

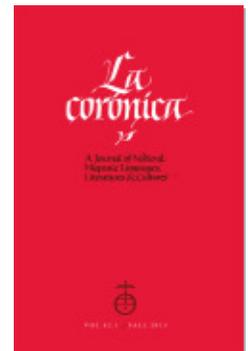


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Gonzalo de Berceo and the Latin Miracles of the Virgin. A Translation and a Study by Gonzalo de Berceo, ed. by Patricia Timmons, Robert Boenig (review)

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Gonzalo de Berceo. Gonzalo de Berceo and the Latin Miracles of the Virgin. A Translation and a Study. Edited by Patricia Timmons and Robert Boenig. Farnham, UK/Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2012. ISBN 9781409441908

The theme of this new book is simple and pervasive: Gonzalo de Berceo was a creative artist and his versions of his Latin source(s) in the case of his *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* (MNS) amply provide us with solid evidence of this claim. The volume will be welcome to all Berceo students and scholars as it will make working with the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* far less complicated and time consuming, at the same time providing important information about Berceo as a true artist.

How often when reading the MNS has one wondered how to access the originals Berceo was almost certainly working with? That is, Thott 128, which contains fifty-three Marian miracle accounts in Latin, of which Berceo adapted twenty-four (of its first twenty eight), adding one (not in Thott 128) to make his twenty-five. This handy volume provides us with a full transcription of the twenty four miracles adapted by the monk of San Millán (145-173). The editors follow Richard Becker's standard 1910 edition of Thott 128 but have accepted most all of the emendations provided in the 1980 edition of the MNS by Brian Dutton. Although Thott 128 has long been Berceo's source of choice for most all scholars, Miguel Ibáñez Rodríguez suggests other options, showing that, for example, the anonymous Latin collection *La deuxième collection anglo-normand* contains 23 of the 25 miracles in the MNS. Adgar (1150-1170) in his *Le Gracial* has 18 of the 25, and Gautier de Coinci coincides with 15 of Berceo's miracles. Fernando Baños compares the MNS to MS 110 held in Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional in his respected edition.

Not prepared to tackle the Latin? The editors and translators, both from Texas A & M University, have provided us with a full English-language translation of Thott 128 and offer helpful, informative notes on each of the MNS (29-65). (There is a previous English translation of Berceo's Spanish MNS, by Mount and Cash, which the editors make use of as well.) Both of these sections mark this volume as essential for all medievalists interested in the art of transformation (not simply translation) in Berceo's work with Latin texts. A key statement from the Preface makes this goal clear: "we are convinced that Berceo *reacted creatively* to his source text and also that changes in Church culture and



governance between the composition of the Latin *Miracles* and Berceo's own thirteenth century helped form those reactions (emphasis added)".

The remaining two sections of the volume are dedicated, first, to an introduction to the Latin *Miracles* (3-25) which the editors rightly claim to be "a work worthy of study in and of itself" (from the Preface), and second, a longer section (85-142) on "Berceo's *Milagros*" in which they analyze five miracles, comparing them with the source miracle. The well-chosen five are: "The Fornicating Sexton" (MNS 2), "The Wedding and the Virgin" (MNS 15), "The Jews of Toledo" (MNS 18), "The Little Jewish Boy" (MNS 16), and "The Pregnant Abbess" (MNS 21).

In the introductory chapter, we learn that Berceo's work shows a knowledge of jurisprudence (earthly practices are reflected in the court hearings in heaven), biblical doctrine, law and even grammar and music. In San Millán, Berceo had an audience not limited to clerics as it was very near to the Camino Francés and therefore was constantly flowing with foreign pilgrims (an idea proposed by Brian Dutton earlier) who brought their own cultures and left their imprint on many areas of Spanish culture, a process that was ongoing over centuries. But the pilgrims also needed to be entertained and such was one of the purposes of Berceo's recounting of the Virgin's prowess in his miracle narrations, probably recited aloud. His use of extensive dialogue, dramatized situations, direct address and more (taken up in the discussion of the five selected miracles) surely captivated his audiences. These many dynamic and dramatic features, lacking in the Latin originals on which he based his accounts, are Berceo's own. The audience and the monk "become protagonists in the stories they hear" (7).

In the Latin texts, the Virgin was "remote and magisterial" and by the time of Berceo "accessible and increasingly human" (11), an evolution fostered by social and religious changes in the Europe of the early Middle Ages. The range of emotions attributed to the Virgin in the Latin text was limited, often harsh, but Berceo's Virgin Mary gives us a softer and more endearing portrait of the Mother of God. He adds physical descriptions absent in the source text and his *MNS* reflect the *lectio divina* or spiritual readings preached by the newly founded Dominican and Franciscan orders, readings which are designed to lead to meditation, then prayer and, finally, contemplative silence. Berceo brings life to the dry Latin text before him with imagination and skill, utilizing word play as one personal contribution (explored on 20-24 with enlightening examples). The editors offer their translations (in the following section of the volume) with a

hope that the reader will come to see how Berceo “creatively adapted his source” (24).

Following the translations of the Latin texts we are afforded a series of observations and notes that will be an aid and a stimulus to students and scholars working with the *MNS*. We are then treated to a brief section on the “life and times” of Berceo which supports the religious and political changes that clarify the earlier claim about how changes in Church culture and governance impact on the stance from which Berceo wrote. The rise of clerical scholars and intellectual secular clergy were an important aspect of the world Berceo knew and of which he was part. The reform movement flowing from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) was manifested in, among other practices, new hagiographies, miracle accounts, and intensified depictions of Christ’s sufferings. These particular shifts in focus all were outcomes of the reformist trend in the thirteenth century, so alive and felt in many details of the *MNS*.

These valuable background points are explored in the choice of five of the *MNS* that the editors explore, as detailed above. They have not attempted a complete analytical reading of more than these five, since, as they state in their Preface, “the analyses of several of Berceo’s versions of the miracles that conclude our volume are offered not as exhaustive treatment of his work with his source *but rather as guides for further work, further discoveries*. Our thesis is that Berceo took an intrinsically interesting and skillfully wrought original and turned it into Spanish poetry of high quality” (emphasis added). And indeed, the commentary on each of these five accounts proves to be just as they were intended, as exemplary “guides” for others to take up and enrich, having at their disposal both the Latin originals and an English version of them. In a way, these five analyses open up areas for the future of Berceo studies, and not just the *MNS*: they are the heart of the volume. Following these five interpretative clusters, we find the Latin texts of the miracles Berceo adapted from Thott 128. The volume is misprint-free, has a full bibliography of all works cited and, thankfully, a good index.

In conclusion, we have now between the covers of one volume the source work used for the writing of the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, a competent English translation of it, and a methodology for continuing the path chosen by its editors, as seen in what and how they have done, in the five miracle texts that they analyze. This will be a volume useful for multiple audiences: undergraduates, post-graduates, and interested scholars: it belongs in all libraries. Not only will



it serve English speakers but also students who are skilled in English but whose native language is other than English. Berceo scholars of all colors will welcome this useful handbook and benefit from it.

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Rojinsky, David. Companion to Empire. A Genealogy of the Written Word in Spain and New Spain, c.550-1550. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2010. 300pp.

This book constitutes a history of writing in Spain and New Spain in the Pre-Modern and Early Modern Periods. Specifically, the work focuses on the relationship between writing and empire, which are understood as textual culture and territorial expansion respectively. David Rojinsky adopts a post-philological perspective in which historical discontinuity and the rejection of mythical origins are the focus of our attention. In other words, the author rejects the notion of historical linear continuity across the different writing practices manifested over the thousand-year period in question (550-1550 AD), and there is no sort of search for a unique and mythical origin of the language, as would be the focus of a traditional historical analysis. According to this post-philological line of argumentation, the only continuity of the language would lie in the permanent relationship between writing and imperial power. Clearly