

## THREEFOLD STORIES, THREEFOLD CHARMS: BÉCQUER'S POETIC ETHNOGRAPHY OF WITCHCRAFT

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Some striking examples of magic charms are to be found in three of the tales included by the Spanish writer G. A. Bécquer in his *Cartas desde mi celda* (Letters from my cell, 1864). Taking a supposed real-life contemporary event as his starting-point – the brutal death at the hands of the villagers of Trasmoz (Aragon) of an old woman accused of witchcraft – he weaves three separate but interconnected stories. Straddling the fields of literature and anthropology, history and fable, the poet is revealed as an astute ethnographer as he examines the basis of the powers attributed to witches in two medieval legends. The central character in the first, which unfolds in Islamic Spain, is a necromancer who obtains the power he longs for by studying books of magic. The second, set in the period after the Christian Reconquest, tells the story of a pretty young woman, a “Cinderella in reverse”, who gets the husband of her dreams thanks to the help not of a fairy godmother but of a cunning sorceress. The spells at the heart of these tales represent three classic reasons for invoking magic: to protect oneself from enemies, to gain power and wealth, and to win love, or at least to subjugate another’s will. The mutual influence of historical charms, which we know about primarily through judicial documents, and literary spells is further proof of the permeability between popular and learned culture. Bécquer, an ardent admirer of Shakespeare, was greatly influenced by *Macbeth*, and for both poets, despite the enormous power of words, witchcraft was first and foremost, “a deed without a name”.

**Keywords:** Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, poetic ethnography, Spain, Spanish literature, witchcraft

“En el fondo de mi alma consagro, con una especie de culto, una veneración profunda por todo lo que pertenece al pasado”

G. A. Bécquer, *Desde mi celda*, Carta IV (1864)

“El pasado [...] es el alma de nuestras almas”

M. de Unamuno, “Adiós al xix”, *Las Noticias* (1–I–1901)

“L’ethnologue écrit-il autre chose que des confessions?”

C. Lévi-Strauss, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l’homme* (1962)

## PROLOGUE

One of the most compelling verbal expressions of all time is the magic spell. The mysterious power of words reveals itself with greater potency here than in any other form of language. And while in practice, the dividing line between magic and religion is often blurred, there is no denying that invocations of evil spirits carry a higher emotional charge than other figures of speech.<sup>1</sup>

Whether in the real world or the realm of fiction, the dialogue between tradition and innovation plays a key part in any charm. For obvious reasons, fictional witches tend to express themselves in more elaborate terms than real ones. However, from historically documented spells we can divine an entire repertoire of formulas passed down from generation to generation – a living memento of traditional poetry.<sup>2</sup> Reality and fiction come together, therefore, in a form of oral expression directed at imaginary beings, whose help is seen as essential by those summoning them.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most powerful magic spells in Western culture appears in the “Pharsalia”, an epic poem from the first century by the Hispanic-Roman poet Lucan, which would inspire innumerable future European literary charms. In it, Erichtho, an utterly repugnant witch, casts a dreadful spell in order to read the future – one of the main goals of magic in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> The three literary spells I shall discuss exemplify three other classic magical objectives: to protect oneself from enemies, to gain power and wealth, and to win love, or at least gain control over the will of others (Tausiet 2004, 2014a). In all cases, there is a clear reciprocal influence between documented, historical magic spells and literary charms, which is further evidence of the constant overlap between popular and learned culture.<sup>5</sup>

## THE POET AS ETHNOGRAPHER

The discipline known today as ethnography has always been a pluralistic practice, reflected in such diverse art forms as memoirs, travel writing, poems, novels, paintings, drawings or simple sketches (Cangas 1995; Maynard 2010). “Ethnography beyond ethnography” has recently undergone a certain revival, particularly since the 1990s (Tyler 1990). The new “poetic anthropology” is focused less on recording oral performances in textual form (“ethno-poetics”) and more on rediscovering ethnographic writings deliberately presented in a polished, poetic language but not included within the canons of scientific research (Olivares 1999; Rettig 2012).

In not being labelled either anthropology or literature, poetic ethnography or ethno-literature is a field as yet little studied (Fuente Lombo 1994; Fuente Lombo & Hermosilla Álvarez 1997; Díaz Viana 2008). One fascinating example of the genre is Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s *Letters from my Cell*. This distinct set of nine short stories in epistolary form was published in 1864, and



*"The poet and the muses" (Drawing by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer)*

ranges between autobiography and fiction, history and legend, anthropology and what many regard as most exquisite poetry.<sup>6</sup>

It has often been claimed that Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–1870) is the most popular Spanish writer after Cervantes. He is renowned as Spain's first modern poet and is most widely recognized for his collection of tales *Leyendas* (*Legends*, 1857–1864; Baker 1991) and his volume of poetry *Rimas* (*Poems*, 1871; Baker 2000). Bécquer is also considered to be a precursor to the modernist movement, as his unique style helped revolutionize contemporary views of literature (Mizrahi 1991). Bécquer's legends are marked by a supernatural quality, which has led modern critics to compare him to authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann (Marín-Ruiz 2009; Mellado Espinilla 2002).

Regarding his poetry, due to his bitter lyrical attitude during the late Romantic period, Bécquer was set apart from his contemporaries, not by his themes of perfection, love, life, suffering, hopelessness and death, but by his unique, restrained style. Bécquer's compilation of poems represent the poet's struggle for perfection and eventual failure in both love and art. The language, written in a colloquial style, alternates between rhymed meter and speech-rhythms. And as the collection progresses, the tone also shifts from frustration and despair to detachment, and solace in death. He is credited with having had enormous



*The Monastery of Veruela from Afar-Drawing by Valeriano Bécquer*



*The Monastery of Veruela. Drawing by Valeriano Bécquer*

influence on many other acclaimed authors, including Rubén Darío, Miguel de Unamuno, and Juan Ramón Jiménez. While Bécquer had a modest, obscure career as a writer during most of his life, he has recently gained international recognition for his work.

Although his legends and love poems are nowadays well known, the stories included in *Letters from my Cell* can be regarded as unique and special, never having been translated into any other language. This work is a form of spiritual autobiography, an inner journey that the poet began when he left Madrid due to ill health and moved to the abandoned Monastery of Veruela in the mountains between Castile and Aragon (Serrano Dolader 2010). From his new home, the poet reflected on the differences between the frenzy of life in the capital and the process of internalisation that he began when he immersed himself in his new rural surroundings and the lives of those he met there. This journey into his inner self was not simply a solitary experience. Indeed, he was only able to discover himself through his encounters with local people, with whom he was utterly fascinated.

Like the Irish playwright John Millington Synge, whose fieldwork on the Aran Islands marked him for life (Smith 1996; Burke 2009), Bécquer was transformed by the time he spent in the monastery, achieving a new maturity and insight. This young man once obsessed with achieving literary recognition in Madrid, now spent his convalescence researching the cultural history of the area, and saw his value system undergo a complete reversal. He became “profoundly indifferent” to the judgement of others, revelled in life far from the crowds, and achieved an acute awareness of his own mortality.<sup>7</sup>

Such a radical change could not have occurred without the “encounter with the other” which, for Bécquer, involved close dealings with the people of the countryside around his new home.<sup>8</sup> His stay at the monastery lasted around a year and was spent in the company of his brother, artist Valeriano Bécquer, who had been given state funding to travel around Spain and capture images of the country’s traditional customs before, as it was feared, they vanished without a trace.<sup>9</sup> Gustavo had no such specific project in mind but, whether driven by his own interest or inspired by his hardworking brother, he too devoted himself, as far as his health would allow, to finding out more about the history and



*Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer in Veruela-Drawing by Valeriano Bécquer*

legends of the area. He spoke to the locals, and then either sketched or wrote about what he had learned (Rubio Jiménez 2011).

Like a nine-month gestation period, the nine letters represent the poet's intimate journey into the symbolic nucleus of the monastery. *Letter One* describes his travels north from Madrid to the abbey. *Letter Two* contrasts the hectic pace of life he knew in Madrid and the meditative state inspired by the atmosphere of the abandoned monastery. *Letter Three*, written as he was recovering from a serious relapse of his illness, marks the start of a new stage, a change of emotional climate enabling him to develop his ethnographical interests. Bécquer openly declares his intent to "collect the final words of a disappearing age", in "a place that is still untouched and resistant to civilising innovation".<sup>10</sup> At the same time, he reveals his emotional involvement with his field of study: "I feel a sense of awe", he says, when he perceives the harmonious organisation of traditional culture.<sup>11</sup>

Bécquer's ethnographic attitude – a profound subjectivity and parallel search for personal redemption – anticipated by a century the position of two giants of the field: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ernesto de Martino. Both men believed that the study of "the Other" only made sense if it also entailed self-investigation. In 1955, the publication of Lévi-Strauss's *Sad Tropics* was not so much about the discovery of exotic peoples, as it was about reflecting in depth on one's own culture. Similarly, the work done by De Martino during the same period on the traditions of southern Italy revealed an essential need for self-knowledge (Lévi-Strauss 1955; De Martino 1961).

Armed only with his intuition – and the emotional support of his brother – Bécquer began observing, noting down and converting into literary form the profound impressions left on him by the history of the area. *Letter Four* is, in a way, a strongly worded *anthropological manifesto*:

You must leave the well-trodden paths, wander at random from one place to another, sleep moderately and eat no better than that. You need faith and real enthusiasm for your aims in order to go in search of the local people and primitive customs ... that are inexorably being driven out by the invasive flood of the new and the advances of civilisation.<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter, in a process of poetic mythologisation, the following letters portray three aspects of the feminine: the strong woman, the witch, and the saint (the latter exemplified in the figure of the Virgin Mary). As if it were a prologue to the three tales that deal with the world of magic and witchcraft, *Letter Five* pauses to admire the qualities of the local mountain girls, who possess a kind of masculine strength in their ability to face adversity,<sup>13</sup> and are the polar opposite of the spoiled, high-society ladies Bécquer had known in Madrid. In fact,

their combination of material poverty and spiritual resilience, leads us to the three stories that form the heart of this collection.

### THREE STORIES, THREE CHARMS

All three are set in the same location. Trasmoz is a real place, but its name means “beyond the mountains”.<sup>14</sup> It therefore also stands as an image of something/somewhere beyond time, a place beyond reality on the frontier of nowhere. Together, the three stories form a trilogy in disguise; the apparent lack of continuity between them reveal the writer’s anthropological-poetic method.<sup>15</sup> Rather than simply gathering and collecting folk traditions, Bécquer applied his literary inspiration to interpreting things that may have actually happened by formulating a historical-legendary reconstruction of the past of this particular area.<sup>16</sup>

The first story tells of the recent murder of an old woman, who the villagers believed to be a witch (her name, “Aunt Casca”, could be translated as “Dried-up Woman”). According to Bécquer’s informant, a shepherd who witnessed the crime, the most astonishing thing was the woman’s reaction. Having begged in vain for mercy, and while continuing to sob, she began to mumble a strange spell. The shepherd could not make out what she was saying, but it seemed to be a tangled mixture of prayers to God and the saints, and invocations of demons:

The old woman lowered her head, clasped her hands together and began to mutter [---] words [---] which those standing near her could not understand. Some swore she was speaking Latin; others that it was some wild, unknown language, while a few understood that she was in fact praying, although she was saying her prayers backwards, as is the custom of these wicked women.<sup>17</sup>

Her *backwards prayers* filled the shepherd with terror.<sup>18</sup> His fear of witches is shared by a second informant mentioned by the writer: his servant girl, who is alarmed by the very mention of Casca. The girl tells the writer about her fears but also about the many precautions – to be baptized correctly, to make the sign of a cross on the hearth, to place a broom backwards in a doorway – she and her family had undertaken to guard against witchcraft.<sup>19</sup>

Like the shepherd, this young girl is convinced that witches have no power on Fridays, because that was the day on which Christ died, but that they can hear all that is being said about them. The writer encourages the girl to tell him more, asking why precautions are necessary since the witch is dead. She answers that the role of the witch is a hereditary one, passed down from one

woman to another – a widely held belief at this time.<sup>20</sup> And she ends by relating another story about witches that the writer promises to tell his readers later.

*Letter Seven* is a kind of parenthesis between that promise and the actual telling of the tale. Bécquer defers the action and appears temporarily to forget his main motif. Aunt Casca vanishes, and the poet takes us back into the distant past: the “time of the Moors”. As he himself explains, for the country folk of the Iberian peninsula, such an expression refers less to a real period of history than to “the mythological and fabled eras of the past”.<sup>21</sup> In search of a mythical-psychological explanation for the witches’ sabbaths supposedly celebrated in the ruins of Trasmoz castle, he pauses to recount a fable about the building’s magical origins.<sup>22</sup>

In essence, this story tells of how, at the time of the Christian Reconquest of Spain, a king who wanted a castle between the Moorish and Christian territories meets an old beggar who promises to build such a fortress in a single night as long as he is appointed its governor. The king laughs at the old man’s wild claim and, convinced that his offer is impossible, agrees to his terms. As in so many other folk tales, the king did not consider the involvement of magic.<sup>23</sup> The beggar turns out to be a necromancer, and charms are his specialty. Unlike Aunt Casca, who knows her spells by heart or makes them up as she goes along, the magician reads from a book of magic (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, p. 254).

Here, Bécquer is highlighting the fundamental difference between “feminine magic” and “masculine magic”. For women, magic was an oral practice, always closely linked to religion, and virtually indistinguishable from the prayers or pseudo-prayers addressed to the saints; for men, however, it was book-based and tied up with the scientific studies of the period, astrology and alchemy in particular. Hence, the importance in this second spell is not the invocation of the spirits of heaven or hell but of nature, present in the four elements. As in the previous letter, where the witch’s spell, if elliptical, forms the culmination of the story, the charm recited by the magician is also climactic, although less than explicit:

The necromancer leafed through the book [---] He was mumbling unintelligible phrases and, stopping his reading from time to time, repeated a strange refrain in a lugubrious tone, as if reciting a psalm.<sup>24</sup>

By centring his two stories on spells whose details are only hinted at, Bécquer is paying homage to the immense strength of words but also, paradoxically, to the power of what is left unsaid. Just as undeclared love is almost always lasting, the power of magic revolves around its secrecy.<sup>25</sup> Once the spell is begun, the necromancer keeps “calling by name upon all the spirits of the air and the earth, of fire and water” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, pp. 255–256), but the poet



*The Village of Trasmuz-Zaragoza, Spain, where the three tales are set*

admits he cannot repeat these names. What we do know is that the spell is divided into three parts and that it has an immediate effect. The spirits of the elements shake the mountain three times, the rocks are split asunder, the trees are parted, sand is brought down by the mountain torrents, and a huge crowd of gnomes prepare to raise the castle (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, pp. 257). The destructive deeds wrought by witches at their sabbaths supposedly took place after sunset, and this sorcerer's constructive work is similarly done during the hours of night, when the villagers and the proud king are asleep, unaware of the work underway (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, p. 258).

This link between night-time and extraordinary events suggests that, despite the classic differences between female and male magic, the two share psychological roots. Aunt Casca and the necromancer, two figures who at first sight appear poor and wretched, both in fact possess awe-inspiring abilities. Bécquer seems to be suggesting that “magic” is precisely that: the power of what remains hidden, of what is left unsaid, of what is invisible (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, pp. 254–255).

Bécquer's witchcraft trilogy ends with an apparently lighthearted little story. Within it, however, is hidden an attempt to “explain” the witchcraft – or in other words the misfortune – that continues to blight a village that has both welcomed the writer and shown him its darkest side.

This third story is again set in Trasmuz, after the Reconquest, when “the constant warfare between Aragon and Castile has ended”,<sup>26</sup> and the castle has been left in ruins. The local priest is such a good man that he has succeeded in keeping evil at bay, and even the witches' gatherings have disappeared. This

priest devotes his life to praying and helping the poor, but his peace and harmony is interrupted when his sister dies and he has to take in his orphaned niece.<sup>27</sup>

Dorotea turns out to be an attractive but vain and selfish eighteen-year-old. The night before a village celebration, when she is complaining about not having a new dress, she sees an old woman begging for alms. Once again, appearances are deceptive and the power of magic is hidden beneath the surface: the beggarwoman is a witch in disguise who, as a kind of anti-fairy godmother, promises to give Dorotea what she wants if she follows her instructions. Among other things, she has to recite a spell – an essential condition for her dreams to come true: “Make the sign of the cross three times with [her] left hand, calling upon the trinity of hell”.<sup>28</sup> Once again, the number three is important here. The spell plays a decisive role in the story and, although it lacks details, the names of the spirits invoked are listed: Beelzebub, Astaroth and Belial, three Phoenician gods who were turned into demons in the history of Christianity.<sup>29</sup> With his usual astuteness, Bécquer chose the names of three of the main divinities in the Canaanite culture: the father god Baal (now Beelzebub); the mother god Ishtar (here Astaroth) and Baal’s enemy (Belial, expelled from paradise by the principal god) (Hillers 1985; Moscati 2001).

Once the spell has been recited, a number of cats are turned into women who work all night to make Dorotea’s coveted finery. The results speak for themselves: two months later she marries “one of the most well-to-do young men”.<sup>30</sup> However, anticipating the trend of subverting traditional narratives that would develop from the 20th century, onwards (Mieder 1987; McAra & Calvin 2011) Bécquer warns of the hidden danger behind this fairytale ending: “the poor priest lost ... forever the power of his Latin exorcisms and his holy water. To his terrified amazement, and that of his flock, the witches took up residence once more in the castle.”<sup>31</sup> The presence of witchcraft in the village is not just an old wives’ tale; in fact, their ominous gatherings exemplify misfortune at its worst: “countless plagues attacked the cattle; the young people of the village were struck down by mysterious illnesses; babies were beaten at night in their cradles...”<sup>32</sup> Having told his tale, Bécquer closes the circle by mentioning Aunt Casca again in his conclusion. However, this is not the original, but another old woman in the village with the same name: “the sister of the other famous Casca”. Witchcraft, like evil, is passed on from one family member to another. Once again, the poet gives voice to the reverential fear that these stories inspire in him (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 274). He ends his trilogy with an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the tragedy of all tragedies, according to which, despite the irresistible power of words, witchcraft is first and foremost “a deed without a name” (Sanders 1995).

## EPILOGUE

As a kind of Christian epilogue, *Letter Nine*, the last in the collection, takes us back to the monastery. After three stories in which, despite all attempts to impose good, evil prevails, the writer strives to convey a message of hope. He then retells the legend of the founding of the monastery, a story about an apparition of the Virgin Mary to a lost traveller (Bécquer 2002, Carta IX, p. 283). And yet, if the enigma of evil is impenetrable and thus inexpressible, good is also a mystery beyond words. As he tells of the traveller's vision, Bécquer says, "I wish I had sufficient imagination to describe that sight",<sup>33</sup> and he goes on to describe how art can only struggle with its limited resources "to give an idea of the impossible".<sup>34</sup> As a good anthropologist-poet, he does not declare himself for or against the subject of his study, but ends by affirming the deep respect he feels for the legend, and the hope of being able to communicate to his readers "the true poetry of religion".<sup>35</sup>

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On charms in the oral European tradition, see Roper 2009 and Kapaló & Pócs & Ryan 2013. On charms in the oral Spanish tradition, see Pedrosa 2000 and Gil 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> On historical charms in the Spanish tradition, see Estopañán 1942; Delpech 1985; Martínez 1990; Moreno 2001; Tausiet 2014a.
- <sup>3</sup> On literary charms, see Briggs 1962; Roper 2003; Alberola 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> See Lucanus 2015 [39–65 a. D.]. On the Erictho charm, see Stratton 2007 and Stratton & Kalleres 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> On the relationship between historical and literary charms in Spain, see Baroja 1990 and García 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> The poetic ethnography of Bécquer and, particularly, his approach to magic has been compared to the work of the Russian writer Nikolái Gógol (1809–1852) (Arséntieva 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> In Bécquer's own words: "Ya todo pasó, Madrid, la política, las luchas ardientes, las miserias humanas, las pasiones, las contrariedades, los deseos [...] Mi alma está ya tan serena como el agua inmóvil y profunda. [---] Las palabras *amor*, *gloria*, *poesía* no

me suenan ya al oído como me sonaban antes. ¡Vivir!... Seguramente que deseo vivir [---] pero vivir oscuro y dichoso, en cuanto es posible, sin deseos, sin inquietudes, sin ambiciones...". (Bécquer 2002, Carta II, pp. 186 and 205).

- <sup>8</sup> On the anthropological concept of "the other", see Tyler 1988; Augé 1998; Fabian 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> On the work of Valeriano Bécquer, see Brown 1957; Rubio Jiménez & Centellas Salamero 1999; Bécquer & Bécquer 2003; Rubio Jiménez 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> "Recoger la última palabra de una época que se va"; "un país virgen aún y refractario a las innovaciones civilizadoras". See Bécquer 2002, Carta IV, p. 208.
- <sup>11</sup> "El ánimo se siente sobrecogido". Bécquer 2002, Carta IV, p. 209.
- <sup>12</sup> "Es preciso salir de los caminos trillados, vagar al acaso de un lugar en otro, dormir medianamente y no comer mejor. Es preciso fe y verdadero entusiasmo por la idea que se persigue para ir a buscar los tipos originales, las costumbres primitivas y los puntos verdaderamente artísticos a los rincones donde su oscuridad les sirve de salvaguardia y de donde, poco a poco, los va desalojando la invasora corriente de la novedad y los adelantos de la civilización." (Bécquer 2002, Carta IV, p. 215).
- <sup>13</sup> Bécquer associated them to the Amazons and the governors of the Saint Brendan's Island: "En este pueblo hay algo de lo que nos refieren las fábulas de las amazonas o de lo que habrán ustedes tenido ocasión de ver en la *Isla de San Baladrán*" (Bécquer 2002, Carta V, pp. 226). On the figure of the strong woman in Spanish literature, see Delpech 1979; Delpech 1986; Tausiet 2014b.
- <sup>14</sup> The term *Trasmoz* might derive from "trasmontes", that is, behind the mountains: "Por su emplazamiento se encuentra tras los montes, tanto si miramos desde el este como desde el oeste" (see Gargallo Sanjoaquín 1993–1994).
- <sup>15</sup> Something similar could be said about three English narrative poems of the 14th century entitled "Pearl", "Patience" and "Purity" (or Cleanness), which have been attributed to the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Putter & Stokes 2014).
- <sup>16</sup> Regarding the subject of witchcraft in the three letters, see Amores 1999, 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> "La vieja inclinó la cabeza, juntó las manos y comenzó a murmurar entre dientes qué se yo qué imprecaciones ininteligibles: palabras que yo no podía oír por la distancia que me separaba de ella, pero que ni los mismos que estaban a su lado lograron entender. Unos aseguraban que hablaba en latín; otros, que en una lengua salvaje y desconocida, no faltando quien pudo comprender que, en efecto, rezaba, aunque diciendo las oraciones al revés, como es costumbre de estas malas mujeres." (Bécquer 2002, Carta VI, p. 237).
- <sup>18</sup> This motif of the "backwards prayers" is one of the many examples of the construction of the myth of witchcraft as the reverse of Christian liturgy. On the idea of witchcraft as a system of representation based in the logic of contraries, see Clark 1997 and Tausiet 1993. According to the Thompson motif index of folkloric literature (G257.2), to read the Bible backwards would inform of the identity of a witch.
- <sup>19</sup> On the continuance and validity during the 20th century of these kinds of rituals against witches in Aragón (Spain), see Beltrán Martínez 1981.

- <sup>20</sup> “Son una familia entera y verdadera, que desde hace un siglo o dos vienen heredando el unto de unas en otras; se acabó con una *tía Casca*, pero queda su hermana, y cuando acaben con esta, que acabarán también, le sucederá su hija...” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VI, p. 245).
- <sup>21</sup> “Corresponde a las edades mitológicas y fabulosas de la historia” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VI, p. 247).
- <sup>22</sup> On this story and its relationship with alchemy and Becquer’s inner voice, see Deutsch-Johnson 1976 and 1995.
- <sup>23</sup> The same psychological resort appears in a traditional folktale about a woman who promises a man they can be lovers if he does something apparently impossible. See, in Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio (“Decima Giornata, Novella Quinta”, *Decameron*, 1353); in England, Geoffrey Chaucer (“The Franklin’s Tale”, *Canterbury Tales*, 1475) and, in Spain, María de Zayas. (“El jardín engañoso”, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, 1637).
- <sup>24</sup> “El nigromante iba pasando las hojas del libro [...] murmuraba entre dientes frases ininteligibles y, parando de cierto en cierto tiempo la lectura, repetía un estribillo singular con una especie de salmodia lúgubre” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VII, p. 254).
- <sup>25</sup> On the subject of collecting and interpreting secret knowledge within the 19th century scientific context, see Stiübhart 2013.
- <sup>26</sup> “Terminadas las continuas guerras entre Aragón y Castilla” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 262).
- <sup>27</sup> “Como no hay felicidad completa en el mundo y el diablo anda de continuo buscando ocasión de hacer mal a sus enemigos, este, sin duda, dispuso que, por muerte de una hermana menor, viuda y pobre, viniese a parar a casa del caritativo cura una sobrina que él recibió con los brazos abiertos” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 263).
- <sup>28</sup> “Si quieres vernos en nuestra primitiva forma [...] haz tres veces la señal de la cruz con la mano izquierda, invocando a la trinidad de los infiernos” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, pp. 270–271).
- <sup>29</sup> These demons were invoked very often in the Spanish charms. See Alberola 2010, pp. 241–265.
- <sup>30</sup> “Uno de los mozos mejor acomodados” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 273). On the classical structure of fairy tales, see Lüthi 1970; Warner 2014.
- <sup>31</sup> “El pobre mosén Gil perdió desde aquella época para siempre el latín de sus exorcismos y el trabajo de sus aspersiones. Las brujas, con grande asombro suyo y de sus feligreses, tornaron a aposentarse en el castillo” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 273).
- <sup>32</sup> “Sobre los ganados cayeron plagas sin cuento; las jóvenes del lugar se veían atacadas de enfermedades incomprensibles; los niños eran azotados por las noches en sus cunas...” (Bécquer 2002, Carta VIII, p. 273).
- <sup>33</sup> “Yo quisiera tener la fuerza de la imaginación bastante para poderme figurar cómo fue aquello” (Bécquer 2002, Carta IX, p. 281).
- <sup>34</sup> “Para dar idea de lo imposible” (Bécquer 2002, Carta IX, p. 282).

<sup>35</sup> “La verdadera poesía de la religión” (Bécquer 2002, Carta IX, p. 288).

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