Architectures of Power in the *Poema de mio Cid*

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This paper explores the use of architecture as a literary device that represents modalities and degrees of social integration in the *Poema de mio Cid* (1207). The evidence observed shows that these signs are used in different ways in the first and in the second half of the poem, which can be interpreted as traces of the development of the discourses during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In this article I will consider the use of architectonic elements in the *Poema de mio Cid* (1207) to express social localization. I will argue that the mention of buildings and their parts, a topos frequently used in epic, is highly functional in the *Poema*, and that the way it is employed changes as the text moves forward. In the first half of the poem, architectural references indicate the progress of the hero up the social ladder. His localization relative to architecture associates social privilege with merit and, by doing so, privileges aristocracy. Contrarily to this, in the second half of the *Poema* the imaginary of buildings expresses the limitations of an aristocratic organization of the polity, and serves to promote the centralization of power in monarchy. I will propose that these differences in treatment reveal the presence of diverse political discourses in the poem, and that they also suggest the existence of multiple instances of composition.

As it is well known, the *Poema de mio Cid* describes the deeds of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, a late eleventh-century Castilian warrior. The poem starts describing Rodrigo's departure to exile and narrates the military victories that enable him to establish a principality in the city of Valencia, on the east coast of the Iberian Peninsula. His victories also give him the financial means to send a shower of gifts to his king, Alfonso of Castile. These gifts will gain him the pardon of Alfonso, who additionally arranges the marriage of Rodrigo's daughters to the brothers Diego and Fernando de Carrión, the scions of one of the great aristocratic families of his kingdom. Through the marriage of his daughters, Rodrigo is brought into the highest level of nobility. However, the poem narrates how those two brothers betray el Cid by beating and abandoning their wives, and how el Cid exacts revenge on them.

Within this narrative there are many mentions of buildings and of building parts which, as Alan Deyermond and David Hook have observed, form a pattern of contrasts that confers "structural and stylistic coherence" to the poem ("Doors and Cloaks," p. 375). The emphasis and repetition of these references suggest that, beyond their denotative and structural function, they convey additional meanings. The revision of the text reveals that nearly every occurrence of these elements happens in a

narrative context of loss or acquisition of social status and is connected also to the ability of buildings and their parts to define discrete spaces.

Michel Foucault has observed the critical importance of space as a means of cultural representation. His main interest is the representation of "real" spaces, heterotopias, the places where the ideal and the real intersect, a "both mythical and real contestation of the space in which we live" ("Of Other Spaces," p. 353). Besides those, he points to a second group of spaces, utopias, which "represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse" ("Of Other Spaces," p. 352). It is the threshold between one space and the other that concerns me, inasmuch as the way it is represented in the poem has a high interpretative value for its reading.

The poem starts with the departure of el Cid from his family home in Vivar. The first lines show Rodrigo weeping while he looks at "puertas abiertas | e uços sin cañados" ["open gates and doors with no locks"] (l. 3).[1] This image displaces the effective loss by el Cid of his ability to control not the physical space of his house, but rather the social dimensions signified by means of the house. The unlocked doors represent the disempowerment el Cid undergoes, his alienation from his domestic and dynastic community.

A few verses later, el Cid, on his way to exile, rides through the town of Burgos and goes toward the house he uses when in Burgos. There, "así commo llegó a la puerta, | fallóla bien cerrada" ["as he arrived to the door he found it was very well closed"] (l. 32). This is the result of a specific command by King Alfonso, who projects his presence in Burgos through a written device: "[a]ntes de la noche, | en Burgos d'él entró su carta / […] / que nadi no·l' diessen posada" ["Before the night his letter entered Burgos […] that nobody should give him a place to rest"] (ll. 23-25).

In Burgos, as earlier in Vivar, the locked doors act as devices of delimitation, of exclusion from a social reality which is here the polity. The closed doors signify the segregation of the hero from the community and his confinement in the "other" space. Inclusion, the recovery of his social status and the acquisition of social meaning, demands the opening of gates. Similarly, empowerment consists in gaining the ability to open and close those gates.

City walls and the gates on them represent the obstacles, but also the means to social integration. Michael Harney, describing the rhetorical importance of the siege in Iberian medieval literature, observes how, for the knight in chivalric romances, the siege becomes the means by which he achieves his goal: "to be absorbed by the amniotic, intramural polity" ("Siege Warfare," pp. 187-88). The city is a utopian space, a figure of communality, and the walls are all that impede the hero's social integration.

Harney gives limited importance to the symbolic aspects of the sieges in the Poema de mio Cid. Following Joseph J. Duggan, he sees el Cid's campaigns from a strongly pragmatic point of view, as focused in the acquisition of plunder ("Siege Warfare," p. 180). Similarly, he sees siege in the poem

[1] All the references are from Alberto Montaner's edition of the *Cantar de mio Cid*. All the translations are mine.

"as a necessarily collective enterprise, the occupation of dauntless opportunists" ("Siege Warfare," p. 184). While I agree to the importance of the communal aspect in the military activity represented in the poem, I consider also that the emphasis the poem gives to the actions of el Cid during and after the battles points toward a personal dimension that transcends material acquisition. El Cid's aim is the attainment of social localization, and this attainment is represented by showing how el Cid acquires material control of the spaces and of the devices that control those spaces.

The narratives about the campaigns of el Cid, and of the victories that enable him to create a polity and to re-insert himself in the Castilian polity, emphasize the taking of control of the gates in the towns el Cid conquers. In his first victory, in Castejón, the poem mentions the gates four times in just eleven verses (ll. 459, 461, 467, 470), and the most relevant act of el Cid in the battle is, precisely, taking control of the gates of the town: "Mio Cid don Rodrigo | a la puerta adeliñava / […] / Mio Cid Ruy Díaz | por las puertas entrava" ["Mio Cid don Rodrigo headed for the gates […] Mio Cid Ruy Díaz entered the gates"] (ll. 467, 470). In the second battle described in the poem, the conquest of Alcocer, the capture of the gates is also the focus of the military action. El Cid baits the inhabitants of Alcocer into coming out from the town, they leave the gates open, and el Cid rushes through the enemy army and takes the gates (ll. 584-610).

Acquisition of status is expressed in the action of taking the gates in the same way as the inability of exercising such control expressed, at the beginning of the poem, loss of status. Complementary to this, possession of status, presence in the utopian space, is expressed with a sign of ownership over the central point of fortresses. In Alcocer, after the victory, one of el Cid's vassals puts his master's "seña," possibly a flag, in the highest point of the town (l. 611). The same action is repeated later, as a sign that indicates the completion of the Valencia campaign: "su seña cabdal | sedié en somo del alcácer" ["his flag (literally, 'head sign') sat on top of the castle"] (l. 1220). The stability of his dominion over Valencia is signified later by the localization of el Cid in the "alcazar," the castle within the fortress (ll. 1652, 1761-62).

The emphasis given to buildings and their gates as a representation of social positioning is hardly exclusive to the *Poema de mio Cid*. It follows a definite epic convention. From the earliest texts, the poetics of epic contain this rhetorical device. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* starts with a physical description of the hero. Immediately after that it moves into one action that defines what he is: "in Uruk he built walls" (l. 59). Founder of a polity, Gilgamesh raises the walls, a distributive device that separates inside and outside, those who belong and those who are excluded from the political community. In the *Odyssey*, the turning point in the restoration of Ulysses to his dynastic space is precisely the moment when he orders Philoitios to close the gates of the palace to prevent the escape of Penelope's pretenders (ll. 21, 240). In this sense, the textual phenomena I have indicated in the *Poema* until now fall well within the horizon of expectations of heroic narratives, which convey an aristocratic ideology: the hero is entitled to a privileged localization in society because he possesses an existential excellence, expressed through his control of privileged physical locations.

I posit, however, that this topos conveys in the poem shades and structures of signification which oppose this reading. In the *Poema*, the hero not only defines spaces with his actions, he is also emphatically determined by them, to the point where his freedom of action is compromised. This restriction of freedom clashes with a defining trait of the epic hero, autonomy.

A very clear example of this point is the narration of the coming of Rodrigo's family to Valencia. King Alfonso allows el Cid's wife, Jimena, and his two daughters to join their husband and father. The text states that they are "lo que más amava" ["what he loved the most"] (l. 1563). At the same time, it shows emphatically how el Cid does not leave Valencia to meet them. First, he sends one hundred knights while he remains behind to protect the town: "'E yo fincaré en Valencia, | que mucho costado·m' ha, / grand locura serié | si la desamparás / yo fincaré en Valencia, | ca la tengo por heredad.'" ["'And I will remain in Valencia, for which I paid much / deserting it would be foolishness / I will remain in Valencia, the inheritance I have'"] (ll. 1470-72). The need for his presence to ensure control over Valencia conflicts with his desire to meet his family, "what he loved the most." When they get closer, he sends two hundred more knights to meet them but "[é]l sedié en Valencia | curiando e guardando" ["he stayed in Valencia, watching and protecting it"] (l. 1566). Later, when the cortege arrives, Rodrigo commands his vassals to protect the stronghold "e todas las puertas | e las exidas e las entradas" ["and all the gates, and exits and entrances"] (l. 1572) while he goes only as far as the main gate of the outer wall (l. 1576).

After this episode, the *Poema* is very emphatic, when el Cid has to leave Valencia, in pointing out the provisions Rodrigo takes to ensure the safety of the city (ll. 1713, 2000-08, and most likely in the missing lines after l. 2337). This is so much so that el Cid will be absent in the episode that vindicates him and completes his social reintegration. When the king invites Rodrigo to set the location for the judiciary duel that closes the poem, el Cid announces that he does not intend to attend it, but will rather return to Valencia (ll. 3473-74).

This apparent spatial restriction expresses an existential loss. One of the defining traits of a hero is autonomy. Autonomy is narratively expressed through unrestricted freedom of movement. At the beginning of the poem el Cid possesses that freedom, but after the conquest of Valencia he doesn't have it anymore. In this sense, the *Poema* shows the contradiction that other narratives—but not necessarily epic poems—hide under the veil of a "happy ending." The result of the actions of a hero is the acquisition of a social and spatial localization that restrict his movement and void his heroic quality. More simply, the hero, because he is a hero, stops being so and is restricted into the less poetic role of a ruler.

The transition from freedom to restriction of movement destabilizes the worth of a way of exercising authority that coincides with feudalism, or with the Castilian version of feudalism. Aristocratic authority is exercised by physical presence and requires constant presence to avoid degradation. By showing how the need for presence stops el Cid from being a hero, the *Poema* textually undermines the aristocratic political system and privileges a form of exercise of authority that develops means of projecting itself that circumvent the need for physical presence: monarchy.

The problem of the relationship between king Alfonso and el Cid—and that of the discourses expressed through the representation of this relationship—has been repeatedly addressed by the critics. The submissive response of Rodrigo to the unfair treatment by his king has been traditionally read as an illustration of the warrior's absolute duty of loyalty toward his liege. More recently, this perspective has been nuanced by Maria Eugenia Lacarra, who reads the opposition between the two characters as an expression of aristocratic ideology by which the top tier of Castilian nobility would try to attract the allegiance of the "Caballeros pardos," the non-noble urban military class (*El* Poema de Mio Cid, p. 207). By identifying Rodrigo as an "infanzón," that is, a member of the lowest tier of nobility, and by showing his ascent into the aristocracy the poem would promote a community of interest between urban knights and aristocracy that would ensure the political predominance of the latter. In a different direction, Diego Catalán interprets both the opposition between king and vassal which is presented at the beginning of the poem and the process by which Rodrigo recovers the royal favor as an expression of the processes of displacement of the old aristocracy by the "pardos" ("El *Mio Cid* y su intencionalidad histórica," pp. 128-29). Catalán argues also that the poem acts as an argument of legitimacy of the Navarran monarchy, dynastically connected to el Cid ("El *Mio Cid* y su intencionalidad histórica," p. 155). I consider that the poem does not just promote a specific dynasty, nor the mere transference of authority between two social groups, but rather a transformation in the ways authority is exercised, and that to do so it shows in the character el Cid the insufficiency of the aristocratic political structures. In spite of his unquestioned heroism, Rodrigo is unable to solve the conflict that originates the story, the confrontation with his "enemigos malos" ["bad enemies"] (l. 9.). Only through the mediation of the king and, more importantly, through a new set of institutions that emerge around the king, can this conflict be solved.

As I pointed out earlier, royal authority is presented in the first verses of the poem as acting through a written device, the letter of banishment. Although in emotional terms the king appears there in a negative light, the remote manner in which he exercises his authority and the strength of that decision, which overpowers el Cid's military might, appear encoded since the beginning of the text. In the third and last canto of the poem, King Alfonso calls the meeting of the royal court in Toledo to give justice to el Cid against the Infantes of Carrión. Here his use of writing originates an epiphany of royalty. The king sends letters calling all the members of the courts, and the poem extends itself in a catalogue of the different regions where he rules, emphasizing how an administrative action, the sending of a letter, extends and multiplies the presence of the King:

> [Alfonso] enbía sus cartas | pora León e a Santi Yaguo,
> a los portogaleses | e a galicianos,
> e a los de Carrión | e a varones castellanos
> que cort fazié en Toledo […]. (ll. 2977-79)

> [Alfonso] sends his letters to Leon and to Santiago, and to the

> Portuguese and to the Galicians and to those of Carrion, and to Castilian men, that he was having a court in Toledo […].

Throughout the poem, the figure of the king appears very loosely connected to buildings, if buildings are mentioned at all. As the narrative proceeds, buildings become textually invisible. His authority is not exercised by immediate presence. Power is exercised remotely, by less obvious but more effective ways.

A few pages later, when the royal court meets, there is another highly revealing textual event. The court meets in Toledo and, in contrast with other towns, the materiality of this one is textually ignored. There is one exception: when el Cid arrives at the court, a door is mentioned: "Assí iva mio Cid | adobado a lla cort, / a la puerta de fuera | descavalga a sabor" ["So prepared, el Cid went to the court / by the outer door dismounted with pleasure"] (ll. 3103-04).

This door of the court is strongly indicative here. Unlike the English "court," the Spanish "corte" does not describe a physical reality but an institution. In an earlier episode, speaking about the royal palace in Sahagún, the poem states that the court is *in* the palace (l. 2928). In Toledo, the material building becomes invisible and a single object, a door, connects two universes, the material and the institutional. Toledo, as a city, has been elided, replaced by a door, that is, by a regulatory device that is created by the authority of the king and that extracts its meaning from that authority. There are no walls, no palace, no town. There is just a door, a door that leads not to a material building, but rather to an idea, the court.

The ability of the king to generate politically meaningful spaces becomes even more evident in the last episode of the poem, the "lides," judicial duels, between the two Infantes of Carrión and their older brother on one side and three of the vassals of el Cid on the other. This combat happens in Carrión, territory of the Infantes, but made neutral ground by the presence of the king. Even more, the king "manufactures" the physical space where the duel will happen. Before the combat, the poem indicates that the battlefield is defined by "mojones," boundary stones, and describes how the king and the judges show these stones to the six who are to fight, indicating that whoever leaves the area defined by the stones would be considered defeated (ll. 3604-08). A field, incapable of giving or withdrawing social signification, becomes the ultimate signifying space by a positive act of the king, the definition of boundaries.

The contrasting ways in which el Cid and the king exercise authority is, I consider, deliberate. El Cid needs to be materially present in a place to ensure that his authority over that place does not degrade. The king can exercise his authority remotely through writing and can generate "institutional locations" like the court, areas of disembodied, raw authority. A place can be redefined as a space of meaning just by an act of the king. An object becomes meaningful when, as the letter does, it receives the imprint of the royal seal.

This difference in the exercise of authority is connected to transformations that were happening in medieval Castile during the decades that precede the final writing of the *Poema*. The last decades of the twelfth century and the first of the thirteenth century know an expansion of the effective power of the

kings, particularly in Castile, and the emergence of political discourses in support of this authority. Although most of the textual expressions of those discourses come from the second part of the thirteenth century, I consider that the discourses predate those texts and that the *Poema* is a register of their presence at the beginning of the century.

In this context it seems highly likely, and consistent with all other existing data, a scenario of composition very close to that recently presented by Michael Bailey which, to a degree, brings together the so-called "neotraditionalist" and "individualist" theories that have been postulated for the *Poema de mio Cid*. The *Poema* was probably composed by a writer in the orbit of the Castilian royal court and he took pre-existing poetic materials belonging to an oral tradition, organized them and supplemented them with new materials that gave the poem the form we know today. This act of composition took the well-known figure of el Cid and elaborated its presentation through the discourses of royal authority to make it serve the enhancing and the extension of the monarchic institution rather than the aristocracy to which, in fact, el Cid had belonged and whose discourses could have permeated the preexisting poetic materials. This compositive and discoursive context permits a reinsertion of the poem into W. T. H. Jackson's argument on epic poetry and corrects his perception of the poem as exceptional in that, unlike most epics, its conclusion would be the total success of the hero (*The Hero and the King*, pp. 91-92). The triumph of Rodrigo over his enemies has a hefty price, the material and legal confinement of the hero and, ultimately, since he has no male offspring, his dynastic absorption by the royal families of Christian Iberia.

The study of how buildings and doors are used in the *Poema de mio Cid* underdetermines its interpretation as an aristocratic text and strongly supports the hypothesis that it is a text produced in the royal environs and that the monarchic ideology is very much behind it. These findings invite us to reconsider other epic texts, either preserved or in their derivative historiographic castings, to identify where they stand in the battlefield of ideas of the thirteenth century. This enquiry will most likely serve to illuminate the interaction of poetic, political and material practices during the Middle Ages.

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