

## Conceptual Oppositions in the Poetry of Camões

Helder Macedo

**Abstract.** Camões was the first major European poet with direct experience of alien cultures, gained during his seventeen years in Africa and the East. His poetry explores conceptually opposed ideological viewpoints, injecting new meanings into the literary language of the European tradition. By giving greater emphasis to experience than to belief, both in his lyric poetry and in his epic, Camões suggests new ways of understanding the world in which he lived.

The poetry of Camões has lent itself to the most contradictory and even conceptually irreconcilable interpretations. For example, Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism in the lyric poetry; imperialism and anti-imperialism in *Os Lusíadas*. The problem is not so much that some of these interpretations must be wrong but rather that none of them is completely so; it is therefore a problem that may permit a better understanding of the complexity of a work that, despite all more or less reductive readings, has always managed to re-emerge with its essential integrity untouched.

The originality of Camões's poetry tends to express itself in subtle semantic shifts within the tradition to which it belongs, a tradition that obviously includes Dante, Petrarch and, in broader terms, Renaissance Christian neo-Platonism. Camões thus remains within the mainstream of the poetry of his time while at the same time deviating from it, being capable of a radicalism so extreme that, in the context of Counter-Reformation orthodoxy, it frequently borders on heresy. Camões was the poet of a world in transition. He

was around eighteen years old when the first *auto-da-fé* was celebrated in the promiscuous Lisbon of his unruly youth. Later, as punishment for his scandalous social behaviour, he spent seventeen years in the East in an exile that was only formally voluntary. He was thus the first European poet with considerable first-hand experience of worlds and cultures as different as those of southern Africa, India and Indo-China.

All language is made up of the past rather than the future. Camões, even before his exile, had learned to use ostensibly traditional themes and an apparently conservative diction to express ideas and experiences for which there was not yet an adequate language. In doing so, he was also contrasting doubt with certainty, rupture with continuity, immanence with transcendence, experience with faith, and, at the end of his wanderings, the fragmentation he found with the totality for which he longed. For him, there would be no harmonious contemplation of "the sun and the other stars" (*il sole e l'altre stelle*).

From Dante and Petrarch, Camões developed the notion of love as the intelligible form of the unknown. But whereas his literary masters saw love as a means of ascent towards the unity of a divine spiritual order hidden behind the material world, he sought to find a spiritual unity in the multiplicity of the human experience of love. In the process, he articulated the symbol of the beloved angel-woman, the *donna angelicata*, with the manifold expression of her bodily reality, demystifying the poetically obligatory one and only love of a Beatrice or a Laura by emphasizing the biographical truth of the various flames in which he "variously burned." And, in affirming that the different forms in which love expressed itself are not "errors" or "faults" but "pure truths" that different readers can and should understand according to their own experience, he is also explicitly bringing these different perceptions into the semantic space of the poetic discourse: "*E sabeí que, segundo o amor tiverdes, / tereis o entendimento de meus versos.*" ("And know that according to the love that you experience, / you will have the understanding of my verse"). This relativistic assertion of the value of experience as a criterion for aesthetic and moral judgement derives from the change in his understanding of love, which is no longer seen as the prescient guide to a preconceived divine order but as the blind guide to somewhere not yet deciphered and from where there is no possible return: "*Não canse o cego amor de me guiar / a parte donde não saiba tornar-me.*"

The existential pilgrimage represented in Camões's poetry is less a metaphysical project than a search for something as indefinable and as revolu-

tionarily modern as the pursuit of happiness. In one of his sonnets he tells us that he had “contented himself with little” in order “to see what it was like to be happy.” In another, he claims that he had wanted to try his fortune by giving Fortune a chance to try him: “*e, por experimentar que dita tinha / quis que a Fortuna em mim se experimentasse.*” This trial of himself inevitably led him to commit “errors” that, as he tells us, were cruelly punished with “prisons,” “sorrows,” “misery” and “exile.” But what he had sought was love alone. And yet the very love that served to guide him—love’s blindness proved to be his own—reveals itself to be a savage deity who is not content with the symbolic sacrifice of “lambs” or “calves” but demands the sacrifice of those who serve it. Instead of the happiness he sought “only to see what it was like to be happy,” he found the labyrinthine real world of “unreason,” “blind death,” “doubtful chance,” and “unjust fortune.” The driving force of his apprenticeship had been the urge to “lose fear.” But in one of the most terrible lines in his poetry he declares that he has lost what losing fear had taught him: “*Já perdi o que perder o medo me ensinou.*” Even more terrible is the realisation that he records in another sonnet: “*Errei todo o discurso de meus anos.*” This extraordinary line, in which “*errei*” means both “I erred” and “I wandered about” and “*discurso*” means both “discourse or language” and “progress or process,” gives the full measure of the supreme boldness of his attempt to transform experience into meaning. Camões’s exile was far more than a meta-physical exile or a factual exile in India, it was an exile from himself. All he had was language—poetry—a discourse as inconclusive as life itself.

This perception leads him to state, in what may be his most nihilistic sonnet (“*Correm turvas as águas deste rio*”), that the world seems to be no more than God’s heedlessness and life no more than what it seems:

Tem o tempo sua ordem já sabida  
O mundo não. Mas anda tão confuso  
que parece que dele Deus se esquece.

Casos, opiniões, natura e uso  
fazem que nos pareça desta vida  
que não há nela mais que o que parece.

The theme of the world’s meaninglessness is explored in a thematically related sonnet that begins by contrasting the positive values of “Truth, Love,

Reason and Merit" with the opposing forces of "Fortune, Accident, Time and Chance" that seem to rule the world. It is a world of "effects" whose "causes" are unintelligible and where "human understanding" cannot grasp "what lies beyond life and death." Evidence derived from experience ("it is better to have seen many things") is thus preferable to the "lofty reasons" of supposedly "learned men." For, he tells us, "there are things that happen and are not believed and things that are believed but do not happen." But the chiasmus encapsulating this sober attitude of rational doubt is followed by the abrupt and logically unprepared for affirmation of the sonnet's last line: "*Mas o milhor de tudo é crer em Cristo.*" Could this line be simply an orthodox profession of Christian faith, as most conventional critics have affirmed? A sudden mystic revelation? Perhaps not. At most, perhaps, it is the expression of a desire for faith. In the sequence of a poem organized as a rigorous logical discussion of opposed concepts, however, this leap into the dark seems a *non sequitur*, an absurdity comparable to the absurdity of human existence.

The chronological order of Camões's lyric poems has never been established. And while it is almost a truism that a poet's spiritual biography is in his work, the fact is that Camões did not organize his work for posterity as Dante and Petrarch had done. Nevertheless, the general course of human destinies makes it possible to organize the poems into three broad groups corresponding to a gradual, but not necessarily linear change from confidence to doubt and from doubt to despair. Camões's early biographers and commentators give us a glimpse of this existential course. Pedro de Mariz says that he was "a great spender, liberal and magnificent" and that "his worldly goods lasted only until he found occasion to spend them as he pleased." Manuel Severim de Faria describes him as "easy in conversation, lively and witty [...]" but adds that "as he grew older he tended to become somewhat melancholy." And Diogo do Couto, who helped him to return to Portugal when he found him living in dire poverty after having quarrelled with the Governor who had been his protector, characterized him as "a man of terrible nature."

It is generally accepted among more recent commentators—particularly since the pioneering studies of Jorge de Sena—that the complexities of Camões's poetry reflect a dialectical mode of thought. This is undoubtedly true, above all in what he must have written before his "terrible nature" became dominant. But the Camonian dialectic does not always proceed in an obvious, and still less in a conventional way. Simplifying the concept without distorting it, it can be said that the dialectical process always seeks to recon-

cile antinomies, whether by asserting the supremacy of one of the two opposed terms—as in Petrarch's *Trionfi*, for example, where spiritual love triumphs over carnal love—or, as in later Hegelian dialectics, by proposing a synthesis in which the opposites can be reconciled. In any event, the dialectical reasoning process always leads to a clear conclusion. Hence its usefulness for mystic speculation and revolutionary prophesying: it serves equally to justify the paradoxical manifestation of God's hidden purposes and to project the contradictions of history into an idealized future. But in the dialectical thinking characteristic of Camões, opposites frequently remain opposed and are accepted as such. In other words, they are regarded not in terms of conflict but of co-existence and complementarity.

A significant example can be found in one of Camões's most beautiful and complex poems—*Canção VII* (“*Manda-me amor que cante docemente*”)—in which he takes up the traditional opposition between “appetite” and “reason” that other poets (notably Dante in his *Vita Nova*) had already explored. The obligatory conclusion was the triumph of reason over appetite. But Camões approaches this opposition from another angle, making it part of an existential process in which reminiscence is replaced by memory (or the preconceived idea by lived experience) and, with a characteristic shift in emphasis, reaches a different conclusion: the conflict could only be resolved by the reciprocal transformation of appetite into reason and reason into appetite. This would make it possible to achieve the desired “mild peace” (“*mansa paz*”) through the co-existence of “each one with its opposite in a single subject” (“*cada um com seu contrário num sujeito*”).

The implications of this different way of reconciling the perennial conflict between spirit and matter—between divine love and human sexuality—are not limited to the typically Camonian celebration of eroticism as a vehicle for knowledge. Underlying this celebration is a whole new attitude, asserting the value of antithetical complementarities as a desirable and positive expression of true human nature. In Camões the object of love is also understood as the subject of a separate individual identity and eroticism is affirmed as a relationship between differentiated others, “each one with its opposite in a single subject.”

Few poets, either before or after Camões, have celebrated feminine sexuality as much as he did. For him, woman is the other desired in her otherness and not an imagined extension of a lover who consubstantiates himself with his beloved. This attitude radically subverts the topics of the so-called



Platonic love prevalent in his time and endlessly explored in the poetry directly or indirectly associated with Petrarchism. Thus, for example, in a sonnet as famous as it is generally misunderstood, Camões takes up the basic neo-Platonic concept of lovers fusing to become one: “*Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada / por virtude do muito imaginar*” (“The lover transforms himself into the beloved / by virtue of much imagining”). But the conclusion he reaches is the exact opposite: however much the lover may imagine, he does not transform himself into the beloved and to claim that this is so is a misplaced fallacy.

It is this same fallacy that Camões mocks in two poems written in the feminine voice, with a lightness of tone that in no way diminishes their conceptual seriousness, in which the women complain about the false lovers who prefer the idea to the reality, the abstraction of a contemplative love to the tangible sexuality they are offering and openly desire. In one of these poems—“*Coifa de beirame*” (“Calico head-dress”)—the woman castigates the “foolishness” of the “false lover” who is more in love with the clothes that adorn her than with the body she would willingly uncover if he really wanted her. In the other—“*Falso cavaleiro ingrato*” (“False ungrateful knight”)—the woman accuses the deceiving lover of being the one who “kills” her when he complains that she is “killing” him with unconsummated love, thus characterizing the masculine stereotype of courtly love as a form of hypocrisy, cruelty and lack of love.

Camões thus demonstrates that the poetics of neo-Platonism provides a language code that can be used to signify the opposite of what it supposedly signifies. Correspondingly, in one of his most beautiful and subtle sonnets—“*Um mover de olhos brando e piedoso*” (“A mild and merciful movement of the eyes”)—he uses the language of neo-Platonism to celebrate a “Circe” whose enchantments have the opposite effect to those of Homer’s Circe. The sonnet is organized as a catalogue of virtues or poetic blazon in which the attitudes, gestures and characteristics described establish the low social, and implicitly ethnic, status of the woman depicted: “*um riso [...] quase forçado*” (“an almost forced smile”); “*um doce e humilde gesto de qualquer alegria duvidoso*” (“a sweet and humble gesture doubtful of some joy”); “*um medo sem ter culpa*” (“a fear that knows no guilt”); “*um longo e obediente sofrimento*” (“a long and obedient suffering”); and even “*um manifesto indicio de alma*” (“a manifest indication of a soul”), suggesting that there is a need to affirm that the woman also has a soul. At the same time Camões includes in the psy-

chological and social characterization of his “Circe” all the qualities associated with the *donna angelicata*—gentleness, gravity, modesty, goodness, serenity—in order to conclude that the “heavenly beauty” (“*celeste formusura*”) of this enchantress is neither the cause nor the result of low love understood in neo-Platonic terms but a “magic poison” capable of uplifting his mind rather than degrading it.

If, as the overall effect of the sonnet so subtly suggests, the woman it describes is, in fact, of non-European race, she would certainly not be the only such instance in Camões’s poetry. She may well have been the Chinese mistress who, according to Diogo do Couto, was with the poet when he was shipwrecked near the Mekong Delta and was probably drowned in the disaster: the “Dinamene” named in two elegiac sonnets and the “nymph” whose death at sea is implicitly evoked in two others. Or she may have been the black mistress to whom he dedicates the “Lament for a slave called Barbara” (“*Aquela cativa que me tem cativo*”) whose revitalizing serenity, shy smile and sweetness are characterized in terms very similar to those he uses to describe his “heavenly” Circe. Sexual use of native women was one of the perks of empire and Camões, the imperial soldier, must undoubtedly have used and abused the privilege. What is unusual is the way in which his lament for Barbara dignifies the racial status of his dark mistress, who “may well seem strange but certainly not barbarous.” So far as I know, he was the first poet of the European Renaissance who celebrated the physical and spiritual beauty of a black woman not as an exotic import or a literary gloss of the “black but comely” lover of the Song of Solomon, but as an appreciative recognition of difference.

The names Camões gave to his non-European mistresses also reveal an intention to dignify difference. “Dinamene” comes from the noble classical tradition: it is a pastoral cryptonym which Camões uses in two of his eclogues and which Garcilaso de la Vega had also used to designate a Tagus nymph. The coincidence—and bitter irony—would not have escaped Camões when he used the name to designate the drowned oriental “nymph” of his exile, who “suffered an early death in the sea’s waves.” As for the name “Barbara,” this is either another poetic cryptonym or, more probably, the name given to the captive by her captors, since it is hardly likely to have been the proper name of a black slave. Inverting this form of identity-usurpation by using the name in a poem celebrating the blackness of the beloved as though it were indeed a real name, Camões transforms the onomatopoeic non-word “Barbara” (the Greek term used to mimic the sub-human non-intelligibility

of languages spoken by other peoples) into the transposed affirmation of the independent identity of his "strange but certainly not barbarous" servant-mistress. Thus, by using the language of courtly love to celebrate his Barbara, Camões is also indicating that the underlying codes of this language could no longer be considered normative: the available language would, however, be used to express new meanings. Oddly—indeed perversely—modern commentators have shown a persistent reluctance to accept that the woman depicted in this poem could, in fact, have been black. It is undeniable, however, that there were many African slaves in Goa, including women.

It is interesting to note that the Petrarchan lyrical tradition was used to serve less conventional purposes in the "Bohemian" Lisbon where Camões spent most of his youth. Poet of "high thought" and promiscuous frequenter of brothels, Camões had the gift of irony that enabled him to understand that things could be both what they were and their opposite. In a letter written from Goa he throws a surprising light on the erotic effects of the poetry of Petrarch or Boscán on the sexual practices of the Lisbon prostitutes or "fresh-water nymphs" as he calls them, whose irresistible "falsehoods" he contrasts with the prosaic sexuality of the local whores. "If you try to impress them with gallantries from Petrarch or Boscán," he writes, "they reply in a language as coarse as common vetch, which gags the understanding and pours cold water on the most burning ardour in the world."

In *Os Lusíadas*, as in the lyric poetry, Camões uses the language of literary tradition to convey a new understanding of the world derived from the perceived co-existence of apparent opposites. The epic is organized around a number of interlinked conceptual pairings: arms and letters, gods and men, Venus and Bacchus, celebration and regret, past and present, epic and pastoral. Its literary references include not only Virgil and Homer but Ovid and Theocritus, not to mention Dante and Petrarch. I shall briefly indicate two or three conceptual and literary links before dealing at greater length with a number of others in order to exemplify Camões's creative process in *Os Lusíadas*.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil celebrates the past in order to glorify the present; Camões uses the model of the *Aeneid* in order to criticize the present by celebrating the past. The literary traditions of epic and pastoral represent conceptually opposed viewpoints, the former glorifying voyages, wars and conquests, the latter lamenting these as a symptom of degeneration and decadence, a fall from the prelapsarian Gold Age to the corrupt Iron Age. Camões brings together the two opposed viewpoints in a passage in which



the epic framework is used to highlight the theme of pastoral regret. At the crucial epic moment when the ships are about to sail from the quay of Restelo, an old man, “made wise by experience,” makes an explicitly pastoral condemnation of the epic enterprise that the poem is celebrating. But the speech of the “old man of Restelo” also incorporates in its criticism the epic celebration of a “just war,” which can bring the nation as many material benefits as those to be found in the East. Correspondingly, the consecration of the heroes of the epic adventure takes place in the peaceful pastoral utopia of the Island of Love. Conceptually, this suggests that the paradoxical purpose of the feats celebrated in this epic is the achievement of pastoral peace and the restoration of the harmony of the Golden Age through the use of the arms of the Iron Age. From a comparative literary viewpoint, this would link the Virgil of *Eclogue IV*, the so-called “prophetic eclogue,” to the Virgil of the *Aeneid* as a literary source of *Os Lusíadas*.

I shall give only one more example of the convergence of opposed conceptual and literary viewpoints. Exactly in the middle of the poem—and of the voyage—the mariners encounter Adamastor, the giant who had been transformed into the rocky African promontory that guards the passage from the known to the unknown world, from the West to the East. His metamorphosis is an implicit link with Ovid; his physical characterization and the threat he represents has something of Homer’s Polyphemus; and, in the punishment he suffers by being eternally imprisoned in the sea—where he is constantly encircled by the nymph he had wanted to possess through force—the Amorous Giant could be a figure from Dante’s *Inferno*.

These literary and conceptual links provide a framework for the poem’s magnificent architecture. *Os Lusíadas* is, above all, I think, a poem about language—about writing—and, consequently, also about its reception. This is what Camões immediately indicates in the dedication to Dom Sebastião when, in a crucial but generally overlooked passage, he exhorts the young king to renew the “memory” and “great feats” of the nation’s ancestral heroes by making the verses of the poem his own, since they will show him the great history of which he is a part and which he must continue:

Mas enquanto este tempo passa lento  
de regerdes os povos que o desejam,  
dai vós favor ao novo atrevimento  
para que estes meus versos vossos sejam.

*But while the time of your reign passes slowly  
 Matching your people's dearest wish  
 Look kindly on this bold new enterprise  
 So that these my verses may become your own.*  
 (I.18)

The "bold new enterprise" is the poem itself, which is thus invested with the quality of that other "*atrevimento*" (the word used by both Bacchus and Adamastor) represented by the epic adventure it celebrates. Only in "the angry sea" of literary representation can chronological time be transformed into its historical meaning, making it possible not only for the present to witness and assume the past but for the past to foresee and invoke a future that would give it continuity:

E vereis ir cortando o salso argento  
 os vossas argonautas, por que vejam  
 que são vistos de vós no mar irado  
 e costumai-vos já a ser invocado.

*And you will see, cutting the salt sea  
 Your own Argonauts, so that they in turn  
 May see that they are seen by you  
 And you become accustomed to being invoked.*  
 (I.18)

In the preceding stanzas of the poem Camões had affirmed the superiority of his epic, which was based on historic truth and not, as in epics inspired by "foreign muses," on mythic falsehoods. Nonetheless, the poem soon includes mythical, fantastic, prophetic and oneiric elements, a fabulous universe represented in the transposition of the acts of men to the machinations of pagan deities who preside over their destinies and give them exemplary meaning. On the level of the literary representation of history, Camões could do this without any contradiction since these deities were empty shells of outworn beliefs that had been transformed into poetic "names" for factual truths. In other words, they had become metaphors of history, with which Camões confronts Dom Sebastião and, through him as head of the kingdom, his contemporaries. This is why once the gods have fulfilled their metaphorical function, Camões can

make them deny their manifest reality: “*Só para fazer versos deleitosos / servimos; e se mais o trato humano / nos pode dar, é só que o nome nosso / nestas estrelas pôs o engenho vosso.*” (“We serve only to make delightful verses / and if ought else can be given us by humans / ‘tis only because our names have led your ingenuity to the stars”). What the poet is saying is not only that the names of pagan gods were used to name the stars, as has usually been understood. He says far more than this: the names that had served him in the making of the “delightful verses” of his own poem are the fictitious vehicles (what we would now call “signifiers”) that enabled him to direct human ingenuity towards the understanding of the unexplained processes of the real universe. In the same stanza, the gods who have served as metaphors for poetic meaning affirm that they will give way to the “true God.” But two stanzas earlier, in a line that has a more radical equivalent in the sonnet in which Christ represents the collapse of reason, the poet had declared: “*Mas o que é Deus ninguém o entende / que a tanto o engenho humano não se estende*” (“But what God is, no one can understand / for human ingenuity cannot reach so far” [X.80]). By placing “divine wisdom” which has “no beginning and no end” outside the finite world in which human understanding operates, Camões would not be deviating too far from the accepted philosophical concepts of the orthodox Christianity of his time. But he uses these concepts to place God outside the semantic space of a poetic discourse that aims to give a non-theological meaning to the intelligible world and to human destinies, which have a beginning and an end. It is this meaning that the poetic discourse manages to confer on transitory human existence.

Correspondingly, in one of his recurrent personal interventions in the poem Camões makes it clear that “our Gama” himself must also be understood as a literary character. The passage in question follows Vasco da Gama’s speech to the king of Melinde and immediately serves to characterize that speech as a dramatic expression of the author’s own voice. But it also includes a more radical suggestion: Camões is the *author* of Vasco da Gama: it is as though Gama and, by extension, the other historical characters of *Os Lusíadas* had no existence other than the literary existence they are given by the poetic text. Fabulous gods and historical heroes are thus established as signifiers of a poetic text that relates ultimately to the author and defines itself as self-referential. But if this is so, Camões is also suggesting that there is no history as such; there is only the meaning that can be given to history. And this meaning, as he had already indicated in his dedication to Dom Sebastião, depends on the reception of the text.

The characterization of Vasco da Gama as a literary signifier of the nation's history occurs at the end of a passage in the poem in which Camões begins by celebrating Letters as equal to Arms, in the terms of the old topic of the classical tradition. But he gradually radicalizes the debate in favour of Letters and the consequent need for proper understanding in the reception of a literary text: "For those who know nothing about art cannot value it." And he concludes unequivocally that "without Virgils and Homers there cannot be a pious Aeneas or fierce Achilles." He subliminally suggests the reason by qualifying the names of the heroes with the epithets given them by Virgil and Homer, attributes that subsequently came to characterize their supposed historical truth. The logical conclusion is that without an understanding of the poem there would be no "captain," no leader of the "signal heroes." Without Camões there would be no Vasco da Gama:

Às musas agradeça o nosso Gama  
o muito amor da Pátria, que as obriga  
a dar aos seus, na lira, nome e fama  
de toda a ilustre e bélica fadiga;  
que ele, nem quem na estirpe seu se chama,  
Caliope não tem por tão amiga  
nem as filhas do Tejo, que deixassem  
as telas de ouro fino e que o cantassem.

*Let Gama be grateful to the muses  
That they love his country as they do,  
Which leads them to honour their own in poetry  
Giving them name and fame for their exploits of war.  
For neither he nor any other of his lineage  
Can claim Caliope as their friend  
Nor expect the daughters of Tagus to leave  
Their cloths of gold and sing of him.*  
(V.99)

Gama is a hero without Muses of his own, unable himself to give meaning to his acts. This assertion also relates to what Camões states in his dedication to Dom Sebastião when he transposes the heroic voyage of the past to the voyage of heroic uncertainties that is the poem itself, the poetic discourse

that gives meaning to the historical voyage. And the progress of the poet's voyage on the "angry sea" of poetry—the "bold new enterprise" that bridges the heroic past and the desired future—is registered as a counterpoint to the voyage celebrated in the poem until, simultaneously accentuating its self-referential character and reiterating the need for its proper reception or understanding, it ends by fusing literary and historical meaning into an inseparable whole. Having characterized Vasco da Gama as one of his poetic signifiers, Camões intervenes in the complementary speech of Gama's brother—Paulo da Gama, a hero of the same lineage—to declare that the poem he is writing in celebration of the factual voyage on which the brothers sailed is carrying the poet himself "on the high seas," with a wind "so contrary" that he fears his "fragile vessel will soon be wrecked" (VII.78).

The metaphorical value of this reiterated semantic correspondence between the historic voyage and its representation in the sea of language acquires a broader connotation of equivalent biographical fact in the reference Camões makes to the changes he himself encountered when Fortune made him wander the world: "Now at sea, now experiencing / the inhuman dangers of war / [...] with a sword in one hand and in the other a pen" (VII.79). The equivalence between his experience of Arms and the feats of the heroes he celebrates in the poem is evident; but to these shared experiences Camões adds his own feats of Letters: the ability he has, but that the others do not share, to give meaning to these feats in the poem in which he includes himself. Indeed, the "shipwreck" of his poem would affect the perception of history.

It is, in fact, the *literary* perception of history that is broached in *Os Lusíadas* in an interlinking of semantic registers centred on the ambiguous relations of Vasco da Gama with the gods and of the gods with one another, in other words, on the poem's articulation of apparent contradictions through the convergence of historical signifiers (Gama and the other human characters) and mythical signifiers (the pagan gods).

On a first reading, Venus and Bacchus are irreconcilable opposites. Venus is the ally of the Portuguese, Bacchus their enemy. Venus offers the path to sublime love (the *caritas patriae* of civic humanism), Bacchus is the manifestation of low love. Venus represents the noble purpose of the epic adventure, Bacchus its degradation. Venus could, therefore, also be the representation of redemptive Christianity, Bacchus—Lord of India—the representation of the infidels awaiting redemption and specifically of the rivals of the Portuguese



in India, namely Islam. A straightforward identification of Bacchus with the East is, however, somewhat complicated by the insistent characterization of him as the mythical ancestor of the Portuguese through Lusus. (Incidentally, this gives a curious ambiguity to the poem's never satisfactorily explained title, *Os Lusíadas*). It is true that Bacchus, as pre-Christian father of the Portuguese (Camões calls him "Father Bacchus" on his first appearance in the poem) can also be understood as the internalised enemy of a nation turned against itself, which deserves Cupid's crusade against "those who love things that were given to us not to be loved but to be used." Even then, however, a basic question arises from the polarization in the poem between Venus and Bacchus. Why Bacchus? Why Venus and Bacchus as opposites? Indeed, in the mythology from which these deities are taken, which Camões knew so well, Venus and Bacchus (or Dionysus) represent parallel or even complementary forces and are never opposed as such, even though they manifest themselves in different ways. But is this not also applicable to their roles in *Os Lusíadas*? This reading was suggested by Fernando Gil in a book we wrote together on the Portuguese Renaissance, *Viagens do Olhar*, where our different viewpoints produced not only basic agreements but also some occasional (and didactically salutary) disagreements. I can only agree, however, with his affirmation that in *Os Lusíadas* the values of Venus and Bacchus are inextricably linked. "The Island of Venus," he writes, "is openly and exclusively Dionysiac." And he adds: "Venus, the enemy of Bacchus, rewards the mariners with the values of Bacchus." This insight confirms that Camões is once more transforming an apparent dialectical opposition into the co-existence of apparent antinomies.

As for the historical signifiers of the poetic text (Gama and the other mariners) we have already seen how Camões places God outside the finite world of human understanding. With impeccable poetic logic and considerable ideological boldness, when Gama, the herald of Christianity, is threatened or cannot understand what is happening and invokes the protection of the "Divine Guardian," it is the pagan Venus, also ambiguously referred to in the poem as "the guardian goddess" (I.102) who comes to his aid and saves him. Venus would, therefore, according to most commentators, be a poetic representation of the Virgin Mary. But the goddess who responds to Gama's prayers has little of the Christian and is hardly virginal in the methods she uses to come to his aid. For example, she sends her "amorous nymphs" to transform the war-like fury of the winds into a peaceful sexual frenzy by offering them their naked and receptive bodies. And she herself goes to seduce her father, Jupiter, who, mad with lust, promises her anything she

wants for her favoured Portuguese. Venus's intercession with her father establishes a deliberate correspondence with the *Aeneid* (I.227-296) but the pagan Virgil does not even suggest what Camões makes explicit.

It is the same divinely sexual Venus who engineers the carnal consecration of the spiritual immortality of Gama and the other Christian Portuguese heroes in the Island of Love. This is yet again a poetic metaphor, a linguistic sortilege: the "angelic painted island" into which Venus metamorphoses herself is a painting made of words, an imaginary place that only exists by being found and must therefore always be found anew. But through this metaphor Camões redirects the historic purpose of the voyage—to find the India that existed—into a broader moral imperative: to discover human love, both in the spirit and in the flesh, as the supreme purpose of any quest. In other words, Venus's Island corresponds to Dante's vision of "the sun and the other stars"; but the universal harmony represented in it is the image of a happiness to be enjoyed on this earth. This was not exactly the spirit presiding over either imperial Christian militancy or the equivalent and no less imperial Islamic militancy of Camões's time.

Through a poetic discourse based on antinomies Camões subtly—subversively—managed to relativize the religious conflict inherent in the Christian meaning of his poem. And in this work written under the nefarious shadow of the Inquisition (but in which, significantly, there is not a single negative reference to the Judaism that so preoccupied the Inquisitors), he not only broadened the concept of Christianity prevalent in his time but also opened a chink for other viewpoints derived from different ways of understanding the world. This was "the bold new enterprise" that Camões was proposing to Dom Sebastião. The poem's reception would not only determine the continuity of the heroic past in the future but the justification of a poetic discourse capable of making life's wanderings meaningful.

**Helder Macedo** is the Camoens Professor of Portuguese at the University of London, King's College, and a Member of the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon. He is the editor of the journal *Portuguese Studies*, was Head of the Department of Portuguese at King's College London, Associate Director of the Institute of Romance Studies at the University of London and President of the International Association of Lusitanists. His main areas of research are the Renaissance and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. Scholarly books include: *Nós; uma leitura de Cesário Verde*, *Camões e a Viagem Iniciática* and, with Fernando Gil, *Viagens do Olhar: Retrospecção, Visão e Profecia no Renascimento Português*. He is also a poet and novelist.