

The Ritual Feast: A Study in Dramatic Forms

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In the years since the research of the Cambridge school has revolutionized theories of tragedy and, to a lesser extent perhaps, comedy, criticism in Spanish has been slow to investigate the implications of these theories for our discipline. Although important work has been done in the application of modern critical techniques to prose and poetry, comedy is still treated much as it was generations ago. A case in point is *Contigo pan y cebolla* of Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza. Although Gorostiza is widely considered one of the most important nineteenth century dramatists in Spain and Latin America—he does not fit into neatly pre-conceived categories—, his work has not been approached from the point of view of its underlying comic forms.

The plot of *Contigo pan y cebolla* is widely known; it is a stock comic plot in Western literature. Matilde, a young woman of wealthy family, has, as the result of reading too many sentimental Romantic novels, conceived the notion that love can blossom only in poverty. To the dismay of her father don Pedro, she has rejected a series of otherwise eminently satisfactory suitors because they were not poor. When she also breaks with the latest in the series, don Eduardo, he concocts a plot whereby he pretends to have been disinherited and convinces don Pedro to treat him shabbily, as though he were unwelcome in the house. Matilde, of course, is enchanted, and the lovers elope. Her dreams of romantic poverty are undone, however, by the grim reality of living without servants or very much in the way of income, surrounded by bill-collectors. Disabused of her silly notions, Matilde happily agrees to her husband's supposed resumption of relations with the mythical uncle who has purportedly disinherited him; she is eager to make the sacrifice of living with the burden of wealth and comfort.

Contigo pan y cebolla is, of course, a standard Neoclassical comedy complete with the implicit moral: a young lady's education should be supervised carefully. It uses many of the stock devices dear to Gorostiza: the feigned intrigue, leading to a double plot, characters who are essentially types or caricatures, in spite of an occasional greater degree of humanization. The servant Bruno is crotchety,

gullible and faithful, in many ways a direct descendant of the Golden Age *gracioso* and, through him, the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* and the even more remote comedy of Terence and Plautus. Matilde also falls into this category, a charming if vacuous young thing reminiscent of her kin in Roman comedy or, more recently, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Eduardo is a little more difficult to categorize; he is sufficiently in love to remain enamored of Matilde even when he recognizes her silliness, but shrewd enough to cope with this silliness in an ingenious fashion: the invention of his supposed poverty. This is, of course, a time-honored comic resource, but it is also a highly ironical technique, not unlike the Sophoclean irony in which the audience knew the denouement of a situation while the protagonist was still seeking: Oedipus, as the prime example. Gorostiza creates an Eduardo who deliberately and consciously *manages* his adoring but empty-headed wife, in a manner which is barely short of cynical. There are sources in the complicated double plots of Roman comedy which led ultimately to the intricacies of the *comedia de enredo*, but there is also a darker side here. Eduardo is also the Greek *eirón*, the ironical man, doing battle not with the impertinent *alazon* but with his own muddle-headed wife.

In this context it is appropriate to cite Paul Lauter's comment that "Contemporary theories [of comedy] show that comic plots usually arrange the triumph of a new, young, flexible order over an older, rigid and yet somehow chaotic situation. Or, as in Aristophanes, that an old but mellow and productive order reasserts itself by exposing and expelling a pretentious intruder."¹ Although it might be argued today that the order sustained by Eduardo and don Pedro was hardly mellow or productive, from their point of view and, more importantly, from that of Gorostiza, it was just that. The pretentious intruder exposed and in a sense expelled is Matilde, or rather, her newfangled and silly ideas. It is clear that the thrust of the play is a reaffirmation of a particular type of family and social structure and functioning.

Somewhere behind archaic comedy lies a prehistoric death-and-resurrection ceremony whose outlines are preserved in the comedies of Aristophanes. Critical elements include the driving out of a scapegoat, thus purifying the society, a ritual initiation, ritual feast and marriage and final triumphant procession or *kómos*, hailing the reintegration of the social group. It is curious to note that all these elements are clearly visible in *Contigo pan y cebolla*. The scapegoat or force of evil is the new social order barely hinted at in Matilde's foolish romanticism; for Eduardo, don Pedro and Gorostiza, such ideas were obviously negative social forces. The initiation is Matilde's trial-by-poverty, during which she discards foolish ideas, like the toys of childhood, and becomes an adult member of the group. The comic dimension is that the initiation is superficially aimed at just the reverse: a new kind of life rather than integration into an older form. Happily, this *apparent* initiation fails; had she passed it in its apparent form, the real purpose would have been subverted.

This same comic twist is seen in the ritual feast, presented here in parodic incipient form in the lovers' nuptial meal. Everything goes wrong: Matilde cannot light the *brasero*, she has not the vaguest notion of how to prepare the chocolate and finally spills the whole mess putting out the fire. They settle

for a glass of water and “. . . que cada cual se coma cruda la onza que le corresponde. . .”² This is the nuptial feast seen from the angle of parody, since it is a feast *within* the initiation rite rather than *after* it; it is, in other words, a false feast, just as it forms part of a false initiation. The true triumphant *komos* comes after the disenchantment with romantic poverty and the full acceptance of the burden of wealth, a full reaffirmation of the established group. The initiation has led to the classical *anagnorisis*, the recognition or discovery, when Matilde realizes her error, and she undergoes a full-fledged *peripeteia*, or reversal. It is, of course, a comic *peripeteia*, although the word as normally used refers to tragedy: “A *peripeteia* occurs when a course of action intended to produce a result *x*, produces the reverse of *x*. Thus the messenger from Corinth tries to cheer Oedipus and dispel his fear of marrying his mother; but by revealing who Oedipus really is, he produces exactly the opposite result.”³

But this is a definition for tragedy. Once again, as in the ritual feast and the initiation, the terms are reversed for comic effect: the *peripeteia* is indeed a reversal if we think of Matilde’s attitudes, but it is also the deliberate and intended result of the comic intrigue. In other words, it is in fact a reversal in terms of its role within the situation, but the responsible individual deliberately caused it.

At this point it seems clear that behind the standard vision of *Contigo pan y cebolla* as a satirical neoclassical comedy lies the dim but clearly perceptible outline of a much older dramatic structure: the archaic ritual form which seems to lie at the root of all comedy. But by now the reader has seen that much of the vocabulary used is normally identified with a different form entirely: tragedy. *Peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* are from the arsenal of those who deal with classical tragedy; they come, like *hubris*, *hamartia* and *catharsis*, from Aristotle’s essay on tragedy. However, for modern theory the formulaic repetition of definitions is not adequate to deal with the realities of dramatic structures. As Wylie Sypher points out, the ancient ritual of death and resurrection lies behind both tragedy and comedy: “From this rudimentary sacrifice-and-feast evolved comic and tragic poetry, using a ‘canonical’ plot formula older than either art, an elemental folk drama from which derived in obscure ways the ‘action’ (myth) of the Athenian theatre.”⁴

The implications of this are, or should be, startling: that tragedy and comedy are parallel if not identical forms, which evolved from a primary form and which should, even today, retain visible signs of this relationship. Or to put it in other terms: whether a work is comic or tragic may well depend on the cast which the author chooses to give the underlying form.

The seminal work of Francis Fergusson has shown us to what extent the structure of classical tragedy still lies beneath all that we call tragedy—and a good deal that we do not. Susanne Langer, Northrop Frye and others have pointed out with acuteness and sensitivity the relationship between the tragic and the comic. Unfortunately, it is easy to perceive this from a historical and theoretical plane, but it is quite something else to grasp the intimate relationship between a particular comedy and a specific tragedy. At this point I propose to attempt to isolate certain basic structures in a given play in order to see to what extent they resemble those of *Contigo pan y cebolla*. An ideal work is *Los*

huéspedes reales of Luisa Josefina Hernández, since its plot is in many ways similar to that of *Contigo pan y cebolla*, but its treatment and resolution are undeniably tragic.

The plot is basically quite simple. Cecilia is a young woman engaged to marry Juan Manuel. He is insensitive and condescending, she a dreamer. It becomes clear that the wedding is the work of Cecilia's mother Isabel, who regards her as an extraneous element in Isabel's relationship with Ernesto, her husband. The marriage is a disaster and Cecilia returns home, where the three gradually strip away their pretense until it is obvious that Cecilia feels an incestuous love for her father, which results in Ernesto's suicide and the two women are condemned to what Cecilia calls the long, long road of their joint solitude.

The structure of the play is exemplary: it consists of ten scenes in which, typically, there are three characters. These are direct confrontations, and the scenes are built around the tension generated by these confrontations. This is, of course, very close to the classical agon. Indeed, the entire play is a tragic confrontation, an agon, between Cecilia and Ernesto. As early as the first scene, there are ambiguous references to their relationship, although neither fully realizes the situation until the play's end. Cecilia is often at the edge of hysteria, and her attitude toward Juan Manuel is frankly hostile. She behaves like a person driven by motives unknown to her, and only the violence of her wedding-night violation by the indignant Juan Manuel drives her to the knowledge of herself. Ernesto is equally uncertain. He deliberately acts older than he is, and reacts in disgust to his wife's sexual overtures. He is obviously opposed to Cecilia's marriage, although he does not really understand why. When, at last, he realizes the nature of their true relationship, and Cecilia offers him a triumphant if bitter love, he is not of the same stuff as she, and chooses suicide. At the point of the tragic choice, the lovers opt for different alternatives.

It is surprising to find in this work of barely suppressed barbaric power many of the same formal elements which we have seen in *Contigo pan y cebolla*. The Sophoclean irony, related to the internal intrigue or double level of plot, is a key factor. Repeatedly Cecilia and Ernesto make remarks which they themselves understand in one sense but which the audience, although not quite certain of their import, recognizes to have a far darker meaning. Ernesto's rejection of Elena and Cecilia's revulsion for Juan Manuel are clear signs that there is a second and secret dramatic level. Cecilia's recognition of her true love and her declaration of acceptance are the tragic *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, the perception and reversal of the previous situation. They are the tragic versions of the same dramatic movement we have seen in Matilde's recognition of the shabbiness of poverty and her acceptance of wealth.

There is even a purely formal resemblance between the role of the Marquesa in *Contigo pan y cebolla* and that of the telephone call in *Los huéspedes reales*, resembling the messenger of classical tragedy who was the formal instrument by means of which the reversal was effected. Gorostiza has the Marquesa, an old friend, visit Matilde and offer to pay her for embroidering *camisas*, establishing abruptly the change in Matilde's life-style. This visit is the specific element which produces Matilde's reversal. In *Los huéspedes reales*, there is a telephone

call from the groom's distraught mistress, which makes clear to Cecilia the extent to which she has been betrayed on all sides.

Behind archaic tragedy lies the same ritual which we have found behind comedy: the expulsion of the scapegoat, the ritual initiation, the ritual feast and marriage. Lacking is the *komos* or triumphant procession; tragedy looks to the moment of recognition of our eternal human error, comedy to the overcoming of this error. It must be said in justice to Cecilia, however, that her desperate bid to overthrow all morality and all society in the name of her outlaw love comes very close to a savage *komos*; had Ernesto been of the same fiber, the play might well have been a triumphant and barbarous comedy. But as the play is written, Cecilia is the scapegoat; her initiation, the ghastly wedding night leading to her forcible violation by the groom. The ritual feast is, of course, the wedding banquet to which are invited the royal guests, those models of conventional morality. Even in these scenes there is a startling resemblance to the comic mode: just as Matilde returns home, so does Cecilia. But the substance is different: Matilde returns purified to the triumphant social order, Cecilia returns unchanged and unrepentant. She is only a scapegoat; the true sacrificial victim is Ernesto. If she cannot be driven forth, then he must die, lest the social order be subverted past all repair.

Clearly, these plays are different in many ways, but these differences are less important than are the similarities. If one ends in a triumphant reaffirmation of the social order and the other in its destruction, these are the flesh with which the dramatists have clothed the skeletons. And these skeletal structures are remarkably alike, even to some of the formal plot elements which the playwrights used to achieve their ends. It hardly need be said that such speculations are of little aid in the critic's task of evaluating a work in terms of its artistic worth. A play is neither better nor worse than another because it is closer to or farther from the ancient structures, although often this nearness or distance is accompanied by a greater clarity or diffuseness of the play's form. But we can hardly evaluate a work if we have an imperfect awareness of what the work really is, of how it is put together and what its formal relationships are. It is time that we abandon the cliché definitions and recognize the close relationships between dramatic genres and the implications of these relationships, time that we deal with Latin American drama with the sophisticated techniques which are available today.

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Notes

1. *Theories of Comedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), p. xxii.
2. Gorostiza, *Teatro selecto*, edición, prólogo y notas de Armando de María y Campos (México: Editorial Porrúa, Colección de Escritores Mexicanos 73, 1957), p. 305.
3. F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy* (New York: Collier Books, rev. ed., 1962), pp. 96-97.
4. "The Meanings of Comedy," in *Comedy*, intro. and appendix by Wylie Sypher (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 217.