

THE RIVER AS A LIMINAL SPACE IN BERCEO'S *THE FORNICATING SEXTON*

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Resumen: El símbolo del río en la literatura y en la imaginación popular es omnipresente, pues evoca un fluir de las aguas esenciales para los seres humanos, pero también puede encerrar peligros. La idea del río como espacio limítrofe sugiere que actúe como una frontera y un umbral mientras los personajes lo cruzan y atraviesan. En el siglo XIII, Gonzalo de Berceo tradujo una serie de milagros de la Virgen María. En uno de los cuentos, *El sacristán fornicario*, el río actúa como espacio fronterizo para el personaje principal, un sacristán, y es precisamente la naturaleza liminal del río la que ayuda al sacristán a salvar la vida y el alma. Este trabajo quiere investigar la idea de los espacios liminales, las fronteras, los umbrales y las transiciones en el cuento de Berceo, que habla de un sacristán atrevido, de su experiencia mortal, de su resurrección, y de su nueva vida posterior.

Palabras clave: Gonzalo de Berceo, *El sacristán fornicario*, resurrección, lo liminar, ríos.

Abstract: The image of the river in literature and the popular imagination is ubiquitous. Rivers have a mystical quality about them, bringing life-giving water essential for human survival, but also certain dangers, since each year numerous individuals also drown in rivers. The idea of the river as a liminal space is suggestive as the river acts as both boundary and threshold as characters move in time and space both across and down these watery courses. In the thirteenth century Gonzalo de Berceo translated a series of miracle stories that dealt with the Virgin Mary. In one of those stories, *The Fornicating Sexton*, the river acts as liminal space for the title character, a sexton, and it is precisely the unnamed river's liminal nature which helps save the sexton's soul and life. This paper will discuss liminality, boundaries, thresholds and transitions in Berceo's thirteenth-century story about an adventurous sexton, his near-death experience, his resurrection, and the new life he will lead afterwards.

Key words: Gonzalo de Berceo, *The Fornicating Sexton*, Resurrection, Liminality, Rivers

Resumé: L'image de la rivière est omniprésente dans la littérature et l'imagination populaire. Les rivières possèdent un caractère quasiment mystique dans la mesure où elles apportent l'eau essentielle à la vie, mais elles recèlent également des écueils, étant donné le nombre de personnes qui s'y noient chaque année. L'idée de la rivière comme espace liminal suggère que la rivière constitue autant une frontière qu'une porte d'entrée pour les personnages qui s'aventurent dans l'espace aquatique. Au XIIIe siècle, Gonzalo de Berceo traduisit un recueil de miracles de la Vierge Marie. Dans l'une de ces histoires, *Le sacristain fornicateur*, la rivière joue le rôle d'espace liminaire pour le personnage principal, et c'est précisément ce caractère de la rivière qui permet au sacristain de sauver sa vie et son âme. Notre essai mettra en discussion la liminalité, les frontières, les portes d'entrée et les transitions dans cette histoire du XIIIe siècle par Berceo, et qui raconte la vie aventureuse du sacristain, son voyage aux frontières de la mort, sa résurrection et la nouvelle vie qui s'ensuit pour lui.

Mots-clés: Gonzalo de Berceo, *Le sacristain fornicateur*, résurrection, liminalité, rivière

The image of the river in literature and the popular imagination is ubiquitous. The most enduring metaphor in Spanish poetry, «nuestras vidas son los ríos / que van a dar en la mar / que's el morir» (Manrique, 1984:149) compares our lives to the many rivers that mark Spanish geography. Huck Finn floated down the river on a raft, marking a journey of self-discovery and growth. Rivers flow through the entire Bible, the Jordan marking the boundary of the Promised Land and the site of Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16). William Wordsworth in his celebrated poem, *Tintern Abbey* writes «and again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur», (Wordsworth, 1974:120) as he idealizes the pastoral beauty of the Wye River's countryside he first knew in his youth. Rivers have a sort of mystical quality about them, bringing life-giving water essential for human survival, but also certain dangers, since each year numerous individuals drown in rivers. The idea of the river as a liminal space is evident in all of these examples since the river acts as both boundary and threshold for characters that move in time and space both across and down these watery courses. In the thirteenth century Gonzalo de Berceo translated a series of miracle stories that dealt with the Virgin Mary. In one of those stories, *The Fornicating Sexton*, the river acts as liminal space for the title character, a sexton, and it is precisely the unnamed river's liminal nature which helps save the sexton's soul and life. This paper will discuss liminality, boundaries, thresholds and transitions in Berceo's thirteenth-century story about an adventurous sexton, his near-death experience, his resurrection, and the new life he will lead afterwards.

Before explaining Berceo's story, let us consider the concept of liminality, transitions, and boundaries, all essential elements of *The Fornicating Sexton*. The word «liminal» comes from the Latin word «límen» which means «threshold». A liminal space is that place which is neither here nor there, that space which no one can really call his own because it is a transition between places. There is a moment at both dawn and sunset when it is neither night nor day, but everything is infused with a strange soft light/darkness that is unsettling, uncertain, and ambiguous. Another great example might be the fifteen-year-old boy who is no longer a boy, but is not really a man yet. He's a kind of «tweener». He's in a liminal existence of being neither boy nor man.¹ Liminal spaces are boundaries, thresholds being crossed that have not been crossed yet. Androgyny is a liminal space between the sexes that does not signal either male or female. Another liminal space temporally is that moment before one wakes up, but realizes that he/she is still asleep, a creepy place in which the mind flounders, disoriented and confused.

¹ This idea comes directly from Victor Turner's article «Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage», in *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967. Though the article focuses exclusively on rites of passage, Turner fleshes out the idea of «liminality» and leaves the door open for its application to other areas of thought.

Mystics, shaman, medicine men (and women), warriors, and other travelers have actively sought liminal spaces between reality and non-reality to pursue visions, truth, symbols, answers, experiences that occur outside the physical world that can give them greater insight to their lives, their people, their world. The hippie flower-power generation of the sixties took drugs—marijuana, LSD and peyote—to artificially induce the experience of hallucinatory liminal spaces between consciousness and unconsciousness. Those traveling in the twilight zone (a very liminal space, as Rod Serling was apt to remind us), should beware, because almost anything can happen. These luminal spaces are all places of uncertainty, of the unknown, of mystery.

Many liminal spaces connect to traveling, a very physical representation of a liminal space because the traveler is neither at home nor at his final destination; he is at an in-between point, having left and getting there, but has not yet arrived. For example, airports are liminal as Tom Hanks' character found out in the movie, *Terminal*. Airports or bus or train terminals are places out of place that represent neither stopping nor starting because they are that space between those two actions. The freeway system is totally liminal because for most individuals, the highway is not the destination. Other liminal spaces might include a theater stage because it allows actors to create new spaces, imaginary spaces, that morph and evolve into other imaginary spaces.

Death and what happens at death is probably the ultimate liminal space, marking the threshold between life and what comes after. Charon's boat that crosses the river Styx is a liminal space, as is the river and the entire journey to the underworld, an idea that will prove both crucial and beneficial for the straying sexton of Berceo's story. The liminal space of death lies shrouded in mystery, and as we see in Berceo's story, a near-death experience only serves to deepen the mystery of liminality, adding to the unknown boundaries of the final liminal space. As Hamlet says, «There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy». (I, 5) So what about the things between heaven and earth? Liminality covers multiple phenomena in multiple situations, times, places and contexts. As Pérez Firmat suggests, «Not only is liminality an umbrella term, a kind of master trope that subsumes diverse phenomena; these phenomena imbricate to such an extent that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss any one of them in isolation». (Pérez-Firmat 1996:xiv) This interconnectedness suggests that liminality brings different kinds of literature, different kinds of social phenomena together, so that in analyzing *The Fornicating Sexton* one might discuss the moral transgressions of the sexton in the same breath with his near-death experience.

In my discussion of liminality I have initially run roughshod over a couple of terms that are actually quite crucial to our considerations: boundary and threshold, and I neither differentiated nor disambiguated them. Boundaries, whether real or imaginary, whether figurative or literal, exist everywhere and mark the limits of any particular

space. We see them as lines on maps, fences around property (to keep people in and to keep people out), rules of behavior, a barrier at a toll booth, orange cones on a road, a bird cage, a door. Boundaries mark the beginning of one space as opposed to some other kind of space, whether similar or different. Often, one cannot travel over a boundary, a line in the sand, for legal, political or social reasons. Personal space is a clearly defined boundary into which we only let our most intimate friends and family. Usually boundaries, such as the foul lines in baseball or the goal line in football, indicate in some negative fashion the problem with crossing boundaries. Players or balls either become «out of bounds» or «out of play» or they score a touchdown. Anyone trying to enter the US boundary without the proper documentation will experience the negative feedback from immigration officials. Boundaries are about separation, for good or bad, about division, about keeping things, people, places, ideas, and imaginations apart.

On the other hand, thresholds are what we cross when we go over a boundary. In a symbolically sexual act, the groom carries the bride over the threshold. We talk about the «threshold of pain» past which one cannot tolerate it anymore. We also mention the threshold for consciousness past which one moves to an unconscious state or coma. Thresholds imply boundaries, but they also imply movement, crossing boundaries, making changes, moving into new territory. For those who stay within their boundaries, crossing thresholds seems dangerous, anarchic and risky. Thresholds imply change, and most boundaries are set up to repress change and insure continuity within the boundaries—social, political, religious, and historical. Crossing thresholds is about exploration and change. A first kiss, nothing being more perilous and risky, is about crossing a threshold in a relationship, but is there anything more exquisite? Human beings, by nature, are risk-takers, crossing all boundaries for a new experience. In Berceo's story, a man, a sexton, has been leading a life filled with high risk behavior, sneaking out of his monastery at night, crossing the river, a symbolic boundary between his safe haven and that den of iniquity, the city.

As a literary space, the river can assume particular importance, a location where special things happen—people drown, take journeys, come of age, fish, swim, get a drink (of water), float, and get baptized. Gonzalo de Berceo, a thirteenth century Spanish cleric, notary and poet, translated and re-configured a series of Latin prose stories that recount miracles performed by the Virgin Mary. The story of the fornicating sexton from the collection is well-known to most students, teachers and professors of Spanish literature, anthologized in the first volume of the ubiquitous, if not Victorian, *Antología de autores españoles, antiguos y modernos*, first published in 1972. In this particular Marian miracle, Berceo presents the story of a fornicating (and perhaps drunken) sexton who, after a night of partying, falls in the local river and drowns, dying in mortal sin.

The river in *The Foolish Sexton* exercises just such a function as both boundary and

threshold; it is a boundary because it physically marks the divide between the sexton's church and «the real world». The river itself is then a threshold which the sexton crosses so that he may partake of the pleasures of the flesh. He is chaste and good on his side of the river, but when he crosses the threshold, he indulges his sexual urges. Crossing back to the church he reassumes his role as «the good sexton». The river becomes both a boundary and a threshold as well as a liminal space marking a «before and after» existence for the protagonist. Carefully tracing the course of the river through Berceo's miracle story leads to a clearer understanding of the episode's moral stance.

This particular episode from *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* is a folktale about corruption, loyalty and crisis, and how all of these elements coalesce around a river. The folktale itself is universal and creating such stories may be one of humanity's most repeated practices, both entertaining and didactic; the folktale, a liminal space in and of itself, skirting the space between orally transmitted history and literary art, crosses boundaries, cultures and epochs. The elements already mentioned here—a man, a river, a descent into the darkness—are timeless, an essential quality of the folktale, and they could easily appear in cultures as diverse as Chinese, Indian, Arabic or European. Many literary characters have made literal or figurative journeys into the darkness of the liminal underworld—the land of the dead—in order to know themselves more fully or to develop a more unified selfhood. They learn to recognize themselves more completely as a mature adult. Passage into the underworld is a common literary motif—Orpheus, Dante, Jesus, Despereaux, and Harry Potter—and the characters always develop a greater awareness of themselves as part of a greater whole. The ego is suppressed as they find themselves caught up in a larger narrative, as do Beowulf or Gilgamesh, for example. They must confront their darkness, their most irrational fears, and they must decide either to integrate those fears within their character, balancing self-preservation against their heroics or give up in despair and fail. They must face death—man's greatest fear—and decide that for the greater good, death may be a distinct possibility. The character in question, a sexton, has no name and lives in an unnamed monastery next to an unnamed river in an unnamed country at an unspecified time. He happens to be Catholic, but he could have Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu. One might be tempted to say that he is like an Everyman in his anonymity.

Details about the sexton's name and identity both add to and subtract from the story's verisimilitude, an important element contributing to the believability of the miracle. Since the sexton is nameless and lives next to an unnamed river, readers can easily identify with the character and imagine themselves in a similar situation, with or without the religious vocation. The sexton is a liminal character in the sense that his identity has been stripped from him, and the marker «sexton» (or «sacristán» in Spanish) does not really distinguish him as a unique individual the way a real name such as

Gilgamesh or Beowulf marks these literary figures.

The sexton protagonist of Berceo's tale becomes involved in behavior unacceptable for a faithful Christian. The narrator presents him as a good man who has been corrupted by the Devil; his sin is fornication. In spite of his errant ways, he does have one sterling quality – loyal devotion to the Virgin Mary. The sexton in question always prays to Mary's statue on his way out of the church each night before going out to have fun. In order to carry out his evil deed, the sexton must, of course, leave his abbey in search of women, although the detail about where he goes for those encounters never becomes clear. In other words, the sexton is a traveler, a person accustomed to liminal spaces of transition, unafraid of what might be outside the protection of his church and monastery.

As he leaves his monastery, the sexton crosses a river as he heads out for trouble. At this point, the river becomes the threshold between his life as a «good» man living in a monastery doing religious things, and a «bad» man, involved in the sin of lust and fornication. Moving from one side of the river to the other, the sexton leaves his «good» safe life and enters into the dangerous territory of «bad» tempting worldly behaviors. Upon crossing the river, the sexton looks for the opportunity to sin, and, as the text makes clear, this cleric has been successful in his search on more than one occasion. The transition physically from one side to the other of the river to fulfill his sinful desires presents spiritual dangers to his vocation as a Christian cleric, and more significantly, to the wellbeing of his soul besmirched by sin.

As the sexton returns home one evening, he, just as many partiers before and since, falls into the river and drowns, dying in mortal sin, condemned to Hell. Literally, «while the body lay at the bottom of the river», (85a) the soul found itself the center of a debate concerning its final destination, either Heaven or Hell. At this juncture in the story, the river represents a kind of unorganized literary space that separates the quick and the dead, the good and the evil, the life in the monastery from life in the world. The sexton is no longer in control of his destiny; he is now dead (or at least not alive), and his previous life of sin and lust has ended. His literal «fall» into the river has turned into a decent into the liminal space of the underworld, like that experienced by a host of other literary figures.

In a very real sense, the unnamed river becomes a liminal space, a «between land;» it is a kind of symbolic Styx, across whose murky waters the soul must pass before arriving at its final destination—the gates of Hell and eternal damnation or the Pearly Gates and eternal bliss. The River Styx in Greek mythology was, after all, the boundary between the Earth and the Underworld—Hades or the world in which the dead receive their final just desserts. Exercising the same function for Berceo, the river now represents clearly the boundary between the living and the dead. As the sexton's soul separates

from his now lifeless body, it inhabits an intermediate area, a liminal space in which angels, devils and Mary appear. This is neither Heaven nor Hell, nor is it Limbo or Purgatory in any of the senses that Christians apply to those terms. While Mary debates with the devils who have come to carry off the most unfortunate soul of the drowned sexton, it remains somewhere around the river, just like his corpse actually reposes in the river, marking a liminal space, a «no-man's land» between life and death, suspended in the water between Heaven and Earth. This space is liminal because action takes place (the devils play soccer with the sexton's soul), but there is no description whatsoever of where all of these supernatural beings are. They inhabit an imaginary literary space that bridges the gap between the mundane world of the sexton, the underworld of the demons and the celestial world of Mary. If the devils win the debate with Mary, they will then go to Hell with their prize.

The debate, which marks the turning point of the story, centers on whether the man's soul should go to Hell or to Heaven. Mary wins the debate by arguing that the man always took leave of her before he left his monastery, ensuring his safety while he headed out across the river. In other words, even across the river, he was under Mary's protection. Dying in mortal sin, however, has put a kink in his protection. Nevertheless, Mary uses the man's loyalty as an appeal to her son Jesus, who grants clemency to the unfortunate sexton. While this lengthy debate between Mary and the devil takes place, of course, the sexton's body lies at the bottom of the river until his fellow priests come looking for him and fish him out. Their consternation with this turn of events is predictable as they are both suspicious of his death and troubled with keeping up appearances in the neighborhood. That their sexton drowned in the river after a night of carousing will look terrible to the other inhabitants of the area because it will be impossible to explain exactly why their sexton was out after-hours. Only the most naïve would imagine that he was not up to no-good.

Being out «after-hours», another liminal space between darkness and morning is necessarily associated with wrong-doing because normal people should be in their beds asleep during that time period. The midnight hour has traditionally been associated with monsters, vampires, werewolves and witches. One needs to remember that the sexton is sneaking out at night to take advantage of the cover of darkness precisely because he is up to no good. The darkness of the night and the black waters of the river create an ambiguous space associated with wrong-doing, sin, lust, rule-breaking, and fornication. The nefarious space created by night is liminal in the sense that boundaries can be crossed, thresholds traversed, and change is implicit.

The story's climax, which occurs beside the river, links Berceo's work with earlier religious events; it constitutes a variation on the two resurrection stories from the New Testament—Lazarus and Jesus. Line 95c, («resuscitó el fraire que era ya pasado»)

records the miraculous event, stating: the dead friar was resurrected. Obviously now on dry land, the dead man comes back to life, granted by Christ a second chance if he will repent and lead a good life. On the river's bank, the sexton scares the living daylight out of his companions by rising up and speaking: «Colleagues, I was dead and now I'm alive, of this be absolutely certain, blessed be the Glorious one, who saves her workers, and who liberated me from the hands of the evil warriors» (96abcd). One has to assume that water is still pouring off the poor man's head and that his clothing is still soaked and stinking of river water; rivers at that time were the main destination of all sewage, run-off, and garbage. Even in this aspect, the sexton's resurrection parallels that of Lazarus, since the latter's sister, Martha, worried that after three days his body would stink, although not from pestilent river water.

Obviously, the resurrection from the dead of the sinful sexton constitutes the miraculous element of the story. For the story to really work as a believable miracle the remaining details of the narrative must have a level of verisimilitude. The river and the sexton's death by drowning offer a plausible, real, counterpoint to the story's miraculous resurrection. All of the story's mundane details, the sexton, the monastery, the river, and the sexton's fornication create a level of verisimilitude that grounds the story for listeners and underpins just the merest whiff of plausibility within the narrative, a most necessary element for a story that purports to recount a miracle. Just like any big fish story, a miracle story must feign plausibility through the convention of verisimilitude in order to draw out the importance of the miracle. The unbelievable part of the story, the debate between Mary and the devils, must take place in some other kind of space that is not real because these characters do not exist in real space. The liminal space between life and death is entirely plausible within the structure of the narrative because it does not intrude on the verisimilitude of the mundane elements of the sexton and his bad habits. In other words, it is a miracle story because something miraculous happened to a normal, everyday individual. There was nothing particularly outstanding or special about the sexton who drowned in the river, and there was nothing particularly outstanding or special about this river. Even today, such events occur on a regular basis. For example, over the last thirty years, twenty-four individuals have drowned in the Mississippi River as it passes through La Crosse, Wisconsin, usually as a result of too much partying and inebriation.² Thus, the river becomes a space in which the narrator can offer his listeners a significant moral warning, connecting the sexton's experience to that of common individuals.

In effect, the didactic warning of the story's action is grounded in the idea that bad

² «Hard-Drinking College Town Struggles to Curb Drownings» October 23, 2006 is just one of many articles that outline the difficulties La Crosse has had with drinkers over the past thirty years.

things happen to normal people in normal places if they misbehave. One lesson to be learned here is that if a person misbehaves, gets too drunk or otherwise impaired to navigate the way home safely, he /she might wind up drowned and transitioning from life to eternity. The warning is even more effective if one does not operate under the same protection as the philandering sexton. Those who misbehave and cross the line into dangerous sin may not get a second chance as Berceo's sinful cleric did.

As a literary trope, the river subsumes all other symbols within the story, assuming the meta-symbolic position as the threshold between what is good and safe and what is bad and dangerous, as well as a liminal space, a space of transition, of «inbetweeness». If the sexton had just stayed home, none of the horrible things that happened to the poor man would have happened. The cold water of the river serves to «put out» as it were the fire of sexual desire that burns within him, and his accidental drowning is a punishment that fits the crime, to coin a phrase. As María Ana Diz explains in her analysis of the story, «La elección de la metáfora ('tanto pudo bullir.') es significativa: de 'hervir el agua u otro líquido', bullir, aplicado también a la sangre humana, significa 'moverse como saltando y dando borbollones,' 'menearse con demasiada viveza, no parar ni estar sosegado'. A la clara, ese movimiento diabólico queda aquí asociado con la actividad sexual». (Diz 1995:57) Berceo chooses the verb *bullir*, which as Diz points out, means to boil as in, the sexton's blood was boiling from his sexual activity. The river—a «cold» shower, so to speak—cools him off, to the point of death's cold stream pouring over his body. In fact, part of the deal Mary arranges with her Son so that the sexton gets a second chance at life is that he will refrain from all sexual activity in the future. He goes «cold turkey», so to speak and will no more be crossing the river into sin.

The sexton's plunge into the river suggests a kind of baptism, a rite of passage that gives him, literally and figuratively, new life. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan as it is narrated in either Luke or Matthew, marks the end of his life as a civilian person and signals the beginning of his ministry. Thus, baptism forms another liminal space between unsaved and saved. From the point of his baptism forward, Jesus carried out his earthly ministry much in the same way that the sexton should now carry out his duties in the monastery following Christ's example. The sexton entered the water a sinner, but he came out of the water a different man, reborn as a reformed sinner:

Confessóse el monge e fizo penitencia,
mejoróse de toda su mala contendencia,
sirvió a la Gloriosa mientras ovo potencia,
finó quando Dios quiso sin mala rependencia,
requiescat in pace cum divina clemencia (100 a-e)

Though he has much to do before achieving sainthood, the sexton has repented and resolved to live a different life from that before his drowning. He entered the liminal space of the story, the river, became dead, stripped of his possessions and identity, and came back from the dead a new person. He effectively occupied a liminal, transitional space in which there are neither sextons nor sinners and was reborn as a God-fearing, repentant sexton who will lead a very different kind of life in the future. His rite of passage has shown him both the terrible devils that had come for his soul and the incredible mercy shown to him by Mary and Jesus.

The drowning/baptism experience which the sexton undergoes is transformative in that he no longer wishes to continue sinning. The drowning makes the sexton face the reality of his bad behavior because now he understands, first hand, the consequences of breaking his order's rules of celibacy and abstention. After the pseudo-baptism experience, which also echoes a pseudo-birth experience, the sexton carefully follows the steps of the truly repentant: one, he confesses, a necessary step in understanding one's own guilt in the prohibited act; two, he does his penance, whatever it might have been; three, he does not return to his sinning ways; four, he continues to serve Mary faithfully just as he had done at the beginning of the story, and his faithfulness closes the narrative circle of the story because it was, in the first place, his faithfulness before he went out each evening that made possible his second chance. The river, however, does not change. As a liminal space, the river reflects a certain timelessness. It will forever serve as a constant reminder to the sexton of his transition from stubborn sinner to repentant believer each time he might have to cross it on monastery business. Better yet, it may mark an invisible boundary for the sexton, a dividing line between his former self and his re-consecrated one, so that he may refuse to cross the river in the future because he no longer journeys to find sinful pleasures.

Berceo's story then, centers on the character of the fornicating sexton, as its title reflects, recounting his sinful activity, his death through drowning in the river, and his miraculous resurrection because of his devotion to the Virgin Mary. As we have also clearly shown, the river becomes the most significant space and metaphor in the story, being both a line of demarcation between good and evil, and a liminal space in which important transitions occur. The story's effectiveness depends entirely on the timeless nature of the river in the collective imaginations of the listeners who all understand the persistent paradox of the river's presence: it at once provides food, drink, protection, and transportation for those who live by it, but it also poses a constant threat of danger for the young, the old, the foolish, the drunk, and the passionate. Without either the foolish sexton or the ancient river, the story lacks the grace and verve that make it vibrate with interest and intrigue. Did he fall or was he pushed? Was the water cold when he fell? Did he struggle to swim? Was it painful to drown? What did it feel like

almost getting dragged off to Hell? These questions all go unasked and unanswered, but to the listening public, these issues would weigh heavily on their minds because rivers are all around them. Each time Berceo's listeners saw a river, they would question whether they were «crossing the line» into danger and sin, and also whether they had been baptized in the river, a liminal space of transitions, to walk in newness of a more devoted Christian existence.

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