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The Editor's Column

The Golden Years

by **Daniel Eisenberg**

The image of the Spain of Cervantes and Lope which we literary scholars tend to have is that of an unhappy era, with widespread suffering and rigid class divisions, teeming with discontented new Christians, intellectuals, and other minorities. After spending several weeks working intensively with a wide variety of books of that period, attempting to reconstruct Cervantes' library, the picture that emerges is somewhat different.

Spain during the reigns of Felipe II and III was a happy, confident country. To be sure, it had problems, but they were problems seen as solvable; individuals might be bad, but the structures of society were good. Personal conduct was much less restricted than is commonly believed today.

The Spanish Empire was the largest and most powerful in history, surpassing that of Alexander the Great, let alone the Roman Empire. Madrid was the capital of the world. Not only was it the political capital, but it was—in the Spaniards' view—the spiritual and moral capital as well. The Spaniards were the successful crusaders, expelling Islam from the peninsula, breaking the power of the Turk, carrying, at great risk, the cross to the farthest reaches of the world. A grateful God was sending them

silver and gold. Spain could relax, celebrate Catholicism in many festivals, and let the rest of Europe work for her.

If there were some military setbacks or stalemates (the Low Countries), the successes elsewhere (Chile, India) were impressive. Protestantism, the work of the devil, was sure to be vanquished.

Spanish literature was also the greatest ever produced. Spanish authors were not only superior to those of the Italian Renaissance, then in eclipse, they surpassed the classics. In lyric poetry, epic poetry, comedy, and the new genre, prose fiction, Spain was the leader in producing good (entertaining and moral) literature.¹

That books were censored was cause for celebration; those published were thus free of error. If anything, more rigorous censorship was desired.² I find no evidence that, at that time, writers resented censorship—many writers themselves served as censors³—or felt inhibited by it.

Other restrictions, which with hindsight seem so misguided, were viewed as sensible. Why did anyone need to study in a foreign country? Keeping the New World religiously pure was as logical as keeping space free of nuclear weapons seems today.

Spain was happy during those decades, as happy as Justina, floating gaily down the river to the sure port of *desengaño*.

¹ On this topic, see my “Cervantes and Tasso Reexamined,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 31, No. 3 (1984). [305–17; published in revised Spanish translation in *Estudios cervantinos*, and available on my Web site, <http://bigfoot.com/~daniel.eisenberg/cervantes/tasso.pdf>].

² See Cristóbal Pérez Pastor, *Bibliografía madrileña*, III (Madrid, 1907), 420–21, and P. E. Russell, “Secular Literature and the Censors: A Sixteenth-Century Document Reexamined,” *BHS*, 59 (1982), 219–25.

³ A partial list of censor-authors in Madrid includes Ercilla, Pedro Laínez, Pedro de Padilla, Gracián Dantisco, Juan de Mariana, Antonio de Herrera, Alejo Venegas, Juan López de Hoyos, and of course Lope.