

The Passion of the Christ in XML: Prayer Tradition Nowadays

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Abstract

The edition of oral traditional compositions can be built in very different ways. Since the last century, several theories and methodologies have been applied to this particular kind of text. In this presentation, I will describe a standardization attempt towards an electronic edition of Portuguese oral prayers, in particular. For this end, I make use of the TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) consortium proposal of an XML edition in the context of humanities studies.

The specific linguistic, rhetorical, and structural features of oral prayer compositions, along with the more obvious constraints of their original transmission medium, pose particularly challenging problems when trying to edit them, in a comprehensive way, in a textual format. The fact that they have an open structure only adds to this challenge, and raises special needs concerning nowadays electronic edition methods.

This kind of texts suggest some new possible research lines in the field of electronic edition. Having their presentation in mind, I will use the Portuguese Passion of The Christ themed ones to exemplify them. Even though they are, taxonomically and functionally speaking, prayers, they have structural specificities as well, like fixed formulas, a unique kind of contamination, especially with the *romancero* (or balladry), and greater narrative presence -instead of the more usually observed dramaticness of balladry.

Along with presenting my edition proposal for this kind of text, I will outline how a standardized edition allows for automatic comparison of all the versions of a given text, namely one that has been collected from orality.

0 Introduction

In this paper, I intend to describe my study on the edition of popular prayers themed on the Passion of the Christ by reaching three different points: (1) I will emphasize the traditional prayer as a peculiar type of text, as being inserted in the general collection of oral transmitted literature, passed on from generation to generation; (2) I will briefly describe an example of ballad edition; and (3) I will suggest as a model the electronic edition, especially the one based on the Text Encoding Initiative standardizing effort for the humanities.

1 Prayer's singularity

Popular prayer belongs to oral tradition even though it has its own contexts, peculiar purposes and particular means. The concept of prayer I bring today is theoretically underpinned taking into account its place within Portuguese popular religion, its function,

performance aspects, and its social context. As other literary oral texts, prayer is not easily defined in strict terms (Pedrosa 2000: 12-13). Its features separately could be perceived as other oral texts, but bringing them together can build the concept of what I believe to be a traditional prayer. Generically, it can be defined as a formula addressed to a sovereign entity in a contemplative way. It is used for general protection, for guidance or as a demonstration of religiousness. Its purpose circulates between requests or begging for protection in several different occasions, without entirely assuming the practical or magical nature of an incantation (“ensalmo”) or spell (“conjuro”)¹. It certainly functions in individuality: a prayer is, definitely, a composition connected to privacy. Even coexisting at the same time with institutional or church practices, it is formulated with intrinsic proximity between person and words that are expressed, since the person learnt the composition orally, in the heart of their family or community religious devotion.

As a text, some elements single out the passion of Christ’s popular prayer: obviously, one is its theme being essentially religious; another is its purpose and its objective that are strongly related to faith and belief: a third element is the textual miscellany that is in fact a presence in the traditional prayer. Explaining a little bit the miscellany phenomenon, there can be two sorts: a) being formed by other texts’ fragments (which in ethnographic and folklore studies is called contamination) and b) converted as prayers from texts that previously weren’t (these resulting texts are in ethnographic and folklore studies called *contrafacta*).

Resuming this first point, prayer concentrates itself on the sphere of belief, of the sacred, thus suggesting prayers don’t have other functionalities besides the religious one; at least they don’t apply to work or knowledge fields, although they can be used to help daily activities (for example, getting out of the house, precaution against enemies or harmful events). Therefore they have never existed as ludic texts, but as a complementary utility for the performance of an activity or action. Moreover, its high degree of textual and linguistic contamination includes fragments of other texts resulting in a textual conglomerate and a linguistic mixture; sometimes even a word can gather parts from different languages. Another element that defines the prayer is a consequence of the last idea: prayers are such contaminated texts that they can be a result of different detachable parts. I call one of these parts “prayer formula”². It can appear either in the beginning or at the end and in all kinds of prayers, or even at the end of a ballad, changing functionally the ballad into a prayer (e.g. in a

¹ There are several studies that try to define prayer. Here are some examples: Gill (1987), Pedrosa (2000), Saraiva (2001), Sawyer (2001), Nogueira (2006).

² Pere Ferré calls them “orational formulae”, Amadeu Ferreira “explanatory formulae” and Maria Aliete Galhoz “closings”.

historical ballad like *Alonso de Aguilar*, what I call a “prayer formula” can be pronounced at its bottom so the text can function as a prayer).

2 Example: one edition method – Editing oral texts

After having the enhanced traditional prayer singularity, the second and third parts of my presentation will be focused on the edition method that will be possible for specimens as complex as these. For this I will give an electronic edition example already made for Oral Literature, which is the Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project, coordinated by Suzanne Petersen, whose website³ and methodology I will briefly describe. This project is very wisely made and is scientifically perfectionist. I will use it just as an example. The website is very easy to use and it is well conceived structurally concerning the users’ point of view. The research tool is simple to use and the results are shown very quickly. The software chosen to build the balladry database was *Microsoft Visual FoxPro*, which develops complex databases. The resources available in the Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project are two databases and a list of related links with indexes and sub-classifications. These resources have two types of references: one is the international reference (like cataloguing references, main characters, thematic categories, etc.); and the second one is Petersen’s project’s own references. The website also gives access to the following indexes: motifs, ballad title given by the project, international title, metrical data, *incipit*, last verse, country in which each composition was collected, texts organized by the *Índice General del Romancero Hispánico*,⁴ etc.

The Pan-Hispanic Ballad Project is very complete to be used by common users or by investigators that study balladry, folklore or areas concerning oral literature. From an editorial point of view, it has two disadvantages. On the one hand, even though some efforts have been made to edit it in simple text format, thus permitting the data migration to different formats or different computational language, this framework is based on a paid software. On the other hand, this project, although successful on the availability of ballad data, and built in an electronic edition which maintains composition identity, was created individually, without worries of standardization or including itself in other initiative already designed. However, this is just an example of how in this area of investigation there is a tendency of isolation and not a quest for the general integration concerning text cataloguing, classification and edition

³ <http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/>.

⁴ <http://depts.washington.edu/hisprom/optional/index.htm>.

method.

Like Petersen's project, the edition and methodological questions are in the heart of every initiative dealing with oral data. It is noticeable the difficulty to transform oral texts into a written form, because they have different final users and different senses of conservation. Then, it is necessary to consider the possibility of offering the reader a written version containing rich information about the composition's original context (or what can be recovered from it): this is strongly possible with an electronic edition like the one I am presenting. The transcription doesn't have to appear aside from the oral recording but the two features can come along together. This allows to recover an essential part of the transmission context and makes possible the accessibility to the performance information. Even though recovering and archiving a composition physically, the only thing the electronic edition, as well as any other edition method, won't do, is the composition's maintenance in orality.

Similarly, in any transformation of the original format of an oral composition, the loss of human circumstance is obvious, which conceals the importance of the voice, gesture and performance, essential elements in the production of any oral specimen. This also happens with the electronic edition, of course. Nevertheless, an electronic edition can recover more of these defining features than a paper edition or any other alike.

3 The edition proposed: solutions and how we can standardize oral literature and provide a classification using this model

In this section I propose an electronic edition model. This model I refer to was built by the Text Encoding Initiative⁵ (TEI) consortium created during the 80s-90s with the objective of standardizing text markup for the Human Sciences. Previous attempts were made, but without success in terms of the generalized adoption of those models, because they were more concentrated on the edition of singular projects, than on sharing and spreading their model for everyone's access (176). The model conceived by TEI uses XML language. XML stands for 'Extensible Markup Language' and it is widely used in the World Wide Web because of all the processing and encoding advantages it offers. It generates hierarchically organized text files which are machine-readable and human-readable, and thus can serve several purposes like the edition of a dictionary, transcription of interviews for oral history or philological annotation of

⁵ Text Encoding Initiative website (TEI): <http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml>

epistolographic documents. Above all, the four most important advantages of this method for oral literature are: a) conserving more of the features from the occurrence of an oral text; b) it can be developed and updated while it is being worked; c) it allows automatic comparison between texts; and d) the collection transcribed is always searchable, and therefore no information or any part of any text is put aside, resulting in an open range of investigation opportunity for every area of interest.

One of the chief advantages of XML is that it doesn't have to be worked in a specific or paid application or software. On the contrary, it works in any common text editor. This metalanguage (for being a language that describes other languages) was built for the annotation or codification, and TEI adapted it for the annotation of text. The consortium comments that: “Encoding a text for computer processing is, in principle, like transcribing manuscript from *scriptio continua*, it is a process of making explicit what is conjectural or implicit, a process of directing the user as to how the content of a text should be (or has been) interpreted”⁶. We can conclude that the TEI/XML edition method seeks to maintain the text’s original integrity in a digital format. As a consequence, we can work with a text in ways that printed paper doesn’t admit. As an example, when constructing a critical edition, the TEI/XML model allows the automatic comparison of specimen versions, collation, stemmatics, and even the archetypal reconstruction.⁷

XML language has several advantages for text mark-up and it has these main features: it is extensible, and in that way it can be used and adapted for the purposes of its user; it must obey to the definitions of two types of files containing what we could call a “deep grammar”, and a “surface grammar”; these are the DTD, the Document Type Definition, which establishes hierarchy relations, element-tags and attribute-tags, and the XLS, the stylesheet, which transforms the tagged file into an edited text. Lastly, an XML file is readable by all kinds of software from a text editor to internet browsers, without losing any information. This makes it easier to change an XML file to other formats, and it can even be changed to produce a paper edition or other sort of transformation.

Explaining a little bit the XML practically, each label is constituted by an opening and an ending. To give an example, let’s imagine the element that starts a text, it would work like this:

⁶ TEI, “A Gentle Introduction to XML”: <http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/SG.html>.

⁷ Shane Houdek, “Electronic Tagging of Verse: A Review of the Literature” (Department of English, University of Minnesota, Undergraduate Opportunities Program (UROP) project, 1997), 2.

`<text>text labelled</text>`

Everything written between the tags is its content. As XML is a hierarchical language, it allows the inclusion of less important elements inside other more important ones. For example, the element ‘body’ (as in text body) is inside the element ‘text’:

`<text><body>text labelled</body></text>`.

From a practical point of view, this markup format separates two different parts of a document: metadata (which is the external context of a text) and document data (the internal part of a text, the transcription). It also allows the connection of the text’s transcription to video, audio or image files, which can complete the recovery of what takes place in the occurrence of an oral composition. This allows us to reach a better fidelity to the original specimen, without having to use loyalty strategies to the text by doing annotated dialectal transcriptions, as has happened with several paper editions.

The essential advantages of this editorial solution are its concerns of standardization and the possibility of creating an international working net where investigators can cooperate united, contributing all for the same kind of platform. In addition, this model can guarantee the adaptation to the general studies of Folklore, Ethnology, Cultural studies and particularly Oral Literature. This concern for a standardized method facilitates the universal coordination of research, gives access to all users interested and allows a real comparison between texts, their versions and variants; the texts in the collection can be searchable and these features render a wider organized classification.

As complex as traditional prayers or other kinds of oral literature compositions are, they need special attention when conceiving an editorial edition that can maintain their context of occurrence with all its features. I believe this method combines all the capacities to do it.

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