

Forum

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The Decline of Spanish Pedagogy

TO THE EDITOR:

In “Negotiating Sites of Memory,” the Presidential Address delivered at the 2015 MLA convention, Margaret Ferguson covers several aspects of the “crisis” in the job market (130.3 [2015]: 546–65). As an emeritus member who received a PhD in 1966 and taught for some forty-four years at four universities, I would like to offer some recollections and commentary.

In 1966 the job market was “wide open” in my field: Spanish linguistics, with medieval Spanish literature. I was offered no fewer than four jobs as assistant professor, tenure-track, including one at the University of California, Los Angeles, by telephone, without even a personal interview. True, my degree in Romance languages was from Harvard University, but I had published absolutely nothing at that point, nor did any of our professors warn us that a candidate had to publish before completing the doctorate. I did have two years of experience as a graduate assistant in Spanish-language courses; that was it.

Without going into superfluous detail about my academic odyssey, suffice it to report that I did not receive tenure until about age forty-five, when I was at my third full-time position. By then I had published one volume in Twayne’s World Authors Series and about ten articles and book reviews; my school was not a research institution, and so it was primarily dedicated to undergraduate teaching. I confess that there was an interruption in my teaching career, a two-year period of academic unemployment, during which I used accumulated savings to spend four months studying Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro, a truly memorable experience.

What newly minted PhD would be hired today without any publications? What candidate, having been terminated after three years at

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one tenure-track job, five years at another, and two years at a third—and then having spent two years unemployed—would even have been considered for a tenure slot again? Perhaps, in my case, the fourth time was the charm?

The importance of Spanish language, literature, and culture was acknowledged both by the academic establishment and by the “1969 radicals” as I began my career. The erstwhile National Defense Education Act even considered Spanish-language learning to be a matter of national security. Enrollments, although largely in elementary and intermediate courses, were enormous.

A few years ago, the New York State Education Department abolished the high school Regents Examinations in languages other than English, including Spanish, as though to prove how little regard it has for “world languages” as preparation for college work. Meanwhile, upper-level college classes have been decimated in all but a few universities, mostly located in parts of the United States where there are sufficient numbers of students of Hispanic background.

Forget about Spanish linguistics and medieval studies. Despite the internationally recognized excellence of the MLA-sponsored journal *La corónica*, the number of American practitioners in medieval Iberian studies is steadily declining. My favorite course, History of the Spanish Language, is no longer a requirement for the PhD at most universities. Instead, “Hispanists” have been encouraged to specialize in film, gender studies, disability studies, art and architecture, and other “sidelines” that have little to do with a linguistic and literary heritage that has been nearly a millennium in the

making. While I concede that the literature and culture of Hispanic America are more germane to students in the United States than is the literature of Spain, I am scandalized that many major universities offer almost nothing on the recognized classics of Peninsular Spanish literature.

And *PMLA* bears some measure of blame for this oversight. I can’t think of the last time anything on Cervantes, Luis de León, or Francisco de Quevedo appeared in the journal, despite the fact that these classical authors are rife with political, religious, and sexual “unorthodoxy.” Where is Federico García Lorca, perhaps the great literary “genius” of twentieth-century Spain, or the Nobel Prize winner Camilo José Cela? Where are the pioneering women novelists Carmen Laforet and Ana María Matute with their heartbreaking portraiture of youth in Franco’s Spain?

PMLA’s dedication to theory, cultural studies, and contemporary political issues has proved that the study of Spanish—as a language and literature—is of little relevance in today’s educational system. In an attempt to be intellectually trendy, *PMLA* has become, ironically, partially responsible for the apparently irreversible decline in the study of Spanish and other world languages in the United States.

The recent issues of *PMLA* have saddened me in their quest for new theoretical approaches that have pushed Spanish, as well as other languages, to the sidelines.

Respectfully submitted by an “old-time” philologist.

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