

And How 'Western' was the Rest of Medieval Europe?

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It is a special honor to be speaking to so many of the distinguished individuals from whom I learned to think about Spain, medieval Spain in particular, in ways quite different from the traditional ones. The earliest part of my re-education, as you might expect, consisted of learning about all those things about medieval Spain, its cultural diversity and hybridness, that many wish had been left in the closet, as Spitzer apparently once said to Castro. This is undoubtedly one of the only groups in the world that requires no further explanation of the kind of conversion that such an education produced. But as I continued my studies, I became increasingly interested in the validity of our assumptions about the cultural nature of the rest of medieval Europe. The question seemed to me necessary because the evidence of Castro and the *Castristas* on Spain's "other" cultures, about Maimonides and Averroes, for example, about *kharjas* and other aljamiado literature, also indicated that much of this cultural production had had at least *some* impact outside the Iberian peninsula. And some of the really radical scholars, from Juan Andrés in the eighteenth century¹ to Menéndez Pidal in our own, seemed to believe their impact and importance went both far and deep beyond Spain itself. Most importantly, in order for our discussions about Spain itself to be as clear and meaningful as possible, the question of the cultural identity of the rest of medieval Europe must be posed explicitly, and in some measure answered.

I would like to begin by reading a small bit from Curtius' short but pointed note on "Spain's cultural belatedness":

Although he wrote in the 15th century, Alfonso de la Torre is almost untouched by the Latin Scholasticism of the 13th century and by *genuine* Aristotelianism. What he gives to the Spain of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century is an eclectic rehandling of learning that goes back partly to late Antiquity and the pre-Middle Ages, . . . partly to the Latin Renaissance of twelfth-century France, . . . partly to the heretical Aristotelianism of the Jewish and Arabic thinkers of twelfth-century Spain. In other words: An author who writes in 1440 and is published in 1480

can find readers in Spain . . . although he practically ignores all that *European* literature, science, and philosophy have produced since 1200—not only Thomism, that is, but also Humanism and the early Italian Renaissance. (Curtius 1953: 542-543, emphases mine)

Curtius makes important assumptions about European cultural and literary history that have been shared by many. First: that there *is* a cultural-literary-historical entity in the medieval and early modern period with identifiable characteristics that can be meaningfully labelled “western” or “European”. The second is that whatever Spain was must be seen, understood and analysed, for better or worse, *in terms* of that presumed cultural entity, that being our yard stick, inescapably, for whether and how Spain is belated or not, different or not, unique or not. This second point is perhaps the only one on which Castro and Sánchez Albornoz and even Green would agree with each other and with Curtius.

Moreover, like most literary and cultural historians who have followed him, Curtius does not recognize the extent to which the twelfth-century Renaissance is Andalusian (rather than Latin and French) in origin and very much derivative of the “heretical” Aristotelianism of Spanish Jews and Arabs, and of its handmaidens. The use in the passage cited above of the terms “genuine” and “European”, along with their implied opposites, further indicates the extent to which post-twelfth-century developments that come to provide the bases for our definitions of what constitutes “Europeanness” are not seen in terms of their strong Andalusian heritage. It is revealing to note that Curtius draws his vision of medieval Spain, as quoted at length in the two pages that precede the passage above, from Sánchez Albornoz and one of his excursuses on the unfortunate Semitic interlude and its retardation of Spain’s development.

It is critical for Hispanists to reexamine all of these assumptions. Any discussion of how different or not Spain and medieval Spanish culture is from the rest of Europe necessarily assumes that there *is* a distinct “western” (i.e. Christian and Latin) cultural entity to which it can be contrasted, and this is true whether the contrast that is made is the anti-Semitic and negative one of Sánchez Albornoz or the infinitely more positive and thoughtful one of Américo Castro. As Professor Silverman noted earlier, meaning lies in discontinuity and contrast. And while many productive years have been spent discussing the problem of the myth of Spain, further attention should now be devoted to the myth of Europe, a question I would consider to be an extension of the work of Américo Castro.

The very title of Curtius' book provides as precise a résumé of that general vision of medieval Europe—to which the mythical Spain is in turn compared—as one could want: medieval, and, eventually, modern Europe, as a more or less pure Christian and Latin cultural entity. In citing Curtius, and in taking his most fundamental assumptions as exemplary, I am not choosing an easy target for this revisionist enterprise, nor am I dealing with an outdated scholar with antiquated ideas. Curtius' general notions on the subject are pointed and precise formulations of ideas—maxims, in some cases—which are widely held today, and he continues to be influential among medievalists. While few *Castristas* would share such general assumptions, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are far from being the mainstream. Those views of medieval Europe as something predominantly *not* Semitic (to turn the tables a bit here in our comparison) are far from out of date and continue to be shared by many or most medievalists, Hispanists or not.

But Curtius' statement is also appealing because of the suppositions he assumes to be beyond questioning. What does he cite as his examples of the constituent elements of "Europeanness"? First, in the realm of philosophy: Thomism and "real" or "genuine" Aristotelianism. To uphold Aquinas as quintessentially European, medieval European, is something one could not agree with more: reader of Averroes, Maimonides and Avicenna, part of his self-assigned task was to reconcile the apparent conflict of faith and reason, as his predecessors had attempted before him. The impetus for such a reconciliation was the astonishing and, for some, alarming, popularity of Averroism, usually euphemistically referred to as radical Aristotelianism. I can only assume that when Curtius says "genuine" Aristotelianism he must be speaking of Aristotle as a "pure" European, unmediated by the "heretical" Averroes. And yet it would be peculiar to adduce the existence of such an Aristotle in the European Middle Ages, not just because such an Aristotle was largely unknown for a long period of time but because all of the exciting, controversial, and influential developments in Aristotelianism were provoked by Averroes' Aristotle. Even Kristeller, hardly a radical *Castrista* by anyone's measure, has admitted, granted in somewhat hushed tones, that if by an Averroist we mean someone who was working with Aristotle as mediated by Averroes then all medieval Aristotelians were Averroists (Kristeller 1961). Those cornerstones of westernness for Curtius, and many others, turn out, when scrutinized without so thick a veil of "Orientalist" prejudice, to be remarkably dependent on the hybrid Spain that supposedly does not even know them. In the associated realm of scientific developments in the twelfth century and beyond, as well as in many of the technological revolutions that

began to accord Europe global preeminence, the role played by al-Andalus was critical.

Although Curtius does not name names when he mentions developments in European literature supposedly unknown and unimportant in Spain, we can readily supply them for him drawing from the standard canon which, in some measure, Curtius himself helped define: the troubadours writing in Provençal and those writing in Sicilian, both in Arabized and Andalusianized environments; Dante, whose ability to deal with and interpolate a variety of different Hispano-Arabic texts is largely unknown to Dantisti and which is still in need of further consideration despite the considerable work done since Asín's revolutionary proposal;² Boccaccio and Chaucer, whose familiarity with Andalusian or Andalusian-transmitted narratives is also in need of further exploration and which was undoubtedly not limited to Petrus Alfonsi, and so on . . .

What I am trying to suggest is that medieval Europe, mostly because of the influence of medieval Spain and Spaniards—defined to include all its Arabic, Jewish, and "mixed" components, to be sure—is considerably more like the hybrid and productively polymorphic al-Andalus of Américo Castro than like the more static, unicultural Europe of Curtius and so many others. Completely aside from the issue of what is the nature of Spain's cultural identity, we must confront the facts, or at least the indications, that the cultural nature and identity of medieval Europe, particularly the Europe that flourishes in what Haskins called the twelfth-century Renaissance, is one that is critically dependent on the intellectual stimuli coming from Spain. At issue, for the moment, is not whether or not Spain was culturally belated, as Curtius egged on by Sánchez Albornoz would say. Rather it is whether in fact the "Europe" and the "western culture" by which Spain's own cultural achievements and identity are measured, are any more purely "Christian and Latin" than were Aristotle in the twelfth century and Frederick II in the thirteenth.

The question remains, of course, of why and how a Spain, what had been an al-Andalus, once at the forefront of the movements and currents that were at heart of the new Europe, would eventually turn its back on so much of what the rest of Europe would accept and redefine as its own. Part of the confusion and prejudice reflected in both Sánchez Albornoz's and Curtius' attitudes has been created by projection backwards: beyond the twelfth century and into the modern period both Spain and the Arab world fell far behind the rest of Europe in many spheres. But the casual connection is certainly not, as Don Américo saw so clearly, what his opponents maintained: that the domination of the Jews and the Arabs had impeded progress and prevented

“Europeanization”. The more convincing argument is that a Spain intent on banishing what was “impure” also succeeded in rejecting much of what was to become modern and European. The irony, of course, is how much of that new Europe had come from Spain when it was al-Andalus, when Maimonides and Averroes were still Spaniards, when the fertility of *convivencia* became poetry in the *muwashshahāt*. It is the Spain that turns its back on such a rich heritage that falls behind a Europe which embraced or adapted much of it—to its greater glory and benefit.

I hope it is not far-fetched to imagine that Castro would not have found objectionable this attempt to extend some of his analyses on the vitality and vigor of cultural diversity to many of the phenomena that transformed medieval Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Don Américo was eminently successful in converting many Hispanists to the *realidad histórica* of a Spain that was considerably more than just Latin and Christian. His brilliant insights into the vigor of polymorphism can and should be applied beyond the Iberian peninsula when what was happening in that Spain of the three religions was of considerable importance beyond the Pyrenees.

Although Castro’s work has made it more difficult—but far from impossible—to view medieval Spain as “pure”, our antiseptic views of the rest of Europe, one assumed to have the purity of blood and culture of that pre-Castro image of “Spain”, remain virtually unchallenged in mainstream medievalist scholarship. And although the task of convincing fellow Hispanists of the value and validity of Castro’s work itself is far from fully accomplished, that effort should be coupled, it seems to me, with an attempt to convince fellow Europeanists that Spain was not only *not* culturally belated but that in its golden age, before the expulsions, it was, more often than not, at its forefront. He succeeded, at least in some measure, in establishing all of those who had previously been the “Other” as being legitimate Spaniards. But they have yet to be established as Europeans.

The belatedness of Hispanism is often lamented by those who feel less respected than our colleagues in related disciplines—French or English, for example. But this is in some measure, at least *vis à vis* the medieval period, a situation created by those who lament it. Boccaccio certainly knew Petrus Alfonsi; Guido Cavalcanti knew his Averroes all too well; Brunetto Latini undoubtedly knew the translations of the *mi²rāj* tradition executed at Toledo while he was there; William of Aquitaine probably heard more than one *muwashshaha* sung at the bilingual courts of northern Spain he frequently visited; the poets of the *scuola siciliana* undoubtedly heard them as well and

were no less familiar with Maimonides, one of Frederick II's favorite authors. But too many Hispanomedievalists have turned their backs on such texts and authors in a fashion parallel to that of the Spain that sought to purify itself.

I would go so far as to suggest that the question to ask as a measure of cultural and intellectual progress in the medieval European world might be reversed. For, if we realize that in Paris and Bologna and London in the thirteenth century being in the avant-garde meant having the latest Averroist treatise, fresh from Toledo or Palermo, is it not more appropriate to ask not how "western" or "European" was medieval Spain but rather how successful in being "Spanish" was the rest of Europe? Fortunately, for the sake of much of twelfth-century humanism and what we have come to accept as some of Europe's greatest cultural achievements, the answer is that many Europeans were quite successful in accepting what Spain—the hybrid Spain of Américo Castro, of course—had to offer. In the spirit of heresy, I would suggest that such might perhaps be a more compelling meaning of the rubric *Spain and the Western Tradition*.

Notes

¹On Juan Andrés, one of the earliest proponents of the "Arabist theory," see Mazzeo 1965. See also Boase 1976 for a full discussion of the impact of his ideas on the development of thought on the origins of courtly poetry.

²For a full bibliography of work done on Dante and the Arabic-Islamic tradition, and its possible influence on the *Commedia*, see Cantarino 1965.

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