

Open Iberia/América: Teaching Anthology

<https://openiberiaamerica.hcommons.org/>

Juan Latino, “On the Birth of Untroubled Times” (*De natali serenissimi*)

Elizabeth R. Wright, University of Georgia, 2019

Introduction: Europe’s First Black Poet

Juan Latino (circa 1517 – circa 1594) is Renaissance Europe’s first known black poet. The best available evidence indicates he was born in the province of Cordoba (Spain) to an enslaved mother. Nevertheless, in the poem featured here and other sources, Latino speaks of being from Aethiopia, a toponym that referred to sub-Saharan Africa in general terms. We know for certain he spent his childhood and early adulthood in bondage to a Spanish grandee, the third Duke of Sessa. Though Spain’s high nobility devoted great energy and resources to documenting their family histories, Sessa-family records do not identify Juan Latino’s parents by name or nationality. One family chronicle does, however, reveal how Juan Latino attained literacy: in childhood, he surreptitiously followed his younger master’s private lessons. Yet we cannot ascertain with reliable sources how Latino claimed freedom. What we do know is that by the mid-sixteenth century, he had attained social respectability as *maestro Juan Latino*. The honorific refers to his position teaching Latin in the newly founded Universidad de Granada and in its Colegio Real, a grammar school affiliated with the cathedral. But in the later sixteenth century, Latino reached for honors that transcended local respectability. In response to the euphoria unleashed by Spain’s victory in the Battle of Lepanto (7 October 1571), he published a book of poems that celebrates the triumph, ponders its geopolitical implications, and claims lasting fame for Juan Latino.

The galley clash that incited Latino to fashion himself as a poet worthy of international acclaim was a truly epochal event. The Battle of Lepanto transpired in one Sunday morning of fighting. But its estimated casualties of some 40,000 men killed or injured exceeds even such horrific milestones as the three-day Battle of Gettysburg in the US Civil War. For Spaniards, the hero of Lepanto was Don John of Austria, the half-brother of King Philip II of Spain. Just over twenty-years old, Don John commanded an allied Catholic fleet (the Holy League) that united forces from the Spanish Monarchy, the Republic of Venice, and the Papacy. In the waters of western Greece, the Holy League defeated a formidable Muslim fleet assembled by the Ottoman sultan and his allies from North Africa. The poem we feature, “On the Birth of Untroubled Times,” pivots on a double entendre: exaltation across Spain over the victory at Lepanto intensified when, two months after the naval clash, Queen Anne of Austria gave birth to a son, the Crown Prince Ferdinand.

Riding this wave of optimism, Latino crafted a poem to honor the king, his newborn heir, and Don Juan of Austria. “On the Birth of Untroubled Times” serves as a proem to a longer epic narration of the naval battle. The Latin verse form used for this poetic prologue is the elegiac couplet, a form associated with Ovid and Martial, revered poets of Roman Antiquity who cultivated this meter to air personal sentiments and witty satire. Directing his elegy to Philip II, Juan Latino renders the naval victory and royal birth twin harbingers of new empire building. A striking feature of this poem as published in 1572 is the glossing of the elegiac couplets; throughout, margin notes point to rhetorical devices, historical references, and literary allusions. In essence, the glosses work in a manner akin to hyperlinks today, making the book an interactive Latin lesson. As such, it displays Juan Latino’s pedagogical vocation for the larger, international audience print publication allowed (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

A Prophecy, celebration, and admonition for the Spanish king

In the poem’s opening verses (ll. 4–6), the speaking subject hails Juan Latino as a *new poet* from *another world*. For Europeans of the sixteenth-century, the uncharted African lands south of the Sahara were as much a *new world* as the American lands. Such an affirmation of black-African identity contrasts to how European



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). You are free to download, share, adapt and republish, provided you attribute the source and do not use for commercial purposes.

mapmakers and chroniclers of the sixteenth century were increasingly resorting to allegations of uncivilized savagery when describing the diverse nations south of the Sahara.

Juan Latino’s verses expose the faulty logic of bias against blacks by drawing on a biblical allusion. Lines 19–30 thus recall the conversion of the Ethiopian emissary of Queen Candace in *Acts of the Apostles* 8. 27–39, who receives instruction in the Scriptures and baptism from Philip the Evangelizer. Latino uses this New Testament episode to warn another Philip—the king of Spain—that in the distant lands where he aims to extend his power in the wake of Lepanto, Spanish emissaries will encounter a black courtly elite who disdain white visitors. To close the poem, the poetic voice shifts shapes, rendering himself a black bird who sings an auspicious song (ll. 77–78). As a closing flourish, this envoi affirms that blackness is beautiful and propitious. A margin notation reminds the reader that this final couplet adapts a famous passage from the Roman historian Suetonius.

Alas, Juan Latino’s claim of honor and renown in exchange for composing artful Latin poetry for the benefit of the Spanish Monarchy would be largely forgotten in the decade after his death circa 1594. Writers of the seventeenth century—including Miguel de Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Diego Ximénez de Enciso—distorted the image of an erudite Latin professor and recalled Juan Latino’s social advancement with racially charged, apocryphal anecdotes as well as racist caricatures. Accurate memory of Latino’s accomplishment became the domain of bookish sources intended for more limited, Latinate audiences.

In time, the arc of literary history did bend towards poetic justice. A caricature of Latino in a prefatory sonnet to *Don Quijote* sparked the curiosity of Arthur Schomburg (1874–1938), a renowned bibliophile of the Harlem Renaissance. Correctly inferring there was an intellectual of the African diaspora buried beneath the racially tinged caricature, Schomburg spent years compiling the scarce reliable sources on Latino, along with documentary evidence about other intellectuals and artists of the African diaspora. He traveled in 1926 to Andalusia, seeking direct material evidence about Juan Latino and other black artists and intellectuals who had lived in the south of Spain in the early modern era. In late twentieth century, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., proposed Latino be studied as a foundational figure in the literary history of the African diaspora. Now, historians and anthropologists in a team led by Aurelia Martín Casares are researching Latino’s educational innovations and social mobility. Literary scholars, including Andrew Lemons and Maxim Rigaux, have invited scholars to recover Juan Latino’s Latin literary practice as a fundamental part of early modern Spain’s Golden Age of literature.

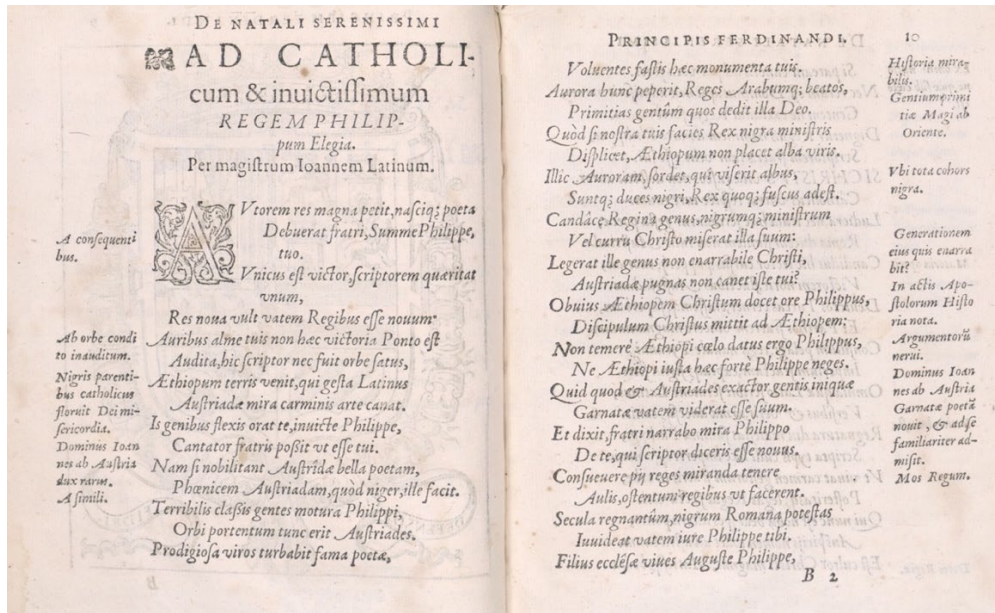


Fig. 1¹

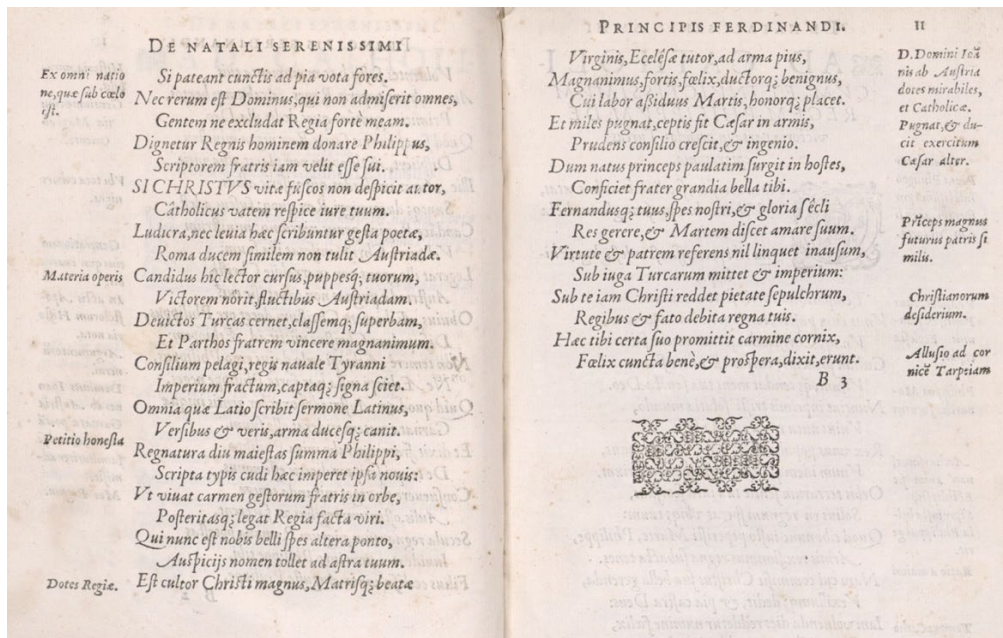


Fig. 2

¹ Figures 1 and 2: Juan Latino’s Latin poem addressed to Philip II, as printed in 1573, renders the book an interactive Latin lesson. Note how margin glosses explain the rhetorical devices and allusions within the elegiac couplets, in effect, performing the work of a schoolmaster in the Latin classroom. [In *Ad catholicum . . . Epigrammatum liber*, fols. 9v–11r, [gathering A1v–B3r], Granada, Hugo Mena, 1573. Textual witness preserved in the Biblioteca Histórica, Marqués de Valdecillas of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, shelf list FLL 11,641. Reprinted by permission.]

Elegy for Philip II, “On the Birth of Untroubled Times” (“De natali serenissimi ad Catholicum et Invictissimum Regem Philippum Elegia”)²

Transcribed and translated by Andrew Lemons (Clemson University) and Elizabeth R. Wright (University of Georgia)

Autorem res magna petit, nascique poeta
 debuerat fratri, Summe Philippe, tuo.
 Unicus est victor, scriptorem quaeritat unum,
 res nova vult vatem regibus esse novum.³

1 A great event seeks an author; and a poet⁴ had to be born for your brother, great Philip.⁵ The victor is unique, he demands a unique writer; the recent event requires a new bard for kings.

Auribus alme tuis non haec victoria ponto est
 audita, hic scriptor nec fuit orbe satus,
 Aethiopum terris venit, qui gesta Latinus
 Austriadae mira carminis arte canat.

5 Such a naval triumph, benevolent one, has never reached your ears; this writer was not engendered in this world: he came from lands of Aethiopia, Latinus, who sings the Austriad’s wondrous deeds with his skill in song.⁶

Is genibus flexis orat te, invicte Philippe,
 Cantator fratris possit ut esse tui.
 Nam si nobilem Austridae bella poetam,
 Phoenicem Austridam, quod niger, ille facit.

9 He beseeches you on bended knee, invincible Philip, so he can be singer for your brother. Now if the wars of the Austriad ennoble the poet, he, as a black, renders the Austrian a Phoenix.⁷

Terribilis classis gentes motura Philippi,
 orbi portentum tunc erit Austridae.
 Prodigiosa viros turbabit fama poeta,
 volventes fastis haec monumenta tuis.

13 Philip’s awe-inspiring fleet poised to strike nations, at which time the Austriad will be a portent to the world. The astounding fame of the poet will stun men as they consider these momentous deeds in your annals.⁸

² Transcription and English translation reprinted with permission from Appendix 1 of Elizabeth R. Wright, *The Epic of Juan Latino*, University of Toronto Press, pp. 185–89. (Some lines have been edited and altered.) Source: *Ad catholicum . . . Epigrammatum liber*, fols. 9v–11r, [gathering A1v–B3r], Granada, Hugo Mena, 1573. Textual witness preserved in the Biblioteca Histórica, Marqués de Valdecillas of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, shelf list FLL 11,641. Latin orthography modernized, following the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, with the exception that the intervocalic *u* is rendered as a *v*.

³ Transcribed margin notes the *princeps* of 1573 are rendered below in italics within the footnotes.

⁴ The prose translation below adheres as closely as possible to the format of the elegiac couplets. Line numbers coincide with the Latin verse.

⁵ *A consequentibus* [argument based on outcome].

⁶ *Ab orbe condito inauditum* [without precedent since the world’s creation]. / *Nigris parentibus catholicus floruit Dei misericordia* [with black parents, he prospered a Catholic by the mercy of God].

⁷ *Dominus Joannes ab Austria dux rarus* [Don Juan from Austria, singular leader]. / *A simili* [argument from likeness].

⁸ *Historia mirabilis* [awesome history].

- Aurora hunc peperit, Reges Arabumque beatos,
primitias gentum quos dedit illa Deo.
Quod si nostra tuis facies Rex nigra ministris
displicet, Aethiopum non placet alba viris.
- 17 The East engendered him as it did the devout kings of Arabia who brought their distant nations’ offerings for God.⁹ Should our black-face, oh king, displease your emissaries, know a white one does not please men of Aethiopia.
- Illic Auroram, sordet, qui viserit albus,
suntque duces nigri, rex quoque fuscus adest.
Candace Regina genus, nigrumque ministrum
vel curru Christo miserat illa suum.
- 21 There, a white man who visits the East is considered vile, and there are black leaders, and there is even a dark-skinned king.¹⁰ Queen Candace sent her relative and black emissary to Christ in a chariot.
- Legerat ille genus non enarrabile Christi,
Austriadae pugnas non canet iste tui?
Obvius Aethiopem Christum docet ore Philippus,
discipulum Christus mittit ad Aethiopem:
- 25 He had read of the ineffable people of Christ; will this man not sing the battles of your Austriad?¹¹ En route Philip teaches the Aethiopian face-to-face about Christ, Christ sends a disciple to the Aethiopian,
- non temere Aethiopi caelo datus ergo Philippus,
ne Aethiopi haec forte Philippe neges.
Quid quod et Austriades exactor gentis iniquae
Garnatae vatem viderat esse suum.
- 29 not by chance, therefore, Philip was brought under Aethiopian sky, nor, o Philip, should you, by accident, deny these just reasons.¹² And what of the fact that the Austriad, banisher of the iniquitous race, had considered him to be his bard in Granada?¹³
- Et dixit, fratri narrabo mira Philippo
de te, qui scriptor diceris esse novus.
Consuevere pii reges miranda tenere
aulis, ostentum regibus ut facerent.
- 33 He said, moreover, I will recount wondrous things to brother Philip about you, who are called a new writer. Pious kings grew accustomed to harbor wonders in courts, so they might display them to kings.¹⁴

⁹ *Gentium primitiae Magi ab Oriente* [Magi from the East bore the first offerings of distant nations]. *Aurora* (l. 17) often denotes the East in Latin poetry. In early modern cartography, the notion of a Far East included sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia), in addition to the Middle East and India. Here verses connect Latino’s Aethiopian homeland to the East from which the Magi brought gifts to the newborn Christ. *Gens*, in medieval Church Latin, often denoted distant peoples, as it does in the context in l. 18 and the accompanying margin gloss.

¹⁰ *Ubi tota cohors nigra* [where the whole court is black].

¹¹ *Generationem eius quis enarrabit?* [Who will tell of his offspring?].

¹² *In actis Apostolorum historia nota* [a notable history in Acts of the Apostles]. / *Argumentorum nervi* [the strength of the argument]. Verses echo *Acts* 8. 27–39.

¹³ *Dominus Joannes ab Austria Garnatae poetam novit, et ad se familiariter admisit* [Don Juan de Austria met the poet of Granada and warmly welcomed him]. Juan Latino met John of Austria when he was in Granada leading the military campaign to repress the Second Revolt of the Alpujarras, a civil war that devastated Granada in the half-decade before Lepanto.

¹⁴ *Mos regum* [custom of kings]. Lines 35–36 refer to the fashion among European elites for appearing in public and in portraits with black servants or slaves to signal wealth or sophistication.

- Secula regnantum, nigrum Romana potestas
invideat vatem iure Philippe tibi.
Filius ecclesiae vives Auguste Philippe,
si pateant cunctis ad pia vota fores.
- 37 For the years they rule, let Roman power, with
reason envy your black bard, o Philip. You shall
live as son of the church, should the doors open to
everyone for their pious offerings.¹⁵
- Nec rerum est Dominus, qui non admiserit
omnes,
gentem ne excludat regia forte meam.
Dignetur regnis hominem donare Philippus,
scriptorem fratris iam velit esse sui.
- 41 There is no lord of states, who has not admitted
everyone, nor [global] monarchy that would
exclude my race capriciously. May Philip deign to
give this man to his realms, may he now wish him
to be his brother’s writer.
- Si Christus vitae fuscis non despicit autor,
Catholicus vatem respice iure tuum.
Ludicra, nec levia haec scribuntur gesta poetae,
Roma ducem similem non tulit Austriadae.
- 45 If Christ, giver of life, did not disdain blacks, as a
Catholic, justly turn your eyes to your bard. Not
light or frivolous, these deeds are written by the
poet; Rome has not brought forth a leader equal to
the Austriad.¹⁶
- Candidus hic lector cursus, puppesque tuorum,
Victorem norit, fluctibus Austriadam.
Devictos Turcas cernet, classemque superbam,
et Parthos fratrem vincere magnanimum.
- 49 Here the enlightened reader will learn of the
charges, and the galleys of your men, the Austrian
victor on the waves.¹⁷ He will see the great brother
vanquish humbled Turks, the proud fleet and
Parthians.
- Consilium pelagi, regis navale Tyranni
imperium fractum, captaque signa sciet.
Omnia quae Latio scribit sermone Latinus,
versibus et veris, arma ducesque canit.
- 53 He will learn of the council at sea, the shattered
naval empire of the Tyrant king and the captured
standard. Latinus writes all these things in Latin
speech, and with true verses he will sing of arms
and leaders.
- Regnatura diu maiestas summa Philippi,
scripta typis cudi haec imperet ipsa novis:
ut vivat carmen gestorum fratris in orbe,
posteritasque legat Regia facta viri.
- Let the supreme majesty of Philip —long may he
rule— demand these writings be stamped in a new
medium,¹⁸ so the song of the brother’s exploits
shall come alive the world over, and posterity shall
read of the royal deeds of the man.

¹⁵ *Ex omni natione, quae sub caelo est [vows from every nation that is under heaven]*. Medieval jurisprudence conceived the king as son and father of the church [*filius et pater ecclesiae*].

¹⁶ Line 47 echoes a Vergilian formulation of the battle for Italy, “huc illu; neque enim levia aut ludicra petuntur” (see *Aeneid* 12.764).

¹⁷ *Materia operis [the substance of the work]*. Lines 49–56 advertise the epic narration of Lepanto that follows the poem. *Tyrant*, in line 53, refers to Selim II (r. 1566–74), the Ottoman sultan. Many Spanish accounts of the battle describe Muslim leaders as *infidels* and *tyrants*, but private communications in unpublished state papers show that many Spanish leaders harbored grudging appreciation for the meritocratic promotions in Muslim fleets, as well as the skill and magnanimity of certain Muslim military commanders.

¹⁸ *Petitio honesta [a worthy request]*. In line 58, print technology is rendered in classical Latin, as a new kind of bas-relief [*typus novus*].

Qui nunc esta nobis belli spes altera ponto,
auspiciis nomen tollet ad astra tuum.
Est cultor Christi magnus, Matrisque beatae
Virginis, Ecclesiae tutor, ad arma pius.

61 He who is now a new hope for us in battle at sea, will raise your name to the stars through auspicious things. He is a great worshipper of Christ, and the holy Virgin Mother protector of the Church, pious in battles,¹⁹

Magnanimus, fortis, felix, ductorque, benignus,
cui labor assiduus Martis, honorque placet.
Et miles pugnat, ceptis fit Caesar in armis,
prudens consilio crescit, et ingenio.

65 a magnanimous, strong, fortunate, and kind leader, who takes pleasure in assiduous toil and martial deeds. And as soldier he fights, becomes a Caesar in battles waged, prudent, matures through council and intelligence.

Dum natus princeps paulatim surgit in hostes,
conficiet frater grandia bella tibi.
Fernandusque tuus, spes nostri, et gloria saeculi
res gerere, et Martem discet amare suum.

69 As born leader he rises against enemies, the brother will carry out great battles for you. And your Ferdinand, our hope, and glory of ages, will learn to govern affairs and love Mars himself.²⁰

Virtute et patrem referens nil linquet inausum,
sub iuga Turcarum mittet et imperium:
sub te iam Christi reddet pietate sepulchrum,
regibus et fato debita regna tuis.

73 Recalling the father in virtue, he will leave nothing undared, he will submit the empire of the Turks under the yoke: he will piously restore the sepulcher of Christ to you, and the realms destined by fate to your rulers.²¹

Haec tibi certa suo promittit carmine cornix,
felix cuncta bene, et prospera, dixit, erunt.

A raven promises you in his song these things are certain, auspicious: he announced all will be well and prosperous.²²

¹⁹ *Dotes regiae* [royal attributes]. / *Don Domini Joannis ab Austriae dotes mirabiles et Catholicae* [the wondrous and Catholic attributes of Don Juan of Austria]. / *Pugnat et ducit exercitum Caesar alter* [A new Caesar, he fights and leads the army]. *Dotes* emphasize John of Austria's royal demeanor, suggesting the poet grasped his (frustrated) ambitions to be granted royal status by his half-brother king Philip II.

²⁰ *Princeps magnus futurus patris similis* [the prince will be great like his father].

²¹ *Christianorum desiderium* [the hope of Christians]. In l. 76 and elsewhere, the poet uses *regibus* to convey the composite nature of the Spanish Monarchy, in which Philip II rules as king of diverse realms (Castile, Aragon, Navarre, Sicily, Naples, etc.), each considered in terms of its particular constitutional and juridical traditions). Pope Pius V and other Catholic leaders voiced the hopes that Don Juan would follow the victory at Lepanto with a campaign to retake the Holy Land (here Christ's sepulcher) and Constantinople from the Ottoman empire.

²² Margin: *Allusio ad cornicem Tarpeiam* [allusion to the Tarpeian raven]. The prophecy of auspicious times ahead echoes Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 23.2, with the *carmine cornix* echoing the Roman historian's *culmine cornix* (“nuper Tarpeio quae sedet culmine cornix ‘est bene’ non potuit dicere, dixit: ‘erit.’”).

Bibliography:

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Maria Wolff. “An Overview of Sources on the Life and Work of Juan Latino, the ‘Ethiopian Humanist.’” *Research in African Literatures: The African Diaspora and its Origins*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1998), pp. 14–51.
- Martín Casares, Aurelia. *Juan Latino, talento y destino: un afroespañol en tiempos de Carlos V y Felipe II*. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2016.
- Schomburg, Arthur A. [Arturo Alonso]. “Juan Latino, Magister Latinus.” In Johnson, Charles S., editor. *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea (1927)*. Rprt. *The Politics and Aesthetics of ‘New Negro’ Literature*, ed. by Cary D. Wintz. Vol. 2 of 7 of *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920–1940*. New York and London: Garland, 1996, pp. 67–73.
- Wright, Elizabeth R. *The Epic of Juan Latino: Dilemmas of Race and Religion in Renaissance Spain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.