

# Reinventing Medieval Iberian Studies

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When I was invited by my colleagues at the Hispanic Institute to participate in this centenary celebration, I accepted with delight and then felt almost immediate trepidation at the remit: a critical reappraisal of my field of expertise, one that is diachronic in nature and also discusses the field's relationship to Hispanism more broadly. What, I thought, *is* my field? (or perhaps the emphasis should be on the personal pronoun: what is *my* field?). As much recent writing on the practice of medieval studies has suggested, it is a field (or assemblage of fields) determined by personal identities and desires. Although academic medievalists in the past may have prided themselves on the empiricism of their practices, much recent work has shown that the lines between medieval studies, as academic discipline, and medievalism, as learned amateur endeavor are often quite blurry.<sup>1</sup> The same can of course be said for work in early modern studies, since the two periods overlap frequently in both academic practice and popular reception. So, first, I will position myself as I enter into this centennial dialogue: I identify as a medievalist, an early modernist, a comparatist, a translator, and as a recent convert to the digital humanities. I have used the prefixes *hispano* and *Ibero* before *medievalist*, and have in the past even called myself a "Hispanist," though the historical implications of this term now make its use problematic.<sup>2</sup> I work mainly with Castilian, Catalan, French, Italian, and English texts produced from the thirteenth to the seventeenth-centuries. My research focuses on the intersections of gender, material hermeneutics, and studies on adaptation and translation, including neomedievalisms. I have also dedicated much of my energies over the past decade to bringing texts from the Castilian tradition to the notice of wider readerships through translation into English. I have long felt that we as Hispanists, Iberianists, and Latin Americanists—whatever we call ourselves—have a great deal of both academically oriented and public-facing work to do because of the overwhelming dominance of the discipline of English in medieval and early modern studies in the United States. To put it very and overly simply, in a country with such a large Spanish-speaking population, study of

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationships between medieval studies and Medievalism see for example Altschul; Dinshaw; Gumbrecht; and Utz.

<sup>2</sup> I refer here both to Eduardo Subirats's "Seven Theses Against Hispanism" and to many conversations with colleagues over the years.

literature and culture from the Middle Ages and early modernity must go beyond Chaucer and Shakespeare.

In the editors' invitation to participate in this centenary celebration of the Hispanic Institute they called attention to the geopolitics of naming, to the shifts from "Hispanic" to "Latin American" and "transatlantic," and from "Spanish and Portuguese" to "Latin American and Iberian Cultures," which "reveal some of the cultural tensions that have shaped our discipline over the last hundred years." I would not be the first medievalist to remark that the most profound change in our field in the past decades has been the move from what Clara Pascual-Argente has aptly called the "ill-fitting and in many cases plainly fictitious use of 'medieval Spain' to the geographically oriented and more capacious use of the term 'medieval Iberia'" (481). The shift from "medieval Spain" and "Hispanomedievalism" to "medieval Iberia" and also to "Mediterranean studies" has been most apparent in the Anglophone academic world, but it has profound resonances in academic, political, and popular reflections on what used to be called *la España medieval* in today's Spain as well. A piece of this length cannot address the many sweeping changes that the field has seen in the past decades, which include an embrace of critical theory, cultural and gender studies; the emergence of the "new" or material philology and a return to the archives; the decline of traditional Romance philology, at least in the United States; and the rise of the digital humanities with an attendant resurgence of textual criticism.<sup>3</sup> The digital turn has done much to foster connections among Ibero- and Hispanomedievalists practicing in North and South America and Europe, but further discussions are needed about how our geographical locations, institutional traditions, and cultural understandings of how we relate to the past shape our scholarly desires and practices. Here, I will concentrate on the shift in terminology, its connections to the weaponization of medieval studies, and to what I see as the importance of teaching medieval Iberian studies within the broader contexts of Hispanic studies and the humanities.

Study of non-modern literatures and cultures has never fit comfortably within the national-linguistic frameworks that served as the basis for the formation of university departments of languages and literatures. The cultural productions of the Middle Ages and early modernity predate those nation-bound and single, vernacular language-bound constructs. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the "inventors of the Spanish Middle Ages" (and the French, and the English, and the German Middle Ages, among others) worked so hard and for so long to make the inconveniently amorphous non-modern pegs fit into the positivist pigeon holes of modern universities.<sup>4</sup> Most medieval texts, as Simon Gaunt notes, were produced in multilingual and multicultural environments, while "most authors

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<sup>3</sup>For a thoughtful and thorough review, see Miguel-Prendes, to whom I will refer below. A special issue of *Diacritics*, edited by Simone Pinet and Óscar Martín, titled *Theories of Medieval Iberia*, addresses the incorporation of critical and cultural theory into the field. Forums and a critical cluster in *La Corónica* address "new" philology, gender, and concerns about the future of Romance philology. Heather Bamford and I discuss the digital turn and its relationship to philology and medievalism in our recent "Tentative Manifesto." On digital humanities, textual criticism and medieval manuscript studies see also Ward.

<sup>4</sup>Here, I borrow E. Michael Gerli's term from his 2002 article on Ramón Menéndez Pidal, "Inventing the Spanish Middle Ages," to which I will return below.

read and some wrote in ‘foreign’ languages” and their texts often “circulated in ways that transcend the boundaries of modern nation states and modern national literary traditions, precisely because these had yet to come into being as we know them” (165).<sup>5</sup> This is very much the case for the texts produced in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and the Romance languages that circulated within and traveled through what are now Spain and Portugal.

Jean Dangler has proposed “non-modern Iberia” as an apt term for “getting a handle” on the “vast and variable” places, times, practices, and relationships that may be included in medieval Iberian studies (30). Following José Rabasa, she asserts that “non-modern” escapes the artificial periodization and teleological thinking implicit in the terms *medieval* and *early* or *pre-modern*. Dangler suggests we consider non-modern Iberia, “a network of interrelated attachments between varying individuals and groups” and “a space of struggle and reconciliation” (32). Sol Miguel-Prendes continues this vision by proposing that scholars consider “medieval Iberia” as a “dynamic boundary object,” a useful construct that has come to define our field and that continues to inspire productive debate (51). The term *Iberia* and the practice of medieval Iberian studies have steadily gained currency over the past two decades, at a pace with the rise of cultural studies more generally in the field. For instance, *La Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Iberian Languages Literatures and Cultures*, the oldest North American journal dedicated to the field, was formerly subtitled “A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages Literatures and Cultures.” Its contents, article titles, and the languages in which they are published reflect the changing landscape of the field(s) of Hispano- and Iberian medieval studies. The journal, which has always published in Spanish and English has recently begun to publish in Catalan and Portuguese as well. Moreover, a survey of the topics covered in articles shows that traditional philological approaches and textual criticism coexist with the field’s incorporation of diverse theoretical, linguistic, and geographic orientations. The founding of the interdisciplinary *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, intended to go beyond the traditional assumption of a unitary “Hispanic” medieval culture dominated by Castile to encompass Iberia and its neighbors as well (notably North Africa), also contributed to the canonization of the term. Finally, the term “Iberia” was recognized as the term of art by the MLA, which restructured the old divisions into forums, changing the division Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures and Culture to the LLC Medieval Iberia. Medieval Iberian studies, Miguel-Prendes observes, also emerged as a response to traditional philology and Peninsular literature losing ground to Latin American studies in departments where Spanish is taught: “a full renovation of the field was required to justify its academic existence” and to merit any sort of prestige (49).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gaunt’s medieval time frame can easily be extended well into the seventeenth century. His remarks are reminiscent of Keith Whinnom’s 1967 groundbreaking essay “Spanish Literary Historiography: Three Forms of Distortion,” which cautioned scholars about how the canon as studied reflected nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary tastes and ideals about language, rather than what was historically being written, read, and circulated in the pre-modern period.

<sup>6</sup> Much has been written about Hispanism’s relative lack of prestige in the American academy. See, for example, Faber and Miñana.

“Our field has never not been a site of struggle,” writes Shamma Boyarin in a February 2018 post in the influential *In the Middle* blog and reposted on *La Corónica Commons* the following month. Boyarin’s post is part of an ongoing engagement on the part of Iberianists concerning our place in the world of medieval studies as practiced in North America in the twenty-first century and, more generally, the political and ethical contours of Iberian medieval studies. It was also a public intervention in the ongoing discussions among medievalists in the US about the neo-medievalism of the alt-right, the weaponization of medieval studies, as well as bias and structural racism within professional organizations.<sup>7</sup> The participation of scholars of medieval Iberia in these debates has been something of a vexed issue, given the general and longstanding domination of English topics in medieval studies in the US, particularly in literary and cultural studies. Chad Leahy asks, for example, where are the voices of Hispanomedievalists in the current debate over medieval studies in the US? (“Dear Fellow Iberianists”). Others, including Boyarin, have responded that we have been raising our voices about issues of racism, marginality, inclusion, and the politics of medieval studies for decades, but the English-speaking academy has rarely been listening.<sup>8</sup> As Miguel-Prendes incisively characterizes the place of our field in American academia, “The [Iberian] peninsula’s multicultural peculiarity was used to justify Hispanomedievalism’s disciplinary identity and its marginalization in American medieval studies, where the dominance of England and France placed the Iberian Middle Ages in the subaltern position of Orientalized other” (51). Medieval and early modern studies are also increasingly on the curricular margins of departments of languages and literatures. Although there has been a tendency to see the medieval past as “clearly dead” and unproblematically contained in Europe (Gaunt 161), recent events have belied the supposed irrelevance of medieval and early modern studies.

Neither the study of the literatures and cultures of what is now Spain and Portugal in the long period between 500 and 1500 that can roughly be called the “Middle Ages” nor the terms used by scholars to describe their objects of study were ever politically neutral, despite academic claims and desires of objectivity and scientific rigor from all sides. The “Spanish” Middle Ages that many Hispanists were taught to imagine through an accompanying canon of Castilian literary texts are the invention of scholars whose work we still turn to—but must also historicize as we do. It is difficult to underestimate the influence of Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo in the construction of the canon and the national-Catholic approach to the canon. Menéndez Pelayo wrote his works on defining Spanish literary history very much aware that he was writing *as a Spaniard*, wishing to find in the *Poema de mio Cid*, the *Libro de buen amor*, *Celestina*, and other premodern works the pillars of a national tradition that could rival Chaucer, Boccaccio, and

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<sup>7</sup>The political and personal academic stakes of medieval studies in the United States have become increasingly loaded in the past several years, when it has been described in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as a field “at war with itself” (Bartlett). See also Schuessler and Natanson.

<sup>8</sup>This is of course not limited to medieval studies, as Ignacio Sánchez Prado wrote in his recent scathing piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Shakespeare, but within a *casticista* uniqueness. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, following in Menéndez Pelayo's ideological footsteps, cemented the *Poema de mio Cid* as an originary nationalist text. As E. Michael Gerli remarks, Menéndez Pidal's work was "intimately tied to the conviction that a national Spanish character exists and can be known through the study of the traditions in language and literature" (113–14). Menéndez Pelayo and Menéndez Pidal were both "inventing the Spanish Middle Ages" against global political backdrops in which they wished to defend their country's national identity, which they both saw as tied to Castile, Castilian language, and Catholicism.

Américo Castro, Menéndez Pidal's student, adapted the latter's philological idea of *convivencia* to reinvent the Spanish Middle Ages for another generation of Hispanists. Rather than to describe the competition of linguistic variants, as Menéndez Pidal had done, Castro applied the term to cultural hybridity, the coexistence of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, seeing in that coexistence the essence of contemporary Spanish character. As Ryan Szpiech sums it up, Castro used the term metaphorically and synchronically "to indicate cultural interpenetration, interdependence, and coexistence" (138). What was perhaps most striking and, to some, disturbing about Castro's thesis was that he asserted that *convivencia*, as he defined it, rather than *casticismo* and Catholicism explained the singular development of the Spanish national character. Castro's thesis, as is well-known, unleashed a long-lasting polemic instigated by the work of his contemporary and fellow exile Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz. Anthony Cascardi and Szpiech review how new generations of scholars fruitfully took up and nuanced Castro's thesis, arguably leading to the present shift from *Spain* to *Iberia* as a conceptual frame. Nevertheless, as Szpiech and others have documented, the polemic that began almost a century ago has also evolved into the continuing "*convivencia* wars." S. J. Pearce speaks of a "fissure" between those who study medieval Spain and those who study non-modern Iberia. This fissure is most evident among conservative historians, who as Pearce and others have shown, set up a false caricature of liberal academics' view of Al-Andalus as a paradise of tolerance.<sup>9</sup> In Spain, the debate is currently framed tendentiously in terms of "Al-Andalus" vs. the "Reconquista" (García-Sanjuán).

Of course, the concept of Iberia runs the danger of becoming as reified as "medieval Spain," as many scholars have pointed out. As Ross Brann writes, "Clearly medieval Iberia occupies a special place in the historical and literary imagination of scholars and writers who are inclined to find it appealing for reasons having to do with their own time, place, and cultural condition. Al-Andalus and Sepharad have long since come to constitute *tropes of culture*—fertilized and constructed by the interface of history and memory, the literary imagination, and geographical desire" (121). Or, as Pascual-Argente puts it, "Yet non-modern Iberia, or medieval Iberia, is also an object of scholarly desire and, at its best, a heuristic tool that allows medievalists from different disciplines to come together for the study of specific social, cultural, and political interactions and creations

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<sup>9</sup>The work of Serafín Fanjul and Darío Fernández-Morera, among others, is emblematic of this approach.

that took place within the Iberian Peninsula and in territories closely intertwined with it" (483).

The shift from "medieval Spain" to "Iberia" implies a major reorientation of at least one contemporary understanding of "our field," one that can be (and has been) interpreted inclusively or exclusively. In the inclusive sense, we can envision "our field" itself as hybrid, and medieval Iberian studies as an umbrella term for many fields, incorporating the study of multiple canonical and vernacular languages, genres, time periods, and transcending the contemporary methodological political boundaries that define traditional university departments. Because the nationalist climate in which contemporary university culture finds its roots also formed the discipline of medieval studies as we practice it today, scholars researching the literatures and cultures of medieval Iberia are in fact found in many different university departments. As David Wacks points out, the linguistic challenges of working across this inherently comparatist field are steep, suggesting a need both for Iberianists to work collaboratively and for US institutions to gain an appreciation for comparative and collaborative work.

There are some who would see medieval Iberian studies in a more exclusive light. Scholars trained as "Hispanists" and who continue to work exclusively on Castilian texts in the Latin-Christian tradition may find themselves reductively defined, regardless of the kind of work that they do. In a perfect world, graduate students in "Spanish" literature and culture programs who become medievalists would have the time and resources to study three or four languages. Nevertheless, the shift from Spain to Iberia can, as Pascual-Argente has argued, profoundly change the way we approach Castilian works produced in the Latin-Christian tradition, through a process of "provincialization" or a decentering of Castile. In this view, even the most traditional works of the "medieval Spanish" canon, rather than evidence of fictitious medieval and exclusionary Spanishness, are reframed as Iberian: "Framing Castilian history and cultures within the paradigm of non-modern Iberia—or simply outside that of medieval Spain—makes it easier to characterize them more accurately, as dynamic participants in a shifting and complex environment rather than as a self-contained, always already hegemonic monolith" (481). Such a process is salutary in many ways, given that, as Wacks has also pointed out, not only are Arabic and Hebrew marginalized in Hispanic studies, but also all of the other Romance languages and Latin "have been equally if not more overshadowed by Castilian." It is possible to read and teach in Spanish while decentering Castile and Castilian, always stopping to remember that "medieval Spain" is a fiction and providing visual and textual examples of linguistic and cultural co-presence and with a different kind of awareness of Iberia. This approach can make the texts more appealing to students and give scholars housed in university units where the teaching of Spanish is curricularly attached to the teaching of non-modern literature a way of teaching medieval Iberian studies.

Graduate students in Hispanic studies or Spanish literature and cultural studies programs will more often than not be headed to jobs where they will be expected to teach Spanish as a second and a heritage language. If, within the field, it is important to decenter Castile and Spanish, in the US it is equally important to teach that Spanish itself, however hegemonic elsewhere, is a language with

a long literary past and not “socially and culturally deficient,” as long-held stereotyping—which filters into academia—in the US would have it (Miñana). “Hispanism” and “Hispanic studies” in the US academy, much like “medieval Spain,” has the virtue of recognition, at least from outside the field.<sup>10</sup> At the risk of echoing the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century champions of the Spanish Middle Ages, it is important to fight for the representation of the history of the languages and literatures of what is now Spain in a cultural milieu where medieval and early modern studies are almost always equated with English. The politics of our moment make this particularly important for Spanish, and while we provincialize Castile and Spanish in terms of non-modern Iberia, we must fight against the provincialism and racism of monolingualism in the US.

Against the backdrop of a globalized neo-medievalism, in part due to the terrorist attacks of 2001 and 2004, and in part due to visions of the “medieval” in popular media in both the US and Spain, the far right has co-opted particular, racialized visions of the medieval past, making the humanistic and multilingual study of the Middle Ages all the more urgent. This urgency was made patent to our colleagues in English in 2017, in the wake of the Charlottesville riots. Political ideologies, always present in academic approaches to the literatures and cultures of the pre-modern Iberian Peninsula, can now no longer be passed over without comment in our research and teaching. The necessity and the urgency of an engaged, public-facing Iberian medieval studies have evolved over the past two decades at a pace with the relevance of studying the medieval past more generally. María Rosa Menocal remarked, reflecting upon the attacks of 9/11, “that we now inhabit what I think was a previously improbable universe in which the history of medieval Spain, by which I mean the medieval history of what is now, *grosso modo*, Spain is widely perceived, either openly or covertly, as tied to the political dramas of our times” (8).

Menocal’s take on the relevance of the medieval past was ultimately hopeful and ethically grounded in the power of humanistic study to make us better humans. As she wrote, “The history of medieval Iberia is about as rich a case as one could wish for in which to explore the vexed questions of what the political has to do with the literary, the ideological with the cultural” (9). In contrast, all too frequently the propagation of hypostatized visions of the past have been exploited for political idealization and weaponization. The remarks of political leaders concerning the crusades, the rightful ownership of what is now Andalucía, and the rights of citizenship for the descendants of expelled Jews and Muslims have been the subject of a good deal, though perhaps not enough, commentary (Aidi, Doubleday, García-Sanjuán, Pearce). José María Aznar delivered a lecture at my own home institution in September 2004, illustrating the relevance of the medieval past to his way of thinking:

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<sup>10</sup>In a review of historiographic publications, Janna Bianchini observes “Medieval Spain” may not have existed eight hundred years ago, but “it exists now—as the idea, or myth, that still beckons to readers from the title pages of so many academic books. Like all ideas, it is not necessarily innocuous. Like it or not, as these studies prove, historians are active participants its evolution” (1179). It is a term that is “not innocuous,” but at the same time has the “virtue of recognizability” (1167).

The problem Spain has with al-Qaeda and Islamic terrorism did not begin with the Iraq Crisis. In fact, it has nothing to do with government decisions. You must go back no less than 1300 years, to the early 8th century, when a Spain recently invaded by the Moors refused to become just another piece in the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity. This Reconquista process was very long, lasting some 800 years. However, it ended successfully. There are many radical Muslims who continue to recall that defeat, many more than any rational Western mind might suspect. (“Seven Theses on Today’s Terrorism”; qtd. in Aidi 83)

A recent example will suffice to show continued currency of the appropriation of simplified visions of medieval history. In a short promotional video titled “the Reconquest will begin in Andalusian lands,” the fortuitously named Santiago Abascal, leader of the Spanish ultra-right anti-immigrant Vox party, rides across an Andalusian plain, accompanied by his *mesnada*.<sup>11</sup> Abascal’s Cidian and Pelayan tropes are clear evocations of a heroic and mythological medieval past. This is only one of many campaign materials Vox uses to trace white, Christian Spanish identity directly back to the Middle Ages.

Just as Spanish is both a domestic and a foreign language in the US, non-modern Iberia belongs both to the past and inhabits our present. Academic and related political debates over the past two decades have shown us that the Middle Ages, and the “Spanish Middle Ages” in particular, are very much (and problematically) alive and not just confined in Europe, if Spain could ever be said to belong unproblematically to Europe. Hussein Fancy asks, of the “*convivencia* wars,” if we, as academics working the context of the US, “have skin in the game?” (295). I would answer that we do, unquestionably. As academics working in one of the largest Spanish speaking countries in the world, our skin in the game is to reinvent the field, presenting the Middle Ages as relevant and to teach using language that is free from the old ideologies of “Invasión” and “Reconquista,” to rebut myths and hypostatizations that are alive and well in popular culture and current events. It is easy to reify some inventions of the Middle Ages into banally nationalistic kitsch, as Santiago Abascal demonstrates when he takes up the banner of the *Reconquista*. *Convivencia* and Al-Andalus are also fairly easy to reify for political purposes, as single words often are; “Dynamic boundary objects” and “networks of interrelated attachments” are not so easily coopted. They are not so easily taught either, regardless of one’s departmental home and languages of instruction. Therein lie our challenges as we continue to invent the Middle Ages and teach in Spanish.

At the heart of the reflections on terminology and practice that I have reviewed here, are the questions that animated a talk by Mary Jane Kelley at a conference in 2015 that brought Ibero- and Hispanomedievalists from Spain, Latin America, and North America together to discuss the *mester de clerecía*, namely: what does the

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<sup>11</sup>I thank Kevin Murphy for bringing this video to my attention. Abascal also professes a particular devotion to Isabel I. Aidi catalogs many other examples of political appropriations of Medieval Iberia.



research that we do matter “in the larger scheme of things” to “individuals living in the twenty-first century?” How and why do we teach what we teach as twenty-first-century Iberianists and Hispanists?

Each generation working in “our field” proposes new definitions and new geographic, linguistic, and temporal limits. Where once the “Spanish Middle Ages” were invented, now “Non-modern Iberia” is being invented and reinvented, and thus our field can be part of what Benita Sampedro Vizcaya and Simon Doubleday envision as “a more mobile form of Hispanism” that will be transatlantic and “go beyond those resilient imperial borders by exploring the circulation of cultural traffic between the Spanish-speaking world and other cultures” (12). Nadia Altschul, in her recent work on medievalism in Brazil, similarly calls for “a more spacious and ethically alert meaning for our field, urging the contemporary medievalism collective to a desirable expansion out of our current comfort zones” (140). This is how our field, in reality any academic field, will not only survive but thrive responsibly in the coming years.

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