

Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française. Vol. V: Chansons brèves (Les enfantines). Conrad LAFORTE (Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1987; Les Archives de Folklore, No. 22. Pp. xxxii + 1017, texts, maps, biblio., index. ISBN 2-7637-7125-4)

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Volume 9, numéro 1-2, 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081441ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081441ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Kehler, R. (1987). Compte rendu de [*Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française. Vol. V: Chansons brèves (Les enfantines)*]. Conrad LAFORTE (Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1987; Les Archives de Folklore, No. 22. Pp. xxxii + 1017, texts, maps, biblio., index. ISBN 2-7637-7125-4). *Ethnologies*, 9(1-2), 125–129. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081441ar>

Le Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française. Vol. V: Chansons brèves (Les enfantines)

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With the appearance of *Vol. V: Chansons brèves (Les enfantines)*, Conrad Laforte brings very nearly to completion his monumental and authoritative 6 volume *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*. This latest volume on short children's songs, added to the previously published volumes,

- I. Songs using the *laisse* form
- II. Strophic songs
- III. Dialogue songs
- IV. Enumerative (or cumulative) songs
- VI. Songs written on pre-existing tunes

rounds out admirably this extremely rich and varied repertoire.

It is to Laforte's credit that he realized, back in the fifties, when given the task of cataloguing Laval University's already substantial collection of folksong material, that French folksong scholarship would benefit greatly if a new, rigorous system of classification were devised. Previous systems had been proposed based on themes, genres, and somewhat confusing notions of social function and origin, but none had proved entirely successful or been universally adopted. Furthermore, there was disagreement as to how to refer to individual songs (by key words? by the first line? by one of the titles already in existence?) Laforte began by first regrouping the numerous versions of individual songs under what he called *titres communs*. In the process he was able to discover criteria internal to the songs themselves which permitted a broader, more scientific approach. His division of the en-

tire repertoire along clearly drawn structural lines has subsequently led to a coherent, comprehensive and forward-looking catalogue: to date, approximately 3700 published pages of bibliographic references.

Each of the six volumes of the *Catalogue* is organized somewhat differently, the type of song itself dictating the way in which the listing is presented. As for the *Chansons brèves*, Laforte makes the point that this category, despite its diversity, is not what was merely left over after the other categories had been carved out. It is rather a grouping of songs which exist by reason of their brevity and whose brevity is part and parcel of their functionality (he chooses the designation “brèves” rather than its synonym “courtes” because of the possible pejorative nuance of the latter). The initial breakdown of the “short” songs into three groups has to do with *who* does the singing:

- 1) songs adults sing to children,
- 2) songs only children sing,
- 3) songs sung by people of all ages.

For reasons of space, the present volume concerns itself with the first two sub-divisions only. Within 1) and 2), the bulk of which correspond roughly to nursery rhymes and school rhymes—whence the designation *Les enfantines*—Laforte organizes the songs along the basic lines he set out in his *Poétiques de la chanson traditionnelle française* (1976):

- 1) songs adults sing to children
 - a) lullabies
 - b) hymns and prayers
 - c) nursery rhymes (*rimettes enfantines*)
- 2) songs only children sing
 - a) counting songs (*comptines*)
 - b) game songs (handball, skipping rope, etc.)
 - c) children’s rounds
 - i) action rounds (turning around, bowing/curtseying, falling down)
 - ii) other rounds

By far the greatest number of songs occur as counting songs (700) and *rimettes enfantines* (217), and consequently those two groups are further divided, respectively, according to topic (numbers and words, letters of the alphabet, “you’re it,” humans, fauna, flora, etc) and function (for stopping tears, amusing youngsters, bouncing children on adults’ knees, and so on).

It is interesting to note that not all the labels used by Laforte for song types seem to have equivalents in English: *comptines* are

“counting songs,” (or “counting-out songs”), *sauteuses* are “knee songs,”¹ but *taiseuses*, *risettes aux doigts*, *risettes aux orteils* do not call to mind obvious English terms.* It is not that the two repertoires are so divergent—indeed, these children’s songs are quite pan-European. It is rather that Laforte and the others to whom he gives credit for many of the designations used—Roger Pinon, Emil Bodmer, Luc Lacourcière—have approached the task of identification and classification in a fashion perhaps more systematic than is the case in the English-speaking world. As a result, few if any French-language folk-songs fall outside the scope of the *Catalogue*, and what is catalogued is always precisely named.

Volume V of the *Catalogue* brings with it an important innovation. Not only are there bibliographic references to a great number of printed, manuscript and recorded versions of short (children’s) songs, but *all* of the songs’ texts are included. Obviously the modest length of the songs permitted what was clearly impossible in other volumes, yet the undertaking was a major one. Laforte proceeds in the following manner: a suitable model version of each song is chosen and its first line becomes the title for the whole group; the text is then set out with each line being numbered; at the end, in parentheses, appears the reference. For example, this version from Ernest Gagnon’s *Chansons populaires du Canada* (1865) is used as a model for comptine #381:

381. 1 IL EST MIDI - 2 Qui c’qui l’a dit? -
 3 C’est la souris - 4 Où est-elle -
 5 Dans la chapelle - 6 Que fait-elle? -
 7 De la dentelle - 8 Pour qui? -
 9 Pour ces demoiselles -
 10 Combien la vend-elle? -
 11 Trois quarts de sel. (26A)²

1. English-language terms used, among others, by Iona and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1975. First edition 1951.

*Herbert Halpert’s *Genre Classification for Individual Student Collections* (M.U.N., revised version, 1971), refers to ‘knee and foot-bouncing chants,’ ‘hand and foot rhymes and games’ and the more usual ‘counting-out rhymes’ (rather than *songs*) for *comptines*. We suggest “‘There, there’ rhymes” for *taiseuses*. *Ed. note*.

2. The full reference number for this version would be V-D-381-26A, where the Roman numeral indicates a chanson brève, D = comptine, 381 = the 381st comptine on the list, 26 = the 26th version of this comptine, and A = the first publication of this version.

All other references to the song, listed geographically, start with the text in its variant form. For example:

BELGIQUE

·4 - 5 - 6 Qu'y. . . - 7 - 8 - Pour monsieur - Pour madame,
- Et pour la reine d'Espagne. ·2. M.-L.P., *RTP*, v.9, 1894, p.
296, 8 vers.

Simple numbers point to identical lines, whereas words preceded and/or followed by suspension points indicate differences in a particular line. Following the second black circle is the bibliographic reference, and at the very end appears the total number of lines in the song. Texts written out in full would certainly have been easier to read, but the resulting tome(s) would have been impossibly cumbersome. Laforte's solution to the problem, though it requires piecing the songs back together, presents no serious difficulty even to someone with only a modest knowledge of French. Children's songs, after all, are not known for their complex syntax.

It is regrettable (but entirely understandable) that two important elements of the *chansons brèves* had to be omitted from the *Catalogue*: firstly the melodies and secondly the game descriptions and dance choreographies. Laforte himself deplores this omission, due to a variety of factors, not the least of which is the lack of information in the sources. (Interested readers can refer to Baucomont *et al.*, *Les comptines de langue française*, for a selection of melodies, and to Guilcher, *A la ronde* and *Rondes et jeux dansés*, for some of the dance and game instructions.) Indeed, a certain amount of intelligent guesswork is required to place songs in appropriate groups according to function, but surely no one is better equipped than Laforte for examining and comparing a great number of song texts.

The *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française* is a valuable tool, but as a tool, even a splendid one, not an end in itself. It is a necessary first step in the logical chain which starts with classification and compilation, and which leads to analysis and the making available of the repertoire. One researcher, or even one team, cannot, in a single lifetime, accomplish all, yet Laforte has again pointed the way by going beyond his own *Catalogue*. In 1981 he published a critically acclaimed study based on the song texts of Volume I, *Chansons en laisse*.³ He has also collaborated on or directed several anthologies

3. *Survivances médiévales dans la chanson folklorique: Poétique de la chanson en laisse*. Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981.

of folksongs and expects soon to be publishing a major volume illustrating, with texts and melodies, all 355 of the *chansons en laisse*.

Volume V of the Laforte *Catalogue* is unique in that it includes literally thousands of song texts. The availability of such a wealth of material will, the author hopes (and he is undoubtedly right), stimulate research not only among folklorists, but also in other fields as well: notably, literary studies, linguistics, and child psychology. He could have added that such a collection of texts also belongs in the hands of all teachers (also teachers of French as a second language) who wish to better understand, or incorporate into their teaching, the rich oral heritage of the various francophone areas. Congratulations and sincere thanks are owed to Conrad Laforte for such an important contribution to the field of ethnological studies and to the cultural enrichment of the French-speaking peoples of Europe and North America.

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