

THE LIFE OF TIRSO DE MOLINA
(FRAY GABRIEL JUSEPE TÉLLEZ)
(1579-1648)

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PROLOGUE

Tirso de Molina junto con Santa Teresa, Cervantes y Lope de Vega, entre otros, alberga un puesto de honor entre los literatos más insignes del Siglo de Oro español. Es, además, el personaje más afamado que ha dado a luz la Orden de la Merced, conocido más por este su pseudónimo, Tirso, que para no pocos les hace, aún hoy, de burladero para no conocer su identidad de fraile mercedario, que por su nombre propio, fray Gabriel Téllez. Sin embargo, su biografía se encuentra, aún hoy, entre las nieblas espesadas por la distancia del tiempo y el desinterés de los siglos XVIII y gran parte del XIX. Y como toda niebla es proclive a sugerir e imaginar el paisaje que no se ve con claridad, así la biografía de este coloso del Siglo de Oro vive entre aproximaciones, idealizaciones y ocurrencias más o menos justificadas.

El buen tirsista y mercedario, Luis Vázquez Fernández, desde los años setenta, desde la plataforma de la revista Estudios, tomando conciencia de la incuria y superficialidad que sufría la biografía de este gran literato, hizo de su vida intelectual una 'consagración' a la vida y obra de Tirso de Molina. Tomó en mano todo lo afirmado de la vida de Tirso de Molina, en la que estaba mezclado el *mito*, el *personaje* y la *persona*, intentado, recorriendo archivos y buscando las huellas documentales, poner puntos sólidos y diáfanos para permitir al sol de la investigación que 'desesperara' la densa niebla tan proclive a ideologizaciones e imaginaciones. No obstante, a pesar de haber puesto negro sobre blanco en tantos e importantes puntos de la vida de Tirso, nunca se atrevió a dar el salto de confeccionar una *biografía*, sino simplemente a establecer los puntos cardinales de espacio y tiempo de la vida de fray Gabriel Téllez, así como de hacer desvanecer los mitos imaginativos más infundados.

Desaparecido ahora recientemente Luis Vázquez, sobre los cimientos de la documentación y mapa biográfico tirsiano dejado como generosa herencia a la familia tirsista por Vázquez, los estudiosos Henry W. Sullivan y Jane W. Albrecht han dado el paso para ofrecer una primera, me atrevo yo a decir, aproximación biográfica de Tirso de Molina, fray Gabriel Téllez, sistematizando el patrimonio heredado.

Aprovecho este espacio para agradecer, de modo póstumo, a Luis Vázquez su 'santo empeño' en su tenaz y generoso trabajo en este campo, y a los autores de este libro por abrir la senda del primer intento sistemático biográfico del *áureo* escritor mercedario fray Gabriel Téllez, Tirso de Molina.

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fray Gabriel Téllez, the playwright known to the world as Tirso de Molina, was born in Madrid in 1579 and died in Almazán (Soria) in 1648. His biography was obscure until Luis Vázquez Fernández O.M. unearthed many valuable details that had lain buried for centuries. Vázquez gathered the particulars into two *Tabulae vitae*, the first preceding his edition of *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (1989), and the second, augmented version appearing in *Cigarrales de Toledo* (1996), which document Tirso's whereabouts from cradle to grave and sketch the contours of his long productive life. There are notes on Tirso's family, education, four decades' service in the Order of Mercy, and works of prose and poetry, most notably the nearly sixty plays published in five *Partes*.

Although Vázquez provides the outlines of Tirso's many and sundry involvements, achievements and experiences, the biography of one of the greatest dramatists ever to write in Spanish deserves to be revealed and reconstructed much more completely. Taking on this monumental task required us to enter the concrete spaces of Tirso's fascinating existence to pry up the floorboards and tear down the surface walls. We proceeded to lay bare his life's foundation in the intimate embrace of his parents, Portuguese refugees who lived and served in a noble house in Madrid, and his wider kinship network; its columns in his cultural edification among the wealthy Madrid elite, maturation and formal education; and its crown in a religious vocation devoted to the Order of Mercy and parallel, dazzling professional career dedicated to delighting and teaching the audiences of the Corrales and private theaters.

To re-erect the edifice of Tirso's life while not immuring him within its walls, we entered his private garden – if you will – to confront a number of mysteries which make him such a singular author and eventually to converge on answers to several points at issue. First, where did his faculty for language come from? We do not know with certainty, but feel confident in surmising that it flowed from the same sources just alluded to, the influence of his parents and maternal language,

Portuguese – Tirso was the only Golden-Age figure who wrote a significant portion of his work in Portuguese –; his schooling and early years immersed in the milieu of a noble household; intense and profound study of the Bible and many other texts; and formal training in theology. We do know, however, that the plays poured from him, dozens and dozens of them. (We treat all plays traditionally attributed to Tirso as his and, except in the case of *El burlador de Sevilla*, do not discuss the authorship of disputed plays).

Several other aphotic recesses in Tirso's biography remained to be illuminated. Since his parents were poor, both he and his sister Catalina were doubtless destined to take religious Orders; the vital need to embark on such a path was without question as real as Tirso's ensuing piety and devotion. But what might have led to his decision to profess in the Order of Mercy and not, for instance, with the Jesuits? In addition, why did Fray Gabriel Téllez, who was the only Golden-Age figure who wrote under a pseudonym, adopt the unique nom de plume Tirso de Molina? And, regarding a matter perhaps not unrelated, how could he write so stridently about all manner of sexual situations and impulses? Tirso was the only one who dramatized a long list of sex-variant behaviors in his theater. We will propose that the nexus between those two final conundrums may lie in the unexplained quinquennium of his youth from 1595 to 1599, the period of his nascent exceptionality.

Three significant touchstones guided us in revitalizing Tirso for a twenty-first century audience. We took to heart Pierre Vilar's widely-cited observation that the family is an important historical fact and so attended to recounting Tirso's roots, family and youth. Next, we were concerned not only with telling what is known about Tirso and the major events of his era, but also understanding how those events shaped him. And, thirdly, we were committed to allowing one of the world's most extraordinary writers to speak for himself and, thus, frequently draw on Tirso's dramatic and prose compositions to weave his own words and reflections into the story of his life and times. There are moments when Tirso fairly walks out of the pages of his works and into his biography. For one example, in the play *El amor médico* Tirso writes with first-hand knowledge of Coimbra and its great University in the year 1597. For another, in *Tanto es lo de más como lo de menos* – by satirizing the Count-Duke of Olivares – Tirso unflinchingly asserts who he is in the face of political repression. Everywhere we turned there was a full human being whose complex identity – renowned au-

thor, tireless Mercedarian, bold traveler, beloved son and brother, steadfast friend and fearless foe – gradually and candidly unfolded in the following pages.

We wish to thank Carla Fernandes, Senior Archive Technician, and Mara Almeida, Technical Assistant, for invaluable assistance navigating the Archives of the University of Coimbra, Portugal, as well as Wake Forest University for a generous publishing grant from their Research & Publication Fund. Henry Sullivan wishes to thank his Assistants Elaine Aguilar and Brenda Lopez Hernandez for their unswerving help and superior technical skills so willingly given at all times.

In memoriam

Henry Wells Sullivan died on October 21, 2023. His kind and generous spirit, brilliant scholarship and masterful writing will long be remembered. Q. E. P. D.