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Volume 20

Louise Mirrer-Singer

The Language of Evaluation: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Story of Pedro el Cruel in Ballad and Chronicle

LOUISE MIRRER-SINGER

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To Philip

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Abbreviations

AEM	*Anuario de Estudios Medievales*
BAE	Biblioteca de Autores Españoles
BH	*Bulletin Hispanique*
BHS	*Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*
ExTL	*Explicación de Textos Literarios*
HR	*Hispanic Review*
JAF	*Journal of American Folklore*
JMRS	*Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
NBAE	Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles
NLH	*New Literary History*
NRF	*Nouvelle Revue Française*
NRFH	*Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*
RCEH	*Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*
RFE	*Revista de Filología Española*
RN	*Romance Notes*
RPh	*Romance Philology*
RH: Historia	*El romancero hoy: Historia, comparatismo, bibliografía crítica.* Ed. Samuel G. Armistead et al. Madrid: C.S.M.P., 1979.
RH: Poética	*El romancero hoy: Poética.* Ed. Diego Catalán et al. Madrid: C.S.M.P., 1979.
SP	*Studies in Philology*
WF	*Western Folklore*

1

Introduction

¿Qué pide María de Padilla, qué pide por aguinaldo?
La cabeza del Maestro, del rey don Pedro su hermano.[1]

These verses, sung today as part of a *canto aguinaldero* in the Spanish provinces of Segovia and Zamora, belong to an oral tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. The lines refer to the years of political turmoil and bloodshed that marked the reign of Pedro I, King of Castile. The question and answer they present recollect the bitter hatred between the Castilian monarch and his illegitimate half brothers, the Trastámaras. Invoking the name of the King's mistress, María de Padilla, they also recall the strained relations between Pedro and his wife, doña Blanca de Borbón.

Clearly, the context within which the present-day *canto aguinaldero* is sung differs radically from that of the fourteenth-century *romance* it brings to mind.[2] Yet the fact that the verses continue to detail the mistress's savage demand for the head of the King's half brother indicates that the Spanish *Romancero* is a vital tradition capable of at once supporting the poetic and ideological legacy of the Middle Ages and the preoccupations of contemporary life.[3]

The Spanish *Romancero* is described by Diego Catalán as

> poesía oral de creación colectiva, capaz de retener, durante siglos y siglos, memoria fiel de toda una serie de pormenores tocantes a un suceso pretérito, real o imaginario, pero, a la vez, abierta a continua renovación, a continua re-creación.[4]

It has at its base an oral literary form which is maximally accessible to a general public. The *Romancero* language is virtually free of the figurative speech common to lyric poetry. Its preponderance of verbs and nouns lends it "a certain forthrightness,"[5] and its direct manner, seen in the extensive use of the vocative,[6] affords a wide appeal. But the properties of the *Romancero* that have allowed infinite recasting of the *romances* go beyond this formal base. On the one hand, it is the tradition of anonymity in the collective re-creation of the

texts which invests the *Romancero* with its distinctive *apertura.*[7] On the other, it is the stories contained in the *romances* and the way in which they are narrated that have advanced the *Romancero* as an open-ended genre.

The story content of a particular *romance* is often a key element in its longevity, for the open-ended nature of narrative is its capacity to be reinterpreted so that one story spawns another. Some stories, which feature historical or political situations, seem to have a natural capability for inspiring public interest beyond the actual events they relate. These stories convert specific historical events into philosophical abstractions which are of general "human interest" and, therefore, are forever relevant.

The timeless qualities of these types of stories have not gone unnoticed in *Romancero* studies. Menéndez Pidal, for example, addresses this topic in his examination of the *romances noticieros,* concluding that many of these "news-bearing" ballads have perished because "los romances noticieros sólo perduran cuando les sostiene su propio valor intrínseco o el interés general de una época memorable."[8]

The verses cited at the beginning of this chapter exemplify the life-prolonging traits Menéndez Pidal points to. They undoubtedly were prompted by the *noticiero Romance de don Fadrique,* yet because they conserve nothing of the historical context within which they originated, their survival must be attributed to more than lasting historical interest alone. Figuring significantly in the timelessness of these lines is the quality of *tellability,* or *reportability.* The shocking demand for a human head made through the two verses of the *canto aguinaldero* would occupy under any circumstances a high place on the "unspoken permanent agenda" of reportable matters.[9] The story of María de Padilla's bloodthirstiness concerns a flagrant violation of customary rules of behavior, worthy of introduction into any number of narrative or dramatic situations.[10] The same is true of many other long-enduring *romances* and *romance* fragments, including additional, related *romances noticieros* from the *Romancero del rey don Pedro* that have found themselves incorporated into dissociated plays and histories.[11] An additional reason for survival has to do with the form in which the content is cast. The *canto aguinaldero,* for example, is a traditional Christmas song which is performed each winter as part of the season's festivities.

There is, however, another important factor in the *tellability* of even the most extraordinary stories. It is possible to tell the same story in different ways, making different points, or sometimes, no point at all. Because a pointless story obscures the reportability of the events it describes, a skilled narrator makes use of grammatical devices to aid in directing audience attention to the story's *raison d'être.* For example, the two verses from the *canto aguinaldero* cited above use a question-and-answer format rather than an "objective" third person narration to present María de Padilla's Christmas wish. The consequence of this syntactic maneuver is to foreground María's outrageous