

Cristóbal de Llerena and His Satiric *Entremés*

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The documented history of the Dominican theatre begins soon after the Spaniards' arrival on Hispaniola. The existence of tribal *areítos*, a combination of music, dance, and drama, is confirmed in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, and the distinguished chronicler specifically mentions the one performed for Nicolás de Ovando, Christopher Columbus' successor to the island's governorship.¹ Spanish drama as well was quickly transferred to the settlement of Santo Domingo and, according to Padre Bartolomé de Las Casas' *Historia de las Indias*, was initially presented for the entertainment of guests at the home of María de Toledo, who had accompanied her husband, Diego Columbus, to the New World in 1509.² The earliest friars to the Caribbean area were the first to blend indigenous elements of dramatization with those of the Peninsula in their creation of *autos*, and these pieces proved to be an important indoctrinary device in the conversion of the Indians and an integral part of religious festivities held throughout the Indies. With such a tradition for the dramatic arts based upon a pioneering spirit, it is not surprising that one of the first plays written by a Spanish American was performed in the Dominican colony and that its reflective vision of colonial life would leave its mark on both the history of the theatre in the New World as well as that of colonial satire.

During the latter part of the sixteenth century, the sponsorship of dramatic performances was still in ecclesiastical hands, but the pieces themselves were undergoing gradual secularization. One of them, which was presented during the 1588 celebration of Corpus Christi, is remembered for the uproar it created within municipal officialdom and for the banishment of its author to South America. The interlude itself had been written by the Creole churchman Cristóbal de Llerena and was presented by his students from the Universidad de Gorjón.³ Because the production resulted in the deportation of a clergyman without a trial, the Church immediately

became embroiled in the controversy, and this prompted the Dominican archbishop, Don Alonso de Avila, to write Philip II on the accused playwright's behalf.⁴ This letter provides what little is known about Llerena, and the attachment of the *entremés* to it assured the preservation of his only extant work for posterity. According to the correspondence, Llerena, who was probably born around 1550 of Spanish parents, occupied numerous positions at the Universidad de Gorjón, Santo Domingo's second institution of higher learning.⁵ Apart from his duties as professor, chaplain, organist, and accountant, he often found time to engage in creative writing. Although the Archbishop refers specifically to his religious poetry, it is evident that his theme may have varied and that this deviation may have brought him into conflict with civil authorities prior to 1588. After a year-long exile in New Granada, however, he returned to Santo Domingo and resumed his post at Gorjón. Without further interference from government officials, he concluded his career in the rectorship and lived at least ten years into the next century.⁶

The controversial interlude penned by Llerena depicts the extraordinary decline of Santo Domingo, the capital of the island Columbus described on his first voyage as "la más hermosa cosa del mundo."⁷ Hispaniola had been under Spanish domination for nearly one hundred years when the dramatic piece was written, but with gold supplies exhausted and Indian labor decimated, it had ceased to be a vital part of the empire. The island drifted into neglect with the conquests of Mexico and Peru, and this resulted in serious economic reversals and left the coastline unprotected from the growing number of buccaneers in the Caribbean area. Holding Santo Domingo's colonial administration responsible for the colony's present state, Llerena describes the island community gripped by poverty and fear and riddled with moral decay.

Llerena's exposure of a colonial city's ills anticipates the more elaborate satiric descriptions of other American capitals and represents the transfer of this theme of Classical and Christian origin to the New World. Juvenal's depiction of Roman decadence in his *Satires* is the most famous example of this literary motif and counters precisely the time-honored concept of *laudes civitatum*. Placing mankind in a more general context of a world community, Saint Augustine also uncovers human weaknesses in his description of the City of God and the City of Man or *caritas* versus *avaritia*.⁸ Llerena's attack on a major municipality of the New World, however, is not merely the continuance of literary tradition; it was designed to deal a severe blow to one of the basic principles of the Spaniards' colonization. Spain's intention to establish permanent settlements based upon order and governed by reason were at the heart of its plan to realize visionary goals for

America. These urban areas, therefore, were the conscious reflection of Spanish ideals, and their destiny as the center of colonial life was preordained.

Structuring his interlude around the birth of a monster by the *bobo* Cordellate, an event taken from Horace's *Epistola Ad Pisones*, Llerena uses the most fundamental form of the grotesque to convey his vision of colonial Santo Domingo.⁹ With a woman's head, a horse's neck, a bird's body, and a fish's tail, the creature resembles the fantastic Roman ornamentation for which the term was first coined.¹⁰ Four Classical figures are called upon to interpret this conundrum, and reaction predictably dramatizes the effects of the grotesque as a technique. Edipo and Delio are amused by the freak and express comic and even absurd interpretations, the former blaming everything on Santo Domingo's female population and the latter citing Ovid and Terence in search of a philosophical explanation. Proteo and Calcas, however, find the monster's appearance shocking, and it is through their augury that Llerena delivers his most destructive criticism.

A strong defense and favorable trade concessions from Spain are tantamount to the island's survival, and these issues lie at the very center of his satiric *entremés*. The 1586 sacking of Santo Domingo by Sir Francis Drake had been devastating to the city, and Calcas predicts another raid with similar consequences. Foreigners, however, are not the only ones who take advantage of Hispaniola's isolation. As Proteo points out, greedy ship captains are often the beneficiaries of the strict mercantilistic system imposed by the Spaniards. After dutifully sending raw materials to Spain, colonists were still forced to pay exorbitant prices for manufactured goods either imported or smuggled into the Indies.

The insensitivity of colonial administration to Santo Domingo's plight and its constant preoccupation with its own well-being are reinforced through Llerena's caricature of royal officials. Described generally as a corrupt group in one of the prognostications, the author relies on the actions of two *alcaldes* to add to their negative traits. Their portrayal as overbearing lackeys also stands out beside the pathetic figure of the *bobo*, who represents Santo Domingo's population at large. Once happy and prosperous, Cordellate is now distraught by the area's impoverishment and stunned and mystified at what his oversized belly has produced. Neither official accepts any blame for this misfortune, and they both mistreat the poor simpleton for what they claim is his responsibility. Unwilling to believe that Santo Domingo has fallen victim to Spain's exploitive imperialism, the two reject the interpretations and predictions of Calcas and his companions and hurry off to the *cabildo* at the conclusion of the skit to

inquire what the official view of this phenomenon will be.

Although Llerena strikes primarily at government mismanagement, he broadens the scope of his attack slightly to demonstrate how it has created a general climate of relaxed standards in which other undesirable elements of society are permitted to thrive. These types are named only and do not appear in the play, but reference to them suggests the profile of Santo Domingo's society. Notaries, lawyers, and theologians are mentioned for their deviousness, but women, condemned by Proteo as disorderly beings "cuyas galas, apetitos y licencias van fuera de todo orden natural" (127), are attacked unmercifully. All of the characters agree that women are accountable to some extent for the capital's deplorable condition, but Edipo attributes the monster's entire repulsive composition to aspects of a woman's character:

Es la mejor mujer instable bola.
La más discreta es bestia torpe insana;
aquella que más grave, es más liviana,
y al fin toda mujer nace con cola. (126)

Women are often singled out in satiric works as a symbol of both physical and moral decay, and their denigration provides the most common theme in colonial Spanish American satire.¹¹ While misogyny has a long and varied tradition, Llerena's scathing portrayal of women probably originated with the interpretation of Man's fall as the result of Eve's weakness. This perspective is clearly demonstrated in Motolinía's description of a 1538 dramatic representation of the Bible story in his *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, and it was no doubt reinforced by the general body of patristic literature with which Llerena was acquainted.¹²

In addition to contributing to the universal undercurrent of antifeminism apparent in literature, Llerena may have taken advantage of its popularity and relative safety as an amusing diversion away from the more sensitive issues to which he alludes. Sexual promiscuity is often used by satirists as a source of humor, and in this case, complaints about women may be a unifying factor among the male members of the audience as well. Llerena's depiction of women staving off poverty through prostitution also may have been included to counter the excessive descriptions of conquerors' brave, female companions written by early chroniclers.

Llerena's use of the grotesque adds theatricality to his interlude with the hilarious appearance of the makeshift monster on stage, but the boldness of its entrance and the shocking nature of its composition provide the cutting edge of his satire. The ridiculous figure is a

succinct statement, which captures the essence of his criticism and presents a challenge to traditional symbols of authority, and its disquieting aura conveys the uncertainty and difficulty of the times with a sense of urgency. The real effectiveness of this technique, however, can only be understood by placing it within the context of the island's early history. Only then do the hideousness and abnormality reach their greatest expression and reveal the process of decay that Santo Domingo has undergone.

In 1492 Columbus had discovered the gateway to enchantment in the Caribbean area. El Dorado, the Amazon women, and the Fountain of Youth were among the many myths and legends pursued by the early Spaniards, but not quite a century later, a frightful chimera, a harbinger of doom, stood perplexingly at the entrance to the New World. Utopia and the Terrestrial Paradise had vanished, if they ever existed, and all that remained was horrifying, according to Llerena. Carefully laid out by the Admiral's brother Bartholomew, the city of Santo Domingo was the first permanent Spanish settlement in the Indies. It was the symbol of the Isabeline utopian dream to be duplicated throughout Spain's overseas possessions.¹³ Instead, the colonies had become an administrative nightmare of tremendous proportions, and the chaos and irrationality of the society which subsequently sprang up are betrayed by the monster's incongruous composition. Official administrators blindly served the Crown and lined their own pockets, and such irresponsible conduct brought nothing but destruction to the community. Viewed in this light, there is little to separate the Spaniards from the English pirates who attacked American seaports at will. Even Columbus' role as the savior of heathen races through their evangelization, although succeeding in other parts of the Americas, was a failure on Hispaniola. The island's Indians suffered considerably under Spanish rule and quickly fell victim to its harsh regimentation and lack of humanitarian principles and to disease.

According to Llerena's view, therefore, virtually nothing remained of the idyllic garden spot Columbus reportedly discovered on his first voyage. The Spaniards had been tempted by the island's rich resources, and their consumption of them had transformed the serpent of *Genesis* into a monster of the apocalypse, the apparent offspring of the epitome of grotesque figures, the devil himself. This absence of a paradisiacal state is also carried out by his portrayal of women, as they are described as fallen and are the ostensible refugees from Eden.

Whether Llerena envisioned the end of the world, as predicted by Columbus, or whether he actually detected fissures in the union that bound Hispaniola to the rest of the empire, it is clear that he perceived potentially destructive forces to be at work in Santo Domingo and that he portrayed them in this exploratory piece of early Spanish

American theater. Although his *entremés* is noted for its combination of Classical characters and traditional comic types with aspects of New World reality and for its demonstration of increased secular influence on the writing of dramatic works in the Indies, it is the work's critical purpose, designed to indict the colony's administration, which distinguishes it in the history of colonial letters. Llerena's satiric perspective, which separates the city's people from their government in the play, is an expression of Creole discontent at being denied the rights and privileges customarily granted to Peninsular Spaniards, and it represents a glimmer of a national consciousness which would eventually spread throughout Spain's possessions and would ultimately result in the dismantling of the Spanish American empire. Ironically, however, Santo Domingo would not participate in this movement because of the infiltration of French corsairs, who took over the entire island in the seventeenth century. While much of Spanish America was gathering forces to challenge Spain, Spanish speakers were resisting the influence of France and the continued domination of its colony, Haiti.

In addition to expressing a controversial minority opinion in early colonial literature, Llerena is also a pioneer in his employment of the grotesque for satiric purposes. His interlude is a good example of the pre-Quevedan concept of this technique, which appropriately conveys the startling issues he raises. In terms of the development of New World satire, this brief play is representative of an intermediate step between the early *pasquines* and the complete satires written before the end of the sixteenth century. Although satiric themes and techniques would not reach their fullest expression in theatrical works of the colonial period because of the vulnerability of the performing arts to government censorship,¹⁴ this *entremés* by Cristóbal de Llerena is undoubtedly precursory to the general body of satiric writings in which a topsy-turvy vision of the colonies is projected and the New World is portrayed as trying to break with the Old.

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Notes

1. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, vols. 117-21 of *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1959) I, 114.

2. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 3 vols. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951) II, 366-67.
3. Francisco A. de Icaza, "Cristóbal de Llerena y los orígenes del teatro en la América española," *Revista de Filología Española* 8.2 (1921): 121-30. Other references to this article appear in the text. Icaza was the first scholar to publish Llerena's *entremés*. It was reprinted, however, in Pedro Henríquez Ureña's *La cultura y las letras coloniales en Santo Domingo* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Filología de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1936) 153-57.
4. Anthony M. Pasquariello, "The *Entremés* in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 32.1 (1952) 55.
5. The University was formally granted the privileges of the University of Salamanca in a Royal Decree dated February 23, 1558. P. Henríquez Ureña 23-24.
6. Max Henríquez Ureña, *Panorama histórico de la literatura dominicana* (Rio de Janeiro: Artes Gráficas, 1945) 38.
7. Cristóbal Colón, *Diario del primer viaje* (Barcelona: Ediciones Nauta, 1965) 82.
8. Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 110.
9. José Juan Arrom, *El teatro de Hispanoamérica en la época colonial* (La Habana: Anuario Bibliográfico Cubano, 1956) 61.
10. For a definition of the grotesque and its use in Spanish literature, see Henryk Ziomek, *Lo grotesco en la literatura española del siglo de oro* (Madrid: Ediciones Alcalá, 1983) 7-18.
11. Julie Greer Johnson, *Women in Colonial Spanish American Literature: Literary Images* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1983) 85-109.
12. Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía), *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1969) 66-67.
13. Mircea Eliade, "Paradise and Utopia: Mythical Geography and Eschatology," *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966) 262-63.
14. Another sixteenth-century dramatist, who criticized colonial administration, was Fernán González de Eslava. His seventh *Coloquio*, for example, satirizes the Crown's regulation prohibiting New Spain's production of silk. Early in his career, he had been involved in an incident similar to the one Llerena faced in Santo Domingo. After receiving the approval of the Inquisition, interludes critical of New Spain's viceroy and the implementation of the *alcabala* were inserted in one of his dramatic presentations. He and the colonial poet Francisco de Terrazas were both jailed, although the identities of the real authors were never disclosed, and Juan Pérez Ramírez, who wrote *Desposorio espiritual*, appeared as a witness in the case. Pasquariello 44-48.