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**Second Thoughts on Morisco Conversion:
Ginés Pérez de Hita's Reappraisal of
Spanish Hegemony in the *Guerras civiles de Granada***

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[Hypertext](#)

In the “Captive’s tale” in *Don Quijote*, Dorotea asks about the Moorish looking companion of the Christian captive “esta señora, ¿es cristiana o mora? Porque el traje y el silencio nos hace pensar que es lo que no querríamos que fuese.”¹ Israel Burshatin noted that Dorotea’s curiosity seeks not to confirm the idealized peculiarities of Moorish dress, but is a part of a larger interpretive process. This is the initial step in what Burshatin has described as a sixteenth-century practice of disposing the Moriscos—newly converted Muslims—on condition of their spirituality, and thereby reducing the identity of Spanish Muslims entirely to biblical exegesis (115). Additionally, Dorotea’s inquisitiveness suggests her role as a collective mouthpiece, which in order to quell her anxiety toward Muslim otherness probed the status of the mora’s conversion. Indeed, the ubiquitous nature of unrest felt toward the “Morisco problem” span over a hundred years leading up to their expulsion and is vastly complex. Nonetheless, the question of religiosity remains fundamental to an understanding of the relationship between the Christian and Muslim people of Spain, both then and now. Correspondingly, Dorotea’s relief at hearing the mora’s willful consent to Christian baptism irrespective of her attire and obvious dialectal shortcomings suggests a psychological urgency as to the Moriscos’ spiritual standing, particularly as it pertains to conversion.

My interest here is two-fold. I first wish to illustrate Pérez de Hita’s own effort to redirect Christian angst felt towards the newly converted Muslims in order to justify the buoyancy of the doctrine of conversion. Second, I will examine Pérez de Hita’s treatment of the conversion process in what appears to be a reevaluation of the current practices of his time. I will further demonstrate how Hita’s text mitigates tensions between Morisco and Christian populations by drawing upon the paradoxical condition of Christian hegemony that both romanticized depictions of Moorish culture yet detested

¹ Part 1, Chapter 37, page 462.

the existence of Moriscos throughout the Peninsula. Ultimately, it is the framing of the ever-suspect Muslim converts within this romanticized context that Pérez de Hita was capable of fashioning a collective history, which helps to explain better his historical imagination that sought to unify seamlessly a polarized system of beliefs.

Between 1492 and 1500, Spain found itself at a significant moment in history. The struggle for Christian dominance of the peninsula concluded with a series of unprecedented events that forever changed the face of Spain. The surrender of Granada to the Catholic Kings was perhaps the inaugural thrust for supremacy and complete control over the remaining enemies of the monarchy. The despotic efforts by the Spanish crown quickly established absolute authority and demonstrated Spain's military strength as both competent and powerful. The Spanish monarchy initiated further measures to combat what they understood as a menacing risk to the solidarity of the kingdom. The threat implicated both Judaism and Islam as the tide of "unification" demanded the existence of only one monotheistic religion, Christianity.

In terms of being guilty by association, Francisco Márquez Villanueva suggests that the *cuestión morisca* provided common ground for a sociopolitical alliance with the Jewish converts or *judeoconvertos*, particularly in the wake of the Statutes of *Limpieza de sangre*. Villanueva explains that "la España que deseara asimilar a sus moriscos tendría así que dismantelar, a la larga, todo sistema de Inquisición, estatutos y menosprecio de la actividad productiva. Nada de esto podría darse sin beneficiar a los judeoconvertos en igual o mayor medida" (24). Spain's orchestrated efforts to consolidate its national identity through a system of mechanized conversion merged both civic and religious authority, which worked to execute control over the marginalized sector of the populace. Both the Moriscos and the Jewish converts became *ipso facto* members of the Catholic community where conversion, whether willing or forcefully coerced, linked the two groups under the canopy of public suspicion and strict censure by the church (Caro Baroja 56). Thus, the heterogeneous essence characteristic of Spain's rich past suddenly began to fade, beginning with the 1492 Alhambra Decree ordering the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.²

The totalitarian actions of Spanish authorities therefore gave rise to such institutional mechanisms of control as the Inquisition and thereby forwarding the practice of *Limpieza de Sangre*. Such a practice would later serve as the defining pattern in Spain's measures to unify, particularly in the case of the Muslim community in Granada. By the year 1502, Francisco Jimenez de Cisneros had successfully argued the need for conversion of the Muslim population in southern Spain, regardless of the Capitulations established by Ferdinand himself after the fall of Granada.³ The

² Issued on 31 March, 1492 by the Catholic kings. The document ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the Kingdom of Spain by July of the same year. Conversion was the only means by which to remain in the Peninsula; inconsequential of social standing, political position or wealth.

³ Known as the Tratado de Granada, was a peace treaty between the Catholic Kings, Fernando and Isabel and Abu Abd Allah Muhammad Boabdil who was the last king of Granada. The treaty comprised forty-nine points ensuring religious and cultural freedom for the conquered Moors of Granada.

imperialistic focus of Spain's ruling authority now focused intensely on the Spanish Muslims, which demanded a more homogeneous consolidation of cultures and ultimately inaugurating the "Morisco problem" of the sixteenth century.

The dilemma facing Spain's ruling body was dealing with the vastly different peoples of Muslim descent. Unlike the Jews, the now *Mudéjares* or Muslims living under Christian control could not easily assimilate themselves into the highly prescribed Christian culture, particularly given the relative freedom they enjoyed prior to 1492. Luis F. Bernabé Pons noted that "Lo mudéjar, pues, que tan especialmente naturaliza a la Edad Media peninsular, tiene su base principal en la coexistencia de musulmanes y de cristianos, o, en términos de la época, de moros y de cristianos" (18-19). With such distinctions as clothing, food, hygiene, religious rites and festivals, marriages, births and language, the *Mudéjares* quickly became targets of control and ordered to accept baptism or leave the country. The brutality of such a scheme was doomed to failure the moment Christian orthodoxy demanded an immediate and complete ideological shift by the *Mudéjares*, which he termed as a pathway from duality to unity (Antonio Domínguez Ortiz and Bernard Vincent 17). As the chief architect, Cisneros took control of all catechistic endeavors of Fray Hernando de Talavera,⁴ at which point the indoctrination of the Granadan Muslims into the Catholic faith took on an air of violence, "sin dilación ni escrúpulos" (Caro Baroja 55). The policy of aggressive and compulsory conversion gave rise to crypto cultures where both Jews and Moriscos feigned Christianity outwardly, but secretly practiced the religion and customs of their forefathers.

Pérez de Hita was writing from a significant point in time in early modern Spanish history. It is 1595 in southern Spain where the results of the various juntas, rebellions, forceful conversions and relocations have decimated the Moriscos socially, culturally, psychologically and linguistically and it is only fourteen years before the 1609 official expulsion of the entire Morisco population. Similar to what Claudio Guillén has noted in the literary structure of the work *Abencerraje*, the *Guerras civiles* likewise presents past historical objects through both explicit and implicit means while also alluding to the author's own period of time (176). Such an exchange however, immediately produces a "silent contradiction," as contemporary reality does not coincide with what is represented as historical fact. Such a phenomena, argues Guillén is inherent to the enduring nature of the pastoral where "The idyllic dream of concordia emerging from discordia is an exercise in dialectics which often is much more than implicit" (178). Similarly, in my reading of the *Guerras civiles*, it is through association and disjuncture that a renegotiation of prominent historical discourse where the author seeks to challenge commonly held perceptions of the "Morisco problem" is even remotely possible.

⁴ Fray Hernando de Talavera was assigned as the first Archbishop of Granada following its fall in 1492. L.P. Harvey argues that Talavera respected the Capitulaciones and sought to create a productive *modus vivendi* between the new Christian rulers and the conquered Muslims of Granada. He further suggests that a new form of Mudejarism was forming as a result were it not for the triumphalism of Cisneros and the brutality of his treatment of the Muslims in general (333).

Francisco Villanueva once termed the *Guerras civiles de Granada* as a seduction of the adversary (33), a term which laconically illustrates the author's rhetorical design to alter the course of perception. The skillfully crafted narrative worked to reignite an association of Christian ideals, which romanticized the once great Nasrid dynasty, in order to produce an analogous context whereby common ground may be forged. As Villanueva explains, it is under the twilight sky that "La vida de sus moros granadinos se devana entre amor y caballerías, conforme a ideales profundamente aceptados y españoles hasta la quintaesencia" (34). While disparate notions of religious practice sustained the ideological disjuncture between Christians and Muslims, it was the romantic sundries of chivalry, gallantry, love and heroism where a sense of concordia surfaces as the ideal and model of assimilation. Américo Castro adds that "Los moriscos se sentían tan españoles como los cristianos viejos y fundaban su conciencia de nación en un pasado glorioso (57). Yet regardless of a shared glorious past and a mutual sense of nation, deep-seated hatred dominated public opinion throughout the Christian communities.

The historical present, in which Pérez de Hita writes, saw a proliferation of deprecating attitudes that swayed public perceptions regarding the Moriscos of his day. Mary Elizabeth Perry noted that Christians often "portrayed Morisco men as flabby and effeminate sodomites and pedophiles" and women as "obstinate, lewd, and treacherous" (188). Moriscos were also accused of "multiplying like weeds and taking jobs away from Christians" (Root 122). Spain's strategy to abolish Muslim heterodoxy was a well coordinated effort that sought to identify Morisco culture in such a way as to intensify xenophobic Christian attitudes that judged Morisco exteriority as menacing; both to the security and well being of the state as well as the authority of the Catholic Church (Root 122). Forcing Spain's *Mudéjar* population to convert to Christianity shifted the notion of Muslims as infidels to that of heretics and therefore, subjected to inquisitorial statutes demanding proof of spiritual, cultural, and even genealogical orthodoxy (Root 119). The manipulation of public perception of Morisco culture as deviant was thus codified in writing. Analogously, Pérez de Hita employs narrative strategies in the *Guerras civiles* in attempt to inscribe cultural change by abating damaging generalizations against Moriscos as unworthy converts to Christianity.

Conversion, whether through coercive means or by one's own will, was an exceptionally complex human experience. Questions of identity, sincerity and assimilation immediately stood at the forefront following baptism, not only for the convert, but also for those that formed part of the dominant culture and religion. While converts directly faced the myriad of emotional, psychological and cultural repercussions of baptism, conversely, those within the dominant society became the agents of interpretation as they had to reckon with both the signification of a baptized, yet foreign other, as well as the demanding influence of their own system of belief. Dorotea's demand to placate the anxiety of her perception of Zoraida in hopes of identifying her as a Christian is one such example. What is important here is the role perception played in the dynamic processes of cultural negotiation and exchange between both Christian and Muslim, particularly as it related to confronting the reviled other.

Pérez de Hita's use of the battlefield often provided the dialectical space whereby rival ideologies participated in an unorthodox negotiation of beliefs. As described in the *Guerras civiles*, the valiant Maestre de Calatrava arrives at the city of Granada during a horsemanship competition. The Maestre was a celebrated Christian knight and well known among the Moorish fighters of Granada. He subsequently wins the competition, but he is challenged by the Moor Albayaldos to fight on the battlefield outside the city. Before the rival knights battle, they refresh themselves at the waters of a spring where a discussion on faith ensues. The Maestre begins by avowing the supremacy of the Catholic faith stating that "viniérades en conocimiento de nuestra santa fe católica, pues se sabe claramente ser la mejor de todas las leyes del mundo y la mejor religion" (118). This matter-of-fact declaration of faith is not as gratuitous as it might first appear. The Maestre's perception of his adversary is one of deep respect and admiration, both of which are necessary to bridge the gap between friend and foe. Albayaldos' personal value system becomes a qualifying factor in determining his candidacy for conversion. Albayaldos confirms the suggestion to convert and responds with the following:

Bien puede ello ser –dijo Albayaldos–, mas como nosotros no tenemos conocimiento alguno della, no nos damos nada por ser cristianos, hallándose tan bien con nuestra secta. Así que no hay para qué tratemos ahora nada desto; posible sería despues, andando el tiempo, venir en este verdadero conocimiento de esa vuestra fe, porque muchas veces suele Dios tocar los corazones de los hombres, y sin su voluntad no hay cosa buena. (118)

The basis of Albayaldos' refusal to convert is simply a lack of understanding as to the truthfulness of Christianity. However, Albayaldos admits a willingness to change faiths, but acknowledges that personal conviction inherently plays a fundamental role in this process.

The two rivals ultimately end the discussion and fight on the battlefield where Albayaldos is mortally wounded. Nevertheless, before dying the brave Moor asks for baptism into the Christian faith. The narrator states that "Albayaldos abrió los ojos, y con una voz muy débil y flaca, como hombre que se le acertaba la vida, dijo que quería ser cristiano" (123). The Maestre then takes the Moor to the spring and baptizes him with the name of Don Juan. As a newly baptized Christian, Don Juan then confesses his wrongdoings against Christians and asks for forgiveness before dying. The transformation of Albayaldos may be seen as a behavioral archetype by suggesting that good Moors can become good Christians and perhaps changing religions is much less monumental than previously understood. Pérez de Hita clearly recognized that society's anxiety toward the Muslim was based largely on public perceptions that focused primarily on elements of exteriority such as dress, language, race and tradition. Therefore, outward conduct harmonious with Christian ideals was vital to judging the intricacies of Spanish Muslims. However, determining one's compatibility with Christian values was a difficult task, as the ideals of valor and gallantry did not necessarily render someone worthy for baptism.

During on of the many festivals in the *Guerras civiles*, for example, the Moor Sarrazino of the despised Zegrie clan handedly loses to a member of the Abencerraje clan during a competition of horsemanship. What follows affords the reader a unique window into the ethos of Christian perceptions of the Muslim consciousness when confronted with failure and spiritual crisis. Shortly after losing the contest, Sarrazino storms out of the arena incensed with embarrassment and indignant for having publicly disgraced his clan. His reaction to the events is equally severe as he rabidly curses Islam and declares his allegiance to the Christian faith.

¡Oh Mahoma traidor, perro péfido engaador, y en el tiempo que habías de favorecer mis esperanzas me faltaste! Di, perro, falso profeta, ¿Yo te había prometido hacerte de oro todo, si me dabas victoria en tal jornada como ésta y de quemar gran cantidad de incienso en tus arras? ¿Porqué, péfido me desemparaste?..don falso Mahoma, que por aprobio tuyo que me tengo de tornar cristiano. Pues es mejor su fe, que tu secta mala y llena de engaños. (90)

The impetus of Sarrazino's repudiation of Islam is failure, yet it is too unceremonious and shallow to be sincere. His actions are hypocritical and exemplify contempt towards religion and the significance of one's personal system of beliefs. Conversion in this context appears immediately distasteful and further distances the non-romanticized political factions from consideration for legitimacy. Authenticity is vital to public perception, as both respect and credibility became the driving force behind a meaningful and accurate assessment in determining the worthiness of Spanish Muslims.

The Conversion of the Moor motivated by failure saw its development within the context of festivals. The commemorative representation of the Reconquest became a popular celebrative pattern of modernity where the glory of the Christian victors continues to be immortalized. Carrasco-Urgoiti's study of the popular festivals of *moros y cristianos* throughout Spain illustrates a unique cultural dynamic where the confrontation between Christians and Moors manifests itself within the context of festivity. The celebration reproduces aspects of the Reconquest and the patent discord that existed between the two groups. The thematic nucleus of the event consists of two elements fundamental to the representation: A provocation and a subsequent reprisal. As is tradition, it is the moors that are the aggressors that provoke their Christian adversaries to retaliate by the use of force (Carrasco-Urgoiti, *Aspectos* 476). The Christians always defeat the Islamic assailant, which in turn, legitimates the authenticity of the champion's faith (477).

As we have seen with the Moor Sarrazino, implicit within the process of conversion were elements of disappointment coupled with a heightened sense of cynicism toward the efficacy of one's faith. The legitimacy of prayers offered is challenged as invocations to relieve suffering or other life changing events fail to produce the desired effects. As faith vacillates so does the conduct that defines and identifies oneself to a particular deity. In this case of Sarrazino, Allah and the prophet Mohammad fail to produce a victory, which incites the antagonist to affirm emphatically an alliance to the faith of the conquerors.

This commemoration of the Reconquest within the context of celebration conforms tightly to public traditions whereby local communities work to confirm national identity and promote the dominant ideology. However, there is a less obvious corollary to the festival with regard to the now beaten and defeated enemy to Christianity. Carrasco-Urigoiti points out that within the process of legitimation the underlying intention is not to malign the Moor or to debase the enemy in such a way to appear weak, powerless and unqualified for victory (Carrasco-Urigoiti, *Aspectos* 476). The Moorish aggressor is always a counterpart to the Christian soldier where such qualities as dignity, respect, and courage coincide with the enemy and help to define what it means to be a true warrior. The only quality that distinguishes the Islamic soldiers from their Christian counterparts was that of faith (477). Nevertheless, the motif of personal failure and conversion unmistakably dominates the festival context and provides further insight into the psychodynamic of renouncing one's faith and recognizing a rival ideology.

As previously mentioned, personal conduct was key to Hita's literary imagination and his representation of historical artifact. Following further Guillén's work on the *Abencerraje*, there is much poetic power found by invoking popular historical precedence, particularly the image of the brave moor from a time long since past. Pérez de Hita capitalizes on this tradition as he forwards his agenda to dissuade readers from focusing on the contemporary realities of the "Morisco problem." It is within the story itself where model behavior is rendered ideal and worthy of consideration. Exemplary conduct as retold in the *Guerras civiles*, illustrates a universal standard of behavior capable of transcending cultural barriers that otherwise give way to division and strife. One must appeal to the cultural sensibilities that dictate notions of right and wrong among the various communities in order to make an association with what is socially cohesive and congruent within that culture. By doing so, the reader may experience a psychological disjuncture between the glorious past and the conflictive present-day realities that have separated both Christian and Morisco.

Pérez de Hita continues with countless examples of festivals, equestrian games, skirmishes, duels and courtships found throughout the first part of the *Guerras civiles*, the author recasts a highly imaginative vision of the renowned Moor, particularly with the figure of Muza. Historically, Muza is a legendary fighter during the frontier wars against the Christians and was later killed and beheaded, according to an anonymous frontier ballad titled *Don Manuel Ponce de León* (Carrasco-Urigoiti, *Moorish Novel* 114). The ballad further reveals that he was the brother of the last king of Granada, Boabdil, or, el Rey Chico. The Muza of the *Guerras civiles* is presented as the illegitimate brother of the Rey Chico and is likewise recast as a fierce contender against the encroaching Christian fighters, thereby maintaining the historical and cultural authenticity of the frontier ballad. However, the death and decapitation of Muza at the hands of Ponce de Leon as recounted in the ballad is not a part of Pérez de Hita's version of the events. Instead, the *Guerras civiles* alters the grisly outcome in order to accommodate a dialectic space within which he advances his agenda of reconciliation and the nobility of conversion.

The Muza that readers encounter in the *Guerras civiles* suffers loss and humiliation in a battle. He becomes frustrated with his failure and is forced to confront intense disappointment. However, Muza maintains dignity, holds tightly to his faith by overcoming his shortcomings, thereby stressing the moral fortitude of the protagonist and prompting a call for his conversion to Christianity. After a vicious dual, the Maestre de Calatrava –the same Christian knight that later fights Albayaldos– spares the life of Muza. The narrator remarks that:

Lo cual visto por el Maestre, considerando que aquel moro era hermano del rey de Granada, y que era tan buen caballero, deseando que fuese cristiano, y siéndolo se podría ganar algo en los negocios de la guerra, en provecho del rey don Fernando, determinó no llevar la batalla adelante, y de hacer amistad con Muza. (33)

The Maestre’s observation of the valiant Muza is a conscientious attempt to delineate the advantages of being selective and conscientious when considering the conversion of Moorish citizens.

There are two points that Pérez de Hita stresses in his rendering of historical perception: First, Muza is of royal blood, which speaks to the sociopolitical rewards of aligning influential and prominent Muslim figures with the Spanish crown. Second, the Maestre’s effort to “hacer Amistad con Muza” creates an ideological bridge spanning the enmity between Muslim and Christian worlds. Muza’s mutual friendship with his Christian conqueror identifies him as a loyal foe and serves to narrow the gap of misperception that has defined the fabric of sixteenth-century life. Although Muza does not convert to Christianity his exemplary behavior establishes his place among fellow Muslim knights as the scepter of cross-cultural understanding, which is seen as harmonious with both Muslim and Christian ideals. As a living, idealized Moor, a syncretic space opens whereby past historical precedence is linked to future possibilities, which is similar to what Vincent Barletta noted in his study of Husserl’s notion of a “thick Present” (xv). That is to say, it is the present reality where communicative interaction may flourish and give meaning to human experience. As such, Muza initiates the momentum of reconciliation in an attempt to alter perception, the fruits of which will see the alignment of many of the knights of the Abencerraje clan who convert and unite themselves with the Christian community (Carrasco-Urgoiti, *Moorish Novel* 121).

The remarkable tales in the *Guerras civiles* are the essence of the Moor’s romanticized past and follow parallel to the stories of bravery and courage as found throughout Chivalresque literature. Pérez de Hita’s challenge, however, is to elevate the cultural and ideological significance of the texts, which appear to serve mainly for entertainment and distraction, to a level beyond mere amusement. In order to mediate human perception and inspire meaningful interaction, the written text must provide a point of intersection with the ordinary experiences of the reader. The personal accounts of courageous Moorish knights of Granada converting to Christianity are therefore brought about through the meditational role of Muza, who becomes the axis of mutual respect between adversaries. This is the crux of Hita’s neo-pacifistic narrative, which is

particularly significant and timely as Hita's exemplary Muslims are, in fact, the last generation of Moors living in the once independent Kingdom of Granada (Carrasco-Urgoiti, *Moorish Novel* 120). The idealized past then, is not so far removed from the present reality of the Grenadine Moor as a conquered people that now have to face the wholesale operation to manipulate public sentiment and prescribe difference based upon Christian orthodoxy.

Following Vincent Barletta's recent study of crypto-Islamic literature, the construction of perception ultimately shapes meaning through a transformative process resulting from a myriad of complex social activities whereby narratives act as the axis (xv). In other words, the written text is a "dynamic" and "shifting" communicative practice –and thereby performative in nature –that may be wielded to accumulate social power by the mediation and negotiation of human experience (xx). Barletta notes Briggs and Bauman's anthropological take on genre as a vital to this process:

Genre thus pertains crucially to negotiations of identity and power – by invoking a particular genre, producers of discourse assert (tacitly or explicitly) that they possess the authority needed to decontextualize discourse that bears these historical and social connections and to recontextualize it in the current discursive setting. (qtd, in Barletta, xx)

Pérez de Hita's retelling (decontextualizing) of both pejorative and idealized notions of the Western Moor may be replete with literary devices that decorate and even exaggerate his narrative, but as a performative text it is grounded in sound historical and social connections where past and present merge to form a discourse for the future. In this light, Pérez de Hita accrues a sense of cultural authority by artfully blending text and social context, in this case conversion, in order to renegotiate Muslim identity and give significance and a renewed sense of form to the experience of being Spanish.

The fictional narrative of the Captive's Tale is similar in that it demonstrates a significant cultural exchange where elements of identity and power reflect the author's own personal experience while exposing society's greater concern for the Moriscos' spiritual standing. Genre plays a fundamental role here in both the *Guerras civiles* and the *Quixote* where the later discursive process exemplifies Christian perceptions of Muslim identity as illustrated in Dorotea's declaration "nos hace pensar que es lo que no queríamos que fuese." In both cases, notions of genuine conversion prevailed whereas the outward expression of cultural nuance, namely Moorish culture and tradition, played more into society's disillusioned perceptions that dominated sixteenth-century life.

In the end, the wake of suspicion and distrust toward the Moriscos dominated every aspect of Spanish society leading ultimately to their expulsion. The hope that forced conversion would facilitate assimilation proved a failing enterprise from its inception. Yet, amidst this intense pessimism, Pérez de Hita triumphed in forming a narrative model of optimism that bridged the gulf separating any meaningful discursive exchanges. By founding his text in the collective remembrance of a once glorious past shared by both Christian and Muslim, Hita was able to link the ideal of conversion based not upon genealogy, but upon personal conviction and nobility of character.

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