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Review of Miguel Martínez, *Front Lines: Soldiers' Writing in the Early Modern Hispanic World*

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Throughout history soldiers have written about their experiences in war and their accounts have come to define our view of various conflicts. Yet in the Early Modern period soldierly writing has been a sadly neglected topic of study despite a voluminous body of both published and manuscript sources. Miguel Martínez has set out to rectify this situation in his analysis of the literary practices of the common soldiers of Imperial Spain. Their writings constituted a veritable “soldierly republic of letters” as they produced and consumed an astonishing variety of poetry, chronicles, memoirs, ballads and autobiographies.

Martínez first sets out to show how the “soldierly republic of letters” rested on the foundations of the Military Revolution. Common soldiers formed the backbone of the new Spanish *tercios*, and were the primary agents of imperial expansion. They were also a highly literate group. Indeed, the ability to read and write was part of the socialization process of becoming a soldier. Literature, ballads, news, and gossip were disseminated across the military spaces of the Spanish empire, including the New World. Indeed, Martínez argues that the armies of the Spanish monarchy were as much spaces of cultural encounter as they were carriers of extreme violence and destruction.

Martínez introduces us to one of the most important types of soldierly writing: the so-called gunpowder epics. This new genre of writing was first developed in Italy as a result of the Italian Wars. Here the common soldiers transformed the old Italian *romanzi* and Spanish tales of chivalry into “grittier and more realistic” forms of literature. These gunpowder epics were radically at odds with these older forms, both in the way they depicted warfare, and their emphasis on the exploits of the common soldiers, rather than the deeds of nobles. Scores of military poets, wrote “to tell the truth about war” that contrasted with the way that the chivalric tales of the past had created an unrealistic picture of combat. In his third chapter Martínez gives two examples of gunpowder epics from the North Africa Theater. The first, entitled *La Destrucción de Africa*, a 3 canto poem written by Baltasar del Hierro, dealt with the occupation of the Tunisian town of Mahdia (1550-1554). Hierro did not glorify its acquisition but rather dealt with the period of its occupation, chronicling the daily cycle of skirmishing, raiding, and plundering, and describing a veritable “dirty war” that had little in common with chivalric notions of warfare. The second, entitled *Libro de cassos impensados*, chronicled the fall of La Goleta from the point of a view of a private soldier who survived the siege. The author, Alonso de Salamanca, not only emphasized its heroic defense but also blamed its loss (and his own enslavement by the Turks) on the incompetence of its commanders and those officials who callously abandoned the garrison to its fate. Martínez highlights here the social tensions that were widespread in such writings. He even chronicles Salamanca’s attempts to publish an artillery manual, arguing that his lack of social connections in Madrid doomed his effort. Many poor soldiers viewed publishing as a means of survival, but very few would see their works in print.

Martínez then shifts his focus to the New World and to soldierly writing about the Arauco Wars in Chile, a conflict that outlasted even the wars in Flanders. The soldiers who wrote about their experiences in these wars raised valid questions about the viability of the Spanish empire and European notions of superiority over the indigenous peoples of

the Americas. This is evident in the author's analysis of Alonso de Ercilla's epic poem *La Araucana*, which chronicled the Arauco Wars in the 1550s. Ercilla lauded the fighting abilities of the Mapuche warriors, particularly their assimilations and improvement upon European tactics. Certain episodes in the poem, such as the death of the Mapuche chief Caupolicán could be interpreted as emblems of anti-colonial resistance. Before his gruesome death by impalement, Ercilla has Caupolicán defiantly proclaim that his death will not end the resistance against the Spaniards but only inflame it further. Indeed the Spanish victory proved hollow. Further uprisings broke out in 1598 and 1655 and the southern frontier in Chile remained destabilized throughout entire the colonial period. Ercilla's primary audience was his fellow soldiers and different editions of his work circulated widely throughout the imperial spaces of the empire. The poem proved so influential that even the Dutch came out with an abridged version, as they saw the struggle in Chile as a metaphor for their own fight for freedom in Flanders.

In the final chapter entitled "Home From War" Martínez presents several scenarios of war-weary soldiers who wrote of their return to a life of poverty and hardship. Many of these ex-soldiers gravitated to the imperial capital of Madrid to petition the court for pensions, where they came to form a restless and dangerous group. The new soldierly autobiographies of the 17th century studied here resemble the picaresque world of Spanish fiction. Most rarely ever made it into print during the lifetime of the author. The autobiography of Alonso de Contreras is perhaps the most famous of this genre. In addition to recounting his military exploits in Europe we see a disjointed personal life punctuated by sensational acts of murder, brawling, criminality, and rebellion. Soldiers such as Contreras defied as much as they defended imperial authority.

In the epilogue Martínez proclaims: "willingly or unwillingly, common soldiers end wars and ruin empires." Here he examines the connections between soldierly writing and army mutinies. Although he acknowledges that most mutineers possessed no long-term political or social agenda, their voices of discontent can still be equated with "political" actions at least in Gramsci's understanding of the "everyday weapons of the weak." Martínez connects the often-caustic social commentary of soldierly writing to the increasing lack of social mobility and professional advancement in the army that the Military Revolution had once made possible. Here we see links to I.A.A. Thompson's work on the rearistocratization of the Spanish military administration and Fernando González de León's thesis of the progressive erosion of the meritocracy of the "school of Alba." Martínez concludes by arguing that the writings of early modern Spanish soldiers and their modern counterparts deserve further study and alludes to the connection of soldierly writing with radical political movements. *Front Lines* is a fine example of a work that cuts across several disciplines; it will appeal to both literary scholars as well as to social, cultural and military historians.

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