

TRADITION AND RENEWAL OF A SPANISH BALLAD

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In spite of the predominantly oral nature of Spanish balladry during the Early Modern Period and later centuries, many scholars and students still perceive the ballad as a form of poetry having a relationship to the written word similar to that of other poetry. Since the ballad, in its origin and traditional circulation, is an oral-aural phenomenon, its reflection in the written word is both subsidiary and incomplete.¹ While the term "oral" is generally used to convey transmission by word of mouth I will also use the word "aural" in this study to refer to the latent medium where the ballad is retained when it is not being transmitted. Because of its unwritten existence in an aural environment and its oral circulation, the nature of the traditional ballad cannot be understood unless it is clearly distinguished from written poetry.

The traditional ballad which begins "Preso está Fernán González, el buen conde castellano" was first printed during the 16th century (Menéndez Pidal & Goyri 2:33). In the five similar versions surviving from that period, the ballad tells the story of how the count of Castile escaped from prison through the scheme of donning his wife's clothing when she visited him. While these printed versions have given the ballad a fixed and recognizable form, none of them is, of course, the original. As is generally accepted, the concept of an original is not applicable to an aural-oral genre which is only accidentally present in written form. As Menéndez Pidal has described it: "el romance es poesía que vive en variantes" and as such, in its natural habitat, the ballad is inherently a fluid and protean genre (Menéndez Pidal 1966, 65). Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that the printed versions provide a recognizable and datable text, the ballad certainly existed before being printed and continued to do so in a latent state for centuries afterward. We are, in effect, dealing with a verbal art form having different characteristics than written literature because the five versions, all have the claim to being a manifestation of the ballad, rather than the ballad itself, or later versions of a lost original.

As shown in Figure 1, an aural ballad can be visualized as consisting of multiple simultaneous variants, A1, A2, A3, etc., which themselves will change over time producing sequential variants such as K,

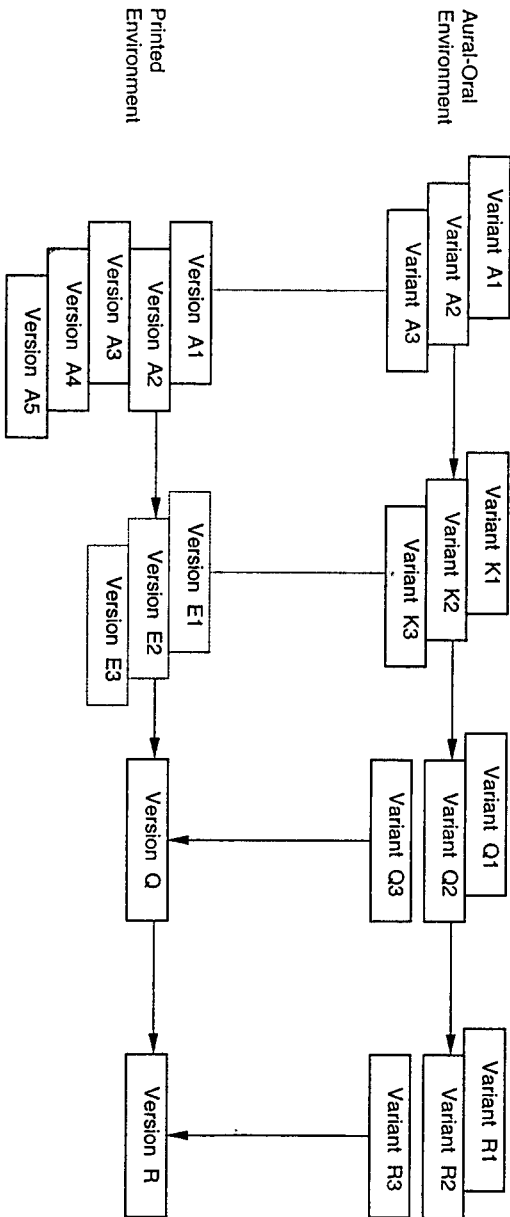


Figure 1. Conceptual Evolution of a Ballad in both Aural and Printed Environments

Q, R, etc. To illustrate the extent to which this organic poetry renews itself in order to remain relevant to its changing audience, I will use as an example the ballad "Preso está Fernán González." Of innumerable oral variants, I will discuss two (Versions Q and R), transcribed during the last century and a half, and compare them with a 16th century version (Version A5). One of the recent versions, in spite of its fragmentary form, can be easily associated with the older versions, but the other is so different that it must be shown to be the same ballad.

As stated, it is important to emphasize that a written ballad version is not, as in the case of most poetry, the ballad itself, but only a manifestation. A ballad does not need to be written in order to exist because its natural habitat is not the written form but the aural-oral environment. That is, a ballad is normally extant in the collective memory of a community and transmitted mainly by word of mouth.² Furthermore, a given ballad is not any one specific oral variant or written version, but rather, it is all of them collectively. While it is this mode of existence that is responsible for "living in variants"—to use Menéndez Pidal's expression—since the printing press came into general use, printed versions have become the easily accessible corpus of any and all ballads. When a version is committed to print, however, the written word does not replace the aural variants in existence, nor does it become, in the mind of the community, anything like a master copy. But, the creation of a hard copy, due to its relative permanence, does introduce a new element in the collective and otherwise latent corpus. With the existence of a version fixed in print, the community has a standard which may affect subsequent variants and, against which these may be compared. And later generations of scholars, outsiders to that community, have an example of one version of the ballad fixed at a moment in time. But the written versions themselves, while endowed with greater stability than the aural forms, are not entirely unchanging either. Amended as they are reprinted, either by the inspiration of the editor or under the influence of the constantly evolving aural variants, the printed versions reflect, in slow motion, the evolution and renewal which is the existence of a traditional ballad.

Because of this evolution it is possible to conceive of a ballad as a corpus of simultaneous and sequential aural variants, as shown in Figure 1, existing over a multi-secular period of time. While this enormous collection remains mostly invisible—and inaudible—during the last two centuries, a few of the oral variants have been transcribed into print. In these printed versions we have a sequence, which, evolving over time, represent a visible record of the ballad during its multisecular existence.

Because of the relative permanence of print, this sequence may

include versions from as early as the 15th century and up to the present day. There is, as mentioned earlier, an inter-relationship between the printed and aural series, since the existence of fixed and stable versions served as a reference and may have affected some aural variants, while at the same time, some aural variants were transcribed into printed versions. Through these parallel series, we can visualize their inter-relationship and associate certain aural variants with written versions. Such direct links, possible in recent times, cannot be established for ballads printed in the 16th century since we have no audible record of their performance. While these early versions may appear to be reflections of an oral tradition they were often edited by the printer while, in other cases, the versions appear to be erudite recreations of traditional material.

The important issue, of course, is to recognize the aural-oral nature of the ballad, its protean existence in variants, and its special relationship to the written word. All of the variants and versions dealing with the same narrative constitute the corpus of a single ballad, but in its evolution over time; variant A1 may be so different from version Q or R, for example, that it may be difficult to appreciate that they are all the same ballad.

The following is the 16th century version (#18 in *Primavera y flor de romances*) of "Preso está Fernán Gonález," which I have arbitrarily called Version A5 (Menéndez Pelayo 8:107-09):

- Preso está Fernan Gonzalez, el buen conde castellano;
 2 prendiólo don Sancho Ordoñez, porque no le ha tributado.
 En una torre en Leon lo tienen a buen recaudo.
 4 Rogaban por él al rey muchas personas de estado,
 y también por él rogaba ese monje fray Pelayo;
 6 mas el rey, con grande enojo, nunca quisiera soltallo.
 Sabiéndolo la condesa, determina ir a sacallo:
 8 cabalgando en una mula, como siempre lo ha usado,
 consigo lleva dos dueñas, y dos escuderos ancianos.
 10 Lleva en su retaguardia trescientos hijosdalgo
 armados de todas armas, cada uno en buen caballo.
 12 Todos llevan hecho voto de morir en demandarlo,
 y de no volver a Burgos hasta morir o librarlo.
 14 Caminan para Leon contino por despoblado:
 mas cerca de la ciudad en un monte se han entrado.
 16 La condesa, como es sabia, mandó ensillar un caballo,
 y mandóle a un escudero que al conde quede aguardando,
 18 y que en siendo salido se lo dé, y le ponga en salvo.
 La condesa con las dueñas en la ciudad se ha entrado:
 20 como viene de camino, vase derecho al palacio.
 Así como el rey la vido, a ella se ha levantado.
 22 — ¿Adónde bueno, condesa? — Señor, voy a Santiago,

- y víneme por aquí para besáros las manos.
 24 Suplícoos me deis licencia para al conde visitar.
 — Que me place, dijo el rey, pláceme de voluntad.
 26 Llévenla luego a la torre donde el conde preso está. —
 Por amor de la condesa las prisiones quitádole han.
 28 Desde rato que llegó, la condesa le fué a hablar:
 Levantáos luego, señor, no es tiempo de echado estar:
 30 y vestíos estas mis ropas, y tocáos vos mis tocados,
 y junto con esas dueña os salí acompañado,
 32 y en saliendo, que salgais, hallaréis vuestro caballo;
 íros heis para el monte, do está la gente aguardando.
 34 Yo me quedaré aquí hasta ver vuestro mandado. —
 Al conde le pareció que era bien aconsejado;
 36 vístese las ropas de ella, largas tocas se ha tocado.
 Las dueñas son avisadas, a las guardas han llamado;
 38 las guardas estaban prestas, quitan de presto el candado;
 salen las dueñas, y el conde; nadie los había mirado.
 40 Dijo una dueña a las guardas que la andaban rodeando:
 Por tener larga jornada hemos madrugado tanto. —
 42 Y así se partieron de ellas sin sospecha ni cuidado.
 Luego que fuera salieron, halló el conde su caballo,
 44 el cual tomó su camino para el monte señalado.
 Las dueñas y el escudero hasta el día han aguardado:
 46 subídose han a la torre do la condesa ha quedado.
 Las guardas, desde que las vieron, mucho se han maravillado.
 48 — Decí, ¿a qué subís señoras, háseos acá olvidado algo?
 Abrí, veréis lo que queda, porque llevemos recaudo.
 50 Como las guardas abrieron, a la condesa han hallado.
 Como la condesa vido que las dueñas han tornado:
 52 — Id, decíd al señor rey, que aquí estoy a su mandado,
 que haga en mi la justicia, que el conde ya está librado. —
 54 Como aquesto supo el rey, hallóse muy espantado:
 tuvo en mucho a la condesa saber hacer tal engaño.
 56 Luego la manda sacar, y dalle todo recaudo,
 y envióla luego al conde: muchos la han acompañado.
 58 El conde, desde que la vido, holgóse en extremo grado,
 enviado ha decir al rey, que pues tan bien lo ha mirado,
 60 que le mandase pagar la del azor y el caballo,
 si no, que lo pediría con la espada en la mano.
 62 Todo por el rey sabido, su consejo ha tomado;
 sumaba tanto la paga, que no pudo numerallo;
 64 así que, todo bien visto, fué por el rey acordado
 de le soltar el tributo que el conde le era obligado.
 66 De esta manera el buen conde ha Castilla ha libertado.

According to Menéndez Pidal, there are at least four other very similar 16th century versions (Menéndez Pidal & Goyri 2:33). All of these contain the essentially the following narrative: The Count of Castile, Fernán Gonzalez, is imprisoned by King Sancho Ordoñez of

León on vague charges of disloyalty. At that time, of course, Castile was a frontier county politically dependent on the Kingdom of León. Despite repeated requests by important figures to release the Count from prison, King Sancho refuses to do so. In light of this, his wife decides to take direct action herself. She gathers three hundred noble knights committed to free the Count or die in the attempt, and together they ride secretly and take position in a forest near the city of León. From there, after posting a squire with a horse outside the gates, the Countess, accompanied only by her female attendants, enters the city. Going directly to the King, she claims to be on a pilgrimage to Santiago and requests his permission to spend the night with her husband. King Sancho, not only grants the request, but even has the prisoner unchained for the occasion. Disguised in her clothing and pretending to continue their pilgrimage, the Count and his wife's attendants leave the prison before dawn without arousing suspicion. Once outside, he recovers the horse from the waiting squire and rejoins the 300 knights in the forest. After daylight, both squire and attendants return to the prison, where the guards are surprised to find that it is the Countess and not Fernán Gonzalez who is their prisoner. The King, acknowledging the skill and nobility of her action, instead of punishing the Countess, allows her to rejoin her husband. Once together and in command of his army, the Count requests the King to repay the outstanding debt for the horse and goshawk. Since the interest on the debt has doubled with each passing day, it is impossible to pay the accumulated total, so as an alternative Castile is granted independence.

All the 16th century versions agree closely with this summary. Since these are the first written records of this ballad, we can think of them as versions A1 through A5 as shown in Figure 1. How many times this ballad has been sung, creating thousands of variants during the ensuing four and a half centuries, is impossible to tell. That it has been in continuous aural existence since the 16th century, however, cannot be doubted, since two versions, which I have arbitrarily called Q and R in Figure 1, have been transcribed since 1850. There may have even been other written or printed versions, such as the E series (in dotted rectangles) of which there is no surviving record. But versions Q and R, recovered from the oral tradition, are reproduced here:

Version Q, "La peregrina" (J. Menéndez Pidal 102-03):

- | | |
|---|--|
| | En la ciudad de León, (Dios m'asista y non me falte) |
| 2 | vive una fermosa niña, fermosa y de lindo talle. |
| | El Rey namoróse della y de su belleza grande: |
| 4 | aun non tiene quince años; casarla quieren sus padres. |
| | El Rey le prende el marido; que quiere della vengarse: |

6 ella por furtarse al Rey, metióse monja del Carmen.
Allí estuvo siete años a su placer y donaire:
8 desde los siete a los ocho a Dios le plogo llevarle.
Por los palacios del Rey, pelegrina va una tarde,
10 con su esclavina ahujurada, sus blancos hombros al aire.
Lleva su pelo tendido: parece el sol como sale.
12 <Dónde vienes, pelegrina, por mis palacios reales?...>
<Vengo de Santiago, el Rey, de Santiago que vos guardé,
14 y muchas más romerías... ¡plantas de mis pies lo saben!
Licencia traigo de Dios: mi marido luego dadme.>
16 <Pues si la traes de Dios, excuso más preguntarte.>
Sube, sube, carcelero, apriesa trae las llaves
18 y las hachas encendidas, para alumbrar este ángel.
<Dios vos guarde, Condesillo, farto de prisiones tales.>
20 <Dios vos guarde, la Condesa, porque siempre me
guardástes.>
<Non pienses que vengo viva; que vengo muerta a soltarte.
22 Tres horas tienes de vida; una ya la escomenzastes.
Tres sillas tengo en el cielo: una es para tu sentarte,
24 otra para el señor Rey, por esta merced que face.
A Dios, á Dios, que me voy; ya non puedo más fablarte;
26 que las horas deste mundo son como soplo de aire.>

Version R (Menéndez Pidal & Goyri 2:36):

— Vístete los mis vestidos, cálzate los mis calzados,
2 entre duques y marqueses me seas muy bien hablado,
allá afuera en la muralla encontrarás el caballo;
4 no me esperes hasta Burgos, que allá me estés esperando.
Al salir de la prisión.....
6 me piden que a petición.....
y un favor os pido, rey, una merced os demando.
8 — Como no sea la vida, todo está a nuestro mandato.
— Yo no he pensado en la vida, ni tal cosa me ha pasado,
10 sólo que me dejen el mundo los nueve meses de mi
embarazo
Esos chasquitos, condesa, ya los tenía aguardados,
12 por eso sois las mujeres punto y medio mas que el diablo.

Version Q, "La Peregrina," collected in Asturias has not, up to the present time, been considered to be a version of the "Fernán González" corpus, although I expect to demonstrate that it really is. Version R, on the other hand, in spite of being only a brief and defective fragment, is clearly a version of "Preso está Fernán González."

From the above summary, the six major elements of the narrative are: 1) unjustified and illegal imprisonment by a king, 2) in the city of León, 3) of a titled count, 4) liberated through deceit, by his wife, 5) while

on a pilgrimage to Santiago, and 6) through taking advantage of the king's generosity.

The fragment of Version R, "Vístete los mis vestidos," collected in Huesca early this century, deals with a noble prisoner urged to exchange clothes with the narrator. He is told that a horse is waiting for him outside the wall and that he should not expect to rendezvous before Burgos. Two incomplete lines mention leaving the prison, and refer to an unidentified request. In the ensuing dialogue with the king, we learn that the narrator urging the exchange of clothes, is a pregnant countess and that the king is predisposed to grant her request. The fragment is so brief that only four of the major elements identified before are present; 1) it deals with an escape from prison, 2) by means of exchanging clothes, 3) where the instigator of the deceit is a countess, and 4) who has outwitted the king in order to achieve her objective. Together with the additional reference to a horse waiting outside the wall and mention of Burgos as the meeting place, these points are sufficient to ascertain that Version R is a fragment of the same ballad as version A.

Version Q, on the other hand, is a ballad collected in Asturias and published during the 19th century as "La Peregrina." It has not previously been considered to be a version of "Preso está Fernán González" because, on the surface, the narrative appears to be so different. It tells the story of a king who becomes enamored of a fourteen year old girl. In an attempt to protect the girl from the king's lust, her parents arrange for her to be married but, in anger, the king imprisons the husband while the girl takes refuge in a convent. Eight years later, while still a recluse, she dies and returns as a ghost to the king's palace where her husband is still imprisoned. Discovering the beautiful young woman with white bare shoulders covered by long blond hair, the king takes her to be a pilgrim and asks where she comes from. The apparition claims to be on her way from Santiago and requests the king to return her husband to her. The king grants her request and the count and countess are reunited in prison. She has come to obtain his release so that they can be together. It is freedom both from prison and from earthly bondage, for the young count's life is also over and it is in heaven that they shall be reunited.

Although this modern variant has little, if any, epic substance left, the six elements identified earlier are present and link the narrative to the "Fernán González" ballad. The common elements are: 1) the unjustified imprisonment of a husband, 2) whose escape is made possible by his wife, 3) from a prison in León. 4) The wife is a pilgrim returning from Santiago, 5) the couple is a count and countess, and 6) the king plays a role in the release of the prisoner.

The collective memory of the 19th century Asturian community where this version of "La Peregrina" was transcribed, however, is four hundred years removed from that of the "Fernán González" version. "La peregrina" is so distant in time from the 16th century experience, and from the epic tradition from which it originated, that the reason for the count's imprisonment is no longer part of the Asturian community's collective memory. The conflict between Castile and León, the role of Fernán González in the independence of Castile, and the very names of the heroes, are no longer relevant and have been forgotten. But the six elements which constitute the core of the story have been maintained, and narrative logic has provided a new reason (the king's lust) and a new plot (the protective marriage of the girl) to arrive at the unjustified imprisonment and subsequent liberation. The original epic fragment which gave rise to the ballad has been transmuted into a moral story with a touch of the supernatural.

According to the conventions of literature "La Peregrina" is so different in content from the "Fernán González" ballad tradition that it has not been considered a part of it. But a ballad is "poetry that lives as variants", and it lives in an aural-oral environment. It is a genre whose main retention mechanism is not the written or printed word, but the collective memory of a community. Therefore, the conventions which are derived from the properties of the written word, in particular the stability of narrative content, must not be applied to the ballad in its own habitat. To live in variants implies a fluidity of content which relies on the knowledge of the audience, that is, on the collective memory of the community. The printed versions of a ballad, as shown in Figure 1, are only snapshots of an organic phenomenon existing in a different habitat. "Preso está Fernán González" is the photograph of a toddler. "La Peregrina" is the photograph of an elderly woman. Separated in time by decades or centuries, they are two very different pictures of the same person . . . or the same ballad.

Notes

¹Among the ballads of the Early Modern Period the distinction must be made between a ballad originating and existing in an oral tradition, that is, a traditional ballad occasionally transcribed into print, and a ballad created in writing by a poet using chronicle material, that is, an erudite ballad. This study deals with oral traditional ballads and their evolution.

²While it is true that at the end of the 20th century the living oral tradition was negligible relative to the vigor enjoyed during preceding centuries, the ballad genre itself is an organic phenomenon different from the surviving ballad versions which are no more than snapshots captured in print.

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