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Elegia a Juan Ponce de Leon [Elegy to Juan Ponce de Leon]

Juan de Castellanos

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Juan de Castellanos, Elegia a Juan Ponce de Leon

Born in Alanís (Sevilla) to a family of “labradores” (laborers), the cleric-historian-poet Juan de Castellanos (1522-1607) arrived in Puerto Rico in the 1540s, was ordained in the mid-1550s, and died at 85, having produced a prodigious body of poetic work. The first part of his Elegías, composed while living in Columbia, was published in 1589,



although his output of over 113,000 lines (comprising four modern-day volumes) was not published in full until 1847. Anthologized selectively for its early description of the Fountain of Youth, the Elegía a Juan Ponce de Leon was in fact one of several attempts by Spanish poets in the Americas to frame exploration and discovery in epic terms. In Juan de Castellanos' case, the goal was nothing short of collating encounters from the Caribbean into a single, vast omnibus verse-history. With Castellanos taking the New World as his subject, Ponce de Leon, links la Florida to a longer history of pillage, and to a creole discontent that fit neatly within the then-popular elegiac form.

Further Reading

Castellanos, Juan de. *Elegía a la muerte de Juan Ponce de Leon: donde se cuenta la conquista de Borinquen*. Intro. Maria Teresa Babin. Transl. Muna Liee. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1967.

_____. "An Early Florida Poem: 'Elegia a la muerte de Juan Ponce de Leon.'" Transl. Thomas Hallock. *PMLA* 128:3 (2013). 756-64.

Pardo, Isaac J. *Juan de Castellanos: Estudio de las Elegías de Varones Ilustres de Indias*. Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1991.

Restrepo, Luis Fernando. *Antología Crítica de Juan de Castellanos: Elegias Varones Ilustres de Indias*. Bogotá: Editoria Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2004.

Amongst the most ancient of their people,
there were many Indians who said that
on Bimini, a powerful island
and center for many different nations,
there exists a fountain with great virtues
from which older men became young again,
and where elderly women walked away
with wrinkles smoothed-over and hair not gray.

After drinking its waters a few times,
from bathing their weary appendages,
they lost the ugliness that came with age
and cleared their pallid, sickly complexions;
by plastering their faces with mud packs

they livened up the dull hue of their skin;
with no desire to again become *niñas*,
all of the women would leave these waters.

It was said that the flowery forests
and fields have such admirable effects
that one no longer sees the appearance
of things that used to be most bothersome;
quarrels are not known, nor litigation,
instead joy, pleasures and great *fiestas*.

The country was painted to us this way:
as a place restored back to the first age.

Given the vanity of our own times,
I can only imagine for myself
how elderly women would come crawling
to gain back ancient and noble graces,
squandering ancient inheritances
on such great childishness! Imagine then
how rich, how strong and powerful the king
the one to possess this fountain would be!

The fame of these waters would spill over

from village to village, from sage to king,
and with imagination, one can see
aged men turning into lads again,
how by following crazy fantasies,
without seeking counsel of any kind,
they would just leave, traveling for long ways,
setting out like fools on a fool's errand.

And so Ponce's people steered to the North,
not without the most challenging rigors;
staying clear enough from the said fountain
and from the prosperous inhabitants,
he discovered the point of Florida,
so named because of *pascua de flores*,^[1]
and Ponce returned, having discovered
the country he would soon ask to govern.

[. . .]

Well stocked with men, arms and ammunition,
Juan Ponce decked out a great *armada*
and put his plan into effect, risking
death for what was so desired by others;
he took the country of Florida, though
not without a very intense battle,
for the *Floridos* met him at the beach

ably prepared to make their defense.[2]

The *Floridos* are vigorous and strong,
muscular, robust, valiant and agile,
they are well proportioned in every way,
and quite skillful with the bow and arrow;
with their arms, they are supremely prepared,
and in battle they leave nothing to chance;
young men and old attack their opponents
like a ferocious beast on carrion.[3]

[. . .]

And so the new arrivals disembarked
into the country so desired by them,
but a great numbers of *Floridos*
gave warning they were ready to fight;
confident in his own belief that things
were not as bad as they appeared to be,
Juan Ponce de Leon showed great courage
and put our people into formation.

With no fear for the twists and turns of fate,
the Spaniards rushed into the encounter,
but those who had made the bravest promises,

to place themselves in the front and center,
fled into the seas that surrounded them,
for with the Indians charging quickly,
the cries and deeds of Ponce de Leon
did not, over there, profit him at all.

Because he could see on both sides of him
a great number of his people falling,
and the survivors fleeing to escape,
despite the plan that he had set in place
and being himself mortally wounded,
with a muscle pierced entirely through,
Ponce realized it would be lunacy
not little by little to bid retreat.

From the many exchanges in battle,
his shield was covered over with arrows
and he looked for ways to make his escape,
seeing how his men had left him naked;
then finally, as the resistance waned,
he made a retreat with those who still could,
surrendering the field of victory
to the Indians who showed greater daring.

[. . .]

And because it was not fitting to part
with lands won at such an inconvenience,
our King created a dominion that
is now populated by our people;
but I want to return to my main theme,
to Juan Ponce, who was left suffering
in severe pain with his soldiers, sailing
back to the island of Fernandina;

And where with no improvement to his wound
the relics of his *armada* arrived,
and recognizing that his fall was near,
Ponce prepared himself for the journey,
bidding farewell to the work of this life
just a few days after his arrival,
and all of the people there felt great pain —
his wife, his children and his relations.

Something was red, of suitable gesture,^[4]
affable, well loved by his people,
properly balanced in every way,
he suffered his labors admirably;

was prepared in the face of danger,
the most courageous trembled before him,
an enemy to friends of convenience
and envied even by the worst of men.

All of the principal gentlemen from
the islands surrounding Fernandina
came for his funeral, which was solemn,
with authority and dignified pomp;
following the proper ceremony,
the time came to enter the sepulcher,
and there inside of Ponce's lofty tomb,
the people placed a couplet that read:

Mole sub hac fortis requiescunt ossa Leonis,

Qui vicit factis nomina magna suis.

In this narrow spot
lies a gentleman,
who was a Lion in name
and much more in fact.

[1] *Pascua de Flores*: Easter. Back to the historical narrative, the 1521 journey; note how Castellanos says less about Ponce's 1513 landing off the Florida Atlantic coast, choosing instead to focus on the tragic, second voyage.

[2] Castellanos conflates several native groups under *Floridos*, although the conflict described below was with the Calusas, on the gulf coast, who dealt Ponce de Leon a fatal wound to the thigh.

[3] *cebos*: “bait,” translated here as “carrion.”

[4] A cryptic line: *Algo fué rojo, de gracioso gesto*”