

The *Serranillas* (Mountain Songs) of the *Libro de buen amor* (The Book of Good Love) and Ecofeminism

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Ecofeminism or ecological feminism is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking. The term, first coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, points to the notion that there are similarities and connections between forms and instances of human oppression, which may include the oppression of women and the degradation of nature (Cuomo 1). In brief, and in layman's terms, men treat women as they treat nature, and vice versa.

It encompasses a number of other approaches and definitions as well. These might include nature viewed as passive and easily exploited by men, just as women are, similar in such linguistic references to women and nature that point to both oppression of the land and women, e.g., "rape of the land," "women as wild and untamed," and finally, the patriarchal domination and exploitation of both. In this paper, I shall utilize various theories of ecofeminism in my approach to the fourteenth century *serranillas* (mountain songs) of Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita (c. 1283-c. 1350 A.D.) in the *Libro de buen amor*.

What are *serranillas*? They are mountain songs that are similar to the French *pastourelle*. They usually describe an amorous encounter between a mountain girl or shepherdess and a nobleman or courtier (Marino 3). I propose to explore the intersectionality of gender, sexism, class, and the domination of nature in the four mountain songs of the *Libro de buen amor*.

To situate the *serranillas* in the context of the period in which they were written and in the context of their literary genre, I will mention a number of interpretations voiced by some of the most prominent scholars of Spanish literary history as to their meaning. Francisco Fernández y González (1894) relates the genre of the *Libro de buen amor* to the genre of the Arabic *maqāmat* written in autobiographical form (*Historia de la Crítica Literaria*). Ramón Menéndez Pidal, on the other hand, maintains that the book was written in the European

Christian tradition in order to teach and to entertain ("*prodesse et delectare*") (*Poesía juglaresca* 266). Américo Castro has recognized the major influence of the Arabic tradition in order to entertain (*España en su historia, cristianos, moros y judíos* 58). María Rosa Lida Malkiel maintains that it was a mudéjar work (i.e., of a Muslim individual living in Christian territory) that utilized the *maqāmat* autobiographical form to present Christian ideals ("*Nuevas notas*" 45). Joaquín Casaldueiro believes it was a European Christian work, an allegory written to moralize, while Otis Green believes it was written to teach, utilizing humor (*Spain and the Western Tradition* 73-75). Claudio Sánchez Albornoz denies much of the Arabic influences and emphasizes instead the importance of the Roman-Christian civilization (*España: un enigma histórico* 35).

If viewed within the context of the genre and the purpose of the work, therefore, the *serranillas* can take on a special meaning in a medieval, Christian Europe. They are meant as allegories with deeper religious meanings. The harsh, ugly, barren, mountainous landscape described in the songs may be interpreted as the landscape of sin. It also may reinforce the misogynist view of the women who inhabit this landscape as the root of evil and sin, a view propagated by the church fathers. Do both "ugly as sin" mountain girls and beautiful mountain girls represent two sides of the same coin in that they both lead to the nobleman's acquiescence? Does the *serranilla* represent a moment of female empowerment in a long history of patriarchal domination, or does it toe the line vis-à-vis the traditional notion of the rustic woman's lowest position in European feudal and peasant societies as the incarnation of evil?

In order to suggest possible answers to these questions there are several aspects to the encounter between mountain lass and nobleman that might help. Each adventure of the Arcipreste de Hita takes place in the Sierra de Guadarrama north of Madrid. Each encounter is also divided into two parts, an initial part, written in the style of *cuaderna vía* (a verse form of four line stanzas, 14 syllables to the line), and a second part written in the style of the *zéjel* (a popular Arabic form) that repeats the same theme.

The following is a list of the characteristics or elements of the encounter which echo certain tenets of ecofeminism (*the green fuse/topics*, "Ecofeminism"). First, there is a

description of the topography and the exact locations of the travel of the nobleman. The weather and its challenging conditions—cold, wind, rain, and snow—are described. A description of the mountain girl's dress and physical appearance follows. The pair's status in society is reflected in a dialogue which reveals their manner of speech. Then follows the *Arcipreste's* impression of the beauty or ugliness of the maiden. The *serrana's* or mountain girl's chores are then described as follows: taming bulls, herding animals, guarding sheep, making cheese. She lives close to nature and is able to utilize all that it offers. Included are the foods and drinks that she offers to the nobleman traveler, such as, salted meat, black bread, cheese, wine. She also provides him with a comfortable bed and a warm fire. Afterwards, begins the dance of seduction with the nobleman using different methods such as praising her beauty, promising her lovely clothes, jewelry, and promising to take her to court. The irresistible offer is when he promises to stay and live with her. On the other hand, the rustic girl employs her means of resistance: her shepherd friends are coming, she is engaged, she will beat him up if he tries anything. She demands that he wrestle her (a euphemism for sex, and, of course, this is not resistance but exerting her power over him). Finally, there comes the ending to the encounter that ends in either seduction or resistance.

Another more recent interpretation of these *serranillas* is that they are satirical in nature and that they are a parody of the mountain song which at times exhibits the influence of the Provençal troubadours' courtly love songs (Green 73-75) or the Galician-Portuguese *cantigas de amigo* (songs of love sung by young girls about the men they were in love with).

Serranilla number four, entitled "The Archpriest and the Mountain Girl," taken from Rigo Mignani and Mario A. Di Cesare's English translation, might best exemplify this interpretation of parody:

Hills and mountains are always harsh; either it's snowing or the ground is icy; it is never warm. At the top of this pass, an icy wind was blowing the hail and snow. Since one doesn't feel as cold when he is running, I trotted down the slope, saying, "If you hit the tower, the stone falls, not the falcon." I am lost if God doesn't help me."

Never in my whole life had I been in such danger from the cold. I descended the pass and found at the bottom of it a strange monster, the most fantastic thing I had ever

seen—a muscular shepherdess, a horrible creature to look upon. But in my fear of the weather and the bitter cold, I asked her for a day's lodging. She said she would put me up if I paid her well. I thanked God for that, and she took me to Tablada.

She had a figure and limbs that were fantastic, I tell you; she was built like a mare. Wrestling with her couldn't possibly come off well; one could hardly lay her against her will either. In his Apocalypse, St. John the Evangelist never envisioned such a prodigious creature. She could tumble with, or beat off, a whole crowd, though I cannot imagine what devil would lust after such a monster.

Her head was huge and shapeless; her hair was short, black, and shiny as a magpie's; her eyes sunken and red, and shortsighted. She left a footprint bigger than a bear's and had the ears of a yearling donkey. Her short, thick neck was dark and hairy. Her nose was long, like the bill of a whimbrel; and she could have drunk her way through a large pool of water in a few days. She had the mouth of a hound dog set in a fat, dumpy face, with great long teeth, irregular and horsy.

Listen to me, anyone who has marriage in mind! She had thick eyebrows, blacker than the black crow, and a heavy growth of beard around her mouth. I saw no more, but if you dig deeper you will find many more strange qualities, I am sure, though you would be better off minding your own business.

In fact I did see her legs, up to the knees: large bones, huge shanks, all scarred and burned; ankles thicker than those of a full-grown calf. Her wrist was broader than my hand. Her hand was covered with long, coarse hair, and was always wet. Her loud hoarse voice would deafen anyone; her speech was slow and harsh, hollow and graceless. Her little finger was larger than my thumb; imagine what the others were like! If she should ever try to delouse you, your scalp would think her fingers were tree-trunks. Her breasts hung down over her dress to her waist, even though they were folded over; otherwise they would have reached her hips. They would keep time to the guitar without lessons. Her ribs protruded so far out of her black chest that I could count them three times even from a distance.

Now I tell you that I saw nothing else; and I will say no more, for an evil-tongued young man is no good as a messenger. I wrote three songs about what she said and how ugly she looked, but I could hardly do justice to her. Two of the songs are for singing, the other is for dancing. If you don't like some of them, look, laugh, and be still. (205-207)

After reading the descriptions of the Archpriest's encounters with mountain girls, we might identify then some of the core principles of ecofeminism evident in these *serranillas*. We see activities of women in nature central to their liberation. They have tasks associated with animal husbandry, gardening, wine making, which all serve to address the needs of the nobleman traveler. Besides having great value in and of themselves they save the life of the nobleman. Moreover, women in these songs are seen as living closer to nature than the men (Plumwood 8). They, through their knowledge of the earth, mountain passes and roads, can direct the travelers to their destinations. We also see their closeness to animals such as sheep, cows, and horses. The *serrana* (mountain girl) lives in close communion with her animals and her rustic abode.

Furthermore, the nobleman traveler views himself as superior to the rustic girl he stumbles upon and tries to seduce her in a number of ways: by commenting on her beauty which he says is greater than that of a town girl (*villana*), by promising her jewels, pretty clothes, and by promising to stay and live with her in the mountains. On the other hand, the women in some of the songs resist the attempts at seduction and create their own rules; they are violent and physical with the man. They subvert the power relationship and demand that the traveler wrestle (have sex) with them.

Likewise, the noblemen travelers throughout their encounters with the natural world also try to exploit the women that inhabit the natural world. Ecofeminism emphasizes the interdependence of all life, without a hierarchical nature in which all parts affect each other (Plumwood 15). Here the nobleman exploits the rustic girl for his needs. In addition, certain traits or characteristics are not necessarily tied to gender. Most feminists believe that soft "female" qualities are socially imposed as part of a patriarchal strategy of oppression. The

serranas (mountain girls) do not possess soft feminine qualities; living in nature has made them strong and independent.

In conclusion, the points that I have raised are only several challenging questions involved in the philosophy of ecofeminism and the *serranillas* of Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita. We have often heard and explored the theme of “man vs. nature” in popular culture, in literature, and in the arts. It takes on a whole new meaning if placed in the context of “the dominant tradition of men as reason and women as nature” (Plumwood 20).

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