

EIGHTY-SIX SONNETS ON KILLING A BULL

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What cultural and political sense can we make of the fact that in 1631 King Philip IV of Spain, well known as a skillful hunter, was nationally acclaimed by poets for his elegance in shooting a bull in a Madrid arena? European kingship is not easy for us to understand from a modern political-science point of view. Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton UP, 1957) is the classical study of the theological and juridical underpinnings of that peculiar institution, at least as it was theorized in England from Norman to Tudor times; it had medieval roots and later merged with the early modern European invention of the nation-state. The first document that Kantorowicz quotes from in his book (p.7) was written during the reign of Elizabeth I; it explains that the monarch has a dual legal status, as both a natural person, who is born, lives, and dies, and as the quasi-divine political personage who embodies the nation's enduring royal institution.

In Spain the Count-Duke of Olivares decided to organize an unusual event for the 13th of October, 1631, in order to celebrate the birthday of the Crown Prince Baltasar Carlos. Inviting an international audience, he gathered together a large group of wild and domestic animals in a Madrid arena and turned them loose on one another (Fernández-Guerra, 445 ff.). The results are narrated in detail by Don Joseph Pellicer de [Ossau Salas y] Tovar (1602-1679) in his *Anfiteatro de Felipe el grande*. Pellicer is best known to literary scholars today as one of the major explicators of Góngora's poetry in his *Lecciones solemnes* (Madrid, 1630), a book brimming with humanistic erudition and criticized by competitors (Alonso). He was also criticized and appreciated as a chronicler, the author of *Avisos históricos*; even Jesuit reporters,

according to James O. Crosby's new index, found it useful to check his chronicles for their news of the Madrid court. His official status, proudly claimed on the title-page of the *Anfiteatro*, was that of *cronista real*; concerning his controversial career as a historian, see especially the lively account recently published by Richard L. Kagan (235-44). As chronicler, he was sending a report in his *Anfiteatro* (folios 2-11) to Philip IV's sister, Maria Anna of Habsburg, married to her cousin Ferdinand, king of Hungary and Bohemia. His report, telling her of her brother's impressive performance, is entitled "Noticia del espectáculo de las fieras . . ." In preliminary unnumbered folios the volume is dedicated, in the usual flattering terms, to the king himself, and is put under the protection of the king's chancellor, the Count-Duke of Olivares. This double dedication is followed by a prologue to the readers, "A los curiosos," preceding the much longer "Noticia." In this introduction, nominally addressed to Maria Anna of Austria but obviously intended for all readers of the volume, we find a descriptive narration of the animal show and the king's intervention. Pellicer's rhetoric and his classical erudition give a humanistic "spin" to the whole event and to its celebration in poetry. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize in English his "Noticia," while at the same time recognizing that such a paraphrase loses the elaborate texture of his Spanish prose.

Pellicer begins by stating that wild animal spectacles, while common in imperial Rome, were rare in Spain, although bulls in particular were part of Spain's Roman heritage. Later, he says, the Arabic horseback tradition of light *cañas* with *adargas* was a more popular combative display in Spain than the heavily armed French jousts and tournaments. As a break with both of these established traditions, in order to celebrate the prince's birthday, the Count-Duke decided to revive the animal fights of ancient Rome by gathering an African lion, an Indian tiger, a bear, a bull, horses, dogs, and smaller animals into an arena that he calls "la plaza del Parque," not Madrid's Plaza Mayor but, as identified by L. Fernández-Guerra, "la explanada del parque por debajo del real Alcázar, hoy jardines del Campo del Moro" (446). For this birthday celebration, in addition to the royal family, Olivares invited a large and varied audience: clergy,

ambassadors, nobles, and the general public. The king, *ex officio*, presided over the spectacle.

It was expected that the wild animals, thrown together into a ring, would attack and try to kill one another. But the show took an unexpected turn when the bull quickly terrorized all the other animals, including the lion, the tiger, and the bear. This Spanish fighting bull, brought in from the Jarama valley, had turned out to be unusually wild and aggressive. Everyone's attention was thus focused on that dominant animal. A group of men, "cubiertos de una artificiosa tortuga de madera que movían ciertas ruedas," went out to prod the other animals into attacking the bull, but with no success. The show had thus finally reached a total impasse. It was at this point that the king decided suddenly to change his role from presiding authority to active participant. Feeling that he should do something to reward the bull for his heroic stance and not to leave him to die an ignoble death, he called for his favorite shotgun (*arcabuz*), elegantly donned his hat and cape, and calmly, with no hasty or undignified movements betraying unseemly emotions, dispatched the animal with a single deft blast into the forehead; this unexpected intervention of the king provoked the roaring applause of the audience. Pellicer emphasizes here the smooth continuity of the whole operation:

Miraba su majestad la valentía de aquella fiera, y deseoso de que bruto que a sus ojos había andado tan intrépido no quedase sin premio, quiso hacerle el mayor favor que pudiera desear a ser [=si fuera] capaz de razón; porque supuesto que entró en aquel anfiteatro a morir, perdonarle la vida fuera castigo, dejándole a riesgo de otro día la perdiera en coso plebeyo y a manos viles. Mejoró de instrumento y alcanzó, en fe de su valor, la muerte por la mejor mano que supiera elegir su instinto. Viendo pues nuestro César imposible el despejar el circo de aquel monstruo español porque los que pudieran desjarretarle le hallaban defendido en los demás animales que le huían, pidió el arcabuz, enseñado en los bosques a semejantes empresas, y sin perder de la medida real ni alterar la majestad del semblante con ademanes, le tomó con gala y, componiendo la capa con brío y requiriendo el sombrero con despejo, hizo la puntería con tanta destreza y el golpe con acierto tanto que si la atención más viva estuviera acechando sus movimientos, no supiera discernir el amago de la ejecución y de la

ejecución el efecto, pues encarar a la frente el cañón, disparar la bala y morir el toro, habiendo menester forzosamente tres tiempos, dejó de sobra los dos, gastando solo un instante en tan heroico golpe.

The poets of Spain, inspired by this action as described by Pellicer, were invited to celebrate the episode in proper literary style. Pellicer says that he has copied and put together, in no particular order of authorship, the sonnets and other poems that make up the *Anfiteatro* as a celebratory volume. And, when we examine the poetry, we find to our surprise that it is in fact of good quality. The volume contains eighty-six sonnets (called *epigramas*), as well as three *romances*, ten *espinelas*, one *silva*, and one poem in *estancias* (*octavas reales*). No major or minor poet of the period is omitted: we find not only Lope de Vega, Quevedo, and Calderón, but also Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Luis Vélez de Guevara, the Príncipe de Esquilache, Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza, Francisco de Rioja, Juan de Jáuregui, Juan de Solís, Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, Antonio López de Vega, Gabriel Bocángel, Francisco López de Zárate, and many others, including a few ladies.

This collection of poetry, produced by a select social and cultural group, provides the modern literary analyst with a unique opportunity to observe how a single publicly defined and implicitly political theme, with an assortment of motifs and topoi in common, could be formally developed in many stylistically different sonnets. For such an analysis it is not the individual poets, but the collective art and craft of defining subjects and constructing sonnets, of *inventio* and *dispositio*, that might well be the object of our attention. The poets knew that they were in courtly competition with one another; as a consequence the level of sophisticated difficulty for the modern reader is often high. The common denominator of all the sonnets is a simple sequence: the action of the bull followed by the action of the king. Each of these two actors, with associated animals in the background, has a number of possible attributes, both physical and symbolic (the lion as king of animals, for example, and Leo and Taurus as signs of the Zodiac). These actions provide a potential syntax that fits into the sonnet form in a wide range of different ways, both paratactic and hypotactic.

Let us begin by reading a relatively simple, paratactic example, Sonnet 67, by Don Francisco de Sandoval, Abad de San Salvador, a

clergyman associated with the cathedral of Palencia. (I have modernized the spelling and punctuation.)

¡Cuán bien, dichosa fiera, por no verte
trofeo de otro bruto, prevenida
te reservaste para tanta herida,
para despojo de león más fuerte!

¡Oh cuán deudora quedas a tu suerte,
gloriosamente a tanto rey rendida!,
pues si te mata tu valiente vida,
te da la vida tu gloriosa muerte.

Ya no corre tu vida por tu cuenta
porque, aunque a cuenta de tu muerte vives,
renuevas en Felipe tu memoria.

Tu mismo daño tu fortuna aumenta,
pues hallas en el golpe que recibes
vida más cierta, más segura gloria.

According to this sonnet's literal and figurative motifs, which also appear in other sonnets, the king is functioning at a virtually divine level. In this case, the voice of the poet rhetorically addresses the bull in an apostrophe. This animal does not allow himself to be killed by another animal, for example the lion, who is king of beasts; but then, with a metaphoric exchange, the king of Spain is "león más fuerte." The bull has kept himself from being killed by another beast in order to have his death at the king's hands achieve, paradoxically, the glorious life of remembered fame. Thus, his eternal death, not the bull himself, is in charge of his life; his suffering is the source of his eternity, for the king's mortal blast assures him of an everlasting life.

Somewhat more complex is the hypotactic Sonnet 10, by Francisco de Rioja:

No fue acierto del caso el aplaudido
golpe que hizo en trueno el plomo ardiente
en la dura, espaciosa, armada frente
del animal de Juno más temido,
ni cayó inútil peso sin gemido,
bañado en su purpúreo humor caliente,
por verse de deidad ocultamente
a forzosa obediencia reducido,

sino que el arte es tanta y la destreza
 del gran Filipo que en el metal hueco,
 si el negro polvo encienden las centellas,
 teme el vuelo que toca a las estrellas,
 teme en toda montaña la fiereza,
 teme aun la imagen de la voz, el eco.

(A note: in several of the sonnets the bull is identified with Zeus, in his animal disguise used to seduce Europa; in this sonnet the awe-inspiring king of gods is alluded to, not by his own name, but by his wife's name, Juno, who lived in fear of him.) This sonnet begins by denying (in the quatrains) two obvious motifs, one physical and the other theological: the king's success was not the applauded physical blast of lead into the bull's forehead, nor was it the bull's secret inner compulsion to obey the king's divine authority, but it was instead (in the tercets) the king's great skill with his gun and the ignited powder ("el negro polvo" is of course the *pólvora* or gunpowder) that literally frightens the bull to death: the animal fears being blown to the sky, it fears wild animals in every mountain, it fears even the resounding echo of the gun's detonation. The complex syntax matches the sonnet form precisely, with the major turning point coming with the first word of the first tercet: the denial of the quatrains is set off against the affirmation of the tercets.

In Sonnet 30, by Don Antonio Coello, we find a similar cluster of ideas addressed to the king:

Pues en sola tu mano nunca miente,
 sin duda te conoce el plomo incierto,
 que has hecho ya costumbre del acierto,
 y es infalible en ti lo contingente.
 ¿Murió el bruto de herido o de obediente?
 ¿Rindióse a la intención o al golpe cierto?,
 que entre el querer matarle y estar muerto
 no cupo la atención más diligente.
 Mas no fue el plomo quien mató la fiera,
 que a una deidad, señor, contra una vida
 le basta para obrar solo el intento,
 y así, supuesta tu intención primera,
 para morirle le sobró la herida,
 y a ti para matarla el instrumento.

As a skilled hunter the king habitually puts the lead shot exactly where he intends to. So which was the real cause, physical or mental, of the bull's death? Since the king is divine, his intention alone was enough, and the gun and physical wound were really superfluous.

The divine nature of the king, the magical power of his thought, is taken to its ultimate consequences in Sonnet 61, by Don Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla:

Recele de Filipo el Otomano
 menos ya las vitorias que su intento,
 que es en Filipo acierto el pensamiento,
 y aun piensa menos que acertó su mano.

Con el venablo si fatiga el llano,
 ofrece en el amago el escarmiento;
 lo visible es en él poco elemento;
 despojo es suyo lo que aun no es humano.

Diga, pues, si a su brazo prodigioso
 ni el plomo engaña ni el objeto mente,
 el mundo ser efeto milagroso;
 si errara la diadema del oriente,
 que acertar en Filipo es lo forzoso,
 y ni aun errar en él es contingente.

I tentatively offer a prose paraphrase for this paradoxical, allusive, and elusive sonnet. (As a clue for “fatiga el llano” we have Garcilaso’s “andes a caza, el monte fatigando,” and for “la diadema del oriente,” Góngora’s “el diadema del luciente Apolo.”) In the first quatrain the king’s mental intention, to say nothing of his actions, is sufficient to frighten the Turk. In the second he is a hunter whose gesture in itself promises to punish even invisible animals. As a consequence, in the case of the bull, we are deceived neither by the lead slug nor by the dead body, for the king does work miracles; the sun may fail to rise, but the king’s intention must be so inevitably successful that even an error in his case would not be subject to chance.

Sonnet 51 has its own peculiarities. Its author is a woman identified only by a first name (Elisa), and she projects the poem into the voice of the dead, but immortalized, bull. Its first word, “escopo,” is extremely rare, not listed in most modern dictionaries: the *Diccionario de autoridades* defines it as “objeto y blanco a que uno mira y atiende”

and asserts it to be “de poco uso”, of Latin (and obviously Greek) origin; the dictionary cites as its two authorities José Sigüenza (“el escopo puesto y el blanco”) and Covarrubias (justice as the “escopo” of the faculty of law). The phrase “Fénix lunado” might also be hard to understand if it were not for the context of the other sonnets, in which the bull’s horns are often referred to as having the form of a “media luna.” Although an irrational beast, he hopes to find himself converted into the higher, rational level of being. Death through suffering, concludes the bull’s voice, is for him a glorious liberation from the vain limitations of life. The tercets, culminating in their final line that hints vaguely at the life of a cloistered nun, constitute a perfect poetic ending.

Escopo fui el mejor que en caso incierto
 ocupó de un monarca la esperanza;
 si mi frente corona su alabanza,
 también sirvió lo intrépido al acierto.

Con la posteridad hice concierto
 de hurtarme a la impiedad de su mudanza:
 ¡tanto un rendido a grande mano alcanza!,
 ¡tanto se esparce quien feliz ha muerto!

Fénix lunado soy, y aspiro fuerte
 a vivir racional porque mi herida
 en más noble materia me convierte.

Fueme la gloria del dolor debida,
 que, en tanta vanidad, me halló la muerte
 estrecho entre los claustros de la vida.

The whole collection deserves editing for modern readers of Golden Age poetry, allowing us to become familiar with all 86 more or less well-made sonnets, as well as with the other poems. In any case, this sample of five sonnets is sufficient to show that Pellicer’s *Anfiteatro* is a thematically unified and highly original *cancionero* of court poetry. Philip IV’s unexpected intervention in the spectacle, his graceful execution and apotheosis of the noble Spanish bull, is seen as reconfirming that his kingship is a divine source of power. This episode needs to be further interpreted in political terms, as evidence of an implicit monarchical ideology generally accepted in 17th-century Spain. During the same period, in England, Thomas Hobbes was making quite

explicit his own social-contract theory of the king (not parliament) as the secular political incarnation of his nation's people.

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