

The Worm and the Partridge: Reflections on the Poetry of Florencia Pinar

Women poets are very poorly represented in the *cancioneros* of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The extraordinary outburst of poetic activity in Spain at the close of the Middle Ages, the extent of which can be roughly measured by the seven hundred poets whose work survives as a whole or in part, seems to have been an almost entirely male activity.¹ Some of the poets are thorough professionals, with a wide and varied production: the enigmatic figure of Alfonso Álvarez de Villasandino may serve as an example. Others were noblemen who penned occasional verses, but who probably regarded a sustained commitment to literature as unworthy of them.² It is just possible that some of the poets who appear in the *cancioneros* under their last name only—Tapia, Cartagena, Quirós, for example—are women. This seems, however, highly unlikely, since Spanish practice has long been to distinguish women by the use of their first name, and we must therefore look to the very few who are specifically identified as women.

Of these few, all but one are represented only by a fragment, glossed by another poet,³ or by a chance survival from the lost pages of a *cancionero*.⁴ The one exception, the one woman poet for whom we possess adequate—though still slender—material for study is Florencia Pinar. As with many *cancionero* poets, nothing is known about her life. This state of affairs need not continue, as some recent investigations have shown,⁵ but until somebody with time, energy, patience, and a flair for archival research turns his attention to Pinar, we shall know her only through her poems.

Those poems appear in a few late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century *cancioneros*: the *Cancionero del British Museum*, *Costantina*, and the *General*.⁶ Of only three poems can we say with anything approaching certainty that they are by Pinar. A few more are attributed to her in one *cancionero* but not in others, and a certain amount of confusion is inevitably caused by the existence of another poet, known only as Pinar, who seems to have been Florencia's brother.⁷ She has had a better press than most *cancionero* poets; for instance, Manuel Alvar says that, whatever view we take of such poetry as a whole, Pinar "merece cierta estima por su gracia apasionada o por la novedad de algún tema."⁸ Part of the reason is undoubtedly her preference for concrete imagery over abstractions: as Keith Whinnom observes, the *cancionero* poems most often included in anthologies are in general those with such imaginery.⁹ There may, however, be additional reasons for singling out Pinar's poetry.

The first of the three poems, "Ay que ay quien más no bive," is exactly the kind of thing that gets *cancionero* poetry a bad name:

Cancion de vna dama que se dize florencia pinar

Ay que ay quien mas no biue
por que no ay quien day se duele
y si ay / ay que recele
ay vn ay con que sesquiue
quien sin ay beuir no suele

Ay plazer ay pesares
ay glorias ay mil dolores
ay donde ay penas damores
muy gran bien si del gozares
aun que vida se catiue
si ay quien tal ay consuele
no ay razon por que se cele
aun que ay con que sesquiue
quien sin ay beuir no suele

(folio cxxv^v)

Nobody can deny its ingenuity—if anyone feels disposed to do so, let him try to decide which *ayes* are exclamations and which are verbs—, but I am not convinced that this poem has any merit beyond that of the moderately difficult puzzle.¹⁰ The other two are of a very different type.

Otra canción de la misma señora a unas perdizes que le embiaron bivas

Destas aves su nación
es cantar con alegría,
y de vellas en prisión
siento yo grave pasión,
sin sentir nadie la mía.

Ellas lloran, que se vieron
sin temor de ser cativas,
y a quien eran mas esquivas,
essos mismos las prendieron.
Sus nombres mi vida son,
que va perdiendo alegría,
y de vellas en prisión
siento yo grave pasión,
sin sentir nadie la mía.

(folio cxxv^v–cxxvi)

This has long been known and liked for its vivid picture of imprisoned birds, and for Pinar's unequivocal linking of her feelings with theirs, of their predicament with her own. However, there has, I think, been some misunderstanding of the nature of those feelings and of that predicament. Pinar is fairly

obviously in love; hence the relevance of the betrayal and trapping of the partridges:

Ellas lloran, que se vieron
sin temor de ser cativas,
y a quien eran más esquivas
esos mismos las prendieron¹¹

The hunt is a frequent image for love (“la caza de amor es de altanería”), and the lines I have just quoted have a distant but haunting resemblance to the magnificent poem which, a few decades later, Sir Thomas Wyatt was to write about Anne Boleyn:

They flee from me, that sometime did me seek,
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame and meek,
That now are wild and do not remember
That some time they put themselves in danger . . .

I have no wish to query the relevance of Pinar’s image of the trapped partridges, the success of her identification of her feelings with those of the unfortunate birds, or the high quality of her poem. I accept the analysis offered by Joaquín Gimeno Casalduero:

Quizá la elección del motivo de las perdices no se deba al conocimiento de un bestiario o de unas afirmaciones procedentes de un bestiario. Quizá la elección se debe al conocimiento, muy común en España, de la caza de las perdices. Para cazar perdices se lleva en una jaulita, al lugar en donde ellas viven, una perdiz macho, la cual con su canto “amoroso” atrae a las hembras que son entonces apresadas por el cazador. Eso explicaría la primera parte de la segunda estrofa: “lloran las perdices porque fueron prendidas por aquellos (machos) a quienes siempre—por no enamoradas—fueron esquivas.” Sería el motivo de “después de mucho despreciar al amor, enamorarse” y el de “el amor engaña (Rodrigo Cota), hiere para abandonar de inmediato.” Por eso creo que Florencia Pinar se identifica con los sentimientos de las aves: tal vez ella también ha sido engañada o tal vez abandonada.

Es posible que eligiera además el motivo porque éste le permitía jugar del vocablo, o al menos se dio cuenta de que podía jugarlo y lo jugó. Ese juego explicaría la segunda parte de la segunda estrofa: “sus nombres mi vida son”; es decir, “perdiz”/“perder.” Por eso añade a continuación, hablando de su vida: “que va *perdiendo* alegría.”¹²

It would, of course, be very difficult to take issue with this convincing and satisfying analysis. At the same time, it seems to me that the full meaning of the poem escapes modern readers who are unfamiliar with the medieval bestiary, a moralized account of the origins and habits of real and mythical beasts. I have found, in the course of another study, ample evidence that medieval Spanish authors and their public were thoroughly familiar with at least some parts of the bestiary, despite the apparent lack of any Castilian bestiary text.¹³

If we turn to the appropriate section, we find it said of partridges that: "Frequent intercourse tires them out. The males fight each other for their mate, and it is believed that the conquered male submits to venery like a female. Desire torments the females so much that even if a wind blows toward them from the males they become pregnant by the smell."¹⁴ It would be imprudent to assume that Pinar wrote in ignorance of the bestiary account of the partridge, especially when other Spanish writers of this period were fairly obviously aware of it. I think one must conclude that, even if the bestiary description was not primarily responsible for Pinar's choice of image, it reinforced that choice, and that she wished not only to associate her plight with that of the trapped birds, but also to identify her instincts with those so graphically described.

If any doubt existed on this score, it would be dispelled by a consideration of the third and final poem:

Canción de Florencia Pinar

El amor ha tales mañas
que quien no se guarda dellas,
si se l'entra en las entrañas,
no puede salir sin ellas.

El amor es un gusano
bien mirada su figura;
es un cáncer de natura,
que come todo lo sano.

Por sus burlas, por sus sañas,
d'él se dan tales querellas
que si entra en las entrañas
no puede salir sin ellas.

(folio clxxxv^v)

One does not need to be a card-carrying Freudian to suspect that when a woman poet writes of love as a worm penetrating her entrails, phallic symbolism is involved, even if only at the subconscious level. (The implications are quite different from those of the worms in the *Dança general de la Muerte*, written one or two generations before Pinar, where Death warns the Two Damsels of the waiting "gusanos rroyentes,/ que coman de dentro su carne podrida.")

Whinnom has suggested that much *cancionero* poetry is "a tissue of veiled eroticism and *doubles entendres*"; his argument depends largely on the identification of such abstractions as "gloria" and "muerte" as sexual euphemisms, and he notes that if one makes this identification, "a great many poems acquire rather startling point."¹⁶ In Pinar's case, such identification is relevant, if at all, only in "Ay que ay quien más no bive" (see, for instance, the

use of "glorias" in the seventh line). In the other two poems, animal imagery makes the point; I am sure that this is conscious in "Destas aves su nación," but it may be unconscious in "Ell amor ha tales mañas." Whatever conclusion one reaches on that, it is certainly true that Pinar's poems strengthen the first part of Whinnom's case.

It is dangerous to reconstruct a poet's life from his works, as the examples of Jaufre Rudel, Villon, Macías, and others show us. We cannot, I repeat, know anything of Pinar's biography until the archival research has been carried out, but I believe that by studying her work we can reconstruct her temperament.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. I take the number of poets from Brian Dutton's forthcoming catalogue of fifteenth-century Spanish poetry; it covers poets included in all *cancioneros* compiled before 1520. I am grateful to Professor Dutton for allowing me to draw on his work. A higher number—973—appears in the author index to Jacqueline Steunou and Lothar Knapp, *Bibliografía de los cancioneros castellanos del siglo XV y repertorio de sus géneros poéticos*, I (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975), but this includes some foreign names and, more importantly, some two hundred poets who appear in later sixteenth-century *cancioneros*. Even the lower figure of seven hundred is much greater than that for the corresponding period in England, France, or, as far as I am aware, any other European country. If one takes into account poets whose work is lost, the number is, of course, even higher. The causes of this troubadour revival are now being discussed by scholars, and Roger Boase's book (to be published in 1978) will take the discussion much further.

2. See Nicholas G. Round, "Renaissance Culture and its Opponents in Fifteenth-Century Castile," *Modern Language Review*, 57 (1962), 204-15, and "Five Magicians, or the Uses of Literacy," *Modern Language Review*, 64 (1969), 793-805; P. E. Russell, "Arms versus Letters: Towards a Definition of Spanish Fifteenth-Century Humanism," in *Aspects of the Renaissance*, ed. Archibald R. Lewis (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 47-58.

3. The *Cancionero general* contains a *mote* by Doña Marina Manuel (known chiefly for the influence that her views exercised on Diego de San Pedro's prose style). It is glossed by the poet Cartagena. See Keith Whinnom, *Diego de San Pedro* (New York: Twayne, 1974), pp. 26-27.

4. The *Cancionero de Martínez de Burgos* contained, as no. 40, a religious poem by María Sarmiento, entitled *Otras[coplas], quando alzaren la ostia y el cáliz y a los agnus*. Only the first two lines and the last stanza survive, thanks to their transcription by the eighteenth-century bibliophile Rafael Floranes. See the edition of the surviving part of the *Cancionero* by Dorothy S. Severin, *Exeter Hispanic Texts*, 12 (Exeter: Univ., 1976), pp. xvii and 59.

5. For instance, those of Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce, some of which are collected in his *Temas hispánicos medievales* (Madrid: Gredos, 1974), pp. 280-367.

6. I print the first text exactly as it is found in this *Cancionero*, in order to give a clear impression of the difficulties facing its early readers. In the other two poems, however, I regularize the use of *u* and *v*, and supply modern punctuation, accents and word-division.

7. In the *Cancionero del British Museum*, the *glosa* to one of Florencia Pinar's poems ("*El amor ha tales mañas*") is headed "*Glosa de Pinar, su hermano.*" In the *Cancionero general*, the heading is "*La glosa es del dicho Pinar.*"

8. *Poesía española medieval* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1969), p. 574. Am I being unduly sensitive in detecting a slightly patronizing note in "*merece cierta estima,*" and in suspecting that a male poet might have received less qualified praise for the same poems? Even the best male critics may suffer from momentary aberrations when discussing work by women writers: Edmund Wilson, in the course of an excellent and perceptive essay on Edna Millay, suddenly lapses into "It is hard to know how to compare her to Eliot or Auden or Yeats . . . There is always a certain incommensurability between men and women writers" (*The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* [1952; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1961], p. 752). In this context, it is worth quoting the judgment of José Amador de los Ríos on Pinar: ". . . estimulada por otros ingenios de su familia, tomaba a veces parte en las lides del ingenio . . . Florencia Pinar, abrigando realmente o fingiendo, al pulsar la lira, amorosa pasión, pondera sus dolores, exagerando sus efectos de la misma suerte que lo hacían cuantos aspiraban al nombre de poetas, y como ellos se pinta impíamente desdeñada. Era la primera dama, cuyo nombre figuraba en el parnaso español; y dadas la época en que florece y la corte donde brilla, parecía justo esperar que tomase su ingenio más elevado rumbo" (*Historia crítica de la literatura española*, VII [1865; repr. Madrid: Gredos, 1969], pp. 237-38).

9. "Hacia una interpretación y apreciación de las canciones del *Cancionero general* de 1511," *Filología*, 13 (1968-69), 361-81, at p. 369.

10. I may be wrong: when I made this observation in a paper read to the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland in 1974, Dr. Ian Macpherson took me to task, arguing that the poem has substantial merits. The point deserves further discussion.

11. The birds are identified as partridges only in the heading to the poem (in both *General* and *Costantina*), and this heading may have been supplied by a *cancionero* compiler, though I think it highly probable that it formed part of the original. I am grateful to Dr. Macpherson for drawing my attention to the importance of this question.

12. Private communication of November 29, 1977. I am most grateful to Professor Gimeno Casaldueiro for his kindness in reading a draft of this article and allowing me to quote his comments.

13. A forthcoming book by Néstor A. Lugones, who has already published three articles on the subject, will add greatly to our knowledge of the bestiary in Spain.

14. I quote from T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts, being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 137.

15. Ed. Margherita Morreale, in *Annali del Corso di Lingue e Letterature Straniere presso l'Università di Bari*, 6 (1963); lines 79-80.

16. *Spanish Literary Historiography: Three Forms of Distortion* (Exeter: Univ., 1967), pp. 22-23. The case is carried further by A. J. Foreman, "The *Cancionero* Poet, Quirós" (unpubl. M. A. diss., Westfield College, Univ. of London, 1969). In fairness to Mr. Foreman, I must point out that this dissertation does not necessarily represent his current views.

17. A version of this article will form part of a longer essay on Spain's first women writers, to be published in *Images: Women in Hispanic Literature*, ed. Beth Miller (Univ. of California Press). I am grateful to the editors of that volume and of *Mester* for permitting this double use of my material. I am also much indebted to those whose help is acknowledged in notes 1 and 10-12, and to others who took the trouble to comment on a draft of the article: Professor Beth Miller, Professor P. E. Russell, and my UCLA colleague Dr. Rosalie Gimeno.