Buried Treasure: The Theatre of Constancio Suárez

R. A. Kerr

In February 1985, during an address given in Florida, Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido announced the discovery of a handful of late 19th and early 20th century plays written by the previously unknown Mexican dramatist Constancio S. Suárez. Carballido praised the quality of the works discovered, and reported that he plans to reprint all of them in forthcoming anthologies in the theatre series currently published in Mexico City by Editores Mexicanos Unidos. Details on the life and career of dramatist Suárez have proven difficult to discover, and Carballido himself, commenting on his predecessor, has affirmed that, "no lo encuentro en ningún estudio de literatura." Despite his dearth of information on the playwright, his newly rediscovered plays provide interesting insights on the development of Mexican theatre.

Four of his five pieces were published between 1897 and 1902. The fifth, though apparently from the same period, has no publishing date. All were printed in *cuadernillo* or *folletín* format, by the Imprenta de Antonio Vanegas Arroyo in Mexico City, a firm known perhaps more for the fame of its illustrator, José Guadalupe Posada, than for its publications. The uniform brevity of all five pieces suggests that if performed, they most likely formed part of a larger program of *entremeses*, or, in the case of the works with religious themes, as part of church festivals. Three plays are in verse (octosyllabic meter with generally imperfect rhyme); the remaining pieces are in prose.

El sacrificio de Isaac, and *Caín y Abel*, two Biblical melodramas in verse, were published in 1897 and 1898 respectively. Although the outcome of these stories from Genesis is familiar to anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible, the works nevertheless offer interesting insights into how Suárez deliberately modified the Biblical accounts for aesthetic purposes. Both plays consist of two acts or *cuadros*, each divided into four or five brief scenes. Despite their late date, the use of melodrama as the dramatic vehicle, the choice of a Biblical plot, and the deliberately exotic settings and time frame (in forests or mountaintops at dawn or dusk) place these pieces clearly within the Romantic tradition. Other Romantic elements include obligatory death scenes

and lamentations, and the evocation of a sense of "sentimental melancholy" in the characters, caused by the emotional effect that their natural surroundings exert on them.

Of the two plays *El sacrificio de Isaac* remains more faithful to the Biblical rendition of the story. Suárez's Isaac is a perfect (if characterologically uninteresting) type of Christian submission and resignation. Abraham initially appears to be stereotyped similarly. Nevertheless, as the brief melodrama progresses, his growing expressions of anguish at the thought of killing his son (a sentiment revealed in a series of *apartes* as he prepares for the sacrifice) and his direct confession to Jehova, "Fuerte . . . quisiera ser, pero no puedo" (8), hint at aspects of a personality that is more complex than that of his son in the play.

Caín y Abel, subtitled "el primer crimen," is a longer play than *El sacrificio de Isaac*, and it takes greater liberties with the Biblical version of the story. While the Biblical narration contains no references to Adam and Eve, Suárez utilizes both figures in different ways in his version. Adam and his son Abel resemble Isaac in the earlier play; both are simple stereotypes of uncomplaining Christian resignation. Eve, however, much like Abraham, is a more complex, "rounded" character. She initially is portrayed as being totally devoted only to her youngest son, whom she describes as "mi gloria, mi adoración, mi todo" (27). Nevertheless, in the midst of her grief at his death, and as she is on the brink of asking God to curse Cain, she manages to reveal a maternal concern for the murderer: "Y tú! asesino malvado! . . . / De los dos soy madre al fin! . . . / Misericordia, Dios mio! / Perdón! Perdón para él . . . " (29). Similar hints at characterological complexity in the midst of Romantic and Christian stereotypes also are evident in the figure of Cain. Suárez's Cain, although early-on portrayed as an archetypal villain, emerges as an individualistic, romantic rebel-hero who rails against Jehova and his parents and who openly proclaims his state of permanent rebellion before God and man: "yo siempre seré altivo / como águila del desierto / como los cedros de Líbano" (7-8).

El sacrificio de Isaac and *Caín y Abel* are by no means superior plays, and they are filled with exaggerated late-Romantic elements that may disturb a modern public's aesthetic sensibilities. Nevertheless, both works display Suárez's fine technical abilities. His series of short scenes moves quickly to an expected yet still climactic denouement. In each work he contrasts stock characters effectively with more complex figures. His adroit use of *apartes* in critical scenes (the preludes to the murder of Abel and the near-sacrifice of Isaac) heightens the intensity of the action, compensating to an extent for the fact that the outcome in each work is predictable.

Of the three remaining pieces, two are written in the Romantic style of the Biblical melodramas. One is a Romantic tragedy, the other a comedy. *Sacrificio de amor*, a two act tragedy in verse published in 1902, is set in Jalapa in 1890 in the home of a middle-class family. Matilde, a young woman who

has been courted by the idealistic poet Conrado for two years, remains suspicious of his intentions, and continues to spurn his declarations of love. As the play begins, she decides to put the young man's love to a final test: "Por última vez con tino / Una prueba decisiva / Voy a hacer de su cariño / Desprecio y halago juntos, / Negativas de continuo, / y cierta especie de burla . . . / Esto es lo que necesito / Poner en ejecución / Esta tarde, ahora mismo" (13). Accordingly, she offers her suitor teasing hints that she may finally accept his love, while at the same time accusing him of feigning his suffering and passion. This type of torture proves too much to bear for Conrado, and he mortally wounds himself in a final act of desperation. Matilde picks up the knife with which Conrado has committed suicide, declares that she is his murderess as the police arrive, and is led away as the final curtain falls.

There is little that is stylistically or technically original in *Sacrificio de amor*. Well-known Mexican dramatists such as Ignacio Rodríguez-Galván and Fernando Calderón had been blending the violent, the pathetic, and the sentimental in their works since the late 1830's. One interesting aspect of the play, however, the opinions of Conrado and Matilde on the nature of love, merits a brief commentary. Matilde's skepticism and extended criticism of the motives of male suitors are very reminiscent of a familiar feminine Mexican predecessor, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: "Ah! ¡cuántas veces el hombre / Con desengaños nos hiere . . . / y después . . . después no quiere / Ni pronunciar nuestro nombre. / En él es lo más frecuente / la pasagera ilusión / Aunque pinte la pasión / Más volcánica y ardiente" (8). The poet-suitor's response to this attitude is typically Neoplatonic and Romantic: "Es tan pura mi afección / cual la mística Oración / que del pecho de una virgen / se levanta hasta El Creador . . . / Ferviente culto es mi amor / Espiritual sacrosanto . . . / Como el que se tiene a Dios" (24). The contrapuntal effect of such continued bantering is very reminiscent of the medieval debates concerning *amor sensual* versus *amor puro*, and its alternating pro and con staccato is skillfully maintained until the play's tragic climax.

The defense of the principles of Romantic love implicit in *Sacrificio de amor* likewise plays an integral part, albeit in a somewhat altered form, in Suárez's comedy *Un robo y una lotería*, a two-act prose piece published in 1889. In this work the primary obstacles to Romantic love are not the suspicions of a skeptical woman, but the alleged "positivist" philosophy of an avaricious father.

Clarita, a well-to-do young woman living in Oaxaca in the 1880's, wishes to marry Angel, a poor law student. Her father, Don Mariano, suspecting the romance, has arranged for his daughter's immediate marriage to a man who is three times his daughter's age. In an attempt to avoid this union, Clarita is in the process of planning to elope when word arrives that the sexagenarian neighbor has been robbed of his entire fortune. The neighbor's misfortune eliminates him as a suitor for Clarita in the eyes of her father, since, for him, "lo que vale es el dinero y nada más" (6).

In the opening scene of the second act, Angel and Clarita develop a scheme to enable them to marry. Angel informs Don Mariano that he has won the national lottery, and is of course then immediately accepted as a suitable son-in-law by the "positivista." The plan is successful and the marriage takes place, but when Don Mariano discovers the lovers' deception in the final scene, he flies into a rage. In an unconvincing but typically Romantic turnabout, he then accepts the marriage and blames himself and his philosophy for what has occurred: "yo he sido el único culpable . . . Estos han sido los resultados de mi positivismo estúpido" (34-35).

If this plot seems familiar, it is not surprising. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrup Frye offers a summary of the typical format for comedy, a summary that mirrors Suárez's comic plot in *Un robo y una lotería*: "What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will."[4]

Similarly recognizable in Suárez's comedy are several classic comic types: a neutral or relatively uninteresting hero, a buffoon in the person of the bumbling elderly neighbor, and the *senex iratus* or "heavy father" whose obsession with positivism (here equated solely with a preoccupation with money) provides the primary opposition, and, not incidentally, the prime source of humor in the play.

The most interesting feature of *Un robo y una lotería* is the strength and individuality of the character Clarita. Unlike the traditional comic heroine, whose role is most often minimal, Clarita is aggressive, colorful, and domineering. In the first act she steadfastly refuses to submit to her father's will and pressures her lover to find a solution to their predicament. When results are not forthcoming, it is she who dares to propose the extreme solution of elopement, a radical option that forces her lover to come up with a clumsy but successful ruse in the second act. In exhibiting an insistent persuasiveness that forces the hero to hatch the scheme that brings about his victory, Clarita more closely resembles the trickster or *gracioso* of Spanish drama than the traditional weak or neutral comic heroine.

Neither the two Biblical melodramas nor the Romantic comedy and tragedy prepare us for the fifth play, *Fandango de los muertos*, which is described on its title page as a "juguete cómico-fantástico en un acto y en prosa . . . Escrito de ex profeso para representarlo en la temporada DE MUERTOS." The play, consisting of one brief act divided into two scenes, takes place in a Mexican graveyard at midnight on All Soul's Day, and the major players include two mummies, three skeletons, and an eight-day old cadaver. When the curtain rises, the mummy Conmemoración and the skeletons Canuto and Ascanio rise from their graves to feast on the food that the faithful have left in the graveyard. During a careful perusal of the delicacies provided them, the two skeletons, former actors, recall the annual presentations of *Don Juan Tenorio* that they traditionally would put on at this

time of the year. Conmemoración, extremely religious and self-righteous while alive (and also while dead), antagonizes the pair, and they in turn deride her for her pompousness. The verbal battle ends when Ascanio suggests that all settle down to enjoy their once-a-year meal. With a shout of "que vivan los muertos y mueran los vivos," peace is restored and the feast begins.

As the second scene opens the dead call on the latest arrival, Regino, to rise from his grave and accompany them. The peacemaker Ascanio recognizes Regino as a former friend in life and offers him food and drink. As Conmemoración resumes her insults and complains, Regino suddenly recognizes her: "Oh, espantosa realidad! Mi suegra!!! . . . (Uy! Caramba! Quien iba a pensar que hasta en el panteón me perseguía mi endiabladísima suegra!)" (16). Conmemoración is no more happy to see Regino than her son-in-law is to see her: "Pillo! insolente! canalla! bandido! ladrón" (16). This dialogue is followed by what may be the first recorded version of a "food fight" in the history of Latin American drama: "([Conmemoración] Le avienta con un plato de mole y otras cosas de las ofrendas) ([Regino] tirándole una calabaza y otras frutas) Tenga Ud. vieja cochina!" (17).

In the midst of near-chaos, Canuto, the second actor-skeleton, mounts a tombstone and gives a short speech that succeeds in restoring order. The party grows merrier thanks to the rapid consumption of *pulque*. Conmemoración and Regino make peace and offer a succession of toasts to the faithful who provided the feast. The revelry reaches orgiastic proportions, and the drunken deceased dance to a *jarabe mexicano*, repeating the refrain, "Mueran los vivos vivan los muertos," as the curtain falls.

Fandango de los muertos is the most intriguing of the five Suárez plays discussed here for various reasons. First, it is one of the very few extant dramatic works that deal specifically with *el día de los muertos*. Additionally, it is clear that the play's roots are deeply embedded in pre-Hispanic soil. At one point, for example, Conmemoración, who significantly is the most Catholic of this crew of zombies, directs the following sentiments to her detractors: "Pero el gusto que tengo es que las almas de Uds. han de estar en este momento *refritas, retecontrarefritas* en los profundísimos infiernos! . . . " (8). Catholic theology provides no explanation for the apparent "other life" that the bodies of the dead, now parted from their souls, continue to live in the play. Other elements present in *Fandango de los muertos* that are noticeably absent in the previously discussed works include realistic, at times grotesque descriptions, and persistent recourse to humor, elements that often go hand-in-hand. When the recently "resuscitated" Regino complains about the odor of rotting flesh in the graveyard, for example, he is humorously consoled by his friends in the following manner:

Regino: Este endemoniado perfume . . . que no huele a rosa por cierto.

Canuto: Con el tiempo ya se irá acostumbrando al olorcito . . .

Mateo: Pues es claro: mire Ud. a nosotros, ya tenemos curtido el olfato y no nos parece feo el perfume que Ud. despide (12-13).

Elsewhere a combination of dialogue and *acotación* humorously reveals how the rotting corpse deals with a problem that temporarily impedes his drinking capacity: "Ay! ya ni sé por dónde tengo la boca! (Se busca la boca por los ojos, por las narices, y al fin se echa el pulque por la oreja, creyendo ser la boca) . . . ja, ja, ja . . . qué bonito es ser difunto . . . ja, ja, ja . . . " (23).

Likewise nonexistent in Suárez's melodramas and Romantic plays but omnipresent in *Fandango de los muertos* is the use of *mejicanismos*. The dead adorn themselves with "guirnaldas de *zempazuchitl*: among the foods discussed and consumed are *chacualole* and *tecojotes*: the augmentatives *re* and *rete* are added with ever-increasing abandon to a plethora of vocabulary items: *retemío, refritos, retecontrarefritas*, and *retecontrabravísimo*.

In sum, *Fandango de los muertos* is a rare discovery: a joyous early twentieth-century anomaly that mixes comedy and fantasy with realism, and provides a precolumbian and uniquely Mexican perspective on the celebration of a Catholic holiday.

While the discovery of the Suárez plays poses no threat to the accepted hierarchy of Latin American dramatists established by the critics, the five works are significant for several reasons. First, they provide interesting insights into the less-well documented undercurrent of *teatro popular* that existed on a plane parallel to that of *teatro culto* in Mexico in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Additionally, the predominance of Romantic themes and techniques in the majority of the works lends credence to the theories of Emilio Carilla in his standard study, *El romanticismo en la América Hispánica*,[5] regarding the existence of a substantial body of third-generation Romantic literature in Latin America. Finally, they introduce a modern public to a talented "yeoman" dramatist who shows remarkable technical skills and versatility in creating short works of melodrama, Romantic comedy and tragedy, and imaginative combinations of realism and fantasy.

Discovered by Emilio Carballido amid an assortment of books that had been stuffed in a sack and forgotten for decades, Suárez's five plays are a felicitous if not momentous find: a literary historian's version of real buried treasure.

Rollins College

Notes

1. Emilio Carballido, "Mexican Theater Today," Keynote Speech, Southeast Conference on Foreign Languages and Literatures, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, 28 February 1985.

2. Personal interview with Emilio Carballido, 19 February 1985.

3. Constancio S. Suárez, *El sacrificio de Isaac: melodrama biblico* (1887); *Un robo y una lotería* (1898); *Caín y Abel o el primer crimen*! (1898); *Sacrificio de amor* (1902); *Fandango de los muertos* (n.d.). All works were published in Mexico City by the Imprenta de Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. All references are to these editions. In citations from the works, the original orthography is maintained.

4. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton UP, 1957) 163.

5. Emilio Carilla, *El romanticismo en la América Hispánica* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1958) 368-69.