

## A Comparative Approach to European Folk Poetry and the Erotic Wedding Motif

Louise O. Vasvari

*State University of New York Stony Brook*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Vasvari, Louise O. "A Comparative Approach to European Folk Poetry and the Erotic Wedding Motif." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.4 (1999): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1050>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1685 times as of 11/07/19. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 1 Issue 4 (December 1999) Article 1**

**Louise O. Vasvári,**

**"A Comparative Approach to European Folk Poetry and the Erotic Wedding Motif"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/1>>

---

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 1.4 (1999)***  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article, "A Comparative Approach to European Folk Poetry and the Erotic Wedding Motif," Louise O. Vasvári posits that while the corpus of folk poetry in any one area of Europe always differs from neighboring traditions, of greater interest is the existence of a large amount of related material across the continent. Nevertheless, while research in folk poetry has been rich in field collecting and cataloguing, there exists little in-depth comparative study of folk poetry. Doubtless, this is owing in part to the fact that the great majority of the texts are accessible only in the original language or dialect. In this study, Vasvári offers a case study as a model for such investigations. The comparative analysis of examples from a German, Hungarian, and Spanish corpus show how in folk poetry women are often depicted as potentially transgressive. On the one hand, being titillating, the songs are appropriate to the occasion of the wedding festivities, and, on the other, they represent a warning to young women about the sexual and, consequently, social dangers always present in their interaction with men.

**Louise O. VASVÁRI**

### **A Comparative Approach to European Folk Poetry and the Erotic Wedding Motif**

Every European language has a tradition of folk poetry. While the corpus taken as a whole in any one area differs in some way from those of other traditions -- in its preferences for particular themes and motifs, formulas, and rhyme patterns -- of greater interest is the existence of a large amount of related folk material across Europe. But, while research has been rich in field collecting and historico-geographic studies, little in-depth comparative work has been done even between the traditions in two related languages, let alone and much less comparing various languages (for exceptions, see Danckert; Vargyas). Doubtless, part of the difficulty has been that the great majority of the oral texts collected, primarily since the nineteenth century, are generally accessible only in the original language or dialect. More work in a comparative framework is needed. In this study, I ignore offer a case study as a model for such investigations. My additional aim is to show that data from a less studied but very rich tradition, like the Hungarian, can provide the key to the understanding of a whole European tradition. My study ends up rather than begins with Hungarian. I first analyze a Spanish ballad, concerned with rape and miscegenation, which I studied in greater detail in a recent book (1999). By tracing the motif clusters from which the poem is composed through the connotative semiotic system of European folk poetry in a number of languages, I documented the existence of a pan-European cluster of erotic folk motifs. In this study I will deal primarily with some twenty Hungarian texts, which are among those that provide the most striking confirmation of my thesis because, as we shall see, some are so boldly non-euphemistic that they serve to unmask the whole abused erotic tradition.

First, in order to identify the motifs which I will be considering, we need to examine the Spanish ballad, "The Little Moorish Girl," which formed the initial impetus for my investigation. The text was first recorded in print in the fifteenth century but variants must have circulated in earlier oral tradition. The plot is concerned with cross-cultural amorous relations in Andalusia in a period where Christians and Arabs still cohabited in the South of Spain. The surface story recounts how when a young Moorish girl is in bed at night, a Christian pretending to be her uncle supposedly tricks her into opening the door for him by telling her in Arabic that the police are after him. What occurs after the abrupt ending is hinted at by the female narrator's reiterated reference to herself as *cuitada* (poor, wretched) and *mezquina* (miserable): "I am a Moorish, a little Moorish girl, a beautiful little Moorish girl. / A Christian came to my door, oh wretched me, to deceive me;/ he spoke to me in Arabic as someone who knows it well: / Open your doors, Moorish girl, if Allah is to keep you from harm!:/ How can I open up, wretched me, when I don't know who you are? I am a Moor, your uncle Mas'ud, your mother's brother,/ and I've just killed a Christian and the law is after me; if you don't open up, my love, I'm finished./ When I heard him, wretched me, I got up, / threw on a shift, not finding my gown,/ I ran to the door and opened it wide" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Yo m'era mora moraina, morilla d'un bel catar. Cristiano vino a mi puerta, cuitada, por m'engañar; hablóme en algaravía como aquel que la bien sabe: 'Abrasme las puertas, mora, si Allá te guarde de mal!: 'Como t'abriré, mezquina, que no sé quien te serás?' 'Yo soy el moro Maçote, hermano de la tu madre, que un cristiano dexó muerto, tras mi viene el alcaide; si no me abres tú, mi vida, aquí me verás matar.' Cuando esto oí, cuitada, comencéme a levantar, vistiérame un almexía, no hallando mi brial, fuérame para la puerta abrila de par en par" [qtd. in Vasvári 11]).

Important features in the poem, several of which I will be discussing in a comparative context, include its form as a monologue, in which the girl manages to convey a double message of chaste enclosure but also an implicit offer of sexual pleasure; the initial alliterative identification of the girl as dark (*mora moraina, morilla*); the girl's own immodest self-characterization as beautiful, which shows her to be linguistically, and hence potentially also sexually, loose; the setting, on the threshold of the girl's house, which stands also for the threshold of her womanhood; the central motif of the man trying to gain entry into the girl's intimate female space, and, by extension, into her body; the seduction through linguistic misunderstanding; the girl running to the door half naked in a skimpy shift; and, finally, the implied element of miscegenation in the allusion, by omission, to the rape -- or seduction -- which takes place after she "ran to the door and opened it wide." Another, longer and likely later version of the ballad, does not end abruptly but, rather, the girl describes in detail the

ensuing rape scene, where the Christian holds a dagger to her throat when she attempts to scream (Vasvári 11).

My earlier project was to recuperate the various motifs and, ultimately, the semiotic core of the text through the study of connotative semiotic systems of European folk poetry and other related oral genres. It soon became evident to me that received scholarly opinion, which claimed either that the politico-social function of the poem was as a serious pro-, or, according to other scholars, anti-Muslim ideological work, simply could not be sustained when considered in a comparative perspective. Note in this context Kodály's reminder about ancient folksongs: "As far as the social function of folksongs is concerned ... we have to know not only the songs, but we need to know how and for what purpose the folk use them" ("A népdal társadalmi funkcióját ... nem csak a dalokat kell ismernünk, hanem tudnunk kell hogyan, mire használja őket a nép" [Kodály, *A magyar népzene* 17]). By confronting each of the elements of the ballad with European folk poetry I was able to show that it is, in fact, a member of a European family of erotic folk poetry, which is meant to be titillating, at the same time that it also serves as a warning to young girls of the dangers of opening their literal and metaphorical "door" to strangers. My documentation includes texts from the major European languages, but it was the addition of Hungarian materials collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from oral tradition which provides the final confirmation.

"The Little Moorish Girl" is typical of the ballad form, which is a (relatively) brief narrative poem, often in monologue or dialogue, concentrating on a single decisive moment, presenting the plot with omissions and innuendos. The typical dramatic representation of the ballad functions simultaneously as a narrative, which depicts a condensed and stylized reality. Unlike the epic, which deals with public events like war, the ballad is concerned with conflicts of everyday life. It can be considered incipiently "novelistic" in its focus on the climactic moment of universal themes, such as betrayal, trauma, sexual assault, and death. And it is precisely these socio-psychological themes that are international (see Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* 340; Vargyas 79-84). For the purposes of my study I will compare ballads with other forms of folk poetry indiscriminately, since all utilize identical stylistic features, such as repetitions, alliteration, and formulaic and symbolic language. Folk poetry is constructed both intra- and extra-textually of poetic prefabs and formulas, expressed in symbolic language, which form the "universal language" of humankind. Inner experiences, feelings, and thoughts are expressed, as if they were sensory experiences or events in the outer world, so that while individual songs when understood literally may seem enigmatic, fragmentary, or obscure, when grouped by themes, motifs, and keywords, they elucidate each other (Fromm vi; Olinger xi-xii). This use of formulas in folk poetry belongs to the sphere of stylization, that is, elevation above the level of everyday life, so that, for example, standing epithets like English *fair*, French *belle*, German *schön* or Hungarian *szép*, or *brown*, *brune*, (*schwarz*) *braun*, *barna*, in the same languages, when attributed to the heroine, are never simply merely descriptive but part of the motivation of the plot (see Vargyas 84). Similarly, by means of formulas characters and situations are presented as types. So, for example, when in folk poetry the heroine appears "sewing," or "embroidering in the window," or when she "walks to the rose-grove," or if she "opens her door" to a suitor, then we know the inevitable sexual consequences to follow (see Vargyas 82-84).

Finally, whether explicit or veiled, the overwhelming majority of symbols in folk poetry are sexual symbols, so that "a door is never just a door," and even linguistic subterfuge, such as the case, above, of the Christian pretending to be a Moor, has sexual implications. The stock of erotic metaphors over hundreds of years seem to have changed little in the common European corpus, and oral tradition lives in variation, which involves a constant reshaping of the form, but with the "deep structure" remaining the same. Because of these essential characteristics, folk tradition is capable of preserving ancient forms, which is what allows us to compare medieval texts -- many of which were first written down in the sixteenth century in some languages, with others collected by folklorists only in the nineteenth and twentieth (see Wehse 223-30; Vargyas 174-79).

Of the motifs which appear in "The Moorish Girl," I will discuss those of female self-praise, the relation of lust and language, images of the sexually enticing "dark" girl, the symbolism of open(ed) doors, and the potential interrelation of all these motifs in erotic folk poetry, concerned with what I have dubbed "borderotics," the enticements of sexual relations with the exotic "Other" (the term was coined by Chavez-Silverman). It is immediately striking that a poem ostensibly about rape begins

inappropriately as a "female song of self-praise," which was a stock feature of erotic poetry as early as in the Song of Songs, where one poem begins "Yes, I am dark! and radiant ... The eyes of many morning suns / Have pierced my skin and now I shine/ Black as the light before dawn" (see Falk no. 2), where a self-assertive girl defiantly counters the angry stares of other women, society's guardians of female virtue, by declaring that she has been burned by the admiring gaze of the piercing sun. Poems with this motif are clearly meant to be sexually titillating. From a more theoretical perspective, we can also analyze the formula of "self-praise" as the description of the female body wherein the woman plays out the roles of both the viewed object and the viewing male subject: that is, the girl's own sense of being is determined by her sexual appeal to men (see Nead 10-11).

The Christian's violation or seduction of the Moorish girl is symbolically centered in language, in that she claims that he was able to trick her by speaking in her language. In fact, there exists a whole minor genre of medieval erotic dialogues in which the woman speaks (or pretends to speak) one language and the man another. In some the woman rejects the man, in others she engages in lascivious wordplay with him. In all there is a sex-linked subtext generated by the interplay of language codes of the dialogue. Perhaps such poems ultimately suggest that when men and women are speaking about love they may not be talking the same language. On another level, male-female linguistic play can stand for the sexual play of miscegenation. In folklore, miscegenation, in stories of the seduction or rape of outgroup women, can serve as the image for the conquering of one culture by another. At the same time, the cultural tabu on consensual sexual relationships with outgroup members makes them a source of constant fascination, so that they are depicted as very alluring or, alternately, as very repulsive, but inevitably as more sexually active than one's in-group. In traditional poetry, for instance in our Spanish poem and in the case of the female narrator of the Song of Songs lyric, it is often dark girls who are forced to play the role of the deviant body of the exotic Other. The unremitting eroticization of Moorish girls in Spanish tradition is paralleled by the English *nut-brown maid*, the German *braunes* or *schwarzbraunes Mädel*, the French *brun(ett)e*, and the Hungarian *barna kislány*. According to context and language, a girl may be dubbed "dark" on the basis of hair, skin, eye color, or any combination of these. However, far more important than physiology are the social and sexual-psychological traits of dark girls, who are inevitably imagined as sexually more available than their fairer sisters, with whom they are *always* implicitly or explicitly contrasted. In addition, the change of a girl's complexion, such as being burned by the sun, is to be understood as symbolic of her having crossed a sexual threshold without the benefit of marriage.

Doris Massny characterized the dark girl in German tradition as *verführungsbereit* (ready to be seduced). In many poems the dark girl can be a real sexual tease; and, similarly, young men who approach her can be free with their language in telling her what they are after. One German dialogue between a *schwarzbraunes Mädchen* and the suitor knocking at her door is particularly similar to our Spanish ballad. Note in particular the titillating motif of the girl's soft-core sartorial sexuality, where the removing or tearing of her shift is symbolic of tearing her hymen, and the transparent symbolic equation of her "chamber door" with her sexual organ: "Nut-brown maid / in a blossomy white shift! / May I come to you when I want to? You can come as far as the door of my chamber, / but you can come no further! / Dark-brown maid / you have a pretty chamber door, / dark-brown maid in a blossomy white shift" ("Schwarzbraunes Mädchen / im blütenweissen Hemd! / Darf ich denn nicht einmal zu dir kommen / wann ich will? / Bis an die Kammertür darfst du kommen, / Aber weiter darst du nicht! / Schwarzbraunes Mädchen hast du 'ne schöne Kammertür, / schwarzbraunes Mädchen im blütenweissen Hemd!" [Ostwald 11-15]).

The consensual seduction continues following this exchange with the girl allowing the lover to come a bit closer in each strophe, from her bed, to her "little body," and, finally, to her *Fötzlein* (little cunt). The poem ends with the girl telling the suitor afterwards that he can come back as often as he wants. In Hungarian tradition we also frequently see the preference for the more available dark girl over the fair one, as in the following example, where a young man at first has difficulty making up his mind about what he desires. Note the feminine symbolism of the blazing hut paired with the phallic burning reed: "The hut is ablaze, the reed crackles, / how I love the dark one! Once I loved a blond girl, / didn't care the least for the dark one. / Now I long for the blonde, / just like I long for grapes; / but I long even more for a dark one, / like I long for a tart cider apple" ("Ég a kunyhó, ropog' nád, / De szeretem e' a' barnát. / Míg a szőke lyánt szerettem, / A barnát csak megvettem. / Úgy vágyom most

a' szőkére,/ mint a szöllő szemecskére;/ de még inkább a barnára,/ mint a borizü almára"  
[Kecskeméthy-Csapó no. 16])

Now compare a German translation of two related poems, which I was not able to retrieve in the Hungarian original. In these there is no equivocation about the clear preference for the dark girl. Note also in the second example the depiction of the sexual aggressiveness of the dark girl: "The reed by the fence is ablaze,/ I love only the dark one;/ softly shines the moon,/ dark is certainly more beautiful than blonde" and "When she chases after the young man herself,/ She herself says to the boy,/ 'Do you want to have me as your sweetheart?'" ("Angezündet has sichs' Rohr am Zaune,/ immer liebe ich allein die Braune;/ leise leuchtet's um den Mond,/ schöner ist wohl braun als blond" [Danckert, 3 258-59] and "Wenn sie selbst den Burschen nachgeht,/ Selber sagt sie zu dem Knaben,/ 'Willst du mich als Liebchen haben?'" [Danckert, 3 849]). In a Hungarian example, the young man rejects fair girls but tells us in vulgar terms that he plans to sample as many dark girls as he can: "A boar is happy when he can go out into the meadow / I'll keep a lover if I could,/ but not a strumpet or an ugly one,/ but rather a cute little dark girl,/ First a Julie, then a Katie/ and then a dear Mary") ("Túr a disznó, ha rétre möhet,/ Tartok én szeretőt ha löhet,/ De nem ijen szajhát, rendát,/ Hanem ojjan szép kis barna lányt,/ Először a Julcsát, Katicát,/ Azután a drága Mariskát" [Bartók and Kodály no. 236]).

In one traditional song, with echoes of the Song of Songs, a girl laments her loss of innocence, equating her darkness with belonging to the most stigmatized outgroup, the Gypsies (Roma): "I got burnt on the sun/ Now no one is going to take me./ Why should anyone take such a girl,/ such a black gypsy?" ("Megfogott mán éngem a nap,/ Mán énrajtam senki sem kap./ Hogy is kapna ijen jányon,/ Ijen fekete cigányon" [Bartók and Kodály 376]). In Hungarian tradition the dark maiden (*barna kislány*) also has a married sister, the *barna menyecske*, as in the following example: "Young wife, you dark young wife,/ I warned you a long time ago not to go into the woods./ She went into the woods,/ She went into the woods, she lay down in the grass,/ A yellow-bellied snake slipped into her bosom" ("Menyecske, menyecske, te barna menyecske,/ Rég megmondtam néked, ne menj a cserésbe./ Bément a cserésbe, lefeküdt a fűbe./ Sárig-hasú kigyó bébútt kebelébe" [Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* no. 86; Berlás and Szalay no. 32]). In a longer and even more transparent version, the young woman asks her mother and her brothers, in turn, to pull out the snake, but they are afraid to do so until finally her beloved pulls it out (Szöllösy no. 157; Bartók, *Magyar népdalok* 53a, 53b, 157m).

In addition to the sexual enticement of dark girls, the brown skin color -- and related black, blue-black, and purple references to color -- have even more basic female sexual connotations: that of the female sexual organ itself. For example, dark-colored? fleshy fruits like the plum can stand for the female sex -- by association with its dark color, smooth skin, and elongated shape with a groove on one side. For example, (Shakespearean) English *sloe* (plum), the German *Pflaume*, or the Slavic *cespa* -- all have this connotation, while in Hungarian, in the following poem featuring another *barna kislány*, "climbing the plum tree" serves as a transparent euphemism for sexual intercourse, which is then deconstructed two lines later in very crude terms: "I climbed up the prune tree/ split my trousers./ I'd fuck her mercy twenty times./ My dark baby will sew them for me" ("Fölmentem a szilva fára,/ Elrepedt a gatyasszára./ Husszor basszam az irgalmát/ majd meg varrja barna babám [Bartók and Kodály no. 376]).

Having looked at some images of the dark girl in a sexual connotation, let us now turn to the symbolism of thresholds and of open(ed) doors. As Mary Douglas suggests, the boundaries of the body cannot be separated from the operation of other social and cultural boundaries (114-39). Concern with what goes on inside and outside the house reflects a larger preoccupation with boundaries of family and its protection. In traditional society the distinction between public and private spheres also extends to distinct sexual spheres, with women rarely seen in public places. Their private, enclosed space, where they are out of public sight, is the only safe place to guard their reputation. The surveillance of women, through whose bodily orifices pollution can occur, concentrates on three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, and the threshold of the house. The three areas become frequently collapsed into each other, so that the signs of the decent woman are the enclosed body, the closed mouth, and the locked house. A woman's body becomes the symbol of family integrity and purity, which is violated by illicit sexual penetration. It is the woman who is held responsible for loss of

her family's reputation through failure to maintain the boundaries of house and body (see Stallybrass). The particular danger of pollution resulting from transgressing society's boundaries can be expressed in traditional poetry by sexually ripe girls who leave the protection of the threshold to pluck flowers, nuts, fruits, etc., all of which are connected with the plucking of their maidenhead, as in the following Hungarian poem: "In my sweetheart's flower garden/ I planted rosemary last night./ 'Water it, my sweetheart, so that our love does not remain half-done'" ("Az én babám virág kertjibe/ Rozmaringot ültettem az este./ 'Locsold, babám, hogy el ne hervadjon/ a szerelmünk félbe ne maradjon" [Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* no. 43]). But even girls who stay inside ~~girls~~ can allow the boundaries of their house, hence body, to be penetrated. For instance in German folk tradition, where the association of the concepts "woman" and "house" is so strong that the term *Frauenzimmer* (woman's chamber) is a colloquial -- although now outdated -- term for "woman" and the term *altes Haus* is used to mean "old woman" and "stretched vagina." And, across a number of languages "to open the door," "to leave the door open," or "to knock on every door" all have sexual connotations.

The division of male public sphere and female private sphere and the female symbolism of enclosed spaces leads, in turn, to the pervasive sexual symbolism of the motif of suitors knocking on doors, corresponding to their seeking entry into the female body. In tradition men's roles remain constant, their only aim being to gain entry, whether through amorous words, crass sexual come-on, or deceit. A typical excuse men use to gain entry into a girl's house is that they seek refuge from the bad weather, as in the following two examples in Hungarian: "It's very stormy,/ my cloak is leaking/ Let me in, my sweetheart,/ 'cause I'm dying of cold" ("Esik a fürgeteg./ Lukas a köpönyeg./ Eressz be, babám/ Mer mögösz a hideg!" [Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* no. 126]) and "Let me in, let me in,/ Boriska, my violet,/ no, I won't let you in, no I won't,/ I don't know who you are,/ It's me, it's me/ a poor Hungarian lad,/ I'm freezing,/ my cloak is soaked through" ("Eressz be, eressz be,/ Boriska violám,/ Nem ereszkék, nem én,/ Mer nem tudom ki vagy/ Én vagyok, én vagyok/ Szegény magyar legény,/ Kezem lábam fázik,/ Köpönyegem ázik" [Bartók, *Magyar népdalok* 19a]). In a particularly explicit Hungarian song collected from nineteenth-century oral tradition, a suitor seeking entry into a girl's house begins his petition in a courtly address, to contrast his switch later to the most explicit sexual register: "I beg you most humbly,/ give me leave to enter, young miss,/ if I don't fuck you [formal address] real well,/ my cock should break off in the effort" ("Kérem, alázatossan,/ Eresszen be, kisasszony,/ Ha igazán nem baszom,/ Törjék bele faszom" [Fohn no. 126]).

It is always women who have the responsibility for making the decision of whether or not to open their door to suitors/lovers and it is they who are made to suffer the consequences. Even today in rural Sicily when an anthropologist questioned informants why a woman and her family bear the burden of sanctions after an illicit affair, the frequent aphoristic reply is that "A man can knock on many doors, but the door opens from the inside, not the outside" (Giovannini 420). Similarly, despite the serious consequences of going against society's sanctions, some Hungarian girls in lyric tradition often seem more than eager to ease the way for their lovers, although they may be unwilling to take responsibility for their deed: "The door opens on its own,/ by the whispering voice of the lover" ("Ki nyílik az ajtó magától,/ a szerető gyöngé szavától" [Kodály no. 223]) or "The door opened all on its own,/ by my little angel's delicate arm" ("Kinyíllott az ajtó magától,/ Kisangyalom gyenge karjától" [Kodály no. 305]). When bolder girls invite their lovers into their house and bed, even they make very clear beforehand the level of sexual performance they expect: "Come in this way, my love, there is no mud;/ there is no lock on my door/ My door is open, you can come in/ My bed is made, you can lie down./ don't leave my house/ until three candles are burnt/ The fourth is already half burned/ but the loving is still not enough" ("Erre gyere rózsám, nincsen sár./ Nincs az ajtómon semmi zár;/ Nyitva van az ajtóm, bejöhetsz,/ Bontva van az ágyam, lefekhetsz/ Addig a házamból el nem mégy,/ Míg három szál gyertya el nem ég./ A negyedik is már félben ég/ A szerelem mégis nem elég" [Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* no. 166]).

In another version of this scene, the girl inviting her suitor not only assures him that the door is not locked but tells him that even if it is, she will have the lock broken: "It's not muddy in front of my door,/ there is no lock on my door,/ what there is, I'll have knocked off,/ I'll let in my love./ I'll make the bed, put him in it,/ towards dawn I'll awaken him,/ give him a kiss and let him go" ("Ajtóm előtt nincsen sár,/ Az ajtómon nincsen zár,/ Ami van is, leveretem,/ A rózsámat beeresztem./ Ágyat vetek,

lefektetem,/ Hajnal felé felébresztem./ Csókot adok, eleresztem" [Ortutay and Katona, *A magyar népdal* no. 167]). Just as in the Spanish ballad about the little Moorish girl, in another Hungarian ballad a further level of titillation is added, not only by the fact that this girl is also a *barna kislány* but also by the initial suggestion that the suitor seeking entry may be a foreigner, a *tót*, that is, a member of the Slovak minority of Hungary: "Open the door my sweetheart,/ it's a Hungarian who is knocking, not some Slovak/ Oh, how long it's taking you to open,/ as if you didn't recognize who it was./ I do know who it is, but I am afraid, because man is a bad soul; he swears that he loves you,/ then he turns and scorns you" ("Nyisd ki, babám, az ajtót,/ magyar kopogtat, nem tót./ Jaj be soká nyitod ki/ mintha nem tudnád hogy ki./ Tudom biz én; de félek,/ mert a férfi rossz lélek:/ azt esküszí hogy szeret,/ egyet fordul 's kinevet" [Berlász and Szalay no. 1]).

In the foregoing poem the lover thinks that the girl hesitates to open her door only because she takes him to be an untrustworthy foreigner. She answers derisively that she knows very well who he is but still has no intention of letting him in because no man, even a home-grown one, is to be trusted. Thus we have a further twist here on the sexual connotations of dark girls, namely that of socio-national hierarchy. Another poem, collected from twentieth-century oral tradition by Kodály, begins with the suitor's identical words, but the outcome is much more unfortunate, as the girl reports in the same elliptical style as the narrator in the "Little Moorish Girl": "I opened the door./ A shaggy-haired Slovak jumped in;/ his head was as big as the top of a tower" ("Kinyitottam az ajtót,/ Beugrott egy boglyás tót,/ Olyan nagy vót a feje,/ Mint a torony teteje" [Bartók, *Magyar népdalok* no. 328a]). The negative and discriminatory connotation to Slovaks -- as to other minorities in the former greater Hungary -- appears in many Hungarian folk songs and here is another example, here with an image of the foreigner's violent behavior: "Open the door, my sweetheart, / It's a Hungarian knocking, not a Slovak,/ If you don't open it a bit, I'll freeze to death out here./ He then brought down the door latch" ("Nyisd ki babám az ajtót,/ Magyar kopogtat, nem tót,/ Ha egy kicsit nem nyitod/ Én idekint megfagyok/ Kinyitották már az ajtót,/ Beugrott egy bolyos tót,/ Beugrott egy bolyos tót,/ Féreütte a kankót" [Bartók, *Magyar népdalok* no. 357]).

The most fascinating detail about these songs is that Kodály was told by his informants that they were sung by a chorus of older village women during the cycle in the wedding ceremonies, while they accompanied the bride to her husband's home. A German song plays even more unequivocally with the sexual possibilities of miscegenation, in this case between a German girl and a "wild" Cossack. While it begins with the usual male request for entry into the house and the girl's fearful negative reply, it ends in the crudest possible terms, clearly meant as a kind of unmasking of the whole abused folkloric motif: "Oh, girly, open, oh, open up, don't restrain yourself!/ I shouldn't, Cossack, I shouldn't do it,/ mother is sleeping near the hearth, she won't allow it./ If you can't manage it, hide me;/ where is your little hole, the one you fuck with?/ Pull your prick out of your pants and stick it inside!" ("Ach, öffne, Mädchen, ach, tu auf,/ Leg du dir selbst keinen Zwang auf!/ Ich darf's Kosake, ich darf's nicht tun,/ Mutter liegt am Herd, sie lässt's nicht an./ Deck mich zu, Mädchen, wenn du nicht schaffst,/ Wo ist denn das Löchlein, mit welchem du/ Zieh den Zumpf aus der Hosen and steck ihn hinein" [Hnatjuk 129]). Interestingly, in the large erotic tradition of the "knocking on the door" motif we encounter in Hungarian folk poetry the unveiling of pretenses and the admission in plain language that even locked doors offer no protection when a priapic man knocks on the door of a girl impatiently awaiting him on *her* sexual threshold: "Oh! Dear mother,/ there is no lock/ that a private won't knock off with his cock" ("Oh! édes anyám!/ Nincsen olyan zár,/ Kit a baka/ A faszával/ Le nem taszigál" [Fohn no. 128]).

Beginning with a Spanish medieval ballad and ending with a Hungarian wedding song from early twentieth-century oral tradition, I have tried to show that although the "open your door" motif is the incessant battle cry of suitors seeking entry into forbidden female quarters and female bodies, poetic tradition, just like real life, has placed the sole burden of responsibility for the outcome on the women themselves. When I first started my investigation of the very elusive Spanish ballad, I already suspected that it could not be read as having serious ideological intent. Examples like the obscene German and Hungarian variants, above, are very important for spelling out what was left in the gaps of more poetic versions. They also show how women are depicted as potentially transgressive, which, in turn, tells us why such songs would be sung by a chorus of older women to the bride. On the one hand, they are appropriate to the occasion of the wedding festivities, being titillating. Compare even much more directly vulgar songs, such as the following, which was said to be sung by unmarried



males to the bride: "Get up bride,/ here comes the groom,/ feel his cock,/ how hard it is" ("Kelj fel menyasszony/ Itt a vőlegény,/ Tapogasd meg a faszát,/ Hogy milyen kemény!" [Bartók, *Magyar népdalok* 12b]). On the other hand, while amusing, these poems *also* represent a real warning to the young woman about the dangers lurking beyond the threshold, and all the more so if the man is from a feared or despised outgroup, whether Christian, Slovak, or Cossack.

### Works Cited

- Bartók, Béla. *Magyar népdalok egyetemes gyűjteménye* (General Register of Hungarian Folksongs). Budapest: Akadémiai, 1991.
- Bartók, Béla, and Zoltán Kodály. *A magyar népzene tára. Népdal típusok* (An Archive of Hungarian Folksongs: Types of Folksongs). Budapest: Akadémiai, 1973.
- Berlász, Melinda, and Olga Szalay, eds. *Moldvai Gyűjtés* (A Collection from Moldova). Budapest: Múzsák, 1989.
- Chavez-Silverman, Susana. "Chicanas in Love: Sandra Cisneros Talking Back and Alicia Gaspar de Alba Giving Back the Wor(l)d." *Chasqui* 27 (1998): 33-46.
- Danckert, Werner. *Symbol, Metapher, Allegorie im Lied der Völker*. Bonn: Verlag für systematische Musikwissenschaft, 1978.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Erdélyi, János, ed. *Népköltészet. Népdalok, népmesék és közmondások* (Folk Poetry: Folk Songs, Folktales, and Proverbs). Pest: Heckenast, 1869.
- Falk, Marcia. *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation*. San Francisco: Harper, 1990.
- Fohn, Julius. "Magyarische Riegentanzlieder aus der Grosswardeiner Gegend." *Anthropophyteia* 2 (1905): 125-53.
- Giovannini, Maureen J. "Woman: A Dominant Symbol within the Cultural System of a Sicilian Town." *Man* 16 (1981): 408-26.
- Kecskeméthy-Csapó, Dániel, ed. *Dalfüzérke válogatott népszerű dalokból fűzve* (A Garland of Popular Folkongs). Pest: Gusztáv Sajátja, 1844.
- Kodály, Zoltán. *A magyar népzene* (Hungarian Folkmusic). Ed. Lajos Vargyas. Budapest: Zeneművészeti, 1971.
- Massny, Doris. "Die Formel 'das braune Mädelein' im alten deutschen Volkslied." *Niederdeutsche Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 15 (1937): 26-65.
- Ortutay, Gyula, and Imre Katona. *A magyar népdal* (The Hungarian Folksong). Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1970.
- Ortutay, Gyula, and Imre Katona. *Magyar népballadák* (Hungarian Folk Ballads). Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1976.
- Ostwald, Hans. *Erotische Volkslieder aus Deutschland*. Berlin: Eberhard Frowein, 1910.
- Stallybrass, Peter. "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed." *The Discourse of Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Margaret W. Ferguson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 123-44.
- Szöllösy, András, ed. *Bartók Béla összegyűjtött írásai* (Collected Writings of Béla Bartók). Budapest: Zeneművészeti, 1966.
- Vargyas, Lajos. *Hungarian Ballads and the European Ballad Tradition*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1983.
- Vasvári, Louise O. *The Heterotextual Body of the "Mora Morilla"*. London: Queen Mary-Westfield College, U of London, 1999.
- Wehse, Rainer. "The Erotic Metaphor in Humorous Narrative Songs (*Schwank* Songs)." *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*. Ed. Nikolai Burlakoff and Karl Lindahl. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980. 223-33.

Author's profile: Louise O. Vasvári teaches Hispanic languages and comparative literature at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. Her interests include Hispanic literatures, folklore, medieval literature, translation theory, and applied linguistics and she has published widely in these areas. She is particularly interested in the *Libro de buen amor* and she published over a dozen articles on various aspects of this text. Her most recent book is *The Heterotextual Body of the "Mora Morilla"* (1999). E-mail: <[louise.vasvari@sunysb.edu](mailto:louise.vasvari@sunysb.edu)>