

SOME JESUIT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE USE OF THE TERM 'COMEDIA' IN SPANISH DRAMATURGY

Anyone who attempts to understand the dramatic labels 'tragedy,' 'comedy,' and 'tragicomedy' must face the fact that the history of their use is full of confusion. Both playwrights and theoreticians, ancient and modern, are responsible for this state of affairs. The trend toward a series of rigid precepts in the Renaissance—a trend in which tragedy and comedy were strictly defined on the basis of types of characters, incidents, ending, etc.—has to ignore the fact that many tragedies have traits usually found in comedies and vice-versa. Further complication is due to the spread of the term 'tragicomedia.'¹ As Marvin Herrick points out in his study of tragicomedy,² neither the ancients nor their Renaissance translators and/or commentators understood what Mercury was talking about in Plautus' *Amphitryon* when he uttered the word 'tragicocomoedia.' The confusion looms even larger when we realize that the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spaniard, when he used the term 'comedia,' ignored the strict distinctions of the theoreticians and resisted for the most part the unpopular and misunderstood term 'tragicomedia.' The task remains, therefore, to explain further what might have contributed to the preferred use in Spain of the term 'comedia' (rather than 'tragicomedia') to refer to the mixed plays.

In my above-mentioned article I emphasized that the Spanish preference for the mixed dramatic piece, known as *comedia*, seems to have been influenced by a group of Italian playwrights. At that time I did not try to explain the background for this but it appears logical to conclude that, given the great importance of the concepts of verisimilitude and mimesis, and given the fact that life contained both comic and tragic elements, a play, in order to be verisimilar, had to contain both elements also. And since the ancients defined comedy as a "speculum vitae" (Livius Andronicus) and as an "imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis" (Cicero)³ it is

¹ For a detailed discussion of many of these problems see my "The Term 'comedia' in Spanish Dramaturgy," *Romanische Forschungen*, 84 (1972), 277-96.

² In *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. 39 (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1955), pp. 1-15.

³ References to these authors and these definitions are numerous in the commentaries on Aristotle

clear that the term 'comedy' was chosen to label this mixture of the comic and the tragic which aimed at imitating life.

Besides these ancient authorities the whole weight of the Christian Terence (from Hroswitha in the tenth century) and the tradition of the Latin humanistic comedy lent support to the practice of mixing high-born and low-born characters, tragic and comic events, etc.⁴ But there is one aspect of the Christian Terence which has not been explored enough and which might shed still more light on the use of the term 'comedia' in Spain to refer to this mixed genre. The reference, of course, is to the Jesuit playwrights and to the Jesuit theoreticians who helped to form them. All students of Lope de Vega, the creator of the Spanish *comedia*, know that he was a student of the Jesuits⁵ and that students in the Jesuit schools not only studied literary theory but also read and recited from classical plays. They even performed in plays written by their fellow students or their Jesuit teachers.⁶ And, contrary to what one might expect to find, the Jesuits did not seek to imitate blindly the classical models.⁷ As García Soriano summarizes the situation,⁸ their plays were not always "fríos y fieles remedos de obras clásicas, sumisas en todo a las reglas aristotélicas y a las normas usuales del

and the various other treatises in both Italy and Spain. See Margarete Newels, *Los géneros dramáticos en las poéticas del siglo de oro*, trans. Amadeo Sole-Leris (London: Tamesis, 1974), pp. 80-82.

⁴ Herrick (*Tragicomedy*) gives a convenient résumé in which the mixture of elements is very obvious (p. 18).

⁵ On this point see Justo García Soriano, *El teatro universitario y humanístico en España* (Toledo: R. Gómez, 1945), p. 43; Felix G. Olmedo, *Juan Bonifacio (1538-1606) y la cultura literaria del siglo de oro* (Santander: Publicaciones de la Sociedad de Menéndez Pelayo, 1938), p. 51 ff.; Claude-Henri Frèches, *Le théâtre néo-latin au Portugal (1550-1745)* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1964), p. 120; Juan Millé y Giménez, "Lope de Vega alumno de los jesuitas y no de los teatinos," *Revue Hispanique*, 72 (1928). 247-55; Rafael Ma. Hornedo, "A propósito de una fecha: 1577. Lope en los estudios de la Compañía de Jesús en Madrid," *Razón y Fe*, 35 (1935) 52-78.

⁶ For an idea of what Jesuit education was like see Allen P. Farrell, *The Jesuit Code of Liberal Education* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co.: 1938). A vivid portrayal is also given in the prologue to Francesco Benci's play *Ergastus* (Ingolstadt, 1606).

⁷ Two good examples of early Jesuit theorists who reject close imitation of the classics are Pontanus (Jakob Spanmüller) and Luís da Cruz. Pontanus criticizes the obscurity of Aristotle's treatise on tragedy, for example, and remarks as follows:

Atque haec de tragoedia. Caetera quoniam impeditiora et magis etiam quam hactenus explicata ab aetatis hujus usu abhorrentia sunt prudentes omittimus. (*Poeticarum Institutionum Libri III* [Ingolstadii 1594], p. 113).

Da Cruz tells us that the times change and that he, therefore, does not try to please the ancients. He is concerned about his own countrymen and answers the anticipated criticism of his ideas:

Primum quis pro ea re decertabit, quam tempora antiquarunt? Ubi Athenae illae? Ubi forum populi Romani? Ubi Megalenses? Ubi circus et theatra? Si haec omnia interierunt, cur requiremus, quae cum vigeabant, poetae factitabant? Deinde ita nostra parabantur non externis spectatoribus, quibus in poemate antiquitas cordi est ut in pictura, sed Lusitanis Academiaeque Conimbricensi, in qua si quid illo vetusto more ederetur fortasse non placuisset. (*Tragicae comicaeque actiones* [Lugduni: Apud Horatium Cardon, 1605], p. 4).

See too Ernest Boyse, *Le théâtre des Jésuites* (Paris: Henri Vaton, 1880), pp. 24-25. He emphasizes the fact that from the very beginning the Jesuit playwrights took many liberties with the rules—especially with those rules concerning the unities of place and time and those having to do with the introduction of the supernatural into the plays.

⁸ See García Soriano, *Teatro universitario*. The page references will be given in the text.

teatro grecolatino. Tuvieron, por el contrario, un carácter ecléctico: hubo en ellas una tendencia constante a recoger todas las corrientes dramáticas, a aunar en un mismo conjunto el arte clásico y el vulgar, la literatura docta y la del pueblo" (p. 42). He elaborates in the next paragraph saying that the Jesuit plays fused "en mayor o menor proporción, los elementos clásicos, alegóricos, teológicos, bíblicos, morales y populares. En una misma comedia alternaban personajes de las más diversas categorías y condiciones. Mezclábanse santos, ángeles, demonios, dioses de la Mitología, seres abstractos y simbólicos, reyes, príncipes, sacerdotes, magistrados, caballeros, burgueses, aldeanos, pastores, mendigos y pícaros: todo un pequeño mundo poético, en el que se unen en contraste, como en la vida real, el coturno y el zueco, lo noble y lo ruin, el dolor y el placer, el llanto y la risa" (p. 42).

Of course, such a hodge-podge as this was for the strict Aristotelian a dilemma of nightmarish proportions. When we read the non-Jesuit Renaissance treatises we sense, along with their authors' preoccupations with the various components (i.e., the type of endings, the social station of the characters, the decorum, etc.), an attitude of indignation and, on occasion, even one of revulsion.⁹ Some Jesuit theoreticians show similar negative attitudes to changes in traditional rules (for example, Martín del Río)¹⁰ while others—and these are the ones who most influenced the Jesuit playwrights in the so-called "schola Ibero-Italica"¹¹—such as Giovanni Antonio Viperano,¹² Ludovicus Crucius (Luis da Cruz)¹³ and Tarquinio Galluzzi,¹⁴ tend to be less rigid. Because of the influence this group had on the Spanish Jesuit schools we shall juxtapose certain ideas of theirs in the hope that by doing this we shall be able to understand better why the term 'comedia' came to be applied with great frequency to the mixed type of play.

Viperano's treatise, although not published until 1579, was written and known before 1561¹⁵ and his ideas, as IJsewijn says, "sunt... veterrimae a patre S.J. de theatro emessae" (p. 951). Viperano, like most other commentators and theoreticians, repeated the strict traditional definitions:

⁹ An excellent summary of the Renaissance polemic caused by tragicomedy is in Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), II, pp. 1074-1105. See also Newels, *Los géneros*, pp. 140-48.

¹⁰ See his *Syntagma tragoedia Latinae in tres partes distinctum* (Lvtetiae Pasrisiorvm, Sumptibus P. Billaine, 1619-1620). He never makes a radical break with tradition but he is somewhat flexible at times (for instance, when he gives the definition for tragic hero [p. 3] he allows him to be merely important rather than someone of royal blood or of high social station).

¹¹ The term is used by J. IJsewijn in his article, "Symbola ad studium theatri Latini Societatis Jesu," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 43 (1965), 948.

¹² He wrote the *De Poetica Libri Tres* (Antverpiae: Ex officina Christophori Plantini, 1579).

¹³ Da Cruz's theory is contained in his "Praefatio ad Lectorem" in the collection of plays cited in note 7. See too Frèches, *Le théâtre néo-latin*, pp. 253-59.

¹⁴ See his *Virgilianae vindicationes & commentarij tres de Tragoedia, Comoedia, Elegia* (Romae: Ex Typographia Alexandri Zannetti, 1621).

¹⁵ See E. Springhetti, S.J., "Un grande umanista Messinese: Giovanni Antonio Viperano: cenni biografici," *Helikon*, 1 (1961), 116.

Tragoedia est poesis virorum illustrium per agentes personas exprimens calamitates... (p. 94) Comoedia est poesis, quae ad docendum vitae consuetudinem ciuiles & priuatas actiones per agentes personas non sine iocis & salibus imitatur (p. 120).

And when it comes to defining tragicomedy Viperano shows himself to be less shocked than some of the other theoreticians:

Est praeterea quoddam genus poëmatis ex vtroque mixtum; quod Tragicocomoediam vocant. est autem ea nihil aliud, quam comoedia graviores personas adsciscens... ut est tragoedia, sicut aliqui volunt, quae exitem comoediae iucundum inquam, & tranquillum sortitur. Semper autem finis tragicocomoediae laetus est. cuius non sanè alia dabantur praecepta, quam ea quae tradita sunt (pp. 129-30).

This calm acceptance of reality (he even goes on to use the term 'comico-tragoedia' to refer to a play which mixes comic and tragic elements but which has a "miserabilem exitum") is significant. But even more significant is the statement that a *tragicocomoedia* is "nihil aliud, quam comoedia..."—especially when we realize that Viperano was writing before there was a well established Jesuit theatre and that the same basic idea is expressed in Galluzzi's 1621 treatise which was also studied in Jesuit schools, where the priests and their students had, by this time, developed a flourishing dramatic activity.

In Galluzzi's work one notices the same preoccupation with the mixture of comic and tragic elements which we saw above. And he, like the others, strictly separates comedy and tragedy, using their traditional definitions. But circuitous reasoning can take him only so far and at one point he must admit that many playwrights have introduced into the same play both high-born and low-born characters and that such mixed works are the same as comedies ("pro comoedijs"):

Quod si quaeras, an illae veterum Fabulae iam commemoratae, in quibus Deos inducebant, & Heroas, dici aliqua ratione Comoediae possint; responderim, eiusmodi Fabulas habendas pro Comoedijs esse, quia tametsi Deos Heroas, ac Reges inducebant, id tamen sequebantur vnum, vt risum mouerent: in quo posita est intima quaedam Comoediae natura, & vis. sed quia personae illae abhorrent a conditione Comoedie, imperfectam eam Fabulam faciunt, & eam, quam corrigendam putat Aristoteles (p. 336).

And so, despite all of the scholastic niceties of reasoning one comes to the inevitable conclusion that, basically, the mixed works are comedies, no matter how imperfect.

Of course, anyone familiar with the Spanish *comedia* established by Lope de Vega, a student of the Jesuits, recognizes that the mixture of comic and tragic is the norm and so is the label 'comedia.' It seems that the founder of the Spanish *comedia* learned first hand from his Jesuit mentors that tastes change and that an author should not blindly imitate the traditional,

classically oriented theatre.¹⁶ IJsewijn describes the situation in another way when he says: "At praecepta usum non mutaverunt..." (p. 953). And it is true that, although in actual practice some playwrights do attempt to conform to the strict traditional definitions of comedy and tragedy, still others mix the two forms and either label the result tragicomedy or leave the more familiar designation of comedy or tragedy. As we stated earlier the term 'comedia' seemed to be the more readily acceptable one because it already embraced a wide range of subject matter, characters, etc. And some of the more influential Jesuit theoreticians played a role in establishing this expanded meaning by stating outright that tragicomedies are basically comedies.

We even see this use of labels reflected in Jesuit documents other than theoretical treatises. For example, Juan Ferrer's *Tratado de las comedias en el qual se declara si son lícitas y si hablando en todo rigor será pecado mortal el representarlas* (Barcelona, 1618) is a case in point. Throughout this work Ferrer specifies what makes a *comedia* and its performance legitimate. But despite all of the strictures and the emphasis upon morality, religion, etc. he concludes in Chapter XVI:

Las Comedias de suyo consideradas y tomadas no son intrínsecamente malas. Porque Comedia no es otra cosa, sino vna manera de entretenimiento de muchos que hay en la república, para recreación y aliuio de los moradores della (fol. 67 v°).

Ferrer's understanding of the word 'comedia' rather than his emphasis on entertainment and the moral problem is what concerns us more at this point because he is using the term in the Spanish sense with the general meaning of play or dramatic piece.

We see the same lack of adherence to traditional meanings in many of the early Jesuit playwrights. For example, Father Pedro Pablo de Acevedo's collection of plays carries the title *Comoediae/dialogi & orationes/q P. Acevedus/sacerdos Soci. Iesu/componebat*.¹⁷ One notices at once the absence of the word 'tragoediae' in the title even though one of the plays in the collection is called *Tragoedia Lucifer Furens* (see fol. 17 ff.). The

¹⁶ See lines 40-44 of his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609) where he rejects the "preceptos" of the classical theatre. He explains further in lines 174-177. It should be noted that Lope is not talking about tragicomedy. He is talking about various types of *comedias*. It is difficult, then, to understand exactly what Juana de José Prades means when she says, in her commentary of these lines, the following:

Lope quiere analizar la sustancia dramática del teatro de su tiempo que ha nacido de la fusión de dos géneros teatrales aparentemente irreconciliables Tragedia y Comedia. Por eso la *comedia nueva* española es *Tragicomedia*; fórmula maravillosa de arte dramático que consigue su mejor logro en la comedia secentista española... (*Arte nuevo*, ed. Juana de José Prades [Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1971], pp. 292-93).

Even when Lope refers to Plautus' *Amphitryon* in which the word *tragicocomoedia* is introduced he says: "esto es boluer a la Comedia antigua." See line 165 ff.

¹⁷ The manuscript is in the Colección de Cortes in the library of the Real Academia de la Historia (Signatura 12-12-6, núm. 383).

obvious conclusion is that Acevedo is using one word ('comoedia') to refer to both comedies and tragedies. Another indication of this is seen in the play which has the title *Comoedia Occasio* in the manuscript. In the text of the play (fol. 246 r^o) this *comoedia* is referred to as "trágica acción." Again the term 'comoedia' does not mean comedy. Miguel Venegas, another early Jesuit playwright, shows a similar use of the word when he refers to his *Tobias* (ca. 1563) as a *comoedia* even though there is nothing comic about it.¹⁸ Another case in point is the *Comoedia Vita Humana*, written by the Portuguese Jesuit, Luis da Cruz (Ludovicus Crucius), and staged in 1571 or 1572. Despite its title it has a tragic denouement.¹⁹

Another Jesuit play, *Comoedia quae inscribitur Margarita*,²⁰ also reflects the tendency to use the label 'comoedia' (rather than 'tragicocomoedia') to refer to the mixture of tragic and comic elements. The prologue of the *comoedia*, which is a dialogue between two comic characters (Valencia and Pérez), illustrates the same point:

Valencia. qué os parece hermano pérez? qué mal lo an hecho cõmigo los maestros, que no me han querido dar dicho por más que se lo rogaron! Pues, pienso yo que no perdiera nada por mi la comedia. En la representación passada de *Nabal Carmelo* pocos salieron con más honra que yo. Es cosa insufrible este rigor. Por no sé qué licciones a que falté, me la guardaron para este tiempo.

Pérez. Consolaos conmigo que con no pedir más de quatro palabras no hubo remedio. Mal mundo es este. Uamanos a un monesterio y acabemos ya.

Vale[ncia]. Veamos primero la tragedia, y bolbamos por n[uest]ra honra. Yo quiero dar razón de mi y mostrar como era para esto y mucho más.

Pérez. Pues qué son n[uest]ros intentos?...

Va[lencia]. Cueste lo que costare, que yo he de hazer prueua de mi abilidad y porque según me an dicho ay en la tragedia latín, romance, copla, uerso y quanto mandardes, he de hazer una ensalada de todo... (fol. 81 v^o).

Just in these few lines the *comoedia* is referred to as *comedia* once and *tragedia* twice. Evidently the tragic elements of the play were no barrier to the character's (and the author's) using the term (*comedia*) to refer to a play

¹⁸ On this point see Frèches, *Le théâtre néo-latin*, p. 235.

¹⁹ In his previously cited "Praefatio ad Lectorem" he mentions definitions for comedy, tragedy and tragicomedy but he does not go into very much detail. Basically the tragicomedy serves to entertain by appealing to the audience's desires for laughter and seriousness:

Cur *Prodigum, Iosephum, Manassenque* appellem tragicocomoedias nunc accipe. Nosti quid inter tragoediam comoediamque intersit. Illa res magnas, eventus inopinatos, caedes regum, urbium eversionses atque regnorum, tristia denique postulare solet. Comoedia contra res populares, factas ex turbulentis tranquilliores. Ob hanc causam stylus et oratio foro similis est comoediae, gravior et excelsior tragoediae. Utrumque copulare fuit in animo ut tragoediae aliquid et comoediae haberetur. Sic enim gravitati auditorum et hilaritudini servire me posse arbitrabar (p. 6).

But, despite these theoretical distinctions, we see in actual practice his use of the term 'comoedia' to refer to works which do not really follow his definitions consistently.

²⁰ The manuscript, written between 1560 and 1566, is number 384 of the previously mentioned Colección de Cortes.

with many tragic elements in it.

We could go on adding examples, but the basic fact would not change: the use of the term 'comedia' in Spanish dramaturgy (with the all-inclusive meaning of play) to refer to a work with a mixture of tragic and comic elements seems to have been influenced by the Jesuit theoreticians who saw the mixture, often called tragicomedy, as nothing more than a *comedia*. Since these ideas were taught in Jesuit schools they were obviously familiar to the Jesuit priests and their students who wrote plays; and, since Lope de Vega was a student of the Jesuits as well as the recognized founder of the genre known as *comedia*, it would be difficult to deny the Jesuits a role in the creation of the new genre which was to become so popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This conclusion is even more inescapable when we look at the actual plays and the occasional comments made by the Jesuit playwrights from the beginning of their dramatic activity in the 1550's.

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¹ *Lope's Fools: Aucassin, Froelus, Calisto and the parody of the courtly lover* (London: Tamesis, 1972), pp. 71-134.

² *El calistano del 'Tirant lo Blanch' y su influencia en el 'Quijote'* (Barcelona: Puvill, n.d.).

³ 'Cervantes: A question of genre', in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies on Spain and Portugal in Honour of J.E. Russell* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literatures, 1981), pp. 63-85.