

400 Years of Literature and History in the United States: Gaspar de Villagr a's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* (1610)

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Born in 1555 in Puebla de los  ngeles, New Spain, Gaspar de Villagr a is remembered today as the author of the long poem *Historia de la nueva Mexico*,¹ printed in 1610 in Alcal  de Henares and — as such — arguably the first literary text of the United States. Villagr a was the son of Catalina Ram rez and Hern n P rez, a successful hide tanner who embarked for New Spain in 1546 but who retained economic interests nonetheless in Castile. In one of his several trips back to Spain, in 1569, Hern n brought along his son Gaspar, in all likelihood his only male offspring. Villagr a went on to spend seven years in Spain, earning a bachelor's degree in Laws at the prestigious Universidad de Salamanca. At Salamanca, young Gaspar polished off his Humanistic culture — which is visible in his poem — while acquiring a solid foundation in the Spanish legal system. In 1576, Villagr a returned with his father and a cousin to New Spain, and he seems to have spent several years in Mexico City. By 1596, however, he enrolled in Juan de O ate's army as a captain, and he was living in New Spain's northernmost fringes. O ate's expedition into the New Mexico aimed to colonize an area that had been explored before by others (most notably Francisco V zquez de Coronado), but that had not been incorporated into the Spanish empire in the Americas. As a result, it offered — perhaps — the last opportunity for soldiers and would-be colonizers to embark upon the settlement of unknown territory. The prospect of potential riches lured Villagr a and many others to join in this enterprise that he would later immortalize in a poem.

Villagr a played multiple roles in the New Mexican army, including those of

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procurador general del campo, juez asesor, vocal del consejo de guerra, and factor de la real hacienda del nuevo México, though not that of official chronicler, as it is sometimes stated by mistake. Rather, Villagrá's decision to write an account of Oñate's expedition in verse should be seen as a personal choice, however influenced it might have been by Oñate and/or others. In all likelihood, Villagrá had multiple motivations. First, as a scholar and as a man of letters, the author had received a solid education that exposed him to many classic and contemporary authors,³ and it is evident that he had an appreciation for literature. Moreover, the still recent success of Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* had resulted in a series of imitations and in a resurgence of epic poetry with American subjects. Like many others who followed in Ercilla's footsteps, Villagrá must have seen an opportunity to gain literary fame by contributing to that revival. As a lawyer, nevertheless, Villagrá may have had ulterior motives for revisiting in print the New Mexican expedition. In this light, since charges against Oñate and his officers were imminent when he wrote his long poem in 1609,⁴ Villagrá's *Historia* can be seen, in part, as a preemptive strike in their defense. The poem afforded him plenty of space to justify decisions and actions, while situating them in the context of previous wars of conquest, a strategy he maximized in his 1612 *memorial de servicios*.

At any rate, the combination of his literary and legal interests with his military experience resulted in a rather novel approach to writing. Villagrá's poem, unlike those by Ercilla's most direct imitators, sets itself apart from many of the conventions of epic poetry, while maximizing discursive and generic hybridity. Thus, Villagrá eschews the *octava real*, Ercilla's meter and the one most closely associated with epic poetry, opting instead for the rhymeless free verse (hendecasyllabic in his case). In addition, Villagrá (who must have either kept a personal archive of legal documents or gained access to them one way or another) further distances himself from Ercilla and others by interrupting his poem three times to interpolate (*verbatim*) several letters, acts, and legal opinions. As a result, his manuscript, and the subsequent printed volume, are marked by a distinct hybrid nature, and can only receive the "epic poem" label by stretching somewhat the definition of that genre.

Villagrá's hopes for the success of his literary efforts are unknown to us, but it is easy to guess that he must have desired to make his mark in the Spanish literary scene, crowded at the time by such giants as Miguel de Cervantes, Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio, and the younger Luis de Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo, among others. Neither Cervantes nor Lope de Vega mentioned our author in their respective pieces on Spanish writers,⁵ and Villagrá's contemporaries seem to have paid little notice to his work. However, we have evidence that copies were sent to the Americas⁶ and that individual

readers appreciated the poem during the seventeenth century.⁷ In 1898, the journal *El Progreso* from Trinidad, Colorado, first claimed the *Historia* as cultural capital for Latinos/as in the U.S. Southwest and — since then — many others have followed suit, especially after Luis Leal's influential article "Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective," first published in 1973. Since 1990, at least fifty scholarly works have discussed Villagrà's writings each decade, signaling a change of fortune for his once obscure and rare book. In that same period, five different editions of the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* have been published, in three different countries, and in 2009 the first monograph on its author (Manuel M. Martín Rodríguez's *Gaspar de Villagrà: Legista, soldado y poeta*) appeared. A second book on Villagrà, Genaro M. Padilla's *The Daring Flight of My Pen* is scheduled to appear in 2011.

All this suggests that the renewed interest in the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* is neither a fad nor the product of an ephemeral curiosity on the part of scholars and readers. As I have explored elsewhere, the *Historia's* rehabilitation may be due in part to the fact that, as literary tastes change and readers' expectations evolve, Villagrà's poem is easier to appreciate now than it was when it first appeared (Martín Rodríguez 2005: 199). Its emphasis on an ambiguous, disappearing hero, its mixture and juxtaposition of genres, its metaliterary and self-reflective nature, its interest in exploring the limits of discourse, and many other similarly "modern" traits resonate with readers today, while seventeenth century readers may have seen them as flaws, as the poem failed to conform to the canons of epic poetry.

Further advancing current interest in the *Historia* is the fact that the poem belongs to multiple literary traditions, in which it plays significantly different roles. Thus, what in 1610 could be seen as a late (and perhaps already outdated) American epic poem by Spanish critics and readers, was nonetheless an early example of Creole letters in New Spain, and the very first literary composition of the United States, predating Anne Bradstreet's poems by forty years. As a consequence, the alleged merits and shortcomings of Villagrà's *Historia* change a great deal when we consider its place in each of the four literary traditions to which it belongs (those of Spain, Mexico, the United States, and the Chicanos/as) rather than judging it in absolute, "universal" terms.

The articles that follow are excellent examples of the most recent multinational approaches to Gaspar de Villagrà's *Historia*. These five pieces were first submitted (along with six others not published here) for presentation at the conference "400 Years of Literature and History in the United States: Gaspar de Villagrà's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* (1610)" (University of California, Merced, October 22, 2010),⁸ and they were later revised for publication in *Camino Real*. As such, these articles address multiple

elements of relevance in Gaspar de Villagrà's *Historia*, ranging from its ties to Classical literature to its impact on Chicano/a literature, and from its immediate assessment of the New Mexican landscape to the transformation of that physical space into an abstract sense of place that fosters, in turn, a sense of belonging — though not exempt from the aftermath of violence and political strife.

In “Ariadna en Nuevo México: Mujer y mito en la *Historia de la nueva Mexico* de Gaspar de Villagrà,” Antonio María Martín Rodríguez explores the ways in which writers and chroniclers of the New World relied on the literary archive to make sense of a reality that often surpassed their imagination. A. M. Martín Rodríguez first assesses the presence of classical myths and figures in Villagrà's poem, then concentrating on its representation of female characters. A. M. Martín Rodríguez astutely notices that the role of Spanish women in the poem is inferior to that played by their indigenous counterparts, and he then proceeds to distinguish the main traits in the characterization of both groups. To that end, A. M. Martín Rodríguez analyzes the interplay of realism and stylization in Villagrà's portrayal of female characters, noting that the latter mode often is filtered by the poet's knowledge of the Greek and Roman traditions.

Joseph P. Sánchez's contribution to this dossier is centered on a contrast and comparison of Villagrà's poem with some of the official documentation of the New Mexican expedition. In “From Santa Barbara to San Juan de los Caballeros: Villagrà's *Historia* and the *Itinerario* of Juan de Oñate's expedition of 1598,” Sánchez follows the route of the expeditionaries reading closely from both texts, an approach that I also followed in my 2010 edition of the poem to help the reader orient herself/himself and to facilitate comparison between the matter-of-fact language of the *Itinerario* and Villagrà's artistic recreation of the journey.⁹ Sánchez comments on many passages in which the poem adheres closely to the *Itinerary*, thus underlining its own historicity. In addition, Sánchez provides abundant detailed information on many of the places visited by Oñate's expeditionaries, thus complementing and supplementing both texts while helping his reader gain a better sense of the geography of northern New Spain and New Mexico.

Landscape and geography are also central for Francisco A. Lomelí, who writes about the connections between the poem's represented geography and its literary fortune over the years. In “The Sense of Place in Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà's *Historia de la nueva México*” Lomelí explores the notions of distance (from the colonial center) and borderlands as illuminating for judging the poem's relegation to the literary margins. Lomelí, moreover, discusses Villagrà's seemingly contradictory urges to rely on myth to

construct the New Mexican space, on the one hand, while remaining true to the physical landscape, on the other. Surpassing both the mythical and the geographical New Mexico in importance, Lomelí considers yet a third space of relevance in the poem: that which results from the violence of the final cantos, a dramatic space full of lessons about otherness.

In my own contribution to this dossier, “History, Poetry, and Politics in Gaspar de Villagrà’s *Historia de la nueva Mexico*” I, too, focus on violence, both as a topic in the poem and as a stepping-stone for interpreting the text from a Chicano/a and Latino/a perspective. To that end, and in line with the poem’s relative marginality in the literary annals, I decided to draw from two “marginal” Latinos who have also written about violence, history, poetry, and politics: William Carlos Williams and George Santayana. Needless to say, their “marginality” should be understood from the point of view of Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies, where they are seldom mentioned, and not from a general point of view, since both authors are well regarded in mainstream literary circles. In particular, I find Williams’s meditations on violence as a foundational moment for the Americas to be quite useful for approaching the complex task of recovering both the *Historia* and its politics for the history of Chicano/a and Latino/a letters. In my analysis, I suggest that the *Historia* can be read not so much as an epic vision of the conquest but as an anguished expression of the role of colonial violence in creating new boundaries, new histories, new peoples, and a whole new set of discursive and critical practices.

The last article in this special examination of Gaspar de Villagrà’s *Historia de la nueva Mexico* is by Chicano novelist and critic Alejandro Morales. In “De cómo la mandala de *The Brick People* se inspiraba en una escena del poema de Villagrà,” Morales discusses the role that mandalas have played in his life and in his work, starting with an episode in Villagrà’s poem (Mómpil’s drawing of the New Mexican geography) that he first read when preparing his doctoral dissertation. Through Jungian psychology, and with the help of other theoretical approaches, Morales explores the questions of inspiration and intertextuality as they apply to his own novel, *The Brick People*.

All together, these five articles — in their multiple and multifarious approaches to Gaspar de Villagrà’s *Historia de la nueva Mexico* — are reflective of the renewed critical interest in this 1610 hybrid work. While they do not exhaust in any way the topics they explore, they are offered here as substantial contributions to an expanding body of criticism that is likely to evolve and continue to grow.

Though he favors the original spelling of Villagrà’s title, the editor has respected some contributors’ decision to adopt the modern orthographical rendering *Historia de la Nueva México*, hence the different spellings throughout this dossier. It is the policy

of Camino Real to publish articles by alphabetical order of their authors' last names. In this case, however, an exception was made to enhance the connections and dialogue between the different contributions.

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NOTES

¹ Throughout this special dossier, different authors use different spellings for the title of the poem. I have opted for the original title of the 1610 *editio princeps*, but I have respected each author's choice within their articles.

² I have explored Villagrà's readings and education in "La formación intelectual de Gaspar de Villagrà," *passim*.

³ For details on the dates of composition of the poem, see M. M. Martín Rodríguez's *Gaspar de Villagrà*, 187-192.

⁴ Cervantes' *Viaje del Parnaso* was printed in 1614, and Lope de Vega's *Laurel de Apolo* in 1630.

⁵ Rueda Ramírez mentions the *Historia* among several other books sent in 1621 to Matías de Solís, an *oidor* in Guatemala (80), and Adams and Scholes documented the book among those embargoed to New Mexican Governor Diego de Peñalosa (266).

⁶ See M. M. Martín Rodríguez's "Reading Gaspar de Villagrà (in the Seventeenth Century)," *passim*.

⁷ The conference was sponsored by the Center for Research in the Humanities and Arts, University of California, Merced.

⁸ For a full transcription of the *Ytinerario* see M. M. Martín Rodríguez's *Gaspar de Villagrà*, 89-106.