

Introduction: literary history and canon formation

In 1978 Hayden White wrote, “Every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications,”¹ a statement which rings particularly true for nineteenth-century Spanish theatre. The history of the theatre in nineteenth-century Spain is usually told through the study of certain selected masterworks, plays which have been read and studied in university classrooms and which have been said to have had a major impact on the direction of theatrical activity in the last century. Students are all familiar with the shocking rebellion of the Duque de Rivas’s *Don Alvaro o la fuerza del sino* (Don Alvaro or the Force of Destiny), the poetic beauty of Zorrilla’s *Don Juan Tenorio*, Tamayo’s neatly structured *Un drama nuevo* (A New Drama), Galdós’s dramatic renderings of his concerns for the Spanish middle-class, or Echegaray’s delicious excesses of honor and betrayal. Yet these works do not necessarily reflect what really happened in the theatre in nineteenth-century Spain nor do they reveal much about what changes took place in the mind-set of the public going to see them. They certainly do not tell the whole story. In fact, they frequently provide false clues as to the development of the theatre by leading modern readers to assume that they represented the dominant trends, the most popular theatre of their time, or an organic “progress” throughout the century. In many cases, nothing could be further from the truth. As Jesús Rubio Jiménez has quite correctly stated, the history of nineteenth-century Spanish theatre is “mucho más compleja y variada que la que presentan los manuales de literatura”² (“much more complex and varied than the one presented in manuals of literature”).

What follows is an investigation into the theatre of nineteenth-century Spain in its many aspects – its performance frequency and problems, the battles for control waged in the offices of theatre administrations, the personality conflicts initiated and maintained by the dominant impresarios and actors, the public reception of certain key plays, the economic

¹ Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978): 69.

² Jesús Rubio Jiménez, “La censura teatral en la época moderada: 1840–1868. Ensayo de aproximación,” *Segismundo* 18 (1984): 231.

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problems faced by the theatres, the constant skirmishes with the censors, the struggle to capture in “art” the predominant themes of the day, and all of this against the background of the political and ideological reality of Spain during the last century. The nineteenth century in Spain was a time which witnessed the most dramatic transformation of social, literary and political realities ever seen in that country. Spain began the century oppressed by the corrupt monarchy of Carlos IV, the harsh dictates of the Napoleonic occupation, and finally the reaction of one of the worst rulers ever to sit upon its throne (Fernando VII). Soon it was decimated by civil wars, troubled by the instability of government leaders, confused by the fall of the monarchy of Isabel II, chastened by the failure of an attempt at Republican government, and finally humiliated by the loss of its last colonies in 1898.

Readers will discover that this book is determinedly non-deconstructionist, because I believe that there *is* an author behind the text, and to study dramatic literature in nineteenth-century Spain totally removed from its personal, ideological, economic, and social context would be interesting, perhaps, but pointless, at least until we have begun to establish a clear idea of which authors and texts constitute theatrical activity during that time. In order to deconstruct texts we need to construct a context for them, something which has not been done for nineteenth-century Spanish theatre. In the words of Juan Antonio Ríos Carratalá:

Es preciso seguir profundizando en las grandes figuras y tenerlas siempre presentes como nervios centrales en la vida literaria, pero al mismo tiempo – y desde la perspectiva de una historia de literatura tal y como fue, sin criterios selectivos que acaben siendo simplemente excluyentes – resulta necesario fijarnos en la multitud de autores que a lo largo del siglo XIX se lanzaron a la palestra literaria con un entusiasmo insospechado.³

(It is important to continue acquiring more profound knowledge of the great figures and to keep them in mind as central nerves of literary life, but at the same time – and from the perspective of a history of literature as it really was, without selection criteria which end up being merely exclusivist – it is necessary to pay attention to the multitude of authors who over the course of the nineteenth century joined the literary fray with unsuspected enthusiasm.)

The theatre, as the most immediate of literary forms, reflected the rapid and, for many, unnerving changes taking place in society. It became a battle ground on which were waged a series of skirmishes – and at times, wars – for the control of the public’s mind. Theatre is both a reflection and an agent of social/cultural shifts in the nineteenth century. For this reason, the importance of nineteenth-century theatre cannot be over-

³ Juan Antonio Ríos Carratalá, *Románticos y provincianos (La literatura en Alicante, 1839–1866)* (Universidad de Alicante, 1986): 21.

emphasized – not only was it the traditional “mirror on society.” What was in life chaotic and frequently threatening was, when transformed into word and movement, comprehensible and thereby controllable. The creation of theatre suggested the creation of a new society (we will see this most clearly in Zorrilla and Galdós), and the tension between art and life played itself out in compelling and lively ways.

The present study will be predominantly chronological, better allowing us to chart the changes in theatrical activity and to assess its impact on future productions and public attitudes. We will look not only at those plays best remembered today, but also at many works which were important in their time but which have since been forgotten. Produced, published, commented upon and debated, these little-known plays and playwrights often more clearly reveal the contours of the debate which raged in theatrical circles throughout the century. It is my hope to bring some balance back to our understanding of Spanish theatre, to demonstrate how Grimaldi’s *La pata de cabra* (The Goat’s Hoof) was more “popular” for many years than Rivas’s *Don Alvaro*, or how Eusebio Asquerino’s *Españoles sobre todo* created a much deeper polemic in the year it was written (1844) than Zorrilla’s celebrated *Don Juan Tenorio*, or how Narciso Serra was considered to be one of the “jewels” of Spanish dramaturgy during his time, to cite just three examples. A generation of women writers, unknown and unmentioned in most literary histories, makes an attempt to be “recanonicalized” in these pages. Of course, even this study is a selection, a series of choices, perhaps even an ideological act. Yet as Jonathan Brown has written about the painters of Golden Age Spain:

This approach, and the desire to keep the book at a manageable length, has also compelled me to make choices, often painful ones, about what to include and what to leave out. Students of the period and admirers of the many fine secondary artists will certainly note the absence of particular favorites. Besides offering apologies to those who are thus disappointed, I can say only that, short of doubling the length of the book, or, indeed, writing another kind of book entirely, I could see no way to make the coverage complete. The same process of selection has required me to omit important works even by the artists discussed in these pages.⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century it became almost *de rigueur* to begin a piece on the theatre by bemoaning the terrible state to which theatre had sunk in the previous few years. From Juan de Grimaldi’s early negotiations with the Madrid city government, to Agustín Durán’s influential *Discurso sobre el influjo que ha tenido la crítica moderna en la decadencia*

⁴ Jonathan Brown, *The Golden Age of Painting in Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): vii.

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del teatro antiguo español (Discourse on the Influence that Modern Criticism Has Had on the Decline of Old Spanish Theatre, 1828), to Juan Lombía's "Causa principal de la decadencia del teatro en España" ("Principal Cause of the Decline of Theatre in Spain," 1845), and right up to M. Martínez Espada's "Decadencia del Teatro Español" ("Decline of the Spanish Theatre," 1900), critics lamented – and predicted – the demise of Spanish theatre. For some, each new year, each new decade seemed to mark a nadir in the health (both literary and economic) of the theatre, and yet we will discover that this lament was (and is) based purely on opinion, rarely backed up by the facts. In reality, during the nineteenth century Spain produced and published not a few dozen or even a few hundred plays, as we have previously thought, but literally *thousands* of one- to four-act works destined to be performed, published, read, and discussed in high and low circles. The richness of theatrical activity is both astonishing and significant, and in the present study it is hoped that what we have traditionally thought of as the "history" of nineteenth-century Spanish theatre will be seen as merely an outline of what really transpired. Rivas, in a letter to Manuel Cañete, spoke of the immense riches of Spanish theatre in his day, referring to "la monstruosa e inmensa *Galería dramática*"⁵ ("the monstrous and immense *Dramatic Gallery*"). I have tried to address this "monstrous" body of work, but also to avoid creating a mere list of names, dates and titles of plays written and performed in Spain in the nineteenth century. This book is not inclusive, that is, it is not a compendium or full analysis of every play, major and minor, from the Spanish repertory. Such a task would not only be impossible, it would be foolhardy and doomed to boring failure. Instead, I have tried to capture the ebb and flow of theatrical activity focusing not only on those playwrights remembered today (and "canonized" in schoolroom classes) but also those who during their time exercised significant impact on the direction and development of the theatre. This book, directly and indirectly, is about canon formation and the writing of literary history: *praxis* in the nineteenth century.

Wherever possible I have used first editions of the plays under consideration since they provide more immediate access to the reaction of the public and critics in the times in which they were performed and read and can allow us more accurately to track the public reaction to their meaning. I urge the readers of the following pages to allow for ambiguities, even inconsistencies and contradictions. The fabric of nineteenth-century Spanish drama is tightly woven from many threads and colors into various patterns and textures, but there are tears in the fabric and

⁵ Cited by Peers, "Some Observations on *El desengaño en un sueño*," *Homenaje ofrecido a Menéndez Pidal* (Madrid: Hernando, 1925), 583–587.

loose ends not yet accounted for. Perhaps future scholars will weave those loose ends into a fabric of their own.

“Yes, but is it any good?” is the question which inevitably arises when one discusses the repositioning of plays within the “canon,” and one I have attempted studiously to avoid in the following pages. “Good” as a descriptor phrase of literary quality has little value when one is attempting to chart the ebb and flow of theatrical activity; instead, I have tried to bring to the discussion notice of plays which were not only “good” (or perhaps not even good) but also polemical, revolutionary, significant in their time, popular, or important as socio-historical artifacts. As Arnold Krupat has suggested, “In our own time, the canon is established primarily by the professoriat, by teacher-critics who variously – passively or actively but for the most part – support the existing order.”⁶ That is, we teach what is available; we make available what we teach. It is a closed circle. Where are the modern editions of many of these plays? While publishers and editors produce several, sometimes dozens of modern editions of certain texts, others – literally thousands of them – languish in difficult (or impossible) to find collections, gathering dust and decaying daily. I hope the present study will help to break that closed circle and open up new paths of study for students of nineteenth-century Spanish literature.

⁶ Arnold Krupat, “Native American Literature and the Canon.” In *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (University of Chicago Press, 1983): 310.

1 Spanish theatre in the nineteenth century. (An overview)

The century seemed to open auspiciously enough. The wars over theatrical reform waged in the eighteenth century seemed to have been won by those who demanded less censorship, more involvement by the acting companies, and better working conditions. The 1799 *Idea de una reforma de los teatros de Madrid* (Idea for an Improvement of the Theatres of Madrid) had been approved in November of that year and was to be put into effect for the theatrical season 1800–1801.¹ Madrid's finest actor, Isidoro Máiquez, had gone off to Paris to study the techniques of that city's dazzling François Joseph Talma, much acclaimed for his natural acting style.² Even the terrible fire that in 1802 destroyed one of the capital's main theatres, the *Príncipe*, held the possibility that with the new edifice would come a new (and enlightened) administration. Meanwhile, the enormous – and unprecedented – success of Leandro Fernández de Moratín's neoclassical comedy, *El sí de las niñas* (The Maidens' Consent) in 1806, seemed to confirm that the curtain was going up on a new and exciting period of stability and quality for the Spanish theatre.³ Alas, such was not the case. The reforms of 1800 were dashed by a series of conflicting interests, Moratín's triumph produced no immediate heirs of merit, and the new *Príncipe* (opened in 1807) was placed back under the control of the *Ayuntamiento* (City Hall). As a final blow, when Napoleon's army entered Madrid in May, 1808, all hopes for a glorious uplift in theatrical life came to a crushing end when the theatres were shut down. The real drama moved into the streets.

The question of who owned and who controlled the theatres had been a key one since the very beginnings of “official” theatre in Spain, and it took on particular intensity during the eighteenth century, when religious

¹ René Andioc, *Teatro y sociedad en el Madrid del siglo XVIII* (Madrid: Castalia, 1976): 547.

² Alberto Colao, *Máiquez, discípulo de Talma* (Cartagena: F. Gómez, 1980).

³ John C. Dowling has called the play's première a “social event.” “The Madrid Theatre Public in the Eighteenth Century: Transition from the Popular Audience to the Bourgeois,” *Transactions of the Seventh International Congress on the Enlightenment: Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1989): 1361. See also Moratín, *El sí de las niñas*, ed. René Andioc (Madrid: Castalia, 1969).

and moral crusaders equated the theatre, and the actors, naturally, with iniquity and moral laxity.⁴ The concept of free enterprise was a problematic one, since it was – from as far back as the early seventeenth century – frequently a money-losing proposition. Ironically, though, a constant tug-of-war for ownership was often played out between private and public owners, since the theatre was viewed as a mechanism through which the government could control, or at least influence, the behavior of the public. The government frequently refused to take full ownership and financial responsibility for theatrical activity, yet it published a bewildering array of rules and decrees aimed at curtailing what it viewed as the excesses of theatre people. Hence, the spirited hostilities and lively debates over the direction, content, and control of the theatre became the dominant discourse in the previous century and set the stage, so to speak, for what would happen in the nineteenth century.⁵

The Napoleonic invasion produced a series of conflicting events relating to the theatre in Madrid. Depending on which political group was in the ascendency during the War of Independence (the *afrancesados* who supported the “enlightened” policies of Joseph Bonaparte or the “liberales” who defended the claims of Fernando VII and who fought heroically against the foreign invaders), the theatre became just as much of a battleground as did the fields around Bailén or Zaragoza. Words poured out instead of blood. Joseph was not uninterested in the theatre, nor unaware of its value as propaganda, and he struggled to have plays staged which underscored the “enlightened” nature of his reign and which attempted to link him with the Spanish national past. Francisco Comella, a dramatist excoriated by Moratín (in *La comedia nueva o el café*, 1792 [The New Comedy, or the Café]), and Gaspar Zavala y Zamora became two of the most represented Spanish playwrights during the 1808–1813 occupation for their appeal to the “glorious” history of Spain.⁶ When the French government officials were forced to abandon

⁴ For information concerning the ownership and development of Spanish theatre in the late sixteenth- through early eighteenth-century, see J. E. Varey, N. D. Shergold, and Charles Davis (eds.), *Los arriendos de los corrales de comedias de Madrid: 1587–1719* (London: Tamesis Books, Ltd., 1987).

⁵ See, for example, the details provided by Andioc, *Teatro y sociedad*, Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España* (Madrid: Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1904), I. L. McClelland, *Spanish Drama of Pathos, 1750–1808* (University of Toronto Press, 1970), and Francisco Aguilar Piñal, *Sevilla y el teatro en el siglo XVIII* (Oviedo: Cátedra Feijoo, 1974). See also Jovellanos’s *Memoria para el arreglo de la policía de los espectáculos y diversiones públicas y sobre su origen en España* (Madrid: Sancha, 1812).

⁶ This period has been studied by Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Isidoro Máiquez y el teatro de su tiempo* (Madrid: José Perales, 1902), and more recently by Emmanuel Larraz, *Théâtre et politique pendant la Guerre d’Indépendance espagnole: 1808–1814* (Aix-en-Provence:

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Madrid temporarily in August 1808, a resurgence of plays dealing with the Spanish monarchy or celebrating the Spanish victories over the French at Bailén, Zaragoza or Arapiles were played in the two main theatres, the Príncipe and the Cruz.⁷ Theatre became a major tool in the war of propaganda waged by both sides. Interesting examples of the “literary” response to the political situation include strident diatribes against Napoleon, Murat, and Joseph Bonaparte, performed whenever possible in Madrid. Dozens of subversive plays satirized Joseph’s alleged drinking problem or Napoleon’s well-known megalomania, as we will see in the next chapter.

When the war finally came to a close in 1814 and Fernando VII returned to the throne, the theatre suffered from the same fierce censorship which stifled the free exchange of ideas in every part of Spanish society. Many young intellectuals were forced to flee the country – even, sadly, many of those who had fought in defense of the legitimate monarch – and would initiate their writing careers in exile. Ángel de Saavedra and Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, both of whom would later distinguish themselves as playwrights and politicians, began to write in the years during and immediately following this divisive war. In the theatres themselves, a cycle began to develop which would dominate theatre ownership for decades: the city government, frustrated by the efforts to organize and regulate the theatres, would appoint entrepreneurs and charge them with putting the theatres on a sound financial footing. These attempts frequently resulted in the actors complaining (often with total justification) that the impresarios cared little for their wellbeing and were not even living up to the modest contractual responsibilities they had vis à vis the actors and the actors’ families. The impresarios, unable to gain full control of the repertory (the city administration’s censors held those reins) and feeling unfairly burdened by the pension and charitable costs demanded by the actors, often lost money and went bankrupt. The actors would then demand more control over their destinies and the theatres would be turned over to them in an attempt to quiet their complaints and to improve the administration of the enterprise. This is precisely what happened in 1815, for example, when Máiquez was named *autor* of the Príncipe while his chief rival for that post, Bernardo Gil, took over the

Université de Provence, 1988). I have placed certain words in quotes to indicate that these were the actual terms bandied about during the period in question.

⁷ John J. Allen provides an interesting history of the Príncipe Theatre in *The Reconstruction of a Spanish Golden Age Playhouse. El Corral del Príncipe, 1583–1744* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1983). A history of the Cruz Theatre can be found in Phillip Brian Thomason’s doctoral dissertation, “The *Coliseo de la Cruz*: Madrid’s First Enclosed Municipal Playhouse (1737–1859),” University of Kentucky, 1987.

reins of the Cruz.⁸ However, these “reforms” failed, and the city government found itself, yet again, in charge of the theatres. It was a boom-and-bust cycle, only with very little boom.

Similar problems reoccurred at a time when the ostensible hope for a real liberal reform seemed possible, the so-called Liberal Triennium ushered in by Rafael de Riego’s uprising against Fernando VII in 1820. Many of the young exiles were able to return to Spain, and interest in theatrical activity grew accordingly. It was Bernardo Gil who once again demanded control over the theatres he acted in, and in a strident and acrimonious paper published and circulated in Madrid, he complained of the “despotic,” “whimsical” and “demeaning” decrees traditionally issued by the city fathers regarding the theatre.⁹ Such outbursts would not have been tolerated during the reign of Fernando VII, but even these complaints came to nothing. By 1821 the theatres were back in the hands of a private businessman, and by the time of the collapse of the liberal experiment in May 1823 (hastened by the invasion of the “One Hundred Thousand Sons of St. Louis,” an army backed by the Holy Alliance whose purpose was to reinstate Fernando VII to his throne) the theatres were once again bankrupt.¹⁰

The first real revolution in theatre ownership and literary taste was to take place after 1823 and at the hands of a transplanted Frenchman, a soldier who came to Madrid that year with the invading forces, but who stayed to change significantly the way theatre was looked upon, performed, and organized. The story of Juan de Grimaldi’s battles with the city government during his first year in Madrid (1823–1824) is instructive for what it reveals about ownership, censorship, finances, and power struggles among the three main forces (the administration, the actors, and the impresario) vying for control.¹¹

After convincing the reluctant city authorities to turn the two main theatres over to him, Grimaldi set about hiring new actors, playwrights, and translators, redecorating the theatres (or at least repairing the myriad cracks and leaks that made the theatres both uncomfortable and frequently downright dangerous places to be), and attempting to bring the

⁸ Cotarelo, *Máiquez*, p. 380.

⁹ Bernardo Gil and Antonio González, *Manifiesto que dan los autores de los teatros de la Cruz y Príncipe* (Madrid: Repullés, 1820).

¹⁰ I have given some details of this crisis in *Theatre and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Spain: Juan de Grimaldi as Impresario and Government Agent* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 10–13.

¹¹ I have told this story in detail in “Juan de Grimaldi y el año teatral madrileño, 1823–1824,” *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas* (Madrid: ISTMO, 1986): 607–613. What follows is a brief synopsis of that recounting. Full details about Grimaldi’s activity in Madrid’s theatres in the first years of the nineteenth century are to be found in my *Theatre and Politics*.

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repertory more in line with innovations in Europe (primarily in his home country, France). His initial experiment was not entirely successful, but he did inaugurate a period of optimism and growth for Spanish theatre, and as he grew in confidence and power a real transformation began to be felt in Madrid. With Grimaldi, the role of the impresario changed from what it had been previously. No longer was the impresario merely a financial manager, mediating between the artistic director, the actors, and the government officials who oversaw the acceptability of the repertory. Now he was more involved in artistic decisions, concerned with the aesthetic achievement of his theatre, and charged with the overall wellbeing of the theatrical enterprise. As Romero Tobar notes:

El empresario, para obtener el lucro congruente, debe realizar una doble operación económico-artística: en primer lugar, el arrendamiento del teatro – el empresario no suele ser el propietario del teatro, especialmente si éste es un edificio y no un tenderete veraniego – tiene que conseguirlo en las mejores condiciones posibles; en segundo lugar, ha de acertar con las exigencias del público en el momento de confeccionar el elenco de actores y las piezas que se han de representar durante la temporada. Si ambos objetivos son atendidos satisfactoriamente, puede aventurarse que el negocio de la *empresa* tendrá resultados *positivos*.¹²

(The impresario, in order to obtain suitable profits, should carry out a double economic-artistic operation: in the first place, the renting of the theatre – the impresario is not normally the owner of the theatre, especially if it is a building and not merely a summer set-up – he must acquire it under the most favorable conditions possible; in the second place, he must take the public's demands into account when he begins to make up the list of actors and the pieces that will be performed during the season. If both objectives are satisfactorily attended to, he can bet that the business of the *business* will have *positive* results.)

The 1820s witnessed the expansion of the repertory into several areas which produced applause in some quarters and bitter complaints in others. Grimaldi encouraged the public's taste for opera (Bretón de los Herreros thought it was more than interest; in fact, he recalled that it increased to a veritable "furor")¹³ as well as the continued production of rewrites, called "refundiciones," of Spanish Golden Age plays and translations of new melodramas recently played in Paris. He has been credited with improving acting technique during the 1820s and putting the theatre on a sounder intellectual footing, that is, making it a more "respectable" enterprise than it had been in the first years of the century. Grimaldi

¹² Leonardo Romero Tobar, "Noticias sobre empresas teatrales en periódicos del siglo XIX," *Segismundo* 8 (1972): 235. I have drawn on this article for some of the details that follow.

¹³ See David T. Gies, "Entre drama y ópera: la lucha por el público teatral en la época de Fernando VII," *Bulletin Hispanique* 91 (1989): 37–60.