Feminist Approaches to Medieval Spanish History and Literature: 
A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Further Research

Although many of Spain's earliest poetic texts give expression to a 
female voice,¹ it is not until the fifteenth century that Spain's first female 
authors are documented.² It is perhaps for this reason that gender-conscious 
studies of medieval Spain have been so scarce in relation to those concerning 
other parts of Europe. Researchers with a feminist perspective have had to 
limit their investigations to the texts of male writers. Yet much can be learned 
from the images of women projected onto the literature, legal codes, and 
chronicles composed by medieval Spanish men, and a number of recent 
feminist studies have turned these texts to their advantage.

Heath Dillard's superb book, Daughters of the Reconquest. Women in 
Castilian Town Society, 1100-1300 (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 
relies on the fueros (statutes) and town ordinances of the newly reconquered 
frontier to offer a fresh perspective on the position of women in medieval 
Castile. Dillard argues that

both as heiresses of municipal property and as individuals capable 
of transmitting it to their children or to other heirs, women were a 
formidable presence in the property structure of the towns where 
the ownership of property was the fundamental basis for full and 
privileged membership. (26)

She goes on to examine different categories of women (brides, widows, 
mistresses, go-betweens), using the large number of surviving fueros to 
substantiate her claim that many of the commonplace negative generalities 
about medieval women do not hold up in the geographical situation of the 
frontier.

Other recent studies of women as seen through the lens of medieval 
Spanish law codes and chronicles include Lucy A. Sponsler's "The Status of 
Married Women under the Legal System of Spain" (Journal of Legal History 
3.2 [1982]: 125-52), Marjorie Ratcliffe's "Adulteresses, Mistresses and 
Prostitutes: Extramarital Relationships in Medieval Castile (Hispania 67 
[1984]: 346-50), and Clara Estow's "Women in the Historical Writings of 
Sponsler's work is less optimistic than Dillard's in setting to rest the 
istereotype of rampant misogyny in medieval Castile. Basing her analysis on 
Alfonso X's ambitious legal undertaking of the thirteenth century, the Siete 
Partidas, as well as the earlier Fuero Juzgo (promulgated in 654 A.D.), she 
describes such female-specific prohibitions as the one-year waiting period before remarriage in the context of what she sees as the law codes' 

¹ Important here are the Mozarabic kharjas and the Galician cantigas de amigo. 
² These are Leonor López de Córdoba, Florencia de Pinar, and Teresa de Cartagena.
fundamental mistrust of women's behavior and their preferential treatment of men. Ratcliffe's work similarly understands some of the harsh punishments specified for women in medieval Castilian law as reflective of men's preferential treatment in society, although she sees women in medieval Castilian law as in many respects enjoying greater freedoms. Focusing in particular on laws governing the married woman's sexual conduct in such codes as the _Fuero Juzgo_, the _Fuero de Baeza_, and the _Fuero de Miranda del Ebro_, she concludes that honor was the chief determinant of medieval society's attitude toward women; it was only when women threatened to dishonor men publicly that the law treated them cruelly. Estow's analysis of women in the chronicles of Pedro López de Ayala turns to historical writings in order to understand the position of women in medieval Spain. She places such women as the influential mistress of King Alfonso XI, Leonor de Guzmán, and his wife, the mother of King Pedro I of Castile ("el Cruel"), María de Portugal, within the turbulent historical events of fourteenth century Castile, discussing how the famous chronicler integrated these "real" women into his work and the terms he used to describe their behavior and activities.

There are also a number of excellent recent publications in Spanish that seek to analyze the position of women in Spain via male-authored legal, historical, and doctrinal records. These publications offer the most comprehensive discussion of women in medieval Spain as seen from a feminist perspective. They address such broad topics as the image of women in medieval Spanish art, women in medieval Spanish cities, medieval Spanish women and the law, and women in medieval Spanish literature and everyday life. Many of the publications result from the Seminario de Estudios de la Mujer of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, established in 1981 for the purpose of reevaluating the image and position of women in literature, history and society. Included in the Autónoma series are _Nuevas perspectivas sobre la mujer_. Actas de las Primeras Jornadas de Investigación Interdisciplinaria (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma, 1982); _Las mujeres medievales y su ámbito jurídico_. Actas II (Madrid, 1983); _La imagen de la mujer en el arte español_, Actas III (Madrid, 1984); and _Literatura y vida cotidiana_, Actas IV (Zaragoza, 1987).

The portrayal of women in medieval Spanish literature has long been a subject of interest in the field. For the most part, however, the topic has not been dealt with from a feminist perspective. Notable exceptions in Spanish are M.E. Lacarra's "La representación de la mujer en algunos textos épicos castellanos" (Actas del II Congreso Internacional de la AHLM, in press) and her "Mujer y Literatura" (Mujer y Sociedad. Bilbao: Universidad País Vasco, 1985. Pp. 118-20.) In English Harriet Goldberg has explored prejudice against women as seen through medieval Spanish _exempla_ in relation to prejudice against Jews--another alien group in medieval Spain--in her "Two Parallel Medieval Commonplaces: Antifeminism and Antisemitism in the

A survey of recent Modern Language Association bibliographies and convention programs indicates that feminist studies, anthologies, and bibliographies which take medieval Spain into account are beginning to respond to some of the major lacunae in the field. A sample of publications includes Inés Dolz-Blackburn's "Recent Critical Bibliography on Women in Hispanic Literature" (Discurso Literario 3.2 (1986): 331-34; Angel and Kate Flores' (eds.) Hispanic Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present: A Bilingual Anthology (New York: Feminist Press, 1986); Jeanne Battesti-Pelegrin's "Le rituel de la plainte justice dans le romancero viejo (La justice au moyen Âge: Sanction ou impunité? Aix-en-Provence: Publications du CUERMA, 1986. Pp. 63-78); Mary Louise Trivison's "The Medieval Woman: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Leisure" (Kentucky Romance Quarterly 33.3 (1986): 377-83); Consuelo Arias' "El espacio femenino en tres obras del medioevo español: De la reclusión a la transgresión" (Torre 1.3 (1987): 365-88); and M.E. Lacarra's "Notes on Feminist Analysis of Medieval Spanish Literature and History" (La Corónica 17.1 (1988): 14-22). Barbara Weissburger's paper on "Role Reversal and Festivity in the Romances of Juan de Flores" at the last MLA convention (28 December 1988) and papers given by medievalists at the Special Session on "Widows in Medieval Spain," over which I presided (Connie Scarborough, "Widows in the Chronicles of Medieval Spain") point to some fine, new interdisciplinary research.

For those in fifteenth-century studies, the future direction of feminist investigation is straightforward: much work remains to be done on texts in which the female voice coincides with a female author. Alan Deyermond's...

For those who study the eleventh through fourteenth centuries, some suggestions for new directions in research are worth offering. A good feminist analysis of any period and its texts needs to consider more than the simple presence or absence of women in historical and literary writings. It needs to consider the ways in which gender determines women's sex, social, and linguistic roles, and the relationship between these roles and those specified for men. In the field of medieval Spanish literature and history, however, there are special problems associated with doing such an analysis. There is, first of all, very limited knowledge about real women in medieval Spain, and what is thought to be known in general about women's everyday lives and behaviors is often only a point of view expressed in texts which seek to prescribe, rather than to describe, women's reality. Secondly, a usual channel for understanding the intratextual dynamics of a work—that is, examining its structure and content in terms of authorship and audience—is in many cases closed to the investigator of medieval Spain. Texts may be anonymous, known authors difficult to document properly, and intended or actual audiences undeterminable. One way of compensating partially for some of these problems is for researchers to make better use of the Spanish oral tradition (Romancero), the texts of which rely heavily on soliloquy and dialogue nuanced with distinctions reflecting the roles of their various protagonists and the perspectives of their singers. Speech patterns often give clues about interpersonal relations, and the speech of the romances, as we know from their modern incarnations, while not mimetic, does appear to be sensitive to certain aspects of the real speech which surrounds them.

Anthropological studies of Mediterranean societies should also be consulted. It is my own feeling that the longstanding neglect of Spain in many academic circles has to do with the eurocentric standards against which it is often measured—standards which may be much less applicable to gender-based studies of the Reconquest years than those relating to, for example, North Africa. Feminist studies of medieval Spain should bear in mind the position of women in the Islamic world and their image in medieval literature and history. They should seek as well to understand the impact of Hebrew
writings and medieval Jewish philosophy, for Jews were important and influential cohabitants—not to mention writers and historians—in medieval Spain.

Recent work on the kharjas (short, fragmentary verses in Mozarabic, the archaic dialect of Spanish spoken in Muslim-ruled Spain) has opened up new avenues for integrating Spain's three cultures into feminist analyses, as has the discussion of Moorish and Jewish women in some of Spain's oldest known texts (e.g., Samuel G. Armistead's and James T. Monroe's "A New Version of La morica de Antequera." La Corónica 12.2 [1984]: 228-40, and Edna Aizenberg's "Una judía muy fermosa: The Jewess as Sex Object in Medieval Spanish Literature and Lore." La Corónica 12.2 [1984]: 187-94). Yet much more could be done in this area.

Finally, it is urgent that those who work in the field participate more actively in broader feminist academic organizations and publications. I was stunned to discover at the 1988 Kalamazoo meeting that there were only two representatives of medieval Spanish studies in attendance at the Medieval Feminist Newsletter business meeting. Colleagues in feminist studies covering different regions and different disciplines have much to learn from one another, as I myself have seen in my most recent project, a collection of essays on widows in medieval European literatures and histories. The resources uncovered by all medieval feminist investigators can profitably be shared by those who work on women in medieval Spain. And, from the perspective of those unfamiliar with medieval Spanish history and literature, the growing interest in multicultural feminist studies should make this field a natural one to study.

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Commentary

In the last "Commentary" column (MFN 6, fall 1988) eight readers offered reactions to an article entitled "Medieval Misogyny" (Representations 20) written by R. Howard Bloch, Univ. of California, Berkeley. The eight respondents were Elizabeth A. Clark, Duke University; Wendy Clein, University of Connecticut; Elaine Hansen, Haverford College; Peggy Knapp, Carnegie Mellon University; Marshall Leicester, Cowell College, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz; Linda Lomperis, Cowell College, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz; Carol Neel, The Colorado College; and Helen Solterer, Duke University.

Prof. Bloch was invited to respond. His comments follow: