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Shakespeare at the Español: Franco and the Construction of a “National” Culture¹

“This is something to make even the coldest-hearted of us proud to proclaim themselves Spanish” (“Acorde” n.p.). The date was 15 Feb. 1942; the setting, the foyer of the Teatro Español in Madrid. The enthusiastic spectator’s remark, which is overheard and reported the following day by the theatre critic of the *Hoja del Lunes*, was made during the interval of a production not of some “classic” of the Spanish stage, but of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

The critic’s praise of a production of a work by a foreign author may seem all the more surprising given the cultural autarchy which characterized the early years of the Franco dictatorship. The period of the early 1940s, which witnessed the hegemony of national syndicalism following the victory of the “nationalist” forces in the Civil War of 1936–1939, is often referred to as the “dark years” of the dictatorship. It was a period in which the expulsion or execution of hundreds of thousands of Republicans was accompanied, in Michael Richards’s words, by a kind of “expulsion of thought” on a vast scale (Richards 6). The newly enforced Law of Political Responsibilities, which was crafted to apply equally to dissidents at large before the conflict, together with the first in a series of censorship laws which would remain in force even after the collapse of the regime in 1975, saw to it that ideological orthodoxy, which was constantly threatened by the “insidious” forces of Judaism, free-masonry, Marxism and/or separatism, was maintained. It was the movement of the Falange, Franco’s own

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thought-police, that was largely responsible for the persecution and destruction of such forces. The “cleansing” or “pruning” process, which spread throughout the institutions of state to affect society at large, had as its ultimate aim the removal of intellectual obstacles to a concept of the nation whose chief ingredients were, according to Richards, “the idea of national unity and spiritual and material resurgence based on the myths of Empire, Reconquest and Counter-reformation” (Richards 14).

The cultural “New Order” which Franco and his ideologues were anxious to put in place was thus underwritten by a national narrative in which the “permanent” values of religious and racial purity, familial and societal stability, imaginatively enshrined in an idealist notion of Spanish peasantry, converged in a “time-space” which was to be located in Spain’s imperial past.² Like the authoritarian regimes in contemporary Germany, Italy and also Portugal with which it sought comparison, the regime pursued a “policy of memory reconstruction”, surrounding itself with the symbolic trappings (the monumentalism, the marches, the rituals of fascism) appropriate to the “desired synthesis between ‘tradition’ and the ‘avant-garde’, between the ‘national’ and the ‘modern’” (Loff 45). In the cultural sphere, Francoism sought to roll back the interventions of the Republican period by constructing an apparatus of its own which was “politically docile” at the same time as it “fulfilled [...] the role, social and diplomatic, of furnishing symbolic capital to underscore the legitimacy of the regime” (Heymann 137). Despite, or rather because of its unfortunate mass-cultural associations, the cinema was ideally suited to those ends, and Franco himself, under a pseudonym, contributed to the screenplay of one the more notorious instances of “memory reconstruction” – the 1942 film *Raza* [Race], with its exaltation of the triad of values (God, Country and Family) the regime flaunted as the bases of its legitimacy. But the theatre also had a role to play, and the nationalization of the Teatro Español was the first step in the search for the kind of “symbolic capital” the new regime so desperately desired.

An immediate problem it faced, however, was the sheer dearth of theatrical talent capable of, or disposed towards, making such an initiative viable. “When on 1 April 1939 a new and decisive era in our history commenced”, one pro-Franco commentator would later observe, “the Spanish theatre, as a living organism, had to begin practically from scratch” (Calvo Sotelo n.p.). The post-war “diaspora” (as it was officially termed) of authors, directors and actors had left a major void, a void the regime nonetheless hoped to turn to its advantage by cluttering the repertoires with plays that, in Phyllis Zatlin’s words, were aimed at “exalting the grandeur of Spain’s past and [providing] an essentialist

² On the means by which such national narratives construct a natural or “commonsensical” sense of historical attachment (time) to a geographical territory (space) defined by memory, see Allan and Thompson 35–50.

notion of the nation's Castilian and Catholic identity" (223). The Español, together with its sister theatre, the María Guerrero (both in Madrid), was initially charged with such a vital and ennobling mission. A product of the Falange's dream of a National Theatre organized along Germanic lines, the Español was soon seen not just as a beacon of probity and artistic excellence in a sea of theatrical mediocrity but, as director José Tamayo would put it, as "a focal point for the urge to renew, a symbol of hope to those who, dissatisfied with the general state of affairs, aimed to make the theatre a modern-day reality which, by using the best possible means at its disposal, might once again instil an enthusiasm for the performance in the public at large" (37). In contrast to the María Guerrero, with its repertoire of mainly new (both national and foreign) plays, at the Español, which from 1941 came under the artistic direction of Cayetano Luca de Tena, the "urge to renew" meant the recovery of some of the "classics" of Spanish drama, a substantial number of them from the "Golden Age" (late sixteenth/ early seventeenth century), and also annually, from the first season after the conflict (1940–1941), at least one Shakespeare.

The importance of Shakespeare's role in the Francoist narrative of national consciousness can be gauged in the reviews of these productions published in the more or less "official" organs of the regime. After the inauspicious production of Hans Rothe's *Falstaff*, almost universally decried as a travesty of the "real" Shakespeare, Luca de Tena's production of *Macbeth* was hailed as *the* theatrical event of the season (1941–42) and the herald of a new era in Spain's theatrical history. "Both the management and the artists of the Español have been working on the performance of *Macbeth* with the utmost care", ran the report in *Informaciones* on 21 January 1942 – some three weeks before the play's premiere on 11 February (n.p.). "The spectacle", which involved many of the cast and also of the technicians who had worked on *Raza*, would, it was (safely) assumed, "be impressive in its scope and serve as an instance of what, theatrically, the new Spain is capable of achieving" (Anon.). The same idea was echoed, almost word for word, in a number of reports leading up to the premiere and was confirmed, one day after the event, in a full-page review in *Gol* where, amid the barrage of stories and statistics relating to the current soccer season, an explicit link was made between the theatrical success of Luca de Tena's production and the credibility of the new regime. "Let there be no more talk", stormed the reviewer, "of the decadence of our theatre or of our period of transition, because both ideas will be forgotten once all our impresarios, actors and authors commit themselves to the iron purpose of producing good theatre" (de los Reyes n.p.). The "dignified" production of Shakespearean drama, such that could compete with the very best of foreign productions of his work, was a possible vehicle for the recognition the regime so desperately sought.

Central to this appropriation of Shakespeare was a conventional perception of his work as embodying the timeless values considered to be both the hallmark of the classic and the legacy it leaves for future generations. “Shakespeare without Shakespeare” – the freedom to retain an aura of recognizable Shakespeareanism while carefully reshaping the text to suit the zeitgeist – was the fundamental tenet of these early performances, with the artistic director (and this, for some, was the only breakthrough of the national theatres as an institution³) now assuming full control of both casting, rehearsals and final performance. As Luca de Tena was to put it a decade or so after the premiere of his 1942 *Macbeth*:

The general acceptance [of the director] is a sign of the maturity of theatre as a form. It is a conquest of the times, a social improvement, one rung further up the cultural ladder. [...] Free from the sacred authority of the author, the directors have felt in Shakespeare, in Aeschylus or in Calderón the full force of their desire to renovate. And very often they have been able to bring them closer to the tastes of a modern-day public [...] who are thus given a full view of [drama’s] most permanent models, which had been virtually relegated to their literary dimension or to serve as illustration in the classroom, without fulfilling their true educational potential, their full capacity to stand as the norm or to suggest things. (Luca de Tena 39)

In practice, the director’s urge to innovate tended to be subordinated to a scrupulous respect for the elements that were regarded as contributing to the play’s ambiance (set, costumes, music, lighting), coupled with a concern for their appropriateness to the age or place evoked in the original – the “medievalism” of *Macbeth*, the “Nordic-ness” of *Hamlet*, etc. The limited financial and technical resources of the Español, but above all the lack of a continuous tradition in performing the classics, let alone Shakespeare, were perhaps decisive here. On the other hand, the playtext, which was generally commissioned to prestigious and, in the main, “politically docile” authors, such as Nicolás González Ruiz or, in the case of *Hamlet*, José María Pemán, was rendered from authoritative editions but generally compressed into fewer acts, reorganized to respect narrative “logic”, spatial unity and, most importantly, the interval; very often it was “unburdened” of episodes, such as the Porter’s Scene in *Macbeth*, which were deemed offensive or too “controversial” to be presented before a discriminating public.

This “authentic”, glossy and cleaned-up Shakespeare was promoted as in no way inferior to foreign productions of his work and, for a time, was presented with the full backing of the all-powerful Falange, which effectively oversaw the nation’s moral hygiene. *Romeo y Julieta*, the second Shakespeare in the Luca de Tena-González Ruiz series, was eagerly anticipated by a press anxious to make the inevitable connection between artistic excellence and the “healthiness” of the new regime. *Romeo y Julieta* “is the play of the Falange”, Juan Carlos Villacorta announced unequivocally in the local daily *Madrid*. “In the shadow of the continual vigilance with which the Vicesecretariat of Popular

³ See, for instance, Oliva 95.

Education oversees it”, it went on, the “theatre of the Falange” shone “like a limpid truth in the dirty milieu of the Spanish stage” (Villacorta “El próximo estreno” n.p.). “The encouragement the Vicesecretariat of Popular Education is giving to the dignifying of the theatre”, reasoned the same publication in a pious preamble to a review of the actual performance, “is a national endeavour which concerns us all”:

The Theatre is not just a school imparting direct, immediate and personalized culture to each individual spectator, but a classroom teaching peaceful coexistence, a sense of identity and belonging to a particular country. Before a stage, into which the very senses and the mood of the audience are absorbed, all sectarianism subsides and the emotional imperative encourages the unitarian impulses to emerge. Lawyers and apprentices, rich and poor congregate in this special place, led there by the same desire..., only theatre can unite all the social classes and categories in peace and festive assembly. (“de C” n.p.)

Needless to say, the desire for a classless, non-sectarian audience reminiscent of the Golden Age clashed head-on with the realities of 1940s Spain, where even if the massive social and ideological rifts opened by the Civil War are forgotten, the dramatic slump in earnings and scarcity of basic resources had alienated all but the upper echelons of society from prestige venues like the Español and the theatre in general. In a period of genuine privation for the vast majority of Spaniards and a “time of silence” for the vanquished (Moradiellas 81), a production which, in the words of one critic, sacrificed the crass commercialism of other productions of the play to stress the author’s “heavenly imaginings, his enchanted and fantastic fables” was unlikely to afford anything but a little harmless escapism for the capital’s ruling social and economic elite (Villacorta “Romeo y Julieta” n.p.).

Perhaps inevitably, then, the values Luca de Tena hoped to inject into the staging of Shakespeare’s work, or the unitarianism which was the declared aim of the Falange tended to collide with the hard economic and social facts of the “dark years”. When *Macbeth* moved to Barcelona in the summer of 1942, the social chasm separating a sophisticated and culturally voracious Catalan plutocracy from the classes which laboured under it was all the more apparent. Amid the glitter of jewellery and clouds of cigar smoke that hung over the stalls as the curtain went up at the Tívoli on 12 August, one reviewer actually rejoiced at being part of such a “select and fervent audience” and rubbed his hands in glee at the thought that the Spanish stage, “constantly vulgarized by the ineptitude” of the bulk of the commercially-minded playwrights who wrote for it, could continue to yield such “fertile and important” work (“Emete” n.p.). In the cultural wilderness which followed the years of conflict, Shakespeare was eagerly seized upon by the promoters of a “national” theatre less as moral ballast for the socio-religious ideals pursued by the regime than as an index of how far the public subsidization of the theatre could lead to work which

could stand, artistically, on equal terms with the very best of non-national productions. This no-expense-spared approach to the staging of the classics may have resulted in some eye-catching, if unadventurous, productions; more dispiritingly, it simply brought to the fore, rather than abolishing, the social divisions which traversed the audiences.

The contrast with the production of classical drama during the Republic could not be greater. For if cultural institutions such as the Institución Libre de Enseñanza or producers such as Federico García Lorca's company La Barraca had, prior to the war, striven to bring Golden Age classics before underprivileged, chiefly rural audiences in the (somewhat ingenuous) belief that, in Lorca's words, they were giving "back to them, in the terms in which they used to know it, a theatre with the plays they used to love" (Holguín 98); if they had toyed with the idea of performing both simplified and stylized versions of these plays, so that the audience might choose between them and, in this way, "the drama of the past could inform the audience of the present, and the present audience, directors, and performers could reinterpret the past" (Holguín 98–99), the rigidly non-popular Español limited itself to presenting high-class audiences with conventional performances of familiar dramatic material. The introduction of Shakespeare, with lavish productions of all of the "great" tragedies except *King Lear*, and the extremely well-known *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*, did nothing to alter that trend.

Years later, Luca de Tena would spell out his recommendations for the "proper" performance of the classics, including Shakespeare: "The secret for performing these authors [...] lies in the speed and logic of the changes of scene". Adaptations were an absolute must, "however much the scholars might carp" (Luca de Tena 46). He had seen Shakespeare performed in Germany and, despite knowing hardly any German, had been impressed by the "popular" dimension of the performances: "What I can say is that they performed him very well, with great vitality, with a direct and popular air, which is what I think is really needed. [...] What I really liked about the German Shakespeare was that its comic actors pursued that crude and popular line the clowns of Elizabeth's time must have perfected" (Luca de Tena 43). Like the revolving stage he had seen and so admired at the Schiller Theater, a Shakespeare at once more vital and more popular was precisely what he had been unable to deliver. By that time, however, Shakespeare had run his course at the Español and would not return there till José Tamayo directed the great naturalist Antonio Buero Vallejo's version of *Hamlet* in 1961. An indifferent performance of *Othello*, too often compared with Calderón's jealousy play *El mayor monstruo del mundo*, brought the first signs of dissent from a press exasperated by the prominence given to Shakespeare. The *Misión* would bring the issue into the open in its otherwise favourable review of *Richard III*: "We are quite content

to see Shakespeare continuing his reign at our official playhouse, but we would be even happier to see [Cervantes] putting in an appearance with any one of his plays at this the nation's leading theatre" (Morales de Acevedo n.p.). The qualified reaction to José María Pemán's version of *Hamlet*, criticized for being both too faithful to Shakespeare's dramatic construction (Abad Ojuel n.p.) and too "cold and rigid" (Haro Tecglen n.p.) was a confirmation the reign had, momentarily at least, come to an end.

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