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Sendebār: The Book of the Wiles of Women (1253)

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Introduction

The *Sendebār* is the Castilian version of an antique work of wisdom literature that can be traced back to the 9th Century, if not before. It was at that time that Arab historian Ahmad al-Yaqubi, speaking about Kush, one of the kings of India, mentioned that this monarch “lived during the times of Sindibad the Sage, and this Kush wrote the *Book of the Wiles of Women*”. From that moment onwards the book became so popular that we now have hundreds of manuscript witnesses. The book soon split into two well-differentiated branches. The Western Branch, farther removed from the Castilian *Sendebār*, has also split into two, one branch depending on the Greek *Dolophatos*, the other on the Latin *Liber de septem Sapientibus*. The Eastern Branch, to which the Castilian *Sendebār* belongs, has also been preserved in Arabic in *The 1001 Nights (The Arabian Nights)* and *The 101 Nights*, in the Persian *Sindibab-Nameh*, the Syriac *Sindban*, the Greek *Syntipas*, the Hebrew *Mishle Sendabar*, and even in a Sephardic version.

The Castilian *Sendebār* was commissioned in 1253 by prince Fadrique, son to king Fernando III (1201-1252) and brother to king Alfonso X the Wise (1221-1284). It has been preserved in just one manuscript, MS 15 of the *Real Academia Española*, also known as the “Puñonrostro Codex”. Here we read that

Prince Fadrique, son to the most noble, adventurous and most noble king Fernando and the most holy queen Beatriz, who abounds in all virtues, in order to preserve his good name and giving ear to the words of wise men ... he wished and approved for this book [to be translated] from Arabic into Spanish ... This book was translated in the Era of 91.¹ [1291 – 38 = 1253].

Fadrique’s translation of the *Sendebār* was surely due to the influence of his family and the cultural atmosphere in which he was raised. His grandfather is accredited with the composition of the *Libro de los doce sabios* (ca. 1237), a collection of wise sentences and proverbs for the education of nobles; his brother with the translation of the *Calila e Dimna* (1251-1261), another collection of tales intended for education; and his nephew Sancho IV with other works of wisdom literature such as the *Lucidario* or the *Libro de los cien capítulos*. Furthermore, during the course of the 13th Century parts of the *Kitab Bilawbar wa-Yudasaf* were translated as the story of *Barlaam e Josafat*, the *Muktbar al-Hikam* was adapted as the *Bocados de oro*, the *Kitab adab al-falasifa* as the *Libro de los buenos proverbios*, and the *Kitab Sirr al-Asrar* as the *Poridat de poridades*, many of which were also concerned with wisdom and the rightful rule of the kingdom. The Spanish 13th-century monarchs, then, were great patrons of translations from Arabic into Castilian. It is in the midst of these translations that we have to place the *Sendebār*, the only work commissioned by poor Fadrique, who was executed by his brother Alfonso in 1277.

The importance of the *Sendebār* (1253) lies in the fact that, together with the *Calila e Dimna* (1251 or 1261), it is the first collection of tales from the East that arrived in the Iberian Peninsula. Until then, there were in Spain collections of didactic literature in Latin, in which the tales, the stories, or the *exempla* were organized one after the other (1, 2, 3, etc.), with no apparent order. However, in these new collections from the East a

¹ The year corresponds to 1291 according to the Hispanic Era, and to 1253 of the Christian Era.



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crucial aspect emerges: a “narrative frame” which helps organize all the separate tales, which only make sense now in a very specific order and applied to a very specific situation.

The main story or narrative frame in the *Sendebar* is fascinating: a king of Judea (probably India in the original) cannot have any children by any of his ninety wives. At least, he cannot produce a male heir. One of his wives, the one “he loved the most”, asks him to lie with her after having asked God to grant them a child. The prayer is effective, for nine months later the woman gives birth to a healthy son. The wise men are called to court to interpret the child’s horoscope, which reveals that, at the age of twenty, he will suffer a great tragedy and his life will be in danger. After a failed attempt to educate the young prince, the wise men meet again and assign the task to Cendubete (*Sendebar*), the wisest of them all, who promises to teach him everything he knows in only six months. The day before the established deadline, Cendubete (*Sendebar*) examines the prince’s horoscope again and discovers that, in truth, he will be in great danger if he opens his mouth in the next seven days. The prince’s silence is carefully noted by another one of the king’s concubines, who tries to convince him to murder his father and reign in his place. Taken aback, the prince forgets that he is not supposed to speak and threatens the woman. His wrath (one of the key topics in the book) gives way to the main plot: the woman tells the king that the prince has tried to rape her, and she takes advantage of his silence to tell a tale, each day of the week, to convince the king to sentence his son to death. At the same time, seven of the wisest counselors of the king tell him two tales each: the first one to soothe his wrath, the second to warn him about the wiles of women. The structure is the following:

Days	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Woman	Acc	3	6	8	11	14	Acc	Prince 19-23
Counselors	1	4	7	9	12	15	17	
	2	5	---	10	13	16	18	

The overall structure is very important. Every day the woman either takes action (days 1 and 7) or tells a story that will make the king doubt his counselors. In turn, they reply with two tales each to prevent the king making rash decisions and to warn him that women are not to be trusted. That way, every single day the king goes from sentencing his son to death to forgiving him, depending on the tale he has just heard. On the eighth day, the prince is free to talk again, and he tells five stories (19-23) that are different from all the others. Their purpose is to show that he is now a humble and wise person, proving that Cendubete (*Sendebar*) has carried out his task well. In fact, the preamble to the first of these tales (19, *Ingenia*) is crucial, for it is here, before the Prince narrates the tale, that Cendubete (*Sendebar*) summarizes the two most important topics in the collection. Addressing the king, he says:

God gave you enough grace, understanding, and teachings to know that you should only take action when you are convinced of the truth. More than anyone else, kings should be certain of the truth. The Prince only did as I commanded. And you, Sir, should not have sentenced him to die trusting a woman’s word.

Furthermore, Cendubete (*Sendebar*) summarizes the whole work with an enigmatic sentence that applies to the whole story: “the best knowledge in the world is speaking”, or, in other words, that the wisest person in the world is the one who can tell when it is appropriate to speak and when to shut up. This sentence is repeated in other versions of the story, such as the Persian *Sindibab-Nameh*, where the wise man has said that one should refrain from speaking, “except in those cases where your words may be useful; then you should speak in a manner that, if you have to speak again, your words may be the same or, better, even more appropriate”. This applies to the story we have just seen, for the prince (now the wisest man in the world)

was able to tell that he needed to remain silent during the first seven days, and that it was only appropriate for him to speak up on the eighth day, managing to free himself from the woman's accusations.

In conclusion, the *Sendebär* is a fascinating book that deserves to be read in its entirety. Each of the twenty-three tales in the Castilian version are the result of a long voyage through different cultures and languages (India, Persia, Syria, Greece, the Arabic world, etc), which have all left its mark on the text. In its pages we find spirits and monsters from Islamic mythology (*ghouls, efrits, jinns*) that the Spanish translator rendered as best he could, folkloric elements, numerology, mistranslations, tales that do not make sense due to the several changes they have been subjected to, and—in sum—a wide array of entertaining (and even raunchy) tales that managed perfectly to fulfill their purpose of “*delectare et prodessè*” (to entertain while teaching, or to teach while entertaining).

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[The Prince has been accused of rape by one of the King's concubines. After consulting his horoscope, his master Cendubete (Sendebär) advises him not to say a word during the next seven days. Each day of the week, the woman tells one tale to convince the King to sentence his son to death. The woman's tale is answered with two tales from each of the King's seven counselors. The first one to advise the King not to act in haste, without having gathered all the facts; the second to warn him about the wiles of women. What follows is the sequence of tales from the second day.]

[Cuento de la concubina: 3. *Lavator*]

Exemplo de cómo vino la muger al segundo día ante el Rey llorando e dixo que matase su fijo

E dixo:

—Señor, non debes tú perdonar tu fijo, pues fizo cosa por que muera. E si tú non lo matas e lo dexas a vida, aviendo fecho tal enemiga, ca si tú non lo matas non escarmentaría ningun[o] de fazer otro tal. E yo, señor, contarte é el exemplo del curador de los paños e de su fijo.

Dixo el Rey:

—¿Cómo fue eso?

E ella dixo:

—“Era un curador de paños e avía un fijo pequeño. Este curador, cuando avía de curar sus paños, levava consigo su fijo, e el niño començava a jugar con el agua. E el padre non gelo quiso castigar, e vino un día qu'el niño se afogó. E el padre por sacar

[The woman's tale: 3. *Lavator*]

How the woman came crying to the King on the second day and said that he should put his son to death

The woman said:

—My Lord, you should not pardon your son, for what he did warrants the death penalty. Should you spare him and not sentence him to death, having committed such a crime... I mean, if you don't order his death, others would have no qualms in doing the same. I will tell you, my Lord, the *Tale of the Tanner and his Son*.

The King said:

—How does it go?

She said:

—“There was a tanner who had a young son. When the tanner had to treat the hides, he would bring his son with him. The son would play with the water, and the father never reprimanded him for it, so that one day the child drowned. Attempting to pull his son out, his father also drowned in the puddle; and they both drowned”.

el fijo, afogose el padre en el piélagu,² e afogáronse amos a dos”.

—E, señor, si tú non te antuvias³ a castigar tu fijo ante que más enemiga te faga, matarte á.

E el Rey mandó matar su fijo.

[Primer cuento del segundo privado: 4. *Panes*]

De cómo vino el segundo privado ante el Rey por escusar al Infante de muerte

E vino el segundo privado e fíncó los inojos ante el Rey, e dixo:

—Señor, si tú ovieses fijos non deviés querer mal a ninguno d’ellos, demás que non as más de uno señoero⁴ e mándaslo matar apriesa, ante que sepas la verdat. E después que lo ovieres fecho, arrepentirte as e non lo podrás cobrar,⁵ e será el tu enxemplo tal como del mercador e de la muger e [del moço].

Dixo el Rey:

—¿Cómo fue eso?

—“Dígame, señor, que era un mercador muy rico, e era señoerigo⁶ e apartado en su comer e en su beber. E fue en su mercadería e levó un moço con él, e posaron en una cibdat muy buena. E el mercador embió su moço a mercar de comer. E falló una moça en el mercado que tenié dos panes de adárgama,⁷ e pagose del pan e comprolo para su señor, e levolo. E pagose su señor de aquel pan, e dixo el mercador a su moço:

—My Lord, if you don’t make haste to punish your son before he defies you again, he will end up killing you.

And the King sentenced his son to death.

[First tale of the second counselor: 4. *Panes*]

Tale of the second counselor, who came before the King to save the Prince from death

The second counselor came before the King and kneeled. He said:

—My Lord, any father worth his salt wouldn’t want any evil to befall his children. Especially you, since you only have one, and you are ordering his death in haste before you know the whole truth. If that is done, it is something that can’t be undone. You will regret it, and your story will be like the *Tale of the Merchant, the Woman and the Young Servant*.

The King said:

—How does it go?

—“Let me tell you, my Lord, that there was once a very rich merchant who was quite refined, and he liked to eat and drink alone. Going about his business, he took a young servant with him, and they both arrived at a very fine town. The merchant sent his servant to buy food. The servant found a young woman at the market who was selling two loaves of sorghum bread. The bread looked good to him, so he bought it and took it to his master. The merchant was pleased with the bread, and he said to his servant:

² *piélagu*: balsa, estanque o cuerpo de agua.

³ *antuvias*: adelantas, apresuras.

⁴ *señoero*: solo, solitario.

⁵ *cobrar*: recuperar.

⁶ *señoerigo*: solo, solitario.

⁷ *adárgama*: harina de flor para hacer pan.

—Si te vala Dios que me compres de aquel pan cada día, si lo fallares.

E el moço iva cada día a la moça e comprávale aquel pan e levávalo a su señor. E un día falló a la moça que non tenía pan. E tornose a su señor e dixo que non fallava de aquel pan. E dixo el mercador que demandase a la moça cómo lo fazía aquel pan. E el moço fue buscar a la moça, e fallola e dixo:

—Amiga, mi señor te quiere alguna cosa que quiere fazer.

E ella fue e dixo:

—¿Qué vos plaze?

E el mercador le preguntó:

—Señora, ¿cómo fazedes aquel pan? E yo faré fazer otro tal.

E ella dixo:

—Amigo, señor, salieron unas ampollas a mi padre en las espaldas e el fésigo nos dixo que tomásemos farina de adárgama e que la amasásemos con manteca e con miel, e que gela pusiésemos en aquellas ampollas, e cuando uviésemos lavado e enxugado toda la podre, que gela tirásemos. E yo tomava aquella masa en escuso⁸ e fazíala pan, e levávalo aquel mercado a vender, e vendíalo. E, loado Nuestro Señor, es ya sano e dexámoslo de fazer.

E el mercador dio grandes bozes del gran asco que avía de aquel pan que avía comido. E cuando vido que provecho ninguno non tenía, dixo contra su moço:

—¡Mezquino! ¿Qué faré que busquemos con que lavemos nuestras manos e nuestros pies e nuestras bocas e nuestros cuerpos? ¿Cómo los lavaremos?»

—If, God willing, you can find more of this bread, you will buy it for me every day.

From then on, the servant would go to the young woman every day, buy the bread, and take it to his master. One day he found that the young woman was out of bread. He went back to his master and told him that he could not find the bread. The merchant asked him to inquire of the young woman how she made the bread. The servant went to look for the young woman, and when he found her, he said:

—My friend, my master needs your assistance for something he'd like to make.

She went to their house, and said:

—What is your pleasure?

The merchant said:

—Miss, tell me how you make that bread and I will make one just like it.

She said:

—My friend, Sir, it so happens that my father's back broke out in hives, and the doctor told us to take sorghum flour, knead it into dough with butter and honey, and apply it to his blisters. Then, once we had washed off the scum, he said that we should throw it away. But I would secretly take it and bake it into bread, which I would later take to the market to sell. And now —praise be to God!— he is healed, so we no longer have to do that.

The merchant shouted in horror, repulsed as he was of the bread he had eaten. And when he realized that he had not profited from any of it, he said to his servant:

—You fool! What will I do? I can wash my hands and my mouth, but how can I wash my stomach?»⁹

⁸ *escuso*: secreto.

⁹ The Spanish version is corrupt: "You fool! What will I do to find something with which to clean our hands, our feet, our mouths, and our bodies? How will we wash them?" I translate here the sentence from the Syriac version, which is much clearer.

—E, señor, si tú matas tu hijo, miedo he que te arrepentirás como el mercador. E, señor, non fagas cosa por que te arrepientas fasta que seas cierto d'ella.

[Segundo cuento del segundo privado: 5. *Gladius*]

Enxemplo del señor e del omne e de la muger e el marido de la muger, cómo se ayuntaron todos

—Señor, fiziéronme entender de los engaños de las mugeres.

“Dize que era una muger que avía un amigo que era privado del rey, e avía aquella cibdat de mano del rey en poder. E el amigo embió a un su omne a casa de su amiga que supíés si era y su marido. E entró aquel omne, e [ella] pagose d'él —e él d'ella— porque era fermoso. E ella llamolo que yaziese con ella, e él fizolo así. E vio [su señor que tardava el mancebo], e fue a casa del entendeder¹⁰ e llamó. E dixo [el mancebo:

—¿Qué faré] de mí?

E ella dixo:

—Ve e escóndete aquel rincón.

E el señor d'él entró a ella, e [ella] non quiso qu'el amigo entrase en el rincón con el mancebo. E en esto vino el marido e llamó a la puerta. E [ella] dixo al amigo:

—Toma tu espada en la mano e párate a la puerta del palacio¹¹ e amenázame, e ve tu carrera e non fables ninguna cosa.

E él fizolo así. E [ella] fue e abrió la puerta a su marido. E cuando vio su marido estar el espada sacada al otro en la mano, fabló e dixo:

—My Lord, if you kill your son, I am afraid you will regret it, like the merchant did. My Lord, don't do anything that you may regret until you know all the facts.

[Second tale of the second counselor: 5. *Gladius*]

Tale of the counselor, the man, the woman, the woman's husband, and how they all came together

—My Lord, I have been given to understand about the wiles of women.

“It is said that there was a woman who had a lover among the king's counselors. The king had given him that city to rule. The counselor sent one of his men to the woman's house to find out if her husband was there. The man went to the house, and the woman found him appealing because he was handsome, and he found her appealing too. She asked him to lie with her, and he did so. The counselor saw that his man was tarrying, so he went to the woman's house and knocked on the door. The young man said:

—What shall I do?

She said:

—Go and hide in that corner over there.

The counselor went in, but she did not want him to go to the corner where the young man was. Then her husband came, and he knocked on the door. The woman said to the counselor:

—Take your sword in your hand, go to the front door, yell at me, insult me, and go away in silence.

He did so. She went to open the door for her husband. And when her husband saw a man with a sword in his hand, he said.

¹⁰ *entendeder*: amante.

¹¹ *palacio*: casa o habitación, estancia.

—¿Qu'es esto?

E él non respondió nada e fue su carrera. E el marido entró al palacio a su muger, e dixo:

—¡Ay, maldita de ti! ¿Qué ovo este omne contigo, que te salle denostando¹² e amenazando?

E ella dixo:

—Vino ese omne fuyendo con gran miedo d'él. E falló la puerta abierta e entró —su señor empós d'él por lo matar—, e él dando bozes que'l acorriese. E después qu'él se arrimó a mí, pareme ante él e apartelo d'él que non lo matase. E por esto va de aquí denostando e amenazándome. Mas, si me vala Dios, non me inchalá.¹³

El marido dixo:

—¿Dó está este mancebo?

—En aquel rincón está.

E el marido salió a la puerta por ver si estava el señor del mancebo o si era ido. E cuando vio que non estava allí, llamó al mancebo e dixo:

—Sal acá, que tu señor ido es su carrera.

E el marido se tornó a ella bien pagado e dixo:

—Feziste a guisa de buena muger e feziste bien, e gradéscotelo mucho”.

—E, señor, non te di este enxemplo sinon que non mates tu fijo por dicho de una muger, ca las mugeres ayuntadas en sí a[n] muchos engaños.

E mandó el Rey que non matasen su fijo.

—What is this?

He left without replying anything. The husband went back into the house and said to his wife:

—Damn you! What did this man have to do with you? Why did he leave this place threatening you and insulting you?

She said:

—A man came running from him, and he was very afraid. His master was closing up behind him, but he found my door open and came in, asking me to help him. After he came in, I stood between him and the other man, preventing his death. And that is why the other one has left, and why he is yelling at me and insulting me, but —God willing— nothing will happen to me.

The husband said:

—Where is this young man?

—He is in that corner.

The husband went out to see if the young man's master had gone. When he saw that he was not there, he called the young man, and said:

—Come out! Your master has gone on his way.

The husband was very happy, he turned to his wife and said:

—You did well, like a good woman, and I am very thankful to you”.

—And, my Lord, I only told you this story so that you do not sentence your son to die trusting a woman's word, for when women get together, they come up with many a trick.

And the King ordered not to kill his son.

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¹² *denostando*: «Injuriando, infamando».

¹³ *inchalá*: del árabe *In-šā' Allah*, para expresar deseo que un acontecimiento ocurra (o no ocurra) en el futuro, si Dios así lo quiere.

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