

THE HOMERIC LINEAGE OF LAUTARO IN ERCILLA'S *LA ARAUCANA*

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Abstract

Within the highly structured literary periods of the European Renaissance and the Spanish Golden Age, Alonso de Ercilla relied heavily on imitation of classical form to both legitimize and inspire the workings of his poem, *La Araucana*. As a part of the fiercely competitive body of work accompanying the colonial movement through the New World, this poem was expected to adhere to very specific ideals for the church, the Spanish crown, and the highly biased audience across Europe that would judge it. Therefore, to sell the idea of a serious threat to the Spanish conquistadors, Ercilla used individual heroes to raise the opposition to epic proportions that could feasibly hinder such a superior military force. Furthermore, he employed the virtuous Hector from Homer's *Iliad* in his character of the Mapuche war-chief Lautaro to elevate him to formidable stature, linking the two heroes through epithet, similar trials of love at war, and their ultimate downfalls through hubris. This example of *imitatio*, one of many in the poem, was important for the character's conceptual development as well as for the critical reception of an aspiring Renaissance epic. Read within this context, Ercilla's challenges to contemporary archetypes and the prejudices of his audience become increasingly more clarified, especially those regarding the image of the ineptitude and barbarism of the natives of the New World. Additionally, it establishes a link between *La Araucana* and the secondary epic tradition started by Lucan's *Pharsalia*, offering further explanation both for commonplace criticisms of the poem's structure and for the arguable digression of the poem from its boldly-stated mission of Spanish glorification.

1. STRUGGLING WITH TRADITION

Roberto González Echevarría once wrote that history serves the same function in Latin American narrative that epic themes do in Spanish literature (González Echevarría 6). As an early work of the New World encounter, Don Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* bridges the gap between the Latin American and Spanish literary practices and creates a precedent for the former while relying on the epic themes of the latter. First published in 1569, *La Araucana* is a distinctive product of the European Renaissance and Spanish Golden Age, and thus its success in these literary epochs required a considerable degree of tradition to which Ercilla was expected to adhere. Classical form and the method of *imitatio* were commonly perceived as prerequisites for a work of high aspiration and formed a critical foundation for poets of the Renaissance epic tradition such as Camões, Tasso, and Dante before them. In order to be received with the same authority in his work, Ercilla imbued *La Araucana* with many intricacies of this tradition, especially classical imitation. Yet in order to preserve the purpose of his poem, he was forced to deviate from many of the finer details that appear equally prevalent in the tradition and among his contemporaries, most notably the principles of focusing on and exalting the ultimately “victorious” figures in the action.

La Araucana's purpose, Ercilla claims in his opening lines, is to tell of “el valor, los hechos, las proezas, / de aquellos españoles esforzados, / que a la cerviz de Arauco no domada/ pusieron duro yugo por la espada” (“the courage, the deeds, the feats, / of those brave Spaniards, / who, to the neck of untamed Arauco, / by the sword placed the tough yoke¹.”) However, such a task appears to be impossible, as Ercilla claims immediately afterward, without also praising the

¹ *La Araucana* I.5-8; all Spanish translations included are the author's own work.

“memorable undertakings” of the people the Spaniards meant to suppress. In a line that Cervantes would later imitate², Ercilla states his reasoning: “Pues no es el vencedor más estimado/ de aquello en que el vencido es reputado” (“For the conqueror is no more esteemed/ than that for which the conquered is reputed to be³”). As readers of his poem would soon discover, Ercilla’s mission was one that would either defy his country’s proud image or its historical record as it developed through their South American exploits. The Spanish consciousness of its own action dictated that success ought to be guaranteed due to Spain’s superior military and superior moral ground as the civilizer and baptizer of the world. However, by the middle of the sixteenth century, this great Spanish war machine found itself beaten back by the same subjects that its ideologies confirmed were inferior in so many ways, a view originating as far back in the discourse of the conquests as the initial observations of Columbus (Pastor Bodmer 215). Faced with this clash of ideology and inspiration, Ercilla used *La Araucana* to depict the Chilean natives as heroic of the Western epic quality while still labeling them otherwise; and whereas he concedes enough to the Spanish to allow for publication of his work, it is not their story Ercilla was writing.

2. SPAIN’S UNLIKELY ADVERSARIES

The primary obstacle for Alonso de Ercilla to overcome with *La Araucana* was why the Spanish conquistadors, supposedly on a divine mandate to civilize the world and already so successful elsewhere, could find such ferocious adversaries in such a remote place. The Mapuche, or Araucanos, of southern Chile were among the first to deny a lasting, permanent Spanish conquest, a feat that in the end was unmatched by both the Incan and Aztec empires, even though both were vastly more advanced and controlled much larger realms of influence. To

² *Don Quijote* II.14: “Y tanto el vencedor es más honrado/ cuanto más el vencido es reputado.”

³ *La Araucana* I.15-16

blame this on unfamiliar landscape and inferior numbers does not provide sufficient explanation; the Spanish had famously overcome both of those obstacles in their previous conquests. However, the Mapuche succeeded where others failed by developing an understanding of Spanish technique, adapting those practices to fit their own, and then pulling all their other advantages into a blend of fighting that beat back the conquistadors again and again (Padden 105). Definitive conquest became impossible because the Mapuche refused to grant the Spanish the opportunity for a definitive battle, instead only fighting when the situations were suitable and then lying low to regroup and wait again for another opportune moment to strike.

Additionally, the Mapuche held were driven to fight in such a way that startled the Spaniards and captivated Ercilla's attention, but this fearsome attribute alone would not be enough to convince the poet himself, the royalty of Spain, or the Spanish audience that such a received defeat should be warranted. Certainly he could not state that the natives had begun using Spanish weaponry and strategies against them; being defeated was enough of a blow to his country's proud image. Instead, Ercilla employed the concept of the "noble savage" in his depiction of the Mapuche, making what he deemed acceptable sacrifices in a true depiction of the native culture to reinforce what he saw to be their more transcendent features (Pastor Bodmer 224). However, as he elevated the status and spirits of the natives in his poem, he isolated his work from many other colonial discourses. Before him, Bartolomé de las Casas was one of the few Spaniards campaigning for the humanity of the Native Americans, but Casas's platform was for a "gentle savage," rich in morality but just as innocent and welcome to Spanish ideas and control (Pastor Bodmer 214). Ercilla endowed the natives with a deep-rooted sense of honor, very similar to that of the Spaniards, but also matched that virtue with a ferocious yearning for

freedom that could justify any means, and as such, the Mapuche of *La Araucana* were quickly becoming a worthy, formidable, and unique adversary.

Still, the distinction between literary and historical is critical. From the moment Ercilla began plotting his epic, the natives he immortalized were immediately separated from the ones that inspired him. This work of literature could not extol such heroic deeds as the poet intended without converting them to Western neoclassical models. This was partly because the epic genre describing such figures entails a certain archetypal hero and also because Ercilla as a Western poet had his own culturally-defined concepts of what a hero should resemble. Many of his contemporaries, including Luís Vaz de Camões and Torquato Tasso, were striving to imitate the “masters of the past,” and so Ercilla’s participation in this trend would lend credibility to his work while also providing a foundation for one of his most critical projects of the entire poem: creating the other.

Bearing great resemblance to warriors of antiquity, the Mapuche share many similar customs to the Greeks and Romans, most notably their extensive rhetoric, their pursuit and compulsion for glory, and their celebratory games. The devotion to the art of war shown by the Mapuche lends itself well to images of Sparta, while the stature imposed by Ercilla on the choicest warriors in the group allows for these natives to transcend the boundary into becoming epic heroes. As mentioned before, not only was this an unlikely choice of opponent for the most powerful army of the time, but the image ascribed to them was as unheard of as the deeds they undertake in the poem.

3. INVENTING A HERO

Considering that in sixteenth-century Spanish epic poetry how an individual could be equally as important and influential as the whole of his army, there would need to be a hero of still greater stature to drive this frenzied foe. Acting as Spain's chief adversary in part one of his work, Ercilla placed this emphasis on Lautaro, a Mapuche war captain of fierce resolve and particular success in the early parts of the war with the Spanish (Fernandez 5). Among the Mapuche, known for their courage and cunning, Lautaro epitomized both qualities. However, considering his role as a Native American warrior, very few literary characters matched the profile, especially within the classical traditions of Greece and Rome. Consequently, Ercilla sought a figure with the same reputation and renown that he wanted to instill in his version of Lautaro through the mediation of the increasingly established role of the Renaissance hero. His character would have to be someone above the limits of mere humanity, with a deep-seated desire for honor, an uncommon degree of integrity, and the fortitude to withstand the suffering that almost always accompanies the efforts of such a hero (Di Cesare 62).

Though Lautaro has been related to several figures in the classical Western traditions, among them the highly regarded figures of Rome's Cincinnatus and Sparta's Leonidas⁴, Ercilla's ultimate choice was Hector, the prince of Troy immortalized in Homer's *Iliad* for the valiant defense of his doomed homeland. Despite criticisms of the waning influence of Homer at this time⁵, critics have noted many other Homeric episodes in Ercilla's verse⁶, and the attributes, actions, and consequences of these two heroes are enough to prove that the similarities between them are not merely coincidence, nor are their ultimate functions in their respective narratives, including but not limited to the roles of doomed yet admirable would-be saviors.

⁴ (Pierce, Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga 99)

⁵ "The impact of Vergil rather than Homer... made a substantial difference" (Di Cesare 66).

⁶ (Pierce, Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga 102)

Lautaro, the “son of Pillan,” is a wise, creative leader with intimate understanding of his enemy and who fights with unparalleled ferocity. By many accounts, he was among the most fearsome of all the Mapuche⁷, and within the poem Ercilla shows Lautaro’s knowledge of his notoriety and his compulsion to spread that renown. Similarly, Hector, the “son of Priam,” fights as a hero unmatched by his fellow Trojans, defending his city with a well-crafted military technique and an equally impressive degree of confidence. Like Lautaro, he is feared greatly by the foreigners seeking to conquer his homeland and destroy his people’s way of life, although his quest for glory seems to compete with his other objectives in certain instances.

A Fitting Title

Referred to in several instances as a “tamer of horses,” Hector may have been common among his fellow Trojans, and the epithet itself may be less noteworthy within the classical tradition, but it carries a much greater significance when comparing his character to Lautaro. When the Spaniards arrived at the New World, they brought with them many European advantages, including all sorts of military weapons and armor; but above all, they brought the horse. No creature resembled the horse in the Americas, and so the Spaniards’ knowledge and use of this animal gave a considerable upper hand to the conquistadors. However, the success of the Spanish cavalry was much less noteworthy in Chile than it had been in other areas of the New World. Not only did the Mapuche manage to avoid most confrontations that favored the mounted attacks of their enemies, but they also learned to gain this advantage for themselves later on in the war (Padden 110).

⁷“...y al yanacona Alonso, que después se llamó Lautaro, y salió en ser belicoso más que indio, porque les dio la orden de pelear, le dieron la parte que él quiso tomar” (Góngora Marmolejo Ch. XIV).
“el famosísimo indio Lautaro... Digo, pues, que se revistió este espíritu en un indio llamado Lautaro... éste ha sido la total destrucción de Chile, éste la causa de tantas mortandades que deben de pasar de dos millones” (Lobera Ch. XLIII).

Early in his campaign through Chile, Spanish captain Don Pedro de Valdivia took as his servant a young native who would eventually come to wander through the camp and learn the Spanish customs, most importantly their art of breaking, training, and riding horses⁸. Soon after the war between the Spanish and Mapuche broke out, that “yanacona,” or friendly Indian, ran away, only to appear at the head of an army and calling himself Lautaro⁹. Using the knowledge he gained from his time among the Spaniards, Lautaro himself became a “tamer of horses,” and after his return, he bestowed this valuable information upon his people, thus neutralizing the upper hand of the Spanish mounted attack by implementing such strategies of diversion and choice of terrain as well as by creating the new threat of a functioning New World cavalry (Padden 111).

The Hero in Love

However, this historical link, though pertinent, would not have been a sufficient foundation to legitimize the defeat of a superior Spanish army. Instead, Ercilla would have to digress from the historical accuracy of his work and dig deeper into the characters of both Hector and Lautaro, coming at last to relate them through similar endeavors in the trials of love at war. As he claims in his poem¹⁰, this was not originally his intention, but as the poem moved along, the use of such a thing as love was unavoidable for Ercilla.

Western audiences, including the Spanish, would be very familiar with the interactions of Hector and his wife, Andromache, during the course of the *Iliad*. In fact, there is evidence to

⁸ “Lautaro, que era caballerizo de Valdivia y actualmente le tenía los caballos que remudaba” (Lobera Ch. XLIII).

⁹ “Estando todos juntos tratando qué orden tendrían para pelear con Valdivia, se levantó de entre ellos un yanacona llamado Alonso [que después se llamó Lautaro], que había sido criado de Valdivia y le había servido de mozo de caballos. Estando atentos a lo que decía, en voz alta les comenzó a decir que los cristianos eran mortales como ellos y los caballos también, y se cansaban cuando hacía calor más que en otro tiempo alguno...” (Góngora Marmolejo Ch. XIV).

¹⁰ *La Araucana* I.1-4: “No las damas, amor, no gentilezas/ de caballeros canto enamorados,/ ni las muestras, regalos y ternezas/ de amorosos afectos y cuidados” (“Not of ladies, love, not of the splendors/ of gentlemen in love do I sing./ nor of the displays, gifts, and tenderness/ of those full of love, affected and concerned”)

suggest that not only was the *Iliad* being read frequently and with great influence in Spain at this time, but it was also being read with similar effects in the New World while Ercilla was travelling through Chile (Jones 45). As one of the most memorable of the hero's appearances throughout the epic, Hector's parting dialogue with Andromache at the end of Book VI is a critical moment in the course of the hero's actions. Hence the language of this discourse was something that Ercilla could not help but imitate in his own work.

Seeking some comfort from her husband for her mounting fears, Andromache starts the dialogue "weeping freely now, clung to [Hector's] hand¹¹." She urges him to consider their "helpless son" who would be orphaned by Hector's death on the battlefield, and laments equally of how "nothing but torment" will be left to her once "they soon kill [him] off." Her fears are well justified, especially with the knowledge that Troy is destined to fall within the next year of this episode and that Hector is the primary obstacle preventing that. However, his wife's fears have little effect of deterring Hector from his duty:

And tall Hector nodded, his helmet flashing:
"All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.
But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy
And the Trojan women trailing their long robes
If I would shrink from battle now, a coward."¹²

Notice Hector's concern for his reputation and for the perceptions that others would have of his desertion. Certainly such an action would not be becoming of an epic warrior-prince, and it is with this image that Hector seems to be infatuated, along with his swelling pride that is increasingly giving conviction to his campaign and simultaneously propelling him closer towards his fate. This exchange does not necessarily imply that Hector has no regard for the fate of his wife and son, but rather that he has come to recognize the call to defend his city as his own hero-

¹¹ (*Iliad* VI, 480-490)

¹² (*Iliad* VI, 521-525)

quest and he sees very little choice but to accept it. Such high regard for public opinion appears to be equally as important to Hector's principles as his patriotism and courage, implying that how his actions are perceived carry the same weight as the results of the actions themselves (Greene 515).

Stemming from this concern for the opinion of his peers is another integral facet uncovered in this dialogue: Hector's sense of duty. His exchange with his wife shows that while his family is important, his people as a whole deserve his service, and it is to the latter that he grants his deepest commitment (Hooker 122). Failure to fulfill his service to the Trojans would yield an inescapable sense of shame, which he cites both in this dialogue and in his final words before he is slain by Achilles (Hooker 123). It is the combination of this fear of shame and thirst for glory that propels Hector, but it is his duty that defines him, both as a character and as the hero amongst the enemy.

For Ercilla to sufficiently imitate Hector's character in Lautaro, he would at least have to imitate some of his memorable moments. The following represents one such moment: as no one stands up to challenge him in open combat, he cannot convincingly crown a Spaniard with the role of Achilles, and so he would have to utilize other character foils to demonstrate the workings of his creation. Andromache serves this function for Hector in the *Iliad*, so fittingly it is Guacolda, Lautaro's wife, who fulfills this duty in *La Araucana*.

The latter pair's parting exchange begins with strikingly similar motions, with Guacolda "'hanging on the neck of Lautaro.'" She likewise cites her "torment" when she is parted from her husband, again evoking Andromache's pleas. However, while the Trojan wife used her personal pleas for the sake of herself and her son, the Mapuche wife here directs that same supplication to

send her husband back into battle to assist their people¹³. She acknowledges the looming fate to befall her husband, but rather than fear it like her Homeric counterpart, she delivers her message in spite of it. This strongly conveys not only the devotion to the group over the individual that Ercilla envisioned for his depiction of the Mapuche, but also the courage that he sought to capture in his illustration of the other.

However, such an order coming from anyone, let alone his wife, should enrage a truly western hero of this time. His name and his reputation are synonymous with his worth, so any doubt cast upon that image detracts from his heroic stature and his significance. Lautaro is not an identical match to the typical Western hero, but his semblance is enough to carry over into his emotional reaction to his wife's pleas:

El bárbaro responde: “Harto claro
Mi poca estimación por vos se muestra:
¿En tan flaca opinión está Lautaro
Y en tan poco tenéis la fuerte diestra
Que por la redención del pueblo caro
Ha dado ya de sí bastante muestra?
¡Buen crédito con vos tengo, por cierto
Pues me lloráis de miedo ya por muerto!”

[The barbarian responds: “quite clearly
Your small estimation for me is shown:
Is Lautaro held in such a meager opinion
And do you hold so low this strong right hand,
That for the redemption of this dear people
Has given already so much evidence?
I have good credit with you, for certain
Since out of fear you already mourn me for dead!”]¹⁴

Notice that the same obsession with his public reputation is present in Lautaro's response as it was in Hector's. However, this rebuttal comes as a defense of that reputation, rather than a

¹³ *Araucana* XIII, 417-432

¹⁴ *Araucana* XIII, 433-440

defense of his motives. Also, it appears that Lautaro, not Guacolda, is the one more troubled by the hero's imminent doom, considering that some unmentioned suggestion on Lautaro's part must have proceeded and spurred such a dialogue over his course of action and that now he must refortify his image by transferring such doubts onto his wife. Again recalling the model of Hector and Andromache, the hint of desertion plays a significant role in the overall dispositions of the characters throughout the conversation in the *Iliad*, and with such a similar episode occurring here in *La Araucana*, an omitted insinuation by Lautaro is not a far stretch.

Meanwhile, the apparent reversal of roles, the hero into the coward and the lover into the confident assurer, should not be read as Ercilla's implication of cowardice in the image of the Mapuche warrior. Rather, unlike the traditional model equating both the female archetype and emotion to weakness, Ercilla's heroic dialogue suggests the unavoidable human potential to succumb to mounting fears and the occasional necessity for a helping hand in achieving a hero's crowning moment. Disregarding the dangers or being unaware of their existence would not aid to Lautaro's heroic stature, but would detract from it, especially through the archetypal Renaissance hero model that Ercilla used. These characters are revered for the magnitude of their actions, but the true heroic awe that these actions render comes from their attempt despite the hero's full awareness of his mortality and flaws (Di Cesare 65). By struggling with his fate, Lautaro only fits his suggested profile more, and by returning to battle despite that fate, he earns his heroic designation. His doubts become necessary, and his limitations and the unattainable nature of his goals lend a sense of epic to his role in the poem that would otherwise be impossible.

Born to Die

Lautaro's death, like Hector's, then becomes a necessity, both to immortalize the hero as a martyr for his own cause and to appease the audience, pulling for a continually disgraced,

demoralized army that has fought more under a banner of fate than bravery. The summation of all the seemingly impossible victories, each more defiant of some invisible natural order than the last, allows a festering of pride in these heroes to infect the rationality that had previously granted their success. Indeed, much of their pride is warranted and well deserved, but for each character there comes a particular significant moment where his pride outflanks his potential and he crosses that dangerous border into hubris. Their certainty of success thus becomes their downfall. For Hector, this hubris comes after a great victory in Book VIII of the *Iliad*. In prideful contempt and anticipation, Hector commands his troops to remain outside the protection of Troy's city walls to camp on the field of battle. The Trojan fully expects the morning to bring forth the ultimate defeat of his homeland's assailants, but as the subsequent books detail, this daring act not only brings heavy defeat to the Trojan army but also costs Hector his life.

For Lautaro, the crossing over into hubris comes not on the heels of victory but rather with the pains of recent defeat. Enraged and emboldened, Lautaro vows to bring about the deaths of every Spaniard alive within the following year or die in the process¹⁵. To this point, Lautaro's army has found great success against the haughty Spaniards, and much to the confusion and dismay of the Spanish audience, it appears that Lautaro and his Mapuche army will be orchestrating even more bloodshed than before. These "barbarians," supposedly primitive, gentle and easy to subdue, have thus far not only proven equally if not more valorous than the Spaniards, but have also conducted themselves with the virtue and integrity both lacking from and desired by their would-be conquerors.

¹⁵ *La Araucana* XII.320-327: "Yo juro al infernal poder eterno/(Si la muerte en un año no me atierra)/ de echar de Chile el español gobierno/ y de sangre empapar toda la tierra;/ ni mudanza, calor, ni crudo invierno/ podrán romper el hilo de la guerra/ y dentro del profundo reino oscuro/ no se verá español de mí seguro"
["I swear by the infernal everlasting power/ (if death does not destroy me in one year)/ to shed from Chile the Spanish government/ and drench all the land with blood;/ not change, nor heat, nor raw winter/ will be able to break the thread of war/ and within the profound dark reign,/ no Spaniard will be safe from me."]

However, Ercilla inevitably must represent the death of his established hero. Whether it is for political, historical, or plot-driven reasons is inconsequential-- Lautaro must die-- but at least for the sake of continuity in Lautaro's heroic profile, the death must be a suitable death. A traditional conception would put such an event at the end of a mighty duel or battle, something memorable and not without a dramatic charge against fate on the part of the doomed hero. But this is not how Lautaro dies. In almost every examinable way, Lautaro's death comes as the anticlimax of his illustrious, rebellious campaign. If Hector's death in Book XXII of the *Iliad* was to be the criterion for a proper poetic tribute to the end of a hero's life, then Lautaro can hardly be considered one himself. After running around the walls of Troy with Achilles at his heel, Hector ultimately turns to face his assailant, charging despite his swiftly arriving demise in what will be the final duel for both the hero himself and for the poem. Fighting continues, but not for long, as the epic will finish with the funeral for the fallen Trojan. Contrastingly, Lautaro's death comes under no banner of omens or ascending action-- he is killed by an arrow at the beginning of Canto 14 of 38. Not at the end of the epic, nor at the end of the first installment, nor even at the end of a fight. He hears something outside his tent, runs out, and is instantly shot dead by an arrow. By Classical standards, this is among the most pathetic ways to perish at war. Nonetheless, it is how Ercilla chooses to complete the martyrdom of the principal novel character of his epic thus far.

An important aspect of this section of the epic to recognize is that Ercilla does not use this moment to glorify anyone among the Spaniards. Someone among them has just slain arguably one of the greatest heroes among the enemy, yet they still remain faceless. Ercilla claims to be praising these soldiers, yet when the moment arises, he cannot elevate any one of them to such a level that they might be able or brave enough to kill Lautaro. The result is a twist

of fate for the Mapuche hero that denies him a memorable death, but what is denied of the Spaniards, especially in this epic where their heroics are so scattered and untitled, is far greater.

4. ERCILLA'S EPIC SECESSION

In many ways, Lautaro's seemingly unheroic end is indicative of many aspects of *La Araucana* as a whole, especially when considering his character lineage. By classical comparison, Lautaro should be the one to carry his people as close to liberation as possible, and the fighting should quickly turn after his death. Indeed, all but one of the Mapuche are slaughtered in the sneak attack on their camp by the Spanish, but two thirds of the poem has yet to describe the further endeavors of this people who should on many accounts be leaderless now. Yet Caupolicán still leads them, as do Rengo and Galbarino. Either way, Lautaro's death is not meant to amplify the multitude of leadership among the Mapuche. The point remains that as an echo of Hector, his character should have been killed famously and arduously. His premature, rather unheroic death is one of many reversed or misshapen epic features throughout the poem, and as his similarity to Hector demonstrates the virtue of the enemy, his contrasting role despite such a persona shows the beginning of a dissenting trend of *La Araucana* as a whole against the primary epic tradition and its benefactors, namely, the establishment, its supporters, and the names of those who have contributed to it.

The Second-Class Epic

Ercilla was by no means the first to attempt this break from tradition. In Ancient Rome, as Vergil's *Aeneid* was being hailed as the national epic of the empire, the poet Lucan wrote a "counter-epic," titled *De Bello Civico* and commonly known as the *Pharsalia*. It was written to reject every possible poetic mechanism contributing to the essence of the *Aeneid* and, by association, all that the *Aeneid* stood for. It was Vergil who transformed the epic into a political

tool, and the primary goal of the *Pharsalia* was to denounce by form the politics of the establishment that cherished Vergil's achievement (Quint 133).

Such an effort is noble, at least by modern standards, and retrospectively there may seem to be few complications to such a project; but essentially, Lucan was trying to denounce the glory of Rome, and in his time, that was treasonous and extremely life-threatening. In fact, Lucan was forced to commit suicide because of his entanglement with the Emperor Nero's politics. Moreover, attempting to deny one's culture is made infinitely more difficult because of one's own participation in that culture itself, and this obstacle is seen manifested especially through the criticisms of Ercilla. As a Catholic Spaniard, he was obligated to portray a certain depiction of his subject, but having been raised in that world, he inevitably took on many of that culture's values and perceptions, and so his criticisms could only extend as far as his awareness of his own culture and country and his willingness or desire to deviate from both of those.

Lucan could not complete this separation; hence he wrote an epic. It may not have been the same type of epic, and indeed his work and those of his imitators have inherited a second-class reception compared to the true imitations of Vergil such as the *Lusiadas* or *Gerusalemme Liberata*, but still it was an epic (Quint 133). Ercilla also wrote an epic, similar in many ways to that of both Lucan and Vergil, but his was further complicated by his heavy implication of evolving Renaissance epic form. His poem has been called "versified history"¹⁶, the same critique applied to Lucan's work, and it has also been rejected as an epic by many scholars, citing predominantly his insufficient use of the supernatural, the chronological beginning to his poem rather than *in medias res*, and his overly heightened regard for historical rather than epic interpretations of the events his poem describes (Pierce 100).

¹⁶ See "The Epic: An Essay" by Lascelles Abercrombie, 1923.

However, Ercilla wrote the poem as a participant in this genre, and so the combination of that declaration, the implementation of many characteristically epic constructions, and the elevation of a continually defeated enemy to the level of its “conquerors” suffices to include the poem in Lucan’s rebellious subset of epic poetry. It is important to note that within this consideration of the poem’s classification as an alternative epic form, it is still possible for Ercilla to have drawn from predecessors such as Homer. By imitating Homer at least to some degree, he is focusing that much of his work on the foundations of the epic that precede Vergil. This can only help in his poetic deviation, regardless of the motives.

Abandoning Vergil

Meanwhile, the majority of readers still associate *La Araucana* with a Vergilian heritage, and this assessment is inescapably true to a certain degree. As the most influential contributor to the evolution of the genre since Homer, Vergil created the new definition of epic poetry. His verse provided a foundation for anyone wishing to continue in that tradition, and in many ways it limited how those devices could be used and what they would imply (Quint 134). A poet in this genre cannot deny all of Vergil’s style because it is too much ingrained into the fabric of the genre itself, just as much as his support of the establishment is only so refutable by his literary descendants because they too are contributing members of that very establishment.

However, this is not to say that only Vergilian verse can constitute epic verse, nor that a poem of aspiration must necessarily imitate all aspects of Vergil’s work. Even critics of Ercilla who claim his verse fails to attain epic stature cannot deny many basic epic qualities of his poem, as well as a distinct resonance of Vergil’s impact (Pierce, *Some themes and their sources in the Heroic Poem of the Golden Age* 97). Nonetheless, it is the greater influence of Lucan and his digressive, cyclical model of “resistance to narrative teleology” and the voices of the triumphant

that holds more sway on Ercilla's verse and ultimately determines the hero of his poem (Quint 160).

For instance, consider how Ercilla uses the Homeric Hector for Lautaro over his counterpart in the *Aeneid*, Turnus. The two are similar in that both take a pre-emptive stance in the defense of their invaded homeland, and that both also suffer an apparent abandonment by the favor of fortune towards the end of their campaigns. But this would still not be far from the character description of Hector, on whom it has been suggested that Vergil himself based his Turnus (Anderson). Beyond this preliminary proximity of character, the conceptual Turnus begins to deviate from the image that Ercilla seems to have had in mind. While Lautaro and Hector were renowned and feared for their ferocity in battle, Turnus also had the notoriety for an impulsive rage and is often depicted as someone worth hating. Although his character is noble, this prince of the Latins is given a dark, barbarian personage that is enhanced by analogies that liken him to a traitor of Rome. Vergil knew his audiences would pick up on these analogies, and he needed them to find a reason to hate Turnus in order to further the idea of Roman destiny (Garstang 55).

Ercilla, on the other hand, was obligated to label his character directly as a barbarian to keep with the rules of the institution that he and his work were a part of, but actually depicting him as barbaric was another matter. While Homer used Hector to show the price of war and the nobility of the enemy, Vergil created a character of seemingly similar stature to inspire hatred of the opposition, and it was this instinctive hatred that Ercilla sought most to dispel. Yes, he is using the same technique as Vergil, but it is one that was neither invented by Vergil nor was it used to the same effect.

The key point remains that just as it was a conscious decision for Ercilla to model his Lautaro after Hector, it was also a conscious decision to avoid modeling him after Hector's Vergilian derivative.

Otherwise Inspired

This extended deviation from the praising of the establishment has raised many questions as to why the poet would go through with such a work. One possible explanation rests in the nature of the story he was telling. The continued struggle of the Mapuche lends itself easily to a subversive, anti-establishment epic of Lucan's variety, with its repetitive non-endings, its lapses into romantic asides, and its inability to accept the task of praising the whole of the institution in which it is written (Quint 160). The story of the Mapuche fighting long after defeat and continually stunning a Spanish army otherwise unbeaten in the New World was one that could not easily conform to the teleological conquest-driven Vergilian epic, but it was that story that inspired Ercilla to write, not of Spain's eventual coming-to-terms with a group of savages that they could not subdue.

Soldiers and Scribes

A separate explanation may be found in a consideration of the politics of writing at the time of Ercilla and his contemporaries. Heavy documentation followed every step of the conquest, and for every ounce of power a conquistador aspired to with his military campaigns, he relied upon the scribes and chroniclers of the quests to portray him in a worthy manner. The entire enterprise of writing became a quest in itself, seeking enfranchisement from higher authorities through all manners of charismatic appeal and using the previous narratives of their times to find their own voice in the scramble for acceptance, both for their careers and the ideals

of their work (González Echevarría 11). As a writer in the Spanish Golden Age, Ercilla was no different than many other writers in many of these respects. He dedicates his work to the king of Spain, Phillip II, and portrays him as one of the few glorious Spaniards of the work. Such a move was common even before his time, as Vergil wrote his *Aeneid* at the request of and for the image of his friend Octavian Augustus, the emperor of Rome, but unlike Vergil, Ercilla was in a constant political scramble to have his own version of the same story be accepted by that higher authority, and against him at many points of this were several of his own countrymen, particularly his own commanding officer.

It is known that García Hurtado de Mendoza almost hung Alonso de Ercilla for a very minor infraction, and that the two scarcely accomplished more than coexistence (Melczer 219). Such a relationship would certainly have incited a poet like Ercilla to portray him and perhaps a few of his closer supporters in a negative light or more simply to remove most of their actions from the course of the war entirely, and nothing could damage the aspirations of a conquistador more than his own omission from the tale. Hurtado went as far as commissioning the publications of two separate accounts of the war in Chile, Pedro de Oña's poem, *Arauco Domado*, and Pedro Mariño de Lobera's history, *Crónica del Reino de Chile*, which was rewritten by a Jesuit scribe through Hurtado's patronage (Padden 112). In both works, Hurtado emerges as the principal hero and conqueror of the Mapuche, and both works have been heavily criticized for their considerable deviation from the history of this period (Padden 112).

Emerging Unscathed

However, despite the meddling of one of Ercilla's rivals to rewrite history, Lautaro still emerges as an influential figure, even if under slightly different emphasis. A hero needs a true

test of his skill (this much is true of any heroic tale), but the level of influence ascribed to him in *La Araucana* and the heroic stature he commands is seen even through the eyes of the self-righteous and self-serving among the Spaniards of this time. Just as Hector remained an image of the pinnacle of virtue throughout the Greek world, Ercilla's tales of Lautaro were followed by the respect and attention of historians to come.

5. THE FAME OF LAUTARO

Fernando Alegría once said that “Spanish critics seem to have spent centuries looking for a better epic poet than Ercilla, to avoid the embarrassment of having to recognize that the best epic poem in Spanish is a work that conventional theorists claim is not an epic poem at all and that the Spaniards themselves feel does not really belong to them” (Alegría 1). In many ways, *La Araucana* has been detrimental to the country it claims to be praising, and whether for political or poetic reasons, the epic proportions of the Spanish heroes pale in comparison to those of the very people they seem to have conquered by the end of the poem. In truth, the Mapuche people were never conquered by the Spanish armies; they fought a war that lasted for centuries. This resilient spirit, magnified through the Homeric stature of his heroes, is the part of Ercilla's verse that has resounded through the ages and the critics. It is this epic symbol of virtuous resistance, seen through the deeds of Lautaro as well as the deeds of others, that inspired the hopes of the Latin American revolutionaries in the nineteenth century. His resilience became their goal, and his fight for freedom became their quest for a country of their own. Ercilla could certainly never have foreseen such an impact from his poem, but he sought to create characters that were above ordinary humanity, and for yet another audience seeking the vindication of its cause in the lines of *La Araucana*, these characters and their tragic heroism fueled that rebellious spirit and ultimately defended South America from the Spanish.

6. CONCLUSION

Whether it was ideologically necessary or poetically convenient, Ercilla's *La Araucana* embraces much of Lucan's propensity to shun the primary epic tradition and the establishment it supports. This dissention is incomplete for both poets, owing mostly to the fact that their respective works still aspire to the genre that their form protests and also to their inevitable predisposition for conformity. For Ercilla especially, his time period and chosen genre praise the works that fit the crowd, while offering little more than disdain for those who resist. Like the *Pharsalia*, this meant a second-class reception for *La Araucana*. Still, such a sacrifice was necessary for Ercilla, conflicted with balancing the demands of tradition with the inspiration that got him writing in the first place.

The product of this balancing act was the unique and revolutionary representation of Native Americans through the Mapuche people. While many of the actualities of this people are either changed or omitted (even their name), Ercilla outpaced even Bartolomé de las Casas in attributing to them a recognition of humanity, depicting their self-sufficiency, morality, and capacity for thought at a time when individuals such as these were regarded as little more than glorified farm tools. Additionally, Ercilla used his epic to highlight many individual examples of these misunderstood yet civilized people, and standing exemplary among them was Lautaro. He attacked an overconfident Spanish army by striking at their ideas of battle itself and turning their advantages against them, while Ercilla's depiction of a nearly faceless band of conquistadors could do little to suppress him. The relation of this character to Hector shows the virtue and valor present among the enemy, but more importantly it shows the quality of men demanded in the

costs of Spain's wars of conquest. Ercilla is careful not to create a Turnus of Lautaro, a tempting prospect considering Turnus' depiction as a traitor of Rome in the *Aeneid* and Lautaro's role as a spy against the Spanish; instead, he makes a martyr out of him. As W.H. Auden said, "No hero is immortal till he dies," and this is no different for Lautaro.

The decision to glorify this should-be enemy, with all his poetically ascribed heroics and his equally prevalent humanity, would allow such a figure to transcend the poem's many criticisms and enter immortality as new generations in the New World looked for a hero to inspire their fight against Spain. Though denied in his own lifetime, Lautaro eradicated the foreign rule of his lands through Chile's revolution nearly three centuries later, and he remains an icon of virtuous resistance there to this day.

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