

Eleventh Century Spain was fragmented into kingdoms and other domains on both the Christian and Muslim sides. These realms were continually at war among themselves. El Cid was a soldier-adventurer of this time whose legend endured through the centuries and became a symbol of the Christian Reconquest. This is his story as told by himself in the guise of a medieval troubadour – but with some present-day anachronisms creeping in.

Song of El Cid

I'm Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar;
my fame has spread to lands afar.
that's why you're sitting here with me
to listen to my soliloquy.

To Moors I'm known as El Sayyid
(though I am no Almorávide).
El Cid, the lord or leader who
is invincible in warfare too.

To Christians I'm El Campeador,
now what that means you can be sure.
I'm champion of the field of battle,
reducing all my foes to chattel!

Confuse me not with Charlton Heston,
my story's not just any Western.
His culture centers round the gun,
but I have owned not even one.

A sword and shield are all I need
when mounted on a worthy steed
like my white stallion Babieca
immortalized by legend maker,
with sword Tizona poised to strike
intimidating friend and foe alike.
In far flung battles I prevailed,
but in court politics – there I failed.

My first allegiance, in Castile
promised a career ideal,
at court of Ferdinand the Great
in Burgos, they did educate
me at the pleasure of the king
in all the fields of soldiering.

Prince Sancho was the one I served,
my qualities were well observed,
so when he became the king in turn
I had but little left to learn
about the matters of warfare,
and to him allegiance I did swear.

As his royal standard bearer, I
was one on whom he could rely
to wage the battles against his kin,
which it was paramount to win.

For in the will of Ferdinand,
he had divided all his land;
to García - Galicia, to Elvira – Toro,
to Alfonso - León, to Urraca - Zamora.

So Sancho was left with Castile alone
instead of his father's extensive throne.
But these siblings four he had, and they
were ever ready to betray
the bonds of friends and family trust
for power of land and wealth and lust.

So in battles fierce I did campaign
Across the north and west of Spain.
I vanquished all we came across
and sent them packing for their loss.
García of Galicia, Alfonso of León,
each in turn was overcome,
'til Sancho sat upon the throne
of Castile, Galicia and León.

If there he'd been content to thrive
as long as he could stay alive,
he could have had a peaceful life
without impediments of strife.

But still he lusted for more land,
so we gathered up our loyal band.
Toro we took from his sister Elvira,
And set our sights upon Zamora
where sister Urraca resisted our siege,
a challenge there to her prestige.

Her henchmen, true to her command
had promised to defend her land,
and so they did assassinate
King Sancho at the city gate.

Though this was plain for all to see,
suspicions of complicity
surrounded brother Alfonso, who
as all the clan around him knew
had every motive to conspire.
He thought him heir to the empire entire.

He returned from exile in Toledo
to claim the throne as Alfonso Sexto.

Though Castilians did not doubt his claim
and recognized his royal name,
they wanted no King of León
to occupy their royal throne.
Lamenting for their murdered king,
they chanced upon the next best thing,
insisting that Alfonso should
deny connection with the blood.

But who would now accept his oath?
The nobles there were wholly loth
for fear of incurring the king's wrath.
But I, in defiance of the aftermath,
did step into the breach for him
and took his vow upon a whim.
Now Alfonso felt demeaned by this.
I feared that he would me dismiss,
but he bided his time, and played along
pretending he had felt no wrong,
gave me his niece's hand to wed,
Jimena sweet to share my bed.
Alas! the joys were not to be,
for unconsummated there were we,
and to a convent she did flee.

But enemies I had at court,
and my career they strove to thwart,
jealous of my high prestige.
Alfonso listened to their pleas.
They swayed him with their accusation,
and he expelled me from his nation.

So to Burgos I could not return.
Besides, its pleasures were all gone.
Infested by the pilgrim horde
who care but little for their Lord,
like swarms of locusts they descend,
enough to drive you round the bend.
They eat and drink from morn till night,
no sense of what is wrong or right.
And though this seems a paradox,
they leave nothing in the donation box.

But it certainly was not my way
to live on unemployment pay.
So my resumé I did prepare
to circulate both near and far.
It came to Yusuf al-Mu'tamin,
whose adversary I had been
when fighting for Fernando's son
against the powers of Aragón.
Emir of Zaragoza, he
had yielded down on bended knee,
became my captive, but I showed
compassion in that episode,
released him from captivity.
Now it's his turn to honor me.

So I became his trusty friend
and fought with him right to the end,
to protect him from his neighbors' dominance,
and maintain his taifa's prominence.

'Gainst Christian or Mohammedan it mattered
not to us,
though many pure religionists might choose to
make a fuss.
To us the Lord was all the same, regardless of
your creed,
so I could earn an honest crust by fulfilling
someone's need.

'Gainst Aragón, Lérida, Barcelona we fought,
and ever, ever changing were the boundaries we
wrought.

For five full years I served him, full and fair and
true,
and we won every battle, and much wealth we
did accrue.

But then Alfonso sought my name
to go and fight for him again.
The Almorávides were the foe,
a different breed of men you know,
who veiled themselves below their eyes
so you would see them in disguise.
Intolerant of others' creeds
but cognizant of all their needs,
their popularity was based
- and this could well be a foretaste -
on lower taxes for the folk.
(The Tea Party may well take note.)

So for Alfonso it came to pass
that they conquered him at Sagrajas.
So he had need again of me
and offered me a handsome fee,
which I felt I could not refuse -
to maximize my revenues.
But soon I again incurred displeasure.
He imprisoned my family for good measure.

So then I went out on my own,
with my own army to set the tone,
no petty king to disenchant
as I ruled the roost in the Levant.
A tower of strength and barbarity,
no time now for the folly of charity.

So feared was I throughout the land
that no-one there could stay my hand.
To many a landscape I laid waste -
to line my pocket with due haste

Christian or Muslim, it mattered not
where I chose to make my Camelot,
for tribute and the spoils of war
enhanced my prestige and power,
and helped me make a tremendous packet -
from running this protection racket.

Until I saw before my eyes
and lusted after one great prize -
the city of Valencia,
for beauty and wealth it had no peer.
By now a legend in the land,
I knew I had the upper hand.
I laid a siege for many a month.
Resistance from the townsfolk shrank,
til tired and hungry they gave in.
'Twas all it took for me to win.

Now Prince of the fairest place in Spain,
I had to defend it again and again.
The Almorávides I laid low
at Cuarte, Bairén, and Murviedro

For five full years I governed there,
to my enemies' complete despair,
'til my end came quite peaceably
in 1099 on the 10th of July.
They took my body to Castile
and buried me with pomp and zeal,
where it still rests this very day,
a soldier of fortune on display

So that's the story of my life
in a veritable world of strife.
My legend lived, my fame exploded,
the myths increased, the truths eroded

For Spain had need of symbols good
to forge the idea of nationhood,
and so the legends multiplied.
But take them all within your stride.

For with El Cid – and Santiago too -
who knows what's false and what is true?

By Chris Slater, 2014, Asheville, North Carolina