

## A Novelist Turns to Drama: Manuel Gálvez' *Calibán*\*

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The prolific Argentine novelist Manuel Gálvez (1882-1962) tried his hand at drama on several occasions throughout his long career, although never with real devotion or interest in the genre. In his early youth he wrote several inconsequential plays which he preferred to forget.<sup>1</sup> In 1924, a dramatic version of his naturalistic novel *Nacha Regules* met with considerable success, but three years later *El hombre de los ojos azules* received little enthusiasm when it opened in Córdoba. As a dramatist, Gálvez was silent until 1933, when he wrote *Calibán: tragicomedia de la vida política*,<sup>2</sup> published privately some ten years later but never produced. Although the work has slight importance in Gálvez' total literary production, it is significant as yet another example of his persistent defense of force in Latin American government. In 1924 Gálvez wrote in a volume of essays: "Este pueblo necesita autoridad. La necesita para crearse un sentido serio y elevado de la vida. . . , necesita una autoridad poderosa que concluya con el pasquinismo, que haga respetar a la Iglesia, que ponga fuera de la ley al comunismo. . . ."<sup>3</sup> In the same essay he states in a similar tone: "Todo acto enérgico del gobierno es discutido por los demagogos del parlamento, que adulan a la masa y a la canalla en procura de votos" (p. 112). And we recall, too, that Gálvez' justification of the iron rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas, as revealed in seven historical novels<sup>4</sup> and a biography,<sup>5</sup> rests on the fact that the dictator unified Argentina and prevented it from yielding its political and economic sovereignty to France and England. Likewise, Gálvez' admiration for the Ecuadorian Gabriel García Moreno underscores his position that extreme force is morally acceptable as a means to achieve a worthwhile goal.<sup>6</sup>

In *Calibán*, Gálvez manifests this same ideology through a dramatic confrontation between two political antagonists in a remote Argentine province around 1930. The play purports to show that force must be employed against those elements in society that would subvert legal authority and destroy the nation's established social system and traditional values. *Calibán* is the leader of a revolutionary band intent on overthrowing the provincial government in the name of the people's democracy. As the idealistic and pusillanimous governor, Próspero disregards his advisors' recommendations to incarcerate *Calibán* and

authorize the use of force to crush the incipient rebellion. Paradoxically, although an idealist himself in so many ways,<sup>7</sup> Gálvez is contemptuous of Próspero for his soft, vacillating conduct, especially his attempt to appease Calibán. Incited by their leader, the rebels enter the capital, imprison Próspero and his family, and then proceed to loot, rape, and commit all sorts of other atrocities. Once in control, they abuse their power under the guise of democratic rule, which for Gálvez is an ineffectual form of government when confronted with lawlessness and popular unrest. Calibán finally capitulates, but it is only when the army takes command and either enforces the law through fear or sets up its own laws that order once again prevails in the province. What Gálvez is saying, of course, is that Próspero's overly democratic and liberal regime opened the way for Calibán's temporary triumph, whereas the application of force would have quickly repulsed him. Toward the close of the play, one of the military leaders who defeated Calibán reproaches Próspero with cruel irony: "Sin quererlo, ha sido usted cómplice de Calibán, ha hecho usted a la provincia un mal enorme que yo trataré de remediar" (p. 96). The same officer, in referring to his own achievements, reflects Gálvez' views on what constitutes ideal government: "Han triunfado el orden, la jerarquía y la disciplina, sin el cual no hay grandeza ni moral verdaderas" (p. 97).

Despite its direct implication for Latin America, *Calibán* falls short of being convincing theatre because of its too obvious and facile interpretation of the complex theme of freedom versus coercion in society. Although the public (or reader in this case) may find it easy to identify with the main action of the play, the political scene presented suggests too simplistic an approach to the workings of Latin American government. Unfortunately, *Calibán* does not rise above a mere verbal blueprint for the take-over of a weak regime by self-styled representatives of the masses. Indeed, what is most lamentable in the play is that there is little character development and even less internal conflict in the minds of the two antithetic protagonists.

In its use of symbolic representation to carry the message of social protest, *Calibán* is a forerunner of more sophisticated contemporary plays that seek to interpret the Latin American political environment. Two works inevitably come to mind: the Chilean Egon Wolff's *Los invasores* (1962), in which a rich industrialist dreams that his home is being invaded by masses of poor people who pledge to destroy the foundations of the privileged bourgeoisie; and René Marqués' *La muerte no entrará en palacio* (1957), which presents in the apparent form of Greek tragedy the conscience of Puerto Rico in its struggle for political and economic independence. While Gálvez had no particular regime in mind when he wrote *Calibán* in 1933, he states that the action of the play bears considerable resemblance to the events surrounding the military coup of June 14, 1943 which overthrew the Castillo government (p. 11). Gálvez is naïve in not recognizing the similarity of pattern of many political uprisings in Latin America. But this is really of little importance in assessing *Calibán*; what matters is that the work is too patently a drama of thesis, a play that veritably shouts out its cry of social protest to the reader. It is propaganda under the guise of drama, instead of being dramatic art that utilizes the social condition as its theme and background.

In *Calibán*, just as in many more contemporary dramas of thesis, the political series of events that forms the nucleus of the story line is played against a background of domestic affairs. Gálvez' *Calibán* is the embodiment of evil, coarseness, materialism, and ruthless opportunism; but at the same time he is portrayed as a victim of society's oppression of the poor and the weak. To match *Calibán*'s political villainy, Gálvez paints him in private life as a repugnant brute and pervers. At one time he was employed in menial jobs at Próspero's estate and resented his inferior social position. His hideous physical appearance repelled Próspero's daughter Anita and filled her with fright. On one occasion he even tried to kiss her, whereupon her father mercilessly whipped him. When the revolution starts, Anita beseeches her father to incarcerate *Calibán*, if only to protect her from his depravity. And much later in the play, when *Calibán* and his hordes of followers are in control of the province, he pleads with Anita to understand what he himself calls his "predestined evil" and his inability to counteract the malevolent forces in his life. After telling her that she was the one ray of light in his dark existence, he frees her from her prison cell, but then brutally whips Próspero just as his master had beaten him years before. *Calibán* is a creation very much in the naturalistic mode, but tempered by Gálvez' fervent Catholic faith:

Dios no sólo me hizo repugnante por afuera sino también por adentro. Me hizo canalla, desagradecido, sensual, cobarde, vicioso. Porque yo, señora, soy una obra maestra de fealdad. . . ¿Y cómo no tener tantas miserias morales, cuando uno sólo ha sentido a su alrededor el odio y el desprecio. . . ? ¿Qué puede haber sino maldad en el que se siente repugnante a los demás, por deforme y grotesco? Y sin embargo, yo tengo un alma, hecha de la misma materia que las otras. Una alma inmortal, inmaterial, hecha a imagen de Dios. Por tener una alma yo tenía derecho al amor. No importa que el alma sea vil, porque también los viles son amados. Pero no son amados los monstruos (pp. 91-92).

Gálvez is as neat and orderly in the development of plot in *Calibán* as he is in most of his major novels. The play is well structured and nicely balanced in its three acts. As the principal focus of action, the *Calibán* revolution is carefully brought to the reader's attention in successive stages. First, Próspero's minister González apprises him of *Calibán*'s treachery and warns him of the imminent revolt of the masses. A drunken *Calibán* and a group of his partisans then appear in a brief scene in which the ideals of the revolution are proclaimed in frenzied shouts. The tense situation is exacerbated when some time later Próspero fails to dissuade *Calibán* from carrying out the planned revolt and gives the impression of moral weakness. The reader first perceives that the revolt has indeed begun through a conversation between Anita and her servant Teresa—a conversation broken by clamor in the streets, the noise of stones striking their window, and menacing blows on the front door. And it is ironic that Próspero, unaware that the uprising is in full force, continues to utter words of appeasement even after Anita is taken prisoner. Próspero is at first reluctant to accept the full reality of the revolution because of his excessive idealism, and even when he finally realizes that the rebels are in control he innocently harbors the hope

that Calibán will govern well. The reader's final awareness of the revolution comes when Calibán addresses the mob and makes empty promises of social reform, vowing to create jobs for all, to redistribute the land, and to eliminate class distinctions and privileges. Then, when Calibán's minister Petronius expresses doubt that the new program can be effectively carried out, the rebel leader answers in words that reveal his true intent:

No te preocupes, viejo. No creo ni medio. Todo eso lo prometo pero ni intentaré realizarlo. . . Yo sé el medio de conquistar al pueblo. Todos los políticos prometen lo mismo. Los grandes políticos son siempre grandes farsantes. Y yo no quiero ser una excepción (p. 72).

Although Gálvez intentionally created his play around two symbols—Calibán and Próspero—he wished to go beyond symbolic representation and present genuine characters. He only partially succeeded, in large measure because the figures are so wooden and painfully stereotyped that they lack even a modicum of independent existence. In a word, they are puppets and the puppeteer is Gálvez, who gives them voices and lines to speak that he himself manipulates. Given the two ideological disputants, Gálvez could have done much more to make us react to them as original creations even within the framework of their symbolic roles. *Calibán* promises far more than it delivers and leaves us with the feeling of having read a very contrived and propagandistic play.

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## Notes

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1. Among them *En las redes del amor* (1898). In his memoirs Gálvez states quite frankly: "Aquí está mi grave error y mi desgracia. No debí hacer otra cosa que escribir novelas. Falté a mi vocación, falté a mi deber." *En el mundo de los seres ficticios* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1961), p. 362. In 1900, still some fourteen years before he published his first novel, *La maestra normal*, Gálvez wrote the play *La conjuración de Maza*, in which the central figure is the dictator Rosas. Strangely, this drama was converted into a *zarzuela* and performed by a Spanish troupe named Rivadavia. The play's only real importance in Gálvez' literary career is that it was the first of many works dealing with the Rosas regime.

2. (Buenos Aires: Edición del autor, 1943.) Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

3. *Este pueblo necesita* (Buenos Aires: Librería de A. García Santos, 1934), p. 112.

4. An indication of Gálvez' constant preoccupation with the moral issue of social restraint through force is that the writing of the Rosas series extended over some twenty-three years, from 1931 to 1954. And although he published other works in the interim years and perhaps on more than one occasion thought about abandoning the series altogether, his almost obsessive concern with the theme of force made him cling tenaciously to the project until completing it.

5. In the preface to *Vida de Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1940), p. 7, Gálvez states his justification in these terms: "Pero la actualidad de Rosas no se refiere a sus procedimientos de violencia. Rosas no es un tema político sino histórico. Si él tiene derecho a figurar entre los grandes argentinos, no es por haber privado de libertad a sus compatriotas o por haber fusilado a decenas de personas, sino a pesar de eso, por haber defendido a la patria contra las agresiones extranjeras."

6. *Vida de don Gabriel García Moreno* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Difusión, 1942). It will be recalled that García Moreno adopted extreme and oppressive measures in his futile attempt to make Ecuador a Catholic utopia. For Gálvez, the dictator's objectives were noble and unselfish and his concordat with Pope Pius XI was especially to be commended.

7. Gálvez' idealism is founded more on moral, religious, and aesthetic values than on real political and social conviction. Note, for example, his novels *El mal metafísico* and *El cántico espiritual*.