

The Other *Pastorelas* of Spanish American Drama

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The *pastorela* as a theatrical form encompasses a multitude of structures and has entertained audiences from colonial times to the present. As late as 1940, Marcus Bach wrote: "Age-old drama is relived each Christmas season among most of the adobe villages in the region of Santa Fe. Mexicans, Indians and Anglos gather in plazas or out in the mountains for the re-enactment of primitive plays; plays brought from Spain during the sixteenth century by the conquistadores. . . ."¹ Actually, the tradition of these presentations goes back to the *Officium Pastorum*, or to the Magian plays termed *Officium Stellae* in the Christmas services of the medieval church. According to some, the *pastorela* is a direct descendant of *auto viejo* forms: "Con respecto a la '*pastorela*' de que vienen a ser cortejo, recordemos (para evitar confusión, entre ésta y el auto sacramental) que ella es la continuación, en nuestro siglo, de otro género de ilustre prosapia: el viejo Auto de Navidad, cuya existencia en Castilla consta ya desde el siglo XIII."²

Variations and adaptations of these spectacles circulated throughout colonial Spanish America, and the *pastorela* structure reached cyclical proportions in the southwestern United States and Mexico.³ Numerous scholarly publications treat the development of these popular pieces, and they continue to receive a good deal of attention.⁴

This religious drama may be analyzed under several general categories. The works commonly referred to as *los pastores* all contain similar plots, characters, staging, and action. Many of the lines and phrasings differ and there are additions and deletions from one text to another, but they remain essentially the same play. Besides the primary purpose of celebrating the birth of Christ, represented by the appearance of the angel to the shepherds at Bethlehem and their procession to the manger where the babe is laid, they oftentimes bear humble gifts. This element originally constituted part of the Magi plays which demonstrate a close kinship to the *pastorela*. Along the way, the shepherds

escape the temptations and malign machinations of the Devil with the aid of Michael the archangel. And customarily, music, choral arrangements, and dance accompany the standard scenes and mirror the action, giving variety to the spectacle.

At times a separate play, but often one integrated into the fabric of this theme, the *las posadas* presentation depicts the trip to Bethlehem and the search for lodging made by Mary and Joseph. Their desperate state and rejection at numerous inns establishes the appropriate setting for the diabolical characteristics attributed to the servants and innkeepers who reject them. License is taken in altering minor events in the story, but the prominent Biblical facts are always obvious.

Modern adaptations and variations of the *pastorela* themes still circulate in Mexico. The outstanding contemporary dramatist, Emilio Carballido, staged two well received versions of the tendency: *Pastores de la ciudad*, published in 1962, and his more recent production *La adoración de los Magos* (1969) which Carballido terms a *pastorela cinematográfica*.

What is most pertinent to the subject of the present study is that the *pastorela* dramatic method is more widespread than is commonly understood. It is not restricted to Mexico and the southwestern United States. On the contrary, it appears in popular performances from Honduras to Chile, in all of its principal forms.

One of the most renowned Spanish American scholars of the nineteenth century was Father José Trinidad Reyes Sevilla. He was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, June 11, 1797, and died September 20, 1855. A celebrated humanist of his country, he excelled in the classical languages, music, and art. And he avidly studied philosophy, law, theology, and mathematics. One of his greatest achievements was the authorship and presentation of nine *pastorelas* restored by professor Rómulo E. Durón. Menéndez y Pelayo spoke of these plays in very favorable terms: "Estas pastorelas no son otra cosa que la interesante prolongación en pleno siglo XIX, de los viejos *Autos de Navidad*, cuya existencia en Castilla consta desde el siglo XIII, y de los cuales ya en el siglo XV se encuentra algún ejemplo anterior a Juan del Enzina."⁵ The list of these Christmas dramas begins with *Noemi*, supposedly the oldest, although their dates have not been positively established. *Micol* precedes the works *Nefthalia*, *Zelfa*, *Rubenia*, *Elisa*, *Albano*, and *Olimpia*. Durón excludes the ninth *pastorela* entitled *Floro* or the *Pastorela del Diablo* with this explanation: ". . . *Floro*, ó sea la *Pastorela del Diablo* la cual casi no parece del Padre Reyes, tan defectuosa es la única copia que de ella se conserva . . . se imprimió en vida del Padre Reyes. . . . Van a leerse esas Pastorelas, salvo la última, cuya publicación reservaré para cuando tenga la fortuna de dar con la impresa ó de cotejarla con otras copias. . . ."⁶ It is extremely unfortunate that Durón's work does not include *Floro* as it well may have proven the most noteworthy of all Reyes' *pastorelas*. In conventional *pastorela* performances the Devil plays a major role either as the antagonist or protagonist and this work undoubtedly would have established a continuation of that trend.

These plays faithfully follow the basic subject matter for this type of drama. Reyes combines prevailing Spanish pastoral ideals with the religious figures of

pastorela performances. Many of the introductory dialogues between the shepherds reflect the principles of the pastoral discourses at the height of that Spanish novelistic tendency of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Generally, those speeches not associated with the *los pastores* theme are artificially formal and of little dramatic value. Regionalisms are rare as are misspelled words or faulty form. Durón reworked and corrected the manuscripts, and Reyes' *pastorelas* exemplify conscientious structural forethought. Although the plot would seem apparent from the outset, there is a dramatic build-up and emotional activity which enhances the overall outcome. In addition, a great wealth of scriptural allusion embellishes these pieces, together with references to the ancient Hebrew prophets and prophecies.

It is interesting to note that, along with the familiar character names taken from the Bible (Noemi, Ester, Raquel, Lía, Rut, Mateo, Bersabé, Zabulón, José), we also find Bato and Blas, two prevalent characters in *pastorelas* throughout the centuries. In *Noemi* the characterization of Bato changes little from the model. He is a jovial buffoon, more preoccupied with his physical needs than with the spiritual endeavors of the other shepherds. As usual, his ravenous appetite amuses the audience:

Bato. Pues dime, ¿no se podrá
Estar pensando en el Niño
Y con los dientes mascar,
Sin que se estorben los actos,
El de comer y pensar?

(RS, 22-23)

Clearly an omission in typical *pastorela* casting, the adversary is only mentioned in passing and never assumes the prominent role found in Mexican works of the same order (of course an exception to this rule would be *Floro* if it had been included).

Singing and dancing also play an important part in all *pastorelas* and these do not deviate from that course. The chorus primarily consummates the activities and condenses the plot and action:

Coro. Hermosas pastorcillas
Dejad vuestros apriscos
Y venid á adorar
A un Dios que se ha hecho niño!

(RS, 27)

Each of Reyes' *pastorelas* contains a song of praise immediately following the announcement of the virgin birth. It serves as a bridge in time and space, linking the pastoral setting and the manger scene. When the players conclude their song the manger tableau is presented.

The women circulate the good news and make the preparations for the journey to adore the King of Man. The men, as in *Zelfa*, are initially incredulous and difficult to convince:

Mateo. ¿Qué ha de ser? Un bello niño
 Que ha nacido en un establo,
 Más blanco que un corderillo
 Y más brillante que un astro.

.

Zabulón. ¡Brava simpleza la tuya!
 ¿Yo habré de ir á ver muchachos?

(RS, 143)

Following an established precedent, the plays end on a common decision to travel to Bethlehem and worship the Lord. The rustics present gifts, accompanied by songs and hymns, and those who had previously doubted express their love and obedience.

The first work of the series to depart from this format for *pastorelas* is *Rubenia*. It alters the current form by including a *las posadas* dramatization, as Mary and Joseph search for shelter in the first act. This act constitutes a play within a play, followed later by the *los pastores* argument. Reyes' presentation of *las posadas* is somewhat cumbersome and unnatural. Often, his poetic considerations for verse and strophe inhibit the natural, free development of ideas. The resultant flow of dialogue and the realism of events appear distorted. Action is subordinate to language and the works become ponderous. However, the pivotal concept of the *las posadas* act (when at last it presents itself) shows a clarity unhindered by unnecessary verbiage:

José. ¿Quién será el campesino cuyas puertas
 Estén francas y abiertas
 A peregrinos, pobres y extranjeros,
 Sin representación y sin dineros?
 ¿Dónde habré de hospedaros ¡oh alma mía! . . . ?

.

Para que os preparéis al sacro parto?

(RS, 180)

After attempting three times to find a room, the traditional Biblical account is slightly modified as the couple is obliged to seek shelter in a grotto outside the city walls where the shepherds bed their flocks. This establishes a natural sequence between this act and the pastoral one to follow.

Physical considerations and discussions of pastoral love predominate in the *los pastores* representation. The relative beauty of the shepherdesses receives some emphasis and the common romantic dialogues appear. Reyes attempts to unite the pastoral ideal with the spiritual symbols of the virgin birth, equating pastoral neoplatonism with Christian symbols of the Nativity.

The plays which follow revert back to the prototypal model, but a new stress on social issues surfaces. In *Elisa*, Reyes discourses on the struggle for supremacy between the sexes. The shepherds express their fear of being trapped into marriage and there is an astrological discussion of those signs which lead to compatible marriages. *Albano* contains speeches on the vices of the rich and

the degradation found in the cities, and the injustices of self-seeking public servants are ridiculed. The blessings of a pure pastoral life, in excellent neo-classic style, far outweigh the vices and debauchery of the cities.

The dramatic production of Trinidad Reyes Sevilla embodies all of the popular configurations and themes of the *pastorela*. It demonstrates graphically the profusion and extension of these forms in Spanish America. Some of the simple beauty of the scriptural accounts is lost in the linguistic and poetic turns, and the pastoral speeches become overbearing at times, but Reyes must be considered one of the outstanding proponents of the style.

The twentieth century perpetuates the *pastorela* in South America through the production of the Colombian playwright Jorge Zalamea. In 1941, Zalamea published a version of the *las posadas* topic entitled *El hostel de Belén*. Zalamea's ingenious treatment presents the subject not from the perspective of Mary and Joseph but from that of the innkeeper and his clientele. The major figure is the Demente who acts as the author's mouthpiece in condemnation of those lodged at the inn. He sets the stage for the arrival of the Holy Couple. And he represents the procedure of treating lunacy as the vehicle for wisdom and visionary clairvoyance—a common literary contrivance.

The author tries to create a realistic, mundane setting inside the hostelry from which to contrast the events that take place outside. He characterizes a cross section of the culture of the period and its accompanying hypocrisy. For example, a prostitute of renown asks for lodging and a Sadducee is stimulated to show his true colors:

Hostelero, hostelero tienes que recibir a esa mujer! Es la cortesana de Jerusalem: Raquel, la que recibe a los traficantes de Tiro y a los centuriones de Roma junto a la puerta de los Jardines.⁷

The Demente then counters in colorfully metaphorical terms, denouncing the wickedness rampant in the hospice:

El vino de la fornicación desciende sobre los hombres como una espesa marea, como un torbellino bermejo, como una lluvia de sangre. A manera de gordas sanguijuelas bailan los hombres la danza de sus pecados a los pies de la bestia; . . . ¡Ah! pero ya viene El que ha de librarnos de la fornicación. Su voz como de trueno quebrará las músicas con que se rodea la bestia, la prostituta cubierta de oro y piedras, a modo de ídolo.

(JZ I, 136)

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door and a silence falls over the scene broken only periodically by the complaints of the patrons. From behind the

door comes the explanation of a weary traveler whose wife is about to bear a child. Raquel and the Sadducee importune the innkeeper to permit the wayfarers to pass the night in the stable. The play concludes as the demented prophet announces the coming of the Saviour:

Como brota una estrella en el claro que
se abre entre las nubes tormentosas, así
saldrá de Bethlehem el guiador que espera
nuestra aficción.

.
Las nubes caerán de los ojos del ciego;
las escamas de los hombros del leproso. . . .
Saldrán los demonios del cuerpo del
poseso. . . .

.
¡Aleluya! ¡Aleluya! De Bethlehem la
pequeñita . . . saldrá la paz del mundo y
el consuelo de los aflijidos. ¡Aleluya!
¡Aleluya!

(JZ I, 146-47)

Jorge Zalamea also composed *Pastoral* (1941), an excellent one-act representation of the sacred night. This brief, direct *pastorela* contains no extraneous elements to complicate the action. Its composition and title allude to the *pastorela* topic, but the piece avoids the standard characters of the form (Bato, Blas, Gila, and the Hermit). The author gives authenticity to the action of his work by employing scriptural names and reproducing as faithfully as possible the ideas and language of shepherds of that era. All references to religion are to the Hebrew faith, using Old Testament prophets' remarks without citing New Testament or Catholic doctrine. Zalamea dedicates half of the play to establishing a realistic ambience, populated by human, thinking beings with differing opinions about life and religious experience.

After several ethical and agricultural discussions on the general nature of life, Ruth brings the news of the holy birth. There is a brief outline of the events leading up to the birth of Christ amidst exclamations of joy and skepticism. Then, the heavens open and a light appears. The hosts sing praises, and the shepherds shudder and hide in terror. The patriarch of the shepherd band cries out in desperation to the Lord, and an angel descends, restoring peace and announcing the great event in scriptural terms:

El Angel. "No temáis; porque aquí os doy nuevas de gran gozo, que será para todo el pueblo: —Que os ha nacido hoy, en la ciudad de David, un salvador, que es CRISTO el Señor.— Y esto os será por señal: hallaréis al niño envuelto en pañales, echado en un pesebre."⁸

The shepherds glorify God for His mercy and a miracle occurs within their midst. Jacholía, crippled from birth, is made whole. As they now prepare to make their way to see the babe, they realize that they bear no gifts, but contrary to similar Mexican *pastorela* renditions, they are told that a contrite heart and a receptive spirit suffice.

This charming Christmas *pastorela* is as typical of the Spanish American stage today as in any period of the past. Its seasonal theme never ages in Christian circles. It is perpetuated with each generation as characteristic of the holiday theatre.

A work similar to those studied appeared in a volume compiled by Francisco Pérez Estrada on Nicaraguan dramatic folklore. Other than its 1946 publication, there is no way of dating the anonymous piece *Original de pastores para obsequio del Niño Dios*. Nonetheless, its content makes the work applicable to this study. It begins with a light festive spirit as the audience interprets the setting:

¡Gloria! ¡Gloria! ¡Gloria!
 inexelsis Deus.
 Humildes pastores
 de estas aldeas
 escucha mi vos
 que os traigo una nueva.
 Todo el firmamento
 cúbrese de lus
 en el nacimiento
 del niño Jesús.
 Ya se llegó el tiempo
 de las profecías
 pues ya vino al mundo
 la antorcha del día.⁹

This play does not represent the standard *los pastores* situation, but another example of the same theme from a separate source. The apparent spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary errors would indicate a folkloric dramatization, popular with the less educated people. However, its versification and changes in meter would suggest more erudite or ancient beginnings. The work commences where most *pastorelas* end, with a processional to the manger. A chorus interprets the individual dialogues, changing the scenes and announcing the arrival of the shepherds at their destination:

La noche tan clara
 anuncia a porfía
 que en Belén nació
 el hijo de María.¹⁰

Each shepherd presents his humble gift to the Saviour accompanied by a short speech, but this scene is less cumbersome and drawn out than many Mexican examples. It demonstrates a well unified presentation of the *los pastores* plot, being a fine expression of the folkloric, Nativity drama.

The experienced Chilean dramatist Luis A. Heiremans has also contributed to *pastorela* theatrical style under the guise of what he terms a *ronda*. Heiremans published the Nativity piece *La Ronda de la Buena Nueva: Espectáculo de Navidad*. It is so similar to simple *pastorelas* based on the sequence of events surrounding the birth of Christ that it lacks only the title *pastorela* instead of *ronda*. The depiction of the stable animals in the work by Heiremans takes the same form as that of the animals in Emilio Carballido's *Pastores de la ciudad*, in that they are personalized and humanized. The chorus serves the customary purpose of setting the panoramic view, introducing the action, and linking the scenes. The *los pastores* plot is minimized by following the primary Biblical events leading up to the birth. Here, as in many *pastorelas*, the *las posadas* argument is only incidental and not developed to any extent. In *La Ronda de la Buena Nueva*, the angel Gabriel becomes the mouthpiece which directs the action:

Yo soy Gabriel que estoy delante de
Dios; y soy enviado a hablaros y a daros
estas buenas nuevas.¹¹

The Narrador announces the scriptural events and relates the betrothal of Mary and Joseph and the journey to Bethlehem, together with the visit of the Magi and the shepherds. It is noteworthy that except for the principal spokesmen during the play (Angel, Narrador, and Coro), the three shepherds have the only speaking parts, but even their lines are extremely limited. The chorus, however, amplifies the pastoral effect by adding a very popular *pastorela* twist—the humble gift from the shepherds to the Christ child:

Coro. Señora Doña María
yo vengo de la angostura
y al Niñito Dios le traigo
un atadito de verduras.

(LH, 12)

The choral frame for this Christmas play closes with a *pastorela* summons to all the viewers to join in the procession in adoration of the Lord:

Vamos, vamos a Belén
vamos toditos a ver
al Niño Jesús,
La Virgen y San José.

(LH, 13)

Undoubtedly, the Christmas message of the *pastorelas* is as applicable today as ever before. The force and emotional impact of the events makes it irresistible to playwrights. In addition, the multiplicity of topics and subject matter, together with the opportunity to elaborate on the simple Nativity themes, give a freedom to the author that other religious forms might nullify. Obviously, the *pastorela* structures have been and still are very popular with the people of Spanish America and this recognition is in no way restricted to any particular

group or nationality. The *pastorela* perpetuates a traditional dramatic structure common to the Spanish-speaking people of America.

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Notes

1. Marcus Bach, "Los pastores," *Theatre Arts*, No. 24 (April, 1940), 283.
2. Alfonso Reyes, "Los autos sacramentales en España y América," *Capítulos de literatura española* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1945), p. 127.
3. Arthur L. Campa divides the *pastorelas* he compiled from research in the southwestern United States into two groupings or cycles. The first, is that dealing with the Old Testament subjects, such as *Adán y Eva*, and *Cain y Abel*. The second contains the works based on New Testament topics describing the life of Christ as found in the *Natividad*, the story of *San José*, *Las Posadas*, *El Niño Perdido*, and *La Pasión*. [Campa, Arthur L. "Spanish Religious Folk-theatre in the Southwest," *The University of New Mexico Bulletin*, V, No. 1-2 (February and June, 1934), 5-69, 5-157.]
4. Extensive research has been done on this theatrical form as it appears in Mexico and in the Mexican communities of the United States. Again, Arthur Campa's work should be recommended, along with several other critical studies of the style and representative plays. A translation of a traditional *los pastores* dramatization was made by M. R. Cole and published in 1907, by Houghton Mifflin of New York, under the title *Los Pastores: A Mexican Play of the Nativity*. Edwin B. Place compiled "A Group of Mystery Plays Found in a Spanish Speaking Region of Southern Colorado" and printed them in the *University of Colorado Studies*, volume XVIII, in 1930. And in 1938, Francisco Monterde published "Pastorals and Popular Performances: The Drama of Viceregal Mexico" which appeared in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, number 22, and sheds more light on the evolution and standardization of the style. The year 1940 saw Marcus Bach's printing of the work entitled "Los pastores" in *Theatre Arts*, number 24. A manifestation of a hybrid form published by George C. Barker, which combines two New Testament stories is the *pastorela*, "The Shepherd's Play of the Prodigal Son (Coloquio de pastores del hijo pródigo)," published in *University of California Folklore Studies*, 1953. A related drama form which carries a separate designation is the *coloquio*, but many of these pieces are taken from the *pastorela* mold as is evidenced by the work edited by Stanley L. Robe, "Coloquios de pastores from Jalisco, Mexico," which appeared in *University of California Folklore Studies* in 1954. Two recent works of primary importance in the study of the *pastorela* are those of Juan B. Rael. "More Light on the Origin of *Los Pastores*" is found in the *New Mexico Folklore Record*, number 6, dated 1951-52. And his fine study, *The Sources and Difusion of the Mexican Shepherds' Plays*, was published in Guadalajara, Mexico by the Librería La Joyita, in 1965.
5. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, *Historia de la poesía hispanoamericana* (Santander: Aldus, 1948), p. 201.
6. José Trinidad Reyes Sevilla, *Pastorelas: Restauradas por Rómulo E. Durón, Precedidas de un estudio por el licenciado Don Esteban Guardiola* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Tipografía Nacional, 1905), p. xxiv. Subsequent references to this text will be abbreviated "RS."
7. Jorge Zalamea, *El hostel de Belén: Imagen de Navidad* (Bogotá: Librería Siglo XX, 1941), p. 134. Subsequent references will be abbreviated "JZ I."
8. Jorge Zalamea, *Pastoral: Imagen de Navidad* (Bogotá: Librería Siglo XX, 1941), p. 114.
9. "Original de pastores para obsequio del Niño Dios," *Teatro folklore nicaraguense*, ed. Francisco Pérez Estrada (Managua: Editorial Nuevos Horizontes, 1946), p. 71.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
11. Luis A. Heiremans, "La Ronda de la Buena Nueva: Espectáculo de Navidad," *Apuntes* (Revista Mensual del TEUC), Santiago de Chile, No. 23 (octubre, 1962), 6. Subsequent references will be abbreviated "LH."