The Eve of Spain

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The Eve of Spain: Myths of Origins in the History of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Conflict.

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Power, friendship, trust, religion, beauty, betrayal, rape, honor, revenge, war, devastation. In Spain, these themes and narrative elements form the most enduring founding myth of the nation, and to many it remains not Myth but History. What follows is the story of the fall of Rodrigo’s Spain in 711 to the Muslims of North Africa and of the resistance to Muslim domination by a tiny band of eighth-century Christian freedom fighters as you might have heard it in fifteenth-century Spain.

The friendship of three men, King Rodrigo, Count Julian, and the Archbishop Oppas, the three most powerful men in the Iberian Peninsula, seemed unassailable in early eighth-century Toledo, the seat of the Visigothic kingdom. Individually, they held the keys to the three institutions of the land: the government, the military, and the nascent Christian Church. Together, their imperial dreams for Spain and the growth of Christianity seemed not an impossible quest, but achievable.

One day, though, against the counsel of his senior advisers, Rodrigo defied the injunction against entering an enchanted edifice, known as the House of Hercules (after the first ruler of the peninsula), to which each of the previous twenty-four Visigothic kings had added an iron lock, as custom dictated. Rather than add his lock, Rodrigo broke into the house—a sin of hubris and greed, because he thought there might be treasures within—and discovered an ark, containing a parchment with sketchings of men with beards and turbans as well as a prophecy, which stated that he who broke the covenant by entering the house would lose his kingdom to people who looked like the figures on the parchment. Rodrigo sealed the house and forbade his advisers to speak of it.

Count Julian entrusted his only daughter to Rodrigo’s court, as was the custom with the Visigothic nobles, removing her from the North African Berber community where his job required the family to live. Toledo provided her instead with the protection of the king and the rich comforts of court life. Who better to look after her safety than his friend the king? The sumptuous gardens of the palace enclave became a favorite retreat for the queen and the maidens of her entourage. But they were not alone in the garden sanctuary: the king also took his leisure along the ramparts of the palace, which gazed down upon the garden and the carefree maidens in it. The beauty of La Cava, as Count Julian’s daughter was called, enchanted the king,
even bewitched him, until he could restrain his lust for her no longer. One day, he summoned her to his private rooms. At first, she laughingly dismissed his entreaties, reminding him that the queen was in the palace. Then she pleaded, she fought, she cried, but to no avail. He raped her and threatened her with harm if she spoke of it to anyone. Perhaps, though, perhaps she could have done more to stop him, or she even led him on—who’s to say? Dishonored and disgraced without the flower of her maidenhood, she confided in her father, and that she should not have done.

Title page of *Crónica del rey don Rodrigo y de la destrucción de España y como los moros la ganaron*. Valladolid: Nicolás Tierry, 1527. The top of the woodcut states, “This is the tower that Hercules built in Toledo.” In the woodcut, Rodrigo orders the breaking of the locks, while his counselors try to dissuade him. Courtesy of The Hispanic Society of America, New York.
Women, it is said, talk too much and never know when silence should be the order of the day.

Outraged, with a murderous desire for revenge, Count Julian conspired with the Muslim groups of North Africa, who longed to conquer fair Spain, particularly the Berber ruler Tarik and his military leader Muza. Though Rodrigo thought he could stem the tide of fate by ensuring the silence of his advisers and of La Cava, it was too late. Between July 19 and 23 in the year 711, approximately twelve thousand warriors of Islam swarmed into southern Spain. When Rodrigo learned of the enemy’s presence, he moved his army south, but the ensuing battle left the king’s entire army slaughtered on the banks of the Guadalete River, and in the middle of the peninsula, the capital—Toledo—unguarded and vulnerable to invasion. Some say the king died that day, but others say he borrowed a shepherd’s humble garb—leaving his own scepter and ermine-trimmed cloak at the river’s edge—made his escape from the devastation wrought by the invading Muslims, and lived out his remaining days in grueling penitence. Meanwhile, in Toledo, the Jews, never soldiers in the king’s army, determined to aid the Muslims in the defeat of the Visigothic kingdom, and—it must be said—in the defeat of Christianity, by opening the gates of the city. Thus, the proud, Christian, Gothic nation fell to the unthinkable: the yoke of Islam.

But one hope remained. In the unforgivingly rugged terrain of the Cantabrian Mountains of Asturias, in a northwestern portion of the Iberian Peninsula, sometime between 718 and 722, refugees from the crushed Visigothic kingdom decided to fight back. A Gothic nobleman named Pelayo (possibly a relative of the defeated King Rodrigo) and a small band of followers, with the help of miracles attributed to God and the Virgin Mary, drew a line at the cave of Covadonga, beyond which the Muslims, for all their numbers and sheer military strength, could not advance. Launched from this tiny stronghold, the Christian Restoration, or Reconquest, would inspire valiant Christian kings and soldiers to strive to recover the lost kingdom and drive out the enemy infidel.

The author of this fifteenth-century version of the legend, Pedro de Corral, never signed any manuscript of the historical romance attributed to him, which circulated among elite readers for decades and was referred to as Crónica sarracina. Corral did not live to see the first printing of his book in 1499, under the title Crónica del Rey don Rodrigo, postrimero rey de los godos, nor even to see the date that changed history, 1492.

But before the post-1492, triumphant days of empire, the ignominy of national defeat. The story of the fall of Spain to the Muslims in 711, Spain’s enthralling foundational myth, shatters the illusion that wars are fought for the glory and honor of great principles, showcasing instead, in grand narrative fashion, lust and anger, two
of the seven deadly sins. These personal acts—the sexual desire of King Rodrigo and the rage of his former friend, Count Julian—had changed the course of history. However, the legend of the fall of Spain, like the story of the fall from the Garden of Eden, came to be identified not by the acts of men, but by its Eve: Florinda La Cava, the cause of Spain’s perdition. And the legend of the origins of the new Spain, the real Spain, the restored Christian Spain, celebrated even today in Spain’s post-Franco coat of arms and reinvigorated principality of Asturias, came to be identified by its redemptive figure, Pelayo, a David-like refugee from the fallen kingdom of Rodrigo, who battled the Goliath-like Arabs in Asturias, the cradle of the tiny, barely surviving Christian nation. The story of Spain’s Restoration, through the centuries, recalled the dangers of a king’s weakness, at the same time it invoked the unshakable courage, bravery, and success of Pelayo as proof that God and the Virgin Mary favored the growth not only of a Spanish Christian kingdom, but of an empire.

Though La Cava is often cited as the woman who caused Spain’s perdition, there is blame enough to go around: Rodrigo is the very embodiment of the reason why self-control and self-discipline, however tempting the sexual partner may be, were so highly valued in a ruler. Control over one’s sexual appetite was commonly considered an outward measure of one’s strength in other arenas. Even Plutarch, in his Life of Antony, disparages how Antony was in thrall to the seductive Cleopatra, pointing out the dangers—indeed, disasters—that had come from his failing to put the well-being of the state before his personal pleasure.1 La Cava’s father, Julian, allowed his need for revenge to outweigh his love of country and loyalty to Christianity, for which he burns in the hellfire of national revilement. Or at least he did until Juan Goytisolo’s late twentieth-century trilogy of modern revisionist novels subjected the legend of Spain’s origins to a scathing critique, proposing Julian as a hero whose “treachery” instead permitted the influx of Arab blood that gave Spanish society a passion, character, and intellectual dimension it otherwise lacked and would have continued to lack. More pervasive, intense, and ultimately destructive to medieval Spain, however, than the blame heaped on Rodrigo and Julian, was the hatred and prejudice that attached to the Muslims and Jews within the larger Spanish society, which the evolving and mutating legend of the fall of Spain dramatically captures and illustrates. While the ancient traditions that cast women as harlots or saints can thrive anywhere and anytime, in Spain they are linked, legendarily and historically through this founding legend, to the virulent anti-Semitism that characterized Spanish society, and the treatment of Jews and Muslims through the centuries. In other words, sometimes a woman is more than a woman. For that reason, the story of how the figure of La Cava developed over the centuries from victim to villain, as well as the stories of virtuous Christian women, beautiful Jewesses, and
Muslim princesses, are emblematic and central to an understanding of the national narratives that sought to define Spanish national identity.

In the early sixteenth century, the writer Pedro Ximénez de Urrea equated Eve and Helen of Troy with La Cava, accusing all three of leaving ruin in their wake. The other two names are iconic, but who was Florinda La Cava? And how did the legend evolve from the bonds of male friendship, betrayed and broken, to the legend of the national harlot, the Eve of Spain? If one asks a Spaniard even today, it seems that everyone knows La Cava caused the fall of Spain in 711, although the king is not held blameless. It has become as clichéd as knowing that Eve gave Adam the apple in the Garden of Eden, for which Eve holds special blame as the woman whose first step set in motion their collective disgrace. Astonishingly, however, in the earliest chronicle from the eighth century, there is no mention of a woman in connection with the fall of Rodrigo’s government, a defeat ascribed to his own failings. Other early Christian chronicles attribute the downfall variously to the sins of the previous ruler, Witiza, or to his envious sons, Rodrigo’s rivals to the throne, or to Rodrigo’s and his kingdom’s general iniquity, or even to his great pride, another deadly sin. Instead, early Arab chroniclers first mention the Christian king’s rape of his army commander’s completely blameless daughter as a way of explaining why Julian sought revenge for the family dishonor by conspiring with the Muslim forces to overrun the Iberian Peninsula.

Christian histories of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries began to include the episode of Rodrigo and La Cava, maintaining as simple fact that he raped La Cava. In the story’s later, more misogynistic manifestations, beginning in the sixteenth century, she used her sexuality shamelessly, tempting the man who was powerless against such a seduction, as men have been since the time of Eve. Although there is ample testimony to defend La Cava and squarely blame Rodrigo—centuries of versions, in fact—the legend evolved over time so that the name most associated with the fall is La Cava. For all intents and purposes, she is the Eve of Spain, a Helen of Troy with a Christian moral dimension added to her.

Florinda La Cava. Where does the name come from? The earliest histories leave her unnamed, simply the daughter of the count; in the thirteenth century, they begin to use something akin to an Arabic name, Alataba or Alacaba. By the time Spanish chroniclers told the story in the fourteenth century, she became la Caba, which comes from their assumption that “Al,” Arabic for “the,” should be removed from the rest of the name Taba or Caba. Logic tells us they were right. The name for Eve in Arabic is a word that means an archetypal, seductive bad woman in Arabic literature, rendered in histories of literature as Hubba, and the word continues today to mean “prostitute.” In the case of a fifteenth-century reworking of an earlier
history, a Jewish convert to Christianity drops the article and calls her simply Caba. The Hebrew for Eve is Chava, and it seems crystal clear that writers—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—have long connected her to Eve, even if, to our modern eyes, La Cava appears quite removed from the name Eve. In the sixteenth century, popular oral song most often called her Cava or La Cava, and in 1592, a Morisco named Miguel de Luna christened her Florinda La Cava, changing forever the way she would be known.

Ancient wisdom warns that a king’s sexual sins do not simply represent his individual failing. Rather, these acts of vice, weakness, or recklessness have powerfully destructive consequences, which far exceed the sexual act and any effect it may have on the individuals themselves, instead often culminating in the loss of a nation. In these legends of lusts of the flesh, the blame for the destruction of a kingdom may fall on a man or a woman, be shared by both, or may change over time, as in the case of Helen of Troy. As told and retold throughout the centuries, Helen is alternately cast as victim or whore, resistant or wanton and complicit, and Paris as either bold and decisive, or weak and reckless, or the entire story resurrected to be political allegory for a current political dispute. In works whose provenance is not Christian, there may be moral issues in a general sense, but far more important is the political havoc wrought by the decadence of the ruler.

When a ruler of Christian Spain commits a sexual sin, much more is at stake than merely the blot on the soul of the two fornicators, however dangerous that may be for their chances of attaining eternal life in Heaven. In medieval chronicles and histories with a strong Christian foundation, both the body politic and the Christian soul of the nation perish, and if the ruler’s moral comportment is not beyond reproach, he can—and in the case of Rodrigo, did—bring down the kingdom. In the history of Christian Spain, the ruler’s sexual sins cause a downward spiral into events of political and spiritual decline, resulting in the perdition of the Christian nation, of both the land and its inhabitants. If the head of the body politic—the king—is morally corrupt, his citizens will follow suit, casting a blight on the nation and its collective soul. This is the argument of St. Boniface, which later resurfaces in medieval Spanish chronicles.

The legend of the fall of Spain as a king’s sexual scandal began with the briefest of mentions in ninth-century chronicles and ended fully developed as the single cause of Rodrigo’s defeat as king, becoming the story of the woman who brought a nation—Spain—to political and spiritual ruin. As I see it, at the heart of this significant shift—at the heart of the fully developed La Cava myth—is the idea of the body. If Covadonga and the start of the “Reconquest” signal the birth of a new, revitalized and restored Christian Spain, as histories have long argued, then the rape
of Florinda La Cava can be seen not only as an act by a single lustful individual, King Rodrigo, but as an event on a monumental scale, that takes place, we might say, on the eve of Spain. Indeed, in the legend of the fall—and restoration—of Spain, every conceivable metaphor for the word “body” is at play. In its earliest manifestations, we find the sinning body of the king, head of the body politic, and the victimized body of the young woman in his court’s care, the iniquitous body of the nation, and in the king’s refusal to heed either precedent or prophecy, bodies of knowledge and bodies of evidence. Later, after the fifteenth century, much more prominent in the legend is the body of the harlot and the paradoxical traits of the sinning yet victimized, and then penitent, body of the king, upon which the Christian nation is destroyed. In restoration tales, subsequent leaders and bodies of government—Pelayo, Alfonso III of Asturias, Alfonso VIII of Castile-León, Alfonso the Learned, Isabel and Ferdinand, Philip II—employ their own unique metaphors of the body to reverse the earlier fall of Spain and create both nation and empire, particularly by creating additional eroticized stories intended to stand for troubled relationships with Spain’s Jews and Muslims. Two important features of Pelayo’s story, as it developed over the centuries, emphasize the body. Early modern histories elaborated on Pelayo’s purity and chastity, as opposed to his lustful predecessor Rodrigo, and both medieval and early modern histories embellished the origins of his rebellion against the Muslims as the desire to rescue his sister from the clutches of Munuza, a Muslim who had abducted her.

There is a longstanding tradition in Europe of the historicization, fictionalization, and allegorization of female chastity and political order, with a particular emphasis on the negative example, that is, the dangers of a lack of female chastity to Christianity and Christian nations. Medieval Spanish history found ample opportunity to exploit the connections of the bad, sexual Christian woman and the seductive Jewess, who were dangerous to men, as well as their surprising opposite, the sexually available Muslim woman, who serves as an instrument to further the growth of Christianity and the recovery of Christian lands in Spain. In the sixteenth century, the political agenda to create a centralized, unified, and above all Christianized Spanish national history dominated historiography. The recognition of this fact helps to explain why La Cava increasingly came to be seen as Eve in the sixteenth century: historiographical and poetic efforts joined forces to insist on the fall of Spain in 711 as a reenactment of the Fall from Paradise. In Spain’s case, though, the result was not simply humankind’s inheritance of original sin. Rather, the dominant and official histories told of the overrunning and domination of God’s most pleasing earthly paradise—the Iberian Peninsula—by unworthy and non-Christian occupants. Christian chroniclers invented historical events designed to trace their lin-
eage back to the roots of Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula, beginning in the Visigothic kingdom of the sixth century. Morisco historians did the same kind of historical invention but to prove their right to live in Spain and argue for their role as participants in the earliest stirrings of the creation of the nation.3 No match for the combined forces of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church, the Moriscos’ attempts to include themselves in the definition of authentic Spaniards failed, and Spanish historiography forged a relentlessly linear view of the nation as Christian through and through from the time of the Visigoths to the present rulers.

As is well known, Spain’s imperial dreams and realities declined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the final blow was struck in the late nineteenth century. In 1898, Spain lost the last colony—Cuba—of what was once arguably the greatest empire on earth. Accounts of national origins, searches to define national identity and the essence of one’s selfhood in an individual country fascinated Western Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Spain participated in the same kind of national soul searching that England, France, and other countries experienced, but because of the pervasive atmosphere of despair that set in with the loss of Cuba, Spanish soul searching acquired an acute sense of urgency in the twentieth century. Discussions of dynastic chains of Christian leaders were joined by the search for “the essence of Spain” and “true” Spanish art and literature, following a linear Christian development. The need to celebrate the eleventh-century warrior El Cid as the national Muslim-slaying hero, to locate the birth of Spanish literature in the thirteenth-century, hagiographic writings of a humble, pious monk from the Riojan region, named Gonzalo de Berceo, as well as the drive to prove that the origins of the nation were rooted in Rodrigo’s Visigothic Christian kingdom obsessed the greatest philosophers, historians, literary critics, and politicians of the nineteenth century. As with sixteenth-century historiography, nineteenth-century historiography was a double-pronged obsession. Not only was it fundamental to define nationhood and national identity in order to go forward in the face of defeat and humiliation, but it was crucial to trace the Spain of the nineteenth century as a direct descendant of the Visigothic kingdom, specifically the Visigoths who had converted to Roman Catholicism in 589 C.E. By casting true “Spanishness” as an unbroken link since the sixth century, the theorists of national identity in the nineteenth century, from Modesto Lafuente in 1850 to Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo in the 1880s, could claim that Jews and Muslims had always been rightly excluded from the “real Spain.” Although such a claim found favor among many people, many other strong, articulate voices excoriated the mission they found to be both anti-Semitic and demonstrative of centuries-long fear of Islam, indeed a fear founded in the defeat of Spain in 711.4
Most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish historians and many literary historians did not question the overall historical authenticity of the fall of Spain legend and its principal players—Rodrigo; La Cava; Julian; Bishop Oppas; Eglona, Rodrigo’s wife; Pelayo and his sister Ermesinda—but started from the point of view that the core legend was historical. They committed themselves passionately to a search for the truth of the proper details of the legend, not to discredit it, but to flesh out the facts of what they believed to be the historical truth. For sources, they returned to the earliest extant medieval chronicles and relied heavily on the histories and literature of the early modern period, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A significant figure in the literary excavations surrounding the Visigothic kingdom was the phenomenally prolific Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who died in 1968 at the age of ninety-nine. Along with his elder fellow Spaniard Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, Menéndez Pidal was responsible for shaping—more exactly, creating—Spain’s literary canon, a fact that has provoked both joy and woe. While rescuing and editing countless medieval manuscripts and fragments of texts, Menéndez Pidal heavily contributed to the national mission of a linear Christian history of Spain, alongside a similarly Christian literary canon, of which Spain could be proud. Central to those efforts, and most pertinent to the present study, was Menéndez Pidal’s monumental three-volume study, *Rodrigo, el último godo* (Rodrigo, the last Goth). It would be impossible to overestimate the value of his work for anyone interested in reading about the founding myth. Nevertheless, two points need to be made. One, in his zeal to establish the purely Christian origins of the legend of the fall of Spain, Menéndez Pidal was capable of some rather remarkable blind spots, for it is clear that the rape of Julian’s daughter, as well as the prophecy of the fall because of the king’s pride, are both Arabic contributions. That Christianity could so easily accommodate the integration and expansion of the daughter’s role to an Eve figure is testimony only to the misogyny embraced by Christian mythmakers, not evidence of Christian origins of the legend. Second, Menéndez Pidal’s focus—and hero—was King Rodrigo. There is no full and systematic study of either Pelayo’s or La Cava’s evolution through the centuries, and certainly no feminist study that examines the shifts in how La Cava is portrayed and how those shifts accompany other kinds of Spanish national stories. This book addresses those gaps, always with an eye to the larger social, political, religious, and cultural contexts in which these changes take place.

The twentieth century brought no respite from the bitter debates about national origins and the essence of a Spaniard, nor from the anti-Semitism and anti-Islamic sentiment that had characterized earlier centuries. The 1947 protest by the eminent
Hispanist Américo Castro in his brief essay “Los visigodos no eran aún españoles” (The Visigoths were not yet Spaniards), came after continuing decades of polemic. Ultimately, and in large part aided by the Franco regime’s insistence on a connection to Spain’s Christian origins in the mountains of Asturias, as well as by the publications of such historians as Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, Castro’s body of work initially had little effect on the national imaginary in its conviction that the myth of the fall of Spain was history, and the Visigoths their kin. For Sánchez Albornoz, the “real Spain” began in the eighth century after Florinda La Cava caused the fall of the nation on the eve of Spain. And if the Visigoths were kin—what were referred to as “authentic Spaniards”—then conveniently left out of the Spanish national identity and the origins of the nation were Muslims and Jews.

Sánchez Albornoz’s *El reino de Asturias: Orígenes de la nación española* (The kingdom of Asturias: Origins of the Spanish nation), published in 1972, resulted from decades of research that began in 1921. Convinced that the truth of Spain’s beginnings, as well as the history of Spanish “blood,” began in the mountains of Asturias, Sánchez Albornoz represented the last of a generation of scholars, but it is a powerful representation. The legend of Pelayo—who may or may not have existed—developed over centuries of time. Nevertheless, Sánchez Albornoz believes firmly not only in his existence, but in the serendipitous, indeed, providential fortune that plucked an unsuspecting minor nobleman “out of nowhere” (unsuspecting in terms of the greatness that would soon be thrust upon him), turning him into “el caudillo de un pueblo, el fundador de una monarquía, el restaurador de la cristiandad, el paladín de la civilidad europea frente a la religión y a la cultura islamitas y africanas” (the leader of his people, the founder of a monarchy, the restorer of Christianity, the paladin of European civility in the face of the Islamic and African religion and culture; 121). Américo Castro, for his part, pursued his theories of the Spanish people as a cultural mix of the three “castes,” as he called them, the Jews, Muslims, and Christians, which gained wide acceptance in the last decades of the twentieth century. His works remain highly influential today. In short, while Castro argued that contemporary Spain resulted from the fortuitous mixture of the three castes, Sánchez Albornoz and others preferred the view that an essential “Spanishness” preceded the fall of Spain in 711, was little affected by the presence of the Jews and Muslims in Spain for hundreds of years, and emerged vital, healthy, and victorious after the expulsions of the Jews and Moriscos in 1492 and 1609, respectively.

The twentieth-century Spanish novelist and essayist Juan Goytisolo borrowed the original title of Corral’s work, *Crónica sarracina*, and called his collection, *Cronicas sarracinas* (Saracen Chronicles). In his essay, “From Count Julian to Makbara,” he writes, “The greatest historic tragedy of the peninsula—the Saracen invasion and
the consequent ‘destruction of sacred Spain’—was blamed *ab initio* by our chroniclers and poets on a sexual crime: the illicit love of the last Visigothic King for the daughter of his vassal, Count Julian” (217). But this has resulted, he tells us, in a “sexual terror” that manifests itself in images of the vile Moor, “a pitiless rapist” of the wounded country, and countless representations—literary, political, and historical—of “the Moor as ferocious and lustful” (216–20). And, he continues, the legend and the fear of Islam pervaded the political discourses during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) of both the Right and the Left (220–22).7 By way of example, Goytisolo cites a particularly hate-filled speech by Dolores Ibárruri, the former president of the Spanish Communist Party, known as La Pasionaria (the Passionate One): “Savage Moorish hordes, drunk with sensuality, who pour forth to wreak horrendous violations of our daughters and our wives; Moors brought from the backward encampments of Morocco, from the most uncivilized mountain villages” (221).

Historians of the late twentieth century were open to searching for less mythic and fanciful explanations of the fall of Spain in 711. These range from recent reassessments of the earliest historical documents, leading to the conclusion that the Goths were simply unsophisticated and readily vulnerable to defeat, to psychoanalytical explanations, mostly involving the fear of strangers and of “strangeness.” The fear of Islam continues today, as the contemporary essays by Goytisolo demonstrate, and the fear reaches far beyond the boundaries of Spain. But within Spain, the legend of the fall and restoration of Spain remains highly significant, kept alive by tradition and political design. This attests to the power of myth to enthrall long after the specific elements of the myth have any actuality, and to endure because it responds to conditions, beliefs, and prejudices that continue to hold sway over human emotions.

But before turning to Spain’s stories of medieval Spain and beyond, let’s move backwards one more time, first to look at some of the associations of women and the nation, and then for some background on the earliest Muslim and Christian accounts of the fall of Spain.

**Of Women, Kings, and Nation**

Perhaps the most striking literary example of the successful regulation of a king’s inappropriate lust before great harm befalls the kingdom is from a Near Eastern text, and one that does not insist on the customary Christian dichotomy of good woman / virgin, bad woman / nonvirgin: the *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, popularly known as the *Arabian Nights* or *Thousand and One Nights*. The king’s custom is to have sexual intercourse with a virgin each night and order her beheading the next day before
choosing a new virgin for the coming night. The beautiful Shahrazad staves off her execution by weaving nightly tales of bewitching fantasy. However, I would argue, it is no accident that Shahrazad’s name means “savior of the city.”

But how does she save the city? By preventing the king’s normal routine and “healing” him through storytelling, she is training and reeducating the king to renounce his lustful practices and take a wife, to live and love monogamously, and to pay more attention to the matters of the kingdom. Shahrazad simultaneously regulates the king’s sexual desire until he marries her at the end of the collection, not only making her queen, but ending the barbaric practice of ritual sex and murder. Shahrazad is a model of the woman who is able to influence the course of government through what can only be called the domestication or sexual regulation of the ruler, earning the meaning of her name, “savior of the city.”

That Shahrazad is not a virgin after her first night with the king has no relevance at all to her value in the tale. Her ability to change the king’s behavior for the better is completely independent of her status as nonvirgin. In the Western tradition, the association of female sexuality and government brings nothing good with it, and a woman’s active sexuality usually carries with it the label of harlot. When women are associated with the positive values of government, as symbols or characters in a narrative, their virginity and chastity matter a great deal, and there are far fewer of them than of sinners. An interesting exception is the case of the sexually available Muslim or Saracen princess, neither virgin nor harlot, a positive figure who aids the Christian nobleman and helps foster and protect Christianity. Her Christian and Jewish sisters fare much worse.

Marbod of Rennes, bishop of Rennes in Brittany (c. 1035–1123), writes in his Liber Decem Capitulorum (Book with ten chapters) a section on the whore, in which he rails against the female sex:

Countless are the traps which the scheming enemy has set throughout the world’s paths and plains: but among them the greatest—and the one scarcely anybody can evade—is woman. Woman the unhappy source, the evil root, and corrupt offshoot, who brings to birth every sort of outrage throughout the world. For she instigates quarrels, conflicts, dire dissensions: she provokes fighting between old friends, divides affections, shatters families. But these are trivia I speak of: she dislodges kings and princes from the throne, makes nations clash, convulses towns, destroys cities, multiplies slaughters, brews deadly poisons. (Blamires, Woman Defamed 100)

Of the many slings and arrows hurled toward woman, contained within the almost relentless misogyny of centuries of writings, one of the most interesting and
titillating is the accusation that a single woman’s sexuality can topple a nation. Clearly, Marbod of Rennes believed it not only to be so, but to be woman’s most devastating of evil achievements. Centuries earlier, St. Jerome’s treatise on the inferiority of marriage, *Against Jovinian*, stated, “In all the bombast of tragedy and the overthrow of houses, cities and kingdoms, it is the wives and mistresses who stir up trouble” (Blamires 74). And further, in his *Letter 22, to Eustochium*, the daughter of his friend Paula, both of whom had dedicated themselves to a life of chastity, Paula as a chaste widow, her daughter as a virgin, Jerome connects the defeat of Samson by Delilah, David’s lust for Bathsheba, Solomon’s lust for women in general, and Amnon’s “illicit passion” for his own sister, Tamar, to the sins of Eve. Even the male gaze was thought to be victimized, rather than the other way around, the male gazer as appropriator of the female gazed-upon: “David was a man after God’s own heart, and his lips had often sung of the holy one, the future Christ, yet as he walked upon the roof of his house he was fascinated by Bathsheba’s naked beauty, and added murder to adultery. Notice here how, even in his own house, a man cannot use his eyes without danger” (Blamires 75).

Bathsheba is violated by the king, made a widow by his judgment to send her husband to certain death in battle, and yet, in Christian Patristic writings, she bears the blame for inciting the passion of the king. As we can see, then, man was not safe anywhere, not even in his own home; if not assailed by the evils of his wife, other temptations abounded. Removing oneself from society to the wilds of nature provided little relief from the torments of the flesh, as Jerome himself, in recounting his travails in the desert, paints a vivid picture of how much more dangerous woman was to his soul than the most deadly of creatures in his ascetic outpost: “When I was living in the desert, that vast solitude which is parched by the burning sun affords a savage home for hermits, how often I fantasized that I was among the pleasures of Rome! . . . Now, although in my fear of hell I had consigned myself to this prison, where I had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself surrounded by dancing girls! . . . [T]he fires of lust kept boiling up within me when my flesh (before its tenant) was as good as dead” (Blamires 74–75).

Christian belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity ushered in a new law and a new era of female virginity, with an emphasis on female chastity if not virginity for all, and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross made possible each individual’s eternal salvation. Unfortunately for mankind, however, the daughters of Eve did not disappear with the overturning of the old law and the start of the new. And unfortunately for womankind, an unattainable ideal—the Virgin Mary—captivated the imaginations of sacred and secular writers alike. This resulted in the dichotomy known as Ave-Eva, from the Latin Ave Maria (Hail Mary) in Gabriel’s greeting to Mary, and her fallen
counterpart, Eve, reinforcing the categories of virgin-harlot and angel-whore, which haunt women to this day. Men born after the time of Jesus Christ continued to have to negotiate the dangerous seas of a world filled with sirens—the female sex—whose only purpose in life appeared to be the spiritual destruction of men through design or even unintentionally, simply through their inherently evil nature. The writings of the Church Fathers and the low opinions of male writers about the ability of women to control their own sexuality, coupled with the Augustinian view of man’s own now-frail self-discipline, allowed relentless attacks on woman, sometimes tedious and condescending, sometimes lively and humorous, often dichotomized into catalogs and categories of good women (extremely rare) and bad women (the vast majority).

Certainly, Augustine contributed much to the dichotomous view of women, the implicit, if not explicit, view of the Garden of Eden as the first loss of “nation” through a woman’s temptation and man’s ongoing vulnerability to female sexuality, establishing a link between sexual activity and the health or sickness of society. Legitimate procreation, sanctioned by the Church, led to civic and national construction of an orderly society. Illicit sexual activity threatened order, and order was always under attack by the inherent evil of woman and the insatiable, often uncontrollable, lustful female sexuality. One of his conclusions about the fall of Adam and Eve, and the fallen state of humanity, is that men lost their original ability to govern themselves. This loss, according to Augustine, ranges from men’s inability to prevent involuntary physical reactions to women or thoughts about women, to a penchant for social disorder. As Elaine Pagels tells us, “The war within us [the passions] drives us to war with one another—and no one, pagan or Christian, remains exempt” (113).

Another of Augustine’s beliefs, shared by other early Christian writers, was the link between the domestic and the public, home and government: “The union of male and female is the seed-bed, so to speak, from which the city must grow . . . Since, then, a man’s home [hominis domus] ought to be the beginning or elementary constituent of the city, and every beginning serves some end of its own, and every part serves the integrity of the whole of which it is a part, it follows clearly enough that domestic peace serves civic peace, that is, that the ordered agreement of command and obedience among those who live together in a household serves the ordered agreement of command and obedience among citizens” (De civitate Dei [The City of God] 15, 16: 19, 13). As with many of Augustine’s premises, the loss of self-government—the loss of control over one’s own body—lent itself to lavish narrative elaboration and extensive allegorical treatment throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Extensive writings that predate Christianity expounded on the necessity for a ruler to hold lust in abeyance for the good of the country. Once Augustine promoted the view that the sin in the Garden of Eden was a sexual one initiated by Eve,
causing the loss of the first nation that sent us all east of Eden, Christian writers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages accepted this view with unbridled enthusiasm. It was not long before the misogynistic expression expanded the representations of women not just as the physical and political downfall of individual men, and of entire nations, but as the spiritual downfall of both as well, leading to the perdition of the national soul. And from this, it was almost inevitable that such a story as the fall of the Spanish Visigothic kingdom in 711 to the Muslims, with its references to a paradisiac peninsula and the hint of a scandal with a woman, would develop into the legend of the national harlot.

In fifteenth-century Spain, the general consensus on woman’s devastating power over monarchs still intact, as well as the view that the overall moral turpitude of a people could destroy a society, Clemente Sánchez de Vercial, archdeacon of Valderás in León, began one of the five hundred brief stories in his _Libro de los enxemplos por a.b.c._ (a book of anecdotes arranged according to the alphabet, translated as _A Book of Tales by A.B.C._) with the aphorism, “Lewd women make kingdoms fall, for chastity has failed them all.” Lest anyone fear that the lewd woman might escape unpunished, Sánchez de Vercial follows this with an anecdote involving the impaling of a lustful queen through her genitalia. Centuries later, the Mexican diplomat Ignacio Ramírez stated in a speech on September 16, 1861, to celebrate that country’s independence, “It is one of the mysteries of fate that all nations owe their fall and ignominy to one woman, and to another its salvation and glory; everywhere is repeated the myth of Eve and Mary” (Franco xviii).

The quotation from Sánchez de Vercial’s _exemplum_ collection reflects a view held about women that predates Christianity, while the second, by Ramírez, ties into at least two strains of the collective popular imagination, as well as that of learned historians, theologians, and fiction writers throughout the centuries. The histories of nations have often been recounted through the mythic pattern of falling and rising again, and more specifically as rehearsals of the Fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden. In stories about a reversal of a fall, the ruler whose tale is being told becomes a kind of Christ figure, whose divinely ordained role on earth is to restore his Christian kingdom or create a Christian empire. In these stories, nations become paradise on earth, and the ruler, God’s chosen earthly leader. Such stories look forward and backward: when told by contemporary historians (of any age), they inspire those who must wage war in order for the ruler to achieve his imperial or nationalistic goals; at the same time, the pattern of a rise and fall (and rise again) salves the wounded pride of those citizens whose histories recount bloody and bitter defeats at the hands of their enemies. In Spanish histories and fiction, writers often glorified the reign of a current ruler by portraying contemporary events as a reversal of the
fall of Spain in 711, especially up to the conquest of Granada in 1492, after which they tended to portray the rulers as links in the Christian continuum begun by Pelayo. By casting the rise and fall of nations as the handiwork of latter-day Marys and Eves, Ramírez signaled a particular strain of the fall of nations pattern: the woman whose sin—usually a sexual encounter with the ruler—results in the downfall of the individual leader, of his soul and his rule, and extends to the downfall of the nation, civically and spiritually. When a nation’s history is told as a manifestation of divine providence, the blame for defeat does not have to be shared by the citizens. In some cases, a decline is the will of God for any number of reasons, or it is a punishment for the transgressive action of the leader himself. Nations have fallen because of women, or so legends claim: Troy had its Helen, and Cleopatra famously used her beauty and seductive powers for her political aims. But what happens when a woman not only “dislodges the king,” in the words of Marbod of Rennes, causing the fall of the nation, but at the same time causes the loss of the nation’s Christian soul? The evolution of La Cava’s story through the centuries reinforces the staying power and the pervasiveness of the myth that a single woman can bring down an entire nation—in the case of eighth-century Spain, using her body to destroy its very soul.

In Alexander Krappe’s study, inspired in part by a desire to prove that the source of the story of Rodrigo and La Cava could be other than Arabic, and preferably Christian, he recounts precedents in which the ruler falls because of his inappropriate lust.13 These examples are human representations of something that had been anthropomorphized centuries earlier, the city as the virgin or the harlot. Indeed, the Bible, myth, and folklore employ this metaphor for the city, and Jung includes it in his catalog of female symbolic fields and exploration of maternal, feminine imagery: “The city is a maternal symbol, a woman who harbours the inhabitants in herself like children . . . Strong unconquered cities are Virgins . . . Cities are also harlots” (208).14

Sixteenth-century Europe witnessed an explosion in the use of the dichotomized figure of the woman, angel-whore and Ave-Eva, as the most general categories.15 This view applied to the lowliest of women and to the most exalted. The ancient attributions of the city as virgin or harlot—stepped up to become nation and empire—enjoyed an extraordinary reincarnation in political discourse, literature, and art. In her book *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism*, Stephanie Jed examines the story of the tyrant Tarquin, his rape of the chaste matron Lucretia, and her subsequent suicide as emblematic of the birth of the nation, and as a symbol used over and over, particularly from the fifteenth century on. Because Lu-
cretia’s male relatives were then galvanized to overthrow the tyrant, Lucretia’s rape “constituted a founding myth of liberty in the aftermath of sexual violence” (5). The image of the female chaste nation abounded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly the vulnerable chaste nation who needed male protection, for she faced the constant threat of rape, invasion by enemies. This view was aided in no small part in Spain by the memory of Queen Isabel the Catholic and in England by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Paintings of chaste Lucretia were popular, and even King Philip II of Spain, who reigned in the second half of the sixteenth century, received a gift of Titian’s spectacular rendering of The Rape of Lucretia.

While the publicly declared virginity of Elizabeth I of England (however feigned that virginity seems to have been) functioned as empowerment, allowing her access to the world of men, as in the days of earliest Christianity, when public virgins were accorded protection, respect, and above all, mobility, this was not the case for the typical woman of the sixteenth century. For the chaste woman is a powerless one: although she signals no invitation, the mere sight of her and knowledge of her inaccessibility incites the lust of men. Only silence and enclosure can protect the third and most precious aspect of woman, her chastity. Shakespeare alludes to the paradoxical sexual provocativeness of the chaste woman, and the link between sexual possession and the city or nation, not coincidentally, in his work The Rape of Lucrece: “This moves in him more rage and lesser pity / to make the breach and enter this sweet city” (vv. 468–69). In other words, Shakespeare’s tyrant is excited by Lucrece’s chastity, which incites this ruler and military leader to penetrate the “sweet city” of her body.

For all the visual and literary representations of a chaste icon such as Lucretia, Renaissance Europe saw no dearth of harlots. The sixteenth century provided extremely sensual paintings and woodcuts of Eve in seductive poses, Mary Magdalene as the penitent harlot, Jezebel, Delilah, and other women whose dangerous sexuality defined them. The dates of four of Titian’s paintings nicely demonstrate the tension of the dichotomized woman in this period, and how they shared the same cultural landscape, if not the same canvas: The Rape of Lucretia (1568–1571 and 1570–1576), The Rape of Europa (1559–1562; here, rape means “abduction,” not sexual violation), and The Penitent Magdalen (c. 1560). In this world of heightened depictions of Ave-Eva, the story of La Cava and the king enjoyed renewed interest, and the sexuality of the woman became the focal point of the tale. Consequently, La Cava found herself in this period—post-fifteenth century—in two undesirable locations: (1) she is raped but guilty because she is woman, inherently seductive, even though chaste in personal behavior and modesty, or (2) she is not raped, because
she herself was Eve, who tempted Adam to fall. We will see a few attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of La Cava after the sixteenth century during Romanticism, though most rehabilitative efforts were exerted on behalf of Rodrigo, as a result of the Romantic tendency to see tragic heroes everywhere, and because the renewed efforts to connect modern Spain to the Visigothic kingdom desired a heroic ancestor rather than a scoundrel.

**Origins of a National Myth**

The peoples of Spain and Provence and Burgundy . . . turned away from God and lived in harlotry until the Almighty Judge let the penalty for such crimes fall upon them through ignorance of the law of God and the coming of the Saracens.

St. Boniface, mid-eighth century

Many a worthy scholar has stumbled trying to sort out the complicated history of manuscripts and their dates in order to track the evolution of the Muslim conquest legend. Manuscript transmission, never an easy feat in classical and medieval studies, is particularly difficult here because of the competing versions and the fact that almost no surviving manuscripts are close in time to the actual historical events. For our purposes, five puzzle pieces tell us what we need to know: the remarks of St. Boniface, and two Christian and two Arabic chronicles. Together they laid the groundwork for Castilian historians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to begin crafting in earnest a national narrative of the past.

When Boniface, in his missionary letters of the mid-eighth century, refers to “the harlotry of Spain,” he addresses the events that led to the destruction of the Visigothic kingdom in 711. In 746–747, he sent a “Letter of Admonition to King Aethelbald of Mercia,” on the findings of his travels, that iniquity abounds. He chastises the king for refusing to marry, preferring instead a debauched life, which included adulterous lust, and for his encouragement of the clergy and the nobility to embrace the same behavior: “these crimes are committed in convents with holy nuns and virgins consecrated to God, and this, beyond all doubt, doubles the offense . . . Peter, prince of the apostles, in his prohibitions against lust says: . . . ‘The price of a harlot is scarcely that of one piece of bread, but a woman steals the precious soul of a man’. . . . [F]ornication is worse than almost any other sin and may truly be described as a snare of death, an abyss of hell, and a whirlpool of perdition” (126–27). After railing against harlots of all kinds—nuns, married women, disgraced virgins—
Boniface warms to his theme, calling upon the rhetorical tools of fire and brimstone, and the lessons of travel and history:

If the English people, as is reported here and as is charged against us in France and Italy and even by the heathen themselves, are scorning lawful marriage and living in wanton adultery like the people of Sodom, then we must expect that a degenerate and degraded people with unbridled desires will be produced. At last the whole race will become debased and finally will be neither strong in war nor steadfast in faith, neither honored among men nor pleasing in the sight of God. So it has been with the peoples of Spain and Provence and Burgundy. They turned away from God and lived in harlotry until the Almighty Judge let the penalty for such crimes fall upon them through ignorance of the law of God and the coming of the Saracens. (128)

Many historians refer to this moralizing view of a country’s decline as a Decadence Tradition, a national debasement that could assail pagan and Christian kingdoms alike. Boniface’s sermonizing tirade asserts the absolute necessity of the ruler’s chaste behavior to ensure the continued success of a Christian nation and the general moral well-being of that nation’s populace.

The earliest surviving account of the fall of Spain in 711, from either the Christian or Muslim point of view, is the anonymous Crónica mozárabe de 754 (Mozarabic Chronicle of 754), probably written by an ecclesiastic in Toledo, a Mozarab—a Christian living under Muslim rule—slightly after Boniface’s epistolary sermons. This chronicle strongly promotes a Decadence Tradition, depicting the invasion as God’s scourge to punish the Goths for transgressions of divine law. According to this anonymous chronicler, Rodrigo had usurped the kingdom of the Visigoths, to which he had no entitlement. When the Muslim leader Muza crossed into the Iberian Peninsula, Rodrigo “wretchedly lost not only his rule but his homeland, his rivals also being killed.” Muza returned to Spain a second time, forging on to the royal city of Toledo, where he decapitated the nobility, with the help of the treacherous nobleman Oppas. He “condemned lords and powerful men to the cross; and butchered youths and infants with the sword,” after which they set up “their savage kingdom . . . in Córdoba.” Muza returns to North Africa, leaving his son, Abd al-Aziz (in later accounts, Abdelasis), to govern in Seville. His son marries Egilona, Rodrigo’s widow. His men kill him, purportedly because Egilona encouraged him to rebel against the Arab caliphate and keep Spain for himself (Constable 29–32). Many centuries later, historians suggest that good Christian Egilona’s advice to her husband was a stratagem to turn the lands back over to the Christians.
The mid-ninth-century Arab historian Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam recounts the events of the fall of Spain from the Muslim perspective in *Futūḥ Misr* (*The History of the Conquest of Egypt*) and introduces the storyline of a raped daughter as reason for Julian's willingness to help the Muslims. His history reflects the influence of his likely source material, oral storytelling, which had developed in this period for the purposes of religious devotion, instruction, and entertainment (Constable 32). Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam’s *History* retains an authoritative place in Arabic writings. He was the first Arab historian of Egypt, and his seven-volume work (of which book 5 described the Arab conquest of North Africa and Spain) was a source for many subsequent histories. According to Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam, Julian entrusted his daughter to the care of the king for her instruction and education, but the king impregnated her. In general, Arabic chronicles from the ninth century and beyond tended to inflate the prophetic quality of the legend to showcase the providential nature of their victory over the Christians, one that Allah had willed. We saw, in the fifteenth-century version of the legend that opened this chapter, how Rodrigo forced his way into the House of Hercules. That episode originates in Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam’s account: Rodrigo refused to honor the ancestry of Toledo by placing a lock on the enchanted edifice, a tradition that endowed the new ruler with authority over his people. Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam includes the prophecy that was to appear repeatedly, that the locked building, rashly and imprudently penetrated by Rodrigo, housed the parchment with drawn pictures of Arabs and the prediction of Muslim triumph over, and domination of, the Iberian Peninsula: “When this door is opened, these people will conquer this country.”

Tarik and Muza storm into Toledo, hoping to acquire a valuable jewel-encrusted table that Rodrigo reputedly had, and which had legendarily belonged to King Solomon. Later in the narrative, instead of Rodrigo’s widow marrying Muza’s son, Abd al-Aziz (or Abdelasis), it is Rodrigo’s daughter who does so. She brings him a fortune in worldly goods, but misfortune in life: “When she came to him she said, ‘Why do I not see the people of your kingdom glorifying you? They do not prostrate themselves before you as the people of my father’s kingdom glorified him and prostrated themselves before him’” (Constable 32–36). Abd al-Aziz constructs such a small door in his palace that all who enter must bow down to him. The people are angry at this show of pride, and further, they suspect that his wife has convinced him to become a Christian. They ambush him in a garden one night, where he cowers under a bush. In spite of his pleas for mercy, they cut off his head.

Our second important Christian history after the *Crónica mozárabe de 754* is the Asturian *Crónica de Alfonso III* (*Chronicle of Alfonso III*), which invents the story of the hero Pelayo. From the late ninth century, *Crónica de Alfonso III* is modeled on
Bishop Isidore of Seville’s seventh-century *Historia Gothorum* (*History of the Goths*). Isidore traces the rise of the Goths, while the Asturian chronicler shows how they fell from grace, lost their kingdom, and had to rebuild it. Crónica de Alfonso III was a self-congratulatory history, designed to demonstrate that “Alfonso was not to be just another conqueror of Spain, but the heir to a past regime, fighting to restore his birthright” (Wolf 48). Alfonso, who reigned from 866 to 910, ordered the composition of the chronicle, in which the theory was first presented that the Asturian king was the legitimate heir to the defeated Visigothic king.

Crónica de Alfonso III depicts this king’s crucial role as the driving force to initiate reconquest of the peninsula. Instead of attributing all blame to Rodrigo’s governance, Crónica de Alfonso III finds that iniquity pervaded the kingdom, and stemmed from the debasement of King Witiza, King Rodrigo’s predecessor. Among Witiza’s sins, he took many concubines and wives, and ordered the clergy to do the same, a sin that Alfonso III would repress in his rule. Contradicting the earlier Christian chronicle of 754, this chronicle insists on Rodrigo’s right to the Visigothic throne, indeed that his entitlement to the throne came from his family legacy, and that his grandfather had been a Visigothic king. The idea that Witiza had already weakened the kingdom, making repair impossible for Rodrigo, and thereby justifying why the Muslims defeated the peninsula so handily, became an important theme much later, gaining great currency in the sixteenth century, such that it was repeated as fact in the nineteenth century and even in Sánchez Albornoz’s 1972 history of the Asturian kingdom.

By far, the longest part of the Crónica de Alfonso III invents the history of Pelayo at Covadonga. Pelayo, the sword-bearer of the kings Witiza and Rodrigo, fled to the region of Asturias, in the north of Spain, where the Muslims and Christians lived in an uneasy relationship, although the Muslims clearly dominated. The local Muslim ruler, Munuza, fancied Pelayo’s sister, so he sent Pelayo away to Córdoba on a mission of sorts and married the sister. He then instructed his men to return Pelayo to Asturias bound in chains. Pelayo escaped the trap and sought refuge in a cave dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Covadonga. The men to whom Pelayo had given the slip reported to Munuza that Pelayo’s goal was to stir up a rebellion. Sending both an enormous army and the treacherous Bishop Oppas to negotiate with Pelayo, Munuza determined to quash the rebels one way or another. Pelayo’s defiant speech to Oppas, repeated in the legend for centuries thereafter, places his trust in God and Christianity.

Convinced by the failure of Oppas’ conversation that only the sword could deter Pelayo, Munuza’s army prepared for battle, setting up catapults, drawing their flashing swords, brandishing spears, and preparing slings. But when the Muslims launched
the stones and shot the arrows toward the Christians, and very near Mary’s cave, the Lord, who tolerates no disrespect or sacrilege to his mother, miraculously intervened, causing the weapons to turn around in midair and fall upon the “Chaldeans,” as the chronicle calls the Muslims, killing some 124,000 warriors. The survivors, 63,000 of them, scaled a mountain in the hope of escaping with their lives. But upon reaching the summit, the Lord cracked open the mountain at its base, hurling the enemy into the river below, and crushing them under the falling rock and soil. Pelayo’s victory sets the Christians on the road to restore what had been lost, which they—and Pelayo’s own words—attributed to God’s divine plan.

Pelayo lived as king for nineteen years (718–737), and his son Favila succeeded him: but Favila had ruled for only two years (737–739) when he was mauled by a

bear. Alfonso, the son of the duke of Cantabria, a region of Asturias, and a member of the royal line, had married Pelayo’s daughter Ermesinda. The coronation of Alfonso I formally initiated the Asturian line of kings, but it was the rule of Alfonso III that forged a number of significant convergences, which brought together the religious, the political, and the military. Under Alfonso III, late ninth-century Christians “considerably extended the boundaries of the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. Alfonso’s sons and subjects speak of him as ‘magnus imperator.’ No longer did the Christians feel themselves humbled in the face of the Moors: their monarchs, once simply princeps or reges, they now called imperatores” (Castro, *The Spaniards* 383).

At the beginning of the ninth century, Christians in northwest Spain began to venerate a sepulcher in the city of Compostela, reputed to be the resting place of James the Apostle. Castro tells us that the cult of St. James developed precisely as a means of furthering Christian military zeal:

> If Spain had not been submerged by Islam, the cult of Santiago of Galicia would not have prospered; but the anxiety of the eighth and ninth centuries fortified the faith in a Santiago the brother of Christ, who, like a new manifestation of Castor, would achieve magnificent victories, riding his shining white charger. Similar miracles had occurred elsewhere occasionally, but without taking on transcendent importance; . . . The cult of Santiago was not a simple manifestation of piety eventually useful in the struggle against the Moor. The truth is, on the contrary, that the belief emerged out of the humble plane of folklore and assumed immeasurable dimensions as an answer to what was happening on the Muslim side: a type of war sustained and won by religious faith was to be opposed (not rationally, of course) by another fighting faith, grandly spectacular, strong enough in turn to sustain the Christian and carry him to victory. (382)

Alfonso III supported the view that Santiago, the place, rivaled Rome as a center for Catholicism, and he “is precisely the one who had the first proper church built in honor of the Apostle: ‘And he caused the church of St. James to be built, all of carved stone, with pillars of marble; for the one before this had been made of earth’” (Castro, *The Spaniards* 386, quoting from Alfonso the Learned’s *Estoria de España* [History of Spain]). In sum, Alfonso III increased the size of the kingdom, which greatly increased the morale of his subjects; ordered the composition of the chronicle that documented an origin for that kingdom in the legend of Pelayo, as well as providing an exemplary tale of the victory of the outnumbered but valiant and ultimately successful Asturians against the Muslims; and by ordering the construction of the church in honor of Santiago, he recognized the significance or potential significance of the Moor-slaying saint for a people launched on a religious, military mission.
Historians believe that Muslim, not Christian, writers further contributed to the development of the legend of the daughter, especially in specifying the sexual act as a rape. Not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did Christian chroniclers begin, first of all, to include this episode and then showcase it as the central event of the legend. The Arab historian credited with developing this aspect of the legend is the most important historian of Al-Andalus, Ahmad al-Razi, typically referred to in Christian writings as Rasis the Moor (c. 950–970). His popularity helped diffuse the legend, and many historians believe he enlarged the role of the daughter and gave the name House of Hercules to the locked edifice. The specific nature of Rasis’ contributions remain greatly debated since all manuscripts are lost. What we think we know about Rasis and the legend of the fall comes from references to him in other Arab histories; from later manuscripts that purport to be translations of his history, specifically a thirteenth-century Portuguese translation; and from various attempts to reconstruct the lost work, which depends on a tremendous amount of luck and guesswork. Although historians can find no direct evidence of Rasis’ contributions, indirect, though possibly incorrect, historical testimonies abound, even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which authors cite Rasis and then reveal that they did not see Rasis’ work firsthand but are borrowing from others who claim Rasis as one of their sources.34

Most Arab historians portrayed the aggrieved father, Count Julian, with great sympathy. As the loving father whose cherished daughter had been deflowered by the very king who should have protected her, the Count Julian of Muslim legend behaves in an understandably human fashion. The exception comes from the historiographer Ibn al-Kittaya, who lived in the late tenth century and claimed descent from Witiza.35 Interested in redeeming the reputation of his forefather Witiza, so bitterly denounced in the Crónica de Alfonso III, Ibn al-Kittaya deviates from the Muslim historical line of argument in his notably hostile portrayal of Julian.

One small piece of the storyline—often absent in the earliest versions of the tale—will prove to be of utmost importance for the increasingly gendered, antifeminist versions of La Cava’s seduction and rape, especially in the oral ballad tradition. How did her father find out what the king had done? Two earlier Arabic examples, from the second half of the twelfth century, propose a clever and unusual way for the daughter to get word to her father.

Both the anonymous Kitab-al-Ictifa and the Fatho-l-Andaluci concur that Rodrigo’s greed for treasure led him to break the locks of the seemingly impenetrable palace in Toledo, despite the petitions and warnings of the counts and bishops who counseled him. They pleaded with him that if it were diamonds, pearls, gold, and silver that he wanted, they would get him all he needed. These historians go be-
yond the earlier, somewhat succinct, prophecy to say that the parchment contained “drawings of men wearing turbans, astride noble steeds, and carrying scimitars, lances and a banner that read: ‘These men are Arabs. They will conquer the land when the locks of this palace have been forced open, and the violator will repent his deed’” (Menéndez Pidal, Floresta 1: 40–41). Repentance was in short supply until this version, but again, Christian chronicles picked up this detail, which engendered Pedro de Corral’s historical romance and an entire ballad cycle on the topic of Rodrigo’s remorse. The king draws no parallel between the forcing of the locks and the forcing of the girl, the prophecy and the sexual act, though every self-respecting reader does.

He does, however, regret the rape out of fear of her father’s vengeance. The king keeps Alacaba under lock and key, forbidding her to speak alone with anyone, or to write to her father. However, he grants her permission to gather some precious objects to send to her father as a gift, into which she is able to slip a rotten egg. The count, perplexed at first to find this broken, unsavory object among the rich and luxurious offerings, pensively considers it until the light dawns: his daughter, like the rotten egg, is no longer intact, but broken and corrupted.

To recap, then, the earliest chronicle, a mozarabic history from around the mid-eighth century, crafts the details of the fall of Spain in 711 as a story of moral decadence. The chronicler carefully avoids any language that casts the invasion as a holy war. The way he tells it, God witnessed his people’s iniquity and punished them. Any plunderer could have succeeded because it was God’s will. He always refers to the Arabs by regional names, for good reason, to avoid any mention of Islam and Allah, and to insist on a vanquished people but not a defeat of Christianity. At roughly the same time, the mid- and late ninth century, two competing narratives develop, one Muslim, one Christian. The Muslim chronicle, which does claim that Allah willed an Islamic victory over Christianity, introduces the features of the king’s pride, the prophecy of Arab victory in the Toledan edifice, and the sexual dishonor of Julian’s daughter as the event that impelled the conquest. The Asturian Christian chronicle continues the theory of the iniquitous kingdom and God’s justified punishment of it, makes no mention of Julian or a specific sexual act by the king, but, most significantly, invents the history of Pelayo, conqueror of the conquerors. At the same time, the cult of St. James the Moorslayer begins to serve as a focal point for the growing belief that Christian military expansion in the peninsula enjoys divine support.