

Folkloric Structure and Narrative Voice in Bécquer's Leyendas

The bulk of the critical study of Gustavo Bécquer's *leyendas* has dealt with the thematics, stylistics, or the folkloric motifs and origins of the individual works. Surprisingly little attention has been given to the structure or the narrative techniques used in the *leyendas* as a whole. The purpose of this study is to examine these structural and narrative aspects from a folkloric perspective in order to better appreciate Bécquer's blending of popular and literary art forms.

Bécquer's use of folkloric themes and motifs as well as his use of conversational tone and reproduction of the speech patterns of his "informants" contribute to give the *leyendas* a genuine folkloric appearance. These aspects have been examined in several studies by Rubén Benítez¹ who notes that certain *leyendas* are not actually grounded in popular oral or written tradition, but rather are original creations which use motifs indicative of folk literature. Thus, he concludes that "no importa conocer de dónde salen los motivos; contribuyen de cualquier modo, eso es lo fundamental, a dar a la ficción el tono de tradición auténtica".²

A different facet of Bécquer's folkloric style has been explored by María Ester García González whose glossary of language used in the *leyendas*³ shows how the words themselves contribute to give the *leyendas* an antiquated quality since they either refer to objects that no longer were in existence in the nineteenth century, or they are words which had changed meaning, or had ceased to be used in Bécquer's time.

Nevertheless, Bécquer's attempts to imitate popular folk-narrative go beyond the thematic and stylistic considerations mentioned above, and extend to the basic structure of the *leyendas*. A classic folklore study by Axel Olric presented in Berlin in 1908, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative"⁴, identifies certain rules which govern and limit the narrative structure of the *Sage*, a broad category which includes European myths, songs, heroic epics, and local legends. The following structural rules are important in the examination of Bécquer's *leyendas*:

1. The Law of Opening (*das Gesetz des Einganges*) and The Law of Closing (*das Gesetz des Abschlusses*): the narrative neither begins nor ends with a sudden action. The plot consists of a series of one or more movements from calm to excitement to calm. Terminal calm is crucial and can consist of a single post-action comment.
2. The Law of Three (*das Gesetz der Dreizahl*) replaced in Indic folklore by The Law of Four (*das Gesetz der Vierzahl*): patterns of three predominate in the narrative.

3. The Law of Two to a Scene (*das Gesetz der scenischen Zweiheit*): only two characters with their own personality can interrelate during any given scene. All others must be passive.
4. The Law of Twins (*das Gesetz der Zwillinge*): two characters can function as one character if they play the same role.
5. The Law of Contrast (*das Gesetz des Gegensatzes*): opposition of various elements exist within the narrative.
6. Concentration on a Leading Character (*Konzentration um eine Hauptperson*): only one formal protagonist is allowed. In man/woman relationships, the more important one is the man, but the woman is often the more interesting one.
7. The Importance of Initial and Final Position (*das Toppgewicht und das Achtergewicht*): in a series, the more important character is first and the more sympathetic is last.
8. The Logic of the Sage (*die Logik der Sage*): plausibility is based on its validity within the boundaries of the plot.
9. Unity of Plot (*die Einheit der Handlung*): all action hinges on the proposed premise.
10. The Law of Repetition (*das Gesetz der Wiederholung*): patterns of similarity occur in the narrative.
11. The Law of the Single Strand (*die Einsträngigkeit*): the narrative consists of one plot and no subplots.

Bécquer clearly makes use of the Law of Opening and the Law of Closing. Each of the *leyendas* begins by setting the scene and introducing the main characters. Similarly, each closes with a comment on the characters, the outcome of the action, or the moral. These openings and closings are often set in a frame of an initial and/or final appearance by the narrator who relates the circumstances of the *leyenda*.

The Law of Three is most evident in those *leyendas* in which it is linked to the Law of Repetition: the lamp that extinguishes and relights three times in "El Cristo de la calavera", or the three times that the wind and air call to the sisters (followed by three silences) in "El gnomo". However, Bécquer's use of three also extends to structural devices such as having three secondary narrators (the guide, the captain bandit, and the warden) in "La cruz del diablo" or by having tri-part action sequences characterized by alternating periods of action and calm, as seen in the glove scene, the duel scene, and the laughing scene in "El Cristo de la calavera". Significantly, Bécquer's emphasis shifts from three to four in his Indic traditions:

reference is made to Brahma's creation of the four elements and their guardians in "La creación" and the plot of "El caudillo de las manos rojas" consists of four basic plot actions (the killing, the pilgrimage to the Himalayas, the pilgrimage to the temple, and the castle scene).

The Law of Two to a Scene and the Law of Twins are also strong in the *leyendas*. Whenever there is direct communication between characters, it is in the form of a two role dialogue. When more than two characters are in a scene, one character functions as an independent entity while the others join together to play one role and function as the other character in the dialogue. This is clearly seen in the various storytelling scenes in which a secondary narrator is telling a story to a crowd which responds as one to the action. Other examples of a group functioning as a single character include the soldiers at the drunken party in "El beso" who try to calm the captain, and the organ playing scenes in "Maese Pérez el organista" where the crowd constantly responds unanimously.

In "El Cristo de la Calavera" the two friends are presented as "iguales en cuna, valor y nobles prendas, servidores de un mismo rey y pretendientes de una misma dama." Consequently, these characters have the potential to function either as twins or as individuals. Both potentialities are realized. In order to remain within the boundaries of the Concentration on the Leading Character rule, the two characters fuse together as twins to become the sole protagonist; however, they also function as independent entities when they fulfill the role of rivals during the duel. Since the loyalties of the audience traditionally lie with the protagonist, and since the protagonist usually is victorious in battle, the use of the Law of Twins to form one protagonist from the two men avoids the necessity for divided loyalties and allows the duel to end without a killing.

Divided loyalties, on the other hand, are insured under the Law of Contrast where good/evil, reality/fantasy, and Christian/infidel are juxtaposed to create character types that can be readily identified by the audience. In keeping with this rule, Bécquer presents stock characters. Even his more detailed descriptions, such as those of Magdalena and Marta in "El gnomo" do not yield complex motivations and feelings, but rather form a relationship of oppositions linked to pre-established types. Marta is the dark, haughty, and cold beauty, while Magdalena is the fair, sensitive, and pure beauty. Since the two contrasting types cannot fuse into one protagonist, the attention is drawn to Marta throughout the story by mentioning her first in all references. In this way, the Importance of Initial and Final Position rule reinforces the Concentration on a Leading Character rule. The older, outwardly stronger Marta is given the important masculine protagonist role, while the younger, sensitive, sympathetic Magdalena fulfills the passive female role. It is logical that Marta, as protagonist, is the focus of the concluding plot action.

Also in keeping with the Concentration on the Leading Character rule, many *leyendas* present male/female relationships in which the male is the

protagonist but it is the female who engages the reader's attention. The mysterious Constanza in "La corza blanca", the rejected love in "La promesa", the fountain spirit in "Los ojos verdes", and the brave Sara in "La rosa de pasión" each are more interesting than the dominant male characters.

The Logic of the *Sage* and the Unity of Plot rules operate in conjunction. In various *leyendas* the possibility for supernatural intervention is legitimized by a previous occurrence, often stated as an interpolated story. Thus, it is both logical and inevitable that the protagonists of "El monte de las ánimas", "Los ojos verdes", "El gnomo", "El miserere", "El beso", and "La corza blanca" would be confronted with the fantastic since they had been told or warned about such things happening before to those who had transgressed the prescribed boundaries between reality and the supernatural.

The Law of Repetition serves the function of creating tension, providing emphasis, and filling out the narrative of traditional folklore. As literary adaptations Bécquer's *leyendas* can rely on description and the formal literary devices discussed below rather than repetition to produce these effects. However, the lack of repetition within the individual *leyendas* belies the pattern of repeated elements that emerges when the *leyendas* are viewed as a whole.

The majority of the *leyendas* deal with a search for the unattainable or the ineffable—be it a woman, a means of expression, or an experience outside of reality. This search has been the subject of numerous critical studies⁵ which discuss Bécquer's striving to transcend the limits of reality and to artistically record the sense impressions from an "alternate reality" which is the realm of the imagination, the fantastic, or the grotesque.

However, if we approach the body of the *leyendas* from the perspective of folkloric repetition, this search theme can be seen as a series of reoccurring plot actions in which similar protagonists play their parts in different situations under similar circumstances. Therefore, when the young men in "El monte de las ánimas", "La ajorca de oro", and "La corza blanca" foolishly defy the supernatural in order to curry the favor of the capricious women they love, they are each participating in a variation of the same basic plot repetition. Similarly, the idealistic poet in "El rayo de luna", the haughty Marta in "El gnomo", the drunken captain in "El beso", the headstrong man in "Los ojos verdes", and the old musician in "El miserere" all are drawn to the seductive call of the supernatural which appeals to a need or weakness in each of them.

Indeed, Bécquer creates a generic atmosphere of the supernatural which is characterized by confusion (often associated with buzzing); vertigo (denoting a loss of control by the character); a fusion of sounds, sights, and movement (which cannot be fully described); and vagueness (brought on by the semi-darkness). The supernatural scenes usually take place in dimly lit churches, ruins, or woods, and all the primary female characters

are beautiful, with distinctive eyes. Thus, Bécquer's minimal use of repetition within the individual *leyendas* can be deceiving if one does not consider them as a whole.

Bécquer's most obvious repetitive devices are his use of interpolated stories and his use of a dramatized narrator who frequently introduces or interrupts the *leyenda* to address the audience. These interpolated stories constitute a major violation of the Law of the Single Strand, and coupled with the multiple narrator format represent Bécquer's literary departure from popular folk tradition.

If we examine these interpolated stories, we find that they correspond in content and function with either legends or true experience stories, as defined by folklorist Linda Dégh in her genre classification of folk narrative⁶. In general a legend is a narrative told in a conversational tone about a local event believed to be true in order to explain some phenomenon or to teach some moral. Though there is no fixed form, it often appears to be a fragment of a more extensive narrative. Content is all important. A true experience story is more personal than the legend, but can function as a replacement for a belief legend when relating sinister occurrences.

Thus, the interpolated stories of "El miserere", "El monte de las ánimas", "La voz del silencio," and "El gnomo" each have the appearance of being legends that explain mysterious occurrences (sounds, lights, unusual snowtracks, gold dust in the fountain, etc.) by means of local historic events, while the interpolated stories of "Los ojos verdes", "La corza blanca", and "El beso", seem to be true experience stories which do not have a historic basis. These two genre types are combined in "La cruz del Diablo" where the first interpolated story is of the legend classification while the others are true experience types. Interestingly, the true experience type interpolated story of "La promesa" is later elaborated on by a ballad which incorporates the characteristics of narrative folk poetry⁷: beginning *in media res*, concentrating on a single episode, developing the action dramatically through dialogue and scene shifts, impersonalizing the characters, and using repetition.

However, based on Dégh's genre classifications, the *leyendas* themselves do not fall into the realm of legends, but rather have characteristics common to the *Märchen* or magic tale type. These tales deal with man's fascination with the supernatural which can suddenly intrude on reality and engage the protagonist in dangerous adventures. Since the *Märchen* solidified its form during the early Middle Ages, the settings are usually medieval, Christian, and feudal. The action consists of one or more episodes preceeded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. Narrative interjection is common and reflects the oral storytelling quality of the tale.

In effect, what we find in several of Bécquer's *leyendas* is an interpolated story which is the legendary premise for the larger tale that surrounds it.

Thus, the fragmentary nature of the legend finds itself anchored to the more substantial tale narrative. Similarly, the tale can expand on the content oriented legend. This story within a story is not allowed in folk narrative due to the Law of the Single Strand, and it is strongly associated with formal literary narratives. Nonetheless, Bécquer's strict adherence to the other aspects of folk narrative (theme, structure, motifs, etc.) offsets this violation so as to give a general appearance of authentic folklore.

This use of the interpolated stories also affords Bécquer the opportunity to develop multi-narrator texts. By viewing the *leyendas* as a whole once again, we can see that Bécquer creates a common primary narrator who functions as a spokesman for what Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* calls the implied author⁸. This implied author (as distinct from the real person author, Bécquer) defines a set of norms and values which operate within the realm of the narrative itself. He creates a reliable narrator to serve as a guide to help the reader to accept these norms and values. This reliable narrator can either be undramatized or dramatized. If dramatized, he becomes a character to whom the reader reacts as he would to any other character. A relationship arises between the reader and the dramatized narrator, and it is the personal quality of this relationship which facilitates the reader's acceptance of the implied author's values. In order to be successful, the dramatized narrator must be interesting. In addition, both dramatized and undramatized narrators can be aware or unaware of their role as narrators (self-conscious narration).

Here, Bécquer has created a narrator who at times is dramatized as the cigarette smoking writer who pokes around in old ruins, is interested in local history, is fascinated by music and art, sometimes has trouble sleeping at night because of his supernatural musings, and is painfully aware of the inadequacies of language as a means of expression. His comments before, during, and after the tale direct the reader's opinions and responses. Even in those *leyendas* where the primary narrator is undramatized, he still guides the reader's progress during the course of the narrative by establishing his attitude towards the characters and events through the choice of words, selection of events, and rhetorical commentary.

Whether dramatized or not, this primary narrator is always the voice of the implied author. The various characters of the *leyendas* are presented either positively or negatively based on Christian moral values. Though the majority of the characters fail or are destroyed, it is their personal strengths and weaknesses rather than their final destinies that define their place in the implied author's hierarchy. Clearly Sara in "La rosa de pasión" who martyrs herself for her belief in God, and the old musician in "El miserere" who searches for the perfect art form for the glory of God and the expiation of his sins are admirable characters, while the capricious and haughty women in "El monte de las ánimas", "La corza blanca", "El Cristo de la calavera", and "La ajorca de oro" are negative characters despite their beauty. The lovers of these women are shown as foolish to allow infatuation and hurt pride to overrule reasonable action.

Pride is also an important element in "Los ojos verdes" and "El gnomo" where the supernatural is able to seduce Fernando and Marta by appealing to this weakness in them. The water spirit tells Fernando: "soy una mujer digna de ti, que eres superior a los demás hombres. . . . lo premio con mi amor, como a un mortal superior a las supersticiones del vulgo, como a un amante capaz de comprender mi cariño extraño y misterioso". Similarly, the water calls to Marta saying "Yo he adivinado que tu espíritu es de la esencia de los espíritus superiores. La envidia te habrá arrojado tal vez del cielo para revolcarte en el lodo de la miseria. Yo veo, sin embargo, en tu frente sombría un sello de altivez que te hace digna de nosotros, espíritus fuertes y libres."

The lack of self-control shown by the curiosity and sensuality of Pulo in "El caudillo de las manos rojas" and by the inter-faith romance of the lovers in "La cueva de la mora" is shown as a human weakness to be atoned for and overcome. Even the blatant blasphemy of Teodoro in "Creed en Dios" can be divinely forgiven. Finally, the poet in "Los ojos verdes" is presented in such exaggerated terms as to make him appear somewhat laughable and shows the consequences of immoderation even in an essentially noble quest.

In addition to the primary narrator many *leyendas* also feature secondary narrators who introduce the interpolated stories which serve as the basis for the *leyendas* themselves. Like the primary narrator, these secondary narrators are aware of their narrative role. However, they differ from the primary narrator in that they function as *juglares* of oral tradition while the primary narrator, as a writer and *cronista*, is part of the formal literary tradition. Thus, each interpolated story becomes the focus of a storytelling event. Often this consists of a group which gathers together to listen eagerly to the narrator (as in "El miserere", "La corza blanca", "El gnomo", "El beso", and "La cruz del Diablo"), and at other times only one listener is involved (as in "El monte de las ánimas", "Los ojos verdes", and "La voz del silencio"). Regardless of the size of the audience, the storytelling scene requires the complete attention of the speaker and the listeners alike—all other action is suspended, and full attention is fixed on the storyteller whose mannerisms, speech patterns, digressions, and comments add to the popular oral quality of the situation. Similarly, the affirmations of truthfulness and verifiability are characteristic of oral tradition reciters. In keeping with his obligation to entertain his audience, the storyteller often builds suspense by evading or postponing questions ("El miserere" and "La corza blanca"), pausing during the narrative ("El gnomo" and "La cruz del diablo"), acting secretly ("La corza blanca"), and building reader expectation by withholding information. The last technique is frequently used and is common to both the primary and secondary narrators, as can be seen in the following examples from secondary narrator tío Gregorio's explanation of the frightening nature of the mountain in "El gnomo":

Ellos son los que aúllan en las grietas de las peñas; ellos los que forman y empujan esas inmensas bolas de nieve que bajan rodando desde los altos picos y arrollan y aplastan cuanto encuentran a su paso; ellos los que llaman con el granizo a nuestros cristales en las noches de lluvia y corren como llamas azules y ligeras sobre el haz de los pantanos. Entre estos espíritus que, arrojados de las llanuras por las bendiciones y exorcismos de la Iglesia, han ido a refugiarse a las crestas inaccesibles de las montañas, los hay de diferente naturaleza y que, al aparecer, a nuestros ojos, se revisten de formas variadas. Los más peligrosos, sin embargo, los que se insinúan con dulces palabras en el corazón de las jóvenes y las deslumbran con promesas magníficas, *son los gnomos* (italics added).

and from the primary narrator's long description of the pre-duel meeting in "el Cristo de la calavera":

. . . ya no turbaba el profundo silencio de la noche más que el grito lejano de vela de algún guerrero, el rumor de los pasos de algún curioso que se retiraba el último o el ruido que producían las aldabas de algunas puertas al cerrarse, cuando en lo alto de la escalinata que conducía a la plataforma del palacio apareció un caballero, el cual, después de tender la vista por todos lados, como buscando a alguien que debía esperarlo, descendió lentamente hasta la cuesta del alcázar, por la que se dirigió hacia el Zocodover.

Al llegar a la plaza de este nombre se detuvo un momento y volvió a pasear la mirada a su alrededor. La noche estaba oscura; no brillaba una sola estrella en el cielo, ni en toda la plaza se veía una sola luz: no obstante, allá a lo lejos, y en la misma dirección en que comenzó a percibirse un ligero ruido como de pasos que iban aproximándose, creyó distinguir el bulto de un hombre: era, sin duda, el mismo a quien parecía aguardaba con tanta impaciencia.

El caballero que acababa de abandonar el alcázar para dirigirse al Zocodover era *Alonso Carrillo*, que, en razón al puesto de honor que desempeñaba cerca de la persona del rey, había tenido que acompañarlo en su cámara hasta aquellas horas. El que, saliendo de entre las sombras de los arcos que rodeaban la plaza, vino a reunírsele, *Lope de Sandoval* (italics added).

As can be seen in these passages, a fearful wondering is aroused which causes suspense until the withheld information is revealed. Other fear producing techniques include the use of stock horrific sublime devices used in gothic literature (unusual sounds, dark places, grotesque creatures, vertigo, contrasts, etc.) as well as expressing anguish through the personal perspective of a character (as during Beatriz's sleepless night in "El monte de las ánimas"). Thus, it matters little whether the reader's interest is directly engaged by the primary narrator, or whether he is vicariously fascinated through the storytelling style of the secondary narrator. The effect is the same—the reader has allowed himself to be guided toward the implied author's value system.

In conclusion, Bécquer's use of folkloric themes and structural devices lend an authentic appearance to his *leyendas*; however, his use of interpolated stories and multiple narrators constitutes his literary departure

from folkloric tradition. In this way Bécquer blends aspects of both popular and formal literature in his literary adaptations.

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NOTES

1. For a study of both prose and poetry see *Bécquer Tradicionista* (Madrid, 1971); for concentration on the leyendas see "Bécquer, prefolklorista", *Revista de estudios hispánicos*, IV 2 (Nov. 1970) and the prologue to G.A. Bécquer, *Leyendas, apólogos, y otros relatos*, (Barcelona, 1974).

2. Benítez, *Leyendas*, p.20.

3. María Esther García González, "Glosario arqueológico en las 'leyendas' de Bécquer", *Archivo Hisplanense*, LV 168 (1972).

4. "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes. (New Jersey, 1965).

5. Of particular note are: Phillip W. Stuyvesant, "La búsqueda como símbolo de unidad en las obras imaginativas de G.A. Bécquer". *Revista de estudios hispánicos*, VIII 2 (May 1974), and Margaret E. W. Jones, "The Role of Memory and the Senses in Bécquer's Poetic Theory", *Revista de estudios hispánicos*, IV 2 (Nov. 1970).

6. "Folk Narrative" in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Richard M. Dorson. (Chicago, 1972).

7. W. Edson Richmond, "Narrative Folk Poetry" in *Folklore and Folklife*.

8. Chicago, 1961.