

Rene Marques' *La muerte no entrara en Palacio*: An analysis

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Since the origins of the theatre in Latin America, playwrights there have struggled to conciliate two major ideals: to interpret the reality of their native environment and to remain abreast of innovations in the European theatre. Among the works by contemporary dramatists included in Carlos Solórzano's *El teatro hispanoamericano contemporáneo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964)¹ is the Puerto Rican René Marqués' fifth play *La muerte no entrará en Palacio* (1957)² which attempts to do justice to both aspects of this dual imperative. It stands out in consequence from the mass of *teatro de protesta* which, if the recent history of the Latin American novel offers reliable indications, is a genre destined to date very rapidly as social change continues.

Three features of the play call for special comment. First, although this is a play of protest (against threats from abroad to the independence of Latin American countries and against arbitrary presidential power), it avoids oversimplification and even contains an element of analysis. Second, it is not only a play of ideas but aims at being also a drama of basically human conflict. Most striking of all, it is alleged to be something rare in the Latin American theatre of today, a tragedy. In what follows it is proposed to examine by means of an analysis of its structure Marqués' success in coordinating these aspects of the play into a consistent whole.

From the outset it is clear that we are in the presence of a sophisticated example of theatre. The first two scenes already provide an example of Marqués' technical skill. Teresias' speech as the curtain rises is designed to create, through its heavily-emphasized references to time and the universal

moral order, a sense of tragic atmosphere. But the impression of portentousness, having served its dramatic purpose, is immediately effaced by Casandra's happy laughter and her appearance, together with her fiancé Alberto, dressed for tennis in the sunny garden. The daring contrast between the two scenes is reflected in the more muted contrast of tone between Alberto's speeches and those of the heroine. Their characters are at once sharply differentiated. He, henceforth, never moves from this initial level of intelligence and idealism. Casandra, on the other hand, presented here as trivial and rather scatterbrained, is allowed margin to develop towards her final decision. Finally, when reference is made to don Rodrigo, the center of opposition to Casandra's father President José, the main counterforce in the action is brought into early prominence. In these brief scenes, then, Marqués very effectively solves the problem of exposition.

They are linked to the principal scene of Act 1, *Cuadro I*, by a sequence of dialogue which has not only the function of introducing doña Isabel, Casandra's mother, and establishing her character, but also that of reemphasizing the significance of don Rodrigo's return from prison and exile. Don Rodrigo's role in the play is that of the symbol-figure of national dignity and independence. Just as Casandra, in her initial reference to him had associated her mother with his ideal, so now doña Isabel in her turn associates Teresias with it, through his friendship and esteem for the returning exile. Thus don Rodrigo is seen from the beginning as a focal point around which are gathered the forces of resistance to President José within his own close circle of relatives and friends.

Only now does President José himself make his carefully prepared entrance, which is the signal for the main ideological scene of Act 1, *Cuadro I*. In the conversation between him and his wife which follows, Marqués once more achieves a double object. The clash of outlook which emerges not only clarifies the message of the play (Marqués' championship of the superior, if intangible, values of national self-sufficiency and self-realization over the material advantages accruing from dependence on a foreign power) but also, and in a way more importantly, establishes don José as a fundamentally weak and insecure human being. In doing so it introduces the secondary aspect of the play: its human dimension, which turns on the study of the dictatorial mentality in don José, and the evolution of Casandra from her initial superficiality of outlook towards total dedication to the national ideal. It may be noted at this point that don José and Casandra are in fact the only characters whose psychology does actually evolve during the course of the action.

President José's insecurity is suggested by his need of alcohol but more effectively by his dependence on his wife's presence for relief from nervous tension. Marqués, with a subtle touch, makes the scene between the Presi-

dent and his wife both begin and end on this note with José's speeches: "No me dejes solo" (327) and later "Sin ti estoy siempre a solas" (330). In this way the argument between them about don José's political policy, on which the theme of the play is centered, is obliquely correlated with his personal, human inadequacy.

From this contrast stems Marqués' clash of allegiances in the rest of the play. The problem is a common one in literature of social protest and can be readily illustrated by reference both to the novel in Latin America and to other plays in this category. To be effective a work of protest must do one of two things. Either it must attack the oppressors, emphasizing all their negative qualities, while idealizing the oppressed, as for example in Alegría's novel *El mundo es ancho y ajeno*, or (less crudely) it must portray any virtues of the oppressors as less important than their vices, and present the vices of the oppressed as deriving from their oppression, as in Icaza's *Huasi-pungo*. In this way a balance of sympathy in favor of the oppressed is preserved. Failure to accomplish this may make a work more realistic, since we know that neither oppressors nor oppressed have a monopoly of virtues or vices, but it will seriously endanger the ideological impact. An illustration of this is seen in another well-known play in Solórzano's anthology, the Chilean Egon Wolff's *Los invasores* (1962). Here the portraiture of the bourgeois exploiters of the poor is conventional enough, though Meyer, their spokesman, makes some shrewd remarks in his own defense; but as the play progresses Wolff, while seeming to realize that there is something crude about idealizing the now insurgent slumdweller, is unable to find a suitable alternative. Just at the moment when what is needed to balance the play ideologically is a clear statement of positive policy on behalf of the now triumphant invaders, Alí Babá emerges as the advocate of blind violence and brutality and China, the rebels' moderate leader, can find no better definition of the movement, hitherto presented as childishly destructive than the vague statement that it is "una cruzada de buena fe" (187). In consequence the play is neither a successful piece of propaganda nor a genuine drama of ideas. Failure to present the invaders in a positive light prevents it from achieving the former category while the crudity of its attack on the bourgeois group removes it from the latter.

La muerte no entrará en Palacio is open to criticism on similar grounds. From the moment Marqués begins to develop the play not simply as a drama of protest but as a tragedy as well he runs the risk of falling between two stools. Tragedy and straight social or political protest are intrinsically incompatible, for tragedy in so far as it is a protest at all is a protest against the *human* condition and not against specific social or political conditions. Though it is possible to envisage a tragedy which includes social or political criticism, this can only be indirect and balanced against some other force which is not in itself morally superior. For tragedy, as we know, obviously

results from the clash of equally justified forces. Thus it would be a critical error to interpret Lorca's depiction in *La casa de Bernada Alba* of narrowness of mentality in an Andalusian *pueblo* as primarily a protest against the conditions which contribute to its formation. The mentality in question is seen rather as a factor in the human situation of Bernada's family which conflicts with another factor: Adela's emotional and sexual frustration. Both are viewed with detachment and the tragedy is born out of the clash between them which is seen as both inevitable and wasteful. No such detachment and balance of dramatic forces are visible in *La muerte no entrará en Palacio*, however. In the last part of Act I, *Cuadro I*, the interview between President José and the peasants' delegation, the equilibrium between José's belief in "pan y techo seguros, instrucción, libertades, progreso" (328) and doña Isabel's defense of "algo que vale más que toda la ciencia y todo el progreso del mundo" (329) (i.e., national independence) is shattered. The protest element in the play takes over as Marqués obviously sides with the young spokesman of the peasants against the President.⁸ Once this has taken place we are no longer confronted with a momentous choice between two equally defensible principles of public conduct. The tragic possibilities of the play are henceforth severely limited.

Cuadro II of Act I is no less interesting technically than *Cuadro I*. It consists basically of four scenes. Three of these are really discussions of the situation; the fourth is a dramatic curtain-scene designed to carry over suspense into Act II. They are separated by quotations from the speeches on the theme of independence by the returned exile don Rodrigo. These provide both a recurrent contrast to the discussions themselves and the context of growing unrest against which the discussions take place. The order in which the three discussion-scenes are presented is significant. The first conveys the reaction of President José himself; the second that of his wife doña Isabel; the third that of his daughter Casandra. The audience is thus confronted successively with an illustration of the dubious political morality on which the President's regime rests; the assertion of the need for a moral choice on the part of the leaders opposed to it; and Casandra's actual choice, which is to sacrifice her happiness with Alberto. Of the three, the first, centering on the President is dramatically the most interesting. Superficially, it is concerned with the fragility of José's regime now under strong attack from don Rodrigo and the doubtful judicial methods by means of which it defends itself. But there is another element; the rebellion of don José himself (or of his better self) against the effects of his own position and policies. Fortunately for the literary quality of the play, don José has nothing in common with Asturias' Señor Presidente. He is seen here to be conscious of the degeneration of his own personality contrasted with that of Alberto's father, who died before their common ideal became tarnished by contact with reality.

In his last speech of the scene with its poignant statement "es fácil serlo todo antes de llegar al poder" (345), we are invited momentarily to see president José as the unwilling victim of his position, a man forced to compromise with his ideals by the realities and responsibilities of power. Similarly in his instinctive rejection of the cynical attitudes of his Chief Justice, there is a further element of unhappy self-awareness: "Todavía soy capaz de sentir asco. Pero lo horrible es que cada vez siento menos asco" (344-45). These flashes of self-insight unquestionably raise don José's character above the level of the stock dictator-figure and recapture for him a great deal of the audience's sympathy. In doing so they at the same time lift the play out of the category of mere protest-drama with its characteristic contrast of black and white, and bring into sight an issue which is far more complex and fundamental than that which is symbolized by the block of stone brought by the peasants to their interview with the President. The question, that is, of a final justification for don José.

Throughout the play don José is assumed to be wrong. But the opposition acts as if his contemptuous view of the people over whom he presides is correct. If what Alberto and Casandra believe is true: that an unscrupulous President can manipulate even democratic methods for his own ends; if the people are incapable of understanding the message of don Rodrigo; if there is no confidence in the triumph of right unaided by force (for as we perceive at the end of Act I even the idealist side is not exempt from violence and bloodshed); then the question arises whether don José is not half-right after all. The real issue in the play, expressed in terms of a direct confrontation between the President and don Rodrigo with the people as arbiter, is avoided. As a consequence some rather worrying interrogations about Marqués' ultimate convictions remain.

Meanwhile, in Act I, *Cuadro II*, the President's over-violent treatment of the *Jefe de Justicia* brings with it for the audience the recognition that he is in fact willfully closing his eyes to the consequences of his own regime, and re-emphasizes his basic weakness and insecurity as a human being. A potentially tragic character up to this point, torn between nostalgia for his youthful ideals and the realism of experience, this is for him the key-scene. But his momentary flashes of self-insight lead to no decision, tragic or otherwise. Henceforth he is lost.

The second discussion, between doña Isabel and Teresias, shows the counter-movement against the President gaining ground within his own intimate circle. Both his wife and friend recognize the necessity for a realignment of allegiances. Teresias' "tenemos que escoger—tenemos que ser fieles sólo a una voz" (351) indicates that the issues have crystalized. In the final discussion they are underlined again by Alberto: "Estamos viviendo una crisis y no podemos eludir nuestras responsabilidades" (357). "Hay algo en

don José que se ha deteriorado, que se está deteriorando de modo lamentable" (358). But as yet matters have not come to a head. The effect of Alberto's dramatic revelation of don José's plan to turn the country into a foreign protectorate is mitigated by the hope that the better side of the President's nature will yet prevail. The attempted assassination of don José closes the act with an effective curtain-scene.

A significant feature of Act II is that in *Cuadro* I the play marks time: there is no real advance in the action as such. Why is this? To perceive the answer it is necessary to examine the dramatic forces in play at this point. One is obvious: it is the President himself, now a force for evil advancing towards the goal of establishing the protectorate. Which is the other? Here we have a clue as to another weakness of the play. The second dramatic force is composed of all the other major characters: the youth from Altamira, Teresias, Alberto, Isabel and Casandra, with Casandra as the eventual dramatic *agent*. Don Rodrigo hovers behind them in the background but never appears.

This fragmentation of the opposing dramatic force has two important consequences. First, the time that should be devoted to a direct clash of character between anyone of the opposing group (one had hopes of don Rodrigo in this act) and the President is used instead to give each one the possibility of revealing his or her hostility, keeping Casandra in reserve for the final *cuadro*. Second, and more important, it has the effect of restricting the underlying conflict to the external plane. Reconsidering the situation we recognize in don José a fundamentally good man gone wrong and vaguely aware of it: a good start for a tragic figure. But apart from the minor instance already noticed (the scene with the *Jefe de Justicia*) and his question to Teresias in this act "¿Qué puedo hacer para escuchar tu voz?" (372) there is little or no evidence of a consistent conflict *within* the President himself. Next we have a situation in which the tragic agent is don José's own daughter Casandra. But, instead of centering the play on her terrible decision, Marqués chooses to range a whole series of characters against the President and only sets her in motion suddenly after a seemingly fortuitous event⁴ has caused her to bring about the death of Alberto her fiancé.

Once more, as in the deputation-scene in Act I, Marqués' divided allegiances, driving him now in the direction of straight protest, now back towards more intrinsically literary effects, seem to play him false. What is uppermost here is the ideological aspect: the contrast of the single dictator with the solid phalanx of his nationalist opponents. By wasting time showing them clashing with don José in this *cuadro* (first Teresias, then Isabel, the political and the personal in interesting symmetry) followed by Alberto's exclamation "Tenemos que hacer algo" (384), as if this were not already obvious at the end of Act I, Marqués loses the opportunity to develop ade-

quately a tragic evolution of character in Casandra and the conclusion of the play is reduced to the level of the merely dramatic, not to say novelesque.

The last *cuadro* is by contrast an extremely effective piece of stagecraft. Too late to salvage the tragedy, Marqués makes a good job of ending the drama. Casandra's growing insight had been deliberately indicated as early as Act I, *Cuadro* II ("Oh, Alberto mío, estoy aprendiendo mucho." 353) and re-emphasized by her temporary flight from her father's once-loved Palace at the end of Act II, *Cuadro* I. She is given additional strength for her later action by the interview with her mother which now takes place. Doña Isabel's plea to her "¡No pierdas tu fe, hijita!" (388) marks a decisive point in Casandra's evolution. Next don José is allowed to drop several notches lower in the moral scale: his actions are seen to derive not merely from weakness, from compromise, from false choice between material and ideal values, but from a hidden contempt for "este miserable, estúpido pueblo" (394). His next words, with their reference to *dignidad*, are ironically an unwitting compliment to the ideal of Alberto and the others, which reveals how confused the President's value-system has now become.

The penultimate scene contains, as usual, the moment of pathos before the climax. Normally the last two scenes of a play are deliberately contrasted in tone in order to reinforce the effect of the concluding one. But here this is not the case. For although the scene opens on a moving note of renunciation and parting, it shifts abruptly into high drama as Casandra, struggling to get possession of her fiancé's pistol in order to prevent him from assassinating her father, shoots Alberto. The usual contrast is thus foreshortened so as to bring Casandra's evolution rapidly to its peak with her cry of "Cualquier otro, menos tú" (402) and at that precise point to bind together inextricably her private catastrophe and the events which follow. The last two scenes of the play are thereby functionally connected. It is by the breaking of her bond with Alberto that Casandra is freed for and in a sense impelled to her final action. This occurs in a spectacular scene in which Marqués mobilizes every possible resource of scenery, groups of characters, symbolism and dramatic contrast to produce a memorable climax with the President struck down by his daughter as he is in the act of signing away the independence of his country. In all the last *Cuadro* there is the mounting intensity characteristic of the work of a highly professionalized dramatist. The only criticism of it is that the last scene and epilogue are possibly a trifle over-written and melodramatic.

But the real criticism of Marqués' play is not this. It is that there is no conflict of ideal with ideal. Ultimately the clash here is between right and wrong as the dramatist sees them. And there is no such thing as a tragedy of thesis. Equally, both don José and Casandra lack authentic tragic stature. Tragic grandeur of character arises from inner conflict or from conscious

involvement in a tragic situation disposed by an irony of fate. These are largely absent here.

The play is in fact a compromise. Marqués, with great technical resourcefulness strives to conciliate belief in his duty as a "committed" writer with pressure from his artistic conscience to aim at a work in one of the highest universal categories. *La muerte no entrará en Palacio* thus illustrates with particular clarity the dilemma confronting so many contemporary Latin American dramatists. It is for this, rather than for its documentary significance, that it is worthy of note.

Notes

1. All page references are to Vol. I of this collection.
2. For a general introduction to the theatre of Marqués, see F. Dauster, "The Theatre of René Marqués," *Symposium*, XVIII, No. 1 (1964), 35-45, which devotes three paragraphs to the play criticizing Act II, and his earlier brief note "New Plays of René Marqués," *Hispania*, XLIII, No. 3 (1960), 451-452.
3. For Marqués general literary attitude see his article "La función del escritor puertorriqueño en el momento actual," *Cuadernos Americanos*, XXVII, No. 2 (1964), which comes out strongly in favor of "committed" writing.
4. The statement by A. del Saz in *Teatro hispanoamericano*, II (Barcelona, 1963), p. 264, that Casandra "prefiere matar a su novio" appears to be unfounded.