

MISERICORDIA: GALDÓS'S NOVEL AND MAÑAS'S PLAY

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«No sé qué juicio merecerá esta versión mía de *Misericordia*; pero ocurra lo que ocurra con su representación, guardaré un recuerdo imborrable de esta obra, que no me podrá quitar ningún contratiempo que su estreno me traiga. 'Trabajar con Galdós' significa acercarse al más alto ideal a que puede aspirar un hombre. Trabajar al lado de Galdós es, simplemente, un acto de libertad.» Thus wrote Alfredo Mañas in the «Autocrítica» that prefaces his dramatised version of Galdós's *Misericordia*, first performed in Madrid's Teatro Nacional María Guerrero on March 18, 1972. Despite Mañas's apparent first-night nerves, some of the contemporary critical reviewers commented favourably and at times ecstatically on the powerful impression created by the play and praised what they considered to be the adaptor's faithfulness to the original work.¹ In the «Autocrítica,» however, Mañas specifically warned against any attempt at judging his play on the basis of its fidelity or lack of fidelity to Galdós's novel: «La única versión teatral absolutamente fiel, perfecta, verdadera, sería para mí la lectura sobre el escenario del texto íntegro de *Misericordia*. Todo lo demás son interpretaciones personales del texto de Galdós» (239).² While it is important to respect Mañas's views on the relationship between his version and the original and also to bear in mind that each work has its own special identity, it is, nevertheless, rewarding to compare and contrast certain aspects of the two *Misericordias*. A joint survey of the two works can prove useful to Galdosistas, since it brings into sharp relief some of the most important features of the novel, often enabling us to see them from a different angle. Moreover, Mañas's play is worth critical attention in its own right. No attempt will be made here to establish quantitatively how much of the text of the play is directly dependent on the novel. Further, it is not the intention of the present study to assess Galdós's own theatrical works in the light of Mañas's dramatisation or to provide new insights into his novel.

Both play and novel begin with the depiction of the beggars. The first stage direction informs us, through two vivid similes, that «Un viento frío, helado, cortante como una navaja de acero silba, ulula, muerde como un animal hambriento» (248). Eighteen beggars stand motionless in the half-light with their ragged clothes flapping in the wind and «Toda la escena, con sus mendigos como estatuas, tiene esa luz gris y negra con matices tenues de blancos de los inconfundibles grabados de don Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, mi paisano» (248). The first signs of life given by the beggars consist of coughs and moans, accompanied by actions intended to revive their frozen bodies. All this, even without the ensuing dialogue, helps to convey their deprivation and hardships and is comparable in its impact to the extended

military metaphor in the novel (1877-78). Here, as on later occasions, some of the details contained in the stage directions are more accessible to the reader than to the audience.

The majority of the beggars are faithful replicas or at least recognisably close copies of Galdós's creations, and their remarks are frequently taken verbatim from the novel. There are, however, some interesting variations. A new character, Corenas, is introduced.³ Described as «una mezcla de mendigo y loco,» he is the first character in the play to speak after the introductory words of the Voz del Narrador (249). Corenas frequently acts as a kind of commentator, indicating the various arrivals and identities. It is possible that Mañas felt the need for an additional, reasonably active, male beggar to help pinpoint the hopelessness and the degrading nature of the situation that is presented at such length in the novel. Another newcomer is the young Maricuela with his empty and repetitive lines. (His real name is Enrique Jiménez Escudero Borja, and he is also referred to as Mediodiente.) Our attention is first drawn to him in a chatty stage direction: «Dentro de la iglesia, digo en el pasadizo, hay un ser especial dentro de los mendigos. Es un muchacho maricuela y tonto... Cosa rara, porque hay tontos... y hay maricuelas... pero las dos cosas en una sola persona se da pocas veces» (249). After his second comment we are told that «se ríe, no sabemos si porque está en las últimas o porque hablando se le quita el frío» (249). Through this character some idea of the grotesque and futile existence of a beggar is conveyed. La Mendiga Madre is a particularly interesting case. She is based on Galdós's Demetria, with an increase in children from two to three (soon to become four). Although she is referred to throughout as La Mendiga Madre, the name Demetria is also used in the play for another beggar whose sole spoken contribution is followed immediately by a remark from La Mendiga Madre (254-55). The fact of the reworking of the original Demetria into La Mendiga Madre and the new Demetria would not be perceived by an audience unacquainted with Galdós's novel, but it is indicative of Mañas's awareness of the depersonalising effects of poverty. In losing her name the mother has lost her identity and individuality and has become subservient to the demands of her hungry children. Other innovations are an armless beggar, meaningfully nicknamed Pocasangre; and Cuartokilo, the epithet Galdós gives to La Diega, Pedra's companion, on account of her extreme thinness. La Diega features in the play but her expressive nickname has been transferred to a separate male character with a very small role. Although it might be felt that the dramatic contribution of some of these individual beggars is minimal or even expendable, they are all vital elements in Mañas's collective portrayal of the begging community. For Mañas, Galdós's presentation of the beggars was «un claro antecedente de lo que hoy llamamos esperpento» («Autocrítica»), and he has sought to exploit this aspect in his stage version, occasionally by emphasising the cruder side of life as is evidenced by the stage direction: «Todos los pobres se burlan con una pedorreta» (253).

The beggars are initially congregated in the forecourt of the parish church of San Sebastián, a fact relayed in the play by the Voz del Narrador, who uses selected sentences from the opening description in the novel. As the beggars eagerly await the arrival of the first worshippers and almsgivers, one

of the priests comes on the scene. In both novel and play he is portrayed as clutching his shovel hat on his head and looking like a black bird as the vicious wind flaps his cassock around him (Mañas 251; Galdós 1878). Mañas names the priest Mosén Senén, and we see him in conversation with some of the beggars, vigorously reprimanding them for their noise and aggressive activities. He threatens them with expulsion from the forecourt and points out that the church also needs financial assistance from the worshippers (252). This active stance differentiates him from the priest in the novel who is merely part of the background description of this blustery March morning. His shadowy and marginal presence is an important factor in Galdós's implicit statement about the fundamental lack of contact between the representatives of the church and the poor.

Charity, in all its varied aspects, is one of the principal themes of the novel and has become a main connecting thread in the play.⁴ In both works, an early demonstration of one form of charity is given through Don Carlos's daily allocation of coins to the beggars. The brevity of the play does not, however, allow for the development of this character's cold and calculating charity which, in the novel, forms such a marked contrast to Benina's warm spontaneity. Nor is Benina's visit to him portrayed on stage. Both novelist and dramatist show how Benina's caring activities progressively embrace her mistress and family, Ponte, Almudena, and the sundry poor to whom she gives bread and consolation.

The novel makes the reader acutely aware that Benina's decision to join the begging community in order to support herself and Doña Paca was painful and traumatic: «no vio Benina más arbitrio que poner su cara en vergüenza saliendo a pedir limosna» (1900). Having taken the step, she could not retreat. This information is communicated in the final paragraph of the third and last of the flashback chapters (7-9), which serve to explain to the reader why Benina, to all appearances a beggar, shares a house with Doña Paca. Mañas conveys the information to the audience in a dialogue between Benina and the Voz del Narrador. Up to this point the narrator's offstage voice has been heard on three separate occasions. Initially he sets the scene (248); next he stresses the bitter cold and the resulting behaviour of the beggars (251). The third intervention is a first-person commentary on the real-life source for Almudena and is simply an abbreviated version of Galdós's own description of his encounter with the beggar whom he recreated as Almudena.⁵

However, when Benina is left alone on the stage, the role of the Voz, coming now from the upper gallery, changes. Through a series of searching questions, it elicits from Benina the information that she is not a permanent, full-time beggar and that she has been with her mistress, Doña Frasquita, for thirty years, on and off. Benina's love of pilfering and hoarding is also established. Her initiation into begging seems a casual occurrence, albeit an escape from the problems of penury: «Yo me levanté y me fui a la calle sin saber adónde iba... y amanecí en la puerta de la iglesia de San Sebastián, sin saber por dónde había venido... Vi a los pobres, me puse a su lado y extendí la mano» (260). On receiving a coin she hears the sound of celestial choirs, and «me sentía alegre, fuerte, joven,» and encouraged to beg on behalf of her mistress without any sense of shame (260-61).

In both novel and play the motivation for the invention of an imaginary employer, Don Romualdo, is Benina's charitable desire to spare her mistress the shameful knowledge that she is living on alms. Mañas has inverted the order in which the information is presented in the novel, since the play records the invention of Don Romualdo before the spectator hears about Benina's entry into the begging fraternity. Further, in the novel the lengthy conversation in chapter 6 between Doña Paca and Benina about Don Romualdo and the elaborate meal Benina had prepared for him takes place before the readers are informed (in chapter 9) that Benina has created him. Thus, the reader experiences first a certain puzzlement during the conversation and then, in retrospect, a realisation of all its subtleties. Although the initial part of the dialogue between Doña Frasquita and Benina in the dramatised version faithfully records the opening exchanges in Galdós's dialogue (Mañas 269; Galdós 1891), the audience's situation is different from that of the reader's in that the spectator already knows that Don Romualdo does not actually exist. However, the episode does not therefore lose all its impact. Mañas makes Benina and Doña Frasquita indulge in deliberate playacting as they participate in an imaginary banquet. The stage direction indicates how the scene is to be enacted: «Al fondo la otra silla; en medio el vacío de la gran mesa que debía existir. Benina pone imaginarios manteles, imaginarios cubiertos y sirve imaginaria comida. Es una escena fantasmal, de delirio de hambre y de grandeza, una escena alucinante, donde La Señora come imaginativamente lo que imaginativamente sirve Benina» (270). The euphoria and excitement of the two participants increase until Doña Frasquita abruptly returns to the bitter reality of their poverty (272). The audience would doubtless recall that, earlier, the beggars had momentarily indulged in similar imaginary feasting (267). The brevity of the play does not allow for any detailed development of Benina's ongoing concern with Don Romualdo. It is probably because of the absence of any continuing insistence on his insubstantiality that his actual materialisation is less surprising in the play than in the novel. Moreover, in its final scenes the play brings Benina into direct contact with Don Romualdo (a rather brusque Don Romualdo, too), whereas in the novel the readers never witness any face to face encounter between them.⁶

Benina's concern for and practical help to others are two examples of her outstanding and most praiseworthy traits. In the play her superior status is conveyed when she appears accompanied by two angels who, like Benina herself, show the effects of hard work and suffering (292-93). The implication is that these angels, who «parecen dos campesinos, dos obreros de la construcción,» are people who have already achieved spiritual elevation because of their good works. They place on Benina's head a crown of thorns on which dried blood is visible (293). As the angels descend, the *Voz del Narrador* proclaims: «Ay, Benina..., ya eres libre» (292). This scene would make a considerable visual impact on the audience and can be considered as a graphic demonstration of Benina's spiritual qualities already established in the novel. There, as has been ably demonstrated by numerous critics, Galdós's use of Biblical analogies and references, in particular the words of Christ, conveys his opinion of his protagonist.⁷ The highpoint of the theme of Christian charity and Benina's apotheosis coincide in the Christlike final words of the

novel as Benina forgives the guilt-ridden Juliána. In the play, Benina's last words, consisting of her farewell to her mistress, although spoken with her characteristic obedience and affection, do not represent the peak of her achievements. Indeed, although there is a definite attempt to show the celestial qualities of Benina, she never reaches the same spiritual heights as Galdós's protagonist. Her ethereal traits are suggested in the play when she is shown flying through the air in the company of two angels (by means of hooks and ropes) before landing at Almudena's feet. His comment, «Benina, tú venir cielo» (302), thus seems almost literally true whereas the virtually identical remark in the novel, «¡Benina!... Tú *venir* cielo» (1952), is appreciated as just a hyperbolic description of Benina's goodness and Almudena's love.

The audience's compassion for Benina is frequently aroused by the presentation of her as the recipient of physical violence. Although such instances are not entirely absent from the novel, they are more prominent in the play. A dramatist must, of course, create or exploit situations in which characters are active rather than passive, but this need cannot by itself account for the play's particular emphasis on violence. Mañas expressed the view that «lo que es por encima de todo *Misericordia* es teatro de la crueldad. ¿Qué más teatro de la crueldad puede haber que la biografía de esta criada... que en pago al bien que ha derrochado a manos llenas es encerrada... en la Santa Casa de la Misericordia?» («Autocrítica»). Mañas has given dramatic form to this opinion. Almudena, who has already beaten Pedra (265), wields a stick against Benina when he is jealous of her attentions to Ponte. But, whereas Galdós's Benina leaps aside in an agile fashion, «en un abrir y cerrar de ojos» after the third blow (1940), Mañas presents a more pathetic picture of his heroine, who «como un pobre animal apaleado, se arrastra por el suelo para librarse de la furia de Almudena» (289). Benina is also at the receiving end of a vicious attack from Doña Frasquita, occasioned by an argument about Don Romualdo. Her attempts at self-protection prove futile, and, when her mistress demands that she remove her hands from her face, «con terror, Benina se quita las manos de la cara y se queda como los niños o como los hombres indefensos delante de la fuerza bruta» (292). The subsequent stage direction indicates that «Los mendigos, y si se quiere el público, pueden acompañar las bofetadas de La Señora como se hace en el circo, golpeándose las manos que resuenen más fuerte las bofetadas que recibe... Benina» (292). Although, superficially, this might appear to be a mere gimmick, we see that, by involving the audience in the mechanical clapping, Mañas is simultaneously implicating them in the harsh treatment given to Benina. The play thus acquires a wider dimension. The audience is also drawn into the play earlier when Benina «empieza a pedir a los espectadores por la sala» (261). Their response to her requests may cause them to examine their own attitudes as well as those of some of the characters on stage.

In both novel and play we make the acquaintance of Obdulia and Ponte when Benina visits Obdulia's apartment. Essential background information about them both is provided by the not entirely impartial Voz del Narrador, who describes Obdulia's romantically oriented past and presents Ponte as «el protoidalgo, el protocélibe, el protomiserable, el protorraído, el proto-

famélico, el protolanguis y el protocursi de Don Frasquito» (278). The unreal world in which Obdulia and Ponte frequently exist is shown when for a moment they and Benina «en actitud ridículamente versallesca se quedan como se dice en lenguaje cinematográfico en 'imagen congelada'. Mientras los tres quedan así, a lo Buero Vallejo el de las meninas, La Voz narra la biografía espiritual y física» de Ponte (278). At the conclusion of this episode (which occurs at the end of Act I), Obdulia has an epileptic fit and Benina revives both her and the starving Ponte by feeding them. Once again, Mañas has recourse to pictorial reference in his stage direction: «Don Frasquito abre la boca con la unción y la resignación con que la abre San José de Calasanz en su famosa comunión pintada por Goya» (280). Ponte is linked with another picture when, after he collapses, he is carried on stage by Pedra and Diega «en figura del Conde de Orgaz. Don Frasquito parece el cadáver flácido del caballero de El Greco en manos de las dos golfas jóvenes» (286). Unlike his namesake in the novel, Mañas's Ponte is not included in the legacy that comes to Doña Frasquita's family. Consequently, he does not feature in the second half of the play and is not presented as a victim of the material wealth which, in the novel, indirectly caused his death. Obdulia's fate also differs from that recorded in the novel. There, having at last acquired through the legacy the potential means for achieving her material ambitions, Obdulia virtually commits social suicide by deciding to leave her husband Lucas and live with her mother. By contrast, in the closing minutes of the play, she appears accompanied by her husband and, at one point, carrying two children (311). The group is joined by Martina with her husband and children,⁸ the former without any of the guilt-ridden neuroses that Juliána suffers in the novel, as well as by Doña Frasquita (who seems to have escaped the senility that besets her in the novel) and Don Romualdo. Thus, although the spectator becomes aware of the family's change in fortune and of their harsh ingratitude towards Benina, there is no stress on the potentially destructive or even fatal effects of material wealth, a point that is basic to Galdós's novel.

Doña Frasquita and her family form a group that is clearly intended to be reminiscent of Goya's portrait of the family of Charles IV. As the elegantly dressed group gathers to the accompaniment of narrative *romances* sung by a chorus of the poor, «empiezan a caer desde el cielo del telar grandes tapices que se colocan detrás del grupo de la familia... y tapando a los pobres» (307). This scene can be taken as symbolic of the desire of Doña Frasquita and her family to exclude all aspects of unpleasant and sordid reality from their new, luxurious existence and is a prophetic indicator of their rejection of Benina and Almudena when they appear a few moments later.⁹ Don Romualdo's subsequent suggestion that Benina and Almudena should enter the Misericordia hospice is initially seen by Benina as a form of punishment for her invention of him (310), and she pleads to be allowed to continue a life of freedom in the streets. Ultimately, she accepts the idea for the sake of the leprous Almudena and is escorted there by all the family and Don Romualdo, who «parecen los acompañantes de un reo camino de la ejecución» (311). Those acquainted with the novel will recall how Benina watched Doña Paca moving house, flanked by family and maids «como si la llevaran entre guardias civiles,» and giving the impression that she was

«la res humilde que va a donde la llevan, aunque sea al matadero» (1987-88). Whereas the novel stresses the freedom, sense of victory, and happiness that Benina eventually experiences after her rejection, the ending of the play concentrates on the injustice and ingratitude shown to her. The positive outlook that the ending of the novel suggests is replaced by a negative commentary in the play.

The initial close identity of story line and atmosphere between the two works lessens as the play progresses and moves towards its dramatic and emotional climax. Mañas's Benina achieves her own viability and is far from being a carbon copy of Galdós's protagonist. As indicated earlier, Mañas claimed that the only really faithful rendering of Galdós's novel would be an on-stage reading of the entire work. He pointed out that his play is just one of a hundred possible dramatic versions («Autocrítica»). The nature of the other ninety-nine is open to speculation. Mañas's version, with its portrayal of physical violence, its use of song and unseen narrator, its pictorial set pieces, and its utilization of stage machinery, does not simply transfer Galdós's *Misericordia* to the stage. It subjects characters, story, and theme to a reinterpretation and recreation and makes an unambiguous statement about man's inhumanity to man.

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NOTES

- ¹ A selection of reviews is contained in *Teatro español* 240-46.
- ² It is also of interest to note that the list of plays on the title page of the collection attributes this dramatised version of *Misericordia* to Galdós rather than to Mañas.
- ³ This name does not occur in any work by Galdós.
- ⁴ The theme of charity in Galdós's novel has been examined in detail by Varey and Penuel.
- ⁵ The account of the genesis of Almudena and other characters is found in the «Prefacio del autor» written by Galdós for the 1913 edition of *Misericordia* (Paris: Nelson). The relevant section of the preface is included in García Lorenzo 39-40.
- ⁶ Recent studies of particular interest are Gullón, Kronik, Kirby.
- ⁷ Biblical references and relevant bibliography can be found in García Lorenzo.
- ⁸ There seems to be no obvious reason why the name should have been changed. However, it is interesting to note that both names have somewhat aggressive connotation: Juliana, through the connection with Julius Caesar, and Martina, as the feminine form of Martín, with the god of war.
- ⁹ Whereas in the novel Juliana prompts Doña Paca with the dismissive words addressed to Benina, in the play the roles are reversed, with Doña Frasquita telling Martina and Obdulia what to say to Benina, to whom she no longer speaks directly.

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