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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

OPTIMISM IN THE SPANISH THEATRE OF TO-DAY

Submitted by

Margaret Mary Maguire

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OPTIMISM IN THE SPANISH THEATRE OF TO-DAY

Optimists and pessimists alike will admit the existence of mingled good and evil in the world--will admit that there is a constant struggle between the opposing forces of construction and destruction, growth and decay, life and death. Whether the world is chiefly good or chiefly bad is a question of perspective and emphasis. To look at it in such a way as to emphasize the evil, the negative, the destructive forces, is the art of pessimism. To look at it in such a way as to emphasize the good, the positive, the constructive forces, is the art of optimism.

The world has never before had so many well-wishers for its general peace and prosperity as it possesses to-day; sincere altruists, deeply concerned for the welfare of all mankind, honestly and unselfishly interested in all the perplexing problems of nature. The theatre, the mirror of life --the mouthpiece of the dramatist--is our guide and leader. Do we wish it to depict only the ills of the world, or do we wish it to recognize and emphasize the good in nature? The facts are the same in either case. It rests with the modern dramatist to make one or the other of the two principles supreme.

The Spanish Theatre of the twentieth century has its share of men who have that nobleness of loving heart

and will, which are the fundamental characteristics of all true optimists. They do not hesitate to accept with open eyes all the hard facts on which pessimism builds. They know that evil is real and has fearful consequences; that we must fight it with all our might. Nevertheless, they also know that a world wholly given over to the bad is as inconceivable as a shadow where there is no light. Evil can never be complete, triumphant, eternal; it is negative, sure to be ultimately conquered. And, according to classic interpretation, that which turns all evil into the means of the increased activity and victory of good is the active root of robust optimism.

There is no truer, no more delicate, no more sincere, no more faithful, no more warm-hearted artist in the field of Spanish literature to-day than Gregorio Martínez Sierra. Neither is there another dramatist who so clearly illustrates the optimistic spirit of the contemporary Spanish theatre. He loves all things and finds joy and happiness in all things. He makes known this fact through the medium of one of the characters of Pastoral in the following manner:

Alcino: A ti todo te place y a todas horas
estás contenta.

Rosa María: Porque soy amiga de todo lo que
veo. Parece que el alma se me

rompe en pedazos y cada uno halla
morada en un rincón del mundo. Si
oigo cantar un pájaro, pareceme que
tengo corazón de pájaro; si huelo
una flor, pareceme que su aroma es
mi alma; si miro al cielo, creo que
soy el cielo; si me baño en las aguas,
soy como las aguas y en ellas me pierdo:
todo el mundo está en mí y todas sus
alegrías son mi gozo.

What a delightful, happy spirit! Is it strange that the
embodiment of such a spirit should wish to emphasize the
good, the positive, the constructive forces in nature?

"Gregorio Martínez Sierra," says Señor Don Julio
Melego in Nuestro Tiempo, "is a consummate observer of
character; he knows profoundly the feminine soul, and
his great intuitive power is linked to an extraordinary
artistic sensitiveness." He has frequently been
characterized as a muse, almost Arcadian in his lulling
optimism. No wonder he has captivated and moved the
theatre-going public of Spain by the beauty of his un-
doubtedly magnum opus, "Canción de Cuna" (1911). It is
his first great dramatic triumph. In it we see all the
deep feelings of the lyric poet and all the emotional
characteristics of the real Spanish dramatist, expressed

in highly artistic form, with the author's favorite embellishment of reality. It is a lyric, an emotional, a romantic drama, but it is a real drama, because it presents in vivid dramatic form a problem of life that is intensely true to the Spanish people. It is an exquisite poem, delicate as a cameo, that fingers the most sensitive fibers of the heart. Moreover, it has restraint and enchanting tenderness and spontaneity, coupled with the inestimable treasure of originality.

Canción de Cuna is a dramatic idyl of the quiet and happy, yet subdued and sorrowful, life of the Spanish nuns. It is typical of the author's tender, sympathetic understanding of women. There could have been no more difficult undertaking than to present the life of a community of nuns. There was the danger of evolving a controversial work, one-sided, either from the clerical or from the radical standpoint. But with his charm of expression, his grace of diction, his sincerity, his optimism, he has aroused a feeling of extreme cordiality between the audience (regardless of religious beliefs) and the gentle nuns who live behind the convent walls, unmindful of the attractions of the world. There is scarcely any action in the first act. We see the nuns in the midst of their occupations, and observe their

little rivalries and distractions, their way of living and their ideas and ideals. Suddenly, we are aware of something most unusual. A little baby is left within the torno of the convent, and a letter with it, begging the good nuns to care for the child, who has no father, to give it the training of which the mother has been deprived, and above all not to send it to the orphan asylum. At first the good women fear that the Lord may be displeased if they expend some of their love and care upon the child. There is a note of sadness, withal generosity, which ensues between the nuns in the discussion as to whether they should keep the little child or not. But finally the instinct of motherhood triumphs, and the good women adopt the baby. Indeed, the Prioress wins our love and admiration when she says to the nuns:

Hermanas: el Señor nos perdone si en todo esto hay algo que no lleve la suficiente pureza de intención. Espero que su gracia nos libre de ofenderle demasiado el corazón a cosa creada. La niña vivirá a nuestra sombra, ya que puede decirse que su ángel de la guarda la trajo a nuestras manos. Todas somos desde hoy responsables de la

salvación de su alma. El Señor nos da
un ángel, y debemos devolverle una santa.

Has any artist ever painted a nobler woman, one who expresses
so great a faith and so great a generosity?

For eighteen years, Teresa adds sunshine to the
lives of the nuns, and then, as it is recognized that
her vocation is not that of a nun, but rather that she
is attracted by the things of the world, and that the
love of a good man has come into her life, the sisters
arrange a trousseau suitable for her to wear in the world.
There is a touch of mystic sadness and innocence in the
efforts of the nuns to prepare a wardrobe for the young
girl. Wanting her to have what other young brides have,
they lay aside religious scruples and undertake to study
the fashion plates. As Sor María Jesús says, "La niña
no había de ir a casarse vestida como en el año de la
Nanita." The Vicereess, who believes in a most rigid
observance of her vows and consequently is not in harmony
with any act of her sister nuns which takes on a worldly
aspect, replies, when asked if she does not think some
of the fashion pictures are pretty, "A mí no me pregunten,
que no entiendo ni quiero entender. Todo eso son pompas
y vanidades, cosa del diablo, que dicen que se encierra
con las modistas de París para aconsejarlas en sus desvaríos.
...; Quítenme, quítenme de delante ese papelucho, que nunca
debiera haber entrado en esta santa casa!"

In such a passage as that just quoted we get a glimpse of the delightful humor and brilliancy which is so characteristic of Martínez Sierra.

Teresa is truly a charming character, full of joie de vivre. Despite the facts which surround her birth, despite the environment of her youth, she is the embodiment of optimism. The Prioress speaks knowingly when she says, "Alegre ha nacido y alegre morirá." Nevertheless, there is a note of sadness in her life, which the author has painted with all the charm and grace of an artist. No passage so clearly illustrates it as that in which Teresa says:

Claro que ésta es la casa de Dios; pero ustedes pudieron cerrarme la puerta y me la abrieron tan de par en par, que diez y ocho años llevo aquí dentro, y hasta ahora que la voy a dejar, no me ha dado cuenta de que vivía en ella de limosna.....De limosna, de caridad, como una pobrecita.

The author might have built on this spirit and given us instead of our own charming, delightful, happy Teresa, a dull, morose character, ever conscious of the circumstances surrounding her birth, ready to see nothing bright in life, but to console herself

with the thought that she is a victim of circumstances. But Martínez Sierra's own views on life, his own faith in nature, would not permit him to portray Teresa in any other light than that in which he has given her to us. He shows her how to find "God's secret" of a happy life ---love---as she tells us when completing the speech just quoted, which shows us the courage of her life, serene, triumphant, hopeful, loving:

¡Si no me da pena decirlo, ni pensarlo!

Si he sido mas feliz ;y lo soy! que puedan serlo las hijas de los reyes. Si de cariño que le tengo a todo, me entran ganas de besar las paredes y de abrazarme con los árboles, porque hasta las paredes y los árboles han sido buenos para mí!

We see her loving, optimistic spirit again when she says:

¡Me parece que todo me quiere y que todo me llama! Tan feliz dentro de estas paredes, y siempre pensando en que el mundo es tan grande! Cada vez que he salido a la calle, me daba unos saltos el corazón, como si se me hubiera vuelto loco...Verdad es que después me daba una alegría volver a casa...! Una alegría

rara, como si me cogieron en brazos o me arropasen con unas alas grandes!"

Teresa sums up the true optimistic spirit of Martínez Sierra, who hides from us neither the pains nor aches, nor the joys nor comforts; neither the bright sides of life nor the sad sides of life; but who has the vision and perspective to emphasize the joys and the comforts and the bright phases of life.

The Prioress likewise is symbolical of the author's own faith in humanity. Her noble spirit, love, humanity, piety, courage, and willingness to serve are brought out by the author in true artistic style.

In Canción de Cuna we have a work diffused with the contemplative and mystic atmosphere of the morality plays of the Middle Ages, yet abounding in the humor, brilliancy, and optimism so characteristic of Martínez Sierra. It is a triumphant hymn to motherhood, universal in spite of the law and religions of all nations, ages, and races.

In Primavera en Otoño (1911) we have a very different piece of work. Here Martínez Sierra has made a study of the heated problems of married life, presenting most vividly human weaknesses and caprices, which

frequently cause great unhappiness without any real volition on the part of the persons concerned. The principal argument is a common dramatic one--the reconciliation between husband and wife after many years of separation, but it is treated in Martínez Sierra's own characteristic style. This work bears a striking resemblance to Jacinto Benavente's famous drama, Rosas de Otoño, (1905). There is, however, a most noticeable difference between the personalities of the two dramatists. Jacinto Benavente, who is mainly an intellectual writer, lets his cold irony play with the follies of the world, his bitter satire killing not at one blow, but little by little by way of pin pricks. Martínez Sierra, on the other hand, is more warm-hearted and full blooded; his irony, in its soft good humor, never suggests anything that tinges of bitterness, but has rather that cheerful, laughing quality which pleases and delights us. His optimism and equable temper are refreshing and healthful in a world that is battling between the opposing forces of good and evil. He is a prophet of good, an apostle of belief and confidence in human nature. He proves that in spite of the many evils and temptations that there are in the world, the good in mankind is stronger than the bad. In his own work, he is indeed included with those leaders to whom Matthew Arnold

addressed the following lines:

"Souls tempered with fire,
Fervent, heroic, and good,
Helpers and friends of mankind.

- - - - -

Radiant with ardour divine!
Beacons of hope ye appear!
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,
Strengthen the wavering line,
Stablish, continue our march,
On to the bound of the waste,
On to the City of God."

In Primavera en Otoño, Martínez Sierra emphasizes very strongly the Spanish ideas on love, marriage, fidelity, and motherhood. It is characteristic of this author to extol the virtues of the Spanish wife and mother. He shows with all sincerity and delicacy how motherhood brings out the noblest qualities in woman. This is unquestionably due to his exact knowledge of Spanish character and life, for, as a mother, the Spanish woman knows no superior, and her ideas of justice and right prevail. In this feature he is the most Spanish of all contemporary dramatists for he has hung most tenaciously to the old ideal of the glorification of

woman. In Primavera en Otoño the mother is the victor, and she gains happiness for all.

This drama tells the story of the beautiful and talented Elena who leaves her husband and baby to seek a career. Her engagements carry her to all parts of the world. Nevertheless, no matter in what city she is stopping, no matter whose company she is enjoying, her thoughts always turn to her husband and daughter. Her husband, likewise, has thought unceasingly of her, taking extended trips on the pretext of business, when in reality he wanted to be near her and to hear her sing, watching the papers jealously for any news of her success, clipping all articles and pictures with utmost tenderness. Unquestionably, he had suffered during her sixteen years of absence. When she finally does decide to visit him, through the persuasion of her daughter Augustina, he reproaches her, saying:

¿En tantos años no has sentido nunca la necesidad de besar a tu hija? Yo te he estado esperando hora tras hora, desde la misma noche que te fuiste. ¿Es posible que a ti no te haya dado nunca la idea de volver!

He realizes the extent of his own sufferings but he does

not think it possible that she could have suffered during her much occupied absence. That she has not been entirely free from lonely hours and sad thoughts is made known in answer to the aforesaid speech when she says:

Sí que me ha dado algunas veces.

Pero siempre me daba estando que
se yo donde, en Rusia o en America,
cuando no podía tomar el tren, de
noche, a las mil y tantas, al salir
del teatro para irme a dormir.....

A pesar de ser como soy, he pasado
mis malos ratos.

It is only when the husband and wife come to an understanding and realize the true love that they have for each other, that the problem is settled, and happiness reigns to everybody's satisfaction.

When Augustina and Don Juan Manuel announce their desire to marry, the father advises them, "No tomen ustedes ejemplo de nosotros." --To which Elena adds, "El caso es querer y que la quieran a una como Dios manda. Ya lo dice la copla:

Al querer lo he comparao
con los días del invierno:
ya se nubla, ya se aclara,
ya graniza, ya hace bueno."

Here again, as in Canción de Cuna, we find that the secret of a happy life is love, from which spring faith and understanding.

The two women, Elena and Augustina, mother and daughter, are both charming in their rare beauty and goodness, the one despite her contact with the world, the other untarnished through her innocence of the ways of the world. They are both happy, optimistic women, notwithstanding the vein of sadness which runs through their lives. For Martínez Sierra has not withheld the sad features of their lives from the audience. He has told the whole story. What passage could touch the fibres of the heart more tenderly than that in which Augustina tells of her girlhood hunger for mother-love:

Tantas horas de soledad en aquel
caserón, cosiendo, leyendo, o sin
hacer nada, teniendo que aprender
yo sola a ser mujer, a querer, a
llorar, porque papá me quiere
mucho, y Manolo también; pero son
hombres, y los hombres no entienden
de locuras.

In this work Martínez Sierra has displayed his sincere optimism by turning all evil into the means of

increased activity and victory--the victory of love. He has again shown us that the art of optimism lies in laying all emphasis, not on what has happened to us, or is to happen to us, but on some end which gives to our activity a worthy goal, and to ourselves abundant exercise and growth.

We have another example of Martínez Sierra's optimistic views in a work of a very different nature --a play of the Underworld--Lirio entre Espinas (1912). It pictures the riots in Barcelona, during which convents and monasteries were destroyed, and the nuns and monks were obliged to seek refuge wherever it might be given them. One nun, Sor Teresa, escapes and takes refuge in a house of ill fame, where she is well received by the women, although insulted, sometimes unconsciously, by the men. Her very presence adds calm and peace to the dismal gloom of the house. Her own goodness wins the contrition and remorse of the women who have fallen so low. Sor Teresa might have repelled against such company and fled from their presence. Instead, she stayed with them, correcting evil by her good influence, demonstrating thereby Martínez Sierra's theory that good is stronger than evil.

In Lirio entre Espinas the author illustrates that if we see in hate the challenge to a love strong enough

to conquer it; and in pain a sting to a joy intense enough to swallow it; and in moral evil a call to battle against it, and the promise of victory over it, then we shall find the world a better place to live in and shall be optimists forevermore.

In a drama with a title such as "El Palacio Triste" we should not expect to find optimism. However, it is present in just as much abundance as in Martínez Sierra's other works. It portrays the dejection and sadness which surround the Princess Teodora and her three sons in the "palacio." Her daughter Marta has disappeared suddenly. Although everybody believes her dead, the mother still nourishes the hope that she will return, and orders that a white path be opened up through the woods in order that she may find her way home. But Marta has not been killed. On the contrary, she had wandered away from the sad palace in order to seek a life of freedom and happiness. She returns to free her mother and brothers, to have them live in a little white cottage, where they will find liberty, love, responsibility, fresh air and sunshine.

In the character Marta we see the basis of all Martínez Sierra's works, for in her we see the embodiment of the active condition of doing, the moral triumph of human will--the optimistic glorification of

human will. As a Spanish critic has said of him, "Hard winter pines should be put in his hands to symbolize Will and Perseverance in an allegory of the moderns."

The drama Mama (1912) presents a true picture of the life of a modern Spanish family of the middle class, where Mercedes, neglected by her husband Santiago, and innocently caught in the net of the clever "Don Juan" Alfonso, succeeds in extricating herself only through the saving grace of Spanish womanhood. Rejected by the mother, the villain turns his attentions to Cecilia, the daughter, who at once falls in love with him. Owing only to the timely intervention of the mother, the daughter is saved from the cruel fate of Alfonso.

In this drama Martínez Sierra shows us the nobility of character of Spanish women, who are happy only when they fulfill their duties as mothers. Again he exalts motherhood in his lofty, poetic style.

Love of nature and universal sympathy are the keynotes of Martínez Sierra's philosophy. He loves the beautiful and the true above all things, because for him beauty and truth are the supreme manifestations of life. He is in sympathy with all living things. He has that nobleness of heart and will which give him the right view on life. He is a poetic realist in the

sense that he portrays Spanish ideals with sympathy and precision, not merely as inherited traditions, but as the Spanish people live them in actual life. According to his own theory, it is far better to portray in a realistic manner the great virtues of a race than its vices. Would that there were more great dramatists who had such a vision, such sincerity, such love, such a will to portray the constructive phases of life, to let the theatre reflect that the good in the world is stronger than the evil! With such an interpretation of life, an artist like Martínez Sierra can do much to further the progress of the world, to enrich and brighten the outlook of the general public on life. We want the people to be more like unto the heroines (and they are, generally speaking) who do not, as do the heroines of Jacinto Benavente, sacrifice their lives in order that others may be happy. His heroines devote themselves to sane, healthy living, not to death. It is unquestionably this splendid optimism and belief in life that make the theatre of Martínez Sierra one of the most durable edifices in this twentieth century.

Other equally successful dramatists of the contemporary Spanish theatre who see in life more than

grime and toil, more than failure and disillusionment, more than jealousy and hatred, more than revenge and death, are the popular brothers of Seville, Serafín and Joaquín Álvarez Quintero. Lovers of nature and sincerely interested in mankind, they wish to portray the world in its brightest, sunniest aspects. Life to them is all roseate--"as bright as the blazing sun of their native province, as beautiful as the flower-decked patios of their beloved Seville", says Charles A. Turrell in the May, 1918, issue of the Poet Lore. With poetic beauty, grace, and ingenuity, they paint Spanish life in its different aspects. Their plays are singularly pure and generally free, not only from that which is in the slightest degree questionable, but from that which contains any jest depending on innuendo or on risque situations. Notwithstanding such facts, however, los hermanos Quintero are followers of the Naturalistic School. But the naturalism of these authors is refined by their own unquestionable temperament, which leads them instinctively to reject all that which tinges on ugliness or foulness. They are firm believers in beauty for beauty's sake, and to them nothing ignoble, nothing questionable, nothing worthless, nothing which is not true to nature, true to life, is beautiful. They are

genial optimists, sunny and whole-hearted, and might, indeed, be trusted to provide relief for the cruellest dramatic situation ever concocted.

In that delightful little comedy Mañana de Sol (1905) we catch something of the poetic air and grace of the Quintero brothers. It is a simple little thing, built on the refrain:

"Pasan veinte años; vuelve él,
Y al verse, exclaman él y ella:
(--, Santo Dios! ¡y éste es aquél...?)
(--, Dios mío! ¡y ésta es aquella?)"

It is the story of Doña Laura and Don Gonzalo, once lovers in happy youth, who meet by chance in a public park after many years of absence. They do not recognize each other until, through fragmentary bits of conversation, the one recognizes the identity of the other, without, however, making known their recognition to one another. A world of impressions, joys, and sorrows separate them from each other, and, at the same time, from their youth, which their chance meeting calls to mind. They know that their youth will never return, that they will never feel now, in old age, what they felt in youth, that they will never understand each other

as they once did when they were lovers in Maricela. Because they know all this, they do not want to break the illusion which exists between them. They want to enjoy the companionship of each other in that illusion, closing their eyes to that which they have in front of them, and opening them to the visions of the past. Not that they have any feelings of remorse over their past lives. Indeed, it did not cost Doña Laura a thought to forget her young lover and marry another, within a very short time after they had parted. Neither did Don Gonzalo spend much time brooding over his first love, for he married a young Parisian dancer three months after his farewell to Doña Laura. Nevertheless, despite the changed conditions, despite the difference between the present situation of life and that of "hace veinte anos," they feel the poetic enchantment of this chance renewal of friendship, illustrating very clearly the power of illusion.

The Quintero brothers show most distinctly in this little drama their congenial good humor, their eagerness to please and amuse. They depict nothing disagreeable, nothing morose. Their characters do not meditate on what might have been, but are happy and

content with their present state. There is no philosophical problem, nothing audacious in the play. It is just a happy little comedy, treated in the genial, sunny, whole-hearted spirit of the Quintero brothers.

In A la Luz de la Luna (1908) the Quintero brothers describe the meeting of Carlos and Elena, the conversation which ensues between them, and their parting. There is scarcely any action, practically nothing more than a dialogue. It is light and airy, typical of the authors, who allow nothing questionable to happen.

The Quintero brothers have given us a much longer work in that of "Doña Clarines" (1909). Here, again, they demonstrate their optimistic spirit by showing the strength of goodness over evil in the character of Doña Clarines, who wins the sympathy of the audience in her final act of repaying good for evil to the son of the man who has been false to her.

In that very brilliant comedy El Genio Alegre the charming character of Consolación, full of joie de vivre, recalls the equally charming character of Teresa in Martínez Sierra's Canción de Cuna.

The Quintero brothers are truly lovers of the sunshine, lovers of life, lovers of the natural goodness

of mankind. They have caught "God's secret" of a happy life. Indeed, in all their works there is not a single death, scarcely a fault that is unforgiveable, or a sorrow that is not to be consoled. They are genuinely and sincerely optimistic. A quotation from the authors illustrates clearly their feelings:

"Sed optimistas, y no pongáis
cara fosca a las sorpresas
del azar ni apliquéis una
filosofía adusta y helada
a lo que ocurre en torno
vuestro, sea favorable o sea
adverso, pues cualquiera que
sea vuestra actitud no podría
transformar la realidad."

Thus we have seen in the authors mentioned --men of totally different personalities--Gregorio Martínez Sierra and Serafín and Joaquín Álvarez Quintero, representative examples of the contemporary Spanish dramatists who have those qualities which help them to see in life the best that is in it. Staunch lovers of nature, they have discovered in her all the beauties of creation and learned from her all the secrets of life.

Without any apparent effort on their part, they see and understand life, ever keeping in mind when portraying it artistic beauty and truth. They have not sacrificed art in their efforts to emphasize the good, the positive, the constructive phases of life. They simply have that nobleness of loving heart and will which enable them to see in life the conflicting forces of good and evil, but to see it in such a light that the good always outshines the evil. With such men as these writing for the theatre--the mirror of life--showing us the sunnier, brighter, happier sides of life, showing us the moral strength of virtue, showing us their sincere faith in human nature, it is only to be expected that the public will gradually imbibe their theories of life and realize that the world is not wholly given over to evil, but that evil exists to be ultimately conquered and that it cannot and should not conquer the human will.

Such men as Martínez Sierra and the Quintero brothers predict a bright future for Spain in the field of her drama.

"No longer forward nor behind,
I look in hope or fear;
But, grateful, take the good I find,
The best of now and here."

--Whittier.

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El Palacio Triste--Martínez Sierra

Primavera en Otoño--Martínez Sierra

Mañana de Sol--Los hermanos Quintero

Doña Clarines--Los hermanos Quintero

El Genio Alegre--Los hermanos Quintero

A la Luz de la Luna--Los hermanos Quintero