

TRAGIC DRAMA
IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPAIN:
SEVEN ESSAYS ON THE DEFINITION
OF A GENRE

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book attempts to lay a stubborn ghost. The ghost I refer to is the critical notion, long maintained both inside and outside Spain, that the great playwrights of the Golden Age never produced tragedy. I have never been persuaded of this view myself, but persuading myself on the one hand and persuading other people are two very different things. The essays newly written here represent a final effort on my part not merely to establish the real existence of Spanish tragic drama – which critical opinion in recent times seems more readily disposed to accept – but also to spell out in detail the answers to a far more intransigent conundrum: how did Spanish tragedy function in its own right as indigenous genre – modified by the affective substance of Aristotle's *Poetics* – in order to achieve the tragic effect? The task before us, therefore, may be said to be twofold: 1) to draw up a corpus of early seventeenth-century dramas from the pens of Lope de Vega, Vélez de Guevara, Tirso de Molina, Calderón de la Barca and others which may with confidence be classified in the tragic category, and 2) to show step by step how this tragic corpus functioned according to Spanish rules and aesthetic conventions of its own, enabling us thereby to arrive – at last – at a definition of the genre.

The narrative of the denial of Spanish tragedy's existence – in the main a passive story of silence and omissions – is laid out in the first chapter. The subsequent chapters approach the problem of definition from a separate perspective each time, using tragic categories familiar to us from their use in the *Poetics* from the fourth century B.C. But far from being an echo or a rerun of the pseudo-Aristotelian attempt to forge a rigid and authoritative set of rules for the composition of tragedy as did the Italian Renaissance preceptists and their French epigons, my intention here is to show how the Spaniards adapted these same categories in a tragic theater which often con-

tradicted or flew in the face of the practices of Ancient Greece, Elizabethan and Jacobean England, or Classical France. So far from being an “irregular” theater (the tedious epithet loaded for centuries on the sublime invention of Lope de Vega), tragic drama in the Golden Age of Spain formed part of a broader “regular” theater quite in conformity with the nation’s previous century of experimentation in a slow but independent evolution. It is now up to us to try and find out the “rules” by which the Spanish playwrights actually composed this regular theater.

Two other main dilemmas present themselves in this critical endeavor. First, it is a profound error in my view to study the blossoming of popular verse-drama in Spain in splendid isolation and quite distinct from the overall rise and triumph of European drama during the century that ran from c. 1580 till c. 1680. The Spanish theater clearly formed part of this overall cultural development and the subject at hand, I submit, demands that we study it in a comparative literary context. This does not mean that we are practicing dedicated comparative literature in these pages, merely that the traditions of Ancient Greece and contemporary Italy, England, France or Holland cannot in good logic be left out of the picture. If for no other reason, the scrutiny of Spanish drama against its European counterparts reveals a host of striking parallels, common themes and theatrical practices which would not otherwise be obvious. This is particularly the case with Spain and England. The uncanny similarities which the two popular traditions bear one with the other – theaters which had no significant direct cultural contact between them – fully justifies the application of Plutarch’s Ancient comparative biography title to describe their trajectories: *Parallel Lives*. In the second place, this overall rethinking of Spanish tragedy, in part through the lens of Freud-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, has in places necessitated the invention of a new vocabulary to convey the unfamiliar concept or insight. This is not the a priori jargon of some strict and orthodox ideological approach, but the result of a process of painful struggle to put inarticulate hunches into words that can convey meaning. The terminology used on occasion, therefore, is the best that I could come up with and I beg the reader’s indulgence in advance for the creation of numerous neologisms (for example, the Kronos complex, the three base-images, suture, the dehiscent argument, the Desire versus Law dialectic, *ekplexis*, *thaumaston*, and so on).

The composition of this book has involved me in very many debts of gratitude to persons and institutions which I should like to acknowledge here. In the first place, I should like to thank Prof. Laura Bass (Brown University) for many fruitful discussions on this subject and for her support in my Fellowship applications to the American Council of Learned Societies. I should also like to thank José M. Ruano de la Haza (University of Ottawa) for numerous consultations and for his reading and correction of my Chapter 1. Similarly, I wish to thank Jane W. Albrecht (Wake Forest University) for her encouraging assessment of Chapter 2, as well as C. George Peale (University of California-Fullerton) for his sensitive critical reading of Chapter 4. My thanks also go to William Egginton (Johns Hopkins University) for his perusal and approval of Chapter 5. I owe an incalculable posthumous debt to the late Francisco Ruiz-Ramón, who constantly urged me to solve problems of Christian catharsis and to frame Spanish tragedy in relation to the theaters of Shakespeare and Racine. I am also grateful to my former graduate student (now at Yale University), Stewart Atkins, who wrote a break-through article on Lope's *El castigo sin venganza* inspired by one of my seminars, and to Jonathan Thacker (Merton College, Oxford) for consultations and communications via e-mail. I express here my greatest gratitude to my German publishers, Eva Reichenberger and Juan Luis Milán of Edition Reichenberger in Kassel for their constant support and encouragement and, finally, to the Dean of Arts at Tulane University, Dr. Carole Haber, and her Executive Committee of the School of Liberal Arts for a generous Lurcy publication subsidy granted to the Reichenberger Press in the year 2011.

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