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Recensioni

Alberto Escalante Varona, *La Escuela de Cruz. Textos y autores del teatro popular en el Madrid ilustrado*, Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres 2020, 173 pp.

In the field of academic research, there are few occasions in which a work is offered that is both informative and specialised, carried out with scrupulous scientific rigour without disdaining the communicative capacity of the discourse. *La Escuela de Cruz. Textos y autores del teatro popular en el Madrid ilustrado* is one of those cases in which any type of reader would find erudition as well as pleasure in its reading. It is not without reason that it has been recognised with the first Ópera Prima Ana Holgado 2019 prize, awarded by the publications service of the University of Extremadura. The author of the book proposes a new approach to the popular theatre that was produced throughout the years of the Enlightenment in the heart of the city of Madrid. The method to be followed is undoubtedly one of the main attractions of this monograph: socio-cultural literary history. Through this method we are offered a rich account of the lives, aspirations, desires, and hopes of popular professional playwrights, as well as the lives of actors and companies; in short, an in-depth study of the social apparatus that articulated the theatres of Enlightenment Madrid.

The study is divided into six chapters which correspond to unlike time intervals between them, covering important historical periods in the second half of the century and which articulate the dialectic underpinning the monograph: classicists versus modernists, «good taste» versus «corruption of art», instruction in morality and virtue versus praise of vice; in short, a dialectic between «moratinianos» (the School of Leandro Fernández de Moratín) and «comelleros» (the School of Ramón de la Cruz). Chapter I (pp. 27-52), devoted to the years 1750-1765, concentrates on the beginnings of popular theatre at a time when classical poetics was being fully re-institutionalised, from which the figure of its founder emerges, resituated in Ramón de la Cruz, rather than in Comella, as the main disciple of José de Cañizares. Chapter II (pp. 53-76), which focuses on the years 1766-1780, takes two events of historical relevance as reference points: the Esquilache Mutiny and the expulsion of the Jesuits, from which it begins to describe the process of institutionalisation and specialisation of the civil service as one of the main arms of action of the state machine of the Enlightenment monarchy with Charles III at its head. The various layers of this social group included the professional writers who would be the greatest exponents of this theatre, and whose writing would participate in the renovation of the system made up of statesmen or civil servants who occupied their posts through meritocracy. In this way, popular theatre burst into the institutional sphere for its propagandistic use and to control public taste. Chapter III (pp. 77-97), focusing on the years

1780-1784, details how this group of functionaries gains more power and influence, from which arises the distinction of the meritocratic class as opposed to authors who, instead of earning a living, can make a comfortable living from literature. In this way, the protagonists of this story distinguish between civil servants and non-civil servants, between popular authors and authors of the classicist élite. In short, the distinction between making a living from literature or surviving on it offers very different life scenarios, but the volatility of literary glory foresees the strengthening of the reformists who, with classicist aspirations, present a radically different conception of literary practice. Chapter IV (pp. 99-116) concentrates on the period 1784-1788; literary criticism in the press is another agent in this account and characterises a time when the school of civil servants or «comellistas» are clearly under attack by the «moratinianos» or classicists, a dichotomy in which the figure of Cruz stands out as an eclectic figure, whose nature is the best exponent of this characteristic aspect of the Enlightenment. Chapter V (pp. 117-136) focuses on the turbulent period of 1789-1801, which fuelled the patriotic sentiment that permeated dramatic production but, despite the theatre's function for this purpose, it was constrained by strict regulation and control to avoid the contagion of revolutionary ideas and to re-establish the restoration of good taste both in the institutions and on the stage. With this situation of political instability and the economic failure of the first great classical reform, the last chapter (VI, pp. 137-150) links up with the events that took place between 1802 and 1808, the return to absolutism and the war against France, as well as the definitive defeat of the «comellistas» and the establishment in literary memory of the good literary taste concentrated in the survival of Moratín's work.

The body of the monograph, made up of these chapters, is introduced by a section entitled «Against the «School of Comella»» and a coda that follows it, «The School of Cruz». Between these two sections, the process of resignification that Escalante Varona carries out of the popular illustrated theatre is witnessed; it is, therefore, a profound exercise of redesigning, resituating and, one of the most arduous things in research activity, decentring the thought of the critical tradition in order to, taking the best of it, shed light on a field that has not been treated as it deserves; in short, an admirable exercise in historiography.

Some of the information in this study is based on previous works specialising in Eighteenth-century criticism (Campos 1969; Andioc 1976; Cañas Murillo 1994; Carnero 1997; Rodríguez Sánchez de León 1999; Palacios 2000; Freire López 2009), but much of it

is unpublished, and the monograph is the result of an in-depth study of the previous bibliography, together with indefatigable research in archives and libraries. The scope of this research lies in the interpretation and location of this unpublished information and sources, which reformulates the current critical awareness of Eighteenth-century theatre, as well as shedding light on issues of particular importance for the history of Spanish literature. With this important advance, not only is the Enlightenment society better understood, accompanied by an interesting history of the city of Madrid's theatres, but also of the appreciation that the Enlightenment and the public of the time attest to in the reception of the golden classics. Thus, it gives the impression that, with all due respect for distance, the *autosacramentales*, the comedies of magic and heroics are revived by new Calderones and Lopes who rekindle the scene of theatrical emotion and passion. It is also about the history of the reception of theatre, about the institutionalisation of the taste and authority of the public, whether bourgeois or lowly. In the lulls of the prescriptive, when the theory and beauty of the classics becomes a heavy and unequalled authority, the tired author returns to the mud, to the taste for heroic comedy with fantastic effects, bringing life back to the wide audience of the playhouses. It is through this aesthetic heterodoxy, common in the Hispanic cultural consciousness as Benedetto Croce recognised, that the theatre is reformulated to please the taste while satisfying the prescriptive demands. It is worth noting whether it was not by means of this path that the cultural authorities decided to recover their literary past by re-institutionalising it, no longer under the sometimes derogatory label of «barroco», «conceptista», or «culterano», but with the authors who built the national identity. In other words, what would have become of Spanish literary and cultural history if the theatre of Lope, Calderón or Tirso had been vilified and considered by an institutional taste as a succession of aesthetic delusions? A very different result, no doubt, and probably desolate; the same void that the prohibition and persecution of popular taste suffered by the Council of Reform for theater and which had been held up to now as the only dramatic reality of the Enlightenment.

The clear, plain and informative tone of the monograph, even in its most technical aspects, is to be welcomed. However, the chapters divided into disparate historical periods are not so intuitive for the reader to remember and are oriented by an index that only indicates numbers, and not themes, events or relevant characters. All in all, this is an edition of merit, with hardly any typos, although an uneven number of courtesy

spaces unbalance the separation between one chapter and another.

I wanted to leave for the end the aspect that I consider most relevant in this monograph; it is its communicative capacity. This work is made up of human and social stories, also civilian stories of the history of the city of Madrid. A work that in turn shows an ability to humanise the literary history that we occasionally receive in terms of canons, authority figures and institutional taste. Undoubtedly, the publication of this work forces literary history to review the history of Spanish theatre in the 18th century and is a work of merit in promoting a new methodology for approaching that literary history which is unknown because it has remained on the periphery of the canon.

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