El Cid Campeador between Luzán and Lorca: Recovering a Nineteenth-Century Pop-Culture Favorite

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In his *Poética* of 1737, the neo-classical writer Ignacio de Luzán claimed that historical events and figures, particularly Spanish figures such as El Cid, were attractive subjects for drama because “even the common folk have heard something of them.”1 Almost two centuries later, the dramatist Federico García Lorca would state, by contrast, that the real treasure of Spanish poetry was not in the offerings of modern writers and their aristocratic readers, but could be found in its most elemental forms precisely among the common folk: “Ask a duchess about the [medieval story of] the lovers of Teruel, she won’t know it. But the cook, the cook will! And she probably knows hundreds of verses from the *Poem of El Cid* and Zorrilla’s *Don Juan* by memory.”2 For Luzán, the average spectator in the theater was an ignorant dolt, passively taking in the offerings of the dramatic poet, whereas for Lorca, poets and dramatists should be drawing their inspiration from the people, who were effective bearers of tradition. Probably encouraged by the early twentieth-century work done by Ramón Menéndez Pidal to recover the oral traditional ballads, which many saw as a survival of Medieval epics, Lorca assumed that you could still hear hundreds of authentic verses which could compare with Per Abad’s fourteenth-century codex. Neither one of these extreme views is accurate. On the one hand, only a small number of fragments, which could be categorized (generously) as “medieval,” actually survive in modern ballad traditions. As it turns out, however, one could in fact hear hundreds of verses about the Cid being recited in the streets of Spanish towns and cities in the

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1 “Algunos hechos y algunos nombres son tan célebres y famosos que hasta la gente vulgar ha entreoído algo de ellos. De esta especie son (por ejemplo) en España los nombres y hechos del Rey Don Rodrigo, del Cid . . .” etc. (Luzán 304; Peers 1: 40n1)
2 “¡Esto es España! Su pueblo guarda todos sus tesoros. Preguntad a una duquesa quiénes son los amantes de Teruel, no lo sabrá. Pero la cocinera, ¡la cocinera, sí! Y sabrá de memoria centenares de versos del Poema del Cid y del Don Juan de Zorrilla” (Auclair 171; Stainton 262)
nineteenth century. But they were verses that survived precisely because those who Luzán called “la gente vulgar” were anything but mindless consumers; their baroque tastes and romantic preferences helped to shape a popular version of El Cid in theaters and on street corners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper will explore examples of pliegos suelto (single-sheet chapbooks from the hand-press and early machine-press eras) that attest to the popularity of Cidian ballads, but which trace their roots to the Spanish baroque rather than Medieval folklore.

Exactly what a medieval hero like El Cid meant for the average Spaniard of any time period is bound to be different from what he means to the scholarly or political elite. The politician, for example, might want to capitalize on the Cid’s “crusader” credentials in an appeal to “national” heritage, to animate anti-immigrant sentiment, or stoke fears of global Islamic terrorists (this is happening now with far-right groups like Vox in Spain). While the historians, literary scholars and folklorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were trying to recover an authentic medieval Cid, the public was always and everywhere interested for its own reasons. A romantic- and post-romantic school of thought about the ballad tradition held that the spirit of the medieval epic (a “national” spirit) was indeed preserved in the folk songs passed down orally through the centuries. When Aurelio M. Espinosa collected a fragmentary opening to the ballad, “Victorioso vuleve el Cid,” in Santa Fé around 1910, he would claim “we can truly say that El Cid Campeador, the protagonist of Castilian hegemony, has not been completely forgotten in Spanish New Mexico” (84). A single line of that ballad, “Victorious returns the Cid from the battles of Valencia,” survived in the memory of a single informant, but the folklorist suggests: “His [el Cid’s] exploits at Valencia took place in the closing years of the eleventh century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, nine centuries later, his exploits were still remembered in one of the most distant corners of the Hispanic world” (84). For Espinosa, as for many folklorists and literary scholars of his day, who were collecting museum pieces instead of living traditions, even the merest of fragments were compelling
and “ultimately derived from the old epic poems composed in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, when the Spanish people were achieving their first definitive triumphs over the Arabic invaders” (78). In his day, the prevailing theory of the ballad’s origins suggested that the tradition arose in the late middle ages as a fragmentation and democratization of aristocratic epics.

Subsequent generations of folklorists might have paid more attention to the songs that the folk were actually singing instead of pressing the singers for the mostly forgotten repertoires of their grandparents. One such “modern” ballad from the period of Espinosa’s fieldwork complained of the incursions of Anglo-American immigrants into New Mexico territory, because they were fencing in the Hispanics’ traditional grazing lands and taking over the politics and economy of the region, marginalizing the “cristiano” (i.e., the New Mexican of Mexican descent) (128-30). The New-Mexicans’ ballad tradition around 1910 (only a few years before statehood) was more concerned with the fact that the “Americanos” did not know Spanish and wanted only to take their land and “enslave” them. The singer identifies with Our Lady of Guadalupe and “la nación mexicana” (129). But the folklorist was more interested in the sensational find of a potentially Medieval relic. According to Américo Paredes, this fetish for the “Captains from Castile” in the early twentieth century was in fact a kind of defense mechanism, an attempt to distance New Mexico from its Mexican identity and to embrace a romanticized Hispanic identity that would be more acceptable in the US’s racial caste system. The narrative for many Hispanics about New Mexico was that it was conquered and settled by Spanish conquistadors (i.e. white Europeans) in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; those early settlers and their descendants maintained an unstained cultural

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3 See Paredes’s critique of the “Hispanophile” school of folklorists (Texas-Mexican Cancionero 4-5; Folklore 3-18); Cf Weber 353-60.
tradition in isolation for three centuries before the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded their territory to the US.4

Alas, Espinosa’s ballad fragment was not one of those “isolated parts of the old epics,” which he believed to be the “oldest and the best historical Spanish ballads” (79). The ballad in question was in fact composed and published in the 1590s. It circulated in print in the Romanceros (ballad collections) of the seventeenth century, and could have arrived in the Americas then, but probably didn’t until after it was popularized on the stage in the 1650s and printed in pliegos sueltos, recited and sold by blind singers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was especially common in Andalusia, where in 1829 Washington Irving began his journey overland from Seville to Granada. If the chant of the blindman was common on the streets of Seville, the mule-driver was likely the one to spread those chants through the provinces. Irving writes: “The Spanish muleteer has an inexhaustible stock of songs and ballads, with which to beguile his incessant wayfaring. The airs are rude and simple, consisting of but a few inflections. These he chants forth with a loud voice, and long drawling cadence” (16). Irving’s description in the early nineteenth century accords with the early twentieth-century recordings of blindmen’s ballads, and his description of their content, likewise, leads us to believe that the romances de ciego formed a large part of the muleteer’s repertoire: “the couplets thus chanted,” he writes, “are often old traditional romances about the Moors, or some legend of a saint, or some love-ditty; or, what is still more frequent, some ballad about a bold contrabandista, or hardy bandolero, for the smuggler and the robber are poetical heroes among the common people of Spain” (16). In addition to the bandit ballads and pious saints’

4 This is a narrative to which Espinosa returns throughout his writings, as, for example, in his study of New Mexican Spanish dialect: “The Spanish colonizers who entered New Mexico with Oñate in 1598, and the Spanish and Mexican colonizers who entered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, lived a more independent and isolated existence than any other group of colonists in the old Spanish Empire in America” (234). It is significant that his posthumous book published in English bears the title The Folklore of Spain in the American Southwest, “of Spain” not “of Mexico”; the racial and ethnic reality was somewhat more complicated, see Menchaca (81-96) on the racial politics of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century New Mexico.
Legends, the *romances de ciego* sold in single sheets, printed on both sides and folded in half to create 4-page chapbooks, text in double-column format on each page, would also include “historical” ballads. The fragment Espinosa collected around 1910, is from a ballad that can be found in just such a chapbook published in Córdoba by the printer Rafael García Rodríguez, who was active between 1805 and 1844.

Although the ballad in its entirety can be found in *Romanceros*, i.e., large book-length collections of ballads, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it probably entered the oral tradition because of the blind singers who sold the chapbook versions, and the mule-drivers who remembered and sang them on their journeys. Before the introduction of rail into the American Southwest in the late 1800s, the primary mode of transportation was the mule- or pack-train. In fact, mule-trains connected the northern frontiers of New Spain/Mexico with urban centers such as Mexico City even after the Mexican-American war of the 1840s. The ballad fragment on El Cid, then, is not proof of the isolated, heroic character of the early Spanish settlers of the region. Rather it is evidence of a network of international trade that linked the popular culture of Andalusia with Mexico, and which reinforced the Mexican identity of Spanish-speakers in the “American” Southwest for more than half a century after independence.

Three years after Espinosa collected his Cidian ballad fragment in Santa Fe, Julio Vicuña Cifuentes published his collection of folk ballads from Chile (1912); it included two (more complete) versions of “Victorioso vuelve el Cid” from informants in their sixties who did not know how to read. The history of this one ballad is remarkable. It began with composition in the 1590s, as a literary ballad, and gained a reading public with its print dissemination in the *Romancero general*

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5 “Long before the rail lines were built, the Spaniards and Mexicans had organized an elaborate system of pack-trains which operated over the endless trails blazed by the conquistadores. In the early days, the ‘King’s Wagons,’—the famous *carros del rey*,—made the long journey from Mexico City to Santa Fe, from Santa Fe to Vera Cruz, carting merchandise, supplies, and silver from the mines. Crisscrossing the deserts and mountain ranges, these pack-trains were the principal means of transportation as late as the 1880’s” (McWilliams 164-65)
the various Cidian ballad collections of the seventeenth century. But it became even more popular with its recitation on the street by blind balladeers, as an inducement to buy cheap chapbooks. Eventually it found its way into the oral tradition, circulating by word of mouth and surviving in the memory of muleteers or Spanish emigrants to the far-flung corners of Spain’s former Empire. I mentioned earlier that the ballad had a presence on the Spanish stage at one point. It was incorporated into a play (as ballads, literary and traditional, often were in the Spanish Baroque) by Juan de Matos Fragoso. *El amor hace valientes* must have had a short run in the theaters in the mid-seventeenth century. It was a Cidian play that was a remake of two previous plays on the same theme (the education of Martín Peláez under the Cid’s mentorship, in the context of the conquest of Valencia), but it is possible that the allusion to the ballad on the stage may have suggested its viability as a pop-culture product to the chapbook printers, and their blind distributors. The other pliego suelto that I will discuss, *El pasillo del Cid Campeador*, began as a scene in a play by the Baroque playwright Antonio Enríquez Gómez.

Enríquez’s *El noble siempre es valiente*, also known by the titles *El Cid Campeador* and *Vida y muerte del Cid*, would supplant Matos Fragoso’s in the late seventeenth century. It survives in a manuscript from 1660, was printed in its entirety more than a dozen times between 1715 and 1822, and it had a long life in the theaters of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with hundreds of documented performances. The play and its writer present us with an interesting case of what contemporary Critical Race Theory calls “double consciousness” after W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote of “the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century” (146; cf. Delgado and Stefancic 45-46). Enríquez Gómez lived and wrote in Sevilla for more than a decade.

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6 On the success of this play in the Spanish theaters before Romanticism, as well as its history in print, see González Cañal and McNair.
after 1650 under a pseudonym, Fernando de Zárate, because the Inquisition sought him for “judaizing.” As a Crypto-Jewish writer, painfully aware of the anti-Semitic attitudes of his audience, he appears to have balanced the more grotesque popular tastes (plenty of triumphalist bombast, and Old-Christian chauvinism) with a more nuanced dramatic structure that might, for the discerning spectator, provide the satisfaction of undermining the xenophobic tendencies of the masses. We often regard the attempts of the Enlightenment and Romanticism to recover “national” origins or the “spirit” of the folk, as a quaint nostalgia for the Middle Ages. Indeed, there was a kind of pastoral idealization of the Medieval past when it was not emphasizing the heroic aspects. But what we see on the stage in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveals a real dark side to this nostalgia for the Age of Heroes: once conquered, the Valencian Muslims become chattel for the Christians. Chaparrin, the play’s gracioso treats his new slaves like animals in the third act of El Cid Campeador, threatening his Muslim servant with bacon grease to get him to reveal the whereabouts of a hidden treasure.

The pliego suelto that capitalized on the play’s popularity is a scene from the first act in which Alfonso VI confronts the Cid with what he perceives are slights and signs of the vassal’s disrespect toward the king. In fact, the charges have been trumped up by the Cid’s enemies at court. The Campeador answers each charge in turn, but cannot convince the king, who banishes him. Rafael González Cañal found reference to six extant printings of this pliego. I have found four additional printings and of the total of ten known printings have been able to consult eight. They range in date from the 1790s to the 1860s. The earliest examples (that we know of) were printed in Córdoba and Sevilla. With the exception of a relatively late printing in Carmona (Province of Sevilla, 1863), the office of Marés and Company in Madrid appears to account for most of the copies of this pliego from the 1850s and 1860s. But, as one can imagine, these single sheets (especially with the poor

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7 On Enríquez’s peripatetic life see the biographies of Dille and Rèvah.
quality of the paper in the later printings), were extremely ephemeral and it is difficult to say how many editions of this particular chapbook were actually printed. We owe their survival today in libraries and archives to the zeal of collectors who saved the pliegos and sometimes bound them together in miscellanies at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The romances de ciego did not attract much (if any) critical attention until the 1960s. They were considered inferior from a literary perspective even though a good many of them--the Pasillo del Cid Campeador, for example--have legitimate literary roots.

The 258 octosyllabic verses exchanged between Alfonso VI and El Cid in this pliego reenact a particularly dramatic moment in the Cid’s career. Medievalists will read it as a prologue to the famous opening in medias res of the twelfth-century epic poem, where the hero, tears flowing, gazes upon home and hearth—now stripped of their usual furniture—for the last time before riding off into exile. But the audience in the theater or gathering around the blind singer in the plaza, as he chants the long speeches of the two characters, would have heard a very contemporary debate about the mutual responsibilities of king and subject. If the Cid must obey the monarch in all things, does not the monarch also have a responsibility to his subjects to set aside political convenience in order to safeguard the Christian faith? The Cid overstepped his bounds in a retaliatory raid of Toledan territory, while the king was trying to maintain a treaty with the emir of Toledo. The Cid’s zealous prosecution of Muslims on the frontier has upset the king’s diplomatic efforts. There is no doubt, from the audience’s perspective, about whose argument should carry the day.

Old religious and ethnic enmities make their presence known. The audience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries certainly would have preferred the Cid’s hard-line stance against Islam to Alfonso’s more nuanced, pragmatic approach. In spite of the fact that Spanish national interests were far more threatened by French, Dutch and English competition around 1800, the popular imagination was obsessed with the “menacing” image of the Turk, the Moor, and the Jew.
This presents us with an interesting example of what the textbooks might call “el problema de España” or the widening fissures between “two Spains,” which emerged during the Enlightenment and culminated in the Civil War (1936-1939). A liberal, intellectual elite sought to modernize Spain, reduce its isolation from the rest of Europe and take advantage of advances in science and technology to bring the standard of living up to the rest of Western Civilization. But a different Spain, religiously and politically reactionary, would resist the progressive agenda (Crow 241-42). While writers like José Cadalso and scholars such as José Antonio Conde, steeped in the Enlightenment, might relish Islamic civilization for its exoticism or evoke the scientific and philosophical achievements of al-Andalus as a model, the majority of Spanish society reacted to Islam (and Judaism) with xenophobia (Kamen 5-93; esp. 38-40, 73-75). Historical ballads and dramatic dialogues might seem strange bedfellows with the gruesome (though moralistic) crime-spree ballads and pious hagiographies that form a large proportion of the blindmen’s repertoire, but they appear to be part of the same (reactionary) cultural project. Carolina Michaëlis, in her *Romancero del Cid* of 1871, a compendium of all the known ballads of the Cid gathered from the songbooks and anthologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, included an appendix with the *Pasillo del Cid Campeador* as a curiosity. She notes that it should “serve as an example of the kind of popular ballads that blindmen are still chanting and selling in the streets of Andalusia among the common folk.”

Before General Francisco Franco brought the Spanish colonial army from Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar in support of the right-wing coup that started the Spanish Civil War, if there was a cook in Lorca’s Andalusia who could recite hundreds of verses about El Cid, it was almost certain to be the popular Cid of the *pliegas sueltas* and not the epic poem of the Middle Ages.

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8 “Para muestra del género de romances populares que aun hoy día en Andalucía venden y cantan en las calles los ciegos, y que circulan entre la gente vulgar…” (357).
Pliegos Sueltos Consulted:

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