



REVIEWS

De Armas, Frederick A. *Cervantes, Raphael and the Classics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 241 pp. (and illustrations).

Frederick de Armas has long been interested in Cervantes's play *La Numancia*, written in the 1580s before the formula of the "tragicomedia" dominated the Spanish stage. While there are other experiments with tragedy, Cervantes's "emerges as the single great Aristotelian tragedy of the Spanish Golden Age" (79). The aim of this book is to explore fully the drama's problematic issues of genre as well as of ideology, always within the context of classical sources. According to the author, Cervantes's staging of the fall in 133 B.C. of the Celtiberian city to the Roman forces of Scipio Africanus is very much more than a dramatization of the episode as described in his historical source, Ambrosio de Morales's *Corónica general de España*. Remarkable—and at times not substantiated—claims are made of learning and influence on Cervantes's *Numancia*, mythologizing and allegorizing, gleaned from the writer's humanistic studies as well as from his own Italian sojourn during the years 1569-75. The sources posited are not only verbal, but also visual: Professor de Armas argues that the Vatican frescoes of Raphael (as well as those of his disciple Giulio Romano) were crucial to Cervantes's interpretation of this particular event in Spanish history. Cervantes, transformed in this study from an *ingenio lego* to an erudite *sabio humanista*, is presented as one engaged in a process of *aemulatio*, which "includes the (re)vision of an ancient model through a more modern perspective" (138).

The first four chapters deal with the relationship between painting and drama, a subject to which I shall return. Then tragic and epic models are discussed. Aeschylus's *The Persians* is posited as an inspiration because it focuses on the vanquished (the Persians), rather than on the victors (the Greeks), just as *La Numancia* emphasizes the plight of the Numantians, rather than the alleged victory of the Romans. But we must ask, is there such a similarity? For the Athenian audience this was a contemporary event (the play was staged in 472 B.C., eight years after the Battle at Salamis in which many citizens had participated), and a sympathetic portrayal of their Persian enemies was a radical innovation; for the Spaniards the events belonged to a distant, legendary past, and their national identification was with the vanquished, whose noble portrayal would have been a source of pride rather than discomfort. De Armas resolves this conundrum by generalizing the significance and extending it forward in

time. It is the rhythm of the rise and fall of empires that is at stake: "Just as Aeschylus may have been warning his own people 'already tempted toward its own later imperialistic *hubris* by a *daimon* as deadly as that of Xerxes' (Arrow-smith 1981, x), so Cervantes may be warning the rising Spanish Empire of its *arrogancia*" (89). The observation is made that in neither play is the leader of the opposing forces (Xerxes; Scipio) denigrated; rather both are praised for their leadership, though shown to suffer from excessive pride (90-93). This is so, but Cervantes need have gone no further than his historical source for a balanced presentation of Scipio, at once "áspero" and "terrible de su natural condición" (43), yet at times demonstrating "prudencia y gran destreza" (46) and even "blandura" (47) (that is, acts of kindness) (*Corónica general de España*, vol. 4 [Madrid: B. Cano, 1791-92]).

The problem remains of Cervantes's possible acquaintance with the alleged source text: the Latin translation? A summary in a compendium? (86-87). We are informed that one of the Greek manuscripts of Aeschylus brought to Italy after the fall of Constantinople wended its way to Messina, Sicily, where Cervantes was hospitalized (1571-72) during his recuperation from the battle of Lepanto. This fact leads to the following improbable suggestion: "Like the fictional narrator of *Don Quijote*, Cervantes could have paid someone to translate the manuscript. The many months spent in the hospital would have provided him with ample time to contemplate the political and artistic implications of Aeschylus's play" (88). De Armas admits that other "less interesting" possibilities, such as translations into Latin, are "more likely" (89). This issue is not resolved, except to conclude that Cervantes "could have known *The Persians*" (89).

Though modeling after *The Persians* is not proved, a comparison between the plays leads to interesting generic considerations. Is *La Numancia* a tragedy or a tragicomedy (*comedia*)? If the focus is on the Numantians, de Armas concludes, it bears the hallmarks of a tragicomedy, for the heroic collective death culminates in the birth of a new empire. If, on the other hand, the focus shifts from the city as collective hero to the individual, the admirable Roman general Scipio, the play qualifies as a tragedy. (The general's fatal flaw of *hubris* turns victory into defeat by conquering a city with not even one survivor). In an effort to reconcile these contradictory classifications (tragedy or tragicomedy) and waylay any hint of imperfection in the play, the author of this study contrives a startling solution. Following a discussion of Homeric resonances in the *Numancia*, de Armas contends that, in spite of transgressions from a perfect epic plot (for its story is double rather than single [100-01]) and from ideal tragic form (by the inclusion of various acts of horror, such as cannibalism), the stature of the play is in no way diminished, for key aspects establish "*La Numancia* as a work that transforms the dictates of the *Poetics* and creates two tragedies of the first rank within one theatrical text. These two stories are structured around the two greatest virtues of the epic hero, *sapientia* [exemplified in Scipio] and *fortitudo* [exemplified in the Numantians]" (114-15). We are, it seems, dealing with two plays rather than one. In the end, however, this supposed transgression of the Aristotelian mandate—however interesting and novel—seems more a product of the critic's will than the result of authorial intent or practice.

De Armas has brought to bear on the *Numancia* his knowledge of the Renaissance (both of its classics and its arcana). But on occasion the interpretations become overly ingenious. For example, Virgil is invoked for the "prophesying impulse" (116) that informs the imperial vision presented in *La Numancia*; by having the Duero's speech recall the Tiber's in the *Aeneid*, Cervantes reinforces the analogy between the rise of Rome upon the ashes of Troy and the creation of the Spanish Empire from the ashes of Numantia. This straightforward connection, noted by previous critics, is then subjected to distressing complications, motivated by the simple fact of stage directions calling for three tributary rivers (in addition to the Duero) represented by young boys. The number four consequently triggers a series of associative leaps, leading us finally to a "deeper" Virgilian source, the *Fourth Georgic* and the ocean cavern of Proteus, a figure mentioned in the Duero's speech (120-21). Because certain Renaissance mythographers questioned Proteus's authoritative truthfulness and focused instead on the potential for deception, de Armas writes that there "might be another Cervantine trick hidden in this allusion, another instance of the wiles of imitation" (122). Another instance occurs in the discussion of the Mars/Venus topos. In his demands for greater discipline from his troops (recorded in the historical source), Scipio chides that "La blanda Venus con el duro Marte / jamás hacen durable ayuntamiento" (vv. 89-90). For this the model of Aeneas/Dido is invoked, as the cares of war and demands of love compete. The analogies become ever more recondite. In Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* the goddess rises in a shell (Venus-pearl), and in his *Venus Vanquishing Mars* the goddess wears a ruby (gem of Mars) encircled by pearls. Because the Numantians toss, among other precious materials, pearls and rubies into the flames (vv. 1656-61), a *coincidentia oppositorum* (Venus and Mars) is uncovered, whereby "The Mars-Venus love affair has thus ceased to be an image of the flames of lustful passion and has become a foreshadowing of the collective and loving suicide of the men and women of the Celtiberian city, who together wish to fend off foreign domination" (164). This, in turn, adumbrates Marandro's symbolizing the Christian Eucharist, for he sacrifices himself to bring bread to his starving beloved (164).

Critical fascination with *La Numancia* in recent years has centered on the question of Cervantes's position with respect to the dominant ideology: apparently supporting it, the text nevertheless reveals itself as contradictory to propaganda. De Armas finds proof of this undercutting in both what is said, and what is left unsaid. Mentioned are the highly controversial sack of Rome of 1527 and the Duke of Alba's prevention of a second sack of Rome in 1557 after his defeat of the French armies called by Pope Paul IV. Not mentioned are the many battles against the Moors, in particular the glorious victory of Lepanto. Yet Cervantes's focus on matters Roman—to the exclusion of other events of national interest—is (perhaps *malgré lui*) unavoidable, as the correlation established is between the old Roman empire and the new Spanish one—a victory and also a revenge for the destruction of Numantia. But as de Armas as well as previous critics have indicated (I recall here Willard F. King's "Cervantes' *Numancia* and Imperial Spain," *MLN* 94 [1979] 200-21, or Carroll Johnson's "The Structure of Cervantine Ambiguity," *Ideologies and Literature* 3 [1980] 75-94), the silences

about the current theaters of war are powerfully suggestive of a resistance on Cervantes's part. The long and bloody war in the Netherlands, Carroll Johnson reminds us, was basically conducted as siege warfare (Haarlem [1572–73]; Leyden [1570])—and will continue through the century to the famous/notorious *sitio de Bredá* in 1625, which Calderón will dramatize, and Velázquez immortalize. To these extratextual historical events that sustain such inferences from omission, the author seeks additional intertextual support for a subversive reading. In Act 2 he detects the incorporation of elements (necromancy in particular) from Lucan's *Pharsalia*, which, as an "epic of the defeated," can be considered an "anti-Aeneid" (David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature*, qtd.138).

As de Armas moves us towards the last acts of the play, evoking ever more classical sources, these accumulate: "Such is Cervantes's creative sparks in Act 3 and most of Act 4, that Empedocles, Homer, Virgil, Seneca, other classical writers, Neoplatonists, and mythographers coalesce in the preparation for the destruction of the city. . . . Out of the ashes of destructive imitation arises an elusive, allusive, alluring, and altogether brilliant phoenix-like creation, which attempts to soar above the classical and Renaissance models. Reveling in anachronism, different traditions are rewoven into a tapestry that seeks to surpass the ancient sieges, to melt into one final work of art all the epic deeds and horror of war" (155).

Let us now return to the opening chapters, which offer an attractive hypothesis concerning the influence of art on literature (an inversion of the usual direction of influence, which is from verbal source to visual art). Professor de Armas states his thesis as follows: "I would argue that Cervantes's concern with the ruins of Numantia derives from reminiscences of his trip to Italy forty years [sic] earlier. . . . Although such memories of Italy are inscribed in his play, they have been altered by time and experience" (17). Thus, to give an example from the beginning pages, the table of quaternities in the Stanza della Segnatura (structured under the four elements of earth, water, fire, air) finds its correspondence in the four acts of the play, each one featuring an element. This observation then leads to the conclusion that the play's design is esoteric: "The four acts thus form a Pythagorean tetractys, their sum creating eternity through fame at the end of the play" (27)

An initial conjecture concerning the impact of Raphael's frescos on Cervantes during his Roman sojourn becomes a hermeneutic springboard. I cite some examples: "Cervantes must have become well acquainted with the Vatican" (18–19); "The Spanish poet . . . must have wanted to understand how Italian artists were able to foreground the pagan while embracing the Christian at the very center of Catholic power, the Vatican" (19); "The young writer would have treasured Raphael's images as mimetic keys for his own poetry" (22); the memory of *The Fire in the Borgo* in the Stanza dell'Incendio "may have been key to the elaboration of *La Numancia* in its epic, tragic, and archeological concerns. It may also have led him to conceive of the flames of *ekpyrosis*" (54); of Giulio Romano, who decorated the Sala di Constantino, the statement is made that "Cervantes

could well have studied him as an artist who helped develop Spain's imperial image. In a play dealing with the birth of Spanish imperialism, the Spanish playwright could very well have sought to include him" (63). (It is furthermore suggested that, because a duplicate copy of Francis I's tapestries was bequeathed to Philip II by Mary of Hungary upon her death in 1544, Cervantes may have been aware of the series entitled "The History of Scipio" based on Romano's sketches. Yet, as described by Steven N. Orso (*Philip IV and the Decoration of the Alcázar of Madrid* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986]) the display of tapestries—items of great luxury and splendor—was ceremonial, occasional, even seasonal (they tended to be removed in the summer). Supporting material about the display history of the series would strengthen this suggestion of Cervantine citation.)

While the initial quotation by Cervantes is proposed as conjectural, during the course of the ensuing discussion it acquires the force of certainty. For example: "Thus, most of the features taken from Raphael's and Romano's paintings went into the structuring of the work, the action and the images encountered in the *comedia*" (63–64); the supposition that changes made by Romano to Raphael's sketch of *The Battle of the Milvian Bridge* "may have played a significant role in Cervantes's imaginings" (63) becomes "Cervantes's explicit stage directions evince his desire to replicate visually upon the stage this feature [the stance for the *allocutio*] found in Romano's painting" (63). In the concluding section it is stated that "*La Numancia* brings together all three modes, utilizing the paintings of Raphael, the epics of antiquity, and the histories of Rome" (180). In fact, what does emerge clearly in *Cervantes, Raphael and the Classics* is that while the Vatican program is shown to exalt unequivocally the power of the papacy, the attitude of Cervantes to official policy and authority is "contrastive and ironic" (68).

The problem is a logical one. The inferences are valid, but the premise upon which they are based is not convincing. To express it in architectural terms: an elaborate and dazzling structure is constructed, but the base is not solid. Readers might feel more comfortable if Raphael were not in the title itself, as though the premise of influence and inspiration on Cervantes were proved and could be stated as fact.

All in all, this critical study displays creative ingenuity. *Cervantes, Raphael and the Classics* enjoins us to return to the *Numancia*—and to enjoy "the pleasure of the text."

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