



Gender of Ethics from *Chronica Najerensis* to Hollywood's *El Cid*

Generally, female figures are not given a primordial role in the medieval historiographic literature. Like in all genealogy-based literature, women are dealt with through their relationship to a male figure in the medieval historiographic literature: they marry kings and noblemen and they give birth to the sons of kings or noblemen; the information given about their lives is mostly minimal: they merely mention their birth, their marriage, their deliveries, and their death. Sometimes we are offered other stereotyped elements that help to shape an ideal image of the woman. To a lesser extent, we are given the example of what a woman ought not to be. When writers choose this latter strategy, the female figure becomes a means through which the lesson of the negative exemplum is enforced. And it is not by chance that this negative example is always linked to female figures who were connected to power, for politics have always been considered an exclusive masculine domain. From biblical Palestine to medieval Iberia we find a plethora of illustrative examples: Jezabel, Delilah, Dona Lambra or Urraca, queen of Castile (1109-1126).

Urraca Fernández (1034-1101) the first-born daughter of King Ferdinand I and Sancha of León is typically portrayed as a shady and vicious figure. Urraca's character and relationships are mostly detailed through fictional and exemplar narratives. At this level, my work will revolve around one fictional episode frequently narrated by the Iberic medieval historiographical works of the 12th and 13th centuries:

namely the episode of the “Siege of Zamora” in which Urraca assumes a position of authority as a ruler of the city of Zamora. I will analyse the representation of this episode in three different testimonies: 1) the version proposed by the *Chronica Najerensis*, a late 12th century Castilian chronicle, 2) a romance testimony from the 13th century and 3) the 20th century’s Hollywood’s film “El Cid”. My goal is to study this episode so to understand how these forms of discourse present and represent gender differences and how these differences, dictated by ideological and moralistic necessities of the writing of History, will interfere with the way female or male characters are treated.

I will first begin with a short summary of the events according to the most famous account. The episode known as “Siege of Zamora” tells us how in the sequence of the distribution of the kingdom of Ferdinand I among his sons, Sancho, who inherited Castile after defeating his brothers puts a siege on the city of Zamora, property of his sister Urraca. In order to break the siege, Urraca plots to have her brother killed. For this purpose, she uses a Zamoran knight named Velido Dolfos. After the death of Sancho, Alfonso is called from exile to become the king of Castille, León and Galicia.

Though some texts revolved about the issue immediately after the death of Sancho, it is the “Chronica Najerensis” who first presents an extended fictional narrative regarding this subject. The version presented in this text is also important because it is the first Christian chronicle to blame Urraca for the death of her brother.

Before delving into the episode of the “Siege of Zamora”, the text introduces a short

but very revealing description. Urraca was famous for her beauty and her habits: “Vrracam namque decore et moribus nobilissiamm puellam priusquam regni apicem obtinuissent, genuerunt”.¹

In a first moment, this affirmation might be looked at as deserved praise but its ambiguity is revealed in the episode of the “Siege of Zamora” when Urraca offers herself as a prize to Velido so he would fulfill her wishes: “Si quis me ab hac obsidione et angustia atcumque liberaret, me et mea omnia illi darem”. Tunc filius perditionis Bellidus Ataulfus dixit: “Si de promisso me certificas, facio quod exoptas”.²

But the “Chronica Najerensis” has other categories of misogynous details linked to the king Sancho’s death. When Velido is confronted with the necessity of explaining to Sancho the reason behind his departure from the city of Zamora he informs the king that he deserted the city because he refused to be ruled by a woman: “Multo melior est nos regi tradere quam se esse sub femine potestate, que nec suos nec se, sive pace sive bello, poterit aut noverit gubernare. Quin etiam domini nostri filius iure nobis potius debet quam filia dominari.”.³ His refusal is not only a personal and whimsical choice but is grounded in law. The argument that the writer of the chronicle chooses to put in Velido's mouth is based on gender inequity intrinsic to the medieval hierarchy of ruling. This discrimination is, as I just described, established by the law: the male is meant to govern by right and by virtue of his inheritance, while the female is only allowed to govern as second in order of preference.

However, through the critical words of Velido we can deduce that Urraca was the

effective governor of Zamora. At least in the textual universe of the “Najerensis”, Urraca was “de facto” the mistress of Zamora otherwise Velido’s argument would not have any validity. The strategy of denouncement of female power in the “Chronica Najerensis” is to condemn explicitly the “illegality” of Urraca's power. Although she possesses the “potestas”, this authority is but a deficient form of power considered inadvisable under the law.

The medieval Iberic romance historiography had its zenith with the works produced under the supervision of king Alfonso the Wise (1252-1284). The family of his works became are today know to us as “Estoria de España”. Because of its importance and because of its approach to the subject I am studying it is important to look at least to one of these texts⁴. These texts produce a new way of understanding the gender relationship by re-evaluating the female role in the dynamics of power relations. In the episode we’ve been refering to, the first change introduced by the texts of “Estoria de España” occurs with the introduction of a new character: Arias Gonçalo Urracas's tutor who is portrayed as a wise counsellor. He is the one guiding Urraca during the siege of the city and the one who advises her during the negotiations with her brother's ambassador. Thus, the Amplified Version places the tutelage of Arias Gonçalo between Urraca and the power. On the contrary, the version stated in *Chronica Najerensis* shows the Infanta exercising her power with no intermediary. Therefore, the mis-en-scène of the male character follows a declassification of female character i.e. Urraca rendered secondary in the exercise of power.

Urraca's loss of authority might be confirmed by the explanation that Velido Dolfos

offers to Sancho when he escapes the encircled city: "...porque dix al conseio de Çamora que uos diessen la villa, quisieronme matar los fijos de don Arias Gonçalo...".⁵

The text does not refute the idea of female command sustained by the force of the law because it is no longer necessary to do so. Alternatively, the argument is based not on the condemnation of female power but on an idea exposed by Velido himself and the consequent reaction of those who hold the command behind the city's wall, namely Arias Gonçalo's family. Thus, instead of confirming the existence of a female commander, the text prefers to hide her power behind the figure of Arias Gonçalo. While "Najerensis" was chiefly and explicitly denouncing this authority, the romance chronicles chose a less evident strategy.

Evidently, the only decision taken by Urraca herself with no male intervention of any sort is the pact she establishes with Velido. It allows not only to set Arias Gonçalez (the male figure) free from any implication in Sancho's death but to show how women act when they are not under male tutelage.

The method of enunciation here is different from the one found in the "Najerensis": in the version presented by the Latin chronicle, Urraca's proposal has an explicit sexual content. However, the testimonies of vernacular historiography prefer a more elliptical version even though the chosen formulation insinuates (rather than states) a implicit sexual offer: "Pero non te mando yo que tu fagas nada del mal que as penssado; mas digote que non a omne en le mundo que a mio hermano tolliese de

sobre Çamora et me la fiziesse descercar que yo non le diese quequier que me demandasse”.⁶

It results obviously that the “Amplified Version” opts for a different view from the one set by the “Chronica Najerensis” concerning the instrumentalization of the female body as a mean to achieve power. By drawing it in a lesser sharp contour, the Alfonsine text shows that the new strategy of denying female power is no longer the open fight but rather the occultation of the existence of this power. It might sound contradictory but the ambiguous character of the text derives from the tension inherent in its two main preoccupations: primarily, to bring forth a culprit in the assassination of the king and at same time warn of the dangers of women's ascension to power.

The relationship of affectivity existing between Alfonso VI and Urraca combined with their age difference are also used by the texts in order to construct the role of Urraca as a counsellor and consolidate her role as an assistant to her brother. This happens during the first years of King Alfonso's ruling. Hence, the writers of these texts do not refrain from stating that the influence of Urraca over Alfonso was not appreciated: “...mando llamar a su hermana donna Urraca, et por que era ella muy sesuda duenna et de muy buen entendimiento, fazie e con conseio della quanto auie de fazer et de endereçar en el regno; pero que gelo tenien todos por non bien, ca estaua mal...”.⁷

Assuming that the act of counselling can be considered as an activity strictly linked to the act of governing we can infer that both activities would require the same type of

virtues. These virtues would necessarily be rationality, self-control and justice which according to the misogynous view of the epoch are natural in men but not in women. It follows then that the condemnation of Urraca's possession of this position might be censored not only by her role in the death of her brother Sancho but also by the fact that she is a female.

The theme of the counselling has also been dealt with in an epic Hollywood film directed by Anthony Mann in 1961 that focus on the life and deeds of the most renowned hero of medieval Spain namely the Cid who was a knight of king Alfonso VI. Medieval epics were rediscovered in the 20th century by filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s. Hollywood saw a boom of epic films that drew inspiration from the deeds of chivalry. Along with Richard Thorpe's "Ivanhoe", based on Walter Scott's homonymous novel, "El Cid" is perhaps the most successful of these revisitations. Although problems of the political conflicts between Castile and León might not have interested the American audience, the figure of the loyal knight ready to sacrifice his family for the sake of his homeland was well accepted in a country fighting a military and ideological enemy. Besides, the medieval knight-hero also shares many similarities with the typical heroes of the "Western".⁸ Thus, "El Cid" was destined to become a very successful movie.

The combination of different sources for the screenplay provides the movie with two clearly intertwined central plots: on the one side, we have the story of el Cid and Chimène (drawn from Corneille's tragedy) and on the other, the issue of loyalty of Rodrigo de Bivar to the crown of Castile (inspired by Guillen's "Historia del Cid" and "Historia Roderici").⁹ In Anthony Mann's epic the episodes of the "Siege of Zamora"

is more concerned with the theme of loyalty. However, since the film's main objective is not to defend Castilian identity against the Leonese threat posed by Sancho's death, this episode is structured in a different manner.

The action is not set in Zamora but in the city of Calahorra due to a structural simplification for the city was previously mentioned in the movie. There again, Urraca uses Velido Dolfos as an instrument in the death of Sancho. But the film introduces a nuance by having Urraca showing her fear that Sancho might kill Alfonso (who is in Calahorra with her). By adding this statement we see that Urraca's main concern becomes the defence of her younger brother against all adversities rather than promoting her own interests. As in the medieval romance chronicles there are few hints to the reward given to Vellido by Urraca in order to execute his task. In the film's version, the scene is portrayed without dialogue but with image alone; we see Urraca holding Vellido's hand before he leaves Calahorra.

Throughout the film, Alfonso and Urraca are portrayed as two negative characters. Alfonso is described as an ambitious character who is weak and immature. But the real villain is the shrewd Urraca, guided by vengeance towards the Cid because he preferred Chimène to her.¹⁰ Urraca then carries a double negative function within the two main plotlines of the film: She is the rival of Chimène and, as her younger brother's counsellor, she is the true political opponent of Cid.

Urraca has in her actions against the Cid two male counterparts, each of them acting mainly in one of the previously mentioned storylines. One is the king Alfonso who disgusted by the demands of the Cid exiles him both physically and emotionally; the

other is Count Garcia Ordoñez who covets the love of Chimène.

Though Urraca, Alfonso and Count Ordoñez assume the role of the Cid's adversaries, the outcome proposed for each one of them is quite different. Count Garcia following Chimène's orders, tries to kill Rodrigo in a treacherous ambush. Much later, after Chimène reconciles with the Cid, Garcia Ordoñez decides not to antagonize him anymore and becomes his vassal. He dies sacrificing himself for the Cid. After his treachery, Count Ordoñez recovers his honour and dies heroically.

King Alfonso of Castile will also have a redemptive destiny. By the words of the Cid we understand that Alfonso's shortcomings are real hindrances on his way to become a fully accomplished king. In a very powerful and revealing scene, the destiny of both Urraca and Alfonso is revealed: Rodrigo sends a knight to offer to Alfonso the kingdom of Valencia that he conquered and asks for "auxilium". Under the influence of his sister, Alfonso refuses to grant the help that the Cid's envoy asked for. The dialogue between brother and sister finally shows their break up: awed by the grandeur of his knight, Alfonso abandons Urraca and runs to Valencia to help his vassal and thus ascends to the level of full kingship. While the film's intention is mainly to show that Alfonso can only be a good king once he supports the Cid, it also shows that for Alfonso to become a full king he has to abandon his sister's misguidance. In other words, although using a very different language, the same idea is articulated as in the "Estoria de España" text: a female counsellor will necessary harm and misguide those who will follow her advice. Such a misogynist attitude allows men to redeem themselves and become positive characters but does not afford Urraca the same privilege. Urraca is the only character who does not achieve any

personal redemption from her initial status as an opponent to the hero. Because she is the story's true villain, she alone is punished. In her last scene, she sees her brother leaving to meet the Cid in Valencia and she remains alone in the throne room. We can guess that her punishment is the classical penalty for the evil women of traditional tales (or modern soap operas): to remain a lonely spinster.

We have travelled through many centuries in order to try to grasp how different forms of discourse present and represent gender differences. In the chronicles, the misogynist mentality of the time does not hesitate to attribute a murder to a woman when it serves the political-ideological interests of the chronicle writers. I would even dare saying that the question of female power raised in these texts becomes a latent issue in the Hollywood's re-writing of these medieval narratives. The way female power is perceived changes throughout the centuries, but is always presented as something undesirable. When looking at the figure of Urraca represented in these historiographical texts as well as in the 20th century film it is hard not to recall the primordial example set by the biblical hypo text: Eve, the mother of all women and the mythical embodiment of the negative female characteristics.

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¹ "Chronica Najerenis", ed. Juan Estévez Sola, in "Corpus Christianorum", Continuatio Mediaevalis,

vol. LXXIA (Brepols, Turnhout, 1995): 153.

² “Chronica Najerensis”: 174.

³ “Chronica Najerensis”: 174-175.

⁴ I have based my study of “Estoria de España” on the “Amplified Version” of 1289, published by Menéndez Pidal under the title of “Primera Crónica General” (PCG). I used the following edition used: “Primera Crónica General de España”, ed. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, 3^a edition, 2 voll. (Madrid: Seminario Menéndez Pidal, 1977). The designation “Estoria de España” was created to include all the historiographic texts produced under King Alfonso the Wise (12-1284). For the terminology of “Estoria de España” see Inés Fernández-Ordóñez, “Versión Crítica de la “Estoria de España”” (Madrid: Fundación Menéndez Pidal, 1993).

⁵ PCG: 510a, 10-15.

⁶ PCG: 510a, 33-35.

⁷ PCG: 520a, 10-15.

⁸ Martin Winkler, “Mythic and Cinematic Traditions in Anthony Mann’s *El Cid*”, *Mosaic*, 26 (1993): 89-111: 106.

⁹ Winkler, “Mythic and Cinematic...”: 90-92.

¹⁰ Urraca’s love for the Cid is not explicit stated but it is latent. Winkler, “Mythic and Cinematic...”: 91.