

Spanish Society as Depicted in *The Trickster of Seville* by Tirso de Molina:

Women's Position, Politics and Religion as Depicted in the Play

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INTRODUCTION

Literature can convey a great deal of information about life and society. This is both as it questions and as it reflects the society in which it is created. This is as true of literature produced today as it is of literature produced in the Middle Ages. In many cases, literature is the only means by which today's society can discern the finer points of earlier societies, such as that found in Spain during the sixteenth century. Plays such as Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville* reveal a great deal about the various nuances of Spanish society during this period of time.

The play essentially tells the story of a young aristocrat who spends his time chasing through the various places he's sent and seducing women at every opportunity. It is largely recognized as the first story of Don Juan tale, the legendary romantic hero of the history. The story begins in Naples, which Don Juan must flee after having seduced the Duchess Isabella, then moves to Tarragona, where he seduces a fisher girl and must flee again to avoid her jealous murderous boyfriend. The play then moves to Seville where Don Juan was supposed to marry Ana and the king banishes him just as Don Juan arrives. Juan seduces Ana in the guise of her real love interest, the Marquis de la Mota, and kills her father in his escape to a nearby town called Dos Hermanas. It is here that he seduces another young peasant girl just as she is about to marry. Finally, he returns again to Seville where he challenges the statue of Don Gonzalo to have dinner with him, which the ghost of Gonzalo does to Don Juan's surprise. The ghost invites Don Juan to dinner at the cemetery, where he strikes the young man dead and disappears with him into the netherworld.

In the process of his travels, the young man destroys many young women's opportunities, prevents an advantageous marriage between unstable states and even manages to murder several people attempting to do nothing more than protect what they view as rightfully theirs. There are a number of things that Molina reveals about his society within this play, including women's normal position within society, the somewhat murky conditions of the political world and the constant struggle between Catholic and Protestant values within a society that could not escape the rigors of the Christian traditions.

WOMEN'S POSITION IN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN THE PLAY

Women within the sixteenth century were largely restricted to home and were considered men's "property". This is made clear in almost every case, including the cases of the peasant women. In that moment there is even a hint that these women have been touched by an 'unauthorized' man, they are deemed destroyed regardless of the nature of their downfall.

When Isabella is seduced by Don Juan in the guise of her fiancé Octavio, it doesn't matter that she has lost her virginity to the man she thought was her betrothed, she is still sent to the convent for a year. In addition, she is never given a chance to even defend herself and let others know how she was deceived. "A woman, yes! That was my wrong, born to this privilege of debasement, ordered to keep a civil tongue locked in its civil ivory casement. When you are pious, she's a wife, and, when appropriate, a whore. Now that you've simplified my life to silence, I will speak no

more.”¹ In this speech, Isabella lets the reader of nowadays understand the highly constrained place woman typically held in her society, which is reinforced by the way the men treat her, but she is not alone.

As Don Juan seduces other women he encounters, it becomes clear that even peasant women were largely considered to be the property of their men as well. This is revealed during the second act when Juan is completing his mischief with Aminta and Batricio. After having convinced Aminta that she will be a duchess if she goes with Juan, he sleeps with her and then runs off to her bridegroom to tell him of the deed. Batricio’s response indicates that marriage even in the country was viewed as something more akin to ownership than to partnership. “Read these papers: my license, here! Read! I bought her! She cost a fortune.”² Although women seemed to have somewhat more flexibility than women in other parts of Europe at that time, evidenced in the way that Tisbea and Isabella are able to travel relatively unencumbered, it remains true that Isabella was traveling on instructions from her male ‘owners’ and Tisbea has few options available for her now that her suicide attempt has been thwarted and her previous fiancé murdered by the man who made her think she could have something better.

POLITICS IN THE PLAY

While the position of women in Spanish society is revealed, Molina also investigates some of the issues regarding politics that were inherent in his society. “The most contentious subject for debate in the early 16th century, as the son (Philip III) and

¹ Molina, Tirso de. *The Joker of Seville*. Trans. Derek Walcott. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978. Act 1, scene 1, p. 19.

² Act 2, scene 1, p. 102.

grandson (Philip IV) of Philip II ruled uncertainly over a discordant and troubled empire, was the role of the monarch. It is no surprise to find that dramatists reflected concerns expressed elsewhere in society over questions of the prince's education, the evils of Machiavellianism and tyranny, and in particular the role of the privado or favorite."³ The play touches on the various frictions that existed between Seville and Naples as Don Juan upsets the marriage plans of Octavio and Isabella which was designed to help heal the discord that existed between these two cities at the same time that the role of favorites is featured to the great extent in the decisions being made.

Don Pedro permits Juan to escape Isabella's bedroom because of his own sense of favoritism in desiring to both protect a favorite nephew as well as to preserve the family name upon the favorites list of his own liege lord. Because of his pretty way of speaking and his willingness to fawn at the man's feet, Gonzalo is able to secure a position of privilege with the King of Castile, who also presumes to make marriage arrangements for Gonzalo's daughter without any consideration for the father's or daughter's feelings. "You, Don Gonzalo de Ulloa, I make my personal chamberlain; you have been a marriage broker between Portugal and Spain, so let two human halves cohere in marriage now, by my command."⁴ Because Don Diego is another one of the king's favorites, he feels it is appropriate to marry Don Diego's son, Don Juan, to Don Gonzalo's daughter, Ana. While it is presumed that the king is merely doing this as a means of repaying his loyal subjects, it is difficult to imagine that the man is insensible to the boy's antics and perhaps is merely attempting to get him married off to someone as a means of trying to stop his wild and destructive behavior. The petty wrangling

³ Thacker, Jonathan. "On my Honour." *Guardian*. (March 27, 2004). May 20, 2009
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/mar/27/rsc.theatre>>.

⁴ Act 1, scene 3, p. 29.

between kings is exacerbated by the petty wrangling between lesser men as they vie for position within the court and the king's favor. However, their children continue making this increasingly difficult as Don Juan works his mischief in every marriage arrangement he can discover and the poor girls, simply attempting to make their own decisions for once in their lives, are deceived again and again in thinking that perhaps the one they are betrothed to is more interesting and romantic than they really are.

RELIGION AS DEPICTED IN THE PLAY

It is in the area of religion, though, that Molina truly exposes his culture as being one strongly affiliated with Christian concerns and struggling between the Catholic and Protestant faiths. As a priest, the playwright was intimately concerned with the relationship between mortal beings and their heavenly creator. Don Juan is constantly referred to as the trickster, which is frequently another name used to refer to the devil. He acts in a devilish manner as well, to fool young girls into thinking that he is their betrothed. Although it is not permissible that affianced individuals sleep together before the wedding day, it might be overlooked in a forgiving household. His method of operation is constantly repeated throughout the play, only changing with the status of the woman he intends to seduce. In the case of the noble woman, whether it is Isabella or Ana, Don Juan talks with the intended groom, getting his permission to use the cloak or other garment that would convince the woman that he was the affianced man and then sneaks into her room under cover of darkness only one moment earlier than that proposed by the man in question – Octavio or de Mota. He then has his way with the

woman and then, just before being caught, rushes out of the room and makes his escape.

In case of the peasant woman, he convinces her that he is interested in marriage with her and convinces her to give up her virginity to him prior to the wedding. In every case, he is involved in using the individual's own words and inner desires as a means of fooling them into behaving the way he wants them to behave. This, too, is considered behavior common to the devil who reportedly did not actually live in hell but wandered the world in the guise of attractive people and attempts to seduce them into betraying their faith in God through their own weaknesses and desires. The concept that Juan might be the devil is also reinforced by the idea that he cannot be killed by any of the individuals to set out to do just that.

Anfriso is reputed to be a very dangerous man prone to violent fits of jealousy to the point that all the other tough fishermen are afraid of him, but Juan manages to kill him rather easily. He is also quick to kill Don Gonzalo, who is a military commander and should not be so easy to strike down. Don Juan is finally only neutralized by the powerful and incontrovertible hand of the ghost of Gonzalo. Throughout this portrayal, Molina gives preference to the Catholic faith as he allows those who are persuaded even slightly by the more lenient attitudes of the Protestant religion to fail.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his play, Tirso de Molina provides a scathing look at his own society and its values. He reveals the conflict that was held between the Catholic and the Protestant faiths in the somewhat lax way in which various characters are willing to dilute their

religious vows in order to appease their human desires and rewards the Catholics with a chance at redemption. He exposes the petty whims of the kings and rulers and illustrates how these functioned to make society less orderly, indicating that a more organized and stable system was required in order to establish a stable community. Finally, he also illustrates the unfair treatment of women who were frequently silenced and provided no means of participating in their own well-being. In illustrating this concept, he also reveals how the system of female “ownership” actually functioned to drive many women away from their appointed duties as the guardian of the family chastity because it was the only thing they had even marginal control over.

I believe that this is a great amount of topics discussed and issues raised in Tirso de Molina’s work that makes it so interesting for readers of different centuries.

Works Cited

Molina, Tirso de. *The Joker of Seville*. Trans. Derek Walcott. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978.

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