

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Towards a History of Literary Composition in Medieval Spain (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9j78j1pp>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 19(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Morrás, María

Publication Date

1988-10-01

Peer reviewed

and spiritual situation—for certainly it consisted of more than the Twelfth-Century Renaissance—would have resulted in a more balanced explanation of Christian interaction with and violence against the Jews.

In any case, Chazan's book no doubt will be the standard account of the events of 1096 and their aftermath for some time to come, and students of Jewish history in particular will find much that is new and much that compels a revision of their views of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. Students of medieval Christian intellectual history will also discover that the cultural revival of the twelfth century was a Jewish as well as a Christian phenomenon. Chazan's fine translation of the Hebrew chronicles of the First Crusade (in the Appendix) will be of great interest and use to anyone concerned with the tragedy that befell the Rhineland Jews in 1096.

Mark D. Meyerson
Lady Davis Postdoctoral Fellow
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Colbert I. Nepaulsingh. *Towards a History of Literary Composition in Medieval Spain.* University of Toronto romance series 54. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986. Pp. x + 296.

This book is a study of an important set of Spanish medieval works in light of their composition. The objective is both ambitious and appealing, and Professor Nepaulsingh has undertaken it with a deep knowledge of the texts and criticism. He has chosen hermeneutics as a theoretical basis. Although the focus is on composition, i.e. on "how parts of a work are put together" (3), the author rejects any theoretical approach that isolates the text from its background. Rather he looks into the various traditions (not sources) in search of a heuristic tool that would help to better comprehend the works he studies. Thus he establishes three dominant influences in composition: the Bible, scholasticism, and the wheel of Fortune to which a tentative fourth book, production, is added.

In "Books on a String" (ch. 1) the rosary or psalter is proposed as a wide-spread composition scheme. As evidence Nepaulsingh draws our attention to medieval iconography in which the holy would be depicted with a rosary in one hand and a book in the other. He examines Berceo's *Milagros* where the psalms occur as textual references, in the division of miracles, and within the allegory of the introduction. The stringing com-

position is even more clear in the *Cantigas de Santa María* of Alfonso X, with a song in praise of the Virgin every tenth *cantiga*, which parallels the pattern of the rosary. The *Cid* is also included in this section because of the regular occurrence of certain lines resembling the psalms which leash or tie together the series of *tiradas*.

In "The *Song of Songs* and the Unity of *Razón de amor*" (ch. 2) Nepaulsingh argues for the unity of the thirteenth-century poem based on its relationship with the biblical song. He does not make the *Song of Songs* a direct source for the Spanish lyric, yet he draws a close comparison in which he highlights the common elements (the garden, the noonday meal, the wine, the taking off of the clothes) overlooking the differences in their structure (the narrative voice in *Razón* is only occasionally that of a woman). "The Apocalyptic Tradition" (ch. 3) is the last chapter devoted to the biblical tradition. It is one of the less interesting because it deals with a relatively large number of texts (Berceo's *Signos del Juicio Final*, *Danza general de la muerte*, *Alexandre*, *Fernán González*, *Zifar*, two poems by Francisco Imperial, and *Laberinto de Fortuna*) in which the apocalyptic tradition is not always the main compositional element.

Under "Sic et Non: Logic and Liturgical Tradition" we find joined two studies previously published. The author shows how didacticism appears as juxtaposed binaries of positive and negative examples in the *Libro de Buen Amor* and the *Corbacho*. Along with the study of its composition, he takes advantage of the commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* by Averrões to discuss the use of imagery in the *Corbacho*. Chapter 5, "The Magic Wheel of Fortune," discusses the *Sierro libro de amor*, *Cárcel de amor*, and *Celestina*.

"The Concept 'Book' and Early Spanish Literature" (ch. 6) differs somewhat from the previous sections. In it Nepaulsingh leads our attention to the consequences derived from the way books were produced in the Middle Ages. He relates the term *cuaderna vía* to the *quaterni* (or *pecia*) of which medieval books were composed. Another suggestion, with wider implications, is that the open end of some works is to be explained by the way books were copied; the circulation of books in *quaterni* made the concept "book" equivalent to something to which *quaterni* could be added or subtracted.

The richness and boldness of many of the ideas presented by Nepaulsingh make the reading of this book an interesting and challenging task. Without doubt it will provoke a productive series of polemics around some central points in the literary history of Spain. However, its subjectivity and

the novelty of some of the theories, highlighted with an enthusiasm that borders on the excessive, might tire or irritate some readers. It is also regrettable that the editors did not take more care correcting misspellings, and the incorrect splitting of syllables in Spanish and Italian words. These minor flaws do not prevent Nepaulsingh's work from making a valuable contribution to Hispanic medievalism by taking a new approach, and giving new solutions, to some of the major questions in the literary history of medieval Spain.

María Morrás

University of California, Berkeley

Penn R. Szittya. *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. xvi + 316.

After receiving the gift of not a "farthyng" but a fart, Chaucer's Friar John storms into the manor house of the village lord. He sits down, almost speechless with rage. He cuts off the lord's puzzled inquiry with a sudden claim: do not call me "maister," but rather a "servitour." Although he has been honored "in scole" with such a title, he now avers that "God liketh it nat that 'Raby' men us calle, / Neither in market nor in youre large halle." For many readers of the *Summoner's Tale*, this may seem simply another realistic detail. Any preaching friar, however hypocritical, knows his Scripture, and like the proverbial devil, may quote it for his own ends (and as a sign of the End).

In his panoramic survey of such "limitours," as seen through the scowls and squints of their historical and literary detractors, Penn Szittya reveals how Chaucer's fictional friar exemplifies a significant thematic pattern found throughout later medieval literature. The friars were excoriated not only as hypocrites but as sons of Cain, not only as seducers but as allies of the Antichrist (220). Tensions raised by the secular-mendicant conflicts at the University of Paris in the 1250s soon converged with those over nothing less than the Signs of the Last Times. Many prophecies (falsely attributed to Joachim of Fiore) predicted that in 1260 the Antichrist would be born. Threatening both Church and university with radical change, the friars were seen as fulfillments of biblical warnings about the End. Almost from their beginnings, then, the friars were more than competitors with the secular clergy for academic and ecclesiastical privilege: they were believed to be the advance guard for the Antichrist.