⁷ After A. Dundes, e.g., “Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism”, *The Monist* (1966), vol.50, pp. 505-516. Consult E. C. Fine, *The Folklore Text* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984) for an enormous blow-up of this “butterfly”.

⁸ See note 2. From many small tribal cultures this kind of linguistic recording of folklore is all we have.

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