



# INTRODUCCIÓN

## MEDIEVAL IBERIA IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE (EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN)

*Cualquiera tiempo pasado fue mejor*  
JORGE MANRIQUE

What is it about the Middle Ages that continues to fascinate us? Whether factual or fictional, long-gone people and their historical circumstances keep speaking to us across the centuries: the Catholic Monarchs Isabel and Fernando, King Arthur and his Round Table, the first hero of the Christian Reconquest, Pelayo, or Robin Hood, these stories represent something that remains meaningful today, stories to be not only remembered, but retold or reenacted. Our nostalgia for times of a remote past relies in great part on our idealization of the events and the players, of their society and their beliefs. The medieval past seems somehow better than the contemporary world, a simpler, purer time when a superior morality reigned, when courtly values of chivalric service prevailed, when national identities were formed. Never mind that brutal tactics were often used to attain these ideals: although contemporary uses of medieval histories often do depict bloody warfare, it tends toward the simplified “good guys vs. bad guys” format in which where the ideal ideological outcome takes precedent over the ruthless maneuvers carried out to achieve it. Novels, films, and historical enactments of battles and other significant events generally respond to this

uncomplicated view of the past. Some of these, like the annual 2 January celebration of the *Toma de Granada*, are controversial events for their one-sided glorification of an episode whose historical consequences are far more complex than the parameters of this celebration allow.

In other words, (and as the modern proverb states), “The past is not what it used to be.” It has been subjected to a process of selective memory (or selective amnesia) in which authors, artists, film directors, or even politicians, choose which aspects of the historical past to utilize for the purposes of their creation, and which to set aside as being not relevant to their intentions, or even contrary to their desired objective. These objectives can range from entertainment (such as novels, films, or television programs), to political campaigns, to propaganda. But it is not only creative artists or politicians (perhaps the ultimate creators of revisionist history), who engage in the methods to carry out their aims; over the centuries historians have also used and sometimes abused the historical method in order to produce works intended to favor one side or another of an important event, or to color the biography of a significant person. These acts of revisionism usually intend to sway public opinion from the previous or received notions of history.

Most recreations of the medieval past are products of romantic notions about what those societies were like, especially the lives of monarchs and courtiers. Indeed, the word “romantic” itself derives from the old French *romanz*, the novel of chivalry. It entered the English language by the mid-seventeenth century as a word to describe the characteristics of the chivalric tales (*OED*); nevertheless, it is not documented in Spanish until 1836, in Mariano Larra’s play *Margarita de Borgoña*, in which he refers to “un escritor romántico” (RAE). Before that time in Spain, *romance* was generally used only to refer to chivalric texts and to ballads. In the English-speaking world the word became the denomination of the Romantic movement, itself motivated by the values espoused in those medieval stories of valiant knights and their moral codes, and the ladies who inspired their feats as well as their amorous devotion.

We tend to associate the term “medievalism” with the nineteenth-century Romantics and their continued influence not only in literature, but in the Gothic revival in architecture, the pre-Raphaelite painters, and eventually the arts and crafts movement. Nevertheless the fascination with things medieval existed well before that time, centuries before the word came into the lexicon to describe it. In Spain, a nostalgia for the idealized past seems to have begun as early as the fifteenth century. In his book *The Troubadour Revival*, Roger Boase sees the resurgence of this culture as an aristocratic response to the decline of medieval values. He writes that they intended to counter this loss by archaizing their world, cultivating ideas of an earlier

era about love and court society through poetic expression. Their preferred form of court entertainment was the creation and recitation of poems that often reflected these themes, and which were collected into the *cancionero* anthologies that remain to us a window onto the literary and social tastes of the period (5).

Perhaps the most famous expression of nostalgia for a particular courtly milieu is Jorge Manrique's *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*, whose verse "¿Qué se hizo el rey don Juan?" is the preamble to a series of stanzas that evoke in detail a bygone era of a gente court of dance, music, beauty, love, and scents. This is the best example of what he had written in the first part of the poem, that "cualquiera tiempo pasado/ fue mejor." The *Coplas* still arouse in the contemporary reader a lost, if idealized, world. The poem, which beautifully expresses nostalgia, loss, the inevitability of death and the certainty of a better life beyond this one, is composed with extraordinary sensibility that has affected readers throughout the five centuries since its composition. Swayed by the *Coplas*, the reader extends the poem's emotive qualities to Manrique himself. In our unconscious revisionism, we are either not aware or prefer to forget that he was, first and foremost, a warrior, son of the formidable Master of Santiago Rodrigo Manrique; his father arranged don Jorge's marriage to a woman who, after the poet's death, complained to the Catholic Monarchs of her husband's treatment: "D. Jorge, su marido, a quien no le convenía en cosa contradecir sin que ella recibiera gran peligro de su persona e causa a le dar mala vida continuo," referring also to the "fuerza et miedo" that she suffered with him (Marino 6).

But it was the emperor Carlos V who engaged in a wholesale appropriation of the medieval chivalric model for his reign. Raised in the court of his grandfather, Maximilian I, Carlos was imbued with the chivalric spirit that his grandfather embraced. Maximilian fancied himself and his courtiers as a continuation of King Arthur's court. Some of his preferred reading included *libros de caballerías*. Inspired by what he saw around him and what he read, the young Carlos created a self-image in the same vein, and he carried this myth of self as chivalric hero into his reign as emperor. The battles against the Protestant princes for the preeminence of Catholicism was to Carlos a kind of medieval crusade. Like Amadís de Gaula, the emperor was struggling against infidels; like his grandparents the Catholic Monarchs, Carlos saw himself fighting a reconquest. Authors and artists were commissioned to produce works that depicted him as this kind of hero: many ballads about his exploits in Italy, Africa, and Europe were written and published in *pliegos sueltos*; he was the subject of several epic poems; he was immortalized in armor, mostly famously by Titian on the event of Carlos's victory at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547. But his self-fashioning on the Burgundian model of knighthood was a fantasy that in the end bore no fruit. His son and successor Felipe II had no interest at all in *libros de caballerías* and even banned their publication. His was not a reign of anachronism.

Even if Carlos V's embracing of medieval ideals failed him, the public's taste for things medieval did not wane with his abdication and death. This is most evident in the ongoing popularity of traditional poetic forms and for romances of chivalry throughout the sixteenth century. It began with the first publication of the *Cancionero General* in 1511, which was reedited and augmented eight more times until 1573. Probably following this model of poetic anthology, and in the wake of the success of the hundreds or even thousands of *pliegos sueltos* that contained ballads both old and newly composed, the *romancero* was born in the mid-1550s and remained a mainstay of erudite and popular reading publics well into the seventeenth century. The best-selling books on the Iberian Peninsula and in the New World in the 1500s were *Celestina*, in prose, and in poetry, Manrique's *Coplas*, followed by the Marqués de Santillana's *Proverbios* and Juan de Mena's *Trescientas*. The works of Garcilaso de la Vega, published for the first time in 1543, were not on the list. In many ways, and for reasons that still need to be completely explored, the sixteenth century was a medieval century both culturally and literarily. As Dámaso Alonso once wrote about poetry in the sixteenth century, "La Edad Media no quería morir" (Alonso 165). I would take that statement further: The Middle Ages not only did not want to die, it went through a series of rebirths well into the 1600s, culminating artistically in the works of the young Lope de Vega and Góngora.

The six articles in this volume demonstrate the various manners in which the Iberian Middle Ages continue to be present in contemporary culture. They illustrate ways in which the medieval past is depicted in or continues to inform novels, television programs, films, the political realm, or how medieval texts can be newly interpreted under the lens of contemporary literary theory. These essays give us insight into how medieval stories have undergone re-definition, reappropriation, or the process of selective memory. In all of them, we are able to understand how recreations of the past, or new ways of reading it, inform our contemporary consumption of the history of the Iberian peninsula in the Middle Ages. Each of them reflects in some way on the ways that Medieval Iberia is understood, misunderstood (either by ignorance or design), how it has been romanticized, idealized, and even sanitized. The overall effect of this collection is the realization of how much and how little has changed since this time, how human emotions, reactions, and desires have informed our engagement with Iberia in the Middle Ages.

In "Echoes of Hispanic Conquest in James Cameron's *Avatar*," Michael Harney takes on an important example of a cinematic appropriation of a historical narrative. Many film re-visionings of medieval stories base their screenplays on facts gleaned from narratives such as chronicles or history books, choosing episodes that best illustrate their intended focus, dramatizing for effect, adding thoughts and emotions not really accessible in the sources, and creating a dialogue that attempts to bring to

life the psychology of the protagonists. But Harney sees that Cameron's purpose was not to re-tell the narrative of the colonization of the New World. *Avatar* is a fantasy film about another, imagined conquest, a conquest with evident parallels to the Spanish domination of the indigenous peoples they encountered. Harney's detailed essay walks us through the many echoes of this historical event and the narrative of the film, where the protagonist Jake is a clear counterpart to Hernán Cortés and Neytiri is Malinche's counterpart. In addition to parsing the parallels of the Spanish colonization that appear throughout the film, Harney takes us back to pre-conquest times, to the world of romances of chivalry, which he sees as having provided the model of knight-errant behaviors for Spaniards in the New World, as well as for its extraterrestrial version in *Avatar*. This essay is a fascinating analysis of the ways in which Bernal Díaz de Castillo's and Bartolomé de las Casa's chronicles informed James Cameron's vision and re-vision of the theme of the "conquest, domination, and exploitation of indigenous people."

From film we pass to the related medium of television depictions of historical personages and events. Núria Silleras-Fernández considers two recent and very popular Spanish television series in her "Versión (no) original: *Isabel y Carlos, Rey Emperador* frente al multilingüismo y la diversidad cultural." Her main focus in this insightful essay is the decision of the series' creators to present a Spain where only Castilian was spoken, despite the fact that this monolingual representation was far from the reality of these time periods. Silleras-Fernández considers this one-language approach a missed opportunity to remind viewers of the many languages spoken on the Iberian peninsula during the fifteenth-century: Castilian, Catalan, and Portuguese chief among them, but also Hebrew and Arabic. She also points out the almost incomprehensible omission of the fact that, when he arrived in Spain in 1517, Carlos V spoke no Spanish at all. The series makes much of his "foreignness" but does not address the language issue, which was one of the important reasons for his lack of acceptance. It was a significant enough factor for the Cortes de Castilla to include his learning Castilian in their demands to him. Instead of presenting Carlos's ability to speak French and Flemish, the character is allowed to express himself in perfect Castilian, even with his grandfather's widow, Germaine de Foix. French was also apparently the language in which he generally communicated with his brother Fernando, as there exists correspondence between them in this language throughout the emperor's lifetime. Silleras-Fernández also discusses an important consequence of the monolingual representation of these historical events depicted in both series: the national and international success of *Isabel* and *Carlos V, Rey y Emperador*, unfortunately reinforces the erroneous notion that Castile and its language were the center stage of the events of the Spanish Middle Ages and Renaissance. As such, these two series, perhaps unwittingly, present an alternative history of Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Two of the essays in this collection concern the image of medieval queens that are presented in contemporary retelling of their stories. The first, written by Cristina Guardiola-Griffiths, focuses on Urraca I de León y Castilla, who reigned in the first quarter in the twelfth century. In “Urraca: Female Sovereignty Forgotten and Imagined,” she addresses the fact that Urraca’s story has been passed over in recent works of historical fiction because it does not respond to the current social and political image of the characteristics of female sovereignty. The queen seems to continue to suffer from her historical reputation: in contemporary chronicles, early historians placed emphasis on the transgressive nature of her queenship. Urraca did not conform to the virtuous queenly ideal, not only because she fought her husband and son for power over her own domains, but especially because of her sexual transgressions, having had at least one lover and two illegitimate children. Since the beginning of this century only one novel about Urraca has been published, an account whose objective is to present a more historically real account of her life, and to reestablish her reputation. Guardiola-Griffiths leads the reader through a kind of history of the reception of the Urraca story, which also has the ability to help us understand the history of attitudes towards women in power over the centuries.

Urraca was apparently at the mercy of chroniclers who defined her legacy by denigrating her character. In “Saint of the Silver Screen: Queen Isabel of Aragon’s Legacy in the Twentieth Century,” Taiko Haessler demonstrates how Isabel de Aragón, queen consort of Portugal (1282-1336), participated in the creation of her own narrative, a self-fashioning that would have been difficult for a woman to achieve in this era. During her lifetime Queen Isabel, who was considered a saint even before her death and later canonized by the Catholic Church, dedicated herself to pilgrimages, prayer, alms, and the founding of a convent, where she requested her burial instead of alongside the tomb of her husband, Dionisio I. A hagiographic account of her life written in this era became the basis for many of the works about her throughout the centuries. Haessler provides the reader with an account of the numerous ways in which Isabel de Aragón’s story has been recounted over the centuries (through literature, painting, festivals, and film), and how depictions of her have changed since the nineteenth century, when this queen became the object of scholarly inquiry as well. In the twentieth century, Isabel became the protagonist of a Franco-era film (*Reina Santa*, 1947) which, like most of the films produced during the dictatorship, served the propagandistic purpose of glorifying Spain’s past. Haessler concludes with a discussion of recent historical fiction about the queen, which provide more nuanced interpretations of her life that attempt to delve more deeply into what her life might have been like.

The medieval legacy in current Spanish politics is the theme of David Arbesú's "Usos políticos del Éxodo: del rey Pelayo al siglo XXI." In the essay, the reader is made to clearly understand the power of revisionist history, a process in which historians seem to have always indulged. Arbesú takes us back to the late ninth century and the court of Alfonso III, whose chroniclers refashioned the history of Pelayo, identifying him as descended from ancient and noble lineages, and creating parallels between the hero of Covadonga and the biblical story of Moses. This alternative history of Pelayo as divine agent lasted through the fifteenth century as the dominant narrative and defining image of Pelayo. In the centuries that followed this vision of events both changed and remained the same: the Habsburg universal monarchy, for example, found it convenient to perpetuate this mythology in order to legitimize itself. Arbesú presents an intriguing update of the use of the Moses narrative in contemporary Spanish politics, explaining how Artur Mas appropriated the image of the Biblical patriarch in his 2012 campaign. Mas depicted himself on a publicity poster with open arms before a wave of Catalan flags. The media did not hesitate commenting on Mas's fashioning of self as Moses, parting the Red Sea, leading his people to the promised land. Nevertheless, as Arbesú wonders at the end of his essay, it is not clear whether contemporary citizens are able to "read" this kind of Messianic message that was very clear to people who lived centuries ago; whether they know enough about history to understand the parallels that are being drawn.

The final essay of this volume moves in another direction, that of current modes of interpretation of medieval texts. In "From Scopophilia to Abjection: Vision and Blindness in the *Monja que se arrancó los ojos*," Andrew Beresford applies contemporary literary theory that sheds new light on what has been traditionally been seen as a simple *exemplum*, in which the nun blinds herself as a means to avoid the lechery of a king, who has been gazing upon her with lust. Beresford evokes a series of theoretical models — from Freud to Lacan, Kristeva to Homi Bhabha, along with other relevant interpretive frameworks — to arrive at new understanding of the *exemplum's* broader, more universal meaning. Through careful explanation of the Christian symbolism of sight and blindness, light and dark, Beresford leads the reader to his conclusion about the real nature of the deceptively simple tale. Through her self-mutilation the nun not only rejects the sexual advances of the king, she essentially reaffirms her loyalty to Christ, her heavenly lover, who miraculously restores her sight. Beresford understands the tale as a metaphor for the Church's central image, the healing of the blind, leading the faithful from the darkness to the light, from death to eternal life.

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