

Fletcher and Shakespeare get the Argentinian literary treatment

A doe-eyed idealist, a grizzled punk

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CARDENIO

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Elizabethan and Jacobean writers could not resist Spanish sources, even at times of political enmity. Shakespeare and other figures including Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser domesticated works for local taste. There were three English-language versions of *The Curious Impertinent*, a novella included in *Don Quixote*, before Thomas Shelton's translation of Part One of the novel in 1612. Shakespeare knew of, perhaps read, Cervantes. The reverse was not true.

Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The History of Cardenio*, based on an incident in *Don Quixote*, was performed in 1613 but it seems the manuscript did not survive. In recent years, scholars and dramatists have attempted reconstructions from more or less plausible sources, including Lewis Theobald's *Double Falsehood* (1727) or Cervantes's novel itself. Cervantes's original *Cardenio* recounts the titular hero's amorous betrayal by his friend, Don Fernando, and their eventual reconciliation, with the intervention of Don Quixote. Shakespeare's version is fascinating to us partly because it unites the English playwright with his great Iberian peer. Barbara Fuchs calls it the missing "Exhibit A" connecting early modern English and Spanish literature; for Brean Hammond, it is "the Holy Grail".

Carlos Gamero's novel *Cardenio* tells a fictional story about Shakespeare and Fletcher's lost play. The Argentinian author does not care about the controversy over the existence of *The History of Cardenio* – that Theobald's *Double Falsehood* may or may not have been an ambitious forgery. Gamero starts, instead, from the firm premiss that *Cardenio* was co-written by the two men, staged in 1613, and then lost. In that cleared space, he begins work on an imaginative retelling.

There is no narrator in *Cardenio*. We read instead long sections of dialogue, entitled with a date and a place. It looks like a script. Also included are letters, fragments of plays, and poems from the day. The form is indebted to another Argentinian writer, Manuel Puig; Gamero, though, is less demanding of his reader than the author of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, who left long sections of dialogue unattributed.

As the story advances, separate dialogues intertwine and overlap, leaving the reader to unpick the strands – a technique also used with much success by Mario Vargas Llosa in *Conversation in the Cathedral*. Such borrowings from recent Latin American authors, in this setting, remind us that many twentieth-century experiments and innovations were already practised by Cervantes and his contemporaries.



Composite of John Fletcher and William Shakespeare

Gamero composed the novel in English and then translated it into Spanish, with the material from Shakespeare and his contemporaries, consulting Golden Age sources – Cervantes most obviously, as well as Góngora and Quevedo. The resulting language is neither too arch nor excessively modern. But deliberate anachronisms, including references to Gamero's own novels, provide humour throughout. Fletcher paraphrases Freud, and wants to give Fernando a proto-Oedipus complex. Chronology is reversed. Drayton's *Poly-Olbia*, mentioned in passing, is made to sound like a Borgesian canard, rather than a real epic poem. The writing process, of a play by "John Shakespeare" or "Will Fletcher", recalls Jorge Irujo, Vargas and Adolfo Bioy Casares's fashioning of a third man, *Borges*, as the author of their shared works.

In Gamero's novel, Fletcher approaches Shakespeare after his long-time writing partner, Francis Beaumont, retires to Kent, engaged to (he thinks) a wealthy heiress. John Aubrey, in his *Brief Lives*, recorded that Fletcher and Beaumont were bed-fellows, and that they shared a wench. Given this sexual arrangement, Gamero reads it thus: Beau-

mont gets to have first go with Jamie; in his absence, Fletcher struggles to perform. Gregory Doran, in his book about the RSC production of a "re-imagined" *Cardenio*, styles Fletcher as a gay writer. Gamero leaves that unsaid, while throwing in lashings of bawdiness and innuendo.

With much persuasion, Shakespeare is tempted to lend a hand with the play Fletcher is writing. One early draft is a bloody tragedy in the style of Kit Marlowe, including, to Fletcher's horror, the violent death of Don Quixote. Fletcher wants to be faithful to the original, but also to his own tragicomedies. Shakespeare prefers well-drawn characters that an English audience will believe: there is too much swooning and contrivance in Cervantes for his liking. *Cardenio* seems naive and dilatory, Fernando an unlovable rogue. But in Dorotea, Fernando's spurned lover, disguised as a gutsy shepherd boy, and Cardenio's faithful betrothed, Luscinnda, Shakespeare finds compelling double heroines.

Gamero paints Shakespeare as a grizzled old punk, whose view of friendship has been jaded by disappointments and betrayals, not least over the publication of his sonnets,

intended only for private consumption. But his imagination, when fired, still captivates. Fletcher is a doe-eyed idealist, yet steely in his ambition to take on the master's mantle. Beaumont comes across as a buffoon, who marries in haste and bungles his attempts to further his ex-partner's career.

The play has to be ready for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth, on Valentine's Day, 1613. Meanwhile, Tom Middleton is touting a rival piece, his version of *The Curious Impertinent*. Fletcher and Shakespeare argue about including Don Quixote as a character, as Beaumont has already used him in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. The play they eventually compose is only loosely faithful to Cervantes, a riotous comedy with a wholly unexpected conclusion. *The History of Cardenio* comes to be known around town as "The Comedy of the Dildo".

More collaborations follow, while Beaumont retires in straitened circumstances and ill health. "Plays make nothing happen", Shakespeare says, prophetically quoting Auden, or possibly Terence Hawkes. Fletcher, though, has a superstitious belief in the real-life effects of his fictions. Beaumont's on-stage alter ego collapses, foreshadowing his own death. Fletcher's earlier play, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, becomes, retrospectively, a monument to his dead friend. He also predicts that his next collaboration with Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, will bring the house down. Alas, it does, as the Globe goes up in smoke.

Cardenio has a distinctive feminist streak. Virginia Woolf told the exemplary tale of Shakespeare's sister, his equal in talent and invention but thwarted by a patriarchal society. Here, Fletcher and Beaumont's lover takes that role. Joanie (the name, it so happens, of two of Shakespeare's sisters) makes vital, and otherwise overlooked, contributions to the history of English literature. Gamero is more than aware of this.

Shakespeare scholars may well set about *Cardenio*, looking for the improbable or untimely. But that is to miss the point. In "The Argentine Writer and Tradition", Borges argued that the peripheral status of Argentinian writers to the Western canon worked to their advantage. Their position allowed access but also irreverence, as was the case for Irish writers and the anglophone tradition.

Perhaps above all else, this is a book about what Theobald called "friendship's holy law". Will urges Fletcher to read Montaigne's essay dedicated to La Boétie, but with the caveat that such strong affections necessarily break, fade, or end in death. But from Sancho and Don Quixote, Fletcher learns of a friendship in which "your friend is not a mirror that reflects back a better version of yourself, but, simply, the limpid glass in which you see another person". It is a friendship that can hurdle barriers and leap the abyss. Playing fast and loose with literary history, Carlos Gamero has written a witty, moving and strangely Argentinian novel.