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Sumario

Faith and Violence in the Sephardi Ballad

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Abstract

While the attenuation of unhappy or violent endings is typical of the Judeo-Spanish corpus, this is not always the case in frontier and historical ballads where the singer did not flinch from depicting graphic details of warfare. Whether or not described in detail, in oral versions of specific Sephardi ballads the representation of violence is both emotive and imbued with social and historical significance. In this paper we will examine the portrayal of violent acts, specifically those committed in the name of religion, and the ways in which they are treated in the Judeo-Spanish tradition. Among the texts that we will analyze are historical ballads such as *El Mostadí* and *La pérdida del rey don Sebastián*, both Sephardi creations. These highly dramatic poems reveal a world in which the defeat and conquest of the enemy, whether Christian or Muslim, was the ultimate goal. The interaction between faith and fanaticism will therefore inform our critical approach to the ballads in question, as will the relevance of the violence depicted to today's world.

Keywords: Sephardi ballads; warfare; violence; religion.

Fe y violencia en el romancero sefardí

Resumen

Si bien la atenuación de finales infelices o violentos es típica del corpus judeoespañol, este no es siempre el caso en los romances fronterizos e históricos, en los cuales el romancista no evitó la representación de detalles gráficos pertinentes a la guerra. Ya sea que se describa en detalle o no, en versiones orales de romances sefardíes específicos, la representación de la violencia es emotiva e imbuida de importancia social e histórica. En este artículo examinaremos la representación de actos violentos, específicamente los cometidos en nombre de la religión, y las formas en que son tratados en la tradición judeoespañola. Entre los textos que analizaremos se encuentran romances históricos como *El Mostadí* y *La pérdida del rey don Sebastián*, ambas creaciones sefardíes. Estos poemas altamente dramáticos revelan un mundo en él que la derrota y la conquista del enemigo, ya sea cristiano o musulmán, era el objetivo final. La interacción entre la fe y el fanatismo, por lo tanto, informará nuestro enfoque crítico de los romances en cuestión, al igual que la relevancia de la violencia representada en el mundo de hoy.

Palabras clave: Romancero sefardí; guerra; violencia; religión.

Beheadings, sieges and the deliberate starving of entire populations are means of warfare that, sadly, are familiar today to anyone following news in the Middle East. Methods of warfare that would have been thought of as vestiges of medieval times have become characteristic of the twenty-first century. Acts that firmly situated the Sephardi ballad and its Hispanic progenitors in an era far removed from the present world now feature regularly in the media and demonstrate the cyclical nature of history as well as the enduring pertinence of the ballads' content.

The Spanish ballads that most frequently depict violence are those relating Spain's early history, the frontier and historical ballads

(*romances fronterizos, romances históricos*), set during the Reconquista when Christian armies fought to regain territory that had been lost for centuries following the Muslim conquest of Spain. They describe the renewed activity, ranging from small-scale skirmishes to protracted sieges and outright war between the opposing faiths mainly during the late-fourteenth and -fifteenth centuries, when Spain sought to achieve religious as well as political unity. Such bellicose activity coincided with the emergence of the frontier ballad. Historians such as Angus MacKay (1976; 1977; 1988), and L. P. Harvey (2014: 252–253; 332) have demonstrated the accuracy of the reports of encounters between Christian and Muslim armies in the ballads subsequently composed to disseminate news of these conflicts.

After the Expulsion in 1492, Sephardi Jews continued this tradition of war reporting in ballad form. Two rare Sephardi ballad creations from Morocco constitute vivid examples of the genre. Both of these Sephardi poems attest to complete mastery of the peninsular ballad tradition including 'poetic techniques, and the narrative components of the traditional *Romancero*' (Armistead 2014: 30). One recounts the attempted Portguese invasion of Morocco in 1578 (*La pérdida del rey don Sebastián*) and is true to contemporary prose accounts. Likewise, *El Mostadí* relates 'a specific historical account' (Armistead 2014: 26), which Samuel G. Armistead has traced to Sultan Mūlāy al-Mustadī's siege of Tetuan in 1740 'cuando saliera el Gran Turco / de Tánger para Tetuán' (Martínez Ruiz 1963: 123, l. 2).[1]

The reasons for attacking neighbouring kingdoms were various, with the desire to convert the enemy to the religion of the attacker being particularly potent, although the desire for booty was also strong, just as several ballads express the wish to enslave the enemy:

[1] Angus MacKay notes that 'historical ballads more or less date from the time of the events they describe' (1976: 15). Elizabeth Drayson gives a stark description of the dreadful consequences of the sieges so often alluded to in Castilian and Sephardi ballads: 'Hunger was extreme, and the Malagans were reduced to eating donkeys, dogs and cats to stay alive, and even the leaves of the trees' (2018: 85).

'Every campaign sent hundreds or thousands of captives to the slave-markets unless they could be ransomed' (Lomax 1978: 105). In the rare Sephardi ballad *El cautiverio del príncipe Francisco*, the prince sends seven ships loaded with ransom to secure his release from his Moorish captors (Menéndez Pidal 1907: 162–163; Armistead 1978: I, 300–301). As the historian Charles Verlinden has stated, during the Middle Ages 'Christianity confronted Islam, and the adherents of the two religions reduced each other to slavery' (1988: XI, 338). This is the background of many ballads of the Prisoners and Captives category such as *Don Bueso y su hermana*, in which 'guerrean los moros / por campos de oliva' (Pomeroy 2005: 234, l. 2) and where the Christian princess is taken captive by the Moors.[2]

1. The Ballad and War Reporting

Comparison with contemporaneous prose accounts shows the veracity of many of the historical events related in the frontier ballads although the precise sources cannot always be determined. Were the facts gleaned from survivors of the battles, from people who had lived through the events, or, as in present-day war reporting, perhaps the creators of the ballads were embedded within the Christian armies much as today's print and broadcast journalists and photographers are in Afghanistan or Syria?[3] Whatever the situation, each ballad, like the

[2] Samuel G. Armistead includes twenty three different ballad categories in his *Catálogo-índice* (1978). In an e-mail sent to Hilary Pomeroy on 21 September 2010, he acknowledged the categories already set up in Menéndez Pidal's *Catálogo del romancero judío-español* (1906–1907): 'I can assure you that my classification is essentially "inspired" by RMP's work'.

[3] It is interesting to note MacKay's statement that 'the *romances fronterizos* were the work of minstrels serving in the frontier' (1976: 17). The assertion made by the early modern Spanish historian Luís Cabrera de Córdoba supports this theory: 'los reyes prudentíssimos, para animar a los cavalleros, [...] lievavan en sus exércitos poetas, que en metro las trobassen con versos de ocho sílabas, son romances; […] y allí la certeza de lo trobado se afinava por el Rey y que hicieron y vieron los hechos' (Montero Díaz 1948: 156). See Diane Sieber (1997: 303).

detailed account of the murder of the Duke of Gandía in *La muerte del duque de Gandía* 'was probably composed soon after the events it recounts' (Sutherland 1993: 165).[4]

Whilst not aways strictly faithful to the minutiae of detail since, with the passing of time, the names of places or of the medieval Spanish protagonists may have occasionally become blurred or confused by the Sephardi singers still disseminating those events whilst living so very distant from them, both geographically and temporally. The original version of *El alcaide de Alhama*, found in Ginés Pérez de Hita's *Guerras civiles de Granada*, refers to the Alhambra palace:

> el rey te manda prender por la pérdida de Alhama,
> y cortarte la cabeça y ponella en el Alhambra.
>
> (Blanchard-Demouge 1913: 256, ll. 2–3).[5]

This disappears from Sephardi versions, presumably because Moroccan Jews did not understand what the Alhambra was. Instead they substitute it with a phrase that retains the same (*á–a*) assonance of the original text and replace it with an image that was not uncommon in Morocco, the heads of the enemy impaled on a weapon:

> el rey le manda prender por la pérdida de Alhama:
> Que le corten la cabesa y se la enfilen en la lansa.
>
> (Armistead 2003: 123, ll. 2–3).

The reporting in frontier and historical ballads is not always dispassionate. The ballad may be narrated from the point of view of the singer, or from the point of view of the protagonist or protagonists. This may even appear to change perspective during the course of the text. Whilst most ballads are narrated from the position of the

[4] For a detailed study of the historical background to the Duke's murder, see Sutherland 1993. Whilst this ballad does not have a wartime setting, it demonstrates clearly the accuracy with which historical events were related in ballads.

[5] Pocket-size chapbook versions of the *Guerras civiles de Granada* circulated widely in Morocco and Moroccan Jews were familiar with these post-Expulsion ballads.

Christian knights who people the songs it is not unknown for ballads to articulate the imagined point of view of the Moorish warriors they represent.[6] As Andrew M. Beresford has commented: 'Moorish protagonists can be seen either as treacherous liars or as pitiful victims of Christian aggression' (2004: 87).

2. Preparations for Battle

Historical and frontier ballads vividly depict the preparations necessary for battle as well as actual warfare and physical encounters. The scene is set, as is characteristic of the ballad genre, either through dialogue or in a terse description. The ballad may begin with a panoramic, general view of an encampment (*Garcilaso de la Vega*) or besieged town (as in the peninsular ballad *Álora la bien cercada*). The scene may be a close-up shot focusing on an individual protagonist such as the Moorish commandant of Alhama in *El alcaide de Alhama*.

The sumptuous quality of the encampments featured in the ballads would appear to have little to do with the reality of warfare. The armies that besieged towns and fortresses, or rather their commanders and, above all, their kings, were billeted in luxurious tents made from fabrics that reflected the status of their occupiers, such as in *El romance del cerco de Baza*. In *Garcilaso de la Vega* a Christian army lays siege to the town of Santa Fe (Santa Fuente in Sephardi versions) near Granada and is lodged in an encampment made up of velvet and brocade tents:

> Cercada está Santa Fuente de un fino lienzo encerado,
> ricas tiendas le rodean, de terciopelo y brocado.
>
> (Weich-Shahak 1997: 39, ll. 1–2).

Such refinement and sensuality would have emphasised the confidence of the army commanders and, above all, the power, authority and

[6] Paloma Díaz-Mas comments as follows on the Sephardi ballad *La pérdida del rey Sebastián*: 'parece narrada desde el punto de vista de los vencedores musulmanes (o, más bien, desde el de sus aliados o simpatizantes judíos)' (2004: 254).

wealth of the individual king. The outward display of such military finery would inevitably impress and intimidate the enemy.[7] To this effect, in *El Mostadí*, the sultan's troops are opulently dressed in the Turkish style wearing clothing embroidered with silver or gold thread:

> con trescientos mil negritos, que más no pudo llevar;
> vestidos a la Turquía, relumbran como el lunar
>
> (Samuel G. Armistead 2014: 24, ll. 6–7).

The depiction of culinary, as well as military, preparations for warfare features in some ballads and includes not only lavish banquets for the nobility but references to essential items supplied to ordinary foot soldiers which, for them, would represent the difference between life and death. Indeed, it was a commander's duty to provide food, symbolised in its most basic form, bread, to his troops.[8] In the Carolingian ballad, *Roncesvalles*, a battle which saw French and Spanish armies pitted against one another, Charlemagne berates the French soldiers for their cowardice and threatens to withhold the prerequisites for an army – food (represented here by bread) and women – so that if they do not fight he will cut off two basic human needs, food and sex:

> –Atrás, atrás, los fransezes, no le dex vergüensa así.
> Si el gran conde lo save, en Fransia no vos dexa ir,
> ni vos dan pan a comere, no con las damas dormir.–
>
> (Armistead and Silverman 1994: 23, ll. 5–7).[9]

In contrast to the meagre sustenance offered to the French and Spanish soldiers mentioned above, *El romance de Reduán* in the Castilian tradition provides ample examples of the extent of the military finery, opulence and excess enjoyed by the Muslim armies of Granada. In *La pérdida del rey don Sebastián*, King don Sebastian orders a lavish

[7] See 'Quitóse paños de siempre', Pomeroy and Yiacoup.

[8] For a study of references to bread in the *Romancero*, see Pomeroy 2018.

[9] According to Armistead and Sllverman: 'the French flee but, under threat of losing their ladies' amours, courageously return to overwhelm and vanquish their enemies' (1994: 47).

banquet to be prepared before going into battle. According to the prose accounts written after this encounter, known as the *Battle of the Three Kings* and which took place in 1578, tables were set with crystal glasses and fine china. This unexpected but accurate prelude to battle and to the king's proposed proselyting campaign (he had hoped to convert the indigenous Moroccan population to Christianity) lives on in the Sephardi ballad:

> Sebastián, con alegría, mesas pusiera en el campo,
> con sus vajillos de plata y son sus vasos dorados;
> muchas gallinas y pavos y vinos desferenciados.
>
> (Armistead 1990: 275, ll. 12–14).

That ultimate purpose of Sebastian's incursion is nevertheless revealed. For, in addition to the cooks and the musicians who accompanied the army, Sebastian had included in his retinue priests brought along to undertake the conversions: 'traeremos moros y moras / y judíos cautivados' (idem: 275, l. 7).

3. Arms and Bloodshed

Not only do the encampments depicted in Spanish ballads reflect the medieval appreciation of fine fabrics, tacitly conveying their economic importance and cultural capitial, but warriors don armour and weapons made from costly metals and decorate their horses with elaborate harnesses. The depictions of chivalric customs and descriptions of military and frontier traditions have been characterised thus by Angus MacKay: 'the participants are richly attired knights who deftly whirl their horses ('revolbiendo sus caballos'), 'play at lances' ('jugando de las lanças'), and engage in skirmishes or *escaramuzas*' (1998: 157).

In the eighteenth-century Moroccan ballad *El Mostadí*, the sultan has at his disposal the advances in technology that have taken place over the centuries, a fact that also serves to demonstrate his wealth. In the extremely rare *La cabalgada de Peranzules*, the weapon of choice

for hand to hand combat, as depicted here between the Moorish warrior and the Christian knight, is the lance or the sword, whereas in *El Mostadí*, advances in military technology are evident. Although the sultan's method of attack, that is besieging Tetuan (the siege took place in 1740), is traditional and typical of so many early frontier ballads such as *Álora la bien cercada* (a siege that took place some three centuries earlier in 1434), he no longer relies only on lightly armed horsemen. His weapons belong to a more recent era, for he attacks the unfortunate town with bombs containing tar, pitch and sulphur:

> ya cargaba las cien mulas de pólvora y alquitrán […]
> Ya mandó llenar las bombas de alcrebite y alquitrán.
>
> (Armistead 2014: ll. 24, 27).

Scholars such as L. P. Harvey have noted that in the Hispanic ballad there is very little depiction of actual violence and a marked absence of bloodshed (1990: 221–222). This is inferred rather than described. There are, however, some notable exceptions. In *La cabalgada de Peranzules* a lone Christian knight fights a Moorish warrior and in Sephardi versions rivers of blood are said to flow:

> tantas eran las espadas, centellas van por el cielo,
> tanta era la matanza ríos andan por el suelo.
>
> (Menéndez Pidal 1906–07: 5, 163, ll. 7–8).

Likewise the singers of *El Mostadí* did not flinch from describing the destruction caused by the sultan's horrendous bombardment of Tetuan, showing as it does a callous disregard for the town's inhabitants:

> Allí cayeron los hombres como rayos a la mar;
> reventaran las preñadas cual gallinas en corral […]
> mató mancebos y alazbas y novios en la huppá.
>
> (Armistead 2014: 25, ll. 33–34, 36).

We may wonder why it is that, in contrast to Sephardi versions of other ballads where the violent endings are attenuated, these particular depictions of brutality have nevertheless survived. The reason may lie

in the fact that violence of the kind depicted in these ballads refers to events that their singers and listeners would have either seen at close hand or heard about in eighteenth-century North Africa. They are, after all, original Sephardi compositions and not derivatives of the medieval peninsular tradition.[11] Judging from the factual accuracy in the historical text *La pérdida del rey Sebastián*, there is every reason to believe that it was composed very soon after the battle of the Three Kings in 1578. This was only two centuries after the Spanish pogroms of 1391 when many Jews sought refuge in Morocco and less than a century after Spain's Edict of Expulsion (1492) and the forced conversions in Portugal (1497).[10]

Indeed, the Moroccan descendants of those Iberian exiles must have been acutely aware of the tragic events that had befallen their ancestors and anticipated Sebastian's possible victory with horror. The fear of forced conversion to Christianity, or worse, must have been palpable among the local population, Muslim or Jewish alike, as members of both faiths would potentially suffer the same fate of conversion to Catholicism. Indeed, indicative of the terror with which the Jews viewed the event is the fact that Sebastian's defeat was commemorated in a celebration, the *Purim de cristianos* or *Purim de Sebastiano*, until the twentieth century (Díaz-Mas 2004: 254). Transmission of the ballad appears to have been limited to the surrounding area with the three collected versions being sung as recently as 1916.[12] Despite the fidelity of the the Sephardi poem to accounts of the event, the ballad concludes with an ending which rearranges and manipulates the facts with Sebastian being pulled from the sea by the Moors, flayed alive and his skin stuffed with bran:

[10] Armistead maintains that the anonymous Jewish *romancista* who composed *El Mostadí* did so 'very soon after the events of 1740' (2014: 30).

[11] For a study of the deliberate avoidance of violence, see Pomeroy's study of *Raquel lastimosa* where a beheading, the traditional punishment for adultery, is replaced by a wedding (1999: 219–227; 2005: 45–52).

[12] These were collected by Manrique de Lara in Tetuan in 1916 (Armistead 1978: I, 182–183).

Tiran sogas y maromas; a Sebastián han sacado.
Ya le quitan el pellejo y lo llenan de salvado.

(Armistead 1990: 275, ll. 18–19).

It was, in fact, the Muslim monarch who sufferd this gruesome fate.[13] Notwithstanding the traditional Sephardi repugnance for bloodshed and violence, Jewish singers have not hesitated to manipulate the facts and have transposed the terrible punishment onto their enemy, the Catholic king.

4. Consequences of Warfare

The result of warfare is inferred in a few succinct words or hinted at in the threats delivered by the protagonist to the enemy. For example, in *Búcar sobre Valencia*, the eponymous North African leader threatens the city of Valencia with the words:

–Oy, Valencia y oy, Valencia, Valencia, la bien cercada,
primero fuitis de moros que de cristianos ganada
y ahora, si Allah me ayuda, y a moros seréis tornada.

(Weich-Shahak 1997: 39, ll. 14–16).

This concise yet ominous threat which, without going into detail, provides little room for doubt about the revenge sought by the speaker for Valencia's perceived treachery in turning Christian. Likewise the Moorish king in *El alcaide de Alhama* threatens to punish his commander for the defeat of Alhama at Christian hands by beheading him: 'que le corten la cabeza / y se la enfilan en la lanza' (Pomeroy 2005: 101, l. 3), a punishment used by both Moors and Christians.

While it is rare for Hispanic ballads to express directly physical suffering, the emotional suffering involved in such forced conversions may be implied as when, in *El alcaide de Alhama*, the *alcaide* laments the losses he has incurred with the fall of Alhama to Christian forces. He has lost not only honour, money and family but, above all, he bitterly

[13] See Armistead 1990: 274.

regrets the loss, both physical and spiritual, of his beloved daughter, 'la flor de granada', who has converted to Christianity (Pomeroy 2005: 101, l. 8). The sparse, seemingly impassive wording is characteristic of the way in which deep emotion and tension are expressed in the *Romancero*. By covering up the *alcaide*'s inner turmoil, his heartbreak appears even more poignant:

> perdi hijos y mujer las glorias que bien amaba
> perdi una hija donsella que era la flor de granada
> 100 doblas les di por ella y no la[s] estimo en nada
> la respuesta que me dieron que se volvió cristiana.
>
> (Pomeroy 2005: 101, ll. 7–10).[14]

The enemy may be coerced either by the use of force and the threat of punishment or, as in the case of *El cautiverio de Guarinos*, by promises of rewards:

> Reñegay la ley de Cristo; la del morito tomay.
> Te daría yo mis armas, mis armas y mis puñales;
> te daría yo mis viñas, mis viñas y mis lugares;
> te daría por esposa a mi hermana caronale.
>
> (Armistead & Silverman 1994: 80, ll. 19–22).

However, despite the horrific torture with which the Moorish king now threatens Guarinos he desists and is imprisoned: 'mandole á carseles hondas / hondas y de oscuridad' (Pomeroy 2005. 281, l. 17).

The consequences of warfare were not limited to violent death, forced conversion or the amassing of booty. The taking of captives is a topic dealt with extensively in the Moroccan Romancero. Those sections of the Spanish population that lived near the Mediterranean coasts lived in contant fear of corsairs from the Barbary coast. That fear and its potential consequences are expressed in the many Sephardi ballads belonging to the Prisoners and Captives category (Armistead 1978: I, pp. 265–318). Particularly noteworthy is the

[14] The original spelling and punctuation found in Halia Isaac Cohen's notebook collection has been retained.

haunting ballad, *El cautivo del renegado*. Most peninsular texts set the song in southern Spain, in Jerez de la Frontera, although the 1550 *Cancionero de romances* reading transposes the setting to Vélez de la Gomera, an island off the north coast of Morocco, a change that cannot be considered unexpected bearing in mind the continued aggressive activity of Moroccan corsairs.

5. Conclusion

In light of the 1492 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain as well as the broader Jewish experience of exile and diaspora, it is unsurprising that the same Sephardi ballad tradition in which the depiction of violence is generally attenuated nevertheless emphasises the suffering caused by religious conflict or, indeed, by military and political conflicts that manifest themselves most keenly along religious lines. In addition to reworking the peninsular ballads for dramatic, emotional or ideological motives while also incorporating new and unique Sephardi creations, the Judeo-Spanish oral tradition has transformed these ballads from narratives of distant events to dramatic re-workings that are pertinent to the world today.

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