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Review of Dov Noy, *Jewish Folktales from Morocco* and *Jewish Folktales from Tunis[ia]*

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Review of Dov Noy, *Jewish Folktales from Morocco* and *Jewish Folktales from Tunis[ia]*

Abstract

These are the first two books in a projected series of twelve volumes, each of which will include the folktales of a single Jewish ethnic group in Israel. The books are uniform in organization and each includes 71 tales (a traditional Jewish formulistic number), bibliographical sketches of both informants and collectors, bibliographies with extensive listings of related sociological, anthropological, and historical works, and, finally, motif, type, and general indexes. The books end—of start, if you open them at the wrong side—with English summaries of the tales, notes, and an introduction. The 71 stories in these volumes are a selection out of 270 Moroccan and 254 Tunisian narratives in the Israel Folktale Archives.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

teachings and ultra-spiritual insights, converting it into a magic mirror that reflected their heart's desire" (p. 110).

And what then does myth criticism have to do with folklore? Nothing.

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Folktales

Jewish Folktales from Morocco, Narrated and Collected in Israel. Edited and Annotated by Dov Noy. (Jerusalem; Bitefutsot Ha-golah, 1964. Pp. xiii + 179, introduction, notes, bibliography, motif index, type index, general index, English summaries.)

Jewish Folktales from Tunis[ia]. Edited by Dov Noy. (Jerusalem: Bitefutsot Ha-golah, 1966. Pp. xvi + 267, introduction, notes, bibliography, motif index, type index, general index, English summaries.)

These are the first two books in a projected series of twelve volumes, each of which will include the folktales of a single Jewish ethnic group in Israel. The books are uniform in organization and each includes 71 tales (a traditional Jewish formulistic number), bibliographical sketches of both informants and collectors, bibliographies with extensive listings of related sociological, anthropological, and historical works, and, finally, motif, type, and general indexes. The books end—or start, if you open them at the wrong side—with English summaries of the tales, notes, and an introduction. The 71 stories in these volumes are a selection out of 270 Moroccan and 254 Tunisian narratives in the Israel Folktale Archives.

Such a series in general and these two volumes in particular, has great value for comparative folklore studies, both from an anthropological and a literary point of view. The tales reflect the cultures of two minority groups which share identical literary traditions and religious values. Thus, any differences between their folklore can be directly related to local historical events, the cultural and political impact of the majority group, and the particular social relationships within each community.

As it turned out, a great portion of *Jewish Folktales from Morocco* revolves around tensions and conflicts either between the Jewish and Moslem societies, or between the various sections within the Jewish community itself. On the other hand, the main themes of *Jewish Folktales from Tunis[ia]* are family relationships, religious beliefs, and general attitudes toward fate. The proportions between the literary genres is in accordance with these thematic differences. In the book of Moroccan tales there is a preponderance of legends and realistic humorous tales over *Märchen*. Among the tales from Tunisia the proportions are reversed. Noy himself does not feel the samples are sufficiently representative to draw any conclusive generalizations, yet they definitely point the way for further research, particularly since the same differences apparently exist between the Arab and the Berber tales, as Henri Basset has pointed out in *Essai sur la Littérature des Berbères* ([Alger, 1920], 273–274). However, Noy is not so much concerned with the generic classification of the tales as with the comparative annotations. Each note includes an identification of a tale by type and motif numbers and lists the parallels from other countries which are available in the Israel Folktale Archives. In

fact this comparative orientation occasionally overbalances the references to Jewish traditional sources. Tale 63 in the collection of *Jewish Folktales from Morocco*, for example, is identified as Type 899 ("Alcestis"), but there is no reference to Moses Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis* ([London, 1924] 137), "Ben Sabar and the Angel of Death," which is an excellent traditional text of the same story. Surprisingly, nowhere is it mentioned when the tales were recorded. Although I am sure these dates are registered with the Archives, the inclusion of this information in future volumes would be desirable.

The main problem with the folktales in both volumes—and Dov Noy is the first to point it out—is the quality of the text. These narratives have been collected since 1955 by devoted but mostly amateur folklorists. The fear that "traditions will soon perish" and therefore "it is necessary to save for posterity whatever is possible" played a role in the development of the network of collectors in Israel. However, the large quantity of material resulted often in texts of inferior quality. In most cases Hebrew was the only language the collector shared with his informants, and hence the storyteller was unable to narrate the tales in his own dialect of Arabic. As a result, the native imagery, the stylistic ornamentations, and formulae are completely lost. Moreover, very often the informants knew only broken Hebrew and could not tell their story in a fluent and coherent manner. Secondly, it was financially impossible to furnish all collectors with tape recorders, and the flare of the storyteller situation was lost in the note-taking process. This, together with the grammatical corrections that were inevitable, has contributed to a certain stylistic stagnation and uniformity. It would enhance future volumes of this series if the editor would include at least a sample of tales recorded on tape in the native language to illustrate the vitality of the storytellers and the richness of their language.

In the light of the fact that these collecting procedures have not led to significant variations between individual storytellers, it is surprising that the editor used the informant as a classificatory criterion for the organization of the tales in each volume. (In *Jewish Folktales from Morocco* the tales are arranged first according to the collectors and only afterwards according to the informants.) The idea itself is commendable and could have resulted in an attractive combination of the historical-geographic approach in the annotation and the emphasis on the individuality of the narrators in the organization of the texts and the commentary. However, in the present volumes this idea has been only partially developed. Because of the recording techniques, the individuality of the narrators does not appear in the foreground. Moreover, there is no indication in the body of the text when the repertory of one storyteller ends and another begins. The reader has to turn back and forth to the table of contents in order to trace the narrator of a particular tale. A preferable arrangement would identify the repertory of each storyteller in the body of the text and provide the descriptive and biographical information about him before his stories.

In spite of my critical comments, these two volumes are important contributions to the study of Jewish and North African folklore. The first of these volumes has already been translated into French as *Soixante et Onze Contes Populaires, Racontés par des Juifs du Maroc* (Jérusalem Organisation Sioniste Mondiale, Dép. d'Organisation, Section des Recherches, 1965), and into English as *Moroccan Jewish Folktales* (New York: Herzl Press, 1966; name of translator not given). Let us hope that the

other volumes will be made available to international folklore scholarship as soon as they are published.

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Ballads and Folksongs

Living with Ballads. By Willa Muir (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965. Pp. 260. \$5.75).

Living with Ballads would be an easy book to review if it were half as long. If Mrs. Muir had written only the first half, it could be dismissed easily; if only the second half were in print it could be accepted as an interesting and informative study. As it stands, *Living with Ballads* is an unbalanced, subjective potpourri which will afford some readers pleasure and hints for further investigation.

In the first section, "Introductory," Mrs. Muir comments about the singing games common in her youth. She notes that the games were popular in the Board School for working-class children which she first attended but that the middle-class children at the Academy had no singing games. In this first section are printed tunes and abbreviated texts; elsewhere in the book only texts are printed.

Mrs. Muir makes much of the underlying meaning of the singing-dancing games. She sees "the drama of choosing a mate and being chosen" (p. 17) in these games and suggests that they are a rehearsal of what might happen later in life. In mother-and-daughter games there is the subtle presentation of opposing forces. And in "Antrim and Tipperary" and similar games in which the father lies in the girls' bed, the girls in the boys', and the boys in the wash tub, Mrs. Muir suggests that the girls who played the games were "covering up possibly naughty unconscious desires by inventing consciously naughty tricks" (p. 22). Unfortunately, I cannot comment on this although sorely tempted, since I can no more prove my point than can Mrs. Muir. Although studies have been done and more are in progress by Sutton-Smith and others, there is no evidence to demonstrate that children are really involved in some type of psycho-sexual activity while dancing.

A review printed on the dust jacket notes that *Living with Ballads* is both historical and scientific. We live in a society in which the word "scientific" carries with it an aura of objectivity and sound scholarship. That we use the term loosely there is no doubt; that it has little relevance to Mrs. Muir's book is also evident.

This is less a criticism of the book than it might seem. *Living with Ballads* is a volume of impressions based on long familiarity with British song traditions. However, too often there is not any reliance upon demonstrable data, no attempt to prove what is stated, and little awareness of the scholarly courtesy—and necessity—for using footnotes. The fifth chapter, "Northern Scottish Background: The Fire of Fren draught," is a striking example of this.

The rationale behind the fifth chapter is John Allan's statement that the farming people of North-Eastern Scotland emerged from the Middle Ages as late as 1713 with the introduction of turnips as cattle fodder. ". . . I propose in the next chapter,"