

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

## THE ROMAN AND VISIGOTHIC PERIODS

TOWARDS 1766 two Franciscan friars, Fray Pedro and Fray Rafael Mohedano, sat down to write the history of Spanish literature. It was the age of long books and the good friars wished to do the job thoroughly. When at last they died, after twenty-five years of continuous work, they had finished ten volumes, bringing their history down to the year A.D. 65.

With this warning I shall try to deal with the beginnings of literature in Spain expeditiously. In fact there is not much, I think, that need be said about the first centuries. We know from Strabo that the Iberians of Andalusia had a literature, including epic poems and books of metrical laws, but it has not come down to us. All we can say is that it probably helped them to absorb Roman culture more rapidly than they would otherwise have done. They certainly showed a remarkable susceptibility to it. By the time of Julius Caesar the cities of the Guadalquivir and Ebro valleys—that is to say, the regions where the Iberians and not the Celts had settled—had become great centres of Latin civilization. We can see the results of this in the literature of the first and second centuries. The Silver Age, as it is called, is crowded with Spanish orators, teachers of rhetoric and poets. The two Senecas and Lucan from Cordova, Quintilian and Martial from Aragon, Columella from Cadiz are only the leading figures among a host of minor literati whose names alone have come down to us. But can we say that there is anything specifically Spanish in their writings? These men were trained in the Latin schools of rhetoric, spent their lives at Rome and wrote for Italians, just as the Spanish American poet José-Maria de Heredia lived in Paris and wrote for the French. The Roman character too—grave, ceremonious, sententious, at once emotional and stoical, humane and quick to shed blood—resembled

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

the Spanish character in many ways. We must be careful then not to make hasty generalisations.

Let us take the younger Seneca. Two distinguished Spanish writers, Angel Ganivet and Unamuno, have declared that his Stoic philosophy is typically Spanish and have founded a theory of the Spanish character upon this. More recently people in other countries have called attention to his Baroque style (so typical, they say, of Andalusia) and to that of his nephew Lucan with his, as Dr Johnson put it, 'glittering accumulations of unsightly ornaments'. But Stoicism was simply the fashionable Roman philosophy of the day and the peculiarly religious tone given it by Seneca comes from a Syrian writer, Posidonius, whose books were then popular. As to the style, we should remember that the cult of eloquence leads naturally to a search for finer and more dazzling expressions. Seneca's rhetoric is partly a literary fashion, partly a political attitude. But it will be said that the melodrama of Senecan tragedies and of Lucan's epic poem, with their fierce insistence on the details of bloodshed, call up a Spanish vein of feeling. That may be so, but do they not much more reflect the Roman amphitheatres and the bloodbaths of Claudius and Nero? Finally let us remember that though their family was of colonial Roman descent, Lucan had never lived in Spain, while Seneca's complex and ambiguous character has nothing especially Spanish about it. Like Bacon's, it is the product of a struggle between strong ambition and noble impulses, taking place in the dangerous environment of a despot's court.

We are on safer ground when we speak of the Aragonese character of Quintilian and Martial. Quintilian (c. 35-100) was the great educator of his age—*summus moderator juventae*, as Martial calls him—and the first man in Europe to receive a diploma and salary for teaching from the State. His influence has been immense. His *Institutions* were studied by the men who founded the French Cathedral Schools in the twelfth century and by the humanists in the sixteenth. In Luis Vives, the disciple of Erasmus, and in Francisco Giner de los Ríos, the educator of modern Spain, we find not only many of his ideas, but a real similarity of temperament. Now Quintilian's aim was to turn out not pedants or prodigies, but

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

complete citizens: men of all-round talents, able to live agreeably in the world, to judge correctly of ordinary affairs and to take part effectively in public life. Since the art of speaking well had come to be the most important attainment for an educated Roman, his book takes the form of a treatise on oratory. He starts in childhood, where he anticipates the modern idea of kindergarten (incidentally he disapproved of corporal punishment) and ends with his famous and, within certain limits, admirable appreciations of literature. His dislike of exaggeration made him react against the Senecan rhetoric towards the more serious and reasoned style of Cicero. He is alive to the moral implications in literature and in his saying 'Schoolmasters are the parents of the mind' he expresses his very Spanish sense of the teacher's universal mission. In every part of his book one finds a preference for observation rather than for theory and a dry, sober, gentle common sense that strikes us as more Aragonese than Roman.

Martial, too, is Spanish. His character at first glance seems less attractive than Quintilian's. He earned his living, as all impecunious authors then had to do, by toadying to the rich and powerful. He was not above giving fulsome praise to the tyrant Domitian or, when his wit ran short, regaling his readers with copious pornography. But when we study him more closely we find certain admirable traits, which have made him, a light-weight poet, one of the most original and widely read of Latin authors.

For all his jibes he was a good-natured man, direct and frank, who took the world as he found it. What he hated most were shams, and in these he included the rhetorical exaggerations of his day and the mythological apparatus that poets thought necessary for their verses. He went direct to life for his material and that is why, when one reads his epigrams, one gets a picture of the Roman world that nothing else in classical literature, except Petronius' picaresque novel, gives us. He had the Spanish eye for vivid detail—one of those dry, hungry eyes that absorb what they see around them because there is no inner preoccupation to prevent them from seeing it—and he had a Spanish spontaneity: his verses, for all their terseness, give a most un-Latin impression of effortless composition. He also had the Spanish philosophy of man.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

'*Hominem pagina nostra sapit*', he wrote, 'My pages tell you about men'; and the words *vita* and *homo*, life and man, recur continually through his poems. It is this tolerance that saves him from cynicism. It also justifies to a certain extent his pornography—since nothing must be left out of the picture—and spares us the moralising which makes Juvenal's dark pictures so suspect to us. Martial, when he was not touting for a present, had no axe to grind.

But let me quote from the delightful poems that he has written on his own country. After forty years of bachelor life in Rome, getting up early, as the custom was, to greet his rich patrons on their rising from bed and returning late to his garret to sleep, he retired to his native Aragon, to escape, as he said, 'the togas stinking of purple dye and the conversation of haughty widows'. The place he chose was a farm that had been given him near to Bilbilis, a little town standing on a bend of the River Jalón, out of whose stones the Arabs later built Calatayud. There life was cheaper than at Rome 'because the soil maintained one'.

In a verse letter to his friend Juvenal he describes his property—the poplar grove and meadow, the springs with their open conduits of water, the pot-herb in January, the rose trees and vine trellis, the tame cel in its tank, the whitewashed dovecot, the tepid river in which one could bathe.

'Here we live lazily and work pleasantly. I enjoy a vast unconscionable sleep which often lasts till ten and so make up for all I've lost these thirty years. You'll find no togas here; if you ask for one, they'll give you the nearest rug off a broken chair. When I get up I find a fire heaped with splendid logs from the oak forest, which the bailiff's wife has crowned with her pots and pans. [Around it squat a crowd of grubby youths.] Then my huntsman comes in, a lad you would love to take off to some quiet wood. The bailiff gives the young slaves their rations and asks leave to have his long hair cut. *Sic me vivere, sic me iuvat perire*. . . 'That's how I like to live, that's how I hope to die.'

But there were also disadvantages—no theatres or libraries or good conversation, and all the petty gossip and backbiting of a small place. Martial grew bored and found the stimulus to write

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

lacking. Bilbilis in A.D. 102 must have been very like what a small town in Spain is today.

We have seen how the Aragonese writers who lived in Rome kept their national character better than the Andalusian ones. That is precisely what we should expect, for the Andalusians are a quick and versatile people and the Aragonese are hard-headed. Besides they had not come out of the Roman colonies of Baetica, with their Republican and latifundist traditions, but from *municipia* of native Spanish origin. Now we must examine another writer of the Ebro valley, the Christian poet Prudentius, whose work, by its combination of two conflicting elements, the popular and the erudite, and its dry unrheterical style, is more Aragonese still.

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born, probably in Saragossa, in 348 and died shortly after 405. Except for a brief visit to Rome, he spent his whole life in Spain, where he followed the careers of lawyer and magistrate. His early verses, which no doubt reflected those licentious years of his youth of which he tells us, are lost. All we have of his are the religious poems he wrote late in middle life 'to make amends' he says 'for his past uselessness'.

Prudentius' best-known works are the *Cathemerinon Liber* and the *Peristephanon*. The first is a collection of twelve hymns written in a variety of metres and entitled 'for cock-crow', 'for the hour when lamps are lit', 'for bedtime', and so forth. The second is a series of fourteen long narrative hymns or poems celebrating the deaths of various martyrs. Besides these he wrote a number of didactic poems in hexameters.

The Latin language had been changing all through the fourth century and the classical tradition in literature was breaking down. In poetry stress was taking the place of quantity, in spite of the efforts of the poets to prevent it, and rhyme and assonance were beginning to creep in. In prose the popular diction and emphatic rhythms of St Jerome's Vulgate mark a change almost as revolutionary as that of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in our time. This tendency was first carried through deliberately in the hymns. In the year 360 St Hilary of Poitiers brought back from the East the custom of singing verse hymns. The principal metre he employed was borrowed from the chanties of Greek sailors and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

artisans: it had a very marked rhythm (Tennyson uses it in *Locksley Hall*) and under the name of *versus popularis* it was already popular with the Roman legionaries. But the person to make hymn-singing general was St Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan who was a contemporary of Prudentius. Since he was a Roman aristocrat, brought up in the classical tradition, he did not care to use the marching-song metre. But quantitative poetry is not suitable for singing. He compromised therefore on an eight-syllabled metre, the iambic dimeter, which had the advantage of allowing him to write verses that were quantitatively correct and at the same time true to the rules of the new accentual poetry. His hymns were written for antiphonal singing—a practice which he was the first to introduce into the Western Church.

Now Spain has always been a country in which popular poetry, made for singing to instruments and not for recitation, has forced its way up into cultural poetry and permeated it. It is just this fusion of two different social elements and two different conceptions of the poetic function that makes its literature so alive and so remarkable. One would therefore expect Prudentius' hymns to be affected by the new popular style of accentual poetry. But this is not so. Everything he wrote is strictly quantitative and belongs to the old tradition coming down from Lucretius and Horace. His hymns were odes, intended for recitation to circles of cultured people, or occasionally for liturgical readings at special ceremonies, and not for choral singing in church.

Where then is the Spanish element in his poems? It lies first of all in the subjects chosen. His *Peristephanon*, as we have said, is a collection of hymns describing the deaths of martyrs. This was not an altogether new subject for poetry because St Ambrose and Pope Damasus (who was also a Spaniard) had already touched on it. But the extraordinary way in which Prudentius develops it and the new form that he invents to express the new material are entirely original and Spanish.

The martyr was the great heroic figure of the third and fourth centuries. We can see how he was regarded from the many so-called 'Acts of the Martyrs' that have come down to us. He was a man of superhuman strength and fearlessness, who through a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

succession of tortures, which are usually minutely described, defied his tormentors and argued with the magistrate who had condemned him on the dogmas of the faith. The point of the performance lay in its being a supreme exhibition of the triumph of mind over matter, of spirit over earthly or daemonic power, which for Christians and pagans alike was the great issue of the day. To the circus-loving crowds these martyrs were a new sort of athlete. St John Chrysostom speaks of them as 'running on hot coals as if on roses, plunging into fires as if into streams of cool water and garlanding themselves with tortures as if they were not tortures but spring flowers'. And when the end came, their souls rose straight to heaven among choirs of angels and their tombs on earth became centres of yearly feasts and pilgrimages.

Many people were converted by these scenes. As Tertullian said, 'Everyone, at the sight of such prodigies of endurance, feels himself struck with a scruple and longs to know what is at the bottom of it'. And the newly converted masses found in the martyrs' legends something to replace the stories of the pagan heroes which the world was forgetting. But in Spain the interest, or excitement rather, in martyrdom seems to have been greater than anywhere else in the West, in spite of the small number who suffered there. It was therefore a proper subject for a Spanish poet who wanted to do something more than write pastiches of the old literature.

Prudentius' 'hymns' on the martyrs closely followed the texts of the semi-illiterate 'Acts'. Although he was for those times an exceptionally well-educated man, deeply read in Latin and Greek literature and versed in theology, he identified himself in this matter with the popular spirit of his day. The result is therefore something quite new in literature—lyric-epic poems made up of action and dramatic dialogue and written in short stanzas. I do not see why we should not call them ballads. If the form is familiar to us, we must remember that there is nothing else in classic literature to compare with them.

Take for example this passage from the Passion of St Vincent. It begins with the prefect Dacianus, seated in his box in the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

amphitheatre, calling on Vincent to offer incense to the statue of the emperor:

Rex, inquit, orbis maximus,  
Qui sceptrum gestat Romula,  
Servire sanxit omnia  
Priscis Deorum cultibus.

Vos, Nazareni, assistite,  
Rudemque ritum spernite:  
Haec saxa, quae princeps colit,  
Placate fumo et victima.

Exclamat hic Vincentius,  
Levita de tribu sacra,  
Minister altaris Dei,  
Septem ex columnis lacteis:<sup>1</sup>

Tibi ista praesint numina,  
Tu saxa, tu lignum colas:  
Tu mortuorum mortuus  
Fias Deorum pontifex.

Nos lucis auctorem Patrem,  
Ejusque Christum Filium,  
Qui solus ac verus Deus,  
Daciane, confitebimur. . . .

‘The great king of the world  
Who holds the sceptre of Romulus,  
Has decreed that every man  
Pay the ancient rites to the Gods.

<sup>1</sup> This line means ‘one of seven deacons’. Note the characteristic ballad style. Images in classical poetry were brought in in the form of similes and were usually introduced by words such as *as if* and *like*. But here there is no *like*, because the image is a symbol and not a similitude of the thing it represents. This symbolic use of imagery comes from the East and was brought into Europe with Christianity. A thousand years later we find that it has sunk into the popular consciousness and become the characteristic image-type of European balladry.

*‘What did you fall out about, my dear son tell me?’*

*‘About a little bit of bush that soon would have been a tree.’*

Modern Spanish *coplas* abound in such symbolic expressions, as do the *villancicos* of the sixteenth-century song-books.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to  
the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

You Nazarenes, draw near,  
Cast off your crude faith:  
These are the stones the Prince worships,  
Offer them smoke and sacrifice.'

Then up and spoke Vincentius,  
Levite of the sacred tribe,  
Minister of God's altar,  
One of seven milk-white columns:

'Let them rule over you, these idols!  
Worship you your stone and wood!  
Be you a dead high priest  
Of these gods that are stone dead!

As for us, we confess the Father  
Of Light and the Christ his son,  
Who alone, Dacianus,  
Is the true and living God.'

Then the prefect was stirred to anger:  
'Wretch,' said he, 'do you dare  
To profane with haughty words  
This law of Gods and princes?

A law both civil and sacred,  
By the whole human race obeyed!  
Surely even your headlong youth  
Will be checked by imminent danger.

Hear then this word of mine:  
Either you salute with incense  
This turf and altar, or else  
You shall suffer a bloody death.'

To this the other made answer:  
'Come on then and put forth  
Your utmost strength and power.  
Here before all I defy you.

Tortures, prison, instruments,  
Tongs and hissing iron,  
Death itself, their culmination,  
To Christians are a mere game.'

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29043-2 - The Literature of the Spanish People: From Roman Times to the Present Day

Gerald Brenan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Roman and Visigothic Periods*

The hymn continues in the same bare, dramatic style for 144 stanzas. The tortures succeed one another—no detail is spared—whilst Vincent incites these S.S. men of the day, the *alumni carceris*, whom he calls ‘artists in their trade’, to wreak their worst on him. For they can only act on the body: the intrinsic part, *liber, quietus, integer*, is out of their reach. And when the *momento de la verdad* is over, the fortunes of his body are followed till it is buried by the seashore.

Another hymn, celebrating in sapphic metre the passion of eighteen martyrs at Caesaraugusta (Saragossa), takes one straight into the Spanish world. It begins with a magnificent painting, in Byzantine style, of the Last Day:

Cum Deus dextram quatiens coruscam  
Nube subnixus veniet rubente,  
Gentibus juxtam positurus aequo  
Pondere libram.

The Son appears in a crimson cloud with scales in his glittering right hand and the peoples of the earth pour out by cities to meet him, bearing with them precious gifts in baskets. What are these gifts? They are the relics of their martyrs, and then follows a list of the cities of Spain—happy Tarragona, wealthy Gerona, populous Mérida, the pavement of whose church is like a flowering meadow—that are lucky enough to possess martyrs to intercede for them. Last of all comes Prudentius’ own city, *Caesaraugusta studiosa Christi*, bearing the relics of its eighteen athletes: Caesaraugusta which never failed to shed its blood under every hail of persecution, which seemed to have been built expressly to make saints and had more martyrs to its account than any city in the world except Rome or Carthage. Here was born St Vincent, who later shed his blood at Saguntum. Caesaraugusta celebrated his day, to the Caesaraugustans he belonged. ‘He is ours’, they cry out. ‘He is ours even though he died in a foreign city and was buried by the seashore. He is ours, for he is our lad on the wrestling ground and it was through him that we learned how to tame the enemy.’

After this follow, like the palm-bearing frieze in S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, the eighteen martyrs buried at Saragossa,