CHAPTER 8

Speeches, Letters, and Chronicle: Fernando de Pulgar’s Anthology in ms. 9–5173 Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid

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1 A Few Words on Pulgar’s Literary Taste and Trends

After a long career in the royal court, Fernando de Pulgar was appointed as royal chronicler of Castile in 1480 at the Cortes of Toledo. As early as 1457, he already formed part of the Chancery of Henry IV, King of Castile, for whom he also performed occasional diplomatic tasks. The Castilian Chancery was the best milieu for satisfying Pulgar’s intellectual pursuits. I do not wish to tackle the discussion of what label would be most accurate for Pulgar in view of the spectrum of his work: a medieval intellectual, a pre-Renaissance man, or a humanist. It seems much more interesting and fruitful to enquire about and describe the cultural environment in which Pulgar and his contemporaries lived and composed, a period during which the imprint of the literary novelties brought from Italy is particularly neat and traceable. The openness of the Castilian royal court and its interest in cultural renovation since the reign of John II is unquestionable. The royal courts of his successors, Henry IV and Isabella of Castile, were no strangers to the same cultural inclinations. After all, the Trastámara dynasty committed to internationalisation of its politics, expanding the kingdom’s boundaries beyond the Iberian Peninsula and creating an interchange that proved to be very fruitful in the cultural field.

Pulgar’s main works are a chronicle of the Catholic Monarchs, a collection of letters (Letras, with two different editions: 1485 and 1486), and a collection of literary portraits (Claros varones de Castilla). Literary portraits, chronicles, and letters were the kinds of prose he liked the most, three related genres where delight and morality combine to perfection. There is yet another element that

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1 In particular, we know of two diplomatic visits he made to France: in 1459 and 1464.
2 For a full intellectual profile of Pulgar, see Pontón Gijón (2008) xxix–xxiii, whom I would like to thank for putting at my disposal his research, which has been of great importance and relevance for the preparation of this study. An excellent overview of Pulgar and his work can also be found in Gómez Redondo (2012). I am using Elia’s edition of the Letras (1982).
made his writing particularly attractive in the eyes of his readers: his irreverent, mocking tone. Aside from being a fine writer, Pulgar was also a homo facetus ("witty man") or so at least he is considered in literary history, which honoured him with this title in Melchor de Santa Cruz’s *Floresta Española* (1574).

2 Pulgar and the Profession of the Historian

A loyal royal official and a smart courtier, Pulgar was appointed as the principal chronicler in 1480, succeeding Alfonso de Palencia, who had held this post since 1456, but had lost the Queen’s favor. This rift could have been caused by Queen Isabella when she demanded that Palencia submit his work to a “learned prelate” for review. Palencia must have interpreted this demand as censorship of his work. Pulgar acted quite differently and assured the Queen that he would hand her all he had written, “para que lo mande examinar” (“for her to have it reviewed” letra 11). In the same letter, under the guise of his lack of talent (commonplace of modesty), Pulgar speaks of the challenges and difficulties his task entails due to what he describes as the extraordinary and almost miraculous nature of the monarchs’ deeds.

Although Pulgar was not the only chronicler to spread the idea of the advent of a new golden age under the rule of the Catholic Monarchs, his influence on the chroniclers who followed him is clear, especially those who wrote their treatises in Latin. There is a guiding thread that links Pulgar with the chroniclers that came before him (Palencia) and after him (Nebrija and Marineo). Each of them is acquainted with the work of his colleagues and crafts his historical account by imitating, while also surpassing, previous or contemporary models. All of them seek to perform their task as historians by fulfilling two purposes: to compose a work of aesthetic value and to contribute to the praise and the glorification of their royal patrons. Consequently, history is pitched at a similar level to epic poetry, since it is an *opus oratorium maxime* with a clear didactic, moralizing, and eulogistic or celebratory function, which makes it a suitable genre for the education of princes and high state dignitaries.

This being the case, the chronicler must be capable of handling major rhetorical devices gracefully in order to compose an accurate and entertaining

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5 This second aim is barely present in Palencia’s chronicle, more concerned with appearing as a historian fully committed to the truth. As Tate (1998) pointed out, in Palencia’s works usually his sense of history as a dispassionate investigation of facts comes first.