

Medieval Spanish and Judeo-Spanish

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Students of medieval Spanish literature can recognize oral tradition (= OT) as substrate, catalyst, reactant, and reagent in the verbal arts created in peninsular Romance vernaculars. Direct and indirect testimony confirm its decisive action on lyric and narrative tokens in those languages, as well as on paremiological forms such as *refranes* (“folk sayings”) and *advinanzas* (“riddles”). OT is a practical instrument, like the clay tablet, codex, or printed page, but exceptional among them: it warrants the singer to create variations within parameters of genre, performance, and audience. Field recordings made throughout the modern Hispanic-speaking world document reflexes of early *romances*, folktales, riddles, proverbs, *villancicos*, and folk remedies, as well as later *corrido* and *décima* forms. The multiple iterations, and the social networks that support them, reveal not immutable texts but bundles of narrative and poetic features diffused nonuniformly in space and time. In this sense the present can be used to explain the past.

OT offers useful interpretive tools. Its anthropological, literary, and folkloristic dimensions account for artistic and cultural features—patterns of sound and rhythm, narrative self-dramatization, the performance arena enveloping performer and audience in which values of group identity are inculcated—unassayed by literalist methods. Medieval vernacular lyric, narrative, and prose share orality in their genesis, transmission, poetics, and aesthetics. To deny the role of OT in the continuum of epic and chronicle, in the corpus of *romances*, or in the tales common to *enxempla*, sermons, and clerical poetry is to obscure their primary verbal dimension and confound their cultural purpose. Adjacent literary traditions affirm the existence of OT in medieval Hispano-Romance before its emergence into vernacular documents. The strophic poetry of the Andalusian *muwashshahat* (“girdle-songs”) in classical Arabic and Hebrew literatures—dense, allusive courtly poems—incorporate into their *kharja* (“exit”) verses drawn from traditional women’s songs of the Hispano-Romance branch. At a later date, the case of Ferrán Verde, a New-Christian merchant imprisoned by the Inquisition in June of 1493, offers a discrete example of orality, or incipient tradition. Given pen and paper, he copied from memory some 220 stanzas of the *Proverbios morales* (“Moral Proverbs”), roughly one-third of a poem

composed 150 years earlier by Shem Tov de Carrión. The practical aspect of OT obtains here on the interface between letter and word.

From the expulsion of 1492 until the mid-twentieth century, OT remained a vital feature for Judeo-Spanish speakers. The *Sephardim* in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa retained pre-exilic *romances* lost on the Peninsula, and exploited the *romance*'s remarkable capacity for absorption by borrowing narratives from surrounding Greek, Slavic, and Arabic cultures, and recasting them on the balladistic aesthetic. Here too, twentieth-century fieldwork recovered ballads unknown in early printed collections, as well as wedding songs, dirges, paraliturgical songs, folktales, and various paremiological expressions. Many of the *romances* with their musical settings have been edited, classified, and analyzed by Samuel Armistead, Joseph Silverman, and Israel Katz in an ongoing project aimed at preserving the cultural legacy of the *Sephardim*. The Judeo-Spanish traditions have lapsed with the passing of the people in whom they lived, victims of the Holocaust. Academic and cultural programs in Israel and Europe for the promotion of Judeo-Spanish are underway and enjoying some success. Full restoration of the language remains, however, a judgment of the future. Scholarly work in this tradition must attend to the recovery of those tokens consigned to writings and recordings of all kinds.

New Directions

Hispanists generally think of OT only in regard to epic and ballad. The monumental contribution of Ramón Menéndez Pidal—who early in the twentieth century recognized and theorized OT for the *romance* and the medieval epic—invigorated critical thinking. Further advances were curtailed by the Individualist-Neotraditionalist polemic that consumed scholarly attention and energy. New theoretical and practical directions for the study of the *romance* have come from a team of collaborators at the Seminario Menéndez Pidal (Madrid), directed by Diego Catalán. Current questions are explored by the articles collected in “Las voces del romancero” (*Insula* 1994) and now *La eterna agonía del romancero* (Piñero Ramírez 2001). The interpretive tools of OT could be employed to advantage for study of the modern Asturian *andar a cantares* (“walking forth songs”) and *asturianada* (“deep song”) (Fernandez 1986) or scrutiny of medieval medical and legal texts.

References

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