

Manuel M. Martín Rodríguez 2009: *Gaspar de Villagrà: Legista, soldado y poeta*. León: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de León. 347 pp. ISBN 978-84-9773-487-5

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Until fairly recently, it was commonplace to open a U.S. history textbook only to find it beginning with an account of the foundation of the first British settlement in North America, Jamestown, in 1607. According to the way American history has been conventionally taught, the nation's historical roots were to be found either in Jamestown or, preferably, in the Puritan communities which sprouted in New England following the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620 and the Great Migration of the 1630s. In presenting such a view of America's past, History books as well as literary anthologies dealing with the United States have, with very few exceptions, consistently ignored the Spaniards' contribution. History books in particular have traditionally dated the origins of American literature back to the publication in 1588 of Thomas Harriot's chronicle, *A Briefe and True Report of the New-found Land of Virginia*. By considering American literature only that originally written in English, Spanish-language texts were more often than not left out from history books even when they had been written on North American soil.

This omission, of course, was far from being accidental, for it reflected nationalistic agendas that have for long decisively shaped the study and teaching of United States history (Mulford 1999: 1; Baym 1989: 459). As a result of this critical neglect, Spanish conquistadors such as Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà or Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, to name but two, have not enjoyed the historical credibility paid to contemporary English explorers such as Captain John Smith or Thomas Harriot. Until a couple of decades ago, "contemporary Anglo-Americans may have scaled back their historical horizons to Plymouth Rock and 1776, leaving 1492 for Hispanics to worry about" (Butzer 1992: 346) while the New England Puritan Fathers were heralded as the forerunners of the 'true' American identity and history (Baym 1989: 460). The Spanish presence in North America was not only regarded as distinct and separate from the British colonization process, but also most conveniently omitted. It is because of this scholarly neglect that the figure of Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, the first poet who wrote in the present-day United States, has not until recently become the object of a more serious and thorough study by the American academe. Evident of this change in sensibility is the entry devoted to Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà in the latest edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Bruce-Novoa and Winans 2005).

More often than not, the study of Villagrà's work has been limited to critical editions of his *Historia de la nueva Mexico* or confined to histories devoted to the Spanish exploration of the Americas. When it comes to the former, Villagrà's only work has certainly been the object of a number of critical editions, including those by

Mercedes Junquera (1989), Victorino Madrid Rubio, Elsia Armesto Rodríguez and Augusto Quintana Prieto (1991), Miguel Encinias, Alfred Rodríguez, and Joseph P. Sánchez (1992), or Felipe I. Echenique (1993). However, when it comes to Villagrà's labor as a conquistador and explorer of New Mexico, Wiget's 1991 landmark essay 'Reading Against the Grain: Origin Stories and American Literary History' is an exception to this trend in scholarship in that it compares Villagrà's *Historia* with a Native American account as well as with Pilgrim Father William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, thus placing Villagrà in the context of more canonical interpretations of America's literary history.

However, until now there had been no fully-fledged study of Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà's work and historical context. Manuel Martín Rodríguez's book comes to solve this telling and flagrant gap in scholarship. *Gaspar de Villagrà: Legista, soldado y poeta* constitutes the most exhaustive biography of Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà to date and, as such, is a valuable piece of scholarship for anyone interested not only in colonial Hispanic Studies but in Early American Studies as well. The introduction of the book explains the relevance of Villagrà's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* and its publishing history. First published in Alcalá de Henares in 1610, it combines poetry and history in its depiction of the origins of New Mexico, making of Villagrà the first poet in what is nowadays the Southwest of the United States. The volume follows a chronological order to chronicle Villagrà's life and is divided into nine chapters preceded by Villagrà's genealogical tree, a chronological chart of the main events in his life and an introduction.

Chapter 1, 'Antecedentes familiares', recounts Villagrà's family history. Born Gaspar Pérez in Puebla de Los Ángeles in New Spain around 1555, he was subsequently better known as Gaspar (Pérez) de Villagrà, this being the Spanish village from which his parents, Hernán Pérez and Catalina Ramírez, hailed (present-day La Unión de Campos in Valladolid). While the names of many of those who participated in the Spanish conquest campaigns in America have fallen into oblivion, his name stands apart from that of other, lesser-known conquistadors because of his authorship of the *Historia de la nueva Mexico*.

Chapter 2, 'Etapa salmantina', collects information about Villagrà's formative years in the city of Salamanca. Having arrived in Spain for the first time with his father in 1569, Villagrà did not begin his university education until 1571, most probably spending the two years in between completing his Latin and educational background in preparation for his university studies (39). Education at the time put special emphasis on rhetoric, grammar and the study of classical sources, a formal training that proved decisive for Villagrà's later life (46, 52). The volume offers the transcription of documents related to Villagrà as well as first-hand testimonies of his contemporaries. The information that is missing about Villagrà's particular experiences as a student in Salamanca is supplied by means of other, contemporary testimonies. It is a particular strength of the book that Martín Rodríguez has checked out the original documents himself, rather than relying on previous transcriptions of them (which, by means of Martín Rodríguez's scholarship, are sometimes proved to be inaccurate). A number of false truths and lies have made their way into Villagrà's biography, which, after being repeated endless times, have come to be considered the true official history on the basis

of their reiteration; these are now being proved wrong and amended. Martín Rodríguez, after a close examination of the Universidad de Salamanca records, comes out with the rather surprising revelation that Villagrà did not major in arts (*letras*), as has been held, but that he read law. With this, the doubts and confusion raised as to why Villagrà transcribed legal documents in full in his poem are put to rest (24). This is the first time that this valuable piece of information regarding Villagrà's academic formation has been proved, constituting one of the many strengths of this volume.

The following chapter, 'El regreso a Nueva España: Villagrà en la Nueva Vizcaya', offers new information at the same time as it advances some new venues for research in Villagrà's biography still to be explored, such as, for instance, whether he had a daughter (apart from his two sons), as some scholars contend on the basis of the existence of a will penned by a so called son-in-law of Villagrà's (59). The significance of this section comes from the fact that mystery surrounds the life of Villagrà once he returned to America; only snippets of information are known about the following two decades of his life. During this period in his life, Villagrà was a participant in the wars against the local Native Americans, and on July 23, 1596 Juan de Oñate appointed him to the post of Procurador General del Campo in his expedition to New Mexico, a post that he unwillingly accepted only after much persuading (66-69).

In 'Itinerario de la expedición de Juan de Oñate (1597-1599)' and 'Gaspar de Villagrà en la Nueva México', Martín Rodríguez not only offers the trajectory of the expedition but also points out probable reasons why the only two chroniclers of the expedition, Villagrà himself and the author of the *Ytinerario de las Minas del Caxco*, chose to put an end to their respective works after the brutal slaughter of Native Americans, interpreting this event as a decisive shift in the character of the colonization of New Mexico (107). Villagrà stated his intention of resuming his poem with a second part recounting the massacre of Ácoma and what followed, but he never managed to write it. His silence speaks louder than words. Martín Rodríguez points out the difficulties that Villagrà would have had to recount this incident in the same heroic mode as that of the *Historia* (107). These chapters also show how Villagrà's academic formation and religious zeal had a profound impact on his time in New Mexico (110). For Villagrà, the conquest of New Mexico "*no se trató de una experiencia exclusivamente militar, sino que su compromiso con la colonización posterior ... fue constante*" (177).¹ It was not a case of *veni, vidi, vici*, but a long-term commitment to the lands he had discovered.

'Nuevo viaje a España y publicación de la *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*' recounts the events leading to the publication of the *Historia*, which was supported by several Spanish scholars who praised the work in a number of poems as a sort of introduction preceding the *Historia* (188-89). The existence of these poems praising Villagrà's work is especially significant, for this scholarly support was more often than not unattainable to the majority of conquistadors. Conquistadors such as Mariño de Lobera (in Chile), Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (in the U.S. Southwest), Bernal Díaz del Castillo (in New Spain) and others, failed to win scholars' endorsement of their works, unless they had

¹ "It was not an exclusively military experience; his commitment to the future colonization was constant".

them extensively re-written by more 'trained' voices, as happened in the case of Lobera (Gómez Galisteo 2009: 119). Villagr , by contrast, enjoyed both support and praise for the publication of his *Historia*.

'Regreso a Nueva Espa a: Juicio, defensa y condena' presents Villagr  as suffering a fate similar to that of his fellow conquistador Cabeza de Vaca. Villagr  was accused by his detractors of the "muertes, justicias, y castigos que el Adelantado don Iuan de O ate dizen que hizo en la Nueva Mexico" (qtd. in 218). Tried in 1613, Villagr  was sentenced in 1614, deprived of his rank and condemned to banishment from the capital of New Spain, thus having the misfortune of sharing a fate common to a number of Spanish conquistadors fallen out of royal favor.

In 'Nuevo viaje a Espa a (1615)', we are introduced to a Villagr  already back in Madrid, where he was given back "la certificaci n de m ritos de la Audiencia de Nueva Galicia" (251). It seems that Villagr  spent the years between 1615 and 1620 in Spain trying to rehabilitate his tarnished reputation, to secure royal pardon and a new post in reward for his past services to the Crown. Moreover, Villagr  apparently worked hard to obtain the same rights for O ate (253-54) although there is no documentation left of this. The book closes with Villagr 's will, his last signature and the inventory of Villagr 's possessions compiled after his death at sea in the ship taking him back home (278). The last chapter, 'Los herederos de Gaspar de Villagr , 1621-1625', recounts the life experiences of Villagr 's two sons, Jos  and Gaspar. The two appendixes that follow consist of a list of the participants in the O ate expedition (1598-1602) and a comparison of the two versions of the 'Memorial de Justificaci n'.

In sum, this volume is a most valuable piece of scholarship and a much-welcomed contribution to the field of Early American Studies in general and to the study of Early American Spanish-language texts in the United States of today in particular. Because of the reasons detailed above, this is a book to take into account as a reference for future studies on Villagr  or his *Historia*, a book appropriate for anyone interested in the colonial history of New Mexico. This book is the first volume of an ongoing three-volume study, the second volume being an annotated critical edition of the *Historia* whereas the third will consist of a new, critical analysis of the *Historia*. We shall be looking forward to the publication of the next two volumes.

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