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"Draumkvedet". From Fragments of a Folk Song to a National Cultural Treasure

Velle Espeland

A couple of years ago, I was contacted at the Norwegian Archives for Folk and Popular Song by the directors of one of the largest theatres in Oslo. They were planning a special production for the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, based on a Norwegian ballad. We discussed several ballads and initially decided that "The Two Sisters" (TSB A 38, engelsk: Child 10) would be an appropriate choice. It is well known not only in the Nordic countries and the British Isles but also in the USA. In areas where German is spoken and here in the Baltic countries, the story is better known as a fairy tale. In Grimm's collection, it is the story called "Der singende Knochen". The advantage of using this ballad was that it would be familiar to Norwegians and foreigners alike, and that the wealth of melodic material from many countries would underscore the international aspect of the Games.

The directors of the theatre decided, however, to use the ballad "Draumkvedet", the dream vision of Olav Åsteson, literally "The Dream Ballad" (TSB B 31), despite the fact that it is not particularly epic in form. "Draumkvedet" is primarily made up of separate, independent images, and thus the theatre production was also a series of tableaux. The arguments in favour of using "Draumkvedet" were just the opposite of those invoked in connection with "The Two Sisters". "Draumkvedet" would represent something that was typically Norwegian, and as such would underscore the national aspect. "Draumkvedet" has in fact been regarded as a national literary treasure for the past century, even though very few Norwegians have read the lyrics. In my lecture here today, I would like to take a closer look at the reasons why this folk song became a national cultural treasure.

The most important 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 each soul is weighed on a pair of scales by St. Michael.

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. This translation was carried out by literary members of the Norwegian court in the thirteenth century.

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 analyzed 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 world view 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.

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.

Another important consideration is that in Moltke Moe's reconstruction, "Draumkvedet" was given a literary form, and was thus taken more seriously. Although "Draumkvedet" originated as an oral ballad, it became a literary text.

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".

However, literary value and an early origin are not enough. "Draumkvedet" also had to be genuine. In his comments Moltke Moe provided the scholarly basis required to give the work authenticity.

Moltke Moe was not the only one who reconstructed "Draumkvedet". Poet and folklore collector Ivar Mortenson Egnund made his own reconstruction. However, Mortenson Egnund was more of a visionary poet than a scholar. His "Draumkvedet", made up of stanzas taken from all kinds of folk songs, is a long, cosmic poem. However, it lacks the scholarly basis Moltke Moe was able to give his reconstruction, and Mortenson Egnund's version could never be considered a cultural treasure.

When we talk about Norwegian folk poetry, it is primarily the fairy tales that have become national literary treasures. In Norway, everyone is familiar with the fairy tales of Asbjørnsen and Moe, and the hero *Askeladden* (a male Cinderella) has become a kind of Mr. Everybody, despite the fact that fairy tales are the most international of all folk poetry. Because of the linguistic difficulties, the Norwegian folk songs have remained more anonymous, appealing to those particularly interested in this form of culture. All the same, despite the many questions concerning its origin and authenticity, "Draumkvedet" was selected as the basis for the largest theatre production staged in connection with the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer.