

INCEST AND THE TRADITIONAL BALLAD

Beatriz MARISCAL HAY

El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios, Lingüísticos y Literarios
Camino al Ajusco #20, Pedregal de Sta. Teresa México D. F. 10740, México

Abstract: The Pan-Hispanic oral ballad tradition provides us with precious examples of how traditional narratives – *romances* – many with roots in medieval times, continue to provide the communities where they are remembered with relevant commentaries on social issues.

Amongst the *romances* most frequently collected from the modern oral tradition, both in the Iberian Peninsula and the Latin American countries, the *romance of Delgadina* offers us a testimony of how a recurring social problem such as incest is dealt with according to the particular view points of the communities where this and other ballads serve as a vehicle for the transmission of values.

In this paper I discuss the various solutions proposed by *Delgadina* and other traditional ballads to this recurring social problem.

Keywords: Pan-Hispanic ballad tradition, incest

Throughout the many centuries of supremacy of the written word over non-written communication, orally transmitted texts have been used by mostly marginal social groups to convey knowledge and values.

It is evident that the number of communities that rely on the oral communication of texts is constantly diminishing, as individuals, and groups of individuals, (related or not), migrate from rural to urban centers that are at times distant from their places of origin not only geographically but culturally as well.

This world-wide phenomenon, however, is countered by the need that many migrants have to reassert and strengthen their cultural identity as a means of surviving within alien and often hostile environments. As a result, in our post-modern XXI century, we are witnessing the re-evaluation of practices such as the singing of ballads, and the oral transmission of legends, stories and myths, that are considered a part of an individual's cultural heritage.

The Spanish ballad tradition, that flourished in the XV, XVI and XVII centuries, has survived to the present day not only in the Spanish Peninsula, but in many other regions of the world where Hispanic peoples have settled, because they went there as conquerors, settlers or refugees – three categories that include the Jews who were expelled from Spain in the XV century and settled in areas around the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors and settlers that went to the New World, and the myriads of immigrants that have settled in every corner of the American continent since then.

It is important to insist on the fact that in spite of the outstanding editorial success that the Spanish ballad tradition, the *Romancero*, enjoyed from the XV to the

XVII centuries, the texts had, and continue to have, an oral tradition. Oral transmission has not only kept alive the *Romancero* tradition, it has given these texts the capacity to adapt to their changing environment. Thus, in spite of an astonishing lexemic continuity, *romances* now being sung within the vast expanse of the Pan-Hispanic world, are not fixed texts, they are not textual “relics” sung or recited as magic formulas. Instead, they are open, dynamic structures that have adapted themselves to the communication needs of those who remember them.

The openness of *romances* that results from their being “stored” in the memory of those who transmit them orally, rather than fixed as written texts, has allowed their adjustment to changing cultural realities and needs.

In this paper I discuss how different communities have transmitted from generation to generation their concern with incest, by means of narratives – *romances* – that put into play this age-old drama, and how they have adapted them so as to reflect their particular views on the problem.

Amongst the various *romances* that deal with the subject of incest, *Delgadina*¹ is one of the most frequently collected from the modern oral tradition, both within the Iberian Peninsula and the Latin American countries.

Delgadina tells the story of a young woman who resists her father’s incestuous advances. For this, she is locked up and denied anything to drink while she is fed only salty foods.²

A constant element of the hundreds of texts that have been collected from the modern oral tradition is the characterization of the father as a king, as the absolute ruler of his family, an identity that has been retained even in countries where there is no royalty, while the victim is characterized as the youngest, albeit the weakest of three daughters.

Given that power is at the center of the ballad’s discussion of incest, the identification of the father as king is important and fully functional in the narrative.

Un rey tenía tres hijas, todas tres como la plata,
y la más chiquita de ellas Delgadina se llamaba.

(A king had three daughters / all three as fine as silver // and the youngest of the three / was called Delgadina).

The arousal of the father’s desire is presented in the ballad as a “natural” response to the young girl’s beauty:

Delgadinha, Delgadinha, Delgadinha bem delgada,
de tao linda que era o seu pai a namorava.

¹ See Manuel Gutiérrez Esteve’s important study on *Delgadina* and other ballads that deal with incest GUTIÉRREZ ESTEVE 1978: 551–579.

² Besides the hundreds of texts collected in Spain, Portugal and several Sephardic communities, there are more than 130 versions registered in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela.

(Delgadina, Delgadina / very slim, Delgadina // she was so beautiful / that her father courted her).

Opportunity, the fact that they both live within the same household and share activities also presents the situation as inevitable. The girl's beauty is before her father's eyes at all times: when they take their meals or go to church, or even when she just moves around the home:

Un día estando a la mesa, su padre la remiraba,
 – ¿Qué me mira, usted, mi padre, qué me mira usted a la cara?
 – Qué te tengo de mirar, tú has de ser mi enamorada.

(One day as they are at table / her father stared at her // What are you looking at, father / What do you see in my face? // What should I be seeing / you are to become my mistress).

Or:

Al salir de la iglesia su padre la enamoraba:
 – Delgadina, hija mía, yo te quiero para dama.

(As they come out of church / her father courted her: // – Delgadina, my daughter / I want you as my lady).

Or:

Un día estaba paseando del corredor a la sala,
 el rey le dijo, – Hija mía, tú has de ser mi enamorada.

(One day as she walked / from the hall to the living room // the king told her: – My daughter / you are to become my mistress).

In the Mexican, as well as in other Latin American traditions, however, Delgadina appears as an active, though somewhat unwitting, participant in her father's infatuation, as she not only displays her beauty, she enhances it:

Delgadina se paseaba de la sala a la cocina,
 con su vestido de seda que en su pecho le ilumina.
 De su cuarto a la cocina Delgadina se paseaba
 con su corpiño plateado que en el pecho brillaba.
 La dice un día su padre: – Tú has de ser mi enamorada.

(Delgadina walked around / from the living room to the kitchen // with a silk dress / that illuminates her breast. // From her room to the kitchen / Delgadina would walk // with her silvery bodice / that shines on her breast // Her father tells her: / – You are to become my mistress).

This showing off of her beauty, and the provocation it implies, can be made more explicit by simple changes in the description of her clothes. If appearing in a suggestive silk dress is bad, parading around in a transparent dress is worse:

Delgadina se paseaba de la sala a la cocina,
 con vestido transparente que su cuerpo lo ilumina.

(Delgadina walked about / from the living room to the kitchen // with a transparent dress / that brings light to her body).

The father's "natural" falling for his daughter's beauty, whether it was induced or not, puts the burden of guilt on her.

This conception of who is to blame informs the rest of the narrative. When Delgadina, locked up and desperate for a drink of water begs her sisters' aid, they not only refuse to help her, they blame her for what has happened: it is her obligation to yield to her father's wishes,

– Hermanas, si son mis hermanas, dénme un poquito de agua,
que el corazón me lo pide y el alma me lo llama,
– Quítate de ahí, Delgadina, Delgadina, falsa y mala,
que no quisiste hacer lo que tu padre mandaba.

(Sisters, if you are my sisters, / give me some water, // my heart needs it / and my soul claims it. // – Get away, Delgadina, / false and evil Delgadina // who did not want to do/ what her father ordered).

Her actions, and not the father's, have brought shame to the household:

– Quítate de ahí, Delgadina, quítate de ahí, perra mala,
que por tu cara tan linda mi madre está mal casada.

(– Get away, Delgadina / get away, you evil bitch // because of your pretty face / my mother is not a proper wife).

This peculiar conception of a family's honor is also expressed by the mother who sees herself, rather than her daughter, as wronged:

– Madrecita de mi vida, madrecita de mi alma,
por Dios te pido y te ruego me alcancéis un jarro de agua.
– Quítate de ahí, Delgadina, quítate, perra malvada,
que por ti estoy yo aquí siete años mal casada.

(– Mother, beloved mother, / mother of my soul, // in God's name I beg you / give me a jug of water. // – Get away, Delgadina, / get away you evil bitch // because of you here I am / seven years a wronged wife).

Both in the Spanish and Latin American traditions, however, there are instances of a more just appreciation of the situation. In those texts, the explanation for the sisters' as well as the mother's reaction is weakness. All the women of the family are equally powerless before a father's abuse.

– Mamacita, si es mi madre, déme una poquita de agua,
que el corazón me lo pide y el alma me lo llama,
– Delgadina, hija querida, no te puedo dar el agua,
que si tu padre me ve, me mata a puñaladas.

(– Mother, if you are my mother / give me a drink of water, // my heart needs it / and my soul claims it // – Delgadina, my dear daughter / I cannot give you water // if your father were to see me / he would kill me with a dagger).

If, as has been proved, women are the main transmitters of ballads, and thus the main re-creators of a *romance* like *Delgadina*, where textual continuity has perpetuated a tale of injustice towards a young woman, what kind of a solution to the problem of incest has been suggested in the various traditions?

The most prevalent ending to the *romance*, has Delgadina begging the father for a drink of water, begging for mercy. Since the father interprets this as an acceptance of his advances, he orders his servants to free her, but when they arrive they find her dying or dead.

Todos llegan a un tiempo Delgadina ya expiraba;
los ángeles la tenían, la Virgen la amortajaba
y a los pies de Delgadina manaba una fuente clara.

(They all arrive at once / Delgadina is expiring // the angels are holding her / and the Virgin is shrouding her // and at Delgadina's feet / a clear fountain is flowing).

Or:

Unos con vaso de oro y otros con vaso de plata.
Y al tomar vaso que traen Delgadina no quiso agua.
– Delgadina, sube al cielo, porque la Virgen te llama,
pa' que subas a la gloria, que ya la tienes ganada.

(Some with golden cups / others with silver cups // when she holds the cups they bring / Delgadina does not take a drink. // – Delgadina, rise to heaven, / because the Virgin is calling you, // so that you can rise to heaven, / which you have already deserved).

No one can defeat absolute power, and that is the kind of power a father yields towards the women of this family. Since there is no one who can counter the father's power, the ballad proposes death as the only solution to incest. The victim's only way out is death.

Judgement as to the guilt or innocence of a young woman who provokes her father's infatuation can vary according to the cultural environment where the *romance* is sung, but there is no solution offered for the problem itself.

There is, however, a moral retribution proposed: some versions of the ballad include the indication that God has taken care of the father's punishment as well as of the young woman's final reward:

La cama de Delgadina, de ángeles rodeada
y la cama de su padre, de demonios atestada.

(Delgadina's bed / is surrounded by angels // and the father's bed / is crawling with demons).

Or:

Delgadina está en el cielo dándole cuenta al Creador
y su padre en los abismos con el demonio mayor.

(Delgadina has gone to heaven / where she is before her Creator // and her father has gone to hell / with the major devil).

In addition, there can also be a final judgment on the mother's and sisters' actions:

La cama de Delgadina de ángeles está rodeada
y la cama de su madre de culebras enroscadas,
y la cama de su padre de demonios apestada.

(Delgadina's bed / is surrounded by angels // her mother's bed / is surrounded by curled snakes // her father's bed/ is infested with demons).

Or:

Su madre en el purgatorio, su padre arde en grandes llamas
y Delgadina en el cielo en silla de oro sentada.

(Her mother has gone to Purgatory / her father is burning in a huge fire // Delgadina is in heaven / sitting on a golden chair).

Interestingly, *Delgadina* has become a popular children's song in several Latin American traditions. Young girls dance and sing the *romance* in a chorus.

In contrast with the impossibility to offer a solution other than death to the father-daughter incest, another *romance* dealing with incest, this time with incest between brother and sister, *Tamar*, develops an interesting array of solutions.

The story told by *Tamar* is of biblical inspiration: Samuel II, 13-14, but, unlike the XVI century *romance*³, the modern oral tradition has little to do with the biblical story's concern with Amnon's death at the hands of his avenging brother, Absalom, which resulted in the rise of Solomon, Amnon's younger brother, to the throne.

The *romance* centers on Tamar's rape by her brother when, at her father's request, she goes to her brother's room where he lies in bed pretending to be ill, though we know he is smitten with his sister's beauty.

It is the father himself who will deliver *Tamar* to his son:

El rey moro tenía un hijo, que Tranquilo se llamaba,
a la edad de quince años se enamoró de su hermana.
Viendo que no podía ser cayó enfermito en la cama.
Sube su padre a verle: - ¿Qué haces que estás en cama?
Me ha dado calenturilla que me está robando el alma.
- ¿Quieres que te mate un ave de esas que vuelan por casa?
- Padre, mátemela usted, que me la suba mi hermana.

³ See ARMISTEAD and SILVERMAN 1974: 245-259.

(The moorish king had a son / who was called Tranquilino // when he was fifteen / he fell in love with his sister. // Seeing that it was impossible / he went to bed sick. // When his father goes to see him: /— What are you doing in bed? //— I have a little fever/ that is robbing me of my soul. // — Do you want me to kill for you a bird / like those who fly around the house? // — Father, you kill it, / but have my sister bring it to me //.

What is to happen is implied by the narrative; the “bird” that flies around the house, Tamar, will be delivered by the father as a succulent dish for his son’s pleasure. A Cuban version has the young man insisting on the need for his sister to come alone to his bedroom, making his intentions quite clear:⁴

Altamara venga sola, venga sola y sin compañía,
con el ruido de la gente gran calentura se me arma.

(Let Altamara come alone, / let no one accompany her / with the noise people make / my fever rises).

After being brutally attacked by her brother, the young woman begs for her father’s support, but in all but one of the two hundred versions collected from the modern oral tradition, the father’s concern is for his son, and not for the victim:

— ¿Cómo queda mi hijo, cómo queda en la cama?
— El su hijo queda bueno, pero yo quedo deshonrada.
— Como mi hijo quede bueno, por tus enojos no hay nada.

(— How is my son, / how is he in bed? // — Your son is well, / but I have been dishonored. // As long as my son is well, / your annoyance is for naught).

As we stated, the tradition offers different solutions to this incestual rape. In Albacete and Zamora, for example, the father proposes that everything be kept quiet in two convenient ways: either Tamar can be put away in a convent:

— No llores mi Altamarita, no llores mi Altamarada,
que yo te meteré a monja, convento de Santa Clara.

(— Don’t cry Altamarita, / don’t cry, my Altamara // that I will put you in a convent / the convent of Santa Clara).

Or she can be quietly married off:

— Calla, calla, el Altamar, de ti no se sepa nada,
que en lo que tu padre vive estarás tú bien casada.

(— Be quiet, Altamar, / let no one hear anything from you, // that as long as your father is alive / you will be married off).

⁴ See MARISCAL 1996: 82–83.

When marriage to the culprit, her own brother, is suggested as an alternative, discretion is obviously not enough. Nevertheless, the Pope's intervention can be secured:

- Calla, Tamariña, calla, que con él serás casada.
- ¿Cómo ha de ser eso, mi padre, siendo yo su propia hermana?
- Hay un Padre Santo en Roma que a todos purificaba.

(- Be quiet, Tamariña, / you will be married to him. // - How can that be, father, / if I am his own sister? // - There is a Holy Father in Rome, / who can purify anything).

Yet another type of solution has been suggested by the Andalusian tradition: the birth of a child; a solution where the woman's natural instinct as a mother overrides the affront:

- De los siete pa' los ocho los pañalitos bordaba,
- de los ocho pa' los nueve las camisinas bordaba
- con un letrado que dice: hijo de hermano y hermana.

(Between seven and eight / she embroiders diapers, // between eight and nine / she embroiders little shirts // with a sign that reads: / child of a brother and sister).

In every instance the solution proposed by the father is acceptable only in social terms, it has little to do with the suffering of a woman who has been raped. Even in the single instance where the father does show some concern for the wronged girl, his rendering of punishment has more to do with his duties as king, yet another social reason. If he were not to punish his guilty son, the kingdom would suffer:

- Posa 't en confesion, que promptament ets de cremar-ne;
- que si el rei permetia allo, que fairen los vassalls!

(- Confess yourself, / as you are about to be killed // if the king were to allow it / what would the vassals do?).

Since the wronged woman does not accept any of these socially oriented solutions offered by her father, she is forced to appeal to higher forces, God or the Devil:

- El su hijo bueno queda isi el demonio lo llevara!
- Aun la palabra no es dicha ya la casa está rodeada;
- unos entran por la puerta otros entran por ventanas.

(- Your son is well / may the devil take him! // The word is not even said / the house is already surrounded; // some enter by the door / others enter by the windows).

Or she takes justice in her own hand by killing herself:

- La niña pidió un puñal y en el pecho se lo clava.
- Que quiero morir con honra y no vivir deshonorada.

(The girl asked for a dagger / and stabs her breast. // – I want to die with honor / and not live dishonored).

The young woman's rejection of any solutions to being raped by her brother that subordinate her to social considerations reveals, in my opinion, a defiant feminine viewpoint which brings to light the active role of women in the creative process of oral traditions.

The women who transmit a narrative that deals with the problem of incest could not be indifferent to its solution, and their views on the subject have been incorporated into the *romance's* narrative structure whenever it has been "culturally" possible.

In the face of father/daughter incest, where the power of a father is practically impossible to challenge, they have been unable to offer any suggestion besides divine intervention. In contrast, when dealing with brother/sister incest, the various traditions offer different solutions. This notwithstanding, the father's social-minded solutions are rejected by the wronged girl, and in those instances where death occurs, it is of her own doing.

Both traditional *romances*, *Delgadina* and *Tamar*, have adapted their narratives throughout time and space in order to offer culturally relevant solutions to the recurring social problem of incest. Through their rendering of these ballads, those who have kept them in their memories have been able to convey their social values.

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