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LESSONS ON CASTIGATING WOMEN IN THE WAR-TORN WORLD OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA



Violence against women is evidenced in Spanish literary works as early as the 12th century. The final drama of the national epic, The Poem of the Cid, is precipitated by the brutal beating of the Cid's daughters. The epic itself is a litany of victorious but brutal battles to recapture lands from the moors.

In a story of a 14th-century prose work violence is used to tame an ill-mannered bride. The plot is international, but the technique is national. ¹ In numerous romances of later centuries daughters, wives and mothers are starved, beaten, stabbed, strangled or beheaded. The ultimate example of violence is seen in the ballad of the wife who is made to ride having just given birth. Her misguided husband demands that she dress and mount because he is returning her to her father. His mother had convinced him that while he was gone, his wife had insulted them both and complained about the poor care she receives from him. ²

Women are victimized by both men and women. A rejected father, a weak king, an angry husband, or a misguided son are equalled by a malicious mother-in-law, a jealous queen, a brooding princess or hateful sister-in-laws. The difference between the abusers is that women act decisively while men often initiate a continuum of violence.

Beatings, starvation, and repeated rapes are not uncommon. These are perpetrated by men. It would be difficult for a woman to beat an able woman into unconsciousness and impossible for her to rape her. However she is capable of plotting her death. She is even capable of killing her own. We see this in the ballad of the mother who serves her husband their son's head and tongue for dinner because the child always told his father what happened while he was gone.

Decapitation is more dramatic when imposed on women. In one particular ballad a mother asks her young daughter to place her soon-to-be-severed head on a platter and take it to the king. The child does so and the mother's head protests its innocence.

Blows to the head with maces or swords are also used to execute women. Strangulation is used to feign death by natural causes and starvation is imposed to weaken a woman into submission. Most of these methods are common to both genders. However, sexual violation is truly a woman's lot.

Not unexpectedly, rape is a common method of abuse. For some, it is a prelude to cloistering or interminable shame. For others, it is prolonged suffering or a death sentence. The ballad of Dona Isabel is a popular romance that touches on this dual tragedy.⁴ Not only does Dona Isabel forcibly bear three children through the King's abuse, but she is ultimately beheaded by order of the barren queen. She is thus victimized by both.

Whether it is rape or indifference to the female body's condition after birth, it cannot be overlooked that women are punished for and through their gender. When a man is supposedly raped, the event is written in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. In the famous Book of Good Love (14th century) the male protagonist succumbs to the mountain women with a sigh and a hope that the audience will understand that he **must** surrender to these wild women to win safe passage through the mountain pass.⁵ The verses of these pastoral poems have double entendres.

Men are killed, but a man never dies from hemorrhaging brought on by abuse after giving birth. A man may be starved to death but not because he will not succumb to a parent's incestuous desires. It would be a unique medieval work that tells of a mother becoming sexually aroused while observing her son eating at the family table or playing outside the window. Yet we find a father reacting to his young daughter this way.

It is the essence of being female that condemns women to greater sexual abuse. It is the continuous expectation that she be both the Virgin Mary and Eve in a world that preaches one and expects the other. One doesn't forget that the Church extols her procreative ability but imposes churching before she can rejoin society. Perhaps much that happens to women in the medieval peninsula can be related to the atmosphere of the times.

Nydia Rivera-Gloekner, Rider University

1. In The Taming of the Shrew Shakespeare treats the same situation with comedy. Petruchio handles Kate's ill-temper with feigned kindness. In Don Juan Manuel's work the bridegroom kills his cat, his dog, and his horse when they don't bring him water for his hands. The bride is the only living thing left to grant his wish. John E. Keller, L. Clark Keating, and Barbara E. Gaddy, trans., Book of Count Lucanor and Patronio: A Translation of Don Juan Manuel's "El conde Lucanor" (New York: Peter Lang Publishers Inc., 1993) 161-166.
2. Several versions of this ballad on Dona Arbola can be found in Narciso Alonso-Cortes, Romances de Castilla (Valladolid: Institucion Cultural Simanacas, 1982) 50-57.
3. This ballad, known as "La infanticida" can be found in the aforementioned edition, 117.
4. This ballad about Dona Isabel can be found in Manuel Alvar, ed., Romancero viejo y tradicional (Mexico, Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1979) 46-48.
5. Saralyn R. Daly, trans. and Anthony N. Zahareas, ed. The Book of True Love: Juan Ruiz, The Archbishop of Hita, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1978) 243-270.