Concerning the 'Probable Mystery' of Nicolás de Piemonte: Returning to Francisco Márquez Villanueva's *Relecciones de literatura medieval*[*]

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Some years ago, I was excavating information in archival and bibliographical sources towards my dissertation. I had decided to explore several versions of *Fierabrás* –a very popular *chanson de geste* since the Middle Ages– in connection to religious and ethnic identity in late medieval Europe. Originally composed in French towards the end of the twelfth century, *Fierabrás* was later translated to Middle English, Anglo-Norman, German, and Italian. Despite its early popularity, this narrative did not appear in any Iberian language until Nicolás de Piemonte translated and adapted Jehan Bagnyon's French prose version to Castilian. The text was titled *Historia del Emperador Carlomagno y de los doze pares de Francia, et de la cruda batalla que uvo Oliveros con Fierabrás, rey de Alexandría, hijo del grande almirante Balán* (hereafter *Historia del Emperador*). It came to my attention that the earliest printed Castilian exemplar known today –dated April 24, 1521– is kept in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

Soon after my first visit to the Morgan Library, I found that Francisco Márquez Villanueva had devoted to this translation one of his works included in his *Relecciones de literatura medieval* (Márquez Villanueva 1977). In the most thorough reading of the Castilian *Fierabrás*, Márquez Villanueva notes that Nicolás de Piemonte's name sounds like a pseudonym because he is unknown, yet his "pages […] no delatan extranjería ni inseguridades de lengua aprendida" (125).[1] Thus, inadvertently, Márquez Villanueva pointed me toward a research area that was beyond the scope of my dissertation but was fascinating nonetheless.

In September 2010, after a short electronic correspondence, Márquez Villanueva kindly responded, "Me parece muy interesante su hallazgo de ese dato sobre la posible identidad de Nicolás de Piamonte […] Mi único consejo es que siga adelante sin peder la ilusión y el entusiasmo, sin lo cual no hacemos nada." This is my tribute to Francisco Márquez Villanueva, who generously offered me guidance and encouragement; these are my findings about Nicolás de Piemonte and his identity.

Like other European translators and *remanieurs* in the sixteenth century, Nicolás de Piemonte identifies himself in the prologue to *Historia del emperador*, inserting his voice over Jehan Bagnyon's own prologue to the French prose version of *Fierabrás*. "Yo, Nicolás de Piemonte, propongo de trasladar la tal escriptura de lenguaje francés en romance castellano" (fol. 1v).[2] But according to Hans-Erich Keller and Márquez Villanueva, this name seems a pseudonym. Keller (263) claimed this because Nicolás de Piemonte "semble être inconnu". Keller mentions this again in his introduction to Bagnyon's text (XXIX). Márquez Villanueva agrees that Nicolás de Piemonte sounds like a pseudonym, and that he is unknown. Yet, it is

[*] I am grateful to the Marco Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for the Lindsay Young Fellowship that allowed me to conduct further research for this paper.

[1] "Pages […] do not reveal his being a foreigner or the insecurities of a second language". All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

[2] "I, Nicolás of Piemonte, have the purpose of translating that writing from French into Castilian". I am quoting from the 1525 edition, also printed in Sevilla by Jacobo Cromberger, kept today in the Biblioteca Nacional de España (hereafter BNE), call number R/12097.

possible that Nicolás de Piemonte is not a pseudonym because today we might know something else about him.

The author of the Castilian translation, whose name would later become "Hispanicized" as Piamonte, might not have been Spanish. We know this because it was a common practice during the Middle Ages to use the place of origin as surname. This led Nicolás Antonio (155) to remark that "Nicolaus de Piamonte" was not Spanish ("si hispanus est"). Yet, Márquez Villanueva rejects this idea as he finds no sign of Piemonte's foreignness in his translation of *Fierabrás* (126). And we should agree with this claim, in part due to the evident mastery of the Castilian language throughout *Historia del Emperador*. Furthermore, despite Piemonte's expressed interest in translating "sin discrepar añadir ni quitar cosa alguna dela escriptura francesa" (fol. 1v),[3] he effected a number of modifications to the text –including abridgements, additions, extensions, and embellishments. Some of these modifications, as already noted by Márquez Villanueva, convey a clear cultural and political awareness of late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Iberia. In the amplifications and transformations to the text we can also see a reflection of the literary taste of his time and place.[4]

Perhaps the translator of *Historia del Emperador*, besides having a clear understanding of the religious tensions and the political issues between France and the recently formed Kingdom of Spain, was also closely related to the literary trade. Márquez Villanueva even comments that unlike Bagnyon, Piemonte is not a *parvenu* and "se halla más metido en el oficio" (106),[5] due to his apparent acquaintance with *Amadís de Gaula* (1508), by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, and *Cárcel de amor* (1492), by Diego de San Pedro. The elements that we know about Nicolás de Piemonte point to someone who lived in Spain during this time, who was aware of the political events of the early sixteenth century and was associated with the literary trade.[6] Furthermore, the person in question shares the name with the translator: Nicolaus Gazini de Pedemontio, also known as Maestre Nicolás or Nicolás de Piemonte. Maestre Nicolás was an itinerant printer working in the Iberian Peninsula, which might explain his command of the Castilian language and Spanish culture in general, and his acquaintance with some of the most popular books of the moment. This man, I claim, might have been the translator of *Historia del Emperador* and we have some evidence to support this assertion. Besides the fact that our translator and this printer share their name and place of origin, some of the content in the books Maestre Nicolás printed leads me to think that these two men were one and the same.

Nicolás de Piemonte, Piamonte, or Pedemontio, might have been either born in Italy or of Italian descent. As Pérez Pastor comments, many of the first printers in Spain did not use their true last name, preferring their place of origin (Pérez Pastor 1895, 481). Yet, that does not imply that these men were born there.[7] It is quite possible that their families came from elsewhere and they just kept the surname. Most known printers in the Iberian Peninsula between 1500 and 1520 were German, according to this naming practice. From what we can tell, looking at Norton's catalogue, only a few of these printers were Italians: Lorenzo de Liomdedei –from Pesaro–, João

[3] "Without any discrepancy, addition, or substraction from the aforementioned work".
[4] In my dissertation (Grinberg) I studied in detail the textual modifications effected by Nicolás de Piemonte. I find these adaptations related to geopolitical events of his time, both within the newly formed Spain and between the main political European powers and the Ottoman Empire.
[5] "He is more into the trade".
[6] For a study on the relationship between readers, translators, and printers in Renaissance France, see Worth-Stylianou.
[7] The sources do not mention any woman in this period.

Pedro Bonhomini de Cremona, and Nicolás de Piemonte (Norton 1978, V-VI).[8] The latter, as far as we can tell, sometimes signed Nicolaum Gazini de Pedemontio.[9]

In his short biography about Nicolás de Piemonte, Pérez Pastor mentions that besides being a foreigner, "Maestre Nicolás" was a migratory printer, as were most during that time (Pérez Pastor 1895, IX). Norton seems to agree with this idea, as he explains that Nicolaus, or Nicolás Gazini "was the last of the [*Iberian*] Peninsula's itinerant printers" (Norton 1978, 500). Maestre Nicolás was one among many other itinerant printers in Iberia and elsewhere in Europe, and his journeys around the Peninsula might have served the printer well. During his stay in diverse cities where books were printed and traded, Nicolás de Piemonte might have acquired a profound knowledge of Spain and its flourishing diversity. I propose to follow the route of the printer and his works to establish the connections to *Historia del Emperador* and his translator.

The first notice we have of Nicolás de Piemonte dates of 1511, when he became the first printer in Medina del Campo. Sánchez del Barrio considers that Maestre Nicolás might have arrived to Medina attracted by the fairs, and it is possible that he could have been "uno de tantos impresores ambulantes 'andantes en ferias,' cuya actividad se centraría en componer impresos sueltos de tipo comercial –pagarés, recibos, etc.–, requeridos por mercaderes y cambistas para ejercer sus tratos".[10] Evidently, we have no way to confirm that this was Piemonte's main occupation, as this type of document did not include the printer's name. But in April 10, 1511, Nicolás de Piemonte prints in Medina del Campo a book titled *Valerio de las historias escolásticas*, on behalf of Josquin Lecaron, a bookseller in Salamanca (Norton 1978, 155). Diego Rodríguez de Almela wrote this compilation of historical anecdotes as a tribute to Valerius Maximus. This text, as Amador de los Ríos mentions, deals instead with events that had taken place in the Iberian Peninsula and Castilian soil (312). The fact is that *Valerio de las historias escolásticas* became quite popular during the sixteenth century in Spain.[11] Despite the totally different genres of Rodríguez de Almela's book and *Historia del Emperador* –particularly the second book which is devoted to *Fierabrás*– translated to Castilian by Nicolás de Piemonte, it should not be surprising to find a number of connections between these two texts.

An instance of the connections in the content of these two texts relates to the role of women in war. In *Valerio de las historias escolásticas* women are an active part of the defense of Peña de Martos, in Andalucía, when they become surrounded by the King of Granada. Notably, the countess and her ladies "dexaron las tocas e vistiéronse en armas e tomaron lanças en las manos e andovieron por los andamios tirando esquinas e piedras" against the attackers (*Valerio* III, 2.9).[12] Similarly, in *Historia del Emperador* the Saracen princess, Floripés and her ladies are "armadas de todas armas con sendas hachas d'armas en las manos puestas adonde estaba derribada la pared de la torre" (fol. 32r[b]).[13] Floripés has to leave her feminine attire behind when she needs to defend her bastion, just as the countess does in *Valerio*. In both cases, the narrator praises these women for their courage; particularly in *Historia del Emperador* there is a long remark about the "varonil coraçón", virile heart, of Floripés and her ladies (fol. 32r[b]). Also, in both works these women are alone fighting. Count Álvar Rodríguez de Castro, in *Valerio*, is

[8] For several other Italian printers in this time period, see Rhodes.
[9] Further research is needed in relation to the Gazini family, both in the cities where Maestre Nicolás worked and in Piemonte.
[10] "One of the many itinerant printers that followed the fairs, whose activity would focus on printing commercial papers, as promissory notes and receipts required by merchants and moneychangers in their deals".
[11] It was first printed in 1487 and reissued in 1511, 1514, 1520, 1536, 1548, 1568, 1574, and 1587.
[12] "Left their headdresses and donned arms, using spears and throwing corners and stones".
[13] "Totally armed, each with axes and positioned where the wall of the tower had been battered".

away in Castile and has his nephew defend the castle in his absence. Yet, the knights make a *sortie* leaving the women alone in the castle. This is the same case in *Historia del Emperador*. Yet, the French text from which Nicolás de Piemonte translated has "les pucelles toutes armees, lesquelles *avecques les barons* firent sy grant devoir" (Bagnyon 119, emphasis added).[14] That is to say that Piemonte was not following word by word his source, as Floripés and her ladies in the French version are fighting together with the French knights and not on their own. Thus, it is noticeable that the two works associated to Nicolás de Piemonte present a group of women actively leaving their attire to don armor and arms in the absence of men.

It is quite possible that, upon further study of *Valerio de las historias escolásticas*, one could find other points of contact with *Historia del Emperador*. Yet not all books printed by Maestre Nicolás are as closely related in content to the Castilian version of *Fierabrás*. After leaving Medina del Campo, Nicolás de Piemonte worked together with Juan de Villaquirán in Toledo, as the successors of Pedro Hagembach in 1512. According to Norton, the partners printed two volumes and possibly a third, unsigned work. At least the first two books –Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi* and Antonio de Nebrija's commentary on Persius Flaccus' *Satyrae*– were important best-sellers, something of importance when trying to keep this press working. The third book, *Petri Pentarci Syderati constructionis ars noviter aedita*, was apparently printed only a few times in the sixteenth century. This grammatical treatise does not include the printers' name in the colophon as most books do in this period, which makes scholars wonder if Nicolás de Piemonte and Juan de Villaquirán were still working together in December of 1512 (Norton 1966, 53). But the fact that Nebrija is mentioned in the book's prologue written by Fernando de Santander might show some continuity with Nebrija's study of Persius Flacus.

The first of these three volumes, published in October 8, 1512, is a Castilian version of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, also titled *Contemptus mundi*. The *Imitatio Christi*, attributed to Jean de Gerson in this edition, is a work of devotional literature enormously popular since the late Middle Ages. This fact is attested by the wide range of languages in which it was translated, with 639 editions published between 1500 and 1650 (Von Habsburg 1). In other words, this was a best-seller and a good start for the newly formed partnership. As Von Habsburg notes, printers "were driven by profit or piety, or indeed both" in their decision to publish this work (49). Maestre Nicolás and Juan de Villaquirán might have been driven by both. This is particularly true if we consider that the Castilian translation of *Fierabrás* is noticeably devout in comparison to the twelfth century *chanson de geste.* This religious tendency is already present in Nicolás de Piemonte's source, Bagnyon's *L'Histoire de Charlemaigne* which was composed upon Henry Bolomier's request. Because Bolomier was the canon of Lausanne, it is understandable that Bagnyon conceived of a more Christian *Fierabrás* to satisfy his patron. Nicolás de Piemonte, instead, does not have an apparent reason to emphasize the Christian element further. Yet, it is clear that he appropriated the text and made it adequate for the Iberian early-sixteenth century readership.

Similar to *Fierabrás*, the *Imitatio Christi* could be "interpreted in various ways and appropriated by a broad range of individuals and groups" (Von Habsburg 2). In fact, the translators of these texts were not faithful to their originals, adapting the works to a particular socio-cultural environment. A clear instance of this type of adaptation in *Historia del Emperador* is princess Floripés' depiction which reveals a conscious authorial effort to specifically address a Spanish readership that is more knowledgeable of ethnic and cultural differences and, apparently, more conservative about women's adequate behavior. Floripés does not act like an aggressive

[14] "The maidens fully armed, *together with the knights*, do such prowess".

Saracen, as occurs in most French versions of *Fierabrás*, but in a manner more according to what is expected of a noble maiden regardless of her religious belief. Furthermore, the princess's body is not exposed to the gaze of the emperor and his knights during her baptism as it happens in other renditions. If the translator of *Fierabrás* and the printer of *Imitatio Christi* are the same person, he would have been interested in transforming the main female character into a more modest young woman.

These transformations are also noted by Márquez Villanueva who claims that "las variantes y peculiaridades de la versión española revisten máximo interés en el terreno de lo religioso" (110).[15] I have mentioned elsewhere that these textual departures are partially the cause of the immense popularity of *Fierabrás* in the Iberian Peninsula after its translation as *Historia del emperador*.[16] Undeniably, both *Historia del Emperador* and *Imitatio Christi* were best-sellers on their own account, despite their different subject matter, because of the ability of the translators in adapting the material to their specific cultural environment.

The second volume printed in Toledo by Maestre Nicolás and his partner was not as popular as *Historia del Emperador* and *Imitatio Christi*. This book, published on October 19, 1512, is Antonio de Nebrija's commentary on Persius' *Satires* titled *Aelii Antonii Nebrissensis grammatici in A. Persium Flaccum Poetam satyricum interpretatio.* According to Del Amo, Nebrija's commentary was first published in 1503 and printed on seven occasions between 1504 and 1529. Del Amo asserts that Nebrija's main purpose is didactic: besides teaching to properly use Latin, the grammarian presents "ejemplos de conducta, válidos especialmente para los jóvenes, a quienes se podían ofrecer modelos de actuación que cuadran bien en la moral católica" (277).[17] Thus, in spite of the apparent disconnection between the goals of a grammar treatise and a *libro de caballerías*, both texts convey a religious and behavioral paradigm to be followed. Nicolás de Piemonte's *Historia del Emperador* depicts Floripés and Fierabrás as most damsels and young aristocratic knights would behave in late medieval Iberian narratives, irrespective of their creed. Floripés blushes if Guy de Borgoña embraces and kisses her, and feels embarrassed when Roldán adds after performing their marriage "que lo demás fuesse guardado fasta que ella fuesse christiana" (fol. 19v^{b}).[18] Neither this sexual innuendo nor Floripés' reaction are present in any other version of *Fierabrás.* On the other hand, her brother Fierabrás knows to use the most holy elements in his opponent's belief –God, baptism, the cross, and fealty to his overlord– in order to appeal to a Christian (fol. 9v^{a}) to tell the truth. It is this Catholic morality that I see as a link between Nicolás de Piemonte the translator and Nicolai Gazini ex Pedemontium, whose name in the colophon of Nebrija's commentary of Persius allows us to recognize him as a printer in the city of Lisbon some years later.

In May 22, 1518, the name of Maestre Nicolás appears in the colophon of *Manuale secundum consuetudinem alme Colymbriensis ecclesie* as "Nicolaum Gazini de Pedemontio." This liturgical book printed in Lisbon was commissioned by the Bishop of Coimbra, Jorge de Almeida, and contains a liturgical calendar, the sacramental services, and the *Breve memorial dos pecados et cousas que pertençem ha confissam, hordenado por Garcia de Resende*. This implies that Nicolás de Piemonte was the first to print Garcia de Resende's text on the

[15] "The modifications and peculiarities of the Spanish version are of most interest in terms of religion".
[16] My dissertation is entirely devoted to the exploration of the many adaptations done by Nicolás de Piemonte. For the dissemination of this text in the rest of the Iberian Peninsula and the Spanish colonies, see Grinberg 198-213.
[17] "Examples of conduct, especially valid for young people to whom he could offer comportment models according to Catholic morality".
[18] "The rest should be saved until she became a Christian".

confession, though it appeared few years later as a single book. The content of *Manuale secundum* is closer to *Imitatio Christi* than to the grammatical treatises printed in Toledo, and the relationship between the latter and *Historia del Emperador* is somewhat tenuous.

An element that appears in *Historia del Emperador* that can be connected to *Manuale secundum* is the importance of godparents during the baptism. Though the book of liturgies refers to christening a child (fol. 2r[a]), the Castilian translation of *Fierabrás* considers the existence of godparents during the conversion of the Saracen knight. After Fierabrás is found wounded on the battlefield, Bagnyon's prose version only mentions that "l'empereur le fit visiter [*Fierabrás*] par ses medicins bien espers" (69),[19] and his baptism follows almost as a given, without further comment. In *Historia del Emperador*, instead, Charlemagne has Fierabrás' wounds tended before baptism and then, the Emperor together with Roldán and Regner, this is, Oliver's father, become Fierabrás' godfathers at the baptismal font (fol. 14r[a]). This is a unique instance among all the versions of *Fierabrás*, as neither Fierabrás nor Floripés have a godparent when they become christened. The link between the former king of Alexandria and the Emperor is more solid than that of fealty.

Moreover, according to Canon law, despite not being between blood relatives such a strong link is deemed exceptional as "nothing else can be so productive of paternal affection" (*Code of Justinian* V, 4. 26). The connection between Fierabrás and Charlemagne in the Castilian text is stronger than in other versions, even if the Saracen has mixed feelings about fighting against his own father during the final battle. Indeed, having godparents during baptism was already common practice since the early Middle Ages, but this is not the case for most conversions and particularly not in collective Christenings. An exception is found in Pere III, King of Aragon between 1336 and 1387, who "served as a godfather and gave alms to a handful of converts" from Judaism (Tartakoff 28). Because this example refers to the Iberian Peninsula, we should consider that most *remanieurs* of *Fierabrás* had no direct experience of conversions, either of Muslims or Jews. Evidently, this would not be the case to Nicolás de Piemonte, who lived in the Iberian Peninsula when the Catholic Monarchs' program of religious homogenization was still critical.

Because *Manuale secundum* was printed with material of the Fernandes-Campos press, Norton claims that "Gazini had clearly been granted the hospitality of the Fernandes-Campos workshop; the known facts do not rule out a possibility that he had for a brief period succeeded to its charge" (Norton 1978, 500). Following the few clues we have of Nicolás Gazini of Piemonte, it is obvious that he went from one established printing shop –Pedro Hagembach– to the next –Fernandes-Campos. It is likely that Maestre Nicolás had notice of the open letter of King Dom Manuel, dated February 20, 1508, inviting printers to settle in Portugal. The only condition, as Norton mentions, was that "the said printers shall possess a capital of 200 gold *dobras* and moreover must be 'Old Christians' without trace of Moorish or Jewish blood" (Norton 1978, 493).[20] It might be possible that our printer was unable to provide the capital, as he had been traveling for several years from one city to the next. Even if Norton comments that "no more is known of him" (Norton 1978, 500), it is possible that he arrived to the most important printer's workshop of the Iberian Peninsula, the Cromberger's in Seville. Furthermore, Jacobo Cromberger was in Lisbon in 1521 printing the *Livro das Ordenações* of King Manuel. Could Cromberger have invited Nicolás de Piemonte to Seville?

[19] "The emperor has his expert physicians visit Fierabrás".
[20] This is a quote from Deslandes, 12. Norton's translation.

Rhodes wonders also, if "this mysterious printer from Piedmont could […] possibly be the same Nicolás de Piamonte who translated from French into Spanish the *Historia del Emperador Carlomagno*, of which seven editions were printed in Seville" (321). As I have shown here, it is quite possible that both Norton and Márquez Villanueva were talking about one and the same person. It is not uncommon for a printer to work as translator in this period. William Caxton is an early example of someone carrying out these two roles in the printing industry. Boffey has noted the "significance of translation to Caxton's enterprise: his *own translations* account for nearly half the total number of works he printed" (318, emphasis added). That is to say that printing and translating were commercially viable and could be done by the same person.

Moreover, Caxton also translated Jehan Bagnyon's text though it did not become as popular in English as it happened in Castilian. As a fellow printer, it is likely that Piemonte was aware of the popularity and economic advantages that such texts as *Fierabrás* could have, just like the commercial benefits of printing Rodríguez de Almela's *Valerio de las historias escolásticas*, Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, and Antonio de Nebrija's commentary on Persius Flaccus' *Satyrae*. Maestre Nicolás's contact with the first text we know that he printed –*Valerio de las historias escolásticas*– provides a good basis to believe that Piemonte was well aware of the popularity of chronicles and chivalry books. Together with the use of historical figures as examples, the religious struggles in a stringent Catholic environment, and the nascent humanist ideas to which he was exposed through Antonio de Nebrija's work, Nicolás de Piemonte was ready to participate in the burgeoning scene of knights and Saracen princesses.

The Castilian translation of *Fierabrás* became enormously popular both in the Iberian Peninsula and the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, becoming part of the blueprint to build a new religiously and culturally hybrid society in the Americas and the Philippines. Piemonte's text traveled through time and space, both as a literary reference and as a major ideological substrate, to the limits of the Spanish Empire and beyond. Besides fifteen sixteenth-century early editions in the Peninsula, the text was mentioned twice in Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, served as basis or was referenced in several works by Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca, became the matter of *autos* and other *romances plebeyos*, as Menéndez Pidal (2: 247) refers to them, and is still found in contemporary representations of *danzas de moros y cristianos* in former Spanish and Portuguese colonies. The translator of this early modern best-seller, whose name was thought to be a pseudonym, did not live to see the success of his efforts. Francisco Márquez Villanueva was one of the few scholars who gave a serious thought to *Historia del Emperador* beyond it being mentioned in *Don Quijote*. Indeed, the mystery of Nicolás de Piemonte is fathomable as Márquez Villanueva expressed in the title of his article. It is our turn, inspired by his brilliant mind and generous heart, to keep trying to find the right answers to the many questions about this text and others.

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