

Góngora heroico. Las *Soledades* y la tradición épica

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In 1627, Juan López de Vicuña published the first edition of the works of the Cordoban poet Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561–1627) and gave it the intriguing title of *Obras en verso del Homero español*.

Góngora did not live long enough to see his poetry in print, and we do not know if the title was one he had approved or even suggested, though we do know that he was involved in the early stages of the preparation of this edition. It seems likely that the title was the invention of the publisher; if so, it was an inspired one, at least to judge by the more than 400 pages of densely and, at times, brilliantly argued analysis provided by Mercedes Blanco in *Góngora heroico. Las Soledades y la tradición épica*, whose starting point is precisely the idea that Góngora was the Spanish Homer. Many will assuredly find this notion difficult to accept, and even harder to accept in the case of the *Soledades*, whose loose structure has given rise to numerous interpretations but none, that I am aware of, that suggest that it is an epic poem along the lines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But that is precisely what Blanco sets out to prove in this illuminating work of literary criticism.

Vicuña's title is certainly one to conjure with, though, interestingly, it was not taken up by any later editor. Gonzalo de Hoces y Córdoba, who published the next edition of Góngora's work, in 1633, gave it the rather simple and anodyne title of *Todas las obras de don Luis de Góngora en varios poemas*. Nonetheless, Vicuña (or those who helped him prepare the first edition of Góngora's poetry, which was quickly removed from sale after complaints were made to the Inquisition) must have seen something in the poetry he was publishing to lead him to choose such a specific title. Homer, as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, was seen in the Renaissance as the father or progenitor of the epic poem, and, as Blanco persuasively argues, the epic poem was for sixteenth-century poets the Holy Grail, 'a cuya zaga se lanzan los escritores de mayor ambición o talento, con éxito improbable y desigual' (p. 11). One of its leading proponents was the Italian Torquato Tasso, whose epic poems on the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders cast a long shadow over all later practitioners of the art, not least (in Blanco's view) Luis de Góngora. In the early chapters of her book, Blanco sets out to show the considerable influence of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* on select passages of the *Soledades*, where the Italian poet becomes a sort of mediator for Góngora between the classical texts he habitually had recourse to (Virgil, Horace, Seneca, Claudian, et al.) and their Italian followers (especially Ariosto). But hovering over all of them is Homer, who is very much the central figure in the second half of the book.

Chapter 7, 'Lecturas homéricas en la edad de Góngora', is an extremely informative introduction to this section, as it examines all the different editions and translations of Homer available to a sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century reader. Simply put, if Góngora is the Spanish Homer, what could he have read or known of Homer directly or indirectly: '¿qué Homero leyó Góngora?' (p. 240). Since we do not have a list or inventory of the books he owned, the question is not an easy one to answer, but Blanco works through various hypotheses that convincingly demonstrate that he would have had access to Gonzalo Pérez's translation of the *Odyssey* (*la Ulisea*), published a number of times and with a wide circulation, and as a student at the University of Salamanca he would have become familiar with numerous fragments of the original Greek text. In addition, he could quite easily have read any one of the numerous parallel translations in Greek and Latin and, finally, via his visits to the estates of the marquises of Ayamonte and their close relatives, the dukes of Béjar, he would have come across Cristóbal de Mesa, who entered the service of the 6th Duke in 1605 and translated the *Iliad* into Castilian verse.

Having established that Góngora almost certainly was familiar with Homeric epic, Blanco then proceeds to examine different passages of the *Soledades* where this influence is to be seen. Two passages stand out, not just for their Homeric echoes, but most importantly for the brilliance of the analysis: the first is the panoramic view the *peregrino* gives us in *Soledad primera*, ll. 182–211, the second is the description of sea voyages, also in *Soledad primera*, ll. 366–502.

For the first passage Blanco has recourse to similar scenes in the *Iliad* (especially those where the Trojans contemplate from the walls of the city the Greek army encamped on the plain outside, and Helen identifies for King Priam the various Greek heroes). Following his Homeric model, Góngora uses both *teichoscopy* (the vision from a height) and *ekphrasis* (a poetic painting) to depict the scene that is laid out before the pilgrim and, by extension, the reader.¹ Additionally, however, he is able to make use of the science of perspective (only recently developed) and cartography (which, by the second half of the sixteenth century, was well established with the series of maps produced by Abraham Ortelius in Antwerp and Amsterdam, and the cityscapes to be found in Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's *Civitatis Orbis Terrarum*, all of which circulated widely and are to be found in numerous private libraries of the period). Here, the excellent reproductions in colour that accompany the text are a real bonus, and add immeasurably to the pleasure of reading this book.

The second long passage to be analysed — the voyages of discovery by Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Núñez de Balboa, and Magalhães — was, for this reader, the most brilliant part of an already exceptional book. Bringing to bear her wide reading of classical texts and encyclopaedic knowledge of Góngora's poem, Blanco provides a tour-de-force close reading of *Soledad primera*, ll. 366–502, aided once again by the quality of the maps that she refers to. What comes out ultimately from this close reading is that, for all of Góngora's dazzling metaphors, the meaning is never far from the reality he is describing; that is to say, beneath the surface brilliance, which can at times seem to obscure (rather than illuminate) the meaning of the poem, there is a hard (and often harsh) reality in these verses. Some 15 per cent of Portuguese fleets that sailed to the Eastern Indies never got there, their crews and cargo lost at sea. Of the five boats that sailed from Seville in 1519 to circumnavigate the globe under the command of Fernão de Magalhães, only one, the *Victoria*, made it back there in 1522, with a crew of just eighteen Europeans and three natives from the Moluccas (mentioned specifically in ll. 477–80: 'Esta pues nave ahora | en el húmido templo de Neptuno | varada pende a la inmortal Memoria | con nombre de Victoria'). Magalhães himself had died the year before on the island of Mactan, in the Philippines. Góngora's verses, for all their complexity, do not hide this reality from the reader.

There is so much to admire in *Góngora heroico. Las Soledades y la tradición épica*, so many instances of perceptive readings, that a review of this length cannot, unfortunately, do justice to it all. One can only urge all those interested in Early Modern Spanish poetry, art, cartography, indeed culture generally, to go out and buy this book. It is extremely well edited (I noted just a few errata) and beautifully, not to say, lavishly illustrated — as we have come to expect from texts published by the Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica.

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Notes

¹See the article on this passage in this same issue of *Hispanic Research Journal* by Luis Castellví Laukamp.