
Jonathan D. Steigman. *La Florida del Inca and the Struggle for Social Equality in Colonial Spanish America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 125p.

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In their accounts, many 16th-century chroniclers depicted Amerindians as murderous savages; those who did not, treated them superficially. Reasons for their negative portrayal ranged from ignorance of indigenous cultures to downright bigotry. It was not until El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616), the first *mestizo* (half-Spanish, half-Amerindian) writer to attain literary fame, that European readers were able to gain a more impartial perspective on the conquered natives. Steigman's purpose is to analyze what prompted El Inca to write *La Florida del Inca* and to what extent this work altered the prevailing discourse.

The book is divided into six general areas: Introduction, Chapter 1 (Prelude), Chapter 2 (Purpose, Style and Themes of *La Florida del Inca*), Chapter 3 (El Inca's Native Americans), Chapter 4 (*La Florida's* Ideal Conquerors), and El Inca's Prophetic Voice. In the Introduction, as expected, Steigman states the purpose of the study: "In *La Florida*, El Inca presents Amerindian and European ethnic and cultural representations and presents his rationale, both explicitly and implicitly, concerning his presentations. The current book is a critical inquiry into these representations and into El Inca's supporting rationale and motivations" (ix). Although the text seems free of typographical errors, it is in this section where the first of two obvious oversights occurs in a citation in Spanish: "...y los alcances *posteriors* del Inca Garcilaso" (ix). The second appears in Chapter 1, also in a citation in Spanish: "En sus postulados fundamentales la *lingística* moderna" (26).

Chapter 1 provides a succinct background of the historical realities of the period as well as biographical information on El Inca. His intellectual development, which took place in Peru and Spain, is well detailed and germane to the scope of the study. Readers are reminded that, because his Spanish father acknowledged him as a legitimate son, he enjoyed educational advantages denied *mestizo* children. (The fact that his mother was of royal Inca stock also afforded him privileges unavailable to most Amerindians).

Steigman analyzes *La Florida del Inca* in Chapter 2, aiming to give readers an overview of El Inca's style and his motivation for writing the work. He comments on chroniclers of the Hernando de Soto expedition to the area that is today the southeastern United States. Because El Inca never set foot on North American soil, Steigman also mentions those explorers whom El Inca consulted. His conclusion

regarding *La Florida*—and one he frequently restates—is that El Inca, besides desiring recognition for himself, wrote in order to elevate natives to the same cultural level as Spaniards, and that their conquest was justified to fill the sole lacuna in Amerindian civilization: their ignorance of the one true religion, Catholicism.

In Chapter 3 Steigman restates El Inca's desire to present the Native Americans in a favorable light. He classifies chroniclers' works thus:

El Inca, [Fidalgo de] Elvas, [Hernández de] Biedma, and [Rodrigo] Rangel can be categorized as de Soto chroniclers. El Inca, [Bartolomé de] Las Casas, Alonso de Ercilla, Juan de Castellanos, and [Álvar Núñez] Cabeza de Vaca can be categorized as chroniclers of indigenous Americans as well as of Europeans. All the de Soto chroniclers except El Inca accompanied de Soto to the New World. No indigenous chronicler except of Cabeza de Vaca ever visited the La Florida natives. The de Soto chroniclers, with the exception of El Inca, record what they learn through personal experience with the La Florida natives.... (64)

Categorizing of this sort, although necessary to understand El Inca's uniqueness and merit, produces a halting tone that detracts from the flow of the reading. (Perhaps columns or graphs would have made reading less tedious.) Further on, while again comparing chroniclers, Steigman stresses that El Inca was the only writer of the period who believed that Amerindians were civilized and that to reach their "human potential" they needed "Christian redemption." He describes indigenous lifestyle, customs, physical attributes, war tactics, and weaponry—an analysis that leads him to concur with El Inca that Native Americans, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, are universal beings worthy of respect and more humane treatment. He ends the chapter by commenting on El Inca's style; his conclusion is that, though a historical account, *La Florida* is also and foremost a literary work: "Some [of its] scenes, according to the critics, appear to have been taken straight from the chivalric romances" (93).

Chapter 4 addresses the remaining characters, the Spaniards, and how El Inca, by depicting them as religious, well-meaning heroes, hopes to positively influence Spanish policy toward the natives. Steigman rightfully argues that in this failed attempt, El Inca comes across as a misguided apologist for Spanish misdeeds and atrocities in the New World.

In his concluding section, Steigman adeptly condenses the main points of earlier pages. Perhaps this brief paragraph supports his thesis best:

El Inca is visionary in his evaluations. Through his universalist ideal, he sees the New World natives with equality in the world community upon their conversion to the Catholic faith. He sees their moral and intellectual stature elevated. He sees the conflict between Native Americans and Europeans overcome by dialogue

between the two. He sees Spaniards and Amerindians coexisting in peace in La Florida, each culture enhanced by the other. (112)

Although original and well researched, this study is redolent of a doctoral dissertation. The rehashing of observations coupled with an abundant number of citations (those in Spanish followed by English translations) lengthens what would have been an excellent article into a somewhat less interesting book. All in all, however, it is clear and logical and provides welcome new insights to historians and literary scholars alike. ✱