The Canonicity of Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Masterpiece Alang Dios! in Kapampangan Literature From 1932 to 2013

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Abstract

The study focuses on the canonicity of Juan Crisostomo Soto better known as “Crissot” and his masterpiece, Alang Dios—reviews, critical essays, theses, and dissertations from 1932 to 2013. These materials are seemingly one in blindly praising and placing him in a pedestal worthy a literary god. The present study is an attempt at tracing how the canonization came about. What was the context? What was the necessity? Informed by John Guillory’s theory on canon-formation, Michel Foucault’s author-function, and Virgilio Almario’s “makapangyarihang pagbasa,” this present work critically analyzes the criticisms about Juan Crisostomo Soto and his masterpiece Alang Dios! Using close reading and metacriticism to disclose the assumptions, norms, and context involved in the criticisms, findings show that the critics were one in their use of methods and means like press, newspapers, academe and other agencies, relevant situations and celebrations to canonize Juan Crisostomo Soto and his masterpiece. This means that the unanimous criticisms resulted into a sense of identity and valor for every Kapampangan and Kapampangan Literature as a whole amidst colonial subjugations and promising literature across regions.

Keywords: canonicity, literary god, metacriticism
Introduction
Juan Crisostomo Soto and his masterpiece *Alang Dios* is obviously the canon of Kapampangan literature as supported by eighteen criticisms written about him from 1932-2013. In fact, one poet could have singlehandedly put Bacolor on the map. The name Juan Crisostomo Soto y Caballa (1867-1918), popularly known as Crissot, shines the brightest among the galaxy of Kapampangan writers. He wrote a mind-boggling 50 plays (including 3 tragedies, 8 comedies, 20 zarzuelas), more than 100 poems, as well as essays, novels, and short stories. “This is an output”, wrote Icban-Castro (1981) one expects from a major writer in order if not of Shakespeare at least the minor Elizabethans”. His best known works are the zarzuela *Alang Dios!*, the novel *Lidia*; the play *Delia*; the short story *Y’ Miss Phathupats*; and the poem *Malaya*.

Soto edited three newspapers, *El Pueblo*, *El Imparcial*, and *Ing Alipatpat*. Literary jousts in Kapampangan, rhymed and improvised on the spot, have been called *crissotan*, the Kapampangan counterpart of the Tagalog *balagtasan*. Soto was a major practitioner of belles letters comparable to Balagtas. Many of his works mirrored his intense revolutionary fervor; Soto wrote for *La Independencia* and served with Gen. Tomas Mascardo as major of infantry.

Soto went on to write about fifty plays, steadily acquiring his reputation as Pampanga’s greatest dramatist. The real break from metrical romances was made earlier by ‘Crissot’ whose work ‘Lidia’ was the first prose narrative of its kind in Pampangan literature. By using contemporary material for his plot and prose as his medium, ‘Crissot’ gave his work the features of contemporaneity and realism that were to ultimately distinguish the new prose narratives from the metrical romances (Manlapaz 1976).

Likewise, Lacson (1984) expressed that Juan Crisostomo Soto will endure as a luminary in the whole of Kapampangan literature with his zarzuela *Alang Dios!*. Although Crissot wrote prodigiously, his fame would have been assured with just this single work of his.

In parallel sense, Mallari (2011) said that Juan Crisostomo Soto is a Kapampangan literary giant, most versatile and prolific writer. His literary craftsmanship achieves hybridity that allows his people to relish their “otherness” and “difference” and be glad for having such an identity. Soto’s prosody reverberates, drawing attention to itself thus decentering the language of the colonizers.

Juan Crisostomo Soto made his way too, in poetry. In fact, his contribution as a poet was deemed of highest significance.

As published in the magazine *The Torch* (1965), ‘No Kapampangan ever equaled nor surpassed Juan Crisostomo Soto on his use of rhythm and beauty in his poetry. This was seconded by Perez (1965) saying, ‘Juan Crisostomo Soto is one of the heirs of Kapampangan poetry. His style in his poems is clear, sweet, and orderly when compared with other Kapampangan poets.


All these and more attested one thing, that Juan Crisostomo Soto popularly known as Crissot was a cultural icon, an initiator of great things, a literary god adored by critics, a great Kapampangan author and poet worthy of emulation.
Statement of the Problem
This study aims to identify, categorize, and analyze the criticisms written about Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Alang Dios to trace how the canonization process came about. Specifically, it intends to answer the following questions:
1. What were the historical, cultural, and sociological events both in the national and regional levels that paved the way to Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Alang Dios canonization?
2. How did institutions like government, academe, and other agencies help in the canonization process?
3. What were the context and theoretical underpinnings that influenced the critics’ canonization of Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Alang Dios?
4. What are the exceptional characteristics of Juan Crisostomo Soto and his masterpiece Alang Dios that helped facilitate their canonicity?
5. What are the implications of the findings of this study to every Kapampangan and Kapampangan literature as a whole?

This study is based on John Guillory’s canon-formation who said that literary critics have long known that the reputations of many writers have risen or fallen through the ages, and for many complex reasons. Could it be possible that Crissot’s critics were also aware of the possible plight and fate of a writer like Crissot and because of such thought; they resorted into identifying and selecting Crissot and his Alang Dios as worthier of preservation than others? This is the obvious implication of canon-formation where a specific author or a specific text is deemed or regarded as privileged while the rest marginalized.

If it were possible to correlate the act of judgment on the worth of a writer and his literature based on categories like class or gender, then Guillory added:

…the history of canon-formation would appear as a kind of conspiracy, a tacit or deliberate attempt to repress the writing of those who do not belong to a socially or politically powerful group or whose writing does not in some overt or covert way express the “ideology” of the dominant group.

For more than eight decades, Crissot and his masterpiece Alang Dios enjoyed a definite stature of being the best and incomparable. This is supported by the criticisms written about him. Using historical documents as source, Crissot played a significant person in a number of revolutionary movements. In fact, he served with Gen. Tomas Mascardo as a major infantry. Not to mention that many of his works mirrored his intense revolutionary fervor. His social status was that also for the chosen few. It was said that Kapampangan literature reached its golden age during lifetime along with that of Galura and Pabalan, collectively known as the great drama triumvirate. He even acted as editor of three newspapers like El Pueblo, El Imparcial, and Ing Alipatpat. This implies that Crissot had the power of the pen and the press during his lifetime.

The aforecited paragraph connotes that Crissot either formed the canon, had the participation in the formation of the canon, or he was the canon himself.

Moreover, canonicity or canonization of a writer and/or literary text is determined by history, literary culture (community of readers or writers), and schools or institutions including the government.

If Guillory expounded on the canonization of a writer or a text, Michel Foucault on the other hand, elaborated on the author-function. Foucault states that the name of an author does not simply refer to a particular individual; it signifies a role that is created by the ways discourse is treated in the culture, and it serves a particular function in the circulation of texts where it characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse (cited by Hendricks 2002:153).

The author-function according to Foucault, is a product of the power relations that exist within a particular society, and because these power relations are not static, neither is the author-function: “It does not operate in all uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture “ (Foucault 1977b:130).

According to Foucault, intellectuals’ political role is a critical one, rather than acting as bearer or agents of the regime of truth, they must serve as critics of truth instead. He suggested that theory and the theorizing individual must analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power and build little by a little a strategic knowledge that could be
put into play by those already engaged in struggles against various practices of power. Rather than acting as “universal intellectuals” as spokespersons for universal truth, intellectuals are instead to offer criticism of present conception of truths and power.

For Foucault, the subject, like the author, is a function of relations of power: we become subjects through “subjection” in power relations, with others and with ourselves.

Furthermore, this study is informed by Virgilio Almario’s “makapangyarihang pagbasa.” Almario discusses the creation and recreation of a literary god, a historical figure, and a text. He specifically posits the power of “hegemonic reading” (makapangyarihang pagbasa) in which a text is recreated in every reading; making it appear as the superior of all readings.

Hegemonic reading for Almario means the reading that dominates all parallel readings which later on serves as the basis or the “canon” of the succeeding readings.

Rizal, for example, was successful in creating Balagtas for us. The way we regard Balagtas at present is somehow the product of Rizal’s reading on Balagtas.

In this connection, whatever necessitated the kind of reading that past critics (who somehow influenced the majority of Kapampangans) had for Crissot and his Alang Dios! resulted in a kind of regard and adoration that these critics had for the author and his masterpiece.

Along with history, the context, the demands of the critics’ time and space were tackled in this study.

Materials and Methods

I made use of close reading and metacriticism so that assumptions and norms involved in the criticisms will be surfaced including the context that necessitated such. To be part of the Kapampangan literary canon the following characteristics are considered: 1. Kapampangan-ness (They are Kapampangans who write in Kapampangan most of all for Kapampangans) 2. presence of Kapampangan sensibility and temperaments 3. cultural and aesthetic value 4. passion for truth and change

Results
Gutierrez (1932), Yuzon (1932), Capitulo (1933), Galang (1935), Baluyot (1935), and Del Castillo (1937), Galang (1938) wrote their criticisms during the onset of the commonwealth period from 1935-1945 when Kapampangan was the second to the least spoken dominant languages in the country. The context was therefore out of the critics desire to make the Kapampangan language known and be on a par with the other dominant languages in terms of number of people speaking the language in the country through re-introducing Juan Crisostomo Soto highlighting his masterpiece ‘Alang Dios’. During this period, a number of Kapampangan newspapers and dailies were also written and published. Along with it, was the mass production of zarzuelas including Alang Dios into theater and stage plays. The critics specifically focused on the works of Juan Crisostomo Soto like Ing Caviten, Lidia, and especially Alang Dios which reflected unique Kapampangan sensibilities, temperaments, and passion for truth.

The criticisms of Aguas (1963), Sunga (1973), Castro (1981), Manlapaz (1981), Lacson (1984) were written when Kapampangan newspapers and publications discontinued its circulations due to lack of patronage, interested writers and readers in Kapampangan. Thus, the best way to remind people specifically the Kapampangans about their own literature and language was through talking and writing about Juan Crisostomo Soto and his ‘Alang Dios’ and Kapampangan literature as a whole. This group of critics also talked about Soto’s poetry and short stories which portrayed the poet’s which were drawn from socio-political happenings around him like Malaya and
Ing Anac Ning Katipunan. The functional sense of the aforesaid works which aimed at transforming the society into a more receptive yet indomitable and humane one was clearly expressed. On the other hand, Mendoza (2003), Tagala (2006), Mallari (2011), and de los Reyes (2013) reviews and manuscripts were produced to reintroduce, revive, and celebrate the accomplishments of Kapampangan writers and their works specifically Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Alang Dios and the Kapampangan literature as a whole so that younger Kapampangans would become aware and be proud of their own literature. They also cited some of the works of Soto which fall under satiric corpus of laughing at follies and foibles of individuals and society to change them for the better like Y Miss Phatuphat where Soto ridiculed those who tend to consciously forget their native tongue after a short encounter with foreigners.

Specifically, on Mallari’s Indigenizing the Zarzuela…

Mallari emphasized that culture undoubtedly played a very important role in the emergence of an indomitable spirit among Kapampangans. Instead of being subjugated, the Kapampangans experienced a profound sense of fulfillment, be it personal or tribal because of zarzuelas.

Soto, the best known Kapampangan dramatist, together with his contemporary writers responded enthusiastically to the spirit of the times by being productive. These writers produced works which remain unsurpassed—perhaps primarily because of their synchronicity with local culture and their relevance to the life of the consumers at that time. Given their artistic achievements, therefore, the zarzuela writers largely determined the course of the province’s literary development. - Mallari, 2011:165

Conclusion
The findings of this study led into the reality of how the critics were one in terms of motivation, context, and method in canonizing Juan Crisostomo Soto and his masterpiece Alang Dios to achieve a sense of identity and valor for every Kapampangan and Kapampangan literature for survival amidst colonial influences, subjugations, and promising literature across regions. Despite serious problems on Kapampangan orthography that caused faction among Kapampangan writers, old and young, the critics created no conflict in making use of press, papers, and even agencies like the academe and other relevant situations and celebrations in the propagation of Juan Crisostomo Soto and his Alang Dios’ canonicity. Moreover, history also speaks about the undeniable achievement of Juan Crisostomo Soto in the field of literature thus, making him the most prolific writer that Kapampangan literature ever produced. He and his works clearly and astoundingly represented Kapampanganess in the form of sensibilities and temperaments, passion for truth and change, culture’s artistic disposition, and cherished values and tradition. Therefore, his stature and position in Kapampangan literature including his masterpiece Alang Dios is but right and well deserved. Indeed, they are part of the Kapampangan Literary canon if not that they set the canon.

Meanwhile, the need to continue works on critical studies in Kapampangan literature and on other Kapampangan writers and their works aside from Juan Crisostomo Soto is recommended.

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