

La Mujer Engañada: A romance in the Judeo-Spanish tradition

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“No debemos, pues, olvidarlo: hemos de intentar evocar un mundo, su mundo, cuando queremos armonizar una canción...” (Joaquín Rodrigo 354)

Joaquín Rodrigo (1902-99) included this admonition in his introduction to “Dos canciones sefardíes armonizadas,” choral settings published in 1954 in the journal *Sefarad*. Fourteen years later he returned to the “world” of Judeo-Spanish song in “Cuatro canciones sefardíes,” a group of solo songs with piano accompaniment. His settings belong to a lineage conceived by a handful of collectors and arrangers in the early decades of the twentieth century. These were composers infused with the nationalist spirit of the infant field of pan-Hispanic ballad research; in fact, Rodrigo chose the melodies for his choral work from the notated collection of Manrique de Lara (1863-1929), which was presented to him by the patriarchal figure of both Hispanic and Sephardic ballad research, Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1869-1968). In 1958, Rodrigo reviewed another compilation, from the field notations of León Algazi, for *Sefarad*. These experiences afforded the composer a thorough familiarity both with the musical and textual material of the Judeo-Spanish *cancionero* and with related contemporary scholarship. In addition, Rodrigo’s wife, Victoria Kamhi, was of Turkish Sephardic heritage, a connection which added a personal element to their collaboration on the “Cuatro canciones sefardíes.”

19. NANI, NANI

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Na - ni, na - ni, Na - ni que - re el
hi - jo El hi - jo de la mad -
- re, De chí - co se haga gran - de. Ay,
Ay, Dúr - mi - te mi al - ma,
Que tu pa - dre vie - ne, Con muncha - ale gri - a.

From Isaac Levy’s *Chants Judéo-Espagnols*

Among Rodrigo's four art song arrangements is a Judeo-Spanish ballad, published with the title "*Nani, nani: canción de cuna*," which is in fact a version of the romance "*La Mujer Engañada*" (Israel J. Katz 1980, 184). The text is listed as "anónimo, adaptado por Victoria Kamhi," but is largely derived, along with the melody, from Isaac Lévy's transcription in *Chants Judéo-Espagnols*.¹ Lévy's and Algazi's publications, along with the pre-war fieldwork of composer Alberto Hemsí, have since served as primary resources for composers and arrangers (Katz 1980, 183). The ballad in Lévy's collection relates a dialogue in which the female protagonist is interrupted while singing to her child as her husband returns ostensibly from working in the fields. He is denied entry,

*Avrir no vos avro, No venix cansado,
Sino que venix, De onde nuevo amor* (Lévy 24)

because he has actually been with his mistress, and the wife offers some heated words in this version:

*Ni es más hermoza Ni es más valida,
Ni ella llevaba Más de las mis joyas.* (Lévy 24)

While Lévy does not list his informants or their cities of origin, these last lines are similar to corresponding ones in the version printed by Mair José Benardete, *Judeo-Spanish Ballads from New York*, whose informant emigrated from Izmir (58). All printed variants describe the wife following her straying husband to his mistress' house, sometimes overhearing their tender words, or cruel ones against her. In Kamhi's adaptation, however, there is no implication at all of marital discord. She has included the first two stanzas from Lévy's text, which are clearly lullaby-oriented, plus the stanza in which the husband asks his wife to open the door. In the fourth stanza the wife opens the door lovingly:

*Ay, la puerta yo vos avro, que venix cansado,
y verex durmido al hijo en la cuna.* (Rodrigo and Kamhi 124)

This alteration makes a more convincing lullaby ("*canción de cuna*") within the framework of the Western classical art song tradition, but omits the bulk of the ballad's content. Three of the five Sephardic texts collected by Hemsí, from Cassaba, Istanbul, and Rhodes, in the 1920's and 1930's, begin with the lullaby section, in variants of:

*Dúrmite, mi alma, dúrmite, mi vista,
que tu padre viene d'onde nueva amiga.* (130)

Katz suggests that, in Lévy's text, the lullaby strophe, which is indented, represents a "genre within a genre," a "lullaby within a ballad" (1980, 185). Bénichou discusses some Moroccan versions containing lines which indicate that the wife, after spying on her unfaithful husband, returns home to take her own lover ("*y tomí en mis brazos al que bien quería*"). He notes that in

¹ Lévy's 1959 compilation, as well as that of Algazi in 1958, was published using reparations from the German government (Katz 1977, 199n).

several Eastern Judeo-Spanish versions,² the concept of the lover is clearly transformed into that of a child the wife sings to sleep upon returning to her house (Bénichou 132-33).

Hemsi asserts that lullabies are “not numerous in the repertoire of Sephardi songs since the mothers preferred to sing romances to their babies” (130). He goes on to say that the choice of ballads for this purpose “was dictated by their musical quality rather than any interesting words or subject” (130). Pamela J. Dorn acknowledges the function of *romances*³ as lullabies (in older generations, as the practice is not as common today), but also notes that they were “an expressive outlet performed while doing routine household work” (143). Judith Cohen also mentions the Moroccan custom of singing romances while swinging on large outdoor swings known as *columpio* or *matesha* (also involving a rocking motion, and equally conducive to songs with a corresponding rhythm). Interestingly, she relates that the words of a ballad may, contrary to Hemsi’s statement above, influence a mother to select it as a lullaby. In “Melisenda insomne,” for example, a favorite of one of her informant’s children, the lines referring to sleeping birds made the song conducive to use as a lullaby. That particular informant chose to omit the traditionally gory ending of that ballad, and Cohen notes that the *romances* she recorded most often in her fieldwork were those with happy endings (162-71). Later, however, she notes that some of her contacts associated ballads and lullabies with a sense of melancholy, as they were sung “late at night when household activities had abated” (171).

The melody Hemsi documents along with the Cassaba text (131) is extremely different from Lévy’s example; though Hemsi has transcribed it without barlines, it clearly fits a 6/8 metrical organization. This melodic style is not typical of Judeo-Spanish song from locations in Asia Minor. Lévy’s melody is closest to the Turkish *makam hicaz*, and is squeezed into an unconvincing 2/4 (it is possibly derived from a freely metered, Turkish-influenced rhythmic organization). All five of Hemsi’s versions contain the refrain “*Nuevo amor*,” “*muevo amor*,” or “*muevo amor, muevo dolor*” repeated between each one, two, or three verses. Similar refrains are documented in several examples⁴ by Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman in their online database of Judeo-Spanish song.

One stanza of this *romance* in the peninsular tradition appears, with musical notation, in Book VI of Francisco Salinas’ 1577 treatise on music, *De música*:

Penso [ó] el mal villano Que yo que dormia
Tomo [ó] espada en mano, Fuesse andar por villa. (306)

Oro Anahory Librowicz cites Menéndez Pidal’s identification of this first verse transformed into the beginning of a religious poem, in which it is a foolish man who thinks God is sleeping (56; Menéndez Pidal 409). Menéndez Pidal dates this application of the ballad to a 1566 manuscript in the Biblioteca Real. He notes that, while we lack complete texts for this ballad from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, identifiable versions exist among Moroccan and Eastern (“oriental”) Jews, as well as in the form of children’s circle games in the Azores, in Spain, in Argentina, and in Chile. The peninsular and American songs, in this distinct functional context carry the initial lines:

² Bénichou mentions Danon, but Alvar’s Turkish version is also relevant.

³ *Romansas*, in Judeo-Spanish, though this is term not used in all Sephardic communities (Judith Cohen 128).

⁴ Two are included from Tetuán, and others whose location of collection are not yet identified in the online catalog.

*Me casó mi madre chiquita y bonita
Con un muchachito que yo no quería.* (Menéndez Pidal 409)

Similar lines are also found in Eduardo M. Torner's collection (244), Arcadio de Larrea Palacín's collection (with musical notation), and a compilation by Montserrat Delíz of Puerto Rican songs (with musical notation and arrangement). *Romances* with incipit corresponding to Salinas' text also appear in Librowicz' (ballads gathered in Málaga), Alvar's, and Larrea Palacín's (diasporic) collections, among informants from Tetuán. "El mal villano," or "Pensóse el villano," writes Bénichou, becomes "(Este) sevillano," (as in Librowicz' example) or even "un ser villano," in Moroccan versions (130-31). In this variant, the husband simply slips away while his wife seems to be sleeping, without the pretense of leaving for work.

Two more Judeo-Spanish variants, identified in a Turkish version by Alvar, and a similar Salonikan one by Armistead and Silverman, begin:

*Horicas de tarde el Chélébi venía,
Toma el pico y la chapa a cavar se iría.*
(Alvar 72-73; Armistead and Silverman 1981, 60)

The Turkish word "Chélébi" (*çelebi*) here is translated by Armistead and Silverman as "señor" or "gentil hombre" (84). Other Balkan words found in this ballad are apparent in a Bosnian version recorded by Armistead, Silverman, and Sljivic-Simsic (79). The first line contains: "¡Dzam, dzam, farfuli findzán!" (Turkish and Serbo-Croatian terms referring to glasses, china, and cups, respectively) and the penultimate line includes the Hebrew-derived "haham," synonymous with "rabbi" (The betrayed wife goes to the rabbi in the end, to discuss divorce). Armistead and Silverman also remark that a separate Salonikan Sephardic ballad, "La Amante Abandonada," is sometimes found as a prologue to "La Mujer Engañada," though the two story lines do not seem to mix well (1971, 192-93).

All of these versions deal with a woman's personal situation. According to Cohen, romances with such personal themes have been favored in the Judeo-Spanish repertoires over those with war-related topics (169). She points to Henrietta Yurchenco's suggestion that the *romance* might have played an additional didactic role, transmitting societal and moral expectations (or warnings?) from generation to generation (165).

In some (especially Eastern Judeo-Spanish) variants, as we have seen, the unfaithful husband is a field worker (though he does not in fact go to work in the story), and in some (peninsular and Moroccan) he has a sword. These descriptions specify the station of the narrator wife; in one Tetuán example from Armistead's and Silverman's online catalogue, the woman is even a queen:

*Yo era reina, reina de Castiya
Cazzisme con él, mi padre no quería.* (15a-12)

This version is very different from the others, but retains the refrain "nuevo amor" and the story of the wife following her husband to the house of his mistress. Other descriptive passages occur in versions documented by Armistead and Silverman (2003, 58re-48a-2), and Attias (cited in Librowicz 57), detailing physical characteristics of the husband's mistress. According to Librowicz, the adjectives "encalada" ("la cara encalada" found in both of the aforementioned) and "preto" ("ojos pretos" in Attias) have meaning "beyond the impartial description of color"

(57). “*Encalada*” implies that the mistress has need of artificial means to achieve whiteness, and “*preto*” is more than a black hue, but has pejorative overtones hinting at falseness or ugliness, in Judeo-Spanish usage (Librowicz 57). This gives us a clear picture of the narrator’s offended (and bitterly sarcastic) state.

The Music

Katz describes three distinct musical traditions of the Sephardic ballad, and these have been applied by scholars to other song forms as well. The Moroccan and North African traditions represent the Western side of the Mediterranean basin, and the songs from communities in Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans represent the East (1972). The main sources of collection from the East were Istanbul, Izmir, Rhodes, and the secondary community in Jerusalem. Research in the West focused on Tangier and Tetuán. In a later publication, Katz distinguishes the Greek tradition (from Salonika and Larissa especially) as a third category separate from the Eastern and Western Mediterranean divisions. He suggests that, in addition to an Islamic influence, the Judeo-Spanish song corpus in Greece was subject to the same Byzantine liturgical influence apparent in Greek folk music (1982, 47-58).

He addresses the musical differences between Western Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean traditions: Western Mediterranean melodies associate more closely with Western (European) concepts of pitch, modality, rhythm, phrase length, and “ornamentation.” If present, accompaniment is harmonic. Eastern melodies generally conform to the Turkish *makam* system, which relates to different paradigms of pitch and rhythm, and involve a more melismatic, “Middle Eastern” vocal style. Any accompaniment for these melodies would typically be heterophonic.

Larrea Palacín’s (Tetuán) and Delíz’ (Puerto Rico) musical notations (“*Me casó mi madre...*”) have similar melodic contour, and, as Hemsí’s version implies, largely conform to a triple meter. Both begin in 3/4, though Larrea Palacín’s notation eventually alternates between 2/4 and 3/4. The triple meter may be related to the hexasyllabic nature of the romance (unusual among primarily octosyllabic Judeo-Spanish ballads), and the 2/4 is imposed upon the text in Larrea Palacín’s transcription by way of repetition (“*chiquitita y ni– chiquitita y ni– chiquitita y niña*”). The melody from Tetuán is transcribed in C major, and the Puerto Rican example in a minor (piano accompaniment is provided in this example). The Lévy notation, and its duplicate in Rodrigo’s setting, are highly melismatic, and therefore could also be considered highly ornamented. Dorn’s excellent dissertation treats the topic of a split social and musical (disemic) tradition among Turkish Jewry, divided between “*a la Turka* (influenced by Ottoman tradition)” and “*a la Franka* (European-influenced, especially through the Alliance Israélite Universelle)” associations. This is not a purely Jewish phenomenon in post-Ottoman Turkey, but is especially evident in the musical styles and performance practices represented in recordings of Judeo-Spanish song in the twentieth century. Dorn writes that *a la Turka* style is characterized by *makam* organization, lack of harmony, and a high level of ornamentation (whether the perception of melisma as ornament is an emic concept, she does not mention). Rodrigo’s setting, of course, eliminates the first and second criteria, but the accompaniment is conceived less harmonically than motivically. A melodic ostinato in the left hand implies the b minor tonality indicated in the key signature, but does not make it explicit in a traditional sense. The augmented seconds in Levy’s and Rodrigo’s versions give the impression of *makam hicaz*, though the notation system, the addition of an equally-tempered piano part, and the particular motivic progress in the

accompaniment challenge such an interpretation. Katz lists several melodic analogues to Levy's opening phrase located in Spanish lullabies (in a harmonic minor similar to Levy's melody), but also notes similarities to a Hebrew hymn (in *hicz*) collected from Eastern Mediterranean sources by the pioneer scholar A. Z. Idelsohn (Katz 1980, 189-91).

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a search for national musical identity among composers in Spain. Herderian theory regarding folk song was taken up by Spanish musicians, and as in other European nations, folklore became a significant source of musical and literary inspiration. This interest motivated a push to gather and publish collections of regional song (Beatriz Martínez del Fresno 649). It is this quest which led Manrique de Lara, beginning in 1911, to collaborate with Menéndez Pidal, who was engaged in pursuit of a link between medieval Spanish ballad texts and extant Judeo-Spanish ballads in the diaspora. De Lara initially envisioned utilizing the ballad tunes he planned to collect as melodic material for an opera on the story of Spain's national hero (and the subject of numerous ballads), *El Cid Campeador* (Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar) (Katz 1977, 182). Rodrigo's arrangements belong to this heritage, as Spanish composers have looked to the Golden Age of a tri-cultural Spain for the material of a national sound.

This is the "world" Rodrigo was attempting to portray, the universe of the *romance* "La Mujer Engañada." It is, due to its expression in both the Jewish and Hispanic diasporas, a truly worldly song, and plays a role in maintaining two intertwined cultural identities on several continents.

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