Walk on the Wild Side

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Abstract
The figure of the wild man is one that crosses artistic disciplines and genres in the cultures of medieval Iberia. In this article I show how the wild man operates within a variety of meanings in diverse literary contexts that, working simultaneously at different narrative levels, cross over from literature into daily life and spectacles, from legal to political discourses. The figure's continued presence from the medieval period into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suggests its use as a commonplace, as a motif with a number of fixed meanings that are put to work through context, providing the possibility of different, perhaps even contradictory readings. As commonplace, then, the wild man is presented as a case study for the reconsideration of other elements in the paintings of the Hall of Justice of the Alhambra, often interpreted to have a specific or fixed meaning, and thus programmed within a particular narrative. Seen in its entirety as a repository of commonplaces, I interpret the complex of the lateral paintings of the Hall of Justice in relation to the central one, in which a set of ten kings in Nasrid dress are depicted as conversing, as pretexts for narration that can be of a literary or juridical nature. I then go on to provide a possible itinerary of reading for the wild man scene not only in its immediate context, but as part of the overall visual project in a political key that illustrates the productive makeup of the paintings as pedagogical and ideological enterprise.

Keywords
Alhambra, wild man, commonplaces, levels of meaning, sentimental fiction, eloquence, narrative sequences

A truchán o albardán
o cavallero salvaje
bien le dan de lo que han
mas ninguno de parage
non trabage, que sin gage
nunca fiesta le farán;
por linage nin omenage
my poco d'él fiarán.
Alfonso de Villasandino

qui ride muyto es blasmado e qui nunca se ride es salvage e cruel
Libro del Tesoro

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In the northernmost vault in the hall adjacent to the Patio de los Leones, a wild man turns his gaze upon his attacker. His body faces a lady, but his head is completely turned back, and the expression in his eyes mixes surprise and terror as he takes in the knight on horseback, bearing a shield with three white doves in a red field, who spears him in the chest. The wild man’s white hair flies about his head, and a long beard flows down over his back, as his head is turned around. The rest of his body is covered in equally white hair, and is simply adorned by a belt around his waist that holds a cloth covering his legs. He wears no shoes on the feet that are depicted as moving towards the lady on the other side, whose wrists/forearms the wild man holds in both his hands. The lady, calmly submitting to his grasp, nods her head slightly in his direction, and neither her attitude nor her eyes betray fear or resistance, even if her right hand seems to point upwards, perhaps calling for help, or warning of punishment to come. She in turn holds in her left hand the chain that commands a lion, also not afraid of the wild man, nor defending its lady, but indifferently or perhaps imprudently sleeping at her feet. Behind the lion, a castle transitions to another scene in which the same lady applauds from her tower the spectacle below her in which a Muslim on horseback spears a Christian in the chest, causing him to drop his lance and fall from his horse (detail in Illustration 4).

By the seventeenth century, two and a half centuries after these ceilings were painted, wild men were especially associated with the visual arts. Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco defines salvaje in his dictionary as “everything pertaining to the mountain,” in a translation of the “selva” or forest to the “mountain,” and immediately proceeds to talk about painting:

los pintores, que tienen licencia poética, pintan unos hombres todos cubiertos de vello de pies a cabeza, con cabellos largos y barba larga. Éstos llamaron los escritores de libros de caballerías salvajes. Ya podría acontecer algunos hombres haberse criado en algunas partes remotas, como en islas desiertas, habiendo aportado allí por fortuna y gastado su ropa, andar desnudos, cubriéndolos la misma naturaleza con vellos, para algún remedio suyo. Déstos han topado muchos los que han navegado por mares remotos. 2. Llamamos salvaje al villano que sabe poco de cortesía. 3. Salvajina, la carne del monte, como jabalí, venado, etc. Dijose salvaje de selva, a nomine latine SILVA.¹

(painters, who have poetic license, paint men all covered in bodily hair from head to toe, with long manes and a long beard. Writers of books of