“ANOTHER KIND OF KNIGHTHOOD”: THE HONOR OF LETRADOS IN EARLY MODERN SPANISH LITERATURE

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2016
To my friends, family, and colleagues in the Gator Nation
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“This tale grew in the telling,” Tolkien tells his readers in the foreword of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954). For me, what began as little more than a lexical curiosity—“Why is *letrado* used inconsistently by scholars confronting early modern Spanish literature?”—grew in scope until it became the present dissertation. I am greatly indebted to my steadfast advisor Shifra Armon for guiding me through the long and winding road of graduate school. I would also like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to the late Carol Denise Harlle (1959-2012), Assistant Professor of Spanish at James Madison University, whose research on Pedro de Madariaga rescued that worthy author from obscurity and partially inspired my own efforts.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** .................................................................................................................................. 4

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................................................. 7

**CHAPTER**

1 **GATEWAY TO THE LETRADO SOCIOTYPE IN EARLY MODERN SPANISH LITERATURE** ................................................................................................................................. 9

2 **SOCIAL AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF THE LETRADO** ................................................................. 24

   Grammatical and Linguistic Perspectives of the Letrado .................................................................................. 27
   - Antonio de Nebrija, Gramática castellana (1492) and Vocabulario español-latino (1494) .............................. 28
   - Sebastián de Covarrubias, Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana O Española (1611) ........................................... 30
   - Contemporaries, Disciples, and Imitators of Nebrija and Covarrubias (1570-1620) ................................. 33

   Juridical Definitions of Letrados ................................................................................................................. 38
   - University Education as the Foundation of the Letrado Class .................................................................. 38
   - Medieval Origins of the Letrado Class as a Service Nobility: The Siete Partidas (1265) ......................... 40
   - Reappraisal of the Letrado Class in the Early Modern Era: Nueva Recopilación (1581) ......................... 44

   Lexical Ambiguities Associated with Letrados ............................................................................................ 47
   - “Lawyer” vs. “Jurist” ............................................................................................................................... 47
   - “Service Nobility” vs. “Robe Nobility” ..................................................................................................... 50

   Current Criticism of the Letrado Class in Early Modern Spain .................................................................... 56
   - Critical Sources Equating Letrados with Colegiales .............................................................................. 59
   - Critical Sources Equating Letrados with Lawyers ................................................................................. 61
   - Critical Sources Identifying Letrados as Intellectuals ............................................................................. 63
   - Disentangling the Semantic Confluence in the Term “Letrado” ............................................................ 65

3 **“RHETORICAL HIRED GUNS”: LETRADOS AND HUMANISM** ................................................................. 68

   Alfonso de Valdés (ca.1490–1532) ................................................................................................................ 73
   - Public Patronage of Letrados .................................................................................................................. 73
   - Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón (1529) ....................................................................................................... 76

   Juan de Valdés (ca.1490–1541) .................................................................................................................. 80
   - Private Patronage of Letrados ................................................................................................................ 80
   - Diálogo de la doctrina cristiana (1529) ................................................................................................... 82

   Hernán Pérez de Oliva (1494–1531) ........................................................................................................... 86
   - Letrados and the “Nobility of Letters” .................................................................................................... 86
   - Diálogo de la Dignidad del Hombre (1546) ............................................................................................ 89

   Cristóbal de Villalón (ca.1510–1588) ........................................................................................................... 93
   - Universities and the “Republic of Letters” ............................................................................................ 93
El Scholástico (ca. 1541) .................................................................................................................. 95
Towards a New Nobility of Letters ................................................................................................. 103

4 “CLOSING THE DOOR TO THE TALENTS”: LETTERS AS PERFORMANCE .............. 106

The Discourse of Utility .................................................................................................................... 111
Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote (1615) ....................................................................................... 113
Pedro de Madariaga’s Honra de Escribanos (1565) ....................................................................... 122

The Discourse of Performance ........................................................................................................ 127
Miguel de Cervantes’ El licenciado Vidriera (1613) ....................................................................... 129
Diego de Hermosilla’s Diálogo de los Pajes del Palacio ................................................................. 137
Towards a New Letrado Elite .......................................................................................................... 142

5 “THE RANKERS OF REACTION”: LETRADO LITERATURE OF THE BAROQUE ...... 146

Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) .................................................................................................. 148
Quevedo and the Law: España Defendida (1618) and Política de Dios (1626) ....................... 150
Quevedo and Letrados: Sueños y Discursos (1627) .................................................................... 154
Salas Barbadillo (1581–1635) ........................................................................................................ 162
The Letrado as Courtier ................................................................................................................... 163
La Casa del Placer Honesto (1620) ............................................................................................... 165
El Caballero Perfecto (1620) .......................................................................................................... 170
Suárez de Figueroa (1571–1644) .................................................................................................... 173
The Letrado as Social Insider ......................................................................................................... 173
El Pasajero (1617) ......................................................................................................................... 176
Ruiz de Alarcón (1581–1639) .......................................................................................................... 180
The Letrado as Social Outsider ...................................................................................................... 181
La Verdad Sospechosa (1634) ....................................................................................................... 186
Polo de Medina (1603–1676) .......................................................................................................... 191
Letrados and the Culmination of “Double Aristocratization” ..................................................... 191
Academias del Jardín (1630) .......................................................................................................... 195
Consolidation of the Letrado Class ............................................................................................... 200

6 CONCLUSION: THE KNIGHTHOOD OF LETTERS ................................................................. 202

Recapitulation .................................................................................................................................. 204
Lettetado as Sociotype ...................................................................................................................... 209

LIST OF REFERENCES ...................................................................................................................... 213

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .............................................................................................................. 237
The focus of the present study is the emergence, expansion, and consolidation of the
letrado as a literary sociotype in early modern Spain. A serious lexical problem in studying the
role of letrados in Spanish letters is the imprecise usage of the term among literary scholars. In
his Tesoro de la lengua castellana (1611), Sebastián de Covarrubias defines letrado broadly as
“one who professes letters.” This expansive usage is consistent with Antonio de Nebrija’s
Vocabulario español-latino (1494), which had defined letrado simply as a “learned man” and
recognized lawyers and grammarians as subsets of the larger category. What is missing from
subsequent literary scholarship, however, is a recognition of the ways in which this process of
identity formation evolved over time. Critics often fail to define letrado explicitly and
consequently flit between contradictory definitions without notice. As a result, the overlapping
and conflicting social categories embodied by this term are frequently elided or conflated. This
dissertation maps the unstable trajectory of the letrado in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries
by tracing that sociotype in a variety of literary and linguistic texts. Although some critics
describe letrados as an early bourgeoisie, this assessment is inaccurate in the Castilian context.
Spain of the Golden Age was a stratified society torn between the old nobility, which sought to
reaffirm its traditional privileges, and letrados who advocated a “nobility of letters” founded on
state service. The letrado polemic may therefore be situated within the general atmosphere of social anxiety that pervades literature of the late sixteenth century. No longer an abstraction to be relegated to academic disputes, the letrado class emerges as an authentic rival for political power and social status. In order to foreground a contested social category that has been persistently misunderstood, this dissertation reveals that letrado should be understood as anyone who “professes” letters. The term therefore encompasses professional bureaucrats and administrators as well as university rectors and professors, professional novelists, poets, playwrights, and anyone who makes a living through exercise of letters. More than a resemanticization, the emergence of the letrado sociotype illustrates a process of identity formation through literature.
CHAPTER 1
GATEWAY TO THE LETRADO SOCIOTYPE IN EARLY MODERN SPANISH LITERATURE

This dissertation argues that letrado and a number of associated lexical terms have been persistently misused by literary critics, who have concentrated narrowly on the legal profession, which in turn has obscured a vibrant polemic in Spanish Renaissance and Baroque letters.\(^1\) Correcting this misconception will not only deepen our understanding of a number of canonical texts but will also place them in dialogue with each other in new ways. The present study adopts an eclectic approach that combines literary, social, and cultural theory, and attempts to locate early modern texts in their historical context of production, circulation, and reception. The unique social and historical circumstances of early modern Spain make such an approach particularly well-suited to examining texts from that period. Accordingly, this dissertation pays close attention to dictionaries and lexicographies, as these linguistic sources participate directly in resituating the letrado class and reframing that category’s cultural identity. Literary scholar James Loxley describes the process of identity formation in the following way:

> Our identities are not given by nature or simply represented or expressed in culture: instead, culture is the process of identity formation, the way in which bodies and selves in all their differences are produced. So culture is a process, a kind of making, and we are what is made and remade through that process. (118)

This “process of making” is not confined to a single genre and can be observed in a number of representative works from the early modern era. Subsequent chapters largely eschew the monologic genre of the \textit{tratado} [treatise] in order to concentrate primarily upon more dialogic texts like colloquies, framed novels, and \textit{comedias} that allow different voices to contest the status of letrados. Among the major canonical works explored in this dissertation are Alfonso de

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\(^1\) Throughout this dissertation I will italicize \textit{letrado} only when referring to the lexical term.
Valdés’ *Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón* (1529), Miguel de Cervantes’ *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) and the Second Part of *Don Quixote* (1615), Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa’s *El pasajero* (1617), Francisco de Quevedo’s *Sueños y discursos* (1627), and Juan Ruiz de Alarcón’s *La verdad sospechosa* (1634). By mapping the unstable trajectory of the letrado sociotype in a variety of texts, this dissertation will cast light on a process of identity formation through literature. Rather than a mere reflection of contemporary social forces, these polyvocal texts reveal a mutual dynamic in which literature participates in the creation of identity and also is enriched by it.

A serious lexical problem in studying the role of letrados in Spanish letters is the imprecise usage of the term among literary scholars. In his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (1611), Sebastián de Covarrubias defines *letrado* broadly as “one who professes letters.” This expansive usage is consistent with Antonio de Nebrija’s *Vocabulario español-latino* (1494), which had defined *letrado* simply as a “learned man” and recognized lawyers and grammarians as subsets of the larger category. What is missing from subsequent literary scholarship, however, is a recognition of the ways in which this process of identity formation evolved over time. Critics often fail to define *letrado* explicitly and consequently flit between contradictory definitions without notice. As a result, the overlapping and conflicting social categories embodied by this term are frequently conflated, and their literary resonances are elided. In response to these lacunae, this dissertation maps the trajectory of the letrado in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by tracing that sociotype in a variety of literary, juridical, and linguistic texts. Although some critics describe letrados as an early bourgeoisie, this assessment is inaccurate in the Castilian context. Spain of the Golden Age was a stratified society torn between the old nobility, which sought to reaffirm its traditional privileges, and letrados who advocated a “nobility of letters” founded on state service. The letrado polemic may therefore be situated within the
general atmosphere of social anxiety that pervades literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. No longer an abstraction to be relegated to academic disputes, the letrado class emerges as an authentic contender for political power and social status.

In order to foreground a contested social category that has been persistently misunderstood, this dissertation reveals that letrado should be understood as anyone who “professes” letters. The term therefore encompasses professional bureaucrats and administrators as well as university rectors and professors, professional novelists, poets, playwrights, and anyone who makes a living through exercise of letters. Much more than a resemanticization, the emergence of the letrado sociotype illustrates a process of identity formation through literature. In making this claim I draw inspiration from Felipe Ruan, whose *Identity and the Forms of Capital in Early Modern Spanish Picaresque Narrative andCourtesy Literature* (2011) examines literary representations of the pícaro [thief or trickster]; Nieves Romero-Díaz, whose *Nueva nobleza, nueva novela: Reescribiendo la cultura urbana del barroco* (2002) explores the nascent urban aristocracy; and Francisco Sánchez, whose *An Early Bourgeois Literature in Golden Age Spain* (2003) describes the formation of a bourgeois sensibility corresponding to the ideal of the república or commonwealth. Each of these scholars mobilizes literary sources to reveal the emergence of a new social category in early modern Spain, and makes comparisons with other similarly-situated groups. Although the preceding critics have used terms like “social formation” to describe literary representations of the groups they study—whether the pícaro, cortesano, or urban aristocrat—such labels seems to me unhelpfully broad. Furthermore, while the categories that they disclose overlap at times with the letrado, they overlook the role that university education played in the formation of the letrado as another category similar in scope and character to those which they have identified. Breaking with the terminology adopted by
prior scholars, I will examine the letrado as a sociotype in order to stress that the repeated occurrence of *letrado* in works of the imagination is the literary representation of a concrete historical discourse. This model is essentially dialogic, as it does not merely chronicle an ongoing confrontation between social groups but actively invites the participation of multiple voices contesting the status of letrados. Such an approach resonates with the humanists’ preference for engaging in dialogue in order to produce new knowledge.

This choice requires further explanation. In the aforementioned work, Ruan describes the *pícaro* and *cortesano* as exhibiting “modes of behavior” that distinguish them from other literary figures of the era. In just such a way does the letrado assume a range of social behaviors and comportments that fashion a unique cultural identity. As discussed above, I prefer to describe those distinctive behaviors as constituting a new sociotype. The concept of the sociotype is closely related to Pierre Bourdieu’s term *habitus*, understood minimally as the typical condition, state, or appearance of the body. As Ruan observes, “Functioning as a deeply internalized set of social and cultural dispositions, the habitus inclines the individual to act in certain ways” (6). Yet whereas habitus is inextricably bound to the physical body—a habitus must be embodied in order to have meaning—sociotype denotes the representation of an idealized figure through an artistic medium such as literature. Moreover, as subsequent chapters will illustrate, letrado status implicates a number of factors such as clientage networks that are not exclusively related to the body. This approach also resembles the work of Romero-Díaz, who examines the genre of the *novela corta* as a social phenomenon and incorporates historical context in order to analyze the contests of symbolic capital waged among urban aristocrats. Central to her methodology is the recognition that texts serve as a cultural space for negotiation and for ideological debate. Whereas she focuses exclusively on discourse expressed within the *novela corta*, the present
study reveals that letrados negotiate their status through a broad range of literary genres. I therefore join Romero-Díaz in recognizing that literature is conditioned by sociocultural reality, but also has potential to condition that reality (14). Nor does the appearance of schisms and fissures within the letrado class detract from the thesis that all letrados share certain unifying characteristics. Culture is neither monolithic nor static, but rather a dynamic process in which contradictory discourses compete. Subsequent chapters will argue that the social and historical factors associated with the rise of a letrado class in Habsburg Spain—above all the nascent conciliar system of government and the corresponding rise in university enrollment—offer fertile grounds for analysis. Departing from the medieval example of the cleric-letrado, who was trained in canon or civil law to fulfil specific legislative or diplomatic functions, the Renaissance and Baroque eras reveal a new letrado class broadly trained in a humanistic curriculum and capable of engaging in a variety of social, political, and juridical roles. As the literary record illustrates, contemporary authors do much more than bear passive witness to the evolution of the Spanish intelligentsia. Letrado apologists like Cristóbal de Villalón and anti-letrado satirists like Quevedo participate actively in the formulation and consolidation of that social stratum.

The critical framework of this dissertation owes much to Louis Montrose, who observes, “By representing ideology as a dynamic, agonistic [sic], and temporal process—a ceaseless contest among dominant and subordinate positions, a ceaseless interplay of continuity and change, of identity and difference—this concept of culture opens poetics to politics and to history” (13). A qualified New Historicist model is appropriate and useful for analyzing early modern literature, particularly the letrado polemic of the Habsburg era, because of its capacity for revealing historically-grounded meanings in these texts. A brief overview of this literary theory is essential. Montrose asserts that all literary production is situated in a specific historical
moment and therefore involves a complex of social discourses and ideologies. Such a hermeneutic stance embraces the historicity of texts, which is to say that all texts are embedded in a particular cultural and material context that conditions literary production and reception. In Montrose’s words, “writing and reading are always historically and socially sited events, performed in the world and upon the world by ideologically sited individual and collective human agents” (7). However, describing Montrose exclusively as a historical determinist is inaccurate. On the contrary, his model is bi-directional and expressly recognizes a mutuality of influence between history and literature. Regarding the text-context dynamic, he states:

Representations of the world in written discourse participate in the construction of the world: They are engaged in shaping the modalities of social reality and in accommodating their writers, performers, readers, and audiences to multiple and shifting positions within the world that they themselves both constitute and inhabit. (3-4)

Rather than positing the subordination of author and text to a vaguely defined cultural milieu, Montrose simply recognizes that the social environment is always constructed through discourse. He therefore describes a dynamic of mutual constitution—even transformation—in the relationship between literary discourse and material life. Such an approach is entirely appropriate for literary criticism, as it gives ideological and semantic specificity instead of reducing literature to a mere cultural byproduct. Such an approach promotes dialogue as an analytical tool.

By approaching all texts—historical, sociological, and literary—as engaged in a dialogue with counter-traditions, this dissertation examines the tensions between the letrado class and its social and political rivals as expressed through literature. Such a model considers history in terms of dialogue within the past, in which every moment is characterized by a conflict of competing voices (Pieters 25). These insights may be applied with great effect to discursive analysis. The present study regards the history of literature as part of a larger sequence of integral “cultural systems,” including social institutions and practices, which are mutually
determining (White 298). Cultural history in turn reintroduces a historicist consideration of literature, but in practice often fails to differentiate between text and context. Gabrielle Spiegel offers a defense of the historicity of literature that avoids this potential snare: “If the literary text is denied the ability to represent reality, so also are all texts, and the distinction traditionally drawn between literature and ‘document’ becomes meaningless, since both participate equally in the uncontrolled play and intertextuality of language itself” (64). Viewed in this light, cultural history sees textuality as both arising from and constitutive of social life. In a similar way, New Historicism seeks to extend attention to the historical contexts in which literary texts originate. Peter Hohendahl describes this method of assigning meaning to the literary text as “radical contextualizing” (103). For our purposes, context may be understood as the conditions surrounding textual production and dissemination. It need not imply a specific agenda or creed on the part of the author, though contemporary social pressures and anxieties certainly may make themselves felt in numerous ways throughout a text. Spiegel would focus literary analysis on the “moment of inscription,” which reveals “the ways in which the historical world is internalized in the text and its meaning fixed” (84). Yet it must be emphasized that—for literary studies at least—context is not simply another text. This dissertation recognizes that every writer is located somewhere in time and space and is necessarily responsive to the forces at work in that environment. Spiegel notes that the reintegration of context has advantages for literary criticism:

We should, rather, seek to locate texts within specific social sites that themselves disclose the political, economic, and social pressures that condition a culture’s discourse at any given moment.... Only after the text has been returned to its social and political context can we begin to appreciate the ways in which both language and social reality shape discursive and material fields of activity and thus come to an understanding of a text’s “social logic” as situated language use. (85)
Context thus serves as a point of comparison, not a causal agent, and is compatible with a degree of textual autonomy. By referring to social and political developments of the Habsburg era, this dissertation seeks to expand the canon by placing texts into dialogue in new ways.

As a contested social category the letrado can best be assessed through the hermeneutical methods of Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt, which incorporate historical and cultural factors in order to allow multiple readings of the text. Literary polemics are contests for power waged through textual discourse. As English scholar Alan Liu affirms: “Power, especially in Renaissance studies, designates the negotiation of social, personal, and literary authority that yields a single regulation of culture” (723). Scholars of literature must therefore ask who has power within a given culture or system. Unlike critics who have viewed the binarism of “arms and letters” as a manifestation of subversive social conflict, I consider the letrado polemic an instance of negotiation and exchange. Literary critic Theodore Leinwand explains the distinction: “Unlike subversion, negotiated change is dependent on the agency of two or more parties that are not entirely content with the status quo” (479-80). This understanding accords well with the model of the letrado class that I propose, principally as it allows letrado authors to arrogate noble status to themselves instead of attacking that caste frontally. As Leinwand observes, the subordinate group is not limited to a choice between passivity and insurrection: “The people (as well as their ‘betters’) may evoke norms in support of their cause, whether they intend to retard a too rapidly changing political or economic situation or to accelerate changes that will foster greater adherence to customary values” (480). Such an approach resembles the stance of authors like Francisco de Quevedo and Juan Huarte de San Juan, who situate the elite of the letrado class in the ranks of the nobility by associating them with Spain’s illustrious medieval legal tradition. I will next offer a brief overview of the main arguments to be advanced in later sections.
The dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 introduces a number of juridical, linguistic, and etymological texts in order to break apart the monolithic letrado class and examine its component parts. My analysis begins with the Siete Partidas, the extensive compilation of laws promulgated during the reign of Alfonso X of Castile (r.1252–1284), which recognizes the importance of university-trained letrados in the royal administration and extends noble privileges to certain members of that class. Indeed, the Second Partida recognizes that “the wisdom of the law is another kind of knighthood, by means of which boldness is crushed, and wrongs are righted.” For centuries this code remained the foundation for a legally-constituted letrado class that persisted well into the modern era. The chapter next addresses the lexicographies compiled by famed grammarians Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) and Sebastián de Covarrubias (1539–1613) in order to reveal a renewed interest in defining letrado status in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. These sources dedicate substantial space to delineating who could properly claim membership in the letrado class and who was excluded from that category. The chapter concludes with an overview of recent criticism of the letrado class and presents my proposed solution to the semantic confluence, which is to define letrado broadly as any university graduate engaged in a lettered profession, whether in public or private service.

Chapter 3 explores a series of humanistic dialogues written during the reign of Charles V (r.1516-1556). These texts illustrate the new role of letrados as professional propagandists in the service of royal or noble patrons. The paramount example is Alfonso de Valdés (c.1490–1532), whose Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón (1529) is a masterwork of political rhetoric. The author uses a variety of classical allusions and Biblical exegesis to justify the Sack of Rome (1527) by imperial forces as an act of divine chastisement upon Pope Clement VII, who had engineered the

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2 Part. II, Tit. IX, Law XXVII. “[L]a sabiduría de los derechos es otra manera de caballería…”
League of Cognac to oppose Charles’ ambitions in Italy. This form of literary propaganda, by which letrados defend their patrons from censure and launch new attacks upon their opponents, represents a new form of royal service distinct from that of the warrior nobility. In the Renaissance context the letrado class truly functioned as “another kind of knighthood,” fulfilling the role of the caballería letrada [knighthood of letters] envisioned by Alfonso the Wise. Unlike the medieval cleric-letrado, whose training was exclusively in canon or civil law, the new letrados of the early modern era mobilized a broad humanistic curriculum in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. This new propagandistic function coincides with renewed interest in the dialogic genre in Spain, both in order to entertain the sophisticated readers of the Renaissance and to invite a more participatory approach to the production of new knowledge.

The remaining chapters address a fundamental change in the character and function of the letrado class due to greatly increased university enrollment in the second half of the sixteenth century. Chapter 4 examines the rhetorical strategies of self-defense and self-promotion employed by letrado authors of the Baroque that I have called utility and performance. Utility refers to a recurring emphasis on the supposed practical value of letrados’ talents to the modern state in order to justify their privileged position within society. An illustrative example of this strategy is Pedro de Madariaga’s *Honra de escribanos* (1565), which compares letrados favorably to members of the traditional nobility, whose martial talents were in marked decline due to innovations in contemporary warfare, and whose capacity to serve in the nascent conciliar system was extremely circumscribed. Performance refers to an internal conflict within the letrado class in which graduates of more prestigious institutions like the Colegios Mayores attempted to distinguish themselves from their less eminent colleagues by appealing to non-academic criteria, chiefly aristocratic bearing and cultural refinement. Diego de Hermosilla
observes the ongoing confrontation between noble and non-noble letrados in his *Diálogo de la vida de los pajes de palacio* (1573). These competing discourses increased tension within the letrado ranks, producing a fissure between a “letrado elite” composed of wealthy *colegiales* and a much larger body of “infra-letrados,” the label Jean-Marc Pelorson applies to scribes, notaries, trial attorneys, and grammarians. Derided for their dependence on collecting fees from clients as well as for their association with manual labor, many infra-letrados attempted to excuse their supposed lack of an aristocratic pedigree by underscoring the great value of their professions to contemporary society. By looking to sources outside the literary canon, in addition to the aforementioned works of Cervantes, I seek to illustrate that this polemic was not restricted to a handful of Renaissance and Baroque luminaries but resonated with a broad segment of society.

Chapter 5 moves deeper into the Baroque in order to examine a series of texts that illustrate the culmination of the phenomenon of “double aristocratization.” As used by Joseph Pérez, the term denotes the progressive blurring or erosion of the frontiers between noble and non-noble letrados (“Les letrados” 448–49). As noted above, rising enrollment in the second half of the sixteenth century greatly increased the number of university graduates in Castile, transforming the relatively small and exclusive letrado class examined in Chapter 3 to a larger and more socially diverse body engaged in a variety of lettered professions. Authors writing in this period consequently reject the narrow identification of *letrado* with the legal profession and instead recognize the letrado class a broad spectrum containing positive and negative valences. The salient author of this period is Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645), commonly described by literary critics as an inveterate foe of all letrados. Contrary to this interpretation, this chapter distinguishes between the “letrado elite” of the Colegios Mayores and the rabble of infra-letrados in order to reveal that Quevedo was not the enemy of the letrados but rather their champion. As a
university graduate who gained ennoblement through participation in a series of diplomatic missions in Italy, Quevedo represents the ideal letrado achieving social advancement through the public exercise of letters. A close reading of texts like Política de Dios (1626) and Sueños y discursos (1627) reveals that his vitriol is directed not to the framers of Castile’s medieval legal tradition—which he in fact reveres—but rather to the mass of greedy and unworthy trial attorneys whose incompetence and avarice have damaged the reputation of the letrado class.

Chapter 6 reaffirms the letrado as a literary sociotype in light of the texts examined in preceding chapters, and distinguishes between the concept of sociotype and the related categories of stereotype, archetype, and persona. Central to all of these models is the concept of identity and its social and cultural expression. Deportment and identity are enmeshed with one another, and often work in conjunction with self-fashioning strategies in literature (Ruan 3). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the attempts of letrado polemicists to situate themselves advantageously within the early modern social hierarchy by mobilizing literary discourse. Following the model set forth by Stephen Greenblatt, self-fashioning may be understood as the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards. This process functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life (Ruan 144). Consistent with this view, New Historicism posits the individual subject as culturally constructed. However, individuals also play a role in their own self-fashioning, thereby retaining a degree of agency. Letrados, it will be seen, engage in strategies of self-fashioning in a similar manner to other social categories that literary and historical scholarship have long recognized, whether the lowly pícaro or the noble cortesano. Adding the letrado to this constellation of sociotypes will offer a more complete picture of the early modern social and cultural milieu.
Regarding periodization, my study coincides approximately with the middle of the Habsburg period (ca. 1550–1630). Francisco Sánchez records the emergence of a bourgeois sensibility that influences literary production in Spain during the same period. Although he approaches the literary record through the lens of economic analysis, our methodologies resemble each other in that they recognize that during this period intellectual and verbal skills become instruments of strategic advancement. As Sánchez observes, “The world of appearances is prominently a verbal space in which the intentional conduct of people presents an analogy with a self-conscious use of language” (13) Although it is difficult to identify a precise date of the transition from the medieval cleric-letrado to the aristocratic noble-letrado, the reigns of the middle Habsburgs—Philip II, Philip III, and Philip IV—mark a relatively clear boundary during which university-trained servants of the crown pass from the former category to the latter. Central to this transformation is the notion of civic exchange, in which symbolic goods of culture figure in negotiations of power. Returning again to Sanchez, “This is the function of a ‘literary republic’ where learned people acquire the identity of persons by the participation in an exchange of letras” (103). Yet recent scholarship has largely overlooked several important questions stemming from this observation: What academic disciplines are associated with letras in the Renaissance and Baroque context? How is letrado status acquired—that is, who can properly claim membership in the letrado class and who cannot? Finally, once letrado status is attained, what is the appropriate role of letrados within early modern society?

It will be noted that the definition of letrado proposed in this dissertation does not encompass women, who were excluded from university attendance during the Habsburg era and therefore barred from participation in the royal administration and judiciary. Women were, however, important members of the broader “class of letters”—understood as the emerging
Spanish intelligentsia—and played an important role in the diffusion of lettered culture in early modern Spain. One forum in which women possessed considerable agency was the academia movement, a flourishing of literary societies that attracted scholars, poets, and members of the nobility during the seventeenth century. Much like the example of the salon movement that occurred in France a century later, some women participated in these literary gatherings, reciting original verses and commenting upon poetic compositions (Cruz & Hernández 193-195). This phenomenon coincides with the emergence of the subgenre of the novela académica—framed novels purporting to be depictions of authentic meetings of these societies—such Salas Barbadillo’s *La casa del placer honesto* (1620) and Polo de Medina’s *Academias del jardín* (1630). Though highly stylized and occasionally parodic, the majority of these texts reveal that women played a prominent role in the lettered culture of the Baroque. Indeed, in Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s *Para todos* (1632), the members of the academia elect a female interlocutor, Doña María, to preside over the meeting. Similarly, Pedro Castro y Anaya’s *Las auroras de Diana* (1632) features a series of five tales told in the Boccaccian style to amuse the titular noblewoman Diana and cure her of melancholy. Subsequently, María de Zayas and Mariana de Carvajal would return to this genre in *Desengaños amorosos* (1637) and *Navidades de Madrid* (1663) respectively. As these examples illustrate, women not only participated within the lettered culture of the Baroque but even assumed a position of leadership at times outside the university. Future studies of the academia movement will continue to examine the role of women in this venue as well as the social and cultural influence they wielded through this literary genre.

The examples in the dissertation reveal a rich interplay of historical context, social tensions, and literary production. The reintegration of a contextualist perspective in the interpretation of literature and culture has much to contribute to our knowledge of the affective
functions of the text. Historians and literary critics disregard cultural, social, and linguistic codes at their peril. At the same time, literary text and historical context are not the same thing and one should not be reduced to the other. Texts both mirror and generate social realities, yet a text is not ultimately reducible to a function of any preexisting system of codes. Once again, Spiegel perhaps best summarizes this relationship: “While linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language” (84). This dissertation will explore how authors from the dynamic and assertive letrado class recognized the value of literary discourse as a rhetorical weapon and deployed it during the early modern era. It is therefore not concerned with the textuality of history but with the historicity of texts. Writers exist at specific moments in time and the social and cultural environments in which they live greatly condition the type of discourse they are capable of enunciating, affecting decisions as broad as the choice of genre and as narrow as the precise word choice within a single passage. One need not embrace the “grand narratives” approach to history in order to make the observation that the Counter-Reformation is relevant to reading texts written after the Council of Trent. Although no text should be reduced to a byproduct of cultural events—totally beholden to the historical context—neither should those extra-textual factors be dismissed as extraneous and therefore irrelevant. In short, history shapes literature but literature also shapes history. For these reasons, it is with an awareness of Castile’s medieval history and an appreciation for Renaissance culture that I now turn to examine the literary origins of the letrado polemic in early modern Spain.
CHAPTER 2
SOCIAL AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF THE LETRADO

In the Chapter 1 we saw the relevance of historical context to the analysis of literature. The present chapter will expand upon that methodology by incorporating linguistic and juridical texts, as well as contemporary critical sources. This approach will allow us to situate the letrado class within a broader body of historical scholarship and literary criticism. In his study *The Golden Age of Spain: 1516-1659*, historian Antonio Domínguez Ortiz comments on the difficulty of periodization and the slippery nature of sociocultural terms:

This is the century of the *Baroque*, a term that being made to mean so much means almost nothing. The attempt to stretch it to cover the many-sided activities of a whole century has caused it to lose all precise meaning... Rather than lose ourselves in abstractions, we would do well to look at some particular instances of conflict which appear in the literature of the time. (254-55)

We find ourselves in a similar position with the term *letrado*.¹ Imprecise usage among literary scholars is a serious lexical problem in studying the role of letrados in Spanish literature. Critics often fail to define the term explicitly and consequently flit between contradictory definitions of *letrado* without notice. These tendencies have inhibited the formation of a coherent approach to the study of the letrado as a literary figure and cultural sociotype.

Today scholarly usage of the term generally falls into one of three categories. The first is to identify letrados narrowly with lawyers and study them only within the context of the legal profession, whether in canon or civil law. This approach is a vestige of medieval society in which the Crown recruited its jurists exclusively from the Church, usually licentiates or doctors in law from the University of Salamanca or Valladolid (Salustiano de Dios 55). Such usage is inappropriate for studying letrados in Renaissance and Baroque literature, where the influence of

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¹ Once again, I have italicized *letrado* when referring to the lexical term. When not italicized, letrado or letrados refers to historical or literary figures who correspond to this cultural sociotype.
humanism and the liberal arts curriculum introduced a much greater variety of letters in which university students could distinguish themselves (Gouwens 58). The second approach is to equate letrados broadly with any literate adult; a slight variation on this approach is to use letrado to refer to particularly well-read adults. Neither usage is correct for literary analysis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Illiteracy was the mark of the villano or rústico, occupying the lowest rung of the social order (Ruiz 72). Being able to read and write offered an enormous range of possibilities, given the very low literacy rates in early modern Spain, but much more than basic literacy was required to distinguish an individual in the realm of letters (María del Rosario García 221-22). To give just one prominent example, Spanish grammarian and lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias (1539–1613) uses the term hombre de buenas letras [man of good letters] to refer to well-read individuals, reserving letrado only for those professionals who made a career out of letters. The latter interpretation hints at the third approach, which equates letrados with the members of the royal government. This is the most promising approach that has been applied to date, and the most consistent with contemporary usage of the term, as it focuses on those who “profess” letters rather than those who possess basic literacy. Even so, it falls well short of the mark.

The present chapter demonstrates through analysis of linguistic and juridical texts that letrado should be broadly understood as anyone engaged in a profession requiring university formation. What distinguished letrados from their peers was not simple literacy, nor even the quality of being well-read, but rather the possession of a specific set of skills acquired through university training. The term encompasses royal councilors and administrators as well as what Jean-Marc Pelorson and Brian Brewer describe as infraletados—scribes, lawyers, and
procuradores [deputies] in the Castilian Cortes.\(^2\) The term also embraces university professors and rectors, professional novelists, dialogists, playwrights, and any person who makes a living through exercise of letters. This more expansive usage is consistent with authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who largely abandoned the narrow medieval view that the only letters worth pursuing were those tending toward a legal or ecclesiastical career. Moreover, this usage strengthens the position of critics who have sought to distinguish between the priest-letrado, cleric-letrado, doctor-letrado, and even conquistador-letrado, among other variants (Malagón-Barceló 9). If letrado referred exclusively to literacy or the study of law, as previous approaches have contended, such descriptions would be meaningless and absurd.

My purpose in this chapter is to adopt a coherent definition of letrado that will avoid confusion among scholars and allow more effective communication about the literary polemic surrounding the letrado class. To this end, we will first look to grammatical and linguistic texts of early modern Spain to observe ways in which letrados defined themselves and were understood by others. We will then turn to the juridical texts that provided the legal foundation for what may broadly be described as the clase letrada [letrado class]. Next we will attempt to resolve some lexical ambiguities related to the legal profession that have contributed to semantic confusion among scholars. The final section will evaluate current criticism of the letrado class and conclude by offering a unique solution. Subsequent chapters will explore the discourse of defense of the profession of letters in a variety of Renaissance and Baroque texts. By the end of the latter period the letrado class truly constituted, in Alfonso the Wise’s phrase, “another kind of knighthood.”

Grammatical and Linguistic Perspectives of the Letrado

As early as the reign of the Catholic Kings grammarians sought to claim (or reclaim) the title *letrado* for their own profession. The *domine* or Latin Master was still somewhat respected at the close of the Middle Ages, but the social esteem of that position had gradually declined due to its association with manual labor and servitude (Gil Fernández 27). At its most literal, *letrado* means a “lettered” or literate man: one who reads and writes (Pérez 444). The quality of being “lettered” was popularly understood to mean *doctor en las ciencias* [one trained in the sciences] in the medieval era before coming to designate *abogado* [lawyer] in common parlance (Schwartz, *La hora de todos* 171n389). Katherine Elliott van Liere dates this change in meaning of *letrado* to the twelfth century, after which point the term was used specifically to refer to men trained in civil or canon law (“Humanism and Scholasticism” 75). Under the influence of humanist currents in the universities, early modern authors sought to break the legal profession’s monopoly on *letrado* and reclaim that term’s ancient prestige for their own fields. In his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611), Sebastián de Covarrubias defines *letrado* broadly as “él que profesa letras, y hanse alzado con este nombre los juristas abogados” [one who professes letters, and lawyers have elevated themselves with this name as well].³ This usage is consistent with Antonio de Nebrija’s *Vocabulario español-latino* (1494), which had defined *letrado* simply as an *ombre sabido* [learned man] and recognized *iurisconsultos* [jurists] and *gramáticos* [grammarians] as subsets of the larger category.⁴

Modern scholarship has evaluated these claims to higher social status and judged them revolutionary. Van Liere argues that the usage of the term *letrado* to designate lawyers had been

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³ Covarrubias 712. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
⁴ Nebrija f. h.vii.
“long-standing” before Nebrija and Covarrubias challenged it, and she suggests that this strategic reevaluation was part of a broader humanist attack on the legal profession (“Humanism and Scholasticism” 82). Others insist that humanist scholarship simply emphasized textual authority and the conventions of ordinary language, whether classical or vernacular, so a degree of friction with traditionalists was inevitable (Kelley 79). My reading is that lexicographers like Nebrija and Covarrubias were deliberately attempting to halt and reverse the popular identification of *letrado* with the legal profession, as well as to insert their own profession as grammarians more decisively into the letrado ranks—both in the popular mind as well as in more erudite circles. Regardless of the authors’ precise motivations, their texts substantially influenced contemporaries as well as subsequent generations of writers, and a close analysis is therefore indispensable.

**Antonio de Nebrija, Gramática castellana (1492) and Vocabulario español-latino (1494).**

Rather than a mere copyist, Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) presented himself as part of a generation of humanists that used philological inquiry as an “intellectual solvent” to get at the authentic meaning of terms and apply them to contemporary reality (205). The works of his colleagues, disciples, and imitators can help expand our knowledge of how the various subsets of the letrado class were seen by others as well as how they understood themselves. Nebrija’s own *Gramática castellana* (1492) makes no mention of any legal connotation of *letrado*, offering it instead as a synonym for *gramáticos* or “teachers of the art of letters.” Even more emphatically, his *Vocabulario español-latino* (1494) defines *letrado* as *ombre sabido* [learned man] and links the term with the Latin *litteratus.*

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5 Nebrija I. 1: 1, “Los que volvieron de griego en latín este nombre gramática: llamaron la arte de letras: y a los profesores y maestros della dijeron gramáticos: que en nuestra lengua podemos decir letrados.”

6 Nebrija f. h.vii.
Looking back to the *Siete Partidas* for support, grammarians tried to elevate themselves to the same social plane as jurists and theologians in their superior quality as “critics” and “humanists” (Gil Fernández 27). That Nebrija also offers *grammaticus* as the Greek equivalent of *letrado* suggests he was seeking to claim equal status with lawyers for his own profession, which he describes as *gramático enseñando en ella* [grammar master].

Reacting also to the popular association of grammarians with the “vile and mechanical” office of scribes, Nebrija instead equates grammar with literature, offering *ars literaria* as a synonym for the *gramática arte* [art of grammar]. This honorable profession is to be contrasted with the relatively lowbrow occupation of scribes and notaries—groups despised for working with their hands and collecting fees. This attitude hints at an early conception of what literary historian Jean-Marc Pelorson describes as *infra-letrados* (455). Although Nebrija does distinguish between the *tabelio* [public scribe] and the *scriba* [expert scribe], suggesting the latter is closer to the letrado elite than the former, he dismisses the *notarius* [notary] altogether as *escribano que escribe lo que otro dice* [one who writes what another says].

While grammarians are praised as teachers of a Classical art, notaries are here reduced to mere craftsmen plying their trade.

Using humanist tools of textual analysis, Nebrija also breaks apart the monolithic conception of the legal profession to reveal its component parts. As with scribes, he distinguishes between the *rábula* [unqualified lawyer] and the *abogado de consejo* [expert lawyer], again suggesting the latter was more compatible with the letrado class due to his expertise. The

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7 Nebrija f. g. vii.
8 Nebrija, f. g.vii.
9 Nebrija f. g.i.
10 Nebrija, f. a. vr.
letrado bueno en derecho [letrado trained in law] was a iurisconsultus [jurist], indicating a greater level of legal mastery and often the possession of an advanced degree.\(^\text{11}\) The term jurista that appears in texts from later periods should be understood as this figure—the expert in the law, holding a licentiate or doctorate—rather than a practicing attorney or trial lawyer.

For all its scholarly complexity, Nebrija’s dictionary is comprised of extremely short entries: each Castilian word is listed alongside its Latin equivalent or equivalents. Rarely is any word accompanied by a prose description, and those few that appear are terse and fragmentary. As interest grew in assimilating the letrados as a new social class, so did the quantitative analysis of that group. This process is illustrated in great detail by Covarrubias’ Tesoro de la lengua castellana (1611), a much larger work that uses rhetorical tools of persuasion to supplement its linguistic and philological analysis. The two texts reveal a high degree of consistency in the lexical reassessment of letrado by humanist critics.

**Sebastián de Covarrubias, Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana O Española (1611).**

Of all the grammatical-linguistic works published during the Habsburg era, Sebastián de Covarrubias presents the most comprehensive and detailed attack on the identification of letrados solely with lawyers in his Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española (1611). In this dictionary he defines letrado broadly as “one who professes letters,” and asserts that lawyers have usurped the title for themselves.\(^\text{12}\) With apparent reluctance he recognizes abogados [lawyers] as one subset of this category but limits their role to trial work.\(^\text{13}\) Escribanos [scribes] form another subset of the letrado class, but while Nebrija had treated that profession with a certain aloofness,

\(^{11}\) Nebrija, f. fo. h.vii.

\(^{12}\) Covarrubias 712. “[E]l que profesa letras, y hanse alzado con este nombre los juristas abogados.”

\(^{13}\) Covarrubias 6. “Abogado. Latine ADVOCATUS. El letrado que defiende o acusa a alguno en juicio.”
Covarrubias has a much more favorable impression and takes pains to distinguish among the variants within this category. At its broadest, “scribe” refers to todo hombre de cuenta y razón [any man of importance and good judgment], which he contrasts with the villano who can neither read nor write. The second definition for “scribe” is los que tienen oficio que ganan de comer por la pluma [those who earn their living by the pen], an extremely broad category that incorporates lowly copyists as well as royal secretaries.14 Because of the expert scribes’ great skill and value to the state, Covarrubias considers it natural that great lords and even kings should honor these hombres de pluma [men of the pen] with mercedes—royal concessions, often monetary or honorary (Williams 190). Covarrubias also defines notaries as the subset of scribes responsible for recording judicial proceedings and certifying their accuracy, a substantially more important role than Nebrija’s model assigned to them.15

Turning to the question of social status, Covarrubias classifies letrados as ciudadanos [city-dwellers] and situates this group as an intermediate stratum between the nobility and those engaged manual labor.16 The choice of the term ciudadanos, which may also be rendered “citizens,” is highly significant in the early modern context. Under the medieval feudal regime men and women of all stations had been called súbditos [subjects] or vasallos [vassals] to

14 Covarrubias 495-96. “No penséis que es cosa nueva el ser los hombres de pluma estimados; algunas veces han sido tenidos de los que no los conocen, no solo por grandes señores, mas aun por reyes… Algunas veces se cortan ellos mesmos [sic] la cabeza, por quererse hacer reyes, pero de ordinario son hombres de mucha sustancia y peso y llevan en peso la máquina de infinitos negocios, que se puede dudar cuando tienen tiempo de comer y dormir, cuanto más de recrearse; y asi con muy justa razón los reyes y los príncipes les hacen mercedes; y los honran, y de todos son respetados y servidos, especialmente que para semejantes oficios echan mano de personas aprobadas y conocidas, y de ordinario de hombres bien nacidos y nobles, por la gran confianza que dellos se hace.”

15 Covarrubias 780. “Notario. El escribano y oficial público que en juicio y fuera del escribe los actos judiciales y da fe dellos. Antiguamente eran los que escribían con abreviaturas, con gran velocidad.”

16 Covarrubias 320. “Ciudadano. El que vive en la ciudad y come de su hacienda, renta o heredad. Es un estado medio entre caballeros o hidalgos, y entre los oficiales mecánicos. Cuentanse entre los ciudadanos los letrados, y los que profesan letras y artes liberales…”
emphasize their subordination to the monarch (Maravall 346-47). Throughout the late Middle Ages the urban elites often felt more closely allied with the feudal nobility than with the rural peasants and town dwellers. In Italy and the Low Countries the leading citizens of particularly powerful or wealthy cities might even declare themselves to be noble, with some preferring to style themselves as “patricians” in imitation of the ancient Roman aristocrats (Zophy 12).

Consistent with this trend, the term *ciudadanos honrados* [honored citizens] appears in Castilian chronicles as a moniker for the rich merchants and burghers who dominated town and city life through ostentatious displays of wealth (Maravall 467). The term also resembles the class of *ciutadans honrats* [honored citizens] in Barcelona—the loose association of urban oligarchs that controlled municipal administration and claimed higher social rank on account of that activity (Amelang 24-25). If that is Covarrubias’ inspiration for choosing the word *ciudadanos*, such a choice suggests he advocates a kind of nobility not founded strictly on heredity, but rather on individual merit and personal achievement.

Although Covarrubias does not expressly deny the validity of hereditary nobility—the foundation of the Castilian aristocracy—he leans toward the relative meritocracy of the letrado class. By gaining ennoblement through one’s own deeds and virtue, he declares, one avoids pride and hypocrisy: “for whoever boasts of his nobility boasts of something that does not belong to himself but to another.”

He offers similar commentary in his entry for *fidalgo* [petty noble], calling one who acquired nobility by his own actions the “child of his works and beginning of his line, who leaves to his descendants something of great value.” This claim is particularly novel

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17 Covarrubias 778. “Aquel es noble que, cuando no hubiera nacido noble, por sus hazañas y virtudes, no solo llega a serlo pero a ser principio de que lo sean todos sus descendientes; y así no hay que alabarte de tu linaje, pues quien alaba su nobleza cosas ajenas alaba, no cosas suyas.”

18 Covarrubias 542. “Equivale a noble, castizo y de antigüedad de linaje; y el ser hijo de algo significa haber heredado de sus padres y mayores lo que llama algo, que es la nobleza y el que no la hereda de sus padres, sino que la adquiere por si mismo [sic], por su virtud y valor, es hijo de sus obras y principio de su linaje; dejando a
as the burgeoning “nobility of letters” was not hereditary unless a letrado formally acquired a title through state service (García 224-25). There are hints throughout the Tesoro that this was the author’s meaning: Covarrabias uses hombre de buenas letras to refer to well-read individuals, reserving letrado only for those who made a career out of letters. This approach is consistent with literary critic Sherry Venere, who identifies letrados as scholastici viri [scholarly men] and contrasts them with dilettanti, “well-read knights who endeavored to differentiate themselves at court and to expand their roles through study” (11). For true letrados, letters were not just another courtly attainment but the very source of their social status and the basis for their careers. Subsequent chapters will explore the distinction between letrados and noble amateurs.

Contemporaries, Disciples, and Imitators of Nebrija and Covarrubias (1570-1620)

Although it may appear that Nebrija and Covarrubias were exceptions, as probably the most prominent grammarians of their respective eras, these luminaries’ influence lasted well beyond their own lifetimes and even transcended the Pyrenees. Highly respected sources seem to follow suit, and from the bewildering array of terms they compiled one salient point emerges: in early modern Europe, both within Spain and without, letrado came to form a “semantic conjunction” (to borrow Carabias Torres’ phrase) that extended far beyond the practice of law to incorporate all learned disciplines, particularly those requiring intensive study and the acquisition of an advanced degree (“¿La muerte del letrado?” 149).

The semantic conjunction between letrado and related terms is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of the French Hispanist César Oudin (ca.1560–1625). The son of the

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19 Covarrubias 712. “Hombre de buenas letras, el que es versado en buenos autores, cuyo estudio llaman por otro nombre letras de humanidad.”
provost of Bassigny, Oudin entered the service of the future Henry IV of France as a linguist-interpreter, and even translated the first part of Don Quixote to French in 1614. Inspired by Nebrija’s model, he examined legal and literary texts in order to produce his Tesoro de las dos lenguas francés y español (1607), a bilingual dictionary composed in response to the growing interest in Spanish language and culture during the early Bourbon regime (Bardon 105).

Nebrija’s influence on the text is palpable: Oudin defines gramática [grammar] as art qui traitte des Lettres [the art of letters], a description that clearly mirrors Nebrija’s gramática arte.20 Oudin also describes letrado as lettre [lettered], docte [learned], and savant [wise], language that accords well with Nebrija’s ombre sabido.21 A letrado who dedicated himself specifically to the study of law is described concisely as letrado en derechos; this figure was identified as a specialized subset of the larger category, which could be further divided into the advocat [lawyer] and the Iurisconsulte [jurist].22 Additionally, Oudin offers homme de lettres [man of letters] as an alternative definition for letrado, emphasizing the broader nature of the term.23 According to these definitions the legal profession is an important component of the letrado class but not its sole function, and letrado is not coterminous with lawyer.

Driven by the continuing vogue of Hispanism in the Mediterranean countries, Oudin’s contemporary and imitator Girolamo Vittori prepared a trilingual dictionary, Tesoro de las tres lenguas, española, francesa y italiana (1609). The similarities with previous works are striking: Vittori again distinguishes between the letrado (“lettre, docte, scavant”) and the letrado en

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20 Oudin f. T4.
21 Oudin f. Y2v.
22 Oudin f. Y2v.
23 Oudin f. P2v.
derechos ("Iurisconsulte, dottore di legge").

The latter term is consistent with what I have called a "jurist," though it is the first instance I have encountered of a jurist being directly identified with a "doctor in laws." Indeed, the term is somewhat redundant: in Castilian universities only law graduates could obtain the title of doctor, as the equivalent degree in theology was maestro or magister (Van Lier, "Humanism and Scholasticism" 65). When used as an adjective, letrado means dotto [learned] or scientiato [learned in the sciences].

Vittori renders scavant as "letrado, docto, leydo" while fort scavant is "muy letrado, muy docto." Finally, he offers científico as a synonym for "scientiato, letterato, homme de lettres, muy letrado." These entries illustrate that much more than a legal education was associated with the formation of a letrado, and suggest that the very concept of "letters" had expanded since the medieval period to include more than juridical training. The highly interrelated nature of these entries also reinforces the claim that the semantic conjunction surrounding letrado concerned both a broad literary knowledge (a "man of letters") and the possession of an advanced degree (a "doctor").

Such was the similarity of the foregoing works that Oxford don Louis Cooper accused Vittori of plagiarizing the first edition of Oudin’s dictionary (391-92). However, he also observed that Oudin in turn copied dozens of entries from Covarrubias’ text almost verbatim for his 1616 edition. These charges of lexical plagiarism have been largely accepted by contemporary critics, some of whom attribute them to a desire for emulation supposedly inherent

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24 Vittori 353.
25 Vittori 1188.
26 Vittori 961.
27 Vittori 1420.
in the Renaissance mentality (Mancho Duque 188-89). Regardless of the respective authors’ originality, the extremely close correlation of the texts serves only to underscore the pervasiveness of Nebrija’s and Covarrubias’ reassessments of the Spanish lexicon. Indeed, in this context outright plagiarism among grammarians may more effectively demonstrate the authority and persuasive power of the humanists’ (re)definitions of these terms than would an original interpretation. A brief look at a handful of lesser-known—though still influential—imitators will suffice to illustrate the point.

Echoing Covarrubias, Florentine linguist Lorenzo Franciosini (1600-1645) also links *letrado* with *hombre de buenas letras* and even *humanista* in his *Vocabulario español e italiano* (1620). Franciosini takes the helpful approach of distinguishing between *letrado* as adjective—which he renders as *letterato* [man of letters] or *dotto* [learned]—and *letrado* as noun—which he defines as *dottor in legge* [doctor in law]. Interestingly, Franciosini also defines *iurisconsulto* as a doctor in law, suggesting once again that possession of an advanced degree was a defining feature of the jurist. Looking again to France, Joan Palet dedicated his *Diccionario muy copioso de la lengua española y francesa* (1606) to the Bourbon Prince of Condé, whom he also served as medical doctor. Palet continued to distinguish between the study and practice of law, defining jurist as *jurisconsulte* while rendering *letrado* as *Advocat* [lawyer], *docto*
[learned],\textsuperscript{34} and leydo [well-read].\textsuperscript{35} Richard Perceval (1550-1620), an English bureaucrat who spent several years in Spain, published an early dictionary in Spanish, English, and Latin. His 

*Bibliotheca Hispanica* continued the distinction between *abogado*—an advocate or lawyer—and *letrado*—a learned man or expert in the law.\textsuperscript{36} Like his Castilian predecessors, Perceval resorts to *advocatus, iurisconsultus*, and even *literatus* in making these distinctions.\textsuperscript{37} Cristóbal de las Casas, a graduate of the University of Sevilla who probably lived in Italy for some time, takes the most direct approach of all (Acero 7). His *Vocabulario de las lenguas toscana y castellana* (1570) simply offers *letrado* and *letterato* [man of letters] as equivalents with no mention of any juridical association for either term.\textsuperscript{38}

These grammatical-linguistic sources demonstrate that although *letrado* is frequently defined in a way that encompasses lawyers and jurists, the terms should not be conflated. The distinction between those engaged in the routine business of legal practice and those occupying high state office is one that carried great importance for early modern lexicographers of the Spanish, French, Italian, and English languages. That distinction has not always been observed by modern literary critics, many of whom continue to use *letrado* interchangeably with lawyer when approaching Spanish Renaissance and Baroque texts. Much of this inconsistency results from confusion over the social status of letrados, which in turn was rooted in medieval and early

\textsuperscript{34} Palet 449.

\textsuperscript{35} Palet 664.

\textsuperscript{36} Perceval fo. Ar.

\textsuperscript{37} Perceval fo. Pr.

\textsuperscript{38} Cristóbal de las Casas, *Vocabulario de las lenguas toscana y castellana*, (Sevilla, Spain: Francisco Aguilar, 1570) 209.
modern legal codes. In order to map the term’s unstable trajectory, let us examine the same juridical texts that grammarians and other humanist authors used to formulate their definitions.

Juridical Definitions of Letrados

University Education as the Foundation of the Letrado Class

The estamental society that dominated Spain during the Middle Ages supposed the existence of three social orders—clergy, nobility, and *pecheros* [commoners]—and a dual civil and ecclesiastical hierarchy (Parello 143). Professional men such as lawyers, notaries, and physicians formed an intermediate group between the privileged estates and the commoners (O’Callaghan 470). During this period *letrado* was used almost exclusively to signify university-trained jurists. Medieval letrados were typically clergy trained in civil or canon law, usually at the University of Salamanca or Valladolid, and came from the cities (Altamirano 100). These highly trained jurists dominated the Spanish universities during the Middle Ages, and studying law was “almost identical” with clerical status (Linz 82). Their immense value to the state was reflected in the legal codes promulgated in medieval Castile, which extended to university-trained men of letters many of the social privileges and exemptions traditionally reserved for the nobility. Before examining those juridical texts, however, it is necessary to discuss what were the formal qualifications for claiming letrado status, which involves the change from the medieval scholasticism to a more humanistic curriculum in the universities.

Much of the confusion over the term *letrado* results from an incomplete understanding of the how the curriculum of the medieval universities differed from those of the Renaissance, which in turn changed the ways in which letrados demonstrated their qualification to participate in government. Medieval scholastic education exalted logic above the liberal arts (Nauert 14). For this reason jurists rather than theologians occupied the leading roles in Spanish universities; even prestigious Salamanca did not acquire a faculty of theology until over a century after its
founding. Richard Kagan suggests that doctors of law from Salamanca enjoyed at least “a modicum of social prestige” due the fiscal and ceremonial privileges granted them by the crown, as well as for their regular recruitment to serve as advisers at the royal court (“Universities” 57-58). These medieval letrados were the exception, however, as the Crown relied primarily on the elite of the warrior nobility—the grandees—as their chief counselors and advisors (Kamen, Spain 179). The only nobles in the universities during this period tended to be segundones [second-born sons] who were barred from inheritance by the principle of mayorazgo [entail] and had to seek careers elsewhere (Fernández Álvarez 193).

The late Middle Ages saw a general effort among monarchs to tame or “civilize” their nobles—that is, to bring them to court and rid them of their warlike ways (Waugh 57-58). University-trained men of letters were more apt to succeed in this courtly environment than the often-violent warrior nobility. In Spain the Catholic Kings’ reliance on letrados in government put a further premium on education, and by the end of the fifteenth century young nobles recognized the need to study Latin as military commands were increasingly reserved for paid professionals (Hunt 115). The Cortes of Toledo (1480) established a new Royal Council in which fully two-thirds of the members would be letrados, possessing at least a bachelor’s degree. (Elliot, Imperial 90). Few nobles had any university degree, leading to their progressive exclusion from high office. In this new arrangement grandees were permitted to attend the meetings but had no vote, while leadership passed to the letrados (Elliot, Imperial, 23-24).

Ferdinand and Isabella thus prioritized the appointment of letrados in the formation of their councils to the detriment of the nobility. In making this decision the Crown abandoned the principle of social representation in which the nobility were the “natural counselors” of the monarch, and thereafter membership in the noble elite no longer gave one an automatic right to a
position in the royal government (Feros 37-38). The gente letrada [men of letters] of the Middle Ages had been the group of educated men with Latin literacy and ecclesiastical training who surrounded the medieval monarchs as companions and advisors (Murillo 420). By contrast, the Catholic Kings and their Habsburg successors surrounded themselves instead with men of learning with university formation. When engaged in state service the letrados wore a distinctive robe—the garnacha—to represent their status. This new letradería [letrado class] was inspired by the Roman model of unwavering dedication and strict self-discipline advocated by thinkers like Justus Lipsius (Mazín 93-94). In subsequent generations councilors drawn from the universities displaced the magnates within the royal administration (Fernández Álvarez 329).

Increased opportunity for law graduates allowed the legal faculty to shed its “clerical” reputation, even to the extent that the average Castilian student matriculated in canon or civil law (Kagan, “Universities” 60). By the seventeenth century the appointment of letrados—especially law professors—to the royal administration had become routine. This development in turn led to an increasing professionalization of the university curriculum. Henry Kamen argues that humanist learning declined as the universities gradually became training grounds for state careers (Spain 153). Carabias Torres likewise describes the University of Salamanca as an académica palanca [academic springboard] from which graduates were recruited to high administrative office (“Salamanca” 25). Consequently, the increased focus on legal studies in that institution’s curriculum had a direct impact on how the entire letrado class was perceived in the popular mind. This change is reflected in the law.

Medieval Origins of the Leetrado Class as a Service Nobility: The Siete Partidas (1265)

The purpose of this section is to argue that medieval Castilian legal codes established the foundation for arguing the superiority of letters to arms and of personal achievement to ancient lineage. In principle the letrados could rest upon no less a juridical foundation than the Siete
Partidas (1256-1265), the extensive compilation of Roman, Visigoth, and regional codes commissioned by Alfonso X of Castile (r. 1252–1284). Originally called the Libro de las leyes [Book of the Laws], this massive text deals with topics as diverse as criminal justice, taxation, conscription and levies, as well as more abstract notions like the nature of kingship. Each Partida is divided into Titles, all of which begin with a prose introduction explaining the organizing principle for the laws included in that section (Pérez Martín 32). The Second Partida is most relevant for present purposes as it addresses the social hierarchy of the kingdom, considering in turn the monarch, grandees, and títulos [titled nobles] as well as the caballeros [knights or middling nobles], hidalgos [petty nobles], and pecheros [commoners] (Kamen, Spain 103).

Because it is concerned primarily with social stratification, this Partida is significantly less juridical and more literary in character than the other six; Title IX in particular resembles a treatise more than a legal code (Pérez Martín 34). Here the Alfonsine legislators recognized that outstanding personal virtue—such as represented by a university degree—could form an alternative basis for nobility: “[F]or, as the ancient sages said, the wisdom of the law is another kind of knighthood, by means of which boldness is crushed, and wrongs are righted.” Indeed, doctors in canon or civil law hailing from the “imperial universities” of Salamanca and Valladolid were granted certain tax exemptions and were generally considered hidalgos de privilegio (García 220-21). These privileges were later extended to Alcalá de Henares and Bologna as well, forming the basis of what critics later called the “letrado elite.”

The language of the Second Partida makes it clear that Alfonso X intended to reward distinguished scholars with ennoblement, and to transform the customary privileges afforded to

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39 I have italicized Siete Partidas when only when referring to the code as a whole. For the sake of clarity I prefer “Second Partida” to Partida Segunda, the latter of which seems jarring.

40 Part. II, Tit. IX, Law XXVII. “[L]a sabiduría de los derechos es otra manera de caballería…”
letrados into a legal reality: “Wherefore we decree that the above mentioned masters, and others who teach the sciences in schools throughout our entire dominions, shall be exempt from taxes, and not be required to join the army, or any foraging party, or perform any other duty, against their will.”\textsuperscript{41} Such exemptions were the hallmark of the noble estate during the Middle Ages and early modern period, so granting those same privileges to letrados confirmed that they had achieved noble status.\textsuperscript{42} The Second Partida also declares that “after they have taught in schools of law for twenty years, they have the right to be styled counts.”\textsuperscript{43} Only dukes (all of whom were also grandees) held a superior title to that conferred upon these veteran letrados (Elliott, \textit{Imperial Spain} 103-104). Alfonso X thus formally opened the ranks of the \textit{títulos} to university-trained men of letters. It must be observed, however, that only the elite of the letrados was permitted to ascend to this most prestigious and exclusive class. The doctorate was not truly a higher degree in academic terms than a licentiate, but rather a title of honor conferred upon a small minority of letrados, and the cost of obtaining such a degree was often prohibitive (van Liere, “Humanism and Scholasticism” 65). University teaching posts were likewise scarce and the requirement of twenty years’ continuous service meant in practical terms that letrados were usually old men by the time they acquired this highest honor (Williams 264).

While groundbreaking in many aspects, the \textit{Siete Partidas} were essentially conservative in character. The Second Partida conferred social distinction upon the study of law solely in recognition of its utility to the state: “The science of law is, as it were, the fountain of justice, and

\textsuperscript{41} Part. II, Tit. XXXI, Law VIII.


\textsuperscript{43} Part. II, Tit. XXXI, Law VIII.
the world is more benefited by it than by any other.\textsuperscript{44} The code thus contemplates an expansion of the privileged estate to incorporate a group that provided useful services to the crown, but falls short of establishing a true meritocracy. While the Alfonsine legislators recognized that “those who are entitled to this [nobility] on account of their knowledge and excellence are justly called nobles and gentlemen,” they still gave primacy to ancient lineage.\textsuperscript{45} The real hallmark of nobility from the point of view of social prestige or honor was that its possession should date from time immemorial; a certain stigma was attached to recently created titles (Domínguez Ortiz, \textit{Golden Age} 113-14). Throughout the medieval period letrados were too small in number to constitute a threat to the noble estate, and too closely identified with the clergy to threaten the church. Further, the nobility acquired by the study of the law was not hereditary (García 224-25). Despite these considerable obstacles, the \textit{Siete Partidas}' influence on the letrado class would prove decisive over time. By recognizing that letters—even defined narrowly as canon or civil law—were an alternative basis for noble status, the code broke the warrior nobility’s monopoly on that category and sowed the seeds for the emergence of the letrado as a rival for royal favor and privilege in subsequent centuries. Future generations of letrados tended to downplay the hereditary element of nobility in favor of proven service to the Crown, a theme that subsequent chapters will explore further.

Despite laying the foundation for future challenges to the social order, the \textit{Siete Partidas} were never formally promulgated during the reign of Alfonso X and did not have force of law until the fourteenth century (Pérez Martín 47). Alfonso XI, great-grandson of Alfonso the Wise, decreed at the Cortes of Alcalá (1348) that the \textit{Partidas} would thereafter have the character of

\textsuperscript{44} Part. II, Tit. XXXI, Law VIII.

\textsuperscript{45} Part. II, Tit. XXI, Law II.
supplementary law, placing them behind the municipal *fueros* and his own *Ordenamiento* in precedence: “And when lawsuits and disputes cannot be resolved by the laws of this book and by the *fueros*, we decree that they be resolved by the laws contained in the books of the *Siete Partidas*.“\(^{46}\) While recognizing that the previous code had never been officially promulgated, the *Ordenamiento* formally established the *Partidas* as the last tier of Castilian civil law, and thereby made the letrados’ claims of customary privilege a legal reality. This development would inspire letrado apologists in the early modern period who wished to present their social ascent as the logical continuation of long-standing Castilian tradition.

**Reappraisal of the Letrado Class in the Early Modern Era: Nueva Recopilación (1581)**

As discussed above, the *Siete Partidas* only achieved the status of supplementary law a century after their composition. However, in reality they were observed continuously up until the nineteenth century because of the Romanist education of Spanish jurists (Malagón-Barceló 3). Despite the civils wars, dynastic changes, and political turmoil of the late medieval and early modern eras, the letrados’ privileges remained basically unchanged through following centuries, and all subsequent legal codes and judicial commentaries reaffirmed or expanded them. The Cortes of Toro (1505) is illustrative of this trend. Held during the troubled reign of Queen Juana “la loca,” this legislative session was both the culmination of the Catholic Kings’ program of rationalization and a further attempt to bring uniformity to their constituent realms. The Laws of Toro represented a qualitative and quantitative simplification of the overlapping and contradicting legal codes in order to make them comprehensible to magistrates and ordinary

\(^{46}\) *Ordenamiento*. Book I, Chapter LXIV. “Y los pleitos y contiendas que se non podieren [sic] librar por las leyes deste libro y por los dichos fueros, mandamos que se libren por las leyes contenidas en los libros de las siete Partidas que el Rey don Alfonso nuestro bisabuelo mando ordenar, como quier [sic] que hasta aquí non se habla que fuesen publicadas por mandado del Rey nin [sic] fueron habidas nin recibidas por leyes; pero nos mandamos las requerir y concertar y emendar en algunas cosas que cumplía.”
citizens alike (Castañeda Muñoz 364). Most significant for the present study was the reiteration that letrados must study the *Siete Partidas, Ordenamiento*, and *fueros* before occupying a position in the royal administration. The same language identifies letrados as “councilors, *oidores* [judges] of our *audiencias* and *alcaldes* of our house and court and chancelleries.” This catalogue of administrative functions distinguishes between the study of law and *abogacía* [the practice of law], which at its most basic meant appearing before the lower tribunals in criminal or civil matters. Service in the royal judiciary required a much greater degree of expertise and specialization. In short, the Crown needed jurists rather than mere lawyers, echoing the distinction between the two categories Nebrija had enunciated scarcely a decade earlier in his *Vocabulario español-latino*. This distinction grew in force in later codes.

Although the code established at Toledo was intended to be comprehensive, the profusion of new and little-known laws in the early Habsburg era fomented the need for yet another compilation to restore legislative unity (Ortiz Caballero 132). The *Nueva Recopilación* (1567) confirmed the letrados’ privileges in the preceding codes and expanded them to graduates of Alcalá de Henares as well. The code also refers obliquely to the “disorders” caused by the large numbers of letrados produced by the universities, and specifically identifies the desire for tax

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47 *Leyes de Toro*. Law II. “Por ende por la presente ordenamos y mandamos que dentro de un ano primero siguiente y dende en adelante contado desde la data destas nuestras leyes todos los letrados que hoy son o fueren asi del nuestro consejo u oidores de las nuestras audiencias y alcaldes de la nuestra casa y corte y chancillerias, o tienen, o tuvieren otro cualquier cargo y administracion de justicia... no puedan usar de los dichos de justicia, ni tener los sin que primeramente hayan pasado ordinariamente las dichas leyes de ordenamientos y prematicas, partidas y fuero real.”

48 *Nueva Recopilación*. Book I, Title VII, Law IX. “[Y] por la presente declaramos y mandamos, que los doctores y maestros, y licenciados que en la dicha universidad de Alcalá se han graduado y graduaren en santa Teología, y cánones, y medicina, gozen de los privilegios y preeminencias, que de nos y de los dichos reyes católicos que santa gloria hayan, tienen y les han sido concedidos: bien y así y tan cumplidamente como por la ley antes desta mandamos que gozen los graduados en las universidades de Salamanca y Valladolid, y colegio de Bolonia.”
exemption as the motivation for this surge in degree-seekers.\textsuperscript{49} The legislators’ concern here seems to contradict historians’ repeated assertion that, despite the proliferation of students and colleges, letrados were only a minority with the possibility of access to public office (Domínguez Ortiz, \textit{Las clases privilegiadas} 223). A minority it might be, but it made its presence felt even among the privileged estates of the clergy and nobility. Consequently the letrado, unflatteringly described by contemporaries as a \textit{caza-puesto} [mountebank] or \textit{pica-pleito} [shyster], quickly became a recognizable sociotype in the literature of the era.

Any legal code is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation by those tasked with enforcing its provisions. Successive generations of Castilian jurists applied linguistic tools of textual criticism in order to get at the legislators’ original intent. In this they were aided by the rise of humanist scholarship, which excelled in the editing of documents and the establishment of accurate texts (Elton 290). Interest in etymology or the historical dimension of language had been present in Spain since the time of Isidore of Seville (ca. 560-636); the science of philology, however, shifted attention to linguistic origins, particularly the derivation of modern vernacular speech from classical Latin (Kelley 81). As discussed in the above, humanists conceived of their role as the explication of texts through linguistic and philological methods (Nauert, \textit{Humanism} 214). In general, humanist grammar represented a shift from the formal and structural approach of the medieval Scholastics to a more commonsense historical and semantic approach (Kelley 77). It is therefore crucial to study the proliferation of Castilian-Latin grammars and dictionaries

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Nueva Recopilación}. Book I, Title VII, Law VIII. “Porque por experiencia se ha visto, que la multitud de letrados que se han hecho y hacen doctores y maestros y licenciados, así en los estudios que nuevamente se han hecho en estos reinos... queriendo como se quieren libertar por razón desto los pechos y contribuciones en que debían contribuir si no fueran así graduados, se han seguido y siguen muchos inconvenientes y danos en perjuicio del estado de los pecheros. Porende queriendo refrenar la dicha desorden, ordenamos y mandamos que de aquí adelante de la libertad y exempción que a los tales es concedida por leyes destos reinos, solamente gozén los que han seydo y fueren graduados por examen riguroso en las universidades de Salamanca, y Valladolid, y los que fueren colegiales graduados en el colegio de la universidad de Bolonia, y no otros.”
in order to see how Early Modern humanists adapted the preexisting legal framework for letrados to their contemporary reality. Failure to evaluate letrados’ claims to privileged status in light of early modern lexicography has obscured the historical record and resulted in erroneous interpretations of both the legal code and the arguments of letrado apologists. These errors require further discussion in order to understand what impact they have had on current criticism.

**Lexical Ambiguities Associated with Letrados**

As the preceding sections reveal, the letrado was the center of a polemic for early modern authors and contemporary critics alike. Before examining current criticism, it is first necessary to resolve some lexical ambiguities associated with letrado and related terms that are responsible for confusion and disagreement among scholars today. The first major source of ambiguity is the term *abogado*, which is usually translated as lawyer or jurist. As we will see, while both terms are related to the study of law, they are distinguished from each other by important social and professional markers that are not always taken into account by modern critics. The second ambiguity involves the tendency to describe letrados as a “robe nobility” along the lines of what developed in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite superficial similarities, these erroneous translations skew scholarly perceptions of the letrado class and hinder its study. Providing clear and consistent definitions of these terms will allow us to approach letrado texts with a proper understanding of their nature and function.

**“Lawyer” vs. “Jurist”**

Primary and critical sources frequently conflate the terms “lawyer” and “jurist.” Although both terms relate to the legal profession, there are important differences between the two groups, and this critical distinction is often lost when *abogado* is used indiscriminately. Lawyers in fact constitute a larger category that includes what we might call trial attorneys: university graduates trained in civil law who were qualified to appear before the lower tribunals in matters of public
or private litigation. Such figures, while necessary in a modern civil society, acquired a negative reputation for their supposed greed and lack of scruples. Jurists, by contrast, were a much smaller group of legal scholars: experts in the law with advanced degrees—licentiates or doctorates—who occupied senior judgeships and council positions (Kagan, *Lawsuits* 67). Such figures rarely practiced law but were regularly consulted by judges and magistrates in specialized matters (Dedieu, “La Muerte del letrado,” 495). They also served in the conciliar system as ministers, secretaries, and other high state posts. The jurist is thus distinguished from the lawyer by a greater degree of legal expertise as well as by a more expansive role in the royal administration and judiciary. Indiscriminate use of the terms is therefore inappropriate and confusing.

Richard Kagan offers an approach that resolves much of the semantic confusion between the preceding terms. Unlike most critics he does not treat *abogado* as a monolithic term but examines the separate components of the legal profession. Kagan distinguishes between advocates, the majority of whom were letrados, and attorneys, who were not. Advocates enjoyed greater social prestige and were often appointed to influential judicial posts as magistrates and *fiscales* [public prosecutors]. By contrast, attorneys were regarded as “legal artisans” and could not be appointed to high judicial posts (Kagan, *Lawsuits* 62). Kagan thus uses the term “advocates” to denote the group that I have called jurists: well-trained letrados who possessed a detailed knowledge of the law and used their expertise to ascend in the judicial hierarchy and state bureaucracy. This definition also corresponds with Nebrija’s and Oudin’s term *iurisconsultus*—an expert in the law rather than a novice. Rather than handling the mundane business of private lawsuits, jurists performed administrative roles in the *audiencias* and *chancillerías* of the realm.
Jurists may therefore be broadly described as the judicial functionaries trained in the absolutist traditions of Roman law who organized Spain’s global empire (Davies 4). Their task was the rationalization of territorial administration, the supervision of local office-holders, and the regulation of many jurisdictions (Manconi 55). In contrast to lawyers who merely applied the law, jurists were active in the formulation of the legal codes themselves. Their continuing role as creators and interpreters of the law gave them access to the royal councils and cemented their place in government, thereby winning them a level of social esteem not enjoyed by common lawyers (Salustiano de Dios 55). Jurists were a permanent fixture at court, where their function was to advise the monarch and to elaborate the laws (Martínez Millán & Ezquerra Revilla 340). They thus comprised part of what may be called the “letrado elite.”

Inconsistent usage of these terms has contributed to confusion in studying the letrado class. Any negative reputation associated with jurists owes to their profession being confused with the routine practice of law. The ordinary lawyer was frequently despised for his suspected links with New Christians or conversos, and a popular belief in his avarice and corruption (Kagan, Lawsuits 69). He appears frequently in literature as the pica-pleitos whose dubious practices were responsible for the bad name of the legal profession in general (Malagón-Barceló 15). However, neither lawyer nor jurist is an adequate definition for letrado, which encompassed much more than the legal profession in later periods. Even during the jurist-legislator’s heyday in the Middle Ages some letrado careerists studied theology rather than canon or civil law, though these were exceptions rather than the rule (Monter 58). Such exceptions grew greatly in number during the Spanish Renaissance, substantially changing the composition and character of the letrado class. This transition, which persisted well into the Baroque, will be explored more fully in later chapters.
“Service Nobility” vs. “Robe Nobility”

A second source of ambiguity among scholars is the tendency to describe letrados as a “robe nobility” comparable to the French model that emerged under the Bourbon regime. This approach is inappropriate and results from a misreading of contemporary documents that describe letrados serving on royal councils as ministros togados or gente de toga [men of the robe]. These terms have a Classical origin. “Let arms give way to the toga!” was a favorite expression of Cicero, emphasizing his belief that skilled rhetoric and oratory were more important to society than the soldiers and politicians that had traditionally been Rome’s dominant force (Braudy 72-73). His attitude influenced letrado polemists who also argued for replacing the outdated warrior nobility with the brilliant minds needed to run the modern state.

The term togado came into popular usage after 1579 when Philip II decreed that letrados serving on his councils must wear a garnacha, a distinctive robe or gown intended to set them apart visually from the warrior nobility (Mazin 91). The latter group was referred to as ministros de capa y espada [ministers of cloak and sword], a term which should not be confused with the similarly-named genre of comedias during the Spanish Baroque. Originally from a military background, the capa y espada councilors were increasingly rendered irrelevant by the letrados’ technical expertise, and their active participation in government diminished correspondingly (Cunningham 34-35). Cicero’s “men of the toga” were again on the rise.

Despite these advances, Spanish letrados never formed a robe nobility along the French model. Indeed, that term is inappropriate for Spain due to its association with venality. Since the sixteenth century, French monarchs had sold judicial and administrative offices to upwardly mobile merchants and burghers, even allowing office-holders to pass them on to their descendants in exchange for an annual payment (Swann 146-47). In France this robe nobility had no formal legal status until an edict of July 1644 confirmed that royal councilors, administrators,
and presidents of the sovereign courts—chiefly the Parliament of Paris—were nobles (Baum 15). Although the law drew no distinction between robe and sword nobility, the groups evolved from being a single class in the fifteenth century to being divided into separate orders by the seventeenth century (Major 328). Career distinctions, courtly education, and military training remained the chief identifying characteristics between the two orders, with robe nobles generally hailing from less wealthy and less socially prestigious families (Motley 11). Like letrados the men of robe longue of France prided themselves on excellence of mind and emphasized the value of an education in the bonnes lettres (J. Smith 88). Despite these similarities, however, the groups are incompatible.

It appears that a more appropriate term for Spain would be “service nobility,” defined as the group of university-trained professionals that acquired noble status and titles through service in the royal administration. This group was uniquely qualified for service in the ever-expanding Castilian bureaucracy, eventually gaining ennoblement through service to the Crown and accumulating wealth instead of the exercise of arms (Jago 74). Letrado polemicists defined themselves in opposition to the hereditary nobility, countering the warrior caste’s concept of “noble blood” with their own supposed individual merit. Both, they argued, deserved reward from the king, the source of all honors and privileges (Parello 151). As discussed above, letrados’ claims to noble status were confirmed as early as 1348 by the Ordenamiento de Alcalá, which in turn drew upon the tradition established a century earlier by the Siete Partidas. Medieval tradition recognized the letrados as “another kind of knighthood” possessing an alternative basis for nobility apart from birth and blood, and even once obtained such status was not hereditary (García 224-25). Letrados did not purchase their noble status outright but instead earned it indirectly through years of study at the universities. They therefore remained largely
unaffected by venality, which in Spain assumed a different character than in France. Indeed, the sale of offices may have actually benefited the letrado class relative to the old nobility, whose exclusive character was gradually undermined.

The Spanish distinguished between purchasing a title and purchasing ennoblement. The former was merely an upward move within the noble estate and was therefore more acceptable than the latter. The Habsburgs frequently sold hábitos—knighthoods in the Military Orders which conferred the status of caballero—to younger sons of titled nobles, so the move was not without precedent. Indeed, conferring a title upon a previously untitled caballero or even hidalgo was largely honorific and could be defended on absolutist grounds as an exercise of sovereign authority by the monarch. By contrast, ennoblement by any means other than blood represented a fundamental change in that person’s status and therefore threatened the existing social order (Domínguez Ortiz, Las clases 72-73). For this reason, sales of hidalgía organized by the Habsburgs had very little success despite the material advantages they afforded (Domínguez Ortiz, Golden Age 112-13). When certificates of hidalgía were put up for sale in the 1520s, the old nobility immediately objected and remained uncompromising in successive generations (Elliott, Imperial Spain 115-16). Philip IV sold numerous certificates of hidalgía between 1629 and 1652 to finance his ruinous wars, but these did not significantly alter the overall social character of the nobility (Kamen, Spain 245). Custom and tradition limited venality’s reach more noticeably than in France.

One reason the French more readily accepted the concept of purchasing grants of nobility was the declining prestige of such titles north of the Pyrenees. The old nobility irreparably harmed its reputation during the Wars of Religion (1562–1598), as the excesses committed by the warrior nobles brought the entire class into disrepute and called into question the very ideal
of nobility (Bohanan 10). Despite occasional friction with the centralizing goals of the Habsburg government, the Spanish grandees were still largely considered loyal servants of the Crown. Following the suppression of the Comuneros’ Revolt in 1521, Spain had no widespread civil conflicts in the sixteenth century. As Stradling observes, “it could be argued that the social norm of the Spanish empire in the Habsburg period as a whole was stability, in clear contrast to that of France” (Spain’s Struggle 25). To be sure, letrado polemicists compared their own public morality and social utility favorably against that of the Castilian nobility (Jago 60). Yet although the estamental character of the old nobility was called into question by letrados eager to assert their own privileged status, overall the Spanish were unable to countenance the frank purchase of nobility as if by barter.

Sales of office were far more successful than sales of nobility in Spain. This process began around 1540 and reached its peak under Philip II, but because most sales were made in local government the movement retrenched local oligarchies rather than forming a new category of nobility (Kamen, Spain 167). Positions in the royal administration that were reserved for letrados or togados were not subject to sale—at least in theory—due to the university formation they required. Because capa y espada posts required no formal qualification, they were vulnerable to sale by a cash-strapped monarchy. Many merchants, letrados, and even minor nobles or segundones purchased habits of the military orders as well as enajenaciones (vacated church or royal lands) throughout the Habsburg era (Kamen, Spain 157). Venality thus served to enrich these groups and to enhance their social prestige. However, unlike in France, nobles lacking university degrees could not use their wealth or influence at court to secure many of the choicest letrado positions. While the grandees still maintained their hold on the prestigious
Council of State and Council of War, elsewhere the letrados gained force and were routinely ennobled in return for their service to the Crown (Allen 240).

I propose identifying letrado status with service to the crown in the royal judiciary or conciliar system. I do not mean to suggest that letrados were entirely disinterested servants or wholly motivated by loyalty to the Crown. Certainly they expected to be rewarded for their labors as councilors and administrators above and beyond the mere honor of holding an office.\(^{50}\) As Elliott remarks, “[t]he social reputation and practical advantages attached to the possession of a privilege of hidalguía made it an object of universal desire” (Imperial Spain 115). Initially plebeian in nature, letrados gained access to the courts and administrative offices, and by the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries they were almost totally assimilated to the governing elite (García 239-40). As members of the incipient state bureaucracy, letrados closely resembled Cicero’s idealized “men of the toga” whose role was to help govern the realm instead of defending it on the battlefield (Vespignani 187). The letrados’ tax exemption, confirmed by the Cortes of Madrid in 1534, also imply noble status and thus furthered their social position (Kamen, Spain 154-55). Within this context, togado may simply be understood to mean a letrado minister. In a broader sense lawyers and jurists may also be considered a subset of the gente de toga (Malagón-Barceló 14). However, authentic togados served on the decision-making bodies of state, and their intrusion into this area of the noble habitus was the primary source of their conflict with the grandees (Salas Almela 264). I stress again that because ministros de capa y espada did not require university formation, their offices were directly

\(^{50}\) For present purposes a “councilor” may be understood literally as a member of a council—that is, a royal minister formally assigned to an administrative body—whereas “counselor” is a much broader term encompassing anyone that advises the monarch in any capacity. The latter category also includes informal confidants and members of court that do not formally hold office within the conciliar system.
affected by venality in a way that *togados* were not (Carabias Torres, “Consideraciones” 158). Thus while a *togado* might obtain the habit of a Military Order—either by purchase or in reward for service—and thereby gain noble status, his noble colleagues without university formation competed for a much smaller number of spaces reserved for the warrior nobility (Pérez, “La aristocracia” 65).

To be sure, the participation of learned men in government was nothing new; by 1493 letrados had already gained control of the Royal Council (Poole 7). Yet while a bachelor’s degree had been sufficient for admission to the letrado hierarchy during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the advanced degree became the norm under their successors, with doctors and licentiates holding a virtual monopoly on high government office (Haliczer 113-14). The letrado meritocracy thereafter assumed a more aristocratic character as its members relied on a close-knit network of “old boy” associations for patronage and support (Poole 198). As letrados were elevated to titles and councillorships they came by osmosis to share the prejudices of their superior critics. Stradling affirms “[b]y the 1630s, the letrados were the rankers of reaction and the cohorts of counter-revolution” (*Philip IV and the Government of Spain* 134). Pérez dubs this process “double aristocratization” (“Les letrados” 448-49). Having obtained their hard-won privileges, letrados distanced themselves from occupations associated with manual labor—such as scribes and notaries—and sought to exclude from their own ranks aspirants engaged in such professions. We may observe in both the historical record and in literary texts a process of transculturation in which the letrados imitate the mores of the older and more prestigious social class.

Although some critics describe letrados as an early bourgeoisie, this assessment is inaccurate in the Castilian context. Spain of the Golden Age was a stratified society torn between
old nobility, which sought to reaffirm its traditional privileges, and the letrado functionaries who advocated a “nobility of letters” founded in state service. However, by the end of the sixteenth century most letrados were already of noble or aristocratic origin (Kamen, Spain, 154-55). J. P. Cooper describes a progressive identification between the letrados and the old nobility after 1600, foreshadowing a similar development in France a century later (60). Similarly, Kagan suggests that interest in the universities declined after the 1630s as the new letrados attempted to “live nobly” in imitation of the old landed aristocracy, abandoning careers associated with the professional universities and juridical study in favor of a more chivalric style of life. He compares this process to the trahison de la bourgeoisie (“Universities” 69). It is doubtful whether the latter description is truly accurate: cultural historian Fernand Braudel calls the letrados “lesser nobles or aspirant nobles far more than true bourgeois” (727). Compromising between these viewpoints, María del Rosario García states that letrados comprised a heterogeneous group of jurists and diplomados [university graduates] that was tanto noble como burguesa [just as noble as it was bourgeois] (García 211-12). As will be seen in later chapters, letrado polemicists argue on both sides of this dispute, but generally assert the innate virtue of “letters” as a substitute for the quality of “blood” possessed by the old nobility.

**Current Criticism of the Letrado Class in Early Modern Spain**

With these lexical ambiguities clarified, let us next examine the prevailing critical interpretations of the letrado class. Adopting precise definitions for lawyer, jurist, and service nobility will illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the following models, and will help to formulate a more coherent and internally consistent approach to future studies. The position I will elaborate in subsequent chapters is that letrado is not a monolithic term but rather encompasses a variety of positive and negative valences. As we have seen, much letrado literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries addresses the question of corporate identity
and maintains a sense of exclusivity with respect to other social groups and professions. Pelorson contrasts the letrados who occupied high posts in royal councils and the judiciary with the “infra-letrados,” a socially inferior category that includes trial lawyers, clerks, and procuradores (455). Brian Brewer adds scribes to this category, probably because of their association with manual labor (138). Given these fierce internal disputes over membership, easy definitions of letrado fail to be persuasive. In order to identify who was an authentic letrado and—often the more difficult question—who was not, one must examine both the individual’s intellectual formation and function in society. To prepare the way, it is necessary to analyze the prevailing modes of interpretation scholars have applied to the letrado as a social class and literary type.

Jean-Pierre Dedieu describes the letrado class as a continuum running from the “true letrados,” whom he equates with the colegiales, to the common lawyers, whom he describes variously as technicians, quasi-letrados, or “letrados by antonomasia.” Within this continuum the colegiales were farthest removed from the actual practice of law, with many obtaining prestigious judgeships and influential positions in the royal administration. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the lawyers, whom Dedieu considers little more than servants due to their dependence on clients to collect their fees (494-95). Breaking with Dedieu, Ana María Carabias Torres rejects the equivalence of colegial and letrado, asserting that from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries letrado was used by all to refer to graduates in law regardless of whether they pursued careers as lawyers, magistrates, or even royal councilors (“Consideraciones” 148). For Carabias Torres, a letrado is any graduate trained in canon or civil law, regardless of his aristocratic origin or relative poverty. For decades these opposing definitions formed the contours of the debate on the nature of the letrado.
Charting a middle course between these positions effectively reconciles them with each other. The following chapters will restore the original understanding of *letrado* in the early modern era as one engaged in the profession of letters. This approach builds upon Joseph Pérez, who defines *letrado* as any university graduate, as well as upon Carol Harllee and Juan Linz, who describe letrados as a community of social and cultural interpretation grounded in *letras humanas* [humanistic letters]. Rather than a narrow class of lawyers—or an even narrower elite of *colegiales*—letrados were a composite body of occupations requiring university formation. This group incorporates jurists and royal councilors as well as Pelorson’s *infra-letrados*—scribes, notaries, grammarians, clerks, and trial lawyers. In addition to high state office, letrados might serve as legal advisors to nobles as well as to colleges, hospitals, municipalities, and other secular or ecclesiastic institutions. They might also find jobs as university professors or in private legal practice, where they could expect to make more money than common lawyers (Kagan, *Lawsuits* 149). In order to resituate the letrado class as a social category it is necessary to look beyond these essentially utilitarian occupations to incorporate literary professions such as novelists, playwrights, and dialogists. It will be shown in subsequent chapters that this reframing of the letrado class is most consistent with the plain sense of the word *letrado* as recorded by the leading grammarians of the era—chiefly Nebrija and Covarrubias—and accurately reflects the role of “men of the pen” in early modern society. This approach also casts new light on the literary sociotype of the letrado and its evolution from a decidedly subservient position in the early sixteenth century to one of pronounced agency and resilience in the seventeenth century. The letrado grew from an obscure—even marginalized—figure to a ubiquitous and controversial one in the span of a few generations, producing reams of paper extolling and condemning its very existence. A definition of *letrado* that only contemplates the legal profession cannot adequately
explain this social and cultural phenomenon. Only by embracing a broader definition of the term can we break apart this monolithic category and cast new light on the study of Spanish letters.

**Critical Sources Equating Letrados with Colegiales**

By any definition, the elite of the letrado class was the *colegiales* or graduates of Castile’s six *Colegios Mayores*. Originally founded to provide advanced education to students with limited economic resources, the *Colegios Mayores* later became restricted enclaves for the formation of an elite of jurists and state functionaries (Volpini 26). Jean-Pierre Dedieu is the foremost proponent of the view equating letrados with the *colegiales*. Though his primary focus is the decline and eventual collapse of the *Colegios Mayores*’ patronage network due to the Bourbon reforms of the eighteenth century, he introduces terminology that is useful for studying the Habsburg era. Dedieu describes the *colegiales* as *verdaderos letrados* [true letrados], which he distinguishes sharply from *los abogados del montón* [the common mass of lawyers] (495). He asserts that these “true letrados” were doctors and licentiates of the imperial universities—especially Salamanca—who were immediately qualified to practice law without undergoing a probationer’s period and were not subject to examination by any civil or ecclesiastical tribunal in the kingdom. Dedieu apparently considers the conferral of a university title a kind of sacrament, one that guaranteed not only a high degree of technical knowledge but also a level of wisdom and personal ability necessary for judicial office. He argues that only jurists that had been “consecrated” by a major university—*ellos y solo ellos* [they and they alone]—could properly be called letrados (483). Any other usage he dismisses as colloquial.

What of members of the legal profession hailing from less prestigious institutions? Dedieu describes the common lawyer as a “quasi-letrado” and compares him unfavorably to the *técnico* [technician], a term which resembles the phrase *vil y mecánico* [vile and mechanical] frequently used to disparage those who engaged in manual labor (494). Like the true letrado, the
lawyer had studied at a university and received at least a bachelor’s degree in civil or canon law. Unlike true letrados, however, lawyers had to undergo a pasantía [probationer’s period] of three or four years in service to a more experienced lawyer before he could practice law on his own, and even then was subject to review by the local chancillería or audiencia real. He was therefore not a true jurist but rather a kind of craftsman—a highly specialized servant, but a servant nonetheless. The lawyer served private interests rather than those of God or king. That he sold his services and depended on clients for his fees further diminished his social status. This description resembles Pelorson’s concept of le monde infraletrado [the infra-letrado world]: those engaged in lettered professions but despised by other letrados due to their association with economic self-interest, subservience, and even manual labor (455). Unlike scribes and grammarians, lawyers never directly benefitted from Nebrija’s or Covarrubias’ efforts to reframe letrado socially. The routine practice of law was considered at best a necessary evil in both popular and erudite circles, and only the expert jurist was owed any measure of respect.

Dedieu’s primary focus is the eighteenth century but his terminology may also be applied to the middle of the Habsburg era (ca. 1560-1630), the period in which university enrollment reached its apogee. As suggested above, the “letrado hierarchy” was recruited from Castile’s universities, with preference given to Salamanca, Valladolid, and Alcalá de Henares. Within this group, graduates of the Colegios Mayores formed an even narrower elite as colegiales were given preference over manteístas [all other students] for royal appointments. This elite became self-perpetuating as sons of colegiales followed their fathers into the Colegios Mayores and into chief administrative posts (Kamen, Spain 154). Upon graduating, many colegiales quickly distinguished themselves by their outstanding university record and performance, though much of their later success was due to the influence of older graduates who had already established
themselves at court and council (Poole 100). Indeed, many of Castile’s most powerful families
came to comprise a network that actively promoted the interests of their old colleges and secured
further high offices for their younger peers (Kagan, “Universities” 64-65). The royal government
thus combined both personal merit and inheritance—expressed here through patronage—not
unlike the noble class itself.

Although Dedieu casts new light on the extremely influential colegial network, he does
not account for numerous appearances of letrado in primary literature in contexts which
manifestly do not refer to graduates of the Colegios Mayores. Rather, he documents the
formation of a “letrado elite” within the broader letrado class. This elite was linked by blood and
breeding to the upper echelons of Castilian society, and quickly entrenched itself in the royal
administration until it became the virtual gatekeeper of the choicest offices. Only doctors of the
great universities who obtained high office could properly be called part of the “nobility of
letters,” admission was carefully controlled by the colegiales, and even when obtained such
status was not hereditary (García 224-25). Most useful for the present study are Dedieu’s terms
“true letrados,” meaning those who in addition to their university degrees possessed the
necessary pedigree to command social esteem, and “quasi-letrados,” referring to those graduates
who were not so favored.

Critical Sources Equating Letrados with Lawyers

Breaking with Dedieu, Carabias Torres asserts that before and after the eighteenth
century abogado and letrado were used equally to refer to jurists—which she defines as
graduado[s] en derecho [graduates in law]—whether the person in question pursued a career as
a lawyer, judge, or royal councilor (“Consideraciones” 151). She rejects the exclusive
identification of letrados with graduates of the Colegios Mayores, insisting that for the majority
of Spanish social history letrado and abogado were used interchangeably to refer to a legal
professional regardless of whether he ever worked for the royal administration. She further argues that since the fifteenth century the terms *letrado* and *abogado* came to form a “semantic conjunction” with others like *oficio* and *servicio*, all of which refer to a law graduate who by virtue of that degree can serve in any legal tribunal or in the royal administration. Apart from certain age restrictions she believes *abogado* likewise means simply a university graduate trained in law (“Consideraciones” 148-49). Although she recognizes that graduates of Salamanca were not required to undergo a probationer’s period in the lower courts before being admitted to practice, she downplays the importance of this distinction.

I agree with Carabias Torres that *colegial* is an inadequate definition for *letrado*, but describing all letrados as lawyers is an equally unsatisfactory approach. By conflating lawyers with jurists she omits to distinguish among the subsets of the broader letrado class, and this tendency obscures finer shades of meaning. The distinction between jurists and lawyers discussed above has been observed by leading historians. John Elliott describes the letrados as “the highly professional caste of officials with a legal training… produced by Castile’s universities” (*Olivares* 92). The use of “officials” here indicates that Elliott is referring to royal service rather than the routine practice of law, a role that brings letrados more line with what I have called jurists and Kagan calls advocates. Similarly, Henry Kamen defines *letrado* as a university graduate in law, “the backbone of the upper levels of Church and state bureaucracy” (*Spain*, Glossary). He further characterizes letrados as the “elite of the Castilian administrative system,” serving in the royal councils and diplomatic service (*Spain* 29). While noting the preferential treatment that graduates of the *Colegios Mayores* received, Kamen does not identify letrados exclusively with *colegiales*.
Once again, curricular reform is responsible for much of this misunderstanding. While the study of law was an important part of the university curriculum in Early Modern Spain, eventually outpacing all other fields of study, the *studia humanitatis* never entirely faded. The trend towards specialization in the universities caused the liberal arts curriculum to become increasingly utilitarian in the sixteenth century, but so-called “humanistic letters” continued to influence all graduates including legal scholars (Van Liere, *Humanism* 102). Charles Nauert argues that although the royal interest was most favorable to the study of law, humanist studies were never wholly eclipsed. On the contrary, by 1500 in Spain a university education, at least partly humanistic, was the typical requirement for high office (Nauert 131). As Van Liere observes, while there was a clear sociological difference between *caballeros*—understood here as the middle nobility—and letrados in sixteenth-century Castile, both groups drew inspiration from the humanist tradition (*Humanism* 49). Indeed, by identifying themselves as *letrados*, law graduates revealed the importance they placed on the style of humanistic learning, above all the language and culture of ancient Rome. Subsequent chapters will explore the many ways in which this admiration for the *studia humanitatis* manifested among letrado authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

**Critical Sources Identifying Letrados as Intellectuals**

More recently scholars have suggested broader interpretations, linking letrados with a nascent service nobility and even with an emerging intellectual class. Joseph Pérez offers perhaps the broadest definition of the term since Covarrubias, affirming that during the sixteenth century *letrado* meant any university graduate that had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree regardless of the field of study (“La aristocracia castellana” 63). While those with a degree in one of the higher faculties of theology, law, and medicine might be particularly deserving of the term, *letrado* designated anyone with university training (Pérez, “Les letrados” 443). Carol
Harllee goes even further, describing letrados as the “intellectual class” that used its letters in service to the Crown, the Church, or private patrons (557). “Letters” in this context meant any kind of advanced education including grammar, the liberal arts, and what we now know as mathematics, astronomy, and the sciences. Harllee would include in the letrado class not only jurists and doctors but also trial lawyers, scribes, and grammarians, groups Pelorson dismissed as infra-letrados and Dedieu scorned as “quasi-letrados.” Harllee insists that such pursuits are not servile but eminently practical. She claims that relying on scribes to manage one’s written communication was a potential dangerous cession of personal power: “A scribe might misrepresent him, defraud him, or reveal his most intimate secrets to others” (559). Though she couches the debate in pragmatic rather than ideological language, she apparently agrees with Nebrija’s contention that grammarians and humanists ought to be afforded the same social prestige as members of the legal profession.

Both in historical and literary terms, Pérez’s affirmation that in the sixteenth century letrado meant any university graduate that had obtained at least the rank of bachelor most closely adheres to the authentic context of Habsburg Spain (“La aristocracia” 63). Although those with a degree in one of the higher faculties of theology, law, and medicine might be particularly deserving of the term, as a foundational matter letrado designated anyone with university training. There is however a critical piece missing from Pérez’s definition: a letrado must not only have a university degree but, after attaining it, actively “profess” letters in public or private service. Harllee hints at such a model by her repeated insistence on the utility of scribes and grammarians performing a variety of state and municipal offices, as well as by highlighting their value as private tutors and confidants to noble households. Similarly, Nauert identifies letrados as “men of education”—university graduates trained in Latin in search of state careers—and
contrasts them with the vernacular aristocratic traditions of men like Santillana and Cartagena. By the reigns of Charles V (r.1516-1556) and Philip II (r.1556-1598), Nauert affirms, letrados were best understood as “educated officials who dominated all aspects of administration except the military” (Humanism 131). Although these authors correctly recognize that letrado denotes a university education, the literary record reveals that the term cannot be confined solely to officials in the royal administration or judiciary.

If in the broadest sense anyone who received a university education—whatever his specialty—could be termed a letrado, why were letrados so frequently identified with lawyers in the literature of the period? Pérez offers a simple explanation: because law was the most common course of study, letrado gradually come to be associated with the legal profession in the popular mind “La aristocracia” 63). This explanation accords well with Dedieu’s model, which claimed that the proliferation of legal studies in the major Castilian universities caused letrado to designate lawyer by antonomasia. Over half the students in the imperial universities studied law during the sixteenth century, and that number rose to well over two-thirds in the seventeenth century. Indeed, Pérez calculates that in Salamanca and Valladolid there were twenty lawyers for every theologian: “No wonder, under these conditions, the term letrado has come to mean almost exclusively lawyer” (“Les letrados” 444).

Disentangling the Semantic Confluence in the Term “Letrado”

The preceding sections expose the confusion among the various definitions of letrado that have been used by literary critics and historians, which fail to capture the full breadth of the term or the heterogeneous nature of the emergent class it describes. I propose reframing letrado as any university-graduate engaged in the profession of letters. This cluster of social functions extends beyond lawyers and jurists to include all university graduates, whether serving in the royal government—Dedieu’s “true letrados”—or in humbler occupations—Pelorson’s infra-
letrados and Dedieu’s “quasi-letrados.” Although in my opinion Pérez offers the most useful definition of the letrado class yet, associating that group with university study and state service, I go further still by identifying letrados not solely with bureaucratic administration but with a larger community of social and cultural interpretation. Moreover, as Pérez is a historian he is exclusively concerned with the historical record. The focus of this study is the letrado in literature: its emergence, expansion, and consolidation as a literary sociotype. Subsequent chapters will engage in contrastive analysis of various strategic deployments of letrado in numerous social, cultural, and literary contexts. Although I draw from the historical record when necessary to provide context or clarify the meaning of a crucial term, I am chiefly concerned with the ways in which the letrados represented themselves and were depicted by others in a variety of literary texts drawn from diverse genres.

It is fortunate that such an approach enjoys substantial support in existing models. Carol Harllee celebrates the letrados as the “intellectual class” that flaunted its supposed mental and cultural superiority over the nobility (557). Similarly, Barbara Mujica hails letrados as “men of letters” and links them firmly with the expanding book culture of the sixteenth century (71). In like manner, Juan Gil Fernández recognizes letrados as successors to the medieval omes de sciencia [men of science], and asserts that they were determined to maintain their monopoly on sciencia in the eyes of the public (23). Common to all these approaches is an insistence that letrado is not a monolithic term but rather encompasses a variety of positive and negative valences. Members of the “letrado elite” sought to distance themselves from less prestigious occupations—particularly scribes and trial attorneys—while members of those professions sought to elevate themselves to equal status with their social betters. Such attempts were not always successful: despite a primitive equivalence between gramático and letrado, the latter
group never accepted the former. The grammarians’ struggle to rise in status lasted nearly a century, but their legitimate aspiration was unable to overcome the defense mechanisms of the established order (Gil Fernández 24-25).

Part of the grammarians’ inability to achieve social parity with other letrados hinged on the concept of utility, a theme that recurs frequently in letrado literature. From the king’s perspective the letrado, lawyer, soldier, and official were all characterized by service to the monarchy and a particular type of education (Dedieu 507). Letrado status depended on mastering rhetorical techniques of literary creation, a luxury accessible only to a minority of highly interrelated people bound together by kinship (Galé Casajús 143). This letrado elite thus had the makings of a class—one that outwardly resembled a service nobility—and this was the image that letrado authors most frequently sought to convey. Yet it must not be forgotten when examining literary texts than letrados were ultimately a heterogeneous minority comprising members of the nobility, the Church, and even pecheros (García 223). Luis Morera cautions against reifying these categories: “Both letrados and caballeros were, after all, people, and rarely do human subjects exhibit perfectly explainable or predictable behavior” (89-90). It is with these caveats that we turn now to the literary record.
CHAPTER 3
“RHETORICAL HIRED GUNS”: LETRADOS AND HUMANISM

In Chapter 2 I used linguistic and juridical texts to demonstrate that during the early modern period letrado experienced a process of resemanticization corresponding to increased career opportunities for university graduates. As discussed, the majority of public administrative offices in Spain and the colonies were held by letrados trained in law. For the career-oriented, then, legal studies were widely considered the more practical option (García Flórez 29-31). In such an environment, it was inevitable that letrado should become associated with the legal profession in common parlance, especially among the lower echelons of society that aspired to financial security and material success. Castilian doctor Juan Huarte de San Juan comments on this usage in his treatise Examen de los ingenios (1575):

In the Spanish language it may be surprising that this name letrado, being a common term for all men of letters, whether theologians, jurists, doctors, dialecticians, philosophers, orators, mathematicians, and astronomers; that despite all this, in saying “So-and-so is a letrado,” everyone understands that his profession is the law, as if this name did not belong to any of those others.¹

However, this lexical association was not universal, and a competing literary discourse existed—indeed flourished—among letrados who had found an alternative mechanism of social mobility in the university itself. The aspiration of many letrados was to become integrated at court by demonstrating their mastery of letters, which constituted a means of social ascent unrelated to birth or lineage (Baranda Leturio, “El humanismo frustrado” 233). Inspired by Erasmus of Rotterdam, this new letrado literature expressly linked university training with state service, presenting letters as a rhetorical “weapon” with which to defend Christian society from external threats.

¹ San Juan 153. “En lengua española no debe carecer de misterio que, siendo este nombre, letrado, término común para todos los hombres de letras, así teólogos como legistas, médicos, dialecticos, filósofos, oradores, matemáticos y astrólogos; con todo eso, en diciendo ‘fulano es letrado’, todos entendemos de común consentimiento que su profesión es pericia de leyes, como si este fuese su apellido propio y particular, y no de los otros.”
enemies and to reform its internal vices. To borrow Luis Morera’s phrase, letrados were “rhetorical hired guns” in the service of the early modern state (88). The literary record reveals a common identification among a rising “nobility of letters,” one rooted in university training and state service rather than ancient lineage and military service.

Although the rise of the letrado class is often dated to the reign of the Catholic Kings, under Philip II (r. 1556-1598) it became thoroughly identified with the monarchy. As discussed in Chapter 2, the curricular reforms associated with Renaissance humanism fundamentally altered the university environment, introducing a much wider array of letters in which students could distinguish themselves. Alfonso X’s interest in the University of Salamanca had been practical rather than ideological. He created three cátedras (chairs or professorships) for canon law against only one for civil law, and earmarked twice as much funding for the former (Montes 116). This early preference for legal studies gave way in the Habsburg era to a renewed emphasis on theology. The Faculty of Theology at Salamanca was designed to prepare future members of the civil and ecclesiastical bureaucracy. The constitutions established by Pope Martin V in 1422 stipulated that no student could enroll in the superior faculties without having been instructed in Latin grammar, leading to the establishment of numerous grammar schools in the sixteenth century (Barrientos 773). Thereafter the study of rhetoric formed the basis of general education, and university students learned to cultivate a rich writing style through imitation of Latin prose-writers. The juridical field was thus enriched by theologians at the University of Salamanca, whose humanist scholarship gave way to ever more elaborate formulations of the law during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Aspiring lawyers were influenced by Christian Neostoicism, emphasizing the ideals of authority and the imposition of discipline upon subjects. Spanish humanists emphasized moral philosophy above other components of the studia humanitatis,
which they held was relevant for the development of the individual as well as for providing practical solutions to moral and political situations. As a result, although the majority of students continued to pursue canon or civil law, Salamanca’s theologians assumed a new importance as they emerged from the cloister to debate the prominent issues of sixteenth-century society: the rights of the Indians, questions of international law, moral economy, slavery, and so forth (Pena 227-28). Rather than isolated fields of unrelated study, all of the academic disciplines were closely related and many students passed from one faculty to another according to individual affinities and career ambitions. *Letrado* is therefore a versatile term implying a broad array of talents.

The letrado polemic should not be understood solely as a semantic shift. Rather, the literary record reveals the emergence of what contemporary Neostoics would call an *officio* and we might call a vocation—“a consciously assumed occupation that presupposes particular dispositions and talents as well as special skills acquired through study” (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 379). The letrado class positioned itself as the members of society uniquely suited to perform a public task: the propagation of the early modern state. This transition was driven by curricular reforms associated with humanism and the expanded conciliar system of government. The *officio* of the letrado is also marked by non-linguistic properties such as academic titles, dress, and institutional attributes like the professor’s platform. This nascent service nobility founded itself upon the Neostoic conception of “public service,” which is distinct from medieval notions of feudal service to the king. Christianized Neostoicism stressed the value of *prudentia*, which Jeremy Robbins defines as “the ability to scrutinize past events and present circumstances to enable the correct course of future actions to be chosen” (*Challenges* 18). Although this influence was felt most heavily during the late sixteenth century due to the vogue of Justus
Lipsius (1547–1606), the Flemish humanist famed for reconciling classical philosophy with Christianity, similar arguments against excessive credulity are evident in earlier generations of writers. Lipsian Neostoics equate appearance (parecer) with incorrect value judgment, while illusion (engaño) refers to false values of the world which are accepted as true by the majority of society (Robbins, “Neosticism” 61-62). Accordingly, Spanish Neostoics sought to elaborate a rational moral code in which it is possible to judge between two conflicting interpretations or positions. Letrado literature of the Spanish Renaissance expands upon this concept, positing that if a sufficient number of individuals are made virtuous then society itself will follow suit. This reform is to be accomplished through education, which the letrados themselves will direct through the university system they dominate. The class of letters thereby positions itself as the natural ruling class, subject only to the king.

The emergence of the new letrado discourse coincided with—and was nourished by—a renewed interest in the dialogic genre. Between 1500 and 1525 very few dialogues were published in Spain, and the majority of these were written in Latin and edited abroad; Jesús Gómez records only one original dialogue published in Castilian before 1525 (150). Such paucity reflects the decline of the genre’s popularity due to the persistence of Aristotelian dialectic in Spanish universities. For present purposes, dialectical inquiry may be defined as the systematic presentation of argument and counter-argument in order to reveal new knowledge. Medieval Scholastic argumentation had emphasized the mechanistic repetition of metaphysical questions, which critics alleged stifled dissent and severely limited the production of knowledge (Rallo 33-34). This environment changed with the accession of Charles V (r. 1516-1556), whose cosmopolitan court featured Erasmian intellectuals that favored the didactic and ludic potential of dialogues, leading to a revival of the genre between 1525 and 1550. Erasmian humanism was
an optimistic movement whose goal was the revitalization of society through education rooted in the liberal arts (Kincaid 133). In this spirit, authors employed the new dialogic genres to create a discursive space of dialectical inquiry that appealed to an increasingly sophisticated reading public. The Renaissance dialogue thus represents a coming together of form and content: dialogic texts invite the participation of the reader by presenting multiple points of view on a given subject enunciated by a variety of interlocutors. Such a model greatly resembles the conciliar system of government in which letrados employed their rhetorical skills of persuasion as instruments of governance. Unlike their medieval precursors, which had valued tradition and authority over innovation, the revived dialogic genres allow conflicting, overlapping, and contradictory discourses to engage readers on numerous levels, appealing to their reason while also entertaining them. This reformist program had a practical element as well as an idealistic one. Humanists were conscious of the value of rhetoric and mastery of language for political activity and administrative purposes, and they based their power on those strategic resources in the same way that the great merchants relied upon their economic resources (Martínez-Góngora 616-17). Letrado authors used this model to claim a privileged position as the gatekeepers to new knowledge. Civic humanism promoted a discursive space in which scholars would reveal hidden truths to the public through dialectical inquiry (Cascardi 82). The dialogic genre thus served to entertain readers while subtly advancing the cause of the letrado class.

This chapter will explore dialogues by several letrado authors who achieved social or political prominence during the first half of the sixteenth century through the public exercise of letters. The texts analyzed in this section reveal a common identification among a rising “nobility of letters,” one rooted in university training and state service rather than ancient lineage and military service. We will see that the “new man” of humanism is not limited to a university
environment but shares his wisdom with all of society (Rallo 40-41). Such a model was appealing to letrado authors who promoted an alternative hierarchy of merit as a justification for social privilege and distinction. To situate this process of identity formation within a uniquely Spanish context, let us examine a pair of dialogues written by the Valdés brothers, whose parallel careers illustrate the “hired gun” function of letrados in the public and private spheres during the height of the Erasmian vogue. These texts demonstrate the emergence of a discursive field in which letters replace arms as a means of serving the sovereign as well as defending the Republic.

Alfonso de Valdés (ca.1490–1532)

Public Patronage of Letrados

Many historians and literary critics consider Alfonso de Valdés to be the embodiment of Renaissance values in Spain. His Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón (1528) is regarded as his most important literary text and ranks among the best prose works of sixteenth-century Spain (Ricapito ix). Previous scholarship has focused on Alfonso’s association with Christian humanism, particularly his role in diffusing the works of Erasmus in Spain. This section will concentrate instead on an often-overlooked aspect of his life and career: his role as spokesman for the letrado class and defender of the emerging service nobility. Alfonso used humanist rhetoric to promote what literary scholar Anthony C ascardi describes as a “community of discourse,” a society ordered by reasoned argumentation rather than adherence to pre-established ideas (81). Ostensibly writing in support of the imperial cause, the author also uses the dialectical function of the dialogic genre to question the primacy of the military nobility. His interlocutors present the emergence of a discursive space dominated by letrados—rather than knights—as a salutary development for Christian society. In order to make this claim, a brief overview of the author’s intellectual and professional formation is essential.
Alfonso was born in Cuenca around 1490, although the precise date is unknown.² His father Hernando was hereditary regidor of the city—an alderman or municipal official. That he held this position suggests that the Valdés family was middling to aristocratic, an assumption reinforced by the fact that Alfonso’s brother Diego became a priest in Cartagena (Quilis 21). Despite these links with secular and religious authorities, the Valdés brothers had Jewish heritage on both sides of their family, and their mother was described as “conversa en tres cuartos” [of three-quarters converted Jewish ancestry].³ Consciousness of his family’s own mixed-faith background likely drew the young Alfonso to Christian humanism, the philosophical current with which he is most closely associated. The Italian humanist Peter Martyr d’Anghiera (1457–1526) directed Alfonso’s education and introduced him to the studia humanitatis. Scholarly pursuits led Alfonso to Alcalá de Henares, and perhaps also the University of Bologna. Attendance at either institution would situate him decisively within the ranks of the “letrado elite” as defined by Richard Kagan (Lawsuits and Litigants in Castile 197). Although he is described as a disciple of Erasmus, it will be seen that his chief concern was the state of Spanish letters as embodied by the letrado class. Before turning to the literary record, it is useful to examine Alfonso’s highly successful career as a courtier.

The young scholar’s introduction at court, possibly accomplished during his father’s sojourn in Valladolid (1505-1510), led to a short but brilliant career as a counselor and diplomat. Alfonso participated in a diplomatic mission to Germany in 1516, where he met Mercurino Gattinara, who became Imperial Chancellor in 1518. As a member of the imperial court Alfonso accompanied Charles V to Flanders and Germany in 1520 and 1521. He probably met Erasmus

² To avoid confusion, I will refer to each of the Valdés brothers by their first name only.
³ Navarro Durán xlvi. In this case, three of her four grandparents were Jewish converts to Christianity.
during his time in the Low Countries, as well as Castiglione upon returning to Spain in 1522 (Ricapito xi). That year he was appointed *escribiente ordinario de la cancillería*, a court secretary attached to the Chancellery. In 1526 Alfonso was named *secretario de cartas latinas*, a prestigious post with a substantial annual salary of 100,000 *maravedís*. His further advancement was curtailed when his mentor Gattinara died in 1530. Alfonso died two years later in Vienna of an unknown disease, possibly the plague (Navarro Durán xlvi-xlviii). His success as a royal official illustrates the letrados’ leading role in the modern state, as well as the potential for social ascent through public exercise of letters, themes that he develops further in his published works.

Alfonso’s early death explains his abbreviated literary corpus. His only other extant dialogue is the *Lactancio* (1528), which also concerns the Sack of Rome. Unlike the *Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón*, it contains no mythological or fantastical elements and is much more catechistical in structure. Such was their influence that an Italian translation of both dialogues was published in Venice in 1545, leading to their inclusion on the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1554. According to literary scholar Joseph Ricapito, “Valdés’ depiction of history was not always perfectly balanced and objective. His first loyalty was to the Emperor and his cause…” (xii). Although the author’s persistent bias in favor of the Habsburgs constrains his utility for historians, the *Diálogo’s* apologetic function effectively illustrates the letrados’ new role as propagandists for the political agendas of their royal patrons. As Cascardi observes, the discourse of myth allows authors to explore the speculative resources and limitations of a given set of values (165). Mercury and Charon challenge not only the Emperor’s enemies but also the archaic hierarchy they represent. The text thus balances propagandistic defense of the author’s patron with literary appeals to an educated public steeped in the *studia humanitatis*. 
Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón (1529)

The Diálogo de Mercurio y Carón remains Alfonso’s seminal work. Organized in two books of roughly equivalent length, the text features a series of conversations between the god Mercury, mythic ferryman Charon, and a parade of souls journeying towards the afterlife. The Diálogo may be further divided into an ideological and a historical part. The ideological content consists of criticism of ignorant priests, warlike monarchs, deceitful courtiers, and other contemporary moral strictures typical of Erasmian satire. The historical part of the Diálogo is a vehement defense of the Emperor’s actions, chiefly the sack of Rome by imperial forces in 1527. As Ricapito observes, “The interpretation of history presented therein must always be viewed with some suspicion because of Valdés’ total devotion to Charles V and his causes” (xvii). Despite this caveat, the text is highly useful for this dissertation as the author’s indisputable loyalty to his sovereign enables him to make bold claims about the status of letters in society.

Critics have focused on the discursive agility of the Diálogo, in which Alfonso maintains the readers’ interest by never dwelling overlong on any speaker. Both books observe the same structural elements: Mercury’s narration of political events is interrupted by the arrival of a soul, which is questioned by the two interlocutors before being sent along to its fate. The primary difference is that in Book One, all but one of the souls are condemned to hell, whereas in Book Two the souls are destined to heaven. Consequently, the first book is noticeably more ironic in character than the second, as the ideological content and moral exemplarity of the second require a much more serious treatment than the farcical hypocrites of the first. The interplay between the two principal interlocutors provides variety, as Mercury’s lengthy narration of political events is broken up by Charon’s frequent questions and interjections. Their conversation is also repeatedly interrupted by the appearance of souls on their way to salvation or perdition, who introduce doctrinal elements into what would otherwise be a political treatise. The text thus maintains
harmony between authentic dialogue and narrative exposition. The parade of souls consists of twelve in Book One and another six in Book Two, a structure that likewise reflects the Erasmian preference for opposition and coincidence (Navarro Durán xl-xlIII).

The Prohemio (Prologue) contains several useful details for this dissertation. From the first lines the author declares his support for the Emperor, which he will express in a learned style as befits a letrado: “I was moved to write this dialogue by a desire to show the Emperor’s justice and the iniquity of those who defied him, in a style that any class of man could read with pleasure.”4 Though brief, this passage introduces the theme of humanistic letters as a strategic weapon in service of the imperial cause. Alfonso, a university-trained humanist, uses the rhetorical tools acquired from his advanced education to defend his sovereign’s actions—the Sack of Rome—and to indict the Habsburgs’ enemies as treacherous schemers who deserve their fate. At the same time, Alfonso makes sure to leave an escape route open by disclaiming any novelty in the arguments he advances: “If the style and doctrine of this work are good, give credit to Lucian, Pontus, and Erasmus, whose works I have imitated, and as such I have nothing for which to expect praise.”5 Further examples will demonstrate that the use of dialogue replete with Classical allusions was a frequent device of letrado authors wishing to avoid censorship.

As discussed above, the prevalence of satire in Book One makes it the more “literary” part of the text. The souls encountered by the interlocutors are prototypes representing social estates, including several members of the letrado class. Alfonso thus gives life to Erasmian ideas through his characters (Navarro Durán xvi). Most relevant for the present study is the encounter

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4 A. Valdés 3. “La causa principal que me movió a escribir este diálogo fue deseo de manifestar la justicia del Emperador y la iniquidad de aquéllos que lo desafían, y en estilo que de todo género de hombres fuese con sabor leído, para lo cual me ocurrió esta invención…”

5 A. Valdés 4. “[S]i la invención y doctrina es buena, dense las gracias a Luciano, Pontano y Erasmo, cuyas obras en esto hemos imitado, y pues a mí no me queda cosa de que gloria alguna deba esperar.”
with a self-professed theologian on the road to perdition. The soul declares that being a theologian simply means to know how to settle questions of theology through argumentation.\textsuperscript{6} Charon, ever the cynic, is astonished to learn that the self-styled theologian is almost entirely ignorant of Scripture—including the Gospels—as well as the writings of the Church Fathers. The theologian dismissively responds, “As if a theologian needed the Epistles and Gospels!”\textsuperscript{7}

Superficially, we are presented with a typical Erasmian criticism of clerical ignorance and arrogance. However, Charon’s strictures regarding letrados go further than moralistic commonplaces. The theologian’s extreme presumption prompts the ferryman to condemn shallow learning—masked here by an ornate style—as an inadequate foundation for letrado status:

You spend all your life studying these disputes, questions, and doubtful and difficult matters to make the simple folk think you know something and are letrados, but you read neither Holy Scripture nor those learned doctors from whom you could receive true Christian doctrine, and thus you reap the fruit you have sown for yourselves and for all.\textsuperscript{8}

Here Charon applies the label letrado to a seminarian that has studied theology rather than law. This designation resonates with the author’s own background as a theologian and Latinist for whom university study—not legal training—was the defining criterion for letrado status.

The author reaffirms humanist scholars as the natural governing class in subsequent examples. As noted above, Book Two presents positive counterpoints to the negative exempla of the preceding section. The most illustrative for this study is the unnamed bishop, who is depicted

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} A. Valdés 100. “Saber disputar pro y contra, y determinar cuestiones de teología.”
  \item \textsuperscript{7} A. Valdés 101. “¡Como si para ser teólogo fuese menester las Epístolas ni Evangelios!”
  \item \textsuperscript{8} A. Valdés 102. “Andáis vosotros toda vuestra vida leyendo y aprendiendo disputas, cuestiones, dudas y dificultades por dar a entender a los simples que sabéis algo porque os tengan por letrados, y no curáis de leer la Sagrada Escritura ni aquellos doctores de que podríais sacar la verdadera doctrina cristiana, y así cual es vuestro ejercicio, tal es el fruto que hacéis para vosotros y para todos.”
\end{itemize}
as the ideal Christian pastor. So earnest is this bishop that the two gods fall uncharacteristically silent in order to listen in rapt attention to his discourse. The bishop extols the colegial system for its potential to train an elite of letrados who in turn will promote the good of the republic:

I established a College in which one hundred boys would learn to live as Christians, and be trained to teach others, and I did not enroll students for personal favors or for profit, but only those who seemed most likely to be useful to the republic, and I gave them the most distinguished professors in letters and in good living that I could find.9

This description is no utopic abstraction. The bishop presents his model as an achievable goal, devoting attention to practical considerations like funding and salaries: “I provided for the Colleges from vacant benefices according to the ability and letters of each.”10 The gods are astonished not only by the bishop’s evident wisdom and sincerity, but also by the stark contrast between this idealized figure and the mass of greedy and uneducated clergy they routinely see condemned to hell. Mercury declares: “I marvel at the boldness of these others who request bishoprics only to make poor use of them, and marvel even more at those who grant them.”11 Charon responds: “I tell you, Mercury, they are either idiots or letrados; if they are idiots, they do not know what they are asking; if they are letrados, believe me that they do not believe what they have read.”12 The context makes clear that letrados does not refer narrowly to lawyers but rather to scholars with broad training in theology and moral philosophy—not unlike the author. Alfonso

9 A. Valdés 162. “Allende de esto, ordené un colegio en que cien niños aprendiesen a vivir como cristianos, y ciencia para que lo supiesen enseñar a otros, no poniendo en él personas por favor ni por otra granjería, sino los que a mi parecer hubiesen de salir más útiles a la república, dándoles los más insignes maestros que en letras y en bondad de vida hallaba.”

10 A. Valdés 162. “A estos colegiales proveía yo de los beneficios que vacaban, conforme a la habilidad y letras de cada uno.”

11 A. Valdés 165. “De esos tales me maravillo yo con qué cara osan pedir obispados para usar tan mal de ellos, y aun mucho más de los que se los dan.”

12 A. Valdés 165. “Yo te diré, Mercurio, los que los piden, o son idiotas o letrados; si idiotas, no saben lo que se piden; si letrados, créeme tú que no creen firmemente lo que leen...”
thus promotes a discursive space in which letters eclipse arms as a means of governing. As propagandist for the imperial cause, the clever humanist demonstrates that letrados perform a valuable service for his patron Charles V that the traditional military cannot.

As the previous example illustrates, the text defines the letrado class in opposition to the unlearned (idiotas). This theme is developed further with the testimony of the ideal preacher (predicador), another righteous soul who evidently holds in low esteem the excessively embellished style of many letrados: “My firm intention was not to make my sermons very high and elegant as long as they were Christian, and I did not care if others called me ignorant or said that my sermons were not those of a letrado, as long as they knew that they were of a Christian.” The preceding examples illustrate two relevant points for the present study. First, in the early modern era letrado was used broadly to denote well-educated individuals capable of cultivating a high literary style. Second, the term had positive and negative valences during this period, as the interlocutors alternate between praising letrados’ brilliance and criticizing their vanity. This discourse is further developed in the parallel corpus of Alfonso’s brother Juan, a defender of Latinate education and promoter of meritocracy—the foundation of the letrado class.

**Juan de Valdés (ca.1490–1541)**

**Private Patronage of Letrados**

Juan de Valdés’ life and career also coincided with the reign of Charles V (1517-1556). Born in Cuenca between 1490 and 1498, he is frequently described as Alfonso’s twin, although this is disputed (Marsá x). The brothers were very close, given their common affinity for humanistic studies which they acquired as disciples of Pedro Mártir d’Anghiera. Whereas

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13 A. Valdés, “Ésta era mi muy firme intención y a este fin enderezaba yo todas mis palabras y obras, no curándome de que mis sermones fuesen muy altos ni muy elegantas, con que fuesen cristianos, ni dándoseme nada que me dijesen idiota y mis sermones no ser de letrado, con que conociesen ser de cristiano.”
Alfonso rapidly ascended the state bureaucracy, Juan thrived in private service. In 1523 he entered the service of Diego López de Pacheco, Marquis of Villena. While residing at the nobleman’s estate in Escalona, Juan was tutored by Pedro Ruiz de Alcaraz, spiritual counselor to the Marquis, who was later prosecuted by the Inquisition for alumbrado sympathies. This early exposure to Illuminist and Erasmian currents, combined with the Valdés family’s mixed-faith background, exercised a notable influence on his literary output. Juan’s dialogues coincided with the Protestant Reformation in the insistence on justification by faith alone. Although he and his followers disclaimed any Protestant affiliation, Juan’s corpus illustrates the potential of Christian humanistic letters—as indicated above by Cascardi—for dismantling pre-established beliefs.

Some five years after his arrival in Escalona, Juan enrolled at the University of Alcalá de Henares. What Juan studied at Alcalá is unknown, but he evidently acquired a background in classical languages and Scripture. It was in that city that he published his seminal work *Diálogo de la doctrina christiana* (1529). The text was not well received by the Inquisition, owing to its Erasmian spirit, and the Holy Office promptly commenced a proceeding against the author. Despite this negative reaction, the tribunal apparently never took any formal action against the author. Juan relocated to Rome, where from 1531 to 1532 he was a gentilhombre de capa y espada in the court of Pope Clement VII, a post that Hispanist Antonio Quilis describes as “purely honorific” (22). Following his patron’s death, Juan moved definitively to Naples in 1534, where he apparently held an office in the viceregal administration and perhaps even served as a political agent for Emperor Charles V. Juan seemed to acclimate quickly to his new environment, so much so that he refused suggestions from various colleagues to return to Spain (Marsá xii-xiii). He lived comfortably in Neapolitan high society until his death in 1541.

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14 Lope Blanch 7. *Alumbrado* refers here to a mystical Christian tradition arising in 16th century Castile.
Although the *Diálogo* was the immediate cause of Juan’s expatriation, linguist Francisco Marsá insists that he was neither an exile nor a fugitive, and describes his departure as “voluntary and preventative” (xvi). That Juan was never formally charged by the Inquisition likely owes much to his skill at cultivating patrons: he dedicated the present text to his protector, the Marquis of Villena, and found favor at the papal court shortly thereafter. By 1535 Juan befriended Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, with whom he maintained an intense correspondence, and with Giulia Gonzaga, Countess of Fondi, whose spiritual companionship would last until his death (Quilis 23). The author’s success as a courtier and administrator demonstrate the resilience and durability of the letrado network, which in some instances could even defy the Holy Office itself. Because his later texts were dedicated to the spiritual edification of a select group of his colleagues and friends, most were not printed in his lifetime and many were lost (Lope Blanch 8). Notwithstanding, Juan’s truncated literary corpus illustrates the ascendant role of letrados in both public and private service. Examples from the present Dialogue will show that humanistic letters provide a reliable means of securing patronage in the competitive world of the court.

**Diálogo de la doctrina cristiana (1529)**

The Dialogue forms a counterpoint to Alfonso’s text: whereas the latter was a highly erudite dialogue meant for a broad public—indeed, the broadest public possible—the former is a comparatively intimate, personal work destined for a select group of readers. Juan’s reformist zeal relegates literary style to a very secondary position. Marsá explains that the author’s didactic goals lead him to favor a clear and precise vocabulary to overblown rhetoric, sacrificing literary ostentation for catechistical efficiency (xvii). Despite the reduced scope of potential readership, the text serves the same didactic and propagandistic purposes as Alfonso’s more scholarly dialogues. Juan, like his brother, seeks to proselytize his readers in the name of Erasmus and Christian humanism. Earlier generations of Italian humanists like Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406–1457)
and their Castilian successors like Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) had spoken broadly of a res publica christiana as a spiritual, rather than territorial, empire (Binotti 149). This ideal society, as elaborated by anti-war Erasmians, would be founded on letters rather than arms. Accordingly, the Dialogue’s relevance for the present project is the extreme importance the interlocutors accord to letrados due to their prominent role in advancing Christian society and good government.

The Diálogo is not formally arranged into books or chapters, but critical editions generally divide the text based on the topics of exegesis. The text features three interlocutors: Antronio, an ignorant priest; Eusebio, a clever layman; and an unnamed Archbishop through whom the author expounds Erasmian doctrine. Although frequent interruptions from the first two speakers provide some variety to the reader, the text is essentially a catechistical exchange in which the privileged voice of the Archbishop imparts his wisdom to a pair of eager supplicants. This dialogue illustrates the role of the letrado class in the Christian humanist vision of an ideal society. In his commentary on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Archbishop equates letrado status broadly with the quality of being well-educated:

I say to you that the purpose of wisdom, which is all knowledge that delights, is to know, experience, and enjoy God, and so the more wisdom a soul has the more it may know, experience, and enjoy [God]. This wisdom God often bestows upon the simple or the elderly but denies to a great letrado, so if you tell him he will think it is heathen babble.15

As his brother had done, Juan defines letrado—enhanced here with the superlative letradazo—in opposition to idiota (“uneducated”). Although ciencia (“knowledge”) is a broad term that can embrace many categories, the reference here is clearly to theology and moral philosophy as

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15 J. Valdés. “Yo os la diré: que la sabiduría, que es ciencia sabrosa, es para conocer, gustar y sentir a Dios, y así, cuanto más tiene el alma esta sabiduría, más conoce y más siente y más gusta. Esta la da Dios muchas veces a una viejecita y a un idiota y la niega a un letradazo, de tal manera, que si le habláis de ella le parecerá que es algarabía o cosa semejante.”
applied in preaching and religious instruction: “Knowledge is specifically for those who have to
teach the word of God, and so you should understand that this knowledge is what Jesus promised
his Apostles, which he told them men would not be able to resist.”16 According to this model,
letters are no mere courtly adornment but an irresistible force for moral and social reform.

In the Compendio, a section broadly analyzing Scripture, Antronio asks the Archbishop
who has taught him such subtle doctrines: “Who was it that instructed you? I can only believe
that God has miraculously taught you, because there are many theologians and great letrados
who would not know how to speak as clearly and to the point as you have done.”17 Once again,
letrado is used in the context of theology and moral philosophy. The Archbishop responds at
length, giving a typical Erasmian description of the proper education of children:

Just as the prelate is obligated to instruct his bishopric in Christian doctrine, and the
priest his congregation, so too is one obligated to instruct one’s children and
household; especially when one is a letrado, not having learned his letters solely to
make a living, but for the edification of his soul and those of his household.18

Here letrado appears as a synonym for being learned, and although their discussion centers on
matters of theology the cited passage makes clear that the Archbishop is contemplating much
more than just letters of divinity. Significant, too, is the Archbishop’s insistence that the proper
function of letters is not just to earn a living for the letrado but to edify the souls of his
household. Letrados are thus presented as university-trained servants of the broader community.

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16 J. Valdés. “Es la ciencia particularmente para los que han de enseñar la palabra de Dios, y así habéis de
entender que ésta es la que Jesucristo prometió a sus Apóstoles, a la cual, les dijo, que no podrían los hombres
resistir.”

17 J. Valdés. “¿Y quién fue el que os instruyó al principio de ello?, porque no puedo creer sino que
milagrosamente os ha enseñado Dios; pues hay muchos teólogos y grandes letrados que no sabrían hablar en lo que
vos habéis hablado tan puramente ni tan al propósito.”

18 J. Valdés. “[A]sí como el prelado está obligado a instruir en la doctrina cristiana a los de su obispado, y
el cura a los de su iglesia, así también estaba él obligado a instruir a sus hijos y a los de su casa; especialmente
siendo letrado, y no habiendo aprendido letras para ganar de comer con ellas, sino para edificación de su alma y de
las de los de su casa.”
The text also addresses the status of *infra-letrados*—Jean-Marc Pelorson’s term for the less distinguished lettered professions—in the section entitled *De la reforma de la Iglesia*, which concerns the value of a Latinate education. The author is evidently in sympathy with writers like Nebrija who strove to elevate the social status of grammarians, particularly Latinists. Antronio reveals that, although he was ordained and is now over fifty years old, he cannot read Latin. The Archbishop is astonished, and asks how he has celebrated mass over the years without even a rudimentary grasp of what he is saying. Antronio’s response is rich in Erasmian satire:

I will tell you. As a young man I became a friar; and because I had a good voice and was the right age, they made me pronounce the mass, although I didn’t know Latin, or even how to read, because (as you know) the bishop does not examine friars, but only the ordinary prelate, and so I was passed along with many others. Later, though I do not quite know why, I gave up the habit, perhaps because I was not satisfied there. 19

The Archbishop is repulsed and considers the priest not to be a letrado at all because of his ignorance of Latin. He further remarks that in his own archbishopric he investigates every candidate for the priesthood extensively, paying special attention to his formation in languages:

“If I find that [a candidate] has lived in conformity to the Christian religion, and that he is also a person of letters and ability, I will ordain him; and if he lacks any of these things, even if all the world pesters me for his sake, I will not ordain him or confer any degree on him.” 20 The label *persona de letras y habilidad* is particularly relevant for the current study, as it excludes lineage as a criterion for holding office. This ideal would become one of the tenets of the letrado class.

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19 J. Valdés. “Yo os lo diré. Siendo mancebete me metí fraile; y como tenía buena voz, en siendo de edad, me hicieron ordenar de misa, aunque no sabía latín, ni aun apenas leer, porque como sabéis, a los frailes no los examina el obispo, sino sus guardianes, y así pasé yo entre otros. Después, por no sé qué desconcierto, dejé el hábito, y también porque no me hallaba bien allí.”

20 J. Valdés. “Y si hallare que su vida ha sido y es muy conforme a la religión cristiana, y que junto con esto es persona de letras y habilidad, le daré órdenes; y, si no, por cualquiera cosa de éstas que le falte, aunque me importune todo el mundo, no le ordenaré ni aun de grados.”
Like his brother, Juan evidently blames the collapse of public morals upon widespread ignorance among clerical officials, as well as corruption in the ecclesiastical hierarchy that permits such mismanagement. The Archbishop expands upon this criticism by affirming that only a program of education—not just of the clergy but of all the faithful—can restore society:

There is nothing I can say to you [Antronio] except, since you do not have time to learn Latin, you must study vernacular books a great deal; and you must likewise find a person of good letters and good spirit, to whom you will give half your [ecclesiastical] income, who will instruct you in what you should do. And do not take this instruction ill, because I assure you, if you were my subordinate, you would not get off so lightly.\(^{21}\)

The author thus combines Erasmian satire of clerical abuses with appreciation for a humanist, Latinate education as a program for social reform. Whereas Alfonso had emphasized the monarch’s role in promoting reform through education—such as through the foundation of teaching colleges to train a new generation of letrados—Juan instead seeks social reform through small-scale gatherings and private literary societies. Although the Valdés brothers were constrained by their role as “hired guns” in service of specific patrons, subsequent authors would build on these themes to assert more dynamic claims in favor of the nobility of letters. The next section examines the work of a celebrated letrado author who presents letters not merely as an alternative to arms but as their replacement.

_Hernán Pérez de Oliva (1494–1531)_

**Letrados and the “Nobility of Letters”**

Hernán Pérez de Oliva is known as a luminary of Renaissance civic humanism, which for present purposes may be defined as the public application of the cultivation of letters. Unlike

\(^{21}\) J. Valdés. “A vos no hay otra cosa que responderos, sino que, pues ya no tenéis tiempo para aprender latín, estudiéis muy mucho en libros de romance; y que asimismo toméis en vuestra compañía alguna persona de buenas letras y buen espíritu, al cual vos deís la mitad de vuestra renta, porque él vos instruya a vos en lo que debéis hacer. Y no se os haga esto de mal, que yo os certifico, si fuereis mi súbdito, no liberaríais tan bien.”
medieval tradition emphasizing philosophical abstractions and contemplation, the new civic humanism stressed the public and social dimension of letters. This model resonated with the letrado class and the emerging service nobility, which based its claims for social status on its perceived utility to the Republic. Oliva and his colleagues called for men of letters to leave the seclusion of the university or cloister and place themselves at the service of the widest possible public (15-16). The author’s unusual intellectual formation combines interest in humanistic letters (*letras de humanidad*) with more specialized academic matters. He spent three years at the University of Salamanca, another year at Alcalá de Henares, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and later traveled to Rome, meeting many prominent humanists. Returning to Spain in 1526, he joined the faculty of Salamanca and was elected rector in 1529. His literary and professional attainments situate him at the pinnacle of the letrado elite. A promising career was cut short by his sudden death in 1531, which explains his abbreviated corpus.

The *Diálogo de la dignidad del hombre* is one of the chief humanist texts of the Spanish Renaissance, both for its elegant style as well as for its careful structure. Because of its similarities with Erasmus’ *Sermo de misericordia Dei* (1524), María José Vega Ramos situates the text’s composition between 1524 and 1527 (106n1). The Dialogue remained unpublished until 1546, when an edition appeared in Alcalá de Henares prepared by the Castilian humanist Francisco Cervantes de Salazar (ca. 1514–1575). The definitive edition was published in Córdoba in 1586 under the auspices of Ambrosio de Morales (1513–1591), Oliva’s nephew and fellow humanist. The text’s egalitarian spirit resonates with the ambitions of the letrado class, who opposed hereditary privilege when not confirmed by personal merit. Oliva shares the

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Renaissance humanist belief that the dignity of man does not derive from participation in a social paradigm or hierarchy, but instead consists of virtue that all human beings inherently possess (Roig 20). Stoics saw virtue as the only guarantee of peace and happiness in an individual's life (Krabbenhoft 29). Each person is a microcosm implicated in the overarching relations of power and dignity corresponding to each person's office. Once again, the term *officio* should be understood in the Neostoic sense of social responsibilities or functions (Roig 14). The text thus underscores the public role of letrados in Renaissance society. By elevating the status of letters—expressed here as the discursive tools for argumentation—Oliva advances the perceived importance of the letrado class as the group able to wield them most effectively, a position he shares with the Valdés brothers.

The text departs from the structure of Italian dialogues written during the fifteenth century in which two speakers submit their opposing viewpoints to the final authority of a third-party judge. The absence of such a judge in the instant text, as well as the lack of a prologue, underscores the author's lack of personal engagement with either position in the debate. The text is not a catechistical exchange between master and disciple, but a genuine dispute among equal colleagues who have a relation of mutual confidence and admiration (Baranda, “Marca de interlocución” 272-73). Antonio and Aurelio, the respective defenders of *dignitas* and *miseria hominis*, do not exist as authentic characters but as vehicles to express two competing discourses. María Luisa Cerrón Puga even suggests that the dialogue may have been a pretext for Oliva to show his rhetorical skill and mastery of Castilian grammar (15-16). This interpretation has a basis in contemporary fact: Ambrosio de Morales realized the importance of the dialogue as a model of rhetoric and oratory, adding a brief *Discurso sobre la lengua castellana* to the front of his 1586 edition of the text. Victoria Pineda suggests Oliva’s purpose was to demonstrate that
Castilian was capable of competing with any vernacular literature (44). The text thus affirms the letrados’ dual role as propagandists and pedagogues in the early modern state, while subtly casting lettered professions as a more civilized—and potentially ennobling—alternative to arms.

**Diálogo de la Dignidad del Hombre (1546)**

As suggested above, the *Dialogue on the Dignity of Man* evinces a strong Erasmian influence in its praise of letters, both human and divine, and the author’s evident belief in the capacity for self-improvement through education. The pretext for the Dialogue is slight: two close friends, Antonio and Aurelio, meet by chance and begin an impromptu discussion of human nature. Following the Ciceronian model, they elect another colleague, Dinarco, as an informal “judge” to hear their arguments and determine the winner. The topic of their debate is the Classical *topos* of the dignity of man, which is relevant to the present study because it accords letrados a prominent role in human society and recognizes the corresponding ennobling function of education. The Dialogue’s conversational framework coincides with the didactic objectives of the humanists, allowing authors to speak in terms of contemporary social reality in order to create a communicative framework that is credible (Ferreras 224-25). Although the debate went unresolved in the original text, the role of letters in both discourses is relevant to our analysis of the letrado polemic.

The discourse of *dignitas* originated in ancient Rome, where it alluded to the Stoic concept of the public individual actively engaged in political life. In this tradition, Cicero had emphasized man’s capacity for understanding which manifests as ethical conduct. This remained the reigning model of the dignity of man throughout the Middle Ages, and humanists accepted the classical notion of a political life that contained public and moral components (Rivas Hernández 174). Rebelling against this view, Aurelio declares that all offices and arts are futile, as even letrados are not exempt from *miseria* because of the futility of their studies in the face of
death. Whereas the Valdés brothers had offered an optimistic vision in which letrados reform society through education, Aurelio affirms that human nature is so corrupt that neither public participation nor contemplative withdrawal can save man from himself. This materialist and negative view is opposed by Antonio’s Christian humanist perspective, which resembles that of Juan de Valdés in that a scholarly elite may find refuge within the privileged space of thought and artistic creation. The rest of the Dialogue seeks to reconcile these rival discourses, concluding with a tepid verdict in favor of dignitas.

According to Aurelio, the ultimate refuge of men of letters is in writing, which functions as a defense against impermanence and obscurity. Instead of seeking fame on the battlefield, men of letters achieve immortality through the texts they compose and leave for posterity. This recurring theme in letrado literature is frequently invoked as a justification for the nobility of letters. Breaking with Erasmian tradition, Aurelio inverts this model and insists that letrados have deluded themselves by linking their fate with that of their texts: “All will be forgotten, time erases everything.”

Assuming the voice of miseria hominis, he despairingly announces:

And although they [i.e. letrados] speak the truth, they do not write on the incorruptible sky, nor with immutable letters; rather, they write on paper, with letters that, although they were durable, with the advance of time are finally forgotten. The letters of the Egyptians and Chaldeans, and many others who so flourished, who knows them? Who remembers today the kings and great men that entrusted their fame to letters?

Whereas letrado authors see their literary output as a means of securing their legacy and perpetuating their memory, Aurelio derides the textual medium as impermanent and futile.

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24 Oliva, Diálogo, 135.

25 Oliva, Diálogo, 135. “Y aunque digan la verdad, no escriben en el cielo incorruptible, ni con letras inmudables; sino escriben en papel, con letras que, aunque en el fueran durables, con mudanza de los tiempos a la fin se desconocen. Las letras de egipcios y caldeos, y otros muchos que tanto florecieron, ¿quién las sabe? ¿Quién conoce ahora los reyes, los grandes hombres que a ellas encomendaron su fama?”
Although the others speakers praise his eloquence, his bleak vision exists only to be disavowed, essentially inviting its own refutation through Antonio’s counter-discourse of *dignitas*.

Antonio first responds by exalting letters as a potential source of immortality. No longer condemned to a brief existence, men of letters can achieve fame, which is a form of life after death. Their written legacy confers dignity on man. Coinciding with Erasmus, Antonio notes that through letters contemporary readers can access the accumulated knowledge of the centuries:

I consider it the great miracle of letters that they give us the ability to speak to those who are not present with us today and to hear now the words our wise ancestors said. Letters maintain our memory, sustain the sciences, and, which is most admirable, extend our life over long centuries, for by them we know the past, which is to feel them live again.\(^{26}\)

Antonio’s counter-discourse thus maintains that letters are the foundation of human dignity and letrados—not warriors—are the divinely appointed defenders of society. In Christian humanist fashion he adduces Biblical examples to support his position, ascribing these words to Solomon:

Wisdom is a great thing, Aurelio, for it reveals to us everything in the world, and exposes the secret things, and allows us to see God and to converse with Him, and shows us all the paths of life! … Through wisdom the kings reign and the princes govern, and wisdom disclosed the laws with which men are governed.\(^{27}\)

Antonio thus recognizes the public and private dimensions of letters, acknowledging their capacity not only to enrich the individual soul through education but also to create a hierarchy of laws to govern society. Within this framework, he positions letrados as the natural ruling class.

\(^{26}\) Oliva, *Diálogo* 153. “[E]ste hallo el gran milagro de las letras, que nos dan facultad de hablar con los absentes y de escuchar ahora a los sabios antepasados las cosas que dijeron. Las letras nos mantienen la memoria, no guardan las ciencias y, lo que es más admirable, nos estienden la vida a largos siglos, pues por ellas conocemos todos los tiempos pasados, los cuales vivir no es sino sentirlos.”

\(^{27}\) Oliva 20. “¡Gran cosa es, Aurelio, la sabiduría, al cual nos muestra todo el mundo, y nos mete a lo secreto de las cosas, y nos lleva a ver a Dios, y nos da habla con El y conversación, y nos muestra las sendas de la vida! … [P]or ella reinan los reyes y los príncipes gobiernan; y ella hallo las leyes con que se rigen los hombres.”
Despite his evident preference for letters, Antonio recognizes the important role that arms have in society as protection against invasion and civil unrest. As part of the earlier *miseria* discourse, Aurelio had presented arms in a negative light, declaring: “And if you observe the men of war that guard the republic, you must see them dressed in iron, maintained by robbery, careful to kill and fearful of being killed…” Antonio demurs from this grim interpretation—any gift, he reminds his colleague, can be abused. Ostensibly defending the warrior caste, Antonio simultaneously demystifies its military function, describing arms as a tool to achieve a specific goal—the preservation of peace—rather than a sacred calling or estamental category:

Here are the failings of man; here are the errors, among which I do not count arms like you do, Aurelio, because if there must be bad men then arms are good to defend us from them… Likewise, arms through bad use become bad, but they are good in themselves to defend against violent beasts and the men that resemble them.  

Antonio’s counter-discourse breaks with the medieval tradition that exalted military service as a quasi-divine mission, instead placing arms on the same level as plows and other labor devices. In true Erasmian fashion, he deconstructs the warrior class without altogether denying its validity as a social entity or its importance in the proper functioning of the state. Although he states he does not consider the military function of arms bad in itself, the previous description of a soldier’s hardships seem calculated to remove the rosy gloss those figures had acquired in novels of chivalry. Oliva’s friend and colleague Cristóbal de Villalón expanded upon his legacy by

28 Oliva, *Diálogo* 132-33. “Y si miráis la gente de guerra que guarda la república, verlos heis vestidos de hierro, mantenidos de robos, con cuidados de matar y temores de ser muertos, andando en continua mudanza do los llama la fortuna, con iguales trabajos en la noche y en el día.”

29 Oliva, *Diálogo*, 154-55. “Aquí son los desvanecimientos del hombre; aquí los errores, entre los cuales yo no cuento las armas como tú, Aurelio, que pues avía de aver malos, buenas fueron para defenderos dellos… así pues, las armas con mal uso se hacen malas, que ellas en si buenas son para defenderse de las bestias impetuosas y los hombres que les parecen.”
promoting university reform to further the cause of the transnational “Republic of Letters,” an
idealized community of scholars governed by meritocracy rather than hereditary nobility.

Cristóbal de Villalón (ca.1510–1588)

Universities and the “Republic of Letters”

Cristóbal de Villalón is a notoriously difficult object of textual inquiry as much of his
eyearly life and career remains obscure. Regarding his biography, José Miguel Martínez-Torrejón
declares, “We only know that he was an old Castilian humanist, dedicated to education and
concerned about it.”30 Despite the paucity of concrete information, Villalón’s life and career
situate him decisively within the letrado class and reveal him as one of the most outspoken
proponents of a “nobility of letters” in early modern Spain. His literary opus synthesizes the
Erasmian, humanist, and classicist traditions present in the other works examined in this chapter
to such an extent that his inclusion here is essential. His unpublished manuscript El Scholástico
(ca. 1541) is most useful for present purposes as it promotes university reform through literary
discourse as a means of realizing the humanist ideal of a transnational “Republic of Letters.”

Regarding the author’s origins, literary scholar Joseph Kincaid states, “We know nothing
of the date and place of Villalón’s birth, his family, or his early years, but it is reasonable to
suppose that he was born in or near Valladolid toward the beginning of the sixteenth century”
(Kincaid 103). In 1525 Villalón graduated from the University of Alcalá de Henares with a
bachelorate in Arts, obtained a position on the Faculty of Theology at the University of
Salamanca, and likely began writing El Scholástico. By 1530 Villalón was part of the Faculty of
Arts at the University of Valladolid, where he later received a licentiate in theology in 1545. He

30 Martínez-Torrejón xi. “Sólo sabemos que fue castellano viejo, humanista, dedicado a la educación y
preocupado por ella.”
also served as Latin tutor to the sons of the Count of Lemos from 1532 to 1534 (Martínez-Torrejón x-xi). In 1537 he won a suit against the Count’s widow for back salary, an encounter that may have contributed to his negative view of the idle nobility. After residing at court for over a decade, the author apparently retired to a small village in Zamora in his old age, where he wrote his final work, the Gramática castellana (1558). Scholars have questioned the attribution of several key texts to this enigmatic author— notably El Crótalon (1556) and Viaje de Turquía (1557)—and some have even suggested the existence of multiple authors publishing under the pseudonym el licenciado Villalón. Kincaid declares there is no justification for a “second” Villalón, and avers that proponents of this view have created “a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces do not match” (110). Asunción Rallo’s subsequent investigations reveal that Villalón lived at court from 1532 to 1545, where he published a number of humanistic texts including Tragedia de Mirha (1536) and the Ingeniosa comparación entre lo antiguo y lo presente (1539) among others (23). Although Villalón’s literary output remains the topic of much critical debate, his authorship of El Scholástico is undisputed, and the text is relevant to this dissertation as a mature statement of the letrado polemic.

Villalón aspired to arrest the perceived decline of Spain’s universities and the ignorance of professors. His corpus extends Erasmian criticism of clerical ignorance to the sabios—the supposedly wise men of letters whose profession is to share their wisdom in the universities, but who perpetuate medieval culture by rejecting the classics. Whereas Erasmus’ target was the clergy and Nebrija’s was the grammarians, Villalón addresses a specifically academic and university phenomenon. When Cardinal Cisneros reorganized the University of Alcalá de Henares in 1499 he recruited professors trained at the Sorbonne, which led to similar measures being enacted in rival Salamanca. The result was the persistence of Aristotelian logic and
traditional Scholastic argumentation based on the mechanical repetition of metaphysical questions, which contemporaries derided as unproductive (Rallo 33-34). Inspired by Erasmus and Alfonso de Valdés, Villalón reacted strongly against this type of dry, repetitive speculation. The author resists easy classification into a single school or literary tradition—such arbitrary divisions are indeed one of the elements he mocks in the medieval Scholastics—but like many Renaissance writers he chose to expose hypocrisy through active dialogue. Unlike Valdés, whose career was intimately tied to the Emperor’s policy, Villalón was not in the royal cortege and therefore a more faithful disciple of Erasmus. Kincaid summarizes his reformist program: “As an educator Villalón envisions the nucleus of social reform through the establishment of an ideal community of scholars under whose guidance the nation’s youth will be enlightened and fortified by the wisdom and moral character they are to acquire” (133). Rather than a utopic abstraction, *El Scholástico* offers a concrete plan for achieving genuine social progress through curricular reform. Letrados are active participants in this process, departing from their former role as passive servants and propagandistic “hired guns.” Villalón uses textualized discourse to argue on behalf of the letrado class for enhanced status in recognition of its expanded role in society.

**El Scholástico (ca. 1541)**

*El Scholástico*, occasionally Anglicized as *The Scholasticate*, is Villalón’s literary statement on the intellectual climate of the reign of Charles V. Margarita Morreale affirms that the title refers to the perfect man of letters, who stands in contrast to the opponents of *buenas letras*—the false philosophers and ignorant priests—whom the author dismisses as *vagamundos* [lazy urchins] (382-83). Kincaid offers a typical description of the text: “An imitation of the Italian Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* (1528), it exists in manuscript form without date or signature, and, as far as we know, did not see publication in the author’s lifetime” (20). The text is structured as a continuous narrative in a series of conversations lasting four days; each day
corresponds to one of the four books that make up the work. As in the *Decameron*, the text features a group of learned friends who seek respite from the summer heat in a rural palace. Whereas Boccaccio’s interlocutors were seeking refuge from the plague, Villalón’s wish to reform the universities as a means of restoring virtue to Spanish society. The text thus links the status of letters—and by extension letrados—to the overall welfare of the Republic.

Villalón’s direct inspiration was the University of Salamanca itself, which he viewed as the ideal community of scholars, one that surpassed even the glories of ancient Greece and Rome. In the *Prohemio* he describes Salamanca as “[t]hat harmony of podiums and lectures, that continuous exercise of letters, that innumerable quantity of valiant letrados that [Salamanca] has sowed for the ordering and rule of all the nations of the world.”

Villalón represents himself as being present at this informal symposium, but he acts as an observer and chronicler rather than an active participant. The major speakers are Francisco de Bobadilla, Master of the University *(Maestrescuela)*; Francisco de Navarra, elected Rector in 1528; and Hernán Pérez de Oliva. The latter is the true protagonist of the text, dominating the discussions both in the amount of space he is given and in the complexity of his arguments. Although the other speakers make frequent contributions to the discussion, their main function is to serve as foils for Oliva so that his ideas may be developed within a dialectical context. Kincaid stresses the feeling of solidarity between the interlocutors, which reflects their common identity as members of the letrado class:

> Friendship and freedom are the two forces that draw these men together. They take solace in their sense of community, and their comradeship is intensified by the realization that as individuals they have broken out of the isolation into which independent thinkers of that age were driven. (131)

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This, in short, is the Republic of Letters: a transnational community of scholars who provide mutual support and enlightening correspondence. The text highlights the opposition of this group not just to the vulgar masses but to the nobility—the ignorant but entrenched hereditary elite.

The ideal of meritocracy is inherent in Villalón’s program for social reform delineated in *El Scholástico*. Kincaid describes it thus: “Any normal person, if he is willing to work hard and maintain a proper disposition, is capable of achieving a high degree of knowledge” (123). Idle nobles are particularly to be despised because, unlike most men, they have access to education yet squander the opportunity—hence the series of *exempla* detailing the escapades of highborn students, and the repeated admonitions for pupils to be diligent in their studies. The interlocutors lament the juvenile behavior of university students who neglect their studies and learn nothing: “There are now some young men who, without even being able to read what they study… disrupt schools and universities with their childish behaviors, and in fact their speech is pointless, because they neither know nor ever learn anything other than childish behaviors.”

Instead of reading the classics and learning the rudiments of ethical decision-making, they waste their time with carousing, fashions, and affected speech. This callous behavior conflicts with Villalón’s ideal of meritocracy: “You will see the ones distracted by these vain frivolities later assume council seats and ecclesiastical posts: and they graduate as *maestros* / *doctores* / and *licentiates* and *bachelors*… and much of the blame for this rests with the university men who admit them.”

By assigning a portion of the blame to the established bureaucracy that permits such low

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32 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 142. “Veréis ahora unos rapaces, que sin saber aún leer la letra de lo que estudian… con niñerías alteran las escuelas y universidades: y en la verdad vano es su parlar, porque ni nunca saben nada / ni aprenden cosa que sea algo, sino niñerías y gorrerías como liviano sirgerico [sic].”

33 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 142. “[V]eréis que los tales distraídos con la vanagloria destas liviandades luego se hacen de las congregaciones y concilios: y se gradúan de maestros / doctores / y licenciados y bachilleres… y desto tienen gran culpa los varones de la universidad que los admiten.”

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standards to prevail, the author echoes Alfonso de Valdés’ strictures against the ecclesiastical authorities who turn a blind eye to clerical ignorance and corruption.

*El Scholástico* is both a defense of learning and a condemnation of anti-intellectual sentiment. This attitude is particularly to be deplored among noble parents, who do lasting harm to society as well as their family name. Oliva describes the typical objection of a father to sending his son to university:

> If a wise friend advises him to hire a tutor to train the child in good doctrines, the father responds “I don’t want my son to suffer the miseries of the letrados, and [besides that] my incomes are sufficient for my son to be a gentleman. I want him to be very refined, to ride horses, joust, play at lances, and court ladies: to know how to play cards and dice, to blaspheme and curse, to be a man and to know everything.”

Although the father’s reference to the “miseries” of letrados is exaggerated to comic extremes, it is not an isolated opinion. Contemporary criticisms of student life typically involved scarcity of food and lack of hygiene (Alejo, La Universidad 314). Alternately scathing and despairing, Oliva dismisses this attitude as a baseless prejudice that will cause great harm to the children of the nobility and imperil their own family legacy:

> Oh unfortunate father who wants such bad things for his son! It seems to you that these pursuits will make a man noble, as if the study of letters made men common, and blunted the lance for noble and heroic enterprises. What harm did letters do to the nobility and military art of Julius Caesar, of whom it is written that he had a book of philosophy in one hand and a lance in the other before riding into combat?

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34 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 123-24. “Y si algún sabio amigo le aconseja que le dé preceptor que le ocupe en buenas doctrinas responde el padre. No quiero que mi hijo se sujete a las miserias de los letrados que yo tengo rentas bastantes para le dejar caballero: quiero que ande polido / cabalgue caballos / juste / juegue canas / sirva damas: sepa jugar dados y naipes / blasfemar y renegar / sea hombre y sepa de todo.”

35 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 123-24. “O malaventurado padre que tanto mal quiere a su hijo: pues le parece que con este ejercicio será más hombre y noble / caballero: como si el estudio de las buenas letras hiciere los hombres viles, y embotase la lanza para cualquiera noble y heroico ejercicio. Que daño hicieron las buenas letras a la caballería y arte militar de Julio Cesar, que se escribe del: que en una mano tenía el libro de la filosofía y en la otra la lanza para ir a la pelea?”
Once again, letters appear as a rhetorical weapon with which letrados actively defend the state. Humanistic learning is not only complementary to military prowess but may even function independently of the latter quality, thereby confirming letters as an alternate source of nobility.

Returning to the question of categorization, Villalón considers letrado status coextensive with diligent university study. The text praises receptivity on the part of the pupil: “But I say that a student that listens continually and attentively, although he never undertakes additional studies, can be a good letrado: and would even be better one who studied much without listening.”

Within this framework, law is presented as merely one of numerous potential careers available to letrados, whose status derives from the study of “diverse doctrines and sciences” instead of an exclusively legal education. The text makes this point explicit: “Nothing makes a man wise other than continual reading. And after having proceeded in this order he may go on to read, dispute, teach, judge, litigate, and preside [at council]: because age and letters will permit him to do so.”

A later reference describes two theologians as letrados: “You will know, sirs, that in the monastery of San Esteban there were two wise and aged letrado friars: one was the Master of Peñafiel and the other the Master of León: both were chairs of theology in their schools.” The quality rather than the topic of study is the defining criterion for letrado status in these examples.

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36 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 95. “Mas antes digo que un discípulo con solo ser buen oyente contino y atento, aunque nunca estude más, puede ser con aquello buen letrado: y aun sería mejor que si estudiando mucho oyesse mal.”

37 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 144. “[P]orque en la verdad no hay cosa que más haga al hombre sabio que el contino y mucho leer. Y después que así hubiere trabajado con este orden y retamiento salgan a leer, a disputar, a ensenar, a juzgar, a boger [sic], y a presidir: porque y a la edad y las letras lo permitirán que lo haga.”

38 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 228. “Sabréis señores que en el monasterio de Sanctisteban fueron dos sabios y antiguos letrados friales: el uno se llamaba el Maestro de Peñafiel / y el otro el Maestro de León: ambos eran catedráticos de teología en las escuelas.”
In a critical passage Oliva explains the distinction between letrados, whom he associates with *sabios* and *doctores*, and lawyers, a subset described as *legistas* or *juristas*. The latter group is characterized by its superficial knowledge of legal matters and its greed for collecting fees:

In this way the jurist addresses an infinite number of questions, and forms new laws from very lowly things: and he prides himself for making great treatises and volumes about [legal] rubrics and summaries. There are more books about [legal] obligations and other inanities than we can say, and in the end everything is designed to sow dissension among the poor, and to feed the letrado jurists.  

Oliva contrasts this specialized subclass with true letrados, who are well-read on many subjects and use their knowledge for the common good, engaging in a variety of lettered professions:

What in my judgment most makes studious men into perfect letrados is reading many books, both to know how to reject the useless and bad ones and to receive doctrine from the good ones… and men should work to be the best, and to perfect themselves in anything they attempt, and may they not be content with whatever is their profession.

The text also refers to *hombres sabios, avisados y letrados*, underscoring the connection between letrados and the general state of being wise (*sabios*) and informed (*avisados*). Additionally, Martínez-Torrejón lists *varón sabio* [wise or learned man] as a variant of *letrado* (417). Despite the prevalence of legal studies in the era, the author privileges the broader definition of the term.

Villalón’s work coincides with that of the historical Pérez de Oliva (d.1529) in references to the discourse of *dignitas*. Navarra compares letters favorably against the uncertainty and variability of human fortunes: “But knowledge is not like this: because those whom it favors

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39 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 155. “En esta semejanza trata el legista otras infinitas cuestiones, y por tan bajas cosas forma nuevas leyes: y se precian hacer grandes tratados y volúmenes sobre las rubricas y sumarios: más cuerpos de libros hay de servidumbres y de otras vanidades que podemos decir: y en fin todo es dirigido para sembrar disensión entre los pobres, y para dar de comer a los letrados juristas.”

40 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 159. “Porque la cosa que a mi parecer más hace los hombres estudiosos letrados y perfectos es ver diversos libros / ahora para saber tachar los inútiles y malos / como para recibir doctrina de los buenos… y deben trabajar los hombres por ser los mejores / y aun por perfeccionarse en cualquiera cosa que quieran intentar: y no se contenten con ser cualesquiera de su profesión.”

41 Kerr (ed.), *El Scholástico* 167.
have eternal glory and it does not abandon them until they are ennobled and deservedly placed in supreme repose. And although they died to the world, the fame of their great knowledge perpetuates them.”

Here the author includes a marginal note to the text: “Nobility acquired through knowledge is more glorious than that gained by fortune.” This statement precedes an extended defense of the nobility of letters. Villalón shared the Erasmian humanist belief that men should be judged for their works rather than their lineage. In this tradition, Navarra cites Plato’s four causes of nobility. After recognizing feats of arms as a source of nobility, he states:

The fourth and most excellent and most esteemed [Plato] says is that which comes to men for having distinguished themselves in a doctrine or science; and this he says gives the most just title of nobility to men, because they do not claim glory for another person’s deeds, but by their own deeds acquire eternal fame. And it seems to me that Plato was right in this, because such men do not only enoble themselves and their families but also their country of birth.

Navarra further cites the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus as support for the notion that judicial and administrative posts should be conferred on men of letters without regard for lineage or noble status: “It was customary among the citizens of Rome that one who distinguished himself in an art or doctrine was permitted to assume any magistracy, and for this they needed no other nobility or inheritance…” The discussion turns next to ancient Egypt, where feats of letters

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42 Kerr (ed.), El Scholástico 78. “Mas la ciencia no así: porque a los que dé su favor docto señalados con eterno gloria / no los desampara hasta que sublimados de gran merecer los pone en la suprema holganza. Y aunque al mundo murieron / la fama de su mucha ciencia los perpetuo sin nunca morir.”

43 Kerr (ed.), El Scholástico 78. “Que sea más glorioso el estado y nobleza habida por la ciencia, que el que es habido de fortuna.”

44 Kerr (ed.), El Scholástico 118. “La cuarta más excelente y de más estima dice que es: aquella que viene a los hombres por haberse entre todos señalado en alguna doctrina y ciencia: y esta dice que da más justo título de nobleza a los hombres: porque no toma la gloria por ajenos hechos / más por los suyos propios adquiere eterno fama. Y en esto me parece que Platón tuvo razón: porque los tales no solo a sí mismos y a sus familias / más a sus patrias ennoblecieron donde ellos fueron nacidos y criados.”

45 Kerr (ed.), El Scholástico 118. “[E]ra costumbre entre los ciudadanos de Roma: que en floresciendo alguno en alguna arte / o doctrina tuviese licencia de pedir cualquier magistrado: y que para esto no era necesidad otra nobleza / ni otra herencia…”
were honored far more than feats of arms, even if performed on the battlefield: “The kings of Egypt, seeing the usefulness of academies in their kingdom, honored the wise who taught the sciences with much greater rewards than those whose fame came from other virtuous deeds, even if they were great feats in war.”\footnote{Kerr (ed.), \textit{El Scholástico} 120. “Aquellos reyes de Egipto vista la utilidad que hacían en su reino las academias, con muy mayores premios honraban a los sabios que en ellas ensenaban las ciencias, que aquellos que hacían otros famosos hechos de la virtud / aunque fuese grandes hazañas en la guerra.”} Oliva concurs that lineage is irrelevant to personal achievement: “And they never praised good lineage among themselves, because they held themselves to be noble for their letters and knowledge without regard for their ancestors.”\footnote{Kerr (ed.), \textit{El Scholástico} 120. “[Y] nunca entre ellas le loaban de buen linaje: porque se tenían todos por nobles por sus letras y ciencias sin tener algún respecto a sus antecesores.”} Such claims, though not entirely without precedent, illustrate a new boldness among advocates of the “nobility of letters.”

To buttress these arguments, the interlocutors continuously stress the active role of letrados in society. The man of letters must be conscious of his public image lest he damage the reputation of his class—and thereby weaken its claim to nobility. One speaker declares:

Those wise men who have the profession of letrados should not speak in public without thinking, or answer without first looking into what is asked of them… It is much better for a letrado to respond, when asked a question, “I need to look into this matter,” and to study, than to respond quickly and make a mistake.\footnote{Kerr (ed.), \textit{El Scholástico} 143. “Pues gran razón es que los varones cuerdos que tienen profesión de letrados [sic] no hablen en público sin pensar, ni respondan sin primero proveer acerca de lo que les preguntan… Muy mejor le parece a un letrado que cuando le proponen una cuestión responda,probeherla, y estudiar: que por mostrarse sabio responder de repente y herrar.”}

Despite these admonitions, the interlocutors observe that a conspicuous lack of effort does not prevent many students from attaining high office after graduation. A thorough review of each candidate for graduation is therefore needed to ensure their continued high quality:

In the example of such wise men teachers should teach their students to be patient in their studies, and without having worked hard for a long time reading many books and authors of diverse doctrines and sciences they should not teach, write, or
speak in public, or practice law, or assume judicial or administrative roles: nor take the rank of bachelors, licentiates, or doctors…

This passage reveals the central theme of the text: the letrado class has been infiltrated by poseurs and dilettantes, with far-reaching negative effects on government and public morals. Villalón denounces the aristocratic nobility, which has abandoned its traditional social function as warriors and demonstrated itself unable to adapt to the new necessities of the modern State. Instead of a sophisticated elite, the contemporary nobles were distinguished only by their idleness and waste. While ostensibly recognizing the importance of the military function of the nobility, he denies—or seeks to diminish—the validity of heredity as a basis for noble status. Criticizing the nobility as idle and effete does not necessarily correlate to a nostalgia for the warlike past, as Erasmians generally held anti-war sentiments (Martínez-Góngora 611).

However, pervading the text is a longing for a supposed past in which letters were held in universal high regard. This utopic vision of the ideal university environment lies at the heart of all the interlocutors’ discussions and expresses itself as a plea for higher standards among students and faculty alike, as well as a more extensive review of candidates for public office. Such reforms, the text insists, will restore the vitality of Castilian letters and have lasting benefits for Spanish society generally.

Towards a New Nobility of Letters

I have argued in this chapter that the process of resemanticization of letrado experienced in the later fifteenth century found notable expression in the literature of the sixteenth century. Because of enhanced opportunities for university graduates in the early modern state, men of

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49 Kerr (ed.), El Scholástico 144. “Pues en ejemplo destos tan sabios varones deben los maestros enseñar a tener paciencia en el estudio: que sin haber bastante mente trabajado en el por mucho tiempo liendo [sic] / viendo y pasando muchos libros y autores de diversas doctrinas y ciencias no salgan a leer ni enseñar en público / ni escriban /ni oren / ni aboguen en causas / ni tomen cargo de judicaturas ni regimiento de repúblicas: ni tomen grados de bachilleres / licenciados / ni doctores…”
letters assumed a new social and political prominence such that they could be identified as a “letrado class.” In contrast to their medieval predecessors—clerics trained in canon or civil law—the letrados of the Habsburg era were broadly trained in the *studia humanitatis* and fulfilled a variety of administrative, judicial, and diplomatic roles. Most relevant for this dissertation is the emergence of letters as a rhetorical “weapon” with offensive and defensive capabilities. As Cascardi affirms, “language is not merely words; it is discourse, which carries with it the inheritance of the past and of pre-existing systems of belief” (98). Under this interpretation, letrados became “hired guns” who defended their patrons from detractors and launched new attacks upon their enemies. The trajectories of the Valdés brothers illustrate respectively the public and private dimensions of letters: Alfonso acted as propagandist for Charles V and imperial policy, whereas Juan diffused Erasmian humanism while defending it—and himself—against charges of heterodoxy. Both authors reveal the rhetorical function of letters as a vital tool to promote the interests of the modern state as well as private patrons.

Despite their frequent material success, the early letrados were constrained by their role as “hired guns.” As Lucia Binotti observes, “Bishops, royal bureaucrats and salaried chroniclers did not exactly enjoy the kind of occupations that would ensure the pursuits of intellectual freedom” (146). Towards mid-century many letrados began to reject this passive, somewhat servile position. Authors like Villalón and Pérez de Oliva argued for enhanced social status for the letrado class commensurate to their expanded role in society, and even claimed that the public exercise of letters was an alternative source of nobility unrelated to birth or lineage. This “nobility of letters” was rooted in the Neostoic ideals of meritocracy and public service, and proponents of this view questioned—or rejected outright—the validity of hereditary nobility. Whereas Oliva concentrated on demystifying the warrior caste by subtly presenting letters as a
more civilized profession, Villalón explicitly attacks the traditional hierarchy by reducing arms to a secondary complement to letters. More than a change of tone, the middle decades of the sixteenth century reveal powerful new arguments in favor of the letrado class being advanced by authors who themselves achieved a high social station through the exercise of letters.

The flourishing of humanistic dialogues suffered a reaction after 1550, which corresponded to the waning of Erasmian fervor and the increased vigilance of the Inquisition (Gómez 153). The literary record also reveals a growing preoccupation among letrado authors with the massive expansion of university attendance in the latter half of the century, which they believed was diluting the quality of graduates and reducing their effectiveness in society. This concern, already palpable in Villalón’s corpus, grew to outright alarm in the late sixteenth century as the rising influx of students led to a proliferation of minor educational institutions throughout Castile. Widespread enrollment undermined the effectiveness of the university system—and the exclusiveness of the letrado class—in the minds of many authors (Cruz, “Mirroring Others” 99). Such an attitude prefigures “double aristocratization,” which Joseph Pérez defines as the process whereby the distinction between noble and non-noble letrados became progressively blurred. This ongoing social realignment would fundamentally alter the dynamic of the letrado polemic during the Baroque era, as ambitious authors sought to broaden the courtly ethos of exclusivity. We will examine the implications of this transformation for Spanish letters in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4
“CLOSING THE DOOR TO THE TALENTS”: LETTERS AS PERFORMANCE

In 1586 Juan de Castilla y Aguayo published _El perfecto regidor_, a didactic dialogue whose prologue announces it as a manual for aspiring public officials. The text devotes considerable space to the role of letrados in contemporary society, ultimately recommending a university education for anyone aspiring to public office. The author declares, “Just as there was a Golden Age, and a Silver Age, we now have an Age of Letters.” As discussed in Chapter 2, the letrado class grew dramatically in number and influence during the middle of the Habsburg era (ca. 1556-1621). Historian R. A. Stradling describes this process of expansion:

> From the 1560s at least Spain had built up this expertise in the practicalities of power. The numbers and talents of the professional personnel who serviced the great machine were incomparable; together they made up ‘the Spanish system’ which dominated European politics until the 1630s… _Spain’s Struggle for Europe_ 24

The greatly expanded career opportunities for letrados within this “Spanish system” persuaded many members of the nobility and urban patriciate to send their sons to universities as a means of political advancement. Consequently, rising enrollment in the late-sixteenth century reduced the perceived exclusivity of the universities. Moreover, degrees obtained from minor institutions were frequently fraudulent, and university secretaries were often suspected of granting diplomas with great ease (Álvarez 177). At the same time, the increased presence of students from _hidalgo_ and _caballero_ backgrounds blurred the distinction between noble and non-noble letrados in a process Joseph Pérez describes as “double aristocratization.” In this chapter we will examine texts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in which authors distinguish between a “letrado elite”—graduates of the imperial universities, typically holding advanced degrees—and

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1 Castilla y Aguayo 24. “[P]orque verdaderamente como dicen que hubo, una era de oro, y otra de plata, la que ahora tenemos es de letras.”
the rabble of trial attorneys, scribes, and grammarians that Jean-Marc Pelorson calls *le monde infra-letrado* [the world of infra-letrados]. The two main strategies to achieve this stratification are what I am calling utility and performance. Although they are used in different ways, the common goal of these discourses is to establish a hierarchy within the letrado class.

What we have seen in Chapter 3 may be summarized as a discourse of utility, in which partisans of the letrado class presented their university training not as a courtly adornment but as a vital resource for the early modern state. Authors like the Valdés brothers claimed that mastery of humanistic letters enabled letrados to serve their royal patrons as counselors, diplomats, and literary propagandists in ways that the warrior nobility could not. Towards midcentury the apologetic function of this discourse became much more aggressive. Emboldened by enhanced career opportunities for letrados under Charles V (r. 1516-1556), whose conciliar system of government required large numbers of highly-trained functionaries, authors like Cristóbal de Villalón and Hernán Pérez de Oliva argued that the new nobility of letters had rendered the nobility of arms largely irrelevant. However, by the second half of the 1500s, utility was no longer a sufficient justification for social privilege. University enrollment grew rapidly during the period, peaking in the 1580s, which greatly increased the number of letrados in Castile (Alejo, *Universidad 27*). As the letrado class expanded in size, it also became less exclusive and consequently lost prestige. As a result, a second defensive strategy emerged to justify enhanced status for certain letrados while denying it to others. This is what I have called the discourse of performance, which the more aristocratic members of the letrado class mobilized against their socially inferior colleagues. Accordingly, literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries reveals letrado status partially depends on non-academic criteria like manners and
dress. This change introduces an element of theatricity into attaining letrado status, as successful university graduates are expected to perform a role rather than provide a service.

The bestowing of a university degree resembles the dubbing of a knight or the ordination of a priest as an official act—or consecration—that formally marks the end of a long preparatory initiation (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 108). High academic titles such a licentiate and doctor resemble titles of nobility like count or duke. As forms of symbolic capital, they are conferred and guaranteed by an official authority—the university in the former case, the monarchy in the latter. The situation is much the same in the context of early modern Spain. Obtaining a doctorate was relatively simple in intellectual terms, requiring nothing more than a series of formulaic oral argumentations, but the associated pomp and ceremonies were often ruinously expensive. In addition to paying for a religious ceremony at which the degree was formally conferred, doctoral candidates were required to fete the university officers, faculty, and other distinguished members of the community with banquets and bullfights. Consequently, many students contented themselves with a licentiate, unable to bear the cost of the doctoral ceremonies, or else sought to obtain the higher degree during Lent or a period of royal mourning in which such festivities were forbidden (Barrientos 115). The high cost of entry to the doctorate did much to increase the perceived exclusivity of this esteemed rank in the early modern era, reinforcing its association with the landed nobility and urban aristocracy. Expansion of the letrado class undermined this elite association during the Habsburg era, creating a hierarchy within the letrado class. We can trace this shifting identity through the literary record.

As we saw in the Chapter 3, there are a series of subheadings within the letrado class. Although each of them strove in a different manner for social prominence, their common identifying characteristic was the possession of a university degree. The institutionalized value of
any title, whether noble or academic, is closely related to its scarcity (Bourdieu, *Language* 241). As universities granted more degrees, graduates sought to distinguish themselves from their similarly-qualified colleagues based on non-academic criteria. Consequently, rising enrollment in the second half of the sixteenth century resulted in a sharp division between collegiales—students of the Colegios Mayores, typically of the higher social strata—and the less wealthy and prominent manteístas, destined for less prestigious posts as low-level attorneys and clerics (Alejo 79). The former group constituted an elite within the university system that jealously guarded its privileges and resisted intrusion by the latter. Historian Dámaso de Lario dates the origin of the Spanish colegial tradition to the foundation in 1401 of the College of San Bartolomé at the University of Salamanca—the first such institution on Castilian soil (467). A Colegio Mayor was distinguished from minor institutions by higher academic requirements for entry, strict scrutiny of limpieza de sangre (absence of Jewish or Moorish ancestry), royal protection, and pontifical privileges. Originally intended for the edification of poor students, the Colegios Mayores came to be dominated by ambitious noble families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As discussed in Chapter 2, the new colegiales were rich students who enjoyed privileges that situated them above all other students. They controlled the appointment of professors, the election of the rector, and the judicial and financial authority within the University of Salamanca (Álvarez 178). The network of colegiales also inspired a system of “turnismo” in which bureaucratic posts and professorships were successively occupied by members of this privileged elite, to the exclusion of manteístas.² Returning again to Stradling, “Posts consequently tended more and more to be filled by men who were family or connections of serving officials, making the bureaucracy increasingly hidebound and exclusive, and closing the door to the talents”

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² Students without scholarships, so named for the manteo or distinctive robe they wore.
Wealthy, influential, and numerous, the letrados dominated government to such an extent that they became a rival elite to the nobility.

In sum, enhanced career opportunities created a hierarchy within the letrado class during the reigns of Philip II (r. 1556–1598) and Philip III (r. 1598–1621). Ambitious infra-letrados aspired to equal social standing with the elite despite their inferior pedigrees, whereas the prosperous and powerful colegiales resisted all encroachments on their privileged status. As a result, contemporary literature reveals competing strategies of utility and performance as letrados at all levels strive to resituate their class in such a way to preserve and expand their privilege.

Through the discourse of utility authors stress the great value of the letrado class to the absolutist state, presenting themselves as uniquely qualified for the burdens of high office. At the same time, many authors argue that not all university graduates are equally qualified for those roles, emphasizing the need for aristocratic bearing and other intangibles to hold high office—in effect, making letrado status a kind of performance. The result is that prominent letrado authors continue to define themselves in opposition to the traditional nobility of the sword, at least in terms of their qualifications for holding office, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the less prestigious members of their own class, primarily the manteístas and graduates of minor regional institutions. Because this social maneuvering typically comes at the expense of other groups, partisans of either side frequently employ satire against their rivals: colegiales depict their lowborn rivals as ambitious poseurs, while infra-letrados cast their highborn colleagues as effete dilettantes with no useful skills.

This chapter will present texts that offer apologies for the rise of the letrado class during the second half of the sixteenth century and argue the superiority of letrados over competing social groups. As indicated above, the two major strategies are utility and performance. By
“performance” I refer to what Jeremy Robbins calls the “performative projection of the self,” a mode of social behavior in which perception matters more than reality (Challenges of Uncertainty 131). This strategy of self-defense and self-promotion is to be contrasted with utility, an argument that reflects the Neo-Stoic notion of “public service” as the only legitimate foundation for social privilege. As letrados came to prominence in the late sixteenth century, utility was no longer a sufficient argument to justify their privileged position in government, and so a second line of self-promotion emerged depicting the letrado elite as a group akin to the nobility for its cultural refinement and courtly manners. Although both colegiales and infra-letrados employed the discourse of utility to persuade readers of their own inherent value to the Republic, only members of the letrado elite appealed to the discourse of performance in order to bolster their exclusive claim to “political nobility.” By defining themselves as possessors of intangible qualities supposedly lacking in their infra-letrado colleagues, the colegiales exclude from membership in the letrado elite large numbers of equally-qualified university graduates who allegedly lacked their aristocratic bearing.

The Discourse of Utility

All social elites confront the need to justify their own existence in the eyes of the less privileged majority. A particularly effective means of achieving this goal is to show that an aristocracy performs a critical role in a given society. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, “All aristocracies must expend considerable energy to convince the elect of the need to accept the sacrifices that are implied by privilege, or by the acquisition of durable dispositions which are a condition for the preservation of privilege” (Language 122). By presenting itself as an integral component to society, the elite naturalizes difference between itself and the masses who supposedly depend on its continued existence. This discourse of utility is one of the primary strategies the letrado elite uses to justify its privileged position in government. At the same time,
less advantaged infra-letrados claim higher social status for themselves due to the perceived utility of their own professions. As noted above, high academic titles function much like titles of nobility, in that both are dignities that grant priority to their holders while simultaneously freeing them from the need to prove or demonstrate their skills (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 119-20). Accordingly, the possession of a university degree was a highly prized social marker in Habsburg Spain precisely because it implied the bearer’s value to the state.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the greatly expanded curriculum available to students in the early modern era resulted in a hierarchy of disciplines. The literary record reveals that not all degrees were valued equally, even if conferred by the same institution, and those tending to state careers—chiefly law and theology—were prized above more esoteric disciplines like poetry and philosophy. Such an attitude prompted students of the liberal arts to defend the practical applications of their studies in contemporary society, a strategy that produced widely varying results. Let us begin by examining a pair of texts that participate in this discourse of utility: Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1615) and the relatively unknown *Honra de escribanos* (1565) by Vizcayan author Pedro de Madariaga. By looking both within and beyond the literary canon, this chapter will show that the desire to assimilate letrados as a new social class is not restricted to a handful of Baroque luminaries but instead resonates with a variety of authors from similar backgrounds. Such an approach cannot be confined exclusively to the canon. Catalan philologist Enric Sullà defines *canon* as “a list or line-up of works considered valuable and worthy of being studied and discussed.”3 Literary canons are essentially restrictive: they exist to impose limits on what works are routinely studied. However, they also provide common points

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3 My translation. In the original article, Sullà defines canon as “una lista o elenco de obras consideradas valiosas y dignas por ello de ser estudiadas y comentadas” (11).
of reference for members of a community, be they literary scholars or the reading public. By subjecting texts to critical commentary, a canon places individual works of literature in a wider cultural dialogue (Bloom 214-15). The singularity of the canon is also questionable. Barbara Mujica rejects the characterization of the canon as a fixed body of literature, preferring instead to call it “an ever-evolving corpus formed of works that stood the test of time on esthetic grounds” (209). Instead of a monolithic construct, the canon is susceptible to modification. James Parr develops this notion further: “The canon is very much a creature of time and place... What is canonical in one historical moment may not be so in another; conversely, texts that were never intended for such high office may come to be prized by succeeding generations” (181). This continuous process of contesting the canon is necessary to avoid intellectual stagnation. Authors like Madariaga may never rise to the same level of canonicity as Cervantes, but placing their texts in dialogue with each other enriches the reading of both, giving new depth to the letrado polemic.

**Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote (1615)**

The episode of the *caballero del verde gabán* [Knight of the Green Overcoat] from chapters XVI through XVIII of the Second Part of *Don Quixote* (1615) casts light on the social status of letrados and the utility of university training. During their travels Don Quixote and Sancho Panza encounter Don Diego de Miranda, a rural *hidalgo* whose son Lorenzo is an aspiring poet. Because Miranda is dressed entirely in green when they first meet, Don Quixote refers to him thereafter by his *gabán*—a cloak or closed over-garment with sleeves and hood, typical of travelers and country gentlemen (Gingras 136). Miranda invites the knight and squire to his home, where they admire his private library, listen attentively to some of Lorenzo’s compositions, and participate in an informal debate about the virtues of poetry. Privately, Miranda charges his son to evaluate their guests to determine if Don Quixote is sane or a
madman. In a moment of lucidity, the latter offers an eloquent defense of knight errantry and the vital role of arms in preserving peace, before amicably parting ways with his hosts. Taken at face value, the episode argues in favor of the superiority of arms to letters; however, a close reading of the ingenious hidalgo’s remarks in these passages reveals an acute commentary on the process of “double aristocratization” and the changing role of letrados in early modern Spain.

Upon their initial encounter on the road, Don Diego describes himself to his fellow travelers as a moderately wealthy landowner and lover of books. His only source of concern is his son Lorenzo, a student at the University of Salamanca, who has imprudently chosen to study poetry over a more practical (and lucrative) subject like law or theology. A poet, in Don Diego’s estimation, is a very inferior sort of letrado—what Pelorson calls an “infra-letrado” (455). Lorenzo meets the criterion of being a university student who has devoted himself to the study of letters, but his father considers these to be the wrong kind of letters: poetry and classics rather than law. The chief objection to this career path seems to be its lack of practical applicability. Don Diego hoped his son would pursue a career in law in order to obtain state office, thereby bringing honor not just to himself but to the entire family: “I would like him to be the crown of his lineage, for we live in a time when our kings richly reward good, virtuous letters, for letters without virtue are pearls in the dungheap” (II.16 555). When Don Diego expresses his feeling of disappointment regarding his son’s profession, he is effectively describing the social situation of the infra-letrados: “I, Señor Don Quixote... have a son, and if I didn’t have him, perhaps I would consider myself more fortunate than I do, and not because he’s bad, but because he isn’t as good as I would like him to be” (II.16 555). This assessment accurately describes the Castilian aristocracy’s attitude toward letrados, as well as the latter group’s reaction to the aspirations of

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infra-letrados. In both cases, the superior social group uses its supposed utility—understood here as suitability for a state career—to justify its privilege.

In order to understand Don Diego’s significance to the letrado polemic, it is necessary to examine his role in the narrative. Previous scholarship has concentrated on Miranda’s garb, which to be sure is emphasized in the text. His words and actions are much more relevant to this dissertation than his clothes, but styles of dress are important social signifiers in the early modern era and therefore deserve attention. Critics have traditionally considered the caballero to be a comical stereotype whose primary function is to highlight Don Quixote’s madness and suggest a parallel with the rural gentry. Randolph Pope associates the color green with erotic adventures, a belief that other critics seem to share (209). Giuseppe Di Stefano suggests that Miranda’s monochromatic attire signals the nobleman’s “eccentricity,” “mania,” and even “neurosis” (398). In a slightly more favorable assessment, Francisco Rico suggests that although Don Diego’s life otherwise corresponds with the Erasmian ideal of moderation, his style of dress reveals a certain vanity and extravagance (137). These characterizations have little basis in the text or historical context. The Spanish gentry enjoyed ostentatious colors and expensive fabrics before and during Cervantes’ time—especially the nobility—and Gerald Gingras affirms that “the gentleman's green garb is entirely appropriate to his status as a wealthy and discreet country hidalgo” (130). Consonant to this interpretation, my reading is that Miranda is an idealized model of the well-read nobility rather than a caricature of that class.

It remains to be seen if Don Diego may be called a letrado. Although there is no mention of his having attended a university, he is unusually well read. Pope asserts that, in a work that claims to attack novels of chivalry, it is a sign in Miranda’s favor that he does not have any books of that genre in his collection, despite having more than six dozen books in his private
library; likewise, the fact that some are in Latin and others romance reveals that Don Diego has enough education to read Latin and to be interested in history (211). Although his collection pales in comparison to that of a Michel de Montaigne, whose personal library contained some 1,000 books, it is still impressive for the period. Edward Baker declares that Miranda’s collection is a model library for the early seventeenth century due to his balance between books of piety and history, written in Castilian and Latin (159). His literary proclivity might be said to align him with the class of dilettante, which Sherry Venere defines as “well-read knights who endeavored to differentiate themselves at court and to expand their roles through study” (11). However, this label falls short. Despite Don Quixote’s insistence on referring to him as a caballero, the text presents Don Diego as an hidalgo of commensurate rank to the protagonist.5 On the opposite extreme, Francisco Rico describes Miranda as a “labrador rico medianamente culto” [rich, moderately intelligent laborer] (140). There is no evidence that the book-loving landowner was directly engaged in any form of manual labor, an act that certainly would have caused him to forfeit his right to hidalgo status. Yet Miranda is also unique in that he does not seek advantage for himself but for his son and, by extension, his future lineage. Unlike Don Quixote, who went mad from obsessive reading, Don Diego represents the perfect idle reader and his library is a model for what a man in his social position should have (Baker 155-56). Viewed in this light, Miranda is best understood as an hidalgo letrado, combining the virtues of the well-read class of letters with the social pedigree and material comfort of the lower nobility.

Whatever else he may be, Don Diego is courteous. Despite observing Don Quixote’s erratic behavior on the road—the madman challenges a pair of caged lions to battle, though

5 Antonio Domínguez Ortiz describes caballeros as “an intermediate class of urban dwellers” (Golden Age, 113). By contrast, the text depicts Don Diego de Miranda as a country gentleman.
Fortunately they ignore him—Miranda invites him to his home and introduces him to his son Lorenzo. As noted above, the father instructs his son to determine if their guest is in his right mind. This leads to an extended conversation between the young student and the aged hidalgo about the respective virtues of poetry and knight errantry. Critical accounts differ on how to interpret this episode. Anthony Close describes the reactions of Don Diego and his son to Don Quixote’s behavior as ambiguous, alternating between mirth and respectful astonishment as they attempt to place him into the “psychological pigeon-hole” of madness or sanity (345). According to Di Stefano, Don Diego refuses to evaluate Don Quixote directly because he cannot face acknowledging his own shortcomings; his decision to delegate the task of verifying his guest’s madness to his son should therefore be seen as a flight from his own manic tendencies (404). By contrast, Rico considers the act of delegation another instance of Miranda’s prudent nature (140). Although I incline to the latter view, from a narrative standpoint the decision serves primarily to facilitate Lorenzo’s conversation with Don Quixote about poetry; it need not conceal deeper criticism of Miranda’s degree of self-awareness or capacity for evaluating their guest.

Returning to the substance of their conversation, Lorenzo is distracted from his task of evaluating Don Quixote’s sanity when the latter asks him to recite some of his verses. Somewhat flattered, the young poet obliges his guest and shares a pair of original compositions. Don Quixote praises the young poet’s ingenuity and urges him to enter a justa literaria, a public competition among authors (usually poets) that was a popular form of Baroque entertainment. Masked in humor, his advice to Lorenzo conceals a satirical indictment of the colegiales:

[I]f the verses are for a literary competition, your grace should try to win second place; first is always won through favor or because of the high estate of the person, second is won because of pure justice, and by this calculation third becomes second, and first becomes third, in the manner of the degrees offered by universities; but, even so, being called first carries with it great celebrity. (II. 18: 569)
His final remark reveals that he is aware that university degrees are sometimes obtained through favoritism instead of merit. Joseph Pérez has discussed how privileged students, often the scions of nobles houses, acquired their university titles through a network of patronage rather than genuine affinity for letters—part of the process he dubs “double aristocratization.” Contemporary authors resent that these aristocrats have infiltrated the universities and, through their indifference to their studies, have diluted what it means to be a letrado. Don Quixote apparently prefers Lorenzo’s sincere but unsuccessful poetic ambitions to the utilitarian pursuit of degrees as a means to social ascent. The hidalgo praises the young poet in extravagant terms:

Praise be to heaven on high, magnanimous youth, for you are the best poet on earth, and you deserve to be crowned with a laurel wreath, not by Cyprus or Gaeta, as a poet once said, may God forgive him, but by the academies of Athens, if they still existed today, and by those that do in Paris, Bologna, and Salamanca! (II.18 573)

Versed in the Greek and Latin classics, the earnest (if untalented) student has a better claim to letrado status than his colleagues, who obtained their degrees and subsequent careers solely by virtue of their noble status and the influence of the colegiales. In this way, a comment on literary jousts may be read as an oblique criticism of the discourse of utility, questioning whether graduates are genuinely qualified for the public service on which their privileged status depends.

This interpretation is borne out by the interlocutors’ subsequent conversation about whether feats of arms can be equated with the study of letters. Lorenzo is impressed with Don Quixote’s astute description of the literary jousts and, assuming his guest also received a university education, asks him what ciencias [sciences] he has studied. The hidalgo responds that his own discipline has been knight errantry, “Which is as good as poetry, and perhaps even a little better” (II.18 570). Whereas previous interlocutors had typically responded that they had not known that knights errant still existed, Lorenzo replies that he has never even heard of such a figure before: “I don’t know that science… I haven’t heard of it until now” (II.18 570). Such a
statement is consistent with his father’s comments about his extreme immersion in esoteric studies. Unlike other, less educated characters in the novel like the village barber, who are familiar with chivalric novels, the young nobleman has never encountered the genre in his six years at Salamanca. Evidently Lorenzo’s brand of humanism eschews martial interests in favor of purely aesthetic pursuits. Taking this slight upon knighthood with unaccustomed calm, Don Quixote delivers a passionate monologue about the virtues of knight errantry, which he believes far surpasses all other fields of “study” and indeed encompasses the most important disciplines:

It is a science... that contains all or most of the sciences in the world, because the man who professes it must be a jurist and know the laws of distributive and commutative justice so that he may give to each person what is his and what he ought to have; he must be a theologian so that he may know how to explain the Christian law he professes, clearly and distinctly, no matter where he is asked to do so... (II.18 570)

This exalted profession, he declares, requires knowledge of jurisprudence and theology—the core disciplines directly associated with medieval letrados—as well as the specialized professions of medicine, astrology, and mathematics. Notably absent are the core of the studia humanitatis: grammar, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy (Nauert 12-13). In his previous conversation with Don Diego, however, Don Quixote praised poetry and its associated disciplines as necessary for the formation of the mind and spirit. The result is that the aged hidalgo’s description of the “science” of knight-errantry closely resembles the intellectual formation required for the letrado class, and his emphasis on a life of public service further underscores this comparison: “[H]e must be chaste in his thoughts, honest in his words, liberal in his actions, valiant in his deeds, long-suffering in his afflictions, charitable with those in need, and, finally, an upholder of the truth, even if it costs him his life to defend it” (II.18 570).

Don Quixote’s affable interactions with Don Diego and his son stand in stark contrast to another letrado encountered in the novel’s Second Part. Between Chapters XXII and XXIV,
during the adventure of the Cave of Montesinos, knight and squire encounter an unnamed humanist referred to only as Basilio’s Cousin, who briefly becomes their traveling companion. Whereas Lorenzo had demonstrated shrewd judgment and reticence regarding his own humanistic proclivities (“A poet, perhaps... but by no means great”) the Cousin is a parody of shallow learning and overly-embellished style characteristic of the new breed of letrados (II.18 569). The travelers’ conversation reveals his literary aspirations:

On the road, Don Quixote questioned the cousin regarding the character and nature of his activities, his profession, and his studies, to which he responded that his profession was being a humanist, his activities and studies, composing books for publishing, all of them very beneficial and no less diverting for the nation... (II.22 599)

Apart from his lack of seemly modesty, the Cousin’s boasting actually underscores his profession’s lack of utility. Among his supposedly useful texts is a volume entitled Supplement to Virgil, a parody of contemporary glosses of classical works, which contains such inane speculations as who was the first man to catch cold, or to use ointments to cure syphilis. Despite the ludicrous nature of his claims, the Cousin proudly concludes: “I elucidate everything very precisely, citing more than twenty-five authors, and so your grace can see that I have done good work and that the book will be very useful to everyone” (II.22 600). This attitude contrasts sharply with Lorenzo’s display of modesty, who had previously announced “I'll recite my gloss, for which I don't expect any prize at all; I've written it only to exercise my wits” (II.18 571) The overconfident humanist thus introduces the discourse of utility only to unwittingly refute it in almost the same breath. Although he claims that his compositions are useful, in reality they offer convoluted answers to absurd questions. Some of the mechanisms he uses are likewise excessive, such as citing more than twenty-five authors in support of his speculations. Based on these behaviors, Edward Baker describes the self-styled humanist as a grafómano [graphomaniac] whose rambling and confused statements degenerate into nonsense (52).
The Cousin’s confidence falters when Sancho Panza produces even more inane questions, causing him to engage in the type of verbal hedging and double-talk commonly associated with lawyers: “The truth is, my friend... that is something I cannot determine until I study it, and I shall study it as soon as I return to my books, and I shall satisfy your curiosity when next we meet, for this cannot be the last time” (II.22 601). The travelers soon part ways, with the Cousin promising to send them a copy of his Supplement for their edification. His evasive attitude and prompt disappearance from the narrative is a trope in letrado literature, particularly in criticisms of attorneys. A similar example appears in Juan Huarte de San Juan’s Examen de ingenios [Examination of Men’s Wits] (1575), a treatise that applies classical philosophy to various contemporary professions. The author, a medical doctor trained at the University of Alcalá, expresses a widely-held belief that attorneys are utterly dependent on their books. This lack of independent judgment situates them beneath other learned disciplines:

[W]hen a litigant consults with attorneys, they have permission from the layman to say, “I will look into my books about this matter,” which if a doctor said when asked for the cure for an illness, or a theologian in a matters of conscience, they would be considered men who knew little of their faculty.6

We may detect an echo of this attitude in Don Quixote’s indifference to the Cousin’s literary output. Whereas the aged knight had praised Lorenzo’s poetry in grandiloquent terms, he receives the Cousin’s speculations in silence. Perhaps Don Quixote is disgusted by the humanist’s extreme presumption, which compares unfavorably to the modesty displayed by the young poet. Likewise, Lorenzo composed verses purely for artistic pleasure, whereas the Cousin expects to win fame for his rambling jargon.

6 Juan Huarte de San Juan 155-56. “[C]uando algún pleiteante los consulta tienen licencia del vulgo para decir: ‘yo miraré sobre este caso mis libros’: lo cual si dijese en médico cuando le piden remedio para alguna enfermedad, o el teólogo en los casos de conciencia, los ternían [sic] por hombres que saben poco en su facultad.”
The preceding examples illustrate the contempt that many advocates of letters felt for the shallow learning and presumption of their less qualified colleagues. Indeed, bachiller was understood by contemporaries as meaning hablador sin fundamento [one who speaks without a foundation] (Schindler & Jiménez 95). Letrados countered this negative popular association with the discourse of utility, praising “true letrados” for their breadth of knowledge and deriding the scant learning of infra-letrados, dismissing the latter as intellectual poseurs. This attitude was challenged by members of the less distinguished lettered professions who argued that their social contributions were equally vital to the preservation of the Republic. We will next consider a text outside the literary canon that exemplifies the potential for social ascent inherent in the discourse of utility.

**Pedro de Madariaga’s Honra de Escribanos (1565)**

Pedro de Madariaga was a Vizcayan university professor and disciple of Juan de Yciar, the celebrated Aragonese calligraphist. Details of Madariaga’s life are scarce, but he almost certainly obtained an advanced degree given his university career, and he would have shared the traditional Vizcayan claim to hidalgo status. His *Honra de escribanos* (1565) is organized as a series of dialogues extolling the virtues of handwriting and praising scribes as productive members of the letrado class. The text may be taken as a mature statement of the infra-letrados’ desire for social distinction based on their value to the Republic. *Honra de escribanos* lacks any literary cornice or frame-story to connect the dialogues, although many of these feature the same set of interlocutors. The dialogues are brief and the characterization is very thin, which may explain the relative obscurity of the text. Perhaps a series of shorter compositions were better suited to the didactic aims of the text as they could more easily be divided into lessons. Indeed, most interlocutors are identified as university students or professors, and this academic setting provides sufficient pretext to discuss the inherent virtue and practical utility of letters. In the first
pair of dialogues, Manrique, a Castilian *caballero*, declares: “We know that man is distinguished from brute animals principally by reason, and being able to communicate; no matter how rustic and mad one is, man is capable of reason and can speak.”\(^7\) Because a clear writing style enables communication among human beings, letrados are distinctly advantaged over those who have dedicated themselves to martial pursuits. Similarly, in a speech praising the university environment, Manrique’s Vizcayan colleague Gamboa declares, “Here one does not fight with lances but with reason and [textual] authorities!”\(^8\) This statement might well be the motto of the new nobility of letters.

Despite these subtle barbs aimed at the military wing of the nobility, Madariaga devotes considerably more space in the text to whether scribes and grammarians can rightly be called *letrados*. Once again, this question hinges on the humanistic curriculum. One of the great contemporary literary debates was whether handwriting might be considered one of the liberal arts. Bernabé Moreno de Vargas, a fellow licentiate who enjoyed a successful administrative career in Mérida, addresses the polemic in his *Discursos de la nobleza de España* (1620), an influential treatise on nobility. Moreno de Vargas declares that whoever teaches or studies the liberal arts, including grammar and rhetoric, enjoys *nobleza política* [political nobility] regardless of whether he actually graduates.\(^9\) Despite this often-cited interpretation, many

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\(^7\) Huarte de San Juan fol.4. “Ya sabemos, que el propio nivel y diferencia con que se distingue el hombre de los brutos animales, es la razón, y saber declarar sus conceptos: más por rustico y loco que fuese uno, es capaz de razón, y puede hablar.”

\(^8\) Madariaga 15. “Pero hasta ahora no os hacemos agravio, pues no se pelea aquí con lanzas, sino con razones y autoridades.”

\(^9\) Moreno de Vargas 13r. “Asimismo gozan desta nobleza política los que leyeren, y enseñaren las ciencias, facultades, artes liberales, Gramática, y Retorica, aunque no sean graduados…”
authors refused to extend this honor to scribes. In a treatise on the arts published in 1600, Gaspar Gutiérrez de los Ríos excludes scribes from the letrado class for their superficial knowledge:

Just as one cannot be called a mathematician for knowing a few basic principles of accounting, without understanding the proportions of the numbers and other subtle yet essential things about that art, neither can scribes be called letrados for knowing only a few points of law without the causes and reasons because them.  

This comment should not be understood, however, as restricting letrado to members of the legal profession. On the contrary, Gutiérrez indicates that the study of the liberal arts is essential: “The art of reading and writing well is one of the greatest virtues among liberal studies. This art has risen so high these days that it is easier and more certain to make a man noble by the pen than by the lance.”  

Moreno de Vargas likewise includes jurists and lawyers in the broader letrado class, but makes clear that the title belongs to members of any liberal profession: “We call Letrados whoever gives excellence and advantage to others through the continual study of human and divine letters, as persons given to letters at all points…” As these examples illustrate, the liberal arts were the foundation of the letrado class and the key to obtaining “political nobility.”

Returning to Madariaga’s text, the author comments on this debate in Dialogue V, featuring a new set of noble interlocutors who are also university students. When Urquçu asks his colleague Bernardo if he considers handwriting one of the liberal arts, the latter responds, “I don’t think so, and I will not allow it to pass as such, because I would not consider myself a

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10 Gutiérrez de los Ríos 91. “[P]orque no se pueden decir Aritméticos propiamente los que no usan, sino, cuatro principios, es a saber cuatro reglas de cuenta, sin entender la proporción de los números, y otras cosas en que esta lo fino y sustancial desta arte, así como tampoco se dicen Letrados lo escribanos por saber cuatro notas del derecho sin sus causas y razones...”

11 Gutiérrez de los Ríos 93. “[E]l arte de leer y escribir bien es una de las mayores virtudes que hay entre todos los estudios y artes liberales, &c. Ha venido el día de hoy a subir tanto esta arte, que es ya más fácil y cierto el hacer un hombre noble por la pluma que por la lanza.”

12 Moreno de Vargas 13v. “[A] quienes por la excelencia, y ventaja que hacen a los de otras facultades en el perpetuo trabajo, y continua ocupación del estudio de las letras divinas, y humanas, llamamos Letrados, como personas que de todo punto son a las letras dados…”
*caballero* if it were a liberal art and I had not been instructed in it.”¹³ Urquçu responds that a discipline may be called liberal for two reasons, “either because they allow us to perceive the sciences more perfectly, as metaphysics and theology do, or because they are well-suited for any *hidalgo* or *caballero*.¹⁴ Handwriting, the speakers conclude, meets both requirements and therefore may properly be called a liberal art. Building on this theme, Dialogue VI features three *caballeros* who discuss the role of scribes throughout history. Velgara, the most astute of the three, declares that any learned man may properly be called a scribe because he must constantly be devoted to letters.¹⁵ He further declares that scribes are noble and wise: “*noble*, because the kings gave them more privileges than to all but a few sciences [or disciplines]; *wise*, because they held the mass [i.e. sum of all knowledge] in their hand; and for that reason scribe and wise man, and wise man and scribe are all the same thing.”¹⁶ In methodical fashion the author first links handwriting with the liberal arts, then with letrado status, and finally with the political nobility claimed by the letrado elite. The unifying thread in each argument is, once again, the perceived utility of a scribe’s talents to Republic.

In the final dialogue, the noblewoman Petronia delivers a speech praising letters as a sure means of providing material success and financial security to one’s heirs: “What means will a poor hidalgo take who has many children, and is unable to make them [government] officials,

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¹³ Madariaga 27. “No me parece, ni consentiré que pase por tal: que yo no me tendría por caballero, si fuese liberal, y no hubiese pasado por ella.”

¹⁴ Madariaga 28. “No consiento, que no haya mas artes liberales que esas siete: porque las artes dicen liberales por una de dos razones: o porque nos aperciben para alcanzar mejor con ellas las perfectas ciencias, como son la filosofia Metafisica, y Teologia. O dicen liberales, porque convienen a cualquier hidalgo, o caballero.”

¹⁵ Madariaga 33. “De donde está claro que los mejores escribanos serían más doctos, y ningún docto dejaría de ser buen escribano.”

¹⁶ Madariaga 33. “Verdades: nobles porque los reyes les daban más privilegios que a cuantas ciencias había; sabios, porque tenían la masa en la mano: y por eso escribano y sabio, y sabio y escribano todo era una misma cosa.”
and cannot afford to support their studies, but can nonetheless leave them a sure and honorable patrimony in the pen?”

17 This rhapsodic account stirs the memory of her companion Sagunto, who neatly summarizes the theme: “I now recall that my father used to say that writing well is a convenient solution for the poor, a great elegance and honor for the rich, and necessary for everyone; and for that reason I admit that not being able to write means great poverty.”

18 Returning to the utility of letters, Petronia concludes by praising their capacity for social ascent:

Finally, the excellent faculty of writing is the absolute mistress of the sciences, the helmsman of the soul’s powers, makes the poor rich, the ignorant wise, and commoners nobles, it preserves the status of kings, and raises many men to be popes and princes: and it is a more generous, faithful and certain fortune than the common fortune that (so they say) roams this world.

19 Significantly, Madariaga’s interlocutors take for granted that letrado status is socially desirable, and argue for other members of that class to recognize them as equal colleagues within the “nobility of letters.” We are presented, then, with a mature statement of the discourse of utility. Just as Cervantes’ Don Diego de Miranda sees a career in letters as desirable for his son Lorenzo, and Basilio’s Cousin boasts of his compositions’ supposed value to the Republic, so too do Madariaga’s interlocutors adduce utility to justify the inclusion of scribes within the letrado class, an essential precursor to obtaining the “political nobility” described by contemporary authors. As Carol Harllee observes, “For Madariaga writing is not a force for levelling the social hierarchy, but rather a means of gaining entry to the inner circles of power and influence” (563).

17 Madariaga 39. “Que medio tomará el pobre Hidalgo que tiene muchos hijos, y no le es honra hacerlos oficiales, ni los puede sustentar en estudios, sino le deja un certísimo patrimonio y honroso en la pluma?”

18 Madariaga 39. “Ahora me acuerdo de lo que solía decir mi padre, que el escribir bien es oportuno remedio para los pobres, grande elegancia y honra para los ricos, y necesario a todos: y por eso concedo que es gran pobreza no saber escribir.”

19 Madariaga 42-43. “Finalmente esta tan excelente facultad del escribir, es señora absoluta de las ciencias, guía el timón de las potencias del alma, a los pobres hace ricos, a los ignorantes sabios, a los villanos hidalgos, conserva a los reyes en su estado, levanta a muchos hasta el sumo pontificado, y a príncipes: y es otra fortuna más liberal, más fiel y segura que la común fortuna, que (dicen) suele rodar por este mundo.”
However, a competing discourse of performance arose during the period of university expansion after 1560, one that approximated the letrado elite with the old nobility. Whereas utility had to some extent bound the class of letters together, this notion of performance was used specifically to exclude aspiring infra-letrados from full letrado status based on non-academic criteria—above all, their supposed lack of noble bearing and cultural refinement.

**The Discourse of Performance**

In early modern society, the university degree represents a concentration of symbolic capital that enables letrados to project a performative self at court and council. Because of rising enrollment in the final decades of the sixteenth century, an academic title in itself was no longer sufficient for membership in the elite, particularly when not accompanied by appropriate manners. Returning again to Bourdieu, “The universally adopted strategy [for an elite]… is to naturalize difference, to turn it into a second nature through inculcation and incorporation in the form of a habitus” (*Language* 123). Ambitious letrados were therefore obsessed with the performative projection of the self, which depended on the accumulation of cultural capital. Such social markers distinguished noble and aristocratic graduates from their more plebeian colleagues in a way that formal credentials and academic titles alone could not. Whereas earlier letrado authors like the Valdés brothers had relied solely on their professions’ perceived utility to justify their social privilege—due in large part to the former scarcity of university degrees—the new generation of letrado authors increasingly described their role in terms of a performance.

We have seen how the discourse of utility enables letrados to argue for enhanced privilege commensurate to their great value to society. However, letrado literature of the era also reveals a discourse of performance that effectively links *colegiales* with the traditional nobility while excluding infra-letrados for the supposed lack of aristocratic bearing. Such efforts are a form of self-fashioning. Stephen Greenblatt observes that “in the sixteenth century there appears
to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (22). This strategy builds upon the efforts of Italian Renaissance courtiers to distance themselves from the urban elites and win favor with their prince. Indeed, to an extent letrado literature of this type may be read in parallel to the ideal noble described in Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528). The courtly interlocutors of that work construct elaborate figures of speech, make clever literary allusions, and offer well-placed comments to win their prince’s favor. Their emphasis on style and manners was a practical response to the realities of court life, in which letters played a prominent role. As cultural historian Jay Tribby observes, “Court culture judged speaking and letter writing as the two best ways of demonstrating one’s social capacities to others...” (147). Literary scholar David Posner elaborates further upon this theme:

The pose of the nobleman as a nonperformer, one whose *parole* is a transparent (re)presentation of identity, is simply one performance among many, and the successful nobleman is one who can control and deploy an array of performative selves according to situational demands, while maintaining an essential separation between performer (however defined) and performance. (5)

In the early modern context, discipline of the body and of language are forms of cultural capital. Because cultural capital is embodied, it does not exist independently of other people's dispositions and perceptions. Consequently, obtaining a distinctive reputation involves marking out a particular space within a field (Bennett 11-12). As noted above, intellectual prowess alone was not enough to distinguish a student in the competitive environment of the university, and aspiring letrados were expected to display a number of qualities not related to their academic attainments. Courtiers and letrados faced a similar dilemma in this regard. Returning again to Tribby, “the body of the courtier was regarded as an edifice, to be built and strengthened through the process of acculturation, or as a vessel, to be filled with centuries of examples of social style” (153). A pressing question for both groups was how to construct an effective social edifice.
Embodied cultural capital may refer to cognitive and manual skills and competences; alternatively, it can refer to manners and mannerisms (Robbins “Neostoicism” 154). The former were the domain of the letrados, whose public service resulted in an extrinsic “political nobility” that competed with the intrinsic “nobility of blood.” Observing this, members of the nobility quickly monopolized the limited space in the universities, imposing upon them a number of performative and behavioral codes more typical of the court than the classroom. By the seventeenth century the Colegios Mayores were full of members of the middle nobility, especially second-born sons, who established networks of clientage and developed a caste spirit (Carabias Torres, “Colegios mayores” 28-29). These colegiales adopted the outwork trappings of courtly society, both in clothing and in gestures, not only to arrogate noble status to themselves but also to exclude their less refined letrado colleagues from the new elite. This section will examine two texts that illustrate the intermingling of aristocratic and academic codes through the discourse of performance: “El licenciado Vidriera,” from Cervantes’ *Novelas ejemplares* (1613), and the comparatively obscure *Diálogo de los pajes del palacio* (1573) by Diego de Hermosilla, chaplain to Emperor Charles V. Both texts demonstrate concern with the individual’s power to control identity as a strategy for adapting to—and thriving within—the world of the court.

**Miguel de Cervantes’ El licenciado Vidriera (1613)**

Cervantes’ *Novelas ejemplares*, a collection of “exemplary novels” published at the height of the author’s fame, contain numerous references to student life and the position of university graduates in contemporary society. Of these tales, “El licenciado Vidriera” is most relevant to the discourse of performance and the competing worlds of the letrado and courtier.

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20 For a discussion of this enigmatic author’s biography, see José Manuel Franco Rodriguez, *Estudio y edición crítica del diálogo de los pajes de Diego de Hermosilla*, Diss. Universidad Almería, 2004.
The *novelas* feature half-serious, half-ironic praise of Spaniards for the noble virtues of honor, constancy, and duty. Cervantes’ protagonists are almost without exception nobles, typically belonging to the *hidalgo* or *caballero* class, and he presents them as a synthesis of material and spiritual values (McKendrick 705-706). The *vida estudiantil* [student-life] tradition recurs throughout the *novelas*, and the frequency with which university students appear is therefore evidence of the close interrelation between letrados and the nobility.

“El licenciado Vidriera” relates the tale of Tomás Rodaja, a university student who succumbs to a strange madness—he believes his body is made entirely of glass. This fixation leads to bizarre behavior, such as traveling in a carriage stuffed with hay and insisting that no one touch him lest they shatter his fragile form. These outward eccentricities, along with his aphoristic speech, win him a large following of curious onlookers. Such is his fame that he is eventually invited to court—the ultimate career goal of all letrados, who sought to gain a patron or protector through demonstration of the extensive knowledge they acquired in the universities.

Historian Patrick Lincoln Williams describes the royal patronage system in positive terms:

> Although there were occasional deficiencies in the experience of groups of councilors and although individual ambition could be limited by social class, it remains true that this Administration offered a career for the talents; the exigencies of governing impossibly complex empire had created a class of men of massive and bewildering experience, and Philip III made the fullest use of them. (214)

Yet Rodaja’s apparent success at court inverts this model of social ascent, as the licentiate’s fame results not from his “massive and bewildering experience” but from his entertainment value as a madman; effectively, he is rendered a type of court jester. Because social success was linked to body control in the courtly milieu, texts often feature body imagery (Tribby 149). Here it is significant that Cervantes’ protagonist triumphs at court despite his mad delusions about his own body. Indeed, Rodaja’s extreme avoidance of human contact seems incompatible with the courtly
milieu, which is characterized by constant interaction among courtiers. This apparent contradiction has resulted in confusion among literary critics on how to interpret the *novela*.

Many critics view “El licenciado Vidriera” in light of Cervantes’ own experience as an erstwhile university student and retired soldier. Jorge García López sees parallels between the author and Rodaja: both studied at Salamanca and sought to win fame through successive careers in arms and letters.\(^{21}\) In a similar vein, Elaine Bunn describes the *novela* as a type of “intellectual biography,” more closely affiliated with the conceptual and academic than the sensual (122). According to Paul Lewis-Smith, the text is “the product of Cervantes's vocationist reflections on the disorientation of top-notch law graduates whose ambition of becoming *abogados* in the new Corte had foundered on personality traits that made them too good for the legal profession, from Cervantes's moral perspective” (440). These critics all recognize the changing nature of the performance expected of letrados, who in the seventeenth century must master elaborate protocols in order to compete with career courtiers on equal terms. Despite his obvious intelligence, Rodaja is too humble and inept at social networking to succeed at court.

Returning to the text of the *novela*, Tomás Rodaja first appears dressed in peasant garb slumbering beneath a tree on the banks of the Tormes River. Two noble students discover him and, seeing that he is a boy of about eleven years, order a servant to wake him. They learn that the child is on his way to the University of Salamanca to seek a master and has seemingly lost his memory, being unable to recall even the names of his country or his parents.\(^{22}\) This state of

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\(^{21}\) *Novelas ejemplares* 266.

\(^{22}\) Cervantes, *Novelas* 265. “Paseándose dos caballeros estudiantes por las riberas de Tormes, hallaron en ellas, debajo de un árbol durmiendo, a un muchacho de hasta edad de once años, vestido como labrador. Mandaron a un criado que le despertase; despertó y preguntáronle de adónde era y qué hacía durmiendo en aquella soledad. A lo cual el muchacho respondió que el nombre de su tierra se le había olvidado, y que iba a la ciudad de Salamanca a buscar un amo a quien servir, por sólo que le diese estudio.”
amnesia is less distressing to young Tomás than might be supposed, as his chief concern is being able to bring honor his family—whoever they might be. When one of the caballeros asks the boy how he plans to honor them, he replies “With my studies, by being famous for them; for I have heard that men are made bishops through their studies.”23 This answer so pleases the older students that they take him on as a criado (private servant), providing tuition in exchange for his service. Tomás quickly acclimates to the university environment, mastering the protocols of student and servant alike. Dressed in the black robes typical of a university student, he quickly impresses his new masters with his “rare intelligence” and diligent work. His behavior is typical of the discourse of performance. As Bunn observes, “The ritual of robing acknowledges not only Tomás’ official entry into the academic world, but it is also a sign of the generosity, affection, and bonding among the three young men” (126). This performance soon leads to social ascent: “And, as the good service of the servant moves the lord to treat him well, Tomás Rodaja was no longer his masters’ servant but their companion.”24 The protagonist’s experience at the University of Salamanca is thus an idealized portrayal of the social advancement potential inherent in higher education.

Tomás spends eight years at the University, ample time to obtain a licentiate, and wins great fame as an exemplary student: “His principal study was law, but he employed himself most in humanistic letters; and he had such a keen memory that it was astonishing, and it was

23 Cervantes, Novelas 266. “Con mis estudios -respondió el muchacho-, siendo famoso por ellos; porque yo he oído decir que de los hombres se hacen los obispos.”

24 Cervantes, Novelas 267. “A pocos días le vistieron de negro, y a pocas semanas dio Tomás muestras de tener raro ingenio, sirviendo a sus amos con tanta fidelidad, puntualidad y diligencia que, con no faltar un punto a sus estudios, parecía que sólo se ocupaba en servirlos. Y, como el buen servir del siervo mueve la voluntad del señor a tratarle bien, ya Tomás Rodaja no era criado de sus amos, sino su compañero.”
complemented by his wisdom, so that he was no less famous for one than for the other.”

Contrary to expectations, however, he chooses a military career after a chance encounter with Don Diego de Valdivia, a dashing army captain who persuades the licentiate of the glory of arms. Valdivia, whose name suggests life and vitality, is the only character other than the protagonist with a personal name (Bunn 127). Despite the strong friendship between the two men, Rodaja’s departure for Flanders should not be read as a rejection of a lettered career in favor of a military one. On the contrary, the Spanish tercios were plagued by nepotism and inefficiency, and the well-dressed army captain likely owes his rank to social status more than military brilliance (Lewis-Smith 449). Whereas the majority of Spanish administrative posts were held by qualified letrados, the nobility continued to monopolize the officer corps well into the seventeenth century despite their lack of experience. Indeed, there is a great discrepancy between Valdivia’s rhapsodic description of a martial life—reminiscent of Don Quixote’s praise of knight errantry—and the mundane experience of soldiers serving abroad in the tercios. As Gerhard Ostreich observes, “the new officer corps, performing routine duties within the army organization, was a professional class with a regular job to do, quite different from the military nobility, which sought honor only in battle and was intent on plunder” (68-69). Ultimately, the military fails to deliver the promise of social ascent. Moreover, the licentiate’s decision to accompany Valdivia to Flanders nearly results in his downfall, as the narrative demonstrates.

During his travels abroad, Tomás unwittingly inspires the unrequited affection of a woman who administers a love potion in the hopes of enticing him. Unfortunately, the

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25 Cervantes, Novelas 267. “Finalmente, en ocho años que estuvo con ellos, se hizo tan famoso en la universidad, por su buen ingenio y notable habilidad, que de todo género de gentes era estimado y querido. Su principal estudio fue de leyes; pero en lo que más se mostraba era en letras humanas; y tenía tan felice memoria que era cosa de espanto, e ilustrábala tanto con su buen entendimiento, que no era menos famoso por él que por ella.”
concoction instead renders him insane, convinced that his body is made of glass—a delusion that inspires his unusual sobriquet. The eccentric behavior and speech of the “Licenciado Vidriera” win him great fame in the capital, and even an invitation to court. Cervantes thus contrasts the world of the university, where virtuous conduct and great intelligence are the hallmarks of a successful letrado, with that of the court, where ostentatious speech and outlandish behavior are prized. The delusion persists for two years until the ecclesiastical Order of Saint Jerome, which specializes in treating madmen, undertakes to cure Vidriera. They successfully restore his sanity, “And seeing him sane again, they dressed him as a letrado and made him return to the Court, where he could finally make himself famous with his office [of licentiate] by giving as many proofs of his wisdom as he had given of his madness.”26 Once again, the ritual act of robing signifies the entry (or reentry) into the ranks of the letrado class. Because this symbolic gesture is performed by religious order, it even more resembles an act of consecration than Rodaja’s first robing as a student by his noble masters. Despite this note of optimism, the cure to the protagonist’s madness results in a drastic decline in his personal fortunes and social status.

Mortified by the number of people who apparently have come to see and delight in his madness, Tomás proudly declares himself a letrado: “I am a graduate in laws from Salamanca, where I studied in poverty and where I received second place [in my class], from which you can infer that virtue rather than favor gave me the degree that I have.”27 In effect, he was the

26 Cervantes, Novelas 299. “Dos años o poco más duró en esta enfermedad, porque un religioso de la Orden de San Jerónimo, que tenía gracia y ciencia particular en hacer que los mudos entendiesen y en cierta manera hablasen, y en curar locos, tomó a su cargo de curar a Vidriera, movido de caridad; y le curó y sanó, y volvió a su primer juicio, entendimiento y discurso. Y, así como le vio sano, le vistió como letrado y le hizo volver a la Corte, adonde, con dar tantas muestras de cuerdio como las había dado de loco, podía usar su oficio y hacerse famoso por él.”

27 Cervantes, Novelas 300. “Yo soy graduado en leyes por Salamanca, adonde estudié con pobreza y adonde llevé segundo en licencias, de do se puede inferir que más la virtud que el favor me dio el grado que tengo.”
salutatorian of his graduating class. This description resembles Don Quixote’s advice to Lorenzo that the first place in literary competitions were always reserved for prominent people, but the second prize was really the “first” because it was awarded for merit (see Don Quixote II.18). By boasting of his poverty and acknowledging the favoritism behind many university degrees, Tomás positions himself as a “true letrado” unlike his aristocratic colleagues of inferior skill. He concludes by inviting the assembled crowd to consult him privately: “What you used to ask me in the plazas, ask me now in my home, and you will see that the man who used to give such good impromptu responses (so they say) will give you even better responses upon reflection.”

Tomás is effectively shunning the spectacle that had characterized his career as Vidriera. The eccentric performance is over, he declares to the court, and henceforth he will offer intelligent advice as a true letrado should.

Unfortunately for Tomás, the public immediately deserts him, having no interest in the articulate and thoughtful speech of a wise licentiate. Unable to earn a living by practicing law in the crowded and corrupt environment of the court, the disillusioned letrado seeks out his old comrade Captain Valdivia and departs again for Flanders. Bunn describes the frustrated scholar’s decision to return to the military as a type of personal triumph: “In any case, from now on he pursues a life not dependent on others but fully realized as an integrated personality—at least a character with agency and not fearful” (134). Before departing, he delivers a final jeremiad to Madrid society: “Oh Court, you expand the hopes of the bold pretenders, and cut down those of the timid but virtuous; you abundantly sustain the shameless rogues and starve the honest men of

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28 Cervantes, Novelas 300. “Lo que solíades preguntarme en las plazas, preguntádmelo ahora en mi casa, y veréis que el que os respondía bien, según dicen, de improviso, os responderá mejor de pensado.”
discretion!”²⁹ Paul Lewis-Smith takes this final, despairing proclamation as evidence Cervantes conceived “El licenciado Vidriera” as a cautionary tale for circulation in Valladolid. According to this reading, its target audience was young men from undistinguished provincial backgrounds who had taken legal degrees in the University of Salamanca, and had moved to Valladolid (where Philip III had temporarily relocated the capital between 1601 and 1606) intent on joining the college of advocates who were licensed to appear before the Reales Consejos (441). The text may thus be read as an indictment of the patronage system, which fails to reward authentic talent.

Despite this negative interpretation, I incline rather to George Shipley’s view of the novela as a vindication of social mobility: “We see the values of humanism validated in the adolescent’s love of learning and his early mastery of Latin texts, secular and religious, and his wide-ranging cultural curiosity” (728-29). Rodaja’s time as a university student at Salamanca illustrates the potential of letters for rapid social ascent, as he rises from servant to salutatorian despite his humble origins. To be sure, he depends on the material support of his noble employers, but his overall academic success results from his own talent rather than from their patronage. I therefore read “El licenciado Vidriera” as a defense of meritocracy as well as an indictment of the court’s superficiality. Bogged down by its elaborate performative codes and network of old-boy associations, the court closes the door to intellectual talent in favor of spectacle. Nor is Cervantes alone in making these claims: I turn now to a text outside the literary canon that laments the inability of talented letrados to compete with the wealthy elite at court.

²⁹ Cervantes, *Novelas* 301. “¡Oh Corte, que alargas las esperanzas de los atrevidos pretendientes, y acortas las de los virtuosos encogidos, sustentas abundantemente a los truhanes desvergonzados y matas de hambre a los discretos vergonzosos!”
**Diego de Hermosilla’s Diálogo de los Pajes del Palacio**

Diego de Hermosilla’s *Diálogo de los pajes del palacio* (1573) addresses the phenomenon of “double aristocratization,” whereby noble and non-noble letrados became increasingly intermingled, and the need to excel in manners as well as intellect to be successful in contemporary society. Christina Lee describes Hermosilla as a “courtly predecessor” to Francisco de Quevedo, serving as chaplain to Charles V and observing the vicissitudes of court life firsthand (52). This attitude is palpable throughout the Dialogue. As Donald Mackenzie observes, “the [Duke’s] palace is a veritable hot-bed of envy and jealousy, and that the grandee is a victim of the intrigues of his servants” (7). The text is organized in four colloquies, each divided into a variable number of chapters. The first colloquy begins with the arrival of Juan de Lorca, a wealthy but untitled merchant, at the ducal palace. The Duke has promised to take on Lorca’s young son as a page, not due to any outstanding qualities of the boy, but as a favor in return for a hefty loan from the merchant. Godoy, an elderly page whose name evokes Old Christian ancestry, describes the routine of the ducal court to Medrano and Guzmán, two less refined and relatively impoverished hidalgo pages (Mackenzie 8). He is frustrated by the limited career opportunities available to men in his station and resents the ease with which parvenus like Lorca translate money into social advantage. Lee describes Godoy as “a disgruntled hidalgo with few prospects for improving his present lot” (Lee 52). However, where she uses this characterization to argue that his social criticisms should not be taken seriously, I see his frustration as emblematic of talented contemporaries who find their career options limited due to extraneous factors like their lack of wealth or aristocratic pedigrees.

A recurring theme in letrado literature is the difficulty of finding a suitable post after graduation. The growing surplus of letrados, and the resulting deficit of available public offices, leaves many qualified graduates without means to support themselves. This theme persists as late
as Matías de los Reyes’ framework novel Para Algunos (1640). After a discussion about the source of true nobility, in which the courtly interlocutors conclude that personal virtue is the only justifiable foundation for social privilege, an anonymous pilgrim responds sardonically that one cannot subsist on virtue alone. His remarks summarize the position of the letrado class:

Moreover, the jurists and theologians would do poorly, unable to earn their daily sustenance, unless they were given stipends by the princes, and of course the princes that reward letters are few, and there are many more letrados than there are letters themselves. And this abundance, it is said, proceeds from the benevolence of the Colleges.30

The use of the term “benevolence” (benignidad) here is an ironical allusion to the lax standards among the Colegios Mayores, which more than any other factor has contributed to the declining quality of the letrado class. The universities have admitted too many students, diminishing the prestige of university degrees, and there are now not enough offices to go around.

Returning to Hermosilla, the Dialogue describes a parallel situation between career-seeking graduates and noble pages. Having observed some twenty pages serving in the Duke’s household, Lorca asks Medrano how there could possibly be enough posts for everyone.

Medrano, whose name may be rendered “social climber,” responds sardonically:

Now you know that university students, the late-hatching chickens, and palace pages are all of the same condition: you will see a hen with twenty or thirty chicks, and some are taken away by hawks, and others die of disease, and others in some misfortune, so that only three or four make it to chicken coop. And if all the students became letrados, it would cheapen their office.31

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30 Reyes 180r. “Demás, que los Legistas, y Teólogos los pasarían mal, no pudiendo ganar el victo, a lo menos sin ser estipendiados de los Príncipes, supuesto, que los Principes que tratan de premiar las letras, son muy pocos, y los Letrados muchos más, que las letras mismas. Y esta abundancia se dice procede de la benignidad de los Colegios.”

31 Hermosilla 26. “LORCA: Como hay oficios y cargos para tantos? porque si no me engaño, he visto en casa del Duque más de veinte pajes. / MEDRANO: Ahora sabéis que los estudiantes de las universidades, y los pollos tardíos, y los pajes de palacio somos todos de una condición; que veréis una gallina con veinte o treinta pollos, y los unos lleva el milano, otros se mueren de dolencia, y los otros en alguna desgracia, de manera que de todos no llegan sino de tres o cuatro al gallinero. Y si los estudiantes viniesen a ser todos letrados, abaratarían su oficio.”
The symbolic value of letrado status depends on its perceived scarcity, as few can meet the rigors of university study. Medrano compares this situation to the status of palace functionaries:

It is the same with us: we begin with fifteen or twenty, some die young, others are taken away by their parents, who realize how little they can gain here; other young men, priding themselves on their honor, and seeing few alternatives, go to the Indies or Italy, preferring the possibility of death in battle, doing their duty, than by the starvation that awaits them in the palace.32

The latter description resonates with Rodaja’s decision to quit the court in favor of a military career in Flanders. As a consequence of these predations, only five or six out of the original twenty pages remain in the Duke’s service until adulthood, and the grandee has little difficulty in finding them posts in his household as secretaries, accountants, and majordomos.33 Those who persist will see their efforts rewarded with an appropriate office, reinforcing the aristocratic ideal that mastering courtly protocols is an essential precursor to participating in the elite.

This point is somewhat undercut in a later exchange between Godoy and Guzmán that affirms having many counselors is better than having only a few: “because being many, although some will miss the mark, there will always be one who hits the bullseye.”34 Despite his hostility to moneylenders and merchants like Lorca, Godoy considers letrado status perfectly compatible with nobility at even the highest levels. He refers favorably to Don Pedro Fernández de Velasco,

32 Hermosilla 27. “Así nos acontece a nosotros, que somos quince o veinte: algunos se mueren sin llegar a edad de poderles dar nada; otros llevan sus padres, conociendo lo poco que de aquí han de sacar; y otros que se ven ya hombrecillos y se precian de la honra, entendiendo el poco remedio que esperan, se van a las Indias, otros a Italia, escogiendo por mejor genero de muerte la violencia que allá pueden recibir, haciendo su deber, que la cevil [sic] hambre que en palacio les aguarda.”

33 Hermosilla 27-28. “Y deste modo, de toda la multitud de pajes, quedan a lo mucho cinco o seis destos, cuando llegan a ser hombres… Desta manera distribuyen sus oficios, y nos pagan a nosotros, y andan gobernadas sus casas como ellas merecen, porque no traen cuenta con los cargos, sino con las personas, y pocos salarios: y como son tan mozos, antes que tomen tinto a los oficios, han hecho un millón de necedades, mayormente si el señor no les sabe advertir ni encaminar.”

34 Hermosilla 110. “GUZMÁN: Cual tenéis por mejor, ser los consejeros muchos o pocos? / GODOY: Como fuere el negocio: que si se requiere secreto, entre muchos se podría mal guardar; mas si no hay en el este peligro, ‘mientras más moros, más ganancia’: que siendo muchos, aunque algunos den en la herradura, no faltará quien dé en el clavo...”
Constable of Castile, who enjoyed the king’s favor while possessing a law degree: “Not only was he not scorned for being a bachelor in law, but I rather think it helped him quite a lot to become esteemed by his King, feared by his enemies, and beloved by all.”

After praising Spanish luminaries like the Marqués de Santillana and Don Jorge Manrique, Godoy concludes: “And we could give many more examples of great captains and princes, both Spanish and foreign, that prided themselves as much for letters as for arms, and they did not win less glory with one than with the other…” Letters, then, are an equally valid means of social ascent available in early modern society, even in the eyes of a status-conscious Old Christian page.

The preceding examples illustrate a parallel situation among courtiers and letrados, who distinguish themselves at court through their cultural capital. According to Stephen Greenblatt, self-fashioning is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite (23). The conversations among Hermosilla’s noble pages revolve around this theme of self-fashioning. What distinguishes letrados from ambitious merchants like Lorca is precisely their performance: great lords may enrich their souls through the acquisition of letters, but materialistic pursuits like banking are inherently degrading. As Lee observes, “This social anxiety might be interpreted as the contradiction that rises out of the nobleman's desire to vaunt his superiority to the masses and prevent the low-born from joining his rank while recognizing his dependence upon the commoner to validate his status” (55). Courtly manners and refinement become a means of

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35 Hermosilla 147. “Don Pedro Fernández de Velasco, Condestable de Castilla en nuestros tiempos, no fue tenido en menos por ser bachiller en derecho, antes pienso le ayudó y no poco a ser estimado de su Rey, amado de los suyos, temido de sus enemigos y habido por padre de todos, como sus obras dieron testimonio.”

36 Hermosilla 147. “Letras supieron el marqués de Santillana, Don Yñigo López de Mendoza, Don Jorge Manrique y Don Henrique de Villena, cuyos libros quemados llora el poeta Joan de Mena, con las cuales esclarecieron su caballería e hicieron sus famas inmortales. Y sin esto podríamos traer muchos ejemplos de grandes capitanes y príncipes españoles y extranjeros que se preciaron así de las letras como de las armas, y no ganaron menor gloria en lo uno que en lo otro…”
excluding the culturally unsophisticated from membership in the elite, whether in the case of university graduates seeking access to state careers or ambitious pages vying for noble patronage. As discussed above, budding courtiers were treated as containers for the deposit and display of culture (Tribby 143). The question remains whether noble courtiers can benefit from acquiring letrado status or if they should merely employ letrado counselors.

Expanding on this theme, Guzmán asks if his colleague agrees with those that say noble lords do not need to be letrados themselves, as the advice of bachelors and licentiates may be purchased at need for low price. Godoy responds that this opinion is an error, because “knowledge of the sciences is very necessary among princes and lords so they may govern their territories, make laws, punish wrongs, and reward the good, and in them [wisdom] is a precious stone set in fine gold.” Godoy further declares, “If those bachelors and licentiates study the sciences to earn a living, why don’t they [i.e. the nobles] also study for their own honor and profit, which is knowing how to govern their territories?” This attitude resembles Madariaga’s argument that nobles should learn the art of handwriting in order to handle their affairs without relying excessively on scribes. Godoy quickly tempers this fervor for letrado status with a disclaimer: “I do not mean to say that I would oblige them all to be great jurists and letrados, and to spend all their time reading books… [but] just as that fertile land needs good seed to produce

37 Hermosilla 146. “No sois vos de la opinión de algunos señores que dicen: a que propósito el señor ha de saber ciencia; que él no ha de ser bachiller sino señor; que bachilleres y licenciados por pocos dineros se hallan, habiéndolos menester?”

38 Hermosilla 146. “No puedo yo ser de ese parecer, teniéndolo por erróneo, porque la ciencia en los príncipes y señores es muy necesaria para regir sus pueblos, hacer leyes, castigar los malos y amparar los buenos, y en ellos parece piedra preciosa engastada en muy subido oro.”

39 Hermosilla 146. “Y si esos bachilleres y licenciados que ellos dicen, la aprenden para ganar de comer, porque no la aprenderán ellos para ganar honra y provecho, como es saber gobernar sus estados?”
fruit, man’s wisdom needs good science and a wise teacher.”

Godoy recommends that lords learn Latin in order to read books of philosophy, oratory, history, and poetry, though he notes that the need is lesser in these days because so many texts have been translated into Castilian.

These observations reveal the extent to which “double aristocratization” had transformed the letrado class socially and altered what it meant to be letrado. Just as Madariaga’s interlocutors consider the liberal arts an integral component of hidalg o or caballero status, Hermosilla’s status-conscious pages believe that even grandees may benefit from the study of letters.

Towards a New Letrado Elite

This chapter has presented literary texts that highlight a transformative process experienced by the letrado class during the middle of the Habsburg period (ca. 1556–1621). Rising enrollment and a concurrent increase in the number of students from noble backgrounds rendered possession of a university degree a necessary but insufficient condition for membership in the letrado elite. These changed circumstances forced advocates of the letrado class to mobilize new strategies of self-defense and self-promotion. One such strategy was what I have called utility. As we have seen in Cervantes, the poet Lorenzo and Basilio’s humanist cousin attempt with varying degrees of success to demonstrate their professions’ great value to the Republic. Likewise, Madariaga’s interlocutors argue that grammarians and scribes—despised by their social superiors for their association with manual labor—are honorable professions that

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40 Hermosilla 146. “Y tampoco por esto no los quiero yo obligar a que por fuerza sean juristas y grandes letrados, y que estén siempre sobre los libros; mas que no sean del todo ignorantes, y se contenten con lo que naturalmente por su entendimiento alcanzan, sino que ayuden a naturaleza con el arte; que así, como la tierra, aunque de suyo sea buena, tiene necesidad de buena simiente, el ingenio de los hombres a menester buena ciencia y docto maestro por buena que de su cosecha sea.”

41 Hermosilla 147. “Lo primero que han de aprender, si quieren saber algo, es latín, aunque ya no les hace tanta falta como solía, porque casi los mejores libros de filosofía, oratoria, y de historias y poesía están traducidos en castellano; pero aun de esos no se quieren aprovechar por no tomar al principio un poco de trabajo, que después les sería gran descanso y recreación, o porque no les falte tiempo para otras cosas que les estaría bien escusar.”
serve a useful purpose. The second strategy I have called performance. We see this applied in “El licenciado Vidriera,” as the talented student Tomás Rodaja tries and fails to make the transition from the university to the world of the court because the latter environment prizes spectacle and entertainment above intellectual ability. On a more optimistic note, Hermosilla’s interlocutors argue that the ideal noble will combine aristocratic refinement and courtly bearing with extensive knowledge of letters. The literary record thus reveals that members of the letrado elite sought to emulate the courtly behavior and cultural capital of the traditional nobility, while simultaneously arguing that they were superior to their noble rivals because they provided vital services to the Republic.

Bourdieu compares academically-based social groups to kinship networks as both are based on the assignation of a title and common identity, which produces very strong social similarities (State Nobility 182). We may observe this process during the Habsburg era, as members of the letrado elite used their positions within the royal administration and judiciary to justify their social privilege. In effect, they claimed to constitute a service nobility in opposition to the nobility of blood. The state nobility’s power and authority were founded on the academic title, which through elite institutions created a hereditary body of agents entitled to occupy bureaucratic positions for which they are uniquely qualified (Bourdieu, State Nobility 377). Such a critical model is eminently suited to assess the internal divisions of the letrado class between elite colegiales and less favored infra-letrados. As observed above, the colegiales elaborated a patronage network through the universities that rivaled that of the court and partially overlapped with it (Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares 14-15). By excluding and undermining their less favored colleagues, the new letrado elite introduced a note of discord into what had previously been a largely uniform class of university-trained public servants. This ethos of exclusivity
fundamentally altered what it meant to be *letrado*, prompting the flood of apologetic literature examined in this chapter.

Returning again to *El perfecto regidor* (1586), Castilla y Aguayo also confronts the question of what distinguishes the *letrado* from the *infra-letrado*. He suggests that the quality of virtue, which he associates in Erasmian tradition with *buenas maneras* [good manners], separates lowly scribes and attorneys from royal councilors and high officials of the judiciary.\(^\text{42}\) One of his interlocutors, a doctor hailing from the University of Salamanca, recalls seeing brilliant and gifted students waste their time and money pursuing vain pleasures, for which reason they failed to obtain the high offices to which they aspired.\(^\text{43}\) The doctor then affirms the potential for social ascent through letters: “Just as the virtue and work of letters may elevate some, vice and idleness may lower others, and the son of a poor laborer through study may because a rich prelate, while the son of a rich nobleman through idleness may become an impoverished squire.”\(^\text{44}\) As we have seen in this chapter, the implied meritocracy of letters is the cornerstone of all literary efforts to

\(^{42}\) Castilla y Aguayo 171-72. “Sin las cuales virtudes no es posible o a lo menos sería muy dificultoso de alcanzar el fin de las pretensiones que tiene cada uno de los que se dan a las letras y ponen su esperanza en el fruct [sic] que pueden sacar dallas, porque verdaderamente, quien sube a los letrados en lugares tan altos como tienen algunos, es la virtud mucho más que la ciencia, porque estudiantes habemos cognocido [sic] en la facultad de leyes tan doctos que pudieran competir con Bartulo, y por no tener tan buenas costumbres como letras, al tiempo que por ellas esperaban tener algún descanso se hallaron metidos en el mayor trabajo de los que puede tener un letrado que es mucha presunción y poca hacienda con que sustentarla.”

\(^{43}\) Castilla y Aguayo 172. “Que yo me acuerdo de haber alcanzado a conocer en Salamanca, algunos estudiantes tan hábiles como jamás los ha tenido aquella universidad, y tan aprobados por doctos, que no se esperaba menos de cualquiera dellos, que ver lo colocado en una plaza de oidor, y haberse venido después, a descomponer de manera con algunos vicios y liviandades, que no correspondiendo la mala orden que tomar de vivir a la buena que tuvieron en estudiar, el crédito que ganaron al principio de sus estudios lo vinieron a perder al tiempo que habían de sacar el premio dellos, porque habiendo trabajado toda su mocedad se vinieron a hallar en su vejez desacreditados y pobres.”

\(^{44}\) Castilla y Aguayo 35. “Porque como la virtud y trabajo de las letras, puede subir a unos, el vicio y la ociosidad suele bajar a otros, y el hijo de un labrador muy pobre estudiando llegar a ser un perlado, muy rico, y el hijo de una caballero rico, holgando, que darse un escudero muy pobre.”
foreground the letrados as a social class, which found expression through self-defensive strategies of utility and performance during the Habsburg era.

The discourse of performance has further relevance to the decline of Spain. The theme of *grandeza española* [greatness of Spain] persists in the works of Cervantes, although the author was fully aware that Spain’s power was waning. By the reign of Philip II (1556-1598) the military function of the nobility had been assumed by professional armies, leaving many nobles to pursue lives of idleness and ostentation while living off their rents (Rico 16). Others turned to the universities as a means of obtaining state or ecclesiastical office. Don Quixote coincides with the letrados in that both groups criticize the knightly class that abandoned military life to become courtiers. Yet while Cervantes’ protagonist seeks to revive the age of chivalry, letrados celebrate its demise as an essential precursor to the Age of Letters—to borrow again Castilla y Aguayo’s descriptive phrase—in which they will serve as the new governing class. In Chapter 5 we will see these pressures within and upon the letrado class grow more pronounced, as successive economic crises and military reversals further alter Spain’s estamental hierarchy.
CHAPTER 5
“THE RANKERS OF REACTION”: LETRADO LITERATURE OF THE BAROQUE

Previous chapters have shown that through the process of “double aristocratization” the social markers between the letrado class and the traditional nobility were gradually eroded over the course of the sixteenth century. This self-fashioning can be observed in the literature of the era. By the early Baroque, writers were no longer asking whether a letrado could be considered noble, but whether one could be a letrado without already being noble (Concha 41). However, due to persistent misreading of the term *letrado*, many critics misunderstand this transformation.¹ Modern literary criticism has described numerous Baroque satirists as avowed enemies of the letrado class. Noble and semi-noble writers like Francisco de Quevedo, it is argued, rejected all self-made “men of letters” for their seemingly insatiable ambition and used satire to oppose their efforts to ascend socially in the estamental hierarchy (Edwards 618). These supposedly “anti-letrado” authors identified more with the traditional elite than with the “new men” of the Renaissance and viewed the latter group as a direct threat to their own privileged existence (Darrell 194). This interpretation is most vividly stated by Hispanist Javier Malagón-Barceló, who upon examining Quevedo’s *Política de Dios* (1626) declares: “We disregard the insane rage shown at court by Don Francisco Quevedo against the lawyers, scribes and other ‘people of the law,’ since this attack was more that of a political rival than of an objective critic” (15n36).

Despite the pervasiveness of this interpretation, ample textual evidence reveals that literary critics have misread the motivations of such writers, conflating the elite of the royal administration and judiciary with the mass of common attorneys under the misleading label *letrados*. As argued in Chapter 1, the letrado class was actually a composite body of numerous

¹ As before, I will continue to italicize *letrado* only when referring to the lexical term.
professions defined by university study and the public exercise of letters. By associating the term exclusively with the legal profession scholars have obscured the literary polemic around the letrado in the context of Baroque satire.

This chapter will demonstrate that many literary critics have misread supposedly “anti-letrado” authors as despising all letrados when in fact they object chiefly to the cheapening of the university degree through rampant enrollment. Indeed, the first decades of the seventeenth century saw the height of attendance in Spain’s three “imperial universities” as well as at a host of less prestigious minor institutions (Haliczer 112-113). In such an environment, satirists condemned lawyers not because the legal profession was inherently corrupt but because there were simply too many attorneys in Spain, and many of them were ill-qualified. Texts also reveal a closely-related belief that cronyism under the Lerma and Olivares regimes had betrayed the principles of medieval Castilian law as embodied in the Siete Partidas (Sieber 95-96). Indeed, by the beginning of the seventeenth century the Madrid court had become a magnet for unemployed office-seekers whose only chance of obtaining a post was through bribery and intrigue (Corbett 146). A close examination of works by five canonical letrado authors from this period will reveal a far more nuanced position regarding this literary sociotype than modern scholarship has tended to recognize. Far from rejecting letrados en masse, these authors seek through literary discourse to distinguish between authentic letrados—those holding advanced degrees, often from the imperial universities—and the inept infra-letrados who disgrace the lettered professions with their greed and shallow learning.

I will begin by considering the most prominent member of the “anti-letrado” camp, Don Francisco Gómez de Quevedo (1580–1645), whose relationship with the profession of letters is also perhaps the most complex. Hispanist Lia Schwartz Lerner has observed that in Quevedo’s
satire letrado forms a semantic conjunction with jueces, abogados, escribanos, and ministros de la justicia—terms all associated with the legal profession (“El letrado en la sátira” 40). However, many scholars persist in conflating this narrow subset with the broader concept of gente letrada—the overarching letrado class (Murillo Rubiera 420). A proper understanding of letrado allows us to read Quevedo’s satire not as a rejection of the rising bureaucratic class but rather as a defense of meritocracy as typified by Castile’s legal tradition. This interpretation is more consistent with Quevedo’s literary reputation for patriotism and religious conviction than the idea that he was an unwavering foe of the sociopolitical group to which he—however reluctantly—belonged.

**Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645)**

In general, criticism of letrados as a class illustrates the opposition of the conservative sector of Baroque society to the expanding role of the state bureaucracy and the jurists who have acquired social status through royal service (Lerner, “El letrado” 45-46). As discussed above, Quevedo is often cast as the most vociferous critic of the letrados in this tradition, supposedly dismissing them as social upstarts and intellectual poseurs. Quevedo, the arguments runs, owed his privileges to the aristocratic order and consequently resented the letrado class for threatening that order (Darrell 194). This interpretation depends heavily on aspects of the author’s early life and career, so it is necessary to offer a brief overview of his professional formation before considering his literary output. Quevedo’s birth situates him decidedly within the letrado elite: his parents were minor nobles and his father even served as a royal secretary. Intending to follow the latter’s example, Quevedo studied at the Colegio Imperial in Madrid before eventually obtaining degrees from the universities of Alcalá de Henares and Valladolid, where he studied **Artes**—logic, mathematics, and physics—as well as theology and philosophy. This humanistic curriculum gave Quevedo a much broader intellectual formation than his colleagues who
dedicated themselves exclusively to legal studies, and may further explain his perceived hostility towards that group. Before beginning his literary career in earnest, he served the Duke of Osuna in various diplomatic and ministerial roles during the latter’s tenure as Viceroy of Sicily and later Naples. In 1618 he was rewarded for his service with the habit of the Order of Santiago, which conferred upon him the rank of caballero—a middling noble. He also received an honorary post as royal secretary in 1632, affording him additional prestige and financial security (Price vi-ix). Quevedo thus embodies the experience of the successful letrado: by using the rhetorical skills he acquired through university training, he achieved a court position and gained advanced ennoblement through state service.

Despite Quevedo’s intimate connection to the letrado class, most scholars have accepted his apparent criticisms of that group at face value. Authors like Lia Schwartz Lerner consider him an unwavering partisan for the high nobility in their conflict with these officious parvenus: “Quevedo is defender and spokesman for the interests of the high nobility, although he does not belong to it by birth. His representation of the letrado as a literary ‘type’ consequently reveals resentment and disdain.”2 This interpretation does not take into account the fact that due to “double aristocratization” the visible status markers between letrados and old noble were increasingly blurred. Joseph Pérez writes that by the end of the sixteenth century the distinction between ministro togado and de capa y espada had lost most of its old social force, perhaps even resolving itself in favor of the former (“La aristocracia” 65). As a career courtier, Quevedo observed this process firsthand. Consequently, even his most spirited tirades reveal an awareness that not all letrados were unqualified mountebanks. Rather than the inveterate foe of all letrados,

2 Schwartz Lerner 45. “Quevedo es defensor y portavoz de los intereses de la alta nobleza, aunque no pertenezca a ella por nacimiento. La recreación del tipo del letrado, por ello, revela este resentimiento y desprecio consecuente.”
this chapter will demonstrate that Quevedo exemplifies a successful letrado distancing himself from the rabble of infra-letrados. This elitist attitude is consistent with his aristocratic pretentions: although lawyers technically held university titles, their dependence on collecting fees rendered them incompatible with nobility and therefore unsuitable for court life (Harllee 560-61). The lexical distinction between letrados and infra-letrados illustrates how Quevedo could reject the latter group while proudly claiming membership in the former.

A final point to consider when examining the literary record is the ongoing process of re-semanticization as discussed in Chapter 2. Many of Quevedo’s comments reveal the same confusion over the meaning of letrado that plagued contemporary authors and continues to affect modern critics. As has been argued in preceding chapters, the profession of letters was broadly understood by the end of the sixteenth century to include a wide array of categories ranging from infra-letrados—scribes, notaries, attorneys, and perhaps grammarians—to the “letrado elite” of royal councilors and secretaries. A member of the Council of Castile, for example, might accurately be described as letrado if he possessed the corresponding university degree. However, it would be entirely inappropriate—even insulting—to call that person abogado due to the term’s association with trial work. Indeed, partly to avoid the stigma attached to either of the preceding terms, royal councilors from the time of Philip II on preferred togado to letrado (Pérez, “La aristocracia” 63). As will be seen, Quevedo recognizes this crucial lexical distinction and always distinguishes between letrado—which he uses exclusively to denote lawyers—and royal officials, whom he describes as ministros or jueces. The next section will examine a pair of texts that illustrate this vital distinction.

Quevedo and the Law: España Defendida (1618) and Política de Dios (1626)

This chapter largely ignores treatises in favor of the more “literary” genres of the novela and comedia. However, Quevedo elaborates his ideology regarding the legal profession and the
administration of justice to such an extent in his treatises that it is essential to consider them as a preliminary step. As we will see throughout his corpus, Quevedo uses *letrado* to refer primarily to trial attorneys, a tendency that caused many critics to conflate anti-lawyer with anti-university sentiment. His distaste for lawyers centers on their supposedly greedy nature and superficial knowledge of legal texts. That disdain does not extend to the higher orders of the legal profession, which as shown in Chapter 2 are properly called *jurisconsultos* [jurists] rather than lawyers or attorneys. Critics who believe Quevedo rejected the entire letrado class disregard this distinction despite its prominence in several of his prose works. His early literary output deals extensively with the crucial social function of the law.

In the treatise *España defendida y los tiempos de ahora* (1618) Quevedo expresses great admiration for Castile’s complex legal tradition and accumulated jurisprudence: “Such laws born of the divine law, so carefully revered! What crimes were not proscribed by the *Fueros Juzgos* of Castile, wherein our sins are punished with rigorous penalties?”

Despite having received a humanistic rather than legal education, Quevedo praises Castilian tradition as superior to the codes inherited from Roman law. Far from despising the “people of the law”—as Lerner and Malagón-Barceló maintain—he reveres them. What has outraged the author is the corruption of the contemporary legal profession, which he believes has betrayed the legacy of medieval legislators and tarnished Spain’s reputation in the present. As will be seen throughout his corpus, Quevedo’s ire is aimed not at the well-educated jurists upon whom the modern state depends but the legion of poorly-trained attorneys proliferating the land. Although occasionally criticizing judges, he chiefly addresses the lower echelons of attorneys, sheriffs, bailiffs, and even litigants

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3 Quevedo, *España defendida* 174. “¿Qué leyes tan licitamente nacidas de las divinas, tan cuidadosamente veneradas de ellos! ¿Qué cosas no advirtieron con castigos en los Fueros Juzgos castellanos, donde se ven con rigurosas penas cosas que por nuestros pecados nos han persuadido los tiempos a que merecen premio?”
(Schwartz 109n143). R. M. Price suggests that Quevedo’s hatred of this group owed largely to a series of contentious lawsuits over his mother’s estate and wife’s dowry (viii). Regardless of the precise origin of Quevedo’s attitude, it hardly amounts to a wholesale rejection of the legal profession.

Nor is Quevedo’s identification with the established order quite as firm as critics have maintained, as Quevedo’s monarchism and conservatism do not prevent him from engaging in patriotic criticism. Due to his diplomatic experience and position at court, Quevedo was more aware of the disastrous state of Spain’s power abroad and the decadence of the nobility than any contemporary writer. His Política de Dios y gobierno de Cristo (1626) is a treatise on morality in government that can also be read as a satire of Philip III and Philip IV, with whom Quevedo was directly acquainted during his years at court (Price 4-5). This text deals with the theme of meritocracy, chiefly in the context of royal appointments. Repulsed by the rampant cronyism under a series of royal favorites, he turns his pen against the office of valido [chief minister] as well as the patronage system: “Nor should a good king permit his estates to be wasted on satisfying his relatives… Let the noble Minister know that he was born of virtue and engendered by merit, not by his father; and let him have as brothers all those who are most deserving, and the poor as his children…”

Royal offices, particularly in the council system and the judiciary, are too important to blindly gift them to friends and relatives. This observation is startling as it runs contrary to his noble patrons’ interests. By ignoring personal merit in favor of kinship and clientage, the Crown has opened the door to widespread corruption and inefficiency: “The bad minister said ‘One for me, and another for me, and the other one for me, and everything for...

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4 Quevedo, Política de Dios 53. “Ni buen Rey debe permitir, que sus estados se gasten en hartar parentelas... Señor, nazca de su virtud, el Ministro conozca que le engendró el mérito, no el padre; tenga por hermanos los que más merecieren; por hijos los pobres...”
The preceding criticisms reveal that Quevedo’s identification with the aristocratic classes was not absolute, nor did his preference for nobility of blood cause him to deny the meritocracy of letters. On the contrary, he identifies the king with virtue, merit, letters, and valor.\(^5\) Such comments underscore Quevedo’s desire for efficient government and his belief that virtue acquired and perfected through letters is the best safeguard against corruption. This emphatic belief in the importance of university studies for the ruling class—and their intense value to the state—reaffirms that Quevedo both supported and identified with the letrado elite.

To summarize, we have seen that far from being an implacable foe of the letrados, Quevedo was in fact their champion. His career illustrates the enormous potential for social ascent that university training and skill in letters represented in the Baroque era. In addition to his literary output, Quevedo served in numerous court offices and even participated in a number of diplomatic missions. As discussed above, he was eventually rewarded for his service with the habit of a Military Order, which automatically conferred the status of caballero, thereby realizing the core ambition of the letrado class—ennoblement through exercise of letters. Where then does the confusion arise? Aside from the persistent critical misreading of letrado already addressed in Chapter 2, much of the confusion arises from the author’s unique literary style. Quevedo uses satirical prose as a moral force to encourage social reform through ridicule and even direct didacticism (Price 7). A close reading of his satiric works reveals that his harshest criticisms were aimed not at the middling letrado administrators, much less the elite jurists, but to the extremes of the spectrum: the mass of ill-trained trial attorneys and the high-ranking ministers who owed their position not to merit but to patronage under the corrupt Lerma regime.

\(^5\) Quevedo, Política 67. “El mal ministro dijera: Para mí uno, y otro para mí, y para mí el otro, y todo para mí.”

\(^6\) Quevedo, Política 92-93. “Señor, la puerta es el Rey, y la virtud, y el mérito, y las letras, y el valor...”
By attacking these figures, Quevedo sought not to denigrate the letrado class but to purify it of its corrupting elements and to restore the ideal of meritocracy to the royal administration. One of his best-known texts, *Sueños y discursos* (1627), applies the ideological and moral abstractions of the preceding treatises to contemporary social reality, and is therefore useful for this dissertation.

**Quevedo and Letrados: Sueños y Discursos (1627)**

The first edition of *Sueños y discursos*, published in Barcelona to avoid Castilian censorship controls, contains five satiric tales or *sueños* (dreams) (Crosby, *La tradición manuscrita* 2). Whereas many letrado authors use the device of an *academia* to link miscellaneous compositions together in a single text, the *sueños* cannot be called interpolated tales as they lack a cornice to connect them and provide coherence. On the contrary, each *sueño* possesses its own narrative frame, with an implied narrator—Quevedo—who addresses an unnamed Señor or Vuestro Excelencia (Crosby, “Quevedo frente al dilema” 111). It is therefore appropriate to analyze each separately. We will disregard only the fourth *sueño*, *El mundo por dentro* [The World Within], a highly allegorical and moralizing tale whose relevance to the letrado polemic is slight. Although Quevedo later made numerous changes to the text, apparently with the goal of avoiding Inquisitorial backlash, critical opinion of these later editions has been largely unfavorable (González 158). We will therefore focus on the 1627 Barcelona edition.

In his Dantesque *Sueño del juicio final* [Dream of the Final Judgment] Quevedo populates hell with an ominous number of letrados. Upon entering the mouth of hell the narrator observes “a scribe eating the letters that he had refused to read in this life.” By forcing the scribe to devour books, the devils symbolically reappropriate the letters the sinner had neglected during his life. Although Quevedo is often described as vehemently anti-letrado, he notably exercises

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7 Quevedo, *Sueños* 18. “un escribano comiendo solo letras que no había querido solo leer en esta vida.”
restraint in this example. Rather than a general indictment of the entire notarial profession—itself only a subset of the letrado class—this punishment applies only to ignorant or undiligent notaries for their incompetence. His treatment of scribes seems even more moderate given the coarse references to other professions that follow: “[I saw] a doctor suffering in a chamber-pot, and an apothecary in an enema.”\(^8\) Nor does the narrator sympathize with those he observes suffering, but rather shrieks with laughter at their fate: “I laughed so hard upon seeing this sad spectacle that I awoke more amused than frightened.”\(^9\)

Turning again to the legal profession, Quevedo offers his own diabolical version of the judicial hierarchy in *El alguacil endemoniado* [The Possessed Constable]. The narrator encounters an infernal spirit that praises judges who through corruption and abuse of office drag with them to hell a veritable buffet of scribes, lawyers, and litigants: “Judges are our main course, the seed that bears most fruit for devils, because for every judge that we sow we reap six solicitors, two barristers, four scribes, five attorneys, and five thousand litigants each day.”\(^10\) Here the author draws upon a long literary tradition that condemned lawyers for obstructing justice by their use of overly-technical language that produces doubt and contradiction (Lerner 43-44). Quevedo thus does not attack the legal profession *per se* but only the corrupt lawyers and unjust magistrates who abuse their authority for personal ends. On the related issue of government, the same devil greedily speculates that a bad minister could produce such a harvest of sinners that all hell would not be able to contain them: “[T]here are not enough granaries in all

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\(^8\) Quevedo, *Sueños* 18: “un médico penando en un orinal y un boticario en una melecina”

\(^9\) Quevedo, *Sueños* 18. “Diome tanta risa ver esto que me despertaron las carcajadas, y fue mucho quedar de tan triste sueño más alegre que espantado.”

\(^10\) Quevedo, *Sueños* 28. “Los jueces son nuestros faisanes, y nuestros platos regalados, y la simiente que más provecho y fruto nos da a los diablos, porque de cada juez que sembramos cogemos seis procuradores, dos relatores, cuatro escribanos, cinco letrados y cinco mil negociantes, y esto cada día.”
hell to hold the fruit of a bad minister.”\textsuperscript{11} This passage again illustrates the disparity of power between letrados serving at the magistracy level and those in the royal councils—that is, between lowly infra-letrados and members of the letrado elite.

The desire to be associated with aristocratic letrados rather plebeian infra-letrados is a recurring theme in \textit{Sueños y discursos}. Later in the same tale the narrator abruptly leaves the path of righteous souls in order to pursue a group of \textit{caballeros} and letrados—described here as \textit{gente de capa negra}—who have veered off into darkness.\textsuperscript{12} As discussed in previous chapters, letrados deliberately set themselves apart by their attire: they wore black robes, carried no swords, and rode \textit{mulas} (mules) rather than horses, elements which are all present in this passage (King 106). The narrator struggles to catch up with this \textit{buena compañía} [good company] even though it requires him to abandon the saintly path and clamber along the icy road of sinners. This slippery path is crowded with merchants, jewelers, and shopkeepers, whom he describes ironically as \textit{gente tan honrada} [very honorable people]. As he advances through the press of people he encounters physicians riding \textit{mulas}—a reference to their letrado status—as well as a “terrible squad” of bearded letrados preceding a group of judges.\textsuperscript{13} Satirical depictions of letrados frequently emphasize their beards, a supposed sign of wisdom (Schwartz 181n390). Quevedo next describes a “battalion of [university] doctors,” no less numerous than the letrados, whom he describes as \textit{ponzoñas graduadas} [noxious graduates] for having devoted themselves to \textit{tósigos}

\textsuperscript{11} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 28. “[N]o hay trojes en el infierno donde recoger el fruto de un mal ministro.”

\textsuperscript{12} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 35. “Volví a la mano izquierda y vi un acompañamiento tan reverendo, tanto coche, tanta carroza cargada de competencias al Sol en humanas hermosuras, y gran cantidad de galas y libreas, lindos caballos, mucha gente de capa negra y muchos caballeros.”

\textsuperscript{13} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 35. “No podré encarecer qué contento me hallé en ir en compañía de gente tan honrada, aunque el camino estaba algo embarazado, no tanto con las mulas de los médicos como con las barbas de los letrados, que era terrible la escuadra dellos que iba delante de unos jueces.”
[poisonous studies] in the universities.\textsuperscript{14} Contrary to Lerner’s position, this passage makes it that Quevedo did not single out letrados as a social aberration, but instead situated them within the broader theme of decadence. By grouping university graduates and noble \textit{caballeros} alongside bourgeois figures—merchants and tradesmen—Quevedo implies that the former group is coming to resemble the latter in its greed, immorality, and self-interest. Under this reading, studies are only “poisonous” if they do not tend to the social good. As we will see, the theme of unqualified graduates recurs throughout the text and culminates in the final tale of this collection.

The \textit{Sueño del infierno} [Dream of Hell] presents the disturbing spectacle of a parade of condemned souls being mocked by an assembly devils as they descend to hell. To the narrator’s surprise, two of the damned are students: the first wears the \textit{capa y gorra}—a simple cape and cap typical of poor students known as \textit{capigorristas}—while the second clings desperately to a scrap of parchment (Defourneaux 172). As the devils mock them, the latter student loudly protests that he is an \textit{hidalgo}:

\begin{quote}
If, as my father said, I am the grandson of Esteban so-and-so, and there have been thirteen valiant captains in my father’s line, and on my mother’s side there have been five of the most learned professors in the world, how can I have been condemned? I have my executory letter right here, I am free from everything, and I do not pay taxes!\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Notably, the self-styled \textit{hidalgo} claims with equal pride the military accomplishments of his father’s line and the academic accomplishments of his mother’s line. Associating the office of \textit{catedrático} (professor) with the maternal line may be a casual slight against academic profession

\textsuperscript{14} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 35. “No digo eso porque fuese menor el batallón de los doctores, a quien nueva elocuencia llama ponzoñas graduadas, pues se sabe que en sus universidades se estudia para tósigos.”

\textsuperscript{15} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 44-45. “—Pues si mi padre se decía tal cual, y soy nieto de Esteban cuales y tales, y ha habido en mi linaje trece capitanes valerosísimos y de parte de mi madre doña Rodriga desciendo de cinco catedráticos, los más doctos del mundo, ¿cómo me puedo haber condenado? ¡Y tengo mi ejecutoria, y soy libre de todo y no debo pagar pecho!”
as feminine or unmanly. Alternatively, because students were required to demonstrate limpieza before admission—above all for the prestigious Colegios Mayores—the supposed hidalgo’s boast may be an indirect reference to his own “Old Christian” status (Cuart Moner 82). Whatever the speaker’s precise intent, his statement is met with indifference by the devils, one of whom knocks him to the ground bodily before announcing that having exalted ancestors is of no avail:

Undeceive yourself of this notion! Whoever descends from the Cid, Bernardo and Gofred and is not like them, but is sinful like you, destroys the lineage that he inherits. All blood, little hidalgo, is the same color, so behave nobly and then I will believe that you are descended from such wise ancestors.16

In this exchange docto [wise or learned] is used as a stand-in for noble, and the speaker’s remarks make it clear that a noble lineage may even be founded upon the quality of being docto. Here again Quevedo demonstrates his admiration for Castilian legal tradition, as this concept of a “nobility of letters” echoes the provisions of the Siete Partidas: “This attribute of gentility they possessed in three ways; first, through their lineage; second, through their knowledge; third, through the superiority of their habits and manners.”17

To elaborate this theme further, the devil next delivers a defense of personal merit over ancient lineage, and even affirms that virtue is the only legitimate source of nobility: “Whoever is virtuous in the world is an hidalgo, and virtue is the only executory letter that we recognize here, and although he descends from vile and low men, if he makes himself worthy of imitation

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16 Quevedo, Sueños 45. “—Acabaos de desengañar que el que deciende del Cid, de Bernardo y de Gofredo y no es como ellos, sino vicioso como vos, ese tal más destruye el linaje que lo hereda. Toda la sangre, hidalguillo, es colorada, y parecedlo en las costumbres, y entonces creeré que decendéis del docto cuando lo fuérdes o procuráredes serlo…”

through his divine customs, he thereby ennobles himself and founds a lineage for others.”

The parchment to which the tormented soul clings is evidently the ejecutoria or executory letter confirming the bearer’s hidalgo status, which implies he is of higher rank than his companion wearing the capa y gorra, yet both are condemned alike for their lack of virtue. While one might be tempted to dismiss these semi-egalitarian claims as a rhetorical flourish, the narrator hints that such criticisms are to be taken seriously: “I said to myself, how strange is hell, were they torment men by telling them the truth!”

The final tale, Sueño de la muerte [Dream of Death], places the narrator in the company of a necromancer as well as death himself, yet even these grim figures flee before letrados. Critics have taken this ironic juxtaposition as proof of Quevedo’s anti-letrado sentiment. When the necromancer asks if there are letrados in Spain, the narrator responds with evident vexation:

There is a plague of letrados, I said. There is nothing but letrados, because some are letrados by office, others by presumption, others by study (and very few of these), and others (these are the most numerous) are letrados because they deal with people who are more ignorant than they, and everyone graduates as doctors and bachelors, licentiates and maestros, owing more to the fools they associate with than to the universities, and Spain would be better served by an eternal plague of locusts than more licentiates!

The vitriol of the final lines has left such an impression on many readers that they disregard their deeper significance. What critics have overlooked in this passage is that Quevedo explicitly

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18 Quevedo, Sueños 45. “[E]I que en el mundo es virtuoso, ese es el hidalgo, y la virtud es la ejecutoria que acá respetamos, pues aunque decienda [sic] de hombres viles y bajos, como él con divinas costumbres se haga digno de imitación, se hace noble a sí y hace linaje para otros.”

19 Quevedo, Sueños 46. “Dije yo entre mí: —¡Y cómo se echa de ver que esto es el infierno, donde por atormentar a los hombres con amarguras les dicen las verdades!”

20 Quevedo, Sueños 100. “—Hay plaga de letrados —dije yo—. No hay otra cosa sino letrados, porque unos lo son por oficio, otros lo son por presunción, otros por estudio (y destos pocos), y otros (estos son los más) son letrados porque tratan con otros más ignorantes que ellos (en esta materia hablaré como apasionado), y todos se gradúan de doctores y bachilleres, licenciados y maestros, más por los mentecatos con quien tratan que por las universidades, y valiera más a España langosta perpetua que licenciados al quitar.”
recognizes that letrado is not a monolithic term but rather encompasses a wide variety of positive and negative valences, most of which have little or nothing to do with the legal profession. The narrator evidently approves of those who acquire letrado status *por estudio* [by study] and regrets only that they are greatly outnumbered by presumptuous office-seekers who disgrace the letrado class. Much as contemporary nobles protested the rampant sale of titles of nobility under the later Habsburgs, Quevedo bemoans the inflation of university titles that has diminished the intellectual rigor of the letrado class and reduced the social prestige of possessing a degree (Kamen, *Spain* 245). Despite critics’ tendency to describe all university graduates as *letrados* as well as the specific subset of trial attorneys, Quevedo’s hostility is clearly directed at the latter group.

Horrified by the narrator’s description of the world above, the necromancer declares that he will never leave hell to face such a bleak alternative. The narrator explains that, just as the proliferation of doctors reduces the quality of medical care—with the result of heightened mortality among patients—the overabundance of lawyers has undermined the cause of justice.21 He delivers a sweeping indictment of the legal profession, arguing that without lawyers costly litigation would cease as well as all private quarrels and public crimes, which in turn would obviate the need for *alguaciles* [constables], jails, judges, and bribes.22 In an extended metaphor Quevedo compares the libraries of letrados to cemeteries, playing on *cuerpos’* double meaning of...

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21 Quevedo, *Sueños* 100. “Repliqué: —En los tiempos pasados, que la justicia estaba más sana, tenía menos dotores, y hale sucedido lo que a los enfermos, que cuantas más juntas de dotores se hacen sobre él, más peligro muestra y peor le va, sana menos y gasta más. La justicia, por lo que tiene de verdad, andaba desnuda; ahora anda empapelada como especias.”

22 Quevedo, *Sueños* 101. “¿Queréis ver qué tan malos son los letrados? Que si no hubiera letrados no hubiera porfías, y si no hubiera porfías no hubiera pleitos, y si no hubiera pleitos no hubiera procuradores, y si no hubiera procuradores no hubiera enredos, y si no hubiera enredos no hubiera delitos, y si no hubiera delitos no hubiera alguaciles, y si no hubiera alguaciles no hubiera cárcel, y si no hubiera cárcel no hubiera jueces, y si no hubiera jueces no hubiera pasión, y si no hubiera pasión no hubiera cohecho: mirad la retahila de infernales sabandijas que se producen de un licenciadito, lo que disimula una barbaza y lo que autoriza una gorra.”
“books” and “bodies.” Just as cadavers have no souls, the narrator declares, unread books give no knowledge or insight.\textsuperscript{23} He even suggests that lawyers are as soulless as the books they possess.\textsuperscript{24} One of Quevedo’s few specific criticisms of attorneys—aside from general avarice—is their superficial knowledge of case law and the hasty, haphazard way in which they consult juridical authorities: “They take a mound of books and glance through them in a hurry… then toss the book upside down on the table.”\textsuperscript{25} Their careless attitude reveals that collecting fees rather than serving justice or advancing knowledge is the attorneys’ real motivation.\textsuperscript{26} The necromancer declares that the public would do better to settle disputes with fists and clubs than by resorting to lawyers. Despite his earlier resolution not to leave hell for any reason, he wavers over the possibility of delivering an \textit{arbitrio} to the kings of the world against lawyers.\textsuperscript{27} I seek here to adjust the model advanced by literary critics like Lia Schwartz Lerner and Javier Malagón-Barceló, in which Quevedo opposes all letrados, to one in which he objects only to the lowest members of the legal profession. Ill-trained, unqualified, and numerous, these infra-letrados brought into disrepute the larger body of letrados—understood broadly as university-

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{23} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 101. “Los letrados todos tienen un cementerio por librería, y por ostentación andan diciendo: «Tengo tantos cuerpos», y es cosa brava que las librerías de los letrados todas son cuerpos sin alma, quizá por imitar a sus amos. No hay cosa en que no os dejen tener razón; solo lo que no dejan tener a las partes es el dinero, que le quieren ellos para sí. Y los pleitos no son sobre si lo que deben a uno se lo han de pagar a él, que eso no tiene necesidad de preguntas y respuestas; los pleitos son sobre que el dinero sea de letrados y del procurador sin justicia, y la justicia, sin dineros, de las partes.”

\footnote{24} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 101. “[L]as librerías de los letrados todas son cuerpos sin alma, quizá por imitar a sus amos.”

\footnote{25} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 102. “Toman un quintal de libros, danles dos bofetadas hacia arriba y hacia abajo, y leen de prisa… luego dan un gran golpe con el libro patas arriba sobre una mesa, muy esparrancado de capítulos.”

\footnote{26} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 102. “[E]s para ellos la verdadera luz y entendimiento del negocio que han de resolver.”

\footnote{27} Quevedo, \textit{Sueños} 102. “—No he de salir de aquí —dijo el nigromántico— hasta que los pleitos se determinen a garrotazos, que en el tiempo que por falta de letrados se determinaban las causas a cuchilladas decían que el palo era alcalde, y de ahí vino «júzguelo el alcalde de palo». Y si he de salir ha de ser solo a dar arbitrio a los reyes del mundo que quien quisiere estar en paz y rico, que pague los letrados a su enemigo, para que lo embelequen y roben y consuman.”
\end{footnotes}
educated men of letters—to which Quevedo emphatically did belong. Although his biography makes it clear that he desired enhanced noble status and the prestige of a court position—both of which he eventually obtained—the preceding examples reveal that Quevedo’s literary corpus is thoroughly supportive of the letrado class and indeed calls for a return to meritocracy amid rampant cronyism under a succession of royal favorites. The examples cited above reveal a deliberate strategy to distance the high-ranking members of the royal administration and judiciary—the letrado elite—from the hated mob of trial attorneys and scribes. We will next consider a series of lesser-known but still widely influential letrado authors whose literary corpus resonates with Quevedo’s. Taken together, these texts offer a new approach to the letrado polemic and allow us observe the great transformation that literary sociotype had undergone since the Middle Ages.

**Salas Barbadillo (1581–1635)**

Alonso Jerónimo de Salas Barbadillo represents what we might call the “frustrated letrado.” Whereas Quevedo successfully achieved literary notoriety and social privilege through exercise of letters, Salas was unable to make the transition from university study to state service. Through his literary corpus we may observe both an optimistic desire to join the letrado elite as well as a deepening hostility toward that group after his ambitions were thwarted. Far from being an isolated or idiosyncratic response, this attitude of mingled envy and resentment against more successful letrados is one that Salas shared many prominent satirists of his time, which helps to explain the pervasive theme of ambivalence in literature assessing the letrado class. The reigns of Philip III and Philip IV have been described as an era of “kingly diversions,” wherein all political power was exercised by the royal favorite and his clients (Peyton 39). In this environment, aspiring authors must demonstrate both erudition and aristocratic bearing. As Myron Peyton observes, “Men of talent but without means were forced to live on the edges of
this society” (40). A brief overview of his life and career is therefore useful in order to situate him among his letrado peers.

The Letrado as Courtier

Born in Madrid to a well-to-do family of montañés descent, Alonso Jerónimo de Salas Barbadillo followed the typical career path for an aspiring hidalgo (Flaskerud 11). At seventeen he enrolled at the University of Alcalá de Henares, where he studied philosophy and classics. He followed the court to Valladolid in 1601 and took up the study of canon law in that city’s university. Upon the death of his father, a minor government official and licentiate, Salas apparently abandoned his legal studies to pursue a career as poet and novelist. Although he quickly distinguished himself as a satirist and writer of picaresque novels, there are no records of him holding any stable occupation and he died in relative poverty. Despite his hidalgo status, university study, and long periods at court—where he spent all but two years of his adult life—he was unable to obtain a high office or ascend socially through exercise of letters (Flaskerud 16). The extreme variety of his literary production correlates in part to his repeated efforts to secure patronage and financial stability, and his failure to attain either goal illustrates the vital importance of possessing an advanced degree—a licentiate at minimum—to compete with the entrenched letrado elite in the Baroque social hierarchy.

If letrado status depends on university study and state service, as argued in Chapter 2, how can Salas—who left his studies incomplete and never held a significant government office—be counted a member of that class? His conspicuous lack of material success is in part why I have called him a “frustrated letrado.” Yet the case against his letrado status is not as


strong as early critics argued. Although there is apparently no extant record of Salas finishing his legal studies, investigations by Enrique García Santo-Tomás reveal that several notarial documents refer to the author as “Licenciado Jerónimo,” from which it may be inferred that he did eventually obtain his licentiate (19-20). In a more recent study, Dana Flaskeud writes that Salas had already completed his studies at Alcalá in philosophy before following the court to Valladolid, suggesting that he attained at least the rank of bachelor (11). A degree from either institution would allow us to situate Salas within the “letrado elite” trained for state service at the imperial universities (Kagan, Lawsuits and Litigants 197). Even if he did not finish his licentiate, he certainly made important friendships during his time at university, as well as connections at court which helped launch his literary career.\footnote{Santo-Tomás, Don Diego 16.} His literary output also shows consistent support for the clase letrada: Salas characteristically emphasizes intelligence and virtue over high birth, an idea consonant with fellow letrado writers (Brownstein 72). For these reasons, Salas may be considered at least a peripheral member of the letrado class as defined by Joseph Pérez and Richard Kagan—he may have been a poor cousin but he was still in the family.

Modern critics have considered Salas one of the greatest novelists of his time following the death of Cervantes in 1616, so it is appropriate for us to examine his contributions to the genre.\footnote{Santo-Tomás, Don Diego 31.} Influenced by Erasmus and his disciples the Valdés brothers, Salas employed dialogue for satiric and moralizing purposes. He also enjoyed the friendship of Cervantes and shared with him a certain ironic treatment of persons and circumstances derived in part from Lucian (Peyton 162). As a court denizen and office-seeker, Salas’ collective subject is the populace of Madrid in the first third of the seventeenth century (Peyton 9). Because a significant portion of that
populace was comprised by letrado-courtiers, his literary output is relevant to the study of the letrado class. This section will examine two of Salas’ novels that address the phenomenon of “double aristocratization”: La casa del placer honesto and El caballero perfecto. Published at the height of his career (1620-1621), both texts idealize the letrado as a member of the nobility while also comparing him favorably to the courtier. Although the tone of the works is dissimilar, the idealistic conception of nobility as deriving from intelligence and virtue remains constant. Both novels depict letrados as highly erudite members of the aristocracy and present this evolution of the governing class as a natural and salutary development. A close reading will reveal that—like Quevedo—Salas directed his pen not against the concept of a letrado ruling elite, but rather the numerous social climbers who pursue university degrees solely out of personal ambition.

La Casa del Placer Honesto (1620)

Salas’s novels were heavily influenced by Italian literary theory, chiefly the humanists’ neo-Aristotelian belief that the artist must improve society through satire of human customs (Brownstein 175). In this tradition, La casa del placer honesto (1620) has been called the first important Spanish collection of short stories modeled on Boccaccio’s Decameron (Place 317). Organized as a series of six novelas, four entremeses, and several interpolated poems, the text is most useful for present purposes in its depiction of university-trained nobles attempting to establish themselves in the court city of Madrid. Salas uses the device of an academia, understood here as a gathering of people to share literary compositions, to emphasize the cultural sophistication of his interlocutors and underscore their reputation as intellectuals. The focus of the novel is not on the personalities of the individual protagonists—which are quite sparse—but on the literary academy as a group and the social interactions among its participants (Brownstein 180). Critical appraisal of the text has largely been in accord with Edwin Place, who declares: “The Casa del placer honesto represents Salas Barbadillo at the maturity and in the plenitude of
his power as a writer” (319-20). Most relevant for present purposes, the text features a social class defined not by noble blood or shared kinship but by cultural refinement and creative talent. Such a description echoes the sixteenth-century humanistic concept of a “republic of letters” of university-trained scholars, an ideal which—as we have seen in Chapter 3—has deep roots in Spanish literary tradition.

The cornice or frame tale quickly establishes the aristocratic character of the interlocutors, describing them as “cuatro caballeros andaluces primogénitos de sus casas” [four firstborn Andalusian gentlemen]. 32 Despite being eldest sons and therefore benefitting from mayorazgo (entailment), they were sent to university at their parents’ behest: “[T]hey studied law because of their parents’ ambitions rather than out of necessity.” 33 Don Diego, the leading spirit of the group, is well-versed in humanistic letters; he is described as accomplished in theology, canons, and languages, particularly Greek. 34 Having lost a cátedra (professorship) to a less qualified competitor, he persuades three friends to abandon the outmoded university life and create a literary society dedicated to art and entertainment. 35 Tired from their long studies and bored by the lack of intellectual stimulation at the University of Salamanca, the others readily agree. The four depart the next day for Madrid, leaving behind letters for their parents informing them of their decision and asking for money. Their financial needs provided for, they acquire a

32 Salas Barbadillo, La casa 329.

33 Salas Barbadillo, La casa 329. “[E]studian más por ambición de sus padres que por necesidad la facultad de los derechos.”

34 Salas Barbadillo, La casa 329. “[I]ngenio peregrino adornado de las letras que llamamos humanas, y bien rico de las que no se pueden intitular menos que divinas, sutil teólogo y profundo canonista, universal en lenguas, y tan dueño de la griega que pudiera enseñar en ella elegancias a Demóstenes y Homero, príncipes de las facultades oratoria y poética.”

35 Salas Barbadillo, La casa 329. “Sentía mucho y con justa razón el haber perdido una catedra con un competidor indigno y desigual”.

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house in the capital where they will host meetings of the titular academia. Although the founders are nobles, they display a decidedly bourgeois spirit by contracting a majordomo to oversee the financial management of their household. Salas thus situates his interlocutors on the nebulous frontier between the letrado elite and the noble dilettantes who pursue letters as a diversion.

Emphatically, the decision to leave Salamanca represents not a rejection of university career as unsuitable for a member of the nobility—Don Diego had sought just such a post for himself and was rejected—but rather a preference for urban living and a practical desire to be near court, the source of all honors and offices. The domestic space of the academia provides a peaceful refuge in the midst of a notoriously filthy, noisy, and dangerous city. The young nobles evidently prefer the private and restricted character of their aristocratic academia to the relatively democratic environment of the ancient university. Their first act is to establish their own leyes y ordenanzas [laws and ordinances] to govern their meetings in imitation of the institution they have just abandoned. Perhaps ironically, in freeing themselves from their tedious university studies the young men have formulated a fairly rigid system of their own. Santo-Tomás believes the meticulous code underscores the elitist character of the academia, but the satiric tone with which they are presented casts this interpretation into doubt. These provisions range from sensible to baffling and reveal the extent to which university life—at least among the more aristocratic students—resembled the elaborate rituals of the court.

The code devotes considerable space to determining who is eligible for membership in the academia. Law II states that all members of the legal profession are excluded: “Let it be

36 Santo-Tomás, Modernidad 96.
37 Santo-Tomás, Modernidad 96.
38 Santo-Tomás, Modernidad 98.
understood that all ministers of justice are excluded from this republic and community, that is: lawyers, scribes, bailiffs, and barristers.”\textsuperscript{39} Although \textit{aguaciles} and \textit{escribanos} were subsets of the letrado class—what Pelorson calls infra-letrados—Salas’ comments regarding that group should not be misconstrued as a rejection of all letrados. As discussed above, Salas’ family fortunes declined steadily throughout his career and a lawsuit intended to claim some inherited property in Italy availed nothing. Peyton describes constables (\textit{aguaciles}) and scribes (\textit{escribanos}) as “Salas’ special enemies and targets for his abuse ever since his own trial for libel” (59). The seriousness of this pronouncement is further cast into doubt by the very next clause, which extends the prohibition to playwrights of the public theaters, “because, as they depend on appealing to the public’s taste, they are doomed if the crowds hiss at a \textit{comedia…”}\textsuperscript{40} Peyton believes Salas included this provision because the failure of one of these caused the author too much melancholy (90). The decision to exclude writers of \textit{comedias} from the literary society is thus more a commentary upon the fickle tastes of the Madrid public than an aristocratic conceit, much less a condemnation of that genre or profession as incompatible with nobility.

Salas frequently utilizes regal imagery to underscore the prestigious nature of the \textit{academia}: the four founders refer to their company as \textit{esta Corte} [this court], to their members as \textit{nuestros súbditos} [our subjects], and to the building itself as \textit{nuestra casa y palacio de placer} [our house and palace of pleasure].\textsuperscript{41} This interpretation is reinforced by Law VII which establishes the office of \textit{mayordomo} to oversee financial matters, a common practice among

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\textsuperscript{39} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 2. “Que se entiende ser excluidos desta república y comunidad todos los ministros de justicia, como si dijésemos: abogados, escribanos, alguaciles y procuradores; y juntamente con ellos los ambiciosos que pretenden y los trampistas que pleitean.”

\textsuperscript{40} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 331. “porque, siendo una gente que se ocupan en trabajar para el gusto del vulgo, están sujetos al pesar de que les silven una comedia…”

\textsuperscript{41} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 332.
\end{flushright}
noble households and even in the royal palace. The presiding member of the company even occupies a seat grandiloquently called a throne.\textsuperscript{42} However, the interlocutors’ identification with the monarchy is not absolute. The chair opposite this “throne” is described as a cátedra, perhaps implying that the nobles considered the academia compensation for their colleague’s failed attempt at obtaining a professorship at Salamanca.\textsuperscript{43} Juxtaposing the throne—the quintessential symbol of monarchy—with the university cátedra demonstrates that for Salas the profession of letters was perfectly compatible with even the highest echelons of the nobility. \textit{La casa del placer honesto} may therefore be read as part of a larger literary movement calling for the restoration of the nobility by curbing its immoderation, idleness, and indulgence.

As the preceding examples show, Salas cannot strictly be described as a moralizer or a writer of “social literature.”\textsuperscript{44} Never prudish or self-righteous, he uses caricature to expose vices and encourage their correction (Peyton 8). The charge of idleness is particularly relevant to the letrado polemic, as defenders of the “nobility of letters” justified their newfound social position on their record of service to the state. As the four founders were all “personas eminentes” in poetry, oratory, and music, Law X requires all members to be accomplished in those arts, “because this House of Virtuous Pleasure deals with the delight of the understanding, and the restoration of the spirit, rather than the vulgar amusement of the body.”\textsuperscript{45} Peyton believes the requirement that each spectator must be prepared to perform reflects Salas’ resentment against

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\textsuperscript{42} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 333-34. “[E]n la parte que estaba enfrente de la puerta-y era como si dijésemos cabecera de aquella sala- pusieron a la mano derecha una catedra y a la izquierda un trono iguales en altura; buscaron en la Corte más colgaduras, de que la adornaron…”

\textsuperscript{43} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 336.

\textsuperscript{44} Santo-Tomás, \textit{Don Diego} 50.

\textsuperscript{45} Salas Barbadillo, \textit{La casa} 333. “porque esta Casa del honesto placer más ha de tratar del deleyte del entendimiento, y suspensión del ánimo, que de la recreación grosera del cuerpo.”
\end{flushright}
“envious do-nothings who could only criticize the works of productive persons” (91). This last provision may be read as a direct criticism of the idle aristocrats that flourished in Madrid under the later Habsburgs, whose idleness was seen by many reformists as the antithesis of the productive behavior necessary to halt Spain’s decline (Lehfeldt 480). Against this backdrop of unproductivity and intellectual stagnation, Salas produced a text that offers an idealized account of Spanish nobility as it could exist when infused with letters.

**El Caballero Perfecto (1620)**

Published the same year as *La casa del placer honesto*, Salas Barbadillo’s *El caballero perfecto* is in many ways a counterpoint to the biting satire of that text. The former is a work of satiric fiction, whereas the latter was modeled on principles of epic poetry in the sense that it follows the adventures of a tireless figure who exhibits great personal courage as well as moral virtues (Brownstein 29-30). Critics have generally considered *El caballero perfecto* an important social document for its depiction of Spaniards of the upper and middle classes, although the individual novelas contained in the text are somewhat threadbare (Place 287). As with *La casa del placer honesto*, the frame features an idealized noble who wins fame throughout Europe during the Habsburgs’ military campaigns, not only through impressive feats of arms but also for his extensive knowledge and meticulous personal conduct. Santo-Tomás joins Leonard Brownstein in identifying Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528) as Salas’ literary model for the text and its sophisticated, cosmopolitan protagonist Don Alonso (*Modernidad* 103). Salas modifies Castiglione’s ideal Renaissance courtier to be compatible with Spanish concepts of personal honor, austerity of living, and tireless devotion to God and king (Peyton 24). Similarly, Edwin Place classifies *El caballero perfecto* as a framework adventure novel and identifies Don Juan de Austria, Philip II’s half-brother, as the likely prototype for the protagonist (286). The text is relevant for present purposes as it illustrates the extent to which “living nobly” implied a
thorough knowledge of humanistic letters, as well as highlighting the social utility of university training even for the nobility of the sword.

The protagonist Don Alonso is an idealized poetic hero: he is educated in all the sciences, deeply religious, a skilled warrior, and above all a loyal and honorable Spaniard (Brownstein 77). The idealistic conception of the noble letrado in *El caballero perfecto* presents letters as crucial to the formation of a virtuous and responsible member of the nobility. Despite Salas’ reputation as a moralizer, the didactic elements of the text are subordinated to plot exigencies, and there is an uncharacteristic absence of burlesquing satire and interpolated verse (Place 286-87). Here Salas offers a detailed portrait of an ideal gentleman in a straightforward way. According to Pauline Marshall, “This he accomplishes, not by stating abstract rules of behavior, but by presenting a definite character in action—that is, in a piece of fictional writing” (vii-viii). Salas’ ideal noble is drawn to Italy not for war or plunder but for the Italians’ reputation for good letters.  

The ideal nobleman scorns war as a diabolical invention that results in human misery. Mourning a fallen comrade, he condemns warlike men for adding to the mortal perils of nature the additional threats of fire and sword. That this indictment is delivered by no mere craven or effete courtier but by a seasoned soldier adds further credence to his declaration. War may serve a virtuous end—the maintenance of peace—but armed violence is inherently evil.

While in Naples, Don Alonso became a great patron of learning, giving lavishly to poor students to continue their studies. He does not give solely to those who studied his preferred subjects, “but rather to all in common, because all the arts and sciences are useful for various

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46 Salas Barbadillo, *El caballero* 775. “Había deseado este caballero ver a Italia, por ser los naturales de esta provincia profesores de las buenas letras más que en otras.”

47 Salas Barbadillo, *El caballero* 798. “Hombres infelices: ya no me admiro de que vosotros, no bien satisfechos de los muchos ministros que tiene en los accidentes de nuestra naturaleza la muerte para acabarnos, hayáis aumentado, en vuestra misma perdición industriosos, el hierro, el fuego y otros instrumentos manifiestos…”
purposes.”  

48 Nor was he prejudiced by lineage, preferring to sponsor genuine talent rather than a famous name.  

49 Like the noblemen of La casa del placer honesto, Don Alonso also hosts literary meetings in his home, embracing diverse topics and disciplines: “In his house they read natural and moral philosophy, mathematics, and the arts of oratory and poetry.”  

50 This company of Spanish expatriates appears far more egalitarian than Don Diego’s deliberately restrictive group of elite madrileños. Don Alonso promotes concord among his guests, preferring frank and productive discussion to vicious personal attacks.  

51 He encourages respectful and orderly debates emphasizing the ever-changing nature of human knowledge: “For many strange and doubtful things have been proved true by the evidence, and today we consider as fables what yesterday our elders revered as true doctrine.”  

52 Compared to the somewhat frivolous discussions of the Madrid academia, and above all the capricious and seemingly arbitrary statutes imposed by its founders, this Neapolitan enclave seems an ideal to be imitated rather than a satirical straw man.

Taken together, these texts present two critical aspects of the letrado polemic. Through its aristocratic protagonists, La casa del placer honesto identifies the letrado class with the traditional nobility and distinguishes it sharply from lowbrow professions of the mass-market,

48 Salas Barbadillo, El caballero 818. “sino a todos en común, atendiendo al buen empleo que del tiempo hacían ya que las artes y ciencias, todas son útiles para diversos fines.”

49 Salas Barbadillo, El caballero 818. “Por la falta de sangre ilustre jamás dejó de estimar a ningún hombre virtuoso y sabio, porque decía que para igualarse un hombre humilde con un alto príncipe, bastante calidad era tener ciencia y virtud.”

50 Salas Barbadillo, El caballero 818. “En su casa se leían las filosofías natural y moral, las matemáticas y las artes oratoria y poética.”

51 Salas Barbadillo, El caballero 818. “Elegíalos no sólo sabios en los estudios, sino virtuosos y templados en sus costumbres, haciéndoles que viviesen con unión, sin morder los unos los escritos de los otros, antes honrándose con reverencia y respeto…”

52 Salas Barbadillo, El caballero 818-19. “[P]orque en las artes lo más es dudoso y raras cosas son las que con evidencia están averiguadas, y hoy juzgamos fábula lo que ayer reverenciaron nuestros mayores por verdadera doctrina.”
chiefly lawyers. As indicated above, however, Salas’ criticism of the *comedia* genre should not be taken literally. The idealized hero of *El caballero perfecto* embraces letters as crucial to the formation of a virtuous noble and for the preservation of the peace. Despite differences in tone, the *novelas* present letrados as morally and intellectually superior to self-serving members of the legal profession, and better administrators than the sycophantic courtiers of the Lerma regime.

**Suárez de Figueroa (1571–1644)**

I have suggested in the previous section that Salas’ frequent recourse to satire is symptomatic of his status as a “frustrated letrado,” but that analysis may be incomplete. If failure to attain high office or significant patronage could produce resentment towards the letrado elite, so too could excessive exposure to the actual individuals that composed that privileged group. An appointment to an important judicial or ministerial post brought one into constant contact with the denizens of court and could equally sour one’s opinion of these entrenched oligarchs (Harllee, “Pull Yourself Up” 550). This point is illustrated by the career and literary output of Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa (1571–1644), a writer frequently described as *maldiciente* [naysayer] for his scathing satires despite achieving notable success as an imperial administrator and enjoying the protection of a series of prominent patrons (Castro Leal, *Juan Ruiz de Alarcón* 38). A brief overview of his intellectual formation and professional aspirations will situate him definitively within the letrado elite.

**The Letrado as Social Insider**

Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa was born in Valladolid to a modest *hidalgo* family. The son of a Galician lawyer, he studied law at his father’s insistence, completing at least four courses at the University of Valladolid before leaving Spain at sixteen for Italy. He received his doctorate *in utroque iure*—both civil and canon law—from the University of Pavia, although Wickersham Crawford argues that his works make it clear he also studied classics (10). After completing his
studies, Figueroa moved to Milan, where he held various judicial and administrative positions before returning to Spain in 1604 (Satorre & López 14). During the early years of his literary career Figueroa struggled against poverty while seeking a noble patron. Eventually, disillusioned with court life, he entered the service of Juan Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza, Marquis of Cañete, and abandoned the capital for the rural province of Cuenca (Satorre & López 28). Figueroa returned to Madrid sometime before 1615, when he began his literary career in earnest by publishing the controversial Plaza universal de todas ciencias y artes, a treatise reviled by contemporaries for its criticism of the Spanish national theater and for its veiled attacks on an ailing Cervantes. Although he subsequently established himself as a successful novelist, he still aspired to government service and in 1623 he accompanied the Duke of Alba to Italy, where he served in the viceregal administration. Notwithstanding a brush with the Inquisition, Figueroa remained a prominent figure in Neapolitan society until his death (Crawford 95).

Despite his reputation as a naysayer, Figueroa was certainly a letrado and may even be considered a member of the letrado elite due to his association with the Dukes of Feria and Alba, his advanced degree from a prestigious institution, and his prominence in the imperial bureaucracy. Willard King attributes Figueroa’s harsh tone to resentment over the scant appreciation for the “nobility of letters,” with which he identified strongly as a doctor in canon and civil law (Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 109). His precise social origin is somewhat in doubt: although he declares throughout his writings that his parents were Galician nobles, baptismal records have not been identified. Later in life he testified before the Inquisition that he was the son of noble parents, but this may simply mean that they were of montañés descent and therefore had the traditional Vizcayan claim to hidalgo status. His rivals mocked his pretentious use of the surname Figueroa—which he evidently adopted only after the death of his father—as an attempt
to link himself socially with the noble house of Feria (Satorre & López 7). Hispanist Wickersham Crawford suggests that he might have been remotely related to the Alba family, which would explain the ease with which he entered their service in Italy, but subsequent researchers have been more skeptical of this claim (Crawford 6). Whether hidalgo or caballero, however, his possession of a doctorate situates him decisively at the apex of the letrado class, and his literary output displays a lifelong preoccupation with the dual roles of author and administrator that also characterize letrados of Baroque literature.

Although modern literary critics have not considered Figueroa a great author in the style of Cervantes, they continue to recognize his extensive knowledge of the society of his time and to praise the ease with which he describes it and credit him with consolidating a poetics of prose fiction. Published in 1617, El pasajero remains Figueroa’s best known and most studied work, both for its detailed panorama of Spanish customs in the early seventeenth century as well as for the author’s attacks on his rivals’ writing style. The immediate model for the text was Cervantes’ Novelas ejemplares (1613), which also combines entertainment with didactic material and criticism of social customs (Satorre & López 94). Like Quevedo, Figueroa was appalled by the social and political decadence of the reign of Philip III, and turned to satire as a means of educating his contemporaries and improving society. El pasajero won Figueroa a reputation as an austere moralist, and this didactic and moralizing trend became even more pronounced in his later works. According to Crawford, El pasajero reveals the author as a persecuted man, worn out by adversity and harried by critics, who seeks refuge in Italy (57). However, rather than a personal apology, the text is more accurately read as a defense of the entire letrado class against infiltration by wealthy but unqualified nobles who dilute its effectiveness and harm its prestige.
El Pasajero (1617)

*El pasajero* is a novel that follows four previously unacquainted men traveling from Madrid to Barcelona *en route* to Italy. The impromptu company consists of an unnamed professor of theology on a pilgrimage to Rome who is referred to simply as *Maestro*; Don Luis, a young soldier destined for garrison duty in Naples; Isidro, a jeweler or silversmith bound for Milan where his late uncle has left him an inheritance (*hacienda*); and an anonymous doctor who holds degrees in both canon and civil law. To alleviate the fatigue of the hot afternoons, the travelers hold a series of ten conversations (deemed *Alivios* rather than chapters) about various social and literary topics. By selecting a judicious cross-section of urban society—two academics, a minor noble of the sword, and a *nouveau riche* tradesman intent on “living nobly”—Suárez de Figueroa adds a new layer of complexity to the text. The interlocutors’ different social stations allow the author to present a broader range of opinions and reactions to a variety of contemporary issues than if they all held the same occupation. As a literary device, dialogue allows the author to present various points of view while adding variety to the narration. The format thus serves didactic, moralizing goals while providing entertainment.

True dialogue is rather scarce in *El pasajero*; instead of conversing as equals, three of the interlocutors passively receive the teachings of the dominant speaker, the unnamed Doctor. Consequently, some scholars have called the text a “sermon” for its moralizing intentions and pedantic tone (Satorre & López 155-56). Literary critic Francis Cerdan expresses the general view when he declares that the anonymous Doctor is a “clear representation” of Suárez de Figueroa, a role he sometimes shares with the also unnamed Maestro (58). The Doctor’s precarious economic history has given him a choleric temper, especially with regard to the wealthy elite, yet his cosmopolitan and erudite style of conversation so enraptures his fellow travelers that they listen spellbound, interjecting only to express their agreement. The Maestro in
turn is the Doctor’s alter-ego: equally well-educated, ambitious, impulsive, and irascible once aroused (Satorre & López 157). Don Luis, the young nobleman and soldier, is a great fan of poetry and the theater, but his main contribution is only to ask his intellectual betters to share their views on literary theory. The artisan Isidro—the only traveler with a manual occupation—participates least in the conversation and functions chiefly as a straw-man to censure members of the middle class who aspire to a higher social position (62). As we will see, these remarks run parallel to letrados’ criticism of infra-letrados and courtiers alike.

The travelers hold the Madrid court in derision. Don Luis considers the life of a courtier unsuitable for a man of the sword and cannot conceive of abandoning his military career: “I will sooner give up my life than my sword, the faithful companion of my person and defender of my honor.”53 As a man of the pen rather than the sword, the Maestro reminds Don Luis that despite the nobleman’s military valor, society will surely fall into chaos without educated leaders: “Without merit and studies, all will be upheaval and ruin. Just as a wise king maintains a strong kingdom forever, so too nothing is as advisable for the state as the service of the wise, and knowledge and experience are the constant companions of government.”54 Inverting Castiglione’s model, the Maestro renders noble blood an accessory to letters: “It is also very important (if possible) that a ruler has the quality of nobility and be of good opinion.”55

53 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 17. “¿Las armas? Eso no: antes dejaré la vida que la espada, fiel companera de mi persona y digna defensora de mi honor.”

54 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 41. “Sin méritos ni estudios, todo será borrasca, todo perdición. Así como el rey sabio es firmeza y perpetuidad de su reino, así no hay cosa más conveniente al estado real que el servicio de los sabios, siendo de contínuo compañeros en el gobierno la ciencia y práctica.”

55 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 41. “Importa también mucho (siendo posible) la calidad de nobleza y ser el que ha de gobernar bien opinado.”
qualifying phrase *siendo posible* [if possible] is crucial: the ideal ruler will have both attainments, but ultimately all depends upon having a scholarly intellect refined by letters.

Although the preceding section focused on the idle habits and vicious appetites of courtiers, the travelers do not confine their criticisms to that group. The Doctor and Maestro have firsthand knowledge of how decadent Castilian universities have become, and observe that many students are as foppish and wasteful as courtiers. The Maestro shares memories of his time as a student in Alcalá de Henares, where novices are still ruthlessly bullied and hazed by older students.56 Aristocratic students consider one hour of studying per day sufficient, and spend the rest of their time socializing.57 The Maestro describes at length this unproductive lifestyle:

One passes the afternoons taking a stroll, or visiting the river, as the seasons allow. You should go to the inn before dusk to hear the news and see the new arrivals. One cannot avoid making the nocturnal rounds, because night is for enjoying the fineries that are prohibited during the day, and they offer other opportunities for ease and pleasure.58

Although they are incensed over the debauched state of the universities, the two men of letters recognize the great benefits one can still obtain through membership in the letrado network. They prefer to enter on their own terms, however, rather than relying on family connections or by pursuing subjects that do not interest them. The Maestro recalls a conversation with his father, who had studied medicine, in which he implored his son to follow his example and even offered

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56 Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero* 121. “Cuanto a lo primero, las burlas que padecen los novatos no sólo son esquisitas, sino de mucho pesar, en cuyo sufrimiento suele quebrarse la correa del más fino redomado.”

57 Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero* 122. “Paréceme bastará al día una hora de libros; las demás consagráréis al solaz, a la conversación.”

58 Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero* 122. “Las tardes se entretienen paseando por el lugar, o visitando el río, según lo pidiere la estación de los tiempos. Debiéis acudir antes de anochecer al parador, para inquirir novedades y ver lo que desembarca de carros y coches. No es posible escusar las rondas, porque, fuera de ser las horas de la noche dispuestas para gozar las galas que se prohíben en las de día, se ofrecen varias ocasiones de recreo y delectación.”
to introduce him at Court. To his father’s amazement, the Maestro rejected the offer. Although his comments make clear that he does plan to pursue a state career, he prefers to have no part of the “sumptuous machine” that is the Royal Palace. Unwilling to beg favors, he instead rebukes courtiers for their luxurious lifestyle and apparent state of self-satisfied ignorance:

They get up early; they spend the morning making social calls. They eat at twelve. At two the mules are ready. They return at night; they eat dinner, and after having so little rest, fatigue soon forces them to bed. Lord! When do they read books? When do they consult Galen? When do they speak with Hippocrates? I gather the answer is never.

Instead of this pretentious and unproductive lifestyle, the Maestro desires to enter the “noble profession” of the law. Armed with a degree from one of the imperial universities, he is confident that he will have no trouble ascending through the letrado hierarchy:

I expect that my many merits will achieve the highest prize, the Council of Castile, where I will be showered with so many honors that it will be easy to obtain a permanent office not just on a minor tribunal but even in the best chancilleries and audiencias of Spain; and that my abundant favor will make up for any lack or insufficiency.

Although he alludes to meritocracy, the Maestro is not motivated by a Ciceronian sense of civic duty but rather by a frank desire to increase the social stature of his family name. He reminds his father of the great benefits a state career will bring for his legacy: “What doctor does not enjoy

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59 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 129. “Prométole, sobre todo, ser solícito diligenciero hasta entablarte en dos o tres casas de titulados, con cuyo favor y sombra te será facilitísimo tener juridición [sic] en el Real Palacio, y aun quizás en el pulso del soberano dueño suyo, a quien tocando, no hay plus ultra que desear.”

60 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 130. “Jamás podré ser hábil para partidos, para juntas, para introducciones de titulados, y menos para tan suntuosa máquina como es la del Palacio Real.”

61 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 130-31. “Madrugan; vásenles la mañana en visitas. Vienen a comer dadas las doce. A las dos ya esperan las mulas. Vuelven a la noche; cenan, y, tras escaso reposo, les obliga el cansancio a buscar los lechos. ¡Santo Dios! ¿Cuándo se revuelven los libros? ¿Cuándo se consultan los Galenos? ¿Cuándo se habla con los Hipócrates? Oigo decir que nunca.”

62 Suárez de Figueroa, El pasajero 130-31. “En tanto, espero alcanzarán sus muchos méritos el último galardón, que es el de la Cámara; donde, en entrando, lloverán tan grandes mercedes, que, no sólo será fácil colocarme en perpetua silla occidental o antártica, sino en las mejores de chancillerías o audiencias españolas; que suplirá la avenida del favor cualquier sequedad de insuficiencia.”
advancing his house or cultivating the greatest splendor for his lineage? … Could there be as great an honor for all our lineage than to see me walk the streets of Madrid wearing the pomp and robe of a royal official?”⁶³ In short, he wants to become a minister of state—a letrado or *togado*.

Concluding the comparison between the traditional elite and the Ciceronian “new man,” the Doctor voices a preference for the self-made man over one born into privilege: “From this one infers that if nature expels with everything superfluous that is good for nothing, then all those who were born only to live without working, like empty vessels creeping towards death, are only suited to serve in the Republic of Excess.”⁶⁴ Once again the language of utility questions the foundation of noble privilege in a world where the need for letrados has outpaced the need for warriors. This point is further illustrated by a letrado author whose literary output wrestles with the dichotomy between nobility of blood and merit, ultimately resolving in favor of the latter.

**Ruiz de Alarcón (1581–1639)**

Novohispanic playwright Juan Ruiz de Alarcón is a paradoxical figure in the letrado hierarchy. Born in the colonial periphery and marred by physical deformity—contemporary documents describe him as *jorobado* (hunchbacked)—he was doubly an outsider (Darst 527-28). In spite of these disadvantages he achieved more material success in the metropolis than any of his peninsular-born colleagues examined in this chapter with the exception of Quevedo.

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⁶³ Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero* 131. “¿Qué médico gusta de no adelantar su casa, de no crecer el timbre de su solar con más lustrosos reales? ... ¿Podrá haber, pues, tan gran contento para todo nuestro linaje como verme frecuentar las calles de Madrid con la pompa de garnacha, con el boato de oidor?”

⁶⁴ Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero* 154. “Serlo todos los deste jaez se infiere de que si aquello se llama superfluidad que, expelido dela Naturaleza, para nada es bueno, los que nacieron para sólo vivir sin obrar, acercándose a la muerte con la continuación de vasos vacíos, sólo sirvieron en la república de superfluidad.”
Alarcón’s career illustrates that by the seventeenth century the letrado class was powerful enough to overcome substantial obstacles, even the subordinate legal status of a criollo. Because he composed his comedias during his time as a student at Salamanca, a lawyer in Seville, and a colonial administrator in Mexico, his literary output is also relevant to the experience of letrados in each of those fields (Castro Leal, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 37). Taken as a whole, Alarcón’s corpus illustrates the decline of the university system due not only to increased enrollment but to the presence of nobles whose frolics and lack of interest overshadowed the efforts of serious students. However detrimental to the letrado class this development might have been, the formerly disparate bodies were now thoroughly intertwined. As suggested above, writers no longer asked if letrados could be considered nobles, but rather if one could be a letrado without first being noble. A constant theme in Alarcónian theater is the decomposition of the hegemonic class as a formerly rigid estamental nobility was forced to admit intra-caste mobility (Concha, “Introducción” 42). It is therefore necessary to examine the author’s relationship both with the letrado class and the traditional nobility.

The Letrado as Social Outsider

Born in Mexico City in 1581, Alarcón hailed from the noble house of Mendoza and was therefore entitled to the use of that illustrious surname as well as the honorific Don (Reyes 19). Unlike many peninsular-born Spaniards, most criollos saw bureaucratic careers as socially acceptable and even “aristocratic” (King, Alarcón 52). With this goal in mind he studied Artes—much like Quevedo—at the University of Mexico starting in 1592 (Reyes 11). He later completed his studies at the University of Salamanca, where he benefitted from a patronato (scholarship), which was arranged by his uncle (Castro Leal, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 23). The poor capigorrones—literally “cap-and-gowns,” so named for their distinctive garb—were traditionally Salamanca’s best students (Castells 36). Despite his aristocratic pretensions,
Alarcón may also have identified with his fellow *becarios* who depended on scholarship funds and represented a nascent meritocracy of letters. Indeed, straitened economic circumstances constrained the aspiring letrado’s career opportunities. Although he took all the required courses for a licentiate at Salamanca, Alarcón could not afford the costly graduation ceremony (Castro Leal, *Juan Ruiz de Alarcón* 28). After briefly practicing law in Seville, he returned to Mexico in 1609 where he belatedly received his licentiate but failed to obtain a doctorate, most likely due to excessive cost (King *Alarcón* 77). He applied unsuccessfully to a number of *cátedras* (professorships) at the University of Mexico while also practicing law and serving in the colonial administration (Reyes 14). Upon returning to the metropolis in 1613 Alarcón made contact with his university colleagues, including powerful members of the letrado elite like Luis de Velasco, president of the Council of the Indies (Castro Leal, *Alarcón* 35). In a time when Madrid was full of starving lawyers, Alarcón was apparently able to charge and collect substantial fees, a fact Willard King attributes to the support he received from the letrado network (*Alarcón* 82). He lived at court for twenty-five years from 1615 to his death, during which time he wrote *comedias* and sought government posts. *La verdad sospechosa* was first performed to great success in 1617 in Madrid, and firmly established his reputation as a dramatist (Reyes 15).

Alarcón thus exemplifies both the literary and ministerial roles of letrados. Despite Alarcón’s literary career and intellectual reputation, his repeated attempts to establish himself in the royal judiciary and conciliar system of government indicate he had aspirations at court. Alarcón's initial goal upon arriving in Spain in 1600 was to obtain his bachelorate in canon law from Salamanca, not to triumph onstage. His family and economic circumstances compelled him to seek the most lucrative government or university job possible (King *Alarcón* 77). Alfonso Reyes likewise believes Alarcón’s aspirations to a public office were the reason he pursued a
literary career, and the author soon lost interest in writing *comedias* upon obtaining a permanent administrative post (19-20). In 1625 Alarcón received an interim position on the Council of the Indies and promptly left the theater, which explains his relatively small literary and dramatic corpus (Montero Reguera 18). Although the initial appointment was only temporary, Alarcón’s economic position was definitively stabilized from that point on. In many ways it was a seminal triumph for the author, who finally saw his merits rewarded (Castro Leal, *Juan Ruiz de Alarcón* 46). In 1637 the king confirmed Alarcón as permanent *relator* of the Council of the Indies, a position that gave him both social prestige and economic security (Montero Reguera 13). A *relator* was an officer whose duty was to prepare briefs of the cases to be tried, and read them to the Council. Although he was a nonvoting member, Alarcón was allowed to use the title *señoría* [His Lordship] and was provided a house by the state (Owen xiii). All accounts indicate that Alarcón took his position as minister very seriously and evidently no longer desired a literary career.

Traditional scholarship has regarded Alarcón’s letrado status as only one of a series of factors that rendered him an “outsider,” no more significant than his colonial origin, *segundón* status, and unstable economic situation within the middle nobility (Darst 527-28). Contrary to this position, this section will reveal that Alarcón’s letrado status was a powerful integrating force, and understanding this dynamic is essential to a correct reading of his corpus. Because he held a degree from an imperial university and ascended to the Council of the Indies through exercise of letters, we may situate Alarcón decisively within the letrado elite. No other author examined in this chapter rose so high in the political hierarchy with the exception of Quevedo. Given his colonial origins, this fact bears explaining. Despite his deformity and *criollo* status, Alarcón had a distinguished lineage. His parents were *hidalgos de solar conocido*—that is, since
time immemorial rather than a recent creation (Castro Leal, *Alarcón* 47). Juan II of Castile had many letrados in his Royal Council and Alarcón’s ancestor, the doctor Pedro Gonzalez del Castillo, figures heavily in the *Crónica de don Juan II* (1517), a historical account of that monarch’s reign (King *Alarcón* 93). He was also a distant relative of Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, author of the *Guerra de Granada* (1610) and staunch defender of the military wing of the nobility (Castro Leal, *Alarcón* 21). For this reason, Alarcón’s comedias frequently display a quasi-mystical belief in the fuerza de la sangre—that noble blood must lead to noble deeds (Josa, “Hacia el pensamiento” 85). This tenet was shaken by the author’s experiences at court, and although Alarcón never denies the primacy of ancient lineage, his preference for a “bureaucratic nobility” is evident in his insistence on the inherent value of the study of letters (Concha, “Introducción” 41).

Alarcón’s letrado status is also relevant to questions of literary style. At Salamanca he received a scholastic, latinizing education that had varied little since the Middle Ages. His legal studies were apparent in his approach to the comedia genre, in which he followed the classical tradition of presenting arguments for and against a thesis in order to prove its veracity or falsity. Critics have seen the influence of Alarcón’s legal education in his complex, well-ordered plots and rational, nuanced argumentation (King *Alarcón* 79). In his study of Alarcón’s plays, Jules Whicker suggests that his training in the law imparted “an acute awareness of the complexity of social reality as empirically perceived, and a strong sense of the problems involved in the relating of apparently conflicting principles and values” (4). In this spirit, Lola Josa calls *La verdad sospechosa* the most emblematic comedia of his opus (El arte dramático 62). Yet Alarcón’s true talent lay in making complex, relatable characters at a time when comedias mostly offered stylized, predictable character types. Because of the psychological complexity of
the characters, Gloria Jeanne Bodtorf calls *La verdad sospechosa* “the best example of his contribution to Spanish Golden Age drama” (11-12). The text thus humanizes the literary sociotype of the letrado.

Possibly inspired in part by Figueroa’s invectives against liars, *La verdad sospechosa* (1619-1620) presents in dramatic form the harmful social and personal effects of deceitful conduct (King, *Alarcón* 190). Criticism has focused on the moral and psychological complexities of Don García’s habit of lying as the thematic axis of the *comedia* (Concha 258). Most critics read *La verdad sospechosa* as an attempt to offer a theoretical basis on which Alarcón might justify the moral or social legitimacy of the theater and his own occupation as a playwright (Whicker 4-5). More broadly, Alan Paterson writes that Alarcón’s satire is “directed towards an urban gentry whose way of life emerges as comically vulnerable when put to the test of comparison with the pristine virtues from which their customs derive” (366). By contrast, Antonio Castro Leal denies that the *comedia* has any didactic purpose, preferring instead to view Don García’s elaborate lies as a triumph of imagination over reality and an authentic act of poetic rebellion. Castro Leal describes *La verdad sospechosa* not as an invective against liars but as a delightful and sometimes even juvenile comedy in the tradition of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* and Wilde’s *Importance of Being Earnest* (135). Despite this dissenting opinion, the critical consensus holds that Alarcón targeted the conspicuous consumption of the nobility with his satire, a message that coincided with the admonitions of the Olivarist reformers of the 1620s against contemporary ostentation. Alarcón laments through this *comedia* that the universities have become places of frivolity that rival even the courtly excesses bemoaned by Madrid social reformers.
La Verdad Sospechosa (1634)

Alarcón addresses the letrado class most directly in his magnum opus *La verdad sospechosa*. Arranged in three *Jornadas* or Acts, this *comedia* follows the aristocratic protagonist Don García as he leaves the University of Salamanca in order to pursue a career at court. Upon arriving in Madrid, he quickly becomes embroiled in romantic intrigues with two noble ladies, a situation complicated by the fact that he is a compulsive liar. Literary criticism of this text has focused on the apparent crisis of aristocratic values: Alarcón observes that the nobility was no longer as sacrosanct as its apologists insisted, taking as his point of departure the frequently immoral and unproductive lifestyles of many students and courtiers (Gaylord 227). A closer reading will also reveal that a corollary to this central theme is the decline of the university system. According to many contemporaries, the influx of noble and aristocratic students in the second half of the sixteenth century had turned even prestigious Salamanca into a breeding ground of vice and dissolute conduct (Concha 278). This discourse is expressed most directly in the first scene of the *comedia*, when the virtuous nobleman Don Beltrán consults a character known only as the Letrado about the reformation of Don García’s character.65 Their interactions illustrate the extent to which the nobility relied upon and progressively identified with the letrado class in the Baroque era.

The relationship between this unnamed Letrado and Don Beltrán is complex and elusive. The aging nobleman addresses the Letrado with a certain degree of respect, formality, and even intimacy: “Deme, señor Licenciado, los brazos.”66 According to Arthur L. Owen, “[t]his expression was frequently only a courteous formula of salutation and was not necessarily to be

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65 I have followed José Montero Reguera in capitalizing “Letrado” to indicate this anonymous character.

acted upon” (Owen 120). The Letrado immediately responds “Los pies os pido,” a phrase that could be taken as a simple courtesy or a gesture of subservience. Superficially, the latter interpretation seems more likely as the Letrado appears to adopt a subordinate tone later in their conversation: “En cualquier tiempo y lugar he de ser vuestro criado.” And again: “Ya, señor, alegre espero lo que me queréis mandar.” However, Owen clarifies: “The second person plural [vuestro, quereis] was the usual form of address among equals in the 17th century, provided their existed friendship or familiarity” (120). Nor should the use of the term criado [servant] be taken necessarily as an indicator of inferior status, much less conflated with the stock role of the gracioso [fool]. Baroque comedias feature a broad range of secondary characters that may function as consejero [advisor], filósofo [philosopher], and even bufón [jester] (Silverman 65-66). Not all of these roles imply subservience, and subsequent examples demonstrate that the Letrado of La verdad sospechosa functions as a social and intellectual equal. Beltrán evidently holds him in high esteem and relies heavily on his judgment in reforming the character of his surviving son. The strained paternal relationship is apparent when Beltrán has to ask his son’s former tutor to inform him of the character of his own heir. We therefore are first introduced to the protagonist from the perspective of the Letrado (Josa, El arte dramático 180). However, when the Letrado answers that García’s only fault is No decir siempre verdad [Not always telling the truth], literature professor Richard Tyler describes this assessment as “one of the greatest understatements in world literature (6). The Letrado has achieved a privileged position in society, but has completely misread Don García’s character; his naiveté is therefore an

67 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.23.

68 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.53-54. I have not translated these lines in order to emphasize the voseo.

69 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.61-62. I have not translated these lines in order to emphasize the voseo.
indictment of the stereotypical man of letters who is not as wise as he should be (London 90). The Letrado misunderstands the court in the same way that Beltrán misreads Salamanca’s environment, further identifying the university with the courtier class (Castells 38).

More broadly, the Letrado of La verdad sospechosa illustrates one possibility of social ascent available to members of the letrado class. Beginning as tutors to the children of noble houses, letrados would later be introduced at court by their patrons, and if all went well they would be appointed to a government office. Consistently with this model, Beltrán recalls that he helped the Letrado obtain a corregimiento—a royal administrative post—in reward for his service, and even expresses a desire to help him rise to the Royal Council. Beltrán also declares that he originally intended his second-born son to pursue a similar career in letters. He evidently considers such an occupation suitable to a child of noble birth, though no mention is made of his late heir Don Gabriel ever having attended university. Now that his firstborn has perished, however, he determines to remove García from the university and send him to court. Beltrán makes this decision not because he considers the university an unsuitable place for the nobility, but because he considers it the duty of every noble heir to spend time at court, both to serve the king from whom their privilege derives and to learn courtly etiquette from the great lords: “because it is good for noble houses to give the king their heirs.”

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70 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 10-11. “Porque le aseguro yo que es tal mi agradecimiento, que, como un corregimiento mi intercesión la alcanzó —según mi amor, desigual—, de la misma suerte hiciera darle también, si pudiera plaza en Consejo Real.”

71 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.69-76. “Ya sabe que fue mi intento que el camino que seguía de las letras, don García, fuese su acrecentamiento; que, para un hijo segundo, como él era, es cosa cierta que es ésa la mejor puerta para las honras del mundo.”

72 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.86-88. “porque es bien que las nobles casas den a su rey sus herederos”
the letrado class emerged with the creation of a substantial bureaucracy in the Spanish court:

“This development allowed literate and witty men of nearly any background to escape humble status and obtain secretarial positions within the early modern court, providing another avenue of advancement” (105). Rather than selfless service to the king, Beltrán sends García to win prestige for the family name.

Although he is a representative of the lettered elite, the Letrado evidently has a low opinion of Salamanca and its denizens: “[I]n Salamanca, sir, they are all children, and everyone obeys only his pleasure; they treat vice as a finesse, pranks as galas, and madness as if it were greatness…”73 This was no longer the austere center of learning praised by the sixteenth-century letrado authors; King describes Salamanca as el reino de la alegría estudiantil [the kingdom of student pleasure].74 The Letrado optimistically believes that Don García will observe good examples of gentlemanly conduct in Madrid, which in turn will facilitate the young man’s moral reform. Taken at face value, the Letrado’s negative description would be a simple indictment of Spanish universities, frequently denigrated as places of idleness and vice by nobles of the era. However, the escuelas del honor [schools of honor] he praises are later revealed to be a façade for dueling and drunkenness, and the lifestyle of courtiers exceeds even that of students in frivolity, superficiality, and romantic escapades.75 This dialogue exalts neither court nor university life but highlights the uncomfortable fact that both environments increasingly share a scandalous reputation. By the start of the seventeenth century the university was less a vehicle

73 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad 1.170-176. “En Salamanca, señor, son mozos, gastan humor, sigue cada cual su gusto; hacen donaire del vicio, gala de la travesura, grandeza de la locura; hace, al fin, la edad su oficio.”

74 King, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 189.

75 Ruiz de Alarcón, La verdad. “Mas, en la corte, mejor su enmienda esperar podemos, donde tan validas vemos las escuelas del honor.”
for social advancement than a depository for the idle sons of the Castilian nobility, which leads literary scholar Ricardo Castells to describe Salamanca’s university environment as akin to a “frat-house” (36). Alarcón thus implies that even prestigious Salamanca is not blameless for the wild behavior of its students or for the poor judgment of even its well-intentioned graduates. Such an observation is consistent with the ongoing theme of double aristocratization—specifically its negative valence—an element common to each of the authors considered in this section.

Alarcón’s opus reveals that the cultural world of the letrados has been tainted by the irresponsible conduct of university students even at prominent institutions like Salamanca. Student life was notoriously roguish, and it remains unclear whether Don García was corrupted by this environment at Salamanca or if his dishonest character made him particularly well-suited for it (Urbina 726). Jaime Concha considers this comedia a defense of human nature, which supposedly can triumph over the unearned privileges of an estamental class (“El tema” 260). Conversely, Lola Josa sees Alarcón’s persistent faith in aristocratic values as proof that he identified with the governing classes (“Hacia el pensamiento” 51-52). A closer reading reveals that letters are the ultimate source of personal virtue and cultural refinement, which ennoble the scholar through diligent study. Perhaps Alarcón never resolved the conflict in his own conscience between his belief that noble blood inevitably leads to noble actions and the bitter experience of daily life in which the code of conduct was routinely broken. His ambivalence on this point supports Paterson’s claim that Alarcón’s criticisms “are not so much rejections of the system as an expression of the unworthiness of those who claimed its privileges” (366).

The desire for ennoblement provides pathos in many of Alarcón’s comedias as well as in many other works of the Habsburg era. In the present text, that desire is realized through state
office or private service in a noble household. However, in an ambiguous exchange with the Letrado, Beltrán declares: “Although my favor placed you on the first rung of the ladder, your own virtue will cause you to rise to the last rung.”\(^7^6\) Castells reads this exchange as an example of Beltrán’s own social manipulation: he encouraged the Letrado’s ambitions when their interests coincided, but quickly abandons him when supporting García’s former tutor is no longer profitable (49). Contrary to this view, I believe that Beltrán’s appeal to virtud represents a genuine faith in the meritocracy of letters. Although a degree of patronage was inescapable under the later Habsburgs—as Alarcón well knew from his own experiences as a becario and a pretendiente—the nobleman never loses his conviction that individual talent refined by letters will ultimately prevail. The final section of this chapter presents another letrado author who recognizes the university and court as complementary environments that are equally important to the formation of the career-oriented noble. This literary synthesis of the noble letrado completes the ongoing process of double aristocratization, first introduced in Chapter 2, by which the class of letters fully shed its identification with the medieval cleric and at last came to the social foreground.

**Polo de Medina (1603–1676)**

**Letrados and the Culmination of “Double Aristocratization”**

As the process of double aristocratization progressed into the seventeenth century, letrado and associated terms—bachiller, licenciado, maestro, togado—became increasingly difficult to define and distinguish from one another (Bouza 64). At the same time, the desire of aristocratic members of the letrado elite to distance themselves from the supposedly plebeian

\(^7^6\) Ruiz de Alarcón, *La verdad* 11. “Mas yo me doy a entender que, si con el favor mío en ese escalón primero se ha podido poner, ya sin mi ayuda subirá con su virtud al postrero.”
attorneys and scribes—which Pelorson calls infra-letrados—was growing ever more urgent (Salas 264). The slippery nature of these terms produces many unintentional ironies. For example, historian William Monter defines licenciado as the “owner of advanced university degree, often a mark of status” (335). Given this straightforward definition, one might expect licentiates to occupy an honored position in the literature of the era. However, Baroque authors alternately mock licentiates for their shallow literary tastes and praise them for their sophistication. One such author was the Murcian satirist Salvador Jacinto Polo de Medina (1603–1671), whose Academias del jardín (1630) wrestles with the uncertain status of the licenciado in contemporary society. His ambivalence regarding this figure results from the rapid expansion of the letrado class in the late sixteenth century due to growing university enrollment. The dramatic increase in the number of university graduates in Castile reduced the perceived exclusiveness of degrees—especially the bachelorate—and cast doubt upon the qualifications of letrados at all but the highest levels. Confronted with this new social reality, many letrados sought to negotiate an alternative space in which to showcase their talent and demonstrate their worth.

One such space was the academias or literary academies of the seventeenth century, which combined the best elements of the courtly and university codes of conduct. According to literary historian Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga, the academias show moments of rebellion and protest against the materialism of the urban elite—“la nueva aristocracia del dinero”—as well as the concurrent inflation of titles and honors (Salvador 68). The academia phenomenon prized education, wit, and personal grace in its members. Above all literary skill—rather than noble lineage—was the defining criterion for entry. An illustrative example is Salvador Jacinto Polo de Medina’s Academias del jardín (1630), which recounts a series of meetings among educated aristocrats in the Espinardo gardens near Murcia. Ostensibly gathered for leisurely
purposes, the company consistently displays courtly behavior; they are described as having “the bearing of lords and the skill of courtiers.”77 Significantly, the text contains no other references to their lineage. Instead of boasting of their ancestors and bloodlines, the interlocutors proudly display their university titles, whether licentiate, bachelor, or the somewhat ambiguous maestro. The text embodies the nobility of letters in its maturity.

Díez de Revenga argues that because Academias del jardín was Polo’s first published work it contains many autobiographical elements (Salvador 45). It is therefore useful to consider the author’s early life and career before examining the text. Like Alarcón, Polo was born in the periphery. Although his native Murcia was distant from the capital, the city had an intense intellectual life at the start of the seventeenth century (Cossío 17). His early years were spent in scarcity, but with the backing of some of the noble families of Santa Catalina parish he was able to enroll in the Seminary of San Fulgencio, where he received an ecclesiastical education steeped in post-Tridentine theology (Souviron López 36). Contrary to what might be expected, religious matters are wholly lacking from his poetry and are only infrequently present in his prose works. This may be explained in part by the fact that Polo also studied under the celebrated humanist and poet Francisco de Cascales (1564–1642), who apparently also introduced him to Nebrija’s Gramática de la lengua castellana (Díez de Revenga, Salvador 33). Upon graduating he moved to Madrid to pursue a career at court. Polo’s literary activities eventually brought him into contact with Lope de Vega, who personally revised Academias del jardín for publication and from whom he acquired a certain anti-culterano prejudice (Cossío 21). Ramón Almela Pérez further speculates that Polo did not get along well with poets during his time at court, which could explain his slighting references to that group (61-62). After a brief but productive literary

77 Polo de Medina, Academias 177. “el aire de señores y la destreza de cortesanos”
career he abandoned the capital and returned to his native Murcia, apparently worn about by conflict with his critics. He eventually became rector of San Fulgencio, although the date is uncertain, and published several more prose works before dying in Alcantarilla (Salvador 43).

Was Polo de Medina therefore a letrado? His university degree, time at court, and literary career situate him decisively in the letrado class—as does, I believe, his election as Rector, an office highly coveted by letrado contemporaries. Polo’s close professional collaboration with Juan Pérez de Montalbán and Lope de Vega in the capital situates him within the patronage system upon which many letrado authors depended (Wright 81). Literary historian Luis Lisón Hernández also believes Polo enjoyed the protection of Don Juan Antonio Usodemar y Narvaez, lord of Alcantarilla and Perpetual Regidor of Murcia, who may have sponsored the young scholar’s education (13). We have then a complete picture of a successful letrado attracting noble patronage through public exercise of letters, and participating fully in the network of “old boy associations” upon which the letrado class relied for advancement (Poole, Juan de Ovando 198).

Although Polo de Medina never achieved the fame of a Quevedo or a Cervantes, Frederick Luciani describes him as “a prominent literary figure during his lifetime in his native Murcia, and indeed throughout Spain…” (3). Nor is Academias del jardín an isolated or obscure work: Willard King situates the text within the same novelistic tradition as Salas Barbadillo’s Casa del placer honesto and suggests it may also have been the inspiration for Pedro de Castro y Anaya’s Auroras de Diana (1631) and Montalbán’s Para todos (1632), frame novels that feature a series of conversations among aristocratic interlocutors (King, “Academies” 374). This proliferation of academias—both real and idealized—reflects the consolidation of artistic talent in the court city, while the novelized depictions of these meetings are a means of obtaining fame and outside recognition for creative talent displayed within this private space (Santo-Tomás,
Modernidad 96). Previous scholarship has focused on the abundance of autobiographical detail present in the text. The following section will reveal that Academias del jardín represents the letrado network in the fullness of its power and illustrates the extent to which letrados successfully created an alternative hierarchy to the estamental categories of the medieval period. As noted, membership in the academia is based not primarily on noble lineage but on lettered culture and literary talent; it is thus a true nobility of letters.

**Academias del Jardín (1630)**

The sessions depicted in Academias del jardín likely correspond with actual meetings of an authentic society attended by the author. More concretely, Díez de Revenga believes that the real-life sessions took place in the Casa de los Ingenios Murcianos under the patronage of the Marques de Espinardo (Salvador 34). José María de Cossío agrees with this assessment but speculates that the text was also likely inspired by literary societies Polo attended while in Madrid (40). Scholars therefore have been attracted to the text largely for its representation of social customs of the era. For the purposes of this study, however, the text is useful primarily because it depicts letrados interacting in a way traditionally reserved for the nobility. The most obvious literary inspirations for the text were Boccaccio and Castiglione, whose interlocutors were all nobles (Cochrane 28). Scholars likewise agree that Polo de Medina was the organizing force behind all the literary meetings, perhaps under the supervision of Cascales (Díez de Revenga, Salvador 34-35).

Classifying the text has proved more divisive. Begoña Souvirón López considers Academias del jardín a dialogue in the humanistic style (37-38). However, Cossío describes the text as a miscellany due to its mixture of prose and interpolated poems (39). More persuasively, Robert Clements and Joseph Gibaldi argue that the presence of a narrative cornice makes the text a framed novel (5-6). Although rudimentary, the frame contains a recognizable plot or storyline:
the young nobleman Anfriso suffers from an unrequited love for the beautiful Filis and invites a group of Murcian ingenios (wits) to distract him from his heartache. In the gardens of Espinardo they engage in literary and especially poetic discussions. As discussed, in the seventeenth century academias were a common means of joining otherwise unrelated literary pieces, including novelas and comedias. We may therefore conclude that the text is a framed novel in the Italianate style. This format’s association with nobility furthers the interlocutors’ identification with that group.

In order to distract Anfriso from his melancholy the interlocutors celebrate a mock tournament as well as a performance of No hay vida como la honra, a comedia by Montalbán—Polo’s friend and colleague from his time in Madrid—published in 1628. Although Anfriso is the pretext for their meetings, his contributions are mainly limited to sentimental poetry. The true central figure is Jacinto, who assumes the role of protagonist in the play-within-the-play, which Díez de Revenga believes makes him the alter ego for Polo de Medina (Salvador 52). Once again, the frame tale itself is simple and artificial, and scholars have valued the text primarily for its depiction of contemporary society, as well as for the direct participation of Polo. The interlocutors’ discussions of literary theory is of little relevance to the present study, but Jacinto’s frequent references to contemporary figures like Cascales and Montalbán do illustrate the extent and strength of the letrado network. The academia thus combines variety, sociability, and above all expertise in letters.

Polo de Medina’s Academias del jardín features an apparent contradiction: an aristocratic group of university-trained letrados who indulge in a series of biting criticisms of licentiates. Whereas Quevedo’s attacks were frequently vitriolic, the tone here is one of chiding amusement. The chief target for criticism is a pompous licentiate referred to only as Pues sea. The name—
which may be rendered “So be it!”—invokes either a stylistic flourish or an inability to find the right word. Although described as a licentiate, this individual is better known for his affinity for villancicos and letrillas—popular poetic formats—than for knowledge of law, suggesting his studies were humanistic rather than legal. That these genres were associated with public festivals also suggest that the licentiate is better suited to socializing than to serious study. The narration makes clear that he is only invited to the academia to entertain the other members with his simplicity.\(^78\) Although described as the village sacristan, he evidently has little familiarity with either Latin or the liturgical calendar, and the other members of the academia mock him behind his back for various gaffes.\(^79\)

Unlike his more learned colleagues, the licentiate lacks seemly modesty. Upon arriving, Pues sea immediately exclaims: “Your Graces honor me, although I well deserve it.”\(^80\) When Jacinto—the author’s avatar—reads a deliberately bombastic and incomprehensible silva in his honor, the others can hardly contain their laughter.\(^81\) Completely blind to their mockery, Pues sea eagerly asks Jacinto to explain some of his obscure and invented terms. A single exchange will suffice. When the licentiate asks him to define archiconflonfo, Jacinto replies with a flood of nonsense: “—Archiconflonfo, my lord licentiate— Jacinto told him—, is in the Indies the same as archipámpano in Sevilla, which is to say… the lord of all the world.”\(^82\) Literary critics have

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\(^78\) Polo de Medina, Academias 157. “entreteniéndolos con sus simplicidades”

\(^79\) Polo de Medina, Academias 159. “Acertaron, pues, los dos sacerdotes a decir juntos Per omnia saecula saeculorum; pero nuestro licenciado, por cumplir con los dos, les respondió: Amenes.”

\(^80\) Polo de Medina, Academias 161. “Vuesas mercedes… me honran, aunque bien me las merezco todas.”

\(^81\) Polo de Medina, Academias 162. “Aunque aventuraron el que se conociera la socarronería de los versos, no pudieron disimular todos la risa de ver juntos tan desiguales disparates y la figurería de Jacinto en haberlos juntado.”

\(^82\) Polo de Medina, Academias 163-64. “—Archiconflonfo, señor licenciado, mi señor— le dijo Jacinto—, es en las Indias lo mismo que archipámpano en Sevilla, y decirle a vuesa merced el Meotis acuario a la Palura, archiconflonfo en la región más pura, es lo mismo que decirle que sea señor de todo el mundo.”

197
read the nonsense verse as an echo of Quevedo’s *antigongorino* style (Díez de Revenga, “Polo de Medina” 77). Here the use of neologisms is taken to a farcical extreme, underlining the arrogance and pretension of the speaker in comparison to his elegant and restrained colleagues. The other interlocutors’ repeated insistence on addressing the bumbling *Pues sea* by his title of licentiate furthers his identification with a class of socially ambitious but ultimately naïve and credulous universally graduates.

Despite these satirical barbs, there is strong evidence that Polo de Medina does not intend *Pues sea* to be an indictment of the entire letrado class, or even of the licentiate degree itself. Indeed, the prevailing sentiment throughout the text is mutual admiration among letrados (Díez de Revenga, *Salvador* 53). The narration also mentions at least two other licentiates: Jorge Fernández, who is described as much more humble and intelligent than *Pues sea*; and Francisco de Cascales, who is included in a long catalogue of Murcian literary luminaries. Díez de Revenga considers *Pues sea* to be a caricature of Quevedo’s *conceptista* style of poetry, depicted here as an incoherent accumulation of archaic or nonsensical words (“Polo de Medina” 77). By contrast, the bumbling, arrogant, and comically unaware *Pues sea* is a grotesque representation of the class of individuals that obtained advanced degrees without actually educating themselves in any meaningful way. Continuing in this vein, another interlocutor known only by a pseudonym—Silverio—relates the tale of a licentiate who offended an honest laborer by his stilted speech and unnecessary use of Latin terms.83 Not to be outdone, Jacinto responds with his

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83 Polo de Medina, *Academias* 264-65. “—No os admire eso, que se yo de un licenciado que escribía versos latinos a su dama, que diciéndole un día un Labrador que su hacienda había menester labrarse dos veces, dijo: —¿Y esas dos veces son simpliciter necesarias, o ad melius esse? El labrador, pues, juzgando que era alguna injuria muy colérico le respondió: —V.m. mire como habla, que aquí no hay ningún hombre que sea simple, ni necesaria, que si no mirara que es clérigo de misa no se había de quedar esto desta manera. Yo no soy hombre simple ni necesaria, y esto lo probare aquí y en cualquiera parte.”
own tale of yet another foolish licentiate.\textsuperscript{84} After listening to these anecdotes, Don Juan voices the group’s feelings of amusement and exasperation: “Now I know that there are asses who can speak Latin.”\textsuperscript{85} With the exception of \textit{Pues sea}, the interlocutors embody the ideal that letrados should cultivate a rich but measured style of language without meaningless adornments. This attitude reflects the humanistic belief that all theory should be tested by critical reasoning through language. For that reason they mock the Latin jargon of academic philosophers, demonstrating that pedantic use of Latin phrases and Scholastic formulisms was unnecessary because one could convince with the vernacular (Souvirón López 38).

Although the members of the \textit{academia} are themselves evidently nobles—the use of \textit{Don} suggests at least \textit{caballero} status—they display a low opinion of life at court. Their meetings are in fact meant to improve upon the lavishly overdone courtly routines of Madrid. As noted above, Murcia was known by contemporaries for its literary culture and intellectual environment. The interlocutors use the \textit{academia} to praise their city’s letters while mocking courtly excess. When Don Pedro asks what it means to be \textit{discreto} [modest], Anfriso responds that it means to have moral judgment and to use plain speech.\textsuperscript{86} Jacinto accepts this definition but adds that courtiers have perverted this simple meaning by affecting a frail, sickly demeanor to simulate modesty.\textsuperscript{87}

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84 Polo de Medina, \textit{Academias} 265. “—Yo conozco otro licenciado que llegando a comprar un bonete, pareciéndole que no eran a propósito las excusas que el bonetero daba para unas faltas que tenía el bonete, le respondió: —ea, señor, que eso es \textit{per accidens}. —No es de pedazos, replicó el bonetero muy mohín y atufado, y lo aprobare con cuantos saben el oficio; ¿Qué cosa es decir que es de pedazos siendo un paño muy fino, nuevo y recién sacado de la tienda?”

85 Polo de Medina, \textit{Academias} 265. “Ahora conozco que hay asnos en latín.”

86 Polo de Medina \textit{Academias} 197. “—Discreto, a mi sentir–dijo Anfriso–, es más que apartar lo bueno de lo malo, y hablar a propósito.”

87 Polo de Medina \textit{Academias} 197-98. “Ir vestido de bayeta, llevar guantes de olor, preciarse de mal regido, tener poca memoria y tener algo ofendida la salud con cualquier achaque, y si fuere de bubas será más importante… la salud muy quebrada, con más achaques que una muerte o que una disculpa, bebiendo todo el año agua cocía y sangrándose a la primavera.”
\end{flushleft}
The company is both amused and offended, with Don Lauro in particular stating that nobility should not be synonymous with ignorance and hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{88} Anfriso consoles him at the same time neatly summarizing the status quo: “There is nothing novel about seeing ignorance so favored and wisdom so unappreciated.”\textsuperscript{89} We are presented, then, with an aristocratic body of university-trained nobles who seek to distance themselves from court not only because of its pervasive vice but also because of the notoriously shallow learning of its denizens. The literary society at Espinardo represents an alternative to the traditional nobility, one defined by erudition and personal grace rather than solely by bloodlines. Polo’s text thereby represents an idealized version of the nobility of letters, and the literary culmination of double aristocratization.

\textbf{Consolidation of the Letrado Class}

This chapter has revealed that much of the apparent criticism of the letrado class in the seventeenth century has been misunderstood by literary scholars due to a persistent misreading of \textit{letrado}. Based on the examples discussed above, we may conclude that the supposedly anti-letrado tone of certain Baroque satirists is actually a symptom of intra-caste competition among letrados. The urgent need to find a patron or \textit{mecenas} explains the intense rivalries that existed between authors with similar social backgrounds and education levels (Concha, “Introducción” 39). Simultaneously, the desire of many doctors and licentiates to distance themselves from less distinguished graduates—particularly attorneys—further explains the satiric barbs many authors address to their contemporaries. These practical considerations do not, however, imply anti-letrado sentiment.

\textsuperscript{88} Polo de Medina, \textit{Academias} 198. “–Eso es–dijo Lauro–como para ser caballeros escribir mal, haciendo caballería, ignorancia.”

\textsuperscript{89} Polo de Medina, \textit{Academias} 198. “Pues no es en mi novedad ver tan favorecida la ignorancia y tan desagradecida la sabiduría.”
Despite moments of intense competition, the emergence of the *academia* phenomenon illustrates the prevailing solidarity among the letrado elite, which considered itself morally and intellectually superior to courtiers and infra-letrados alike. Traditional scholarship has considered literary refinement little more than an aristocratic adornment, as historian Ellery Schalk states:

One [reason for education] was to train nobles for jobs, especially administrative ones, so that they could compete on an equal footing with others. The second was to help redefine them: to add letters and general learning, ‘grace’ and ‘assurance’ and the like, or simply culture, so that they would have a more plausible and appealing ‘image’ and definition. (181)

Although university degrees were certainly necessary for an administrative career, the preceding texts reveal that the literary polemic surrounding letrados involves much more than just a superficial question of “image.” Each of the authors examined in this chapter takes issue with real or imagined individuals who—motivated by personal ambition rather than duty or intellectual curiosity—have neglected their studies, demonstrated shallow learning, proved ineffectual administrators, and thereby damaged the reputation of the letrado class as a whole.

I therefore conclude that, far from expressing anti-letrado sentiment, these authors are in reality apologists for the elite of the letrado class—what Jean-Pierre Dedieu calls “true letrados.” Frustrated by the decline of the university system and the progressive infiltration of their privileged ranks by infra-letrados, these authors construct an idealized hierarchy through their literary corpus that separates the authentic “nobility of letters” from ambitious *parvenus*. Their exclusivist attitude supports my thesis that the letrado class was not a monolithic entity but rather a composite body of lettered professions. Using *letrado* narrowly to denote lawyers therefore fails to encompass the broad variety of positive and negative valences associated with the term, thereby eliding or conflating vital aspects of what was in reality a contested social category. This myopic view of the letrado class impedes our ability to approach and understand texts that feature this literary polemic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: THE KNIGHTHOOD OF LETTERS

My goal in this dissertation has been to polemicize a discourse that has long been considered stagnant. As we have seen, in the early modern period letrado, though commonly associated with the study and practice of law, actually refers to a broad class of university-trained men of letters engaged in numerous professions. Far from being a monolithic category, this body includes a broad variety of social functions including royal administrators and members of the judiciary as well as professional playwrights, dialogists, and propagandists. Reframing the letrado in functional terms accommodates the conflicting and overlapping characterizations of the letrado class that we have observed in tension with one another. Numerous literary texts attribute a greater social function to letrados than previous scholarship recognizes. The authors presented in this dissertation situate letrados on a larger stage, and often demonstrate a will to shape public perception of the letrado class actively through dialogue. Correcting scholarly assessments of the letrado class will avoid much confusion among literary critics by acknowledging the expanding social implications of letrados’ unique role in society.

I have called the progressive broadening of the meaning of letrado a resemanticization, though this process is only one component of the overall letrado polemic. It is necessary to revisit that assertion in light of the texts we have covered in this dissertation. Resemanticization derives from semantics, which for our purposes may be defined as the historical and psychological study of changes in the meaning of words over time. Muriel Norde describes resemanticization as the “functional enrichment” of an existing term, by which it gains a new function or meaning (93). The sources examined in this dissertation are in accord with this definition, as they reveal how a term previously reserved for members of a narrow juridical field was newly applied to a nascent social class—the letrados—whose identity in turn derived from a
specific function: the public exercise of letters. José Antonio Burciaga describes the relevance of philological inquiry to literary scholarship: “Resemanticization is also the exploitation of connotation and ambiguity in propaganda. Resemanticization deals not only with words but with ideas and symbols that cross borders and languages to take different meanings” (44). We have observed how partisans of the letrado class have employed the strategic use of words to position themselves favorably through literature. The propagandistic role of letters is the distinguishing mark of the letrado class, and the use of literature as a rhetorical “weapon” with offensive and defensive capacities is the function that clearly distinguishes the medieval cleric-letrado from the new nobility of letters. In this light, Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco describes the letrado class as the realization of Alfonso X’s caballería letrado [knighthood of letters], which “has been made flesh by completely dissolving the false dialectic between arms and letters, and thus unifying these two forms of monarchical sovereignty” (115). This final chapter will evaluate these claims in the context of the transition from pre-modern to modern literary discourse.

The letrados’ struggle for status achieves new vitality in the early modern era precisely because of the transition from catechistical dialogues of the classical and medieval periods to the more complex discursive possibilities of the Renaissance. Literary scholar Laura Vidler comments upon this change: “In premodern or ‘monologic’ discourse, the text functions under a single mode of discursive principles, for example chivalric, pastoral, or courtly love. A dialogic discourse recognizes the multiple discursive possibilities of real life” (160-61). As we have seen, literature of the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque features active dialogue between defenders of the traditional nobility and advocates of the letrado class, who assert that their intellectual attainments have made them the natural ruling class. The letrado class is no longer an abstraction to be relegated to academic disputes, but an authentic rival for political power and social status.
More than a resemanticization, this debate implicates questions of utility, as even the staunchest supporters of the old social order (notably Quevedo) recognize that the innovations of modern warfare and statecraft have made the counsel of expert advisors essential to governance. This insight allows a fuller understanding of the complex social realities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by revealing the heterogeneous composition of the rising “class of letters” and elucidating the variety of social functions performed by that group in early modern Spain. The ongoing reassessment of the letrado’s status was a far-reaching literary phenomenon with broad social and cultural implications. To illustrate this transformative process, I will first recapitulate the main arguments of this dissertation.

**Recapitulation**

Chapter 1 demonstrates the utility of adopting Stephen Greenblatt’s school of “cultural poetics” and expressed qualified support for a New Historicism model of literary scholarship. Such a model involves the incorporation of historical context into the analysis of literature, focusing on what Gabrielle Spiegel calls the “moment of inscription,” at which point the historical world is internalized in the text and its meaning is fixed (84). Consistent with this critical model, this dissertation has placed texts in dialogue with each other as well as with the relevant social and cultural aspects of the times in which they were produced. Such an approach to literary scholarship balances awareness of historical context with appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the works being examined. Dismantling monolithic categories and unsettling established meanings widen the scope for analysis in art and literature. As Loxley observes, “The broader work of deconstructive writing is to unsettle precisely this set of fundamental structures, these conceptual oppositions in which one pole of the opposition is presumed to be full, substantial or central and therefore to come first” (108). Accordingly, this dissertation has examined a variety of texts that feature conflicting uses of *letrado* in order to reveal changing
attitudes about the class of letters in the Habsburg era. Nor is this observation a mere grammatical curiosity, as it has allowed us to place texts in dialogue with each other in new ways. A primary function of literary criticism is to generate innovative explanations that reveal unobserved aspects of literature and its origins in the individuals who produce it. Literary critics in turn explain situations from which a work emerged as well as the consequences of its emergence (Peckham 55-56). The approach employed in this dissertation is consistent with this interpretive function of literary scholarship, as it serves to broaden the scope of textual analysis.

Chapter 2 begins by tracing a semantic shift in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when letrado ceased to refer narrowly to clerics trained in civil or canon law—the prevailing medieval model—and broadened to encompass all university graduates trained in the studia humanitatis. Curricular reforms associated with humanism greatly expanded the potential areas in which a student could distinguish himself, and the political reforms of the Catholic Kings (r.1479-1504) and Charles V (r.1516-1556) provided enhanced career opportunities for university graduates in the royal bureaucracy. Within the context of the Spanish Renaissance, letrado denotes a member of the nascent “nobility of letters” that defines itself in opposition to the traditional “nobility of the sword.” Literary language plays a key role in marking this transition, as authors take advantage of the nuances of meaning within letrado to argue for and against this emerging class. This observation is consistent with Mikhail Bakthin’s description of the interrelation between literary production and sociohistorical context:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process… (294)

We observe this process in the humanistic writings of the Valdés brothers, whose literary output demonstrates an awareness of the ascendance of the letrado class and the decline of the
traditional nobility. Their collective corpus signals the beginning of a series of literary efforts to reframe the letrado class in terms of social function.

Chapter 3 examines a series of humanistic dialogues that celebrate the letrados’ new role as literary propagandists in the service of royal and noble patrons. Authors like Alfonso and Juan de Valdés use their mastery of humanistic philosophy and theology, acquired through years of university study, as a rhetorical weapon with which to defend their patrons from their detractors and to launch new attacks upon their adversaries. Borrowing a phrase used by Luis Morera, I have called these letrado propagandists “hired guns” because they fought on behalf of the king in a way the warrior nobility could not, thereby gaining social status at the expense of the traditional elite. Inspired by Christian humanism and the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, authors like Hernán Pérez de Oliva denounce the violence of war—the foundation of the Castilian nobility—and questioned the validity of inherited social privilege when not accompanied by personal virtue. This humanistic model presents letters as the more civilized alternative to the sword, and subtly suggests that the warrior elite has outlived its usefulness in government. Cristóbal de Villalón abandons all pretense of subservience and enthusiastically supports a “Republic of Letters” in which university-trained scholars rule, subject only to the Crown. Although his manuscript El scholástico (ca. 1541) went unpublished during the author’s lifetime, his arguments in favor of the universities resonate with later works by subsequent authors who sought to resituate letrados as a new social class comparable to a service nobility.

Chapter 4 addresses a change not of function but of form. Rapid expansion of the universities due to rising enrollment—which peaked in the 1580s—created an internal hierarchy within the letrado class, with various subheadings competing among themselves for advantage at court and councils. Ambitious letrados hailing from the Colegios Mayores mobilized what I have
called the discourse of performance, a strategy of self-advancement by which they equated letrado status not solely with possession of a university degree but also with courtly manners and aristocratic refinement, thereby excluding their socially-inferior colleagues. The letrado polemic may thus be situated within the general atmosphere of social anxiety that pervades literature of the late sixteenth century. In *El estudioso cortesano* (1587), a manual for aspiring courtiers, Aragonese humanist Juan Lorenzo Palmireno (1524-1579), presents a seeming paradox: “We study letters to be better informed, prompt, affable, and useful to the Republic: but the more we work at it the more useless we end up.”¹ The contradiction, he explains, results from the lack of political astuteness among many letrados, who do not know how to position themselves advantageously outside the university walls. Although their degrees qualify them to apply for high office, they are outmaneuvered by more astute colleagues with inferior qualifications. Consequently, “Some deserve what they do not have, while others have what they do not deserve.”² As the letrado moves from the margins to the corridors of power, letters no longer signify a profession but a series of dispositions. These in turn mark the parameters of the letrados’ personal identity, constituting what Pierre Bourdieu calls a *habitus* (*Poder* 136n4). More than any external threat, the internal conflict between members of the letrado class fundamentally alters the character of the letrado sociotype as represented in literature.

Chapter 5 presents texts that illustrate the culmination of “double aristocratization.” As introduced by Joseph Pérez, the term refers to the broad process by which the line between noble and non-noble letrados was progressively blurred due to increased university enrollment in the late sixteenth century. This dissertation has traced the literary expression of this phenomenon in

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¹ Palmireno 2. “Así es, que las letras se estudian para que un hombre sea más avisado, prompto [sic], afable y provechoso a su Republica: pero los más acrecentemos el trabajo, y salimos más inútiles.”

² Palmireno 2. “[P]or lo cual vemos que unos merecen lo que no tienen, otros tienen lo que no merecen.”
the works of authors who praise letters not merely as a courtly adornment but as a defining feature for the nobility, without which they might even forfeit their claim to noble status. The literary record reveals that by the dawn of the seventeenth century it was no longer possible to question whether letrados were nobles; instead, the pressing question for polemicists was whether anyone could properly be called noble without a background in letters. Historian Antonio Álvarez de Morales describes this phenomenon as the “elevation of the tradition of administrative service among talented families within the internal noble hierarchy, a growing conversion from arms to letters of the highest members of the nobility, which reinforced a noble reaction in society and in the State” (476). Consistent with the observation, the literary record reveals that the consolidation of the letrado class as a state nobility was complete by the 1630s.

Although periodization is notoriously slippery, ample historical evidence confirms the preceding timeline. By its very nature, the letrado class is inextricably bound up in the rise and expansion of Spain’s university system. Spanish universities had been receptive to innovation during the sixteenth century, only to become intellectually stagnant by perpetuating an obsolete structure of disciplines. University enrollment, which had peaked in the 1580s, plummeted from the 1630s to the end of the century (Alejo, La Universidad 27). José Antonio Maravall traces the crisis of the European nobility in the early modern era: “The seeds of this presumed threat, by individualist forces against the socially and hierarchically established order, came from the past: they flower in the fifteenth, develop in the sixteenth, and veer off toward an eroding action in the seventeenth century” (“From the Renaissance” 21). The letrado class follows a similar trajectory,
expanding rapidly under the Catholic Kings, consolidating its position under the Habsburgs, and entering a period of decadence and decline by the 1630s and 1640s.

The texts analyzed in this dissertation reveal an internal competition among members of the letrado class, as successful letrados resist the efforts of fellow aspirants to gain status within the royal administration. This jockeying for position resembles similar contests among nobles, who competed for royal favor at court while also attempting to exclude parvenus from office. Maravall links this phenomenon with the nobility’s sense of insecurity after 1580:

For this reason, at the same time that protests are made about the royal concessions of titles, nobility (hidalguías), or of equivalent honors, it is thought that those with the ambition of moving up the social ladder, away from those who are down below, must be contained so as to keep the established order from tottering toward its end. (“From the Renaissance” 25)

These similar dispositions result from the process of “double aristocratization” whereby letrados were progressively ennobled through state service and nobles increasingly became letrados through university enrollment. Although attendance declined after the 1630s, veritable letrado dynasties were already well established and continued to exercise social influence, chiefly through the colegial network. We therefore may conclude that the new letrado class was fundamentally established by the fourth decade of the seventeenth century.

**Letrado as Sociotype**

Much more than a semantic shift, the letrado polemic of the Habsburg era involves the emergence and consolidation of the letrado as a new literary sociotype. As applied in psychology, the term sociotype refers to the specific profile attributed to some well-recognized profession, such as lawyers. It is an attempt to cover the social interactions, bonding structures, and communication relationships of each individual (Moral et al. 7). This dissertation has traced the literary expression of the letrado sociotype during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period in which—I argue—*letrado* ceases to refer narrowly to medieval clerics and expands to
incorporate a broad variety of lettered professions. Beyond the purely lexical dimension, *letrado* became associated with a spectrum of positive and negative valences that ultimately consolidated the new sociotype. Thereafter the term ceased to be a neutral descriptor and, in the hands of various authors, became a rhetorical tool employed for and against the emerging class of letters.

The term *sociotype* must not be confused with *stereotype*. According to Corinne Valdez, a sociotype is a fundamentally accurate characterization of social groups based on empirical data, whereas a stereotype is a mental category based upon exaggerated and inaccurate generalizations (84). For our purposes, the university graduate would be the *letrado* sociotype while the grasping lawyer or pedantic scholar—figures that recur throughout Baroque satire—would be *letrado* stereotypes. Other scholars applying psychology to literature have used the term *persona*, understood as a “public face” which a person may assume when relating to others (Knapp xii). This usage is inappropriate for the present project because it assumes that authors consciously project themselves into the text on behalf of a particular social group. In my analysis, even the most fervent defenders of the *letrado* class examined in this dissertation—Villalón and Madariaga above all—tend to present themselves as neutral arbiters instead of active partisans of the lettered professions. Accordingly, *persona* is an inaccurate moniker for the *letrado* in literature. Recognizing *letrado* as a sociotype enables us to understand the conflicting usages of the term among authors of the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque, and demonstrates that the *letrado* discourse extends beyond the confines of a literary polemic.

The methodology adopted in this dissertation resembles archetypal criticism in several respects, although these approaches should not be conflated. James Baird defines *archetype* as “the primal image, the original form, the model” (9). Because this dissertation has contested identifying *letrado* exclusively with its original model—the medieval cleric trained in law—this
definition is not helpful for present purposes. More auspiciously for present purposes, Renaldo Maduro and Joseph Wheelwright describe the archetype as a “system of readiness” that responds to environmental cues (182). In this tradition, archetypal critics are concerned with the relationship between a given archetype and the style of the works in which it manifests itself. This approach resembles New Historicism by recognizing that all literary production is embedded in a specific social, cultural, and historical context. As Evelyn Hinz and John Teunissen observe, “just as the archetype cannot be contained in its individual manifestation—its temporary location—so neither can it be extracted from or observed independently of the frame in which it manifests” (197). For our purposes, the frames in which the letrado sociotype manifests are the university system and royal bureaucracy of the early modern period. These are the arenas in which members of the letrado class demonstrate their value to the Republic and argue for enhanced social status commensurate with their new political role.

The literary record we have examined in this dissertation reveals that the resemanticization of letrado during the Habsburg era fundamentally altered the term from its medieval origins. The shifting of the ancient medieval sociotype of the letrado-cleric from the margins to the center of Renaissance and Baroque society provoked a visceral response that enriches our understanding of both literature and society. This process took the form of a literary polemic that spanned over a century and continues to influence scholarly writers in the present day. Although the letrado was established as a recognizable literary sociotype by the 1630s, the distinction between common parlance and erudite usage of the term persists as late as the twenty-third edition of the Diccionario de la lengua española (2014). Indeed, at the time of publication of this dissertation, the first definition of letrado recognized by the Real Academia Española is
“Sabio, docto o instruido” [wise, learned, and well-informed].

No hint of a legal association appears until the sixth definition: “abogado (licenciado en derecho)” [a lawyer licensed in law].

The persistence of the broader definition of letrado and related terms illustrates the continuing vitality of the class of letters in society. Understanding the expansion, consolidation, and transformation of the letrado class in early modern Spain therefore also enriches our knowledge of the present. Defining the social role of letrados is to some extent a means of exploring the contemporary profession of letters—its function within, relevance to, and transformative impact upon human society—which is no less important a revelation today than it was under the Catholic Kings of Spain.

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LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matt Michel received his Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and history from the University of Florida in 2007. After obtaining a Master of Arts in international business at the Hough Graduate School of Business, he enrolled in a concurrent J.D./Ph.D. program through the Levin College of Law and the UF Department of Spanish and Portuguese Studies.