B O S T O N U N I V E R S I T Y

G R A D U A T E S C H O O L

THESIS

MARTÍNEZ SIERRA

Submitted by

Mary Margaret Stavrinos

(A. B., Emanuel College, 1924)

In partial fulfilment of requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts.

1928.

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MARTINEZ SIERRA

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Gregorio Martínez Sierra, one of the most famous representatives of the modern Spanish drama, was born in Madrid in 1881. There is little known about his life. He attended the University of Madrid, but was not successful in receiving his degree, because he failed in the course in Critical History "through a horror of the many battles" as he half-humorously confesses.* He began to write at a very early age, at the age of seventeen. From this time until about 1910, he met with the disappointments and discouragements to which young writers are subject.

He had the fortune to be admitted to the friendship of Benavente, that undisputed dean of dramatists. Benavente is said to have been much impressed by the modest, unassuming youngster, who seemed to cherish such lofty ideals for humanity. However, he refrained from using his enormous influence in behalf of his young friend during the latter's struggles, for, he believed that it would be far more beneficial for the youth to serve his apprenticeship and win his way through without favor. Martínez Sierra also formed a friendship with the dramatists, Joaquin and Serafín Alvarez Quintero, who saw merit in his work, and at a time when he was most discouraged, urged and encouraged him to continue with his struggle for a recognition in the theatre. They showed him the merit that lay hidden behind his work. "Ellos me alentaban sin cesar,

*El Ama dela Casa - Introduction, P. 11, Owen.

con una nobleza poco común; hasta llegaron a decirme. 'Bajo nuestra responsabilidad, haga usted teatro.' "En momentos para mi de desaliento casi definitivo, ellos han levantado mi obra hasta a mis propios ojos saliendo fiadores de ella con toda la autoridad de su gran talento."

The real beginning of his dramatic work was "La Sombra del Padre," which was presented early in 1909 in the Teatro Lara. A year later this was followed by "El Ama de la Casa" another very delightful play. It was however the performance of "Canción de Cuna" (1911) that made him a leading figure in the theatre.

In the Canción de Cuna" Martínez Sierra undertakes a very difficult task. Like a rare Don Juan he has leaped the convent walls and presents to us the daily life of a community of Dominican nuns. The play opens with a very pleasant incident. The Feast of the Superior is being celebrated. One of the nuns has composed some verses in which she extols the virtues of the Reverend Mother. The verses are received with much appreciation by the Superior, and all the other nuns join in congratulating the writer. Every nun has done some little thing by which she tries to show her gratitude to the woman who to them represents everything that is lofty and ideal. It is a delightful scene. The monotonous life of the nuns is presented to us with all their petty rivalries, their

infantile distractions and their subdued mirth. We love the Prioress for her sweetness and kindness, we wonder at the tart Vicaress with her bitter remarks and are perhaps at times inclined to criticize the almost flippant Sor Marcela. To me it seems almost incredible that any nun would act and speak in the manner in which Sor Marcela does. Imagine any nun being so flippant as to say to her superior, that she has stuck out her tongue for no other reason but because she had to scare away the fly that had settled on the tip of her nose. She is anything but the convent type. She possesses none of that refinement which seems to be innate in the nuns.*

However, even the people who have no use at all for the Sor Marcela type cannot but admire and almost revere the author for the enchanting tenderness and spontaneity which he displays. A foundling is left at the door of the convent. It gives rise to considerable disturbance and commotion among the nuns, for as nuns they have no right to adopt the child. It is evident, however, that they are all most anxious to see what they can do for the infant and that it would give them great happiness to be able to solve the difficulty. The kind doctor solves the problem for them. He consents to adopt the infant and afterwards to give it to the nuns to care for it. Everybody is very happy at the conclusion and the babe is intrusted to the (saintly) amiable Sor Juana.

*Cancion de Cuna - p. 11. A. M. Espinosa.

In the second act we have the infant grown to girlhood. The girl is known as Teresa, for such is the name which the good nuns gave her when they baptized her. Even though she has been brought up within the convent walls, this does not prevent her from acquiring a "novio" and so we find her on the eve of her wedding. The nuns are busily engaged in preparing her hope chest. The most touching moment is the time when the Prioress tells Teresa that they shall always pray for her, and when Teresa bids the good nuns good bye and especially Sor Juana who has been just one wonderful mother for her.

Between the two acts of this remarkable play the poet speaks an interlude and in it he is very careful to explain just what the object of the play is. He claimes that the instinct of motherhood is present in every woman. "Madre si eres amante, madre si eres hermana, madre por pura esencia y madre, a todas horas, si con nosotros ríes, si por nosotros lloras, ya que toda mujer, porque, Dios lo ha querido, dentro del corazón lleva a un hijo dormido!"*

**As Krutch says in the "Canción de Cuna" we see the work of a man to whom the incurable romanticism of Spain is still the most precious thing. He still believes in innocence, he still delights in creating young girls of the type of Teresa, who loves her Antonio so much that

*Canción de Cuna - Intermedio p. 32 - Espinosa
**Joseph Wood Krutch - Nation 124: 243-4 March '27

it would be the ideal married life for her to sit in a corner, to sit at his feet looking at him in the eyes and listening to him speak. She frankly admits that as a child she often pitied herself for having been born a girl, for she thought that as a man she could become a captain, a general, an archbishop etc. But now when she loves Antonio and he loves her nothing is of importance to her, because if she is a poor ignorant person, it suffices that he is wise, and if she is worth a little to the world, it suffices that he is worth a great deal. "Ay, Sor Juana, Sor Juana,,,,,,cuando Quiere una de veras a un hombre, que humilde se vuelve.* Martínez Sierra pours in his plays a sentiment as old as can be and yet, because that sentiment is not affected but perfectly native and sincere it gives the effect of something with a quaint charm.

Many reviewers were surprised to see that their interest in the "Canción de Cuna" should be so complete, when the story of it is comparatively slight. But they must bear in mind that the theme of the play is as strong as the story is slight; for it is maternal love, and we know that from time immemorial it is that maternal love that has guided mankind and has afforded it a great deal of its happiness and prosperity. And what is very rare about the "Canción de Cuna" is that Martínez Sierra in

*Canción de Cuna - p. 48 A.M. Espinosa

order to develop his theme (maternal love) laid his scene in the last place human reason could conceive--a convent of Dominican nuns. What could be more original? Even these women who have renounced all earthly goods in order to come nearer to their divine Master, cannot but be deeply touched by the little newly born girl. The instinct of motherhood comes forth in all its force and without much ado defeats all scruples, and they decide to accept the little girl, and we already know how the whole thing turns out. It is seldom that human emotions can be seen washed clean from selfish spots.

There is a great deal of characterization in the comedy; The cutting Vicaress, the sympathetic Prioress, the sensitive Sor Agnes, the amiable Sor Juana, the twittering novices, their devoted friend, the old doctor. It is told that Señora Sierra was the daughter of a doctor who had a number of religious communities under his care, and that it was from going about with him as a child that she obtained so much information regarding the life of the nuns. It was this valuable information that helped her husband immeasurably in his attempt to depict convent life with all its intimacies and naivetés.*

We must not forget to state here the role that Señora Sierra has played toward her husband's success. In a great many of his works he has enjoyed the collaboration of his

*Catholic World 124: 812-813 March '27

talented wife, María de la O Lejárraga. Though her name has never appeared in any of her husband's works, yet it is evident that the feminine touch in many of Sierra's plays represents the well-known views of Doña María O Lejárraga to whom might also be attributed something of the delicacy and exquisiteness of the craftsmanship. Her appreciative husband, however, has been proud to acknowledge the value of his wife's collaboration. "Si, señor, mi mujer toma parte en mi obra literaria. Es mi colaborador y tiene más talento que yo. Es más: mientras luché sin éxito, no he querido decir nada; pero ya quehemos triunfado, me gusta que se sepa, y no hay cosa que mas me orgullezca que el que digan que mi mujer tiene talento,,,,,,Mi mujer y yo nos queremos tanto y nos llevamos tan bien, que, en este caso si que puede decirse que somos uno solo, en muchas amarguras que han querido traerme las malas gentes, la primera que ha fortalecido mi espíritu ha sido ella."* Certainly no one can pay greater tribute to Señora Sierra than her husband does in the lines already mentioned.

With the performance of "Canción de Cuna" the years of struggle were definitely over for Martínez Sierra. Play followed play in rapid succession and with great success until our dramatist took his place beside Benavente and the Quinteros as one of the dominating figures of the con-

*El Ama de la Casa - Introduction p. 15 A. L. Owen

temporary Spanish stage. In Sierra's theatre we see something of the productiveness of genius which astonished the world in the days of Lope de Vega.

Another one of his works which brought considerable fame to out author is his "Primavera en Otoño." Here we see Martínez Sierra making a study of married life. This play, bears resemblance to Benavente's famous work, "Rosas de Otoño," which had been produced in 1905. In both plays the scene is the reconciliation between husband and wife after many years of misunderstanding. But there is a great difference between the personalities of the two writers. Benevente is mainly an intellectual writer who lets his cold irony play with the follies of the world; and his satire does not kill at one blow but little by little by dint of pin-pricks. Martínez Sierra is more warm-hearted and full-blooded. His irony is cordial and effusive - similar to the holy scoff of the mystics. In this delightful play- "Primavera en Otoño," we have a perfect display of character. In Elena we see the whimsical independent wife, who for some years has caused considerable pain to her husband--Don Enrique, because of her progressive ideas. Yet with all that, she never forgets for a moment the fact that she is the wife of Don Enrique and the mother of Agustina. Her love for her daughter is everywhere apparent. In Don Enrique we

see the kind, sympathetic father, devoted to his daughter and anxious to bring her up into an ideal young lady. Who cannot but admire and love Don Emrique when he reads his invaluable advices to his daughter, his effort to instill in her love and respect for her mother? "Hija mia, tu madre te quiere mucho, mucho, pero, como ha corrido tanto mundo, tiene una idea del amor maternal distinto" etc.* Although for many years Elena has Been anything but the ideal wife, yet, he tells her that his house is always hers and that any time that she wants to go she is perfectly welcomed. In Agustina we see the perfect idealist. She longs to be in a place where there would be no jealousy, no hatred, no deception, but where happiness would reign supreme. In Manolo we see that type of a man who in my opinion would regard his wife as just a piece of furniture. The tart Ama Justa with her droll views also holds our interest till the end. Juan Manuel is another type who delights us with his views and especially his views on marriage. To him his wife would be something sacred, whose love he would always receive as a gift, as a favor, as a miracle. He urges Agustina to be individualistic. He tells her that there exist in her heart ideas, hopes and dreams which she must not suppress to the satisfaction of any one. We are certainly satisfied to see that Agus-

*Primavera en Otono - p. 143 - Martinez Sierra,
Obras Completas-Madrid 1920.

tina finally decides to marry the noble Juan Manuel instead of the narrow minded Manolo. We are also very happy to see that our heroine, Elena, finally decides to stay with her husband for she realizes only too well that a married woman is happy only when she is with her husband. In my opinion that seems to be the chief idea in the play. The power of maternal love is also brought out but not to the same extent. From the characters in this play, we see that Bell is right when he says that Martínez Sierra has the faculty of making his characters immediately and indelibly interesting.*

"Mamá," (1912) is another great dramatic production of Martínez Sierra. Mercedes who plays the role of Mamá is good but inclined to frivolity; she is as some one says "one of those women who go and pray before starting off for a dance"** Her husband loves her but is too much absorbed in his business affairs to pry into her activities. Sometimes he (her husband) reprimands her for her frivolous tendencies, but not with sufficient force. Temptation is put in her way by a worthless creature, Alfonso who goes through society winning conquest after conquest. By many of his friends he is called a "Don Juan." "I have only one method," he says, "serenity and constancy. I make love to every woman who comes my way. Naturally,

*Contemporary Spanish Literature - Aubrey F. G. Bell.

a good many send me on my way, but there is a fair number who receive me with mercy. As I am serene, the failure matters little--I already counted on it--and I remain tranquil.....there are bound to be losses and gains."* Mercedes is frivolous but not indecent. She makes this very clear to villainous Alfonso when he tries to allure her. The villain then turns his attentions to her daughter who at once falls in love with him. The mother's strength appears and she saves her child from the libertine. The author shows that the mother is happy only when she realizes what she means to her daughter. It seems to me that Martínez Sierra expresses his own views on married life through the mouth of Mercedes. He believes in a strong cooperation between husband and wife; that the wife should not be the plaything of her husband but that she should be his intellectual companion in everything and should share his responsibilities and cares. As I have already said, Martínez Sierra possesses the faculty of making his characters not only intensely interesting but amiable as well. There is always some instant when no matter how loathsome they have been, by some action or by some word they gain our favor. Take for instance Don Fernando, the father of Mercedes. At the beginning of the play he was to me a worthless old spendthrift with no other motive in life but extravagance.

*Mamá - P. 23 - G. Martínez Sierra, Obras Completas, Madrid

But I could not help but admire him at the time when in a most logical way he casts the blame for all his daughter's frivolities upon her husband and makes him realize that he has been the cause of it all. Santiago also leaves a very pleasant impression upon me for the way that he loves his children. I am almost moved with pity for him, for although he always seems to try to do his best toward his wife and children, he never seems to succeed. And as for José María he is unsurpassed in his love and devotion for his mother.

In "La Sombra del Padre" the author for the first time perhaps puts woman aside and makes the man in the play the hero of the situation. Don José, the father, has gone to America where by means of hard work he has acquired considerable wealth. His family in Spain take advantage of the money which the father most generously sends them and indulge in a life of luxury and ease. The father returns from America very enthusiastic and happy at the thought of being reunited to them. They, a sort of "nouveau riche", instead of rejoicing at his coming regret it; for they feel that his social manner, friends, dress, etc., do not toe the mark. It would have pleased them to have him stay in America. The father does not realize the moral degradation toward which the family is drifting until the end. The daughter is married to a worthless, good-for-nothing

youth who married her just for her money; the son is involved in a scandal and is in danger of his life, from the husband of the woman whose honor he has stained; and one of the young daughters is on the eve of an elopement. The mother is an amiable and kind lady who has not been strong enough, however, to impose herself upon her children. The father, coming to a realization of the chaos and disorder of his family, with all his strength sets about the task of restoring order in his house. He realizes that the cause of all this is the money with which he so generously supplied them. He impresses upon them that he is the master of the house and that they have to abide by his commands. Well does the family realize toward the end of the play the old saying that "money alone will not buy happiness". Ramón, the son, also proves this when he says, "Dinero! Por haberlo tenido sin ganarmelo, desde que lo he podido desear soy un hombre que no sirve de nada".* It is very dramatic toward the end of the play when Don José, the father, pleads for cooperation and tells them that it is never too late to redeeme themselves. He urges them to trust in him. We are almost moved to tears when the kind Doña Felicia tells them all how they have always been dearer than life to her. She explains to them, that it is to the hard work of their father that they owe their life,

*La Sombra del Padre - p. 174 - Martínez Sierra, Obras Completas, Madrid, 1920

their bread and their all and begs them on their knees to ask their father never to leave them again. To her husband she says, "No marches. Siempre conviene en una casa la sombra del padre,"* and this incident suggests the title of the drama.

I think that in the above-mentioned play our author besides showing the influence that a strong-willed parent can exert upon his family, wishes to show also that we appreciate wealth not when it is lavishly thrown upon us but when we earn it through hard work.

In the one-act comedy, "Pobrecito Juan", we can note the increasing interest taken by the author in social questions. Mariana is a healthy young girl, full of life and spirits. She is the true optimist; she can see only the brightest side of things. She has been loved for years by Juan, a handsome but delicate youth; one of those weak creatures who are unable to bear up against the kicks of the world. He admits his weakness, says that he is a good-for-nothing, but at the same time does nothing to remedy it. He is resigned to his fate and this angers Mariana at times. She loves him but feels that she can not marry him for she tells him, "I need a man who can carry me up hills in his arms."** We admire Mariana for her frankness. She does not wish to have him think that

*La Sombra del Padre - p. 180 - Martínez Sierra, Obras Completas, Madrid, 1920

**El Pobrecito Juan - p. 183 - Martínez Sierra, Obras Com-

she will be his someday. She wishes to accustom him to the thought that she is destined for a real man. And though we pity poor Juan, yet we do not blame Mariana; for imagine any real man begging a woman to allow him to be in her life a child, a dog, a toy, anything, provided he is hers, and that is what the hero in this play does. The real man finally appears and Juan disconsolate at the thought, tries to commit suicide, but true to his ineffective nature he even fails at that, and is brought back to see the triumph of his rival. In this little play as in amny others of Martínez Sierra, it is woman who represents the integrity and strength of character. It is evident that everywhere the author cherishes the highest ideals with regard to women.

Another play in which he emphasizes and extols the virtues of the Spanish wife is "El Ama de la Casa". The "ama" is a very charming person. For thirty-five years she has lived a life of comparative poverty, as she herself admits. During this time she has been compelled to do all sorts of things; she has been an ironer, a milliner, a seamstress, a telephone operator, even a maid. This does not detract at all from her character but makes her all the more admirable before our eyes. She has been poor but at the same time very decent. She meets and marries Don Felix,

a widower of comparative wealth. He seems to be a kind, loving man, but the sort of a man who needs very much the strong influence and the cooperation of a good wife. The "ama", whose name is Carlota, finds the house in a chaotic state. She sets about with all her powers to restore system and order in the house. The two daughters of Don Felix by his former marriage, resent Carlota's coming and by their actions try to make life miserable for her. They are encouraged in this by their aunt, Genoveva, a weak, happy-go-lucky sort of a woman. It is here that I admire Carlota for the patience, discretion and tact which she employs in winning over her step-daughters. She is determined to win them over to her side by love, not might. By making her solicitude for their welfare apparent at every opportunity, she finally succeeds in winning their affection. Their father is kind enough and well intentioned, but he is absorbed in his inventions and can give very little time to his children. When the son of the family who, from the very beginning was well disposed toward Carlota and realized her worth, pretends love to her, she handles the situation admirably and sends him off to make a man of himself. To Carlota woman means mother. A woman does not necessarily have to have children of her own in order to be mother. "No ha reparado usted," she says to Genoueva, "en que todo el que sufre, aunque tenga cien años, dice: madre

mía! Pues la mujer que acude a socorrerle, y también habrá usted reparado en que casi siempre acude una mjuer, es la madre que estaba pidiendo."*

Again, when her husband praises her for the order she has restored in his house, and says that he does not know whether it is the woman part in her, or the mother part, she decides the whole thing for him by stating that "mujer o madre, da lo mismo." Carlota has even taken an active part in her husband's business affairs and has succeeded in discovering the dishonesty of the business associate of Don Felix. By bringing out this point in his play, the author wishes to show the cooperation of husband and wife which he advocates everywhere.

In his play "Lirio entre Espinas", Martínez Sierra introduces an altogether new idea, the power of religion even among the lowest classes; that is, lowest morally. A number of people of evil life are gathered in a house of ill repute. A nun, Sor Teresa, comes to the door and ignorant of the character of the place asks for shelter. The good nun relates the hardships that she and all her companions suffered when their convent was burned by an anarchistic mob and they were hurled into the street. It is not very long before Sor Teresa begins to realize the nature of the place where she is, from the actions of some of the vicious men surrounding her. It is at this moment

*El Ama de la Casa - Owen, p. 71

that all the women inmates rush to the side of the good nun and try to defend her with all their might. She is saved from all harm, and after ministering as an angel of mercy to one of the women inmates who has been wounded in her anxiety to find out the cause of the riots, she goes on her way. The solicitude of the other inmates at the sight of their wounded companion is also quite admirable, and perhaps our author wishes to illustrate that even in the most degraded classes we are bound to find humanitarian sentiments.

Optimism is the prevalent note in Martínez Sierra's works. In his play, "El Palacio Triste" we see Martínez Sierra the optimist showing in all his power the moral triumph of the human will. This short symbolic play was produced in 1911. An atmosphere of dejection and sadness surrounds the Princess Teodora living in her palace with her three sons. She seems more of a child than her sons and bereft of her husband who has been drowned she lives on dreaming in her dreary palace surrounded on all sides by courtiers and conventions. It is these conventions that bore her; they almost render her melancholic at times. Her daughter Marta has disappeared suddenly and all believe her dead, but Teodora does not allow herself to become discouraged. She believes that her daughter will come back to her and has opened up a white path in the woods in order that

she will find her way home. It is this hope which gives life to Teodora, which makes her endure her monotonous existence. She is right in hoping, for Marta has not been killed but has wandered from the palace in order to reach the life of freedom. She returns to free her mother and brothers also, and it is through the mouth of Marta that the author expresses what the poem symbolises. "They are going," she says, "to live away from this sad palace, away from tediousness, in the free air, in the sun, away from meaningless words; they are going to live with liberty, with love, with responsibility, with duties which serve for something, with laws which do not come from old books passing through the mouths of teachers who do not understand them, but which are instinctively observed. They are going to live like human beings."*

In his "El Reino de Dios", the purpose of Martinez Sierra cannot be any other but one exalting the spirit of charity and more so, that of personal service. Who can read the above-mentioned work and not be impressed by the heroine, Sor Gracia with her winderful ideas on kindness, justice, and so forth? Her character is incomparable. Her soul is full of the most noble sentiments in the world. It is through her that the author expresses the true meaning of the word charity. Charity for her does not consist

*El Palacio Triste - p. 37 - Martinez Sierra, Ginn & Co.

merely in giving a piece of bread to the poor but in giving them happiness. For Sor Gracia the only way of remedying the bad world is by doing it good.*

In "Sueño de una Noche en Agosto", we see the characteristic elements of Martínez Sierra's work. The author's Latin directness and Latin rapidity is very evident. Can there be a more perfect Latin scene than the time when as Rosario is seated by the window enjoying the cool breezes a man's hat is blown through her window and is followed soon after by its owner? Rosario's progressive ideas, her resentment to act as a slave for her brothers while they go out to enjoy the world, delight us. Her quest for a position and the way it turns out thrills us. The motive of this little play is simply to entertain. The third act goes pretty thin and the second act is not so blest as the first; but the first act possesses all of Martínez Sierra's charm.**

The nature of the man who wrote "El Reino de Dios" is a nature that is essentially gentle and versatile. In all the writings of Martínez Sierra we see a trust in man. There is a gentle sanity and sweetness that pervades the whole atmosphere of his plays. It might be profitable for the belligerent, controversial type, which we have sometimes among us in America to observe the sweetness and

*El Reino de Dios - Martínez Sierra, Renacimiento, Madrid 1915.
**Stark Young - New Republic, 47:59-60 - June 2, 1926.

wit, the whim and humor, the free-heartedness and humanity by which Martínez Sierra makes his plays so intensely delightful.* He has a philosophy which is seen in many of his lines--a philosophy devoid of artificiality, pomp, and the like. It is the virtues of man that interest him. He believes that it is better to emphasize and bring out in a realistic manner the virtues of a race rather than its vices. He is intensely patriotic and shows a marked admiration for everything Spanish. He exalts the Spanish wife and mother. He makes woman represent the ideal in his art, and in this he has followed the general trend of the western civilisation.

Martinez Sierra's love of nature and universal sympathy have impressed his work with an almost pantheistic philosophy. He loves all things and finds happiness and joy in all things. Perhaps the following lines prove more than anything else the character and the attitude toward life of the man who has been the subject of this thesis.

> Espejo de plata, vereda florida.....
> Gloria en las alturas y paz en la
> tierra, luz y amor en todo.....
> Tal mira la vida la musa optimista
> de Martínez Sierra!**

*Stark Young - New Republic 50:274 - April 27, 1927
**Francisco Villaespesa - El Ama de la Casa by A. L. Owen

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