From the Supernatural to the Uncanny

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing
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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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CHAPTER TWO

THE SUPERNATURAL IN SPANISH BALLADS

TYLER FISHER

Over the past two centuries, a persistent critical commonplace has clouded our view of Spanish balladry, or the romancero, as the Hispanic ballad tradition is known. Spain’s traditional ballads, this commonplace maintains, lack supernatural content. Scholars have frequently remarked upon what seems to them a paucity of miracles, supernatural marvels, and other departures from realistic, verisimilar representation in the ballads. Generalizations like this one can be helpful, of course, when dealing with a category of poetry so vast and varied as the romancero. While the basic verse form of the Spanish ballad has remained fairly constant through the ages (octosyllabic lines, with assonantal rhyme on alternate lines), the tradition comprises a diverse array of styles and content. From the romancero’s origins in the High Middle Ages to its remnants in the present day, Spanish ballads have served as expressive vehicles for military dispatches, reports of scandal among the aristocracy, retellings of biblical and Graeco-Roman lore, hagiography, laments, fables, prayers, and political propaganda — and this motley inventory takes into account only the Hispanic folk tradition, setting aside the various ends to which erudite poets have used the ballad form over time.

Attempts to discern tendencies, patterns, and subcategories in this breadth of material can usefully delineate constellations amid potential confusion, but to discount supernatural elements from the romancero’s range of content is to turn a blind eye to a dimension that can otherwise enrich our reading. Conversely, recognizing ‘lo sobrenatural’ in Spanish balladry can enhance our sensitivity to how the ballads have been read and reimagined over generations. The critical commonplace needs careful reconsideration. This essay reconsiders scholarly disregard of supernatural phenomena in the romancero with a particular focus on the cycle of Spanish ballads concerning Rodrigo, the legendary last Visigothic king of Spain.
First, it is necessary to trace how this commonplace developed. How did critics come to consider the romancero as being somehow deficient in supernatural content, and how has this idea been articulated and sustained? In modern, canonical criticism, the general notion is bolstered by comments which the foremost scholar of the Spanish ballad tradition, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, included in his monumental Romancero hispánico, in a subsection titled ‘Escasez de lo maravilloso’:

Se admite solamente el milagro en los romances de santos. Pero sólo muy rara vez entra lo sobrenatural en asuntos profanos, de los que sólo recuerdo el habla prodigiosa del caballo, de la espada y de un recién nacido en tres romances arriba citados. ¹ Las hadas se nombran en el romance de La Infántina. Y esto es todo.²

Naturally, other scholars closely followed the preeminent philologist’s lead on this point. Among them is Juan Luis Alborg, who perceives a certain uniformity of style in the romancero. Alborg’s history of Spanish literature lists various traits, ‘unas características inconfundibles’, which distinguish the romancero’s ‘molde único’. Two traits are especially relevant among the ‘[n]otas esenciales de este estilo’: ‘la inmediata aproximación a la realidad, [y] la casi total ausencia de elementos fantásticos o maravillosos’.³ In a similar vein, José María Legido’s introduction to the romancero for secondary schools lists, among the ‘rasgos generales’ of the romancero, ‘Verismo: el romance capta la realidad como es. Con esta casi completa ausencia de elementos maravillosos o inverosímiles, la narración popular española difiere de otras literaturas europeas.’ ⁴ At least Alborg and Legido qualify their generalizations with the caveat of ‘casi’. Not all writers have been as careful. A recent manual for teachers of Spanish literature recommends that one can ‘resumir […] una serie de rasgos que son comunes en el romancero’ and enumerates among such rasgos ‘la inmediata

¹ These are, respectively, ‘Búcar sobre Valencia’, in which the Cid’s horse speaks; ‘Valdovinos’, in which the eponymous hero’s horse and sword speak, assuring him of victory; and ‘Doña Arbola’, in which a newborn baby speaks, ‘por la gracia de Dios Padre’, to vindicate his mother’s fidelity; see Ramón Menéndez Pidal (ed.), Romancero hispánico (hispano-portugués, americano y sefardí): Teoría e historia, 2 vols (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1953), I, p. 71.
² Menéndez Pidal (ed.), Romancero hispánico (hispano-portugués, americano y sefardí), I, p. 77.
⁴ ‘Presentación’, in El romancero (Madrid: Castalia, 1999), pp. 7-16 (p. 10).
aproximación a la realidad, que se logra mediante el verismo de los hechos y de las descripciones, y con la ausencia del componente maravilloso'.

Thus the commonplace clumsily migrates to the classroom and colours perceptions of Spanish balladry, to the point that we can only wonder what students would make of any extraordinary elements they encounter in the romancero, or, for that matter, how they might construe historical Spanish reality, which, they are told, the ballads strictly, directly convey.

But Ramón Menéndez Pidal’s opinion has much older roots, and these roots extend beyond generalizations concerning the romancero. He himself had articulated this view three decades earlier, applying it much more broadly, as he perceived Spanish literature to lack marvelous elements. For Menéndez Pidal, ‘La escasez de lo maravilloso en la literatura española es un hecho indiscutible’, a result of ‘ese invencible desvío que la literatura española siente por las quimeras fantásticas’. (He was, of course, making these remarks before the advent of the movement we now call realismo mágico, which has so profoundly impacted Hispanic literatures.) The basic perspective, which seems to have led Menéndez Pidal to prejudge the matter, arises from a nineteenth-century stereotype regarding Spanish literature and the Hispanic ethos. This stereotype perceived the Spanish psyche, conditioned by the nation’s supposedly austere religiosity, history, and climate, to be inhospitable to fantasy and other imaginative representations of the supernatural. Juan Valera’s speech before the Real Academia Española in 1864 offers a telling elaboration of this theory. While an ‘abundancia de lo fantástico, de lo sobrenatural y de lo misterioso’ characterized imaginative literature of the European Middle Ages, he argues, there was,

sin embargo, un pueblo, donde se manifiesta antes, y con toda su fuerza, la conciencia de la vida real colectiva; donde el continuo batallar contra infieles, disputándose el terreno palmo a palmo, identifica el amor de la religión con el de la patria, la unidad de creencias con la unidad nacional; donde el sol brillante del Mediodía, junto con el afán de guardar la pureza de fe, disipa todas las visiones heterodoxas de la fantasía popular de la edad media, hadas, encantadores y vestigios; y donde la dureza de la vida y la actividad guerrera no dan vagar ni reposo para fingir sentimientos quinta-esenciados y metafísicas amatorias. Este pueblo es el español, y en las primeras, indígenas y originales manifestaciones de su espíritu poético, hay una sobriedad tan rara de lo sobrenatural y fantástico, tal solidez, tanta

5 Manuel Ariza Viguera et al., Lengua castellana y literatura (Seville: MAD, 2005), p. 107.
precisión y firmeza en las figuras y en los caracteres, tan poca exageración
y ninguna extravagancia en los amores, y una rectitud tan sana en las
demás pasiones y afectos, que forman del todo una poesía naciente,
caballeresca también, pero que se opone a la fantástica, libertina y afectada
poesía caballeresca de otros países.7

Agustín Durán, the principal pioneering collector of ballads in the
nineteenth century, likewise attributes the ballads’ purported deficiency of
‘lo maravilloso’ to a religious motivation and presumes deep-seated
cultural conditioning. For Durán, the ‘romances [...] conservados
oralmente [...] carecen del color maravilloso que caracteriza los poemas
franceses e italianos de igual género. Ni Fadas, 8 ni Genios, ni
Encantadores, ni ficción alguna árabe se encuentra en aquellos, y sin
embargo del trato íntimo que teníamos con los Moros, la parte que
constituye lo maravilloso es allí puramente cristiana. Tal era el odio con
que los españoles mirábamos la fé de nuestros enemigos, que ni aun en
poesía podíamos soportar sus ficciones, que detestábamos como obras del
diablo. [...] son más bien narraciones sencillas y áridas de hechos, que
carecen del brillo de una imaginación verdaderamente poética.’9

And thus the commonplace echoes in successive anthologies and
studies of the romancero. Georg Bernhard Depping, another early
nineteenth-century collector of Spanish ballads, even adds the point to a
subsequent edition of his Romancero castellano, following Durán.
Depping supposes that the Spanish ballads ‘huyen[ron] de pintar el mundo
sobrenatural’.10 The burgeoning cliché generated a veritable blind spot,
predisposing critics to perceive only rigidly realistic texts in the
romancero: ‘Spanish ballads rarely deal with the supernatural’;11 ‘Son
cuadros poéticos, [...] vivos y realistas’;12 ‘Los romances son siempre, para

7 Sobre el Quijote y sobre las diferentes maneras de comentarle y juzgarle
(Madrid: Manuel Galiano, 1864), pp. 18-20.
8 Oddly enough, Durán here fails to recall the ‘fadas’ who enchant princesses in
ballads such as ‘Romance de la infantina’, ‘La infanta encantada’, and ‘La
infanta de Francia’, which he himself collected and published.
9 ‘Discurso preliminar’, in Colección de romances castellanos anteriores al siglo
10 ‘Introducción’, in Romancero castellano, o colección de antiguos romances
populares de los españoles, ed. Antonio Alcalá-Galiano, vol. 1 (Leipzig:
Brockhaus, 1844), pp. xi-lxvii (p. xxxvii).
180.
12 Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa, El romancero español: Sus orígenes y su historia
en la literatura universal (Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1931), p. 22.
s trasmisores, una proyección simuladora de la realidad social en que viven’. Gerald Brenan’s *The Literature of the Spanish People* codified the idea for a wider English readership: ‘Spanish ballads lack an imaginative quality that the finest English and Scottish ballads possess. The supernatural element in the *romances* is rare, [...] the Spanish ballad is severely realistic.’ Colin C. Smith prudently omits this notion from the ‘series of negatives’ he enumerates in his helpful essay, ‘On the Ethos of the “Romancero viejo”’, but even Smith later argues that ‘the Castilian ballads [...] preserve a sober down-to-earth attitude. It is pointless to talk of “realism”; but the people are credible and the things that happen to them are feasible’.

16 *Spanish Ballads* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), p. xxxvii. Not all of the critics who reiterate Durán’s or Valera’s characterization of Spanish literature, or of the *romancero* in particular, follow them in positing a religious explanation or in pointing to ‘la dureza de la vida’ for why it should be thus. One rather fanciful historian of literature, Henry Beers, makes it a matter of forestry. Comparing Spain’s ballads to those of the British Isles, he sees ‘a wilder imagination in Northern balladry; a much larger element of the mythological and supernatural. Ghosts, demons, fairies, enchanters are rare in the Spanish poems. [...] The medieval Spaniards were possibly to the full as superstitious as their Scottish contemporaries, but their superstitions were the legends of the Catholic Church, not the inherited folklore of Gothic and Celtic heathendom. I will venture to suggest, as one reason of this difference, the absence of forests in Spain. The shadowy recesses of northern Europe were the natural haunts of mystery and unearthly terrors. [...] The treeless plateaus of Spain, and her stony, denuded sierras, all bare and bright under the hot southern sky, offered no more shelter to such beings of the mind’; see A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Holt, 1901), pp. 244-45. Beers conveniently forgets that the sands of Arabia have cradled a thousand and one fantasies which would challenge his geographical determinism. Other critics make some allowance for supernatural content in Spanish balladry but still perceive such content as somehow deficient or incidental. J. M. Cohen, for one, acknowledges that there is an air of the mysterious in the *romancero*, but attributes this not to the ballads’ content but to their form — the fragmentary or truncated nature of some ballads: ‘Many of the Spanish ballads tell tales of magic, but seldom with the suggestive overtones of our
This roughly chronological sampling gives some idea of how the tendency to discount supernatural content from considerations of the *romancero* endured and intensified, perpetuated by authorities as influential as Durán, Brenan, and Menéndez Pidal. The critical commonplace, as we have seen, attracted a long line of followers, but it has also inspired several challengers. Even challengers, however, have been oddly reluctant to question the received notion. Mark Brand was the first to survey ‘Magic, Superstition, and Miracles in the Spanish Ballads’, in an unpublished Master’s thesis bearing this title. He catalogues a wide array of supernatural elements in the *romances* of Durán’s collection and concludes that these elements are not proper to Spanish culture but are either an inheritance of pre-Christian religions or imports from Northern Europe. Even in the light of Brand’s dozens of examples, he insists on seeing them as relatively few: ‘It is remarkable that, in an age when all Europe had a profound belief in the supernatural, so few indications of the belief found their way into a body of literature as great as the ballads’; and he speculates needlessly that the Spanish communities that produced and preserved these ballads likely granted them little credence: ‘the Spaniards thought of them merely as interesting stories [and] probably regarded [them] as more interesting than true.’ Although Brand assembles a useful overview of magical and miraculous ingredients in the *romancero*, his commitment to finding some singularity in the Spanish national character or Spanish belief system leaves him unwilling to render an account of what the supernatural elements actually contribute to the *romancero*. Questions of whether they are alien to the Hispanic ethos, if such an ethos can be delineated, or of whether the Spanish people have regarded them as true, do not really afford grounds for analysis. The features and functions of the supernatural elements, on the other hand, still offer scope for careful scrutiny based on the texts themselves.

Mercedes Díaz Roig directly addresses Menéndez Pidal’s claim. She agrees with the basic idea — ‘el mundo romancesco es el mundo en el que vivimos; los personajes [...] son seres de carne y hueso, [...] Las historias que cuentan los romances [...] no trastocan las leyes naturales que nos own [...]’. Doña Alda’s dream, or the young princess whose hair covered a whole oak-tree are poetic figments, but in no way mysterious. Yet there are among the *romances* pieces that possess a fortuitous haze of the supernatural which they owe to their very fragmentariness”; see The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse, 2nd ed. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), p. xxxi.

— but she qualifies this generalization in key ways. First, she adduces notable exceptions: apparitions of the dead and personifications of Death, songs which wield power over nature, miraculous metamorphoses, enchantments, plants or fountains that can grant human fertility, talking beasts, supernatural rates of growth, resurrections from the dead, and explicit interventions by God, angels, the Virgin, or saints. Like Menéndez Pidal, she omits from consideration ‘romances de tema religioso’, but shows how elements of ‘la mitología cristiana’ also appear as motifs within some ballads that have no other apparent connection to Christianity, and argues that this ‘cumple el mismo papel que la mitología no cristiana con sus encantos, sus transformaciones y sus animales parlantes: incluir en el relato la presencia de lo maravilloso’ (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, pp. 55-56). In this regard, Díaz Roig proposes a more nuanced approach: while she agrees with Menéndez Pidal concerning the scarcity of ballads based on otherworldly settings or on ‘sucesos sobrenaturales’, she acknowledges that there is a significant presence of ‘lo maravilloso’ and ‘lo extraordinario’ as motifs within the romancero (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, p. 52). Menéndez Pidal’s original claim and Durán’s before him, it should be noted, treat lo maravilloso, milagroso, prodigioso, and sobrenatural as effectively synonymous concepts. For Díaz Roig, the difference is that lo maravilloso ‘romp[es] las leyes naturales’, while lo extraordinario comprises uncommon elements — silken sails in ‘El infante Arnaldos’, extraordinarily long hair which covers an oak tree in ‘La infantina’, for example — that do not transgress natural laws (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, p. 59). Still, she sets up this distinction only to deny any effective difference in the way the romancero handles elements from these categories:

lo extraordinario […] forma parte importante del relato y contribuye a dar brillo a la narración; lo maravilloso cumple idéntica función y no es sino un grado más alto de lo extraordinario; la ‘realidad’ básica de uno y la

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18 ‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, in Deslindes literarios: Juan Goytisolo, el romancero, José Emilio Pacheco, José Gorostiza, Alejo Carpentier, Reinaldo Arenas, Roberto Arlt, Roman Jakobson, ed. Blanca Elvia Mora Sánchez (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1977), pp. 46-63 (p. 47).

19 Taken to extremes, this argument might just as well apply to all narrative: any story involves the ‘extraordinary’ to some extent, or else it is unremarkable and not worth telling. Coincidence, mishap, novelty, reversals of fortune, selectively framed and sequentially patterned, are the stuff and artifice of narrative. The ballads, naturally, are no different in this regard.
irrealidad del otro, no los separa de hecho, porque esa dicotomía entre real e irreal no existe para los recreadores, cantores y oyentes del romancero. [...] No existe una diferencia fundamental entre los motivos tomados de la realidad y aquellos motivos tejidos con elementos fantásticos. (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, pp. 60-61)

Like Brand, Díaz Roig ultimately reduces the question to a matter of credence and subjective perceptions of reality on the part of the people among whom the romancero arose and endured. For these people, Díaz Roig assumes an undifferentiating perception of ‘la total equivalencia de lo extraordinario y lo maravilloso, así como la realidad de ambos para el cantor de romances y para su público’ (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, p. 62). In this view, a marvellous apparition of the Virgin and extraordinary sails made of silk are equally plausible and equally far removed from the people’s experience.20 Díaz Roig’s approach entails needless presuppositions regarding a community’s attitudes, reactions, and degrees of credence, which can, after all, vary widely even within an individual mind or with successive iterations of the same text. Conflating as equivalent the romancero’s treatment of marvellous and extraordinary elements risks losing sight of their significance and relative weight. Nevertheless, Díaz Roig’s contribution is helpful insofar as it proposes a distinction based on a given representation’s relationship to natural laws. Now we are getting closer to a consideration specifically of the supernatural in Spanish ballads.

One additional scholar’s answer to Menéndez Pidal requires attention. Michelle Débax’s treatment of the topic follows Díaz Roig’s argument closely at first, and she likewise catalogues instances in which Spanish ballads endow characters with superhuman qualities or invest settings or objects with suggestive, supernatural attributes.21 However, whereas Menéndez Pidal, Brand, and Díaz Roig limit their focus to narrative

20 In a similar vein, albeit independently, Graciela Battagliotti also marshals a list of examples that problematize Menéndez Pidal’s generalization and classifies the examples by type; see ‘Aproximación a lo maravilloso en el romancero español’, in Actas: II Congreso Argentino de Hispanistas (Mendoza, Argentina: Oficina Cultural de la Embajada de España en la Argentina, 1989), pp. 9-21 (pp. 10-18). Like Díaz Roig, Battagliotti concludes that ‘con respecto a la naturaleza de lo sobrenatural o irreal — y también los personajes — no es problemática. [...] conviven armónicamente el verismo y la verosimilitud con lo maravilloso’ (p. 19).
elements, Débax adds an important line of argument regarding the connotative weight that certain expressions can carry in the romancero, especially exemplified by formulaic phrases. Such quasi-codified phrases as ‘la mañana de San Juan’, ‘a orillas del mar’, ‘lunes era, ¡qué fuerte día!’ can imbue a ballad with connotations of the supernatural by evoking ‘un trasfondo de creencias y ritos’ (‘Lo maravilloso en el romancero tradicional’, pp. 159-64). The context takes on astrological, ominous, or propitious significance, in accordance with the associations these expressions carry. We will see this technique at work in ballads concerning King Rodrigo. The traditional romancero’s recourse to special numbers and the incantatory repetition of names can have similar effects, casting a supernatural aura on all or part of the narrative. Débax is careful to note that the effects are dependent on the audience’s recognition of these possibilities and on the associations an audience might assign them, but, unlike other critics we have surveyed, she does not make ‘lo maravilloso’ ontologically dependent on an audience’s beliefs or reactions. In this way, crucially, Débax decouples the matter of supernatural content from assumptions about degrees of credence.

The present study likewise challenges the critical commonplace regarding the romancero’s supposed paucity of supernatural content, first, by noting significant examples to the contrary. My subsequent discussion takes into account certain refinements that Díaz Roig and Débax propose, and builds on their approaches by offering a sustained examination of the supernatural details in a particular cycle of ballads. Yet the problem of definition remains. As we have seen, Menéndez Pidal treats concepts such as lo sobrenatural and lo maravilloso as essentially synonymous, and Díaz Roig follows him in employing these terms as synonyms. Díaz Roig, however, prefers the latter term when delineating her two categories: ‘lo extraordinario’, which comprises ‘elementos reales [...] llevados al extremo para deleitarnos con sucesos, fuera de lo trillado, pero que no trastocan las leyes naturales’, and ‘lo maravilloso’, in which ‘los sucesos relatados rompen las leyes del mundo real’ (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, p. 47); she then proceeds to set aside these categories on the basis of a presumed equivalence of their treatment in the romancero. Débax extends the parameters of ‘lo maravilloso’ to include not only ‘sucesos’ but also other facets ‘que se refieren a una realidades sobrenaturales’, such as the formulaic setting, ‘la mañana de San Juan’ (‘Lo maravilloso en el romancero tradicional’, p. 146). Both scholars perceive a natural-supernatural dichotomy in the romancero, but the concept of lo maravilloso etymologically entails presuppositions about reactions (mirabilis, evoking admiration and wonder), and it is precisely in
such presuppositions where Díaz Roig loses sight of the transcendent ontology of particular representations within the romancero. The supernatural, as a category, need not depend on assumptions about a community’s degree of credence or range of reactions. As Charles Stinson shows, with reference to Seneca and Augustine, the classical and patristic concept is fundamentally, metaphorically spatial in its orientation (supra naturam). That is, the supernatural occupies a particular relation to the natural; it surpasses the natural order. 22 The supernatural is that which ‘is above nature; belonging to a higher realm or system than that of nature; transcending the powers or ordinary course of nature’ (The Oxford English Dictionary, sv. supernatural). 23 This conceptualization of a two-tiered universe pervades representations in Indo-European languages, Western thought, and art, and the romancero is no exception. But the natural-supernatural distinction does not necessarily entail a relationship of antithetical discontinuity or opposition. What theologians call immanence, supernatural involvement in the natural order, manifests itself in interventions and irruptions of the supernatural — the phenomena overlooked by the critical commonplace we are examining here.

Of course, on the simplest level, it is easy enough to call into question the sweeping characterizations of Spanish balladry as being deficient in lo sobrenatural. The unqualified statements we have surveyed leave themselves especially vulnerable to challenges because one has only to produce an exception — a single instance in which the supernatural is unmistakably present — to begin populating the supposed void, ‘la ausencia del componente maravilloso’, or to refute the categorical assertion that ‘the Spanish ballad is severely realistic’, as we have seen. In addition to the four instances Ramón Menéndez Pidal himself cites as particular exceptions, one could list many other examples of supernatural visions, apparitions, portents, enchantments, and metamorphoses: ‘Augurios del rey don Pedro’ narrates a supernatural vision and prophecy; ‘Muerte del Maestre de Santiago’ features the eponymous Maestre’s

23 Another advantage of supernatural as a term in a literary study such as this is that it has not become bound up by association with a particular mode or genre, nor tangled in the various definitions and delimitations of a term like the fantastic, which, since Tzvetan Todorov, scholars have tried to link to historical periodizations of ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’. The romancero existed before and has continued after the period to which Todorov assigns the ‘littérature fantastique’. Supernatural, as a conceptual term, accommodates this ‘poesía que vive en variantes’. 
decapitation, after which his head continues to speak; in ‘Abenâmar’, King Juan’s apostrophe to the city of Granada receives a reply from the personified city; ‘El sueño de doña Alda’ proves to be clairvoyant, an augury betokening her husband’s death at a distance; ‘Lanzarote y el ciervo de pie blanco’ begins with a king’s curse on his three sons, which transforms them into a deer, a dog, and a Moor, respectively; ‘Espinelo’ includes advice from a Moorish necromancer and a magic cloak; in ‘El infante Arnaldo’s’, a strange mariner on a wondrous ship with silken sails and gauzy rigging sings an Orphic song that calms the sea and weather and charms fish and birds; in ‘Conde Olinos’, flowers sprout from lovers’ graves within a church and subsequently transform into birds; and ‘La aparición’ tells of a man’s encounter with his lover’s ghost.24

But a list of exceptions is a rather facile counterargument. I am more interested in the question of how supernatural elements function in the romancero. Once we take note of their presence, what implications do they hold for our readings of the ballads? For this we must turn our attention to specific examples. The ballads concerning La Cava and King Rodrigo, or Roderick, the putative last Visigothic king of Spain, offer an especially interesting set of examples, because they circulated in both the written and oral traditions of the romancero and derive from an identifiable prose chronicle (Pedro del Corral’s Corónica sarracina of circa 1430). This gives us additional information concerning the elaboration of the supernatural elements within them, and we can thus perceive how the ballad tradition has adopted and adapted supernatural elements from the legend in significant ways.

The so-called ‘romancero del Rey Rodrigo’, as a set of ballads in which the supernatural has a notable presence, can likewise serve to refute Menéndez Pidal’s generalization. Díaz Roig, regarding Rodrigo, cites only the king’s divinely ordained penance as an instance of supernatural intervention (‘Lo maravilloso y lo extraordinario en el romancero’, p. 55), but, as Graciela Battagliotti notes, several other supernatural phenomena punctuate this series or cycle of ballads: omens and portents, the apparition of Fortuna, a voice from heaven, a seven-headed serpent, and bells that toll spontaneously upon Rodrigo’s death (‘Aproximación a lo maravilloso’, pp. 10-18). To these I would add Rodrigo’s deliverance to heaven at the close of the cycle, an ending which signals an exceptional dispensation to bypass purgatory on account of a severe penance. Taken together, these

24 The order of these examples, titles, and précis here follow Paloma Díaz-Mas’s edition, Romancero (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006). I am very grateful to Hilary Pomeroy for helping me to assemble this list.
varied supernatural phenomena occur at key points in the narrative of Rodrigo’s sin, ruin, and penance. Their patterns and the manner in which they are articulated enhance the narrative’s implications.

The basic narrative of the Rodrigo ballads recounts how the king of Visigothic Spain tries to seduce La Cava, a damsel serving in the royal court. When La Cava demurs, he forces himself on her, and she in turn informs her father, Count Julian, a governor of Spanish territories in north Africa. To avenge the rape of his daughter, the Count invades Spain in league with the Moors and vanquishes Rodrigo’s armies. Rodrigo, defeated, wanders the wastes of his erstwhile realm until a holy hermit tells him what penance he must perform. He must enter a cave or tomb, where a serpent devours him gradually until his soul ascends to heaven. This legend, which has been characterized as ‘by far the oldest legend of the Peninsula’, is primarily aetiological. That is, it offers an explanatory story of sexual transgression and retribution as a moral rationale for why Spain should have succumbed so rapidly to the Islamic invasion of 711, CE. As we will see, the supernatural features of the legend, as incorporated and reconfigured in the ballad tradition, serve to frame and colour its aetiological import.

The most striking supernatural phenomena appear at the beginning and end of this ballad cycle’s storyline; supernatural omens attend the scene of the rape, and a supernatural penance marks the conclusion. At the beginning, as the king sleeps with La Cava — perhaps on the very night of the assault — the night is beset with ominous portents and a prophetic apparition of Fortune personified. The opening lines of the ballad conventionally titled ‘Visión del rey Rodrigo’ set an inauspicious scene:

I here set aside, as essentially extraneous to the story of Rodrigo and La Cava, the legend concerning Rodrigo’s illicit entry into the Tower of Hercules (alternatively a palace or cave of Hercules, in some versions), which also figures in the chronicle and ballad tradition as both a portent and provocation of Spain’s downfall. Reminiscent of Pandora’s box, the enchanted Tower contains a prophecy that the one who opens its locked doors would unleash the Islamic invasion. Rodrigo penetrates the forbidden edifice, and an eagle from heaven subsequently burns it down. The supernatural tenor of this legend is clear.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the ballads concerning Rodrigo and La Cava refer to the versions compiled by María Goyri and Ramón Menéndez Pidal Goyri, María and Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros del Rey Rodrigo y de Bernardo del Carpio, ed. Rafael Lapesa, Diego Catalán, Álvaro Galmés, and José Caso (Madrid: Gredos, 1957), pp. 22-95.
Los vientos eran contrarios,  
la luna estaba cresida,  
los peces davan gemidos  
por el mal tiempo que hazía,  
cuando el buen rey don Rodrigo  
junto a la cava dormía,  
dentro de una rica tienda  
de oro bien guarnescida.

The opulence of the king’s golden tent with its enumerated silver rigging (‘Treziendas cuerdas de plata’, line 9) contrasts starkly with the darkly tumultuous natural world outside.\textsuperscript{28} Heavenly bodies, the weather, and fauna portend disaster, in its full etymological sense. Daniel Devoto has demonstrated at length how the motif of ‘el gemir de los peces’, in the wider medieval European tradition, typifies a foreboding, unnatural, even apocalyptic, state.\textsuperscript{29} In the opening lines of this ballad, the peces gimientes constitute the most unmistakably supernatural phenomenon among the list of unsettled elements. The inclement winds, the full or waxing moon, and the foul weather are not necessarily out of the ordinary, but the wailing fish, as if by suggestive contagion, infect and inflect these surrounding paratactic elements to create an extra-ordinary, disquieting atmosphere. This welter and the weird sounds outside have their contrasting counterpart within the royal tent, where a hundred damsels, evenly, orderly divided, make harmonious music:

dentro avía cien donzellas  
vestidas a maravilla:  
las cincuenta están tañendo  
con muy estraña armonía,  
las cincuenta están cantando  
con muy dulce melodía. (lines 11-16)

But, akin to the wailing fish amid the otherwise unremarkable atmospheric conditions (however tempestuous they may be), one doncella emerges to reveal that these musical damsels are not all necessarily of an ordinary nature, in the lines immediately following:

Allí habló una donzella
que Fortuna se dezía:
—Si duermes, rey don Rodrigo,
despierta por cortesía,
y verás tus malos hados,
tu peor postrimería,
y verás tus gentes muertas,
y tu batalía rompida,
y tus villas y ciudades
destruídas en un día;

[...] Despertó muy congoxado
con aquella boz que oía,
con cara triste y penosa
desta suerte respondía:
—Mercedes a ti, Fortuna,
desta tu mensagería.

Estando en esto ha llegado
uno que nueva traía
como el conde don Julián
las tierras le destruía. (lines 17-26, 37-46)

Fortuna’s apparition and prophecy serve as a nucleus for several other supernatural elements here. The omens of the opening lines now give way to an explicit warning about the impending loss of Rodrigo’s kingdom, but the unequivocal forecast is couched in nebulous, oniric expressions that blur the distinction between sleeping, waking, and dreaming, and facilitate a telescoping of time, conflating of cause and effect, and melding of prophecy and fulfillment. The cumulative effect is to underscore the remarkable swiftness of the retribution (‘en un día’) and the immediate connection between transgression and consequence, but there is something more at work here. Normal categories become difficult to assign in this oniric nocturnal scene of vaticination and semi-consciousness. Is the doncella named Fortuna the goddess of Roman and medieval lore, or a merely human member of the royal retinue, one among the hundred doncellas? Are the hundred doncellas themselves illusory, human, spectral, otherworldly? At what point is Rodrigo asleep or awake, hearing or hallucinating? Within the diegetic framework, are we to regard the events of lines 21-46 as presently unfolding or yet to come? Significantly, these points of indeterminacy mark the ballad’s representation of supernatural involvement in the natural order — a productive ambiguity that focuses the interpretive task, for both protagonist and reader, on recognizing and construing the uncommon ontologies that cluster around the onset of Spain’s downfall. Immanence accentuates significance. Whatever her
status between natural and supernatural, the personification of Fortune heralds an abrupt reckoning for Rodrigo, divinely ordained for his having transgressed the moral order, and the monarch awakens to a nightmare.

At the end of the ballad cycle, after Rodrigo has surveyed the destruction of his armies and has wandered alone through the wilderness, he seeks spiritual counsel from a holy hermit. The hermit petitions God on Rodrigo’s behalf for a means of penitential absolution. The ballad conventionally titled ‘La penitencia de don Rodrigo’ recounts the divine revelation of the penance as follows:

Fuéle luego revelado [al hermitaño]
de parte de Dios un día
que le meta [a Rodrigo] en una tumba
con una culebra biva
y esto tome en penitencia
por el mal que hecho avía. (lines 75-80)

The king obeys these instructions to the letter (‘métese como Dios manda / para allí acabar su vida’ [lines 87-88]). After three days, in a scene reminiscent of Darius’ checking in on Daniel in the lions’ den, the hermit calls to Rodrigo to see how he is getting on with the snake:

dize: —¿Cómo os va, buen rey?
¿Vaos bien con la compañía?
—Hasta ora no me ha tocado,
porque Dios no lo quería;
ruega por mí, el hermitaño,
porque acabe bien mi vida. (lines 91-96)

The hermit again intercedes for the king, returns to the tomb, and finds the dying king’s penance taking effect. In an echo of the peces gimientes of the ominous night, it is now Rodrigo who moans in agony in the ballad’s closing lines:

[El hermitaño] halló que [Rodrigo] estaba rezando
y que gemía y plañía;
pregúntole cómo estaba.
—Dios es en la ayuda mía,
respondió el buen rey Rodrigo;
la culebra me comía,
cómeme ya por la parte
que todo lo merescía,
por donde fui el principio
de la mi muy gran desdicha.
El hermitaño lo esfuerça:
el buen rey allí moría.
Aquí acabó el rey Rodrigo,
al cielo derecho se iva. (lines 103-16)

Thus end the ill-fated king and the series of ballads of which he is the central figure.

This, at least, is the account as given in the oldest extant printed versions, which María Goyri and Ramón Menéndez Pidal compiled from pliegos sueltos. In terms of the supernatural phenomena these ballads represent, there are striking parallels between ‘Visión del rey Rodrigo’ and ‘La penitencia de don Rodrigo’, near the beginning and end of the ballad cycle, respectively. Both texts involve supernatural phenomena that irrupt within ostensibly natural, albeit uncommon, settings. More specifically, both involve settings that are conspicuously liminal: ‘una rica tienda’ that constitutes something between a fixed abode and transience; an oneiric, nocturnal ambience between sleeping and waking; a tomb (or cave in other versions) somewhere between surface and subterranean spaces, between the living and the dead; and, finally, a briefly articulated transit between the terrestrial and celestial realms. These liminal spaces, as theatres of supernatural phenomena intervening amid the natural world, signal that the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural is not necessarily clear, fixed, or stable. Boundaries may be ambiguous, yet there is a certain governing order in the conceptualization of the supernatural as reflected in these ballads. Both texts organize supernatural phenomena around intermediary agents: Fortuna, in her visitation, is the centerpiece and exegete of the ill-omened night; the intermediary hermit is the channel of divine revelation, an intercessor and sacerdotal guide during Rodrigo’s extraordinary penance. In other words, attended by supernatural phenomena that signal their status and function, they mediate between God on high and the abased king. There is divine intervention in the romancero, but the intervention is not direct. Rather, it manifests by means of signs and wonders, investing the affairs of men (in this case, the Moorish conquest of Spain) with transcendent significance. A distant but by no means absent divinity, supra naturam, governs and judges the natural order depicted in these ballads.

Distant, but not absent; elliptical at times, but operative — much the same can be said to characterize the techniques and manner in which the ballad tradition itself represents the supernatural. Such characteristics are likely what led critics to disregard or downplay the romancero’s supernatural content. The ballad tradition’s tendency towards economy of expression, towards suggestion and implication instead of elaborate
explanation, means that the ballads’ supernatural elements are not always spelled out as such. Supernatural phenomena may be present but largely tacit in a given ballad, while another variant of the same ballad more plainly identifies and foregrounds the supernatural elements at work. For instance, the moment of divine revelation we have noted in lines 75-76 of ‘La penitencia de don Rodrigo’ is more explicitly an audible answer from on high (‘del cielo una voz se oía’) in line 24 of the version beginning ‘Allá arriba en alta sierra’. More strikingly, the serpent at the climax of the Rodrigo ballads in the pliegos sueltos — a serpent which is already wondrous in itself — is a less apparently supernatural monster than the two-headed serpent in the prose source. In Corral’s Corónica sarracina, the snake has two heads: one to devour Rodrigo’s heart and the other his genitals — the heart and genitals being the twin source and instrument of his sin: ‘la culebra [...] que tenía dos cabeças [...] comenzó de le comer por la natura con la una cabeza e con la otra en derecho del coraçón’ (II.401-404). Turning our attention from the ballads recorded in pliegos sueltos to the versions that survived in the early modern and more recent oral tradition, we can observe how the supernatural qualities of the Corónica’s serpent, as if latent in the pliegos sueltos, reemerge with vigour — even proliferate — in later iterations. Those that render explicit the serpent’s supernatural status ascribe to it prodigious size and multiple heads: ‘siete varas tien de largo, / siete cabezas tenía’, 30 or, as a version collected in Soria in 1981 reiterates, ‘siete cabezas tenía, / con todas las siete muerde / con todas las siete pica’. 31 The agent of penitential suffering becomes something more akin to a fantastic dragon or hydra, and echoes, as Luis Díaz Viana also notes, the seven-headed dragon of St John’s Apocalypse (Revelation 12.3-4). A vestige of this plurality (multiple serpents, serpents’ heads, or mouths) survives in Cervantes’s Don Quijote, when illiterate Sancho Panza recalls that Rodrigo was ‘comido de culebras, si es que las trovias de los romances antiguos no mienten’, and Doña Rodríguez replies by quoting two lines of the ballad wherein Rodrigo describes his agony: ‘Ya me comen, ya me comen / por do más pecado había’ (II.33). And yet another version of the ballad, recorded in Extremadura as recently as 1997, introduces a dialogue between the king and a talking serpent. 32

30 María Goyri and Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros del Rey Rodrigo y de Bernardo del Carpio, ed. Rafael Lapesa, Diego Catalán, Álvaro Galmés, and José Caso (Madrid: Gredos, 1957), p. 65, lines 31-32.
32 Fernando Flores del Manzano, ‘Situación actual del Romancero en Extremadura’, Revista de estudios extremeños, 55.3 (1999), 739-56 (pp. 748-49).
together, these treatments suggest an awareness, among those who created, performed, and perpetuated the ballads, of the supernatural potential of this serpent and its function in the text — even among those who would, of course, have had no direct access to the two-headed precedent in the prose chronicle.

This sensitivity to supernatural potentialities has extended beyond the serpent to other elements of this episode and ballad cycle more broadly, and romancistas over the ages have added supernatural phenomena beyond what the prose chronicle mentions concerning the Rodrigo legend. At some point in the oral tradition, the Rodrigo cycle became associated with the ballad known as ‘El enamorado y la Muerte’, which, like the addition of speech to the snake’s abilities, served to introduce a dialogue between the chastened monarch and personified Death.33 Other ballads have embellished the supernatural capacities of the legend more playfully and extravagantly, such as the fanciful sequel collected in Argentina in the early twentieth century. This later ballad narrates how Rodrigo, following the loss of his kingdom, escapes with La Cava to the New World on the back of a whale in a journey that takes only a day; he records this experience on a parchment which Columbus eventually consults.34 Again we see the ballad tradition embroidering the uncommon end of a notorious king, as the texts exploit the fantastic potential of supernatural interventions surrounding a national and individual fall.

Finally, we come to the two laconic closing lines that declare the king’s end in ‘La penitencia de don Rodrigo’: ‘Aquí acabó el rey Rodrigo, / al cielo derecho se iva’. For a twenty-first-century reader, this brief coda might seem wholly unremarkable, but the ballad tradition registers a different perception. The statement signals that the adulterous rapist has become a successful penitent. His direct admission to heaven, bypassing purgatory, is the spiritual outcome of his extreme penance, and one might expect supernatural phenomena to accompany such a wondrous event. Corral’s Corónica offers additional exposition: ‘E fueron en aquella hora

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que [Rodrigo] espiró todas las campanas del lugar movidas por sí mismas de aquella manera como si algunos hombres las tañeran. E allí conoció el mayoral [i.e. el ermitaño] que el Rey era muerto, e que su alma era salva’ (II.404). The ballads of the pliegos sueltos suppress this detail. Some ballads in the oral tradition make mention of the bells but leave the miraculous nature of their ringing to be inferred, stating only, ‘Tocábanse las campanas / cuantas n’el convento había’ (Bazán Bonfil, ‘La Cava y Rodrigo’, p. 111), or, as a version recorded in León in 1916 describes, ‘Las campanas de aquel pueblo / de par en par se tañían’ (Goyri and Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros, p. 68), or, to cite another collected in Orense in 1905, ‘Las campanas se tocaban, / las candelas se encendían’ (Goyri and Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros, p. 66). In a manner typical of the romancero, these versions elide the kind of explanation Corral provides and express only a succinct description of Corral’s paranormal sign, though readers or listeners might well recognize the implicit, suggestive presence of the supernatural in these early versions’ closing lines. Some romancistas did indeed recognize or recall that the tolling bells miraculously did so of their own accord; for example, ‘Las campanas de aquel pueblo / ellas de sí se tañían’, and ‘Las ceras de los altares / ellas solas se encendían’ (Goyri and Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros, p. 63; p. 72), which register more clearly that the verb phrases, ‘se tañían’, ‘se tocaban’, and ‘se encendían’, are properly reflexive rather than being instances of the impersonal ’se’. Other ballads further elaborate on the chronicle’s miraculous bells. In addition to the self-igniting candles, which already constitute an accretion of the supernatural, these ballads embellish their account of the king’s death by enumerating and expanding his heavenly escort: ‘Dos mil ángeles del cielo / iban en su compañía; / también le acompañaba / la Virgen Santa María’, to which others add Saint Joseph and two unidentified virgins (Goyri and Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros, pp. 69-71).

Perhaps diachronic comparisons in a more systematic, comprehensive study would reveal an even more pronounced tendency among the ballads towards increasing and foregrounding their supernatural content, though such a study might prove to be fundamentally impossible given the difficulty of dating ballads and the greater difficulty of assigning a time for when certain components of a ballad gain or lose currency. For now, it is sufficient to observe how a supernatural element from a late medieval source can remain implicit, even imperceptible, in the course of the ballad tradition, only to emerge explicit and amplified in alternative iterations. A germ of supernatural potential, inherent in the source text or in the scenario itself, may survive as a relatively undeveloped hint, becoming
more apparent, more elaborate, or, conversely, further suppressed in successive versions, as we have seen in motifs such as the miraculously tolling bells. This aspect of the ballad tradition evinces a special awareness, among at least some of those who conceived and communicated the ballads, of supernatural overtones — an awareness of a subtext, or more aptly, a supertext, which ascribes transcendent significance to elements of a story or setting, without necessarily expounding that significance. For the communities that perpetuated the Spanish ballad tradition, in keeping with the view of the supernatural as immanent, what is out of sight is certainly not always out of mind. Rather, it is a matter of perceiving a particular element as pertaining to the supernatural, construing it as such, and assigning significance accordingly.

The bells that signal Rodrigo’s death again provide a critical clue regarding the reception and understanding of these ballads. Several versions collected in the early twentieth century register a reaction to the uncanny tolling. Unidentified witnesses question the motive and meaning of the bells, and the narrator or an unassigned voice answers their questions. A version recorded in Galicia in 1931 expresses this scene in the following manner:

Campanas de cielo y tierra,
elas de seu se zanguían;
unos dicen “¿quién será?”,
otros dicen “¿quién sería?”
—El alma de don Rodrigo,
que pra el cielo subía.
Dos mil ángeles llevaba [sic],
lo llevan de compañía;
(lines 35-42, Goyri and Menéndez Pidal, Romanceros, p. 70)

Such renderings openly depict the kind of interpretive interrogation that the ballad-makers and their audiences might apply to a supernatural element in the ballads. Here, the diegetic questions-and-answer dramatize the recognition of a supernatural manifestation (celestial and terrestrial chimes), the urge to seek an interpretation of the extraordinary phenomenon, and the acknowledgement of otherworldly intervention (the fate of a soul in the afterlife). The supernatural element grants enhanced significance to this narrative of an individual’s death, as it points to wider repercussions on the physical and spiritual planes.

What, then, is the enhanced significance that the cumulative supernatural phenomena impart to the Rodrigo cycle? Without presupposing the highly subjective interpretations that any listener or reader might make, the
following general conclusions apply. The supernatural omens, apparition, prophecy, temporal distortions, divine guidance, monstrous penance, and celestial welcome serve to invest the legend of Spain’s last Visigothic king and the Moorish conquest with transcendent connotations. The historical, sociopolitical struggle becomes a story of personal sin, divine judgement, and spiritual absolution. The supernatural phenomena in the Rodrigo cycle elevate a moral aetiology of the conquest to the status of a theodicy. By their very inclusion, the supernatural elements sidestep any question that might be raised about the veracity of the Islamic faith, whose adherents had overrun most of the Peninsula by 720, CE. The worldview of folk Christianity prevails in these ballads, and they relegate the competing faith to being a tool of divine justice, facilitated by a vengeful Christian father, at that. Here, the hierarchical, two-tiered conceptualization of cosmology informs the basic design and development of the ballads. The supernatural stands in a certain spatial relation to the natural — above, beyond, exceeding natural ontology, yet immanent and providential. It frames and structures the Rodrigo legend and intervenes within the cycle at key junctures. In the ballads’ depiction, a wondrously swift invasion, foretold in portents and prophecy, sets divine retribution in motion, thereby underscoring the ‘rightness’ and deservedness of the conquest in terms that are very different from those of, say, the invaders’ more effective military force and greater administrative efficiency. Even if we set aside intractable questions concerning degrees of credence, the cycle’s penitential denouement and celestial coda point to redemptive possibilities, even eschatological repercussions, for the Spanish Reconquista in physical and spiritual realms.

Perhaps surprisingly for poems that are predominantly narrative, Spanish ballads tend not to narrate the episodes in which one might expect to find the most narrative action. Instead, they dwell upon considerations of the aftermath (of a battle, siege, illicit affair, or family feud) or on portentous preliminaries. The same tendency characterizes the Rodrigo cycle. For a set of ballads ostensibly treating the conquest of Spain, they focus remarkably little attention on the events of the conquest itself. The focal points of fascination are elsewhere, on the prelude and aftereffects of Spain’s fall, condensed in an intensified focus on individuals. The supernatural elements heighten this fascination and imbue those aftereffects with heightened significance. The depictions of supernatural phenomena may be oblique, merely hinted, in some versions of the ballads, because the potency and imaginative persuasiveness of these representations, as with so much else in the romancero, lie in their suggestive potential and their capacity for evocation.
It is high time we put to bed, once and for all, that curiously persistent error about the *romancero’s* purported paucity of supernatural content. The critical commonplace, especially as it has come to be articulated with little or no qualification, has desensitized critics to the Spanish ballads’ real wealth of ‘lo sobrenatural’. While there might be, in the most general terms, a relative infrequency of explicit supernatural elements in the Spanish ballad tradition, when compared to similar traditions in other languages, this should not lead us reductively to presume their absence. Sometimes their presence is simply unannounced, and requires an informed sensitivity to recognize them. Recognizing a ballad’s supernatural content is key to recognizing how the communities that cultivated the *romancero* perceived their histories, roles, and positions as divinely ordained and spiritually consequential. The supernatural is in no way superfluous in the ballad tradition. By it, we are reading a reading of a meaningfully patterned cosmos, wherein an event or phenomenon may be inexplicable — and even more often unexplained — but is never void of significance. Disregarding or discounting the ballads’ supernatural details risks losing sight of all this. It is akin to turning a deaf ear and unquestioning mind to miraculously tolling bells.