CRITICAL CONFUSION IN SELECTED STUDIES
OF SANTILLANA’S _PROHEMIO E CARTA_

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ABSTRACT

M. R. WEINBERG: Critical Confusion in Selected Studies of Santillana’s Prohemio e carta
(Under the direction of Dr. Frank Domínguez)

Poetics, like the poems that it explains and informs, is subject to multiple interpretations. Moreover, when it is written by a practitioner of the same art, the poet’s prominence may at times obfuscate the true value of his propositions. Such may be the case with the Prohemio e carta of Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marquess of Santillana, whose greatness as a poet often exaggerates the interpretation of the comparatively minor Prohemio. This paper investigates the importance and supposed novelty of the Prohemio with the end of better understanding its place in the literature of the fifteenth century and the place assigned to it by others, considering historical context, literary precedents, and selected examples of contemporary scholarly reception. It concludes that any attempt to establish the true value of the Prohemio e carta for its contemporaries should be based not on its posterior reputation but on its epistolary origins.
To the memory of EMN

and

with inestimable gratitude to KRC
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Introduction

Poetics, like the poems that it explains and informs, is subject to multiple interpretations. Moreover, when it is written by a practitioner of the same art, the poet’s prominence, acquired often posthumously, may at times obfuscate the true value of his propositions, causing the impression that they deserve honors befitting the totality of his production or his general contribution to the literature in question. Thus, a work that the poet himself may have regarded as minor or even incidental may come to be lauded more for its presumed transcendence than for its immanence, more for its universality than for its particularity. Such is likely the case with the Prohemio e carta of Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marquess of Santillana (1398-1458), which has firmly established itself along with the nobleman’s other works as part of the Castilian literary canon. Nevertheless, it is his greatness as a poet that often obscures the interpretation of the comparatively minor Prohemio, in such a way that text assumes a transcendence that the author perchance never anticipated nor intended.

This paper investigates the importance and supposed novelty of the Prohemio e carta, a document considered to be foundational to Castilian poetic theory and history, with the end of better understanding its place in the literature of the fifteenth century and
the place assigned to it by others. It first presents the historical context and literary precedents of the *Prohemio e carta* and then examines selected examples of scholarly reception that have overly emphasized its place in the Castilian canon. Finally, it concludes that any attempt to establish the true value of the *Prohemio e carta* for its contemporaries should be based not on its posterior reputation but on its epistolary origins.
By virtue of its author, the *Prohemio e carta* has conferred no small degree of prominence on its destinatary, Pedro de Avis y Aragón (1429-1466), son of the Regent of Portugal. Appointed Constable of Portugal, Pedro rode to the aid of John II of Castile at Olmedo but arrived too late to participate in the battle of May 19th, 1445. It was then, however, that the young nobleman met Íñigo López de Mendoza, who would be created marquess soon thereafter. The *Prohemio e carta* is the letter and prologue that the marquess sent to the young Portuguese nobleman prefixed to a collection of his poetry,\(^1\) intending to justify and promote to the young man the ideal of the man of arms and letters (López González 180).\(^2\)

As its title and its content jointly indicate, the *Prohemio* is both a prologue and a letter. In the former capacity, it naturally precedes and introduces a work of greater length

\(^1\)The volume that it accompanied was *Decires e Canciones mias*, a gift for don Pedro, “who deserved the homage of the Castilian poet, for he was the first Portuguese to write in Spanish” (Pastor 56).

\(^2\)Wider scholarship gives a range of 1443-1449 for the letter’s composition, whilst conservative estimations give 1445/6-1449. To postulate a date within the latter period requires several assumptions, all of which appear reasonable in light of currently available data: don Íñigo identifies himself as “Marquess of Santillana, Count del Real de Manzanares, Lord of...,” etc., which titles he received on August 8th, 1445 for actions in battle, and addresses the letter to Pedro, Constable of Portugal, which title Alfonso V of Portugal withdrew in 1449. Since their meeting is supposed to have occurred in 1445, any date earlier than that is unlikely, and any date later than 1449 is likewise improbable because of the content of the salutation. Pastor remarks that “it was probably in the spring” (56).
and significance which, by the fifteenth century, constituted one of several ways of articulating a corpus of poetic theory. First among these were the poéticas oficiales, or “libros normativos sobre la poesía, escritos por poetas y casi siempre para poetas,” which in spite of their apparent authority, were “a minimal part” of Castilian poetic theory, and not easily accessible to the average reader of the time (Porqueras Mayo 19-20). A far more important category, however, were the prologues written by various authors, some of whom undoubtedly composed poetry, and which one may call “poetical prologues.” Finally, there were disquisitions in literary academies, formal treatises, and criticism that introduced their subject in one manner or another. Santillana’s prologue belongs to the second category.

Prologues, designed to accompany the material that they intend to justify, were far more versatile than one might imagine, for in them a poet could clarify difficult passages, defend a certain technique, or, like Santillana, comment on the very legitimacy of poetry itself using his own voice (as distinct from the poetic voice) to say what he could not say within a poem. Instead of being a manual of style, lyrical or otherwise, or a set of literary precepts to enact, a poetical prologue is the complementary half of a compositional whole: theory and practice in a single opuscule. Furthermore, a prologue of this kind can better announce the poet’s gratitude to a patron or elucidate his didactic intentions. This makes it a highly personal statement that begins to resemble a letter. As Gómez Moreno explains:

Proemios y cartas pertenecen a universos próximos pero claramente diferenciados: la presencia del primero se justifica sólo en unión de la obra o grupo que introduce; la carta, sin embargo, no precisa de ningún compañero de viaje, pues puede empezar y acabar en sí misma. Ambas formas literarias entran en contacto cuando el proemio o prólogo implica de modo explícito un destinatario, particular o colectivo; años después, el
Thus, Santillana’s prologue has a dual function: in its precession and defense of another text, it is a prologue, and in its address to a specific audience, it is a letter.

Given the volume and influence of Santillana’s literary production, there is little doubt that an introduction written by him to any collection of his work would have had great influence in the educated circles of fifteenth-century Spain. Nevertheless, the Prohemio e carta is not intended first to promulgate poetic theory; instead, it appeals to a specific individual, the young don Pedro, Constable of Portugal, whom it seeks to convince of the value of poetry with its substantial arguments, perhaps in the spirit of a rhetorical exercise: “don Íñigo no compone tanto un prólogo en forma epistolar cuanto una carta a un destinatario específico con el propósito de presentar una colección de poemas propios” (Gómez Moreno 18, 19). Consequently, a better classification of the text would be, as Gómez Moreno continues, “una carta de envío, una auténtica Carta-prólogo (que no prólogo a manera de carta) que gustó al Marqués de modo especial por su condición de escrito erudito…” (Gómez Moreno 20). It has a dual function, but the epistolary function precedes the argumentative, if only by reason of the personal nature of the appeal.

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3Others, of course, may argue that it is indeed (and perhaps primarily) a prologue in the medieval tradition or in the manner of its own time. This is a fully reasonable concession and in no way diminishes the epistolary character of the text; on the contrary, it merely strengthens the supposition that the prologue was versatile genre, a mode of expression that suited the Marquess’s particular purposes, which further supports the text’s inherence in its period.
Literary Precedents

Prohemio e carta’s defense of poetry is not unique. According to Porqueras Mayo, one of its prominent forms is the theological, which also appears in Santillana:

La especulación teológica sobre la poesía aparece en la segunda mitad del siglo segundo de la era cristiana, coincidiendo con la escuela de los apologistas, entre ellos Justino el mártir, que usan razonamientos de los judíos helenizados como Filón y Josefo, que ya trataron de conciliar la ley judaica con el pensamiento griego. Especialmente practican la exégesis alegórica y “la autoridad de la antigüedad.” Es curioso notar que los primeros tratados españoles, como los del Marqués de Santillana y Encina, ya citan, por ejemplo a Filón y a Josefo. (29)

Two facts are worthy of remark: first, occidental letters have long striven to unite the writings on this topic of the ancient Greeks and Romans with those of Jewish and Christian thinkers, most notably the Church Fathers; second, an appeal to ancient authority has always exercised a significant influence. Early Christian writers recognized the value of classic (i.e. pagan) literature and sought to justify their use of it, and that very search by Santillana’s time had itself become a major theme of poetic inquiry.⁴

⁴Several Latin and Greek Fathers possessed rhetorical training, and many continued to practice it even after their conversion and assumption of leadership within the Church. In the Latin West are notable Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Augustine, Ambrose, Hilary, and Jerome. The first five were rhetoricians prior to their conversion, and the latter three “were thoroughly trained in rhetorical schools” (Kennedy 146). The East had, at the very least, the three Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, not to mention the “golden-tongued” John Chrysostom. In the same spirit of the exhortation to virtue that often appeared in these
Along with poetry, a major theme of this classical and religious reconciliation was rhetoric, for both were thought to be intrinsically related. Moreover, not only in its substance does the *Prohemio e carta* place itself in the current of rhetorical inquiry and exposition, but also in its form: it obeys certain epistolary conventions of its time, the bulk of which were inherited from the ancient art.

The particular rhetorical discipline that it practices is known as *ars dictaminis*, the art of letter writing. For this prologue-letter is not a casual introduction; on the contrary, the *Prohemio* actively seeks to persuade. If the Marquess wishes to convince the Constable of the quality of his poetic judgments, and consequently of the merit of the verses that he sends to him, he will employ the appropriate and approved rhetorical practices so as to make the recipient favorable to his cause (Gómez Moreno 24). (This, of course, is the very essence of rhetoric.) Furthermore, if the Constable indeed possesses any influence over the literary elite of his own realm, the Marquess has all the more reason to engage himself earnestly in such an epistolary endeavor.

In his excellent survey of rhetorical history Kennedy notes the phenomenon of “letteraturizzazione,” which he defines as the “slippage of rhetoric into literary composition” (109), curiously contrary to the origin of the art as the practice and cultivation of spoken public, political address. The writing down of speeches and the imitation of great oratory in works of literature naturally contributed to its emerging writings, Santillana’s work disavows that poetry promotes “cosas vanas e lascivas,” and, perhaps not only for the sake of argumentation but also of virtue, affirms that it has its origin in the biblical writers and ultimately in God himself.

3If, in accord with classical structure of the Seven Liberal Arts, poetry and poetics, being the art thereof, may be considered the union of the three verbal arts with music, Kennedy observes that poetics then becomes “the study of the specific compositional needs of the poet working within the poetic genres. These needs include plot (or at least unity of narrative), characterization, the choice of appropriate poetic diction, and not least an understanding of the conventions of the genre within which the poet works” (115). This subtly evokes Santillana’s tripartite classification of verse in the body of the letter (“sublime, mediocre, and low”).
importance, and as rhetoric was taught to successive generations of students from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, its transmission easily acquired this additional dimension: rhetoric ceased to be conceived of as an oral art. As Kennedy explains, “rhetoric…found application in forms of creative expression other than spoken oratory and these other forms became more common and more important” (112).

A consequence of the previous decline in the orality of rhetoric, the art of letter writing was a “truly medieval invention. It marks a sharp break with ancient rhetorical practices” (Murphy 194). While Murphy notes that the sending of written messages from one person to another certainly boasts a record in ancient literature, “message transmission remained a function of oral language throughout the ancient world” (194). He gives the example of envoys who spoke the message to the intended recipients and continues by commenting that “eloquent letters, like eloquent speeches, were expected to be the product of broad rhetorical education. In fact, it was common to dictate (dictare) a letter aloud for a scribe to copy out” (194, 5).

Curtius describes how *ars dictaminis* or *dictandi* arose in the Middle Ages out of the “needs of administrative procedure, and was primarily intended to furnish models for letters and official documents” (75). In contrast to Murphy, Curtius sees less contrast with ancient orality: collections of classical letters and even models for various social situations are attested in Ancient Greece, as “an aftereffect of Attic comedy” (76).

The earliest treatise on the subject (or approximately so) was that of the fourth-century Roman rhetorician C. Julius Victor, *Ars rhetorica*. After a presentation of Ciceronian rhetoric, he expounds three auxiliary topics, *de exercitatione*, *de sermocinatione*, and *de epistolis*. Murphy continues:
The first deals with the virtues of practice; the second, however is more important because Victor points out at once that regular rhetorical theory does not cover the *sermo*, or informal discourse… Victor goes on to say that the *epistola* follows the precepts of the *sermo*… (195)

This second form, which is to be unlike an oration in light of the closeness of the audience, must above all be brief. The third form admits of two variants, official letters (*negotiales*) and familiar letters (*familiares*). The former “includes serious argumentative matter and may use figurative language of the type found in orations” (195, 6). It may be both erudite and polemical and should be graceful “without losing the quality of a letter” (196). (One can already hear echoes of this in Santillana’s prologue one thousand years later.) The latter type should be marked by both brevity and clarity, “avoiding obscure terminology, arcane proverbs, and curious language” (196). Victor also expounds upon salutations, signatures, and social status, in such a way that the latter be reflected in the former two. “If one writes to a superior, the letter should not be jocular; if to an equal, it should not be discourteous; if to an inferior, it should not be proud” (196).

Two of these phenomena, though greatly modified over the course of a millennium, appear concomitantly in Santillana: a marquess writes to a constable, a high officer of the kingdom,⁶ who is also the son of the heir to the throne, yet the marquess is much older than the constable, who may have been a lad of but sixteen or seventeen. Santillana must show deference, yet as an older man he must also instruct the youth. Of course, the foregoing inferences remain somewhat tenuous, given that these postulations of the fourth century are not the formal beginning of the dictaminal art as the Marquess likely practiced it.

⁶Like the Great Officers of the Crown of France, the Office of Constable was, in some kingdoms, conferred not by birth but by royal commission. Although the holder was almost certainly aristocratic, by virtue of his office and proximity to the monarch, he received additional dignity superior to that befitting his noble rank.
The true advent of *ars dictaminis*, however, comes in the eleventh century (about AD 1087) in the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, and the two monks responsible for this re-introduction were Alberic of Monte Cassino and his pupil John of Gaeta (202, 3). “Alberic’s major contribution of *ars dictaminis* is his application of rhetorical principles to letter-writing” (203). He has two major works, *Dictaminum radii*, (or *Flores rhetorici*) and *Brevarium de dictamine*, the first of which, evincing his grammatical and rhetorical training, treats of ornament, and the second, of letter-writing itself (203). He enumerates four principal parts of a speech, following St. Isidore’s Ciceronian conception: *exordium*, *narratio*, *argumentatio*, and *conclusio*. As later became common, he devoted a lengthy section to salutations. His initial comments both laid the foundation for subsequent development of the art and demonstrate the classical rhetorical provenance of the same. The spoken word now appears in ink, and an art almost exclusively oral now transforms itself in large part into a written, scribal discipline.

Other manuals from both lay and cleric authors followed, and in subsequent decades the primary place of cultivation changed to Bologna, where its new proponents

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7 Of further note, in the very manner in which Murphy describes this most crucial development, is that Alberic cites the Ciceronian objectives of the *exordium*, that is, to render the audience “attentive, docile, and well-disposed.” He does not name Cicero, but that is hardly surprising for such a famous quotation. Significantly, though, Alberic uses the term “reader” (*lectorem*) instead of “audience” (*auditores*) —and declares his intention to discuss those “colors” by which the reader is swayed. His choice of Latin term is highly significant, in light of later terminology in the dictamen manuals. He writes: *Colores autem eius dico quibus capitur benevolentia, docilitas, attentio*. This seems to be the first medieval use of a word-set which later became petrified into a formal part of a letter as *captatio benevolentiae*. (In fact, some of the manuals come to use this petrified phrase as a synonym for *exordium*, so that in the following century the first two parts of a letter are often named as *salutatio* and *captatio benevolentiae*) (205, 6)
composed works that became standards for the next three centuries\textsuperscript{8} (211). By about 1124, under the guidance of the canon Hugh of Bologna, this new field had received some internal structure: *dictamen* comes to mean “the whole of writing, coming ultimately to include prosaic, metrical, rhythmical, and mixed forms”; *dictamen prosaicum*, to denote “in practice, the writing of letters in prose; in theory, any writing in prose”; *ars dictaminis*, to mean “the theory of writing letters in prose; the term is also applied to a treatise of manual on the subject”; *dictator*, to denote a professional teacher of the *ars dictaminis*; and *dictamininum*, to indicate “a collection of models, usually complete letters” (219). By about 1135, the sexapartite Ciceronian oration had been adapted into a quiquepartite “‘approved format’”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ciceronian Parts of an Oration</th>
<th>Bolognese ‘Approved Format’ for a Letter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Davardium</td>
<td><em>Salutatio</em>, or formal greeting to addressee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Captatio benevolentiae</em>, or introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divisio (Omitted as a separate part)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narratio (Omitted as a separate part)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Narratio</em>, or narration of circumstances leading to petition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Confirmatio</em></td>
<td><em>Petitio</em>, or presentation of requests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Refutatio</em></td>
<td>(Omitted as a separate part)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Peroratio</em></td>
<td><em>Conclusio</em>, or final part (225)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first two parts received the most attention from theorists, whereas the final three received comparatively little, with the *narratio* especially reserved for the “briefest statement of facts” (Murphy 225, Witt 13). In general, regarding prominence of the *salutatio*, Witt notes the importance of making a letter appropriate for the complex social rules of its day, which hearkens back to the Carolingian *formulae* and also evokes the

\textsuperscript{8}Of the expansion of *ars dictaminis* to other realms, medieval Castile in particular, Murphy notes in Charles Faulhaber that it was “the dominant type of rhetorical treatise,” though such did not necessarily apply elsewhere in Spain and at other times. He then cites *Ars epistolarium ornatus* of Geoffrey of Everseley (c. 1270), *Dictaminis epithalamium* of Juan Gil de Zamora (c. 1275?), and *Breve compendium artis rhetorice* of Martin de Córdoba (1300-1350) (243, 4).
persistent oral quality: recipients could expect to have such a letter read to them (6). In Santillana’s letter one certainly finds a similarly elaborate salutatio, as was previously explained, yet his narratio, is not brief by any stretch of the imagination: being in fact the longest section of the letter, it comprises the impressive survey of sacred, pagan, and vernacular poetry —likely facilitated by his impressive library— and his tripartite classification of poetry: sublime, mediocre, and low, the first being verses composed in the classical tongues; the second, vernacular works, and the third, a seeming dismissal of popular ballads and the like. (Of course, one should not read into this too much disdain, for the Marquess composed many works in the popular style and would not lightly dismiss such a large portion of his own verse.\(^9\)

Regarding the general adherence of the Prohemio to the scheme of ars dictaminis, one may consider the outline offered by Gómez Moreno (26):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. SALUTATIO</th>
<th>• Dedicatoria.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. EXORDIUM</td>
<td>• Justificación del envío.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agrado por el interés del Condestable por la poesía.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Respuesta a ¿a qué es la poesía?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preeminencia de la poesía sobre la prosa: criterio de antigüedad y teológico. (→ 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. NARRATIO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poetas bíblicos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poetas griegos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Los metros se utilizan en situaciones diversas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poesía y Dios. La utilizan todos los</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^9\)The Marquis, as we have seen, makes constant use of popular themes; but his poetry is never without ‘order, rule, nor measure’. He insists, on the contrary, on the metrical perfection of poetry” (Pastor 51). Low verse is therefore called so not because of its theme but because of its lack of meter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recapitulatio</th>
<th>hombres: poesía en Roma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Modernidad: Petrarca, Italia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Grados de la poesía en nuestros tiempos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Italia y Francia. Resumen.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ESPAÑA.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Declaración de cierre expositivo.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conclusión general: sobre orígenes de la poesía remite al Prólogo de los Proverbios y vuelve sobre la evidencia de su valor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. EPILOGUS</td>
<td>Petitio y conclusio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exhortación y cierre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gómez Moreno further divides the salutatio into three parts: the intitulatio (“nombre y dignidad de quien envía la carta”), the inscription (“nombre y dignidad de quien la recibe”), and the salutatio proper (27). As was previously mentioned, because of the higher dignity (rank) of the recipient, the inscriptio precedes the intitulatio despite the greater age and achievements of the sender. The captatio benevolentiae is likely found in the praise that the Marquess offers for the Constable’s family and forms the beginning of the exordium; the latter part takes up the question “What is poetry?” and, with its invocation of the theological, constitutes the transition to the narratio, which, as
previously mentioned and contrary to dictaminal prescription, is the longest section. Lastly, the epilogue contains the famous “man of arms and man of letters” theme.\textsuperscript{10}

Posterior developments, especially in Italy, saw the close relationship between \textit{ars dictaminis} and the rhetoric from which it had sprung: the growing complexity of the notarial art and its relationship to rhetoric necessitated a close dependence upon the \textit{dictator} (Witt 25). The \textit{ars dictaminis} and its cousin \textit{ars notariae} never separated from each other completely (25). Nevertheless, with the rise of humanism in the fifteenth century, official, diplomatic letters in this style declined. As Witt explains

\begin{quote}
However, despite decreasing practical importance, official Latin epistolography in the fifteenth century remained strongly tied to the teaching of the \textit{dictatores} of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Singling out the personal letter for special treatment…was to be a long-standing practice among the humanists, who…conceded the advantages of \textit{ars dictaminis} in other areas of epistolography. (33)
\end{quote}

This might explain Santillana’s use of the art: although it had begun to fade from official use, it still remained in vigor amongst the humanists and was also in accord with their aim of rhetorical revival, as previously recounted. Thus, it would be natural that Santillana employ it in order to persuade the Constable of the value of literary cultivation, be it in the form of personal composition or aristocratic patronage. Furthermore, although his humanism and his love of things Italian be also well established, Santillana remains firmly grounded in a medieval rhetorical heritage that has taught him not only how to express himself but also the value of doing so well.\textsuperscript{11}

The prologue therefore can be a means of poetic exposition and the internal form that it takes is in conformity to the rhetorical practices of the times as they were received

\textsuperscript{10}There are different divisions, of course; López Estrada sees the beginning of the \textit{narratio} with the question “What is poetry?” (52).
\textsuperscript{11}It is also possible that both his humanism and his use of \textit{ars dictaminis} be of the same Italian root, although the proof thereof lies outside the scope of this investigation.
and modified from Antiquity. Whatsoever the timeless value of poetic recommendations, the *Prohemio e carta* remains a product of its time—a time in which poets often discussed their art in prologues and in which exhortatory prologues took the form of letters whose precepts had been adapted from ancient oratory.
Scholarly Reception

Both the study of the origins and the exposition of the effects of a text such as the *Prohemio e carta* have historically been the task of literary scholarship. Nevertheless, the same literary criticism, like the poetics that it purports to elucidate and apply, is often a multeity of interpretations in which the eagerness to comment on the finest nuances of a text’s significance takes on a life of its own, disposing of poetical treatises in the same manner as the latter dispose of poetical theories. While interpretative creativity is greatly to be appreciated and often reveals thitherto unknown details, there is a kind of expository exuberance that more obfuscates than clarifies. Pearls of aesthetic judgment that the author likely never knew he was hiding, although much treasured afterward, belong first to his period; later renown cannot so immediately ennoble the humble origins of a text that the author likely meant as incidental, even if he suspected that more than the stated recipient would read his words. Bearing in mind this *caveat lector*, one may then consider selected examples of scholarly interpretations that have presented a more transcendent image of the *Prohemio e carta* than its historical and literary context may confer on it.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\)In addressing these examples, it is to be understood that such a survey by no means presents itself as comprehensive. There are, undoubtedly, numerous examples of good historical and literary
One final preliminary thought before undertaking this brief survey proceeds from literary theory, specifically reception theory. As Holub observes in his survey of theories of literary and aesthetic reception,

One of the most persistent dilemmas, in fact, has been how Rezeption (reception) differs from Wirkung (usually rendered by “response” or “effect”). Both have to do with the impact of a work on someone, and it is not clear that they can be separated completely. None the less, the most frequent suggestion has been to view Rezeption as related to the reader, while Wirkung is supposed to pertain to textual aspects… (xi)

As one may observe, a seemingly natural distinction of the two processes recognizes the recipient of the text on the one hand and, on the other, the sundry effects produced by the same, often long after the original destinatary has left the scene. In the case of the Prohemio, the latter may well embrace the scholarly evaluations about to be considered: the effect that Santillana desired to produce in the Constable by means of his letter was one, and the effect it had subsequently is another. (Such “textual aspects” may include its rather successful use of ars dictaminis, as well as the influence that it has exerted in posterior Castilian poetics.) For the purposes of the present investigation, “reception” in the strict sense delineated above has already been partially addressed in respect of the Constable of Portugal; it is then the latter “response” or “effect” as manifested in following scholarly interpretations and how they may conflate themselves with the former process that concerns this section.

From the foregoing admonition, however, one need not infer that the interpretation and exposition of theoretical texts is so easily susceptible to misunderstanding at every step. For if there should be misinterpretation, it is due not so
much to defective reasoning as to the recursive application of a text’s historical importance upon the text itself. Such an error is not necessarily serious until, it becomes the interpretive motor. Let one consider the remarks of Ferrie regarding Santillana’s humanism:

En una época de grandes cambios culturales e intelectuales como la que caracteriza el siglo XV, esta carta de Santillana se vislumbra como un medio de cultivar la sensibilidad y consciencia literaria hacia nuevas tendencias que surgían en la poesía. Parece que el Marqués se aprovechó de esta encrucijada cultural para moldear los gustos artísticos en España de acuerdo con sus propias aspiraciones. (195)

The context is rightly and incontestably established: the fifteenth century was indeed a time of great cultural and intellectual change. (Of course, that is known from the comparison of texts of that period to those that precede it.) This measure of interpretive generalization incurs no fault. Furthermore, if one discerns in Santillana’s recommendations an attempt to exert influence on contemporary change, that too appears reasonable. In fact, the Marquess is one of the likeliest people to perceive the subtleties of those changes and one of the best figures by which to measure the same. The error appears, however, in asserting that one letter, in one sense a mere introduction to a *cancionero*, was an intentional attempt to change the entire body of aesthetic conventions of the time. In fairness to the spirit of the Ferrie’s interpretation, however, it may well in some form have been Santillana’s intention to guide the literary and poetic change in direction or another, even by virtue of his elite position, in such a way that he was carefully to expound well his tastes even in minor letter, but one need not consider his words as having a latent desire to become the sole aesthetic arbiter of his time.13

13Those intentions would have been known only to the man himself, unless he left some textual evidence thereof, and no such record has yet been found. Furthermore, one might also doubt the nuances of the historical context in which this phenomenon is described to be occurring: Spain as
It is then rather doubtful that Santillana expected to change the totality of Castilian poetic taste with a single letter or even with his entire poetic work, although he was likely aware of the literary influence that he enjoyed. Reason should constrain one to a more conservative estimation: while it was likely the goal of many literate men of the age to reinvigorate Castilian poetry, it was not probable that any single member thought himself the sole individual to effect such a change.\textsuperscript{14} If the Marquess considered himself a part of such a humanistic endeavor, as he likely did, it is probable that he availed himself of such opportunities, without aspiration to a universal literary revolution. The error, in retrospect, has been the attribution of a large portion of the causes of cultural change to a single prominent figure.

The abundance of texts produced by authors from different walks of life, though mostly noble and to varying degrees engaged in such a cultural endeavor, has survived to this day and gives generous testimony of their efforts. Nevertheless, abundance and simultaneity does not imply a cohesive, “revolutionary” attempt. Once again an exaggerated inference from the effects may result in a distorted image of origin, which in turn corrupts the interpretation of the effects. Of the Marquess and his collaborators, Garci-Gómez writes the following:

Carecía de precedentes en el suelo hispánico el sentimiento y la labor de equipo que unía al Marqués de Santillana con las figuras de los intelectuales y los literatos de su época. Entre todos ellos se ergúa Íñigo López de Mendoza como el gran mecenas, el hombre rico e influyente que

\textsuperscript{14}Notwithstanding supremely fatuitous egomania, of course, it is nigh to impossible to prove and results a little anachronistic in the diagnosis as well. A far more reasonable concession inferred from the text appears to be that Santillana may have tried to demonstrate his familiarity first with the accepted biblical, ancient, and medieval authorities of his time by citing those whom he does and second with a wide range of poets and poetry in enumerating so many vernacular traditions.
apoyaba y fomentaba las tareas culturales del equipo. Los hombres que lo integraban pertenecían a diversos estados, profesiones y ocupaciones: reyes, nobles, obispos, capellanes de corte, poetas, guerreros y otros, unidos todos entre sí por un celo intelectual y un talante estético similares. Entre sí se llamaban amigos. […] Y lo que quizá sea más digno de ponderación, se encomiaban con entusiasmo y se defendían ávidamente contra los que les atacaban y los que reprendían su nueva manera: su dedicación a los clásicos, su estilo de época. Se consideraban a sí mismos, y eran por otros considerados, casta diferente. Por todo esto hemos de considerarlos Generación Literaria, la primera en la Península. (25, 26)

The first supposition, though it is certainly (and in some sense, justly) imbued with a sense of the grandeur of the cultural and literary change in progress and to which numerous Castilian men of arms and letters committed their pens, presupposes a more epic endeavor than its epoch may readily grant. The writings of the humanists indubitably bear much similarity to one another in convictions and objectives, and their collaboration, inasmuch as the spirit of the age did unite those writers, is established. Nevertheless, to describe the effort of Santillana and his contemporaries as so organized as to evoke images of a literary coup d’état, exaggerates. Furthermore, although Santillana’s literary prominence at the time is also well established, one does not necessarily gain the impression that he was considered the broad leader of a movement. Likewise suspicious is their address to one another: in fact, the salutation of the Prohemio demonstrates a distinct and rigorous formality, as previously described. It would have been highly uncharacteristic of the time to write in less respectful a manner. Furthermore, whether the members of this elite group lauded one another as the quotation leads one to believe may also be interpreted in light of ars dictaminis: any well-wishes, any benevolent conclusions, would be more likely a function of the current rhetorical practices that reflect the respective stations of the individuals involved than a mutual, exuberant encouragement to participation in a literary revolution. Additionally, the interpretation
exaggerates the adherence of these literati to the classics. The progressive rediscovery of classic writings indubitably exercised great influence upon the literary consciousness of the time and inspired many to find their place within the inherited legacy of Antiquity, but there was far less repudiation of what the present knows as the Middle Ages as one might be disposed to imagine. Moreover, as already demonstrated herein, Santillana, the reputed head of this movement, manifests a decidedly medieval heritage, though he may not have been as aware of it as contemporary scholarship is. To continue, any exclusivity felt by the members of this group was more likely first a function of their aristocratic birth than their participation in a cultural endeavor, for one must note the Santillana speaks of the man of arms and letters.\textsuperscript{15}

It is in the last assertion, finally, in which the interpretation incurs in its greatest and perhaps gravest error: anachronism. The concept of a literary generation would not be invented and applied until many centuries later (although quite notably in the Iberian Peninsula, no less) articulated by a member of that very group.\textsuperscript{16} Santillana makes no such claim. His primary exhortation to the young Constable is in fact not that he separate

\textsuperscript{15}As many will observe, study and artistic pursuit were the privilege of the wealthy and those whom they endowed.

\textsuperscript{16}This is, of course, the Generation of 1898, first proclaimed by José Martínez Ruiz, also known as Azorín, in his essays titled \textit{La generación de 1898}, published in 1913. Nevertheless, the same critic justifies his use of the term by reason of the intimacy implied by more affectionate forms of address: Santillana called Juan de Mena “especial amigo”, and addressed the Bishop of Cartagena with the terms “por magna, por antigua, verdadera, e non corrompida en algunt tiempo amistat” (26). As a matter of course, the foregoing considerations do by no means preclude the discovery of true personal friendships amongst the Castilian humanists of the fifteenth century; in fact, such were quite probable given the (textually) evident similarity of interests and shared sense of vocation (that of renewing or reinvigorating the literary practice of the time). The enthusiasm must have been contagious! Authors must have felt closer to one another, yet of the totality of the sentiment felt, present scholarship has received only a part: that which was recorded in ink. This investigation simply argues here against organized literary undertakings as deduced therefrom. If salutations in other letters demonstrate more intimacy or works appear (artfully, affectionately, eagerly, or more than respectfully) dedicated to contemporaries, one is not constrained to conclude that such friendship translated into a common literary objective as implies the designation “generation”.

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himself to become a part of an exclusive, enlightened, and revolutionary group, but that he join himself to a broader, commoner cultural change, albeit effected by those who have the sensibility for it. Thus, in this interpretation, one sees the effects of projecting a greatly exaggerated posterior prominence to figure that viewed himself as much more integrated with his own society.

Nevertheless, conceding to the merits of the interpretation of Garcí-Gómez (and they do exist), one must admit that the description of the prologue and the environment of its creation is certainly unmatched in eloquence, and perhaps thereby aptly represents something akin to what the Marquess himself strove to attain: a persuasive exposition of poetics that was also elegant. That elegance, however, Santillana strove to realize by means of *ars dictaminis*, a literary convention meant for the individual use of every educated man, not by means of essay-like proclamations written for an audience of potential secondary readers: the letter has one recipient, as the art would dictate; any other readership must be regarded as incidental, even if the Marquess had such in mind upon composing it. Therefore, while it is wise to recognize the labors of Santillana’s contemporaries in conformity with the spirit of his times, their stark separation as an intimate group of men of letters united by a common humanistic spirit anachronically exaggerates the causes in light of the effects.

Lest one acquire an incomplete and discouraging picture of contemporary scholarship, it is good also to consider a well-reasoned example by which properly to conceive of the interpretation of particular texts that have attained to universal significance, as well as to conclude the present investigation.
With a view toward the synthesis of its content and context, Weiss makes the following remarks:

In one sense, Santillana’s enthusiasm possesses its own logic. Speech is man’s defining characteristic; and, according to the traditional Ciceronian view, man should strive to cultivate those qualities that set him apart from the beasts. Eloquence becomes an ideal to be pursued. And poetry is the finest form of eloquence. Thus, Santillana’s declaration of his undying love for this art, and the eulogistic terms in which his arguments are couched, combine to make *El prohemio* a vindication of his own intellectual and spiritual nobility. (228)

One will note that, perhaps also in vindication of the more the exaggerated and anachronic interpretation previously presented, Weiss recognizes Santillana’s zeal to promote elegance of expression. The spirit of the letter-prologue is indeed the promotion of excellence in literary expression, and, as Weiss observes, poetry is the vehicle most fit to transmit that divinely ennobling gift of eloquence to man.¹⁷ Santillana does indeed do a great service to poetry in so reverently and laudatorily presenting to the Constable, entrusting it to the young man for the continuation of the same cultivation, which is at once something new in respect of the new Italian humanism and something old in respect of the ancient and medieval tradition of poetical inquiry. Nevertheless, the far greater merit of this interpretation is that it recognizes the *Prohemio* in its context: particulars are not sacrificed for the sake of universals. The “intellectual and spiritual nobility” of which it speaks and which it considers the object of Santillana’s literary and cultural endeavors as expounded in the *Prohemio* (i.e. to become a man of arms and letters well versed in all the essential writers and theories, to produce good and beautiful art, and to inspire others to the same) cannot be properly understood but by first apprehending the text’s literary

¹⁷This is in clear agreement with Santillana’s argument that poetry proceeds from holy sources and, ultimately, from God himself. It is also an ancient topic, which, as one will note, makes Santillana more firmly grounded in his time and tradition, not less so.
and conceptual heritage. Truly, it is a supposition more implicit than explicit, but such latency in no way diminishes its effect: as the very text of the Prohemio argues, citing the ancients who have said the same thing, poetry is noble because it proceeds from on high. Context and content nourish each other, and neither promotes itself at the expense of the other: the Prohemio is neither lost in the humanistic, Italophilic desire to promote everything classical nor abstracted to a set of transcendent, egomaniacal, revolutionary poetical principles that bear only the vaguest temporal relation to their Castilian origin, but, on the contrary, this letter-prologue, the product of a single mind and a single set of aesthetic inclinations, takes the best of its tradition and retells it with excellence. If the tree of Santillana’s little preface rises higher than its neighbors (and has perchance lived a little longer as well), it is first because it is rooted in good soil and draws from it well: its epistolary roots sustain it, for without them there is naught but wood to stoke the fires of anachronism.

To conclude the examination of this last example by way of comparing the preceding one to it, Garci-Gómez rightly recognizes the nobility of Santillana’s words, which Santillana himself perhaps did not understand upon writing them to the Constable: perhaps he thought only of the greatness of poetry, and in describing such greatness well, he has attained to great fame. Weiss also rightly recognizes something, however, which contradicts the anachronism that others project on the Marquess: Santillana, like many of his time, is very classical and is consequently very medieval. There is no detaching him from his tradition. Moreover, though the nobleman writes of things always considered of universal significance, he remains very personal and very particular, recommending his own tastes whilst practicing the rhetorical conventions of his time. Santillana is indeed
noble not only for his arms but also for his letters, but the nobility with which he was born, or which he acquired by feats literary or otherwise, is not the nobility that scholars have conferred upon him, and those authorities do right to remember the limits of their domain.
Recapitulation

The present investigation began by considering the rather inglorious historical and literary context of the *Prohemio e carta*, rose to the heights of praise as the letter-prologue's virtues were (wrongly or rightly) expounded, and returned to whence it departed —and perhaps where it has always remained—: the text. It is, after all, a letter that follows the conventions of *ars dictaminis*. It is also a prologue, a genre that the literary convention of its time recommended for poetical disquisitions and that, by definition, is never the main attraction. It is a text that repeats many established topics but, far from arguing against what has been before, adapts it to the cultural changes in vogue. It is highly personal, containing familial allusions and propounding the aesthetic inclinations of its author to another individual. It is, for all these reasons, very particular.

How then will one interpret it? With respect to its particular circumstances or with respect to its universal applicability? The answer is both. And doing so reaffirms its place in the canon, which recognizes not only a set of themes and ideas to be passed down from one generation to another, but also the times and places in which they were examined. The error that causes this inquiry to falter is anachronism. While certain ideas may be perennial, they do not always appear on the historical stage of discourse at once; some
entrances are contingent upon the lines of players who have not yet spoken, and although
contemporary scholarship enjoys the advantage of a few centuries’ reflection by which to
enjoy the spectacle hitherto unveiled, as logic will instruct, present action is not what
brought about past action. Though one player’s role can at times be more memorable or
pleasant than that of another, the audience’s enjoyment does not supplant the sequence of
dramatic action: sometimes someone says something really memorable, and everyone
forgets the setting in which the character said it. Yet to take only that one particular
monologue and to discard the remaining scene deprives the monologue of its full force
and dignity. The same holds true for literary interpretation: posterior glory may be well
deserved, but it was not deserved before its time, before others to whom the letter was not
addressed found that it spoke to more than just the young Constable of Portugal.


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