Cambridge readings in Spanish literature

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ONE of the main obstacles which confront the compiler of a Spanish chrestomathy is concerned with the matter of accents. The difficulties are greater in Spanish than in the case of French, owing to the constant changes of system authorized by the Royal Spanish Academy. In a book of this kind, it is necessary to follow the best printed editions available: these printed editions differ in detail, one follows one system of older tradition, another edition follows another system. At any rate, I have accepted this as an established fact; there is, so far as I can see, no reason for applying rigidly the modern Academic system of accentuation to the names of writers who often flourished centuries before that system was invented. If this were an exhaustive statement of the facts, it might perhaps be possible to find a practicable via media. But it is not an exhaustive presentation of the circumstances. It has been borne in mind that this book is intended chiefly for English students equipped with some knowledge of the current system. The special needs of such students have been taken into account. For them Cervantes may be regarded as the beginning of modern Spanish literature. Editions of Cervantes exist in facsimile. These editions have been followed as closely as possible; but I have not thought it necessary to puzzle readers by reproducing mechanically old systems of spelling, graphic accentuation and so forth in the case of most writers who have flourished after Cervantes’s time. As modern Spanish literature begins with him, I have modernized the text of later writers and may hope that the change has been carried out without undue brusqueness. The text has been modernized except when philological reasons rendered modernization out of question; the names of writers have throughout been modernized in the main headings; titles have been regarded as, in some sort, quotations, and are reproduced as given by the authors in the prefatory notes preceding each extract. In the prefatory notes the writers’ names have not usually been modernized previous to the insertion of
Calderón, whose active career, spread over the greater part of the eighteenth century, seemed to be a good point of departure for the introduction of the modern system. The selection of extracts is, of course, a manifestation of individual taste, but even taste is based to some extent on principle. The principles that have guided me in my choice are that each extract should be mainly characteristic of the author, and that no extract should be excluded on the ground that the average reader may chance to be already acquainted with it. Not so much novelty, as excellence of manner or of substance, justifies the insertion of each fragment. Some omissions in the present compilation may be set down to difficulties imposed by copyright law.

It may be found that prose rather than poetry is represented in this volume. Of Spanish lyrical verse there is already ample illustration in a number of books. Epical verse is unrepresented in these selections, and this absence of a whole genre is the less to be deplored since the new ametrical theories concerning Spanish epical verse are undiscussed, though they approximate epical verse more closely to prose. In lyric verse Spanish is perhaps less rich than is English; in prose Spanish attained a full development more speedily than English. It may be doubted if we have in the English of the fourteenth century anything that can match in lightness of touch and gaiety of spirit the Coronica de Pero Niño, an extract from which heads the present series of selections. This is not the earliest specimen extant of Spanish prose—far from it; but the Coronica de Pero Niño is, in my judgment, the first Spanish book likely to interest the foreign reader, and in substance its matter is as novel as its style is readable at the present day.

Between Spanish and English literature there are certain obvious parallelisms. These extend from the earliest period when allegory—perhaps borrowed in each instance from France—reigns supreme in both countries to the epoch of Italian Renaissance which is, roughly, synchronous in both Spain and England. The efforts of Boscan and Garcilasso de la Vega may be compared with those of Wyatt and Surrey. Soon after this time Spanish verse and prose attained their highwater mark of excellence and independent treatment in the original poems of Luis de Leon, and in the natural periods of Cervantes’s best prose. We cannot quite feel certain concerning the originality of the Celestina; still less
can we feel certain as to the origin of *Amadis de Gaula*. In any case both works are anonymous, and it is not till shortly before the appearance of *Don Quixote* that we can assert positively that a Spanish book by a Spanish author has gone the round of the world. *Don Quixote* at first affects the drama in France and England; but it is not suitable to the stage conventions of either country, and it is not till more than a century later that, guided by Fielding and Sterne, the example of *Don Quixote* begins to react on the substance of English prose. It may be possible to trace this influence through some of the later extracts given here: if so, one of the compiler's aims has been achieved.

As there are chronological coincidences of literary productions between Spain and England, so there are corresponding coincidences of comparative sterility. The eighteenth century is a desolate period in each country; national spirit had sunk to a low point in Spain as in England, and French taste governed the leaders of literary fashion in both lands. Production at this time is thin and uninspired, and the reaction of romanticism was almost a necessity, if literature were to survive at all. It is not for us to estimate the attainments of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Scott, or to compare the literary gifts of each of these men with those of their conceivable Spanish compeers. Be it enough to note that, while England is perhaps somewhat more advanced in point of time, there has been no real solution of continuity in Spain where the romantic spirit has never died out since the heyday of her literary renown. Sufficient proof of this will, possibly, be found in the present volume.

J. F.-K.

Swardeston, August, 1920.