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**Golden Age Studies in the 21st Century: A View of
the Culture Wars**

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Until the mid-nineteen sixties, Golden Age literature in North American departments of Spanish literature held sway over its younger competitor, Latin American literature. At the time, courses on poetry, prose, and theater produced by the great authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—called ‘classical’ literature in Spain—took precedent over those in any other field. This was due to the fact that medieval was considered by some a deviation from or a prologue to the literature, and Latin American perceived as either a reductive copy of European literary movements or a collection of nationalist manifestations that were studied for mainly political reasons. With the exception of sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Gongorist poetry, Colonial literature had yet to claim a name or space in the literary canon. That literature of the Golden Age had been taught in numerous universities by Spaniards exiled during the Civil War and by British expatriates consolidated and confirmed its privileged status. Its position, equal to that of Shakespeare studies in English Departments, combined with its dazzling aesthetic value to draw a good number of Anglo-American students, who never considered their nationality an impediment to the major. Scholars such as Manuel Durán, Stephen Gilman, Francisco Márquez Villanueva, Alexander Parker, Elias Rivers, Gonzalo Sobejano, and Bruce Wardropper, some of whom had studied under the brilliant philologists Dámaso Alonso and Américo



Castro, trained the young students who are now the field's senior scholars.

The emergence of the Latin American literary "boom" (initially an American phenomenon) and the growth of comparative literature departments during the 1960s saw the decline of Golden Age studies on American campuses. The appearance of US Latino studies and of feminism as theoretical categories within the academy, with their concomitant histories of adversity and advocacy, further drove away students, whose consciousness had been raised by the struggle for equal rights for ethnic groups and for women. The rejection of the literature's imperialist thrust, attributed to it as a product of the abusive Habsburg regime despite the marginalized condition of its authors, dovetailed with university students' attacks on US imperialism during and after the Viet Nam war.

The drop in student enrollments and in the numbers of majors and PhD degrees coincided with the lean years in academic positions in the 1970s that, for better or worse, culminated in the politicization of the humanities. At worst, the exclusivist attitudes of some Spanish faculty and at the very least, the politically unreflective nature of its studies both in Spain and the US, contributed to the field's isolation and even demonization by students who felt that their claim to both Spanish and American indigenous cultures was being dismissed and degraded by the imposition of a Eurocentric curriculum and a 'pure' Castilian language.

The movement sparked faculty solidarity: enclosing the term within quotation marks to call attention to its historical incongruity: some specialists of this tarnished Golden Age found they could more easily identify with writers addressing the postcolonial conflicts of Latin American countries and with Chicano and US-Caribbean authors who were fighting their own political and cultural battles in this country.

At the same time, with fewer positions available, departments reconstituted their curricula to meet the professional as well as the ideological needs of their students. From the 1990s on, state universities downsized their Golden Age faculty from the usual two (and sometimes three) members to one. The University of Wisconsin, the University of Minnesota, Ohio State University, and other universities known for their strength in the field reduced their faculty numbers to balance the loss of interest by students and faculty. Over the years, some have eliminated the field altogether: although its prestigious Mellon chair was held by Golden Age specialists A.A. Parker, Javier Herrero, Gonzalo Sobejano, and Edmond Cros, the University of Pittsburgh no longer has any faculty active in either Golden Age or medieval literature. Campuses built in the sixties had already anticipated the cut: within the University of California



system, the Irvine campus has had only one specialist in Spanish Golden Age since its founding in 1965. Currently, UC-San Diego has no active faculty in either Golden Age or medieval literature.

In contrast, the more traditional campuses have rejected the trend: UC-Santa Barbara has, since at least the 1950s, maintained three specialists. And UC-Berkeley, which offers one of the few degrees in Romance philology in the country, and where, in 1918, Rudolph Schevill gave as his Faculty Research Lecture “Cervantes and Spain’s Golden Age of Letters,” also lists three Golden Age specialists on their faculty.

I mention the UC system not only because I am most familiar with its campuses (I was the sole Golden Age specialist at UC-Irvine from 1980 until 1995), but because the state of California served as a major battleground for Chicano activism, literally, in its fields and on its campuses. Its most prestigious private university, Stanford, has not had an active Golden Age scholar since 1996 (and no medievalist since the 1970s).

Yet the reduction in Golden Age specialists (and the resultant shrinking of courses and degrees) did not ensure the acceptance of newly-formed ethnic studies within Spanish departments across the US. While UC-Irvine’s Spanish and Portuguese Department had up to three full professors in Chicano Studies, other campuses assigned ethnic studies courses to specially designed programs. Because its literature is written mainly in English, US Latino studies are usually housed in English departments, a decision that remains controversial for its implied or real rejection of US multiculturalism by Spanish departments. The belief that Golden Age studies, with its imperialist overtones, is somehow the enemy nonetheless dies hard among minority students, many of whom have told me that they had not imagined the literature so satisfying or so relevant.

Academic activism has not been the only force behind the toppling of Golden Age studies from its place in the hierarchy. All fields in Spanish have suffered from what has been called their belatedness; their late arrival on the theoretical scene. The parallel theoretical movements of the early 1970s that resulted in the so-called postmodern turn in English, French, and comparative literature departments (which seldom accepted Spanish as one of their languages, but that’s another story), were ignored in Spanish departments, where theoretical concepts and constructs—from Russian formalism to Derridean deconstruction—made little mark until the 1980s. Unsurprisingly, since belief in the author always remained strong in the field, psychoanalytical studies increasingly developed a following despite the anti-Freudian backlash in Anglo-English literatures.

I do not bring this up to disparage my colleagues. Spanish criticism has long depended on the 'vida y obra' approach. While some may consider this method outdated, for Golden Age literature, it carried with it the politically radical discovery that many of its authors were not as imbued with the essentialist Spanish character or Catholic faith as previously asserted. Américo Castro's invaluable contribution to the field was based on his rethinking of the origins of Spanish literature, a reference point that would have been rejected by the new conceptual system aspiring to be 'without center, without origin, or without end,' as Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, in their 1971 edition of the *Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, pronounced postmodern studies.

Even though it originated in positivism, the traditional historicist approach preferred by many Golden Age critics allowed an understanding of Spanish culture as studied by the French annals school. French schools of criticism, in fact, have a long history of important contributions to Golden Age studies (ironically, however, their practitioners are more respected in Spain than their US counterparts who follow similar historicist approaches.) The analytical methods that circulated in Golden Age studies in lieu of deconstruction and other postmodern theories, therefore, adhered to a strong materialist base. True, other approaches were less progressive, but they also served to emphasize the Spanish Golden Age's contribution to world literature. The thematic approach of the British school, for instance, significantly differentiated the Golden Age comedia from English theater. And philologists reconstructed libraries in search of sources long before the current interest in the history of the book. Perhaps the most wide-ranging of all belated influences has been that of gender studies. Holding to the conviction that no culture is entirely known or understood by studying only half its population, materialist feminist critics have not only broadened the literary canon, they have revised Spanish history by studying women's lives and works. Others are reconsidering social construction and constraints from the theoretical bases of gender and queer studies.

Spanish belatedness, then, has actually had a positive impact on critical studies of Golden Age texts, whose scope has increasingly broadened to become interdisciplinary. Already heavily bent toward history, younger Golden Age critics have readily followed the analytical model proffered by Steven Greenblatt's New Historicism. They have also learned from the more politicized studies by British cultural critics, as their focus has moved from the printed text to investigations of the social meanings of rituals, bodies, and clothing, and of non-literary texts,

such as conduct manuals, letters, medical, religious, and economic treatises. Indeed, if I have kept the field tied to its literary past by utilizing the term ‘Golden Age,’ I confess it has been a rhetorical strategy to call attention to one of its most significant changes, since its previous literary periodizations of Renaissance and Baroque, subsumed under the uniquely Spanish rubric of ‘el siglo de oro,’ have been increasingly replaced by the historical term of ‘early modern.’

Again, this is not to disparage the field, whose literature remains, without doubt, one of the most brilliant examples of intellectual wit and artistic mastery ever conceived. Nonetheless, perhaps driven by the fear that academic positions are again shrinking, and following the lead of Anglo-English scholars, the most recent publications by its scholars touch but lightly on literature, choosing instead to venture into what is now labeled as ‘cultural studies.’ In contrast to the many fulsome celebrations that marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote*’s Part I (1605) last year, which tended to apotheosize its author, most scholars are working toward a fuller understanding of the cultural aspects inflected in early modern texts. While the recent interest in moriscos, long overdue after so many years of *converso* studies, may have been wrongly encouraged by the recent violence and terrorism, it demonstrates the bearing of cultural studies. Indeed, like its belatedness, the field’s loss of hegemony, while not without consequences, need not prove fatal, even as departments are questioning their divisions by chronological periods and by language. These departments are, per force, asking questions that should encourage us to actively participate in the discussions, both to underscore the importance of the early modern studies and to suggest ways in which the studies can be redeployed.

The push toward cultural studies, although decried by some for its perceived lack of disciplinary rigor, has opened up timely and exciting opportunities to revitalize ‘Golden Age’ studies as part of an interdisciplinary endeavor. The venture aims at breaking down the conventional divisions among fields to contribute even more strongly to their intellectual and curricular offerings. I submit the following as examples: the rise of Colonial studies in the past decade should unite students of the literatures and cultures of both sides of the Atlantic, not solely as is currently happening in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in the early modern period. The theoretical transcendence, as well as the very real crossings of such natural frontiers as oceans and land masses necessarily place in doubt traditional views of national borders; likewise, the study of empire, both as a concept and as a realizable political entity, requires far more theorization and analysis than our current anachronistic conceptualizations of nation-states. Gender remains



a theoretical and critical category that serves to bring together students across languages while noting major differences. For instance, early modern English women share similar subject positions with their continental counterparts, yet assume a unique legal status when married. As part of its documentation of the culture, archival studies help unearth the quotidian activities that engaged early modern women's lives. Performance studies that incorporate Spanish theater with other theatrical traditions can also furnish much information on the material aspects of staging and acting theater. These are only a few of the ways that the cultural studies of early modern Spain may expand the field, contribute to other areas and disciplines, and attract students. In compelling us to assess the past beyond its literary production, cultural studies—as both a political position and as a series of theoretical approaches—provides us with a key to reconsider the future of Golden Age studies.

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