CHAPTER 4

CROSSING AND DOUBLE CROSSING: ISLAMIC CONQUERORS IN THE CRÓNICA SARRACINA

Acosta and the Great Schism

The death of King Acosta opens the Crónica sarracina (c.1430), Pedro de Corral’s historical narrative of the fall of King Rodrigo and the Muslim invasion of Spain:¹

En el tiempo que el buen Rey Acosta, Rey de toda España, murió en Toledo, fijo que fue del Rey Antanta, fícaron del Rey Acosta dos fíjos pequeños, al uno dezían don Sancho, e al otro Elier. E a la ora que fue muerto e lo sopieron por toda España, fue la buelta tan grande que todas las más gentes e de los más altos onbres de toda España se comenzaron luego a guerrear unos contra otros. (2001, 1, 93)²

The keynote of the work is schism, and our introduction to Rodrigo, who is called to take the throne by the most authoritative men of the kingdom, set against a background of vicious and unsustainable civil strife. The narrative describing Rodrigo’s downfall was well-known at the time Corral was writing, having been widely diffused in the chronicle tradition, and readers of his work would have been anticipating Rodrigo’s terrible sexual misdemeanor and its dramatic consequences. However, Corral’s text starts with rather surprising attention to a generalized climate of strife predating Rodrigo’s kingly career. Rodrigo emerges as an exemplary character, chosen for his qualities as an “onbre bueno y muy sesudo, y esforçado e ardid” (1, 94), yet he is brought into the center of a polemical world, where tensions between hereditary and elected kingship are rife while the sons of Acosta remain too young to govern, and where he is left quite literally to amend the climate of thieving and violence left by

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Acosta’s death (i, 96). We are encouraged to view Rodrigo’s personal narrative of sin and castigation within a broader frame of strife and division, and this highly original element of Corral’s work has important repercussions for our interpretation of the text. This broad narrative frame reappears at other strategic points. The death of Acosta is re-evoked in the context of a lament about the internecine war that has broken out among the Goths, “¡Ay qué malo fue el día que el Rey Acosta murió para venir tanto de mal por su muerte!” (i, 139). The motif of schism then reappears in striking figurative terms at the very end of Part One when the queen pronounces a wish that the earth would open up and form a chasm in which she might hide: “¡O tierra, abre a ti misma! E tú, Señor del mundo, faz una grand sima que abaste a las más baxas partes de la tierra en que se esconda esta desconsolada reina vista de toda crueldad” (i, 652). The placement of schism at key structural points is confirmed by the ending of Part Two, a recounting of the written denigration of treachery on Rodrigo’s grave, where Count Julian is denounced as the instrument of division: “matador de su señor, destruidor de su tierra, e aleuoso contra los suyos” (ii, 405).3

The governing motif of schism shapes the portrayal of Islamic figures in the work and prevents them from being read in the binary terms favored by some critics, and common in scholarship on the presence of Islam in Spanish literature, as either the maligned “other” or with guarded praise, as a means of reflecting further glory on Christian success.4 A text that announces its matter as splitting and strife requires a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between two entities, be they Christian or Islamic. In this chapter I argue that Islamic conquerors are depicted in a setting that is divided, sorrowful, and sinful. In this setting, the role of the Moorish characters is not that of the “other” against which the Christians define themselves, but as central actors in a tale of flexible and shifting loyalties where the crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar is only the most literal demonstration of crossing, and crossover, in a work that explores the creation and repercussions of schism and betrayal. Henry Berlin’s articulation of the role of the Moors in the chronicle as revealing “much more interior disquiet than hatred of the invaders” is a helpful correlative to this view, linking the suffering staged in conquest scenes with “not a case, then, of radical otherness, but rather of the exteriorization of an internal discomfort, a projection” (2009, 120). However, his contention that the Moors undergo objectification, and are “imbued with autochthonous values and fears” (2009, 120) seems to undervalue their active presence in the text, and particularly in establishing and asserting the very subjective dynamic of loyalty and betrayal. The fact that this dynamic is the very axis of the work also means that the reader