Some Thoughts on Vélez as a Tragedian

William M. Whitby

It is my assigned task for this symposium to discuss Vélez as a tragedian. The way in which I intend to carry out my assignment is to examine three of his plays which, because they end with the death of either the protagonist or someone dear to him, must have been inspired by the tragic muse. Whether all three plays deserve, without qualification, to be called examples of truly authentic tragedy is certainly an important question; but I am more concerned with answering the question of how the three plays make the reader/spectator feel the tragedy they embody.

The plays to be analyzed are La serrana de la Vera, Reinar después de morir and Los celos hasta los cielos y desdichada Estefanía. Some years ago, at another symposium, I compared the last-named play with Lope de Vega’s La desdichada Estefanía. I called Lope’s an “honor play” and argued that Vélez had made a tragedy out of it. Raymond R. MacCurdy, who also read a paper at that symposium, suggested, when I had finished reading mine, that a better name for Vélez’s play might be “melodrama.”¹ I had no ready response to that comment; I had become so attracted to the play—so involved, in fact, in its culminating scene—that for me it was a tragedy. I felt it as a tragedy. Why were our perceptions so different?

After giving the problem more thought recently, I have come to believe that one should approach individual works first of all through feeling. If I do not feel a work as tragic, there is no point in my looking for formal or structural characteristics which might identify it as a tragedy, thereby rectifying the judgement made by my “untutored” sense of the tragic. There is, to be sure, the danger that melodrama might, beneath the cloak of tragedy, deceive my senses, arousing my passions and involving them wastefully on behalf of a person—a character—who, either for ethical reasons or because his plight has nothing to do with reality, does not deserve my compassion. Reason and moral judgement must be present, certainly, to keep feeling on course. Yet the prime role of feeling in enjoying tragedy cannot be denied. So, since
melodrama like tragedy depends for its effectiveness on its ability to arouse pity and fear in the spectator's heart, it is useful to understand its relationship to tragedy. For this purpose Eric Bentley and Robert B. Heilman are helpful.

Bentley, in an essay on "Melodrama," calls attention to some of its virtues. After remarking that the bad reputation which currently afflicts that vehicle comes from the low opinion in which popular Victorian melodrama is held, he says that at its weakest (which is discovered in the answer to the question "What is the least anyone would ask of a melodrama?") a play of this kind stimulates the spectator to have "a good cry." Hence the appellations "tear jerker" and "sob stuff." But the contempt implied in those labels "is not more interesting than the very wide appeal of the thing despised." Tears are not necessarily a bad thing, even though "having a good cry" implies feeling sorry for oneself" (p. 218).

As Bentley says, Aristotle explains in his *Rhetoric* that pity and fear are related, for each of these emotions is evoked by "an enemy or object of terror." When we are threatened, we feel fear; when others are threatened, we feel pity. Bentley, on the assumption that most pity is self-pity, carries Aristotle's analysis further, affirming that "the pity we feel for them [for those with whom we are identified] is [really] pity for ourselves; and by the same token we share their fears . . . . Pitying ourselves, we pretend that we pity [the hero or heroine]" (p. 220).

In an essay by Robert B. Heilman we find a different approach to the problem. Heilman is concerned about the tendency to apply the term "tragedy" (which should be reserved to refer to a kind of play) to what he rightly says is more accurately called "accident" or "disaster," such as automobile wrecks or airplane crashes resulting in fatalities or terrible injuries. Both are misfortunes, but tragedies are (or should be) defined as misfortunes stemming from the "dividedness" of human nature—in other words, they come from within—while disasters largely come from without and are beyond the control of the person or persons to whom they happen. Within the realm of literature, there is tragedy, and there is what Heilman calls "literature of disaster," a subdivision of a more inclusive category called "melodrama." In melodrama, man is either victim or triumphant, but his struggle is against the "villain," or "villains"—society, nature, etc.—never against himself. It is in tragedy that man must choose between two "impulses," between an "impulse" and an "imperative," or between two "imperatives."

Reading Heilman, one is helped to keep Bentley's defense of melodrama in the perspective he intended, which can be summed up fairly closely in the following two statements: "There is a melodrama in every tragedy, just as there is a child in every adult" (p. 230); and, tragedy is "melodrama plus something" (p. 231). In tragedy, Heilman would say, self-pity (which we associate with immaturity) has no place: "When we shift from feeling sorry for pain received to fear of pain given, we move from the sense of disaster
toward the tragic sense” (p. 250). In Bentley’s terms, “self-pity is only valuable up to a point in life and only tolerable up to a point on the stage” (p. 220).

How do these ideas work out in Vélez’s plays? First of all, it is primarily on the basis of the pity and fear we feel as we read the texts or attend performances of *Reinar después de morir* and *Los celos hasta los cielos* that we call them tragic. I am not sure that the same can be said of *La serrana de la Vera*. Gila may be sufficiently admirable and good to qualify (in our subjective estimation) as a tragic heroine, if we can believe that all men (or most of them) are deceivers and all women (or most of them) are their innocent victims. Then we can see Gila, as she reacts to avenge her own affront, assume the defense of all women deceived and affronted by men. But, if we have achieved this vision of her career of violence, our complacency is upset toward the end when we find that she accepts her own execution as just while apparently blaming her father (as well as Don Lucas) for her life of crime, biting off Giraldo’s ear as punishment for not having curbed her excesses. Not only is the motivational chain of cause and effect somewhat tangled; we have some difficulty sympathizing with (that is, feeling pity and fear at the plight of) a heroine who acts with the strength and self-possession which Gila displays as an outlaw.

Heilman’s approach in combination with Bentley’s may be helpful when instinctive feeling founders. As Bentley says (p. 220), what predominates in melodrama over pity for the hero is fear of the villain. Now, if we assimilate the melodramatic “villain” to the half of the tragic “divided self which will, if chosen and followed, give pain, we can see that fear and pity are combined in a mature or tragic sense. So, we cannot help applauding the *serrana* Gila when, after she has been dishonored by Don Lucas, she swears she will take vengeance on all men, but we feel fear both for her innocent victims and for her, because of her error and the debt she is contracting with society, and pity because of the pain she is inflicting upon undeserving victims and the pain she is eventually to bring upon herself through her life of crime.

In *Los celos hasta los cielos*, the “villain” is jealousy: we fear what Fernán Ruiz may do to Estefanía if his jealousy (or sense of honor) should overcome his love and trust. This fear is combined with the pity which we feel for her as an innocent victim and with the pity which we feel for him in anticipation of the moment when grief will overcome him as he realizes he has been wrong.

Bentley’s discussion seems addressed to the problem of the “irrational” part of the soul, and Heilman’s to the rational. As Gerald F. Else reminds us in his very useful elucidation of what Aristotle meant by “catharsis,” Plato found poetry, and especially the theater, harmful, because it “excited and fed the emotions, that is, the irrational part of the soul.” Aristotle, improving on Plato’s thought (at least in this regard), elevated one of the two irrational parts of the soul (the feeling part, that is, the other being the vegetative) to bring it into direct contact with the rational part, “so that henceforth
we can speak of rational aspects of feeling or emotional employments of reason (that is, of the ‘practical’ or moral reason), depending on our point of view” (p. 435). So pity and fear are for Aristotle not emotions which need to be got rid of (through catharsis, or purging, as we commonly say6), but, like the other emotions, they are, in a manner of speaking, part of the total reasoning or thinking process and therefore at least potentially useful. That being so, poetry, which appeals to that aspect of the psyche much more than to the rational aspect, can also be “useful.”

If catharsis is not a purging of harmful emotions, what is it? Else defines it as “purification.” He discusses in some detail (pp. 424-33 especially) the important role played “in the history of Greek religion, law, and poetry by the concept of pollution for the killing of blood kin” (p. 424). The concept had existed since time immemorial, but even before Plato’s day, law, although it did not “usurp the place of religion” in the matter, did have the authority to decide whether or not a murderer could be released from pollution, and, if so, whether or not cathartic rites were required (p. 431). There were, then, “two different and potentially conflicting principles in the consciousness of the Athenians: (1) the immemorial horror of blood pollution . . . ; and (2) the positive right of men, in a court of law duly assembled, to judge whether pollution has been incurred, and in what degree” (p. 431). In the history of the conflict between these two principles, Plato’s Laws mark one stage and Aristotle another (pp. 431-32). Aristotle, in his Ethics, works to “establish still finer discriminations between degrees of guilt. . . .” In the Poetics, the problem is different: the cases to be judged come from the “traditional store of Greek legend. . . .” The judges are the same Athenian citizens “who sat in the jury courts on civil cases, [but] they are here as human beings, not to pass legal sentence but to be moved by the tragic cases of men ‘like themselves’ who are involved in parricide, matricide or other fearful crimes. . . . For . . . they will and do pass judgment, though not a legal one” (p. 433).

Catharsis, then, as Aristotle intends it in his Poetics, is in the nature of a defense of the protagonist; or, to put it in Else’s more precise language, “the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that [it was not intentional].” It is accomplished, moreover, “by the whole structure of the drama, but above all by the recognition” (p. 439).

Now, whether or not Else is right about what Aristotle meant—and there is a good chance he is—and, even though the Spaniard living in the seventeenth century A.D. did not feel horror at the same tragic acts—not at least in the same degree—as the Greek of the sixth to fourth centuries B.C., the idea that catharsis means for Aristotle a purification of the tragic act is eminently practical. The tragedian, as though he were a lawyer, presents in dramatic form the defense of his client, the good man who, because he has been visited by misfortune or has committed some act which in outward appearance is evil, is commonly thought to be guilty.
It is not necessary to argue that, although in *Los celos* and *La serrana* we are not dealing with parricide or matricide, we are concerned with crimes against kin; and so there should be no objection to trying the definition out on those plays. It is not immediately apparent how it could be applicable to *Reinar después de morir*, so I will postpone discussion of that play.

The situation as understood before we have read Vélez's "defense" of Gila and Fernán Ruiz is clear: Gila has murdered a number of men—innocent, presumably, of any crime except that of belonging to the same sex as the one that dishonored her. She is guilty of homocide, and she dies in punishment for that crime. Fernán Ruiz de Castro, protagonist of *Los celos hasta los cielos*, is guilty of uxoricide—he has killed his wife Estefanía. There is no doubt that both Gila and Fernán Ruiz are guilty and that they have brought upon themselves the punishments which they must suffer. I will now argue that the dramatist sets himself the task of converting these disastrous events and "criminal acts" into tragedies by "purifying" them—by showing the "criminals" to be not so guilty as they seem, by showing them to be persons like ourselves, and by causing us to pity them and fear for them.

Aristotle defines fear and pity in his *Rhetoric*: "fear is a state of mental pain or upset caused by an 'imagination' . . . of an impending evil which will be destructive or painful. . . . Similarly pity is a painful state attendant upon the threat of pain or destruction to one who does not deserve to suffer them, evils of the kind that one might expect to suffer oneself. . . ." One could also, without betraying Aristotle's thought, say of pity and fear in tragedy that they constitute that process in which we as readers/spectators are brought through empathy into aesthetic proximity to the protagonist, then distanced from him or her by dramatic irony, which, as we become aware that tragedy is inevitable, turns empathy into pity and fear for someone who, though no longer ourselves, is like ourselves.

The degree of the dramatist's success in "mitigating the guilt" of the protagonist is dependent on how well he handles a number of aspects: (1) portrayal of the protagonist in such a way that we see him as "like ourselves"; (2) structuring of a plausible set of circumstances and/or series of events which will serve to explain why the protagonist happened to commit the crime; and (3) modulation of aesthetic distance through skillful deployment of reminders (signs intelligible to the reader/spectator, but not to the protagonist) of the inevitability of the tragic event. Control of those three aspects can be increased, of course, by the judicious excision of unrelated or extraneous episodes; the spectator/reader's concern is thereby kept more active and focused on the protagonist and his impending misfortune.

I have referred above to the portrayal of Gila; and, although the motivational cause-and-effect chain is here and there more interesting than clear, one can tell by looking at earlier treatments of the story, including Lope de Vega's, that Vélez has done a great deal to turn it into a genuine tragedy.
By that I mean that he has unified the story of the *serrana* and constructed a coherent plot where before there was little more than a jumble of unrelated events. Since Lope did something, though not as much as Vélez, to give adequate dramatic form to the popular tradition, an efficient way of demonstrating briefly the extent of Vélez's tragic talent as exemplified in his play on the *serrana* is to compare it with Lope's, as Ramón and María Goyri de Menéndez Pidal have done in their edition of Vélez's version. They recognize Vélez's superior sense of dramatic logic in his imitation of the legend: Vélez's play, in those episodes and other aspects in which it is most like Lope's, is not only closer than his to the common source, but (what is more important to mention here) those same elements are in Vélez more logically related to or consistent with the plot (p. 139). A few examples must suffice: (1) In both Lope's play and Vélez's, a traveler (Alejandro in Lope, Mingo in Vélez) who lives in the **serrana**'s hometown, falls into her hands but then manages to escape. The editors comment that, while in Lope's play Alejandro's escape serves no dramatic purpose, in Vélez the corresponding episode is logically related to the plot, for Mingo's escape results in the disclosure of the *serrana*'s lair (p. 138). (2) Like Vélez, Lope has the Holy Brotherhood seize the *serrana* and prepare to execute her; but a royal pardon arrives in the nick of time to ward off the punishment and (as the Menéndez Pidáis put it) to make her capture another useless episode (p. 138). (3) Finally, as for the protagonist, Leonarda—the *serrana* of Lope's play—she is not a *serrana* at all, but a young lady born and bred in the town of Plasencia; moreover her “furia salteadora” is in keeping neither with her character nor with the kind of life she has lived (p. 140).

Vélez's tragedy is far from perfect—it may be that it is more easily perceived intellectually as a tragedy than felt as one—but he did, unlike Lope, keep the traditional story a tragic one, and he can indeed be said to have attempted to "purify" the *serrana de la Vera* by making her homicidal career understandable both by reason of her character (birth and upbringing) and because of her treatment by Don Lucas.

The ways in which Vélez reworked Lope's *Desdichada Estefanía*, an honor play, in an attempt to convert it into a tragedy are too numerous to list here. But, since even an incomplete comparison of *Los celos hasta los cielos*, y *desdichada Estefanía* will be a useful means of seeing Vélez at work as a tragedian, I shall discuss some of the more important changes he made. His improvements could be grouped under the headings of unity, including the economical use of space and time and the skillful deployment of plot components; character portrayal; preparation of the reader/spectator for what is to come (but dramatic irony is minimal in this play); and motivation. Vélez has handled all of these aspects well, but the obstacles he faced in the last category named were perhaps insurmountable.
As Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo pointed out, Vélez, in reworking Lope’s play, focused attention on the tragic action, “cuyo interés consiste en la persona de Estefanía, . . . cercenando los elementos accesorios que la obra de Lope contenía.” Except for the rivalry between Fernán Ruiz and Count Don Vela for Estefanía’s love, and her maid’s infatuation for the Count which would give rise to the ill-fated intrigue, there was nothing in the first half of Lope’s play that Vélez needed. Lope’s first act, aside from the fact that it contained many extraneous episodes, insisted on honor as the basic conflict between protagonist and antagonist. In Vélez, on the other hand, from the opening lines the amorous competition is made the axis of the plot: love and jealousy are to be the motivating forces. In his first act, which ends with the wedding of Estefanía to Fernán Ruiz, Vélez, by focusing squarely on the tragic nexus, finds adequate scope to show Estefanía’s amorous inclination toward Fernando, the maid Fortuna’s infatuation for the Count, and the latter’s jealous torment when Estefanía chooses his rival.

In Lope, an interval of about nine months elapses between the end of Act II and the beginning of Act III. At the end of Act II, the newly wed Fernán Ruiz is called upon (as is also his rival, named Fortún in Lope’s play) to accompany the King in a military expedition against the Moors. At the end of the nine-month inter-act period Estefanía gives birth to Fernando’s son, and this serves as a good reason for the father to leave the fighting temporarily and return home. The interval between Acts II and III in Vélez’s play is of unspecified duration. We only know that Fernando (but not Count Vela) has been away from Toledo—and from Estefanía’s side—fighting against the Moors with King Alfonso. One of the functions of this inter-act interval in Lope’s play had been to create a situation in which Estefanía’s maid could begin to implement her plan to channel Fortún’s love for her mistress into the satisfaction of her own desires, at the expense (so it would turn out) of Fernando’s and Estefanía’s bond of marital trust. Fortún would be deceived by the maid’s disguise into thinking she was Estefanía, and so would some of Fernando’s loyal servitors, who would then convince their master, upon his return, that his honor was lost. Vélez made that the sole function of the interval between his Acts II and III, intensifying its possibilities by having the Count remain in Toledo during Fernando’s absence, rather than, as in Lope, simply returning early from the wars.

More interesting than that, however, is what Vélez did with the interval between his Acts I and II. He made that period of time from ten to twelve months long. Coming where it does, that time segment allows plausible scope for several developments which are suggested, referred to, or recounted in detail either at the end of the first act or at the beginning of the second. It allows us, through the Count’s soliloquies and what he says to Estefanía in their first encounter after his long absence from the Court, to imagine the
increase of his jealous passion. It allows us, through Lebrel's account, to imagine the marital bliss of Estefanía and her husband, enhanced by the birth of a son and scarcely clouded by a couple of ominous accidents that befall her, from which, after all, she escapes unscathed. In Lope, since he was a bit rushed by the imminent ending of his Act II, Estefanía's maid approaches Fernando's rival right after the wedding to tell him (falsely, of course) that Estefanía already regrets having married Fernando. In Vélez, the corresponding scene does not take place until almost a year after the wedding, and that fact alone goes a long way toward explaining how the Count could believe that Estefanía has (finally) decided to yield to his immense and firm love.

The weakest thread in the plot, even though Vélez has given it more strength than it had in Lope's play, is the matter of the maid. Literary tradition may make its improbabilities a trifle easier to swallow, but it is difficult to defend in a discussion of the play. On the other hand, to the extent that we admit the plausibility of Fernando's error and the circumstances that led up to it, we seem to diminish the right to speak of a hamartia. The villain appears to be external. But, if it is jealousy, then perhaps it can be said that the greater the love the greater the jealousy, as much in Fernando's case as in Don Vela's.

As Alison Weber has observed in her fine study of Reinar después de morir, "tragic hamartia and tragic stature are not limited to Pedro. Inés, Blanca of Navarra, and King Alonso also suffer when the human frailties of their noble characters are exposed to the pressures of circumstance." Her focus, however, is on Pedro, for, as she states and demonstrates, "it is with [him] . . . that we can trace most fully the trajectory of the tragic hero—the pattern which leads from hamartia to suffering and, finally, to perception" (p. 90). I have nothing to add to Professor Weber's analysis, but it might help to fit it into the focus I am attempting to adjust if I suggest that the play can be viewed as a cross between the Aristotelian definition of tragedy (as she has shown) and the Hegelian kind, with Antigone as the model. Professor Weber does allude to "a knot of conflicting loyalties and irreconcilable interests" (p. 90).

In Vélez's treatment of the Inés de Castro legend, he does, of course, make the claims of love seem more rightful than those of the state, but in his far from negative portrayal of Blanca de Navarra and King Alonso he has allowed us to entertain, if only for a brief moment, the thought that the claims of the state are not without validity. The rightfulness of Antigone's will is also put above that of Creon in Sophocles' tragedy, but in Hegel's interpretation the claims of family and those of state have equal weight, at least in the abstract. It is also in the abstract and objective view of the conflict in the story of Pedro and Inés de Castro, or in the view which we as contemporaries of Vélez might have had of that "case" before we heard his presentation, that we perhaps might be, or might have been, unsure as to whether the claims of Pedro and Inés or those of Alonso and Blanca were more justifiable. In Vélez's defense of
Pedro and Inés, we are not given an opportunity to entertain duly the rightfulness of Alonso's claim. It is not until after we have witnessed a scene in which Pedro's all-powerful love for Inés is displayed and—through Brito's long account of his embassy to Coimbra—another scene attesting to Inés's complete devotion to the Prince, that we are reminded by the King's brief statement to his son that

los que hemos nacido
padres y reyes, también
hemos de mirar al bien
común más que al nuestro. 12

In Vélez's "purification"—or poetic defense—of Pedro, one of his most effective weapons—two-edged—is to show the object of Pedro's will as worthy and to show Pedro completely dedicated to that object. It is therefore difficult (as well as inappropriate) to separate Pedro from Inés (and their children, of course) in an analysis of him as a tragic hero in this play, for, as A. C. Bradley has said in his "sketch" of Hegel's theory of tragedy: "It is the nature of the tragic hero, at once his greatness and his doom"—in this case Inés's doom—"that he . . . identifies himself wholly with the power that moves him, and will admit the justification of no other power. . . . Antigone is the determination to do her duty to her dead brother; Romeo . . . is lover pure and simple, and his love is the whole of him."13 Alison Weber writes: "[Prince Pedro's] virtue as a lover—his total commitment to Inés—leaves him blind to the political world in which he must act and renders him incapable of preserving his love from destruction" (p. 90). This is, briefly, his hamartia; Inés's death is the pathos, and the recognition, though "perhaps . . . never fully articulated" (p. 94), can be glimpsed in Pedro's contemplation of "his own part in Inés's death" and in his "final act of justice," her coronation. Death has made the ritual meaningless, as he realizes, but "he fulfills the poetic covenant [all the while] conscious of its effective futility." His act "thus becomes an implicit self-castigation" (p. 94).

Are all these three plays of Luis Vélez de Guevara tragedies? Are they all melodramas? Are they imperfect tragedies flawed by melodramatic characteristics? My view is that, whatever else they may be, the three plays are tragedies, that as tragedy La serrana de la Vera is the least successful, and Reinar después de morir the best.

Notes

1 The occasion to which I refer is the Symposium on the Spanish Theater organized by the Department of Romance Languages of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, held April 30-May 2, 1970. MacCurdy and I were the speakers on the last half day. The
title: of my paper (on which I have drawn partially in the present one for my discussion of Los celos hasta los cielos) was "From Honor Play to Tragedy: La desdichada Estefanía According to Lope de Vega and Vélez de Guevara."


3 Bentley is interested, primarily, in these emotions as they function in melodrama. Gerald F. Else, discussing tragedy, treats the same passage differently. See below, p. 131 and note 7.

4 Heilman's essay, "Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form," is also included in Corrigan, pp. 245-57, where I have consulted it. It was published earlier in TQ, 3, No. 2 (1960), 36-50.


6 For a brief survey of the literature on the question of what Aristotle meant by "catharsis," see Else, Ch. vi, n. 14 (pp. 225-26).

7 This is Else's rendering—much abbreviated—of Aristotle's definition of those feelings (Else, p. 436).


9 The play needs (and warrants) a modern edition. Forrest Eugene Spencer and Rudolph Schevill summarize the plot, of course, and refer to a suelta (n.d.) of the seventeenth (?) century and another printed in 1745. See The Dramatic Works of Luis Vélez de Guevara: Their Plots, Sources and Bibliography (Berkeley, 1937), pp. 160-63.


11 "Hamartia in Reinar después de morir," BCom, 28 (1976), 90.
