

Four Distinctive Features in the Early Dawn of Vernacular Spanish Poetics: Between Classical Influence and the Italian Style Ruling

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Abstract During most of the 16th century, Spanish Poetics was understood as something difficult to figure it out. Therefore, the first poetic standards that organized and fixed the new way of doing poetry — both in their principles and in their uses — did not appear in the Iberian Peninsula until almost the last two decades of the 16th century. However, this fact does not imply that the Spanish poets were not caught up in the new winds of change, which had started early in the same century in Italy. Therefore, some treatises, which seek to explain and systematize a new poetic regulation just all in Spanish, rather than in Latin, begin to appear timidly from 1580 onwards. This article will attempt to propose and summarize four distinctive features that explain why the modern Spanish poetic treatises come so chronologically late regarding the rest of Europe. In addition, it will point out the fundamental aspects of the new modern Spanish Poetics, considering the most significant titles that were published in Spain at the dawn of the Early Modern Age.

Key words Poetics, Classical antiquity, Italian-style, vernacular Spanish, features

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Apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari.

Seneca

No todos los pensamientos y consideraciones de amor, y de las más cosas que toca la poesía cayeron en la mente del Petrarca y del Bembo y de los antiguos.

Fernando de Herrera (16th century)

When studying of how it must be developed and conceived a literary text, firstly it is indispensable to know the ideological, cultural, and literary background of the literary moment it has been devised. Concerning that, the well-known Spanish literary academic Claudio Guillén (142) pointed out quite rightly that “every period, every school or every critical approach takes its situational prism, that it is to say, it is reformatted from other issues or questions that constitute their historical setting or in connection with it.” Thus, the moment muse of the literary theorists will help us to reconstruct widely the broadly literary sense of any text.

Therefore, in the late Spanish 16th century, —as the modern Spanish poetic language started to consolidate and the dawn of the century—, many factors and historical events started to converge and markedly affect the birth and subsequent development of Spanish Poetics by itself. This meant that at the beginning of the Spanish Early Modern Age (mid-late 16th century), the early new Spanish Poetics features noteworthy characteristics that stemmed from the idiosyncrasies of the political, social, cultural and historical development.

This brief discussion aims to put forward four general distinctive features on this peculiar situation that shaped modern Spanish poetry theoretical precepts and provides some wide general arguments that would help to explain it based on its classical shaping influences.

The Spanish Poetics during the 16th Century

Contrary to what it occurred in much of Europe, throughout the Middle Age and Early Renaissance, poetry did not play a significant role as a specific and distinguishing subject area in vernacular Spanish literature. The few theoretical studies about poetry found could be included in some grammar and rhetoric books under the sub-heading of *artes versificatoriae* or *artes poetriae*¹ and they are rather

1 The *artes versificatoriae* or *artes potriae* “covers the borderline area between Rhetoric and Poetics. The expression *poetria*, which appeared around 1200, represents the instruction of verse writing and achieving the stylistic effect through tropes, figures, composition and other means. [...]. In its final stages, medieval rhetoric gradually but more consistently applied its rules to the works of literature as well as preaching in national languages” (Kraus 92).

simple descriptive texts more than an analysis or pedagogical document on the poetic craft.

Poetic theoretical treaties in the new established Spanish language —dealing with the subject exclusively and with enough comprehensiveness— are not frequently found until well the beginning of 17th century. This situation has led some critics to insist to this day on the perhaps misleading idea that Spanish poets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were “prodigious improvisers” because they sought the direct empirical imitation of Italian Renaissance poets¹. This somewhat elevated conception of the genius of 16th century Spanish poets is perhaps somewhat inaccurate. However, although the chronological data seems to support this claim, it is also in somehow deceptively because until 1580 it does not appear published the first two modern poetic theoretical attempts²: the hardly known *El Arte Poética en Romance Castellano* by the Portuguese Miguel Sánchez de Lima and the renowned *Anotaciones a la poesía de Garcilaso* by the celebrated Fernando de Herrera. These publications about modern poetry principles in the new vernacular Spanish language, very delayed and extemporaneous in chronological terms, have helped bolster this high regard of Spanish poets of this period.

Moreover, it is also true that generally any instructional compendium on any subject is always created *a posteriori* what it aims to prescribe. However, if this element is also considered, the influence of the new Spanish poetic theoretical treatises on Spanish authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries must have been rather limited and even more questionable in the most innovative poets.

Nevertheless, it is likewise important to underscore that all literary authors —even the most unconventional— strive for their work to follow the accepted artistic and rhetorical channels, whether implied or intrinsic, carved out by the transcendent literary texts in their field. This fact was, if anything, more significant during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the theory of *imitatio* of Classical antiquity models permeated everything. It implied following a tradition, which was already certified and therefore prestigious.

Moreover, the clear majority of Spanish literate and knowledgeable people of the time had a fair mastery of Italian. Therefore, from early on, they had access to a wealth of Italian theoretical treatises, which were decisively instrumental in the creation of the extraordinary literary activity of the next century poetry.

1 This idea comes principally from Vilanova (567—692).

2 We call these two books “attempts” because although they deal with poetic analysis, any of them were designed or conceived as a poetic treatise themselves. It has been the later critical labour the one that has defined them as poetic instructions.

Accordingly, it would perhaps be more appropriate to change our perspective of the scientific approach to them, from “prodigious improvisers” to the excellent interpretation that López Bueno makes in this regard. She considers that Spanish 16th century authors are “the most eloquent example of empirical learning” (98), not only for their assimilation of the Italian literary world—with varying results—but also for their continual scouring of Greek and for Roman classics, especially authors such as Ovid, Virgil or Horace.

Thus, it can also be said that modern poetic prescriptive standards in new vernacular Spanish, although far removed from the poetic yearnings of the moment, are born and structured simultaneously to its practice but it took more time to put in words. This parallel receptivity changed throughout the 17th century, as Spanish poetic theorists began to be more interested in the actual literary activity around them and immediately, they started to score and discuss about. This culminated in the famous poetic controversies started the next century by poets like Luis de Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo, perhaps one of the most significant and decisive epicentres and poetic ideological battles in the Spanish literature.

Shaping the Birth of Modern Vernacular Spanish Poetical Treatises

Since the early 1530s, the Italian manners and style increasingly guided how poetry must be written in the new consolidated vernacular Spanish language. Many Spanish authors travelled continuously to Italy and established strong ties, including acclaimed Spanish Renaissance poets such as Garcilaso de la Vega, Gutierre de Cetina or Hernando de Acuña, among others. These authors gave proof of the modern poetic reality that would very soon begin to emerge in Spain. In this sense, it is important to remember that in 1543 the widow of Juan Boscán (the first Spanish translator of Baldasare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*) published in Barcelona a volume entitled *Las obras de Boscán y algunas de Garcilaso de la Vega*. This work marks a clear path to follow (Petrarch-style approaches and classical Latin references) and became a watershed event in the ultimate nationalisation of Italian-style new Spanish poetry.

To understand why and how this new poetry arises in Spain, it is first important to bear in mind the long time span between the publication of the ultimate example of the courtly lyric poets of the medieval songbooks, Juan del Encina’s medieval poetic treatise *Arte de Trobar*, in 1496 and the publication in 1580 of the two first poetic modern treatises attempts abovementioned —*El Arte Poética en Romance*

Castellano by Sánchez de Lima¹, but most notably, Fernando Herrera's *Anotaciones a la poesía de Garcilaso*—. These two texts represent the turning point and transition to another and fresh way of understanding the new poetry written in Spanish language, which it will become delineated during the 17th century.

According to this, in this wide-ranging poetic scene, it is equally important to note also that, after Sánchez de Lima and Herrera, in the short time slot between 1580 and 1605 up to four great generations of literary authors co-exist, all of whom are very different in their understanding of literature and the topics they handle. In the first place, teachers and mentors (Fernando de Herrera himself or Fray Luis de León), authors who straddled various periods (Vicente Espinel or Miguel de Cervantes, among others), then the reformers (Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina or Luis de Góngora) and, finally, the young poets who were destined to coalesce the new Spanish poetry (Francisco de Rioja, Francisco de Quevedo or Pedro Espinosa, between the most representatives). In this prolific environment, both theoretical and applied, the emerging of literary controversies would be crucial to understand the evolution of modern poetic Spanish standards that will also mark the area of the new poetic prescriptive treatises.

Amid this intense literary rise, the new Spanish-language poetic theorists would still take some time to emerge, particularly as regards the poetic craft. Critics has discussed on many occasions why this delay in the appearance and final consolidation of Spanish modern Poetics, but there has not been enough consensus among it. Even so, most likely, it was the result of many circumstances of different sorts which can be gathered and reviewed in the next four features:

1) Complex and laborious adaptation and assimilation into the Spanish literary system of anything featuring Italian elements.

The majority critics agree that the Italian dominance drove the configuration of the new Spanish poetic standards in the late 16th century. Nevertheless, many distinctly traditional Spanish authors resisted these new forms and did not accept the foreign influence. They opposed to those who, at various degrees, had already assimilated these standards as their own and genuinely poetic way. However, this opposition to new influences from abroad had very little real influence because the poetic standards shaped by the traditional Castilian style had also little effect on the literary works of the time. The aesthetic and literary ideas these authors still

1 Despite the absence of treaties in the vernacular, “during the first half of the 1500s several theoretical treatises were published in Spain on poetry matters written in Latin and incorporated as appendices to rhetorical works (Rivas Hernández 70).” These works include *De ratione dicendi* (1522) by Luis Vives, *De oratione* (1554-1558) by Antonio Lulio or poetry exercises published in the annex of *De art dicendi* (1558) of Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas, “el Brocense.”

professed had very limited real impact as well. Thus, this fact would certify that the literary theory was already almost anchored to the Italian influence.

However, in most cases the actual development of the Spanish poetic craft stemmed from the individual experience (and sometimes genius) of the Spanish writers and it was also very coupled with empirical guidelines imported from Italy. The consequence was that in most new literary works from the year 1560 it can be detected a clear empirical influence of literary patterns, rather than the result of any knowledge of the day's foremost European poetic treatises. In the absence of adequate modern prescriptive poetic standards in Spanish, it is common for Spanish poets who achieved a certain literary level and mastery of Italian to resort to the modern Italian theoretical models to perfect their craft, examples as *L'Arte poetica* by Minturno, Scaliger's *Poetics*, the *Discorsi* by Tasso, *L'Italia liberata* by Trisino, the *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* by Castelvetro or Robortello or his reinterpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, among the most well-know.

2) The old residual medieval poetic verse was still deeply rooted in Spain, which entails a prevailing widespread desire to follow these old medieval principles throughout most of the 16th century.

Although poets realised very early that the poetry in Italian meters also offered a huge variety of possibilities in Spanish, the craft of the ancient medieval poetry songbooks was still pervasively practiced. A cursory glance at few late-medieval and early-Renaissance Spanish songs' anthologies reveals this strong support. Thus, for example, in the song collection *Cancionero General* (1511) by Hernando del Castillo the metric and poetic style of the old Spanish forms still feature prominently. This also applies to similar compilations that appeared later in the century. In another songbook compilation, *Espejo de enamorados* (1535-1539), the old medieval Spanish ballad "Romance de Fonte Frida" and the outdated medieval couplets by Garcí Sánchez de Badajoz are extended and still very traded. Other mid-century late songbooks, as *Cancionero llamado Vergel de amores* (1551) by Esteban de Nájera, mostly still feature compositions, which have already still appeared, like in the example before, forty years earlier in Castillo's collection¹.

Even so, although the new Italian style was very established, only a few song collections did timidly begin to include a few new Italian-style verses and stanzas, delighted with characteristics of the incipient Renaissance environment.

¹ "By around 1550 the general songbook *Cancionero General* was virtually dead, although not buried, except for some ditties and carols. [...]. Significantly, after 1540 it was no longer reprinted in Spain and the only two editions (1557 and 1573) were printed in Antwerp (contemporary Belgium), one of last places in which outlasts the defence of Spanish literary archaism" (Rodríguez Moñino 33).

This is the case of the 1564 songbook *Cancionero general de obras nuevas* which gives equal share to compositions in old Castilian meters and poetry in new Italian rhythm. Final current poetic strengthening will take some decades more to become consolidated.

Under these circumstances throughout the 15th century, Spanish poetic genres developed under two different bearings, but with continuous connections between them. The first will be the Italian vernacular-origin Petrarch-inspired system, which reached Spain fully developed. This style was imitated directly by the Spanish poets (for example, in forms like the sonnet, *madrigal* or the use of the hendecasyllable verse). The second relates to the classical or neoclassical genres of Latin Antiquity, which adapted to the new vernacular approach to poetry (poetic forms, such as the ode, the eclogue, the elegy, or the Roman epistle would be the most popular). In this line of influence, Spanish poets will no longer directly imitate the Italians but rather will blend an amalgamation of contributions from other European poetic traditions that also sought the recovery and use of the classical Greek and Latin heritage.

The outdated patterns of song collections would not truly begin to die out until the last two decades of the 16th century. However, the debate between Italians and Spaniards or hendecasyllabic *versus* octosyllabic verse will still rage for a few years more, which it will transform into the particular and idiosyncratic nuances of Spanish poetic patterns.

3) Chronological delay in the dissemination in Spain of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

This merit is often attributed to the Spanish humanist Alonso López “el Pinciano” in 1596 with his *Philosophía antigua poética*. However, most of Aristotle's poetic ideas were already known in Spain towards the year 1550. And yet, —despite the significance of Alonso López's virtually definitive translation into Spanish of Aristotle's works— it was of little use to Spanish literary flair, not only because of its intrinsic characteristics but also because the impetus and strength of other classic poetic thinkers who had enjoyed and still enjoyed much influence in Spain. These include Horace and Plato who, as maximum *auctoritates* of the Renaissance, fuelled most of the Spanish modern reflection on the literary scene, both in substance and form. However, the penchant of Spanish humanists for the *contaminatio* between texts meant that each ideological trend would take on nuances from counter patterns. In this aspect, it is likewise important to remind that Aristotle's *Poetics* is a laborious text to assimilate because it is an argumentative treatise difficult to adapt to other formats. This feature contributed to its lack of impact in the Spanish poetic system.

In addition, the literary revolution at the turn of the century must also be

considered, triggered by the new ideas of Lope de Vega whose theories collided head-on with Aristotle's. The early appearance in 1609 of the *Arte Nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* and its extremely rapid consolidation –although it directly only advocated for a renewal in theatre– had also very significantly swayed in all aspects of the Spanish literary world.

Moreover, translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* failed to take much root since there was also very little translation tradition in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries. Spanish translators — very much in line with Erasmus ideas — had a very particular idea about how to translate. For them, translating did not imply an absolute fidelity to the text but rather an understanding of the general feeling or spirit of the text. Overlooking the intrinsic literalness assumed in standard translations resulted that many Aristotelian ideas were modified, and even perverted, scattered in prefaces, introductions, scholia, didactic treatises or miscellaneous documents. Thus, Spanish translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* barely made any impact on the synthetic Spanish scenery of translated authors during this time. The first two reliable translations into Spanish of Aristotle's *Poetics* were not published until 1626, firstly by Alonso Ordoñez das Seijas y Tobar and later by Vicente Mariner de Aragón, librarian of King Philip IV at the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial in Madrid.

4) Gradual and progressive metamorphosis of classical rhetoric towards positions that are more literary than persuasive.

The new Italian poetic standards marked in *De arte poetica* by Girolamo Vida in 1527 pointed to the full confirmation of poetry as a field separate from rhetoric. However, in Spain, this change would not become evident until well into the last third of the 16th century¹. This transformation in turn meant a gradual but noticeable decline in the prevalence of rhetoric. One of the most eloquent quantitative data in this regard is that, strictly speaking, prior to 1580 (same year of Sánchez de Lima and Herrera's publications) there is an abundance of rhetoric publications but only a few poetic printings. After 1580, it was just the opposite, many and varied poetic works began to be published but only a few rhetoric works (Kohut 33).

Some 16th century Latin rhetoric treaties, as *Institutionum Rhetoricarum* (1554) by Fadrique Furió Ceriol, challenged the use of rhetorical principles in literature. In *De imitatione seu de informandi styli ratione* (1554), Sebastián Fox Morcillo even

¹ López Bueno points out that at the outset of the Golden Age, “it is true that in terms of the treaties and theory in general, the [Spanish] authors were rather near-sighted about poetry in their surroundings. They preferred to abide by the Aristotelian and Horatian standards and couch into this format their contemporary poetry —often a very contrived arrangement” (57).

noted that rhetorical precepts could be aimed not only to the speaker but also to the writer (in most of the work the term *dicere* is replaced by *scribere*). A decisive factor in this regard is the cultural transformation involving the leap from an eminently oral culture —such as it was the medieval universe— into another world decisively committed to the written word, in which the printed text offers virtually infinite possibilities for studying the artistic language, and even more in the new demanding Spanish language.

Until the late 16th century, Spanish humanists regarded that poetry and historiography had to be subordinated to the dictates of rhetoric (Kohut 34). However, from the second half of the century a significant shift became apparent in the intrinsic configuration of rhetoric itself, since the explanation of the theoretical conscience of the work began to be fostered, in contrast to the mere *elocutio* thereof. For Spanish humanists of the first half of the 16th century, Poetics was a vague, indeterminate and common discipline that sometimes was studied diffusely by a grammarian or rhetorician. The only interest Poetics aroused had to do with the metric element (most of the time only applied to works in Latin) and theorists such as Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas, “el Brocense,” with his *Organum Dialecticum et Rhetoricum* (1579), or Pedro Simón Abril, with his *Artis grammaticae latinae linguae rudimenta* (1576), briefly only study Latin literary texts exclusively in terms of metrics. Likewise, in the Spanish vernacular language, theorists such as Juan Díez de Rengifo, with his *Arte poética española* (1596), or Luis Alfonso de Carvallo, with his *Cisne de Apolo* (1602), barely explored beyond the metric. Thus, it can be said that virtually all poetic treaties in Spanish that appeared until the *Philosophia antiqua poética* (1596) dealt almost entirely with metrical aspects of poetry, without addressing essential theoretical issues, as it was the case of the new Italian poetic treaties since the early same century.

In this situation, non-prescriptive significant in shaping texts, such as Juan de Valdés’ *Diálogo de la lengua* (1547) for example, are even more concerned about structuring the language itself and its results than the original treatises themselves, which they only were theoretical without getting attention into any critical literary problem. Even the influential *Anotaciones y Enmiendas a Garcilaso* (1574, and subsequent revisions) by “el Brocense” did not reached general poetic standards and conclusions because it only focuses strictly on finding Garcilaso de la Vega classical and Italian sources. In his preface to the second edition of the text in 1581, “el Brocense” even admits that he does not regard a poet who does not imitate the ancient good poets, an idea that flies in the face of the poetic originality and freedom championed by the new Italian style. Other representative, albeit partial, samples

of this mixed situation are, for instance, the famous Garcilaso de la Vega's *Carta-Prólogo* (published in Juan Boscán's translation of *The Courtier* in 1534) which only includes a brief and not very deep reflection about the new Renaissance poetry and also Gonzalo Argote y Molina's *Discurso sobre la poesía castellana*, inserted at the end of his edition of *El conde Lucanor* (1575), which only explores virtually some metrics used and others outdated, without engaging in substantial literary theorising.

However, a significant change will occur gradually through the century with respect to the usefulness of poetry beyond the metric component, a fact that will significantly influence the progressive shaping of Poetics and its gradual disengagement from rhetoric. By the late 16th century, poets will begin to appreciate instruction and delight in equal measure as the aim of good literature. From this emerging hedonistic position, some outstanding authors began to look for reasons that help to explain the purpose of art in general, and poetry in particular, an attitude that would distinguish the Spanish 17th century literature. Nevertheless, other authors would continue to follow trends more closely linked to morality. This is the case, for example, of Juan de Mariana with his *De monetae mutatione* (1609) where he rejects the delightful part of literature (which he associates with the devil, the antagonist of every good Christian) and in which he attacks anything that undermines the ethical fibre of literature.

Thereby, it began to feel the necessity to talk about Poetics as a discipline separate from Rhetoric but without ever losing sight of the rich wealth of theoretical concepts that Rhetoric accumulated since time immemorial. This moment in time has been defined as "switching between a discursive theory to a textual theory" (Luján Atienza 200), something which helped decisively to "place the poet's activity in the foreground, outranking the speaker" (Lorenzo 209). Poetics started to acquire greater autonomy, independence and generic value as a unique and individual discipline that will drive Spanish literature to its pinnacle in the 17th century.

In this exited and unique environment, Spanish poetry brought about the growth of a much more aesthetic and utilitarian poetic theory, far removed from the most conservative rhetorical patterns. This would foster the emergence of Spanish literature designed for entertainment and enjoyment with no moral purpose, but with also a solid support based on the Classical antiquity influence and the Italian-way style.

As far as the poetic theory is concerned, the Spanish poetic theorists will still take a little more time to establish their conceptual bases, a fact that will not affect to lay the solid groundwork for one of the most important and valuable literary

moments of Spanish literature that it will soon start in the 17th century. The belated but new poetic perspectives will decisively help shaping this new reality as one of the first important steps to build the modern Spanish Poetics.

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