

## A Converso in the Canary Islands: Counter-Narratives of Spanish Imperialism in Agustín Millares Torres' *Aventuras de un converso* (1877)

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### Abstract

The Converso, a descendant of Jews, is one of Spain's historically marginalized figures. The importance of *limpieza de sangre*, the concept of blood purity, in early-modern Spain, is testament to the outsized role of Conversos in the Spanish imaginary. Despite this presence, however, Converso characters rarely appear in works of literature, even in the nineteenth century, when Spain rediscovers an interest in its Jewish past. Hence the uniqueness of *Aventuras de un converso* (1877) by the Canarian writer Agustín Millares Torres, a historical novel with a Converso protagonist. As the text recounts the Castilian expedition to conquer Gran Canaria in 1478, it may seem strange, at first glance, that Millares Torres should choose a Converso protagonist. The two issues are seemingly unconnected. Yet Millares Torres draws a parallel between Spanish intolerance towards Jews and Conversos on the mainland and the cruelty and fanaticism with which the conquerors treat the natives on the islands. Thus, the conquest of the Canary Islands becomes part of a broader dynamic of rejection of ethnic and religious difference, which culminates in the novel with the establishment of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews. In this chapter, I will examine how Millares Torres draws on the critical irony of the Converso voice—which is at work, for example, in the picaresque genre—to formulate a critique of Spain's imperial history and its tradition of religious intolerance. Moreover, through the experiences of the Converso, as well as the indigenous Canary Islanders, the novel advocates for hybridity and religious freedom, in a clear echo of the nineteenth-century concerns of its liberal author.

### Keywords

Spanish novel – Agustín Millares Torres – conversos in literature – antisemitism – Canary Islands in literature

The historical marginalization of Jews and Jewishness in Spain is most clearly manifest, perhaps, in the development of “limpieza de sangre”, or blood purity, which dominated the social life of Spaniards between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on purity of lineage and the importance of avoiding the ‘stain’ of Jewish ancestry became so fundamental that for Américo Castro “limpieza de sangre” becomes the “columna vertebral del alma española desde el siglo XVI”.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the somewhat essentialist nature of Castro’s discourse, his comment speaks to the historical othering of Jewishness in Spain. On this point, Christiane Stallaert makes a cogent case for the transformation of Jewishness from a religious to an ethnic category through the rise of blood purity.<sup>3</sup> The historical significance of “limpieza de sangre” in Spain, however, paradoxically implies a central role for Jewishness as a uniquely significant marker of deviance and marginality. Yet, at the same time as blood purity becomes paramount, Spanish culture appears to conspire in forgetting its marginalized other. In his comprehensive study, *Los judíos en la literatura española*, Rafael Cansino-Asséns argues that, after the expulsion of 1492, “El judío desaparece, se borra en la conciencia de los españoles y sólo asomará alguna que otra vez en su literatura como figura de leyenda y vestido con arreos históricos”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Jews appear surprisingly infrequently in Spanish literary works. Even rarer, however, are those of Jewish ancestry, the Conversos, whose very existence created the moral panic about blood purity in medieval Spain.

*Aventuras de un converso* (1877), by Agustín Millares Torres, is unusual in this regard. Its protagonist is a Converso, an orphan of Jewish ancestry, who joins a seafaring mission to subdue and conquer Gran Canaria. The novel forms part of a clear renewal of interest in Spain’s Jewish (and Muslim) history towards the end of the nineteenth century, a trend driven by Romanticism earlier in the century, liberal questions about the country’s historical missteps, and a reevaluation of Spain’s relationship with its historical Others that formed part of emerging colonial interests in North Africa. In this period, Jewish characters begin to populate the pages of Spanish fiction, alongside their Muslim

1 Julio Caro Baroja, *Los judíos en la España moderna y contemporánea I* (Madrid: Ediciones ISTMO, 1986), 134.

2 Américo Castro, *Cervantes y los casticismos españoles* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1974), 74.

3 Christiane Stallaert, “La España de la limpieza de sangre. Una interpretación antropológica de una reacción étnica” in *El antisemitismo en España*, edited by Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida & Ricardo Izquierdo Bonito (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2007), 107–8.

4 Rafael Cansino-Asséns, *Los judíos en la literatura española* (Barcelona: Columna Edicions, 193), 27.

and Morisco counterparts. This is all the more striking, when one takes into account that, unlike in other European countries, such as England, France or Germany, no Jews resided in nineteenth-century Spain. Nevertheless, as Anita Benaim Lasry argues, “no hay personajes judíos en las obras de primer orden de la alta literatura europea del siglo XIX, fuera de España”, which indeed suggests that Spain enjoyed a unique relationship with its medieval others that was not present in other national contexts.<sup>5</sup> Yet in a country without Jews, what form did this engagement take? How were Jewish characters portrayed?

Critical studies of Jewish characters in nineteenth-century Spanish literature tend to begin with Galdós. Danielle Rozenberg, for instance, states that “el primer autor español en introducir un personaje judío fue Benito Pérez Galdós, en *Gloria*”.<sup>6</sup> Sarah E. Schyfter, meanwhile, suggests that Galdós creates the “most comprehensive portrait of the Jew as he exists in the culture, the religion and the fabric of Spanish history and society”.<sup>7</sup> In her overview of his Jewish characters, Schyfter argues that in the literary universe Galdós creates, to be a Jew is to be “an outsider, a misfit and a dreamer”.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, his Jewish characters serve a common purpose: “to point out the deficiencies of a nation and a religion [Catholicism] that excluded and isolated them”.<sup>9</sup>

Agustín Millares Torres shares with Galdós his origins in the Canary Islands. In *Aventuras de un converso* (1877), he similarly seeks inspiration in the marginalized figures of Spain’s medieval past. Although lesser-known, the Converso protagonist, Juan, appears in the same year as the well-known Daniel Morton in *Gloria* (1877) and eight years before the first appearance of the Converso moneylender Francisco Torquemada in *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1886). In addition to their Canarian origins, moreover, both writers share a liberal outlook, which is evident in their writing. While we have seen that Galdós turns to Jewish characters to criticize aspects of Spanish history, Álvarez Chillida points out that the publication of *Gloria* in 1877 was a deliberate intervention by the author in the contemporary debate on religious tolerance in Spain.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, *Aventuras de un converso* must also be read in the light of Millares Torres’

5 Anita Benaim Lasry, *El judío como héroe de novela: Humanización del personaje judío en algunas novelas españolas de los siglos XIX y XX* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Judeo-Cristianos, 1980), 51.

6 Danielle Rozenberg, *La España contemporánea y la cuestión judía* (Madrid: Casa Sefarad-Israel, Marcial Pons Historia, 2010), 95.

7 Sarah E. Schyfter, *The Jew in the Novels of Benito Perez Galdós* (London: Tamesis Books, 1978), 7.

8 Sarah E. Schyfter, *The Jew in the Novels of Benito Perez Galdós*, 8.

9 Sarah E. Schyfter, *The Jew in the Novels of Benito Perez Galdós*, 8.

10 Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida, *El antisemitismo en España: la imagen del judío, (1812–2002)* (Madrid: Marcial Pons 2002), 164.

political liberalism. His commitment to reform and to a liberal reading of Spanish history is evident in the works he published as a historian such as *Historia de la Gran Canaria* (1860), and particularly, his *Historia de la Inquisición en Canarias* (1874).

In *Aventuras de un converso* Millares Torres builds on his historical interest in the Canary Islands and draws an explicit connection between the marginality of the archipelago within Spain and the marginalization of Jewishness discussed above. In effect, he intertwines the story of the Canary Islands with that of Spain's Conversos, by highlighting the historical connections between religious persecution on the mainland and conquest overseas. Moreover, Millares Torres makes use of the outsider status of his Converso protagonist to draw attention to the traditional marginalization of the Canary Islands in the Spanish historical imagination. In the novel, he seeks to reverse this situation, by highlighting the importance of the Canary Islands as a precursor to Spanish conquest in the Americas.

This chapter will examine these multiple discourse of marginality in the novel. It will seek to elucidate the mechanisms of representation, through which the Converso, as a symbolic victim of the historical drive for purity, is used by a liberal writer to denounce intolerance and fanaticism, as well as to stake a claim for a specific Canarian identity. Moreover, it will show how the novel places the conquest of the Canary Islands within a wider historical matrix of Spanish overseas expansions. Thus, colonization of the islands is presented as a political experiment, in which the subjugation, evangelization and enslavement of its native population would become the model for engagement with the indigenous populations of the New World.

## 1 The Converso as Outsider

*Aventuras de un converso* is set in 1478, the year in which Juan Rejón set sail from the Puerto de Santa María on a mission to conquer Gran Canaria. His commission, from the Catholic Monarchs, came at a time of increasing consolidation and centralization of power, in the final years of the Christian 'Reconquista' of the Iberian Peninsula. Within this historical context, the novel offers a fictionalized account of Rejón's expedition to Gran Canaria.

It begins with the scene of a rustic lunch shared between an old soldier and his ten-year-old daughter, who are on their way to Puerto de Santa María to join the mission. While eating, they encounter a young traveler, who has been on the road for two days and is hungry. They offer him some bread, discover that he too is planning to enlist in the expedition, and decide to travel together. The

stranger, Juan, reveals his unfortunate past and his reason for leaving home. We discover that he is an orphan, with no recollection of his parents or childhood. He explains that he is a descendant of *Cristianos nuevos*, or Conversos and that he was raised by a priest in Seville, who never failed to remind him of his inferior status owing to his Jewish origins. After accidentally overhearing that the priest has arranged to sell him into slavery, Juan decides to escape and plans to join the expedition to Gran Canaria in order to seek his fortune.

When he arrives at the Puerto de Santa María, Juan goes to a local convent to visit the priest's niece, Magdalena. She was the only person to show kindness to Juan as a child and he wishes to bid her farewell before sailing to Gran Canaria. After speaking with her, Juan takes a nap in a confessional and wakes up to overhear a conspiracy between the Mother Superior and her brothers, the dean and the ship's captain. They intend to send their orphaned niece, Isabel, on the expedition to Gran Canaria, where the captain can contrive to leave her behind, so they can seize her inheritance. Juan decides not to reveal to anyone what he has heard, but to make it his goal to protect Isabel throughout the mission.

From the brief plot summary above, we see that Juan inadvertently overhears conspiracies on two separate occasions. Yet in both instances he is powerless to act directly because of his low status in society. Instead, he must act extremely carefully and tread a fine line between his public persona and his true intentions. These incidents can serve as a metaphor for the function of the Converso in the text, as well as the life of the Converso in early-modern Spain. The Converso is above all an outsider: he listens from the margins and discovers a hostile society that conspires to shut him out. Moreover, an acute awareness of cruelty, through personal experience, makes him aware of cruelty shown to others and the corruption of society. In this sense, Juan can be seen as a *pícaro* and *Aventuras de un converso* can be read as a revival of the *picaresque* genre. Indeed, Juan enlists in the mission to Gran Canaria as the only possible route to acquiring the social status of which he is deprived, because of his origins. In his own words, it is a “medio honroso de buscarse la vida”,<sup>11</sup> a reminder of the importance of *honra* as a social currency in early-modern Spain.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between the *picaresque* novel and *limpieza de sangre* has already been noted by critics. Marcel Bataillon, for example, observes that:

11 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Imprenta de Francisco Martín, 1877), 28, <https://mdc.ulpgc.es/cdm/ref/collection/MDC/id/40291>.

12 For a discussion on the manifestation of *honra* in Calderón de la Barca, see John Bryans, “System and Structure in Calderón's *El médico de su honra*”, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánico*, Vol. 5, No. 3, ‘Homenaje a Pedro Calderón de la Barca’, 1981, pp. 271–291.

el hidalgo es racialmente puro, por definición; el pícaro no podrá ser realmente su antítesis, si no aparece marcado, poco o mucho, por aquella impureza que tenía que excluirlo para siempre de los privilegios reservados a los hidalgos. Es decir que el auge de la picaresca bajo Felipe III nunca será plenamente comprendido si se olvida la herencia medieval de la España de las tres religiones.<sup>13</sup>

As Ettinghausen points out, Pablos in Quevedo's canonical *Buscón* is of Converso origin,<sup>14</sup> while many scholars have argued that the anonymous author of *Lazarillo de Tormes* may himself have been a Converso.<sup>15</sup> Juan's journey in *Aventuras de un converso* is reminiscent of both *Lazarillo* and Pablos: from humble origins, he seeks wealth and social status.

As an outsider and *pícaro*, Juan is more aware than most of the injustices in Spanish society. Already in his first encounter with the old soldier Nuno, Juan does not merely reveal his unfortunate childhood, but also criticises the treatment of Jews and Converso in Spanish society more generally. He accuses the Catholic Church of using religion as a pretext to kill Jews in order to acquire their wealth and possessions:

¿Quiénes fueron los que ganaron con aquellas matanzas? Los grandes Señores y el Clero, deudores de los industriosos Israelitas. Con el puñal y la tea en sus manos homicidas, arrancaron ellos mismos el recibo del mutilado cuerpo de sus infelices acreedores. Esa es, según ellos, la justicia de Dios.<sup>16</sup>

His observation is not well received by Nuno, who warns him: "detened vuestra lengua si queréis vivir en paz en España".<sup>17</sup> His words suggest a silence, one that, throughout the novel, Millares Torres seems to imply formed part of Spanish history. It is a silence, moreover, that he seeks to subvert, through the utterances of the Converso protagonist. Yet, Juan immediately retreats from

13 Marcel Bataillon, *Pícaros y picaresca* (Madrid: Taurus, 1982), 199.

14 Henry Ettinghausen, "Quevedo's Converso Pícaro", *MLN*, 102, no. 2 (1987), 242.

15 Walter Holzinger, "The Breadly Paradise Revisited: 'Lazarillo de Tormes', Segundo Tratado", *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 37, No.4 (1972), 231; Carlos Tapia, "Anonymous Author, Reformist Writer: Ultimate Reality and Meaning in the *Lazarillo De Tormes*", *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 32, No.1 (2009), 32; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within. The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 266; Américo Castro, *Hacia Cervantes* (Madrid: Taurus, 1967), xxiii.

16 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 35.

17 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 36.

the full power of his criticism, when he affirms his indifference to Jewish suffering: “¿Qué me importa a mi la raza de Israel? ¿Sé yo acaso quien soy?”<sup>18</sup> His response reminds us of the slippery nature of *converso* identity. Juan is not Jewish and, as he poignantly argues, he is no less Christian for his origins. Moreover, like his later response to overhearing the plot against Isabel, Juan calibrates his actions in awareness of his social situation. If he is to survive, he must learn to be inauthentic: to divorce his utterances from his inner thoughts.

The split between inner thoughts and outward expressions is characteristic of the condition of the *conversos*, who were forced to live a double life, to avoid persecution. This specific condition in turn gives rise to a unique form of language:

The picaresque use of language—the dual-talk characteristic of oppressed groups and minorities—drew from Marrano linguistic habits, and at the same time helped to develop their special linguistic sensibilities, the talent for ironic equivocation and reading between the lines.<sup>19</sup>

The use of language in the picaresque, then, speaks to a need to dissemble and is characterized by its rich use of irony.

In *Aventuras de un converso*, we can find this irony in Juan’s frequent criticisms of Spanish fanaticism. When the captain tells him, for example, that appropriating land from the indigenous Canarians is moral because “las buenas tierras han de ser siempre para los buenos cristianos”, Juan replies that “si Dios los quisiera quitar estas tierras, Sr hidalgo, no necesitaría de nosotros”.<sup>20</sup> The ironic tone is even more explicit at the end of the novel when Juan and Isabel return to Seville and witness an *auto de fé*. In order to disguise Isabel’s disgust at the violent spectacle, given the potential danger of admitting it, Juan exclaims: “el gozo le embriaga. ¡Ese olor de herege es tan grato para un católico”.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in response to the comment that Spain needs more such executions to rid itself of the “mala semilla”, Juan states: “llegará el día en que esta noble Nación, reciba el lauro merecido por tan briosas hazañas. Entonces seremos todos felices, porque habrán desaparecido de entre nosotros el libro, el pensamiento, y la razón libre”.<sup>22</sup> From the perspective of the nineteenth century, particularly for a liberal reader, Juan’s comment is all the more ironic,

18 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 36.

19 Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within. The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 264.

20 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 105.

21 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 304.

22 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 303.

when viewed through the lens of history, as it seems prescient in its prediction of Spanish intellectual decline.

The irony of the Converso protagonist also ‘contaminates’ the narrative voice, as is clear in the novel’s final lines:

—¡Viva! la hoguera, la Inquisición y los frailes! gritó Sólorzano con furor creciente, dirigiéndose al fanatizado Pueblo.

—¡Viva! repitió rujiendo la multitud.

Y durante tres siglos ese fue el grito de la católica España.<sup>23</sup>

This denunciation of fanaticism lies at the crux of the novel’s critical thrust: The Inquisition—and its violent public spectacles of *auto-da-fé*—is merely an explicit expression of the historical intolerance and quest for purity that the novel seeks to undermine. The same dynamic is at work in the obsession with blood purity that complicates the life of the Converso and in the violent conquest of the Canary Islands and forced conversion and enslavement of its inhabitants. Above all, it is the homogenizing tendency that began with the Catholic Monarchs and found its purest expression in the expulsion of the Jews in 1492: a tendency that would later continue under Hapsburg rule.

## 2 Religious Freedom

The historical expulsion, largely marginalized in Spanish historiography in the intervening centuries, rose to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century. More generally, numerous publications at the time are testament to a renewed interest in the country’s Jewish past, with the following some of the most prominent examples: Adolfo de Castro’s *La historia de los judíos en España* (1847); José Amador de los Ríos’ *Estudios históricos, políticos y literarios sobre los judíos en España* (1848); *Un milagro y una mentira: vindicación de los mallorquines cristianos de stirpe hebrea* (1858) by Tomás Bertrán Soler and *La España judía: apuntes para la verdadera historia de los judíos en España* (1891) by Pelegrín Casabó y Pagés. Reading these texts reveals that there existed a large degree of ambivalence about this aspect of Spanish history, with some portraying the loss of Spain’s Jews as negative for the country, while others

23 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 304.

perpetuate negative stereotypes. Often this ambivalent portrayal is found in the same text.<sup>24</sup>

Inevitably, Jewish history in Spain came to be seen through the prism of contemporary concerns and political ideologies. While traditionalists and Carlists routinely celebrated the expulsion of 1492 as a milestone in Spanish religious unity, liberal writers began to posit a revisionist view of history, which often saw the expulsion as the symbolic—and sometimes literal—beginning of Spanish decline. Nevertheless, even within the liberal tradition, attitudes were far from straightforward. For instance, Danielle Rozenberg shows how Modesto Lafuente, in *Historia general de España*, (published in multiple volumes, between 1850 and 1867), criticises the Inquisition but suggests that the provocative behaviour of some Jews may have been partially responsible.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Rozenberg demonstrates how he attributes the decision to expel the Jews to the excessive religiosity of the Spanish at the time, while arguing that it enabled the unification of the country under the banner of Catholicism. The case of Amador de los Ríos shows how attitudes were both ambivalent and variable, particularly over time. In *Estudios históricos, políticos y literarios sobre los judíos en España* (1848), for example, he is critical of the Jews and celebrates the expulsion. By 1877, however, in *Historia social, política y religiosa de los judíos en España y Portugal*, he highlights the Jewish contribution to Spanish civilisation.

*Aventuras de un converso* emerges from this liberal reevaluation of Spain's Jewish history. Certainly, the novel makes it clear that its liberal writer regrets the expulsion of 1492. Yet, Millares Torres is not specifically interested in the Jewish question. Rather, he turns to this issue to address a more contemporary concern: the question of religious freedom, which becomes a central theme in the novel. Religious freedom in nineteenth-century Spain was, to a certain extent, a weathervane for its fluctuating politics. When Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808, he abolished the Inquisition, a situation that was maintained in the liberal Cádiz Constitution of 1812. With the return of Ferdinand VII, however, the Inquisition was reestablished, until its brief suspension during the *Trienio liberal* (1820–23). It was definitively abolished in 1834, during the Regency of María Cristina de Borbón. The abolition of the Inquisition, however, did not

24 For more on late nineteenth-century debates on Spain's Jewish history, see "La cuestión judía en el enfrentamiento de las dos Españas (1860–1939)" in Danielle Rozenberg's *La España contemporánea y la cuestión judía. Retejiendo los hilos de la memoria y de la historia* (Madrid: Casa Sefarad-Israel, Marcial Pons Historia, 2010).

25 Danielle Rozenberg, *La España contemporánea y la cuestión judía. Retejiendo los hilos de la memoria y de la historia*, 88.

entail immediate freedom of worship for religions other than Catholicism, a right that was guaranteed only after the Glorious Revolution of 1868.

The immediate context of *Aventuras de un converso* is the Restoration of 1874, which led to the revocation of some of the religious freedoms gained in 1868. Article 11 of the 1876 constitution, for instance, guaranteed freedom of religion in principle, but forbade the public display of any religion other than Catholicism.<sup>26</sup> These developments informed Millares Torres' criticisms of religious fanaticism and the Catholic Church in the novel. We have already seen that Juan points out the injustice of Spanish treatment of the Jews, which he attributes to greed. But there is also a more general anticlericalism in the novel, which focuses on hypocrisy. Religious figures use religion as an excuse to pursue their own selfish interests. Moreover, the trappings of religious ceremony are often used in the novel to disguise brutal behavior. Thus, for example, after discussions in the convent, in which the instigators plot to have Isabel killed in Gran Canaria in order to seize her inheritance, the abbess suggests a mass in her honour: "Sería muy conveniente en ese caso, observó la monja, con voz compungida fundar un aniversario de misas por el descanso de su alma". The captain's reply, "Excelente idea. Yo me encargo de la fundación que se hará con toda la ostentación y publicidad que el caso requiere", reinforces the cynicism with which religious belief is manipulated by the conspirators.<sup>27</sup>

Religion is also criticised in the novel for its role in justifying Spanish imperialism and the abuse of native populations. An exchange between Juan and Nuno, the old soldier, illustrates this dynamic. Juan explains to Nuno that he has decided to join the expedition because "los que como yo son huérfanos y pobres, necesitan un medio honroso de buscarse la vida", which serves as another reminder of the novel's picaresque undertones. He also reveals, however, that he feels guilty about the idea of "despojar a esos isleños de las tierras que Dios les ha dado, y cazarlos como bestias feroces para esclavizarlos luego o hacerlos morir".<sup>28</sup> Juan's comment speaks directly to religious concerns. The native islanders have a God-given right to their lands. Yet Nuno, who throughout the novel represents the voice of the common people, replies by saying that the islanders are not God's children, but rather "idólatras, adoradores de Satan y Belial".<sup>29</sup> According to Nuno, then, it is acceptable to steal from the islanders by force, because they are not Catholic.

26 Juan María Laboa, "La libertad religiosa en la historia constitucional española", *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, 30 (1982), 172.

27 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 67.

28 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 28.

29 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 28.

Nuno's justification for conquest is precisely the same ideology that Juan criticizes earlier in the same discussion, with regards to the treatment of Jews and Conversos in Spain. Indeed, the link between the two issues is made even clearer later in the novel. As the mission approaches the coast of Gran Canaria, the soldiers discuss the imminent fight with the native islanders. In their discussion, they draw a direct link between war and religion: "Aquí se les espera con buenas picas, espadas y ballestas. Ya veremos si sus falsos Dioses son tan poderosos como nuestro señor apóstol Santiago".<sup>30</sup> The implication is clear: the sword and saint go hand in hand. As occurs throughout the novel, Juan once again offers a veiled criticism that is couched in irony, when he asks why the islanders were born at all, if they are to suffer this fate. Nuno's response reaffirms the link between conquest and religious intolerance:

Para ser nuestros esclavos, hijo mío. Nosotros los Españoles estamos destinados a convertir infieles, y llevar triunfante la enseña de Cristo por donde quiera que haya adoradores de Belial. Día llegará en que no haya moros ni judíos en España, y entonces seremos completamente felices.<sup>31</sup>

His statement also refers more explicitly to the connection that is always implicit in the novel between the Converso protagonist and the Canary Islands; between religious intolerance in mainland Spain and the thrust of overseas conquest.

Juan's response uses irony once more to ridicule intolerance and point out its problematic consequences for Spain:

Es verdad; replicó el mozo con visible ironía. El día en que no tengamos comercio, industria, ni agricultura, ni haya moros que combatir ni judíos que robar seremos verdaderamente felices. Entonces nos tenderemos al sol, rezaremos el rosario, y saldremos a los caminos con navaja en mano a buscar el pan de cada día.<sup>32</sup>

This statement reinforces Millares Torres' criticism of Spanish fanaticism and the historical damage it caused. Such ideas were not unusual in liberal circles during the nineteenth century. Modesto Lafuente, for instance, argued that

30 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 167.

31 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 168.

32 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 168.

the expulsion of the *moriscos* led to the destruction of Spanish agriculture.<sup>33</sup> While the relative merits or errors of the Jewish expulsion of 1492 were a matter of fierce debate in nineteenth-century Spain, it is clear that this event was unearthed in service of present concerns, more often than for the pursuit of history. As López Vela suggests: “el solo planteamiento de la cuestión, sacaba a luz las partes más oscuras del pasado nacional reciente con una clara proyección en el presente”.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Amador de los Ríos, or Adolfo de Castro, however, Millares Torres does not reveal a specific interest in Spain's Jewish history. Rather, he turns to this aspect of Spain's past with another objective: to criticise the excesses of Spanish imperialism, particularly in the Canary Islands.

### 3 Conversions

As we have seen, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, critical appraisal of the Inquisition and the expulsions of Jews and Moriscos was a common feature of Spanish historiography, and was especially prevalent in liberal circles. Millares Torres takes advantage of this critical apparatus to draw attention to abuses of power during Spanish conquest overseas. Thus, his plea for religious tolerance applies most often to the indigenous Canary Islanders. The narrative voice frequently ironizes on the use of religion as a fig leaf for brutality, as the following fragment about the baptism and enslavement of the Canary Islanders makes clear:

Los isleños eran conducidos a la capilla de Santa Ana, donde se les bautizaba con gran pompa, siendo guardados luego como prisioneros, hasta que se presentaba cualquier patrón genovés, mallorquín o lusitano, que los compraba y llevaba a revender a Europa, recibiendo por ellos un buen precio. ¿Qué importaba el cuerpo, si el alma se había purificado en el agua del bautismo?<sup>35</sup>

33 Modesto Lafuente, *Historia general de España*, Tomo XII (Barcelona: Montaner y Simón, 1891), 282, <https://bibliotecadigital.jcyl.es/es/consulta/registro.cmd?id=7259>.

34 Roberto López Vela, “Judios, fanatismo y decadencia. Amador de los Ríos y la interpretación de la Historia Nacional en 1848”, *Manuscripts*, 17 (1999), 17.

35 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 212.

The narrator mocks the obsession with baptism, as part of the religious drive to convert conquered peoples to Catholicism, whereas no concern is shown for their physical welfare. The use of evangelisation as a justification for conquest and domination recalls Spanish colonial practices in the Americas. Indeed, we have already seen that Millares Torres draws a parallel between the conquest of the Canary Islands and colonisation of the New World and we will return to this point in greater detail below. In this fragment, however, the narrator exposes the absurdity of forced baptism, as part of the novel's general plea for tolerance and religious plurality.

The same message is key to the novel's representation of the indigenous Canary Islanders, which, as we shall see, Millares Torres also incorporates into the same racial and religious dynamic as his Converso protagonist. In doing so, the author establishes a clear parallel between the conquest of the Canary Islands and the marginalisation of Jewishness in Spain itself, both of which were ostensibly justified by religion, yet, as Millares Torres points out, often stemmed from less lofty motives.

The principal indigenous characters in the novel are Adalmina and her father, the Faican, a native chieftain and spiritual leader. Our first encounter with Adalmina is when Juan captures her father while searching for the missing Isabel. Adalmina pleads with Juan to spare her father's life, which he eventually agrees to do and, in exchange, she offers him an amulet of protection. Throughout their conversation, however, Adalmina makes frequent appeals to God and establishes a moral equivalence between religions. For instance, when she swears that no other islander is nearby to threaten Juan's life, she exclaims: "Te lo juro por mi Dios, que es un Dios tan bueno como el tuyo".<sup>36</sup> When Juan explains that he will be remiss in his duties if he sets her father free, she tells him that "el que perdona en la tierra, Dios le perdona en el cielo".<sup>37</sup> Surprised by this proclamation, Juan asks her if she is Christian, to which she replies that she does not know, but that her mother was Spanish.

Adalmina's attitude to religion is rendered even more explicit when Juan encounters her again, when he, in turn, is captured by the Faican. She pleads with her father to release Juan and, furthermore, explains that she is in love with the Spaniard and wishes to return with him to the land of her mother's birth. The Faican is horrified by Adalmina's wish to abandon her culture and is particularly outraged by her desire to convert to Christianity in order to marry Juan. In response to the Faican's shock that she could be so blinded by passion

36 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 158.

37 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 158.

that she would turn her back on the faith of her ancestors, Adalmina stakes a claim for the freedom to convert: “No hay más que un Dios, contestó ella con acento inspirado, la religión es la envoltura, el alma es Dios; desechar un vestido viejo para vestir otro nuevo, no es un perjurio”.<sup>38</sup> Her impassioned plea, however, goes beyond a claim for tolerance; she lays out a powerful argument for the universality of religion and the moral equivalence between them, a sentiment she already tentatively expressed in her first encounter with Juan. In her fiery speech against her father, who defends the importance of specific rites of worship, Adalmina argues for a vision of religion that is flexible, open and universal:

Así hablan todos los Faicanes. Pero yo que estoy iniciada en sus secretos, no doy valor alguno a sus palabras. ¿Qué le importa a Dios que le adoren sobre las alturas de Tirma, o delante de un madero en cruz? Si el corazón está limpio de toda impureza, llamará a su seno con igual ternura a los ricos españoles y a los humildes canarios; a los inmergidos en el agua santa, y a los que no lo estén. Dicen que el mundo es grande, y que nosotros somos un átomo en medio de ese inmenso Océano. ¿Y cómo hemos de pretender que Alcorac, el grande, al justo Alcorac, castigue a todos los que no doblan su cerviz ante un desconocido Faican? Quién conoce nuestros ritos? ¿Quién sabe de nosotros? Y entonces, ¿con que derecho queremos imponerles nuestra Religión? Déjame padre ser cristiana, no porque yo crea que sus ritos sean mejores que los nuestros, sino por salvar esa barrera que se opone a mis deseos.<sup>39</sup>

In her monologue, Adalmina advocates for religion as an instrument of unity, which is diametrically opposed to exclusive and chauvinistic view promoted by the fundamentalism of the Spanish Inquisition and the forced baptisms of Spanish colonial practice. Her plea to her father that the world cannot be condemned for its ignorance of their specific rites and rituals is clearly intended by Millares Torres to hold a mirror to the Spanish and their condemnation of native populations for their lack of Catholicism. Indeed, the intolerant and dogmatic Faican is an echo of the novel's Spanish clerics.

By contrast, Millares Torres uses Adalmina to espouse an idea of a tolerant and merciful God. Her definition of religion is reminiscent of the *erasmismo*

38 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 239.

39 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 239.

spirituality that was popular with Conversos.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it is an idea that Juan will also repeat in the novel's epilogue, while witnessing an Inquisitorial *auto-da-fé*. After Adalmina fails to persuade her father to allow her to marry Juan, the Faican decides that Juan must marry Isabel, as a condition of their release. While discussing this possibility between them, the two Spaniards discover that they are both of Converso origin and decide to marry and return together to Spain, where the Inquisition has now been established. As they unwillingly witness the burning of a heretic, Juan exclaims:

Tranquilízate, esposa mía: el Dios que nosotros adoramos no es ese Dios que odia, sino el que ama; no es ese Dios que castiga, sino el que perdona; no es ese Dios intolerante y sanguinario de los frailes e Inquisidores, sino el Dios de las misericordias infinitas y de las almas honradas.<sup>41</sup>

This vision of religion as a tolerant and inclusive faith, then, espoused by the novel's "Conversos", both in the historical and literal sense, in the case of Juan and Isabel, and in its broader sense of conversion and hybridity that Adalmina also embodies. Indeed, these three characters, the moral heroes of the novel, represent Millares Torres' plea for tolerance. As a celebration of hybrid identity, their mere existence undermines the post-Reconquista narrative of racial, religious and ethnic purity that the author sets out to criticize.

#### 4 Prologue to American Conquest

The focus on Adalmina's hybrid identity—half Spanish, half indigenous—reinforces the link between the Converso protagonist and the Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands. Yet, as his previous work reveals, Millares Torres had an enduring fascination with the pre-Spanish inhabitants of the Canary Islands, whom he sought to portray in a positive light. His *Biografías de canarios célebres* (1871), for example, pointedly begins its examination of notable Canarians with Andamana, a legendary queen who united the tribes of Gran Canaria before the Spanish conquest. In the text, Millares Torres describes the

40 Stefania Pastore, *Una herejía española: conversos, alumbrados e Inquisición (1449–1559)*, trans. Clara Álvarez Alonso (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2010), 71.

41 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 302.

indigenous Canary islanders as “audaces, inteligentes, esencialmente hermosos” and their language as “dulce y armonioso”.<sup>42</sup>

This fascination with the indigenous islanders manifests itself also in his first work of fiction: *Benartemi o El ultimo de los canarios* (1875), which narrates the violent encounter between the Spanish conquerors and the native Canary Islanders, through the perspective of Benartemi. The indigenous hero attempts to save his people from extinction but fights against the tide of history and is doomed to fail. Benartemi is, of course, a romantic hero and the novel brings to mind a similar story from earlier in the century: Chateaubriand's *Les Aventures du dernier Abencerage* (1822), which was highly successful and gave rise to imitations across Europe. In the French novel, the last descendant of an aristocratic Moorish family from Granada fails in his attempt to overthrow the Spanish and restore Muslim rule in the city. Like Benartemi, Aben-Hamet is portrayed sympathetically, but his courage and valour are no match for the relentless march of history and he ultimately accepts his fate.

Despite the obvious similarities, however, *Benartemi*, is more directly inspired by a novel from the United States of America: James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), which portrays the violent struggles between the European settlers and the native population of North America. The transposition of an American story of conquest—with its devastation of the Native Americans—to the Canarian context is revealing of a wider trend in nineteenth-century literature, in which the Canary Islands is often compared to the New World. In the biography of Adalmina by Millares Torres mentioned earlier, for instance, the legendary queen is said to be “digna de colocarse junto a las más célebres que en las tradiciones americanas nos conservan las viejas crónicas españolas”.<sup>43</sup> Adalmina, therefore, becomes an indigenous heroine, in the same vein as those chronicled by the Spanish in the New World.

In reality, such comparisons were already present in the early days of Spanish overseas conquest. This is unsurprising given the parallels between the colonization of the Canary Islands and America, which were roughly coterminous. The discovery of the New World by Columbus transformed the relationship of the Canary Islands with Spain. Manuel Hernández González explains how the archipelago became an “escenario privilegiado” as a “laboratorio experimental” for Spain's system of dealing with the indigenous

42 Agustín Millares Torres, *Biografías de canarios célebres* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Planas de poesía Lezcano, 1978), 10. <https://mdc.ulpgc.es/cdm/singleitem/collection/MDC/id/61860/rec/1>.

43 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 13.

populations it encountered in the Americas.<sup>44</sup> His assertion that “Canarias será desde entonces el primer espacio de Indias, o las Américas una Isla Canaria por ganar” suggests how the Canary Islands and the Americas became interconnected in the Spanish imagination.<sup>45</sup>

In the prologue to *Noticias de la historia general de las islas de Canaria* (1772), Joseph Viera y Clavijo, the most illustrious Enlightenment figure of the Canary Islands, makes a similar comparison:

Es verdad que las famosas conquistas de Méjico y del Perú harán siempre más eco en todo el mundo que las de Canaria, y Tenerife. Es verdad también, que Cortés, y Pizarro serán en la opinión de los hombres más héroes que Vera, y Fernández de Lugo: Pero ¡ah! ¡si fuese lícito hacer un paralelo riguroso entre los Guanches, y los Indios; entre las fuerzas de las Canarias, y de las Américas; entre el impulso que animaba el brazo á unos, y otros Conquistadores!<sup>46</sup>

Viera y Clavijo makes the comparison to justify his history of the islands, which he argues is necessary “para que sean más conocidas en el mundo sus glorias, sus hazañas, su nobleza, sus servicios, sus talentos, sus méritos ...”.<sup>47</sup> It is clear that he celebrates the Spanish conquest of the islands. He hails as heroes Pedro de Vera and Alonso Fernández de Lugo, who conquered Gran Canaria and La Palma and Tenerife, respectively.

In *Aventuras de un converso*, Millares Torres builds on this history, but uses the parallels between the two conquests as a way to criticize Spanish aggression. Thus, he transforms the celebratory tone of Viera y Clavijo’s assertion that Spanish glories in the Canary Islands deserve recognition on an equal footing to those in America, to a more negative understanding of Spanish behaviour in both territories. Whereas the earlier parallels between the Native Americans and the indigenous Canarians remain, their bond is now one of shared victimhood, at the hands of European colonizers. Far from heroic, the Spanish conquerors are portrayed as violent aggressors.

44 Manuel Hernández González, *La emigración canaria a Venezuela* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Ediciones Idea, 2007), 18.

45 Manuel Hernández González, *La emigración canaria a Venezuela*, 18.

46 Joseph Viera y Clavijo, *Noticias de la historia general de las islas de Canaria* (Madrid: Imprenta de Blas Roman, 1772), xii, <https://mdc.ulpgc.es/cdm/ref/collection/MDC/id/160441>.

47 Joseph Viera y Clavijo, *Noticias de la historia general de las islas de Canaria*, xii.

In the passages before the Spanish arrive in Gran Canaria, the description of the island is romantic and idyllic:

su terreno era muy fértil, y cortado de profundos barrancos, cuyas vertientes estaban pobladas de espesos bosques, donde crecían los tilos, pinos, laureles y otros árboles, y se anidaban millones de pájaros de pintados colores y armonioso canto: que las mujeres eran muy hermosas, honestas y gallardas, y los hombres altos, fornidos y valientes.<sup>48</sup>

This Arcadian description reflects Millares Torres' admiration for and love of his native islands. But it also reveals an attempt to create a contrast between life on the islands before the Spanish arrived and the violence and exploitation that the conquest would unleash. Indeed, in anticipation of the Spanish landing, the narrative voice laments that this same landscape is about to be "regado con tanta sangre inocente".<sup>49</sup>

The transformation and undermining of triumphalist historical narratives of Spanish conquest can also be seen in Millares Torres' portrayal of Adalmina. We have already seen how her pleas for religious tolerance and the freedom to convert rank her alongside the Converso characters as one of the novel's true heroes. Beyond this, however, her frustrated love story with Juan also offers a subtle rewriting of the narrative of conquest. The romantic plot between the Spanish conqueror and the indigenous princess echoes Lope de Vega's *Comedia famosa de los guanches de Tenerife y conquista de Canaria* (1618), in which the Spanish captain Gonzalo de Castillo falls in love with Dácil, a Guanche princess. The Golden Age play, which is based on a historical event, stages the love affair, and eventual marriage, between the Spanish conqueror and the Guanche princess as a consummation of the union between the two peoples. Portrayed as a willing partner, Dácil's sexual submission to the Spaniard symbolically represents the submission of the Canary Islanders to Spain and a harmonious future for the two peoples.

In *Aventuras de un converso*, Millares Torres rewrites the story to frustrate this outcome. Adalmina's love for Juan is not requited, nor is she permitted to marry him by her father, the Faican. Moreover, Juan, as a Converso, who is critical of Spain's objectives in the Canary Islands, is unable to symbolically represent Spanish conquest. Instead, Juan marries a fellow Converso and returns to Spain, whereas Adalmina commits suicide. Before this tragic outcome, however, Adalmina and Juan discover similarities in their worldviews, not least in their understanding of religion and their critical stances towards

48 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 8.

49 Agustín Millares Torres, *Aventuras de un converso*, 92.

the fanaticism of their respective clergy. Through their encounter based on mutual understanding, Millares Torres appears to explore alternative models of colonization in the Canary Islands, which, although they didn't occur, could have provided the basis for less exploitative systems in the New World.

## 5 Conclusion

As we have seen, *Aventuras de un converso* addresses multiple marginalities in the Spanish historical imagination—the ethnic and religious marginalities represented by the Conversos and the native Canary Islanders, as well as the Canary Islands themselves as a geographically and historically marginalized region of Spain. The novel's interest, however, lies not so much in its portrayal of these elements, but rather in the way in which Millares Torres combines them to provide a liberal critique of imperialism and religious intolerance. In this chapter, I have attempted to elucidate how Millares Torres makes use of the Converso voice, with its layers of irony, to offer a counter-reading of Spanish history, which points out hypocrisy and ridicules fanaticism. Moreover, the Converso protagonist allows Millares Torres to destabilize fixed identities and celebrate hybridity and change. Hence the choice of a Converso character: it is not so much his Jewish background that is of interest to Millares Torres, but rather the very nature of a Converso, as one who converts from one religion to another and is therefore flexible and hybrid.

The author's celebration of such hybridity stems from his liberal stance on religious freedom, which, as we have seen, was connected to contemporary political concerns. As the novel makes clear, however, the focus on hybrid identities also emerged from his interest in staking a claim for a unique identity for the Canary Islands, which is integrated with Spain, yet separate. The implications of Millares Torres' criticism of the excesses of Spanish imperialism become clearer when viewed in the context of the historical and rhetorical links between the archipelago and the Americas. The rhetorical force of this connection would appear more strongly towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of political movements that advocated for the independence of the Canary Islands. Hernández González points out, for instance, how the separatist ideas of Secundino Delgado, one of the fathers of the Canarian independence movement, were formed through contact with the Cuban struggle for independence.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Manuel Hernández González, *Secundino Delgado. El hombre y el mito. Una biografía crítica* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Ediciones Idea, 2014), 21.

In *Aventuras de un converso*, Millares Torres does not advocate for the Independence of the Canary Islands. Nevertheless, in its explicit comparison between the islands and the Americas, its condemnation of the Spanish conquest, while giving voice to the indigenous inhabitants, the novel rehearses some of the touchstones of the political movement that would eventually emerge.

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