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The Zajal and the Villancico: The Path to Modern Spanish Christmas Carols

Andalusian literature – that which was written in al-Andulus, the area of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule from the 8th to 15th centuries – contains a combination of elements from Spanish and Arabic literature. The effects of this Arabic influence on Spanish literature, especially in poetry, can still be seen in written works even today, especially in the path from the Arabic zajal to the Spanish villancico, and on to the creation of the modern Spanish Christmas carol.

The Arabic zajal in particular – a poetic form of writing originating in Al-Andalus sometime around the 11th century, meaning “to raise the voice in singing”– was a sung poem consisting of a chorus, a body, and a back verse that would rhyme with the chorus (Haydar 191). Haydar also discusses two main forms of the zajal, with one based on Khalili patterns from classical Arabic and one based on a stress-syllable pattern, while the zajal overall can be flexible in meter due to the fact it is normally set to music and therefore edited as needed. These elements are not totally unique to the zajal, however; they can also be seen in some later Spanish written works, such as the villancico from a few centuries later. The villancico began to take hold during the 15th and 18th centuries and – like the zajal from Al-Andalus – is a type of writing that is often sung and has come to take the form of modern Christmas carols in some cases (“Villancico”). It also is written in a strophic form with a chorus-verse structure, with or without an introductory prelude, a characteristic found in the zajal. The earliest time period included in the villancico’s conception is also on the tail-end of the Muslim rule of the Iberian Peninsula, creating plenty of opportunities for traditionally Arabic styles to affect those in Spain.

However, what is of interest of the connection of the zajal and the villancico, is how the term “villancico” eventually evolved to mean something more familiar: “Christmas carol.” The villancico began to expand further beyond secular themes around the 16th century, giving it the foundation to develop into a religious carol. The zajal with its particular use of meter, rhyme, and chorus-verse structure influenced the later villancico, which transformed into the traditional Spanish Christmas carol.

The key to the overlap between these types of poetry lies in Al-Andalus, the Muslim kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula that ruled from 711 until the early 11th century. As Muslim conquerors made their way across North Africa to Spain, they brought with them their culture, language, and of course, literary practices (“Al-Andulus”). These ultimately led to the meshing of Arabic and Spanish literature during the Andalusian period as Arabic writers combined their own literary practices with those present in Spain, giving rise to new poetic forms such as the zajal and the *muwashshah*, a poetic form with similarities to the zajal that also utilized Romance languages in its writing (“Which Came First, the Zajal or the Muwaššaha? Some Evidence for the Oral Origins of Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry” 38). These both grew in popularity across Al-Andulus and were known by those across the Peninsula, not just the recent conquerors. Even once they were conquered themselves about six centuries later, their poetic forms lived on in popularity and eventually influenced the Spanish poets of the Renaissance era.

Looking more closely at the two forms themselves, the zajals were created in the local languages in the Iberian Peninsula and reached their arguably peak design under poet Ibn Quzman (Salloum). This research also notes that the zajal was performed as an impromptu work, intended to keep the attention of the audience while using different stanzas with a consistent rhyme scheme through each individual stanza. This music form spread through Spain by

troubadours – who “atrabu al-dar” or entertained the home – and became a more well-known feature of Andalusian life (Salloum).

The Spanish villancico, developed around the 14th to 16th centuries according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, took its form from medieval dance songs, already alluding to the possibility the zajal and other Arabic-influenced works could have been influences on its creation. It consists of a refrain – *estribillo* – and a stanza – *copla* –, where the stanza is split into two parts. The *vuelta* section rhymes with the last line of the *mudanza* section, however, it is meant to be sung with the melody of the refrain (“Villancico”). This allows for more poetic forms to be present in this type of organized music, the way the zajal is also presented as a work meant to be set to music.

The two forms share quite a few more detailed characteristics, and a few of these can be highlighted through a direct comparison. For example, Zajal 59 by Ibn Quzman could be compared in form to Mas Vale Trocar by Juan del Encina, known as one of the lead creators in early Iberian drama. In Zajal 59, the poem follows a general rhyme scheme of AAAB, CCCB, DDDDB, and so on and so forth. Each of the stanzas – or strophes – follows the same internal rhyme pattern before returning to the rhyme from the end of the initial stanza, the vowel “-ur” sound, perfect for the debate-type call and response singing this form is often used for. Each strophe follows the same structure of rhyme pattern, three lines of the same and the one repetition from the first strophe but is unique in rhyme against the other strophes.

The first two strophes – in a transliterated version– highlight this:

mā‘i ma ‘šūqan malīh wa-waft

jīd yakūn in lam tajīh ṭuza ‘u

-

'al-malīḥ muḍ kān 'anīs wa-nafūr
wa-fī 'ahlāquh 'asà wa-surūr
wa-'in anṣaf layla jum'ah yajūr
lassu qalbī min wiṣāluh rafī
'annu fā ḥlā mā yaṭīb qaṭa'u

(“«Its Maṭla‘ and Ḥarja Are Twofold in Function»: Form and Content in Ibn Quzmān’s «Zajal 59» and «138»”)

About four to five centuries later, the famous playwright and poet del Encina penned his villancico with – albeit some variation and expansion beyond this type of basic rhyme scheme – a similar structure. The song begins with an introductory ABB strophe, and is followed by stanzas of CDCBB, EFEEBB, and so on and so forth. Although he provides a more complex internal rhyme scheme for each strophe, the same general idea is the same as within Zajal 59 – an initial pattern repeated at the end of every strophe, the same rhyme pattern within each strophe but with different rhymes between strophes, and the use of words with vowels that roll off the tongue, making them fit to be sung.

This pattern is set up within the first two strophes of the villancico:

Más vale trocar
plazer por dolores,
que estar sin amores.

-

Donde es gradecido
es dulce el morir;
bivir en olvido,

*aquél no es bivar:
mejor es sufrir
pasión y dolores,
que estar sin amores. (MusicaAntigua)*

Both works – following the theme of lovers – include a short introductory strophe that provides the first link to the rhyme that will be repeated in the final verse(s) of each following strophe. It therefore ties each strophe back to the poems’ themes in the same way choruses do in modern music. The two also, overall, share elements beyond form – both are considered the poetry or work of commoners and utilize vernacular in their language and therefore made them more accessible, leading them to be passed down to where they still exist in various forms in the modern world (Salloum). They were to be performed, and not simply read alone as other poetic forms are, and both included the participation of at least two parties, the addition of instruments, and the freeing ability to break the standard “rules” of their form a bit. This includes, as alluded to earlier, the Spanish Christmas carols.

Villancicos began with more secular themes when they were first introduced, but later began to take on religious forms as they transformed partially into Christmas songs (“Villancico”). According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, at this point the villancico also began to change into a more dramatic one that sometimes included arias and choruses, and then the term began to solely refer to what is now known as the Spanish Christmas carol. These songs are structured more similarly to how most people would picture a common Christmas carol, with the *estribillo* as a longer chorus repeated between rhyming as opposed to the traditional villancico and its shorter repeating phrase – and, as to be expected, they used musical instruments such as a classic church instrument, the organ (“Villancico”). The Christmas villancico of “Los Peces en el

Río” includes a shorter repeating section of only three lines, however, the poetic wording and repeating rhyme schemes and lines relates to the villancicos’ origin. This song follows an ABAB, CCDD rhyme scheme in this particular section, the slight change in rhyme scheme following the idea that these are meant to be sung as a group and can break more from strict poetic rhyme.

Although some versions begin with the repeated chorus – similar to the traditional villancicos – this version below begins with a rhyme that also occurs in the certain lines of succeeding verses “-ando.”

La Virgen se está peinando

entre cortina y cortina.

Los cabellos son de oro

y el peine de plata fina.

-

Pero mira cómo beben los peces en el río.

Pero mira cómo beben por ver a Dios nacido.

Beben y beben y vuelven a beber.

Los peces en el río por ver a Dios nacer. (Erichsen)

Although the more popular modern villancicos may stray from traditional forms of villancicos – and therefore, the zajals of the Andalusian era – they all share in the tradition of poetic lines set to music meant to be performed in a group setting. As Christmas carols today are performed by a choir or church, zajals and early Arabic poetry in Europe were performed by groups in the Iberian Peninsula, complete with the same strophes, repeating rhyme schemes, and flexible singing style and rhythm as carols today are depending on the setting. They also share in

the fact they don't have a set number of strophes, which lends itself well to a freer performance setting.

Although both still exist in some form and have continued to evolve in performance over the past centuries as they spread across Europe or the Arab world, they remain connected through the strong bonds of Arabic and Spanish culture formed in Al-Andalus under Arabic conquest. By studying their structures and the circumstances in which they were performed, researchers and readers alike can gain a deeper understanding of each of these cultures and the detailed art forms each created. These literary creations of the past not only reflect in the way modern works are structured, but in the sense of community that brings people together to perform them and share in their joy.

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