

Myth destructive: Corte-Real's rewriting of Amor as eristic imitation

H. J. S. Alves

University of Evora – CIDEHUS

While for epic poets like Camões, Spenser and Milton erudite commentaries were available from early times to explain something of the polysemous range of their use of Greek and Roman myths, another epic writer of comparable sophistication, Jerónimo Corte-Real, has lacked interpreters of that kind. Since this poet offers a completely different array of myths from the more famous English and Portuguese epics of the Renaissance, he forces the serious reader to start from scratch research into the sources and interpretations of those myths that were available during Corte-Real's lifetime (d. 1588).

The most salient characteristic of the employment of myth in the last of this poet's three epics is its difference from what could be called the mainstream of mythology in European epic. Corte-Real's first epic uses Greek or Roman myth sparsely, while the second poem goes much further, as it reproduces much of the dominant usage of myth which can be found in Classical epic (especially in the *Aeneid*). However, *Naufração e Perdição de Manuel de Sousa Sepúlveda & Dona Lianor de Sa* [*Shipwreck and Loss of Manuel de Sousa Sepúlveda and Lady Lianor de Sa*], the author's culminating effort in the genre, radically transforms the structural features upon which mythology was represented in the epic tradition. Here there are no councils of the gods, no goddess particularly favourable to the heroes, no divine being bearing a grudge against them. There are also no prophecies coming from Zeus or Jupiter, no inklings from the Fates or from any other divine personage concerning a Christian, national or universal future history. And yet, Corte-Real does employ the gods in his poem and he employs them abundantly.

The first mythological scene in *Sepúlveda* occurs just after the birth of the heroine, Lianor, when the three Graces and three horrible sisters (presumably the Furies) sing good and bad omens around and about the baby girl. Later on in Canto I, Love or Cupid (Amor as I shall call him, following the Latin and Portuguese word that Corte-Real

always uses) makes his presence felt for the first time in the poem, initially as the force which makes young and old men unhappy, thanks to Lianor's beauty; and secondly, as Amor shoots his arrows, Lianor herself, because she falls in love with Manuel de Sousa Sepúlveda. Amor is already personified in Canto I and it is the challenge posed to the god by Lianor's father's decision to marry her to another man and to do his utmost to separate her from her lover that brings in, again, the personified Amor to the poem, this time in Canto II.

As in Canto I, Amor feels embarrassed and offended by the resistance to his divine powers brought about by Lianor's father's wedding plans, and he consults his mother, Venus, as to what should be done about it. Most of Canto II is taken up by Venus' plan, which includes a lecture on the birth of Anteros, Amor's younger brother. This is so because, as Venus says, Anteros is essential for the solution: both he and Amor should travel to the island of Rhamnusia, also known as Nemesis, and there, they should ask the goddess for the help in achieving the level of anger and determination required. Once they have obtained what they are looking for, Amor and Anteros should return. Meanwhile Venus will have got a bolt from Vulcan for Amor to avenge himself with. And so it is that Amor and Anteros make their journey to the island of Nemesis.

Canto III is mostly occupied by Amor's visit to the terrible island of the goddess of Vengeance, an allegorical portrait of the excruciating preparations for the murder of Lianor's would-be husband. The bolt which Venus got meanwhile from Vulcan is then finally put to use, so that Luís Falcão (for that was the fiancé's name) is shot dead by an invisible murderer. In a kind of semantic trick, Corte-Real writes that the suspicion grew among neighbours and friends that Amor was responsible for this death, and someone wrote on the tombstone (in a well-wrought octave) that Luís Falcão was a victim of Love. But who is this Love that feels terrible grudges against those who ignore his power, to the point of preparing a vendetta and concluding it with murder? Who is this Amor that generates Corte-Real's entire seventeen Canto narrative? What is this Love that needs to work in association with his brother Anteros and his "aunt" Nemesis to such dire consequences?

A word about these consequences is necessary before we go further. This is because, once Lianor is married to Sepúlveda, the rest of the poem is centred on the slow progress of the protagonists toward tragic destitution and death. The poem, indeed, reinforces the connection between the couple's destiny and the love and murder plot of the initial three Cantos. One leads fatally into the other. The couple's end is the

punishment for the couple's beginning. (Indeed, at a certain point in Canto XV, there appears an explicit personification of Divine Punishment as a sword-bearer). In narrative terms, then, the entire poem is submitted to the power of one complex myth elaborated within it, a myth whose central character is Amor but whose pessimistic ramifications require commentary and explanation, if the myth and its role in the poem are to be understood.

The first thing Venus teaches Amor in her lecture is that the fact that her son did not grow up was such a source of concern that she decided to consult the oracle at Themis. This oracle told her that if Amor was to grow he needed a brother of a very special kind:

O oráculo de Témis consultando,
Em resposta me deu ser necessário
(Pera creceres tu) ter outro filho
De Marte, o qual a ti faria grande.
Naceu de nós Anteros, que às injúrias
De Amor vingança dá.

(*Sepúlveda*, 1979: 530)¹

[On consulting with the oracle of Themis, I got the reply that for you to grow it would be necessary to have another child by Mars who would make you great. Anteros was born to us, the god who avenges insults made to Love]

The way Anteros is characterized reveals significant choices on the part of the poet. Indeed, this new god is here considered the avenger of slighted love, a meaning which Corte-Real could have found in Pausanias' *Description of Greece* and its reference to an altar erected in honour of Anteros. The poet's turn of phrase, however, suggests a Renaissance source such as Hadrianus Junius, a humanist who calls Anteros *deo amantium iniuriae vindici*, an almost word for word Latin version of Corte-Real's god "who avenges the insults offered to Love" (Merrill 1944: 269). But this avenging god is, at the same time, the brother who has an effect on the growth of Amor:

Deste já sabes
Que quando firma em ti prontos os olhos,
Não menino pareces, mas gigante;
E se de ti os aparta, logo tornas
A essa primeira mínima estatura.

(*Sepúlveda*, 1979)

[You know that he is the one who makes you seem not like a child but like a giant, when he stares at you, and makes you return to your first pigmy size, when he looks elsewhere]

¹ References to the *Shipwreck and Loss of Sepúlveda* refer to page numbers of the modern edition cited in the Bibliography.

The sources which refer to the proportional difference in size between the two gods are quite different from the texts just mentioned. They refer to an emulative streak, as the presence of his new brother provokes Amor to become his rival. In another section of his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias writes: “Love holds a palm-branch, and Love Returned is trying to take the palm from him” (VI, 23,5). Artistic objects in ancient Greece seem to show the popularity of such a view of Eros and Anteros: several engraved stones exist showing Cupids struggling for a palm, as in Pausanias, but also matching fighting-cocks, running a foot-race, or otherwise competing with each other, much in the same way as Amor grows every time Anteros looks at him (Merrill 1944: 267). This competitive streak ascribed to Eros and Anteros shows that both vengeance and rivalry were present in ancient Greek culture as traits connected with a certain myth of Amor. It is difficult to see, however, how these ancient notions came in Corte-Real’s hands to suggest the growth spurts of Amor and his brother.

Again, the most likely source for the content of the myth is a Renaissance humanist one. In a small treatise called *Antheros sive de mutuo amore*, published with Celio Calcagnini’s other works in 1544, the Italian humanist gathers together and translates the most important textual sources of the myth, while at the same time defending the opinion that Anteros is indeed a partner of Amor. It is here that the clearest account of Anteros’ role as a protector and avenger of Love can be found, as well as a translation of the earliest source of the myth of the god’s birth, in a work by the fourth century rhetorician Themistius (Merrill 1944: 274).

Absent from Calcagnini’s essay but not wholly outside the tradition of the myth is the connection Corte-Real establishes between Anteros and the goddess of vengeance, Nemesis, also called Rhamnusia because of the sanctuary she had in Rhamnus, a town in Attica. However, the Portuguese poet seems to bring in elements either from other sources, or from his own imagination, inasmuch as he strengthens inordinately the relationship between Love and Vengeance, as well as between Venus and Nemesis – who become half-sisters in Corte-Real.

In *Sepúlveda*, Nemesis is a daughter of Jupiter who, after the War between the Gods and the Giants, went to reside in a dry and sterile island in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Although I do not wish to suggest that Corte-Real invented this, research is required to find where the poet encountered this particular strain of the myth of Nemesis. There is a little-known ancient source, the *Cypria*, an epic from the seventh or sixth centuries B.C. usually attributed to Stasinus, that may be understood as making Zeus the father of

Rhamnusia – she is much more commonly the daughter of Night or of the Ocean –,² but it is odd that, either as a goddess or as a personification, Nemesis should have been condemned with the Giants to live in a rock, as if she were a Giant herself. The kind of location she lives in,

La no Tirreno mar, um sítio estéril,
Espantoso se vê, de ondas cercado,
Onde a fera Raunusia vingadora
Tem sua habitação e assento esquivo,
(*Sepúlveda*, 1979)

[There, in the Tyrrhenian Sea, a sterile, awesome place can be seen, surrounded by waves, wherein fierce, vengeful Rhamnusia has her residence and rough seat]

a mountain thrown into the sea by Jupiter’s lightning bolt, associates Nemesis with the Gigantomachy and to the type of punishment suffered by the losers of that war. So far, I have found no origin for this conception, but this does not mean that one cannot be found in the future.

On the other hand, I am inclined to believe that the description of the residence of Nemesis herself, plus the allegorical personifications of Hatred, Ire and Determination and of their lodgings in the island, is of the Portuguese poet’s own making. He combines a series of narrative, mythical and allegorical elements to construct a large, inventive and elaborate episode; so much so, in fact, that it may well be one of the most ambitious of all mythological or fantastical episodes in Iberian epic. It is a poetic *tour de force* that Corte-Real presents us with in the Cantos II and III. But there is a cultural anomaly to the story as told by the Portuguese poet, if it is understood within the bounds of the epic tradition and even of the principles of Greek myth: the adventures of Love in *Sepúlveda* are founded not on creation or restoration, but on destruction.

The best explanation for this that is available to me lies in the oppositional nature of *Sepúlveda* itself. It is interesting to observe, for instance, that the recondite myth of Nemesis allows Corte-Real to evoke the Gigantomachy, to conceive of his goddess as an earthbound Fury (*fúria*) and to place her on a rock, surrounded by sea water. All of these features, it will be noticed, are common to Camões’ greatest invented character, Adamastor. On the other hand, the presence of Cupid in an island suggests parallels with the isle of Venus in the *Lusiads*. I am not saying that Corte-Real alludes

² See, for example, Davies, 1989: 33-34.

specifically to either of these two episodes in the earlier poem; as far as I can see, it is very difficult to find any verbal similarities. What is plain, though, is that this long mythological scene offers a strong contrast to Camões, especially as it rewrites Amor in the context not of a *locus amoenus* as in the general tradition of bucolic, lyric and epic poetry, but of a *locus horrendus*; not for a productive and generative purpose, but for a destructive and even a deadly one.

This means that Corte-Real builds, in effect, a mythological conception which forms an antithesis to the poetic tradition and genre he is, nevertheless, writing in. Now, the myth of Anteros supplies, I would argue, the ideal explanation of what the poet is doing here. He is, in fact, competing, as a kind of negative twin, with the Virgilian epic tradition and its closest and strongest representative, Camões's *Lusiads*. Corte-Real writes as the Anteros of epic.

Again, the myth of Amor and his brother illustrates to perfection the poet's intentions and compositional procedures. The fierce violence that accumulates as the brothers approach the isle of Nemesis and which explodes finally in the shooting and murder of Luís Falcão, is also the violence with which Corte-Real responds to the poetic challenge of epic. As we saw, figures inscribed in stone in ancient Greece showed a god who worked to steal the palm from Love's hands or to match him in a race. In the Renaissance, this god was identified with Anteros by a humanist I have already mentioned, Celio Calcagnini, who, in a letter usually entitled *Super Imitatione Commentatio*,³ interpreted the myth precisely as a representation of the vitriolic behaviour involved in serious artistic performance. It is as if, to steal the palm of poetry, adversaries have to be pushed aside, if not crushed. Calcagnini tells the same tale of the birth of Anteros that we find in *Sepúlveda* and then proceeds to interpret it in the following way:⁴

I think you [i. e. Giraldi Cinzio, to whom Calcagnini is writing the letter] will easily conclude from this story that no brilliant minds can make substantial progress unless they have an antagonist (as the Greeks say) with whom they may struggle and wrestle. And we must contend not only with our contemporaries, but also with those who wrote in the past (...)

³ *Cynthii Ioannis Baptistae Gyraldi Ferrariensis De obitu Alfonsi Estensis (...) Eiusdem super imitatione epistola. Coelii Calcagnini ad eundem super imitatione commentatio (...)*, Ferrara, 1537. Calcagnini's text was reprinted in *Cynthii Ioannis Baptistae Gyraldi Ferrariensis Poematia*, Basle, 1540 and Basle 1544; as well as in Calcagnini's *Opera aliquot*, Basle, 1544. Corte-Real could have read Calcagnini's interpretation of the birth of Anteros in any of these editions.

⁴ The translation is by Bernard Weinberg (quoted from Pigman 1980: 17).

It is therefore true indeed that “the myth of Anteros allows Calcagnini to justify strife in universal terms. The myth excuses violence and envy as necessary” (Pigman, 1980: 17-18). As such, the story as retold by Corte-Real constitutes a particularly vivid theorization of eristic imitation (Pigman, 1980) which contemplated not only the imitation of the ancients, but quite emphatically the imitation of present competitors. “Not only with our contemporaries”, says Calcagnini, as if it were obvious that a struggle with one’s coeval fellows in art is inherent to it. What is happening in *Sepúlveda* is that the poem is “figuring forth” as an allegory, through his portrait of Amor and Anteros – reinforced by his recreation of Nemesis and her Hatred, Anger and Determination –, its own stance towards past and contemporary poetry.

Competition, naturally, takes place usually within the same type of artistic composition. In the case of *Sepúlveda*, tragedy is a genre to be taken into account, as the story of the unfortunate couple lends itself to the tragic treatment that the poet also engages in. It can perhaps be argued that the poet nods to the greatest example of tragedy which Portuguese (and Iberian) literature had so far produced, António Ferreira’s *Castro*. More than one passage from Canto I may point to this textual relationship. Also the fact that a love-story is involved gives Corte-Real the opportunity of approaching several, then fashionable, forms of lyric and bucolic writing. Certainly, the poem does not fail to echo lines from Jacopo Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* and Garcilaso de la Vega’s pastoral lyricism. Nevertheless, it is clear, and it is to be expected, that his vengeful and destructive sort of imitation is turned towards the epic.

What other conclusion are we to reach of a poem which describes only the destructive powers of Love, the slow degradation of the human heroes, climaxing in their deaths? In the narrative mould, it can be said of *Sepúlveda* what has already been said of *Paradise Lost*, albeit for very different reasons: this is the epic to end all epics. This is the epic of pain and self-destruction, like no other before or after. Under the auspices of Love, the poem chastises most of the epic’s standard ingredients, sometimes with specific allusion to Camões’s *Lusíads*.

National and imperial history, for example, is clearly rewritten by a gigantic Anteros, a poet bent on aggressive imitation. It is not just because the battle of Alcazar-el-Kebir and the end of Portuguese independence is told in elegiac and tragic mood at the end of a long historical narrative which takes the best part of two Cantos (XIII and XIV). The destructive impetus of Corte-Real’s narrative is based, mostly, on the fact that he

chooses to tell events about which Camões is silent, more often than not revealing serious cases of internal strife in Portuguese history.

At certain moments, *Sepúlveda* rewrites entire episodes, implicitly robbing Camões of legitimacy in his epic version of them. One cannot fail to notice, for example, how the story of the Twelve of England in the *Lusiads* is completely overturned in *Sepúlveda*, to the point where Magriço, the main hero of the episode according to Camões, ends up playing second fiddle to the new main hero, Vasqu'eanes, who happens to be Corte-Real's forefather...

The combined mythological tale which provides the basic structure propelling the narrative forward, although inspiring the composition of *Sepúlveda* and allowing it to reach the finish line, is predominantly a motif symbolizing a destructive impulse. And if this destructive impulse brings dire consequences to the protagonists of the narrative – Falcão because he is murdered, Lianor and Sepúlveda himself because they die from the punishment they receive –, the myth of Amor, Anteros and Nemesis represents a kind of death-wish that Corte-Real brings upon the poem. What happens when a work of art uses myth not as a creative stimulus, but as a stimulus to destruction?

Bibliography

Camões, Luís de (1998) *The Lusiads*, transl. Landeg White, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corte-Real, Jerónimo, *Navfragio e Lastimoso Svcesso da Perdiçam de Manoel de Sousa de Sepulueda, & Dona Lianor de Sáa sua molher & filhos, vindo da India para este Reyno na nao chamada o galião grande S.Ioão que se perdeo no cabo de boa Esperança, na terra do Natal. E a perigrinação que tiverão rodeando terras de Cafres mais de 300. legoas tè sua morte*, Na oficina de Simão Lopez, [Lisboa], M. D. XCIIII [in Jerónimo Corte-Real (1979) *Obras*, Oporto: Lello & Irmão, 1979, 479-877].

Davies, Malcolm (1989) *The Epic Cycle*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989.

Merrill, Robert V. (1944) "Eros and Anteros", *Speculum. A Journal of Mediaeval Studies*, 19: 3 (1944), 265-284.

Pigman III, G. W. (1980) "Versions of imitation in the Renaissance", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 33 (1980), 1-32.