

Gwerz Skolvan

‘Skolvan’ is a Breton ballad known for its deep roots and haunting story. This essay will analyze what we know of its history, context, and connections as well as the Breton culture of death which pervades this tale. It will then compare this *gwerz* with other Breton ballads and show the cultural differences between Breton *gwerziou* and English and Scottish ballads. Finally, this essay will peel back the layers of ‘Skolvan’ itself, evaluate its emotional impact, the tale’s arc, and a few of the literary devices it uses to produce an emotional and spiritual effect. Breton *gwerziou* are all incredibly captivating, mysterious, and beautiful, but the tale of ‘Skolvan’ stands out amongst them as particularly heightened and fascinating.

Estimated to be an older oral *gwerz*, ‘Skolvan’ is an eerie tale about a dead, but penitent, sinner seeking redemption for his crimes so he may join God in heaven. *Gwerziou* were often believed to be songs which related true stories¹ and because of their importance in the Breton culture, held a sense of deep solemnity.² Their stories are often tragic, frightening, and deeply rooted in location—some even relate to specific historical events. Because Breton is spoken largely by a rural community with influence from French and Latin,³ the oral tradition of Brittany is imaginative and has a distinct character. The tone of ‘Skolvan’ carries on this tradition. An example of its tragic and shocking style is the grim relation of Skolvan’s crimes:

He raped seven of his sisters

And killed their innocent children

That was not his greatest sin

He went into church, smashed windows

Killed the priest at the altar

That was not his greatest sin⁴

Another interesting aspect of the ‘Skolvan’ *gwerz* other than its horrifying details, is its similarity to a 13th century Welsh poem found in the Black Book of Carmarthen. Like ‘Skolvan,’ the Welsh

¹Mary-Ann Constantine and Eva Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders: An Introductory Anthology of Breton Ballads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 13.

² *ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *ibid.*, p. 2

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 49.

poem 'Ysgolan' deals with a returning sinner whose description 'Black your horse, black your cloak / black your head, black your self'⁵ is reminiscent of the godfather's words to Skolvan: 'Black is your horse, you are black yourself.' Beyond this, Skolvan and Ysgolan have both committed the heinous crimes of destroying a church, killing cattle, and worst of all, ruining a sacred book. The *enlgyn*-metre, like that of the *gwerz*, is 'a solemn or sad one—grief-stricken, guilty, or depressed.'⁶ Why this connection between the two tales exists and how exactly it came to be is still a mystery, yet they undoubtedly share themes and motifs. These repeating elements can also be found in the Irish legend *Buile Shuibhne* and across broader Celtic cultures.⁷

One of the striking factors of 'Skolvan' is its depiction of the world of the *anaon* (souls). For the Bretons, the land of the living and the dead, the real and the marvelous, were one and the same. There was no separation between the two.⁸ It is no surprise to Skolvan's mother when he comes knocking on her door asking forgiveness. While a strange and preternatural tone undergirds the whole ballad, the presence of Skolvan, after his death, does not seem to break the walls of reality for the audience. On the contrary, it reveals their deep religiosity and mysticism. Souls were not believed to go straight to the other world after death but were thought to 'remain for some time in the neighborhood of the places where they dwelt in the bodies they animated.'⁹ This appears to be true of Skolvan as he wanders the paths of his home, seeking help to escape purgatory and ascend to heaven. This follows the Catholic Church's perspective on purgatory where prayers and suffrages from the faithful help the dead on their journey. One such example is the belief that if one went to a votive chapel to pray for someone who died, the deceased would appear to them, at first as black figure, but as Mass was performed, he would lighten to gray, becoming white and luminous by the end.¹⁰ Skolvan goes through this colorful transition himself after finally receiving pardon, not only from God, but also from his mother:

- White your horse, you are white yourself

Where have you been, where are you going?

- I come from purgatory

And I am going to heaven

With my mother's blessing upon me¹¹

⁵ Oliver Padel, 'Legendary Poetry in *Englyn*-Metre,' (unpublished), p. 18.

⁶ Padel, 'Legendary Poetry in *Englyn*-Metre,' p. 2.

⁷ Constantine and Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 53.

⁸ Anatole Le Braz, *Dealings with the Dead*, trans. by A.E. Whitehead (London: George Redway, 1898), p. 10

⁹ Le Braz, *Dealings with the Dead*, trans. by Whitehead, p. 32.

¹⁰ Le Braz, *Dealings with the Dead*, trans. by Whitehead, p. 48.

¹¹ Constantine and Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 51.

The presence of death is a familiar theme throughout many of the *gwerziou*, but in ‘Skolvan’ in particular, the dead intermingles with the living as a warning of judgment and repentance.

While there are many threads which connect ‘Skolvan’ to the other Breton ballads, they still remain distinct and individual in many of their aspects. Throughout many of the ballads, there exists a foreboding sense of doom and gothic horror—somber, tragic, and in many cases horrifying. The ballads frequently interact with the ‘otherworld,’ like in ‘Lord Count and the Fairy’ where the fairy intrudes upon the scene and brings death with her. However, whereas the grief in ‘Lord Count’ stems from the separation between man and wife only assuaged by the even more sorrowful reunion in the church, the tragedy in ‘Skolvan’ comes from the sinner's separation from God. The reunion near the end, while not joyful, is one of peace and great gladness now that he can join his fellow souls in the presence of his maker and judge—a heavenly image reflected in ‘Lord Count’ by the earthly church. ‘Maharit Charlès and her Bandits’ also has many similarities in themes, yet a prominent difference marks the two tales. Much like Skolvan, Maharit is ‘thrown onto the street’¹² to wander restlessly. Both characters commit horrible crimes; fratricide; burning of farm animals; murder of innocents. The difference is that Maharit’s ‘final words are chilling, but also fiercely angry and unrepentant,’¹³ whereas Skolvan is desperately seeking forgiveness. Further, it is interesting to note the contrast between their interactions with their mothers. Maharit decries that ‘if my stepmother had given me / Some clothes, and a bite to eat,’¹⁴ she would not have had to seek refuge in the bushes; she would not have killed three hundred men. Skolvan, when his mother shuts her door on him and cries ‘If my son Skolvan has come here / I put my curse upon him,’¹⁵ woefully accepts the judgment and trudges forward on his journey; a picture of the repentant man who accepts a righteous punishment. This tension and division between family members is emphasized in other Breton ballads as well. In ‘The Bridegroom and the Mad Dog,’ a brother loses his sister to death at the hands of her rabid husband. Yet even here the differences in the tales help to reveal the themes which run through them. Whereas the brother priest is opening a door into a room of blood, death, and appalling criminality, Skolvan is a criminal trying to open the door to reach the light and purity of a home which is locked to him. While many of these tales have an intense specificity in location, Skolvan’s story is noticeably lacking in this arena. The effect is a powerful displacement of time and place, exaggerated by and perhaps intended to accentuate the world of the *anaon* as the figure and world most heavily felt in this ballad.

¹² Constantine and Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 117.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 47.

The English and Scottish ballads—while they have a few overlapping features, mainly death, trials, magic, and otherworld themes and motifs—offer an unmistakable contrast to the Breton *gwerziou*. While the English and Scottish tales are of a more legendary content, relating tales of knights such as Sir Kay, and Gawain, and King Arthur, the *gwerziou* are much more related to the everyday nature of real people and the real world. They deal with peasants, sailors, priests, a few lords and ladies, and do not seem concerned with the heroic or chivalric world which much of the English and Scottish tales contain. If we take the example of ‘King Orfeo,’ the otherworld or fairyland steals away his wife and in grief, Orfeo leaves his kingdom barefoot and for ‘ten years he lived in the woods.’¹⁶ He then plays beautifully for the King and Queen of Elfland, and they give his wife back to him as a reward. Afterwards, they return home to rule over their kingdom. This is miles away from the haunting, rustic, and preternatural world of the *gwerziou* which often ends in loss and devastation; even when a happier ending occurs, a note of tragedy, sin, and the passing of mortal things still lingers. This preoccupation with real, mundane people and often harsh circumstances could be due to the fact that ‘Breton was and has remained very much the spoken language of a rural community.’¹⁷

With the full context and comparisons with other tales laid out, ‘Skolvan’ takes on a layered sense of depth; a repository of history, culture, and religiosity. From the beginning, the ballad refers to those who are listening and singing it, calling them to repeat the tale to gain God’s pardon and benediction. This is not only a captivating story, but a learning experience for those listening to continually seek salvation and forgiveness. Skolvan’s crimes have divorced him from, not only God, but from his mother as well and he must embark upon a journey with the destination hanging in the balance—will his wanderings take him to hell or to heaven? The whole world has cursed Skolvan at the behest of his mother, from the stars to the moon, to the sun and the dew falling on the ground;¹⁸ he is an exile, with the very land turned against him, reminiscent of Adam’s expulsion from Eden:

Cursed is the ground because of you;

In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you¹⁹

¹⁶ Francis James Child (ed.), *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1 (Project Gutenberg, 2014) [ebook], p. 216 < https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/44969/pg44969-images.html#Ballad_19>

¹⁷ Constantine and Guillorel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 2.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁹ ESV, ‘Genesis 3,’ *The Holy Bible* (Good News Publishers, 2001), Genesis 3:17-18 < <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%203%3A17&version=ESV>>

His crimes are very telling, for his mother lists off the atrocious acts, repeating ‘that was not his worst crime,’²⁰ until she arrives at his greatest sin which was losing ‘my little book / Which was written with the blood of our Saviour.’²¹ It is salvation which Skolvan has lost, yet despite his mother's despondency, the book of salvation can be regained. With imagery alluding to the story of Jonah, Skolvan's godfather reassures them that the book is not lost forever but is guarded ‘under the sea, eighteen fathoms deep / In the mouth of a fish.’²² The number eighteen is a traditional number in the ballads used to denote a large number,²³ emphasizing the great chasm which divides Skolvan from his redemption. However, this is the moment on which the *gwerz* hinges for the key to bridging that chasm is in the three ruined pages:

One with water, and one with blood

One with the tears from my eyes.²⁴

Water and blood, as Christian elements, symbolize the purifying and redemptive work of Christ on the Cross in forgiveness of sins. The tears are the image of repentance—sorrow for past crimes and hope for salvation. With forgiveness achieved, Skolvan is washed clean; he exchanges his black garb and horse for an identity of purity and brilliant whiteness. His journey which before was destined for hell has now turned towards heaven; and the world which before was cursed to him, now imparts blessings. Repetition, used throughout the ballad, is a ‘device of repeating a phrase or phrases in successive stanzas, producing a cumulative emotional effect’²⁵ and is nowhere else as compelling as it is in this climatic moment.

The recorded ballad from 1959, sung by 73-year-old Marie-Josèphe Bertrand, has ‘gained an almost mythic status among subsequent generations of singers of *gwerziou*.’²⁶ A clog-maker from Plounévez Quintin, her version is haunting, rustic, and even without knowledge of the language, arresting.

The tale of ‘Skolvan, a penitent soul’ is a compelling journey of a soul seeking forgiveness and salvation. It has the traditional solemn and tragic elements of a Breton *gwerz*, but one of the things which makes it unique is its surprising connection to the ‘Ysgolan’ poem from the Welsh Black Book of Carmarthen. It has many similar motifs and themes to the whole corpus of *gwerziou*, but also a few distinct differences that help reveal the underlying meaning of the ballad and contrast it with ballads of the English and Scottish cultures. It is a moving piece that

²⁰ Constantine and Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 48.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 48.

²² *ibid.*, p. 48.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁵ Padel, ‘Legendary Poetry in *Englyn-Metre*,’ p. 20.

²⁶ Constantine and Guillourel, *Miracles and Murders*, p. 52.

uses biblical allusions, incremental repetition, and Christian symbolism to paint a tale of guilt, separation, and ultimately, redemption.

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