

1980

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### Citas recomendadas

Charnon-Deutsch, Lou (Otoño 1980) "Godfather Death: A European Folktale and its Spanish Variants," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 12, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss12/2>

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## GODFATHER DEATH: A EUROPEAN FOLKTALE AND ITS SPANISH VARIANTS

**Lou Charnon-Deutsch**

During the past century short story writers routinely borrowed skeletal arguments from popular traditions which were still being transmitted orally throughout Europe. Countless stories which today owe their fame to the artistry of some nineteenth-century *cuentista* are, in fact, reincarnations of folktales which date back centuries to anonymous fireside storytellers. One such tale, designated type 332 in Aarne (D1825.3.1 in Stith Thompson),<sup>i</sup> concerns Death and the doctor or Godfather Death. The differences between the tale, outlined below, and the Spanish stories are examined here to shed light on some of the techniques Nineteenth-century writers explored in their attempt to transform the tale into a *higher* form of literature. The time has come to examine the artistic story with a variety of critical approaches which will expand our understanding of the «underrated art» .<sup>2</sup>

Simply stated, the European tale tells of a poor man who seeks out Death (or is sought out by Death) to be a godfather for his children or to relieve his poverty by some other means. Death grants him the magical power to forecast the moment of death or the progress of an illness and, using this gift, the poor man becomes a famous doctor. Often the man attempts to evade the moment of his own death, but Death usually succeeds in claiming the life of the doctor. In most versions<sup>3</sup> the doctor is led on a tour of the lower world where each living being is represented by a life light. In the end the doctor's life light is extinguished by an unrelenting Death.

Although most of the surviving variants are Baltic, Scandinavian or German in origins the tale is not unknown in Nineteenth-century Spanish, Italian and French literature, both oral and written. The known written Spanish variants, which are designated as stories in this study, include:

Caballero's *Juan Holgado y la muerte* (first published in *Semanario pintoresco* in 1850),<sup>5</sup> Trueba's *Traga-aldabas* (published in *El museo universal*, 1867)<sup>6</sup> and Alarcón's extensive *El amigo de la muerte* (first published in 1852 in

*El eco de Occidente* and later revised for *Las Americas* in 1858-9 and finally for inclusion in the *Obras* in 1881).<sup>7</sup>

The three Spanish versions of the Godfather tale respond to three divergent aesthetic choices of narrative stance. Fernán Caballero (Cecilia Boni de Faber) offers the closest rendering of her European models, probably because she was genuinely interested in the propagation of Spanish tales, as well as those she had inherited from a German background. On the other hand, Antonio de Trueba saw in the tale's characteristically didactic structure an opportunity to satirize the contemporary ills of Spanish society. In the third and longest versions, Pedro de Alarcón uses the tale as a skelton for what could have been a short novel (but which for a variety of reasons falls short of being considered a novel). Alarcón's rendering is the most ambitious and the least faithful to its origins.

### *Juan Holgado and Traga-aldabas*

One of Fernán Caballero's earliest contacts with foreign folklore was Grimm's *kinder und Haus-marchem* which contains a version of the Godfather Death tale. However, there are several indications that she did not use this version as her principal source when writing/wan *Holgado y la muerte*. For example, in the beginning of the story Juan receives a gift which he promptly loses, a common motif in European versions of the tale, but not found in Grimm. Further, Death promises Juan Holgado that she will come for him only when his house begins to crumble, just as in many folktale versions (but not in Grimm) Death promises to come for the doctor only after he has said the Lord's Prayer or made some other preparation for death. These details seem to point to more primitive versions than the one reproduced by Grimm. It is logical to assume that Bóhl de Faber heard the tale in its oral form, as Trueba and Alarcón both claim to have done. This would be in keeping with her intention, as stated in the introduction to the collection, to record some of the Spanish folklore which she feels has been wrongly overlooked in Grimm's compilation «Cuando vimos que España, que tan rica es en toda clase de producciones populares, era el solo país que no había contribuido por su parte a formar la colección, nos propusimos dar a luz estampa algunas de las creaciones que produce en diversos géneros su rica e inagotable musa popular.»<sup>9</sup>

Both *Juan Holgado* and Trueba's *Traga-aldabas* are primitive narratives reminiscent of their northern-European prototypes, and both are virtually lacking in internal character development and the structural complexities of Alarcón's *El amigo de la muerte*. Yet both Caballero and Trueba, while

including several typical motifs of the European versions, have rounded out the narrative with witty provincial dialogue and humorous incidents to whet the reader's interest in the character's plight. For example, the punch-line conclusion of *Juan Holgado*, arising from the character's mistaken notion of what it means to keep one's *house* in order, has been anticipated but is, nevertheless, entertaining, for the reader cannot help comparing himself favorably with the naive doctor. More significantly, both storytellers have seen fit to eliminate the triplicated structures so common to the folktale, perhaps in a conscious effort to *update* the material or mode of expression. Trebling is common in German and Swedish versions in which the poor man meets first God (or the Virgen, a saint, etc.), then the devil, both of whom are rejected as suitable godfathers before a third and final encounter with an impartial Death. Usually the doctor, in order to save the life of his more illustrious patients, tricks Death three times, prompting the angered godfather to carry the doctor off to the cave of life lights. Such trebling of functions does not survive in any of the three Spanish versions.

Outside of the absence of trebling, the nature and ordering of functions in both *Juan Holgado* and *Traga-aldabas* are essentially the same as their traditional counterparts. But because more attention is paid to characterization and verbal expression, Spanish versions tend to be longer. Compare, for example, the exposition of *Juan Holgado* to that of the German version cited below (p. 12):

Pues, señor, han de saber ustedes que había una vez un hombre que se llamaba Juan Holgado, y a lo que a nadie le pudo venir peor el nombre, porque el pobre no tenía más que la mañana y la tarde, tres cuartos de hambre y tres de necesidad.

Pero en cambio tenía un celemín de hijos, con unas tragaderas como tiburones, (p. 105)

The facts presented in this introduction are nearly identical to those of Grimm's version, but the narrator of *Juan Holgado* makes every effort to attract attention to his wit. Readers of preceding stories from the same collection will recognize the typical opening remark used by *tío Romance* to begin a tale.<sup>10</sup> Here, as in the other stories, the tone is confabulatory and facetious, and the prose sparkled with folksy metaphors such as the one which describes Juan's poverty or, in the next sentence, the capacity of his children's mouths.

Thus, Caballero's narrator is both more self-aware than folktale counterparts and significantly more aware of his audience, whom he addresses not as a group of peers, but as a well-bred person resembling the *Fernán* of other stories:<sup>12</sup> «digo esto por no gastar una voz más cruda, pues sé ante quién hablo, y aunque basto, pues entre matas me crié, sé crianza, que mi padre me la enseñó con una castilla de acebuche» (p. 108). Still, like his folktale model, this narrator views his function as one of oral communication; he is pretending to tell his tale out loud, as did generations of storytellers before him.

In addition to the light-hearted treatment of the characters (including Death), together with the narrator's chatty intimacy and the provincial flavor of the prose, Caballero employed other compositional techniques which play little or no role in primitive versions. For example, scenes are rendered more vivid through the use of dialogue and descriptive detail. More than the structure of actions, which has been somewhat reduced by the absence of trebling, Caballero's narrator is concerned with the dynamics of a lively discussion between the two main characters who, however different their station in life, equally value humour, irony and wit as the most effective means of communicating. In contrast to the solemn godfather of European folk models, Death here seems to delight in colloquial expressions and figures of speech. When the wary Juan points out his deficiencies in the field of medicine, Death impatiently replies:

- ¡Dale bola, dale! - dijo la Muerte que se la iba llevando el demonio con tantas dificultades -. ¡Caramba contigo, Juan Holgado, que tienes la cabeza a prueba de bomba! ¿No te estoy diciendo que no importa, que no importa dese hace huna hora? Te digo que me da un pito del saber de los médicos; yo no voy ni vengo porque ellos me llamen ni me sapeen; hago lo que me da mi real gana y me río de los médicos, que cuando se me antoja cojo a uno por la oreja y me lo llevo. Cuando se pobló el mundo no había médicos, y por eso se hizo la cosa pronta y bien, y desde que se inventaron los médicos, se acabaron los Matusalenes. Serás médico y tres más, y si te niegas te llevo conmigo más fijo que el reloj. Ahora atiende, y chitón. En tu vida de Dios has de recetar más que agua de la tinaja, estás? (pp. 106-7)

The author's desire to display to the fullest the verbal agility of her characters led her to expand these dialogues to occupy nearly half of the entire story and to omit key central episodes which depict the doctor's rise to fame, and which are so essential to the structure of the folktale. Even the one episode which shows Juan exercising his power is graced with humorous dialogue, in this case between secondary characters:

- ¡Pues mire usted que salir ahora con esa sopa de ensalada, al cabo de Ramos Pascuas, parece cosa de juego! ¿Se habrá imaginado ese vejestorio, que tiene unas luces como eslabón de madera, que no hay más sino el decir y las gentes creer? Y no es más sino pura fachenda y para que le digan *don Juan*, y el *don* le sienta como a un burro un sombrero de copa alta. (p. 107)

Although a close relationship exists between *Juan Holgado y la muerte* and *Traga-aldabas* there is no reason to suspect Trueba consulted Fernán Caballero's version before composing his own; he, like Alarcón, claims to have come across the tale in its oral form,<sup>13</sup> and indeed, with respect to the argument, the most that can be said of the two works is that they share a common ancestry. The narrative techniques and tone of both are quite similar, although *Traga-aldabas* tends to be more digressive and reiterative. The main difference lies in the ideological focus which in *Traga-aldabas* has been shifted from the theme of Death and the doctor to that of the medical profession as a whole, which is scathingly satirized throughout.

The narrator begins by directing his wit at the pastoral ideal of a shepherd: Lesmes, to be sure, is not a very suitable name for a shepherd, anyone who has read about such things in the «autores más clásicos y autorizados» knows they should be called Nemoroso, Silvano or Batilo and be «guapos, limpios, discretos, músicos, cantores, poetas y enamorados» (p. 185). None of these epithets seems to fit the description of the corpulent Lesmes, «Traga-aldabas.» No amount of science has been able to cure him of his insatiable appetite. Indeed, it is because of this enfermedad that he has had to become, in addition to a shepherd, a country *curandero*, to fatten his purse and thereby his belly.

The opening situation is, as in every folktale, shattered by an unfortunate circumstance which alters the stability of the situation: a plague kills most of the sheep in Lesmes' herd causing a double disaster because the townspeople now argue: «si Traga-aldabas no entiende la enfermedad de las bestias, es inútil que acudamos a él» (p. 186). Lesmes' reaction is one of resignation, he chooses to die rather than face hunger and privation. But Death has reasons for befriending an inept *curandero*: «los médicos malos y los curanderos malos y buenos» have rendered her a great service becoming her instruments, and she would just as soon keep it that way. Thus her intention in keeping Lesmes alive is that of satisfying a debt of gratitude ; Lesmes' mediocrity as a medicaster has meant less work for her. As a doctor, he could be of even greater service, for as his reputation grows more and more healthy people would consult him and he

in turn would make them ill with his *barbaridades*. The lengthy discussion about Lesmes' future occupation serves more to accentuate the author's sarcastic intent than to further the plot. In this instance Trueba simply could not pass up the opportunity to poke fun at the medical profession, even though by doing so he suggests a role for the doctor (that of making people ill) which is never assumed.

When, for the first time, Lesmes applies his newly acquired power to predict the moment of death, the narrator is ready again to display his wit, this time to censure political corruption. Lesmes' first patient is the mayor, who it seems didn't bribe the voters with free drinks, doesn't host sumptuous lunches at the electorate's expense and refuses to pocket fines or dip into the public treasury. In short, it is implied that he is a rarity among mayors who has won the love and respect of his townspeople. After his successful *cure* of the *alcalde* Lesmes' reputation is firmly established. At this point in the traditional folktale (as in Fernán Caballero's adaptation), it is time to show the doctor's own undoing through greed, carelessness or trickery, and his final meeting with Death. The narrator of *Traga-aldabas*, however, cannot resist a humorous digression, which, he would omit «si no viniera tan a cuento». Once again the action is suspended and the medical profession discredited:

Cuéntase que cierto sujeto llamó a un médico y le dijo que estaba enfermo sin saber cuál fuese su enfermedad, pues no le dolía nada.

Lo más raro de este picaro mal, añadió, es que tengo buen humor, buen sueño y buen apetito.

- Pues no le dé a Vd. cuidado, le dijo el médico, que ya le quitaremos a Vd. todo eso.

Y en efecto, a fuerza de cama y medicinas y dieta y sobaduras, le quitó todo aquello, es decir, el buen humor, el buen sueño y el buen apetito, (p. 194)

Sudden fortune makes Lesmes lose sight of his own mortality. The downfall of the poor man favored by, but not immune to, Death serves as a reminder to all would-be doctors that the profession is not held in great esteem by the author, who regards himself as the spokesman of *thepueblo*. The conclusion of *Traga-aldabas* makes this needlessly clear. If Trueba heard this story from the «boca del pueblo» as he claims, he elaborated it to his purposes and in so doing deprived it of much of its folktale flavor:

La moral de esta narración, en que la Muerte no desperdicia ocasión de morder a los médicos, es que los médicos como Dios manda hacen muy mal tercio a la Muerte, y por consiguiente son utilísimos a la humanidad. Conque, señores médicos, a ver si Vds., a fuer de agradecidos, se esmeran en la asistencia del autor de esta narración, que es el pueblo. Por lo que a mí hace, declaro que si Dios me hubiera dado siquiera una pizca de la gracia y la malicia que se necesitan para cultivar la sátira, la emplearía para satirizar a los curanderos titulados, que son aún más numerosos que los titulados curanderos, (p. 202)

### **El amigo de la muerte**

As *Juan Holgado* is the earliest of the three Spanish versions of Godfather Death, predating Alarcón's first edition by two years, one might suspect that the latter had read and used it as a prototype for his *Y amigo de la muerte*. However, Alarcón makes no mention of *Juan Holgado* when he traces the origin of his story in *Historia de mis libros*. He is also dismayed to find that the same tale is the basis of an Italian operetta then popular in Madrid and Valencia. Alarcón claims to have heard the tale from his grandmother, and, whereas he may not always be trustworthy in such matters<sup>15</sup> he is, at least, correct in pointing out the great disparity between his version and the Italian opera entitled *Crispino e la comare*:

... entre la obra lírica dramática y mi cuento notábanse sobradas diferencias externas para justificar esta explicación. En la ópera la Muerte es una vejezuela innoble, y en la mía un caballero invisible, que ejerce la medicina. El discípulo de la negra deidad es casado en la fábula extranjera y soltero en la mía. Allí resuelve grotescos y ruines conflictos de un matrimonio vulgar; aquí da origen a un drama fantástico, con ínfulas de cósmico. . . En suma: no habrá quien me acuse de plagio, por grande que sea su mala fe; y; de todos modos, conste a los leales que yo he sido el primero en delatar al público esta picara casualidad. 15

Indeed, Italian written versions have little in common with any of the three Spanish works. As attested by Alarcón, *Crispino e la Contare*, by Louis and Federico Ricci, centers around the arguments of a married couple corrupted by sudden wealth and petty jealousies.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the other Spanish versions, *El amigo de la muerte* is most serious and its length that of a short novel. Alarcón has transformed the primitive



narration into a grand sentimental love story which has made critics moan, mock or applaud, depending on their appreciation of the post-romantic style which, according to a reproachful Pardo Bazán, filled "muchas páginas con poca prosa."<sup>n</sup> Did Alarcón ruin a perfectly good folktale or did he, on the contrary, expand the tale into a unified and artistically pleasing *nouvelle* which deserves to be reappraised? The fate of *Godfather Death* at the hands of Alarcón mirrors that of many an honest tale turned artistic story during the past century, and for that reason alone it merits study. It is also true that *El amigo* suffers from the unflattering comparisons often made between *El sombrero de tres picos* and everything else Alarcón wrote, with the unfortunate result that the critical bibliography of his work is still very meagre.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons it seems appropriate to examine the work both as a version of the tale and as a representative example of the author's post-romantic style.

The most notable difference between the story and the tales inevitably concerns the narrative mode. Exposition in the folktale is all but dispensed with on the assumption that the reader is not concerned with the motivations of the character but rather only with his actions (or reactions), a fact which makes the past irrelevant. The exposition of most tales is less than a paragraph long, it is straightforward and succinct, and serves chiefly to summarize recent events in the hero's life, as in this introduction recorded by Grimm:

A poor man had twelve children and was forced to work night and day to give them even bread. When therefore the thirteenth came into the world, he knew not what to do in his trouble, but ran out into the great highway, and resolved to ask the first person whom he met to be the godfather.<sup>19</sup>

As in most other sections of the story, the narrator of *El amigo de la muerte* shows little restraint in his exposition, too lengthy to be quoted here. In most of Alarcón's stories the preliminary exposition either follows the first discriminated event of the *fabula* (in which case the story is said to begin *in medias res*), or precedes it in the traditional (in the folktale sense) manner. *El amigo de la muerte*, however, begins with an exposition which is foreshortened by yet another and temporally antecedent exposition. The opening description of the nineteen-year-old Gil Gil is suspended to give entry to a lengthy summary of his past, a continuous block of antecedents beginning with his *sietemesino* birth, the deaths of his mother, his adopted father and his natural father, his education, and so forth, up until the moment of the fictive present, which, however, does not receive full treatment until more details are added to

the original exposition which opened the text. At one point in the interrupting exposition the narrator pretends to be aware that his material is digressive: «Pero nada de esto tiene que ver ahora con mi cuento, llamado *El amigo de la muerte*» (p. 10), but this is simply the tactic of a storyteller who truly enjoys his mission and who, in the next breath, will show why the various facts of the preceding paragraphs are indeed pertinent to understanding the character's circumstance.

The second exposition finally arrives, chronologically, at the moment in time being described in the first exposition, which is then resumed. A specific scene is described: Gil Gil bids farewell to his beloved Elena, who is about to depart for France. It seems that at last the reader is to be plunged into the first discriminated event of the narrative present. Devices such as time referents and dialogue are employed to heighten the illusion of presentness. But once this pseudo-scene concludes, the author interrupts again to say that his story is only now about to begin: «Así lo encontramos al empezar este cuento, que, como ya queda dicho, se titula *El amigo de la muerte*» (p. 14).

Death and Gil Gil become acquainted in Chapters Two and Three. The narrator provides physical descriptions of the *twofriends* but does not otherwise interrupt their conversation with commentary. But, as if unable to contain himself, he returns in force in Chapter Four, appropriately entitled «Digresión que no hace al caso» (p. 26). The action is suspended once again, before it has barely begun, this time to describe an otherworldly walk, which serves no obvious purpose in the narrative other than to manipulate the reader's anticipation. Further digressions, such as the one in Chapter Five which details the power struggle of Spain's royal family, continue throughout Part One of the *nouvelle*. Unfortunately, the dilatory effect of these passages does not always have a beneficial impact on the total composition.

No attempt is made in the folktale to establish mood, either psychological or ambient. The creation of a mood would be reviewed as superfluous by a folktale audience since characters never react to changes of mood but rather to changes of fortune, circumstances beyond their control to predict (such as a sudden confrontation with a bloodthirsty witch). Alarcón reveals Gil Gil's mental anguish on every possible occasion, especially during his three-year separation from Elena. The character's state of mind, amply explored in the text, is notably reflected in his environment. Descriptions of spatial context are, when appropriate, dramatic, and sometimes overcharged with redundant imagery:

Llovía. Era una de esas tristísimas tardes en que parece que hasta los relojes tocan a muerto; en que el cielo está cubierto de nubes y la tierra de lobo; en que el aire, húmedo y macilento, ahoga los suspiros dentro del corazón del hombre; en que todos los pobres sienten hambre, todos los huérfanos frío y todos los desdichados envidia a los que ya murieron, (p. 18)

The last clause illustrates one of the author's favorite narrative techniques: whether describing scene or character, Alarcón's mind works in triplicate, with more thought for dramatics than economy as in this description of Death's eyes, which might have provided parodie material for a number of the author's contemporaries (the numbers are mine):

Eran, sí ( 1 ) unos ojos de sombra, (2) unos ojos de luto, (3) unos ojos muertos. Pero (1) tan apacibles, (2) tan inofensivos, (3) tan profundos en su mudez, que no se podía apartar la vista de ellos. (1) Atraían como el mar; (2) fascinaban como un abismo sin fondo; (3) consolaban como el olvido.

Así fue que Gil Gil, a poco que fijó los suyos en aquellos ojos inanimados, ( 1 ) sintió que un velo negro lo envolvía, (2) que el orbe tornaba al caos, y (3) que el ruido del mundo era como el de una tempestad que se lleva el aire. (p. 23)

By the fourth set of triple the impact intended by the rhetorical device is considerably diminished.

Alarcón's narrative strategy might sometimes falter, bogging the reader down in too much detail, yet other elaborative techniques have precisely the opposite effect. For example, his sense of the dramatic is the most welcome feature of *El amigo*. Even though at times he destroys the air of suspense by revealing too much information or making his characters seem too unsuspecting, he skillfully leads the reader forward with anticipation, using a set of clues, cryptic references to events of the future and especially those already past but not clearly explained. The persistence of dark or melancholic images add to the illusion of mystery and expectancy. As we advance, the clues multiply, some putting us on guard, others throwing us off, all constituting a coding system which is one of the saving graces of *El amigo de la muerte*. As in *El clavo*, some of the clues only become so in retrospect. On the verge of suicide, Gil Gil raises a vial of sulphuric acid to his lips when suddenly he feels the cold hand of Death on his shoulder (p. 19). Inserted between the two

actions, the raising of the glass and the hand grasping the shoulder, is a dotted line marking an elipsis, to heighten the tension of the moment, or to warn the reader that some information has been omitted? There is no reason to suspect at this early moment (the story proper has just begun) that the narrator will be manipulating our knowledge of events through false or misleading clues ; so the latter question might not be posed in a first reading of the text. But, by the end of the chapter «La muerte recobra su seriedad», if not sooner, only Gil is unaware that he is dead; the clues to his real state have become so overwhelming that the only question left to be answered by the text is how long will it take, and in what fashion will Gil realize that he and Elena are not alive?

These questions provide the inspiration for what is really a second part of *El amigo*, one which refashions the temporality of Gil Gil's story by seeing events from Death's perspective.

The narrator concedes that the story might very well have ended after the wedding scene in Chapter XI: «Aquí pudiera terminar la presente historia, y sin embargo, aquí es donde verdaderamente principiará a ser interesante y clara» (p. 72). Such a conclusion would have been more in keeping with his folktale model, but not nearly as engaging as what Alarcón, inspired by Espronceda, Byron, Walter Scott and others, has in store for his readers in Chapters XII (El sol en el ocaso), XIII (Eclipse de luna), XIV (Al fin .. . ¡médico!), XV (El tiempo al revés) and XVI (La muerte recobra su seriedad) which comprise an incredible journey designed to destroy the divisions of time and the constraints of physical space as Gil Gil understands them. Each section contains numerous poetical references and allusions. «El sol en el ocaso», which opens with a quote from Byron (p. 73), describes the waning of civilization and is truly a hymn of praise to the romantic imagery of Alarcón's poetic muses. Now, when his story is all but concluded, Alarcón unleashes his romantic vision to describe the luminous beauty of Elena: her lips, neck and skin, and her body that radiates «entre los pliegues del vestido blanco, al modo que las náyades y las nereidas iluminan con sus bruñidos miembros el fondo de las olas» (p. 78).

Chapter XV («Tiempo al revés») is the most dramatic and fanciful of these chapters. Emulating Espronceda, Alarcón seeks to achieve the speed of Diego's trip from a street corner in Salamanca to Death's mansion. A chariot made of skeletons whisks Gil off for an aerial tour of the world which Death promises will last only three hours but which is instead to shatter his concepts of day and night and prepare him for the fact that the end of time is near. The polarities of day and night, the sun rising and setting in such rapid succession over so many remote sections of the world succeed as a lesson by making Gil question his notion of time and the scale of his own existence within it. The tour finished, the

chariot veers towards the North pole and Death's abode. The house is conspicuous for the absence in it of the figures and images of Espronceda's sombre mansion. Don Diego descends into a crumbling shadowy shell, lit by candles, flanked by «rotas columnas, patios mal seguros, yerbosos, tristes, húmedos y oscuros.»<sup>20</sup> The bleak house contrast with the white glowing figure floating through its corridors. Diego finally falls down a spiral gallery into a black and shapeless abyss. For Alarcón, who portrays Death as man's rescuer, the mansion is a massive ice flow, glistening and marble-like. No pained voices arise from the «escalera de caracol» which leads to Death's salon. Gil's psychological process is the reverse of what Diego undergoes in his final encounter with Death. The mansion is meant to dispel Gil's terror, to release him from any emotion whatever, and to show him that emotions are inappropriate. It resembles a void, an absence of mystery and of all things material: «Imaginaos una total ausencia del calor; una negación completa de vida; la cesación absoluta de todo

movimiento Era el caos sin el embrión del universo; era la nada bajo la apariencia de hielos seculares» (p. 104).

Despite his claims to the contrary, Alarcón's closest model for *El amigo de la muerte* was not the tale he learned from his grandmother. The presence of Espronceda in nearly every aspect of the work is pervasive. The sequence of events which leads from Gil's first encounter with Death to the consciousness of his own death is inspired by Part IV of *El estudiante de Salamanca*, following the same pattern of misperception or equivocation and gradual revelation of Death's identity. Recognizing the model helps us to understand Alarcón's reading of the romantics as well as the process of articulation of the disfigured tale. His imagery, often criticized as reiterative and burdensome, is at least consistent with his romantic vision. Unlike his model, however, Alarcón avoids the clash of opposites in many critical facets of his narration. For example, Gil sees Death as a white-robed, luminous beauty «como la describe Espronceda» (p. 18). But this version, if inspired by the poet, is conspicuous for what it lacks. At the end of Diego's pursuit, the luminous phantasm is transfigured into a skeleton whose boney grasp is ineluctable, and so the illusion is a lie and Diego's life used up. Only beauty and goodness survive in *El amigo*; Death is portrayed as a noble messenger whose task is to prepare Gil's soul for immortality.

The poignancy of contrast is a constant throughout Espronceda's work. The beatific Elvira is all the more fascinating because she contrasts with the scornful audacious Diego. Alarcón rejects the polarity and opts instead for goodness as the sole driving force of his characters. It's as if evil were banned

from *El amigo*. Gil is the antithesis of the rebellious Diego. He thinks of nothing but Elena, in death as in life it is she who guides his will. In his own affairs he is humble to the point of being weak and resigned, relying on Death to restore his birthright and rid him of his poverty. Even the wicked marchioness who tries to prevent the union between Elena and Gil repents on her deathbed.

In his avoidance of evil one is able to appreciate to what extent Alarcón's romantic vision is tempered by his preoccupation with religious salvation. By carefully preparing a heavenly reward for Gil and Elena he clearly rejects Espronceda's pesimism and the «terrible muerte sin futuro»<sup>21</sup> into which his characters are cast. Gil earns the chance to be rescued from damnation because, although he took his own life, he appears to have had no other faults or vices while alive. Elena and Death join together to save his soul and reveal the meaning of spiritual as opposed to phenomenological existence. Gil, in turn, teaches Death that love may transcend even death; he is determined to keep Elena even in the face of eternal night: «¡Ven, ven, noche nebulosa, y envuélvenos en tu negro velo! ¡Ven, aunque hayas de durar siempre! ¡Ven, aunque el día de mañana no amanezca nunca!» (p. 80). Death's goal is to make Gil put aside his love and question instead the meaning of life, not simply whether he and Elena are alive or dead: «¿Qué es el morir? ¿Lo sabes tú acaso? ¿Qué es la vida? ¿Te la has explicado alguna vez? Pues si ignoras el valor de esas palabras, ¿a qué me preguntas si estás muerto o vivo?» (p. 68). Life, as Gil knows it, is only an illusion. He learns that his *life* as a doctor is but an hour's grace granted to Elena to save his soul, and his *death* occurs 600 years before his last meeting with Death, who triumphantly concludes: «¡Eso te dirá lo que es la vida! Los sueños parecen realidades; y las realidades sueños» (p. 110).

In the end Alarcón reconciles the position of his two characters, on the one hand Gil's illusion of eternal love and, on the other, Death's contention that Gil's clamoring for eternal love is but a clamoring for his own soul's immortality. Elena and Gil are granted a heavenly reunion:

- ¡Mío para siempre! - exclamaba Elena estrechando entre las suyas las manos de Gil Gil - ¡Dios te ha perdonado, y viviremos juntos en el cielo!

- ¡Para siempre! - repitió el joven con inefable alegría. La *Muerte* desapareció en esto.

Un frío horrible invadió la estancia, e instantáneamente Gil Gil y Elena quedaron helados, petrificados, inmóviles en aquella religiosa actitud, de rodillas, cogidos de las manos, con los ojos

alzados al cielo, como dos magníficas estatuas sepulcrales, (pp. 113-114)

## Conclusion

Each of the three Spanish versions of *Godfather Death* provides peculiar insights into Nineteenth-century elaborative modes in short fiction. Fernán Caballero has designed a tale pleasing to an audience fond of regionalistic flavor, while at the same time preserving the integrity of her folk models. Both she and Trueba bring Death out of the realm of mystery and terror down to the level of day to day rural conversation. The parley between Death and the poor man in *Juan Holgado* constitutes a lively exchange between two linguistically matched partners. Into her dialogues she injected a special brand of regional humour, an unknown ingredient in all but the Spanish versions, but one which was sure to appeal to her audience if we are to judge by the popularity of her folklore collections.

Trueba, to a far greater degree than Fernán Caballero, uses the tale as a vehicle for satire. In addition to the medical profession which comes under the heaviest attack in *Traga-aldabas*, the narrator takes to task: people who would rather be sick and cured than healthy, members of the king's court who would like to see their sovereign die so they might have a lovely coronation ceremony for his successor, a certain doña López who exclaims «¡Qué fastidio!» when told that an execution for which she is dressed in her best finery has been stayed, the Spanish people who enjoy hangings, «operación que debe ser en extremo ingeniosa y divertida cuando el pueblo que debe ser el más culto de España gusta de presenciarla,» (p. 197) and the Spanish nobility, which debilitates the common people and destroys the offices of the king.

Although the tale Alarcón heard from his grandmother probably differed little from the ones which inspired *Traga-aldabas* and *Juan Holgado y la muerte* Alarcón's imagination, sentimentality, and sense of the supernatural led him to expand the story nearly beyond recognition. Even the motif of Death as a godfather does not survive, although Gil Gil, like Lesmes and Juan, is granted the power to forecast the moment of death according to the position of his *friend* at the foot or the head of a sick man's bed. Some elements of the primitive folktale have disappeared altogether while others, such as the trip to the cave of life lights, have been extended and transformed, not only to please an audience fed on Alphonse Karr and E.T.A. Hoffman, but to satisfy the author's need to communicate his peculiar version of the romantic hero. To this end Alarcón felt compelled to add suspense, love, royal intrigue, spiritual

salvation, reflections on time and immortality, a trip to the North Pole and, to leave nothing out, the end of the world as described in post-apocalyptic visions.

While Fernán Caballero and Antonio de Trueba reveal their hostility towards the medical profession and all that is not rooted in popular tradition, Alarcón is hostile towards realism. What he admires in Walter Scott is what he sought to create in his version of the Godfather tale. Like Scott, Alarcón speaks constantly to «la imaginación de sus lectores, los transporta fuera de su tiempo, les revela la historia, les hace asistir a poéticos, maravillosos y excepcionales dramas.*mi* Alarcón believed that in the «regiones superiores» of the soul reigns a higher reality than the one which we face in our day-to-day relationship with the material world. This higher reality is inextricably bound to his notion of spiritual salvation and the soul as the province of God.

## NOTAS

1 Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* (Helsinki 1932-36), 337; *The Types of the Folk-Tale: Antti Aarne's Verzeichnis der Marchentypen Translated and Enlarged*, F.F. Communications, no. 74 (Helsinki 1928)

2 Thus it was aptly described by Thomas A. Cullason in his article «The Short Story: An Underrated Art,» *Studies in Short Fiction* II (1964), 13-31.

3 See, for example, the Swedish version in *One Hundred Favorite Folktales*, ed. Stith Thompson (Bloomington 1968), 73-76.

4 According to Boite and Voivka, *Anmerkungen zuden Kinder un Haus-märchenderBruderGrimm*, I(Leipzig 1913-32),377-388,andR. Th. Christiansen «Nogen lagttageiser over et par 'Episke Love' indenfor to Eventyrgrupper»,*Danske Studier*, XII (1915), 72-78, there exist over 124 variants of the tale, mostly from northern Europe, some dating as far back as the early century. To my knowledge there were no early British or American versions. See: Ralph Steele Boggs, *Bibliography of Latin American Folktales* (New York 1940), Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague 1966), and Tom Peele Cross, *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature* (Indiana 1969).

5 All citations of *Juan Holgado y la muerte* are from *Cuentos y poesías populares andaluzas* in *Obras de Fernán Caballero*, ed. Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, CXL (Madrid 1961), 105-108.

6 Vol. XLI (1850). The edition cited in this paper is *m.Narraciones populares* (Leipzig 1875), 185-202.



7 The version cited here is the last of these, in *Novelas cortas*, 3rd Series (Madrid 1920), 10-115.

8 First edition (Berlin 1912-15), according to Agatha Cavallo *The Use of Folklore in the Works of Fernán Caballero*. University of Chicago Masters Thesis (Chicago 1925), 7.

9 Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, CXL, 63-64.

10 It is worth nothing that unlike the other introductory formulas, this one is directed to a plural reader, even though it begins with the familiar «Pues, señor». It would seem that Bóhl de Faber made a conscious effort to vary the formula using elsewhere: «Pues, señor, ha de saber usted que había una vez», «Pues señor, había una vez», «Pues, señor, érase», or simply «Había una vez», «Habíase», and «Erase».

11 The narrator of Bóhl de Faber's stories usually identifies himself in the masculine singular, a convention while Emilia Pardo Bazan also adopted in her short stories.

12 In *Tío Curro el de la porra* and *La oreja de Lucifer* the tío Romance tells his stories at the insistence of a person identified as Fernán, whose goal is to record oral folklore. This narrative persona is sympathetic, in a paternalistic fashion, to the storyteller, but remains apart from him, apparently making a distinction in social rank or education.

13 In his introduction to *Traga-aldabas m El Museo Universal XI* (no. 41, October 12, 1967), 327, Trueba writes: «El cuento que voy a contar carece de la intención moral y filosófica que deben tener los cuentos en estos tiempos en que ni siquiera hay niños a quien contar los que no la tienen, porque los niños, ya no son niños, que son hombres pequeñitos. Le he recogido de boca del pueblo, el pueblo, y no yo, es su autor, y en este concepto, si hay alguna agudeza en él, probará que el pueblo es agudo, y esto ya es algo en unos tiempos en que se escriben y publican tantas cosas que prueban únicamente que sus autores son agudos como punta de colchón.»

14 Concerning Alarcón's reliability Montesinos comments: «... debido a su educación romántica y a sus exageraciones post-románticas, Alarcón no tomó nunca muy en serio la exactitud histórica -sobre todo allí donde el sujeto de la historia era él mismo.» *Pedro Antonio de Alarcón* (Zaragoza 1950), 9, note 12.

15 *Historia de mis libros* in *Obras*, IV (Madrid 1909), 208.

16 *Crispino e la comare* was first presented in Venice in 1850. It was later reproduced in Barcelona in 1854, Cadiz in 1858 and Madrid in 1868. Since the first version of *£7 amigo de la muerte* was published in 1852, it is safe to assume Alarcón did not consult the play before writing his story. Unfortunately,

Alarcón was unaware of these facts when he defended the originality of his work. The operetta was based on an earlier comedy by Salvatore Fabbrichesi, // *medico e la morte*, which is similar to it in most respects. One of the two versions probably furnished the plot for a later *novella* by Giovanni Forteguerra which expands the married couple's dilemma and resurrects a host of mythological figures, among them Jove, Mercury, Minerva and Proserpina to further complicate an already untidy argument. The Spanish and Italian versions, then, only share a common ancestral argument; they are in all other respects dissimilar. See *Novelle edite e inedite de Ser Giovanni Forteguerra* (Bologna 1882), 14-41. The original edition was published by G. Papanti in *Catalogo dei Novellieri italiani in prosa* (Livorno 1871). Neither version met with much success; Forteguerra's was a limited edition of only 202 copies.

17 *Obras* (Madrid 1883), 93, cited in Baquero Goyanes, *7 cuento español en el siglo XIX* (Madrid 1949), 242. Baquero Goyanes considers *Las narraciones inversosimiles* to be the least fortunate part of Alarcón's narrative production. Montesinos, on the other hand, praises *El amigo* despite its «lunares» (*Pedro Antonio de Alarcón*, 130). The opinion of Azorin is also favorable although it is not shared by present day critics: «Qué poder formidable de genio en *El amigo de la muerte*. ... No hay en las literaturas europeas modernas nada que supere a estas narraciones citadas», *Andando y pensando* (Madrid 1929), 216.

18 Leaving aside the question of style, Donald Shaw attributes the neglect to Alarcón's didacticism: «Pedro Antonio de Alarcón (1833-91) remains, in spite of his immense contemporary popularity and the polemics caused by his work, probably the least studied of the major nineteenth-century novelists. There can be no doubt that the neglect is due to his being foremost among the writers who inherited Fernán Caballero's view of the novel as a vehicle for 'buenas ideas'.» *A Literary History of Spain: The Nineteenth Century* (London 1972), 51.

Montesinos feels Alarcón failed because he was a victim of his own romantic style (p. iii, prologue), and he ignored the limits of his talent choosing not to pursue the kind of styles at which he was most adept (pp. 180-81).

19 *The Complete Household Tales of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm*, ed. Louis and Bryna Untermeyer II (New York 1962), 727-29.

20 *El estudiante de Salamanca*, ed. José Moreno Villa (Madrid 1971), 242-243.

21 Pedro Salinas «Espronceda (La rebelión contra la realidad)» in *Ensayos de literatura hispánica (Del Cantar de Mío Cid a García Lorca)*, 2nd ed. (Madrid 1961), 264-65.

