

**Retelling Christian-Muslim Relations: Christian ‘Fascination’ with
Moors in Medieval Iberia**



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Introduction

As the word *convivencia* ambiguously describes, medieval Iberia was inhabited by a multi-religious population who somewhat co-existed ‘peacefully’, while oppressing, admiring and depending on religious minorities. Whilst the idea of peaceful, utopian *convivencia* has been criticised, medieval Iberia was undoubtedly a diverse region characterised by frequent intercultural exchanges. Particularly at the frontiers where different religions were exposed to one another, multidimensional cultural contacts, including linguistic, artistic, economic and cultural fusions were observed (Barton 2015, 11). However, this does not negate the continuous and escalating oppression against religious minorities in Iberia. [*Mudéjares*] and other non-Christian populations struggled with dwindling freedom and rights until they were forced to convert or expelled (Mercedes and Wieggers 2019, 2). These complicated inter-religious relations have been narrated and recorded in various forms, resulting in multiple narratives about inter-religious interactions in medieval Iberia. This essay will analyse the various retellings of inter-religious relations among Christians and Muslims in medieval Iberia found in the medieval Spanish legend *Los Siete Infantes de Lara (SIL)*. It will compare two versions of the legend; the older version from the 13th-century *Estoria de España* and the newer version from *Crónica de 1344*, and my analysis is based on Peter J. Mahoney’s English translation of both versions in ‘The Seven Knights of Lara’. The essay will first survey the medieval Christian ‘fascination’ with Moors and Moorish culture, explaining a range of complicated and contradictory emotions towards Moors. Subsequently, it will closely analyse three key elements of this ‘fascination’ - admiration, Maurophobia and Maurophilia – and set these in relation to the political background of scholarship on this literature, identifying, for example, Menéndez Pidal’s ambiguous attitude towards Moors. Finally, the essay will conclude by arguing that recognising the existence of multiple retellings about Muslims in medieval Iberia can influence the public perception of the European Middle Ages in the modern world.

Christian ‘Fascination’ with Moors

In medieval Iberian society, the unfamiliarity of Moors with Christians generated a range of feelings from extremely positive to extremely negative. Respect, approval, wonder, curiosity, bewilderment, otherness, doubt, suspicion, and horror – all of these feelings can be described as 'fascination'. Being fascinated entails a variety of complex and contradictory emotions. Christians indeed held a genuine sense of respect for Moors, yet simultaneously were suspicious and horrified by Moors (O'Brien and Zgourides 2018, 36). Christian ‘fascination’ with Moors, therefore, is a mix of conflicting emotions that sometimes do not align with one another. The conflicting emotions, however, ironically amplified the curiosity to know more about the mysterious neighbours. For Christians, Moors were full of contradictions. Stereotypical narratives about Moors often included opposing qualities– docile and submissive on one hand, aggressive and usurper on the other. (Hanlon 2000, 479). These conflicting ideas painted Moors as more mysterious and intriguing. Consequently, Christian curiosity towards Moors was intensified. The mysterious others carry a yet-to-be-discovered possibility of wonder and disaster. In SIL, Moorish characters are portrayed as respected outsiders, worthy of attention and highly recognised by Christians, yet are still unfamiliar strangers. The ‘fascination’ for Moors is based on both awe and fear, which are eloquently illustrated in SIL.

Admiration for Moors

Despite the intricate nature of Christian-Muslim relations, pure admiration for Moors is frequently observed in SIL. Both versions of SIL favourably depict Moors, emphasising the morality of Moorish characters. In contrast, it is Christian characters that play villains in the literature, most explicitly demonstrated by a noble Christian knight Ruy Velazqués and his wife Lady Lambra. Across both versions of SIL, Moorish characters are often portrayed as moral figures, in contrast to Christian characters who commit treason against their family. One notable example of such moral Moorish figures is Almanzor, a powerful Moorish leader. In both versions, Almanzor saves the life of Gonzalo Gústioz, a noble Christian knight and the father of the seven knights and Mudarra. Initially, Almanzor spares Gonzalo from execution upon receiving a letter from Ruy.

Later, when Almanzor learns that Gonzalo has illegitimately fathered Mudarra, he retains from taking Gonzalo's life. Furthermore, when Gonzalo is in despair after seeing the death of his sons, Almanzor's sadness is vividly portrayed in both versions, rejecting Gonzalo's wish to kill him saying that nobody would dare to harm him (*Estoria de España*). In *Crónica de 1344*, Almanzor cries and tells Alicante that he does not want Gonzalo to die since he is aware of the impact of Ruy's treachery on Gonzalo. Later, he releases Gonzalo from prison, which clearly shows his humanity, generosity and compassion (Mahoney 2019, 182). When the Moorish woman becomes pregnant with Mudarra, Almanzor provides everything for the mother and child and rears Mudarra as if Mudarra was his own child. Even when Mudarra acts violently upon finding out his origin in *Crónica de 1344*, Almanzor still supports Mudarra's wish and regards it as a 'good deed' (Mahoney 2019, 127). He gives Mudarra everything he needs for the excursion, being pleased with Mudarra's noble intention. In both versions of the literature, Almanzor's humane, lenient and moral character is unquestionable.

Eloquently depicted in Almonzar's wealth and institutional power, SIL also illustrates Christian admiration for Moors that is not limited to morality. In the Middle Ages, Muslim Europe was wealthier than Christian Europe, and the 'urbanism' of Al-Andalus was what Christians in Northern Iberia admired (O'Brien and Zgourides 2018, 46-47). In reality, Muslims generally had superior business institutions and agricultural productivity, and Christians even regarded Arab facial features as more aristocratic than theirs in Al-Andalus (O'Brien and Zgourides 2018, 38, 47-48). Hence, Christians adapted Muslim technologies, institutional systems and names to their culture, recognising the superiority of the Muslims (O'Brien and Zgourides 2018, 38). By labelling Almanzor as a 'Moorish king' (Mahoney 2019, 166) in *Crónica de 1344*, SIL recognises Almanzor's institutional power. Adding to the moral superiority of Moors discussed above, Moorish characters in SIL illustrate Christian admiration for Moors from various angles. These positive depictions of Moors, however, are not to demonstrate the legend's Muslim preference. In fact, as this essay will show, the SIL also contains numerous critical attitudes towards Moors. Therefore, the depiction of Almanzor as a moral figure and a leader in power is merely one aspect of the Christian attitude towards Moors. This perspective is only a fragment of the broader

Christian ‘fascination’ with the Moors and highlights the complexity and ambiguity of Christian-Muslim relations.

Maurophobia

The respected outsiders of the SIL are not only respected but also feared. Despite the generally favourable depictions of Moors, SIL still articulates Moorish ‘otherness’, which can be interpreted as Maurophobia. One notable example is Mudarra, a mixed-race hero who was born as an illegitimate son of a Castilian knight and a Moorish woman. Although Mudarra is favourably depicted as a hero in both versions of the legend, he is essentially portrayed as an outsider due to his Moorish origin. Whilst his liminality, defined as the state existing ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (Fuentes 2015, 25), is what allows him to act as a hero, his Moorish upbringing, the exposure to Moorish culture, sets him apart from the Christians. Due to his liminality - his ability to be portrayed as either Muslim or Christian - Mudarra conveniently illustrates different attitudes towards Islam in the two versions of SIL. The primary difference between *Estoria de España* and *Crónica de 1344* is after Mudarra embarks on his excursion to find his father. *Estoria de España* only briefly describes his encounter with Gonzalo, yet *Crónica de 1344* fully elaborates on the encounter, and most importantly shows Mudarra’s adoption by Lady Sancha and his conversion to Christianity. In this regard, *Estoria de España* is more open to interpretation whilst *Crónica de 1344* legitimatizes Christianity by showing the heroic figure’s conversion. *Crónica de 1344* necessitates the hero’s conformity to Christianity to have a ‘perfect’ ending, emphasising Christian superiority over Muslims. By fully narrating the ultimate ‘desirable’ ending, *Crónica de 1344* prefers Christianity over Islam, whereas *Estoria de España* does not explicitly show religious preference. Nonetheless, this does not diminish Mudarra’s status as an outsider in *Estoria de España*. Since he does not convert to Christianity, he is essentially portrayed as an outsider until the end of the story. Furthermore, despite Mudarra’s noble intention, his actions go beyond King Alfonso X’s legal parameters when he breaks the truce to kill Ruy (Mahoney 2019, 45). In contrast, Mudarra in *Crónica de 1344* establishes his heroic status within the legal parameter (Mahoney 2019, 45). The breach limits his heroism only within his family in *Estoria de España*, whilst his compliance with the law in *Crónica de 1344* allows him to be a national hero of Castile (Mahoney 2019, 45). The narrative then goes,

as a national hero, he naturally converts to Christianity, and only when he completes his conversion does he become a 'true hero'. Mudarra's liminality, therefore, portrays him as a respected outsider and his integration into the depicted society of the narratives depends on his conversion.

Maurophilia 'el fenómeno de la idealización literaria de los personajes musulmanes' (Benito 2015, 109)

Seemingly positive narratives of Moorish characters can be considered a sign of Maurophilia. Despite the difficulty in deciding if a depiction of Moors is simple admiration or idealisation, some narratives in SIL demonstrate the characteristics of idealisation and exoticisation. Whilst Almanzor undoubtedly represents Christian admiration for Moors, excessive admiration can also be seen as an idealisation. For instance, the texts describe Almanzor as a 'knight' despite his Moorishness, and Mudarra was dubbed a knight by Almanzor. This is a forcible adaptation of Christian custom to Moors and can be seen as a form of cultural appropriation. The noble Moorish woman, a sister of Almanzor, is somewhat eroticised in *Crónica de 1344*. The noblewoman is described as 'very beautiful and very young, and who was a virgin maiden that spoke very well and very genteelly' (Mahoney 2019, 179), being idealised and sexualised. She initially shows hatred against Christians but unwillingly consoles Gonzalo Gústioz after being threatened by her brother, and later is raped by Gonzalo and conceives Mudarra. Mudarra, ironically, is the most difficult in determining if he demonstrates the characteristics of Maurophilia. His favourable depictions – 'be of good sense, of considerable strength, and of good inclinations in all aspects' (Mahoney 2019, 125) - can be considered either admiration or idealisation. His noble spirit can, likewise, be seen as either admiration or idealisation. However, the combination of extremely favourable depictions and Mudarra's liminality -the mysterious figure who is neither fully Christian nor Muslim- results in the exoticisation and idealisation of the half-Moorish character. By any means, Mudarra does not demonstrate the characteristics of a traditional hero figure of medieval Spanish literature. He is an illegitimate son and culturally Muslim, yet despite his deviation from the conventional hero character he possesses remarkable strength and morality. Emphasis on such an extraordinary character can, therefore, be seen as an obsessive curiosity for the unique and exotic half-Moorish hero. Moreover, Mudarra's extreme similarity to Gonzalo González, the youngest knight among the seven brothers, also shows the Christian appropriation

of the Moorish figure. Out of the seven brothers, Gonzalo González is depicted to be the bravest and strongest. Demonstrating similarities with the Christian brother implies that Mudarra's outstanding character comes from his Christian heritage, not Moorish. Hence, praising Mudarra's heroic quality implicitly celebrates his Christian lineage, and therefore, it is a hidden legitimisation of Christianity. Mudarra, therefore, most likely represents Maurophilia despite the favourable narratives.

Menéndez Pidal's Contribution

The complex social position of Moors in the 19th century may have contributed to the mixing of admiration, Maurophobia and Maurophilia found in the SIL. As the pressure for nation-building intensified in 19th-century Spain, the presence of Moors could have been deemed either crucial or threatening. On one hand, the presence of Moors indeed underwrote the greatness of Spain, as it proved the history of Christian Castile winning and protecting the kingdoms comprised of diverse cultures (Fuchs 2002, 121). Conversely, however, the presence of Moorish culture was also viewed as exoticizing the whole of Spain as a nation, depicting the nation as colourful, exotic and somehow less European (Fuchs 2009, 4). Depictions of Moors, therefore, could 'render Spain African' (Fuchs 2009, 4), compared to white Christian nations such as France. Whether or not the presence of Moors was beneficial or harmful for the nation-building movement in the 19th century, Menéndez Pidal, often referred to as 'the scholarly father of the Spanish epic' (Brown 1995, 15), was likely to have tailored the legend in a way most suitable for Spain's nationalist discourse.¹ Within the fragments of the chronicles, he tried to identify 'relics' of epic poems that generate and authenticate stories of Spain's illustrious history (Brown 1995, 21). He did so by reordering and reconstructing the texts so that he could identify a lost epic poem (Brown 1995, 23). Since epic poems were considered to be more valuable than chronicles in nineteenth-century scholarship, Pidal tried to increase the importance of SIL by re-introducing it as a poem (Brown 1995, 20). This allowed him to highlight the story of SIL as a historical 'truth' which shows the history of Spain's glorious past. SIL, therefore, was used as a political tool, which unfortunately further complicated the reception of narratives of Christian-Muslim relations in the literature.

¹ Information kindly provided by Dr Rebecca de Souza during an interview on 24/7/2023

The long process of editing amplified or downplayed admiration, Maurophobia and Maurophilia, slightly shifting the reality of Christian-Muslim relations each time. In fact, although SIL is originally based on manuscripts X and Y in two redactions, which generated manuscripts M, Z, W, and subsequently manuscripts L, P, Q, U and V, Pidal selected some lines from one manuscript and other lines from different manuscripts (Lathrop 2017, 22-23). Pidal's choices, therefore, are deeply influenced by his subjective perspective, making the two versions available in English today far from all-encompassing. Consequently, *Estoria de España* and *Crónica de 1344* represent only fragments extracted from SIL's original manuscripts, chosen by Pidal based on his beliefs and preferences.

Conclusion

Christian 'fascination' for Moors is comprised of various emotions: admiration, Maurophobia and Maurophilia. The co-existence of contradictory emotions complicated the Christian-Muslim relations in medieval Iberia and generated multiple retellings about the Moors. Recognising various retellings of Moors, therefore, reminds the readers of the existence of mixed attitudes towards Moors in the Middle Ages, including the positive attitude that contemporary readers tend to forget. Analysing various retellings of Moors, therefore, helps understand the historically complex social position of Muslims and the co-existence of religiously diverse groups. The various retellings of Moors, moreover, underwrite the multi-cultural reality of medieval Europe, an idea of Europe with which modern readers may not always be familiar. Shedding light on such works can, in turn, help challenge the popular but erroneous image of white Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, altering the public perception of medieval Europe. Although editing may have shifted the depictions of Christian-Muslim relations reflecting the political convenience of the time, it only generates more retellings of Muslims that are also worthy of analysing. Christian-Muslim relations in Iberia have been complex and subject to change at any time, yet trying to understand this complexity enables a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of religious, cultural and racial identities and politics. Studying retellings of Moors and their relationship with other religions, therefore, reveals various social positions of Moors in medieval Iberian society and highlights the diversity that existed in medieval Europe.

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