

Reviews

Garcilaso, príncipe de poetas. Una biografía. By MARÍA DEL CARMEN VAQUERO SERRANO. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europea Hispánica y Marcial Pons Historia. 2013. Pp. 676. €28.00. ISBN: 9788492820948

There have been a surprisingly small number of biographies of the poet Garcilaso de la Vega since Keniston's well-known study of 1922, but none has been based on so much new archival material as *Garcilaso, príncipe de poetas* by María del Carmen Vaquero Serrano. This study will surely stand as the definitive biography for a long time to come, since it seems difficult to imagine that much more new, undiscovered material can be lurking in Spanish archives after Vaquero Serrano's exhaustive search. The twelve pages of archival sources that come at the start of the Bibliography stand as testament to the author's diligence in this respect. In truth, we have here two biographies running parallel to each other: a historical biography based on the written record, whether manuscript or printed; and a literary or fictional biography based on Garcilaso's own poetry. I will deal with each separately.

As already stated, the historical biography merits all of our plaudits. It is exhaustive without being exhausting, and it recreates wonderfully the world Garcilaso was born into, at the end of the fifteenth century. Vaquero Serrano opts for a date of birth of 30 September 1499, based on the thirty Masses the poet asked for in a codicil of his will of 1529 to commemorate Saint Jerome, whose saint's day is 30 September. Why thirty Masses, she asks? A strange number of Masses for a will. And why Saint Jerome, and not, for example, Saint Dominic of Guzmán (a saint from his mother's side of the family)? Perhaps because in 1529, she argues, he was about to celebrate his thirtieth birthday, which would fall on the saint's day of 30 September. It is an interesting hypothesis, impossible of course to prove or disprove, until somebody comes up with the actual baptismal certificate. Hypotheses, based at times on considerable leaps of the imagination, are very much part of the author's style, and the reader eventually comes to put up with them, though always maintaining a considerable and healthy degree of scepticism.

The first six chapters cover the period from the mid-fifteenth century to 1519; after that there is a chapter dedicated to each year from 1520 to 1536, year of the poet's death in southern France. This division shows very clearly the detailed discussion of Garcilaso's life from the outbreak of the War of the Comuneros (in which his elder brother Pedro played a leading part, on the side of the so-called rebels) to his utterly pointless death scaling a ladder in order to dislodge some French peasants from a tower in the village of Le Muy, Provence. The level of detail is such that at times we move from one day to the next as the author follows his movements within the Peninsula, from Toledo to Valladolid and back, or to Barcelona, to embark with the troops to Italy and yet another of the emperor's wars. Such detail means that these chapters are among the most interesting that this reader has come across for the first period of Charles V's reign. Since Garcilaso's life and movements were so tied up with those of the emperor, we gain, through the eyes

of the poet, an incredible insight into the life of Charles's court, the personalities, the factions, the role of the empress Isabel, and so on.

Another aspect worthy of comment is the way that Vaquero Serrano brings into the discussion and the biography Garcilaso's extended family, which covered most of the noble families of early sixteenth-century Toledo (as the very useful family trees at the start of the book demonstrate). The reader is made aware early on of the important role that the Lasos of Toledo played in the civic life of the city, and how their matrimonial strategies meant that they were related to the Mendoza, the Suárez de Figueroa, Guzmán, Ribera, and Pacheco. All of these aristocratic families had important palaces in the city, often quite near to each other (the centre of Toledo, after all, is and was quite small), and they dominated city life. Garcilaso was born into a privileged world, one he never really left.

In that world, young men had a number of paramours or mistresses, either before or during marriage. It has been known for some time that Garcilaso was the father of an illegitimate son, Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa, born before his marriage to Elena de Zúñiga, as he names him in his last will and testament. As Vaquero Serrano points out, the opening of this closed testament in early 1537, and the revelations contained within must have come as something of a shock to doña Elena, probably unaware of her husband's peccadilloes. For not only does he signal the existence of an illegitimate son, but he also posits the possibility of another child born out of matrimony, this time with a young girl from Extremadura called Elvira. Should he have fathered a child with her, he asks for a certain sum of money to be paid to her for the child's upkeep, but he is insistent that all this be done with the utmost secrecy in order not to compromise her honour. Since the only time that Garcilaso was in Extremadura was in 1524, the adventure must have taken place then.

What was not known until very recently was the name of the mother of Garcilaso's eldest son Lorenzo. Vaquero Serrano's exhaustive archival research eventually produced the 'smoking gun' document, that in which Guiomar Carrillo openly recognized that she was the mother of the illegitimate Lorenzo, and not only that, but that she was also the mother of two further illegitimate daughters! Garcilaso and Guiomar had known each other for a number of years (their families lived near each other in Toledo) and Lorenzo was born probably in 1521. In a letter of donation that Guiomar Carrillo ordered and signed in November 1537, she handed over to her son Lorenzo one third of her possessions during her lifetime. The opening of the document could not be more explicit, and is worth quoting in full:

Digo que por quanto yo, siendo como era mujer libre y no desposada ni casada ni monja, ni persona de orden ni religión, tuve amistad del muy magnífico caballero Garcilaso de la Vega [...]. Entre mí y el dicho Garcilaso hubo amistad y cópula carnal mucho tiempo, de la cual cópula carnal yo me empreñé del dicho señor Garcilaso, y parí a don Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa, hijo del señor Garcilaso y mío; siendo asimismo el dicho señor Garcilaso hombre mancebo y suelto, sin ser desposado ni casado al dicho tiempo y sazón. (pp. 189–90)

Apart from the astonishing openness of the declaration, what also stands out is the fact that their relationship lasted for many years, perhaps even, as Vaquero Serrano postulates, after Garcilaso's marriage in 1525 to Elena de Zúñiga. Guiomar Carrillo's two other illegitimate children, both daughters, were not Garcilaso's and were probably fathered by

two different men, all of which leads the author of the biography to posit both the ending of the relationship with our poet and the beginning of growing jealousy on his part.

This hypothesis leads us nicely into the second part of this review: that of the literary or fictional biography Vaquero Serrano weaves around and based upon Garcilaso's poetry. Readers familiar with Garcilaso's poetry and the critical writing it has engendered will remember the large amount of ink spilled over the identity of Elisa of Eclogues I and III, with the Portuguese lady-in-waiting Isabel Freire being a prime candidate for many centuries. Eventually, a consensus seemed to form over the fact that 1) it was unlikely that we would ever discover the true identity of 'Elisa', if indeed she were a real person; and 2) even if we did discover who she was in real life, it would make no difference to her role in the two eclogues or to our understanding of them. In short, some critics came to realize, rather late in the day, that poetry is not history or biography and should not be read as such. Vaquero Serrano is unfortunately not one of these. Convinced that Garcilaso's poetry (as a whole and not just the Eclogues) contains references to real people and real events, hidden under the mask of courtly shepherds and their nymphs, she devotes a large part of this biography to trying to identify them and their place in Garcilaso's life. To cut a long (and, at times, tedious) story short, she claims that Galatea of Eclogue I is Guiomar Carrillo; Elisa of Eclogues I and III is Garcilaso's sister-in-law Beatriz de Sá (married to his brother Pedro); and Camila of Eclogue II is a young cousin of his, Magdalena de Guzmán, perhaps his first, childhood sweetheart, but a love doomed to failure as she was destined for the convent, as in the poem Camila is dedicated to Diana, goddess of chastity. The author links Magdalena with Camila via the more than dubious similarity of their names; for example, the familiar form Magdalenica is a sort of anagram of Camila, and the fact that in the Eclogue Albanio talks of 'una doncella / de mi sangre y agüelos descendida'. Beatriz de Sá was Portuguese, possibly died in childbirth, and her surname Sá is 'of course' embedded in Elisa (< ela Sá). Surprisingly, Vaquero Serrano makes no effort to link Galatea and Guiomar via their names (perhaps because it would be nigh on impossible!), but links them via their actions: Guiomar [Galatea] was, apparently, 'unfaithful' to Garcilaso by having children with other men; he was not unfaithful, apparently, when he married Elena de Zúñiga, a marriage of convenience in the eyes of the author, since Guiomar could not compete economically with her.

In the eyes of this reviewer, this is bad enough, but it gets worse. Sonnet VIII 'De aquella vista pura y excelente' is deemed to reflect Garcilaso's sentiments towards his sister-in-law, on the basis that the syllable 'sa' occurs six times in the poem, in, we are told, key positions: *salen, pasan, salen, pensando, salir, salida*. The question that any sensible critic would ask is this — the repetition of the syllable 'sa' — significant in Garcilaso's poetry, or is it normal? At the very least, the author should have carried out a systematic search of the whole of Garcilaso's poetry in order to determine the frequency of this particular syllable over others. We also note that four of the six occurrences have to do with the same verb: 'salir'. The syllable 'sa' is scarcely infrequent in Spanish; as the first syllable of Spanish words, it fills page after page in dictionaries such as María Moliner. As the last syllable, it also occurs with relative frequency, especially in poetic language: *hermosa, desdenosa, temerosa, amorosa, deleitosa, miedosa*, and so forth. Garcilaso uses none of these highly charged words to identify his poetic mistress, instead he repeats the pedestrian verb 'salir' four times.

But once Vaquero Serrano decides, on the basis of this extremely dubious reading, that Garcilaso's sonnets refer to his love life and his real-life mistresses, there is no stopping her, and if, at the start, she is cautious enough to preface her readings with 'tal vez', 'quizás', 'puede que', slowly but surely these cautionary notes disappear and hypotheses elide into ringing affirmations. At no point is the poetry studied as poetry; for this author it is only a vehicle for biographical detail. This highly reductionist view renders most of Garcilaso's poems of little literary value. The sheer beauty of so many of his verses, the magical world he creates in the first and third Eclogues, the meta-poetic nature of so much of this latter poem, all of this is lost in the absurd effort to identify biographical references (where, in the opinion of this reader, none are to be found). The effort is also highly selective and, therefore, distorted. To take but one example: Elisa is, as we have seen, identified with the poet's sister-in-law Beatriz de Sá, who was Portuguese (as was, perhaps, Elisa, though this is hinted at, if that, rather than stated directly) and may have died in childbirth (as did so many women then), but we do not know. Elisa in the first Eclogue appears to die in childbirth. However, as readers of Garcilaso's third Eclogue will know, one of the thorniest problems of interpretation of the whole poem is the startling reference to Elisa's death: 'estaba entre las hierbas degollada / cual queda el blanco cisne cuando pierde / la dulce vida entre la hierba verde'. A violent and wholly unexplained death that has confounded critics for generations. Whatever sort of death it was, it was certainly not death in childbirth! Therefore, it could be claimed that the Elisa of Eclogue I and that of Eclogue III are two different people, even if the lover is the same Nemoroso. And even if they are the same person, their different deaths need to be explained, and not simply ignored as here in *Garcilaso, príncipe de poetas*.

As a final point regarding reading poetry (literature) as history or biography, even where real people can be identified beneath the poetic mask, the fact remains that they are poetic creations, the result of a long process of maturation and selection. Whatever once may have linked them to real people has long since disappeared and they have become new creations in the mind of the poet. Reading poetry as biography is, fortunately, doomed to failure; it should be read for what it is, not for what it is not. It is a pity that Vaquero Serrano has mixed the two in this otherwise splendid biography of one of Spain's greatest poets.

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After the Classics: A Translation into English of the Selected Verse of Vicent Andrés Estellés. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by DOMINIC KEOWN & TOM OWEN. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 2013. Pp. xi + 242. ISBN: 9789027240118

Certain areas of the canon of twentieth-century Catalan poetry remain highly contested. For some, who might not be averse to seeing themselves as the heirs to Noucentisme, Josep Carner, Carles Riba, and J. V. Foix are the three undisputed masters who laid a solid foundation on which Gabriel Ferrater would build a new aesthetics in the 1960s. Ferrater himself, and his brother Joan Ferraté, made a very strong case for the canonization of Carner and Riba. This approach to the Catalan poetic canon casts the likes of Joan Salvat Papasseit, Salvador Espriu, Joan Vinyoli, and Vicent Andrés Estellés in the role of somewhat peripheral figures. Others claim Espriu is the most accomplished