

RACIAL PREJUDICE AND THE *FRONTERIZO* BALLADS

It is perhaps a forgivable lapse of objectivity that tempts the literary critic to praise the virtues of his own national literature without first submitting these supposed virtues to some form of rigorous analysis. Menéndez Pidal, in his enthusiasm for the ballads of his native Castille, explained these poems as spontaneous expressions of the spiritual nobility of the Spanish people. The ballads, whether they were epic fragments or simply later manifestations of an epic consciousness, must share the same composure, objectivity and fair-mindedness that is common to all Spanish "poesía de tipo tradicional." Menéndez Pidal's theory assumes that the most important literary features of the Spanish ballads correspond directly to all the most admirable virtues of the Spanish nation. The *fronterizo* ballads, texts which are thought to be roughly contemporaneous with the final years of the Reconquest, are specially important to Menéndez Pidal as evidence of Castilian strength and tolerance, and proof positive of a national crusading "virtue" capable of defeating all manner of foreign incursions:

Nuestros romances fronterizos demuestran bien la mejor cualidad del pueblo, que desamparado, sin apoyo de organización oficial, supo entonces proseguir el plan de la reconquista, como tres siglos después, vendido por sus gobernantes, supo resistir a la invasión francesa. (30)

Subsequent generations of hispanists have been persuaded by the attractive logic of Menéndez Pidal's "traditionalist" school. They have interpreted the ballads in general and the *fronterizo* ballads in particular as literary proof of the exemplary social structure of fifteenth century Castile. C. Colin Smith, in his brilliant critical collection of Spanish ballads, suggests that one defining feature of the *fronterizo* ballads is "their pathos, and their ability to see matters from the Moorish point of view without irony, sarcasm or contempt..." (114). Colin Smith's description of the particular social content of these ballads is corrolary to this earlier definition of narrative voice: "The narrator almost never intrudes himself upon the scene, but acts in an objective, impersonal way, like the eye of the camera..." (3). He believes that objective narrative functions within the particular confines of the *fronterizo* ballads to generate a tone of fair-mindedness toward the Moorish population. Objective narrative equals racial tolerance, which is in turn proof of a social phenomenon known to modern historians as "acculturation".

Proponents of the acculturation theory, whether they be historians or literary critics refer to this process, by which the cultural differences between dominant and subordinate groups are decreased, as if it were a concrete fact. It is not. It describes only one half of a vigorous polemic that plagues students of medieval and early renaissance Spain. This polemic has divided historians into "continuist" and

“discontinuist” camps. The continuists see Moorish and Mudejar culture as being allowed to continue intact through the generous terms of the Reconquest, while the discontinuists see the minority culture as being interrupted, fragmented, and ultimately destroyed by the Christian aggressor. When Menéndez Pidal applied the continuist half of this polemic, with its theories of acculturation and “convivencia” to the **fronterizo** ballads, he established a critical response that continues to dominate even the most modern research.

Menéndez Pidal’s influence is clearly evident in Colin Smith’s theory of fair-mindedness and objective narration, which in turn is expanded by Angus MacKay in his study of the social component of the **fronterizo** ballads:

If a process of acculturation can be observed in warfare, is it not possible that a similar process is hinted at by the ballads themselves? Signs of Arabic influence, of course, have been detected in the ballads, but of greater importance is the whole question of the ethos of the ballads. If it is accepted that all the **romances a noticia** belonged to the same frontier audience, then the hostility between Christians and Moors ceases to be such a dominating theme in the oral tradition of frontier society. (MacKay, *The Ballad* 22)

Of course, MacKay’s book *Spain in the Middle Ages* provides many more detailed analyses of frontier society, all of which place him firmly in the continuist camp. The examples he chooses of frontier life all illustrate a degree of acculturation, both formal and informal, clearly suggestive of religious tolerance and a generally felicitous state of cultural symbiosis. Little wonder that the **fronterizo** ballads, which were composed in those happy times, have come to be understood as Islamophile literature!

There is, however, a dark underside to the story of Christian and Moor in late medieval Spain—an area which is the domain of the “discontinuist” or “pessimistic” school. According to Anwar Chejne, for example, the disgraceful racial prejudice that precipitated the final tragedy of the Morisco population was not an isolated phenomenon (*Islam and the West*). The dominant Christian powers had, for generations, isolated the Moorish minority and progressively stripped it of its cultural identity. The liberal terms of surrender constitutions, often cited as evidence of “convivencia,” were commonly violated and were in no sense the equivalents of the earlier protected “dhimma” status enjoyed by the Christian Mozarabs, whose rights were firmly established by the Koran. The so-called guarantees of the Christian surrender constitutions were based solely on political expediency, and Chejne suggests that the reality of the defeated Moorish minority was in fact a harsh one: “Following the humiliation of defeat, they were faced with forced conversion, with no choice other than almost total effacement of their identity overnight. Little time was allowed for accommodation that could lead to assimilation... The end result was alienation, with grave sociopsychological consequences that led to the tragedy of the Moriscos.” (16) The general thrust of discontinuist scholars like Chejne or Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, is that any

evidence of Islamic cultural survival owes more to the tough and stubborn nature of the "aljama" structure than it does to any Christian legal or religious attempts to guarantee them cultural autonomy.

Obviously this perspective presents a less than attractive picture of Castilian domination, and unfortunately involves many of the ugliest manifestations of racism. Nevertheless, it is a perspective that we, as readers of the **fronterizo** ballads, must consider if we are to reach a clear and balanced understanding of the texts. It is a lonely critical stance. The overwhelming consensus of critical opinion, both traditional and contemporary, continues to believe that the **fronterizo** ballads faithfully reflect the prevailing social values of tolerance and interracial respect.

Seen against the traditional critical background, Louise Mirrer-Singer's recent study of the *Romance de la Morilla Burlada* is a unique and courageous reading of a **fronterizo** text as something other than a pro-Moorish lyric. Earlier criticism had praised the ballad for its ability to adopt a Moorish point of view and sympathize with the plight of the unfortunate "morilla". Mirrer-Singer demonstrates quite convincingly that the opposite is true and that the text is actually pro-Christian in its bias. A Christian, posing as a Moor and speaking Arabic, tells Moraima that he is her relative. He claims to have killed a Christian, and begs her for aid and asylum. The clever Christian seducer turns the Moorish cultural and linguistic codes to his own advantage, highlighting his superiority over an intellectually inferior victim. Mirrer-Singer points out the simple logical link between this literary text and the underlying social phenomena: "Given the circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Romance de la morilla burlada*, there is good reason to consider the work as a celebration of Christian superiority rather than as a sympathetic gesture towards the enemy at precisely the moment when demand for completion of the Reconquest was most intense." (162)

Of course Mirrer-Singer might easily have extended her observations one step further and suggested that the ideological basis of the poem indicates not only Christian superiority, but also inherent Moorish inferiority. A basic anti-Moorish prejudice on the part of the ballad public, would support her reading of Moraima as a deceived and inferior protagonist, while at the same time allowing for a second interesting interpretation. If the "morilla" is never really fooled by the Christian, but willingly participates in the masquerade, then her Moorish character would be even more reprehensible. According to the latter scenario Moraima, a lady of alluring "bel catar," immediately senses the deception. Rather than rush to the aid of the false fugitive, she slowly gets up, changes her clothes, and calmly lets him in. Any implication of sexual promiscuity would be totally consistent with actual Christian suspicions regarding the moral fiber of Moorish women.

Is the character of Moraima an amusing, but totally isolated literary detail, or does it suggest a general tendency of the **fronterizo** ballads to portray the Moorish population as racial inferiors? The ballad of *Álora, la bien cercada* provides another interesting example of contact between Christian and Islamic characters.

The city of Álora is surrounded by the flower of Christian infantry. At their head is an "adelantado" who need not be named in the text, since the ballad public would immediately recognize Diego de Ribera's role in the campaign. The Moorish inhabitants, by contrast, are anonymous and faceless shadows. When the Castilian artillery opens a "portillo" in the wall, these unnamed "moros", "moras", and "moricos" scurry out like rats, carrying off every possible worldly possession. By progressively narrowing the field of vision, the narrative is able to select one "morico" from the crowd and isolate him against the battlements:

Entre almena y almena
quedado se habia un morico
con una ballesta armada
y en ella puesta un cuadrillo. (Colin Smith 128)

The narrative frame first narrows to the crossbow in his hand, and then further to the arrow which is poised and ready. The cold reality of the crossbow quickly dispels any illusions we might hold about the innocence of youth. The focal point of the scene is now established by introducing the only two lines of direct discourse, fixing attention of both the "adelantado" and the ballad public on the plea of "treguas:"

'¡Treguas, treguas, adelantado,
por tuyo se da el castillo!
Alza la visera arriba
por ver el que tal le dijo;
asestárale a la frente,
salido le ha al colodrillo. (Colin Smith 128)

The sense of this ballad can only be apparent if we assume that the poet and his public share a specific set of values. All Moors are anonymous non-individuals. All Moors are inherently treacherous and deceitful, and it comes as no surprise that even the youngest and most innocent should exhibit moral defects that are common to the race. The young "morico" betrays the sacred concept of truce, which ought to be held inviolable by even the most uncivilized nation. He acts automatically, without reflection, and the narrative does not pause to judge him for what is evidently a racial defect, and consequently beyond his control. The Castilian reaction is equally swift. The racial instinct of the "adelantado" is to show mercy, and the consequences of his actions are immediate. Death is simply the split second of time between a crossbow aimed at the forehead and a shaft emerging at the nape of the neck. The fact that the "adelantado's" death does not inspire a lengthy lament may in itself constitute a mild reproach. He should have known better. Castilian mercy can not be appropriate response within the special context of Christian crusade or Islamic "jihad."

The ballad narrative functions according to a process of selective focus and conscious ordering of detail. This process is neither objective nor impersonal. The

artistic goal is to establish a firm dichotomy between Christian and Moor, and to do so with as much subtlety as possible. As with most forms of propaganda, the appearance of impartiality or objectivity can greatly enhance the impact of even the most partisan message.

Thus far, we find that the **fronterizo** narrative functions quite smoothly so long as we understand that poet and public share the same definition of Castilian and Moorish racial characteristics. Of course our reading is radically different from the assumptions of acculturation or “convivencia” that inform the critical responses of Menéndez Pidal, C. Colin Smith and Angus MacKay. To assure that we are not forcing an unwarrantable interpretation on our **fronterizo** texts because of a skewed selection process, we must apply our criteria to the one ballad that has been most consistently accepted as an Islamophile text. Coincidentally *Abenámar* is probably one of the best known Spanish ballads of all times.

Leo Spitzer’s detailed analysis of the *Abenámar* ballad, which appeared in various forms between 1928 and 1962, still stands as one of the most impressive studies of **fronterizo** text. Spitzer notes that the controlling formal structure in this ballad is dialogue. As the ballad opens, we suddenly find ourselves overhearing a conversation between a Christian and a Moor; and as we eavesdrop, we gradually unravel the situation of King John II of Castile and Abenámar overlooking the city of Granada. Spitzer feels that the most important aspect of their dialogue is that an exchange of courtesies and compliments between the King and Abenámar shows that a channel of communication has opened between the two cultures. John II and Abenámar:

...han encontrado una base común de confianza, las viejas recriminaciones contra la falsedad de los moros están momentáneamente olvidadas. Parece como si, al menos en representantes extraordinarios, las dos civilizaciones pudieran entenderse. (65)

Perhaps we may find it useful to both accept and reject Spitzer’s hypothesis. We may accept the artistic impact of an exchange of compliments, but sadly we must part company with Spitzer as regards the ultimate meaning of this exchange. The first example of courtesy is simply the fact that the ballad allows the Moorish character an identity—a name that rings out clearly and continues to gather force from its own echo.

‘¡Abenámar, Abenámar,
moro de la morería,
el día que tú naciste
grandes señales había! (Colin Smith 125)

As soon as Abenámar has been granted his individuality, the very next word takes it away. Following the normal formula of the **fronterizo** ballad, he is simply described as a “moro.” Since he has already been named, the term “moro” does not advance the dialogue unless it is intended as a contrast, negating the very idea of

Abenámar's individuality. Should there be any doubt as to the pejorative force of this term, the line ends by relegating the "moro" to the "morería." In the urban ghettos, or "morerías", the Mudejar population could be isolated from the community, forced to wear distinctive clothing, and kept under the scrutiny of the ruling class.

No sooner is Abenámar reduced to his rightful station, than he is once again raised in our esteem by virtue of the "grandes señales" that accompanied his birth. It is unlikely that the fifteenth century public could ignore the influences of sea, moon and stars that distinguish Abenámar as a unique individual. However, the king's intent is not to praise him, but to nullify the very compliment that he has just paid him: "moro que en tal signo nace/ no debe decir mentira." (Colin Smith 125) The extended implication is perfectly clear. We understand that lying is an inherited racial characteristic—all Muslims are liars. The only chance for truth, is that Abenámar's portentous birth may have removed him from the influence of his own race.

Even the brief lines of narrative that introduce Abenámar's response, do not miss the opportunity to label him: "Allí respondiera el moro." The king's intuition that this particular Moor might be different, is borne out by a most unexpected revelation. Abenámar will in fact tell the truth:

porque soy hijo de un moro
y una cristiana cautiva;
siendo yo niño y muchacho
mi madre me lo decía,
que mentira no dijese,
que era grande villanía: (Colin Smith 126)

No wonder that he is a truthful man! He is only half Muslim, and the all-important maternal influence is Christian. His mother's status as "cautiva" forgives her for the disgusting act of mating with a heathen. It is she, not the father, who has taught him the Christian virtue of truth, despite the "villanía" that surrounds them. It is only after this revelation that King John can restore to Abenámar his name, and treat him with the "cortesía" that is due a Christian: "Yo te agradezco, Abenámar, aquesa tu cortesía."

Why does the ballad devote such an inordinate amount of attention to the character of Abenámar, only to ignore him completely and shift focus to King John's fascination with the city of Granada? Granada, the final stronghold of Islamic culture, is not inhabited by the likes of Abenámar. The ballad has taken great pains to establish that his character is in fact a departure from the racial norm. We must assume the Granadine Moors are the same lying and deceitful characters that appear throughout the *fronterizo* ballads. In this context, the king's fascination with and ultimate courtesy toward the city of Granada is totally inappropriate. The king treats the city like Abenámar, as if it were to be trusted, and the flat rejection of "Casada soy, rey don Juan,/ casada soy, que no viuda;" establishes a tone of

reproach toward a king who has allowed himself to be mesmerized by an exotic culture—forgetting his sacred duty to crush Islam once and for all.

The *Abenámar* ballad, which has so often been understood as an Islamophile text, actually depends on the same assumptions of racial prejudice that characterize the **fronterizo** ballads. The four Moorish characters that are mentioned are all quickly dismissed by the term “moro,” and only Abenámar is finally allowed an identity. The question of Moorish deceit and Christian virtue is given prominent thematic significance. The king, like the “adelantado” of the *Álora* ballad, is mildly reproached for having been deceived by the charm or the innocence of Islam.

The characterization of Muslims as racial inferiors is not simply an accidental or an occasional artistic flourish. Racial prejudice was a dominant reality in frontier society, and was translated into a conscious program of literary propaganda known as the **fronterizo** ballads. The artistic impact of these works requires that poet and public share a clear understanding of the racial inferiority of the subordinate Muslim minority. We must not assume that racism appeared suddenly and brutally in the sixteenth century, much to the surprise of a tolerant frontier society. Robert Burns, in his very balanced study of the kingdom of Valencia, finds evidence that as early as the thirteenth century, the Mudejar is: “despised for his religion, hated by the mobs for his ethnic difference, feared for his potential for revolt, and marginalized in Christian eyes as inferior...” (Burns 50).

We must understand racial prejudice as having evolved along an unbroken continuum. The **fronterizo** ballad falls within this continuum and clearly participates in the process. However deep our affection for Spain might be, it is our duty as critics to read objectively and to expose any literary manifestations of intolerance or prejudice. Perhaps by better understanding the past, we may better insure a climate of love and respect for the future.

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