

KINSHIP
AND
POLITY
IN THE
*POEMA DE
MIO CID*

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Introduction

Our reading of the most famous narrative poem devoted to the exploits and adventures of the historical personage Rodrigo Dfáz de Vivar has been forever altered by Ramón Menéndez Pidal's scholarly crusade for the implementation of a twofold program in Cidian studies. The first element of this program involved propagating the image of the Cid as a Spanish national hero. This nationalist-historicist premise held not only that the Cid's importance resided in the heroic symbolism of his embodiment of Spanish national character but also that the epic masterpiece dedicated to the tale of his exploits and his triumph was itself essentially valid as historical documentation. As is well known, Menéndez Pidal's position invoked a certain degree of controversy, leading to a debate with Leo Spitzer along the lines of the historical/literary dichotomy. Spitzer expressed an opinion few would now dispute: that a literary work, even where historical accuracy is verifiable, is literary precisely because accuracy for its own sake is irrelevant to the narrative aesthetic. Reversing the terms of Menéndez Pidal's characteristic formulation, Spitzer declared that given the fabulous nature of the plot, it would indeed be risky to postulate the historical accuracy of this epic ("Sobre" 107, 114–17). Much the same conclusion was reached by Colin Smith, who observed that the poet "composed an epic poem, not a historical work." Having created "a drama with a plot, a series of climaxes artistically disposed," he therefore "felt no special duty to record or respect or even to use the facts of history." Such facts, if he was aware of them, were only utilized "when it suited his entirely literary purpose to do so." Bound only by the constraints of "existing traditions and memories," this poet "invented freely" (*Making* 137).¹

The second element of Menéndez Pidal's program committed the formidable resources of the great philologist to the promulgation of the so-called traditionalist theory of the poem's composition. The work—variously referred to as the "Cantar" or the "Poema" of the Cid—is held by this school of thought to have been produced collectively, anonymously, by generations of folk poets. It was one among an untold number of folkloric compositions of varying length produced by the same communal tradition. Behind each literary masterpiece lie generations

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of anonymous, collective elaboration—a latent state of popular artistry, endlessly refining, adapting, enhancing. No single author, in this poetic tradition, may claim credit; no single generation can monopolize consumption of the work of narrative art so produced. This, in essence, is the traditionalist premise.²

While the nationalist and historicist aspects of his scholarship have lost their power to generate controversy, the second aspect of Menéndez Pidal's approach has been vigorously disputed—or, at any rate, extensively modified—by a number of scholars. Eventually the theory was fortified by fusion with the oralist theory propounded so compellingly by Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and their host of enthusiastic disciples. The field work of Parry, documenting living poetic traditions in Yugoslavia and elsewhere, supported a theory of oral composition in the purest sense, providing the model for a poetic tradition that could compose literary masterpieces without literacy. Master singers transmitted not memorized fixed texts but extensive repertoires of typical motifs (e.g., those of leave-taking, of landings of ships, of sword fights, of homecoming, of banishment, of warriors in council, etc.) and vast inventories of metrical formulae. The song-story, in effect, was an array of such motifs devoted to a specific topic, such as the story of the hero's triumphant homecoming, the victory of one clan over another, the siege of a stronghold. Variable in its specific sequence but consistent in its content, the song, during performance before an audience, was enacted by means of a line-for-line splicing-in of metrical formulae from the singer's vast accumulated store of stock elements, many of which could be fitted, allowing for the constraints of meter and narrative context, to a large number of different motifs. Texts were not memorized in this tradition.³

Although the singers may have the impression of singing the same song repeatedly, each performance differs, to a greater or lesser degree, from all others on the same theme. Lord, in a recent summary and updating of his theory, points out that the fundamental medium of communication in the oral world is talk, and that song, a form of talk, is a "specially conventionalized medium that serves to filter out some sounds, [and] to amplify others" ("Merging" 19). Through song, images and

ideas “. . . are refracted in the mind’s eye, an eye that sees *images* directly rather than through letters and written words.” The dimension of talk is necessarily one of “fluidity” and “variability,” of “artful speech before codification” (20). In this precodified environment, the storytelling endeavor is characterized by mutability and “multiformity”: “One may use the same words as the last time, but the last time was no more formative than any other time” (23). The oral world of manifold variability and the literate world of codified consistency may coexist. Only when the literate elite draws its materials from the oral world is a “bridge” erected between the two realities.⁴

The work that we will designate in this essay as the *Poema de Mio Cid* is the Spanish epic par excellence perhaps chiefly because it is the only more or less complete epic manuscript from a medieval Peninsular language to have come down to us. Its uniqueness has prompted one prominent expert on this poem, Colin Smith, to postulate that the work is the unique effort of a solitary poet working in imitation of French epic style. Smith thus manages to account for formulaic style—he does not deny the possibility of oral formulaic tradition in the French context—while preserving the essential point of authorial creativity for this Spanish masterpiece. The impact of French poetic models on the composition of the *PMC* is so extensive, he argues, that “it is best to postulate [the poet’s] residence and study in France, and his learning of the epic art there by both reading and listening” (*Making* 157).⁵

The two foci of debate just discussed—historicist/narratological, traditionalist/individualist—are by no means the only dualities to have plagued Cidian criticism. Another such controversy might be called the philology/aestheticism debate. John S. Geary points out the dangers of such a thematic division in his discussion of Thomas Montgomery’s analysis of the *PMC*’s style. While characterizing as “perceptive” the latter scholar’s appraisal of the work’s primitivism, Geary suggests that Montgomery’s contrast of visions—subjective in the *PMC*, objective in chronicle treatments of Cidian themes—supports an unnecessary dichotomy. The evident contrast in styles may indicate not an epochal transition or a cultural transformation, but rather merely a “distinction between poetic and prosaic expression” (Geary 180–81).⁶

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Miguel Garci-Gómez chides Menéndez Pidal for his “exteriority,” suggesting that “en torno” was a most appropriate title for one of the earlier scholar’s best-known collections of essays. Menéndez Pidal’s approach, according to Garci-Gómez, avoids the “entrañas,” focusing as it does on the environment of poet and public. The neotraditionalist school exemplified by Menéndez Pidal is in fact inherently “externalista.” It is an “exocrítica” that functions not to study “la médula, el sistema nervioso o endoesqueleto” of the literary work, but rather its “exoesqueleto.” This, he affirms, consists of such “disciplinas de soporte periférico” as philology, history (civil, social, economic, ecclesiastical), geography, folklore, jurisprudence, numismatics, and comparative literature. This exocriticism inevitably tends to succumb to “la tentación de salirse de la obra al autor, de la estructura al marco cultural, de los personajes a las personas, de las formas a la materia.” In short, he concludes, the critic’s attention wanders “de la poesía a la historia” (Garci-Gómez, “*Mio Cid*”: *estudios* 13–14).

As it happens, Garci-Gómez’s enumeration of exocritical categories is a fairly complete list of the principal bibliographic rubrics covered by Cidian criticism over the past several decades. According to Garci-Gómez’s criteria, the vast majority of studies are exocritical. In a bibliographic essay, Miguel Magnotta discusses the history of *PMC* criticism and scholarship by dividing his survey into the following topics: date of composition and of the manuscript (Magnotta, *Historia y bibliografía* 17–37); authorship (38–77, with subtopics such as anonymity vs. known author, cleric or layman, originality vs. adaption); origins (78–89); influences (90–117, including French, Germanic, and Muslim); the relation of the *PMC* to both the chronicles (118–35) and the *romancero* tradition (136–45); problems of versification (150–76); aesthetic and critical evaluations (177–207). Appendices address such additional topics as the identity and possible contribution of Per Abbat (208–18), the question of learned vs. popular authorship (219–23), the mythic aspect of the *Cid* (224–28), and the sense of space and time conveyed in the work (229–39).

The topics outlined by Alan Deyermond exhibit much the same kind of categorization. In his bibliographic survey of work devoted to the *PMC*, he points out the very frequent