

5-6-2020

Review of The Epic of Juan Latino: Dilemmas of Race and Religion in Renaissance Spain, by Elizabeth R. Wright

Susan Byrne

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, susan.byrne@unlv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/wlc_fac_articles



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Byrne, S. (2020). Review of The Epic of Juan Latino: Dilemmas of Race and Religion in Renaissance Spain, by Elizabeth R. Wright. *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 73(1), 139-141.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/wlc_fac_articles/9

This Book Review is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Book Review in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Book Review has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

*The Epic of Juan Latino: Dilemmas of Race and Religion in
Renaissance Spain* by Elizabeth R. Wright (review)

Susan Byrne

Revista Hispánica Moderna, Volume 73, Number 1, June 2020, pp. 139-141
(Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhm.2020.0005>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/754647>

tation but can be acknowledged through encounter with the limits and textual resistances of what is known, which can be emphasized and exaggerated by certain modes of performance, thought, and inscription—including (anti)literature. Shellhorse cautions that we must be careful not to idealize this resistance, lest we allow “free play [to become] a foundational principle, the inverse of the ‘real’ of metaphysical realism” (116), an argument that dispels much of the so-called post-modernism debate in Latin American studies (no longer mentioned as such, but arguably still operational). Shellhorse gives the name “inframateriality” to indicate the non-metaphysical nature of differential excess that underlies the structures and concepts that order our world, and which anti-literature engages by definition.

This Derridean interlude stands out as somewhat surprising, given the overtly Deleuzian tone of most of the book and the profound differences between these two philosophers. A glance at the footnotes reveals that Shellhorse relies heavily in this section on an essay by Pheng Cheah that compares Derrida’s and Deleuze’s respective approaches to being or “materiality.” Cheah’s article enumerates some of the ways in which their ideas may not be completely incompatible, but he does stress their differences, and Shellhorse would have done well to include some discussion of this. His tacit avoidance of the considerable differences between two of his primary theoretical sources is repeated in his references to Latin Americanist critics, in his reluctance to acknowledge important differences between Beverley’s work and some of the other figures he cites as influential, including Moreiras, Levinson, and Williams, and to elaborate the relationship of his project to theirs. There are moments when Shellhorse seems to acknowledge the ways in which others have been discussing something like anti-literature for a long time, but these moments tend to be buried in the text—see, for instance, the references to Moreiras and Williams on subalternity as textual resistance (134, 178). Also, although Shellhorse logically enough engages with the work of Ángel Rama, his focus on the transculturation book seems surprising given the fact that Rama is much more critical of the institution of literature in his posthumously published *La ciudad letrada*, which had such a strong influence on Beverley’s work and the field in general. A more nuanced discussion of precursors would strengthen, not diminish, the originality and analytical acuity of this book.

KATE JENCKES, *University of Michigan*

ELIZABETH R. WRIGHT. *The Epic of Juan Latino: Dilemmas of Race and Religion in*

Renaissance Spain, U of Toronto P, 2016, 288 pp.

Elizabeth Wright begins her study of Juan Latino and his epic poem about Lepanto with a full historical-literary contextualization centered on a geographical locus, Granada, that serves to both frame and deepen the poet’s life story as well as his work. The volume is divided into two overarching sections, with the first, “From Slave to Freedman in Granada,” comprised of two chapters: one that considers Latino’s birth, education and situation in Granada, and a second that

concentrates on the Civil War that marked, as Wright clearly and convincingly explains, both the city and the man. Here, Wright explains her choice to use the contemporaneous phrase Civil War, which she takes from Ginés Pérez de Hita, rather than what scholars today call the Second Revolt of the Alpujarras, or the Morisco Revolt. Her reasoning is sound, and provides a marker for her approach throughout the volume: she studies the poet and his work from within the time frame, not only including but also trusting the multiple voices from historical and archival sources that enrich her study.

Wright's portrait of Juan Latino is a welcome refutation of the later "distorted image" or "canonization in caricature" of him that, as she points out, came about due to another set of social currents operative in the early seventeenth century (178). Although some details of the poet's life remain unknown, Wright's study reveals many fascinating subtleties, connections, and coincidences that, without overplay or exaggeration, she states clearly so as to allow a reader to draw their own conclusions. In chapter 2, for example, Wright measures the full impact of the Civil War on all aspects of daily life in Granada, then uses this basis, in turn, as foundational material to inform relevant details of the poet's epic portrayal of the subsequent Holy League victory at Lepanto. This solid structural approach is edifying on many levels, one of which becomes even more evident in chapter four's further study of the Christian-Muslim background of the city leading up to the 1568–70 Civil War, to be followed immediately by news of Lepanto in 1571. As her title promises, Wright explores the poet's life, work as a teacher of Latin, and epic in an ample context that affords the reader much to consider in regards to race and religion.

The second section of Wright's volume, titled "The Epic of Lepanto," is a richly detailed three-chapter social, historical, and philological study of Latino's epic poem, *Austrias Carmen* (*The Song of John of Austria*), along with the poet's proem elegy to King Phillip II. Following these chapters, Wright includes two appendices: the elegy itself, titled *On the Birth of Untroubled Times*, with the original Latin followed by Wright and Andrew Lemon's prose translation, and a helpful chronology of the life of poet Juan Latino sketched out alongside salient historical moments. A recent translation of the full *Austrias Carmen* is included as one of twenty-one neo-Latin poems written by Italian and Spanish authors to celebrate the Battle of Lepanto, all recently published in a bilingual Latin-English edition in Harvard's I Tatti series (*The Battle of Lepanto*, 2014). Wright and Lemon, along with Sarah Spence, are the translators and editors of that volume. More attention to the era's neo-Latin writings, as recommended by Chris Celenza in his *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (2004), a volume not included in Wright's otherwise impressive bibliography, has in this case yielded a fascinating portrait of Juan Latino, his work, and the Granada of his day.

From the start of *The Epic of Juan Latino*, Wright recognizes and addresses the difficulties inherent in attributing ideas about race, which she openly identifies as "the most mutable of my terms" (12), to a sub-Saharan poet teaching and writing in Latin in sixteenth-century Granada. To clarify the parameters of her arguments on this point, she uses details from contemporaneous definitions (Covarrubias) and practices (blood purity statutes), along with studies by later

historians. Wright then, however, offers the first of many fine examples of a principal strength of her book: the use of Latino's words themselves, culled from his writings to excellent effect as foundational arguments and examples on which Wright then bases her reasoning. Throughout the book, Wright continually coaxes Latino to speak for himself, as she provides considerable historical, social, and literary detail to elucidate those multiple lexical choices and phrasings from his writings. There are numerous examples of how this admirably close philological work yields multiple valuable messages. Moreover, to her excellent lexical study Wright adds literary and literal parallels that distinguish Latino's epic from other writings on Lepanto. These "dissonant notes" (115), as she calls them, highlight the poet's own choices, from direct discourse for commanders' harangues, to the "anguished attention" paid by Latino but not other writers to the moral dimensions of Ali Pasha's death, as well as the poet's clarity regarding the "frenzied looting" by Spanish soldiers the morning after the battle (114). To Latino's self-fashioning in his proem elegy, studied in chapter 3, Wright adds, in chapter 4, the poet's insertion of himself as *vates* into the action of Lepanto as he relates the battle. She highlights Latino's fascinating refashioning of classical Latin to fit the imagery for modern warfare without having to coin new terms (138–39) and compares the abstract nature of Fernando de Herrera's prose account of the battle with Latino's precision and particular detail, including the latter's inclusion of gruesome details elided in many other contemporaneous accounts. On a broader scale, Wright also highlights numerous echoes of Virgil's *Aeneid* in *Austrias Carmen* to demonstrate Latino's subtle adaptations while linking them to the poet's own circumstances. Wright teases out many feasible double-entendres from specific appropriations, noting both lexical and metrical parallels in these Virgilian notes. In each of these cases, Wright supports her suggestive and convincing readings with copious detail.

In sum, Juan Latino's consummate artistry and erudition is revealed through Wright's impressive and careful philological study. More than that, her skilled scholarly effort with this poet and his work also clarifies for her reader much valuable nuance of life in sixteenth-century Granada, as well as the complex web of intricate detail behind the combat at Lepanto, along with later related developments in Spanish letters and culture. Wright's first-rate and fully contextualized study of Juan Latino and his *Austrias Carmen* opens many doors and answers many questions. And as she herself says in her brief epilogue on Arthur Schomburg's recovery of Juan Latino during the Harlem Renaissance, "May it continue" (183). Wright's cogent and comprehensive analysis whets one's appetite for more, and she is to be highly commended for this excellent study.

SUSAN BYRNE, *University of Nevada, Las Vegas*