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Marjorie Ratcliffe
Wilfrid Laurier University

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Women and Marriage in the Medieval Spanish Epic

by

Marjorie Ratcliffe
Wilfrid Laurier University

Medieval Spanish literature offers only three extant epic texts, Roncesvalles, the Cantar de Mio Cid and the Mocedades de Rodrigo. Knowledge of the Spanish heroic genre has been further extended by considering the thirteenth-century Poema de Fernán González, a reworking of a much earlier poem, as well as the similarly re-elaborated fragments of the stories of Rodrigo, the last Visigothic monarch; of Bernardo del Carpio; of the seven sons of Salas; of the traitorous countess; of prince García and the Cantar de Sancho II y el cerco de Zamora. These texts will all be considered in this study of the role of women in the Spanish epic.

Although these poems and fragments primarily concern the deeds of a male heroic figure, these early examples of Spanish literature all present women and the family as vital to the Spanish epic. Because a large part of the action and of the heroes' motivation depends upon women, the presence of these female protagonists is fundamental. The medieval Spanish epic, without its female characters, their marriages and the children for whom the heroes are responsible, would have long been forgotten or ignored as tales of mere border skirmishes, petty jealousies or recitals of mundane historical facts.

Unlike the literary representation of Jimena, as portrayed in the Cantar de Mio Cid, and contrary to the views of Lucy A. Sponsler, in her Women in the Medieval Spanish Epic & Lyric Traditions,1 the other female characters in the Spanish epic are not secondary. Jimena is not the norm, but the exception. Their roles are very different and they cannot therefore be compared to Jimena. These women are more than deserving of study on their own account, a study which considers why their role is so important in the Spanish epic.
Epic poetry in the Middle Ages in Spain fulfilled a didactic role as a repository of knowledge necessary for the function and cohesion of a preliterate or semi-literate society. The early minstrels sang "de gestis, ad recreationem et fort ad informationem." The poets chose what to sing and what to omit; they determined what would be not only understandable and enjoyable, but also beneficial to their audience. The heroes, their marriages and their families were the vehicles for the illustration of social mores. Their main function was the depiction of the laws of the society which they upheld and the exemplification of traditional ideals, communal values and group loyalties. The concept of the family, with women as the cornerstones of this social unity and the mainstay of the feudal system, was basic to the medieval Spanish epic.

Undoubtedly the medieval epic narrator held his audience spellbound with stories of battle, minute descriptions of booty, vigorous exposition of the lust of conquest, the glory of proselytizing and the wonder of marvelous elements. The reader, however, may assume that domestic affairs interested both the poet and his audience. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century chronicles reworked the oral poems and incorporated them into their historical narrative, adding fictional material as they went. These additions reflect the interests and tastes of an audience of city dwellers and artisans who were less interested in the warrior enthusiasm and aristocratic spirit of the primitive poems. The chronicles and later poems in turn gave way to the ballads. Here extended narration and continuous action were superseded by a deeper contemplation of a single scene, with greater importance being given to characterization and dialogue. Domestic rather than heroic conflicts were emphasized. All characters in the medieval Spanish epic genre and related literature move from the stature of a myth based upon factual reality to a more realistic depiction based upon poetic imagination.

I

Long after the true political facts of the defeat of the Visigothic monarchy and the entry into the Iberian peninsula of Muslim troops in the early eighth century, the people of medieval Spain sought an explanation for their degradation and dishonor. Because the real story had long been forgotten, the blame was put on the shoulders of Rodrigo, the monarch, and his supposed rape victim, La Cava. The legend of Rodrigo and La Cava is unique in Spanish literature because it is the only eighth-century epic tale to have survived, albeit in a highly imaginative manner: it relates the story of Julián, a merchant, who is sent by King Rodrigo to Africa on a mission and who, as a widower, left his daughter at the king's court. Rodrigo is portrayed as an impious rapist who abuses the absent father's trust. Some versions claim that Rodrigo intended to marry her; others say that
he was already wed. Learning of his daughter’s and therefore his whole family’s dishonor, Julián returns to Africa and arranges the Muslim invasion. The story’s origins are neither Spanish nor French, but Arabic. The final extant product combines contemporary and later views held by differing political factions, Muslim as well as Christian, including a poem composed by Ben Alcama in 860, the tenth-century chronicles of Ben Al-Kutuya (d. 977) and Ar-Razi (887–955), the Kitab-al-Ictifa and Fatho-l-Andaluci. The Chronica Gothorum Pseudo Isidoriana, probably originally written in Arabic by a Toledo mozarak and later translated, was also used. The author of the ninth-century Chronica Visigothorum or Cronica de Alfonso III, Sebastián, bishop of Orense, first saw some correlation between the immoral behavior of Vitiza’s people, whose conduct supposedly worsened under Rodrigo, and the arrival of enemy forces. Sebastián does not tell of any legendary connection between Rodrigo and La Cava. The first entirely Christian author to mention the daughter of Julián in his chronicle was the monk of Silos, writing around 1118. Sometime, therefore, between 880 and 1118, the legend of Rodrigo and an as yet unnamed young woman entered the Christian literary and historiographical tradition, perhaps due to the translation of the Pseudo Isidoriana in the eleventh century. The thirteenth-century authors could not forgive an aggrieved father’s taking revenge on the rapist of his innocent daughter because, for them, the price paid by generations of Spaniards was excessive.

Another contemporary legend, that of the “Casa de Hercules,” also refers to Rodrigo. Also Arabic in origin, it reflects the Muslim traditional futuhat—episodic tales of conquest which rely heavily on presentiment, dreams and the acquisition of talismans. Here, despite the admonitions of his counsellors and the actions of his predecessors, Rodrigo breaks the locks and chains of a house and coffer said to be untouched by human hands, thereby entering where no monarch dared. Once inside, he discovers the curse that his deed will bring upon his nation—his country will be invaded and conquered by Arabs:

que quanto aquellas ceraduras fuesen crebantadas et el arca et el palacio fuesen abiertos et lo que y yazie fuesse uisto, que yentes [como agora andan los alaraues] entrarien en Espanna et la conquirien et serien ende sennores.

The correlation between the two legends is clear: by raping the virgin daughter of a loyal vassal, by going against the sacred bonds of marriage, family and feudal ties, Rodrigo is again an interloper abusing his powers.
Both actions were crimes of arrogance, greed and lust. One culminated in the threat of a foreign invasion; the other fulfilled that prediction.

These two literary fabrications convey the dismay of the Visigothic people at their leaders' licentiousness, their fear of their king's abuse of power and lack of control over his passions, their worry over the result of his political divisiveness and their concern for his disregard of traditions. Rodrigo may have been innocent of rape, as some versions of the legend maintain, but he was not innocent of abuse. Rodrigo, *el último godo,* was the final product of a degenerate monarchy. In the epic, evil is always punish by vengeance exercised by a family member. Here La Cava, as the representative of an abused Spain, suffers at the hands of a tyrannical monarch so that vengeance might be taken by her father and his allies, thereby restoring order.

The creation of the figure of Bernardo del Carpio and his frustrated destiny was a tardy reponse in Spain to the figure of Roland in the French epic. Not until the sixteenth century did scholars realize that Bernardo del Carpio, unlike most Spanish epic characters, was a fictional product.

Only two female characters fleetingly appear in this tale. Neither is important. The acts of the woman who does not appear—Bernardo's mother—provoke the hero's search for identity. The legend has two manifestations, both very similar, except for the part relating to Bernardo del Carpio's mother: one claims she was French and named Tiber, the other that she was Spanish and named Jimena. Although learned criticism has concerned itself with separating Tiber from Jimena, in the texts themselves Bernardo is disinterested in who his mother was and what her fate had been. This legend deals with legitimacy conveyed through the father. Only after his father, count Sancho, dies does Bernardo attempt to make contact with his mother's family. A woman—even a mother—could not solve his quest and was therefore useless to him. She is the cause of his dissatisfaction, and she cannot redeem him.

The very lack of marriage and family underlies the legend of Bernardo del Carpio and illustrates many elements characteristic of the Spanish epic. Two such motifs are especially apparent and of interest to any study of marriage in epic literature: that of the uncle and nephew relationship and, as Heinermann has so straightforwardly put it, "Das Bastard-Motif." The first emphasizes the mutual dependence of uncle and nephew over other familial ties because of bloodlines; the latter illustrates how, despite the greatest of social impediments, the epic hero usually attains prominence by his own efforts.

The legend of Bernardo del Carpio portrays the orphan and bastard's search for his roots, the frustration with his own inability to achieve legitimacy and the anger caused by rejection. Despite his parents' punishment
at the hands of their monarch for their unsanctioned union, their son is the true victim. In this tale, filial devotion, demonstrated by Bernardo's fruitless attempts to rescue the father he does not know, is pitted against loyalty to his king as the man who raised him and his duty as a nobleman. The tragic death of the still incarcerated father is made all the more grievous because of the son's inability to exact vengeance. This story is the most tragic of the Spanish epics because of the futility of the hero's search, a quest made necessary by the forbidden love of a man and a woman.

The Poema de Fernán González derives from the retelling of the same story over three centuries. The learned author of this thirteenth-century poem was conscious of writing literature as opposed to history and freely added extra or even anti-historical portions to his poem, which was then not a common practice. He viewed the real deeds of the tenth century with thirteenth-century eyes, using the poem as his vehicle for expressing his personal aims and biases. The author juxtaposes Fernán González and his young wife Sancha, as symbols of tenth-century Castilian courage and foresightedness, against the temerity and complacency of thirteenth-century Spain.

The fictive aspects in this epic poem arise out of Teresa of Leon's treachery and desire to revenge her beloved brother and Sancha's interest in keeping Castile free from the Arabs through Fernán González's zeal and intervention. The plot revolves around the nucleus formed by the counterpoint of Castile versus Leon and Navarre, Fernán González versus kings García and Sancho, freedom versus captivity. By their actions and goals, the two women, as representatives of the two warring royal families, are also in opposition to each other. Teresa is courtly, looking backward to traditional family heritage, vengeful and preoccupied with the past. Sancha is energetic, imaginative, proud of her accomplishments, ethical and interested in the future. Teresa, symbol of the noble families of Leon and Navarre, is thwarted by Sancha, worthy representative of the spirit of the founding families of new Castile.

The legend of count García Fernández of Castile, the son of Fernán González, and his second wife, the traitorous countess, is novalísque though based on a historically factual rebellion of a son against his father. The story of García Fernández's two fictional marriages is also important to the study of Spanish literature because it is the first manifestation of the Calderonian concept of honra, the external societal preservation of family honor, which would become intrinsic to seventeenth-century literature. The original plot was an account of the son Sancho's rebellion supported by his mother, the French countess Aba, against his father, count García Fernández in 994. The revolt was based on the son's desire to make peace with the Muslims. His wish for closer ties with the infidel enemy would be blamed on his mother's influence over him. Possibly her support for this endeavor came because, being from distant France, she perhaps felt less dread towards the Arabs
than did the Castilians who lived so close. Sancho's insurrection led to civil discord, and García Fernández was abandoned by many of his warriors when he needed them most. Just as in the legend, his horse is weakened by the countess's treachery; in real life he was morally debilitated by his men's, and especially his son's, disloyalty. His death was undeniably, albeit tenuously, linked to his wife's and son's discontent.

In literature, so as to tell the tale of García Fernández's death without blaming count Sancho, through whose later efforts Castile reached great heights, his mother bears the blame. One of the most odious of epic women, her driving ambition and lust for power, supplemented by vast amounts of cunning and guile, lead her to commit the most horrendous of crimes: she is an accessory to the gory murder of her parents by helping García Fernández avenge his lost honra; she meticulously plans a cruel fate for her husband, the Castilian count, by betraying his trust and, later, mixes the poison with which she intends to kill her only son. She is totally devoid of any sentiment of maternal interest or marital devotion. The legend symbolizes the Castilians' distrust of foreigners, their strong bonds of regionalism and their constant vigilance and defensiveness against the Muslims. Just as the countess was killed by her own poison, so too was Aba, the French countess, the victim of Castile's poisonous fears. In literature, she was found guilty so as to protect the reputation of her husband and son.

The Romanz del Inffante García constitutes the only love story in the Spanish epic tradition. This tragic tale of unconsummated love, terminating in murder and familial vengeance, contributes worthily to the tradition that will culminate in the late fifteenth-century Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea (La Celestina). The original version of this tale must have been composed soon after the murder of Prince García around 1030 because neither he nor his fiancée, Sancha, were of enough historical importance to have been remembered over a long period of time. Nevertheless, twelfth- and thirteenth-century chronicles all relate this sad story. They tell of a young prince and princess's love at first sight, of how she warns him to no avail of dangers surrounding him. When he is killed—some versions say defending her—Sancha mixes her tears with his blood, begging to be buried with him. The assassins flee unpunished, and Prince García dies unavenged. Sancha refuses to marry another until she takes revenge on the murderers of her lost love. The vengeance she takes is fierce and bloody, making that sought by other epic women seem like child's play:

tomo un cuchiello en su mano ella misma, et taide luego las manos con que el firieria all infnant et a ella misma desitaiol los pies con que andidiera en aquel fecho, despu&ntilde; saco la lengua con que fablara la tracyjion; et desque este ouo fecho,
Sancha’s desire for vengeance and her ability to execute it match her to other Spanish female epic characters. Prince García, as the last male descendant of Fernán González, had no male relative to carry out this family duty. Family pride and honor remained tarnished because no victim had redeemed it. Through the acts of valor of this young woman, the Spanish people over the centuries remembered the tragic death of the last count of Castile. Although Prince García and Sancha were never married, he and his family line were aggrandized by Sancha’s great love, her willing self-sacrifice and her courage to undertake this foremost of family duties.

The relationships contained in the fratricidal *Cantar de Sancho II y cerco de Zamora* are controversial and veiled in mystery. The fate of the three sons and two daughters of King Fernando I is enveloped in repeated incarceration, assassinations, banishment, treachery and perhaps incest. It recounts a maternal older sister’s attempt to have her favourite brother, Alfonso VI, the youngest of three sons, come to the throne. To achieve this, the two older brothers, García and Sancho, are jailed and killed respectively. One version of the story, the *De Praeconii Civitatis Numantinae* of 1282 by Juan Gil de Zamora, leaves no doubt as to the relationship of Alfonso and Urraca. After Sancho’s death, according to this chronicle, Urraca determines to satisfy her passion for power and her incestuous lust for her brother. She jails Alfonso until he agrees to marry her:

et in aspectu mutuo quo se ipsos videriunt domina Urraca et dominus Aldefonsus ineffabiliter congaudentes, ad tractandum de novis nupciis, inter se ac fratem suum dominum Aldefonsum, domina Urraca humano consilio se convertit, et per tale illicitum matrimonium, posset ipsa laciaus dominari, et regine nomine appelari... fratem et sororem ad talem confratri suo Aldefonso Zamorensem traderet civitatem, et ipse Aldefonsus sororui sue corpus suum traderet atque regnum. Et hoc super sacrosancta sibi mutuo iurarat... Post her, nupciis celebratis.12

This notice of royal incest first appeared in early twelfth-century Arabic chronicles and no doubt circulated amongst Christians as well. A late
eleventh-century poem possibly existed, recorded this whole tale and was incorporated into the popular conception of the story.

Ramón Menéndez Pidal reproduced confessional prayers from Urraca’s *Liber Canticorum*, a book of hours written for her, which indicated that she was repenting for sins hardly expected of a maiden sister:

Confesio... omnia peccata mea quecumque peccauit ego misera et peccatore (-trix) Sancia (Urracka), per superuia, mea culpa, in cogitatione, in loquutione, in delectatione, in pollutione, in fornicatione, in consanguinitate, in omicidiis, in periiuis, in risu, in uisu, in facto, in consensu, et in omni opere malo et in omnibus uitiis malis, mea culpa. More revealing was Alfonso’s intention that his exiled brother, García, inherit the reign from him “por que consideraua Alfonso que este [García] reynaria despues del.” Unmarried until 1074, perhaps Alfonso did not expect to have legitimate heirs. Interestingly, in the same year that Alfonso finally married, Urraca withdrew to a convent.

The *Cantar de Sancho II y cerco de Zamora* has the force of a Greek tragedy. This results from the exceedingly complex personality of Urraca who is cold, implacable and calculating yet tender and maternal, driven by intense and constant passions. It has been said that “as an unmarried woman responsible for governing a city, Urraca plays the masculine role of a leader surprisingly well.” Urraca did not play a masculine role, for there was nothing surprising in a medieval princess, married or otherwise, controlling a town. Urraca was a strong woman, a leader of men, thirsting for the complete power her sex denied her. She used and abused the familial ties which bound her to her brothers to accomplish her own goals.

II

Unlike the epic material considered above, the *Leyenda de los siete infantes de Salas* and the *Cantar de Mio Cid* glorify marriage. In both these poems, marriage provides the stability otherwise lacking in the heroes’ lives.

The legend of the cruel death of the seven brothers and their mother’s eventual revenge, depicted in the *Leyenda de los siete infantes de Salas*, is the elegy of the strength of family ties, of tribal bonds. The mother, Sancha, guards the family’s honor as did women of all classes in medieval Spain. Her need for revenge and both parents’ sorrow over their loss dominate this tale. Because it is concerned with blood ties to the exclusion of other themes usually seen in the epic, it is unique to the medieval Spanish epic.
The Castilian story of the *Siete infantes de Salas*, which appears for the first time in the *Primera Crónica General* of 1289, was based on a previous, now unknown, epic. The treason and revenge which form the basis of this tale were probably already famous in the late tenth century soon after the boys' death. Traces of versification and primitive assonance assure us of the existence of such a poem. The *Primera Crónica General* begins the narration with the wedding feast of Ruy Velásquez and Lambra. Taking part in the festivities are his sister Sancha, her husband, Gonzalo Gustioz, and their seven sons. For unexplained reasons, Lambra successfully incites Sancha's adolescent sons to violence. She then demands revenge from her husband, overdramatizing her supposed shame and insulting his manly pride. Because he cannot act openly on such a trumped-up charge in Castile, Ruy Valásquez seeks the help of his Moorish ally, Almanzor, and sets a trap for the father, the seven boys and their tutor. The father himself unwittingly delivers the letter which condemns his sons. While the father is incarcerated, the unknowing Arab brings the heads of his seven sons to him to identify. In his sorrow, he does not think of his own loss but of that felt by the boys' mother:

que biba o que muera, de mi ya no me jincaba,
mas he muy fiero duelo de vuestra madre dona
Sancha; sin fijos e sin marido como quedan tan
desconortada.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite Gonzalo Gustioz's dalliance with an Arab girl—some versions say princess—while in jail, these words show how concerned he is for his wife. Sancha is the embodiment of all wisely and motherly qualities and is much respected by her husband and sons. She is the only woman in the medieval Spanish epic genre in whom these attributes are fully illustrated. Out of pity, Almanzor frees Gonzalo Gustioz, who, before leaving for Castile, learns that he will again be a father. He leaves with the Arab mother-to-be half a gold ring by which he will recognize his son. No such provisions are made for a daughter nor for the future mother. Back in Castile, Gonzalo Gustioz bemoans his lack of relatives who might assist him in avenging his sons. Ten years later, his illegitimate son, Mudarra, comes to Salas to bear this burden. Neither father nor son shows any embarrassment over the son's origins; Sancha is not mentioned. Mudarra seeks out his family's enemy and kills him. Lambra, as the instigator, is burned alive at the stake for her part in this tragedy.

The Portuguese *Cronica Geral d'Espanha de 1344* differs only slightly from the *Primera Crónica General* at the conclusion of the story. As if to illustrate Gonzalo Gustioz's powerlessness against his enemies, this chronicle describes how poorly the now elderly parents live, having been robbed by Ruy Velásquez. The husband has been nearly blinded by his tears; they live
in penury and have no suitable clothing in which to greet their visitor, Mudarra. This illegitimate son is not immediately accepted by Gonzalo Gustioz because he fears offending his wife, who might then leave him:

Oo mizquinho, mal adante! Ora pode saber dona Sancha que lhe fiz torto e cuidara que assy fiz na mancebya a teerme a por desleal; e desampararme ha, quando vir o meu filho. Mas eu negarliho ey e pasarme hey com ella o melhor que poder, ante ca me desamparar e mynha velhice.¹⁹

His reticence emphasizes his lack of resources and his crippled dependence on his wife. Having dreamed of the arrival of someone who would restore her family’s honor and wealth, Sancha surprises her husband by forgiving him. Much impressed by Mudarra’s resemblance to her youngest son, she adopts him once he has been baptized. Mudarra’s coming to Castile was not initially motivated by a desire for vengeance; rather, like Bernardo del Carpio, he sought the legitimacy denied him. However, once adopted, Mudarra seeks to establish his rightful place in society by avenging his brothers. Having captured Ruy Velásquez, Mudarra presents him to Sancha for sentencing. This gentle and understanding woman, in a surprisingly unsisterly fashion, dictates a slow and painful death for her brother. His wife, Lambra, is also skinned alive.

The truth of this legend is undeniable. The original poem must have been the work of a contemporary tenth-century author, for too many details are contained in the later chronicles that only modern historiography has shown to be true. The origin of the conflict is, however, still unknown. Without a doubt it concerned the two women Lambra and Sancha and their respective marriages. Perhaps as an impetuous and thoughtless young woman—jealous of the good will Sancha, her sons and her husband received from the ruler—Lambra goaded her husband into breaking an existing peace treaty with the Arabs. Her actions may have imperiled the lives of other women’s husbands and sons who were ambassadors to Almanzor in Cordoba in 974. Maybe it was the sacrifice of these hostages which the orginal poet intended to commemorate. So that justice may be seen, vengeance was necessary in the primitive epic poem. Mudarra is invented to avenge his brothers’ deaths and his parents’ suffering. This legend reveals no significant national involvement nor psychological depth; it dramatizes and glorifies tribal instinct, unbound by civil and religious laws, protecting its own and punishing those who are a threat. Sancha is the incarnation of this tribal spirit: the gentle mother and tender wife—the cautious adviser understanding of human nature; but also bloodthirsty and unpitying towards those who threaten her loved ones.
In its myriad literary manifestations, the story of the hero of the *Cantar de Mio Cid* is that of the perfect hero functioning triumphantly in an imperfect world. The responsibility he bears for the well-being and future of his wife and children triggers his efforts. The family manifests his social status. Because through his fault his family has become destitute, penniless and dishonored, in exile his overriding concern will be to regain land, wealth and honor so as to restore his dependents to their original status. Only after his daughters’ marriages will he be fully vindicated. Because women in the medieval world reflected the social position of their husbands, in the story of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, his wife and children are the victims of his ill fortune and the symbols of his good luck. Although secondary to the Cid, his family is the mainstay of his virtue and the motivating force behind his climb back to power and recognition.

Having survived the ignominy of exile, the Cid’s conquests lead him to triumph over Valencia. Confident of his own wealth and security, he sends his vassal Alvar Fáñez to King Alfonso VI to obtain permission for his family to leave the monastery where they too were exiled. The king agrees and, intending to further please the Cid, suggests a marriage between Rodrigo’s small daughters and the Infantés de Carrión, two high-ranking noblemen. Reluctantly, the Cid agrees. In the last part of the poem, the brothers tire of their spouses and of living at the Cid’s court where they are the butt of jokes and shown to be courtly cowards unused to battle. To avenge this dishonor, they determine to rid themselves of their wives, beating them and abandoning them to die along a deserted road near Corpes. The daughters survive and reach their father who demands justice from the king who initially arranged these marriages. Rodrigo succeeds and his family pride is avenged.

Although the second segment of the poem forms the core of the story of the Cid, the *Cantar de Mio Cid* owes its literary value to the first and last parts. The first records loss—loss of honor, power, prestige and family; the final portion records the consolidation of the honor, power and prestige which the Cid regains by his own valor. His marriage, his family, his world are again whole. The exile was the journey away from Castile, away from his wife and family, towards instability; the reverse Valencia–Toledo voyage to the audience with the king, shows not only the Cid’s reinstatement into society, but also his dominance and superiority over that world. The song of exile shows the Cid, accused of treason, to be judged unworthy of his society and therefore banished; the song of Corpes shows that in truth that society was always unworthy of the Cid.

Upon leaving Castile, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar made three promises: first, to his men that they would all return in glory; second, to his wife Jimena that he would yet arrange their daughters’ future marriages honorably; and finally, that he would always serve her faithfully. The return to Castile, the second weddings and the restoration of his wife to her former status are indelibly
linked in the minds of the hero, the author and the audience. Without his family, the Cid’s efforts have no meaning. His wife and daughters are the focus of all his actions, receptacles of all he holds dear, everything that makes him a complete man. They are his sole preoccupation throughout the *Cantar de Mio Cid*.

## III

The characters of the medieval Spanish epic genre reflect the essential contribution made by all segments of society to the development of their world. The roles played are realistic in terms of the groups they represent. Together, the men, women and children studied encompass most aspects of the medieval world. Unlike the medieval French epic, where the role played by women is a marginal one having little impact either upon the movement of the story or on the behavior of men, in the Spanish epic women are the prime movers. Rodrigo without La Cava would have been remembered in Latin chronicles as the monarch who, having lost control over his nobles and himself, allowed the invader to enter the peninsula; with her he is a passionate man torn between duty and lust. She can be seen as a pawn in the politics of her time. By removing Bernardo del Carpio’s illegitimate birth, all reason for his existence ceases; he would have been another nobleman of Alfonso II’s court, courageous no doubt, but not driven. His young parents illustrate the lack of freedom felt by most medieval youth. Fernán González, without the psychological, political and even physical support of his wife, would have languished in the jails of Navarre or Leon; her faith in him and in his cause only increased its credibility. Sancha represents the hardy energy, physical strength and moral zeal of those medieval Spanish wives who not only supported their husbands’ efforts, but also followed them into hostile territory to start new lives. García Fernández and his son Sancho’s shameful fight over the destiny of Castile would probably have been suppressed by chroniclers anxious not to sully their memories; the traitorous countess provided the target by which the popular author could redeem them. The *Siete Infantes de Salas* would have been seven more young men of the multitude killed during the wars of reconquest were it not for their aunt’s passion to see them dead and their mother’s grief and determination to have their deaths avenged. The last count of Castile, the infante García, is remembered only because of the great love a woman bore him. Sancho II of Castile fought and conquered both his brothers, but only his defeat at the hands of his sister is poetically recorded. Jimena, although portrayed in a more passive and courtly fashion, concerns herself with restoring her family’s position and arranging good marriages for her daughters, although, in the *Cantar de Mio Cid*, she takes no steps in this direction. Together these characters represent the distinct yet complementary aspects
of women in medieval Spain. Women, in the Spanish epic, are not secondary characters acting in the shadows of masculine endeavours; they are the catalysts of the dramatic action of the plots.

The social purpose of the Spanish epic was to tell of past glories and to urge future feats. On the whole, the heroes are idealized, exemplary figures worthy of imitation. The heroines, on the other hand, are far more human and complex, depicting the good and evil attributes of human nature. They are fierce, daring, driven by elemental instincts. Because we are dealing with literature, evil is punished and goodness triumphs. Their actions are self-propelled; they do not rely on their partners. Their destiny is their own. These are exceptional women living in exceptional times.

It cannot be said that without the female characters, Spain would not have had an epic genre. The eighth-century Arab invasion of the peninsula, the ninth-century determination to remain free of France, the tenth-century independence of Castile and the eleventh-century fratricidal wars would have been recorded in history without the intervention of these women: in history, but not in literature.

These husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, are tender and violent, fearful yet cunning, passive or determined. Drawn from ordinary experience they are also mythic. They are agents of retribution, irrational and destructive, but they are also incarnations of something deeply and significantly human. It is around this humanity that the medieval Spanish epic revolves.

NOTES


4. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, ed., Romancero tradicional de las lenguas hispánicas (Madrid: Gredos, 1957), I, p. 7. The female protagonist is known as La Cava, Alacaba or Oliba in the different texts. La Cava appears the most frequently and will be used here.

5. Ibid., p. 3.


12. Ibid., p. 364.