

*The Practice of Epic and Lyric Writing
in Colonial Mexico*

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The last twenty-five years of scholarship on colonial Mexican poetry have borne witness to the development of at least two principal, recurring themes: one dealing with literary history, the other with literary criticism. The first centers on the traceable origins of European poetry in Mexico. One side of this story pertains to popular poetry, more specifically the ballads that Bernal Díaz del Castillo reports the Spanish conquistadors composed and sang in between massacring indigenous peoples (Martínez 101–102; Chang-Rodríguez 153). It points to the 1559 memorial held in Mexico City in honor of Emperor Charles V, during which poetry was publicly staged and read as part of the official ceremonies and festivities. Printed a year after the celebration, the description of this event by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar in his *Túmulo imperial de la gran ciudad de México* represents for some scholars an early taste of Petrarchism in the Americas, which would emerge more fully in the 1577 anonymous compilation of poetry *Flores de baria poesía* (Tenorio, “La función” 352; Chang-Rodríguez; Roggiano 71). Also in the sixteenth century, Francisco de Terrazas’s work was the first poetry created by a poet born in America to be printed (Chang-Rodríguez 156). And we find yet another beginning in the Latin compositions by Cristóbal Cabrera, a Franciscan priest who arrived in Mexico shortly after the destruction of Tenochtitlan, and who Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico, took under his wing. Cabrera’s poetry has been deemed not only the “earliest known from colonial Mexico” (Laird 81), but also an example of Erasmian thought in the Americas (Laird 96).

The second motif – literary criticism – refers to the role that epic poetry played in colonial society and its current status in scholarship. It is common for studies on the subject to begin by affirming the prestige that the epic genre had in the sixteenth century and noting the unfortunate, forgotten place to which it has been relegated today (Cacho Casal, “Volver”; Davis, Myth; Vilà). The critical disregard for sixteenth-century

epics has gone so far as to question the relevance of reading them at all, which has generated doubtful responses (Perelmuter). With the exception of Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana*, colonial epic poetry remains, as Raúl Marrero-Fente puts it, a ghost in the field of colonial Latin American studies because of the emphasis on historical chronicles and other literary genres such as lyrics and narratives (11–30).¹

This chapter is not concerned with tracing origins, nor with proposing new genealogies for the poetry written in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico, nor with scholarly efforts to redeem the epic genre. Rather, my main interest is to examine colonial Mexican poetry as a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice and to consider the challenges that such a practice poses to twenty-first-century readers. There are several histories of colonial poetry that provide accounts of the introduction and appropriation of Petrarchism in the so-called New World and the development of a Baroque aesthetic (Tenorio, “La función,” *Poesía novohispana*; Chang-Rodríguez; González Echevarría; Roggiano; Rama). Despite the trope of the colonial epic's alleged abandonment, several studies already address the relationship between this form and its peninsular and classical models (Marrero-Fente; Blanco; Vilà; Davis, “La épica,” *Myth*; Peña, “Epic”; Quint; Pierce). I urge any reader interested in a survey of colonial Mexican lyrics and epics, and their main writers and works, to skim through any of these thorough studies. What follows is not an overview, but rather an attempt to address the kinds of questions that, in my opinion, we should be asking regarding the production of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexican poetry. I also explore the kinds of answers that we might encounter after reflecting on what poetry did at that time and what we can do with poetry today.

What Is Colonial Mexican Poetry?

What makes poetry “colonial”? What does it mean to favor this label instead of the many others used to describe the same literary corpus, such as Golden Age, Early Modern, Spanish American, or Hispanic poetry? This is a broad question that has recently elicited two different sets of answers from scholars. On the one hand, there is what Rodrigo Cacho

¹ Ercilla's *Araucana* is mentioned in almost all modern scholarship dealing with colonial and early modern peninsular poetry. More recently, another colonial epic, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà's *Historia de la Nueva México* (1610), has caught the attention of scholars in the field of colonial Latin American studies and Chicano studies. See López-Chávez, Martín-Rodríguez, Stavans and Acosta-Belén, and Padilla.

Casal deems “identitarian readings,” whose origin we can locate in the 1980s in what is now known as the “new paradigm” of colonial Latin American studies (“Introduction” 2). This new paradigm widened the scope of the discipline by proposing the concepts of “colonial discourse” and “colonial subjectivity” as primary subjects of analysis. In doing so it shifted the focus of a field that, until then, had functioned from a Eurocentric point of view in which works by European individuals were read either at face value or according to aesthetic categories that erased the violence inherent to the practice of writing in the New World (see *Díaz*). On the other hand, there is a more historical, philological take on these works as “derivative or strongly indebted to the Peninsular tradition” (Cacho Casal, “Introduction” 2). Although Cacho Casal does not mention it, this latter perspective is prevalent in Mexican scholarship, where the use of “colonial” is an anomaly, as the more widespread and accepted term is *poesía novohispana* (New Spanish poetry; see *Tenorio, Poesía novohispana*).

By following an approach in which a formalist/philological reading takes precedence over textual history, these kinds of readings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry often involve building the encyclopedic knowledge necessary to understand all the references that poets used; judging poetry in the same exact same terms that we find in the theoretical writings of the historical period; and posing models, literary influences, and form as the only context necessary to understand such writings. One drawback to this perspective, as Cacho Casal has already noted, is the subjugation to a Eurocentric perspective in which any verse written in Spanish during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries is just a variation of European models. As Martha Lilia Tenorio’s work shows, there is an idea among some scholars that the term “colonial literature” has no place or purpose when reading and analyzing literature (*Poesía novohispana*, vol. 1, 17).²

This misleading understanding of the relationship between colonialism and literature theorized by Tenorio hasn’t always been the rule. If we go back in time, we see that past histories of literature have pointed to the entangled relationship between the “vast poetic renewal in the peninsula and colonial expansion throughout America,” which unfolded simultaneously (González Echevarría 192). This framework has less to do with the poets’ origins, as Tenorio would have it, and more with how writers situate

² “El concepto de ‘literatura colonial’ entendido como una categoría diferente de ‘literatura hispánica’ es totalmente incorrecto. Funciona si lo que se quiere es especificar que tal autor escribió, nació o vivió en las colonias y no en España, esto es, sirve como determinante biográfico o geográfico, pero no como una categoría de análisis literario.”

themselves before the world in which they are writing.³ Take, for instance, Diego Mexía posing as Ovid in exile in his translation of the *Heorides*, published as part of his *Parnaso antártico* (1608). For Mexía, writing poetry in American territories implies holding a privileged position over the indigenous peoples, who he describes as barbarians, and at the same time inhabiting a distant position in relation to the hegemonic cultural center that, for him, is the Spanish peninsula.

The epic form exploits the idea of the American territory as a place of barbarians through the clash between the civilized Spaniard and the barbarous indigene (Davis, Myth 11), regardless of where authors were born and where they wrote and published their poems. But beyond this ideological division, lyric poetry also takes part in the same production of a Eurocentric point of view when it engages, purposely or unintentionally, with the reality created by European colonial expansion. Thus, writing colonial poetry often means writing amid epidemics that severely decreased indigenous populations, as with Mexía's *Parnaso antártico*; within flooded cities, as in Fray Juan de Alavés's *Relación historiada de las solemnes fiestas que hicieron en la ciudad de México al glorioso San Pedro Nolasco* (1633); or even in praise of newly developed urban environments, as in Arias de Villalobos's *Canto intitulado Mercurio* (1603, published 1623), or Bernardo de Balbuena's *Grandeza mexicana* (1604). Writing colonial poetry also meant enjoying not only the obvious privilege of literacy, but also the less noted privilege of time – which Sor Juana famously thematized in her *Respuesta a sor Filotea* – and the means to make one's poetry circulate through space. All of this is what Raquel Chang-Rodríguez has characterized as the “colonial circumstance” of sixteenth-century poets in the Americas (164) – that is, a disjointed position in which literary models were European but material conditions of writing, including patronage, were dependent on the new territories.

Although geography has played a significant role in critique that describes sixteenth-century poetry as a discourse on the newness of the American territory (Tenorio, “La función”), it is not enough to reduce the meaning and function of these works to a mere poetic locus. At the core of all interpretations of colonial Latin American poetry that view it as either derivative or as part of the literary tradition from the Spanish peninsula,

³ The best examples for understanding that it is not possible to define a poem through the location in which it was written are the many poems that were written in in-between places. For instance, Diego Mexía's translation of Ovid was written on the poet's journey from Lima to New Spain. Something similar happened with Antonio de Saavedra Guzmán's *El peregrino indiano*, published in 1599 in Madrid but written during a seventy-day journey across the Atlantic.

there is an idea of literary history that makes nothing of the sociohistorical conditions in which poetry is produced. There are many ways to look at these material conditions of production as a decisive characteristic of colonial poetry. Anne J. Cruz points to the material conditions of production of seventeenth-century Spanish poetry when she refers to the work of academies – that is, the groupings of lettered people that composed poetry under a wealthy patron’s wing – as “art of the State.” Following this model, perhaps we should consider the particularity of the viceregal administration and the social elite produced by it when talking about poetry written in colonial Mexico. Anna More has pointed out this particularity by elaborating the idea of a “poetic economy of the Viceregal Court,” which she presents as the dynamic through which poetry becomes a symbolic currency in the relationship between poets, local elites, and the Crown (114).

Balbuena’s *Grandeza mexicana* reveals this tension between European models, American territory, and local administration in a fully visible fashion. In this poem we see the placing of the Mexican territory at the center of the Spanish empire and, simultaneously, the creation of a new socioeconomic order in which the state leaves room for the economy as the “new civilizing order” (Fuchs and Martínez-San Miguel 676–677; Del Valle 40). The arguments against calling Balbuena’s poetry “colonial” are premised on the superficial idea that while his *Grandeza* and some passages from his epic poem *El Bernardo* (1624) put the American territory at the fore, some of his sonnets and other compositions are clearly influenced by Spanish peninsular and classical poetry. Where would one find *Novohispanismo* in Balbuena’s poetry?, asks Tenorio (*Poesía novohispana* 40–41), apparently believing that the realm of poetic language exists in a different sphere, completely detached from the realm of the economic, the social, and the political.

Literary forms do not belong to any other world than ours, and I find it naive to think that one can look at a poem and understand it just by tracing its influences and references and not also looking at its material conditions of production. This is precisely the point in Cacho Casal’s recent work on Balbuena, where he emphasizes that *Grandeza mexicana* is a byproduct of Balbuena’s classical training as much as of the dynamics of New Spain’s cultural and political spheres. Cacho Casal’s proposal rests on the belief that a compromise and a dialogue can be achieved between theoretically informed approaches from the fields of subaltern studies and postcolonial studies and the formalistic views that come from the work of philology-oriented scholars; hence, his use of the label “Spanish American” to build on such a compromise (“Introduction”). His main argument centers around the need for reconsidering how poetry was produced,

how it circulated, and what social purposes it served. This is what I would like to further explore in relation to lyric poetry of colonial Mexico.

Colonial Mexican Lyric Poetry

“Poetry,” says Cacho Casal, “was hardwired in society in ways that escape our modern understanding, since this has become nowadays a literary genre for private consumption addressed to a rather select group of readers” (“Introduction” 4). This acknowledgment of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latin American poetry, however, falls short in bridging that gap, because it fails to consider that, in fact, in our current world we have the tools to understand the intricate relationship between poetry and society, but perhaps we as a society simply do not care enough. Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century people in Mexico probably didn’t care either. Knowing that this might come across as pure cynicism or as simply nonsensical, I will provide an example from a recent official, public event, the 2019 Day of the Army ceremony that took place on 19 February at the Plaza Mayor in Mexico City.

After walking from the National Palace to a stage in front of the Cathedral, while saluting members of the army and the general public gathered for the festivities, the Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and his spouse, Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller, took their places on the stage among several members of the Cabinet and the Congress. After a performance of the national anthem by a military band, they all sat down to enjoy the first activity on the agenda: a poem entitled “Sentimientos de un soldado,” recited by two members of the military. As is to be expected, the poem lacks any sense of rhythm and structure, being focused, as it is, on extolling the fierce love of military men and women for their country. A little more than four minutes later, the two soldiers were met with a standing ovation after affectedly yelling out the last stanza:

Que viva el ejército nacional
Que viva México y su grandeza
Honor al soldado de mi nación
Amor a mi país y a mi bandera. (“Día del Ejército Mexicano”)

[Long live the army / Long live Mexico and its greatness / Praise to my nation’s soldiers / Love to my country and to my flag] (my trans.)

Colonial literary critic Rolena Adorno, in a chapter on the relationship between poetry and civic spectacle, argues that “in Baroque times the recitation of poetry was never absent from the ritualization of current

events or the representation of history in public commemorations and allegory, created by visual and verbal means, played a large role” (31). How different is the 2019 ceremony from the one organized, say, to receive a new viceroy with triumphal arches and poetry? This rhetorical question is not intended to overlook or underestimate the many sociohistorical differences between the 2019 Day of the Army celebration and the ceremony with which the city of Mexico received, in 1680, the Marquess and Marchioness of La Laguna, Tomás de la Cerda y Aragón and María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, with arches and poetry written by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Rather, my point is that the performative use of poetry in relation to civic and religious festivities is not something that people in Mexico would regard as alien in the formal, ceremonial sphere of today. If anything, what might be a little different would be the frequency with which these ceremonies were inserted in the daily life of colonial society (Maldonado Macías). Yet the relationship between “ephemeral poetry and political culture” that Martínez sees in the conquistadors singing the ballads described by Bernal Díaz del Castillo is visible in the many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century public ceremonies and poetic contests, as well as in events like the one in 2019 I have described (102). Whether the people attending these ceremonies in colonial times deemed poetry relevant is contested. The abundance of festivals makes it safe to affirm that performance, in its many forms, played a significant role in how colonial societies negotiated their condition as colonial subjects, with the development of new forms of self-fashioning (Voigt; Merrim; Davis, *Myth*). But despite the abundance of documented poetic festivals in colonial Mexico (Pérez Salazar), it is somewhat difficult to assert that poetry reached people beyond the cultured circles of the colonial elite. As Cacho Casal has demonstrated in the case of Balbuena’s *Grandeza mexicana*, poets wrote primarily for their peers and patrons (“Balbuena’s”). Thus, to assume that poetry played a relevant role in society just because it occupied an important role in public performances might be misleading in the case of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico, just as it is in 2019.

The connection between modern and colonial poetry is a well-studied subject (Martínez; González Echevarría; Rama). If the use of public poetry in official ceremonies in the colonial period is not that different from what we can imagine today, what has, however, been completely lost to us is the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century use of poetry as a means of communication and as a practice. There, perhaps, lies the key to understanding the

role and place of poetry in colonial society, and the role and place of colonial poetry in today's world. To understand poetry as a practice, we need to connect such a practice to specific institutions. To understand poetry as a means of communication, we need to frame such communication within a broader perspective that includes the material conditions of poetic production, as well as the specific agenda that each poet brought to their writing.

How, then, to read the vast corpus of lyric poetry written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – from the Petrarchist poetry compiled in *Flores de baria Poesía* (Peña, *Flores*) to the poems written for literary tournaments, from the *villancicos* to be sung in churches to the poems written in praise of patrons and books – in light of what has been said in relation to poetry as a means of communication? And perhaps even more relevant: What does lyric poetry communicate and to whom? What we must consider when trying to answer these questions is that as a topic lyric poetry is not as well developed as epic poetry in classical and early modern theoretical works. Although there are early examples of reflections on lyric theory in colonial Mexico, such as Eugenio de Salazar's *Suma del arte de poesía*, a Petrarchist treatise written around 1590 and only recently published, poetic theory and preceptive texts generally fell short in dealing with a genre that comprised many poetic forms (sonnet, elegy, epistle, letter) and at least three different modes of circulation: oral, as in ballads and *villancicos*; manuscript; and printed form. Additionally, the present-day concept of lyric poetry has evolved from what it meant and how it functioned in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because of a comprehensive understanding of lyric poetry from the point of view of European Romanticism, a process that Virginia Jackson calls the “lyricization of poetry.” This modern way of reading sees poems as autonomous units of meaning – something that doesn't necessarily work with the vast corpus of poetry written for specific events or publications – and also implies an understanding of authorship that is quite different from colonial times.

All of the above explains in part the fixation in criticism on individual figures and works, such as Balbuena's *Grandeza mexicana* or Sor Juana's poetry. They offer what we as modern readers are used to receiving from literature: a sense of autonomy that comes from either the understanding of an author as an anchor of meaning, or the idea of a book as the ultimate form of a completed work. Both ideas, however, pertain to modern times and constructs rather than to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

when the idea of an oeuvre as a literary project and a book as an autonomous form of meaning did not exist. In addition to the dedication, license, and usual preliminary laudatory poems, both 1604 editions of Balbuena's *Grandeza* include two other texts seldom discussed by critics: the *Carta al Arcediano Don Antonio Ávila* and the *Compendio apologético en alabanza de la poesía*, the first being a letter in which Balbuena boasts about his own poetry and the second a text in praise of poetry. The printed works of Sor Juana are a late, and to some degree arbitrary project that says very little about how her poems circulated during her lifetime.⁴ Additionally, equating lyric poetry with traditional and popular poetic forms and meters neglects some other modes of poetic expression, such as visual and silent poems, which are also lyric poetry and were an integral part of a humanistic education at university.⁵ Poetry, in this sense, was a scholarly exercise and a practice that granted the lettered elite of colonial society a sense of belonging. This is one of the main functions of the introductory poems that preface books, regardless of their genre and topic: they are not there as masterpieces of poetic expression, but rather as proof that the author belongs to the community. They perform a social function – that of granting status through the poetic form.⁶

There is something strange about poetry being both an integral part of the everyday practice of elitist institutions – the clergy, the university – and poetry as public performance, such as the works composed for and recited at public ceremonies, like Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Teatro de virtudes políticas* (1680). The latter type of poetry has two main features: the first is its ephemeral nature, as it partook in a “cult to the present time” (Maldonado Macías 487) that was fully displayed during public ceremonies; an example is Francisco Cervantes de Salazar's *Túmulo imperial*. The second feature is its ability to appeal both to the lettered elite and to the common people who gathered in public plazas to witness such events, what Humberto Maldonado Macías describes as a “short-lived collective service that poets render to colonial society” (my trans.; 487).⁷ The degree

⁴ For a detailed study on Sor Juana's printed works, see [Rodríguez Cepeda](#).

⁵ At the time of writing, Amelia R. Mañas was working on a PhD dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, entitled “Políticas de lo visual en México colonial” (Politics of the visual in Colonial Mexico), in which she investigates the close relationship between image and text in festivals and visual poetry. In 2022 she published an article (“[Repositorios de poder . . .](#)”) based on this research. For a sample of this kind of poetry, see [Gutiérrez Reyna](#).

⁶ See [Téllez](#) for a study of this social role of poetry in late colonial times.

⁷ See [González González](#), [Bravo](#), and [Merrim](#) for studies on the impact of public ceremonies and festivities in the daily life of colonial Mexico.

to which the audience at large was able to understand classical references is difficult to determine, but my point here is that the performative dimension of colonial lyric poetry is completely lost today. I am referring not only to festivals as events, something to which we might have access through the many *relaciones* that scholars like Cacho Casal have studied, such as Fray Juan de Alavés's *Relación historiada*, but also to the many other elements on display during these ceremonies that the printed text is unable to share with us, such as the aural dimension. Fortunately, there are significant current efforts by scholars to recover, reconstruct, and study this missing piece of colonial society (Sierra Matute; Finley) that we need to consider when studying colonial lyric poetry. By omitting the performative aspect of lyric poems, projects like a recent anthology of colonial poetry (Tenorio, *Poesía novohispana*) provide readers with just one dimension of what was a rich, complex machine in which art, literature, politics, religion, and performance were intertwined.

The Epic Poetry of Colonial Mexico

Perhaps if Sor Juana had written an epic poem, no one would complain about such works' supposed lack of literary merits, but by the time Sor Juana started writing, the deployment of the epic form as a way to reconstruct and recreate Spanish imperial expansion was no longer functional, for many reasons. For one, the figure of the conquistador had exhausted its symbolic capital. Secondly, the colonial Mexican epic of the seventeenth century took the locus of *laude civitatis*, the praise of the city, as its main topic (Pullés-Linares). This does not mean that the Spanish invasion completely disappeared from epic tales, but rather that the actions of the conquistadors opened an avenue to celebrate not their deeds in battle, but their accomplishments in rebuilding what they had previously destroyed. A telling example of this turn is Arias de Villalobos's *Canto intitulado Mercurio*, composed to welcome the Viceroy Juan de Mendoza y Luna in 1603. Although we can find in this poem a retelling of the conquest of Mexico, its historical frame goes beyond Hernán Cortés and ranges from the arrival of the Aztecs in Central Mexico to the genealogy of the viceroys that preceded Juan de Mendoza y Luna (Pullés-Linares 79–80). In addition, the version published two decades later offers a description of New Spain up to 1623. This epic draws a path from the Aztecs to the newly arrived viceroy in relation to the city, and in doing so decenters the figure of the conquistador to give much greater importance to the urban space.

In a telling article on Balbuena's epic poem, Rosa Perelmuter asks: Is *El Bernardo* worth reading now? Although she does not give readers a straight answer, it is clear that she is relieved to have finished reading the poem, and not particularly thrilled about the process of reading it. Her article is not only the narration of her experience as a reader, but also an erudite study of the misfortunes of a poem that Balbuena struggled to publish in a world that did not care much about it, much like the world today. Are we condemned to ask ourselves continually about the point of reading epic poems from the sixteenth century? Are we doomed to bemoan time and time again the oblivion into which this prestigious sixteenth-century genre has fallen? Perelmuter's article, along with much of the scholarship on colonial epics, makes me think that we need to shift the conversation from *why* epics are to be read into a different one that asks *how* to read them.

Scholars have failed, on two counts, to acknowledge the prestige that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century epic poetry enjoyed. First, they have neglected the preeminence that the genre has enjoyed in poetic theory since Aristotle, a prestige that translated not only into symbolic value, but also into the more practical status of the printed page – in comparison with lyric poetry, which circulated more often than not in manuscript form (Davis, *Myth* 3). Second, scholarship has not examined epic poetry's closeness to imperial power, a proximity that made the epic form “invaluable to the ruling circles . . . who used it to forge a sense of unity and to script identities during the period of expansion and conquest” (Davis, *Myth* 10). This closeness to power also made the epic a suitable vehicle for colonial writers to channel their inner sense of entitlement when translating the bloodbath accompanying European invasion into a heroic endeavor.⁸ Modern readers have clung to the symbolic value of this literary form by highlighting its formal features and its classical roots – Virgil, Tasso, Ariosto (*Vilà*; Davis, *Myth*). There is virtually no recent work on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century epic that does not mention the relevance of *La Araucana* as the ruling work of the vast corpus, and as an aspiration and goal for early modern writers. And although it is tempting to propose that this aspiration is solely artistic, I would like to contend that the relevance of *La Araucana* lies in a different mindset, one that has less to do with artistic and literary greatness and more with symbolic and economic value. In the minds of aspiring sixteenth-century epic poets, Alonso de Ercilla was probably a hero. One year after publishing the first part of his poem in 1569, he had already married well, and one year later he was

⁸ For a classic study on the form and models of the colonial epic, see [Pierce](#).

granted membership to the Order of Santiago, one of the most prestigious military and religious orders of the time (Peña, "Epic" 233–234). Of course, unlike many of the conquistadors, he came from a noble family, but it is not difficult to propose that what made him and his poem appealing for future poets was the combination of a refined literary work and subsequent economic reward and social prestige.

This dual functionality of the poem in its time is what, in my opinion, makes it difficult to read epic poetry only according to its literary standards. To be fair, a purely aesthetic reading of these poems is a reaction to centuries of ill-informed interpretations of the genre as a type of history written in verse (Blanco 23). But regardless of the compelling case for arguments that take into account the pleasure that derives from reading poetry as opposed to reading history, such interpretations fail to address at least two significant aspects of what it meant to write epic poetry. First, regardless of the high quality of the epic poem itself, colonial epics display an "aesthetic of colonial violence" (Rabasa, "Aesthetics" 110) that has very little to do with the delectable imitation of Virgil, and a lot more with creating a Manichean world in which the devastation of indigenous peoples is celebrated as a heroic endeavor. Second, the writing of this poetry was not exclusively a literary task, but also a means of communicating the author's specific needs to those in power.⁹

Colonial Mexican epic poetry is comprised of a more or less stable corpus that begins with Francisco de Terraza's *Nuevo mundo y conquista* (an unfinished work that we know through Baltasar Dorantes's 1604 *Sumaria relación*) and continues through the two versions of Gabriel Lobo Lasso de la Vega's *Cortés valeroso* and *Mexicana* (1594), Antonio Saavedra y Guzmán's *El peregrino indiano* (1599), Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà's *Historia de la Nueva México* (1610), Balbuena's *El Bernardo* (1624) and, in some critics' view, his *Grandeza mexicana* (1604), and Villalobos's *Canto intitulado Mercurio* (1623) (see Peña, "Epic"). This corpus "partakes of an ideology that justifies war against Indians, but whose force of representations resides in the use of grotesque images that rob indigenous peoples of all dignity even in death" (Rabasa, "Aesthetics" 110). This is not, of course, a definitive corpus, and it proves that normative thinking in literary studies is not sufficient to explain the many tensions that literature poses.

⁹ The same goes for lyric poetry. On Balbuena's economic accomplishments after publishing *Grandeza Mexicana*, see Rabasa, "Bernardo," and Terukina Yamauchi.

One of those tensions surfaces when we look at the relationship between genres and forms. It is a long-accepted matter that Hispanophone epic poems are written in *ottava rima* – that is, in a stanza of eight hendecasyllabic lines rhyming ABABABCC. This is not the case in Pérez de Villagrà's *Historia de la Nueva México*, whose blank hendecasyllabic structure does not make it less of an epic; nor is this the case for Balbuena's *Grandeza mexicana*, a poem labeled as both epic and lyric, which starts with eight lines organized as an *octava real* but then continues in tercets. Some other epics, such as Terraza's *Nuevo mundo y conquista*, have been said to be more lyric than epic (Peña, "Epic" 234), and it is not unusual to read scholarship on epic poetry which refers to the "lyric voice" (Pullés-Linares 80).

Another point of tension appears when we consider the topics these epics deal with, where they were written and published, and how scholars have cataloged them over the centuries. The grouping known as the "Cortés cycle" (Davis, "La épica" 131) encompasses epics that were written in México, such as Terraza's *Nuevo mundo y conquista*, and in Spain, such as Lasso de la Vega's *Cortés valeroso* and *Mexicana* and the later example of Juan Cortés Osorio's *Las cortesías* (ca. 1665). Neither De la Vega nor Osorio ever set foot in the New World, but precisely because of this we see how the Spanish imperial project goes beyond the notion of territory, aligning more with point of view and with a process that would end up giving birth to what Aníbal Quijano named "coloniality of power" in the modern world. The grouping of these texts as part of either Hispanic literature or Golden Age literature implies an erasure of such tensions, and of the specific dynamics through which authors understood the ends of epic poetry writing.

For many colonial authors, epic writing made possible a public reflection on what they saw as the Crown's disenfranchisement of the conquistadors' heirs, as José Antonio Mazzotti has eloquently proven in the cases of Terraza's *Nuevo mundo y conquista* and Saavedra y Guzmán's *El peregrino indiano*. In both cases, what we see is the deployment of a discourse in which the authors feel entitled to a missing reward, a plea and protest against what they saw as the deprivation of their privileges. Mazzotti argues that colonial epics emerge from an instrumentalization of the genre through which one can read the resentment and entitlement of those criollos who felt they had been cast aside after the 1542 New Laws attempted to end the inheritance of *encomiendas*. This is, of course, nothing new, for it is the same impulse that made Díaz del Castillo write his *Historia*, as Mazzotti also notes (146), and the same sentiment that

Lope de Aguirre conveys in his affected letter to Phillip II, where he challenges the king on how little conquistadors were rewarded in exchange of their sacrifice for the Crown (Pastor and Callau). Each of these examples diminishes the harsh reality that indigenous peoples were forced to live through after the arrival of the Spaniards, serving instead to advance a discourse of precarity according to which conquistadors and others were badly affected by the policies of the Crown. This tension between a colonial “elite” and local peninsular authority is at the forefront of epic poems. An approach that takes into consideration only literary models and “poetic language” misses a main function of these poems: a means of communication with authorities to advance a personal agenda.

Consider Saavedra y Guzmán’s *El peregrino indiano*. This poem is not shy in declaring its purpose in the dedication from the author to the king: to regain the *encomienda* that the author thinks he deserves as a great-grandson of a conquistador. Thus, the recreation of the conquest offered to the king in the poem has a specific purpose that comes to the fore in the fourteenth chapter, where the voice of the poet interrupts the action – Cortés besieged in Tenochtitlan, preparing to flee the city – to recount a long dream. This then becomes the rhetorical premise that turns the fifteenth chapter into a plea for money.

Think also of Pérez de Villagrà’s *Historia de la Nueva México*, a poem that has been compared, to my surprise, to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* because of the alleged modernity of its main character Juan de Oñate, and to Gloria Anzaldúa’s writings for the supposed hybridity created by the mix of poetry and legal documents (Martín-Rodríguez 668, 674). It has been presented as the foundational text of Latino literature (Leal) and read as the story of the cruel destiny of conquistadors haunted by the atrocities they themselves committed (Padilla). This is what happens when we focus on the literary only: we run the risk of misreading things. It took the work of two cultural critics originally trained in the field of history to unveil a quite different reading and reality of the poem. What we see after such readings is the clear intention by Pérez de Villagrà of vindicating “the name of Oñate and of all those who participated in the massacre of Ácoma” (Rabasa, “Aesthetics” 98) and the presentation of the New Mexico expedition as a reconquest to justify all colonizing violence as an act of just war (Fernández-Armesto 48). Neither of the critics discussed above – Luis Leal and Genaro Padilla – dismisses the literary aspect of the poem, but neither believes that form and poetic resources are all there is to it, and we are talking of a poem that has been commonly acknowledged as a poor literary

exercise.¹⁰ Comparing this poem with *Don Quijote* and with *Ulysses* is one thing, quite iconoclastic in my opinion, but disregarding the bloodbath that the poem aims to legitimize is problematic. In recent years, scholars have studied Pérez de Villagr a's writing with a more nuanced point of view, focusing in particular on the relationship between epic writing and frontiers, and on how to understand the colonial legacies that are foundational to the USA–Mexico borderlands (L pez-Ch vez; Fonseca-Ch vez).

In addition, this is an epic poem in which nearly nothing happens until the last part, in which the poet narrates the massacre of the pueblo of  coma. In a quite generous interpretation of this strange feature for a genre that is based on a heroic plot, Manuel M. Mart n-Rodr guez affirms that the *Historia* “thematizes the impossibility of extending the life of the epic beyond the sixteenth century, heralding instead a hybrid discourse in which the legal constantly interrupts the poetic, and vice versa” (671). The interruptions to which Mart n-Rodr guez refers are several documents intertwined in the poem, referring to the halting of the expedition when the journey was about to begin, the record of the company's arrival in New Mexico and the seizing of the land in the name of the king, and the opinion of the religious commissaries in response to O ate asking for legitimate reasons to declare just war against the indigenous peoples of the land. Reading the insertion of these documents as hybrid discourse is the result of an eye trained to read only modern literature, because when the personal agenda of the author comes to light, it is easy to see that his verse and the documents are not two different kinds of discourses, but one and the same. This shows that epic poetry's goal is not only joy and artistic creation, but also official communication to make a case – a weak one in this instance, for the charges against the author to be dropped. P rez de Villagr a's *Historia* is not a hybrid text, but simply an example of the connections between political administration and what we now call literature. In this sense, the poem is *about* bureaucracy as much as it *is* bureaucracy. The dilemma that scholars have struggled with regarding this poem (but in truth regarding all colonial epics), as part of a genre that sits at the junction of history and literature, is secondary when we finally accept that P rez de Villagr a was not primarily interested in either, but rather in exonerating himself through both.

This is not an isolated case. While personal agendas and literary merits vary, all colonial epics ultimately seek to use the form to achieve a goal,

¹⁰ See Leal's “Poetic Discourse in P rez de Villagr a's *Historia de la Nueva M xico*,” in which he lists vices pointed out by scholars and defends the literary quality of the poem solely based on the use of similes throughout the text.

usually related to social status and/or economic rewards. Once again, here we are facing a different economy of literature than that which many scholars have pursued in discussing the literary value of poetry. The economy I refer to conveys both literary and economic value in a way that few scholars have been able to articulate in their readings of colonial poetry.¹¹

Taking this into consideration, perhaps it is necessary to reshape Perelmuter's question about *El Bernardo* in such a way that the inquiry includes both the colonial epic in general and the specific historical message that each work aims to convey. Reading colonial poetry in search of literary models, or from the perspective poetic theory has assigned to this form (that of captivating and instructing the reader), may not be worth the trouble. But perhaps it is worthwhile, and even necessary, to recognize the kinds of things that these artifacts did or performed – the production of a discourse that legitimized Spanish hegemonic rule – and what, in some instances, they achieved for their authors: personal and collective recognition and economic rewards.

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¹¹ See Del Valle, More, and Fuchs and Martínez-San Miguel for examples of this type of analysis.

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