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 Tirso de Molina
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INTRODUCTION

LIFE OF FRAY GABRIEL TÉLLEZ

Bibliographical approaches to seventeenth-century authors are out of fashion, and rightly so. These writers wrote objectively and did not expect us to see an individual behind the pen, anxious to assert a bold personality. It is, therefore, no real loss that we have only the flimsiest knowledge of the life of the dramatist Gabriel Téllez, better known by the pseudonym that he adopted in later years, Tirso de Molina. He was born in Madrid, but exhaustive research into the city's archives has failed to discover any details of parentage. The year of his birth was probably 1580, or 1581.¹ We know nothing at all about his youth. In 1600, he had begun his noviciate in the Order of Mercy, an order founded to help forward the ransom of Christian captives abroad. His early education and profession were completed at Guadalajara. Thereafter, the few documented facts suggest a life of travel. We find him at Toledo for a while prior to his departure in 1616 for Santo Domingo on an official visit. He returned from the New World two years later, revisited Toledo for a spell, and moved on to Madrid round about 1621. At that time, the new administration of Philip IV, under the control of the Conde-Duque de Olivares, was pursuing various reforms. It was at a meeting of a major reform committee held in March, 1625, that Tirso's activities came up for censure. The Junta discussed the scandal which a Mercedarian friar, Maestro Téllez, otherwise known as Tirso, was

¹ This is a matter of dispute. Doña Blanca de los Ríos affirmed that he was born in 1583 or 1584, arguing from an entry in a collective passport issued in 1616; he was stated there to be thirty-three years old. She also claimed to have discovered Tirso's baptismal certificate, but this is no longer entertained seriously; her rather idiosyncratic theory that Tirso was the bastard son of a noble family is also generally dismissed. For the first document see Doña Blanca de los Ríos, *Tirso de Molina. Obras dramáticas completas* (Madrid, 1946), vol. 1, p. 85a. Another document drawn up by the Holy Office in 1638 and witnessed by Tirso himself states his age as fifty-seven. On the basis of this, G. Guastavino argues convincingly that he was born in 1580, or 1581. See 'Notas tirsianas', *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, vol. LXIX (1961), p. 818.

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causing by his profane plays and the evil example that they set; after due consultation with His Majesty, he should be sent to a remote house of his order and placed under greater excommunication should he continue to write plays or other forms of profane verse.¹ In all probability, the decision was never put into force, but it had, I think, far-reaching consequences; 1625 was a turning-point in the career that Tirso had made for himself as a dramatist.

Almost a year before the Junta's deliberation, Tirso had gone to press for the first time, publishing in Madrid the miscellany of short stories, poems and plays known as *Cigarrales de Toledo*.² In the prologue to this work, one catches his enthusiasm for a new venture; a sequel is in preparation, and he has sent to the printers twelve plays, 'primera parte de muchas que quieren ver mundo entre trescientas que en catorce anos han divertido melancolías y honestado ociosidades'. But no such *parte* of plays exists. In 1627 twelve plays were published in Seville, but in a scrappily presented volume suggesting literary piracy. Seville was far enough from Madrid for its printers to defy the restrictions which I think were imposed upon the lost first volume. Ten years separate the *Cigarrales* from the legitimate and carefully executed texts of his plays. Meanwhile, about 1625, Tirso's activity as a dramatist seems to have fallen off; he withdrew steadily from the theatre and applied himself to a more orthodox religious career. At a provincial chapter held at Guadalajara in 1626, he was promoted to prior ('comendador' in the Order's pseudo-military terminology) of the friary at Trujillo, a post that he held until 1629. After a putative period in Toledo, he concluded in 1631 a collection of pious short stories, *autos* and devotional poetry entitled

¹ 'Tratóse del escándalo que causa un fraile mercedario, que se llama el Maestro Téllez, por otro nombre Tirso, con comedias que hace profanas y de malos incentivos y ejemplos. Y por ser caso notorio se acordó que se consulte a Su Majestad de que el Confesor diga al Nuncio le eche de aquí a uno de los monasterios más remotos de su religión y le imponga excomunió mayor *latae sententiae* para que no haga comedias ni otro género de versos profanos. Y esto se haga luego.' (Quoted by E. Cotarelo, *Comedias de Tirso de Molina*, Madrid, 1906, tomo I, p. xlii.)

² A licence to publish was issued in 1621, but the volume did not appear until 1624. For details, see my article, 'Tirso de Molina: two bibliographical studies', *H.R.* vol. xxxv (1967), pp. 43-68.

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Life of Fray Gabriel Téllez

Deleitar aprovechando.¹ The subject matter and tone of this book point to a sober and chastened author, who emphatically denounces the theatre as inadequate to deal with his solemn subjects. He tells us in the prologue that he had begun to think in terms of the theatre, but considering the impiety of the audience, the ostentation of stage scenery and the temptation of unholy exaggeration to which playwrights yield, he turned instead to prose narrative. A novel will endure, he adds, whereas a play quickly fades from the public's memory. The note of disillusionment over the theatre is strong. Two new posts in the Order of Mercy came his way in 1632. His literary talents were employed in the post of official chronicler, an appointment which must have absorbed much of his time until two sturdy autograph volumes of Mercedarian history were completed in 1639. His administrative experience won him the job of *definidor* (governing member) for the province of Castile. Clearly, Fray Gabriel had deserted the world of the players and the stage.

But before his life fell into the obscurity of a routine religious career, Tirso undertook an incalculably important task; with the help of a nephew, he redeemed from oblivion some at least of the plays which had once brought him fame and had them published. Four volumes, containing about fifty *comedias*, appeared in rapid succession between 1634 and 1636. Golden Age plays can raise mountains of textual difficulties, and Tirso's are no exception; it seems that behind the printed texts there was a labour of correction and revision unusual for the period. This is a problem that we touch when we consider the text of *La venganza de Tamar* presented here. After these major publications, Tirso's biography remains virtually silent. In 1645, he was appointed to the priorate of the Soria friary; from there, he made a final move to Almazán, where he died in 1648.

An apt judgement on Tirso's life was made by the scholar critic Menéndez y Pelayo: 'Vida, como se ve, modesta y ejemplar, sencilla y sin peripecias... Fue un gran poeta y un excelente religioso; a

¹ The earliest *aprobación* is dated May 1632, but publication did not take place until 1635.

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estas dos líneas puede reducirse su epitafio.¹ What we miss, perhaps, is the gossip which splashes across the biographies of his other great contemporaries. He kept the world at bay as effectively in his own life as he controls the wayward world of passion in his plays. This is not to say that Tirso was emotionally short of reach. His plays have a tough sense of character and situation, that a cloistered poet could scarcely have recreated; even in his pious *comedias de santos* his holy men win through to saintliness after weathering the storms of lesser ambitions and passions. The lack of biographical excitement by no means implies a life of inactivity; on the contrary, the scattered details gathered from friary records and chapter minutes suggest a life spent on the move. If Tirso had immured himself from the world, neither his piety nor his wit could have sustained his mastery of the seventeenth-century *comedia*.

THE THEATRE OF TIRSO DE MOLINA

By 1605, Tirso had become known as a dramatist; a contemporary historian of his Order mentions 'the most renowned poet Fray Gabriel Téllez' among those Mercedarians who were celebrated then by the general public.² Five years later, he was noted as one of the principal authors writing for the *corrales*, as the Spanish theatres were then called.³ During a long and prolific career, he successfully maintained the reputation won in early manhood. Generous compliments were paid to him in later years by two eminent playwrights. Pérez de Montalbán, addressing Tirso as 'Maestro por su gran talento en las sagradas letras, y Apolo, por su buen gusto, de las curiosas Musas', urged him in 1635 to make more of his plays available to the reading public, 'en gracia de la lengua castellana, en honra de Madrid su patria, en gusto de los bien intencionados, y en pesadumbre de los maldicientes'.⁴ That same year, a younger dramatist

¹ M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Estudios de crítica literaria*, vol. II (Madrid, 1912), p. 171.

² Fr. Bernardo de Vargas, *Chronici sacri et militaris ordinis B. Mariae de Mercede* (Palermo, 1622), p. 440.

³ Andrés de Claramonte, *Letanía moral* (Sevilla, 1613), approved 1610, in the 'Inquiridión de ingenios convocados'.

⁴ In Montalbán's *aprobación* to the fourth volume of Tirso's plays (Madrid, 1635).

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who was to prove master of the Spanish *comedia*, Calderón de la Barca, quietly acknowledged the skills and insights that he had noted in a senior writer, 'que con tantas muestras de ciencia, virtud y religión ha dado que aprender a los que más deseamos imitarle'.¹ Calderón's generous words permit a valuable glimpse of how a man with a real gift for theatre turned in his apprenticeship to another who had gained experience in an exacting and relatively new form of drama. We can add a further note. The seventeenth-century theatre in Spain avoided separating its audiences into those with a taste for learned plays and those with less cultivated minds; there is little hint of a division such as the one created in the contemporary English theatre. We can only assume that, through the years, audiences were trained in the ways of serious entertainment. Calderón's own taxing style and intellectual rigour would have been unthinkable if writers such as Tirso had not won over their public, initiating them into an advanced form of drama. One can conveniently look upon Tirso's theatre as a bridge that spans the early efforts of the *comedia* and its full development in the hands of Calderón.

No dramatist in Spain at this period can be situated without reference to the *comedia's* presiding genius, Lope de Vega. Tirso himself acknowledges Lope as his mentor. In *La fingida Arcadia*, a countess with an insatiable appetite for books appears on stage surrounded by a library of Lope's works; 'If the Queen of Sheba went to see Solomon,' she tells her maid, 'then I would go to Spain to see Lope!' In the *Cigarrales de Toledo*, Tirso writes a rousing defence of the new style of drama introduced by Lope. For his part, Lope refrained from returning the compliment. True, he dedicated a lone play to Tirso, but his praise merely complies with dedicatory rhetoric. Lope, always a sensitive professional, probably recognised an able rival, and duly tempered his attitude.

Tirso could scarcely have disowned Lope's influence; the latter had devised and explored the very form of drama he inherited—the *comedia*, or, to use the more prestigious title, the *arte nuevo*. The art

¹ In Calderón's *aprobación* to the fifth volume of Tirso's plays (Madrid, 1636).

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was new because it had broken free from the precepts on dramatic form and content which academic theorists had tried to formulate in the later sixteenth century. Inspired by a Renaissance reverence for Latin and Greek culture, these preceptists had sought to control the art of drama by recommending that authors observe certain principles extracted from Classical theory and practice. The dramatist should never confuse the Tragic and Comic kinds; his play should respect the famous unities of Time, Place and Action. Lope broke decisively with these doctrines; mingling the kinds and ignoring the unities of Time and Place, he brought flexibility to the stage-play. More than this, the *arte nuevo* absorbed the wide range of popular and traditional material; it likewise digested the erudite poetry and cultured sentiments of the Spanish Renaissance. In short, Lope applied a powerful, unifying imagination to Spain's past and present traditions and created a new theatre, one that was supple yet highly organised, that had immense appeal yet could enjoy depth of thought and experience. The *comedia* and its inventor were swept along on a flood of almost universal popularity. This was the theatre to which Tirso turned his own talents.

In one of Tirso's liveliest plays, *El vergonzoso en palacio*, Serafina offers this enthusiastic appraisal of the *comedia*:

¿Qué fiesta o juego se halla,
 que no le ofrezcan los versos?
 En la comedia los ojos
 ¿no se deleitan y ven
 mil cosas que hacen que estén
 olvidados tus enojos?
 La música ¿no recrea
 el oído, y el discreto
 no gusta allí del conceto
 y la traza que desea?

The *comedia*, she continues, entertains every man according to his needs; there is laughter for the merry, sorrow for the sad, counsel for the foolish, violence for the bold, wisdom for the prudent; even, should you wish, Moors, tournaments, bulls. Serafina does not,

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however, confuse universal appeal with triviality; the stage offers a likeness of life and enlightenment to those who seek it:

De la vida es un traslado,
 sustento de los discretos,
 dama del entendimiento,
 de los sentidos banquete,
 de los gustos ramillete,
 esfera del pensamiento,
 olvido de los agravios,
 manjar de diversos precios,
 que mata de hambre a los necios
 y satisface a los sabios.¹

As described here, the *comedia* is not associated with any particular group; all may be accommodated according to their lights and prejudices, moods and illusions. Yet, of course, to see a play well is to live wisely, so Serafina closes her description with a brief challenge:

Mira lo que quieres ser
 de aquestos dos bandos.

No modern student can hope to recapture the expectations and reactions of the men and women who went to see a Tirso play. One suspects that a dramatist laid great store by the interaction between his play and its audience; the stage was intimate and the style of writing 'reaches out' to an audience. We can, at least, try to imagine the society which attended performances in the *corrales*. Tirso's plays were not written for itinerant players in Spain's farflung provinces; nor for wealthy patrons who could afford a private theatre. They are associated rather with the permanent play-houses constructed in capital centres, and with Madrid in particular. By the time that Tirso began to write, Spain's capital had acquired a cosmopolitan atmosphere. The Habsburg court had settled there, and round it a distinctive society was emerging. Indeed, contemporaries as often as not refer to Madrid simply as the 'Corte'. In these surroundings, fashions were not set by academic groups with a bookish concept of drama,

¹ Ed. Américo Castro (*Clásicos castellanos*, vol. 2, Madrid, 1963, Act II, 749–82). *El vergonzoso en palacio* was an early play.

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nor by players of primitive farce. A new order had arisen, awake to the real-life drama of personalities enacted in a powerful, though still compact, capital city. Theatre had to equip itself to meet the variety of demands and temperaments which a town-dwelling audience brought through its doors. In many of Tirso's plays, an urban atmosphere prevails; the Corte's churches, streets and squares, nobles, worthies and rogues are picked out with a sharp eye. Such a play is *La celosa de sí misma*, where one character sums up his opinion of the city:

Haz cuenta que es una tienda
de toda mercadería.

This background is an essential part of Tirso's theatre; he is master at catching the devious passions that city families and courtly characters pursue in a stylised stage-existence. Behind his sense of fantasy, audiences must have sensed a deal of themselves and their own manners. What is more, the 'tienda de toda mercadería' was an ideal inspiration for the Human Comedy that the dramatist drew steadily out of life into drama.

Satire had played a long-standing role in comedy; according to sixteenth-century preceptists, comedy should aim at unmasking the vices and follies of the times. Tirso took full advantage of this satirical licence. Few plays lack invective against contemporary objects of ridicule: young fops with costly wardrobes, old dames who try to trick age with cosmetics, wits who massacre their mother tongue in a search for subtlety, or, more seriously, those who debase the money of the realm by clipping its coins. From play to play, the senseless and absurd create an impressive gallery. Such pointed satire must have been the joy and embarrassment of city audiences. Yet satire plays only a small part in Tirso's theatre; rather it reinforces a deeper theme that runs right through his plays: the opposition between artificial or inadequate habits of mind, and real integrity.

Like any dramatist of any age Tirso had to find the theatrical terms in which to express his theme. Theatre is bound in countless ways to conventions; some may be formal and academic, others constitute unwritten rules of good drama. A sensitive dramatist

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grasps these requirements and turns them to his own use; he will project his own vision through forms and topics shared and accepted by his public. Tirso frequently employs, for example, the well-established literary division of society into the Country and the Court. This formal device is rich in comic traffic, and it also allows the dramatist, with a minimum of fuss, to contrast effectively ways of thought and conduct, attitudes and values; in the chronicle play *Antona García*, a country heroine's good-will and intuitive sense of justice contrast with false notions of power and privilege maintained by courtly intriguers.¹ The theatrical topic that Tirso persistently employs and turns to best effect is that of love. His manipulation of the topic brings about a pervasive sense that love, pursuing its intentions through elaborate rhetorical schemes and involved stratagems, makes fools of men. As love imposes its laws of the moment on a situation, order dissolves and confusion reigns. A ducal household in *El vergonzoso en palacio* is invaded by a lowly outsider, a timid (*vergonzoso*) country youth whose naive intrigue brings a precarious family rule into the throes of misrule. The licence of the comic poet allows him to soothe trouble away for a happy ending. Here is Tirso at his most frivolous. Yet under the extravagant literary surface we see the unreality of the passions that move the characters. As a malicious comment on man and his obedience to fickle love and family esteem, the play is sharp and far from fanciful. *Marta la piadosa*, a city comedy, tells the story of a successful and uproarious deception, but, as love prepares its predictable triumph, a world bent on honouring appearances and its petty values is unmercifully revealed—the presentation of fading gentility, shallow affections, mock religiosity, an *indiano's* confused illusions about money, love and piety, all spring from acute, detached observation.

Apart from the fact that the stage finds the topic of love amenable, exploiting the misunderstandings that accompany passion in the

¹ *Antona García*, a peasant girl from Toro, passes through a series of escapades in the Guerra de la Beltraneja between the Catholic Monarchs and the pretender Juana. She helps overthrow the rebel masters of Toro. Her devotion to the cause of Fernando and Isabel is climaxed in their victory and the pardon of their enemies. There is a modern edition by M. Wilson (Manchester University Press, 1957).

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comic and tragic theatre, the idea was still strong in the seventeenth century that man shapes his life by following an ideal, an end to which he devotes his will. By pursuing our affections we find an identity. A book such as *Don Quijote* is deeply related to this idea of man's freedom to find a self through love. If Quijote had not fallen passionately in love with chivalry, he would have remained a non-descript village eccentric, a man without a self. Throughout the poetry of sixteenth-century Spain, the freedom to be creative with life through the affections is a fundamental notion; we find it in the mystic poet as much as in his secular counterpart. Tirso's theatre lives within this tradition; his typical character strives to alter himself by bending his own will, and that of others, to a chosen law. And what law can the theatre better dramatise and an audience more willingly accept than that of Cupid? Love provided the dramatist with an eminently workable topic through which he could explore and demonstrate human conduct in the best theatrical ways. In *El vergonzoso en palacio*, for example, the artfully organised conflicts between different desires reveal a comic disorderliness in life, a vision of misdirected affections. No one would claim that the play is other than comedy, for the ideals pursued by its characters are pinned down to triviality; it allows us to laugh at a way of life. Others provoke a more serious reaction; still inviting us into a fanciful world of love, they offer a graver apprehension of how man orders himself and others, and of the laws he chooses to do so.

El melancólico is a fine example of such a play. Its plot is slight and fantastic: Rogerio, a country youth, is suddenly taken to the Court and transformed into its ruler. There he is not shown tackling onerous duties of state; instead, the plot gathers round his attempts to have his country girl accepted in his new surroundings. The obstacles placed in the way of his love bring about the grief that gives the play its title. Every move is presided over by Tirso's sharp sense of the absurd; he deals outrageously with men of dignity, reducing them to bewildered spectators of a fairy-tale romance. Yet the mixture of literary extravagance and satirical malice is superimposed upon a theme of more durable worth; Tirso seems to invite