



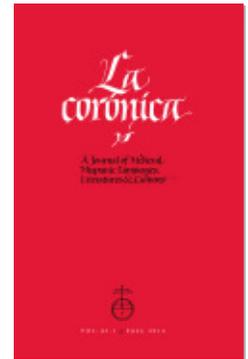
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## Transforming the Medieval Iberian Canon: Finding a Space for Women

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La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Volume 32, Number 1, Fall 2003, pp. 5-13 (Article)



Published by La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

DOI: 10.1353/cor.2003.0001

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**CRITICAL CLUSTER**

**BRINGING IBERIAN WOMEN WRITERS  
INTO THE CANON**

**Guest Editors  
Dawn Bratsch-Prince  
and Montserrat Piera**



Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, MS L-18, folio 1<sup>r</sup> (parchment, 406 folios, 41.5 x 63 cm; scribe Joan Esteve; illuminator Bernat Martorell, d. 1451). This illumination serves as a framed frontispiece for the first page of the *Comentaria super Usaticis Barchinonae* (*Comentaris als usatges de Barcelona*) written in Latin by Jaume Marquilles (1368-1451). The presentation miniature shows María of Castile presiding over a session of the Consell de Cent, the town council of Barcelona, with Catalan jurist Jaume Marquilles formally presenting to the Queen and *consellers* his commentaries on the *Usatges*, the fundamental law code of the city. The five principal *consellers* seated directly on the Queen's right –Bernat Sapila, Pere Romeu, Pere Serra, Berenguer Llull, and Felip de Ferrera– are dressed in their official *gramalla*, the distinctive fur-trimmed red robes of their office.

# TRANSFORMING THE MEDIEVAL IBERIAN CANON: FINDING A SPACE FOR WOMEN

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In their compelling analysis of the gender of the Hispanic literary canon, Crista Johnson and Joan Brown show that the representation of female authors, across centuries and continents, on required reading lists at Ph.D.-granting institutions in the United States is, at best, minimal and inconsistent. Scholarly activity on women writers, however, is substantial—one might even say vigorous—and so sadly at odds with those lists of required or canonical works. Johnson and Brown ask: “How much time must elapse before current scholarly trends are communicated to the next generation of scholars?” (1998, 473).

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed great strides in the amount and scope of scholarly research on women’s history in medieval Iberia,<sup>1</sup> and women’s literary history, too, received attention from an array of scholars, male and female.<sup>2</sup> At long last, some of the better known female-authored texts have been made available to scholars via critical editions and thematic anthologies.<sup>3</sup> Acutely missing from this activity has been a conversation on how female-authored texts can be best incorporated into the mainstream of literary and historical canons. How do we present these works to students who have been

<sup>1</sup> See A.M. Aguado 1994; Elisa Garrido, *et al.*, 1997; Heath Dillard 1984; Mary Nash 1988; Alain Saint-Saens 1997; Marilyn Stone and Carmen Benito Vessels 1998; Teresa María Vinyoles i Vidal 1983, 1984, 1993, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Carolyn L. Galerstein 1986; Linda Gould Levine 1993; Francisco López Estrada 1986; Carmen Marimón Llorca 1990; Kathleen McNerney and Cristina Enríquez de Salamanca 1994; Louise Mirrer 1992, 1996; Ronald Surtz 1990, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau 1989; Amy Katz Kaminsky 1997; Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego 1989; María Jesús Rubiera Mata 1989.

implicitly taught that medieval and early modern women did not write, or that the odd one who did wrote something “less than literary”? As Lola Luna accurately asserts, “aún parece ejercerse una política de exclusión que elimina a las mujeres de la institución ‘Historia de la literatura’” (1995, 128). Women writers, she continues, are either relegated to a separate universe of “feminine” writing, or they are re-gendered as transgressive or “masculine” writers (128). Nor do the types of works they composed fit into the general definition of literature, which frequently omits religious prose texts, letters and treatises. By virtue of their exclusion from canonical anthologies and reading lists, women authors are perceived as not measuring up to some undefined, yet understood, benchmark.

The nine articles in this Critical Cluster focus on how to go about the (re)placement or (re)incorporation of these texts and voices into a body of canonical texts. Of utmost importance is the consideration of how these works can be best presented to students who struggle to accept female-authored texts as “real” or “valid”. Among the questions we pose are: How do these texts fit into what we typically value and teach? Given the current configuration of anthologies in our field, how can these works be presented as more than just faddish “add-ons” or “filler”, perennially relegated to a binder of costly photocopied materials? How do we work around the paucity of accessible editions, didactic guides, or ancillary materials? How do we avoid limiting these texts to occasional seminars and include them in our standard introductory and survey courses? In order to produce a future generation of scholars better informed of the activities and interests of medieval Iberian women and of the multi-dimensionality of the medieval world in general, we need to focus our efforts on preparing well-informed students at all levels.

Complementary to the incorporation of female-authored texts into the canon is the application of current theoretical approaches to the issue of gender in these and more traditionally-accepted texts.<sup>4</sup> According to Constance A. Sullivan, rereading with an eye to gender “must be an essential aspect of all authentic intellectual inquiry that aspires to accuracy and completeness” (1983, 95). Using the lens of gender allows us to challenge the canon and “to question all prior assumptions and received critical opinion” we have been taught, “while trying to discover and interpret the true dynamics of the various dis-

<sup>4</sup> Dawn Bratsch-Prince 2000, María Eugenia Lacarra 1988, 1993, Barbara F. Weissberger 1998, 1999.

courses of a culture” (96), medieval or modern, elite or common. The task sounds like a simple one, but it is fraught with fear by those who prefer the comfort of more positivistic approaches.

Rafael Mérida-Jiménez offers readers a broad, pedagogically oriented introduction to teaching medieval women writers in his article “Convivencias, jerarquías, exploraciones: la escritura femenina medieval dentro (y fuera) del aula”. He recognizes the difficulties inherent in the teaching of women authors: the extensive lack of critical editions, the paucity of critical essays accessible to students, and the diversity of languages to be included: Castilian, Aragonese, Catalan, Galician-Portuguese and Arabic. The linguistic challenges in particular, he observes, are substantially more difficult for the non-native speakers of Spanish who populate classrooms in the United States. The author offers several specific course models for presenting the works of women authors to undergraduate and graduate students, either in the original language of composition or in translation.

According to Montserrat Cabré in “Medieval Women’s Writing in Catalan: Textual Inscriptions of Feminine Authority”, the accepted corpus of works by medieval Iberian women has been restricted to those texts that align themselves with “conventional criteria for texts to be considered canonical”, namely that they have been written by identifiable individual authors with a precise literary goal. In contrast, Cabré postulates “an epistemology of medieval feminine authorship which is ready to acknowledge that authorship itself is the result of feminine authority, rather than its cause”. Following a concise overview of medieval women’s writings in Catalan as traditionally presented, she utilizes this notion of feminine authority to enlighten “understanding of the authorship of the anonymous, and still unpublished, *Crònica de Sant Pere de les Puel·les*”. In the collective creation of the *Crònica*, the acknowledgment of feminine authority is a necessary condition for feminine authorship.

Ana Gómez-Bravo perceives that a great majority of *cancionero* poetry is excluded from the accepted canon of *cancioneros*, a canon which privileges texts that fit “los parámetros culturales, la concepción estética, el programa de construcción nacional o de higiene moral en un determinado momento histórico...”. The “determinado momento histórico” was, according to the author, marked by the establishment of the Spanish school system and the subsequent codification of its curriculum. Doubly forgotten from the corpus are *cancionero* texts authored by women. In her study “‘A huma senhora que lhe disse’: Sobre la práctica social de la autoría y la noción de texto en el

*Cancioneiro geral* de Resende y la lírica cancioneril ibérica”, Gómez-Bravo boldly proposes expanding the field of *cancionero* studies to include “la consideración de los medios de producción y forma de circulación literarias, reproducción y lectura de textos poéticos, así como del ambiente socioliterario” which she posits will call into question the established canon as well as its formation. Using the *Cancioneiro geral de Resende*, Gómez-Bravo suggests a concept of co-authorship, or dialogic interaction, as a method of literary composition used with great frequency by women in the *Cancioneiro geral*. In contrast to behavioral norms of the period which upheld for women the virtue of silence, courtly culture expected women of the nobility to serve as co-participants in the creation of courtly discourse, creating an ideal of female eloquence which has not previously been examined by modern Iberomedievalists.

In “Las poetisas de al-Andalus y el canon de la poesía árabe”, Teresa Garulo studies the process by which “la lírica femenina de al-Andalus, es decir, la lírica femenina árabe de la Península Ibérica” has been omitted from the traditional canon of Classical Arabic poetry. The thirty-three Andalusian women authors whose poetry has been preserved are typically excluded from this accepted corpus because of the poetic genres they chose to develop, the forms of publication and manner of diffusion of these works, and their mode of preservation or transmission. For example, the *casida*, the first poetic form to enter the Arabic canon, was part of a literary genre that celebrated masculine virtues. Given behavioral expectations, the *casida* was not a socially acceptable or appropriate venue for public display of the female voice. By contrast, women were permitted –even expected– to make public displays of mourning for the dead, so they are frequently authors of elegies. Female-composed elegies usually lament the death of a male kinsman; they are also short and monothematic in comparison to male-authored texts, which tend to be lengthy and polythematic. The known elegies composed by women were preserved and transmitted within biographies of illustrious men, and not included to preserve the memory of the *autora*. Garulo stresses that with the passage of time and the sedentarization of Arab culture, women had increasingly fewer opportunities to venture a public voice.

Complementing Garulo’s inquiry into the Classical Arabic canon, Lourdes María Álvarez seeks to justify a place in the canon of Iberian literature for these same *poetisas* in her essay “‘This still flickering light’: Reading and Teaching the Women Poets of al-Andalus”. While acknowledging that “the medieval period predates (and transcends) the na-

tional and disciplinary borders that define our departmental identities”, Álvarez laments that in the university of the twenty-first century “the study of these histories and cultures is divided up according to retroactively imposed national borders”. She evaluates the available editions of this Arabic corpus, including Spanish and English translations, concluding that the inclusion of these writers is both commendable and beneficial to students of Iberian Studies insofar as we strive to “broaden our definition of the medieval world, highlighting the rich tapestry of cultures (whether defined by religion, ethnicity, language, educational attainment, etc.)”. By doing so, Álvarez convincingly argues, we contribute as well to the contemporary theoretical conversations on postcolonialism, feminist studies, cultural studies, and comparative literature.

The fifteenth-century *Vita Christi* composed by Sor Isabel de Villena has for some time been included among the ranks of “feminist” texts insofar as it is a product of female intentionality, namely “a book written by an abbess, prepared for printing by her successor, made public at the request of a queen and whose subject matter is largely the female characters of the Gospels” (Rosanna Cantavella and Lluïsa Parra, 1987, vii). Lesley K. Twomey, in “Sor Isabel de Villena, her *Vita Christi* and an Example of Gendered Immaculist Writing in the Fifteenth Century” identifies Sor Isabel’s “intent to build a sense of community” as her primary motivation in writing. Twomey studies the Valencian nun’s authorial intent by concentrating on her treatment of the conception and birth of the Virgin Mary in the early chapters of the *Vita Christi*. Villena’s presentation of the Immaculate Conception is carefully analyzed for clues on how she sought to mold the world of her female readership through a feminine presentation of events. In their gendered retelling, the events recounted in this particular *Vita Christi* are fused with the contemporaneous world of its female readers, as Twomey carefully details. Such a fusion empowered those *lectoras* by “recreating them as participants in the events, showing them the value of observance, reinforcing their sense of being a community”.

Isabel de Villena’s retelling of the life of Christ and its role in reshaping the canon of its time is the subject of Montserrat Piera’s article “Writing, *Auctoritas* and Canon-Formation in Sor Isabel de Villena’s *Vita Christi*”. Piera argues that Villena participated in a re-examination of the fifteenth-century literary canon by recasting the traditional *Vita Christi* to meet the needs and historical circumstances of a female audience. Villena created a feminist perspective on the life of Christ by shifting the emphasis in her text toward women.

According to Piera, Isabel's refashioning of the *Vita Christi* "demonstrates that canons are arbitrary and subjective, while flexible and ever-changing".

"¿Cómo desarrollar aquello que no se puede expresar como propio?" ponders historian Núria Silleras-Fernández in her article "*Queenship* en la Corona de Aragón en la Baja Edad Media: estudio y propuesta terminológica". "Aquello que no se puede expresar" is the concept of 'queenship', a term of reference widely utilized in the English-language, particularly in the fields of historical and women's studies, but one for which no Spanish-language equivalent exists. Undaunted by the lack of a precise term to define the focus of her scholarship, Silleras-Fernández utilizes a representative instance of three royal women of the Crown of Aragón—María de Luna, Violante de Bar, and Juana de Foix—who gambled all they had on the chance to be queen. Silleras-Fernández constructs her study of medieval queenship through the experience of these three women and from a feminist perspective. With convincing aplomb, she also proposes Castilian and Catalan terms, "reginalidad" and "reginalitat" respectively, to name that which has gone unnamed until now, opening the door for more precise debates in the future.

Our cluster concludes with a final examination of medieval queenship, as Theresa Earenfight notes the absence of the voices of queens from the "canonical culture of monarchy". In "Political Culture and Political Discourse in the Letters of Queen María de Castilla", Earenfight asks: "But what did queens have to say about the political events of their age?" As she observes, queens have been "oddly silent, or perhaps silenced" by their contemporaries and modern historians who have regarded these women as marginal or ancillary to a real discussion of the power dynamics of their times. Earenfight offers a close reading of a selection of the letters of María de Castilla, wife of Alfonso V de Aragón, demonstrating convincingly that "a queen's letters are integral components of the public political discourse of her age and vitally important to understanding medieval politics in both theory and practice". María de Castilla, argues Earenfight, should have a rightful place in the canon of Iberian women writers and as agents of statecraft because "a woman in possession of public authority must be studied as a political thinker, no matter what form her ideas took—speech, poetry, prose, or letters".

The articles included in this thematic Cluster attempt to examine ways in which scholars can challenge and reshape the canon of literary and historical texts taught as part of the curriculum in medieval Ibe-

rian studies, by redefining which genres of writing are worthy of inclusion; by welcoming the inclusion of non-Castilian texts; by incorporating female-authored texts; and by applying recent modern theoretical approaches, such as aspects of post-modern, feminist, and queer theories, to the presentation of gender. To be sure, the nine essays offered here do not exhaust the enormous variety of historical periods, movements, languages, ethnicities, social groups, etc., of the pre-modern Iberian world. They do represent some of the ways in which scholars can create more inclusive canons of literary and historical works.