Cervantes' and Shakespeare's Closest Encounter in Cardenio

Can you re-imagine a world without Shakespeare and Cervantes? Without mountains, nature, and serenades; without (un)requited love…without Cardenio? Life would be so different without them. We need Cervantes' and Shakespeare's stories and characters in order to discover more about ourselves. Today, more than ever, their names are globally interrelated. You cannot refer to one without alluding to the other. Even their lives are somehow connected. Not only because they might have met either in London in 1604–more likely–or in Valladolid in 1605, on the occasion of the signing and ratification of the Treaty of London. And not just because they died on the same date–not on the same day, as there were different calendars in use in England and Spain. There are parallels in their lives that can help us explain their being set apart as writers, on the one hand, and being closely related in what they experienced and sought as human beings, on the other.

As in Shakespeare's case, very little is known with certainty about Cervantes' earliest years except that his family frequently moved away from Alcalá de Henares where he was born in 1547, probably on 29 September. He went to live in Valladolid, Córdoba and Seville, where he might have attended schools run by the Jesuits. It is not until 1566 that we have any documentary evidence on his life. At that time, Cervantes was in Madrid where he continued his education under the auspices of the humanist López de Hoyos.

When he returned to Spain in 1580 after his successful and heroic period as a soldier in Italy, it was time for love. Love became a burning passion for Cervantes and Shakespeare as young men. They strongly felt the force of blood, as shown in their lives and writings. Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway at the age of eighteen when she was already pregnant. Cervantes, for his part, fell in love with Ana Franca, a married woman, who bore him Isabel, his only daughter, and later, in 1584, he married Catalina de Salazar, eighteen years his senior. Cervantes' sexuality–like Shakespeare's–has been the subject of repeated debate, particularly due to its homoerotic overtones. In 1575, when Cervantes was travelling to Spain, the ship Sol was boarded by Turkish pirates, and Cervantes was taken to Algiers where he spent five years in captivity. It is hard to explain why after four unsuccessful attempts to escape, Hasán Bahá, the city governor and allegedly an extremely cruel man, let him off punishment each time. Shakespeare's homoerotic fictionalisation in the Sonnets might have become a biographical episode in

Cervantes' life. However, any attempt to offer an interpretation of their intimate emotional life needs to be treated with caution as the evidence in this area is so scant. After all, it would mean that they fully experienced human sexuality, which provided them with a deeper knowledge of human love and passion.

Cervantes and Shakespeare also shared a passion for writing. It was always a major interest for them and eventually became their livelihood. Cervantes became a writer almost by accident when his military career was curtailed after he lost the use of his left arm. Theatre was possibly the first love for Cervantes and Shakespeare, since they were fascinated by the stage from boyhood. They had memories of early performances of Lope de Rueda's interludes in Seville, and of the moralities in Stratford, respectively. From 1580 to 1587 Cervantes wrote some 20 or 30 plays that enjoyed much success, though only two of them survive: The Traffic of Algiers and The Siege of Numantia. Cervantes' later production consists of 16 plays that were published in 1615, although they never reached the stage. Sadly, the theatre became Cervantes' greatest literary frustration.

Cervantes and Shakespeare also experienced the dark side of life as writers. Literary rivalry and commercial competition were common in England and Spain in those days. By the summer of 1592 Shakespeare began to emerge as a popular playwright in London, where other dramatists like Marlowe, Greene, Dekker and Nashe, who claimed the monopoly of the stage, looked with suspicion at the meteoric career of the "upstart crow". The rivalry between Cervantes and Lope de Vega is well known. Lope introduced the Spanish comedia, gave it its basic structure and raised it to its peak of popularity. They started a lifelong confrontation over the theatre because of the different vision of stage writing each of them promoted. Lope and Cervantes criticized each other either for being too conventional, or for being too daring and innovative. Finally Cervantes broke free from the strict, commonplace rules of Lope's plays and shunned all the new stereotyped conventions. In the prologue to Eight Plays and Eight Interludes. New and Never Performed, he laments the fact that his efforts at writing drama brought him relatively little popular success because of the popularity of Lope's new comedy.

As far as we know, Cervantes and Shakespeare never came closer in their literary relations than in Cardenio. But why did Shakespeare and Fletcher choose the Cardenio story? There must have been a reason. It cannot be simply argued that it was due to the similarities of the Cervantine story with Shakespeare's last plays, where contradictions

are finally resolved in a fable at the cost of terrible losses and betrayals set in exotic locations. There must have been a much deeper reason beyond the popularity of Don Quixote after Thomas Shelton's translation in 1612. The story of Cardenio (1.23) was perhaps the best story available from the best source for the kind of play Shakespeare and Fletcher intended to write. Neither Part I, nor the whole of Don Quixote would have been the same without it, as the story of Cardenio is the embodiment of Cervantes' famous novel. The narratives and themes of Don Quixote are somehow anticipated and condensed in the Sierra Morena episodes where the mad Cardenio, like the Knight of the Sorry Face, voices his story of unrequited love.

Something would have been missing without Cervantes' story, rewritten by Shakespeare and Fletcher in a lost play that has finally been re-imagined by Greg Doran and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. We are the lucky ones to see it after so long but our joy will not be complete until we can–sooner or later–see the staging of the story within the original play. After all, the production of Cardenio serves again as a reminder of the ties that bind Cervantes to Shakespeare across centuries, nations and theatrical styles.

José Manuel González
University of Alicante