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Pearls Thrown Before Romantics: Shakespeare, Milton and the *Don Alvaro o El fuerzo del sino* of *el duque de Rivas*

In the introduction to his edition of *Don Alvaro o El fuerzo del sino* Donald L. Shaw points out the "confluencia de dos líneas de discusión crítica" with regard to the play—one dealing with the nature of Spanish Romanticism itself, and the other concerned with "el drama mismo y su significado" (11). These confluent streams of criticism, ranging from E. Allison Peers' often-cited *Historia del movimiento romántico español* and Hans Juretschke's *Origen doctrinal y génesis del romanticismo español* to Joaquín Casalduero's *Estudios sobre el teatro español* and María Socorro Perales' introduction to the play, have come to serve as the warp and woof of criticism regarding *Don Alvaro*, both in its socio-historical, and formal and thematic contexts.

What neither current of criticism contains however, is a full account of the importance of Shakespearean drama to it. Peers writes:

> La influencia de Shakespeare sobre la rebelión romántica fue, pues, escasa e indirecta, y de casi ninguna importancia si se compara con la ejercida por Dumas o por Victor Hugo.... (Peers 390)

Admittedly, the influence of these French authors is greater than that of perhaps any non-Spaniard over Spanish Romanticism, but this does not mean that it is correct to dismiss the effect of Shakespeare as "escasa e indirecta".

With regard to theme and characterization, there has been no mention of Shakespearean drama in relation to *Don Alvaro*. In Socorro Perales's

lengthy study of the play she studies these two dramatic elements in detail, but never once mentions Shakespeare.

This paper will focus upon theme and characterization in *Don Alvaro*, showing through this examination the conspicuous presence of Shakespearean (as well as Miltonian) elements in a play which Antonio Cánovas de Castillo believed to contain "más elementos genuinamente españoles" than any other Romantic tragedy (Par 256). The logical consequence of this sort of analysis focusing upon *Don Alvaro* is, of course, a reopening of the debate concerning Spanish Romanticism and Shakespeare's place within it, and so through it we intend to bring together in one study the two "confluent" lines of criticism associated with this play.

One of the themes that Socorro Perales highlights in her introduction to *Don Alvaro* is honor. According to her the theme of honor in Rivas's play is linked to vengeance, its necessary consequent. This theme is developed through the characters of don Alvaro and don Carlos. She writes:

> ...frente a la frialdad en la ejecución del deber social que es la venganza, la lucha interior de don Carlos entre el honor familiar—bien social—y el honor individual—bien personal—, o la pasión exacerbada de don Alfonso que, reflejada en el odio, triunfa sobre los deseos de salvación eterna en el momento de la muerte, se nos aparecen en la obra de Rivas como elementos insólitos en la actuación de un caballero ofendido de un drama calderoniano y son un punto de conexión de sus personajes con el pensamiento de la época.... (61)

Her observations about the internal struggles which revolve around these two characters with regard to the theme of honor are valuable because she links those struggles to an idea of honor found in the plays of Calderón, but it is doubtful that theirs is a central place in a discussion of the theme. If we allow that there is no necessary link between honor besmirched and

vengeance exacted we admit into the study the first figure whose honor has suffered— don Alvaro. In the second scene of the play, through a conversation between some townspeople, the reader is given a stark picture of the injustice he has suffered at the hands of the *marqués:*

> HABITANTE 1. Amigo, el señor marqués tiene mucho copete, y sobrada vanidad para permitir que un advenedizo sea su yerno.
>
> OFICIAL. ¿Y qué más podía apetecer su señoría que el ver casada a su hija (que con todos sus pergaminos está muerta de hambre) con un hombre riquísimo y cuyos modales están pregonando que es un caballero?
>
> ...PRECIOSILLA. El marqués de Calatrava es un vejete tan ruin, que por no aflojar la mosca, y por no gastar....
>
> OFICIAL Lo que debía hacer don Alvaro era darle una paliza.... (Jda. 1, sc. 2)

This scene makes clear the insult that don Alvaro has suffered from the *marqués de Calatrava* : the latter has vainly refused to accept a marriage between don Alvaro and his daughter, Leonor. Yet don Alvaro seeks no vengeance.

It is possible to argue, as the *canónigo* does in the same scene, that "los padres tienen el derecho de casar a sus hijas a quien les convenga"(I, 2), and that don Alvaro has no right to feel affronted by the *marqués's* judgment, but then this would introduce a contradiction, a sort of double-standard within the play. This contradiction would exclude don Alvaro's frustration from the moral boundaries of the play while entertaining don Alfonso's and don Carlos's desire for revenge.

The most valuable point that Socorro Perales makes in her passage on honor is that the conflict itself exists due to the presence of an individual sense of honor in these characters, taken not from the values of nineteenth century Seville, but from drama of the Early Modern period. Socorro Perales

mentions Calderón as a source for this idea of honor— this conflict— but fails, as we have stated above, to mention Shakespeare.

Such a concept is developed profoundly in Shakespearean drama, where the psychological struggles of characters over conflicting codes of honor play a crucial role. The reader sees through the unfolding events in *Don Alvaro* the folly of the highly subjective (and frighteningly dominant) sense of *honor de caballero* practiced by the *marqués* and his sons and the suffering it causes; and it is presented similarly in Shakespeare, although Elizabethan technique provides for a much more explicit presentation of the theme. We see in *1 Henry IV* the buffoon John Falstaff, so beloved by José Samoza (Par 248) delivering a telling blow against this sort of honor. He states, in the midst of a battle out of which he is ducking:

> Well, 'tis no matter; honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set a leg? No: or an arm? No: or take away the grief of the wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He thatdied o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism. (I, 4)

Falstaff, although a comical figure in Shakespeare's play, represents a voice of authority within the framework of the play; he delivers—explicitly—a "catechism" on individual honor which accentuates the role and value of the individual within his (Elizabethan) social construct. In *Don Alvaro* there is no character who acts as the voice of authority as Falstaff does here in *1Henry IV*, but such a conception of honor is present and very powerful throughout the play. It is introduced and developed by the dynamic of torment which swirls around those who abide by an idea of honor which by

the nineteenth century (if not by the sixteenth) was decidedly archaic for all but a minute percentage of the populace.

But the internal conflicts engendered by public duty in opposition to individual desire are a common thematic thread which links all drama of the modern age. What we find in *Don Alvaro* which relates it to Shakespearean drama is precisely what we mentioned earlier in our presentation of Falstaff's discourse on honor: the lack of an authoritative voice. This lack is no oversight, but the intentional *inversion* of the Shakespearean construct which is its at least partial source. Rivas presents the Shakespearean model, but denies his play the central voice on which his audience may rely.

We see this at work thematically in a comparison between a scene from *Don Alvaro* and one from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which Romeo has just slain Juliet's brother, Tybalt in order to avenge the death of his loose-tongued friend Mercutio:

> ROMEO. This gentleman, the prince's dear ally, my very dried, hath got his mortal hurtin my behalf; my reputation stain'd with Tybalt'sslander, —Tybalt, that an hour hath been my kinsman! O sweet Juliet, thy beauty hath made me effeminate and in my temper soften'd valour's steel!
>
> BENVOLIO. Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio's dead! That gallant spirit hath inspired the clouds, which too untimely here did scorn the earth...Here comes the furious Tybalt back again.
>
> ROMEO. Alive, in triumph! And Mercutio slain! Away to heaven, respective lenity, and fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! (III, 2)

For Romeo the conflict regarding honor revolves around his love for Juliet and a need to avenge the death of his friend. In *Don Alvaro* the same forces are at work within don Carlos upon his discovery that don Fadrique, his beloved friend to whom he owes his life, is truly don Alvaro, the man he has sworn to kill. He states:

¡Oh cielos¿Y la palabra que di?
Más si la suerte me da
tan inesperado medio
de dar a mi honor remedio,
el perderlo ¿qué será?
Si a Italia sólo he venido
a buscar el matador
de mi padre y de mi honor,
con nombre y porte fingido,
¿qué importa que el pliego abra,
si lo que vine a buscar
a Italia, voy a encontrar?...
Pero no, di mi palabra.
Nadie, nadie aquí lo ve...
Mas si él mi vida salvó,
también la suya salvé.
Y si es el infame indiano,
el seductor asesino,
¿no es bueno cualquier camino
por donde venga a mi mano? (Jda. 3, sc. 8)

The conflict here is between individual and familial or clan honor according to Socorro Perales, and she rightly links this struggle to its origins in the Early Modern period, particularly in the works of Calderón de la Barca. But is the conflict at its core truly between individual and familial (societal) honor, private and public obligations? As the scene plays itself out don Carlos nurses don Alvaro back to health only to be slain by him in a fair duel. In contrast, Romeo successfully avenges Mercutio, thus setting the scene for the play's final tragedy. The conflict between individual and familial/clan honor is not the true axis of thematic development in these scenes; rather it

is the conflict between potency and impotency. The impotence of the characters in *Don Alvaro* is the dominant theme of the play, and it is developed through the inversion of Shakespearean dramatic elements, as we have mentioned above.

And this is consistent with ideas about Spanish Romanticism which have become more or less accepted. In the facet of Romanticism which Rubén Benítez has termed subjective Romanticism, the effort of the artist is focused upon presenting the nuances, or the incertitude of experience rather than a pre-determined block of thought.

What is seen in Calderón, although his drama is certainly filled with a powerful preoccupation with individualism, is exactly this block of pre-determined thought. In *La Vida es sueño*, for example, the idea that *life is in fact a dream* is never challenged or questioned; it is *the* voice of authority within the play. In *Don Alvaro* however, there is no such certainty, either for the characters themselves (the *marqués* possesses this certainty but he is killed in the beginning of the play; arguably as a result of his stubborn and misplaced sense of certainty which is never seen as anything but archaic and senseless) or for the work as a whole. There are many voices which speak and act decisively, but the aggregate effect of their words and actions (or more accurately, their *inaction*) is to make the reality of the play all the more problematic. And this comes not from Calderón, as we have seen, but as a response to reality in Shakespeare. If life is in fact a dream in *Don Alvaro*, it is, in the most simple of terms, a nightmare in which all human efforts and notions are fruitless in the face of tragic destiny.

While the theme of honor leads us toward an understanding of this inversion of Shakespearean dramatic elements, it is the study of the character don Alvaro himself which makes it fully clear and specific. And as any study of characterization in *Don Alvaro* is incomplete without taking into account elements of Spanish Romanticism (thus bringing together the two

"confluent lines of critical discussion"), we turn now to Mario Praz's seminal work *The Romantic Agony* in order to provide a more solid base for our observations.

Praz includes in his book a chapter entitled, "The Metamorphoses of Satan" in which he discusses, as his central point, the effect of Milton's *Paradise Lost* on the Romantic movement. He writes:

> With Milton the Evil One definitely assumes an aspect of fallen beauty, of splendor shadowed by sadness and death; he is 'majestic though in ruin.' The Adversary becomes strangely beautiful, but not in the manner of the witches Alcina and Lamia, whose loveli ness is a work of sorcery, an empty illusion which turns to dust like the apples of Sodom. Accursed beauty is a permanent attribute of Satan; the thunder and stink of Mongibello, the last traces of the gloomy figure of the medieval Fiend, have now disappeared. (Praz 58)

In Milton's epic poem Satan's beauty is linked with his terrible resolve. Shelley writes, in his *Defence of Poesy:*

> Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose, which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most terrible revenge upon his enemy...with the alleged design of exasperating him to new torments. (Praz 59)

This awful moral superiority, this sublime resolve of which Milton's Satan is the literary embodiment finds its nineteenth century voice in what has been termed *Rebellious Romanticism* by Rubén Benítez. In the facet of the movement there is a preoccupation with "internal values which have to do with the soul" and the idea that evil, which exists as a reality, could be more powerful than good, which exists for man only as an aspiration. In this

construct the Satan of *Paradise Lost* serves as a powerful heroic symbol, his words to Beelzebub ringing loudly (with disturbing consequences) in the ears of Byron, among many others:

> Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable,
> Doing or suffering: but of this be sure,
> To do aught good will never be our task,
> but ever to do ill our sole delight,
> As being the contrary to his high will
> Whom we resist...Is this the region, this the soil, the clime...
> this the seat that we must change for heaven? this mournful gloom
> for that celestial light? Be it so, since he
> Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
> What shall be right: farthest from him is best,
> Whom reason has equalled, force hath made supreme
> Above his equals. Farewell happy fields,
> Where joy forever dwells! Hail, horrors! Hail,
> Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,
> Receive thy new possessor, one who brings
> not to be changed by place or time. (I, 157-250)

But in this resolve, in this decision of Satan's from whence he never retreats, there is a sort of one-dimensionalism. His are not the weaknesses of man, although he undoubtedly is portrayed as more human than his Counterpart. His resolve, based upon a certainty of God's (and goodness's) existence allow him to stand on very firm ground when he opposes Him. What is more, he believes in his opponent's existence without doubt, and thus the force he is able to devote to his opposition of Him is resolute and concrete. For man it is very different; unsure even of God's existence, every step is met with doubt and wonder. We have difficulty believing either in good or evil, and thus our efforts always lack Satan's resolve— in short, we lack his faith.

This is shown explicitly in the character of don Alvaro. He is a mere penumbra of the brilliant, anti-heroic Satan of *Paradise Lost*, and if there is some element of heroism in his character it is obscured by his helplessness and surrender in the face of destiny. He screams, before leaping to his death:

> ¡Infierno abre tu boca y trágame! ¡Húndase el cielo,
> perezca la raza humana; exterminio, destrucción...!

In this way he admits his own powerlessness, his own fall, and his inability to be saved.

Satan does not suffer from such a crisis of self-esteem, nor of faith. He is sure of his worth, and of his place in the cosmos—whether it be as the Angel of Light or as the Sovereign of Hell. Don Alvaro, on the other hand, simply acquiesces. But to state that there is also a process of inversion with respect to Miltonian themes in *Don Alvaro* would be incorrect; through introducing Milton's Satan into the discussion we have shown only how in the rebellious or Satanic element of Romanticism is undermined in *Don Alvaro*. There is specificity however, when we turn once again to Shakespeare.

In 1622, six years after Shakespeare's death, his tragedy *Othello* appeared in quarto. This drama, of a noble Moor duped by his ambitious and evil ancient while in the service of the Venetian state, may provide the clearest link between Shakespeare's drama and Rivas's play. Coleridge, for his part, has written of *Othello*:

> The agonized doubt which lays hold of the Moor is not the jealousy of a man of a naturally jealous temper...[but rather his is a] noble nature, naturally trustful, with a kind of grand innocence, retaining some of his barbaric [non-Christian] simpleness of soul in the midst of the subtle and astute politicians of Venice. (Clark, Wright and Dowden 725)

Like Othello, don Alvaro is also swathed in moral excellence at the play's beginning; his virtue is unquestionable:

PRECIOSILLA. ¡Don Alvaro es digno de ser marido de una emperadora...¡Qué gallardo!...¡Qué formal y qué generoso!...

MAJO. ¡Y vaya un hombre valiente! (I, 2)

Also, in the scene in which the *marqués* is accidentally killed, don Alvaro simultaneously shows his chivalrous nature and his love for doña Leonor by inviting her father to kill him—the result, of course, is much different.

Both men too, are marginalized racially within the society in which the respective dramas unfold. Othello is a Moor in the employ of the Duke of Venice, and although his military prowess is valued by the duke, it is apparent that this is the only basis for his acceptance into Venetian society. Don Alvaro, for his part, is of mixed Spanish and Incan descent, and his American "otherness" is quickly established within the play:

TIO PACO. Y luego dijeron que no, que era...No lo puedo declarar...Finca...o brinca...Una cosa así...así como...una cosa muy grande allá de la otra banda.

OFICIAL. ¿Inca?

TIO PACO. Sí, señor; eso: Inca...Inca...

With both, this "otherness" is of central importance to the drama; Coleridge's remarks about Othello are enough to make clear exactly how much his being a Moor is important to the text, and of course there are explicit, textual examples, such as Desdemona's father's reaction to her marriage to the Moor:

BRABANTIO. Damn'd as thou art, thou has't enchanted her;
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunn'd
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, to incur a general mock,

Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight.... (I, 3)

We have also, as a comparison, don Alfonso's challenge to don Alvaro before their fatal duel:

DON ALVARO. Mi escudo es como el sol limpio, como el sol.
DON ALFONSO. ¿Y no lo anubla ningún cuartel de mulato?
¿De sangre mezclada, impura...? (V, 6)

These last words could certainly be interpreted as empty, designed to spur don Alvaro to fight, but what is most interesting is that they succeed: immediately afterward, in a fury, don Alvaro takes a sword up and prepares to fight don Alfonso, thus sealing both of their fates.

With these similarities there are two paramount differences between the men: 1) Where Othello succeeds in stealing away and marrying Desdemona (like Romeo with Juliet), and even gaining approval for the union, don Alvaro is completely, tragically unsuccessful; and 2) Othello achieves a state of grace through his suicide, while don Alvaro only succeeds in bringing his own dynamic of personal damnation to its final consequent. This is the process of inversion to which we referred earlier, and we see a vivid example of it in the last words that each character speaks. Othello, penitent and remorseful, speaks in defense of his honor:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; then you must speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum. (V, 2)

In this scene he appears almost subdued, yet there is still measure and resolve in his words. As a samurai who has brought dishonor to his clan he commits suicide with his own knife—to right the wrong he has unwittingly caused. Don Alvaro however, seeks no understanding or forgiveness, but surrenders himself wholly to the forces of Hell:

Yo soy un enviado del infierno,
soy el demonio exterminador...
Infierno abre tu boca y trágame (V, final sc.)

In this way don Alvaro accepts his destiny within the narrow confines of the societal reality in which he has chosen to participate, which is damnation. And this point is important: both men choose to live according to the social norms of their adopted societies, both are marginalized, and both accept defeat within the parameters of that society's rules. Their styles of self-destruction however, are in opposition. Othello dies asking forgiveness, thus fighting for acceptance to the end (he asks forgiveness not from God but from Venetians), while don Alvaro accepts the wretched lot which his adopted society prescribes for him (*destiny,* in Rivas's terminology).

Returning to our more general considerations above, which of these characters exhibits the resolve of Milton's Satan? Neither one. Othello dies in the service of the lords he has served in life, seeking forgiveness, while don Alvaro surrenders himself, body and soul, to the forces of destiny which have wracked his life. He acknowledges his own wretched state and admits defeat. What both of these incredible men have most in common, apart from the external facets which we have mentioned above, is the internal doubt which renders both of them docile and eventually suicidal.

What one sees at work within the text of *Don Alvaro* specifically is the incorporation, and then inversion of the Shakespearean elements which make this sort of dramatic struggle so compelling. Both Othello and don

Alvaro are faced with the same decision— they merely choose different paths. But the choice remains the same— to accept society's sentence upon them as a divine decree. Don Alvaro's choice— damnation— exemplifies the impotence of his place within that construct. He is denied the sublime death of Othello, to say nothing of the rebellious beauty of Satan.

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