

CUCENDO LA VELA: A POLYPHONIC JOURNEY THROUGH SPANISH LITERARY TIME

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David T. Gies, ed. *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Pp. 863. **131**

The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature, edited by David T. Gies, comes to us soberly bound in black, but sheathed in an attractive blue slipcover adorned with a reproduction of a colorful late nineteenth-century painting by Spaniard Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida entitled, unexpectedly in Italian—the painter was apparently a student in Italy at the time—*Cucendo la Vela* (Sewing the Sail). The painting depicts—impressionist-style—a team of seamstresses under a sunlit grape arbour or latticework apparently just finishing work on a large sail, while what may be a male overseer looks on. The sun-mottled creamy white sail dominates the illustration, occupying most of the fore- and middle ground, while at the far end of the sail, a conversation takes place between one of the women and the only other male (could he be the man who commissioned the sail?), gesticulating with one hand as he grasps a corner of the sail with the other: is he making a request, voicing a complaint, disputing something? This painting was no doubt chosen as the only illustration associated with Gies' 863-page volume for a reason. The *Cambridge History* is in fact a collective effort. Unlike many previous histories of Spanish literature, there is no single narrative voice; instead, there are many, nearly fifty, in fact. The expert contributors have each written essays (10–20 pages in length, on average) treating different aspects of Spanish literature, arranged as chronologically as possible. One wonders how much structuring was intimated beforehand by Gies—the overseer—for the end product, while not perfectly seamless, displays a definite uniformity. As for the sail, variegated hues and differences in work(wo)manship alternate—the contributors' styles, perhaps—while the overall function remains one. Reading the history lends

the metaphor maximum force: the sail, now unfurled, achieves its full potential as the reader navigates the sometimes troubled or turbulent but usually spectacular and often glorious waters representing the literatures of Spain.

Gies writes in his opening essay *The Funes effect: making literary history*, "If literary history consists of choices, then who chooses? And can choice produce any semblance of objectivity? Furthermore, is objectivity possible?" The enterprise of creating literary history is thus seen as problematic. What strikes the reader repeatedly is the *questioning* on the part of many of the writers here. The text is punctuated by, sometimes even consists primarily of, a series of questions, with few (and sometimes ambiguous) answers. The lack of a narrative voice "unifying" the history here presented may disconcert some, may well contribute to the "lack of cohesion" that Gies nevertheless commends. Delving into the individual essays soon reveals, however, a basic underlying critical consensus, even a predominantly similar approach, eclectic, of course, and leavened by a postmodern mood.

- 132 One recurring theme in the volume, the question of the identity of Spain, echoes queries elsewhere in the postmodern world. What does (should?) Spanish literature encompass? What, indeed, is the nation of Spain? One might have answered more confidently a few decades ago. Now, at least, at last, reassessment of the issues involves reconsidering the Hebrew, Arabic, Catalan, Gallician and other antecedents/components embedded (but often obscured) like multi-colored chunks in the mosaic that is Spain. Non- or formerly sub-canonic authors and genres as well are here re- or newly examined. Gay and lesbian literature(s) are included and taken seriously. Comic books, pulp fiction, video games, newspapers, to mention but a few examples of popular culture, also formed - and form - part of the cultural and literary entity that was/is Spain, and emerge here overtly, now validated.

John Dagenais takes the helm in his well-wrought essay, *Medieval Spanish literature in the twenty-first century*, propelling us into a brave new historico-critical world in which the concepts of the recent past are mere flotsam amid an uneasy sea of new realities tugging hither and yon. Quotation marks say more than what they enclose: "Spain," "Medieval Spain," "medieval Spanish literature" fall by the wayside as questions and new imperatives punctuate Dagenais' readable yet deconstructionist discourse. The presence and importance of Catalan writers (e.g., Ramon Muntaner) in reassessing the Middle Ages is highly relevant, their view of the unity and diversity of kingly realms vital insider information until recently ignored: a multiplicity of crowns belies any "Spanish" unity. The peninsula—and indeed all medieval Europe—here collapses into a crazy-quilt of contemporaneous dialects, kingdoms, traditions, a diversity which confirms the inherent multilingualism of the medieval

Iberian writer. In the end, Dagenais calls into question the very term “Middle Ages,” calling for a more sophisticated approach to scholarship of the period, and laments the neglected state into which the study of various medieval languages has fallen.

Maria Rosa Menocal, too, in her essay *Beginnings*, poses questions at the same time as she affirms and discusses the initially surprising multilingualism (Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew) at the heart of Spanish origins. What was once termed “influence” becomes transmuted presence, intertextuality, making of Iberia (and not to say merely “Spain”) a multilingual palimpsest. Forcing Spain into a monolingual, Castilian mold is unrealistic, impossible: “What we should understand is that throughout the Middle Ages that segregationist and monolingual principle simply did not exist, or utterly failed when attempts were made to enforce it.” The thrust of Menocal’s essay is that the term “origin” is specious; in the beginning, there were already traditions which constituted a heterogeneous and multifaceted heritage, a heritage we are only now acknowledging.

Coverage of the medieval period offers few surprises in the new Cambridge *History*, though it is disappointing to find *El Cantar de Mio Cid* dealt with in less than one page. A short extract or two would have at least given a hint of the austere splendor of this masterpiece. Similarly, only about a page is devoted to *La Celestina*. Though James Burke does term it “the greatest prose masterpiece of the late Spanish Middle Ages,” no synopsis or extracts are included. In a previous Cambridge history (*The Literature of the Spanish People*, 1965), Gerald Brenan stated that of all Spanish literary works, the *Celestina* is “the one that is most alive today.” Have forty years taken such a toll? While admittedly multi-generic, the *Libro de Buen Amor* initially seems out of place in the chapter on medieval theatre, though Charlotte Stern’s rationale for considering it a theatrical work is intriguing. Again, one or two brief passages would have livened up the presentation. Overall, one might wonder if two competing urges on the part of the contributors—to be complete and to be concise—have conspired to create a text that is both intricate and tightly packed. This dual compulsion may also partly explain the paucity of extracts offered as illustrations. 133

Jeremy Robbins’ review of the Renaissance and Baroque (Chapter 7) highlights certain of the problems involved in using received terminology—thus, the reappearance of quotation marks, as in “Golden Age,” “greatness,” “Renaissance,” “Baroque,” and “early modern.” Robbins nevertheless offers a vigorous defense of his use of the term Baroque, affirming that its value “outweighs the problems inherent in its usage,” and reassuringly retains several precepts that had been rejected or questioned by structuralists and their heirs, among them the importance of historical context and the role of cultural transfer. Reaffirming the relationship between literature and the intellectual and political context it arises in, Robbins sees literature as “being an integral part of a process of cultural negotiation and national self-definition.”

Julian Weiss’ treatment of Renaissance poetry, a significant constituent of Spanish literature, is thorough yet readable. Especially adroit is the section on Garcilaso;

Weiss is both succinct and eloquent, eg, “Garcilaso forged his literary modernity through a creative appropriation of a variety of poetic models, and by demanding added depth and breadth from the literate nobleman’s cultural literacy.”

Cervantes is often considered the fulcrum, the central point upon which Spanish literature converges and from which it radiates. His works embody so many strains, so many currents and tendencies, that he cannot fail to fascinate every succeeding age. Anthony Close accurately situates Cervantes in his cultural and historical milieu, and presents a judicious overview of his major works. Although ambiguity and Bakhtinian dialogism are mentioned here, Cervantes’ masterpiece *Don Quijote* is teeming with other postmodern concerns. Replete with multi-level allusion, both an outstanding example and a critique (*avant la lettre*) of the novelistic genre, the *Quijote* embodies much that has returned to relevance in the wan light of postmodernism: the role of illusion in our view of reality, the ambiguity naturally present in language (including particularly the propensity of language to lend itself to lies), the querying of authorship, even identity, all are intrinsic to the *Quijote* as well as to the postmodern sensibility, and might have been more thoroughly exploited. Turning to Auerbach and Kundera for interpretative handles, Close points out rightly that novels “are read in a particular ideological climate, which throws into sharp relief those features that appear particularly adapted to it,” and adumbrates a period soon to come when new critical stances may reinterpret the *Quijote* yet again.

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The phenomenon of the Baroque in Spanish poetry is delineated by Mary Malcolm Gaylord in the twelfth chapter. The perennially problematic distinction between *culturanismo* and *conceptismo* is elucidated; a detailed tracing of the fate of verse forms during this period ranges from the *romance* to the sonnet, all the while underlining the durability and adaptability of the octosyllable. Góngora, of course, must be mentioned on nearly every page, and although Gaylord asserts that “some would hesitate to anoint Luis de Góngora y Argote as the finest poet of his age,” he is, she says, nevertheless the most influential. A solid grounding in the terminology of classical rhetoric assists in the dissection of Baroque features and *genres*. The art and fortune of the conceit usher us through the period, taking us well into the seventeenth century. Aspects of the Baroque often remembered from the visual arts are underscored here—El Greco is evoked in more than one way—while figures and tropes reveal this Baroque to be a further flowering of the Renaissance, however belated. Gaylord briskly yet thoroughly highlights the astounding virtuosity and versatility of Lope de Vega’s Baroque poetry, but spills less ink—perhaps justly—over Quevedo, whose uncomfortable misogynistic and anti-Semitic (nearly formulaic for the period) aspects are nevertheless singled out. Covering some of the same ground as Gaylord, Victor Dixon’s article on Lope offers a sketch of his life and loves, significant, Dixon asserts, for “no author was ever, in the broadest sense, more autobiographical.” Lope’s *comedias* are effectively described and their (partial) theoretical underpinning in his

El arte nuevo... well characterized, but classics such as *Peribáñez* and *Fuenteovejuna* are mentioned only obliquely. This section might have profited from more straightforward exposition and the insertion of an extract or two.

Philip Deacon systematically illuminates the major issues of the eighteenth century, a time of prescription and proscription often considered alien to the Spanish character, highlighting the importance of Luzán's *La Poética*, the ongoing struggle against extravagant metaphor (a measure of the enduring allure of *conceptismo* and *culteranismo*) and the Spanish attempt to incorporate the Aristotelian unities into drama. In the subsequent chapters, Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos outlines the rehabilitation of prose and the appearance of early *costumbrismo*, pointing out as well the dichotomies intrinsic to eighteenth-century Spanish poetry (Baroque vs neoclassical) and theatre (neoclassical vs popular).

Derek Flitter's introduction to Romantic Spain stresses the polemics underlying early avatars of the Romantic, the one endemic yet still espousing Enlightenment values (represented by José Joaquín de Mora), the other championed by the German transplant, Böhl von Faber, whose importation of Schlegelian principles colored the movement in Spain for its duration. Subsidiary theorists (Durán, Donoso, Galiano) are well dealt with, their viewpoints clearly set forth. Gies' essay on Romantic theater is valuable particularly for its reliance on the reality of *performances*, not merely on texts alone, for it is through staged productions that texts come to life. He thus must point up the importance of Juan de Grimaldi, the entrepreneur who revitalized Madrid's theatrical life and launched a number of signal Romantic theatrical successes early in the 19th century. Zorrilla follows on from this flowering, rounding out the Romantic theatrical canon with his Faust-like *Don Juan Tenorio*. Gies finishes his survey by incisively sketching the career of Cuban-born Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, perhaps the best-known female poet/playwright of the period. 135

Susan Kirkpatrick's treatment of Romantic poetry reinstates Espronceda's *El diablo mundo* to its true status as a compendium of Romantic techniques and themes, indeed a Romantic poetics; Bécquer, too, emerges renewed, his poetics evoking "the eternal struggle between the formless energies of inspiration and the constraining structures of reason." Intrinsically dialogical, the *Rimas* point ahead, for Kirkpatrick, to the modernists. Finally, clearly delineated, the figure of Rosalía de Castro completes this review of Romanticism in Spanish poetry.

A close but necessarily brief look at the Spanish Realist and Naturalist canons understandably reveals a largely male cohort; but sensitivity to feminism and female writers is significantly present. Rather than simply list, describe or define, Stephen Miller encompasses works and writers in an ongoing dialectic, a discourse by turns historical and critical which points out the enduring value of individual actors and products in the history of Spanish Realism, without hesitating to summarize at times their contribution or illustrate their importance. Miller's account of Emilia Pardo Bazán's career is nuanced and detailed, cognizant of the period's misogynist prejudices and male chauvinist orientation, yet affirming her unquestionable importance

as a novelist and as a persona in the *fin de siècle* Spanish literary world, a novelist who produced great works of Realism even in face of the modernist onslaught.

Modernism, in its turn, far from remaining the familiar monolith, undergoes a sort of deconstruction here. Querying, challenging, reassessing, Nil Santiáñez, Richard A. Cardwell, Joan Ramon Resina, and C.A. Longhurst affirm the importance of writers such as Azorín, Unamuno, Antonio Machado, Baroja, Valle-Inclán, and Maragall and convey concerns such as “the self-conscious text, the nature of artistic autonomy, the role of language, the identity of the self, and authenticity of the image (Longhurst),” “a differentiated aesthetic sphere (Maragall),” “the probing of identity... (Cardwell),” and “experimental and dislocated language, dissolution of personal identity, spatial form, preponderance of discourse over story (style over plot), tendency toward parody, metaliterature ... and the demand that the reader take an active hermeneutic role (Santiáñez).” Carrying such issues forward a few decades, and invoking Fernand Braudel’s concept of “longue durée” (fruitfully utilized by Santiáñez), does it not become obvious that modernism and postmodernism are all of a piece?

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Andrew A. Anderson’s essay on García Lorca presents just the right amount of detail to portray the poet’s brief career as well as his stylistic “phases.” Anderson’s own style is what one would rightfully expect from a literary history: earnest, transparent and relatively free of polemic. Atavistic in various ways, Lorca’s poetic work as read by Anderson places the gypsy ethos in high relief, pays homage to Arab and medieval Castilian origins, and exploits the twin themes of love and death, while revealing autobiographical elements that cannot fail to interest us three quarters of a century on. His theatre, usually experimental, always challenging, preoccupied with love, death and sexuality, emanates, for Anderson, from a “tragic vision (tragic in twentieth-century terms) that is broadly existentialist in nature.”

The dislocation of the Civil War, Franco’s dictatorship, its ultimate demise, and the ensuing recession of his priorities and world-view dominate the last 150 pages of this volume—as well they must. Much of what constituted “Spain” until recently was questioned tentatively, with difficulty; now much that goes to make up the reality of contemporary Spain continues to pullulate and propagate, raising questions year by year. The “influence” of Franco persisted, albeit in a negative way, a ghost shadowing—silently harrying—much else, an obsession not easily shaken, into the 1980’s, 90’s and beyond. Only recently have younger writers begun to shake off this heavy mantel.

The familiar litany of family, Church, Spanish culture and ethnicity, imposed and intoned as fundamental by the Francoist regime, recurs in the articles covering this period. José María Naharro Calderón discusses the many issues affecting writers in and out of exile, reviewing distinctions between retroexile, infraexile, intraexile and supraexile literatures, yet ultimately rejecting the idea of exile as a “segregated area of production or study.” This section, entitled *In and Out of Franco Spain*, emphatically depicts the trauma of the Civil War and its aftermath. The ensuing Fascist regime

imposed a sort of exile on every writer, a psychological if not physical diaspora. Camilo José Cela's *La Familia de Pascual Duarte* appears here in various contexts and remains one of the essential texts of the period. Janet Perez conveys the incredible lengths to which "triumphalism" went to extol Fascist values and abhor what was perceived as aberrant: society's margins became crowded and diverse, their denizens suffering through an interminable depression. The extent of the censorship and repression is today shocking, almost unimaginable. Perez here deftly critiques *tremendismo*, the first literary movement to emerge after the Civil War, a current that Carmen Laforet surmounted with her first novel *Nada*. Writers of the time were almost all marked in one way or another by the war and its ramifications, yet despite the pall engendered, experimentalism emerged during the 1960s and continued well into the 1970s: Cela, Torrente Ballester, Juan Goytisolo, and Delibes are outstanding examples of this current, akin to *le nouveau roman* in France.

Guillermo Carnero ("Poetry in Franco Spain") ushers us through several distinct Generations of poets, the influences upon whom include surrealism and existentialism, the Avant-Garde, the Garcilasian school, and the social poetry movement, among others. Again, a few excerpts, however brief or fragmentary, might have helped illustrate the diverse traits of Spanish poetry during this period. 137

Antonio Buero Vallejo's impressive output dominates the theatrical corpus of Franco Spain (*Theatre in Franco Spain*, Martha Halsey). Prison-like metaphors (blindness, tenements, tunnels, labyrinths) determine the atmosphere and predict the "action" in many of his plays, while allegories alluding to Franco's Spain proliferate. With Francoist repression in mind, Halsey asserts: "Buero's affinity for the ideas of enclosure, immurement, or entrapment reflected his own condition and that of others of his generation." Halsey's contrast between Buero and Alfonso Sastre (as much theorist as playwright) is instructive: their polemic played itself out during the heyday of existentialism. Lauro Olmo, Martín Recuerda and Rodríguez Méndez receive deserved, detailed treatment here. The "underground" playwrights and subsequent dramatists, for Halsey, disclose the influence of Artaud and Genet at the same time as many of them continue to create variations on themes involving the state and political freedom/repression.

A major contribution of the present volume is the introduction into the canon of writers, directors and film-makers producing since Franco's death. The title of Part X, *Post-Franco Spanish Literature and Film*, directly indicates the growing importance and status of film, while the title of the last chapter, *Spanish literature and the language of new media; from film adaptation to digitized cultural interfaces* (Susan Martin-Márquez), indicates the heterodox nature of writings concerning "literature" in the twenty-first century. As critics of the time struggled with the theatre of the absurd in the fifties of the last century, so do we as we contemplate the dynamics of paradigm change operating under our noses: the digitized medium of the computer encompasses a world of possibilities, the internet a universe of entities, relationships and ways of being.

José-Carlos Mainer's introduction to the period begins by recapitulating the familiar quandaries inherent to the Franco regime, which were nevertheless tinged, by the 1970s, with the hope of imminent freedom: films, cartoons, magazines, cinematic adaptations, even doctoral dissertations, were by then bursting with subversive tendencies. In the years immediately after Franco's death, many Spaniards evinced simultaneous tendencies toward victimhood, rage and exhibitionism: the resurgence of the erotic and the dropping of taboos affected both cultural life and its products, on the one hand, while new state-funded initiatives and institutions promoted the elaboration of cultural pluralism on the other. Mainer sees Spanish letters in the 1980s as "more self-satisfied," and his précis of the period ends with the affirmation of "the public recognition of the writer," as well as "the hegemony of the intimate and personal as thematic material."

138 With the waning of Franco's influence came the demise of social poetry and the estheticism of the *novísimos*. Juan Cano Ballesta's essay on post-Franco poetry presents the broad spectrum of poetic trends manifested during this period. Tending toward a poetry characterized as "culturalist, elitist, and ludic," the *novísimos* set the tone for a number of years; however, eroticism, civic poetry and "dirty Realism" intervened, giving way to "a return to emotionalism and to metaphysical meditation." Subsequently, and up to the present, the poetry of experience revalidates the individual and his/her innermost feelings and doubts. Cano Ballesta affirms that for the young poet today, "personal emotions and experiences now fill the void that in the past was occupied by transcendental truths." Current trends involve, of course, controversy and discord, and an important contribution of this chapter is the naming of numerous new poets, whatever their propensities.

Brad Epps recounts the vicissitudes of Spanish prose between 1975 and 2002, discussing, in turn, the contributions of Juan Goytisolo, Carmen Martín Gaité, Montserrat Roig, Juan Benet, Torrente Ballester, among others. Ebbing but not disappearing, the grip of Francoism morphed, during this period, into, as Epps puts it, "a Post-modern playground of raucous desires." The profile of experimentalism recedes as well, for the "debatable premise that good writing is socially significant and experimental becomes increasingly untenable as Franco fades." Significantly, the figure of Almodóvar dominates the post-Franco period as *la movida* manifests itself in multifarious media. The (partial) queering of Spain's culture was begun, though gay men fared better than lesbians in terms of visibility: Epps importantly documents this new phase of literary creation/appreciation in some detail. Popular cultural products (comics, video games, video clips, detective novels) as well are considered without prejudice, though the spectre of "*el desencanto*" hovers, influencing many. "Collapse," "fragmentation," as well as the problematization of classification become issues; titles, names and dates crowd the last few pages of Epps' essay, as they often do when literary historians bump up against the present.

Sharon G. Feldman affirms a "cacophonous state of aesthetic heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and linguistic plurality" in present-day Spanish theatre. Feldman's

style is versatile and engaging as her tightly woven prose depicts a near-permanent state of theatrical crisis, a crisis necessary, perhaps, for survival. As elsewhere in the post-Franco period, “crossover” phenomena take on greater importance while intertextuality of various sorts becomes more commonplace. Catalan groups and playwrights sport a high profile here, while individual directors and companies operating across Spain receive their due. As Feldman details the most important characteristics of contemporary Spanish theatre and its exponents, Sergi Belbel, playwright, director and translator, deserves especial mention: for Feldman, Belbel “is presently at the forefront of his theatrical generation.”

Susan Martin-Márquez’s final essay, an excursion into the permutations of intertextuality involving prose narrative, cinema, theatre, television, and multimedia—among other mediatic forms—questions the legitimacy of fidelity (in letter and/or spirit) to an original work as a guiding principle for cross-media adaptations, affirming the fertility and validity of “poaching” (cf. Michel de Certeau), which furnishes meanings “to serve many different, and possibly unforeseeable, purposes.” Dense, rich and far-ranging, Martin-Márquez’ account reveals profound similarities between intertextuality and interactivity—that new mode of responding most enthrallingly enacted through video games—yet nevertheless challenges the “promise of ultimate interactivity.”

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Of course this undertaking is lengthy: compared to Brennan’s (1965) and Díaz-Plaja’s (1971) earlier histories, this one must be nearly twice as long. As mentioned earlier, the present history might have profited from more examples; excerpts of actual texts would have allowed the reader to experience that whereof the historians write, while less prolixity would have permitted more mental breathing space. The unrelenting listing and characterization of works, writers, movements, and periods becomes somewhat tiresome, in the end. Perhaps the polyphonic nature of this history, or the need to be inclusive, have something to do with this. What strikes the reader as well is the starting over again, the adapting to a different voice every few pages, a bit like a relay race wherein the gait of each participant requires a brief period of adjustment. At times, there is a bit of overlap or repetition; with so many authors, it may not have been feasible for each of them to read every contribution.

These reservations having been voiced, it must be stated that *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* offers a valuable, far-reaching, up-to-date overview of the movements, issues, social history, writers and works of the literatures of Spain, and includes ethnicities, languages, genres and writers/producers that would probably have been excluded only a few decades ago. It is not possible here to mention every writer’s name, nor to paraphrase each contribution. All are robustly competent,

several are brilliant, and the general tone is homogeneous. Gies here foregoes the reassuring, sometimes even avuncular—though often eccentric, biased and perfunctory—voice of the “master narrator” but gains, through collaboration, an impressive collection of more challenging essays by experts, essays which convey the essence of the topic at hand without becoming overly polemical or numbingly detailed.¹

The genius of this volume, more generally, is the unearthing and laying bare, in almost archeological fashion, of layers of ethnicity, language, culture, historical fact, and literary tradition, many previously unknown, neglected or ignored. These layers, like deposits containing fault lines and fissures long hidden, reveal new divisions and groupings, new views of familiar phenomena, as well as new realities. Not a literary history for the casual reader, Gies and his collaborators demand more than a passing knowledge of postmodern theory as they review and reinterpret the seminal texts of the literatures of Spain. For those who unfurl the sail, a fruitful exploration is in store.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Aside from a formidable 45-page bibliography, and a comprehensive index, this history features a Chronology which situates important political events shaping Spanish history beside individual literary works (with the date of their appearance/first publication) along with other intellectual or artistic manifestations. Thus, we see, for example, that the expulsion of the Jews, Columbus’ “discovery” of America and the conquest of Granada are contemporaneous with Diego de San Pedro’s *Cárcel de Amor* and the publication of Nebrija’s *Gramática de la lengua castellana*. Ironic? Perhaps. Formatting literary history in this way offers some surprising and serendipitous synchronicities.