

## Eighteenth Century playwrights: Sheridan and Ramón de la Cruz

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### Key Words:

Metatheatre. Sheridan. Ramón de la Cruz. *Sainetes*. Parody.

### Abstract:

Sheridan, in English, and Ramón de la Cruz, in Spanish, wrote their plays during the eighteenth century and shared many topics and rhetorical resources although they were very different authors. They both created metatheatrical pieces and used parody as one of their strategies to fight against the prevailing model in French neoclassical tragedies. Some Ramón de la Cruz's *sainetes* and Sheridan's comedy *The Critic* will guide us through our analysis of their similarities and differences.

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## Dramaturgos del Siglo XVIII: Sheridan y Ramón de la Cruz

### Palabras clave:

Metateatro. Sheridan. Ramón de la Cruz. *Sainetes*. Parodia.

### Resumen:

Sheridan, en inglés y Ramón de la Cruz, en español, escribieron sus obras durante el siglo dieciocho y compartieron temas y recursos retóricos, aunque eran autores muy dispares. Ambos crearon piezas metateatrales y utilizaron la parodia como estrategia para oponerse al modelo imperante en las tragedias neoclásicas francesas. Los *sainetes* de Ramón de la Cruz y la comedia de Sheridan *El crítico* nos guiarán a través de nuestro análisis de sus similitudes y diferencias.

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## 1. Introduction

Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779) was written only a few months after Spain had declared war on England and there was a real threat of invasion. The parody of tragedy in the rehearsal of the play *The Spanish Armada* in the second and third acts echoes the courage exhibited by the nation in times of trial, but its lasting success is due to the fact that it deals with theatrical attitudes and techniques that are still recognisable and funny today. Sheridan's play is not the only metatheatrical exercise of his time; there were plays like Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) or Garrick's *A peep Behind the Curtain* (1767) that also dealt with the subject but «they are distinctly occasional, topical pieces which treat with irreverence that which the audiences enjoy, and which titillate mildly with real and imagined theatrical gossip» [Auburn, 1977: 152]. Sheridan shows the author's methods and tricks to write a play in such a clear and exaggerated way that they are seen as ridiculous and absurd. One after another, he makes the audience aware of the conventions they are subject to in order to understand the plot and the characters, and makes them participants in the art of the rhetorical devices used in writing fiction.

Ramón de la Cruz's *Sainetes* are short pieces that were staged between acts in longer plays. They were comical and the characters one can find in them are *Majos* and *Petimetres*, that is, from the low class, a meddler or a criminal the former and high middle class and Francophile the latter. De la Cruz shows the *Petimetre* very unsympathetically and, although the types he likes may be the worst of society, they represent the traditional Spaniard. Some of these *Sainetes* have as a topic the theatrical disputes and customs of the time and we will consider three of them: *El pueblo quejoso* (1765) (The Querulous People) *El teatro por dentro* (1768) (The Theatre seen from Inside) and *El poeta aburrido* (1773) (The Bored Poet). A fourth one, which is his famous parody *Manolo* (1769), will enable us to see how de la Cruz, like Sheridan, makes fun of the pompous language and easy resources of the tragic texts in vogue.



## 2. Metatheatre

Although Sheridan and Ramón de la Cruz may have paid attention to different stylistic points, they both share the criticism against the French tradition. Neither of them, for example, respects the laws of unity so valued by the neighbouring nation in the structure of their plays and in *Manolo*, more explicitly, we read:

SABASTIÁN: [...]

Pero Manolo viene; ¡Santos cielos!  
aquí del interés de la tragedia;  
y porque nunca la ilusión se trunque,  
influya Apolo la unidad, centena,  
el millar, el millón, y si es preciso,  
toda la tabla de contar entera.<sup>1</sup>

(Scene V)

De la Cruz was attacked by Moratín, among others, for his lack of commitment to morality in his choice of characters and sympathies due to the fact that the stage was seen as a tool to teach common people: «we are in a moment, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which there is the dream of reforming the theatre and educating the public»<sup>2</sup> [Coulon *in* De la Cruz, 1996: x]. Sheridan, in his turn, was aware of how ridiculous such attempts were and made Sneer utter these ironical words in answer to Mrs. Dangle in *The Critic* (1779):

SNEER: I am quite of your opinion Mrs. Dangle; the theatre, in proper hands, might certainly be made the school of morality; but now, I am sorry to say it, people seem to go there principally for their entertainment!  
(Act I, scene I)

And a few lines later, talking about a play written by a supposed friend of his, he adds:

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<sup>1</sup> But Manolo is coming, ¡Good Lord!/ That's the point of the tragedy,/and in order to have our illusion alive/ let Apollo inspire the unity, the hundred,/ the thousand and million, and if needs be so,/the whole multiplication table.



SNEER: You see it is called *The Reformed Housebreaker*; where, by the mere force of humour, housebreaking is put into so ridiculous a light, that if the piece has its proper run, I have no doubt but that bolts and bars will be entirely useless by the end of the season.  
(Act I, scene I)

Another central issue was whether it was acceptable to mix comedy and tragedy in a play. De la Cruz talks about the subject in *El teatro por dentro*:

CHINICA: [...] han dado los ingenios  
en que no se ha de mezclar  
lo ridículo con lo serio  
Todos: ¡Qué tontería!<sup>2</sup>  
(vv. 116-119)

By making fun of pretentious plays and feeling close to common people, Sheridan and Ramón de la Cruz showed respect for the audience and both were considered followers of the true ideal of freedom. In De la Cruz's *El pueblo quejoso*, we can hear García stating: «quien al público habla, /el público le responda» (Let who addresses the public/ by the public be answered) [vv.306-7].

Although there were also examples of parody written by French authors, like Marc-Antonie Legrand, the general attitude and tone of Ramón de la Cruz's and Sheridan's plays makes one think more of the Italian theatrical tradition than the French. Carlo Goldoni, as Francisco Lafarga points out [VVAA. 1996: 576-8], was one of the most translated authors into Spanish, and De la Cruz was a translator or adapter of plays from the Italian as well as from the French language. Sheridan can be compared to Goldoni in his treatment of the servants in *The Rivals*; and, in *The Critic* itself, we have a family of Italian actors and actresses visiting Mr. Dangle for protection (Act I, scene II). Humorous texts by Sheridan and De la Cruz and the way in which the characters are shown in them are similar to

<sup>2</sup> Chinica: bright minds have decided/ that one should not mix/ what is funny with what is grave// All: ¡What a silly thing to say!



Goldonian plays, where all the characters are finally forgiven in a very humanizing happy end. Moore was aware of that fact regarding De la Cruz when he wrote the following lines although not connecting it to any other author in particular: «One other important quality characterizes Don Ramón: a comedian's love for the man he is laughing at» [1972, 160], something one cannot say about the French tradition as we can clearly see if we compare Moliere's and Goldoni's *Miser*. The Italian *Lazzi* are good examples of theatrical structures which resemble the *Sainete* and, in the English tradition, we also count with the pantomime, also used as entertainment in longer plays and owing some of its traits to the *Commedia dell'arte*.

### 3. Plagiarism

The borrowing of plots was a very common practise in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and free translations or adaptation of literary works produced a fertile field for plagiarism. In *The Critic* we find Sir Fretful Plagiary, a perfect example of a plagiarist, but it is yet another character, the one which provides the more absurd justification:

DANGLE: Yes, I think there is something like it in *Othello*.

PUFF: Gad! Now you put me in mind on't, I believe there is –but that's of no consequence- all that can be said is, that two people happened to hit on the same thought- and Shakespeare made use of it first, that's all.

Sheridan himself wrote *Pizarro* (1799) as an adaptation of *The Spaniards in Peru* by the German writer Kotzebue. This play is, precisely, the kind of tragedy he makes fun of in *The Critic*, becoming thus able of self-criticism, a virtue that not many playwrights possess. *Pizarro* was very successful, because these kinds of pieces were in vogue at the time and the public enjoyed them. The topic is particularly illustrative of the dislike for the Spaniards and it also shows a general trend of revolutionary ideals: «It was the age of revolution, the dawn of Romanticism, a time conducive to



sympathy with heroic tales of brave Indians resisting invasion and oppression by cruel Spanish tyrants» [Worth, 1992: 34]. Ramón de la Cruz as translator and adapter also made free use of plots and scenes and was accused of not being original. Many of his *Sainetes* were inspired in the French and Italian repertoire but he changed them to appeal to the Spanish public and to talk about issues of the time: «Ramon de la Cruz's *Sainetes* become more and more connected with coetaneous reality» [Coulon in De la Cruz, 1996: xiii].

#### 4. The language in mock tragedies.

Ramón de la Cruz and Sheridan, even though they themselves could have made use of pompous language in some of their works, were aware of the artificiality of the linguistic resources which filled serious tragedies to the point of making them ridiculous. From *Pizarro* we can draw examples of this empty rhetoric, as when Pizarro describes the treason he has suffered.

PIZARRO: But when he found that the soft folly of the pleading tears he dropt upon my bosom fell on marble, he flew and joined the foe; then, profiting by the lessons he had gain'd in wrong'd Pizarro's school, the youth so disciplined and led his new allies, that soon he for'd me –Ha! I burn with shame and fury while I own it! in base retreat and foul discomfiture to quit the shore. (Act I, scene I)

In *The Critic* the exaggerated useless rhetoric is one of the basic elements of the comic effect. In the tragedy staged in the play, the introductory information about the previous events is also the place chosen to display these linguistic exercises.

SIR CHRISTOPHER: Alas, my noble friend, when I behold  
Your tented plains in martial symmetry  
Arrayed – When I count o'er yon glittering lines  
Of crested warriors, where the proud steeds neigh,  
And valour – breathing trumpet's shrill appeal,  
Responsive vibrate on my list'ning ear;  
When virgin majesty herself I view,



Like her protecting Pallas veiled in steel,  
Which graceful confidence exhort to arms!  
When briefly all I hear or see bears stamp  
Of martial vigilance, and stern defence,  
I cannot but surmise. –Forgive, my friend,  
If the conjecture's rash – I cannot but  
Surmise. – The state some danger apprehends!

SNEER: A very cautious conjecture that.  
(Act II, scene II)

In *Manolo* by Ramón de la Cruz, the same mock language is found in the presentation of the hero this time, also at the beginning of the piece.

SABASTIÁN: Esto es, señor, sin duda, que Manolo,  
aquel de quien han sido las pobreza  
en Madrid tan notorias, aquel joven  
que, alumno de las mañas y la escuela  
del ensine Zambullo, dio al maestro  
tanto que hacer, en el mesón se apea  
después de concluir las diez campañas  
que en la África vio, pues su soberbia,  
no cabiendo en el mundo de la una parte,  
repartió entre las dos su corpulencia.<sup>3</sup>  
(Scene IV)

Another device both authors share is the creation of names for their characters suggesting and telling about their traits. In *The Critic* names like Dangle, Sneer or Plagiary make very clear what they refer to and in *Manolo*, Mediodiente (half-tooth) or Tío Matute (uncle smuggler) describe Lavapiés, the area in Madrid where the *Sainete* is set and where there were many thieves and criminals. *Manolo*, in Africa, was imprisoned and therefore was not able to take part in any military action at all, but he arrives as a returning hero boasting of having been of vital importance. In fact, the character, although exaggerated and obviously a literary creation, was close to the public because many young men had had to join the army as mercenaries

<sup>3</sup> The meaning, sir, no doubt, is that Manolo,/ that one whose deeds in Madrid are so well known, that young man/ that pupil of tricks and of the distinguished Zambullo, that gave his teacher so much work, is at the inn/ after having finished ten campaigns/ that Africa has seen, because his arrogance,/ not having enough room in one side of the world,/ split between the two its corpulence.



and their only skills were killing and stealing, which was their occupation when they were back home again.

## 5. Theatrical types.

Ramón de la Cruz, in his Sainete *The Bored Poet*, reminds the audience of the overuse of the figure of the monk as an evil character in Europe. Although the easy recognisable types were inherited from the commedia dell'arte, there were also stereotypes in France and England. In Whalpole's *Mysterious Mother*, for example, we have a famous evil monk trying to discover the incestuous sins of an apparently very virtuous lady who refuses confession. In De la Cruz's Sainete *Don Justo* answers a monk who appears in scene to complain about the image which is given of monks in theatres.

DON JUSTO: Señor, es pleito vencido  
que en toda la Europa sean  
los abates el objeto  
ridículo de la escena.<sup>4</sup>  
(vv. 109-112)

But if there is a character that is found in most tragedies or parodies of the time it is the warrior-lover. Being him a mock hero or a serious one, he is always in love. In Sheridan *Don Ferolo Whiskerandos* has fallen in love with Tilburina, the Governor of Tilbury Fort's daughter, while he is imprisoned.

WHISKERANDOS: Art thou the true? Begone cares, doubts and fears,  
I make you all a present to the winds;  
And if the winds reject you – try the waves.  
(Act II, scene II)

In *Manolo*, not only the hero, but also his opponent is debating between two women:

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<sup>4</sup>Sir, it is a lost case/ that in the whole of Europe/ the monks are/ made fun of in the scene.



MEDIODIENTE: [...]

¿Dónde está mi valor?...¿Mas, mi fineza,  
adónde está también? ¡Oh, injustos hados,  
qué de afectos contrarios me rodean!<sup>5</sup>

(Scene X)

Obviously, the language is not appropriate for such a character but this is another criticism to neoclassical plays: all characters display a wonderful command of language no matter what their background is. Sheridan in *The Critic* refers to the problem too, and Puff has the perfect answer ready when Sneer complains.

SNEER: But, Mr. Puff, I think not only the Justice, but the clown seems to talk in as high a style as the first hero among them.

PUFF: Heaven forbid they should not in a free country! – Sir, I am not of making slavish distinctions, and giving all the fine language to the upper sort of people.

SNEER: That's very noble of you, indeed.

(Act III, scene I)

Of all the truants in love in the plays of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the most famous one is Macheath and the mock opera *The beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay the reference text for many of the low class literary characters that followed. There was a French translation of A. Hallam, *L'Opéra du gueux*, in 1750. He is also between two (and more) women:

MACHEATH: Which way shall I turn me? –How can I decide?  
Wives, the day of our death, are as fond as a Bride,  
One Wife is too much for most Husbands to hear,  
But two at a time there's no Mortal can bear  
[...] (Act III, scene XI).

Another feature that heroes share is their similar attitude before the tragic end. The death scenes in *Manolo* and in «*The Spanish Armada*» are

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<sup>5</sup> Where is my courage?... But, my subtleness,/ where is it too? Oh fate unfair,/ what a lot of opposing feelings surround me!



very funny passages where one can see the excesses of the neoclassical tragedy again. In De la Cruz's text the characters kill themselves in order to have a proper finale; A. Moore summarizes it with these words: «Manolo dies in his mother's arms as Mediodiente is exultant and Remilgada relieved. Chiripa kills herself because her son's death has deprived her life of meaning. Her husband kills himself to avoid paying his wife's funeral expenses and the expenses of mourning. Remilgada kills herself because her father is dead. Potagera plans to kill herself for love of Manolo, but she prefers to go to bed to die in comfort» [1972: 88]. In Sheridan's rehearsed tragedy the comic effect is acquired by giving just the opposite from what we expect, that is an extremely short, too short in fact, farewell:

WHISKERANDOS:

O cursed parry! – that last thrust in tierce  
Was fatal! – Captain, thou hast fenced well!  
And Whiskerandos quits this busting scene  
For all eter-

BEEFEATER:

-nity – He would have added, but stern death  
Cut short his being, and the noun at once!

(Act III, scene I)

## 6. Conclusion

In Sheridan's comedies and Ramón de la Cruz's *Sainetes* the French neoclassical tragedy and its great success and adaptations in the British Isles and Spain are criticized, not only because the style is artificial but because the whole dramatic idea is foreign. The Italian influence is very strong in 18<sup>th</sup> century comedies and although France is the reference for good taste and fashion, one has to pay closer attention to the Italian tradition, as well as the Spanish and English traditions themselves in order to understand the clues for humour.

In Spain and the British Isles, newspapers and magazines began to be very powerful at the time and in the beginning of *The Critic* we witness a discussion over them. In the first scene Mr. Dangle is reading a theatre



review in the *Morning Chronicle* and later on, Puff (Act I, scene II) explains with every detail this taxonomy for «puffing» or letting people know about things according to his own interest, showing for the first time and with irony the professional critic. It is also through the press that Ramón de la Cruz is attacked and the argument is, curiously enough, that he is producing a false image of the Spanish types: In the *Discurso XXXII* in *El Censor* we can read about his *Sainetes* that: «one can learn nothing but (...) the coarse and beastly Majo's manners, being passed as features of the Spanish character» [See: Andioc, 1976: 159].<sup>6</sup>

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Age of Reason, we also find some of the most humanised humorous texts. In Italy, Goldoni provides us with a great amount of comedies that have as a subject common people and their daily affairs and even though there's criticism, he is never cruel to his characters and we can always feel some sympathy for all of them. The same attitude can be said of authors writing comedies in English and Spanish. But in France, it will have to be Diderot, in his *Paradox* the one to introduce some spontaneity in the stage of his time and in a way, leave definitely behind Moliere's cruel view of the human weaknesses.

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<sup>6</sup> «no se aprende otra cosa que (...) las modales toscas y brutales de los Majos, haciéndolas pasar por características del Español».



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