

DANIEL GUTIÉRREZ TRÁPAGA

REWRITINGS, SEQUELS, AND CYCLES  
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CASTILIAN  
ROMANCES OF CHIVALRY

‘AQUELLA INACABABLE AVENTURA’

TAMESIS

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## Introduction

Castilian romances of chivalry, the *libros de caballerías*, were the dominant form of fiction when the Spanish Empire ruled so much of the world. During the sixteenth century, this genre multiplied with uncanny speed and at least eighty-seven different romances were written in the span of this century. More than two hundred Castilian editions of the *libros de caballerías* were published in this epoch; many of them were translated into Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Portuguese, thus multiplying its cultural influence. The pages of the *libros de caballerías* conquered the audience and readership of Castile, the Iberian Peninsula, Western Europe, and, despite their prohibition, they crossed the Atlantic into the New World. Whilst in Castile the popularity of the genre significantly decreased after the sixteenth century, outside the Peninsula several imitations and translations of romances of chivalry were written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many adventures of these romances were adapted into other genres and media, such as ballads, plays, and operas. Therefore, the genre had a crucial part in the development of early modern fiction and it played a central role in the formation of modern Western fiction. Nevertheless, Hispanists and other literary scholars alike have often overlooked Castilian chivalric romance.

During the early modern period, it was not only Don Quijote's dreams that were full of Amadis, Esplandianes, and Belianises. The emperor, the nobleman, the soldier, the cleric, the merchant, and the peasant dreamt of defeating Endriagos, basilisks, and dragons alike. Equally, women were well acquainted with the damsels in distress and the damsels in shiny armour within the genre; some of them, such as Beatriz Bernal, themselves became writers of *libros de caballerías*, and some romances paid particular attention to their female audience. From a material perspective, the genre's widespread circulation and cultural impact was in part a result of the introduction of the movable-type printing press to Castile late in the fifteenth century. Most often, the transmission of Castilian romances of chivalry occurred in the new format, the imprint, and not in the old format, the manuscript book or codex. However, the new medium is not the only factor that explains the importance of the genre in the sixteenth century.

Castilian chivalric romance had its origins in a long and fruitful medieval tradition, dating back to the twelfth-century French-speaking kingdoms. From its inception, chivalric romance was a shape-shifting genre that appeared as verse translations of the Latin stories of Troy, Greece, and Rome into Old French. The genre soon evolved to encompass the accounts of notorious medieval paladins, Charlemagne and King Arthur, in lengthy prose narratives that often formed cycles. These chivalric cycles were known in the Iberian Peninsula, which enabled a strong development of original romances in Castile during the Middle Ages. As such, medieval Castilian chivalric romance was successfully disseminated in manuscript format.

The genre saw an unprecedented development in the sixteenth century and had pan-European success, when the printed book became its main medium of transmission (Rodríguez Velasco 2008: 685; Gómez Redondo 2012: 1673–1958). This literary boom went beyond fictional genres and included chivalric chronicles, treatises on chivalry, and testimonies of chivalric duties, for example letters of challenges and tournaments (Gómez Moreno 1986, 2001: 374). Despite the extensive circulation of romance in the Middle Ages and the blooming of the genre in the sixteenth century, the importance of chivalric romance in Spanish literature has only recently been acknowledged.

Influential scholars from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as George Ticknor (1849: 242) and Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo (1961: 200–289) had a negative and dismissive perception of the genre (Cacho Blecua 2007). On most occasions their judgements were based on nationalistic prejudices and on the opinion of a fictional canon from Toledo in part I of chapter 47 of *Don Quijote*, who said about the *libros de caballerías*: ‘que, cuál más, cual menos, todos ellos son una mesma cosa’ (Cervantes 1998: 599). As María Jesús Lacarra and Juan Manuel Cacho Blecua (2012: 65–66) have shown, it was the chauvinist views of the best-known disciple of Menéndez y Pelayo, Ramón Méndez Pidal, who forged the predominant opinions on medieval and early modern Spanish literature. He created a literary canon that has little relationship with the actual circulation of works. Such bias explains why chivalric romance in general and *libros de caballerías*, in particular, have often been disregarded or undermined in studies of Spanish and European literature.

Alan Deyermond’s 1975 landmark article ‘The Lost Genre of Medieval Spanish Literature’ first drew attention to two central issues concerning the study of Iberian medieval and early modern romance: the unjustified chauvinist attitude towards the genre and the lack of an accurate and univocal term in Spanish to describe the genre (*libros, novelas, crónicas, historias, romances*, or what?). In his works, Deyermond underscored the presence and importance of the genre in Castile as part of the European literary tradition (1971: 156–157, 1979: 351–390, 1991: 281–311). The monumental work *Historia de la prosa*

*medieval castellana* and its sequel *Historia de la prosa de los Reyes Católicos* by Fernando Gómez Redondo (1999a, 2012) includes the most complete revision of medieval Spanish romance, solving some of the problems identified by Deyermond. These books are the first works to recognise the whole production of Castilian romance as a crucial part of medieval and early modern Castilian prose. Nevertheless, this work has not generated a definite shift in the attitude towards Castilian narrative beyond specialised studies on the genre.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Castilian chivalric romance has yet to be embraced as an important part of Spanish and European literature, the last three decades have seen an outstanding increase in the number of editions and studies devoted to the genre, since the publication of two modern editions of the genre's paradigm, Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's *Amadís de Gaula*: one by Juan Bautista Avallé Arce (1984) and the other by Juan Manuel Cacho Bleca (1987-1988). More than thirty different romances are now available in modern editions and many of the original editions exist online. This recent accessibility has resulted in a considerable growth in interest in the genre and represents an opportunity to expand and refine our knowledge of the *libros de caballerías*, not only as individual works, but also as a genre.

From a chronological perspective, the scope of the genre is clear. Its first testimony is the now lost *editio princeps* of *Amadís de Gaula* by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, printed in Seville in 1496. The final testimonies are the manuscript sequels of Marcos Martínez's *Espejo de príncipes y caballeros (III)*, one anonymous and one by Juan Cano López, both written after 1623. From a broad thematic and formal perspective, early modern chivalric romance continued with the central traits of the medieval genre: lengthy prose narratives that followed a biographical structure, focused on the feats of a knight. Chivalric exploits, love, and religion remained at the thematic core of the genre. The chivalric adventures are often set in a remote time and location, which justifies the presence of wonderful elements (Deyermond 1975: 233; Guijarro Ceballos 1998: 66–138).

In total we know of the existence of eighty-seven different titles of *libros de caballerías*, eighty-three of which remain extant (66 imprints and 17 in manuscript format), from 1496 to sometime after 1623 (Lucía Megías 2008: 191–193; Ramos forthcoming). With this number of works written over more than a century, it would be erroneous to suppose that the genre did not evolve. Several diachronic divisions have been proposed, the latest and most

<sup>1</sup> See for example Brownlee (2000). For a complete evolution of the studies of *libros de caballerías* see Trujillo (2011) and of the studies of Iberian chivalric literature see Gómez Moreno (2001).

comprehensive by Lucía Megías.<sup>2</sup> He has suggested a classification based on two literary paradigms. The first paradigm covers the period from 1496 to 1512. It groups the works by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, Arthurian romances, and *Palmerín* and *Primaleón*. These romances portrayed an ideal vision of chivalry with an explicit didactic intention, linked to chivalric and monarchic ideology (Lucía Megías 2002: 27–32).

According to Lucía Megías, after 1512 two literary trends appeared as a response to the initial paradigm. The first trend consists in a series of works focused on the didactic aspect of the narrative. These romances reduced magic and marvellous adventures in order to comply with religious values and to privilege verisimilitude, such as Páez de Ribera's *Florisando* (1510), *Floriseo* (1516), *Arderique* (1517), *Claribalte* (1519), *Lepolemo* (1521), Juan Díaz's *Lisuarte de Grecia* (1526), and the *Clarián de Landanis* cycle (1518-1528). The second response moved towards literary experimentation, namely in the five *Amadís* sequels written by Feliciano de Silva (1514-1551). In Feliciano's romances amusement was the central aim, bringing an increase in the number of characters, adventures, and elements from other genres.

The initial paradigm and its two responses cover the first half of the development of the genre and its most fruitful epoch, both in terms of the number of works published and popularity. More than two thirds of all chivalric romance editions were published before 1551. In that respect, the decline of chivalric romance in Castile began with the promulgation in Castile of an anti-Protestant pragmatic to control books by Felipe II in 1558 (Lucía Megías 1999; Alvar and Lucía Megías 2001: 27–35). Nevertheless, new works were published and previous romances were reprinted for the rest of the century.

During the second half of the sixteenth century, Feliciano de Silva's experimental approach to romance moved the genre towards the second paradigm, that of entertainment. Its best example is the imprint cycle of *Espejo de príncipes y caballeros* (1555-1587). The central traits of this paradigm are the presence of hyperbolic, highly erotic, and wondrous adventures, to the point that these romances move away from a clear structural scheme. Lucía Megías has also defined a final phase based on the return of the manuscript format. This reflects the decline in the popularity of the genre during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, since some of the romances that compose this phase did not find their way to the printing press (Lucía Megías 2002: 30–32).

The impressive devolvement of the cycle was founded on the writing of sequels or continuations of previous romances to configure literary cycles. The formation of cycles often required the rewriting of prior texts. Beyond the

<sup>2</sup> See also Curto Herrero (1980).