

# Spanish Violence in the Theatre of Gil Vicente

Maria Dodman  
*York University*

One of the noted accomplishments of the Portuguese dramatist, Gil Vicente, has been his ability to portray 16<sup>th</sup> century Iberian society. Indeed, most critics have pointed out this feature as well as Vicente's sharp criticism, especially towards the clergy and the nobility. In terms of violence, the Portuguese playwright lived through one of the most agitated and violent periods in Portuguese history. The violence that characterized the encounters with others in the new worlds, the violence of the Inquisition and the violence toward the Jews. Regarding the latter, Gil Vicente was one of the few who condemned such violent behaviour and advocated for kindness and tolerance<sup>1</sup>. Vicente also lived in a court where the presence of the Spanish was part of daily affairs. At the service of a bilingual court, the Portuguese playwright, like many of his contemporaries, and in addition to his Portuguese works, also wrote many bilingual and Spanish texts. For a writer who constantly critized the vanities and excesses of the clergy and the nobility, it should come as no surprise that he extends his criticism to the neighbouring Spain. Thus, the goal of this article is to examine the theme of violence within the portrayal of the Spanish in vicentine theatre.

Generally speaking, his views of the Spanish are, for the most part, negative. Several examples are found throughout his works.

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<sup>1</sup> Such are the contents of the letter to king Dom João III regarding the earthquake of January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1531, and the subsequent events of hatred towards the Jews (479-482).

Essentially, the Spanish just do not measure up to the Portuguese. Such is the case of *Auto da Fama*, where Spain, among other nations, desire and court the Portuguese Fame. However, no one is worthy of her attention, as she symbolises the greatness and unmatched spirit of the Portuguese empire. In another instance, the *serra* from the *Serra da Estrela*, asks a group of men if they are from the *Extremo* or from *Castela*. One of them, a Portuguese from Sadoal, while defending his Portugueseness, also takes a jab at the Spanish:

agora nos faria o demo  
a nós outros castelhanos.  
queria antes ser lagarto  
pelos santos avangelhos. (72)

Not only do the Portuguese rather be lizards than Spanish, they also consider them to be of such inferiority that they are lower than the infidels of Guinea. This is clearly the message presented in *Auto da Festa*:

Todo bem e a verdade  
neste Portugal nasceram,  
e se há i alga ruindade  
de Castela a trouxeram  
que não são nego maldade.  
É a mais ruim relé  
esta gente de Castela,  
que juro pela bofé  
que melhor é a de Guiné  
setecentas vezes que ela. (670)

One of the characteristics that define most Spanish is indeed their violent nature. In many cases, the violence is directed at women, whose purity, safety and honour are often jeopardized by the Spanish. As Girard points out, violence is deeply associated with sexuality, since the later «is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious of communities» (35). Rubena from the *Comedia* with the same name finds herself seduced, pregnant, and subsequently abandoned by a young Spanish priest

at the service of her father. We also learn that a great source of her fears and sorrows derive from the fact that her father, a *abad en Castilla*:

era fuerte cruel per nación  
celoso muy bravo sin templa ninguna.  
Lloraba Rubena su triste fortuna,  
rompiendo las telas de su corazón. (367)

This characterization of *fuertes, bravos sin templa ninguna* seems to be a common feature of many of the Spanish characters. In *Triunfo do Inverno* the climate in Portugal is one of sadness, where song, dance and happiness belong to a «tempo passado» (76). The reason for all the gloom is the arrival of Winter, who, as we are told:

O Inverno vem selvagem  
castellano en su decir  
porque quem quiser fingi  
na castelhana linguagem  
achará quanto pedir. (77)

Winter then enumerates his many qualities, most of them destructive:

Aunque veáis mi figura  
hecha un salvaje bruto  
yo cubro el aire de luto  
y las cierras de blancura.  
Quito las sombras graciosas  
debaxo de los castaños  
y hago a los ermitaños  
encovar como raposas. (78)

Throughout the play, Winter plays havoc on the various shepherds he encounters and also at sea where he vows to «demostrar mi poderío» (96). His destructive power is so great that while the shepherd Brisco praises Summer as a creation of God, Winter on the other hand:

... yo juraría  
 por la crizna del baptizo  
 que Satañé se lo hizo  
 Sin saber lo que hacía. (80)

Monderigón, the savage from the *Comédia sobre a Divisa da Cidade de Coimbra* also exhibits a similar profile. From the very beginning, his nationality is established by his name and speech. Similarly to Winter, he is presented as «um feroz salvagem, gigante senhor» (452). As we later find out, Monderigón, in addition to terrorizing the area, has taken and kept several prisoners, including the princess Colimena, her brother Melidonio, and four maids. When Melidonio is sent by Monderigón to speak to Liberata, a young woman his opposite, «discreta, mansa, muy buena» (459), he elaborates on the violent abuse inflicted on the princess and her maids. Beyond the poor treatment and the complete incarceration, Monderigón uses other forms of torture. Melidonio tells Liberata:

mas para le dar tormento  
 busca toda invención.  
 Señora por se gozar  
 que cautivó estas señoras  
 cada día a aquellas horas  
 las hace todas cantar.  
 Sus llantos son muy continos  
 lloran con ojos divinos  
 y las sus lágrimas son  
 arroyos del corazón  
 con que molerán molinos.  
 Escuchad, que aquéllas son. (469)

Not long after Melidonio describes his cruel and salvage behaviour, Liberata experiences it firsthand. Monderigón not only threatens to take away her shelter but also to kill her brother if she does not surrender to him (471). At the end, and in spite of such savagery and violence, Monderigón's demise happens swiftly and effortless:

Toca Celipôncio sua bozina, pola qual a serpe e leão  
conheciam sua necessidade, os quais acodem mui apressadamente  
e matam o selvagem Monderigón, e logo se vão ao seu castelo e  
tiram a princesa Colimena e suas donzelas e irmãos. (474)

Nonetheless, Spanish violence is not limited to those considered savages, but it appears to be a trait that crosses all social classes. In fact, in Vicente's last work, *Floresta de Enganos*, a *Doctor de leyes* tries to take advantage of a young woman<sup>2</sup>. When she comes to him in search of legal advice, he attempts several times to lure her into the house. She however, senses danger and refuses to do so:

DOUTOR	Y pues no havéis d'entrar?
MOÇA	Entrarei, mas nam ja'gora.
DOUTOR	Y pues cuándo?
MOÇA	Estais agora estudando Só e eu sam grande já.
DOUTOR	No sé qué estáis recelando.
MOÇA	Mas será bem que me vá. (494)

As the dialogue continues, the doctor continues to insist that due to his old age, she has nothing to fear. The young woman, however, isn't convinced; her suspicions come true when he suggests that the payment he requires from his legal advice is not monetary, but rather some personal time together:

DOUTOR	Yo no quiero de vos plata ni dinero mas privar con vos por cierto en lugar mucho secreto por deciros cuanto os quiero. (495)
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The text also indicates that it's not the first time that he has made such advances and she is now ready to set him straight: «enganado andais, amigo / dias há que vo-lo digo» (496). The *doctor* is eventually persuaded to take on the disguise of a Black servant. However, instead

<sup>2</sup> His nationality is characterized by the fact that he speaks Spanish while the *moça* and her *ama* speak Portuguese.

of obtaining the reward he longs for, he becomes the victim of abuse inflicted by young the woman and her mistress. Now disguised as a Black servant, he is exposed to the most degrading treatment. The women also stress his immoral and corruptive behaviour and he is later driven away, unclothed, ashamed and humiliated.

Another example of violent behaviour and perhaps one of the best known is the *castellano* who appears in the *Auto da India*. The story revolves around the romantic escapades of Constança, who after her husband leaves to India, is courted by several suitors. Among them is Juan de Zamora, a Spanish man who also exhibits a violent nature. At one point, he even states that his love for her is so great that he would rather die a violent death than to be without her:

no fue él Juan de Zamora  
que arrastrado muera yo,  
si por quanto Dios creó  
os dexara media hora.  
Y, aunque la mar se humillara  
y la tormenta cesara,  
y el viento me obedeciera  
y el cuarto cielo se abriera,  
un momento no os dexara. (175)

He then explains what type of man he really is:

Trayo de dentro un león  
metido en el corazón:  
tiéneme el alma dañada  
d'ensangrentar esta espada  
en hombres, que es perdición.

Ya Dios es importunado  
de las ánimas que le envió  
y no es en poder mío  
dexar uno acuchilado.  
Dexé vivo allá en el puerto  
un hombrazo alto y tuerto  
y después fuilo a encontrar;

pensó que lo iba a matar,  
y de miedo cayó muerto. (176)<sup>3</sup>

However, in spite of such aggression and contrary to the reaction thus far by the women in other works, Juan de Zamora does not stir fear in Constança, but rather scorn and laughter. For instance, when she realizes that it is him at her door, she says: «vós sois, cuidei que era alguém» (174), implying therefore that he is no one, or at least, no one of importance. Then, while he boasts of the many killings, which, as we see above, even include a man who simply died out of fear, Constança laughs, interrupts him and even calls it pure nonsense (175-176). When he later returns, she is occupied with another suitor. After a considerable wait, his frustrations are revealed again through violence as he vows to destroy the house and the entire city:

Asosiega corazón,  
Adormiéntate león,  
no echas la casa en tierra,  
ni hagas tan cruda guerra,  
que mueras como Sansón.  
Esta burla es de verdad  
por los huesos de Medea  
sino que arrastrado sea  
mañana por la ciudad.  
Por la sangre soberana  
de la batalla troyana  
y juro a la casa santa. (181)

And he continues:

Quiero destruir el mundo,  
quemar la casa es la verdad,  
después quemar la ciudad.  
Señora, en esto me fundo. (181)

<sup>3</sup> The critics have interpreted these comments as a series of *españoladas*, quite common in the depicting of the Spanish in Portuguese literature (Saraiva 36).

Again, the response by Constança is not what he expects; not only does she dismiss him at once, but she also points out that he is bluffing (181). Indeed, Constança immediately replaces him with Lemos, a Portuguese suitor<sup>4</sup>. Bernardes points out that this comical situation indicates the disconnection between appearances and reality in which the Spanish «se define pela fanfarronice de palavras e de temperamento, em claro desajuste com a falta de coragem que o assinala» (323). Furthermore, while Lemos is identified as *irmão*, Juan de Zamora becomes the *castelhano vinagreiro*, who, as Constança tells Lemos: «vem polo dinheiro / do vinagre que me dava» (179). As Bernardes suggests, this is not a mere excuse or cover up, but rather «uma certificação da desvalia amorosa em relação a Juan de Zamora e como uma exaltação manifesta da preferência por Lemos» (324).

In the same manner that don Quijote emulates his model of Chivalry, Amadis of Gaul (Girard 2), Juan de Zamora also tries to portray a fearless and invincible character. The ideal man of Renaissance Spain is modeled and identified with the great heroic men of the past<sup>5</sup>, a man whose actions tend to repeat through different times and cultures, one that «must prove his manhood everyday by standing up to challenges and insults ... As well as being tough and brave» (Gilmore 16). Indeed, as Herrero García points out, there are certain attributes that define man, such as honour, strength, courage, but most importantly: «no hay arma comparable con la resistencia física ni economía de guerra superior a la sobriedad del soldado. Esta moral de imperio fue el gran nervio de la política española durante el siglo XVI» (61). Clearly, Juan de Zamora lacks the so-called *sobriedad*, the essential element of the great Spanish soldier. Through this comical portrayal of a discredited and ridiculous *fanfarrón*, Gil Vicente questions Spanish definitions of manhood and masculinity. As a truly keen observer of his society, Gil Vicente

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<sup>4</sup> We are faced here with the same message we encountered in *Auto da Fama*. That is, even a Portuguese woman of such questionable character will choose a Portuguese as a more appropriate suitor and not a Spanish.

<sup>5</sup> John Elliot's book offers an excellent discussion on old and new models of behaviour as well as the debate of nationhood and masculinity.

anticipates one of the great debates of his time, which will translate in a growing concern with Spain's feminization and decreased virility<sup>6</sup>.

The interactions between characters that derive from Spanish violence fit within the parameters of what Girard defines as good and bad violence. The good «as necessary to the unity of the community» while the bad «is affiliated to violent reciprocity» (115). Winter's answer to the shepherds hardships is violence, inflicting on them bitter cold, rain and the ruthless elements of Winter. Monderigón also reciprocates Liberata's rejection with violence, even threatening to kill her brother. Juan de Zamora reaction is similar when he does not get his way. In addition, Girard's notion of the sacrificial victim, those who are «exterior or marginal individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants» (12), is quite relevant to our discussion. The perpetrators of violence are outsiders and do not belong to these social circles. Either identified by name, by speech, or clearly stated on the text, their Spanish identity defines their marginality. Often, by inflicting or trying to inflict violence on the Portuguese serves to sever any possible social ties. In all cases, their actions are theirs alone, and since they are missing the necessary social link, «they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal» (Girard 13). In most cases, bad violence is counteracted with good violence aimed at restoring society. In Winter's case, just the mere presence of the Portuguese king is sufficient to destroy him:

Y porque va enflaqueciendo  
mi fuerza delante de vos  
para decir lo que entiendo  
señores dígalo Dios  
que yo ya voy pereciendo. (103)

This violent Spanish presence is thus quickly replaced with Summer along with praise for Portugal's people and its beautiful land

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on this subject, see the article of José Cartagena-Calderón and the book of Sydney Donnell.

(103-105). Monderigón's death is also necessary to restore and maintain societal values. After all, his death sets free Liberata, the princess and the maids, who end the story in a festive atmosphere where Colimena praises the Portuguese (477). In the same manner, we are compelled to applaud the verbal violence against the *doctor de leyes*, as his breakdown and shameful escape serve to restore societal goodness. The lesson here is twofold; on the one hand, the *moça* and her *ama* establish that the judge's power and social status do not give him permission to abuse them, and, on the other hand, by exposing the immoral nature of this character, they are the ones who ironically teach him the conduct proper to a judge. When he complains and demands his clothing, it is now the young woman's turn to threaten to expose him for what he really is:

E vós Doutor ervilhastes  
vindes vós em vosso siso  
que mentira.  
Ide pregar Altemira  
que s'eu quisesse falar  
mais quiséreis vós furta  
se vo-lo eu consentira. (501)

Order is again reinstated as the judge's final words indicate that he has learnt his lesson and will not attempt to threaten the young woman again:

Quién pensara norabuena  
que una rapaza de un año  
hiciera tan grande engaño  
a un doctor hecho en Sena.  
Será más sano  
callar hecho tan profano  
y olvidar esta guerra (501)

As for Juan de Zamora, there is no real violence. In the end, his bluff is evident. As he simply disappears, it is quite clear that there is not a place for him in that Portuguese environment. As the author himself has told us in the case of Winter, Spanish is the language of

pretence<sup>7</sup>, and as the characters reveal themselves, they also show the disconnection between appearances and reality. None of the characters is able to stand for what they pretend to be and their violence does not triumph over the greatness of Portugal. Winter succumbs to the mere presence of the Portuguese king, a serpent and a lion kill Monderigón with very little effort, Juan de Zamora is defeated by laughter and mockery, and *el doctor de leyes* is overpowered by the wisdom of two simple women.

Ultimately, Gil Vicente is able to show us once again the world in which he lives. The manner in which he portrays the Spanish through their violence also tells us something about how Vicente viewed them. Perhaps a society in crisis, since violence, as we have seen, is a direct consequence of the loss of social order. The prominence of Portugal's exemplary behaviour in these works serves not only the stress the flaws of the Spanish but also their limited capabilities when faced with «todo o bem e a verdade / [que] neste Portugal nasceram».

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<sup>7</sup> The author is the narrator who introduces the coming of Winter, who, as we have been told: «castellano en su decir / porque quem quiser fingir / na castelhana linguagem / achará quanto pedir» (77).

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