

Political Violence and Sacrifice in Lope de Vega's *El bastardo Mudarra*.

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Lope de Vega, a very popular playwright of the Spanish seventeenth century's Golden Age, understood well his people and country. His poetic theory and theatrical practice underscore the contradictions and paradoxes of the Spanish society of his time. In *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, a short treatise on poetics, the playwright stresses the shortcomings of intellectual

attempts to represent reality with a didactic purpose of edifying audiences. Among the great playwrights of the European Counter-Reformation, Lope might be the only one who did not claim the necessity of improving the representation of reality according to neo-Aristotelian precepts. For Lope, the truth (*naturaleza*) has a Minotaur's body. Its dualistic nature is impossible to inscribe into an abstract linear syllogism. The circularity of human existence cannot be regulated by abstract intellectual propositions that would lead it out of its contradictions and conflicts between passionate attachments and rational aspirations. This is why Lope's theater does not obey the rules of poetic verisimilitude. For him, verisimilitude remains in sharp conflict with the truth. The purpose of his art is to appeal to emotions rather than teach ideals that cannot be attained. This skepticism led him to the representation of great human passions rather than the construction of didactic plotlines according to the principles of good art derived from various interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* and championed by the European intellectual elite of the period, most conspicuously the French Academy.

Lope de Vega's life (1562–1635) encompassed the apogee of the Spanish Empire and the beginning of its slow decline (Lázaro Carreter 7). The turning point for the Spanish expansion was the defeat of the Invincible Armada in 1588. According to J. H. Elliott (288), the defeat of the

Armada marks the division between the triumphant Spain of Charles V and Philip II, and the disillusioned Spain of their successors, Lope's theater witnessed the evolution of Spanish society from optimism grounded in national glory to pessimistic *desengaño* (disenchantment) caused by its slow retreat from the international scene.

Unlike writers of the same period such as Francisco Quevedo, Lope de Vega does not offer a virulent social critique. Literary criticism often describes these writers as complacent with the political status quo (Lázaro Carreter 198). As Barbara F. Weissberger shows in her study of Lope's play *El Niño inocente de la Guardia*, which dramatizes an alleged ritual murder of a child by a group of Jews and conversos between 1594 and 1597, the playwright has the skill to support and subvert at the same time the dominant ideologies, creating an ambiguity that challenges audiences in their customs and convictions (206). In fact, Lope is very much a poet of social compromise. One might recall at this point Franco Moretti's analysis of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. According to this commentator, "Tragedy belongs to the world that does not yet recognize the inevitability of permanent conflict between opposing and immitigable interests or values, and therefore does not feel any need to confront the problem of reconciling them" (28). I argue that Lope's *comedia* transcends tragedy by proposing a conciliatory resolution to the conflicts it stages. *Comedia* surrenders the tragic impulse to its "comic" component. It does not avert tragedy, but inscribes the tragic component into the providential design as a necessary obstacle that often requires sacrifice of some characters before reaching a "peaceful" resolution. The poet first represents tensions and then shows a means of neutralizing them (Lázaro Carreter 198). This is why I think insights from thinkers such as René Girard and, to a lesser extent, Georges Bataille, help elucidate the complexity of *El bastardo Mudarra*.

The conflict in *Mudarra* results from the heterogeneous makeup of Spanish society. The idea of a Spain at the same time ethnically pure, Catholic, and inclusive offers a tremendous challenge to a writer such as Lope de Vega. As Américo Castro suggests, Spanish society of the medieval and

early modern period was divided into castes rather than classes. Classes are based on what one does, while castes are formed upon the mere existential status of the person. Christians perceived themselves superior to Moors and Jews not because of their skills or wealth but because they belonged to the ruling caste over the territory of Spain. The three castes were closely interconnected economically. This resulted in a customary acceptance of Jews and Moors in spite of some legal pronouncements such as the thirteenth century *Partidas*. According to these decrees, the Jews, for example, were granted some degree of tolerance so that “they would live as in captivity forever, and would be a reminder for men that they came of the lineage of those who crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ” (qtd. in Castro 608).

Yet, as Castro points out (531), the three beliefs on the Iberian Peninsula resented social and religious integration; at the same time, however, a considerable number of Jews sought ways of entering the political mainstream. The anti-Jewish riots in 1391 and 1449 resulted in many Jews submitting to baptism. Conversion to Christianity provided access to the circles of Court and aristocracy (Elliott 106-7). However, these voluntary conversions brought about a new social category of New Christians. A number of these conversos embraced their new faith with sincerity and became hostile to other faiths. Indeed, they often exceeded the Old Christians in their orthodoxy. The creation of the Inquisition might have been inspired by zealous and influential conversos at Court, who feared that their social position could be jeopardized by those of their brethren, who either reverted to their ancestors’ faith or practiced it covertly. Nevertheless, after the expulsion of Jews at the end of the fifteenth century, the conversos became the main target of the persecutions by the Old Christians who sought to deepen the distinction between Christians of pure Iberian blood and those who had Jewish or Moorish ancestry. This attitude reinforced the segregation between the New and Old Christians that continued through the next two centuries. The expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609 was a follow-up to the earlier expulsion of the Jews.¹

The period of the composition of *El bastardo Mudarra* (1612) falls within the period of revived ethnic tensions on the Iberian Peninsula.² After the defeat of the Moors in Granada in 1492 and their expulsion in 1505, the Spanish kingdom was theoretically free of Muslims. Those who chose to remain in Spain had to convert to Christianity, and they joined the category of *cristianos nuevos*. Their conversion was merely nominal; despite the prohibition on the practice of Moorish customs, the Moriscos maintained these customs in their daily life. Their socioeconomic impact was less important than that of the Jews, and the Holy Office paid less attention to their ways of living.

Nevertheless, there were attempts to assimilate the Moriscos, one of which was a decree (pragmatic) from 1566–1567. It issued an order prohibiting the wearing of traditional habits and the use of Arabic. This was a direct cause of the rebellion of Moriscos, who resisted for approximately three years in the mountains of the Alpujarras³. The failure to assimilate Moriscos reached an unhappy conclusion in 1609 when the government issued a decree of expulsion. This decision was meant to please a populace that had become disillusioned by the weak and corrupt political leadership under Philip III, in particular following a humiliating peace treaty with the Dutch in 1609 (Elliot 305).⁴

David H. Darst argues that the ultimate Spanish Counter-Reformation event was the expulsion of the Moriscos in 1609, although it is less known than the forced conversions of native populations in America. In the chapter entitled “Converting Others,” Darst analyzes several Golden Age plays that have Moorish protagonists. He demonstrates the Counter-Reformation techniques of closure by conversion. It is true that usually the plays of that period end in the conversion or death of the non-Christian characters. Nevertheless, Darst’s study (which does not include *Mudarra*) fails to examine tensions that this requirement of closure imposes on the plot. Susan Niehoff McCrary suggests that *El bastardo Mudarra* is a drama of cosmological dimensions that represents history as an inherent drama of life itself inscribed in the providential design (85).

All this being true, I claim, however, that it is necessary to pay more attention to Lope's representation of the contingent reality of his time. In this tumultuous period of Spanish history, *El bastardo Mudarra* was a challenge to the national obsession with *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood). Lope de Vega, an extremely successful playwright in his time, proposed a play on the Moorish subject, whereby he reminds his audience that it was not what it pretended to be. The ethnic composition of the Spanish nation was essentially "bastardized" in nature. The play rehabilitates the idea of complexity and multiplicity in opposition to the concept of purity of blood, custom, and religion. In its enactment of violence, *El bastardo Mudarra* espouses a certain religious syncretism, interfusing the pre-Christian notion of sacrifice with the Christian idea of redemption.

The play dramatizes a medieval legend well known to a wide audience. The first written account of the legend is found in Alfonso X El Sabio's *Primera Crónica General*. A few *romanceros* and theatrical versions were also recorded throughout the Middle Ages and the Golden Age. Lope de Vega's version is believed to be inspired by Florián de Ocampo's *Crónica* (1541) and *romanceros* (Menéndez Pidal 127-38; Antas 44).⁵ The plot of *El bastardo Mudarra* relates events from the tenth century. The seven *infantes*, Gonzalo Bustos' sons, are present at the wedding of their uncle (their mother doña Sancha's brother) Ruy Velázquez to doña Lambra, a cousin of the count of Castile, Garci Fernández. In a contest called in Spanish *tablado*, consisting of throwing the javelin, Gonzalillo, the youngest of the seven brothers, wins, but his rival, Alvar Sánchez, member of the opposite clan and doña Lambra's brother, questions his victory and insults him. Gonzalillo responds by killing the man with his sword. This act is a pretext for doña Lambra to seek vengeance for her relative's death. As a result of her devious influence, doña Lambra's husband, Ruy Velázquez, sends the father of the *infantes*, Gonzalo Bustos, with a message to Almanzor, the king of Cordoba. In a letter written in Arabic, he demands that Almanzor behead the messenger and set an ambush for the seven *infantes*. Betrayed, the *infantes* die at the Moors' hands. However, Almanzor spares the father's life and offers to him the *infantes'* heads as a macabre dessert. Almanzor's sister, Arlaja, pities the unfortunate father, and gives him a son, Mudarra. The grown-up Mudarra comes back to

Castile, where his father lives after being freed by the Moors, and avenges his family's dishonor by killing the traitor Ruy Velázquez and burning doña Lambra.

The main peripeteia in *Mudarra's* plot, the ambush and the slaughter of the sons of Gonzalo Bustos, contains many features of a sacrifice. As in ritual sacrifices, the purpose of the slaughter is to overcome divisions within the community. The sacrifice of the seven infantes brings about an unlikely alliance, that of their lineage (from Lara) with the Cordoba Moors against the clan of the wicked Ruy Velázquez. Looking at the story of the infantes, their death, and the final appeasement of the warring factions, one could evoke René Girard's interpretation of sacrifice. According to his theory, communities enact the ritual of sacrifice in order to channel the fear of communal dissolution (26-29). By selecting an arbitrary victim, the community finds itself united again at the victim's expense. René Girard attributes the origin of conflicts in communities to the principle of "acquisitive mimesis." Members of the community become driven toward an object, thus creating rivalries. The contagious nature of acquisitive mimesis might result in a complete dissolution of the community, yet the desire for the same object creates alliances among rivals, which Girard denotes as "conflictual mimesis." It creates an allegiance against a common enemy, bringing about the reconciliation of the community. The conflict dissipates with an immolation of the chosen victim. Hence, to avert their dissolution, communities enact rituals containing some forms of sacrifice.

In *El bastardo Mudarra*, mimetic rivalry unfolds as members of two Castilian clans compete to prove who is the best at *tablado*. In Act 1 of the play, members of the same lineage give proof of civic immaturity by their constant rivalry and quarrels. Referring to Girard's insight, we can say that the play depicts outbursts of primitive, unchecked violence as an outcome of mimetic rivalry among the members of the same noble lineage. The reward is reputation, as in many plays by Lope de Vega, qualified by historians of literature as *honor plays*.⁶ The contest soon degenerates into a series of violent acts. The first killing occurs after a rival questions Gonzalillo's victory and insults him: Gonzalillo replies with a sword and slaughters the man. Next Gonzalillo breaks doña Lambra's

husband's nose when he chastises him with a stick for having dishonored his wedding ceremony. A sudden intervention of the infantes' father and of the Count of Castile suspends the violence for a time. Nevertheless, doña Lambra takes revenge into her own hands. She will feed the rivalry between the clan members with a sense of vengeance until the conclusion of the conflict.

The predominance of female negative agency, in accord with the playwright's misogynistic worldview, typical of the period, gives the play a fatalistic quality. Doña Lambra is a perpetrator of ancient customs involving bloodshed and sacrifice. She is associated with a certain ritualistic tradition, and her blind thirst for vengeance reveals cannibalistic tendencies. The first instance of doña Lambra's evocative role as an agent in the ancient ritualistic practice is the moment when she dispatches a man to throw a cucumber filled with blood on Gonzalillo's face. Carolyn Bluestine has suggested that blood contained in a phallic symbol is intended to evoke doña Lambra's lust and to demean Gonzalo's virility (203). After fulfilling Lambra's orders, the man runs and seeks refuge under Lambra's coat. Following the ancient Germanic custom, no one should touch a man thus protected (Menéndez Pidal 6, n.4). Nevertheless, the infantes do not respect the custom, and they slaughter the refugee. The incident amplifies Lambra's thirst for vengeance, which she expresses as a cannibalistic desire to ingest Gonzalo's heart.

Cuando entre mis dientes tenga,
si Ruy Velázquez me venga,
aquel corazón cruel;
que no he de tener sosiego
hasta comerle a bocados,
que bien sé que irán asados,
pues que la venganza es fuego (521-7).

The passage foreshadows the culminating moment of the seven infantes' story, that is, the macabre dessert of their heads, which Almanzor will serve to their father. According to Georges Bataille's

insight on practices of human sacrifices, we may see in Lambra's desire to ingest Gonzalillo's heart a longing for absolute intimacy with the object of her confused desire, a combination of sexual attraction and hatred. Bataille suggests that destruction and consumption bring the object to the intimate world as opposed to the world of things (43-44). According to Bataille, the essence of sacrifice is to go beyond the sphere of the useful. Slavery and the work ethic introduced a reasoning continuity that destroyed the truth of the instant. Practices of sacrifice reenacted the intimate order by suspending the realm of utility. "(Human sacrifice) is the most radical contestation of the primacy of utility" (60). Consumption is a means of transcending the division between beings separated in the world of things.

The violence between the two clans reaches its apex in Act 2, in the vengeful killing of the seven infantes in the ambush set by their uncle, Ruy Velazquez, Lambra's husband. Ruy sends the father of the infantes with the letter to Almanzor written in Arabic in which he asks Almanzor to kill the messenger and informs him of the opportunity for the Moors to surprise the infantes in an ambush. Almanzor spares the life of Bustos, whom he imprisons. The imprisoned Bustos finds compassion in Arlaja, Almanzor's sister who lives at her brother's court. During their first encounter Bustos compares Arlaja to the guardian angel.

Que, aunque eres mora, segura
la comparación parece,
pues nombre de ángel merece
la virtud y la hermosura (1147-50).

The Muslim Arlaja has all the traits that the Christian Lambra does not. She will become the mother of the play's title character, Mudarra, an illegitimate son whose hybrid nature as a Muslim and Christian will put an end to the intestine rivalry of the nobility in Castile.

A conversation between Bustos and Arlaja, during which she reveals to Bustos that she carries his child, precedes directly the macabre dinner to which Almanzor invites Bustos. There, Almanzor offers him a dessert composed of his sons' heads disposed on a table. Bustos kisses the heads, lamenting his misfortune as a father. The spectacle moves everyone present at the scene, including Almanzor himself, who is moved to tears:

El caso lastimoso
mueve las piedras, y de suerte mueve,
que siendo tu enemigo, mi piadoso
pecho a tu fuego tierno llanto llueve.
No te quiero mirar tan doloroso (1998-2002).

The intensity of this confrontation might evoke Bataille's notion of the intimate world, where distance between the sacrificing subject and the sacrificed object is eliminated through the intensity of the pain the subject experiences at the sight of the object's pitiable display. The exposition of the heads generates the moment of intimacy with the slaughtered sons. Although we do not have here an act of sacrificial consumption, the fact of presenting the heads as a macabre dessert suggests the union of the father with his sons in the intimate world that erases the distinction between the subject and the object of the gaze. At this point the plot enters the realm of tragedy. The Christian Bustos and the Moor Almanzor see the heads of the infantes as an outcome of tragic circumstances that could not be averted. For Almanzor, the scene offers an experience of intimacy with former enemies, who had been separated by historical contingency. The conflict of interests between two ethnic groups, Christians and Muslims, created an inescapable tragic situation for the individuals implicated in the strife. Each side needed to give up personal interests for the benefit of their respective religious and national community.

In fact, the treason of Ruy Velazquez recasts the conflict from a family feud to the war between Moors and Christians: the conflict that begins in an outburst of intestine rivalry among the

members of the Castilian nobility eventually reaches the stage of an international conflict. Violence originates from the humiliation of the losers at the javelin throw and leads to treason inflicted on the winners of that game. Violence that could not be contained within the boundaries of the Castilian clans can be held in check only through the external intervention of the Moors.

The display of the horrific repast in front of the father of the victims represents an awakening: the absurdity of their death becomes apparent. As the old Bustos laments the death of his sons, the play suggests to the audience that with that death an era of Castilian politics needs to be buried. Further violence would annihilate the embattled Castilian body politic. Just as it has destroyed the infants, Castile must destroy the life of blind competition and find civilizing ways of constructing a polity that will redirect its energy to rebuilding its sociopolitical fabric. The slaughter of the infantes forces the Castilian community to look for ways to amend the fragmentation caused by clan rivalry.

Almanzor's motive in exhibiting to the father the severed heads was not cruelty, but rather respect and compassion. The scene has an odd, ritualistic depth, proper to sacrifice, although the father himself did not perform the act of immolation. As in a sacrificial ceremony, the flesh of the victims is served, and the characters refer to the occasion in culinary terms (*comida, postre*). It echoes the concept of real presence in the ritual of the Catholic mass. At the end of the macabre confrontation, Bustos alludes to a ritualistic consumption of blood:

¡Terribles son los postres de tu mesa!
¡Nunca hubiera yo en Córdoba comido!
Todo cuanto me has dado es sangre mía;
a mi costa comí tan triste día (2010-13).

We can evoke here Georges Bataille's notion of the intimate world reenacted by the physical presence of the heads: it casts on the viewer the truth of the instant, the real presence that erases

any obstacles to intimacy between the grieving father and his sons, and between the former foes, Bustos and Almanzor, who transcend their hostility in an intimate act of sharing grief at the sight of the dead infantes.

On the political plane, the sacrifice of the infantes brings about a new chance for Castile. Almanzor's sister, Arlaja, carries in her womb the half-brother of the infantes, Mudarra, who will have a striking resemblance to the youngest of the dead infantes, Gonzalillo. Mudarra is brought up in Almanzor's court, thinking he is the son of Almanzor himself. However, during a chess party, Almanzor, angry at losing the games, calls Mudarra a bastard. Mudarra asks his mother for explanation and she reveals to him the truth of his birth. He has noble roots on both the Christian and Muslim side. In a lightly amusing tone, Lope has his hero evaluate which background is more important for him. Mudarra says that he owes more to the mother who gave him a noble Christian father than to the father who gave him a *bárbara en ley* mother. He solves the question of his illegitimate birth by juxtaposing it with his Christian origins: "por ser cristiano, el ser bastardo apruevo" (2233). As expected, the Christian ancestry outweighs the birth out of wedlock from a Muslim mother. Mudarra returns to Castile, avenges the death of his half-brothers, and is welcomed by his father as a successor of the Lara lineage.

In accordance with René Girard's insight into mimetic rivalry, violence remains the foundation of the social order. It must eventually be contained through a scapegoat mechanism meant to expel violence when its excess threatens to dissolve the community and thus to restore order. Lope de Vega's play is a mythologized response to a historical act of violence, that of the expulsion of the Moriscos from the kingdom of Castile a few years before the play's composition. The play seeks to camouflage the historical reality by offering a story that presents the Muslim influence on Castile in an unusually positive light. Outbursts of violence within Castile are contained by external intervention. To ease the conflict, Castilian society needs to surrender to external pressures and reach a compromise in the process of ethnic hybridization. Political equilibrium in the

kingdom is achieved and symbolized by the ethnic hybridity of the title character, Mudarra. For the audience of early seventeenth century Spain, the Baroque theatrical strategy of *desengaño*, or disenchantment, offers an occasion to be confronted on stage with a recent political violence. Through the process of dramatizing and mythologizing the recent past, the playwright invites the spectators to accept the ethnic complexity of the Spanish Empire.

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¹ For a detailed analysis of the issue of purity of blood in Spanish society, see Castro's section entitled "Purity of Blood and Inquisition" (521-44).

² On Lope's attempt to contextualize the medieval legend in early modern Spain, see Dolores Clavero, "La manipulación del *epos* en *El Bastardo Mudarra*, de Lope de Vega."

³ For an analysis of economic reasons for the rebellion of the Alpujarras, see John. H. Elliott 235-41.

⁴ For the political and theological justification of the expulsion, see Benjamin Ehlers 126-150 and Mary Elizabeth Perry 133-156.

⁵ For a comparative study of the legend of the *siete infantes de Lara* and its theatrical versions, see also Susan de Carvalho's article "The Legend of the *siete infantes de Lara* and its Theatrical Representation by Cueva and Lope."

⁶ On the topic of honor in the seventeenth's century Spanish and French theater, see José-Manuel Losada-Goya.