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IBERIAN MYTHS AND AMERICAN HISTORY IN BALBUENA'S *EL BERNARDO*

Rodrigo Cacho Casal

Early modern authors born in Spain who spent part or most of their life in America seem to inhabit a critical limbo. The adscription of their literary works is often contested between cognate areas of study, particularly peninsular and colonial studies. First developed in nineteenth-century Latin America, colonial studies fostered the rediscovery of texts that allegedly embodied the spirit of the newly constituted countries. Nowadays identitarian readings are still at the core of the discipline, buttressed by the development of postcolonialism, ethnic and subaltern studies (Adorno 2011, 3–6). On the other hand, more traditional European methodologies, such as those fostered by Hispanic Philology, have tended to appropriate texts written in the colonies, ignoring the American substrate of their political discourse. Taken to the extreme, such dichotomies can lead to rather narrow intellectual debates. For instance, Alonso de Ercilla's epic poem *La Araucana* (1569–89), which describes the clash between Spaniards and Mapuches, has often been regarded as mere continuation of European poetic codes or, conversely, as the embodiment of an early national identity upon which Chilean independentist claims would later rest.

The critical reception of Bernardo de Balbuena is an eloquent illustration of such binaries. Though born in Spain (ca. 1561–1562), the author spent most of his adult life in America, where he held several ecclesiastical appointments: first in Mexico, then promoted abbot of Jamaica (1608), and finally, in 1619, bishop of Puerto Rico (Rojas Garcidueñas 1982; Van Horne 1940). Balbuena's three most significant works were conceived in Mexico, between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Here he obtained his first university degree, took orders and started making a name for himself as a poet. His ambitious artistic project was to replicate Virgil's tripartite literary career (*Eclogues*, *Georgics*, *Aeneid*), writing a pastoral book, *El Siglo de Oro en las selvas de Erífile* (1608); a modern georgic, *Grandeza mexicana* (1604); and the heroic poem *El Bernardo o victoria de Roncesvalles* (1624) (Cacho Casal 2015). Despite the presence of American themes in these works, the consideration of Balbuena within the canon of colonial studies rests on shaky foundations. Some critics find him to be representing echoes of an early Creole identity in Mexico, whereas others dismiss his writing as the product of a Spaniard who never really felt truly connected with the New World, and was only able to produce a narrow imperialistic and Eurocentric discourse (Balbuena 2011, 23–59).

Such controversies seem to have been fuelled also by the topic chosen for *El Bernardo*, the work which Balbuena regarded as his masterpiece. Rather than narrating the events of the

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conquest, such as Ercilla and other epic poets of the colonial period, the author focused his attention on the deeds of the legendary medieval Iberian hero Bernardo del Carpio. Balbuena's poem seems thus to lean more towards the construction of Spanish nationalistic myths rather than looking at American identity. The New World, however, has a central role in various books of *El Bernardo*, especially 18 and 19. Balbuena drew from American history and geography to describe Columbus's discovery, the arrival of Cortés to Mexico and the subsequent fall of Tenochtitlan. Despite its relative brevity, this is a key episode in *El Bernardo*, which allows the author to establish links between the past greatness of the Spanish crown and the colonization of the New World. Balbuena puts forward a teleological reading of the American conquest presented as the ultimate achievement within Spanish history; all previous glories and efforts were only meant to lead to this outcome: Spain would not be Spain without America. History is turned into myth, and vice versa.

The manipulation of myth and history in *El Bernardo* has its roots in the sixteenth-century heated debate on the nature of heroic poetry, revolving around neo-Aristotelian principles, the role of history and fiction in heroic poems, and the controversial relationship between epics and romance as embodied by Tasso and Ariosto. Ultimately, it is perhaps not so crucial to establish whether Balbuena belongs to the peninsular or the colonial tradition; whether he was Spanish, Iberian, Mexican or American. He was all of these at the same time since such categories did not possess the same political value that they hold nowadays (Brading 1998). What is likely to prove more fruitful is to analyze the ways in which Balbuena manipulated the literary tools to which he had access at the time, and how these were affected by their implantation in the New World; what was the meaning of concepts such as history and myth with regards to heroic poetry, and how this genre was used to voice contemporary political ideas. This essay considers dualisms and ambiguities as a defining feature of early colonial writing, looking at *El Bernardo* from two complementary angles: firstly, accounting for its literary tradition, paying close attention to the poem's prologue, where Balbuena summed up his theory of epic poetry; and secondly, considering its ideological discourse, analyzing the role of the conquest and Amerindians in the poem.

A double-faced discourse: history and myth in the heroic poem

The date of composition of *El Bernardo* is uncertain. Although it first appeared in 1624, the work underwent a long process of revision. Following the information provided in the preliminaries of the text, Van Horne (1927, 25–27) has argued the author completed the first draft of the poem around 1595, followed by an unsuccessful attempt to publish it in 1609. If Van Horne is right in assuming that Balbuena began to write *El Bernardo* in the 1580s, this would mean that it was composed during the critical years of the literary debate concerned with the heroic poem. This quarrel arose mainly in response to the *Orlando furioso* (1532). The initial success of Ariosto's *romanzo* was later met with strong criticism from the most rigid neo-Aristotelian scholars, who regretted its lack of unity and verisimilitude, and its inappropriate mixture of serious and burlesque themes. The controversy reached its climax after the publication of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), which offered a more orthodox interpretation of heroic poetry in line with classical principles and poetics (Weinberg 1961, 954–1073).

Before the triumph of Tasso's model, Ariosto had offered the first important epic vernacular example to the Spanish authors of the sixteenth century. Despite its grotesque and marvellous elements, the *Furioso* was canonized as a veritable imitation of classical sources, especially the *Aeneid*, the ultimate model within the epic genre. Allegorical and political readings proliferated in commentaries and annotated editions, making Ariosto the modern Virgil (Chevalier

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1966, 7–106; Javitch 1991). The first Spanish heroic poems followed on *Furioso*'s steps, shifting the protagonism of the French paladins to a more suitable national hero, Bernardo del Carpio. Born from the secret marriage of King Alfonso III's sister and the Count of Saldaña, he will play a crucial role in the battle of Roncesvalles, defeating the French army and killing Roland (C. Alvar and M. Alvar 1991, 381–408; Burton 1988, 14–23; Franklin 1937). This medieval legend was appropriated by Spanish epic poems of the sixteenth century, with an emphasis on its nationalistic message, which fed on contemporary military and political conflicts between Spain and France; Alfonso III and Charlemagne were masks for Charles V and Francis I, whilst the French defeat at Roncesvalles was read as a prefiguration of the 1525 battle of Pavia (Vilà 2012). This is the case for Nicolás Espinosa's *La segunda parte de Orlando* (1555), Francisco Garrido de Villena's *El verdadero suceso de la famosa batalla de Roncesvalles* (1555), Agustín Alonso's *Historia de las hazañas y hechos del invencible caballero Bernardo del Carpio* (1585) and, to a lesser extent, Luis Barahona de Soto's *Primera parte de la Angélica* (1586).

Undoubtedly, Balbuena had in mind these Spanish texts and, most importantly, the legacy of Boiardo and Ariosto when he began composing his poem. Balbuena broadly follows the intricate narrative style of the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso*, choosing a literary path that could be regarded as outdated at the time when he was writing (Vilà 2012, 59). In the first book of the poem we find two fairies, Alcina and Morgana, conspiring against the French and foreseeing the great deeds of Bernardo, who will avenge them. Here *El Bernardo* is clearly indebted with canto 1 of Barahona de Soto's *Angélica* (Chevalier 1966, 376), which reproduces the gathering of several fairies – comprising also Alcina and Morgana – organised by Demogorgone at the beginning of Ariosto's posthumous *I cinque canti* (1548). Balbuena, however, does not include this assembly and focuses only on the private meeting of the two fairies, a choice which can be regarded as a declaration of artistic intentions. Morgana has a leading role in the *Innamorato*, whereas Alcina in the *Furioso*. By linking them from the onset the poet seems to be implying that his goal does not only lie in the continuation of Ariosto's work, as it is the case for the other Spanish authors mentioned previously, but rather to combine the content and style of both texts in a final effort to culminate the quest of the Italian *romanzo* as a whole, as he declares in the prologue of *El Bernardo*: "Este poema se puede llamar el cumplimiento, la última línea y la clave que de lleno en lleno cierra el artificio y máquina de sus fábulas" (Balbuena 1624, ¶6v).

Key terms here are "artificio" and "máquina de sus fábulas," which define some of the main features of the Boiardo/Ariosto model as reworked by Balbuena; that is, the presence of a complicated narrative plot, magic and marvel. According to Aristotle's *Poetics* (1460a), the marvellous is a fundamental tool for the epic poet. In Homer and Virgil this is usually produced by the actions of pagan "deidades y semideos," whilst in *romanzi* wonderment is generated by "las hadas y encantamentos de los magos" (Balbuena 1624, ¶6v). Such predicaments appear to be a response to Tasso's *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (1587), later reworked and expanded in the *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), which dominated epic theory in the later part of the sixteenth and in the first half of the seventeenth century. Although Tasso agrees that the marvellous is crucial, he prefers to present it as the symbolic clash between the Christian God and the Devil, angels and demons, and employing wizards and fairies only in the second instance (Tasso [1594] 1973, 38), as it is made abundantly clear in his *Liberata*. The kind of magic and supernatural actions found in *El Bernardo* are more in line with Boiardo and Ariosto, although the prologue accounts for ideas that seem to be in direct correlation with the *Discorsi*.

Balbuena has conceived his heroic poem as an ideal continuation of Homer and Boiardo (Balbuena 1624, ¶6v), founders of the genre in classical and modern times, as well as Virgil,

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Ariosto and even Tasso, whose *Liberata* appears to be rather different from *El Bernardo*. In its prologue several instances seem to echo the *Discorsi*, and the second part of the poem – especially the last books – acquires a more austere tone combined with truly grandiose descriptions of epic battles. Balbuena's ambitious project was to produce the ultimate and all-inclusive heroic poem of his time, accounting also for the most prestigious text of the Spanish tradition, Ercilla's *La Araucana*. As it is well-known, Ercilla's first stanza (1.1) is a *recusatio* which rejects the *Orlando furioso*: "damas," "amor" and "gentilezas / de caballeros" are replaced with "hechos" and "proezas" of the Spanish soldiers deployed in Chile (Ercilla [1569–89] 2002, 77); this is what in the prologue the author calls "la historia verdadera" and "cosas de guerra" (Ercilla [1569–89] 2002, 69). Balbuena's opinion regarding the presence of history in heroic poems is radically different from Ercilla, following on Aristotle's idea (*Poetics*, 1451a–1451b) that poetry ought to be a creative imitation of life, and not an account of true events: "donde en la palabra *imitación* se excluye la historia verdadera, que no es sujeto de poesía" (Balbuena 1624, ¶6). It follows a strong criticism directed against Ercilla (who is never mentioned in *El Bernardo*) and his imitators:

> Donde de paso se verá cuán inadvertidamente hablan los que la principal calidad de sus obras en verso hallan que es el no haberse desviado un punto de la verdad, como quiera que cuanto más desta tuvieren, tanto ellos tendrán menos de poetas, [. . .] que es la razón porque tampoco Lucano es contado entre los poetas, con haber escrito en verso: porque la poesía ha de ser imitación de verdad, pero no la misma verdad, escribiendo las cosas no como sucedieron, que esa ya no sería imitación, sino como pudieran suceder, dándoles toda la perfección que puede alcanzar la imaginación del que las finge; que es lo que hace unos poetas mejores que otros.
>
> (Balbuena 1624, ¶6)

With these words, not only is Balbuena opposing *La Araucana* and other heroic colonial poems that dealt with the conquest of America, but also the whole Spanish epic tradition based on the deeds of Charles V and the Hapsburgs, beginning in the 1560s, especially after the publication of Luis Zapata's *Carlo famoso* (1566). The idealised medieval world of Boiardo and Ariosto, which "se funda sobre cimiento dudoso y aún por ventura de todo punto falso" (Balbuena 1624, ¶6), offered the poet more freedom to let his imagination fly than if he had to depend on real facts. Balbuena's defence of the fictional nature of poetry also challenges Tasso's theory that "truth provides a more suitable basis for the heroic poem" (Tasso [1594] 1973, 26), though such truth could – and indeed should – be embellished by invented episodes. The problem with Boiardo and Ariosto, Tasso believes, is that they go too far in their *romanzi*, lacking any real historical basis. The dubious veracity of their plots produces flaws with regards to verisimilitude: "what we are not sure has been done is thought less possible" (Tasso [1594] 1973, 28). Balbuena inverts such argument, turning an alleged flaw into a virtue, holding onto a very literal reading of Aristotelian poetics through which the writer expresses his aesthetic and political ideas.

Looking at the aesthetic motivations, it should be noted that Ercilla complains at the end of part 1 of *La Araucana* (15.4) about the lack of variety and "gusto" produced "por ir a la verdad tan arrimado / y haber de tratar siempre de una cosa" (Ercilla [1569–89] 2002, 430). To overcome such limitations, love stories and magic will make more frequent appearances in the remaining two parts of *La Araucana*. Balbuena, on the other hand, offers from the onset a "obra tejida de una admirable variedad de cosas," as we read in the title page of the book. In *El Bernardo* there are endless sentimental interludes and fantastic adventures, guided by the

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hedonistic principle according to which "de la imitación poética la porción mayor de su fin es el deleite" (Balbuena 1624, ¶7v); a closer look at the poem, though, shows that there are several episodes that rely on Spanish and colonial historiography. It is often through such digressions that Balbuena's political message becomes more apparent, emphasising its nationalistic and imperialistic content. We could perhaps claim that there is an inverted relationship between the use of fiction and history in *La Araucana* and *El Bernardo*. What appear as digressions from the central plot in Ercilla instead constitute the main core of Balbuena's poetic work.

Such dialectic between history and fiction rests on classical poetic and rhetorical principles that had a major role in the interpretation of heroic poetry throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This happened particularly thanks to Virgil's commentary attributed to Servius, which had a lasting effect on early modern epic theory (Dietz 1995; Lazzarini 1984). *Historia* was the kind of narration that described real past events (*res gesta*), whilst *fabula*, or *mythos*, dealt with fictional and inverisimilar episodes, such as those of pagan mythology. The juxtaposition of both kinds of narration was recognized by Servius as a fundamental semiotic tool in the construction of meaning in the *Aeneid*. According to him, Virgil refers to the events of a mythical foundational past that announces the birth and expansion of the Roman empire, and the greatness of Augustus, his patron. This is obvious from the beginning of the poem (1.5–7), where clear reference is made to Rome and the birth of the Latin lineage (*genus Latinum*). Both narrative planes merge in book 8, where the shield of Aeneas is described, including a foretelling of the great deeds of the emperor, culminating in the battle of Actium. This *mise en abyme* was the key section of the text that fostered a political and imperialistic interpretation of the epic genre for posterity (Quint 1993, 21–49). Political Virgilianism, also present in Ariosto and Tasso, permeates most heroic poems written in early modern Spain, as pointed out by Vilà (2001, 2010, 2011), highlighting their allegiance to the Hapsburg cause.

Servius's hermeneutical approach granted a twofold interpretation of the *Aeneid*; the poem consists of *historia* (especially book 8) and *fabula*: myths enclose natural, philosophical and religious truths. *Fabula* deals with universals, whilst *historia* with particulars; Aeneas is a representation of the good king, and he also foreshadows Augustus.[1] The *Aeneid* and subsequent imitations are – to use Lipsius's terminology – *mythistoria*.[2] Balbuena welcomes both *historia* and *fabula* in his work, though for him there is no doubt that the latter is the defining trait of poetry, linking both concepts, also thanks to Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry discussed previously. For the author of *El Bernardo*, poetry is essentially *fabula*, that is, *myth*, as the term was then understood: "un razonamiento de cosas fingidas" which contains "escondida moralidad y provechosa doctrina" (Pérez de Moya [1585] 1995, 65). It is the *fabula* that makes a poem, since this provides the ultimate source of entertainment (*delectare*) and moral instruction (*docere*). The "encubierta moralidad y alegoría" is in no way alienable from "el deleite de la fábula y sus colores retóricos" (Balbuena 1624, ¶7v). This explains the central role played by allegories in *El Bernardo* (Pierce 1949–50). This also explains Balbuena's rejection of the pseudo-historicist model put forward by Ercilla, where particulars predominate. Both writers authored *mythistoriae*, although the degree of these two components (history/myth) varies radically from one poem to the other.

Balbuena uses Aristotelian principles to claim that history is less entertaining and philosophical than poetry, and that its moral message is weaker since it rests on the actions of real human beings who are, by definition, imperfect. This is very apparent in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, populated by betrayal and anti-heroes. The role of poetry is to employ myths to overcome such limitations by presenting fictional characters who embody greater moral ideals. This is why, for both Servius and Balbuena, Lucan (Ercilla) was not a real poet, because in his text history is not veiled by allegory (Lazzarini 1984, 131), leaving no room for beauty, aesthetic

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pleasure and intellectual elevation. Ultimately, this is also a disservice to the nationalistic and imperialistic cause. As argued by Quint (1993, 8), the Virgilian model gave rise to the "epics of the imperial victors," and Lucan to the "epics of the defeated." The former aestheticize and universalize colonialism and warfare, whereas the latter does not hide the horrors and contradictions that ensue from armed conflicts and from the violent subjugation of a civilization by another. This is why *El Bernardo* can, at least in part, be regarded as an extensive response to Ercilla: an anti-*Araucana* where its ideals and poetic choices have been reversed, as it is apparent by the role that America and the conquest play in both poems.

From Iberia to America: Tlascalán and political allegory

Balbuena's contested presence in the colonial literary canon is also due to the superficial treatment of Amerindians in his works. According to Adorno (2007, 4–5), "the native – colonized or indomitable – stands always at the heart of colonial writings." But this does not seem to apply to Balbuena, who appears to be lacking any depth or real interest when dealing with pre-Columbian civilizations. Absent from *Siglo de Oro*, they are quickly dismissed as barbarians in the prologue of *Grandeza mexicana*. Here, the "indio salvaje" (Balbuena [1604] 2011, 161) responds to stereotypes associated with the rebellious Chichimecas, an image that appears drastically reversed at the end of the poem, where Balbuena describes the "indio feo" (Balbuena [1604] 2011, 249) as the tamed and dominated version of the savage encountered in the first pages of the book. The author fails to account for the *grandeza* of Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards. In the second chapter he states that he has made the conscious decision to leave out Tenochtitlan and its history, focusing only on the present of "de lo que soy testigo" (Balbuena [1604] 2011, 177). A similar silence can be found in *El Bernardo*, where the poet openly rejects Ercilla's model. In *Grandeza*'s preliminary poem addressed to the Count of Lemos, he turns *La Araucana*'s opening *recusatio* on its own head:

> Otros canten de Arauco las bravezas
> y aquellos capitanes
> que llegaron a ver tras mil afanes
> un nuevo cielo y polo en sus cabezas.
> (Balbuena [1604] 2011, 87)

Balbuena prefers to recount instead the "antiguas victorias y hazañas" of "tu español Bernardo," whilst the fights against the Araucanians are degraded to "guerras bárbaras" (Balbuena [1604] 2011, 87). As I have argued elsewhere (Cacho Casal 2015), Balbuena's decision to obliterate the conquest from its discourse could also be read as an attempt to limit the literary projection of the Mexican *encomenderos* and their descendants, who produced several epic texts revolving around the figure of Cortés to support their claims (Mazzotti 2000). Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Balbuena made these statements in a poem dedicated to the Count of Lemos, Pedro Fernández de Castro, who was also the principal addressee of *El Bernardo*. Here the hero is presented as one of the legendary originators of the Castro lineage, similar to Aeneas and Augustus in Virgil, and Ruggero and Ippolito d'Este in Ariosto. This is made abundantly clear in the dedication of *El Bernardo* written for the Count's brother, Francisco, after Pedro had died; the main goal of the text is describing "la esclarecida decendencia de la excelentísima casa de Castro" (Balbuena 1624, ¶4). It is easier to recreate a legendary fictional lineage in a remote fantasy world. Also, locating the origin of the Castros in a distant past grants them more prestige.[3]

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Unlike Ercilla, Balbuena compresses the conquest of America in a few books of *El Bernardo*, mainly 18 and 19. Here he offers a geographical vision of the New World, and describes the quarters of the wizard Tlascalán who foretells the arrival of Cortés to Mexico and his alliance with Tlaxcala in order to defeat the violent Mexicas. It could be argued that Balbuena had in mind Zapata, who in his *Carlo famoso* offered the first account of the discovery and conquest of America in a Spanish epic poem. Following mainly López de Gómara, Zapata recounts Columbus and Cortés's deeds in cantos 11 through 14. The principal dissimilarity between Balbuena and Zapata, however, is that in *Carlo famoso* the New World appears only as a series of interpolated episodes, which do not particularly stand out in relation to other events described in the text. *El Bernardo*'s case is rather different. Tlascalán's prophecy is a crucial episode in which various dichotomies converge: myth and history, Iberia and America, the Middle Ages and modern times. This is also the section in which some of the most relevant political ideas of the text are revealed.

As discussed earlier, the central political *mise en abyme* within heroic poems was usually located in ekphrastic scenes revolving around the description of the hero's shield or armour. Such a device was first used in the *Iliad* (book 18), and later imitated in the *Aeneid* (book 8) with a specific propagandistic content; a convention followed by early modern authors such as Zapata in his *Carlo famoso* (cantos 34–35). In *El Bernardo* the protagonist inherits Achilles's armour, but, despite the fact that these are mentioned on several occasions (books 2, 9 and 19), and that they are said to have engravings representing "una oculta decendencia / de héroes ilustres" (2.96), they never generate political panegyrics of great national leaders. It seems, however, not a coincidence that when the armour is mentioned there is often a foretelling related to Spanish distinguished figures. In book 2, Alcina enumerates the peninsular Gothic kings, and Iberia – personified as a nymph – gives account of the deeds of "nueve capitanes celebrados" (2.188), amongst who are Nuño Belchides (related to the Castro lineage), El Cid and Hernán Cortés. In book 19, Tlascalán refers to the conquest of Tenochtitlan, and Iberia appears once again, this time describing her tapestries where the names of great Spanish families are found. This catalogue ends with seven stanzas devoted to praise of Balbuena's own family, his father and himself (19.220–226).

Symbolically, Iberia and Tlascalán join forces in book 19. This section of the poem represents what Balbuena conceived as the unbreakable bond between Spain and the New World, looking at the past (the Goths, El Cid) and at the present (noble families, such as the Castros) in connection with the conquest (Columbus and Cortés). Spatial and chronological coordinates shift and merge in the name of Spanish imperialism. According to Balbuena, this is also achieved thanks to his poetic skills, which have enabled him to compress history and myth in a vast and imaginative text. The "nuevo mundo" is mentioned both at the start and at the end of *El Bernardo* (1.3, 24.186), as a recurring theme that gives meaning to Spanish history as a whole. Iberia's greatest achievement was the discovery of America, which stands as the foremost embodiment of Hispanic providential vision of world domination: "que el cielo ha dado a España el mundo todo: / suyo ha de ser en esta edad postrera" (2.79). If *El Bernardo* is an ideal sequel of Homer, Virgil, and particularly Boiardo and Ariosto's poems, it can also be said that for Balbuena the New World is the ultimate continuation (or *gionta*, to use a term dear to ariostesque tradition) of Iberia: Spain can only be complete and achieve its true destiny once reunited with its missing piece. The West Indies are the ultimate marker of Hispanic identity; *El Bernardo* transpires all of Balbuena's pride for being Spanish precisely because he feels also American; particularly his literary works are fashioned as an American product, which "a vueltas de su nuevo mundo fueron naciendo" (Balbuena [1608] 1989, 65), as he confesses to the Count of Lemos in the dedication to the *Siglo de Oro*.

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The providential conception of the conquest in *El Bernardo* is never visualized as explicitly as in Tlascalán's episode. His prophecy regards the fall of Tenochtitlan as an inevitable event; a semi-divine act that joined together what was always meant to be united. The prophetic view of the American wizard projects a sense of predetermination onto Spanish colonialism. This is also made possible thanks to a native group met by Cortés in the New World, the Tlaxcalans, who are portrayed in a very different light than the Indian savages encountered in *Grandeza*. Tlaxcala stands in the poem as the missing link, the civilized force of the continent waiting to be reunited with Spain in their common effort against the unruly barbarians, here embodied by the Mexicas. The Tlaxcalans are described as "hidalga nación," the legitimate inhabitants of the land that has been appropriated by the Mexica, represented as foreign and violent invaders: "feroces estranjeras gentes" (19.10). Tlascalán is a symbol of the sophisticated culture of his nation, "mi constante pueblo altivo" (19.13), which joined forces with Cortés. Here Balbuena is reworking popular accounts of the conquest of Tenochtitlan, such as those written by Gómara and Cortés, where the Tlaxcalans, after their initial resistance against the Spaniards, became their most powerful allies. Their support was rewarded with tax exemptions and with the title of "Insigne, muy noble y muy leal ciudad de Tlaxcala" (Gibson 1952; Martínez Baracs 2008; Oudijk and Restall 2007).

The fictional role of 'liberator' from the evil Mexica invaders, attributed by Balbuena to Cortés, allows him to draw parallels with previous events of Iberian history: the *reconquista* against the Moors, initiated by the Gothic kings and culminated by the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, who will also be the promoters of the discovery of the New World, as recalled by Tlascalán: "su luz abrirá el alba a nuestra gente / y el sol dará en los mundos del poniente" (19.70). True events, mystifications, anachronisms, legends: they all seem to fit, to find their cohesive place in *El Bernardo*. Hidden amongst fairies and giants, history reaches the surface of *El Bernardo*, giving a whole new meaning to medieval Iberian myths and highlighting the political message of the poem, which is tightly connected with the representation of America. As pointed out by Nicolopulos (1998), the encounter with Tlascalán is an imitation and an outdoing of Fitón's episode in canto 23 of *La Araucana*. Ercilla's wizard is an old and feeble man, "anciano consumido" (Ercilla [1569–89] 2002, 644), whereas Balbuena's character appears as a "corpulento jayán, doblado en ciencia" (18.115); he is taller, stronger and more knowledgeable; he is also more threatening and imposing. He epitomizes the dualisms embedded in colonial discourse. He stands for the pre-Columbian sophisticated civilizations, and he also incarnates the dangers and violence of the New World.

Such dichotomies pertain also to the literary and symbolic registers. The dark side of America has been here represented with the stereotypical evil character found in European chivalric books and *romanzi*: the giant. Tlascalán is both a friend and a foe; both familiar and exotic: he is the ultimate allegory of the New World.[4] The very measure of his size matches the greatness of the continent's geography, described by Balbuena in book 18 (101–110) as a set of contradictions, where beauty and hostility meet: the *antípodas* are a combination of *riquezas* and *guerra*. *El Bernardo*'s verbal cartography is as well an adaptation and an extension of *La Araucana*'s account of Chile in its first canto (1.6–10). Ercilla's American world has been tamed and compressed in a few books of *El Bernardo*; as if Tlascalán had swallowed up Fitón and, with him, the whole ambiguous vision of the conquest that appeared in *La Araucana*, where the vanquished often seemed more worthy of praise than the vanquishers.

Balbuena's metaphorical discourse sheds a moralising and religious interpretation on the discovery, as it is made clear in the *alegoría* at the end of book 18. Malgesí's flight above America is compared to the wonders of contemplative life, which leads the mind to reach higher truths hidden underneath appearances: "con la cual llega a la felicidad del Nuevo

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Mundo, que es la bienaventuranza prometida al hombre, como a la monarquía española las Indias Occidentales" (Balbuena 1624, 223[v]). *El Bernardo* combines political (particulars) and spiritual (universals) interpretations of the conquest, entertaining readers with its variety – or its "confuso amontonar de cosas" (12.130), distracting them from the darker realities of war and colonialism. Here lies the crucial substrate of Balbuena's use of myths in his poem. As pointed out by Barthes (1957, 216–230), mythology is a semiotic system which fosters stasis above change, de-historicising and de-politicizing language. Myths conceal the political contingency of imperialism, presenting it as a natural and inevitable outcome: *anti-physis* is disguised as *pseudo-physis*. This is why they have always been a powerful tool in the hands of conservative regimes.

Balbuena's *mythistoria* was conceived as a celebration of Spain, America and the Catholic Church, fulfilling thus some of the main goals that Tasso ascribed to heroic poetry: "establish the faith or exalt the Church and Empire" (Tasso [1594] 1973, 50). But greatness was also meant to be reached in the literary field. The all-encompassing need for variety and accumulation of episodes in *El Bernardo* reflects also the author's wish to set himself as the foremost epic poet, following on the inventor of the genre, Homer: "fuera Homero el segundo, yo el primero" (3.174). Balbuena's opening with a Homeric invocation to the Muse – "Cuéntame, oh Musa" (1.1) – and the organization of his poem in 24 books, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are all clear indicators of this imitation. The same can be said for the assortment of themes discussed, which, as stated by the title page of the book, include history, geography, ethnography, architecture and moral philosophy. According to ancient interpretations, still very much alive in the sixteenth century despite its competition with Virgil, Homer was the greatest author, the originator of all literary genres, knowledgeable in all subjects and sciences (Ford 2007). Balbuena's ambitious project takes him back to the roots of literature and philosophy, writing his masterpiece, a heroic poem, which was regarded at the time as the most prestigious genre of the literary canon, as pointed out by Dryden ([1697] 1900, 154): "A heroic poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform."

Balbuena sets this Homeric background on the shoulders of the *romanzo*, conceiving it as a modern variation on heroic poetry. Also Tasso ([1594] 1973, 69) shared this view, though he found the structure of the works of Boiardo and Ariosto to be too loose, and their content often obscene and inadequate. Balbuena had similar concerns, since *El Bernardo* lacks the traits of humour and grotesque that characterized his Italian predecessors. Such purged interpretation of the *romanzo* is epitomized by the invention of a new character, Arcangélica. As her name suggests, she is a morally improved version of her mother, Angelica, and her relationship with Bernardo is always kept on a spiritual level. *El Bernardo* is both an exuberant heroic poem and an orthodox *romanzo*. The last scene of the poem, when the Spanish hero kills Orlando, seals Balbuena's imitation and outdoing of his literary models. This is achieved thanks to the symbiosis between author and character, which reaches its peak in book 17. Here the protagonist climbs to the top of mount Parnassus, where Apollo proclaims that his military victories will be sung by a modern poet. Bernardo the warrior is also Bernardo the writer on his way to fame: "ambos de un mismo nombre y un cuidado: / tú en hacer con tu espada maravillas, / y él con su humilde pluma en escrebillas" (17.89).

El Bernardo cannot be understood without taking into account Balbuena's literary ambition. His ultimate goal was to write a memorable poem, which would make him rise above the greatest models of the epic canon. To do so, he fashioned himself as a pan-Hispanic author, shared between two worlds, the Old and the New – "juntando de ambos, para el grave acento, / lo de mayor sustancia y fundamento" (16.149). Balbuena conceives *El Bernardo* as one of the best products resulting from the Spanish presence in America. Turning his back on the

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realities of colonialism, resting on the principle that all great literature is conceived in the first place by the imagination of the poet, Balbuena crafted a fictional world that, he hoped, was to culminate the long epic tradition. Set against the backdrop of Homer and Virgil, he put forward a personal reworking of *romanzi*, which would retain the entertainment produced by its typical accumulation of episodes without disregarding the high stylistic register conventionally attributed to heroic poetry, as well as its political and moral content. It has often been said that *El Bernardo* is a baroque poem (Pierce 1945). If this rings true, though, it is not because of its intricate style or complex metaphors, but rather down to the autonomy granted to the work of art. In *El Bernardo*, *fabulae* supersede reality; imperialism and national propaganda, Spain and America are components of a larger semiotic network, a poetic "mundo entero" (1.66) whose end is to teach readers what they already know, or should know, and, most importantly, to stimulate their imagination. Nothing, perhaps, can better express the aesthetic principles and ideological limitations of Balbuena's text than to say that the ultimate protagonist of *El Bernardo* is the poem itself.

Notes

1 Homer was the object of allegorical readings since antiquity, though, unlike the *Aeneid*, Homeric discourse could not be related to a particular dynasty and specific political leaders. Ideological approaches to Homer in the Renaissance (Ford 2007) tend to dwell on abstract themes (justice, the good king, etc.) rather than on finding equivalences between the characters in the poem and a real national referent outside the text.
2 In his 1600 letter to Nicolas de Hacqueville, Lipsius (1602, 62) distinguished between *historia* and *mythistoria*, defining the latter as a combination of history and myth ("fabulas vero mixtas").
3 Barahona de Soto, following on Ariosto, anticipated Balbuena, including a genealogical panegyric in his *Angélica*, linking Bernardo del Carpio with the Osuna family.
4 Also Cabello de Balboa's *Miscelánea antártica* (1586) compares the map of South America with "un corpulento y robusto gigante" (Firbas 2004, 272).

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