Waking the Dead
Miguel de Cervantes' Numancia and the Problem of Golden Age Historical Drama
Kluge, Sofie

Published in:
M L N

DOI:
10.1353/mln.2019.0015

Publication date:
2019

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

• You may download this work for personal use only.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

Download date: 14. Sep. 2023
Waking the Dead

Miguel de Cervantes' *Numancia* and the Problem of Golden Age Historical Drama

Sofie Kluge

Much critical discussion of Miguel de Cervantes' *La Numancia*, presumably written between 1580 and 1585 (Ynduráin 23), has centered on its tragic elements (de Armas; Edwards; Friedman; Hermenegildo; Lewis-Smith; Maestro; Méndez; Ponce-Hegenauer). Seeing that all the major Golden Age "preceptistas", who took their cue from Cervantes' generation of writers, classified historical drama as a tragic subgenre this line of interpretation is clearly relevant. It rhymes well, moreover, with Cervantes' overt use of tragic genre conventions (Martín; Tar; de Armas). However, tragedy is not the only relevant generic frame of Cervantes' most celebrated attempt at dramatic poetry. As I will argue on the basis of the relatively few critics who have read the play as a history play (Darst; Shivers; Kahn), *La Numancia* also offers rewarding insights into the contemporaneous idea of history and the still underexplored Golden Age conception of historical drama, insights that lead to a fuller understanding of Cervantes' conception of the tragic yet which are thwarted by the mono-tragic approach to his play.

I intend to demonstrate how the famous novelist's affair with tragedy in *La Numancia* is finely interwoven with Golden Age conceptions of historical drama and the period's idea of history. In my discussion of the play, I focus on the clash between the tragic interpretation of Numantian history found in the play's intriguing necromancy scene (end of Act 2), and the transcendental explication of the same historical events voiced in the allegorical scenes, particularly the closing parabasis (end of Act 4). Whereas the former represents a negative projection of historical drama as an occult waking-of-the-dead tied to a desolate pre-
Christian worldview, the latter represents the playwright's official promotion of *La Numancia* as a play which sets out to counter, precisely, the tragic interpretation of Numantian history. Yet, as always with Cervantes, things are not so evident. The fact that both notions of historical drama and both conceptions of history are present in the play suggests its author's problem-oriented engagement with the period's conception of historical drama as a tragic subgenre.

By highlighting the opposed historical visions represented by the play's two surrogate historical dramatists, the pagan necromancer Marquino and the allegorical figure Fama, I will demonstrate that *La Numancia* is neither a pure tragedy nor simply an apotheosizing "comedia histórica". It is a self-reflective historical drama which negotiates its own generic affiliation and hereby discusses the relation of 'tragic' history to the atemporal and essentially 'comic' cosmic order: Is tragedy the appropriate lens through which to understand and dramatize historical events, past and present? Read in this way, the play becomes a notable contribution not only to the Golden Age theory of history plays, by then still "in nuce", but also to the period's 'anti-depressive' discourse.

**Golden Age Discourse on History Plays**

Cervantes' play about the fate of the Celtiberian oppidum in today's northern Spain inscribes itself in the rich aesthetic-historical culture that sprang from the proverbial Renaissance birth of the past as epistemological and historiographical idea (Grafton; Schiffman) and dominated the two half centuries on each side of 1600. Especially during the 1580s and 1590s there existed a striking preoccupation with history outside the domain of historiography proper; and in the plethora of historiographical forms that saw the light of day during those decades the blooming

---

1 Quotation marks here indicate my deviation from the current popular understanding of the term. Throughout this article I use "comic" in the high, Dantean sense. However, for the sake of readability, I will subsequently refrain from using quotation marks.

2 In my characterization of the epoch, I am drawing extensively on the work of British historian John Eliott, notably *The Revolt of the Catalans: A Study in the Decline of Spain, 1598–1640*. 
historical drama took pride of place. It was soon seconded by developments in literary theory where "preceptistas", faced with the emergence of precisely historical drama, grappled with superordinate questions of imitation and verisimilitude along with more specific problems such as: The status of poetic invention in plays based on historical events; the dramatist's obligation to present good and bad historical examples in order to provoke the cathartic purging of unhealthy audience passions; and the ultimate legitimacy of historical representations – half-breeds that with their unscrupulous mixing of fact and fiction jeopardized truth.

If history was a popular dramatic material in the decades around 1600 it was thus also polemic or even controversial; and though he was – as he himself asserted in *El viaje del Parnaso* (1614) – somewhat of an outsider in literary circles, Miguel de Cervantes was anything but ignorant of contemporaneous literary discussions. As with all other things, he was a most perspicacious observer and analyst of these discussions who seemed always to focus on the crucial issue. Thus, my exploration of the Golden Age discourse on history plays begins with the famous harangue against the theater found in *Don Quijote* I.48. Here, Cervantes has his character, the canon of Toledo, speak about historical plays:

> Y si es que la imitación es lo principal que ha de tener la comedia, ¿cómo es posible que satisfaga a ningún mediano entendimiento que, fingiendo una acción que pasa en tiempo del rey Pepino y Carlomagno, el mismo que en ella hace la persona principal le atribuyan que fue el emperador Heraclio, que entró con la Cruz en Jerusalén, y el que ganó la Casa Santa, como Godofre de Bullón, habiendo infinitos años de lo uno a lo otro; y fundándose la comedia sobre cosa fingida, atribuirle verdades de historia y mezclarle pedazos de otras sucedidas a diferentes personas y tiempos, y esto no con trazas verisímiles, sino con patentes errores, de todo punto inexcusables? (2004 I.48 [unpaginated internet text])

3
The canon's words reveal how historical drama, generally seen as an uncontroversial conformist genre (Maravall 1975 and 1990; Küpper), at the very heart of the Golden Age theater controversy. Judging from this passage, it was even the prime suspect of that falsification of reality and distortion of truth with which contemporaneous literature and drama was continuously charged (Kluge 2007a and 2007b).

On close inspection, history plays did indeed epitomize the entire complex of problems relating to the theater during this period of recurrent condemnations of actors, invectives against dramatic poetry, and bans on the representation of plays. For historical dramas challenged not only classicist stylistic decorum and standing moral values, but also the very laws of temporal and physical reality. And they could therefore be considered even more reprehensible than the cloak-and-dagger plays – widely criticized for their irregular form and immoral content, but in the end wholly fictive and therefore, in a certain sense, harmless: pure comedy. History plays, on the other hand, claimed to represent something which had actually taken place, something true; and yet mixed with historical facts and with fiction, contaminating truth with illusions and lies. In the eyes of contemporaneous critics of the theater historical drama therefore approached the blasphemies of hagiographical plays and other credulous forms of religious theater.

Cervantes' text no doubt echoes the general critique of dramatic poetry's falseness and threat to morality voiced by contemporaneous theological thinkers such as the Jesuit theologian and historian Juan de Mariana in his 1599 De spectaculis. However, Quijote I.48 also resonates with more acute, expert observations such as those put forward by Lupercio Leonardo Argensola in his petition to Felipe II to continue the 1598 ban on the public representation of
plays. Underpinning his view that historical and religious plays in equal measure deceive the public with "mala doctrina," the Aragonese chronicler and ex-playwright refers to the example of a recent history play, in which Juan II of Aragón was ascribed "hechos y acciones, no solamente contra la verdad, más aún contra la dignidad de su persona":

[...] Dice el memorial que se dió en favor de los comediantes que con las comedias se hacen los ignorantes capaces de muchas historias, como si en las comedias no fuese esto antes inconvenientes que provecho; porque no saber las causas de las cosas, y ver los efectos solamente, causa en los entendimientos confusión y fe muy contraria a la verdad, así porque en las comedias por algunos respectos, ó metafóricamente fingen cosas que los ignorantes las tienen por parte de la historia y beben mala doctrina, así en las cosas sagradas como en las profanas. Otras veces acaece esto por ser los que hacen las comedias por la mayor parte indocitos, y por variar manjar al gusto del pueblo, añaden á las historias cosas improprísimas, y aun indecentes y mal sonantes, y por callar de comedias divinas que hacen en las cuales, se han oído muchos desatinos. En una que pocos días ha se representaba del casamiento del Serenísimo rey D. Juan, padre del Católico rey D. Fernando, le aplican hechos y acciones, no solamente contra la verdad, más aún contra la dignidad de su persona; y á la Serenísima reina, su mujer, liviandades que en persona de mucha menor calidad fueran represibles. Pues la libertad con que en estas comedias se hacen las sátiras á diferentes estados de gentes y naciones, que por fuerza han de engendrar odio contra la española, y más que se les hará creíble que V. M. lo tolera siendo que es en su corte. [...] (67-8)

Argensola's petition, a possible intertext of Cervantes' tongue-in-cheek harangue in my view, is worthy of specific attention because it demonstrates not only the complexity of the controversy
surrounding Golden Age dramatic poetry, but also the centrality of the history play in that context. Indeed, the above-sketch cluster of problems relating to historical drama is present in Argensola’s short but exemplary piece of theater criticism, proto-Enlightenment in argument ("porque no saber las causas de las cosas, y ver los efectos solamente, causa en los entendimientos confusión y fe muy contraria a la verdad"), yet echoing the rhetoric of traditional moral and religious critiques ("añaden à las historias cosas improprísimas, y aun indecentes"; "fingen cosas que los ignorantes las tienen por parte de la historia y beben mala doctrina"). Still, was detraction really the main tenor of the Golden Age discourse on history plays?

The absence of ancient theories of historical drama surely left Golden Age history plays in a precarious position. Nevertheless, historical spectacles ended up not only as some of the period's most popular public entertainment, but also as one of the most prestigious forms of dramatic poetry. Considering the "fuerza de la historia representada", exalted by Lope de Vega in his well-known dedication to the history play La campana de Aragón (Case 203-4), the public success of these spectacles was hardly surprising. But how could a genre without classical pedigree gain critical acceptance in a literary culture that routinely looked to antiquity for its paradigms? How could what Argensola termed the "bad doctrine" of contemporaneous history plays find its way to the Parnassus?

Two intertwined processes worked together to secure this end: first, the negotiation of veracity implicit in Golden Age literary theorists' redefinition of dramatic verisimilitude as plausible imitation of edifying examples. Second, playwrights' parallel development of an array of performative devices aimed at stimulating audience reflection on the nature of history and historical truth. Before turning to Cervantes' pioneering version of this sophisticated poetics in

---

3 I call Cervantes' historical poetics "pioneering" because, together with Juan de la Cueva, he was among the first Spanish (and European) playwrights to write secular historical drama. See also his own (self-flattering) account of
the second part of this article, I will elucidate the conceptual labor of contemporaneous literary theorists that paved the way for the eventual triumph of the Golden Age historical drama at the hands of, primarily, Lope de Vega (McKendrick 2000).

Despite their die-hard classicist reputation, Golden Age literary theorists such as Alonso López Pinciano, Luis de Carvallo, Francisco de Cascales, and Jusepe Antonio González de Salas were well aware of what Cervantes' clergyman had called "disparates y cosas que no llevan pies ni cabeza". They were, in other words, a good deal more “modern” than the erudite, classical attire of their poetical treatises could lead us to believe. Though they certainly appreciated poetic verosimilitude and strongly encouraged the keeping of stylistic decorum, Spanish Golden Age literary theorists were far from dismissive of the more or less fabulous historical representations of their time. Several of them, including Cascales and González de Salas, expressly favoured plays with historical plots. How did they accommodate their personal taste with the fact that history plays in many respects typified all that in the eyes of contemporaneous detractors of dramatic poetry (religious as well as laic) was reprehensible about the stage?

It first proved essential that, in the period's poetics, the history play passed as a tragic subgenre. This meant that its legitimacy was, in principle, raised beyond doubt. In an authoritarian culture like Golden Age Spain, no one would think of challenging anything endorsed by Aristotle who, as everyone was aware, favored tragedy above everything else. Secondly, the passage in the Poetics which treated the difference between history and poetry provided an appropriate basis for elaborating the specific mimetic mode of the history play. As the ancient philosopher explained in chapter 1451 b:

the development of Spanish drama in the prologue to Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses, 1615. (Quoted in Escribano & Mayo 1965: 142-6).
[...] indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in metre or not. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened [τὰ γενόμενα] and the other what might happen [οἷα ἄν γένοιτο]. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious [φιλοσοφῶτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον] than history, because poetry tends to give general truths [τὰ καθόλου] while history gives particular facts. (1451 b [unpaginated internet text]).

Although the dramatist was of course bound by considerations of verisimilitude, he thus had poetic license to alter the facts of reality here and there referring, as he did, to a higher and more comprehensive or more general truth. Aristotle even added that "[f]or this reason poetry is something more scientific [φιλοσοφῶτερον, literally: "more philosophical"] and serious [σπουδαιότερον] than history". As tragic subgenre the history play could therefore conduct its investigations into historical reality without the strictest observation of verisimilitude. Aristotle himself had said as much. Unfortunately, however, he had not specified exactly how far dramatists could go in their pursuit of poetic truth, how much they could play with probability, as it were.

If the 'Ciceronian' "truth to life"4 was the main element dramatic poetry should keep in view – as Golden Age theorists never tired of repeating – how was it then, as Cervantes' canon

---

4 I am referring to the famous dictum that "Comoedia est imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis", attributed to Cicero by Donatus in De comedia 1:22 and cited, variously, by Juan de la Cueva in El viaje de Sannio ("De la vida humana / es la comedia espejo, luz y guía, / de la verdad pintura soberana; / en ella se describe la osadía / de mozo, la cautela de la anciana / alcañiz, las burlas de juglares / y sucesos de hombres populares" (Quoted in Escribano & Mayo 1965: 74); Lope de Vega (Arte nuevo, 49-53; El castigo sin venganza I:929); Juan Caramuel, Primus calamus (Quoted in Escribano & Mayo 1965: 292), among many others. Most importantly in this context, however, it is mentioned Don Quixote I.48 where we hear that: "[...] habiendo de ser la comedia, según le parece a
pointed out, "posible que satisfaga a ningún mediano entendimiento que, fingiendo una acción que pasa en tiempo del rey Pepino y Carломagno, el mismo que en ella hace la persona principal le atribuyan que fue el emperador Heraclio, que entró con la Cruz en Jerusalén, y el que ganó la Casa Santa, como Godofre de Bullón, habiendo infinitos años de lo uno a lo otro; [...] ."

Moreover "fundándose la comedia sobre cosa fingida, [cómo es posible] atribuirle verdades de historia y mezclarle pedazos de otras sucedidas a diferentes personas y tiempos, y esto no con trazas verisímiles, sino con patentes errores, de todo punto inexcusables?" Where was the borderline between poetic license and sheer lies?

Though they of course agreed that history plays should be true to life, contemporaneous theorists differed notably about the nature of verisimilitude. According to experts of Golden Age dramatic theory Federico Sánchez Escribano and Alberto Porqueras Mayo (1971), a clear dividing line can be drawn between, on one hand, the author of the first Aristotelian Golden Age poetics, Alonso López Pinciano, exalting poetic license as long as the result was plausible; and, on the other hand, the weighty early seventeenth-century classicist, Francisco de Cascales who underscored history plays' requirement to adhere to the facts. Indeed, countering Pinciano's striking declaration that the dramatist "no debe estar ligado a las fábulas vulgares, sino fingir y inventar otras de nuevo, que en esto está el mayor primor" (Escribano and Mayo 1965: 74), Cascales showed an attitude not far from Cervantes' canon:

Ya entendéis a Aristóteles, cómo dize que en la tragedia se guardan los verdaderos nombres. Pues éstos no los podemos aver de la acción fingida, sino de la verdadera,
que es la historia. Y como prueba, que en los casos tan graves como son los trágicos (Y lo mismo se entiende en los heroicos), más persuaden y mueven las cosas que sabemos aver pasado y sucedido realmente que no las que fingimos. Y esta verdad es tan clara, que no a menester provocación quando nos faltara la autoridad del Filósofo. Y si la fábula trágica tuviesse acción no hecha ni verdadera, no persuadiría tanto, por ser más dificultoso mover a lástima y terror, que es el fin de la tragedia, que no mover a risa como hacen los cómicos, porque fácilmente nos dexamos llevar a cosas de contento. Y después desto, si las cosas verisímiles nos mueven, ¿quánto más nos moverán las verdaderas? (Cascales "Poesía en genere, tabla segunda" [unpaginated internet text]).

Art will be art, we gather, but if it distances itself too far from the facts it becomes ridiculous; and – needless to say – this goes especially for plays with historical plots where the audience presumably has previous knowledge of what is supposed to pass. However, Cascales reply to Pinciano is not just interesting because it makes visible a fundamental dividing line in Golden Age poetics.

Centering on the tragic genre's quintessential impetus to "move" the spectator ("si las cosas verisímiles nos mueven, ¿quánto más nos moverán las verdaderas?"), the author of Tablas poéticas cuts directly to the core of the period's debate on poetic verisimilitude and the relation between history and dramatic poetry, namely the moral intentionality of truthful imitation or the interrelation of mimesis and catharsis – that manipulation of the audience which contemporaneous Aristotelians took in an unequivocally moral sense. Indeed, theoretical differences over poetic license during this period can largely be seen as disagreements about how best to achieve the spectator's moral purging: Through invention or through adherence to facts.
Whether they endorsed the dramatic poet's freedom of invention or pondered his confinement within the boundaries of the factual, they did so with their eyes firmly fixed on the edifying lessons that the theater was supposed to impart. Even Pinciano, who took pleasure in free artistic invention, emphasized that the end of tragic drama was to "limpiar las pasiones del ánimo" (Escribano and Mayo 1965: 72).

We can say, then, that though they disagreed about the way to achieve it, Golden Age literary theorists agreed that the goal of serious dramatic poetry was to move the audience toward moral purging – that very quality which according to their rather tendentious interpretation of the ancient master's words made tragedy more philosophical and serious than history. Thus, just as was the case with tragicomedy, another contemporaneous whipping boy that was eventually rehabilitated (Kluge 2007a), moralization was key in the theoretical legitimization of Golden Age history plays. As long as they provided plausible imitation of edifying examples, the vicissitudes of the Spanish "comedias históricas" could be tolerated or at least overlooked.

As I have attempted to illustrate here, Golden Age literary theorists thus vindicated what they liked to term "historical tragedy" or "tragedy with a historically based plot" referring to Aristotle's description of the dramatic poet's holistic imitation of history, all the while they – quite un-aristotelically – interpreted the goal of this imitation as an unequivocally moral one. In relation to the history play, theorists can be seen to strike a careful balance between Aristotle's admission of poetic license and Plato's censure of the poets' lies as adopted by Christian adversaries of poetry through the centuries. Golden Age theorists accepted Aristotle's notion, that the imitation of dramatic poetry was not subject to the laws of the real in the strictest sense because it had a higher purpose, on condition that this purpose be understood as moral.
The implied relation between dramatic verisimilitude as method and moral purging as goal was of course essentially on a par with the idea of history as "life's schoolmaster", backbone of the moral historiographical tradition from antiquity through the Renaissance (Momigliano 29-53). In this tradition, history was a treasury of good and bad examples the didactic utility of which depended on credibility and, hence, on verisimilitude. The importance of the "historia magistra vitae" paradigm for Golden Age theory of historical drama becomes wholly explicit in Luis de Carvallo's early seventeenth-century poetics, the dialogical Cisne de Apolo (1602). This treaty, a demonstrable intertext of Cervantes' late work (Stagg: 30-7), devotes an entire section to the "benefit of history", pondering that:

Antes son tantos los prowechos que de las historias se sacan que sera impossible referirlos, que al fin la historia es luz y testimonio de la verdad, maestra de la vida, presidente de la memoria, embaxadora de la antiguedad, por ella venimos en conocimiento de todas las hedades, de todos los lugares, de todas las gentes, de todos los pueblos, de todas las costumbres, y de todos los acaecimientos de todas las cosas." (II: 44).

While Carvallo found it "licito hazer una fiction para traer a proposito de la historia que va contando alguna cosa agenda della y fuera de proposito" (II: 43), he strongly advised against that the poet "dixese alguna mentira falsando la historia, que esto no se permite, que preuertirian el fin de la arte, [...], que como significa nuestro Cisne dar gusto y aprovechar." (II: 44). According to him, the art of history, including the various kinds of poetic historiography:
enseña lo que se deue huyr, y lo que se ha de seguir [...] alaba y ensalça la virtud, y vitupera el vicio [...]. Eterniza finalmente los buenos hechos, para que de ellos aya gloriosa memoria, y los torpes abate para que ni los virtuosos piensen que han de quedar sin premio de alabança, ni los malos confien que han de quedar sin el castigo de la perpetua afrenta." (II: 45).

And so, at the hands of Golden Age literary theorists, the history play was quietly but unmistakably transformed from the epitome of reality falsification into an almost ideal form for teaching the audience those profitable moral lessons around which contemporaneous poetics revolved (Kluge 2007b). Implicit in Pinciano's and Cascales' unequivocal interpretation of catharsis as moral purgation; spelled out in Carvallo's lengthy treatment of the "prouecho" of history, this Golden Age theoretical amalgamation of historical representation and didacticism arguably culminated in the peculiar postscript to Jusepe Antonio González de Salas' 1633 poetics, *Nueva idea de la tragedia antigua, "El teatro escénico a todos los hombres. Ejercitación escolástica"*. Here, Theater recommends humans that they "[...] Aprended, pues, en la Moral Filosofía de mi escuela avisos y escarmientos, donde, como en építome, hallaréis comprendida la condición del hombre, ya que advertirla no podáis en la historia dilatada de sus sucesos" (II: 900).

Golden Age literary theorist's redefinition of dramatic verisimilitude as plausible imitation of moral examples had come full circle. The development that would eventually lead to the late seventeenth-century theorist-playwright Francisco Bances Candamo's enthusiastic statement: "Es [la comedia española] la historia visible del Pueblo, y es para su enseñanza mejor que la historia [...]" (82) was well on track. It accorded well with the transcendental Christian conception of historical events as a kind of playful interludes in the great divine comedy. Bearing
all this in mind we can now, finally, turn to one of the plays that sparked this whole process: Cervantes' *La Numancia*.

*La Numancia*

It is no coincidence that I could begin my discussion of the Golden Age discourse on history plays by quoting Cervantes. As passages throughout his work demonstrate, this author was deeply engaged in the literary and philosophical debates of his time, and, as I will demonstrate, *La Numancia* was – like the "comedia nueva" taken as a whole (Martin) – in several respects intricately intertwined with these debates.

Basically, the play can be understood as a historical drama because it is based on historical events or, more precisely, the description of these events in identifiable historiographical sources. Thus, it depicts the Roman siege of the Celtiberian oppidum of Numantia in the second century B.C.E. as described by Greco-Roman historian Appian (ca. 95-165 AD) in his *Historia romana*. However, while Cervantes uses Appian quite loyally (Shivers), he also introduces invented elements into his history mixing fact with fiction in the above-described manner of his period. Thus, the play includes both historical persons: Scipio Aemilianus or Scipio Minor (185-129 BCE), Gaius Marius (157-86 BCE), and the Numidian king Jugurtha (160-104 BCE); fictive characters: the Numantians Teogenes, Caravino, Marquino, Marandro, Leoncio, and Lira; and allegorical figures: España, Duero, Guerra, Enfermedad, Hambre, and Fama. Act 1 describes Scipio's arrival to the Iberian peninsula where Roman soldiers are demoralized after sixteen years of unsuccessful siege. The General declines the Numantian ambassadors' call for a ceasefire, and the act closes with an allegorical scene in which España and Duero discuss the fate of Numantia and the future of Spain. Act 2 shows

---

5 The *Historia romana* is only partly extant. The story of the destruction of Numantia is recounted in the section *The Foreign Wars*, chapters 13-5. I have consulted Horace White's edition (1899). The *Historia* is translated from the original Greek into Latin by Pier Candido Decembrio (1399–1477), and printed in Venice in 1477.
Numantians taking counsel together and deciding on action. A propitiatory sacrifice is prepared and the audience becomes acquainted with the local lovers, Marandro and Lira. Then a colorful pagan ritual ensues, ending in scandal as a demon surges and snatches away the sacrificial animal. This part of the play ends with the peculiar necromancy scene, in which the magus Marquino resuscitates a corpse to learn the destiny of Numantia. Act 3 presents the increasing desperation of the Numantians who first plot a military confrontation, then decide on the total self-annihilation strategy: to starve themselves to death and destroy the city. The final Act 4 describes the total destruction of Numantia, with death from starvation, fathers killing off their children, and the burning of valuables. The destruction of the oppidum through infirmity, war, and hunger is subsequently explicated allegorically in the dialogue between Enfermedad, Guerra, and Hambre. The last Numantian standing, Variato, throws himself from the tower depriving Scipio of his triumph. The play ends with Fama's surprise declaring the Celtiberian mass suicide a "feliz remate".

This unexpected and paradoxical ending has been acutely described by Edward Friedman as a logical continuation of the play's conceptual victory-in-defeat nexus (80-8); and in another well-argued attempt to make the play's ending agree with the generic conventions of tragedy, Frederick de Armas has proposed that, in La Numancia, the tragedy is not on the Numantians: It is on Scipio, the Roman general who overestimates his own cunning, falls into tragic "hamartia" and is tragically defeated. However, the apotheosizing ending of La Numancia can still bear some scrutiny. As I stated at the outset, further insight into Cervantes' conception of the tragic may be obtained through consideration of the author's engagement with the Golden Age conception of historical drama and the period's idea of history. Concretely, we should take a closer look at Cervantes' careful working of the generic mold of tragedy by means of an acute
and also ambiguous reflection on the nature of history: Pointless suffering? Tragicomic in the manner of Lope de Vega's early historical drama (Lewis-Smith; Morby)? Or human tragedy that will, at some point, be revealed as part of the great divine comedy? Where are the manoeuvres sustaining this modulation of tragedy by means of historical reflection detectable in the play?

**The Necromancy Scene: Tragic History**

The striking scene at the end of Act 2 in which the Numantian magus Marquino resuscitates a corpse before the eyes of his astonished compatriots, Leoncio and Morandro, is key in this respect. It draws attention to itself because it has neither bearing on the development of the plot nor part in the play's verisimilar imitation of historical reality. There is, of course, the possibility that it was meant as a mere entertaining element. Yet, though it must certainly have been the showpiece of La Numancia, placed strategically at the very center of the play, the function of the necromancy scene cannot reasonably have been to simply entertain. It should, on the contrary, I argue, be seen as a carefully orchestrated performative act designed to reach out and activate audience reflection on the nature of history and the truth imparted by historical drama; a play-within-the-play which dramatises the waking of the dead common to necromancy and historical drama and questions the legitimacy of the playwright's 'magical' art; a piece of "secondary dramatisation" (Wurmbach) which discusses whether the pagan art of tragedy is, in fact, the apropriate lens through which to scrutinize historical events, past and present.

---

6 According to Shivers (8), Cervantes would have known from the historical sources he used that the Celtiberians cremated their dead, a fact that logically prevented necromancy. Hence, In contradistinction to other elements of the drama – the characterization of Scipio, for example; or the description of events preceding the destruction of Numantia – the scene is not "realistic".

7 Cervantes appears to have had a general interest in magic which appears time and again in his writings ("El coloquio de los perros", most notably), often as metaphor for writing. According to Kallendorf (194), two important sources in this respect was Pedro de Ciruelo's *Tratado* en el qual se repruevan todas las supersticiones y hechicerías (1530) and Martín de Castañega's *Tratado muy sotil y bien fundado de las supersticiones y hechicerías y vanos conjuros y abusiones* (1529).
Though it has not – to my knowledge – been attempted before, this meta-dramatic reading of the scene is really quite compelling. It is, moreover, directly endorsed by the stage directions which describe Marquinos highly theatrical entrance (in a strange costume, equipped with various props) and clearly underscore Leoncio and Morandro as hidden witnesses to the magus’ act of necromancy – that is, as a stage audience:

(Aquí sale MARQUINO, con una ropa negra de bobací, ancha, y una cabellera negra, y los pies descalzos y en la cinta traerá, de modo que se le vean, tres redomillas llenas de agua: la una negra, la otra teñida con azafrán y la otra clara; y en la una mano, una lanza barnizada de negro, y en la otra, un libro; y viene MILVIO con él, y así como entran, se ponen a un lado LEONCIO y MORANDRO)

(1964: 73).

The scene thus set and the spectators in their place – onstage and in front of the stage, in the theater – the performance can begin. As surrogate historical dramatist, Marquino now begins to awaken a corpse in order to know "[el] fin que ha de tener guerra tan cruda":

MARQUINO

[...]

Quiero que al cuerpo que aquí está enterrado vuelvas el alma que le daba vida, aunque el fiero Carón del otro lado la tenga en la ribera denegrida; y aunque en las tres gargantas del airado Ceberó esté penada y escondida,

---

8 Beginning with Plato’s Republic, bk. X (the soldier Er’s descension into Hades), it is a common place in classical literature that the dead have visionary powers.
salga, y torne a la luz del mundo nuestro;
que luego tornará al escuro vuestro.
Y pues ha de salir, salga informada
del fin que ha de tener guerra tan cruda,
y desto no me encabra o calla nada,
i me deje confuso y con más duda: [...] (1964: 74-5).

It takes the magus quite some time to perform the necromancy because the corpse, we subsequently learn, has no wish to return to historical existence: In the eyes of the dead man temporal life is all suffering and violence and, as such, infinitely much worse than the obscure realm of the Beyond inhabited by "fiero Carón" and the Ceberus with "las tres gargantas". When the corpse finally awakens he has a grim vision to report, according exceedingly well with his negative view of history. As clairvoyant messenger from the "escuro bando" the corpse reveals the "lamentable fin", the "mal infando" of Numantia:

EL CUERPO

[...]
Engañaste si piensas que recibo
contento de volver a esta penosa,
mísera y corta vida que ahora vivo,
que ya me va faltando presurosa;
antes me causas un dolor esquivo,
pues otra vez la muerte rigurosa
triunfará de mi vida y de mi alma;
mi enemigo tendrá doblada palma.
El cual, con otros del escuro bando,
de los que son sujetos a agradarte,
están con rabia en torno, aquí esperando
a que acabe, Marquino, de informarte
del lamentable fin, del mal infando
que de Numancia puedo asegurarte… (1964: 77-8)

In the logic of the necromancer-historical playwright analogy, and in accordance with the contemporaneous understanding of history play as a tragic subgenre, Marquinos 'historical drama' is a clear-cut tragedy. In view of what the theater audience has witnessed thus far, and the previous knowledge it can be presumed to have had of the historical events treated in the play, it seems all plausible that Numantia will suffer a lamentable end and that the adequate dramatic mold of its fate should indeed therefore be tragedy. Hence, upon hearing the corpse's prediction, one half of the stage audience, Morandro, in the grip of terror, exclaims:

MORANDRO
¡Mira, Leoncio, si ves
por dó yo pueda decir
que no me haya de salir
todo mi gusto al revés!
De toda nuestra ventura
cerrado está ya el camino;
si no, dígalo Marquino,
el muerto y la sepultura (1964: 79).
Overcome with the tragic emotions φόβος and ἔλεος [fear and pity],\(^9\) the stage spectator Morandro – and with him quite possibly some among the real life audience (and critics) of Cervantes' play – has succumbed to the pessimistic, negative reading of history represented by the corpse and his ghost writer, Marquino. However, presaging the critique of historical drama that would soon be raised in Spain, the other half of the stage audience, Leoncio, immediately corrects his friend pointing to the illusory or even diabolic nature of necromancy – and, by analogy, historical drama:

**LEONCIO**

¡Que todas son ilusiones,
quimeras y fantasías,
agüeros y hechicerías,
diabólicas invenciones!
No muestres que tienes poca
Ciencia en creer desconciertos;
que poco cuidan los muertos
de lo que a los vivos toca. (ibid.)

Voicing an almost canon-of-Toledo-like position, Leoncio thus tears down the illusory but suggestive tragic vision conjured by the Numantian necromancer-historical dramatist. Tragic spectacles – even when based on historical facts and historical persons\(^{10}\) – are but "ilusiones",

---

\(^9\) The tragic emotions are first mentioned by Aristotle in his well-known definition of tragedy: "Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude—by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions." (*Poetics* 1449b).

\(^{10}\) From an extra-literary perspective the corpse is of course fictive, but within the fiction it is a real life or 'historical' person: A deceased Numantian citizen and not, for instance, a demonic spirit.
"quimeras", and "fantasías". Worse still they can be considered "agüeros", "hechicerías" or indeed "diablólicas invenciones"; and they are certainly only admired by credulous fools possessing "poca ciencia". The fact that tragedies, as Aristotle thought, productively address essential human preoccupations and anxieties (such as the fear of death) here matters little compared to the fact that they are opposite to truth: "Mala doctrina", in the words of Argensola. Thus, the tragic pre-Christian worldview, represented by "Marquino, el muerto y la sepultura" and accepted by Marandro, is countered in this scene by a Platonic-Christian critique that unmask it as illusion, error, and heresy.

This small and easily overlooked exchange following Marquino's necromantic performance should indeed be well noted. As scene audience, Marandro and Leoncio anticipate the thoughts and feelings of the real audience of Cervantes' play. They serve as guides for the spectators who see themselves reduplicated on stage and identify with them. At the same time, they represent diverging views of the waking of the dead performed by the necromancer-historical dramatist. Thus, in the necromancy scene, the historical dramatist Cervantes presents a self-conscious on-stage negotiation of the veracity and legitimacy of historical drama, more specifically historical drama conceived as a tragic subgenre. The result is an eloquent contribution to both the contemporaneous theoretical discussions of history plays and, as I shall subsequently explain, to what may be termed the period's 'anti-depressive' discourse – a contribution, however, which is in both respects more problem-oriented than conclusive in that it embodies contrasting views in the two Numantian friends without finally deciding between them.
Allegorical Passages: Comic History

Like the magician's performance, Cervantes' history play wakes the dead in order to help the living interpret their present (Armstrong-Roche; Irigoyen-García). However, unlike the one presented by Marquino and his corpse, the scenery painted in *La Numancia* is not an unequivocally tragic one. First, through the character Leoncio, as we have seen, the play voices a traditional Platonic critique of the tragic interpretation of history, as subsequently echoed in the Golden Age discourse on history plays. Secondly and more strikingly, at least from the viewpoint of a modern-day audience, the interspersed allegorical scenes largely project a more positive, comic image. Thus, the dialogue between Duero and España at the end of Act 1 begins with the latter's appeal to the "alto, sereno y espacioso cielo" to show compassion and redeem her from suffering:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Alto, sereno y espacioso cielo,} \\
\text{que con las influencias enriqueces} \\
\text{la parte que es mayor deste mi suelo,} \\
\text{y sobre muchos otros le engrandeces,} \\
\text{muévate a compasión mi amargo duelo,} \\
\text{y pues al afligido favoreces,} \\
\text{favoréceme a mí en mi ansia tamaña,} \\
\text{que soy la sola y desdichada España (1974: 50).}
\end{align*}\]

As suggested by her use of unequivocally negative words such as "amargo", "afligido", "ansia", and "desdichada" in the quoted passage, España's view of her destiny is essentially tragic. Recalling the heroines of Greek tragedy or Job, the great 'tragic' figure of the Jewish-Christian tradition, she presents herself as subject to the caprice of uncontrollable and unpredictable
external powers. From her historical viewpoint, a good one hundred thirty-one years before the light of Christ appeared to humankind, "la sola y desdichada España" – steeped in the spiritual darkness and primitive religious beliefs so vividly depicted in the ritual scene in the middle of Act 2 (Maestro 2005; Whitby) – cannot know the glorious future that will eventually befall her. However, for some not immediately obvious reason, her interlocutor, the river Duero, has prognostic powers and reveals to her that:

De remotas naciones venir veo

gentes que habitarán tu dulce seno,
después que, como quiere tu deseo,
habrán a los romanos puesto freno:
godos serán, que, con vistoso arreo,
dejando de su fama el mundo lleno,
vendrán a recogerse en tus entrañas,
dando de nuevo vida a tus hazañas.

Estas injurias vengará la mano
de fiero Atila en tiempos venideros,
poniendo al pueblo tan feroz romano
sujeto a obedecer todos sus fueros;
y, portillos abriendo en Vaticano,
tus bravos hijos y otros extranjeros,
harán que para huir vuelva la planta
el gran piloto de la nave santa (1974: 54).
Taken as a whole the allegorical scene at the end of Act 1 thus by no means simply endorses a tragic reading of history, although it clearly recognizes historical tragedy as a necessary stage in the teleological process leading to salvation. It juxtaposes España's pagan-tragic historical vision with Duero's apotheosizing presentation of Spanish history as moving steadily toward the jubilant zenith represented by the reign of "el Segundo Felipe sin segundo" (1974: 55), that is: Cervantes' own time, Spain's Golden Age. Thus, the allegorical dialogue of the first act in a way encapsulates the play's overall negotiation of the veracity and legitimacy of the tragic reading of history – a negotiation that is finally brought to a close, or so it would at least seem, with the play's second surrogate historical playwright figure's parabasis at the end of the play:

FAMA

Vaya mi clara voz de gente en gente,
y en dulce y suave son, con tal sonido
llene las almas de un deseo ardiente
de eternizar un hecho tan subido.

[...]

Indicio ha dado esta no vista hazaña
del valor que en los siglos venideros
tendrán los hijos de la fuerte España,
hijos de tales padres herederos.
No de la muerte la feroz guadaña,
ni los cursos de tiempo, tan ligeros,
harán que de Numancia yo no cante
el fuerte brazo y ánimo constante.
Hallo sola en Numancia todo cuanto
debes con justo título cantarse,
y lo que puede dar materia al llanto
para poder mil siglos ocuparse:
la fuerza no vencida, el valor tanto,
digno de en prosa y verso celebrarse;
mas pues desta se encarga mi memoria,
dése feliz remate a nuestra historia. (1964: 129-30)

With its already mentioned, much-discussed and apparently paradoxical celebration of the Numantian mass suicide as "feliz remate a nuestra historia", this passage essentially supports a reading of Cervantes' play as something quite different from pure historical tragedy. Indeed, as interpreter of Numantian history, Fama directly opposes the tragic reading of the same historical events that dominated Marquino's necromancy. Whereas the magician's performance represented a 'bad' (tragic; emotive; pagan) staging of history, her vision represents a 'good' (comic; edifying; apotheosizing) history play. Thus, anticipating the general drift of the Golden Age discourse on history plays discussed in the first part of this article, Fama's closing words express a transcendental moral framing of human suffering which partly annuls tragedy by inserting it into a greater scheme: the bird's-eye view. Thus, rephrasing the medieval English historiographical writer John of Salisbury's dry assessment of the death of Cleopatra, we can take Fama's meaning to be that the Numantian mass suicide was "a tragedy perhaps for them, but a comedy for the Spanish Empire,"11 whose transhistorical valor was allegedly founded on exactly the kind of stern moral fiber demonstrated by the Numantians. Like other allegorical passages of the play,

11 See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, bk. III: 10: "She had formerly dominated kings; afterward not to be pitied despite her pitiable plight, she made her exit — a tragedy perhaps for her, but a comedy for the Roman Empire that she had been striving to overthrow."
but clearly augmenting the comic perspective implicit in them, Fama's closing parabasis apparently effectuates the play's modulation from historical tragedy to historical "tragicomedia" (Lewis-Smith) or perhaps even to an "ante terminem"\textsuperscript{12} historical "comedia" in which historical events are beheld disinterestedly or perhaps even comically "sub specie aeternitatis".

The ending of \textit{La Numancia} read this way, the play can be seen to illustrate not only the well-known Christian dialectic of suffering and redemption, or redemption through suffering, but also the element of moral edification that, as I have argued above, eventually paved the way for the critical acceptance of Golden Age historical drama, once the epitome of reality falsification but eventually the perfect example of the Spanish "comedia". The question, however, is whether this concluding comic or moral-transcendental modulation of the Numantian tragedy is in fact the final message of Cervantes' play. I will conclude my article by briefly discussing this question.

\textbf{Problem-Oriented Poetics of History}

I have argued that the fact that both tragic and comic notions of history and historical drama are present in the play point to the author's engagement with the period's general notion of history plays as a form of tragedies. However, I also mentioned that it signalled an 'anti-depressive' engagement with contemporaneous historical pessimism, and I will here finally elaborate a bit more on this point which is crucial to my interpretation of \textit{La Numancia} as a play whose discussion of historical drama is intricately intertwined with a discussion of the nature of history (pointless suffering apt for tragic treatment or imbued with eschatological hope and therefore good comic material?).

\textsuperscript{12} "Ante terminem" because "comedia" was not globally used to describe Spanish plays until after 1600 (Newels 125-52).
It is well established in the critical literature on this period how the second phase of the Spanish Golden Age was seized by a general depression signs of which began to emerge as early as shortly after 1550: recurrent state bankruptcy (1557, 1575) provoked by the costly transatlantic enterprise and exhausting European wars; social desintegration following the impoverishment of the country side due to increased taxation, leading day laborers into vagabondry and picaresque life; ethnic disturbances in the wake of the rebellion of the Alpujarras (1568-71) and other racial and religious conflicts; political depression after the defeat of the Spanish armada in 1588. Cervantes may have been writing his play at the beginning of this historical process, which culminated about hundred years after it began, but as soldier in the Papal army at the Battle of Lepanto subsequently captured by Berber pirates operating in the lawless Spanish Mediterranean; as a tax collector in poverty-stricken picaresque Andalucia; as several times prisoner due to various kinds of problems with corrupt authorities; and as a writer out of favor with rich benefactors and always short of money, he must have been keenly aware of the critical state of affairs in late sixteenth-century Spain. Indeed, contemporaneous history provided suitable material for tragedy, one should think. However, did Cervantes think so?

Considering the critical-reflective attitude that famously characterizes all of his writing, it seems reasonable to assume that, as a starting point, he would have adopted a detached analytical stance toward the historical pessimism, or "desengaño", that was beginning to proliferate among his contemporaries. Beheld from his usual elevated position, the collective depression issuing from historical circumstances would have appeared a fancy not unlike the chivalric idealism examined in the Quijote or the picaresque spirit scrutinized in several of the exemplary novellas – appealing, to be sure, given the circumstances, but still a fancy. However,

13 The idea of the second part of the Golden Age – the Baroque – as a culture of socioeconomic crisis is a critical commonplace powerfully formulated by Maravall (1975). For a more recent contribution, see Flor, and, for a less unequivocally negative discussion of Golden Age decadence, see Abellán and Kluge (2010: 34-42).
neither his apparently ironical approach to cultural and discursive forms, including mental states; nor the fact that he gave the last word in his history play to Fama's expressly anti-depressive discourse should lead us to see Cervantes as a conformist playwright endorsing jubilant Habsburg-Tridentine ideology or as someone who countered tragic insight simply because it was an insubstantial transient feeling.

As the co-presence of comic and tragic notions of history and historical drama in *La Numancia* and the questioning of historical drama in the necromancy scene clearly suggest, his poetics of history was fundamentally ambiguous or what I would term problem-oriented: To some extent it followed the comic, moral-transcendental path that the "preceptistas" would subsequently indicate for historical dramatists; yet in the total economy of the play tragedy plays no insignificant role and is certainly not obliterated altogether to give way to an unequivocally apotheosizing vision of history. Characters who represent the tragic worldview greatly outnumber those ascribing to the comic ditto;\(^{14}\) and the play's flattering references to "el Segundo Felipe sin segundo" (1974: 55) could even suggest that Cervantes' concessions to the comic vision of history was simply the struggling author's attempt to conquer the goodwill of a powerful maecenas by endorsing his cultural-political agenda. Yet the "feliz remate" of the play surely must be taken at face value? Or is it ironical? In the end, the impression is of a play that presents more questions than answers.

\(^{14}\) Thus, the necromancy scene, for example, ends immediately after the exchange between Marandro and Leoncio with the character Milvio's endorsement of the corpse's prophecy, hence, of the tragic interpretation of Numantian history:

\begin{quote}
Nunca Marquino hiciera
desatino tan extraño
si nuestro futuro daño
como presente no viera.
Avisemos de este caso
al pueblo, que está mortal;
mas para dar nueva tal,
¿quién podrá mover el paso? (1964: 79).
\end{quote}
However, the aporetic image thus ultimately projected by *La Numancia* should not necessarily be seen as a sign of Cervantes' inability to engage whole-heartedly with the dramatic formula of the upsurging Lopean "comedia", his "lack of vision" in the field of the theater (McKendrick 2008: 132). Indeed, I think it can be construed as a consciously deivced strategy designed to stimulate audience reflection on the nature of history and historical truth. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, *La Numancia* can be productively read as a self-reflective history play at whose core is an ambiguous negotiation of the nature of historical drama intricately intertwined with an emphatically open-ended discussion of the relation of tragic history to the atemporal and essentially comic cosmic order. In this play, as in so many other Cervantine texts, emulation of a literary form – historical tragedy – becomes an ambiguous inversion of the ideology that it (more or less explicitly) harbors. Literary emulation thus, in effect, becomes small-scale ideology critique, a typical Cervantine technique that would of course find its quintessential expression in the *Quijote* some twenty years later, yet can essentially be found in all of his works. That Cervantes' contention with his period's historical pessimism should spill over into a critical engagement with the contemporaneous conception of historical drama as a tragic subgenre seems only natural for a man whose work was a virtual encyclopedic traversal of Western literary forms and modes as so many media of human experience; a man, in other words, whose take on historical reality was emphatically literary and who, more than any other writer, arguably, tended to blur the boundaries between life and fiction.

University of Southern Denmark

---

15 *Pastorale; chivalric literature; Italian "novella" and "novela morisca"; satire; travel literature and epic; dream literature; hagiographical literature; lyrical poetry; picaresque; Byzantine romance; "entremeses"; comic and tragic drama – to mention but a few (to which must be added various theoretical discourses).
Works Cited


Cascales, Francisco de. *Tablas poéticas*. Edición digital a partir de la de Murcia, Luis Beros, 1617, y cotejada con la edición crítica de Benito Brancaforte. Espasa Calpe, 1975,


Cotarelo y Mori, Emilio. *Bibliografía de las Controversias sobre la Licitud del Teatro en España*. Real Academia Española, 1904.


Flor, Fernando R. *Barroco, representación e ideología en el mundo hispánico (1580-1680)*. Cátedra, 2002.


Mariana, Juan de. *De spectaculis*. Antonius Hieratus, 1609.


Morey, Tracy Crowe. *Between History and Fiction, the Early Modern Spanish Siege Play*. Peter Lang, 2010.


