

María Rosa Menocal
Yale University

Although I am sure many people wish never to hear about 1492 again, after its many uses and abuses last year, for a medievalist it is an incredibly economic trope: it is the end of pluralistic Spain, the marker of the expulsions; and it is the beginning of what everyone else calls modern, what makes us—our texts, our universe—pre-modern, un-modern. Not. But let me remind you, at the risk of annoying you, of the key liminal events of that remarkable year, because I need them all for my remarks: the first event of the year, on the first of January, is the taking of Granada, last outpost of al-Andalus, what Spain was called when and where Arabic was its magical language; and although the Spaniards who were Muslims are granted religious freedoms in the capitulation agreements signed these would be shamefully abrogated in short order. Several months later, on the last day of March, the decree expelling Spaniards who were Jews was signed, and they were given three months in which to make their peace and say good-bye to the most spectacular of homelands. The date of the expulsion was, however, slightly renegotiated by Isaac Abravanel, so that it would fall several days after the 31st of July, so that the fateful last day in Sefarad would be the 9th of Ab in the Jewish liturgical calendar, the anniversary of the Destruction of the Temple which is, of course, the beginning of the first Diaspora. In the middle of the summer, the third event: Nebrija publishes his grammar of Castilian and, by the way, this is the first *gramatica* of

any of the European vernaculars. Finally, of course, it is on the second of August that Christopher Columbus leaves the Old world, the pre-modern, for the new, the modern. But let me point out that the second of August in 1492 is the 9th of Ab, that Columbus is only one of thousands who sail away that day, when the second Diaspora is written over the first. The Spaniards may not have been the first or the only or the last Cabbalists but they were, arguably, the best. And, by the way, he does take with him the only kind of translator imaginable, one who would be able to speak the magic tongue, Arabic, to others, although it would soon be never again heard in Spain itself.

So, let me turn now to the questions about cultural history and the first question I will answer is the last one we were asked: "Which form or forms should the study of texts and culture, in a *Hispanic* context, assume in the future?" I start with this because it is, self-evidently, a very easy one, and because that is something I have spent the better part of a decade trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to do. The answer, of course, is that the very notion of what Hispanic means is—or rather should be—radically problematic for any medievalist. Sadly, it is, in fact, rarely questioned, and this has left us with a "Hispanic" canon of medieval literature which, in fact, by privileging, retrospectively, the texts of the aftermath of 1492, of the expulsions and of Nebrija's grammar, focuses either exclusively or predominantly on a language and its texts which were not the culturally prestigious ones in medieval Europe. It is hardly surprising, as a result, that medieval Hispanism is notoriously on the margins of medieval studies. Indeed, at the same time the canon is constructed on the basis of many secondary texts, because they legitimize Nebrija, the most prestigious texts go ignored—or assigned by us to other cultural constructs—because they are not "Hispanic"—Judah Halevi's poems were on those ships that sailed away and the Spaniards who wrote in Arabic, from Averroes to Ibn 'Arabi, have also lived in exile from Spain since those years. That is, of course, why writers like Juan Goytisolo live in exile, along with them.

Now, we all know, of course, that writing literary history is in greater or lesser measure an activity of cultural legitimation, in the case of what we call Spain, but which before 1492 is called, in that

pluri-lingual and often heterodox culture, al-Andalus and Sefarad, the problem seems to me a particularly poignant one because what has been written out, in legitimizing the cultural constructs of the events of 1492, are the cultures that were once dominant. In other words, it is important to emphasize—because this too is a fact that is often elided—that it is not a case like that of, say, women writers, whose cultural positions were almost always marginal and where the role of the new cultural history is to retrieve texts that were marginal in the first place and read, within them, the often-powerful rage and resistance to marginality. But in this case what Hispanism's definition of Hispanic has done is to exclude what was *central*, the highest cultural achievements of the medieval period, the most influential writers of Europe, from the philosophers who dictate the terms of European philosophy for hundreds of years, to the songwriters who give Europe the shape and sound of its love songs, forever. So, in shaping the Hispanic medieval cultural construct using a post-1492 definition of what constitutes Hispanic, the field has made itself a backwater rather than, as it might be, central and essential. Indeed, if Hispanism had done a decent job of grasping its own centrality, by understanding that Hispanic in the medieval period must mean what is Jewish and Muslim, what is Hebrew and Arabic, when Eric Clapton cleaned up at the Grammy's last week we might all have rejoiced in the legacy of "Layla" as much a part of the Andalusian heritage as of rock's.

This observation brings me in one last minute to the other crucial way in which medieval literary studies must aggressively resist the impositions of the paradigms of 1492: its literature should not continue to be seen as pre-modern, as distant from us, as very much on the other side of an essential epistemological construct. The conceit of evolution in literary history—and the concomitant primitiveness and distance of the Middle Ages—is tied to a narrative construct rooted firmly in a whole parcel of Renaissance anxieties and, sadly, medievalists have become the most abject practitioners of that construct that distances and marginalizes medieval literature from ourselves and our culture. And this is, once again, more than a simple loss, it is also ironic and poignant since within medieval philosophical and literary constructs it is intimacy with history itself and with all literary texts, regardless of their

temporal provenance, that is cultivated. History, if you are medieval, is culture, our culture, and all the texts that we read, wherever and whenever they come from, become a part of our culture. We are what we read.

Let me close by suggesting what will probably seem extremely odd to most of you and say that some of the most radical and brilliant articulations, both pragmatic and theoretical of the best that could be done in cultural studies today already exist and it involves re-centering what was explosively central in medieval Europe and has only been marginalized by the modernity that has never been able to really accept or imagine a culture so far ahead of itself. Both the modern and the Renaissance have a very hard time with the post-modern, the medieval.