

## HAMLET AND THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX IN TWENTIETH CENTURY SPAIN. A GALICIAN TRANSLATION OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN MYTH

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**Abstract:** *Reception Studies in XX century Spain have recently started to pay attention to the role of Shakespeare in the complex Spanish scenario from the end of the 19th century up to the Democratic Transition of the 20th. Works such as Shakespeare in Catalan. Translating Imperialism (2007) by Helena Buffery should be thus considered as a pivotal milestone in this tendency. However, and as far as Galicia is concerned, Shakespearean reception in the North-Western region of Spain could not be explained without the works of Álvaro Cunqueiro and the Freudian interpretations of the Galician writer.*

**Keywords:** *Hamlet, Shakespeare, Oedipus complex, Galician, adaptation.*

The cultural disaster provoked by Franco's regime in Galicia had more harmful and persistent effects on theatre than on any other literary or artistic field. The limited but intense stage activity during the nineteen twenties and thirties was followed by an almost absolute emptiness. Only Galaxia Press (founded in 1950) worked by the time that Cunqueiro was writing his *Incerto Señor Don Hamlet, Príncipe de Dinamarca* (1958) struggling with official interference, in favour of the cultural recovery of Galicia after the war. Institutions such as Escola Dramática Galega and Escola Rexional de Declamación had no alternative but to close, and theatre studies were slowed down up to the democratic transition in the nineteen seventies, with a straightforward influence on performance quality.

In the nineteen sixties, actors and directors willing to restart the history of Galician theatre had no references except for those provided by cinema and theatre on TV. Theatre places, very active during the nineteen twenties and the Second Republic (1931-1936), were turned into cinemas. Authors like Cunqueiro who insisted on writing plays in Galician knew that the possibilities of staging those plays were little. They were writing that invention called "theatre to be read" (Lago et al 488-9). Even so, the author drives his readers to plays with no connection at all with any previous plot or visual references, located in the antipodes of what the history of contemporary theatre has labelled as a "well done play", fitting a successful scheme (Monleón 494). Cunqueiro's drama thus becomes the foundation of 20th

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century post civil war Galician theatre, a theatre that was already well-established in other communities such as Catalonia. As Helena Buffery explains in the second and third chapters of her *Shakespeare in Catalan*, the extensive French and Italian Shakespearean tradition from the 19th century is in permanent contact with the Catalan stage at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The multiple and successful performances in 1898 of *Hamlet* on the Catalan stage as a means of denouncing the lack of action in the loss of Cuba that same year, constitutes a relevant example of that strong tradition. However, in Galicia, Cunqueiro is almost our only starting point for Shakespearean influence, with the exception of the translation and performance of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* by Villar Ponte [Antón Vilar Ponte: *As alegres casadas de Windsor* 1920 (?)] in the twenties.

In this context, Cunqueiro is not always the person he thought he was. That is, a conventional falangist. On the contrary, he turns out to be a conservative writer who suffers the cultural limitation of Francoism despite his ideas. The author writes - in Castilian and Galician - about myths which are suitable for the likes of Galician people, providing Galician settings to make his stories familiar to his readers, and promoting Galician culture beyond dictatorial limits. He does not hesitate to become an unusual falangist who uses the same sort of myths which were common among the liberal authors thus to avoid censorship publishing his works in Galaxia Press while trying to continue with the Galician cultural life after the war. The publication of *O Incerto Señor Don Hamlet, Príncipe de Dinamarca* in 1958 is one of the first examples that prove the influence of Shakespeare and his works in the Galician cultural life in the 19th and 20th centuries. With many references published in journals and newspapers on

the life and works of the English playwright, this play is the first example of Shakespearean reception in Galicia. Yet between Shakespeare and Cunqueiro, Sigmund Freud was born. In this article, we will try to prove how the Oedipus complex and Freudian theories mandatorily influenced Cunqueiro's version.

In writing this play, Cunqueiro learns about himself and builds a new personality out of his permanent doubts and fears. He uses his knowledge to seek for the non-revengeful re-establishment of peace after Francoism in order to prevent his own destruction. Like many other writers during the Spanish post-Civil war period, Cunqueiro suffered both the economic and cultural crisis inherent to a dictatorial regime. This partially explains his drastic political and ideological change during his life and works, a political and ideological alteration that will place Cunqueiro, with the apparent cultural "openness" in the sixties and the creation of the Galician Publishing House Galaxia, in the defence line of his native Galicia and its cultural interests again. At this stage, Cunqueiro will reunite with the Galician intelligentsia of his university years. They constitute the essential support Don Álvaro needs to start again. Gradually recovering his spirit, our author will immerse himself in the Galician cultural sphere of the time. However, not every intellectual was willing to accept Cunqueiro's return to the Galician cultural and literary realm. Largely despised by Spanish media and repudiated by many friends and colleagues after the war, Cunqueiro's comeback in Galicia will be difficult and controversial. Reconciliation of the "two Spains" from the Civil war and later years will therefore be essential in Cunqueiro's works. Indeed, his proposal is reoriented from the issue of vengeance to reconciliation in this sense.

On a similar basis, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* uses the power of theatre to try to restore

the order of the Old King through the punishment of the guilty usurper. Cunqueiro, meanwhile, writes a new play including variations on Shakespeare's story with the explicit intention to make his so-called loose Shakespearean pieces fit. But in fact, the Galician author makes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* fit through the elimination of the original idea of violent punishment and revenge. In a post-war environment, and envisioning the end of Francoism, Cunqueiro-always in disguise and hidden behind his own play-uses such a tragedy of revenge as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to question the need for revenge in the years of cultural openness during the last decades of Francoism.

The conservative author is able to question himself in order to question Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to provide a non-revengeful alternative in his *Don Hamlet*. In a way, this is his technique to question all those intellectuals who criticised his controversial attitude during the first years of Francoism, trying to counteract their possible revenge on him. In his defence, thus, the author explains that he uses the Classics to be able to escape from censorship rather than to cope with it. Nevertheless, he still is the same author who questions the use of literature for political purposes when his play's characters criticise *Hamlet*'s use of the play-within-the-play device. However, Cunqueiro does not only suffer from conservative and leftist repressions during this period, he also suffers from discontent of both critics and readers when he starts drafting the first act of his *Don Hamlet*. This controversy was reflected in an article published in the Galician newspaper *Faro de Vigo* in 1958:

"I have received an anonymous letter, placed in my mailbox in Pontevedra, which tells me that it is stupid that I make now my mind to write a dramatic piece in Galician about the doubts and death of

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; that wrote in English a certain Mr. Shakespeare] and that it is immense vanity comparing myself with him, that if I wanted to create theatre in Galician I should seek a topic of our everyday reality, and if I would like to stubbornly rewrite *Hamlet* again, translating Shakespeare was enough. Etc., etc. (Well: I was also called a vacuous writer by the anonymous hand). [...] I write these lines not as an answer to the anonymous letter, which is a string of inconsistencies and disrespectful remarks; but because with this writing, there are already twelve, twelve letters precisely [...] against my version." (Cunqueiro, 1958, 25)<sup>1</sup>

Being aware of the difficulties of cultivating a classic myth as *Hamlet* in Galicia during the Spanish post-war, Cunqueiro explains to the reader that his version was indebted, when it comes to a variety of sources, not only to Shakespeare as one of his favourite writers, but also to numerous books, versions, and schools of thought:

"Let me also warn you, before my "Don Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" comes to light, that my version "sounds like" Shakespeare. I had no reason to hide from that voice. [...] I have given more than enough evidence of my creative ability, [...] all my friends and my few followers also know what attireless reader of Shakespeare I am. [...] And when I read aloud to a friend my "Hamlet", I knew that if they recognised Shakespearean voices in my words, I was right in the expression of my tragedy." (25)

It is quite possible that the publication of any Cunqueirian work can be summed up as a provincial voice that the author wants to highlight and after reconstructing the whole myth, he builds again a universal story. Ultimately, the expression of purely local experience is the approach to universal localism or universalism. As we

can imagine, the local, the universal, and the myths are essential in order to understand Cunqueiro's cosmogony. In his own words:

"I believe in myths - Merlin, Hamlet, Ulysses - and I know that they have a revealing energy which lights our way through this bizarre cosmos every day. There is nothing more powerful than myths nowadays. They are always breaking news" (25).

The role of myths, though, and especially the myth of Prince Hamlet, can only be explained if we consider myths as a revealing energy that exceeds the boundaries of censorship and repression of the totalitarian Francoist regime. This is manifested by Cunqueiro when he answers the following question in an interview during his last years: "Topics such as ancient Greek and Latin literature are often the subject of your books, why do you like classic literature so much?"

"- [...] I experienced the Civil War and subsequent years and I had an intellectual and moral concern about the futility of vengeance. This is what "A man who looked like Orestes" is about. I am a reader of Shakespeare since I was a child and they are all in it. One day I was surprised that "Hamlet" did not fit within his work. There was a missing piece. I came to realise that this great drama of human maturity was the Oedipus complex. In other words, the murderer of his father, who married his mother, was his true father. Then everything fits and the mother wants to marry his son to avoid revenge. After I wrote my Hamlet, other writers would come to this discovery. Clearly, eternal human passions are all the same since the creation of classic myths. Human beings, since then, had no new passions. Everything is condensed in the Greeks.

It is curious, but during the German occupation of France, a Frenchman translated Homer. During Francoism,

Segarra, in Catalonia, translated Shakespeare [...]. I know that censorship was ferocious against a few paragraphs in Segarra's translation, as Shakespeare was often a political opinion. Thus, the classics are sometimes the way a man has to say issues that are not allowed to say in a situation without much freedom of speech." (Outeiriño, 1979, 12)

Themes such as vengeance, death and forgiveness, are therefore within the Cunqueirian *Hamlet* as much as in Shakespeare's. However, whether these issues represent an ambiguous or open critical apparatus against Franco's regime or not, is difficult to solve. To be able to deepen in these issues, we should also analyse Cunqueiro's other Shakespearean works. The Galician writer in fact not only adapts the Shakespearean myth on stage, he also works in various formats such as radio programmes as *Sueño de una noche de San Juan - A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and a play-within-the-novel in *Función de Romeo e Xulieta: Famosos namorados - Romeo and Juliet*. These two important works, together with the critical essay "A Thousand Faces of Shakespeare", are also essential in order to understand the foundation which holds the Shakespearean reception in Cunqueiro and in Galicia during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, and apart from vengeance and reconciliation, Cunqueiro also acknowledges that he had always been convinced of the fact that there was more to say about Shakespeare's own tale: the Oedipus complex.

After many years, the author finally reaches the conclusion that the usurper had to be Hamlet's real father, being the fratricide and the subsequent "incest" which derives from the classic myth and abandons its Judaeo-Christian aspect the starting point of his version. It is rather more anthropologically Christian than barbarous, rough or medieval. (Míguez

512-3). The Christian element is indeed firmly superimposed on the resolution of Don Hamlet, when suicide is reconciled with remorse. For instance, the influence of the Catholic church in an Oedipus play is depicted when the Choir demands on faith and the Holy Oils (I, ii), when Laertes calls the ghost an article of faith and describes him praying for his salvation (I, iii), or when the study of theology is suggested (II, ii). Hamlet also talks about God in some scenes (III, ii) and he absolves his mother (III, v) at the same time that his image ironically appears in coins with the legend “By the grace of God” (III, vii). However, the clash with the open proposed incest and the lack of solutions to several questions during the play makes the drama an unstable text.

*Don Hamlet*'s awareness of these issues is finally explicit in Cunqueiro's 1980 edition: “I suppressed it in the first edition but now, in brackets, I include all the seduction scenes. In the end, I summarise the ideas reflected in Carlos Rojas', in *The Neophiliacs* in 1969, as well as in other plays...” (Ledo 5). The pieces of the Shakespearean play now fit better as Cunqueiro points in his final edition's notes in 1973. The author explains in these same notes that the variations on Shakespeare's original included in his *Don Hamlet* were later supported by the publication of Christopher Booker's *The Neophiliacs* in 1969, eleven years after the first publication of his *Don Hamlet*. As Cunqueiro quoted, Booker studies the evolution of thought and English cultural events, in addition to the literary ones, of these last years. He includes a remark on Hamlet and explains that Hamlet's problem is his immaturity and finding that Claudius is his real father. In those same notes, Cunqueiro complains about Carlos Rojas not mentioning his *Don Hamlet* until a few years later: “Since I published Hamlet, Carlos Rojas published a novel

titled *Aquelarre* that deals with a boy who is driven crazy from time to time and those moments he believes that he is Hamlet, then he wants to kill the usurper but he does not do it because he is his father” (Cunqueiro, 2003, 101).

Many differences are expected indeed when comparing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Cunqueiro's. Shakespeare is a courtier of the times of James I who adapts himself to his ideological world in order to tell a story that he had read in old sagas. On the threshold of his *Don Hamlet*, however, Cunqueiro explains that he does not arrive at the dramatic text of Shakespeare until there is nothing more than corpses on stage. According to Ricardo Carvalho Calero, the only reason why Cunqueiro dares to give us another version of the story is because, perhaps, Cunqueiro's version is closer to “the reality of events” (248):

“I do not remake, I do not modernise, I do not explain. I tell a story that perhaps occurred. I imagine myself like one of those soldiers who arrived with Fortibras to Elsinor announced by military gunpowder, when there are still corpses in the room of the castle: the usurper, the queen, and Hamlet at the end.

A soldier I am, maybe, or a mounted archer, that places his weapons in a corner and helps to pile the corpses of the crowned ones and their heir in the Cemetery.” (Cunqueiro, 2003, 9-10)

Although Cunqueiro defends Italian comedies and the three-act structure used in his *Don Hamlet*, the Galician writer questions the use of the play within the play, reduces the number of characters, and criticises Shakespeare's tone in his version. Cunqueiro's critical attitude with the Shakespearean originals somehow represents the obstacles that Shakespeare had to overcome in the 19th and 20th centuries Spanish conservative stage. In this sense, Laura Campillo Arnaiz gives

full account of many difficulties that Shakespearean translators had to overcome in order to adapt Shakespeare to the likes of a Spanish audience (2005). But going back to the play within the main play, the players performing question the Shakespearean original in Cunqueiro's *Don Hamlet*. Colombina states that the Queen verbalises the most unsuitable expressions before daring to reproduce her words: "Several men, varied according to their flesh, would be more bearable. And the soul would be free to love one gallant, lined with roses" (Cunqueiro, 2003, 67). The Italian players' performance is also questioned by some characters. Both Halmar (Claudius) and Gerda (Gertrude) want to give their own version of the story. Players are not expected to reveal the main characters' truth here:

"Halmar: Hamlet, I'm telling you that it wasn't like that..." (77) [...]

"Halmar: I speak of me and the others..." (78) [...]

"Gerda: ... Should we bring a whore coming from Italy to say in the covered courtyard of Elsinore what kind of whore the Queen of Denmark is?" (79-80) [...]

"Gerda: I want to be heard! Colombina, young lady, the reprimend is not for you. Forgive us all. He was the coward, crying on my lap. You did not want to die, Halmar..." (79-80)

Cunqueiro also openly shows in his *Don Hamlet* what he considers to be the truth behind the original characters. Shakespeare's play is the point of departure for his version. By revealing their hidden parts, the characters in the work by Cunqueiro also unmask their counterparts in the Shakespearean source without the need for a parallel play. As for the prince, the shadows that cover his character in Shakespeare are cleared in Cunqueiro (Marín 532). But Cunqueiro's character can only go a step further than Shakespeare's when the author undergoes

that same process previously experienced by Shakespeare's Hamlet. Both Hamlet and Cunqueiro undergo a double transformation process to "unmask killers" in search of Truth. Shakespeare's Hamlet first uses madness to disguise himself trying to hide his revengeful intentions. From that point on, he can question everybody's actions openly, the play-within-the-play device being the final step in his search process. A conservative Cunqueiro hides his ideas behind a willing author who promotes Galician culture after the war. Only then he can disguise himself as the soldier who arrives at Elsinore and tells his own version of the story, questioning, in the end, Shakespeare's version. The disguise metaphor is relevant in Cunqueiro as the audience listens to a full speech of Don Hamlet when he states that killers usually wear a double disguise. An internal disguise for themselves and an external disguise prevent others from discovering them:

"Hamlet: ... A real murderer dresses up twice: so the outsiders don't realise that he is the bearer of the dark weapon, and another one for himself, for his own sake. Murderers are always decorating their hearts with music, their thoughts, with new clothes. Dressing up with a different costume to hide an old and single reason, believing they had another excuse to commit their crime, a powerful alibi." (Cunqueiro, 2003, 59-60)

Don Hamlet also finds out the truth of his existence here. As the Choir pointed out, Shakespeare's Hamlet was playing the role of his identity without knowing it. Hamlet, thus, was not aware that the killer was his own father. However, in Cunqueiro's version, Hamlet deciphers his real identity, and there is no need to play a double role any longer:

"Choir: I am the choir. Any piece of theatre must have a choir. I am the one and I am many. I can be night and day, secret



words, rumours running, passing shadows from here to there, listening. I am Mr vague suspicions, Don murmurings, [...] Don lurking eye in a lock, a prophet in the plaza..." (22)

[...]

"Hamlet: The King is dead, now I am the King. It is law, tradition, and order. I am the eldest, bloody flower engendered in the bridal night.

Choir: No! That is not what you are!" (27)

But perhaps, Hamlet's mother is more important in the play than we may believe in the first place. She is actually the element that starts the incestuous plot in the Galician version. Therefore, she is no secondary character in the play, but a very significant one when she asks for a voice to be heard. She demands to tell the story from her perspective. She wants everyone to know her implication in the old King's assassination: "Gerda: ... Because I want them to know it was me who, in the end, decided, Polonio. And as it was me who in the end decided, I paid for it. I am still paying" (80). She does not hesitate to contradict Halmar's own version of the story (Claudius) in order to tell her own truth:

Gerda: ... And my hand led you to the most horrible crime. The cup and poison were mine. Your gracious hand was only an obedient servant. I took the shortest route. The King, my holy husband, could not ever be a murderer. He was a real man, tired of being genuine, a royal head and heart, justice himself, and as a courtier, a gentle confidant. I could not continue deceiving him. I am telling you, Hamlet, I could not. And he died. (82)

In the following lines, King Halmar is killed and in the most Oedipal fashion the Queen openly declares her love for Hamlet in the following scene:

Gerda: Hamlet, we have actually lived apart from each other for so long... we are only a man and a woman, rather than son

and mother. When I was a child, they used to sing old sagas to my brothers and sisters, old sagas which accounted the marital right of royal mothers over their sons. (88)

[...]

Gerda: I would not dare to think of you as your wife, Hamlet, if you did not find me attractive, the most beautiful woman. (89)

[...]

Gerda: Listening to old sagas, have you ever thought I could choose you one day, ask you for a heir? Do you like my body warmth? while embracing Hamlet with her two hands around his hip. (91)

In the end, and supported by old sagas, Cunqueiro shows what he considers to be the truth behind Shakespeare's characters. The author plays within Shakespeare's play. He looks back to the Nordic sagas not only to deepen into Shakespeare's version, but also to question this author's own use of the play-within-the-play device. His constant hints at the Shakespearean work make his play another version, another main play within the Shakespearean play that he questions.

The background problem then, both in Cunqueiro and Hamlet, is a personality problem. That is, it is a matter of "to be or not to be". If Hamlet in the Shakespearean proposal is a dubitative character submitted to search and discovery of a precise story - as it happened with Orestes, guided by Electra, both Cunqueiro and his Don Hamlet are committed to the discovery of themselves. For Shakespeare's Hamlet, the accounts seem to register the paternal ghost's complaints. His action clearly tends to clarify a hidden crime, re-establishing peace and the Court's moral order with the punishment of the culprit. But the reality of Don Hamlet is not exactly that one. Self-knowledge involves his own unavoidable destruction as it will lead him to the

acknowledgement of a series of events and feelings which affect his own awareness.

All in all, *Don Hamlet* is distanced from Orestes or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to get closer to Oedipus, whose tragedy is based on the assassination of his father, the marriage to his mother and also, on a self-discovery journey. A self-discovery journey of the anti-hero of our story that is very similar to the self-discovery journey that Álvaro Cunqueiro experienced during the post-civil war period in Spain.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The translations of Cunqueiro's *Don Hamlet* into English in this article are mine, unless otherwise specified.

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