

Victims and Violators: The Structure of Violence in *Torquemada*

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Augusto Boal began writing *Torquemada* in February of 1971 while he was a political prisoner in Brazil, and he completed the work later that year as an exile in Buenos Aires. The play is a vivid, personal portrait of torture used for political purposes. It consists of a series of fragmented scenes depicting various types of torture—including arrest and imprisonment—the role of the torturers and the effect this insidious form of violence has on its victims. The entire work is held together by the presence of one character, Torquemada, whose name alone functions as a universal sign for violence and torture. Here, Torquemada, the historical symbol for repression, travels through time to represent a present-day government or official entity that employs torture as a means of controlling real or imagined subversion.

As an essayist, critic and playwright, Augusto Boal is committed to revolutionizing the theatre in both form and content. In his writings, he has stated that if theatre in Latin America is to be a viable instrument in any struggle for social or political reform, the playwright must reject outdated or Aristotelian dramatic structures that create illusion and allow the spectator's emotional involvement to prevent his intellectual participation. Audience empathy with characters and action must be either replaced by objective reactions or correctly utilized to force the spectator into a confrontation with an idea or message.

According to Boal:

. . . Aristóteles formuló un poderosísimo sistema purgatorio, cuya finalidad es eliminar todo lo que no sea comúnmente aceptado, incluso la revolución, antes que se produzca. Su sistema aparece . . . en formas y medios múltiples y variados. Pero su esencia no cambia: se trata de frenar al individuo, de adaptarlo a lo que pre-existe. Si es esto lo que queremos, este sistema sirve mejor que ningún otro; si, por el contrario, queremos estimular al espectador a transformar su sociedad, si

lo queremos estimular a hacer la revolución, ¿en ese caso tendremos que buscar otra Poética!'

Torquemada is a good example of Boal's vision of the theatre as a platform for protest and embodies structures based on dramatic theories he contends are capable of creating a change in the public's social and political attitudes. Dramatic structures characteristic of Brechtian theatre and a related movement, documentary drama, are present in Boal's works and occur in both their original forms or as assimilations formulated by the playwright alone or in conjunction with his collaborators.² Boal, in his search for new structures, has noted that Brechtian theory offers an excellent model for the theatre of protest in Latin America. Brecht's statement, translated by Boal, that "el deber del artista no es el de mostrar cómo son las cosas verdaderas, sino el de mostrar cómo son verdaderamente las cosas"³ functions as a frame for many of Boal's theatrical productions and an impetus in his effort to effect social or political reform through intellectual change in the spectator.

Brechtian structures usually associated with the emotional distancing of an audience are evident in *Torquemada*. For example, each actor plays several roles, a technique designed to prevent identification with any one character as an individual. Yet the theme of the play—political repression through the use of torture—requires that the dramatic structures used by the playwright produce not distance but an empathy with the characters that will intensify the spectator's horror of this kind of violence. Emotional identification is necessary if the message of political protest is to be received properly by the audience.

In *Violence in the Arts*, John Fraser states:

Art can indeed help to alert one to alarming possibilities, both in groups and individuals. And presentations of violence can help us to understand more fully the natures of various kind of violators, and attitudes that make for violation, and so, in the long run help us to be better able to deal with them. But an essential condition is that one empathizes with the perpetrators of the violences, however much one may deplore or abominate the violences themselves.⁴

Empathy with the victims is also essential if we are to comprehend and alter their plight. According to Fraser, "Where violences are involved, however, each victim of it becomes momentarily a sort of hero himself, in that behind the surface a good deal of intense feeling must be presumed to be going on that underlines not his differences from the reader but his kinship."⁵

Torquemada's basic structure or organization consists of the binary opposition of victims and violators. That is, the characters acting out the various scenes function as signs for either victim or violator. This opposition is further divided into subsigns that both support the original signs and reveal variations within the context of the relationship victim-violator. The purpose of this discussion is to identify and examine examples of the binary oppositions within the play as text and to evaluate their effectiveness as instigators of political and social awareness in an audience during a possible performance.

All drama consists of two facets: text and performance.⁶ Before a written text is translated into performance, however, there is another stage closely related to the text but not yet a part of the play as a live presentation—the text

as potential performance. It comes into existence when a reader projects all aspects of the play he is reading into a future staging—a necessary step if a play is to be read or performed effectively. According to Jean Alter, the text of a play:

. . . is written and read according to literary codes. On the other hand, in the play as performance, the representational function is carried out with means of staging techniques: gestures, facial expressions, body movements, voice intonation . . . etc. In that sense, the play is staged and seen/heard according to codes of behavior . . . which not only are extremely complex, but fluid and more frequently transgressed than literary codes.⁷

Therefore, signs occurring in a written text must be decoded at some point as signs of a possible performance or a reader may fail to grasp the entire range of signification suggested in a play's structure.

Because *Torquemada* contains a number of complex scenes of arrest, imprisonment and torture, this discussion, or reading, will focus first on the overall pattern of binary relationships and second on those scenes or signs/characters which represent significant strengths or weaknesses in the play's portraits of violence.

In *Torquemada* the principal violator is the government, represented by characters portraying authority figures: Torquemada, priests, policemen, soldiers, civil servants, businessmen. The victims are the people or social groups representing the people of the country: artists, political activists, and bystanders caught up in political turmoil. As the play develops, the binary opposition remains the same, but there is a gradual transfer of signs. Those who began their relationship with Torquemada as violators finally become his victims. Characters serving as subsigns in the play's structure reveal variations in the manner in which the violators and victims view each other and serve as a link between the two.

Except for a few characters, like Torquemada, whose name frames the actions, most do not emerge as individuals whom the audience can identify, thereby increasing the emphasis on the meaning of the binary structure. Those characters that are given names serve to highlight in action or dialogue a particular function of the sign group to which they belong. For example, the priests who torture a writer in one scene are called "Barba," "Atleta," "Bajito," nicknames that describe physical characteristics. This underscores their role as anonymous extensions of a larger organization and also creates the impression a victim of torture might have of his tormentors. They are types, not individuals with whom one can reason. In another scene, a political informer is called "Hombre" while his victim has a name, Vera. Yet the civil servant whose job is to torture subversives is known as Desiderio. He is an individual with a wife and family and because he is an easily recognizable member of society, his choice of profession is even more horrifying.

Among the political prisoners who await interrogation and torture, only a few have names: Ismael, Fernando, Zeca. Ismael and Fernando were unsuccessful terrorists and revolutionaries who now spend their time in prison explaining the reasons behind the failure of their organizations. Zeca believes

that he is about to be rescued by his comrades who have kidnapped an ambassador and are negotiating for the release of a prisoner. Zeca, certain that he will soon be free, challenges and insults the soldiers guarding him. When it is discovered that Zeca is not the prisoner the kidnappers were trying to free, he is taken away to be tortured and probably killed. The identification by name of key characters in this group should help prevent the audience from perceiving the victims as an anonymous mass whose suffering does not affect its own life.

Subsigns supporting each group are found in several characters. For example, the "Locutores" or announcers whose news bulletins link the scenes in Brechtian fashion explain the play's political atmosphere. Their announcements seem to show a bias toward the establishment, but instead reveal the repressive measures being taken by the government: ". . . Los principales líderes estudiantiles, obreros y campesinos son encarcelados. Estado de sitio . . . Retornan entusiasmados los capitales extranjeros, financiamientos internacionales. . . . Los capitales internacionales eufóricos; Torquemada eufórico . . ." ⁸ In order to discover how the man on the street is affected by the political situation, the announcers interview Desiderio, the government official who tortures for a living.

Another subsign is the relative of a young girl who has been taken prisoner while making love to a subversive. He is neither victim nor violator at this moment, but his inability to offer any substantial assistance underlines the helplessness of the victims and the power of the violators.

The most effective subsigns in the play are Cristina, the homosexual prison janitor, and a sympathetic "Carcelero." Cristina contains elements of both signs because he is likewise a prisoner and is forced to suffer certain indignities at the hands of his jailers. Yet he is one of them because he carries out their orders and because his personal characteristics mirror those displayed by his captors: ". . . Son todos homosexuales, . . . ven su propia cara en mí, por eso me odian. Porque son como yo. Soy su espejo." (p. 137) The jailer expresses sympathy with the prisoners saying that he understands their challenges and insults, but warning them to maintain their silence around the soldiers: ". . . conmigo ustedes pueden hablar, pero no van a hablar con los soldados que están de plantón . . . ¿Qué quieren? Díganme a mí que somos hijos de puta, pero no a los soldados. Yo comprendo, pero ellos no . . . y somos. ¡Yo sé que somos!" (p. 132) The jailer is a victim because his weakness makes it impossible for him to do anything for the prisoners but warn them. He supports the violators because he allows the atrocities he witnesses to continue without reacting.

In the play's story line, Torquemada is called in by the "King" or government to control subversion. At first, he is only an instrument of the government and those interested in social, political and economic stability. When he realizes his goal, Torquemada's proponents among the middle class, business and industry believe that they can now resume power: "Nosotros los burgueses ayudamos a Torquemada a ayudarnos. Ahora está terminada la primera etapa de nuestra lucha: la subversión está vencida. Ya no necesitamos su ayuda. Ahora queremos ayudar a Torquemada a que no nos ayude más. Que-

remos retornar al poder." (p. 117) However, Torquemada does not relinquish his position so easily. The system is now in place and must perpetuate itself:

TORQUEMADA—Señores: Un poder no existe en su esencia. Existe en el día a día. Cuando al pueblo le es difícil aceptarlo, el poder se manifiesta en sus excesos. Se aplica con blandura al pueblo dócil, con energía al amotinado. No es por capricho que el Estado se revela de una u otra forma: es por necesidad, por deseo de conservarse. En una democracia como la que sueñan ustedes, el pueblo descontento elige y cambia sus gobernantes, elige y cambia el sistema. Pero en un sistema como éste en el que vivimos, la impopularidad del gobierno se ve compensada por su fuerza. Los excesos de un sistema son su verdadera esencia. Y si ustedes, burgueses, luchan por el retorno de la antigua ley, no estarán luchando solamente contra los excesos de mi poder, sino contra el poder mismo. Para defenderlos a ustedes, yo debo ejercer mi poder. Contra todos. (p. 118)

When Torquemada ceases to be an instrument of the government and becomes the sole power in the political structure, characters that belonged to the sign "violator" become victims. A representative of the middle class who had always supported Torquemada is arrested and tortured for subversive activities. He believed that repression was unjust and that the poor should be given assistance. The character, Paulo, represents the violators among the middle-class businessmen that sympathized with the victims of the system they wished to impose on the people. This element must be eliminated if social order and economic progress are to be maintained. Paulo's arrest, torture and death create enormous gains in the stock market and political and social stability in the country.

No one escapes the system in its role as ultimate violator. A prisoner acting as narrator closes the play by describing the effects of a government which rules through violence:

PRESO—Torquemada nos mató, uno a uno. Algunos murieron de bala, otros de cobardía. Algunos murieron luchando, otros murieron de miedo. Todos se fueron muriendo. Y el país entero se transformó en un inmenso cementerio donde el pueblo dejó sus casas y cada hombre entró en su tumba, y los que ya estaban muertos allí se pudrieron, y los que estaban por morir, allí endurecieron, y todos están muertos, profundamente muertos. (p. 175)

Although the prisoner goes on to exhort the audience to act before it is too late and to speak out against repression, the central message remains intact: those who violate for power without concern for the community as a whole will perish along with their victims.

Having identified the patterns of binary opposition as they occur in *Torquemada's* text, the reader must take his examination one step further and project the sign functions in each scene into a possible performance. He must consider the text according to the codes of behavior that will constitute the play on stage. Because *Torquemada* treats violence as it is expressed in the relationship between victim and violator, the reader's first task is to determine

whether a particular confrontation between representatives of each sign group will produce the proper effect.

If an audience is to experience empathy and horror and not emotional distance or intellectual superiority when it observes the characters portraying victims or violators, certain elements must be present in each sign and must be translated easily into action on stage. Victims or violators who are either outrageously monstrous or deformed physically or emotionally will seem unreal to the observer. The pain they suffer or inflict will not produce empathy but indifference or amusement. Empathy is produced, according to Fraser, ". . . where there are the fewest accretions of distance, foreignness, and sheer 'otherness' that need transposing into terms of one's own experience."⁹

Empathy for a victim may be induced, for example, when the observer can perceive the victim's reaction to pain or suffering to be similar to his own. This will occur if the victim is depicted doing a task or participating in a simple, everyday activity and is stopped in a violent and unexpected manner. The spectator's horror is increased if he witnesses a violent act while normal activity continues around the victim.¹⁰

Violators, too, must be seen carrying out tasks in seemingly normal circumstances or must be recognizable members of society. The spectator should be able to see the violator in himself even in horrifying situations. Phillip Caputo in *A Rumor of War* states that the reason most Americans reacted with fear and revulsion when faced with returning Viet Nam veterans was that the young men who committed the atrocities they heard and read about were mirror images of themselves.¹¹

Torquemada's victims and violators sometimes contain the elements they need to produce empathy and as a result create a horror of the violence in which they take part. However, not all the scenes are successful. In some instances, the victim is grotesque in the sense that he takes an illogical course of action that makes him appear weak or a natural loser and therefore deserving of his fate. Some of the violators are also portrayed as intellectually inferior beings, thereby eliciting not fear but contempt.

In the opening scenes of the play, the victims and violators display characteristics that can mar their effectiveness. The first scene shows priests carrying out the function of the sign, "violator." Because they belong to a respectable social group engaged in a violent activity, their actions should cause the proper reaction in the spectator—even though they are symbolic representatives of *Torquemada*. Yet they are foolish and stupid in comparison with the tortured writer who appears calm and reasonable:

BARBA — Difamas, porque cuando te vas al exterior dices que en nuestro país hay tortura. (*Un silencio. El dramaturgo, colgado en el palo, no entiende muy bien.*)

BAJITO — El se está riendo.

(p. 73)

The priests continue to complain that they, unlike the subversives, are never given the opportunity to travel. They then make facetious statements about airplanes and the American dollar. The spectator can only see them as comic figures bested by a superior intellect.

In the final scene, the spectator is prevented from identifying with the vic-

tim, Paulo, because he chooses to increase the torture he suffers when he realizes that this is having a positive effect on the stock market. The circumstances here have become too remote, too unreal, to appeal to the observer. Yet an earlier confrontation between Paulo and his torturers has many possibilities for increasing the terror the audience should feel. The entire scene is played while Torquemada eats dinner, talks with Paulo and directs his torture. Normal activities continue while a man suffers great agony. The stage directions themselves set the tone for the episode:

(Torquemada y Paulo. Torquemada cena mientras Paulo es torturado por frailes armados. La conversación es como si estuvieran ambos dialogando serenamente. Paulo está colgado. Los mismos frailes que lo torturan son los que le sirven a Torquemada el vino y las comidas. Los dos rituales, tortura y cena, se confunden.) (p. 138)

Perhaps the most successful victim in the play is the young girl who was arrested because she was in bed with a subversive. She is interrupted at a moment in her life that everyone considers private and a personal right. She has not committed a crime or even an act of subversion because she did not know about the young man's activities. The shock of her subsequent torture and death is heightened by the fact that she is an ordinary girl who is not allowed to live out her ordinary life.

The violator who can have the most impact on the audience is Desiderio, the civil servant who is just trying to make a living. He is a man who must support his family and torture is his work: "Bueno, es decir, desde el punto de vista profesional, es decir, el filete de mis hijos . . . Ese es mi filete. Cada uno tiene el suyo. Ese es el mío" (pp. 115-116). Because it is his work, and now familiar to him, he does not see the horrible suffering he inflicts. In his interview with the news announcer, he exhorts those subversives who will soon be tortured to confess quickly for the good of the country. His character recalls the Nazi concentration camp guards who were able to discuss calmly atrocities they committed without a hint of remorse or feeling for their victims. Desiderio is a man whose profession causes great suffering, but he is as dedicated to it as anyone in the audience is to his own.

Torquemada is a protest against the use of violence and torture by any government, no matter how difficult it may be for those in power to maintain social and political stability. For this reason, the structure of binary opposition must support the play's theme effectively. If the play is taken as text and is examined according to the probable impact of the manner in which each violent scene of torture is organized, certain flaws and weaknesses can be discovered along with definite strengths. Keeping them in mind, the reader or director of the play can project corrections of the weak relationships into a possible performance. These might take the form of deletions in the text, attention to intonation or insistence on well-crafted characterizations by the actors. Careful alterations in the original sign system may be able to ensure the desired reaction in the spectator when the work is brought to the stage. This discussion is a preliminary reading and identifies only a few elements in the

sign system which could be changed or enhanced by a more detailed examination.

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Notes

1. Augusto Boal, *Teatro del oprimido; y otras poéticas políticas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1974), pp. 64-65.

2. For a description of the development of the "sistema comidin" in the Teatro Arena of Sao Paulo see Boal, pp. 195-238.

3. Boal, p. 137.

4. John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 85.

5. Fraser, p. 56.

6. For a detailed discussion of drama as text and performance, see Jean Alter, "Coding Efficiency in Plays from Text to Stage," *Semiótica*, 28 (1979), pp. 247-258. For a reading of a play as performance, see Kirsten F. Nigro, "La noche de los asesinos: Playscript and Stage Enactment," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11/1 (Fall 1977), 45-57.

7. Alter, p. 247. Concerning the same subject, Nigro states: "The published playscript, however, is a special kind of book that has not been written so much for a reading public as for an audience of theatregoers. The readers of a dramatic text engage in a private activity, whereas the audience's experience of that same text is social and communal. The readers hold in their hands the blueprint of a complex, four-dimensional art form; the audience shares the end-product of a collaborative effort which transforms the blueprint into the total theatre event. The theatregoer's perception and understanding of a play comes from the way in which the diverse elements of the performance are orchestrated, in time and space, to produce a desired effect. In the readers' case, the script substitutes for the performance and is the primary means of grasping a play's essence. If necessary, the text can be read numerous times, an opportunity not afforded to the viewing public. Yet the readers' experience is somehow incomplete and should be supplemented by an imaginary staging of the text." See Nigro, p. 45.

8. Augusto Boal, *Torquemada* in *Teatro latinoamericano de agitación* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1972), pp. 114-115. All further references to this work appear in the text.

9. Fraser, p. 57.

10. Fraser, pp. 51-108.

11. Caputo says, "Most American soldiers in Vietnam – at least the ones I knew – could not be divided into good men and bad. Each possessed roughly equal measures of both qualities. I saw men who behaved with great compassion toward the Vietnamese one day and then burned down a village the next. They were, as Kipling wrote of his Tommy Atkins, neither saints 'nor blackguards too' But single men in barracks most remarkable like you.' That may be why Americans reacted with such horror to the disclosures of U.S. atrocities while ignoring those of the other side: the American soldier was a reflection of themselves." Phillip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. xx.