Ramón Betances: Leader of Latin America, Reader of Latin Literature

This paper concerns the prospects for reception and opportunities for outreach provided by the works of Puerto Rican nationalist Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827-1898). Born during the last century of Spanish control over Puerto Rico, Betances was a key figure in the independence and abolitionist movements of the Caribbean. His international and pan-Antillean identity developed partially during his periods of exile from Puerto Rico (1858-1859; 1867-1898), during which he lived in France, the United States, and various nations in the Caribbean. His contributions to Caribbean intellectual history remain under studied, especially his poetry, plays, and works of fiction (Chaar-Pérez 2013: 11). Interest in Betances' literary writings has increased (see Reyes Santos 2015; Vásquez 2000), but he remains virtually unknown to English-speaking audiences, and his works have never formed the subject of any reception study. In presenting this paper, I offer both commentary and translation of Betances' poem, *Amour des poète*s, a reflection on literary history and the traditions of Roman elegy. This lengthy piece of over 150 lines begins with proclaimed ignorance of these poets (ll. 1-2: Je ne connaissais pas Horace ni Catulle, / Je n'avais pas encor lu Properce et Tibulle) but later reveals a thorough knowledge of them through both allusion and explicit reference to the ways in which different elegiac poets construct the relationship between themselves and their mistresses (ll. 96-125). I demonstrate that this prompts further reflection on the nature of elegiac poetry (does it preserve the memory of poet or mistress?), and whether it is possible for Roman literature to be "received" by moderns. I also elaborate a metaliterary reflection that explores the poet's role in mediating ancient literature and culture, and I observe that Betances relies on a recurring motif – the poet's tears – to mobilize a connection between himself and the great poets of the past (which, in addition to the Roman elegists, includes Pierre de Ronsard). I conclude by suggesting that Betances' goal may have been to effect such a mediation, to create classicizing art for the Pan-Antillean, multilingual Caribbean society that he endeavoured to create (Chaar- Pérez 2013; Reyes-Santos 2013).

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