

**Leticia Álvarez-Recio, ed. 2021.**  
***Iberian Chivalric Romance: Translations and Cultural  
Transmission in Early Modern England.***  
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In the year 1700, in one of his incisive passages, the satirist Tom Brown proclaimed: “The Stage has now so great a share of Atheism, Impudence, and Prophaneness, that it looks like an Assembly of Demons, directing the Way Hellward [...]. What are all their New Plays but Damn’d Insipid Dull Farces, confounded Toothless Satyr, or Plaguy Rhiming Plays, with Scurvy Heroes, *worse than the Knight of the Sun, or Amadis de Gaul.* They are the errantest Plagiaries in Nature” (Brown 1700, 51–52; my emphasis). Reading such a statement, one might assume that the hero of *Amadis de Gaula*, and, by extension, chivalric romance novels generally, were widely despised at the turn of the seventeenth century. And certainly they all were. Still, only two years later, J. Gwillim ventured to publish John Shirley’s latest version of *Amadis*, doubtlessly tempted by its historical editorial success, while aware of the new tastes requiring some adaptation in the novel, by making it “somewhat briefer in Bulk, but not less in Effect [...], more pleasing and efficaciously diverting” (qtd. in Moore 2020, 118). Leticia Álvarez-Recio magisterially addresses the apparent paradox behind the negative perception of these novels and their enormous popularity during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, in her edited collection of essays *Iberian Chivalric Romance: Translations and Cultural Transmission in Early Modern England*.

In her introduction, Álvarez-Recio takes as a starting point the criticism of these novels by humanists, who condemned their lack of decorum and utility, their pernicious effects on religious and moral behavior and their stimulation of misguided emotions. This censure is seen by the editor as parallel to the long-standing scholarly neglect of the genre, resulting from the combination of earlier humanistic arguments and a change in literary tastes that occurred in the late seventeenth century, never to return to what Covarrubias called

“ficciones gustosas y artificiosas” [enjoyable and artful fictions]<sup>1</sup> (1611, 211v). Prior to this, however, early modern readers had made these works bestsellers all over Europe. The essays in *Iberian Chivalric Romance* brilliantly bridge the gap between these two realities by focusing not just on the popularity of the romances but also on how their influence permeated early modern English literary culture and contributed “to the very definition of English native prose fiction” (13). This volume thus proposes actively “to compensate for the distortions of literary history, both past and present, and establish a more accurate picture of Elizabethan literary culture,” in Jordi Sánchez-Martí’s words, reclaiming the study of “the literature read and favoured by the actual Elizabethans” (38).

With that purpose in mind, the essays in this volume study the English translations of Iberian romances as literary texts in their own right and in all their full dimension. The collection offers a wide range of methodological approaches that go beyond traditional translation and reception studies, which not infrequently relegate these works to the periphery of English literature. Authors of these essays address questions of book history, material culture, textual circulation, gender and sexuality, spatiality, rhetoric, post-colonialism and religious history, in a profound interdisciplinarity which demonstrates the immense possibilities for further research in this area. The book is divided into four sections, the first of which is dedicated to examining Iberian chivalric romances in the early modern English book trade, with a chapter by Jordi Sánchez-Martí on the “Publication of Chivalric Romances in England, 1570–1603.” This essay lays the foundation for the rest of the volume by providing a thorough analysis of the publication history of the chivalric romances in England, from Caxton’s 1473 edition of *Recuyell of Histories of Troie* until the end of the Elizabethan period. Combining a highly detailed examination of the Stationers’ register and their publication practices with a scrutiny of the sociocultural changes in England, Sánchez-Martí cogently explains how printers moved away from native medieval verse romances in the 1560s, only to look for new materials in the Iberian stock. In Sánchez-Martí’s view, the English translations of Spanish romances became instrumental in the renewed success of the genre on English soil in the last decades of the century. This, in turn, had a significant impact on

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

the production of native English texts: “The fascination with English translations of Iberian romances served as a catalyst to encourage the publication of other types of chivalric fiction” (35) as English writers started to imitate the narrative devices, themes, stories, and style of the Iberian texts.

The second part of the volume discusses the main agent of the reception of these works in England, Anthony Munday, focusing on specific aspects of his translations from a cultural and ideological perspective. Leticia Álvarez-Recio’s chapter, “Sir Francis Drake: Conquest and Colonization in Anthony Munday’s *Palmendos* (1589),” situates Munday’s dedication to Drake in the context of a wider campaign by publishers and merchants with overseas commercial interests. Her analysis of the episode on the conquest of the Isle of Delphos discloses an underlying ideology of territorial expansion and foreign intervention in Munday’s work. In her essay “The Portrait of the *Femme Sole* in Anthony Munday’s *The First Book of Primaleon of Greece*,” María Beatriz Hernández Pérez puts romance and hagiography side by side to show that “the common ground shared by these two genres is a metaphoric means of highlighting space,” (74) in particular when depicting the qualities of the *femme sole*, which in Hernández Pérez’s view would have captured the imagination of English women readers of Iberian romances. The last chapter in this section, Louise Wilson’s, ““Such maner of stuff’: Translating Material London in Anthony Munday’s *Palmerin of England*,” focuses on material objects, noticing how Munday applies the polytemporal discourse typical of early modern chivalric works to them. Munday, Wilson contends, intended to appeal to non-elite readers by evoking objects in his own quotidian world – the world in which those readers lived – while simultaneously keeping the flavor of the medieval past of chivalry.

The last two sections of the book explore the impact of Iberian chivalric romances on, respectively, English literature and English prose fiction. The impact on English literature is examined through a number of specific elements. In chapter 5, Rocío G. Sumillera traces the development of the epistolary genre in England to translations of the letters in *Amadis*. Timothy D. Crowley, in chapter 6, argues for the influence of the interlaced motifs used by Feliciano de Silva in stories of disguise and clandestine marriages on Sidney’s *Arcadia*.

The representation of how loyalty issues exacerbated early tensions between national identity and cosmopolitanism is taken up by Elizabeth Evenden-Kenyon in chapter 7. Donna B. Hamilton examines ways in which Munday combines romance and history with ideological intent in the context of political and religious controversies in chapter 8.

Two essays specifically tackle the impact of the Iberian romances on English prose fiction. Goran Stanivukovic's "Iberian Chivalric Romance and the Formation of Fiction in Early Modern England" convincingly argues that the translations of these chivalric romances played a central role in the creation of a new kind of fiction "by shifting the narrative focus from the exteriority of militant chivalry to the interiority of the protagonists and their emotional lives" (208). The last chapter of the volume, "*La Celestina* and the Reception of Spanish Literature in England," by Helen Cooper, may surprise by apparently shifting attention from the Iberian romances to discuss the fifteenth-century Spanish *Celestina*. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Cooper compares the two early modern translations of the Spanish work, dated 1525–1530 and 1631, arguing convincingly that the changes in public taste they evince are the result of the pervading influence of chivalric romances.

The volume closes with an afterword by Alex Davis, whose reflections on the several ways these chivalric romances become central to the subsequent shape of English prose—in their cosmopolitanism, in their evocation of the past even as they move towards modernity—characterize the collective thrust of the essays, and provide a solid conclusion to this meticulously edited and superbly assembled volume.

*Iberian Chivalric Romance: Translations and Cultural Transmission in Early Modern England*, then, comes to join what is by now an expanding number of publications by a research group at the forefront of the study of the dissemination in England of Iberian chivalric romances. Among such illustrious company, this latest addition well deserves its place.

## References

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