

Almerique de Narbona: Ballad, Epic, History

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(with a musical transcription by Israel J. Katz)

IN THE EXTENSIVE collection of Judeo-Spanish folk-literature which we have brought together over the past thirty years, there are several versions of a ballad (*romance*) from Salonika (Greece) that begins with four enigmatic verses. The most complete rendition reads as follows:

- Aquel conde y aquel conde,
en la mar sea su fin,
2 armó armas y galeas
y para Fransi quijo ir.
Las armó del todo punto
y las echó adentro del sanġi.
4 El sanġi, como era estrecho,
no las podía él sofrir. . . .¹

The narrative reflected here is somewhat less than transparent: A count, object of an imprecation that

¹The ballad was sung by Mrs. Esther Varsano Hassid, 65 years old, and collected by S.G.A. and J.H.S., in Van Nuys (California), August 20, 1957. For the bibliography of other Judeo-Spanish versions, see Armistead and Silverman (1971:66; 1981:74). The verses studied here serve as a prologue to a combination of two other narratives: *Roncesvalles + Bodas en París*. A detailed study of this and other Judeo-Spanish ballads derived from Old French *chansons de geste* will appear in our forthcoming book (with Israel J. Katz), *Folkliterature of the Sephardic Jews*, Vol. III: *Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Oral Tradition: Carolingian Ballads* (I) (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press [in press]). Concerning our ballad collection, see Armistead, Silverman, and Katz (1986:4-19).

he should perish in the sea, fits out a great fleet (in other versions: "naves y galeas"), sets out for France, and [commands his forces to] enter the [river?] *sanġi* (elsewhere: *sanġir*, *sanguí*), but it is too narrow to accommodate all his ships. The seemingly jumbled Judeo-Spanish verses—the only vestige to survive anywhere in modern oral tradition—are clarified by the first five verses of the poem's sixteenth-century Spanish congener, the ballad of Benalmenique or Almerique de Narbona, first printed in Martín Nucio's *Cancionero de romances* (Antwerp, 1550). Here the Sultan of Babylon (= Cairo)—may God persecute him and bring him to a bad end!—fits out 60,000 ships and galleons and attacks the city of Narbonne, where the fleet drops anchor in the port of San Gil (thus clarifying our mysterious and otherwise meaningless *sanġir*). Count Benalmenique is then captured by the Muslims and, mortally wounded, is subjected to humiliation and torture:

- Del Soldan de Babilonia
desse os quiero dezir
2 que le de dios mala vida
y a la postre peor fin
armo naues y galeras
passan de sessenta mil
4 para yr a combatir
a Narbona la gentil
alla van a echar ancoras
alla al puerto de sant Gil



A - quel con - dey a - quel con - - - [o]n - de, en la
 mar - - se - a - su - - [u] fin, y en la
 mar se - a su fin *ca. 153*, ar - mó ar - - - mas
 y ga - le - [e]as y pa - ra Fra - [a]n - sia qui - - -
 jo ir, pa - ra [en] Fran - sia qui - jo
 ir. La - sar - mó del to - - do
 pu - [u] - [u]n - to - - y la - se - chó a - dien - tro del
 san -
 ñi, y la - se - chó a - dien - tro del san -
 ñi. El san - ñi co - mo e - ra es - tre - - - - -
 chó no las pu - dí - - - - a él so - - - - -
 frir, no las pu - dí - a so - frir.



- 6 catiuado han al conde
al conde Benalmenique
descienden lo de vna torre
caualgan lo en vn rocin
- 8 la cola le dan por riendas
por mas deshonnrado yr
cient açotes dan al conde
y otros tantos al rocin
- 10 al rocin porque anduuiesse
y al conde por lo reudir.
La condessa desde lo supo
salese lo a recebir
- 12 pesa me de vos señor
conde de veros assi
dare yo por vos el conde
las doblas sesenta mil
- 14 y sino bastaren conde
a Narbona la gentil
Si esto no bastare el conde
a tres hijas que yo pari
- 16 yo las pariera buen conde
y vos las vuistes en mi
y sino bastare conde
señor vedes me aqui a mi
- 18 Muchas mercedes condessa
por vuestro tan buen dezir
no dedes por mi señora
tan solo vn marauedi
- 20 heridas tengo de muerte
de ellas no puedo guarir
a dios a dios la condessa
que ya me mandan yr de aqui
- 22 vayades con dios el conde
y con la gracia de san Gil
dios os lo eche en suerte
a esse Roldan Paladin.²

The exact relationship of medieval epic poetry to the Hispanic *Romancero* is one of the most vexed questions of Hispano-Medievalism. For revisionist neo-individualist criticism, the relationship, if indeed it exists, is argued to be dubious and ill-defined.³ For neo-traditionalists, on the other hand, there can be no doubt whatsoever about the direct, genetic connection between epic and ballad in an oral-traditional continuum that stretches from the high

Middle Ages up to modern times.⁴ In the specific case of the Almerique ballad, Menéndez Pidal has demonstrated the Spanish song's close affinities to the late twelfth-century French epic poem, *Mort Aymeri de Narbonne*.⁵ Not only do ballad and epic coincide, in this case, in multiple narrative features and even in verbal similarities, but the specific passages of *Mort Aymeri* reflected in the ballad also rhyme in *i-e* or *i* (in agreement with the *romance's* *í*). Compare, for example, the following verses devoted to the departure of the fleet—"nés . . . et galies" (= naves y galeras)—of the "amiral [de] Babiloine" (= soldán de Babilonia) and its arrival at the port of Narbonne:

- 690 Quant Sarrazin orent lor nés garnies,
Asez i metent pain et vin et farine,
Et char salée et autre manantie,
Hauberz et elmes et espées forbies,
Destriers de garde et bons murs de Sulie.
- 695 Quant ce fu chose, que li nés sont garnies,
Tréent lor ancre, si ont drecié lor sigle.
En mer s'empaignent, quant la terre ont
guerpie;
- Braient cil or et cil broon glatissent,
Rechanent mur et cil destrier henissent.
- 700 Cil espervier sor ces perches s'escrient,
Sonent cil cor, cil olifant bondissent;
Haute mer covent de lanternes esprises.
Bons fu li venz qui droitement les guide,
Desoz Nerbone a droit port les arive.
- 705 Paiene jent ne s'esmoierent mie,
Lor ancre jetent, si abessent lor sigle,
Vestent hauberz, et les elmes sesirent;
Si sont issu des nés et des galies. . . .⁶

The ballad and its epic source thus agree, not only in essential narrative details, but also sometimes in their rhyme as well. It would, then, seem difficult, if not impossible, to claim—in the interest of neo-positivist theory—that these two texts are not intimately and genetically related and, by extension, of course, that the epic and ballad genres do not constitute a single continuous tradition dating from medieval times. In this brief Sephardic fragment, as in many another case, we hear not only the same words (naves y galeas/nés et galies), but even the same rhymes of the medieval epic as they have sur-

⁴For the neo-traditionalist position, see Armistead (1979–1980; 1981; 1986–1987).

⁵Menéndez Pidal (1953: 1, 257–258).

⁶Couraye du Parc (1884:30–31). On *Mort Aymeri*, see Riquer (1968:125–126, 166).

²Rodríguez-Moñino (1967:318); for later printings: Rodríguez-Moñino (1973–1978: II, 403).

³See, for example, Cummins (1970:368); Smith (1972:xvii); Wright (1985–1986).



vived in living oral tradition and have come echoing across the centuries down even to the present day.

The enigmatic detail of the *sançir* (= puerto de San Gil), embodied in the Judeo-Spanish version, suggests yet another feature—unnoticed until now—that binds the Spanish song incontestably to its epic congener and to an exclusively medieval historical context. Here an obscure historical datum will come to the aid of neo-traditionalist criticism: Throughout the early Middle Ages and, indeed, since Roman times, Narbonne was a bustling, prosperous seaport, whose excellent harbor catered to a diversified commerce from far-flung emporia throughout the Mediterranean. For a variety of reasons, the city's fortunes began to decline in the early 1300's, but the final blow which was to destroy Narbonne as a seaport and international trading center can be dated very precisely. In 1320, a dike on the River Aude gave way and diverted the river's course so that, within a few years, the once thriving harbor was silted up and rendered quite impracticable to seaborne traffic:

Le grand barrage de Sallèles-sur-Aude a été emporté, et le fleuve, quittant brusquement son ancien lit, a délaissé Narbonne, et s'est écoulé tout entier dans la direction de Coursan et de l'étang de Vendres, qu'il n'a pas abandonnée depuis. La ville de Narbonne perdit alors presque subitement le peu d'importance commerciale qu'elle avait conservée, et la stagnation des eaux autour de la ville ne tarda pas à engendrer une insalubrité des plus dangereuses. . . . Les derniers restes de son commerce furent anéantis.⁷

Here, then, history lends support to philology. The consistent agreements in content and rhyme between *Mort Aymeri* and our Hispanic ballad prove beyond doubt the genetic relationship of the two texts, but they are further reinforced by the historical circumstance of the collapse of the dike on the Aude in 1320 and, in consequence, the sudden and definitive obsolescence of Narbonne's harbor. In alluding to Narbonne as a functional seaport, our sixteenth-century Hispanic ballad perpetuates the distinctive medieval conditions evoked in the *chan-*

son de geste, conditions that could not have been in effect after the first years of the fourteenth century.

To Professor Robert M. Stevenson, whose brilliant scholarship has contributed so much to our understanding of early Spanish music, we dedicate this small example of balladic archaeology as a sincere expression of unbounded admiration.

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