

The Legends of a Traveler:
Excavating a Transnational Past through Storytelling in Irving's Alhambra

by
Jack Lammers

A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in International Studies
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 11, 2015
Commencement June 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jack Lammers for the degrees of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English and Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in International Studies presented on May 11, 2015. Title: The Legends of a Traveler: Excavating a Transnational Past through Storytelling in Irving's Alhambra.

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To the chagrin of his American comrades, Washington Irving would spend much of his life in Europe as a writer and cross-cultural explorer, including a stay in the halls of the Alhambra. This experience led to the completion of *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), a collection of sketches, anecdotes, and legends related to the palace-fortress in Granada in southern Spain. Historically, American critics have cheapened the value of Irving's legends in the work and have instead focused on the autobiographical portions of the work. I argue that Irving's stories reflect his point of view as a transnational storyteller, as shown with the worldly characters in his stories as they attempt to share their experiences with other markedly parochial characters. Focusing on two of his stories, "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer" and "Legend of the Two Discreet Statues," I contend that Irving draws attention, through his characters, to the importance of storytelling in expanding worldviews, excavating transnational relationships, and renewing interest in exploring new cultures.

Key Words: Washington Irving, Alhambra, Storytelling, Al-Andalus, Spain

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Jack Lammers, Author

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INTRODUCTION

Two of Washington Irving's legends from *Tales of the Alhambra*, the "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer" and the "Legend of the Two Discreet Statues," adjoin characters from different points in Spanish history and from entirely distinct cultures. In the former, a paranoid Moorish king greedily accepts magical talismans from an astrologer who journeys into the Iberian Peninsula from Egypt, and in the latter a precocious Spanish girl revives that Moorish past and communicates directly with characters from "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer." Both of these stories, which take place in two distinct periods—one far before the Alhambra's construction and another long after—create character foils between those who want to learn more about the world and those who prefer to keep their perspectives limited. Irving's stories paint the Alhambra in a romantic light as a small compound teeming with converging histories and as a place that provokes visitors' imaginations and transports them to different cultures and eras.

Washington Irving emphasizes his purpose for writing *Tales of the Alhambra* almost immediately. Within the first chapter, he writes about how "care has been taken" to portray what he calls a "microcosm, that singular little world into which I had been fortuitously thrown, and about which the external world had a very imperfect idea."¹ Irving contends that his immersion in Spain has directly influenced his perspective and has afforded him the opportunity to unearth truths from Spain's misinterpreted "internal world." He first expressed interest in Spain in 1826 when he asked his acquaintance, Alexander Everett, American minister in Madrid, for a post at the U.S. embassy. Clara Penney writes, "He was not in search of heavy duties, but desired a position which would allow him to give a large part of his time and

energies to literary work.”² Irving had already been living abroad for some time in Germany and France before traveling to Spain. Everett suggested that Irving translate historian Martín Fernández de Navarrete’s book on Christopher Columbus, titled, *Viages de Colon*. Irving found the task to be incompatible with his goals as a creative writer. Branching out on his own, he decided to write an independent work on Columbus: *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*.³ Irving would continue to write other works while in Spain. American literature scholar Stanley Williams concludes that Irving wrote about Spain “some three thousand pages and approximately one million words, amounting to one third of his total writings,” and continues, “Although he is still known as the traditional interpreter in American literature of old England, he devoted far more space and effort to his books on Spain.”⁴ In 1829, after writing his book on Columbus, Irving would leave on a journey to the south of Spain with a friend, Prince Dolgorouki—a Russian diplomat in Madrid.⁵ After few days in Granada, the Governor of the Alhambra would grant Irving the opportunity to stay in the Moorish complex. Irving became infatuated with the Alhambra as a relic and as a storyteller’s gold mine. In his diaries, Irving comments on the inspiring qualities of the Alhambra, writing, “It is impossible to contemplate this delicious abode and not feel an admiration of the genius and the poetical spirit of those who first devised this earthly paradise.”⁶

From the observations Irving makes in the journalistic sections of the work, he suggests that the current state of the palace-fortress reflects a rift between its Spanish inhabitants and Moorish predecessors. However, Irving commends the work of a select few that recognize the value of the structure’s Moorish *and* Spanish past. He remarks that the current commander, Don Francisco de Serna, has begun restoration on the structures after decades of neglect. Certainly, Irving concludes, “Were government to second (Serna) with means equal to his zeal, this relic

of it might still be preserved for many generations to adorn the land, and attract the curious and enlightened of every clime,” (Irving, 49-50). This short relation of the Alhambra’s dilapidation serves a tremendous purpose in framing this work of sketches and stories. More importantly, this observation raises a point about how we choose to continue with Irving’s book. Do we consider the book to convey the neglect and the growing gap between the Moors and the Spanish? I argue against this idea and instead believe that Irving *reveres* the efforts of cultural preservers, just like Serna and Irving’s cultural guide Mateo Ximenes, a native of Granada described by Irving as his “historio-graphic squire,” (Irving, 257). On Ximenes, Andrew Breen Myers writes that he “poured into [Irving’s] ears piquant gossip and regional folktales.”⁷ Instead of burying the past, Irving applauds the efforts of preservers and of those that keep the blood of the Alhambra—its stories—in circulation. Deserving of as much attention as Irving’s autobiographical entries in the collection, Irving’s stories comment on the very practice of storytelling as a way of avoiding parochialism and reviving the past, just as the Alhambra as a structure has long served as a gateway to a multicultural history.

Traditionally, the Alhambra has been regarded as a symbol of conquest and fracture rather than one of cultural coexistence. Beginning in 711, Islamic Moors from Morocco crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, raided the Visigoths in what was then Hispania, and established Al-Andalus (the namesake of Spain’s southern autonomous community of Andalusia), which then covered most of Spain and Portugal.⁸ Translated from Arabic to English as “the red one,” the Alhambra underwent many transformations in Al-Andalus. Originally built as a small fortress in 889 in the Muslim kingdom of Granada, the fortress was renovated in the 11th century and turned into a royal palace in the 13th century by the last Muslim dynasty in Spain: the Nasrid dynasty.⁹ In 1492, more than 700 years after the Moorish invasion, the Catholic Monarchs

(*Reyes Católicos*) Isabella I of Castille and Ferdinand II of Aragon would see to the completion of their conquest of Granada and the end of the Christian Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁰

To this day, visitors to the Alhambra can be reminded of the schism between the Moors and the Spaniards by observing the convergences of Spanish and Moorish architecture. The most prominent example is Spanish ruler Charles V's eponymous palace in the center of the complex.



Figure 1 – Lammers, Jack. “The Alhambra from the Mirador de San Nicolas.” Digital image. 2014.

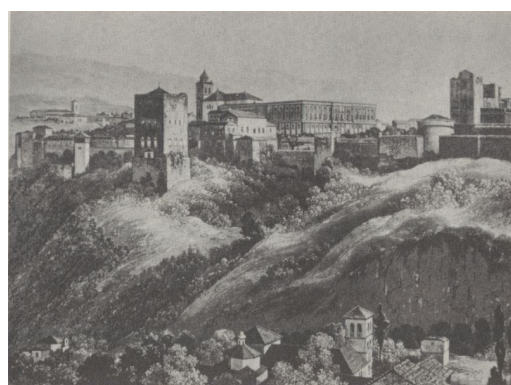


Figure 2 – Lerebours, Noel. “The Alhambra from the Albaicín.” Etching from the original daguerreotype. 1840.

Within *Tales of the Alhambra*, in an early section titled, “Palace of the Alhambra,” Irving deplores the palace as an eyesore in his observations, writing, “The splendid pile commenced by Charles V [is] intended, it is said, to eclipse the residence of the Moorish king. We regarded it with a feeling almost of scorn, rang at the Moslem portal,” (Irving, 54). While Irving suggests here that the Alhambra is symbol of irreconcilable cultures, I argue that his stories “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer” and “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues” instead evidence a deeper significance of the Alhambra as a structure. Irving stories show how the Alhambra—beneath the decay—has inspired stories that bear Moorish and Spanish aspects and served as a platform for well-rounded, alluring, and precious multicultural stories and histories.

Over time, Irving's collection has been repurposed as a guidebook in tourist shops throughout Granada. Writer Charles Dudley Warner comments on the reputation *Tales of the Alhambra* has attained in the literary world. Dudley writes, "How much of the romantic interest of the entire English-reading world in the Alhambra is due to him; the name invariably recalls his own, and every visitor there is conscious of his presence."¹¹ Since publication, few scholars have paid critical attention to the work, and those who have often comment that the firsthand accounts outshine the fantastical legends. At the time, playwright and historian William Dunlap said about *Tales of the Alhambra* that the book was "very slight stuff."¹² Critics concluded that any value of Irving's stories was stylistic, rather than thematic. In 1832, the year of publication, a writer for the North American Review commented on the value of Irving's collection, writing:

The best articles are those, in which the author gives a description of scenes and persons that have come directly within his own observation ... The tales [are] the most agreeable portion of the work, and though, in fact, not distinguished by any particular power or point, are written in the correct and graceful style peculiar to the author, and will be read with pleasure, were it only for the beauty of the language, which is in fact their principal merit.¹³

According to the reviewer, no characteristic other than the "beauty of the language" distinguishes Irving's collected legends. That American reviewers were skeptical of the *value* of Irving's Spanish experience serves to stress the unique quality of Irving as "the only American writer of his time with an international reputation."¹⁴ Wai Chee Dimock refers to reviewers of Irving's international works in her article titled, "Hemispheric Islam," writing: "Being insufficiently American was a sin that these reviewers could not get out of their heads." Dimock also writes that Irving was flying in the face of American insularity and nationalism: "Foreign input had always been crucial to Irving's writing."¹⁵ Dimock's article stakes the claim that

Irving was developing a niche as an American writer that had not yet been popularized: the use of “foreign input” and worldly experience in literature.

Dimock’s claim about Irving as a literary explorer adds to a reader’s understanding of Irving’s self-awareness in his legends. In the pair of stories I will discuss, Irving brings in characters that, like him, have explored other cultures and have tried to communicate their experiences to others through their stories, which fall on deaf ears. In “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer,” the astrologer Abu Ayub attempts to tell his stories to the Moorish king Aben Habuz, but Habuz has no interest. Similarly in “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues,” the Spanish girl, Sanchica, tells her father Lope about her fantastical experience interacting with Moorish ghosts, to which he simply laughs dismissively. Thinking about the trajectory of the storyteller in the legends, they parallel Irving himself in many ways. Almost as if anticipating the very reluctance of American readers to fully embrace this chapter in his European endeavor, Irving’s legends portray ethnocentric characters against others who do not shy away at the opportunity to explore outside their cultures of origin.

I have selected the stories “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer” and “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues” because they stand in opposition to the idea that the Alhambra is merely a disjointed jumble of disparate cultures. The stories show that the Alhambra is *not* simply the bone of conflicts between nations nor is it a marker between the Moors and the Spanish, but instead is a unifying multicultural relic working across time and space placing its many cultures in conversation with one another. In “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer” and “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues,” Irving condemns parochialism and promotes diverse perspectives through his characters in relation to the Alhambra’s history. In my analyses, I will first discuss the fortunes of the worldly astrologer, Abu Ayub, and the shortcomings of the insular king,

Aben Habuz, in “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer.” Then, I will explain how this theme of insularity versus worldliness continues in “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues” highlighting, in particular, the contrast between the open-mindedness of the protagonist Sanchica and the provincial attitudes of those in her milieu.

“LEGEND OF THE ARABIAN ASTROLOGER”

In a book titled *Tales of the Alhambra* one would expect all of the stories to incorporate the structure in some vital aspect, but Irving inserts a story that contains no mention of the structure and, in fact, takes place entirely before the Alhambra’s construction. In “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer,” Irving concerns himself with the original foundation of the structure, begging the question: What is the Alhambra *built* on? Abu Ayub, the astrologer alluded to in the title, chisels his home into the very rock where the Alhambra now stands and fills it with objects reflecting the cultural knowledge he has collected throughout his life. Abu Ayub becomes the storyteller within the tale, and the Moorish king, Aben Habuz, becomes Abu Ayub’s sole—and unreceptive—audience member.

Irving characterizes the astrologer Abu Ayub as experienced and broad-minded by way of the character’s backstory. Abu Ayub has taken his experiences in foreign lands and adopted them into his understanding. Irving writes that Abu Ayub had “every mark of extreme age, yet he had travelled almost the whole way from Egypt on foot, with no other aid than a staff, marked with hieroglyphics,” (Irving, 170). Abu Ayub, according to the legend, has lived “since the days of Mahomet,” referring to Muhammad, the prophet and messenger of God in Islam. Abu Ayub also took part in the conquest of Egypt and “followed the conquering army of Amru into Egypt,” (Irving, 170). By “Amru,” Irving is likely referring to ‘Amr ibn al’As, the Arab commander who led the conquest of Egypt, which lasted from 639-642.”¹⁶ In the conquest, the Arabs took over the land controlled by the Byzantine Empire in what Hugh Kennedy calls “The swiftest and most complete” of early Muslim conquests. Kennedy writes of the conquest, “Seldom in history can so massive a political change have happened so swiftly and been so long

lasting.”¹⁷ Although a member of the conquering Arab forces, Abu Ayub took interest in the conquered Byzantines, as Irving writes, he “Remained many years studying the dark sciences, particularly magic, among the Egyptian priests,” (Irving, 170). Instead of dismissing the conquered Byzantines, Abu Ayub studies the “dark sciences” among them and adopts their culture.

By the time Abu Ayub reaches Al-Andalus, he bears every mark of an ascetic and over the course of the story proves to be wiser than the king, Aben Habuz. Whereas the king enjoys the possessions he “wrest(s) from his neighbors,” (Irving, 169) Abu Ayub has taken care to learn about the conquered Egyptian culture with which he has interacted, as shown when he reproduces the Egyptian symbols in his cavernous observatory. Irving writes, “The walls of this hall were covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics, with cabalistic symbols, and with the figures of the stars in their signs,” (Irving, 171). One of the most highly charged terms here is “cabalistic symbols.” The first book of the Kabbalah, the *Bahir*, surfaced at the end of the 12th century¹⁸ and according to the Oxford Dictionary, the term Kabbalah can be concretely periodized “towards the beginning of the thirteenth cent. A.D. applied to the pretended tradition of the mystical interpretation of the Old Testament,” pertaining to Jewish usage. Another definition refers to Kabbalah as “mystery, secret or esoteric doctrine or art.”¹⁹ Because the story is set somewhere in the 8th century, we as readers can more likely use the interpretation that Irving is casting this word “cabalistic” to refer more generally (as the second definition states) to Abu Ayub’s dabbling in esoteric dark magic with the Egyptian priests. However, the word “cabalistic” still brings Judaism to mind and adds to the development of Abu Ayub as a worldly and wise character. The term “cabalistic” taken simply as a synonym for the word “secretive” or “mysterious” adds to the idea of Abu Ayub as a carrier of precious cultural knowledge and

suggests that investing his time to learn about these traditions has given him the tools needed to decode these symbols, while others simply view them as incomprehensible symbols of “dark science.” Even the tower erected by Abu Ayub as a talisman for the king is built from “stones brought from Egypt, it is said, from one of the pyramids,” (Irving, 173). The use of Egyptian stone emphasizes the astrologer’s connection to Egyptian culture and demonstrates how his cultural interest has benefited him greatly in developing his magical knowledge.

Abu Ayub infuses the essence of his experience in Egypt into his dwelling. He asks for the construction of “ottomans and divans” and he also asks for perfumes and has baths constructed to “counteract the rigidity of age, and to restore freshness and suppleness to the frame withered by study,” (Irving, 176). Further, Abu Ayub figures the Egyptian culture into his life as he orders the hanging of crystal lamps filled with oils prepared “according to a receipt discovered by him in the tombs of Egypt,” (Irving, 176). Similar to how he uses the Egyptian stone as the building block for his talisman, Abu Ayub projects the Egyptian influence in his life onto the walls of his underground dwelling.

Most importantly, the astrologer’s decision to burrow himself underground creates a visible parallel to the layering of history in Spain. The likelihood is very high that Irving took note of the layering of historical artifacts from across time in his travels through Spain. For instance, we know from Irving’s “Court of Lions” section in *Alhambra* that Irving knew of the Cathedral-Mosque of Cordoba,²⁰ nestled next to a Roman bridge. In the Cordoba example alone there are three clear cultures within one compact landscape: Spanish, Moorish, and Roman. In Alcala de Guadaira, Irving talks about the great reservoirs that provide water to Seville. Irving notes the cultural cross-section of the reservoirs, writing, “Here are great tanks or reservoirs, of Roman and Moorish construction, whence water is conveyed to Seville by noble aqueducts,”

(Irving, 21). In Granada, the same characteristic emerges as the examples of Seville and Cordoba suggest. From the walls of the original fortress (*Alcazaba*) within the Alhambra, visitors can clearly see the Granada Cathedral where the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella are buried as well as the Spanish Palace of Charles V in the other direction.



Figure 3 – Lammers, Jack. “Granada Cathedral from the Alhambra.” Digital image. 2014.



Figure 4 – Lammers, Jack. “Palace of Charles V from the Alhambra’s Alcazaba.” Digital image. 2014.

Examples like these reinforce an idea that Irving, in these stories, uses the subterranean as an indication of the lasting impact that culture has versus the fleeting influence of individual power. Vested with knowledge of world religions, geography, and cultures, the astrologer refuses to stay with Aben Habuz above ground and instead forges a structure that endures time and teleports him culturally from the Iberian Peninsula to Egypt.

If the astrologer takes pride in the ancient culture he discovered by living among the Egyptians, the king’s cultural shortsightedness prevents him from looking beyond his kingdom’s borders. The desires of King Aben Habuz are provincial. He seeks immediate protection of the kingdom and the ability to lead a peaceful and sheltered life, rather than adhere

to more ambitious aspirations. Irving details Aben Habuz's predicament, writing, "...He had foes on every side ... Aben Habuz was kept in a constant state of vigilance and alarm," (Irving, 169). Abu Ayub wanders into the kingdom and the king quickly appoints him, based on his wisdom, his "bosom counsellor," (Irving, 171). Abu Ayub soon reveals his magical abilities to the king and gives him the power of talismans to assist him in keeping out invaders. When Abu Ayub affords Aben Habuz the perverted luxury of killing off his enemies by piercing effigies with a miniature lance placed up high in a tower, the king is overjoyed by the prospect of avoiding direct contact with war. Aben Habuz asks the astrologer what he would like in return for the power of the talisman, and the astrologer requests that his cave to become a "suitable hermitage," (Irving, 177). In response, Aben Habuz says, "How noble is the moderation of the truly wise!" (Irving, 177), but the narration adds that Aben Habuz was "secretly pleased at the cheapness of the recompense," (Irving, 177). The king in this passage reveals himself to be a hoarder of both material goods and power. He feigns interest in the wisdom of the astrologer and, in fact, is one-dimensional, caring only about himself and his own contentment. He also distinguishes himself from Abu Ayub in that he relishes his disconnect from others up in the canopy of his tower, while Abu Ayub makes cultural contact and roots himself in the earth beneath Granada in his burrowed-in dwelling.

Perhaps the most crucial difference between Aben Habuz and Abu Ayub comes from the king's flippant attitude toward storytelling as a meaningful practice, whereas the astrologer lives for telling tales from his past. When Abu Ayub tells the king about a magical talisman he could build to counteract threats to the kingdom, Aben Habuz interrupts Abu Ayub's story. With no regard for the well-traveled astrologer's tale, Aben Habuz interjects, saying, "What a treasure would be such a ram to keep an eye on these mountains around me ... how securely I might

sleep in my palace with such sentinels on the top!” (Irving, 171). The king trivializes Abu Ayub’s cultural knowledge and thinks only in self-interested terms (i.e. “*My* palace” “How securely *I* might sleep”). In response, the astrologer “waited until the ecstasies of the king had subsided,” (Irving, 172). When Aben Habuz interjects in the middle of the explanation of the talisman, the king shows that he is greedy at heart and absorbed in his own “ecstasies.” Abu Ayub resumes, after the king’s interruption, and explains *how* he learned about this talisman and how he sought to make himself a “master of the hidden knowledge” of the Egyptians (Irving, 172). Years before, Abu Ayub, after talking with an ancient Egyptian priest, learned about a powerful book of “magic and art” (Irving, 172) stored in the center of a pyramid and decided to search for the book with the help of the Egyptians and some soldiers. In the middle of this explanation, Aben Habuz interrupts once again and says to Abu Ayub, “Thou hast been a great traveller, and seen marvelous things; but what avail to me is the secret of the pyramid, and the volume of knowledge of the wise Solomon?” (Irving, 173). To Abu Ayub’s disappointment, he finds that Aben Habuz shows no reverence for the cultural or mystical significance and history of the volume, but instead thinks in terms of how the book can benefit *him*, asking “what avail” is Abu Ayub’s knowledge. Reducing his tales, Abu Ayub explains in simpler terms that the book will be of value because he can use it to create talismans and protect the kingdom from attack.

Later on, the king desires an escape from his kingdom and asks if Abu Ayub would help relieve him of his duties as king. Abu Ayub asks if the king has heard of the “garden of Irem.” Abu Ayub refers to “Iram of the Pillars,” an ancient city that, according to the Quran, was cursed by Allah for the inhabitants’ disobedience.”²¹²² The king says he read of the garden in the Quran, but that he considered the stories of the Quran “wild fables,” to which the astrologer

replies, “Discredit not, O king, the tales of travellers ... for they contain precious rarities of knowledge brought from the ends of the earth,” (Irving, 182). First of all, Irving is being self-referential with his wording when he writes the phrase “the tales of travellers.” Indeed, this reminds readers of *Tales of a Traveller*, Irving’s story collection written in 1824 while he lived in Germany and France. Irving published *Tales of the Alhambra* only eight years after *Tales of a Traveler* and his reference leads those familiar with Irving to not only reevaluate the value of storytelling, but also reconsider the import of Irving’s work abroad. Second, Irving brings into focus the contrast in values between the two characters in very specific terms, as Abu Ayub is willing to share *how* he is able to construct a paradise for the king, while Aben Habuz has no patience for the astrologer’s anecdotes and simply desires results without explanation.

The tension between the two and their conflicting values intensifies when Irving introduces the Gothic princess: a character viewed as a beautiful treasure by both Aben Habuz and Abu Ayub. The introduction of the Gothic princess suggests that this story takes place at a crux in the history of Al-Andalus, probably closer to the first incursion into the Iberian Peninsula in 711, before the Visigoths were totally displaced. Before 711, the Visigoths controlled Hispania after wresting the land from a weakened Roman Empire in 409.²³ The princess’s father was killed by the magic of the talisman and she decides to walk into Moorish territory. The princess’s beauty makes her precious to Aben Habuz and her sorcery is of interest to the astrologer. The astrologer demands her from Aben Habuz: “Give me then this stray captive, to solace me in my solitude with her silver lyre,” (Irving, 179). The princess acts as a link between the conquered Visigoth culture, the Moors, and Abu Ayub. By introducing the Gothic princess to the storyline, Irving expands the idea of cross-cultural symbolism in the Alhambra by showing that the stories of the past cannot be severed from the present and that

layers of history never erode completely. Aben Habuz attempts to keep those he conquers out of sight and out of mind, but even he is enthralled by the Visigoth culture he is trying to suppress. The princess's daring decision to enter Granada rewards her later on and she gains the ability to manipulate other cultures with ease. Irving captures the princess's ability when he writes, "The Gothic princess regarded all this splendor with the air of one accustomed to magnificence," (Irving, 180) and further, "Whenever [Aben Habuz] began to plead his passion, she struck her silver lyre ... [and] he gradually sank into a sleep," (Irving, 180-81).

Later on in the story, the princess and Abu Ayub escape into the cave and become sealed beneath what is now the Alhambra's Gate of Justice. The two stealing away into the foundation of what is now the Alhambra reflect a few

themes. First of all, the princess and the astrologer, by living in the Alhambra's foundation, show that the structure's history lives on, as the astrologer is able to "counteract the

rigidity of age within his cave." Second, in presenting the Visigoth and Arabian cultures side by side, Irving transforms the structure from a *Moorish* architectural marvel into a world wonder reflective of more than just one culture or epoch. Third, Irving equates contact with cultures to references to the Alhambra's foundation and to the subterranean, as opposed to the distance Aben Habuz creates between himself and others—as evidenced by his lofty tower.

The beginning of the story sets up an opportunity for enlightenment where a weathered and experienced traveler could impart wisdom to a less adventuresome ruler. This opportunity is wasted on Aben Habuz, who resists Abu Ayub's stories and observes only his most shortsighted

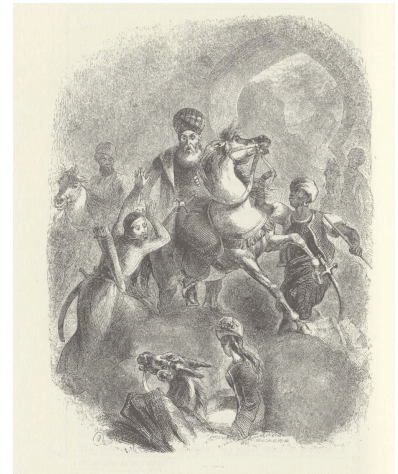


Figure 5 – Darley, Felix. "The Spell-Bound Gateway." From: Irving, Washington. *The Alhambra*. (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1851).

desires including his desire for retirement and his greedy passion for the Gothic princess. This story comments on the very idea of storytelling as a worthwhile pursuit that brings cultures together. That Abu Ayub becomes part of the Alhambra's foundation with the Gothic princess (both characters that break out of their own cultures) while Aben Habuz is left hopeless against enemy forces serves to prove that only those who take risks in understanding the greater world will reap true rewards. Now I return to the question: What is the Alhambra founded on? The story conveys the notion that the Alhambra is *actually* founded on a multiplicity of cultures shown with the Visigoth princess, Arabian astrologer, and Moorish king. Simultaneously, Irving observes that there is a prominent parochial view (like that of Aben Habuz) that takes for granted the richness of the structure and fails to recognize its true foundation. Irving concludes the legend by noting that the princess and astrologer will remain in the cavern until, "The mystic hand shall grasp the fated key, and dispel the whole charm of this enchanted mountain," (Irving, 189). The one who finds the hand and contributes to the release of the astrologer and princess from the multicultural foundation is the next genuine cultural explorer, named Sanchica. The hand and key come into play in what could be considered the second part of this tale, "The Legend of the Two Discreet Statues," despite its distance from "Arabian Astrologer" in both the collection and in time period.

“LEGEND OF THE TWO DISCREET STATUES”

Sanchica, a Spanish girl living in the ruins of the Alhambra, discovers a jet-black hand in “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues” as she plays in the ruins of a Moorish fort. Set centuries in the future from “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer,” this legend warps through time from the mythologized foundation of the Alhambra to the structure’s decay in Christian Spain. Sanchica lives with her father, Lope Sanchez, in a “waste apartment” of the Alhambra at a time when the structure had begun its turn to ruin (Irving, 354). Sanchica possesses knowledge beyond her years and, like both Abu Ayub and the Gothic princess, she takes a risk in her foray into another culture. Whereas Abu Ayub journeys on foot from Egypt to Al-Andalus and the princess traveled into the heart of Moorish territory in Granada, Sanchica makes a journey into the past when she uncovers life in Moorish Granada—buried by time and unawareness.



Figure 6 – Schermann, John and Sonya. “This hand inscribed over the gate represents the 5 pillars of Islam.” From *The Website of John and Sonya Schermann*. April 2008. <http://www.scherminator.com/spain/granada/gates/gates.html>



Figure 7 – Schermann, John and Sonya. “The key is a symbol of 7 which has meaning in Islam, such as the 7 heavens in the Koran.” From *The Website of John and Sonya Schermann*. April 2008. <http://www.scherminator.com/spain/granada/gates/gates.html>

Early in the story, Sanchica and her friends play amongst the ruins of a Moorish fort and she finds, “A small hand curiously carved of jet, the fingers closed, and the thumb clasped upon them,” (Irving, 355). Immediately after finding the small trinket, Sanchica is “overjoyed with her good fortune,” (Irving, 355) but when she brings her prize to her community, the hand “...immediately [becomes] a subject of sage speculation, and [is eyed] by some with superstitious distrust,” (Irving, 355). One says to “throw it away” and another says “it’s Moorish- depend upon it...” and finally one suggests that she sell the talisman.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, an old soldier who served in Africa and was “as swarthy as a Moor” examines the talisman and says to Lope that, according to the Moors of Barbary, the hand “bodes good luck” to Sanchica (Irving, 355). The knowledgeable soldier confirms Sanchica’s first reaction of joy at finding the jet hand, showing Sanchica’s precocious intuition by knowing the cultural value of the hand. Irving describes her acute intuition when he writes, “She had discretion far beyond her years or sex,” (Irving, 363). By bringing the jet hand back to the group, Sanchica encourages a discussion based on Moorish superstitions and begins the process of reviving Moorish culture among the Spanish community. This moment where she inspires conversation about the Moors shows Sanchica’s burgeoning role as a storyteller. Spurred on by Sanchica’s find, the community exchanges Moorish legends and one old woman or “crone” tells a few stories, first about the last Moorish king, Boabdil, and his court still living in a subterranean palace and then a second story about a deep pit in a nearby ruin that goes “into the very heart of the mountain,” (Irving, 356).

The “crone” says that a poor man went into the pit after a goat that fell in, and he came out raving “about the hobgoblin Moors that had pursued him in the cavern,” (Irving, 356). In spite of the fear inspired by this story, Sanchica confronts the pit. Due to popular opinion,

Sanchica's blood "[runs] cold" upon viewing the pit for the first time, but then she decides to roll a large stone and push it "over the brink," (Irving, 357). By interacting with the blackness, Moorish apparitions surge from out of the pit, indicating Sanchica's ability to revive the past. From the seemingly bottomless pit to Sanchica's eyes to the jet hand, this story reiterates the color black as multivalent symbol. First, in the bottomless pit, black represents the unknown and the fear of facing into the Moorish culture that, for Sanchica, was always portrayed as hobgoblin legend rather than real history. Second, the jet hand represents the link between cultural ignorance and unlocking a door to the past. Third, Irving describes Sanchica as "a little black-eyed girl" (Irving 354) suggesting a personal connection between Sanchica and the Moors. The Moors themselves were often referred to as "Black Moors," because of their skin color. Irving shows that Sanchica's community has perceived the Moorish history as unknown while Sanchica possesses a racial linkage and an uncanny ability to commune with the Moorish past. Because of the affirmation she received from the tawny soldier, Sanchica now feels more powerful with the talisman in her control—leading her to face into the pit. Sanchica approaches the pit and is at once fearful and enticed. Irving encapsulates Sanchica's inner-conflict when he writes, "In the centre of this basin yawned the mouth of the pit ... The very horror of the thing was delightful to her," (Irving 357). With the verb "yawn," Irving refers to the sense of the pit being wide open but also by referring to the "mouth" of the pit, anthropomorphizes the pit as if it were a creature being awakened by Sanchica.

When Sanchica rolls the rock into the pit, the rock tumbles for some time before making "a final splash into water, far, far below," leading to a "murmuring sound" that grows "louder and louder ... as if some army were marshaling for battle in the very bowels of the mountain," (Irving, 357) which she later discovers to be a cavalcade of Moors recalled from the past. While

Sanchica looks into the pit and sees nothing but darkness, throwing the rock into the pit reveals to her that there is water, and likely life, and the bottom. The delay between Sanchica throwing the rock and the murmur of voices and surge of Moors out of the pit reflects the way in which cultures like the Spanish in this story have ignored but have not covered up the past—just as the pit obscures the Moors, but remains wide open to the present. The pit also calls Abu Ayub’s underground cavern to mind. Just as the astrologer sought to make a lasting impact by placing himself in the foundation of the Alhambra, Sanchica is, in a sense, looking through a wormhole to her Moorish predecessors and her interaction shows that she is inserting herself into the foundational historical narrative of the Alhambra. Sanchica’s direct engagement with the dark pit recalls the path of Abu Ayub in Egypt and the way in which Abu Ayub extracted knowledge of the dark sciences from his experience among the Byzantine priests.

Following her well-developed intuition, Sanchica follows the Moorish cavalcade through the Gate of Justice. She finds an “opening in the earth ... leading down beneath the foundations of the tower” (Irving, 359) and discovers the Gothic princess and Abu Ayub concealed within. Irving uses this meeting between Sanchica, the princess, and the astrologer to reveal Sanchica’s knowledge of Moorish history. On Sanchica, he writes, “The little Sanchica now recollected a story she had heard among the old people of the Alhambra, concerning a Gothic princess confined in the centre of the mountain by an old Arabian magician,” (Irving, 359). In spite of her ethnocentric culture, Sanchica recognizes the astrologer and princess from the legends of experienced elders. By the time Sanchica descends below the Gate of Justice, she has become accustomed to the subterranean. After her experience with the pit, she has now uncovered a hidden and complex cultural intersection of Gothic, Moorish, and now Spanish cultures. The princess requests that Sanchica use the talisman of the black hand to free her from

beneath the Gate of Justice, saying, “Touch my fetters with the talisman that hangs about thy neck, and for this night I shall be free,” (Irving, 360). Complying with the princess’s request, Sanchica then follows the freed princess who reveals a secret treasure. The princess says of the treasure, “Here ... is a great secret, which I will reveal to thee in reward for thy faith and courage ... Tell thy father to search the spot on which their eyes are fixed, and he will find what will make him richer than any man in Granada,” (Irving, 362). As a result of using the talisman, Sanchica receives an extravagant treasure and is commended by the princess for her “faith and courage.” This result stands at odds with the popular legend of the hand and key—both symbols etched into gateways in the Alhambra—passed down by the Alhambra’s residents (Irving, 53). Irving writes early on, in a section titled “The Journey,” that many, according to tradition, have believed, “The hand and key were magical devices on which the fate of the Alhambra depended,” (Irving, 53). Further, Irving writes of the legend that the Moorish king who built the Alhambra put the fortress under a spell to prevent the fortress from collapsing, but that if the hand would ever grasp the key, “The whole pile would tumble to pieces, and all the treasures buried beneath it by the Moors would be revealed,” (Irving, 53). Irving has repurposed the legend in a very nuanced way. Sanchica has, indeed, used the hand and has, in turn, received a treasure for her efforts that was “buried by the Moors.” However, the structure of the Alhambra has not collapsed and, in fact, Sanchica has benefited from a kernel of direct cultural knowledge by meeting the Gothic Princess and reliving the Alhambra’s long lost Moorish past. Instead of having the Alhambra’s walls crumble in the story as legend would have us suspect, Irving shows that another type of destruction is happening here at the hands of Sanchica’s father, Lope.

Sanchica's courageousness, comparable to that of the Gothic princess or Abu Ayub, contrasts with her resistant father Lope, who parallels Aben Habuz in his shortsightedness. A beloved singer among the Alhambra inhabitants, Lope sings of the Cid, Bernardo del Carpo, and Fernando del Pulgar: all Spanish heroes.²⁵ His songs focus on heroes that led incursions into Al-Andalus and it is worth noting that there are no traces of Moorish culture to be found in the opening paragraph. Appropriately, Irving mirrors Lope in that he is living during a period in American history characterized by a fixation on American topics. Irving comments that Lope is "the life and soul of the fortress," (Irving, 354) which leads to the idea that he, as the conveyor of entertainment and stories through song, is placing an emphasis on the *Spanish* heroes rather than on the Moorish culture they conquered. Similar to Aben Habuz in "Arabian Astrologer," Lope possesses a parochial quality. However, Lope is slightly more complicated because he is parochial while he also known as a *conveyor of culture* through his songs.

Lope reveals that he is close-minded in his skeptical response to his daughter, Sanchica, when she relays to him her experience meeting the Gothic princess and finding the hidden treasure the night before. Irving comments on Lope's skepticism when he writes that Lope "treated the whole as a mere dream, and laughed at the child for her credulity," (Irving, 363). Initially, Lope rejects the word of his daughter, but then Sanchica brings a stalk of gold myrtle given to her by the princess and Lope then starts to believe her as Irving writes, "He was ignorant of the real value of the wreath, but he saw enough to convince him that it was something more substantial than the stuff of which dreams are generally made, and that at any rate the child had dreamt to some purpose," (Irving, 363). At first, Lope lacks the faith to really believe his daughter, but once provided hard evidence and an incentive for wealth, he sees the "purpose" in his daughter's story. This narrative correlates directly with the moments where

Abu Ayub attempts to tell stories to king Aben Habuz in “Legend of the Arabian Astrologer.” Just as Aben Habuz is only interested in the astrologer’s magic talismans insofar as they benefit *him*, Lope discredits his daughter’s story only until he realizes that he could benefit from the tale.

After visiting the site of the treasure between the two statues, Lope becomes “distracted with a thousand cares” and cannot help but “[hover] within distant view of the two statues,” (Irving, 364). Just as Aben Habuz concerned himself solely with the protection of himself and his kingdom, Lope becomes obsessed with his treasure. After Lope’s wife tells Fray Simon, their priest, about their fortune, the priest begins to ask for the treasure bit by bit as offerings to the church, which prompts Lope to leave Granada with his family. He decides to leave his mule in the place where the Belludo, a goblin horse, leaves at midnight with a pack of hounds, according to legend. Lope again exploits stories for his own gain: “[Lope] Had little faith in the story, but availed himself of the dread occasioned by it, knowing that no one would be likely to pry into the subterranean stable of the phantom steed,” (Irving, 369). Instead of believing in the Belludo, Lope plays guilefully off the superstitious fears of others in leaving his mule in that stable. Compared to Sanchica’s embrace of legend and her feat in looking beyond the ignorance of her community regarding the Moors, Lope manipulates legend and gives up his position as a storyteller and musician by leaving the Alhambra and his community behind.

In “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues,” Irving complicates the folklore of the key and black hand to suggest that the preservation of the Alhambra’s *essence* is far more important than the collapse of its physical walls. Sanchica breaks through the stigma her Spanish community has attached to the Moors and uncovers the true treasure beneath the Alhambra: its vivid legends and culturally packed history. While Sanchica finds intrinsic value in her courageous

endeavor, she cannot communicate the richness of her experience to her father Lope, who mistakes the physical treasure of gold as the *true* treasure. By again contrasting a character motivated by passion with another whose impetus is self-interest, Irving shows that the worst possible fate of the Alhambra will not come when the palace-fortress collapses, but when its stories cease to circulate or carry meaning.

CONCLUSION

Irving's "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer" and the "Legend of the Two Discreet Statues" would *appear* to be unrelated. They are both separated temporally—one set in Moorish Al-Andalus and the other in Christian Spain—and they are physically separated within the collection. When Sanchica meets Abu Ayub and the Gothic princess, Irving hopes readers excavate the relationship between the Moorish, Spanish, and Visigoth characters he creates. Though set in different time periods, this pair of legends is resounding, rather than dissonant. Indeed, the foundation of the Alhambra—both the structure and Irving's collection—reveals intercultural relationships and connections to those who value multicultural history. A significant correlative relationship exists between the characters of "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer" and "Legend of the Two Discreet Statues." Two sets of characters emerge: those who are willing to broaden their worldviews and those who are not. Specifically, Irving implements Sanchica, the Gothic princess, and Abu Ayub as open-minded and powerful characters that stand in opposition to Aben-Habuz and Lope Sanchez.

Sanchica relates to the Gothic princess and Abu Ayub in three principal ways. First, all three are links between one culture and another. Sanchica serves as a link her Spanish culture to the previous Moors and Visigoths. The princess brings the perspective of the Visigoths and Moors to the Spanish, and the astrologer fastens his Egyptian past to his experience in Granada. Second, all three characters journey into foreign lands as Abu Ayub travels to Granada from Egypt on foot, the princess walks into Granada from her kingdom, and Sanchica makes a journey through time to observe the fabled Moors. Third, all are excellent at exercising discretion. Both Sanchica and the Gothic princess are careful to keep the treasure secret and

Abu Ayub is careful to divulge just enough of his magical knowledge about the talisman and the palace to entice Aben Habuz.

Whereas Sanchica, the princess, and Abu Ayub treat cross-cultural knowledge as a treasure, Aben Habuz and Lope Sanchez have a more provincial view concerning what “treasure” *really* entails. First, both value their possessions and become paranoid that they will lose what is theirs. Aben Habuz fears that he will lose his kingdom to incursions from outside settlements and, similarly, when Lope acquires the treasure, he believes that no amount of protection will keep the gold safe. Second, both characters see no value in myths and lore. Aben Habuz shows no interest in the story behind Abu Ayub’s magical abilities and only values his powers to the extent that they will benefit him as king. In the same way, when Sanchica approaches Lope about the treasure she discovered, he discredits her story—but when shown the gold myrtle wreath, Lope *then* takes interest. The third characteristic Lope and Aben Habuz share is their belief that the best way to solve problems is to run away. While Sanchica, Abu Ayub, and the Gothic princess all confront the unknown, Aben Habuz and Lope try their best to avoid taking risks. When an insurrection breaks out in his kingdom, Aben Habuz decides that his only solution is to retreat to the astrologer’s magical garden of Irem to escape the conflict. In “Legend of the Two Discreet Statues,” Lope also chooses to avoid conflict and to abandon his community with his family when Fray Simon continually asks for more and more of the treasure.

Lope and Aben Habuz’s self-interested desires to lead insular lives make their journeys static while Abu Ayub, Sanchica, and the Gothic princess make efforts to understand different cultures. Through the magic of the Alhambra, they are able to travel through time and space and communicate with the cultures that have conquered, flourished, and decayed on the same

ground. In this pair of seemingly straightforward stories, Irving comments on the value of cross-cultural immersion and storytelling. Aben Habuz and Lope Sanchez fake an interest in myth, only because they can exploit them for their own purposes. When Lope plays off the people's fear of the Belludo to keep his donkey secret, and when Aben Habuz cuts off Abu Ayub in the middle of his explanation of his magic book to ask to "what avail" the book can benefit *him*, Irving makes clear that these two belittle the value of stories. Irving makes the two characters pay the price as Lope and Aben Habuz end up living in fear of having their possessions taken from them. While those two spend the rest of their lives looking over their shoulders, Sanchica, Abu Ayub, and the Gothic princess have all acquired a gift of worldly experience that *cannot* be wrested from them and provides enduring satisfaction.

In "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer," Irving uses his characters to give the Alhambra both spatial and temporal freedom. The astrologer Abu Ayub creates a cavernous palace in the same spot as the Alhambra that stands as a confluence of his Egyptian past and his Moorish present—bringing two distant cultures together and making the very foundation of the structure able to move freely across the globe. Concerning the temporal dimension, this multicultural foundation extends across time when Sanchica revives the moors in "Legend of the Two Discreet Statues" and looks through the black pit of Spanish ignorance of the Moorish past to strike up a dialogue with the founders of the Alhambra. Irving found himself straddling between his conservative need for money and his quest for cultural knowledge. Like Sanchica and Abu Ayub, Irving is more focused on discovering the value in his life versus using his stories to serve another end, in his case to make money. The stories on the whole parallel Irving's conflicted relationship with writing as a passion *and* as a profession. Andrew Breen Myers

points out that “his chief income had to be from books.”²⁶ At the same time, Irving saw his stories as a self-fulfilling undertaking and concludes in his journal,

“Could I afford it, I should like to write and lay my writings aside when finished. There is an independent delight in study and in the creative exercise of the pen; we live in a world of dreams, but publication lets in the noisy rabble of the world and there is an end to our dreaming.”²⁷

One could argue Irving’s *Alhambra* mirrors his own pressures as an American writer with an “independent delight in study” attempting to make a living in an unpopular *non-American* context. Some of his characters exploit legends for their own gain and others appreciate stories solely for the ways in which they color their understandings. Like Abu Ayub and Sanchica, Irving attempts to introduce worldly tales to an insular audience. He reflects in his work on Christopher Columbus, “I have lost confidence in the favorable disposition of my countrymen, and look forward to cold scrutiny and stern criticism, and this is a line of writing in which I have not hitherto ascertained my own powers.”²⁸ In spite of the anticipated “stern criticism” of his Spanish works, Irving ups the ante in his argument for cross-cultural literary exploration in his *Alhambra* and in this pair of stories, specifically. These legends stress not only the importance of multicultural literature, but also the value of questioning our regional histories and whether we will choose to live insular lives or break through time and space as global thinkers reflecting on our shared past, present, and future.

NOTES

- ¹ Washington Irving. *The Alhambra*. (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1851). Facsimile, Introduction by Andrew Breen Myers (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1982), Introduction. 1. All future references to *The Alhambra* will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- ² Clara Penney. Introduction to *Washington Irving Diary*, Edited by Clara Penney. New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1926. ix-x.
- ³ Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky. "In Reality Imagination Triumphs: *The Alhambra*," in *Adrift in the Old World: The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving*, ed. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, 221.
- ⁴ Williams, Stanley T., ed., *The Spanish Background of American Literature*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).
- ⁵ Clara Penney. Introduction to *Washington Irving Diary*, Edited by Clara Penney. New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1926. XVI.
- ⁶ Washington Irving and Pierre Munroe Irving. *Irving's Works: The life and letters of Washington Irving, by his nephew, P.M. Irving*. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1882. 98.
- ⁷ Andrew Breen Myers. *Introduction to Alhambra*. (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1982).
- ⁸ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). 30-31.
- ⁹ "Historical Introduction - History." Alhambra De Granada. Accessed April 3, 2015. <http://www.alhambradegranada.org/en/info/historicalintroduction.asp>.
- ¹⁰ Oleg Grabar. *The Alhambra*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). 35.
- ¹¹ Warner, Charles Dudley
- ¹² Rubin-Dorsky, Jeffrey, "In Reality Imagination Triumphs: *The Alhambra*," in *Adrift in the Old World: The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving*, ed. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, 216.
- ¹³ "Irving's Alhambra," *North American Review* 35, no. 77 (1832): 277.
- ¹⁴ Rubin-Dorsky, "In Reality Imagination Triumphs: *The Alhambra*," 219.
- ¹⁵ Wai Chee Dimock, "Hemispheric Islam: Continents and Centuries for American Literature," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 28-52.
- ¹⁶ Steven Carol. *Middle East Rules of Thumb: Understanding the complexities of the Middle East*. 8th Rev. ed. (New York: IUniverse, 2008). 139.
- ¹⁷ Hugh Kennedy. *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live in*. (Boston, Da Capo Press, 2008). 165.
- ¹⁸ European Association for Jewish Studies. *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the 6th EAJIS Congress, Toledo, July 1998*. BRILL, 1999. 18.
- ¹⁹ "Cabbala | Kabbalah, n." OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/25725?redirectedFrom=kabbalah> (accessed April 18, 2015).
- ²⁰ Irving, *The Alhambra*, 132.
- ²¹ Irving, *Alhambra*, 183.
- ²² Pillars of Iram. N.d. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iram_of_the_Pillars#cite_note-1. (Accessed April 20, 2015).
- ²³ Roger Collins, "Visigothic Spain 409-711," (Maiden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2004). 11.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Irving, *The Alhambra*, 354.

²⁶ Andrew Breen Myers. *Introduction to Alhambra*. (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1982).

²⁷ Irving, Washington and Pierre Munroe Irving. 211.

²⁸ Ibid., 260.

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