

Spanish Ballads of Charlemagne II

Published by John Adams College

Translator's Introduction

The French Epic, *The Song of Roland*, began as an oral tradition before being written down, likely for the first time between 1040 and 1115 CE. Its characters continued to appear throughout French literature, and its influence extended beyond France. Because the battle of Roncevaux (the battle the epic is based upon) took place in España between Muslim warriors and French knights; this gave a special opportunity for the scholarly world of España to create and tell their own stories from the Spanish perspective. In 1920, the resulting ballads, based on the French Epic, were taken in their original Spanish by Guy Le Strange and compiled into a concise book format. Le Strange was a British oralist known for his research on the historical geography of the traditional Middle East and Islamic world, as well as for his expertise in Spanish, Arabic, and Persian. These Ballads comprise #49-53 of his compilation. They tell the stories of the noble Knight Don Gaiferos and his loyal wife Julianesa. They tell of the courtly love that possessed the Saracen Princess Rosaflorida, a young maiden yearning for her Christian Knight, Montesino. They tell of a humble pilgrim Knight and an angry Knight avenging the blood of his brethren. Ballad #49 is the romance of Julianesa. This ballad tells the story of Julianesa, also known as Melisenda, the wife of the noble knight Don Gaiferos. Much of what is known about Julianesa and her husband comes from *Don Quixote*, in which a puppet show depicts her as the daughter of Charlemagne (Cervantes 742). Although the ballad tradition does not explicitly confirm this lineage, her title of “Infanta,” or princess, suggests noble origins and possible ties to Charlemagne’s family. In this ballad, Don Gaiferos laments his journey to rescue his wife, who has been taken captive by Muslims. Meanwhile, Julianesa, held by her captors, is overcome with emotion as she reflects on her husband’s loyalty and devotion.

Ballad #50 shifts focus to Don Gaiferos himself, a knight of Charlemagne’s court, much like Roland. His story emerges later in the medieval heroic tradition, portraying him as an adventurous figure devoted to his wife, Melisenda. He is again referenced in *Don Quixote*, where a puppet show dramatizes his rescue of her. In his own ballad, Gaiferos demonstrates his bravery by escaping Muslim captivity and returning to Christian lands, not before killing one of his captors. Together, Ballads #49 and #50 provide a more complete picture of their relationship and shared narrative.

Ballad #51 presents the courtly love story of Rosaflorida and the Christian knight Montesinos. Rosaflorida, a Muslim princess, embodies a perspective that differs from the primarily Christian narratives of the earlier ballads. She falls deeply in love with Montesinos despite never having met him, reflecting a classic ideal of courtly love rooted in admiration from afar. The ballad

takes the form of a confession, as Rosafiorida expresses her longing to a trusted chambermaid. Montesinos himself is linked to the legendary knight Durandarte, a figure associated with Charlemagne's court. According to tradition, Durandarte, as he lay dying, entrusted Montesinos with the task of delivering his heart to his beloved, Belerma, a duty Montesinos faithfully fulfills. This connection reinforces Montesinos' image as a loyal and honorable knight, further elevating him as an idealized figure in Rosafiorida's devotion.

Ballad #52 is the ballad of the Palmero. Palermo means a pilgrim in Spanish. Throughout the Roland cycle of knights and heroes, the pilgrim knight is not a single character with a definitive background and storyline; he is used when the role of a wanderer adds depth to the story. His story and character change depending on who tells it. His character was passed on through oral tradition and has been changed over and over again. In this specific ballad, he is a wanderer who enters the court of King Charlemagne in search of the king. Upon finding him and two of the noble knights, he offends them and is sentenced to death. Right before he dies, upon the queen's request, it is discovered that he is the son of King Charlemagne and his queen.

The last ballad in this translated selection is the story of The Infante Vengador, or avenging prince, which is much like the pilgrim knight in the sense that he is not a stable or fixed character but rather a figure attached to a given purpose throughout the poems, serving in whatever role is needed. The Infante Vengador is a recurring dramatic role. He is often portrayed as an avenging son of a father who has been killed, or a disguised figure returning from exile. In this ballad, he is an avenging knight who has come to seek a traitor and kill him. His success is rewarded by betrothal to King Charlemagne's daughter.

Translator's Notes

As I translated these ballads, I had to decide how to present them on the page. After comparing different translation approaches and drawing on my knowledge of Spanish, I chose to translate and present them as prose narratives rather than strict poetic stanzas. Reimagining the verses as story-like allowed the imagery to feel more like real-life experiences, bringing the characters' emotions and struggles into sharper focus. This approach emphasizes the human experiences within the ballads, rather than their original structure. I present these translations as stories, inviting readers to engage with the imagery and emotion in a more firsthand way.

Aurelia Anderson,
John Adams College, April 2026

The Ballad of Julianesa

(#49)

Up, you dogs, up! May a wretched fury strike you dead! On Thursday, you slaughter the swine, and on Friday, you feast upon the meat. Alas! For today marks seven years that I have wandered through this valley, my feet are bare, my toenails running with blood; I eat raw flesh and drink the scarlet blood, searching in sorrow for my dear Julianesa, the daughter of the King, for the Moors have snatched her away from me on the morning of Saint John's Day while she gathered roses and flowers in her father's garden. Julianesa heard his words, for she lay in the arms of the Moor, and the tears streaming from her eyes fell upon the Moor's face.

The Ballad of Don Gaiferos

(#50)

It was just past midnight, and the roosters were about to crow, when the adventurous knight Gaiferos escaped from captivity; he left the jailer and all those with him dead. He went down a street there like a man of the land, chattering away as one who knows the ways of the Muslims well. He came to the gate of the city, and there he found the gates closed, and he found no way to get through. Seeing himself lost, he began to call out: "Open the gate for me, Moor, may Allah protect you from harm! I am a messenger; I carry letters with a message for the King."

When the Moor speaks, you will hear clearly what he says: "If you are a messenger, my friend, and you carry letters with a message, wait until dawn, and you will leave with the others."

When Gaiferos heard this, you shall hear what he says: "Open the door for me, Moor, may Allah protect you from harm. I'll give you three gold coins, for here they're no longer of use to me."

A Moorish woman who was in the high towers heard all this and began to speak to him thus, "Take the coins, Moor, for you'll need them; you have a young wife and small children to raise."

When the Moor heard this, he rose with great force and threw the closed doors wide open. Gaiferos remembered the sword he carried and struck off the Moor's head from his shoulders. The Moor fell dead; he fell dead to the ground.

When the Moorish woman saw this, she began to scream; her screams were so loud they seemed to reach the heavens, "I Abrasmonte, Abrasmonte, the lord of this place!" By the time the Arabs realized Gaiferos had escaped, he was already in Christendom.

The Ballad of Rosaflorida

(#51)

In Castile, there is a castle called Rocafrida; the castle is called Roca, and the fountain is called Frida. Its base is of gold and its battlements of silver. Between each battlement lies a sapphire stone; it shines as brightly at night as the sun at noon. Inside was an Arab Princess named Rosaflorida; seven counts and three dukes of Lombardy had tried in vain to court her, she spurned them all, such was her beauty. She fell in love with the noble Montesinos by gossip, not by sight.

One night, while she was there, Rosaflorida cried out, a chambermaid heard her, “What is this, my lady? What is this, Rosaflorida? Are you suffering from lovesickness, or have you gone mad?”

“I am neither lovesick nor mad, but take these letters to France, well sealed. Give them to my Montesinos, the one I love most; tell him to come see me for Easter. I will give him my body to adore, the most beautiful in all of Castile. If not, my sister, may she be consumed by fire. And if he loves me more, I would give him much more: I will give him seven castles, the finest in all of Castile.”

The Ballad of the Pilgrim Knight

(#52)

From Mérida comes the pilgrim: his feet were bare, blood trickling from his toenails. He wears a tattered cloak, not worth a single maravedí, and underneath he hides another, one that’s worth a whole city! for neither king nor emperor could match such a thing. He heads straight for Paris, that city; he asks neither for an inn nor, much less, for a hospital: he asks for the palaces of King Charlemagne. A doorman stands at the gate, and he begins to speak to him: “Tell me, doorman, where is King Charlemagne?” The doorman, seeing him, was greatly amazed that such a poor pilgrim would come to ask for the king. “Tell me, sir, do not worry about that.”

“He was at Mass, pilgrim, over there at San Juan de Letran, where an archbishop says Mass, and a cardinal officiates.” The pilgrim, upon hearing this, set off for San Juan: as he entered through the gate, you will see what he did. He humbled himself before God in heaven and before Saint Mary, His Mother; he humbled himself before the archbishop; he humbled himself before the cardinal because he was celebrating Mass, not because he deserved more: he humbled himself before the emperor and his royal crown, he humbled himself before the twelve who eat bread at one table. Oliveros was not humiliated, nor was Don Roldan, because they had a nephew in Moorish captivity, and even though they could, they were not going to rescue him. As soon as Oliveros saw this, as soon as Roldan saw this, they both drew their swords and went after the pilgrim knight. The pilgrim used his staff to shield his body. Then the good king spoke; you will

hear well what he says: “Wait, wait, Oliveros, wait, wait, Don Roldan, either this pilgrim is mad, or he comes from royal blood.” He took him by the hand and began to speak, “Tell me, you pilgrim, don't deny me the truth: in what year and month did you cross the sea?”

“In May, Sire, I crossed it. Because one day I was by the seashore in my father's orchard, taking a break: the Moors captured me, took me across the sea, and presented me to the Infanta of Sansuena. The moment the Infanta saw me, she fell in love with me. The life I used to lead, O King, I wish to tell you. I would sit at his table and lie down in his bed.”

Then the good King spoke; listen well to what he said: “Let anyone who wishes take such a captivity. Tell me, pilgrim, can I go and win it?”

Then spoke Oliveros and Don Roldan, “Do not go there, good King. Good King, do not go there, for Mérida is very strong; it will defend itself well. It has three hundred castles, a sight to behold, and even the smallest of them will defend itself well against you.”

“You're lying, sir,” said the pilgrim, “you're lying and not telling the truth, for there aren't a hundred castles in Mérida—not even ninety, as far as I can tell, and the ones Mérida does have, no one is there to defend them, for they have neither lords nor anyone to guard them.” When the pilgrim heard this, overcome with great sorrow, he raised his right hand and slapped Roldán across the face.

Then the king spoke with fury and great sorrow: “Take him, my executioner, and hang him.” The executioner took him to carry out the sentence, and even at the foot of the gallows, the pilgrim knight spoke: “Oh, what a misfortune, King Charlemagne! May God punish you, for you are ordering the hanging of your only son.”

The queen, who had stopped to watch, interjected, “Stop, justice, do not harm him, for if he were my son, it could not be hidden; he must have a distinctive birthmark on one side.” They were already taking him to the queen; they were already taking him away: they stripped him of a cloak that wasn't worth a single maravedí; they stripped him of another that was worth a city: there they found the mark of birthright. Such was their joy that no one can describe it.

The Ballad of the Avenging Knight

(#53)

Behold, behold, here comes the avenging knight, riding side-saddle on a swift steed, his cloak draped over his arm, his face pale, and in his right hand a sharp spear. With the tip of the spear, they draw out a plowshare. Seven times it was tempered in the blood of a dragon, and just as many times it was sharpened so it might cut better: the blade was forged in France, and the shaft in Aragon; he carried it with him on the wings of his falcon. He is set to seek out Don Cuadros,

Don Cuadros the traitor, whom he would find alongside the emperor; he holds the staff in his hand, for he was the chief justice. Seven times he thought about it, whether to throw it or not, and on the eighth time he hurled the spear at him. But instead of hitting Don Cuadros, he struck the emperor: the spear pierced through his cloak and tunic which were made of iridescent silk; it sank more than a span into the tiled floor. There, the king spoke to him; you will hear well what he said:

“Why did you throw it at me, Prince? Why are you throwing it at me, Traitor?”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, I was not aiming at you, no: I was aiming at that traitor Cuadros, that false deceiver, who had seven brothers, none of whom he spared, save for me: that is why, before you, good king, I struck him down.”

Everyone turned on Don Cuadros, and they would not have spared the prince, had it not been for a maiden, the emperor’s daughter, who took them by the hand and led them onto the field. In the first skirmish, Cuadros fell to the ground. The prince dismounted, cut off his head, and impaled it on his lance, presenting it to the good king. When the king saw this, he married him to his daughter.