La Baltasara in Performance, 1634-35: Reports from the Tuscan Embassy

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La Baltasara, one of three comedias on which Vélez de Guevara collaborated with Antonio Coello and Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, was already being acted in 1636; in that year the title appeared in a list of plays to which the autor de comedias Tomás Fernández held the rights of performance. Early in the present century Rennert conjectured that it was written c. 1630, when playgoers would have still vividly remembered Baltasara de los Reyes, the actress he identified as the real-life model for the title character. Since Rennert's time, the date he suggested has continued to be associated with the comedia in literary scholarship.

It is now possible, with the recent discovery of an unpublished account of the play on the stage, to offer firm evidence that La Baltasara received its first production in the autumn of 1634 and that, moreover, it met with extraordinary acceptance at all levels of society. The information is contained in a letter written by Bernardo Monanni, a secretary attached to the Tuscan Embassy, who was a close observer of theater and spectacle in Madrid throughout the 1630s. On November 11, 1634, Monanni gives news of the theatrical season:

In questa Villa ultimamente è stata composta da huomini di lettere una Commedia (che quà chiamano tutte, ma è più tostó una Rappresentazione spirituale) et recitata dai comici publici nei loro saloni, che ha havuto tanto applauso et concorso che s'è replicata ogni giorno per tre settimane continue, oltre à molte altre volte fatta in casa di Signori et in Palazzo à Lor Maestà sichè i comedianti ci hanno guadagnato assaiissimo. Il suggetto è stato verace d'una comediante, che fece à imitazione di Maddalena riuscita esemplare. Questa giovane chiamata Baldassarra dai 13 ai 24 anni della sua età; di bellezza et talento non mediocre, rappresentò publicamente nei teatri con fama della più eccellente in tutta Spagna nel suo mestiero nei suoi tempi . . . et in conseguenza per l'occasione con libertà et licenza di vita; ma sempre fù assai devota di San Giovanni Battista. Andando una volta da Murzia à Valenza in quel cammino alla Riva del Mare vedde un Romitorio di Santo; quale osservò, le
piaque, et facendovi orazione in spirito, per special grazia del Signore vi fu punta
d’amor divino, et celando per allora, passò innanzi con la sua compagnia, con
la quale stando poi poco doppo un giorno nel fervor del rappresentar una tragi-
comedia nella Città, fu repentinamente vinta di modo dal sudetto ardor celeste,
che in quel punto se n’andò all’eremo et solitudine sopradetta, et quivi nel maggior
frescor degli anni, si messe à viver santamente con un habito di sacco, letto di
paglia et sasso, sustentandosi solo con herbe et acqua, et in continua orazione et
contemplazione; con gli occhi al cielo et à una imagine che aveva d’un crocifisso
benedetto (ventura senza comparazione soprattutto, dell’anima, che illuminata dal
vero splendore et grazia di Dio, sale dalle tenebre mondane à godere la luce eterna
del paradiso).4

Monanni goes on to say that after spending seven years in rigorous penance,
la Baltasara cast herself on a bed of thorns (“nei pruni”) in an appeal for “il
superno aiuto.” He then makes reference to her exemplary death.5

The secretary concludes his report with assurances of the truth of the
play’s action; he describes also its powerful impact on those who witnessed
performances:

Et di tutto si son fatti tali informazioni autentiche, ch’ella è tenuta assolutamente
per santa. Così piaccia a Sua Divina Maestà d’inspirare ogni peccatore. Il rappresen-
tarsi adunque con energia in scena questo successo, ha mosso di maniera gli affetti
degli uditori et spettatori, che causò singulti et lagrime quasi in tutti, particolar-
mente nelle Donne, et tre di loro publiche, si son messe per questa Causa nelle
Convertite, et senza dubbio la composizione è stata di molto profitto spirituale.6

The religious subject matter of La Baltasara and the comedias remarkable
popularity with theatergoers made it an appropriate choice for production
as a puppet play during the following Lenten season, when the regular com-
panies of players were inactive. Writing on March 17, 1635, Monanni describes
a puppet entertainment at court:

Lor Maestà domenica passata facendo anticipare un’hora più pronto del solito la
messa grande et predica della Cappella Reale, furono à desinare al Buon Ritiro,
conforme havevono determinato, ma essendo cattivissimo tempo, non potette già
seguire la Giostra ordinata; et in quel cambio si mutò la ricreazione, et si trattenero
Le Maestà Loro in vedere nel salone grande di quel Palazzo, los titeres, che quà
chiamano et son come i Burattini d’Italia, che qui si fanno con gran propramento
et studio: poiche tra l’altre, quest’anno han rappresentato con piccole figurine La
comedia di Baldassarra già scritta, che piaque assai.7

Why did Monanni think that La Baltasara would interest the Grand Ducal
court in Florence? For the most part, the dramatic works which engage his
attention are political, either in subject matter or circumstances of performance.
Occasionally he reports on a play which cannot be termed political by either
of these criteria. As a keen diplomatic observer, he presumably would have discussed *La Baltasara* because he found response to it suggestive of the mood and temper of Spanish society. Furthermore, it is likely that he was prompted to give an extensive account because the play commends devotion to John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence.

For the twentieth-century scholar, Monanni’s references to *La Baltasara* are not only of interest for what they imply about Vélez de Guevara’s literary career. To be sure, the evidence that the *comedia* should be dated 1634, not 1630, can be useful in a reexamination of the three collaborations between Vélez, Coello, and Rojas Zorrilla. Moreover, future assessments of Vélez’s reputation in his own lifetime will not be able to ignore the evidence of *La Baltasara*’s grip on the public. It seems reasonable to assume that contemporaries would have acknowledged the contribution made by Vélez as the author of Act I, with its play-within-the-play in which the conversion occurs. He was, after all, the senior of the three dramatists and was drawing on long experience as a writer of *comedias de santos*. But beyond all the ways in which the Florentine reports can be related to a specific work and a specific playwright, they are important for another reason. In the first letter on *La Baltasara*, especially, the secretary Monanni has bequeathed us a remarkable document on the devotional function of religious drama in a society of believers.

**Notes**

1 In 1636 Fernández sent a *poder* to Roque de Burgos, a Sevillian merchant, with instructions that he try to prevent a number of plays, including *La Baltasara*, from being performed in Seville. See José Sánchez Arjona, *Noticias referentes a los anales del teatro en Sevilla desde Lope de Rueda hasta fines del siglo XVII* (Seville, 1898), pp. 310-11. Two printings are known: In *Primera parte de comedias escogidas* (Madrid, 1652); also a *suelta*, n.p., n.d. The multiple authorship (Act I by Vélez, Act II by Coello, Act III by Rojas Zorrilla) is indicated on the title page of the early printings as well as in the final lines of Act III. See further, Charles F. Kirk, “A Critical Edition, with Introduction and Notes, of Vélez de Guevara’s Act I of *La Baltasara*,” M.A. Thesis, Ohio State University 1940.

2 Hugo Albert Rennert, *The Spanish Stage in the Time of Lope de Vega* (New York, 1909; rpt., 1963), pp. 278-79. Rennert gives information on her career as an actress from 1604 to 1614. I cannot accept the identification of the title character with María Francisca de Gracia, who was alive until 1638. The arguments in favor of this identification are presented by Justo García Soriano, “Damián Salucio del Poyo,” *BRAE*, 13 (1926), 272, n. 5.

3 I am preparing an edition of references to the Spanish theater which are included in dispatches from the Tuscan Embassy in Madrid.
Vélez de Guevara

4 Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo, filza 4960. For the transcriptions, I have resolved all abbreviations; otherwise, I have retained the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of the original.

5 I have summarized here a passage of about twenty-five words. Difficulties with the transcription of a few words have prevented me from giving an exact reproduction.

6 ASF, Mediceo, filza 4960.

7 ASF, Mediceo, filza 4960. This is an early date for a reference to a comedia by title as a puppet entertainment. See J. E. Varcy, Historia de los títeres en España desde sus orígenes hasta mediados del siglo XVIII (Madrid, 1957), pp. 172-87 passim.

8 While it is Monanni's close attention to the activities of the royal family that leads to mention of La Baltasar in the second letter, it would seem that his chief purpose is to show the continued demand for the comedia.

9 It is to be noted that Monanni mentions only the title character, interweaving data about the actress on whose life the play was based with a summary of the plot.