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Seventeenth-Century Spain (review)

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(Review)

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Writers on the Market: Consuming Literature in Early Seventeenth-Century Spain
Bucknell University Press, 2005
By Donald Gilbert-Santamaría

Anyone who hoped to succeed in the public theaters of early modern Spain, as Lope de Vega famously quipped in his “Arte nuevo de hacer comedias,” must contend with “the choler of a seated Spaniard.” Lope’s concession to the taste (and impatience) of his maravedí-paying public is the point of departure for Donald Gilbert-Santamaría’s stimulating reflection on the commercial poetics of Lope, Alemán, and Cervantes. The need to respond to the demands of writing for a heterogeneous audience of consumers, he argues, led these three authors to rework inherited poetic ideas in strikingly different ways.

It should be made clear from the outset that this book does not pretend to describe the economics of the early modern stage or book trade. Instead, Gilbert-Santamaría is concerned with the explicit and implicit poetics of imaginative literature as discerned through close readings of the works of each author. He begins with an exploration the ambiguities in Lope’s attitude toward his commercial success. On the one hand, Lope yearned for a prestigious past of discreet patrons and universalist poetics; on the other hand, he recognized that the *vulgo* was his meal ticket. Although Lope remained deeply attached to the prestige of the classical tradition, he grudgingly accepted that the *corrales* had given audiences an active voice in critical judgment. What the public wanted—and Lope provided—was imitation of “the age” (not Renaissance *imitatio*, the imitation of prestigious writers of the past), and a favorable, identifiable representation of itself. In plays like *Fuenteovejuna* and *El caballero de Olmedo*, peasants and servants play a role that is no less active than that played by the aristocracy, and merit trumps lineage. But Lope’s theater is hardly populist. Like New Historicists of the “containment” school, Gilbert-Santamaría acknowledges that Lope’s plays reinforce the legitimacy of established class hierarchy in ways that defuse other more radical forms of self-expression by marginalized

groups. But unlike these critics (or the “*comedia* as propaganda” school of criticism), Gilbert-Santamaría does not attribute this containment of subversive discourses to the invisible workings of a repressive baroque ideology. Rather, he argues for Lope’s sophisticated understanding of the psychology of his heterogeneous audience. Thus, the collective amnesia that settles over the inhabitants of Fuenteovejuna at the end of the play responds to the audience’s desire for a happy ending—one that effaces the more terrifying excesses of individual autonomy.

Like Lope, Mateo Alemán was acutely aware of the new power of the book-buying public. But if Lope resigned himself to writing for the *vulgo*, Gilbert-Santamaría argues, Alemán fought back with vehemence. Like the painter whose client complained that in his commissioned painting the horse was rolling on his back, Alemán demands that his readers turn the painting right-side-up, that is, that they read the novel as he, the author, intended. The problem, however, is that Alemán’s insistence on interpretive clarity is fundamentally at odds with the picaresque world of *Guzmán de Alfarache*, one characterized by deceptive appearances and unstable meanings. Nor was Alemán completely impervious to the influence of the paying public, and at key moments he acceded to the prurient appeal of violence. In a stimulating discussion of two intercalated *novelas*, Gilbert-Santamaría explores how the stories “Osmín y Daraja” and “Dorado and Clorinia” reflect Alemán’s ambivalence toward the epistemological premises of the picaresque as genre. The former *novela* reflects Alemán’s nostalgia for moral clarity enshrined in religious orthodoxy; the later, the pull of the picaresque “poetics of engaño”—the negation of meaningful identities in the temporal world. *Guzmán de Alfarache* has elicited a considerable body of scholarship, and Gilbert-Santamaría responsibly recognizes previous contributions and debates. However, I would have liked to see a more thorough engagement with the work of Michel Cavillac. Cavillac has disputed the view of Alemán as the standard-bearer for Counter-Reformation conformity, proposing instead that he was a proto-bourgeois economic

reformer. Cavillac's thesis is not incompatible with Gilbert-Santamaría's. In fact, Alemán's failure to reconcile his economic reformism with religious orthodoxy is consonant with his frustrated attempts to reconcile literary edification and entertainment.

In the last section of his book, Gilbert-Santamaría turns his attention to Cervantes's response to literary marketplace in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. If Alemán railed against the *vulgo*, Miguel de Cervantes was willing to cater to a consumer audience, especially to that audience's demand for entertainment. As the prologue to Part I of the *Quijote* makes clear, Cervantes delighted in his freedom from classical models. Yet he was also aware of the new constraints of the market, especially the need to speak to a heterogeneous audience that vied with the author as arbiter of meaning and value. Cervantes's ongoing dialogue with Aristotelian categories thus reflects not only the author's will to invent a new kind of literature of entertainment but also a response to the readers' interest in representations that reflected their quotidian existence. The result of this imperative for identification is a new mode of literary subjectivity, one that stimulates Cervantes to explore the existential predicament of the modern individual. Readers may not agree with Gilbert-Santamaría that Cervantes's economic-existential vision was bleakly conflictive. However, they will find his comments on Cervantes's strategies for creating a sense of his protagonist's subjectivity both plausible and insightful. In sum, this is an admirably ambitious, well-written book that can be read with interest and profit by any specialist of early modern Spanish literature.

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*Traces of Contamination:
Unearthing the Francoist Legacy
in Contemporary
Spanish Discourse*

Bucknell University Press, 2005
By Eloy E. Merino and H. Rosi Song

Que la Transición española no ha sabido lidiar convincentemente con su pasado histórico, es decir, con su origen en la dictadura franquista, no debe ya sorprender a nadie. Se han publicado estudios, como los de Jo Labanyi, Joan Ramón Resina o Eduardo Subirats, por citar unos pocos, donde se analiza la dificultad de las prácticas culturales del estado español actual por mantener una relación de normalidad con su historia. Como es conocido, en aras de una supuesta concordia civil, la izquierda política durante la Transición, por un lado, deliberadamente silenció, pospuso o, al menos, dejó de lado la recuperación del legado democrático republicano más cercano a su tradición cultural. La complejidad del proceso o los miedos a una involución, claros antes y después del intento de golpe de estado del 23 de febrero de 1981, pueden ayudar a entender, que no explicar del todo, el porqué del abandono de la memoria de la resistencia, entre otras, en contra de la dictadura franquista. Por otro lado, el llamado franquismo político, cultural y sociológico durante estos mismos años seguía campando a sus anchas como si la Transición ni siquiera hubiera significado un mínimo rechazo de la dictadura franquista que ellos tan convincentemente seguían representando.

Parece que lo que la izquierda no consiguió hacer en el terreno político, ligando la Transición con el mejor pasado democrático de la República española, se tradujo en un interés casi desmesurado por la memoria histórica, como si las narrativas de memoria tuvieran que compensar el déficit democrático que no se había conseguido paliar en lo político. Es en este aspecto en el que se centran la mayoría de los estudios sobre la memoria colectiva y el pasado histórico español. Al mismo tiempo, lo que los herederos naturales del franquismo durante la Transición no se sintieron obligados ni siquiera a maquillar con las formas de la derecha europea más rancia, resurgió en los años 90 en la forma de retóricas, manipulaciones históricas y desprecio, cuando no odio, por el oponente político desconocidas para los que nos educamos cultural y políticamente en el post-franquismo. Se volvía a recurrir a discursos originados en la dictadura. El análisis de este segundo aspecto,