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Cortés's Shark Meets Orlando's Orca

The Transformation of History and Poetic Imitation in the First Golden Age Epic Treatment of the New World

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Luis Zapata's *Carlo famoso* can claim pride of place, if not of excellence, in the branch of learned epic that was to become the most outstanding of the Spanish Golden Age. It is the first published (1566) Iberian epic poem to revel in the navigations to and conquest of the New World (Medina y Reynolds, 3). Zapata dedicated major portions of five cantos to Columbus's voyages to the Antilles and Cortés's conquest of Mexico, while two octaves of yet another canto mention the Spanish discovery and conquest of Peru (Medina y Reynolds, 1-2).¹ Like the more successful poets who were to succeed him in the celebration of the enterprise of maritime expansion—Ercilla, Camões, etc.—, Zapata had to deal with the seemingly intractable problem of transforming recent, well-known, historical events into the matter of learned epic poetry. In this article I propose to examine one example of how Zapata tried to meet the challenge of lending epic grandeur and heroic awe to the relatively sober material supplied him by a contemporary historian.

Carlo famoso is an extraordinarily long poem—50 cantos—and Zapata spares no opportunity to intercalate diverse episodes and materials, thus deliberately lengthening what already would have been a lengthy narrative had he been content to focus exclusively on the historical record of the reign of Charles V—his declared subject (Pierce, 282-84). Although, like most Renaissance poets, Zapata's poetic sources are various—notably Virgil and Ovid—he pays special tribute to Ariosto, whom he calls a “new Homer” (X:20*h*). Not only does Zapata imitate Ariosto's form—use of the *octava real*, division into cantos and breaking off of action at the end of cantos to create suspense—, but he also adorns his celebration of the Emperor with many concrete “citations” of episodes and even specific, word-for-word “quotations” of entire octaves of the *Orlando Furioso* (Chevalier, 132-38).²

Naturally Zapata, writing at the end of Charles's long years on the throne, made use of the works of historians as well as poets. In fact, he makes it clear in his prologue that he considers his work

primarily a history and feels obliged to defend the introduction of "cuentos fabulosos" by claiming that they are necessary in order to "deleytar y cumplir co[n] la Poesia" (Zapata, fol. Aii v). Furthermore, he explains that it was the practice of various ancient poets—Homer, Virgil, Lucan—and some moderns—Sannazaro—to do the same, and for the same reasons. Horace, he asserts, in his *Arte Poetica* demands that poetry be thus adorned (fol. Aii v). Nonetheless, Zapata insists that he will describe the great deeds of the Emperor's reign so truthfully that ". . . a ningun historiador en prosa dare la ventaja" (fol. Aiii r). Zapata's publisher, Joan Mey of Valencia, was even more concerned that the "truth," especially when it touches upon the life and times of the reigning monarch's father, not be sullied by fabulous inventions. He assures the reader that the "fictions" will be marked off from the rest of the text by asterisks in the margins (fol. Aiiii v).

For his New World material Zapata drew principally on the *Historia general de las Indias y conquista de México* written by Cortés's confidant Francisco López de Gómara and first published in 1552 (Medina y Reynolds, 4). It is worthy of note that even when he is following his historical source—in this case, Gómara—most closely, Zapata cannot resist the temptation to embroider and enhance his narrative by recourse to his omnipresent basket of Ariotesque color and episode. For example, Gómara relates that Cortés's little fleet arrived at the island of Cozumel in February of 1519, that contact was established with the Mayan inhabitants, and that Cortés himself took special care to seek out a shipwrecked Spaniard who, now fluent in Maya, could serve him as interpreter. At last able to communicate beyond the most elementary level, Cortés had his newly acquired *lengua* preach the fundamentals of Christianity to the Cozumeleños. As soon as the sermon was concluded the Spaniards set about casting down the idols from the Mayan shrines and temples and replacing them with crosses. Setting sail once again, the expedition passed over to Isla Mujeres where a great shark was caught—a creature so large that it could not be hauled directly aboard one of the little ships, but first had to be cut in sections in the water and then winched up into the vessel one piece at a time. According to Gómara more than five hundred rations of salt pork, among other things, were found in the monster's stomach that must have come from a Spanish vessel (Gómara, caps. X-XVIII).³

Zapata has Francisco de Montejo, one of the emissaries sent by Cortés to the Emperor's court, tell the story of the fleet's visit to Cozumel in Canto XII of the *Carlo famoso*. We are told (29cd) that:⁴

Tenia toda aquella isla atribulada
Un águila, y un pez, dos monstruos fieros,

Needless to say, Joan Mey, Zapata's publisher, felt it necessary to place asterisks at the beginning and end of the following episode (XII:29-XII:69). Medina and Reynold's edition gives no hint of this distinction. The depredations of the two monsters are described at length, and, naturally, Zapata's Cortés undertakes the task, alone and unaided, of freeing the island from its tormentors. The giant bird is first brought low in single combat by Zapata's champion (40-49). Once the menace of the rapacious eagle is removed, Zapata has Montejo tell us that the Indians fall at the hero's feet to plead that he also rid them of the great shark (50). José Toribio Medina (Medina y Reynolds, 4-5, n. 4, 13-14) was one of the first modern critics of the poem to suggest that Zapata modeled his description of the ensuing combat on Orlando's rescue of Olimpia from the "Marine Monster" or "Orca" in Canto XI of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (28-48).⁵

A brief comparison of the two episodes will bear out Medina's assertion. After inquiring about the nature of this New World leviathan, Cortés proceeds to arm himself for the coming encounter (52a-d):

Las armas escogió, que eran su espada
Y una lanza de un hierro ancho y recio,
Y con una gran boya al cabo atada,
Un áncora, un esquite de un navío:

This recalls Orlando's preparations for his foray against the *orca* which is set to devour the nude and defenseless Olimpia, tied, like Angelica before her, to a rock in the sea. The paladin declaims to his pilot (*OF*, XI:30efgh-31):⁶

Sopra l'isola sorti, Orlando disse
al suo nochiere: — Or qui potrai fermarte,
e 'l battel darmi; che portar mi voglio
senz'altra compagnia sopra lo scoglio.

E voglio la maggior gomona meco,
e l'ancora maggior ch'abbi sul legno:
io ti farò veder perché l'arredo,
se con quel mostro ad affrontar mi vegno. —
Gittar fe' in mare il palischermo seco,
con tutto quel ch'era atto al suo disegno.
Tutte l' arme lasciò, fuor che la spada;
e ver lo scoglio, sol, prese la strada.

With the exception of the pike or harpoon—*lanza* is somewhat ambiguous in this context—, the two heroes equip themselves in much the same way. Both Orlando and Cortés require a skiff in order to meet the monster in its own element. Because Cortés—despite Zapata's having introduced him as “un nuevo Marte” (XI:53e)—cannot possibly, even in the “epic” world of the *Carlo famoso*, possess either Orlando's superhuman strength or a magical weapon like Durindana, it is only reasonable to provide him with at least a lance. In fact, the lance may well recall Ruggiero's previous battle with the Orca in Canto X: 92e-112. Ruggiero, mounted upon the hippogriff, swoops down upon the monster, his lance “non in resta / ma sopra mano,” and plunges it between the leviathan's protruding eyes (X:101a-b, g). Zapata tells us that Cortés also uses his lance to break the fury of the great shark's first charge by thrusting it into the monster's eye as it rushes towards him (XII:58). Zapata somewhat incongruously uses a bullfighting metaphor here to describe the sea battle (XII:56,63). It is only after the shaft has been broken off in his hands that Cortés must take up his sword in one hand and the anchor in the other (59-60), only to be thrown into the sea from the skiff as it flies up through the air and then sinks beneath the waves (64). The shark then makes to swallow his prey whole, and it is at this juncture that Cortés, awash, is able to emulate Orlando (*OF* XI:37-39) and set the flukes of the anchor firmly into the monster's palate and his lower jaw (65).

The anchor provides the principal link between Zapata's and Ariosto's renditions of the classic motif of a battle with a sea monster. Ovid, for instance, might provide a model for such a battle when he has Perseus rescue Andromeda from a sea monster in his *Metamorphoses* (IV:670-752), but regardless of how well Zapata may have known the passage (Chevalier assures us that Zapata must have read Ovid with great care [138]), the lack of an anchor—Perseus slays his monster with his sickle-curved blade alone—would seem to leave Ariosto as the most obvious source for the episode in the *Carlo famoso*.⁷ Furthermore, the scene of the battle with the leviathan is an excellent example of how Zapata goes about the process of imitation. From his poetic model—Ariosto—Zapata takes key details (the use of the anchor to render the monster's jaws harmless, for instance) and then combines them with others found in his historical source (when the shark opens its mouth to swallow Cortés it displays “dos órdenes de dientes” [65cd]). This last recalls Gómar's general description of sharks which he appends to his account of the taking of the great shark off Isla Mujeres, where he says: “Muchos de ellos tienen dos órdenes de dientes, una junto a la otra . . . , (79 [Chap. XVI]). Zapata

is capable of drawing on both types of material for embellishment, although it is usually the poetic rather than the historical which lends "superhuman" epic grandeur to his subject.

The matter of the battle aside, there is yet another curious resonance between the denouements of the two episodes. Ariosto recounts that as Orlando hauls the carcass of the defeated *orca* up on the beach (*OF*, XI:46):

De l'isola non pochi erano corsi
a riguardar quella battaglia strana;
i quai da vana religion rimorsi,
così sant'opra riputar profana:
e dicean che sarebbe un nuovo torsi
Proteo nimico, e attizzar l'ira insana,
da farli porre il marin gregge in terra,
e tutta rinovar l'antica guerra;

The inhabitants of the island, taking Orlando's feat as an affront to their "vana religion," fear that dire consequences await them if they do not avenge the sacrilege. This they attempt to do by attacking the hero en mass with all the arms at their disposal (*OF*, XI:48-51).

In contrast, as Cortés swims ashore, still grasping the cable attached to the float at one end and the dying monster at the other, the Cozumeleños, overcome with joy, run to meet the hero, kiss his feet, and help him drag the carcass of their former tormentor onto the beach accompanied by singing, dancing and flowers (XII:67-69). Zapata next tells us that (XII:70a-d):

Cortés, en pago desto, alcanzó que ellos
Sus ídolos quebrasen y a la hora
La cruz puso en la isla en lugar dellos,
Y la imagen de nuestra alta Señora:

In both cases the islanders are pagans, thoroughly enthralled by their "vana religion." It suits Ariosto's purpose that they be contumacious and, subsequently, destroyed. In the somewhat alienated world of the *Furioso* Orlando's actions often reflect those of the future dynast, Ruggiero, in a negative light (Fichter, 71-72, 74-81). Ascoli (198) points out that Ruggiero's rescue of the nude and bound Angelica from the *orca* (*OF* X:92e-112) is evidence of his "progress" in the learning process that leads him towards the desired goal of maturity and dynastic fruition. Orlando's destruction of the monster and liberation of the similarly naked and constrained Olimpia in the following canto must, therefore, represent an antithetical doppelganger of the Ruggiero/Angelica episode. Where Ruggiero's actions lead,

however uncertainly, towards maturity and dynastic procreation, those of Orlando and the ill-fated Olimpia produce only madness, devastation and death. The genocidal destruction of the "pagan" islanders, then, is both a castigation of their barbarism—set fittingly in conjunction with Orlando's draconian reaction to the technologically ultracivilized but chivalrically barbarous invention of fire arms (*OF* XI:21e-28d)—and a reflection of the sterility of Orlando's anti-Aeneas behavior. Moreover, as Quint (128) has suggested, the hostile encounter of seafarer, monster and land-bound islanders first essayed in the Polyphemus episode of the *Odyssey* may well have always represented the sad results of maritime colonialism. How fitting then, and how true to the acerbity of his world-view, that Ariosto should counterpoise the ignoble but devastating introduction of gunpowder, arquebuses and cannon with the total liquidation of a "primitive" people by a sea-bourne "slayer of monsters"—a process that was well under way in the Caribbean even as he committed the *canti* of the *Furioso* to writing.

Zapata, however, uses the episode to portray the conversion of the "pagan" islanders as joyous, spontaneous and certain, when in fact even Gómara—major publicist and booster of conversion by conquest against the ideas of Las Casas—betrays considerable skepticism about the permanence or reliability of the Cozumeleños's apparent change of heart after Cortés's visit (Caps. XI-XV). Zapata betrays himself as heavy-handed imperialist as he is a poet—he misses, or chooses to ignore, both the irony and thinly veiled sarcasm of his historical source and the subtleties of his poetic model.

We are even lead to ask why Zapata makes such a great hero out of Cortés at all. It certainly was not to curry favor with his sovereign and hoped for patron, Philip II. Cortés's published letters had been banned from sale or print since 1527 by royal decree, and Gómara's history received the same treatment in 1553 shortly after its publication (Bataillon, 78-79). Medina tells us that Zapata harbored resentment against the Prudent King ever since he had been dismissed from the royal service upon that prince's accession to the throne (15). Significantly enough, it was at precisely that same time that Zapata was probably working on the cantos dealing with Cortés (Medina y Reynolds, 12). Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that Zapata was imprisoned upon his poem's publication in 1566 (Medina y Reynolds, 14-15). In that same year the ban was renewed on Gómara's history, an event Bataillon connects with Martín Cortés's failed conspiracy in Mexico in 1565-66 (81).

Be that as it may, as the reader will no doubt have observed,

Zapata is a mediocre poet at best, but his problem is one that will continue to confront the far more successful writers who succeed him in the enterprise of turning fairly recent or even contemporary history into epic. As Aristotle had cautioned long before in his *Poetics* (32-33):

. . . it is also clear that the poet's job is not to report what has happened but what is likely to happen Thus the difference between the historian and the poet is not in their utterances being in verse or prose . . . the difference lies in the fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that *can* happen. Hence also poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.

The problem was how to lend epic universality and grandeur to recent history without being hamstrung by the very historicity, the intractably "particular" nature of the matter narrated. Precisely for this reason Torquato Tasso, although preferring history to pure fantasy as a source for epic subject matter because historical events are inherently more believable, urges the would-be poet to avoid "le istorie moderne" because they "togliono quasi in tutto la licenza di fingere, la quale è necessariissima a i poeti, e particolarmente a gli epici." Tasso, in fact, refers to precisely the deeds of Charles V as an example of a subject too well-known to allow the poet enough freedom of invention for a proper epic poem (4,9-10). In the hands of Zapata, even the exploits of Hernán Cortés—a much more inherently "epic" figure—prove to be too great a challenge. Nor, despite Joan Mey's asterisks, was Zapata able to navigate the sea of difficulties presented by the epic presentation of the deeds and misdeeds of the immediate ancestors of the yet living great and powerful. Nonetheless, when we come to read Ercilla and Camões we should bear in mind the true difficulty of their respective undertakings, and appreciate how much more successfully they blend history and poetry.

NOTES

¹ Canto XI briefly relates Gómara's version of Columbus's voyages, something of Magellan, and introduces Cortés. Cantos XII-XV deal with Cortés and Mexico up until the final conquest of Tenochtitlan and even the Emperor's granting of the title of Marqués del Valle to Cortés, all of the last violating chronological versimilitude but not the epic sweep of Zapata's poem (Medina y Reynolds, 5-6). Canto XXXVI:30-31 briefly celebrate Pizarro's conquest of Peru.

² Chevalier (136) gives a number of examples of word-for-word quotation, for instance: "Certains vers sont traduits littéralement, et parfois des octaves entières. Assailli par la tempête devant Alger, Charles-Quint implore le Ciel en des termes très voisins de ceux qu'employait Charlemagne assiégé par les Maures (*Carlo famoso*, XLV, fol. 245 d. R.F., XIV, 70), et, quand Barberousse l'invite à capituler, Francisco Sarmiento, commandant de la place de Castilnovo, répond à la sommation par une déclaration de fidélité à son roi qui reproduit presque mot pour mot les promesses de constance adressés par Bradamante à Roger (*Carlo famoso*, XLIII, fol. 235 cd. R.F., XLIV, 61-66)."

³ Isla Mujeres is still renowned for its sharks, especially the great, so-called "sleeping" sharks which frequent the southern tip of the island where Gómara says Cortés's fleet was waiting out a calm. Bernal Díaz does not mention this shark at all. The "great fish" washed up dead on the beach near Vera Cruz described by Díaz in Chapter XLIV of his *Historia verdadera* and linked to this episode by Medina and Reynolds in their notes to the episode (p.68) has nothing to do with Gómara's story of the shark caught off Isla Mujeres. Gómara apparently got the tale from Andrés de Tapia, an eye witness.

⁴ All of the following quotations from *Carlo famoso* are from the modernized text found in Medina y Reynolds.

⁵ Neither Medina nor Reynolds actually identifies the episode; Medina only mentions the *Furioso* and Reynolds merely adds that the matter refers to Canto XI.

⁶ All quotations from the *Furioso* are from Bigi's edition.

⁷ Ovid is mentioned among the possible sources for both the Olimpia and Angelica rescues from the sea monster by Bigi, ed., *Orlando Furioso*, 459, n. 1. For Perseus and Andromeda, I have consulted the edition and translation prepared by Frank Justus Miller, 1: 224-231.

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