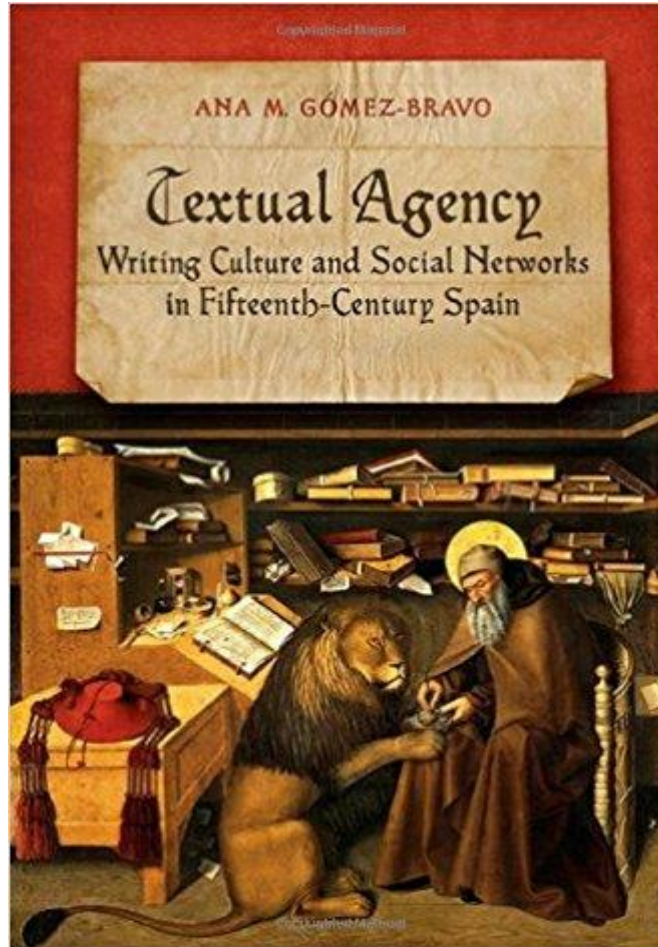


Gómez-Bravo, Ana M. *Textual Agency: Writing Culture and Social Networks in Fifteenth-Century Spain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. ISBN: 9781442647206. 338 pp.

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Even nowadays, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholarly approaches to medieval Spain literature have maintained parameters similar to those of Ramón Menéndez Pidal in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Don Ramón's essential idea was to emphasise the aristocratic component of medieval Spanish literature because a number of remarkable titles were written by members of the aristocracy. In spite of that fact, the increasing importance of lay literacy in the Iberian Peninsula during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, including the 'revolution' –in cultural terms– provided by the emergence of the printing press, provoked changes in both the reception and transmission of literary works. Gómez-Bravo's monograph reviewed here aims to trace the changing perceptions regarding medieval Spanish literature that occurred during the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a crucial period in the history of Spanish culture that, so far, has been analysed principally from the point of view of the aristocratic element mentioned above. In fact, let us underscore that this is one of the first attempts to bring to the academic table the always uncomfortable chrematistic ingredient of the culture, shedding light therefore on the role played by all kinds of agents in the process of producing texts and the networks assembled to achieve that goal.

After a brief introduction, chapter 1, “Poetry, Bureaucracy, and the Social Order”, is dedicated to explaining the spread of lay literacy in Spain during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as expressed in some well-known classic works, such as those by Ángel Gómez Moreno, Roger Boase, and Jeremy Lawrance. The rise of professional copyists, *escribanos*, is conveyed here by emphasising the increasing power of scribes, notaries, and other professionals of the writing field and the unstable concept of nobility, which made possible a transformation in the social order of the Spanish territories in her expression of the topos of arms and letters: “Knowledge did not dull the blade of the sword, nor did it weaken the arms and hearts of the *caballeros*” (21). This classical approach to the topic is counterweighted in chapter 2, “Escribano Culture and Socio-professional contiguity”, where the author seeks to explain the social and cultural changes caused by the exchange of ideas that occurred in the Castilian Middle Ages. Here she introduces the concept of “socio-professional contiguity” (33), a new theoretical approach she has developed to explain more accurately the evolution of culture in the Spanish Middle Ages. Gómez-Bravo explains convincingly how the social development of *escribanos* and notaries was short-circuited by the so-called *converso* problem: a large number of people skilled in the materiality of writing were either converts from Judaism to Christianity or from *converso* families. This fact was used by noble authors in order both to minimise the rise of these professionals of the pen and to force them to assimilate the aristocratic precedents of Spanish culture. It is for this reason that many of the authors of material texts –from scribal documents to the typical wandering poems of the Middle Ages– can be clearly perceived as resembling Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals.” This approach constitutes, indeed, one of the most successful achievements of Gómez-Bravo’s monograph, for it allows a new model of analysis of the volatile social equilibrium achieved by medieval Spanish cultures.

Chapter 3 and chapter 4, “Pervasive Papers” and “The Hands Have It”, deal with the materiality of “copying, compiling, and preserving documents” (59), as well as the way in which it profoundly affected the creativity of Spanish medieval culture. Focusing on the examination of “the uses of poetry in relation to the medium used for its support” (63), this paratextual activity is offered as a key for the accurate interpretation of the entire cultural phenomenon of Spanish medieval poetry, underscoring the nature of poems as ‘publishing agents’ thanks to their hand-to-hand dissemination. In addition, Gómez-Bravo enhances the different types of documents provided, from rolls to wrapping papers, legal processes, and poetic notebooks, pointing out the common elements in all of them regarding what she defines as “mutual referentiality of text and image” (103).

In “Papers Unite” and “Paper Politics”, chapters 5 and 6, Gómez-Bravo analyses the precarious life of papers, which was due to a range of reasons, but most of them are related to their lack of monetary value. However, as Gómez-Bravo emphasises, the members of the bureaucracy in medieval Spain were producing literary spaces, creative environments, and writing tools, knowingly or not, in order to transform texts into a crucible of cultural and political forces. In “Books as Memory” (chapter 7), she focuses on the conceptual image of the book and the total comprehension of its materiality as an exercise of power and, above all, as a materialising effort of collective memory. As a consequence, Inquisition records, books of lineages, and the typical medieval Spanish songbooks (*cancioneros*) are scrutinised here in a way barely seen before, underscoring the necessity of understanding the great degree of manipulation occurring in paratextual elements like rubrics and glosses to secure the correct interpretation of medieval Spanish culture.

In “Arranging the Compilation” and “The Book of Fragments,” the two final chapters of this monograph, the author guides us on a journey from medieval poetry to narrative accounts, showing the process of textual agencies conveniently imbricated in the cultural and political networks of the Spanish Middle Ages and beyond—for the continuities of these patterns during the Golden Age lasted longer than one might suspect. Through in-depth analysis and some remarkable insights, the author succeeds in identifying “the inner dynamics of specific groups strongly vested in writing activities and the situations that sustain them and constitute their particular culture” (215).

As a final thought, Gómez-Bravo’s monograph is a significant effort in shedding light on the role played by agents of all kinds in the cultural process of producing texts in medieval Spain, as well as a top-notch exploration of the networks created and linked together in order to perform those activities. In addition, the author here begins to trace a new path for the study of medieval Spanish literature, resembling the principles established by Norbert Elias in his classic essay on court society, to which she refers on occasion. The final result of this study is the bringing to light of a decisive part of Spanish medieval culture that had fallen into oblivion and had previously been only partially assessed. Reversing the aristocratic trend in the analysis of medieval literature, whilst opening the academic field to more complex social and economic elements of exploration is, undeniably, the most significant achievement of this work.