

Um Auto de Gil Vicente and the Tradition of Comedy

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Garrett, as dramatist, tends to be a man of a single work.¹ This seems always to have been the case. During his lifetime *Frei Luís de Sousa* had 293 performances at the Teatro Nacional, while his other plays were performed only a handful of times.² Today the tragedy continues to be very successful, both in terms of staging and in the quantity of critical attention that it receives.

Um Auto de Gil Vicente is not exactly forgotten. But it is usually thought of as a cultural event, a turning-point in the history of Portuguese Romanticism, rather than as a work of art in its own right. Garrett himself claimed that the play, first staged in 1838, marked the start of a truly national style of drama in Portugal, and that is a view frequently repeated, especially in histories of literature. Luiz Francisco Rebello, for example, starts his account of Romantic drama in 1838, clearly privileging *Um Auto de Gil Vicente*.³ The play does indeed break with theatrical tradition, including in the purely formal sense, since it has three acts rather than the classical five and the rule of the three unities is treated with some flexibility. It is easy to see a Romantic impulse in Garrett's dramatization of events and characters taken from the most glorious period of Portuguese history. The plot, too, has seemed Romantic to some, perhaps because it is a tale of thwarted love, complicated, as in *Hamlet*, a drama much admired in the Romantic period, by a performance of a play within the play, Gil Vicente's *Cortes de Júpiter*.⁴ In my view, though, the play is underpinned by a structure which is clearly classical in origin. Almeida Garrett's commitment to Romanticism was never complete or wholehearted.⁵

¹ A version of this paper was originally read at a 'Jornada de Estudos Garretianos' held at St Peter's College, Oxford, on 26 November 1999.

² See Helena Barbas, *Almeida Garrett, o trovador moderno* (Lisbon: Salamandra, 1994), p. 78.

³ See his *O teatro romântico (1838-1869)* (Lisbon: Biblioteca Breve, 1980), p. 36. A. J. Saraiva and Oscar Lopes also see the play as a new beginning, though they are very dismissive of it as a work of literature. See their *História da literatura portuguesa*, 4th edn (Porto: Porto Editora, [n.d.]), pp. 689-90. For Garrett's own view, see 'Introdução a *Um Auto de Gil Vicente*', in *Obras*, 2 vols (Porto: Lello, 1966), II, 1324-25. All other references to Garrett's works will be to this edition.

⁴ See Luciana Stegagno Picchio, *História do teatro português*, trans. by Manuel de Lucena (Lisbon: Portugália, 1969), pp. 230-31. Yet one can detect a certain discomfort in her characterization of the plot as being 'da mais chã trivialidade romântica'. It is, I think, much more profitable to see the play as a classical or neo-classical comedy rather than a Romantic tragedy, though it has elements of both.

⁵ For a similar view of Garrett's tragedies, see Aníbal Pinto de Castro, 'Garrett: um dramaturgo moderno, leitor dos clássicos', in *Camões*, 4 (1999), 33-44.

Um Auto de Gil Vicente is already looking as though it deserves more than the page or two allotted to it in literary histories. So far as I know, the only critic to have gone beyond a purely text-book approach to the play is Helena Barbas, whose fifty-page essay is published in her *Almeida Garrett, o trovador moderno*. The great merit of her work is to have given an idea of the complexity of Garrett's writing. Two areas of complexity which she identifies are particularly relevant to what follows. One is characterization. She shows how the plebeian Paula, daughter of Gil Vicente, grows in stature as the play progresses and in the end dominates the stage.⁶ A second is her exploration of the play's recreative function. Writing from a mythological and symbolical perspective, she claims that Garrett, the 'dramaturgo-mago' in her terms, absorbs the contrasting characteristics of Bernardim Ribeiro and Gil Vicente into his own work and thereby brings the past to new life.⁷

Bernardim Ribeiro and Gil Vicente are characters in Garrett's play, but characters who are also writers, and some fifty or so lines of Gil Vicente are quoted during the rehearsal and performance of *Cortes de Júpiter* which takes place in Act II. Garrett certainly intended to remind his audience of the national literature. 'Não foi somente o teatro, a poesia toda nasceu naquele tempo; criaram-na Gil Vicente e Bernardim Ribeiro', he says in the introduction to the play.⁸ But although Garrett wanted to bring alive the great writers of the past he also wanted to establish a distance between his work and theirs. He does not absorb them magically or symbolically, as Barbas believes, but puts them in their place, fitting them into the structure of his own, classical comedy. In that Bernardim plays the part of the *adulescens*, or young lover, foolish and feckless, while Gil Vicente is a comic servant, neither very dignified roles. The roles allow for a certain flexibility of approach. Bernardim can be a poet and novelist, as well as a lover, and Gil Vicente a playwright, though admittedly a distracted and disorganized one. But there is no doubt that it is Garrett who is in charge. By pigeonholing his characters, making them conform to unflattering classical stereotypes, he is distracting attention from their contribution to literature and concentrating on his. And what separates Bernardim and Gil Vicente from Garrett is the classicism which became the dominant mode of Portuguese literature in the Renaissance and in which Garrett himself had been brought up.

Garrett's preference for Roman comedy, or Portuguese imitations of Roman comedy, over the more spontaneous writing of Gil Vicente may seem strange to modern readers. However, Garrett's classical training at

⁶ Barbas, pp. 109 and 117–18. Though it is possible to doubt some of the symbolic links that she finds in the play, she is nevertheless correct in emphasizing the role of Paula.

⁷ Barbas, pp. 81–86.

⁸ Almeida Garrett, *Obras*, II, 1325.

the hands of his uncle, D. Frei Alexandre da Sagrada Família, left a lasting impression. Such a background made it difficult for him to appreciate certain literary forms, like drama, unless they conformed in some way to Graeco-Roman patterns.

Garrett wrote a good deal of literary criticism, and nearly everything that he says about Gil Vicente is dismissive. Ofélia Paiva Monteiro rightly comments in her classic study of Garrett's intellectual evolution that his attitude to Gil Vicente matured in time, but even so one of the jokes that Garrett makes in a journal article of 1822 about the *Auto da Mofina Mendes* reappears in *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* sixteen years later.⁹ In the article in *O Toucador* Garrett had referred mockingly to the allegorical characters of *Mofina Mendes* as D. Fé and Mlle Prudência. The joke depends on the ironic use of the modern titles Dona and Mademoiselle, the French word being a hint that Gil Vicente was always prepared to follow the fashions of the court. The same irony reappears in D. Ingratidão, granddaughter of the Devil, about whom the dramatist muses in *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* (II, 1357). In 1826 Garrett published the much more serious *Bosquejo da história da poesia e língua portuguesa*. In it he makes comparisons between Gil Vicente's *autos* and Sá de Miranda's neo-classical Terentian comedies which indicate very clearly where his sympathies lay:

São de admirar suas [i.e., Sá de Miranda's] comédias, e são notável monumento para a história das artes pela feliz imitação dos Antigos, e pelo que excedem quanto até então se tinha escrito. Porém, o teatro português criado pela musa negligente e travessa de Gil Vicente e João Preste carecia de reforma. (I, 385)¹⁰

Although Garrett regretted the Italian settings of Sá de Miranda's comedies, there was no doubt in his mind that he was a better dramatist than Gil Vicente. By the time that Garrett wrote *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* he had been to England and had learnt something about the Romantic enthusiasm for Shakespeare, but in the play Gil Vicente's work is still not treated sympathetically. In Act II the audience witnesses the chaotic rehearsal and performance of *Cortes de Júpter*, in which improvisation — and not just Bernardim's famous improvisation at the end of the act — seems to play an important part. Lines of Gil Vicente's play are quoted, but not consecutively and in a way which emphasizes the loose structure of the piece.

Gil Vicente the man is characterized in much the same way as Gil Vicente the dramatist. He is creative, but disorganized, finding it easier to

⁹ Ofélia Milheiro Caldas Paiva Monteiro, *A formação de Almeida Garrett: experiência e criação*, 2 vols (Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Românicos, 1971), I, 385 (for the reference to *O Toucador*), and II, 208.

¹⁰ The mysterious João Preste is perhaps a slip for António Prestes.

think about future literary projects than solve the practical and human problems that face him. As usual, Paula hits the nail on the head:

Quem tivera aquela paixão de arte que o domina, aquele entusiasmo pela beleza ideal desse mundo de ficções que criou e em que vive; aquela cegueira ditosa que lhe não deixa ver a miserável realidade que o cerca! Meu pobre pai, como ele vive enganado! (II, 1354)

Gil Vicente's incomprehension extends as far as Paula herself, whose emotional life he is not interested in and whose contributions to his own success as a writer he only grudgingly recognizes (II, 1357–59). In reality, he is little more than a servant, tolerated by the court because he is amusing. Paula once more: 'Sem o salva-conduto de bobo e chocarreiro, morria de fome o grande poeta' (II, 1354).

At one level the aristocratic Bernardim seems to be a very different character from Gil Vicente. Yet, as Garrett says in the Introduction to his play, they were 'engenhos de natureza tão parecida, mas que tão diversamente se moldaram' (II, 1325). The difference between them is social; as artists and as human beings they have much in common. Garrett comments about Bernardim's work in the *Bosquejo* in the same condescending style that he used about Gil Vicente. Bernardim is 'original em sua simplicidade'. He has 'uma ingénua ternura que faz suspirar de saudade' (I, 488). His problem is the same as Gil Vicente's: he is not in control of his material. Garrett's attitude had not changed much by 1841, the date of the Introduction to *Um Auto de Gil Vicente*. There it is said that *Menina e moça* is 'um livro de enigmas e alegorias que não entendia talvez nem quem o escreveu' (II, 1325). As a man the Bernardim of Garrett's play is an original, full of brilliant notions, but a liability to himself and to others. He nearly brings disgrace upon himself and upon the princess, and is only rescued through the efforts of the actors, especially Paula Vicente who, like her father, is little more than a servant.

In Garrett's view, Gil Vicente and Bernardim Ribeiro fail, as writers and as human beings, because they cannot organize their discourse or themselves. Garrett makes their failings plain, and simultaneously demonstrates what he conceives to be his own superiority as a writer, by finding them both roles in the orderly structure of a classical comedy. In this way, too, he can flatter his nineteenth-century bourgeois audience by revealing to them the progress made by literature between the sixteenth century and their own time.

This does not mean that *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* is nothing but a classical comedy. It is an extremely complex work of literature, which incorporates many and diverse forms of discourse. But its structural underpinning remains that of Terentian comedy, an aspect of the play

which appears not to have been discussed before, and yet which forms an important part of the whole.¹¹

The basic structure of Terentian comedy has formed the plot of innumerable plays in every Western European language. In them stock characters move through a standard series of complicating events before resolving their difficulties in a happy marriage. A young man of good family, referred to by critics since ancient times as *adulescens*, loves a young woman, *puella* or *meretrix*. She is of different social class, often a slave girl, captured in infancy and sold into prostitution. The relationship is opposed by the young man's father, the *senex*. The *adulescens*, impetuous but scatter-brained and unaware of the realities of life, tries to outwit his father and also the owner of the girl, the *leno*, or pimp, by tricks of one kind or another, often involving a disguise. In this he relies heavily on his slave, *servus*, who is usually the brains of the enterprise. Almost invariably the tricks and disguises practised by *adulescens* and *servus* lead to further complications, which require all the wiliness of the slave to sort out. And when all seems lost a relative arrives unexpectedly from abroad with the news that, after all, *puella* was not born a slave but is a girl of respectable parents who is free, therefore, to marry her lovesick admirer.¹²

Garrett's understanding of the structure of classic comedy came to him not just through reading, but also through his own theatrical practice. A truly forgotten area of Garrett's work are his 'comédias', that is, pieces described as such on the title-page, of which there are seven or eight in the two-volume Lello edition of the *Obras*.¹³ Some of them, like *A sobrinha do marquês* or *D. Filipa de Vilhena*, are three-act plays, but others are much shorter. Some are original works by Garrett, others were written in collaboration with friends or colleagues or are based on French originals. What is surprising about this very varied body of theatre is the number of occasions in which the Roman comic plan, or something approximating to it, is used. Nearly all of them (the exceptions are *Tio Simplicio* and *O conde de Novion*, both more akin to French farce) have characters who can be identified with the classical *adulescens*, *puella*, *senex* and *servus* and who go through a routine of deception and disguise before arriving at the happy ending.

¹¹ This does not mean that the play's comic side has escaped critics. In one of the first reviews of it in 1838 Anselmo José Braamcamp called it a 'comedia' — quoted by Theophilo Braga, *Garrett e os dramas românticos* (Porto: Chardron, 1905), p. 194; while Andrée Crabbé Rocha says of it 'embora intitulado drama, *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* é o que se pode chamar alta comédia': *O teatro de Garrett* (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1954), p. 130. But neither writer investigates its classical antecedents.

¹² For information about Roman comedy and its influence see Peter Brown, 'The First Roman Literature', in *The Oxford History of the Roman World*, ed. by John Boardman and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 438–53 (p. 450).

¹³ Eight if *O corcunda por amor* is counted. This is described on the title-page as a farce, but has many of the elements of Roman comedy.

Falar verdade a mentir, for example, is a one-act play of 1845 based on an original by the French dramatist Scribe.¹⁴ But behind Garrett and Scribe the Terentian structure is clearly visible. In this play the servant José Félix is a brilliant actor, who successively pretends to be a businessman, an outraged English aristocrat, milorde Coockimbroock, and a colonel in the Portuguese army, in order to get his chaotic young master out of trouble and enable him to marry the girl he loves. José Félix's success in all these roles is connected to the fact that his own marriage plans — for reasons too complicated to go into here — depend on his master's. It is the fact that the servant is a lover that makes him into a convincing actor, a development not found in Terence but one which is also very important to *Um Auto de Gil Vicente*.

Um Auto de Gil Vicente is described on the title page as a 'drama', not a 'comédia'. It certainly touches depths undreamt of in Terence's urbane but in some ways rather shallow plays. Yet it may be that the strongest moments in Garrett's play, the ones that give the best opportunity for a good actor or actress, are those where the structure of classic comedy is most apparent.

If we are to see the play in terms of Terentian comedy then Bernardim is the *adulescens* and D. Beatriz the *puella*. They are separated by a difference of social rank, though D. Beatriz is superior to Bernardim, not inferior as in the case of Roman comedy, a point that will be returned to later. Insofar as he knows about the relationship the *senex*, D. Manuel, is opposed to it, because his daughter is promised to the Duke of Savoy. Equally opposed to anything that might compromise D. Beatriz are the Duke's representatives in Portugal, especially the secretary Chatel, who is suspicious where D. Manuel is benevolent. Contrasting pairs of old men or young men are a very common feature of Terence's plays, though it may be that the unsympathetic Chatel, who is responsible for delivering Beatriz to her husband, is more akin to the *leno* of classical comedy.

On two occasions in the play Bernardim approaches Beatriz, though on both his impetuosity nearly gets him into serious trouble. In Act II he insists on taking part in Gil Vicente's play and, disguised as the Moorish Tais, presents the princess with a ring. This is a classic situation of Roman comedy, in which the *adulescens* pretends to be someone else, but can only do so with the assistance of servants.¹⁵ There is no doubt that Gil Vicente and his troupe are treated as servants, a fact which his daughter Paula, easily the most perceptive of these characters, bitterly resents:

¹⁴ See Crabbé Rocha, p. 186.

¹⁵ For a good example see the scene in Terence's *Eunuchus* (ll. 568–80) in which the *adulescens* Chaerea is induced by his servant Parmeno to disguise himself as a eunuch so as to be able to be alone with his girlfriend who, perhaps not altogether by coincidence, is called Thais.

Sente-me o coração, concebe-me o espírito quanto podia, quanto devia ser alta e sublime a minha missão na Terra — e pobre, e sujeita, e humilde, e mulher sobretudo. (II, 1353)

Slaves in Terence's or Plautus's plays, or the servants of post-classical drama, are not all the same. Some are the clever *servi callidi*, represented in Garrett's play especially by Paula. But they can also be comically incompetent, like Gil Vicente himself.

Bernardim's attempts at deception only serve to make matters worse. The suspicions of both D. Manuel and Chatel are aroused. In Act III, Scene 9, Chatel confronts Paula and gives the clever servant a splendid opportunity for thinking on her feet.

The point has already been made that *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* is a many layered play. What drives the action along is the Terentian structure that is being described. But Garrett also includes elements of another plot structure which is not classical but can be found in the Renaissance drama of Spain and England, as well as in certain plays of Gil Vicente.¹⁶ In these plays humour is found in the spectacle of a chain of hopeless lovers. So, in *Um Auto de Gil Vicente*, Pero Safio (one of the actors) loves Paula who loves Bernardim who loves Beatriz who is to be married to the Duke of Savoy. So when Paula finds herself having to explain to Chatel Bernardim's mysterious presence in Gil Vicente's play a brilliant explanation comes to mind. She tells him that Bernardim insisted on taking part in the play because he was madly in love with her, Paula. She can say this with perfect conviction because her own emotions are so deeply engaged and Chatel leaves, convinced of Beatriz's innocence.

The scene is a fascinating and multi-layered example of 'falar verdade a mentir', which goes far beyond anything in the rather trivial farce of that name. Paula tells a factual lie about Bernardim, but remains truthful to her own feelings. In another sense, too, she remains truthful to her mistress, the princess, by not betraying her. In this Paula tells a diplomat's lie, one that perhaps may be justified by its patriotic intent. A further level of meaning is implied by the fact that, by profession, Paula is an actress. This, her best performance, raises questions about the paradoxical nature of artistic truth and its relationship to the everyday world. *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* was Garrett's first play for the new Teatro Nacional and it is very appropriate that this magnificent scene should be one which shows how the successful conduct of Portuguese diplomacy depends on a brilliant piece of acting.

¹⁶ The point is made by Stegagno Picchio, p. 231. A good example of a play by Gil Vicente in which humour is derived from the spectacle of a chain of lovers is *Tragicomédia pastoril da Serra da Estrela*.

Finally, and most importantly, it is Paula, a woman, who transforms the role of *servus callidus* into a remarkable apology for the theatre. It is her convincing performance which upholds the honour of Portugal, not any of the men's. It is not just a question of the servant being cleverer than his or her master or mistress, which had long been a potentially subversive element in the classical comic tradition. Paula shows how a woman can triumph in the traditionally male world of diplomacy. Nevertheless, the triumph is undercut by its essentially private nature, since none of the other characters ever learn the extent of Paula's achievement. And yet although situations as complex as this never arise in Terence, the scene has its original inspiration in a Davus or a Syrus with his back to the wall coming up with something which will appease an outraged *senex* or a *leno* who thinks he has been tricked out of his girl and his money.

There are two ways in which the structure, and not just the characterization, of *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* develop or subvert the Roman model. One has already been mentioned: Beatriz is a princess, not a prostitute. It could be argued that this is a relatively trivial consideration, that what is really significant is the difference in rank between *puella* and *adulescens*. Certainly the great changes in social life between ancient times and the Europe of the sixteenth century led the Renaissance imitators of Terence to change the convention that the heroine had to be a loose woman. In the first Portuguese play of this kind, Sá de Miranda's *Os Estrangeiros*, which as we have seen was well known to Garrett, the heroine Lucrécia is a respectable girl. But in the case of *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* it is not necessary to invoke this argument, because marriages of state are a form of prostitution. D. Beatriz is, after all, being sent abroad to live with a man who she does not know. Since, in addition, she is to be married to him she will be forced not only to prostitute her body, but also her feelings.

The point has already been made that *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* is not just a neat classical comedy. That is nowhere more apparent than at the end of the play, where Garrett subverts or even abandons the structure that had been established by Terence. So he omits entirely the recognition scene and the happy ending and in the final scenes the lovers are not united, but separated definitively. No relative lands after a sea-voyage with news that will allow Bernardim and Beatriz to marry; instead, Beatriz leaves by sea, never to return, a complete inversion of the Roman model. It may even be that the play has a tragic ending: the last words of the play, uttered by D. Manuel, are 'Meu Deus, se eu matei a minha filha!', and Bernardim's dramatic leap into the sea may cause his death, though Garrett hints in a note that the incident is not necessarily to be taken seriously (II, 1384). Bernardim could have swum to shore, since the *Santa Catarina* had not yet left the Tagus, and Beatriz's fainting fit, which prompts D. Manuel's

outburst, is not the first or even the second of the play and is an indication that she has not the stature of a tragic heroine.

Garrett's relationship with Romanticism is one of the most interesting features of his complex literary personality. He was certainly not sufficiently Romantic to appreciate the aesthetic value of late medieval drama, but by 1838 he was not content either to follow the structure of Roman comedy throughout his own play. In the last act *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* slips from comedy into something more serious, without losing that teasing ambiguity which is one of the hallmarks of Garrett's mature work. Indeed the whole play could be seen in that light. D. Manuel, Gil Vicente and Bernardim Ribeiro are all, each in his own way, great historical figures, and yet they are made to operate through a structure which is that of light comedy. And the true hero of the piece, a character of selfless nobility, is a woman almost unknown to history. *Um Auto de Gil Vicente* is interesting because it keeps us guessing.

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