
Richard Helgerson. *A Sonnet from Carthage: Garcilaso de la Vega and the New Poetry of Sixteenth-Century Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 120p.

HEATHER C. EASTERLING
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

At a fruitful time in which questions of early modern literature and empire are being revisited in light of new attention to literacy, to gender, and to the period as one of great vernacular change, Richard Helgerson's new book extends his ideas and expertise on language and nationhood in sixteenth-century England to France and, especially, Spain. *A Sonnet from Carthage: Garcilaso de la Vega and the New Poetry of Sixteenth-Century Europe* first and foremost is a close reading of the title's noted 1535 sonnet by Garcilaso de la Vega, who along with his friend and fellow-poet Juan Boscán (to whom the sonnet is addressed), pioneered a "new poetry" in sixteenth-century Spain, reforming Spanish verse via self-conscious imitation of Italian and ancient Roman forms. But the extended essay that makes up this slim volume also and importantly uses Garcilaso's sonnet as a synecdochic exemplar of the "new poetry" of the sixteenth-century across Western Europe. As Helgerson describes, "In a single 14-line sonnet...I found expressed the deepest ambitions, longings, reservations...and interdependencies that had shaped the new poetry wherever it appeared" (x). This is an audacious proposition and also quintessential Helgerson, whose acclaimed *Forms of Nationhood* (1992) brilliantly—if at times reductively—illuminated, interpreted, and linked the ambitions, anxieties, and output of a generation of Elizabethan English men of letters. In the present book, Helgerson aims to illuminate, interpret, and link his own prior work on Sidney and Spenser, "new poets" of England, with France, Spain, and to a lesser degree Italy. The result is a reading that dissects this self-conscious, vernacular-reinventing poetry of empire and exposes contradictions and conflicting sensibilities within it which Helgerson sees as inherent, even essential, to the new genre.

The book is divided into two parts, Part I comprising Helgerson's essay in six short chapters on the sonnet, and Part II a small but valuable collection of other poems by Garcilaso presented by Helgerson and his assistant William Gahan in English and Spanish. A precise attention to Garcilaso's poetry as part of his trajectory within Spain's imperial project is revealed in Helgerson's departure from conventional ordering of the poems in Part II. Instead they are presented in the chronological order in which Garcilaso likely wrote them during his participation in Spain's siege of Tunis. Along the way pointing out the significant generic innovation of Garcilaso just in this small collection—a classical epistle, two elegies, and a Latin ode—Helgerson highlights the poems as the most proximate literary companions of the sonnet that

is his primary focus and thus vividly frames Garcilaso's sonnet with the sense of a self-conscious artistic and discursive project.

In Part I, an initial chapter, "What They Expected (...and What They Got)," offers an opening survey of the phenomenon of the "new poetry" in Europe, with the chapter's somewhat cumbersome title signaling the demands on a poet of empire as well as the complex and even contradictory allegiances for Garcilaso and his peers. This first chapter distills much of Helgerson's (and others') prior work on epic and romance and on empire, nation, and language; and the intellectual delight with which Helgerson links the ambitions and challenges of Sidney and Spenser with their earlier French and Spanish counterparts is palpable. Though at times masterfully precise in discussing the nuanced tensions of a poetry of imperial glory that is also a love poetry of erotic self-abandonment, at other times Helgerson moves too quickly, making interpretive leaps and offering a kind of master-narrative—with no notes and few references—that can feel too seamless. Acknowledging that he is undertaking a risky "romp" through a lot of history and material, Helgerson also dispenses with the issue of notes by suggesting their lesser significance for his essay format. I disagree with him and his editors on this point, frequently having found myself looking for or wishing for a reference or citation. While not a fatal diminishment of the book, the omission prevents a level of transparency and acknowledgement of scholarly discourse that is somewhat surprising for someone of Helgerson's stature and more typical largesse.

Having limned the new poetry as one of "profound self-division," including an essential, paradoxical interdependence of imperial ambition and erotic, lyric dilation, Helgerson devotes the rest of Part I to reading Garcilaso's sonnet in five short chapters, each headed by a word or detail from the sonnet that organizes its explication and that reveals, for Helgerson, several additional commitments present in the new poetry more broadly. In "Aqui" (chapter 4), Helgerson contemplates the significance of Garcilaso's assertion of place in his sonnet, a "here" that is Carthage in the poem. In evoking Carthage, Garcilaso of course evokes the most potently not-Rome, not-imperial of places, and also asserts the importance of place in the face of the essential placelessness of empire. Garcilaso's sonnet, Helgerson asserts, contributes to a duality that both acknowledges empire's destruction of such places and suggests the seduction and undermining attraction of these places as alternatives. Subsequent explicatory chapters use "Me Deshago" ("I am undone") and "Boscán" similarly to tease out rhetorical, ideological, and material commitments in Garcilaso's compact sonnet that are both specific to Garcilaso and also, importantly for Helgerson's project, present in the new poetry wherever it appeared.

A Sonnet from Carthage is a provocative and important book about the innovations, modernity, and at times contradictory allegiances of sixteenth-century poetry. The book's weaknesses—the glaring absence of any notes, some overly swift and seamless leaps and conclusions, a thin bibliography—perhaps are indeed inherent to its essay format. It is also possible that they were made inevitable by the circumstances under which the book was written and sent to press. In his Preface, Richard Helgerson reveals his diagnosis with terminal cancer in 2005, just as he was sketching a much larger study with Garcilaso and his sonnet at its center. With such a multi-year project suddenly, stunningly impossible, the single chapter on Garcilaso's sonnet from Carthage that is the present book becomes possibly the final chapter of a life's work, and the book truly functions as an expert, brilliantly imaginative and insightful distillation of Helgerson's longstanding interests and gifts as a reader of Renaissance literature and culture. One perceives urgency in the task, and also moments of critical and personal longview, where Helgerson seems anxious to identify and point out larger patterns of civilization and of poetry's role in societal change that transcend the early modern period. With this new book, Helgerson will leave us with both a compelling new contribution to our understanding of sixteenth-century Europe's and its poets' complex and conflicted ambitions, and a brilliant record of one of our discipline's best minds at work. ✱