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A BLACK MAN'S DILEMMA  
IN  
*LAS MISAS DE S. VICENTE FERRER*

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MESONERO Romanos praised the works of Fernando de Zárata y Castronovo for their, "robusta elocución y estilo castizo, su gracejo y donosura." Those of Antonio Enríquez Gómez, on the other hand, he found full of "mal gusto y lenguaje afectado y con resabios de extranjerismo."<sup>1</sup> It is ironic that recent investigation has shown the *castizo* Zárata to be in fact the pseudonym of the *judaizante* Enríquez.<sup>2</sup> But regardless of past critical esteem or lack of it, today the numerous *comedias* produced under both names are not readily available and have been little studied.

*Las misas de S. Vicente Ferrer*, printed under the Zárata alias, first appears in *Parte XXIII* (1665) and, according to the number of *suestras* extant, must have been relatively popular. Like many of Enríquez's *comedias* its chief flaw is its dilution of dramatic unity by too many subplots, extraneous characters and unnecessary scenes. In spite of this, *Las misas* is remarkable for the author's insight in the characterization of the black renegade, Muley.

The principal conflict concerns Muley's passion for the wife of his master. But this brings into play the larger question of the black man's place in the world. While there are a few cases of a Black

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<sup>1</sup> *Dramáticos posteriores a Lope de Vega*, ed. and introduction by R. de Mesonero Romanos, Vol. 47, BAE (Madrid, 1951), p. xxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> For the details of Enríquez's life see I. S. Révah, "Un pamphlet contre l'Inquisition d'Antonio Enríquez Gómez," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 131 (1962), 81-168. For a discussion of the Zárata alias see my article, "Antonio Enríquez Gómez alias Fernando de Zárata," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 14 (1978), 11-21.

as the hero of a *comedia*,<sup>3</sup> he is usually a secondary character and generally a buffoonish type. Enríquez's Muley is noteworthy not only for the depth of his portrayal, but also for his importance to the drama. Certainly by sheer number of lines this antihero is the principal figure of the play even though he appears in only the first and second acts. It is his absorbing struggle between good and evil that provides the main conflict holding together an otherwise fragmented work.

In spite of his Arabic name and the indiscriminate use of the terms *moro*, *negro* and *turco*, the recitation of his pathetic history makes clear that he is an ethnic Negro, born and raised in the Congo. His life prior to contact with Whites is passed in idyllic but savage surroundings. Later Muley comes to realize that his ill-starred life has been determined by both his environment ("Crieme entre aquellas fieras, / en las costumbres nocivo")<sup>4</sup> and especially by his color. His blackness he regards as a stain imposed by unjust fate, overriding any possible positive qualities:

y aunque mi ingenio era vivo,  
y altivos mis pensamientos,  
en mirandome la color de Etyopia,  
me aborrecia à mi mismo,  
porque es terrible pension  
(no sè yo por què delito)  
que al nacer le diesse en rostro  
à un hombre todo el abismo.

Because of his race Muley's personality is further scarred by his treatment at the hands of Europeans. Spanish slavers carry him off at the age of twenty, and while he laments their greed, he fatalistically feels that such is the black man's lot:

. . . . . el cielo  
nos puso para testigo

<sup>3</sup> Notably Jiménez de Enciso's *Juan latino* and Claramonte's *El valiente negro en Flandes*. The latter is the subject of an article by A. V. Ebersole, "'Black is beautiful' in Seventeenth-century Spain," *Romance Notes*, 12 (1971), 387-91.

<sup>4</sup> The citations used in this article are from a *suelta* (n.p., n.d.) in the collection of the University of North Carolina Library (Chapel Hill).

de la sujecion la mancha  
 mas horrible, que ha tenido  
 Nacion en el mundo.

As the sole survivor of the shipwreck of the slavers, Muley is cast ashore and rescued by a venerable Spanish pilgrim who instructs him in Christianity. The years spent with the hermit are peaceful and inspiring but are unfortunately only an interlude in an existence of continual misfortune. After the death of the hermit, the desolated Muley is captured again by a Moslem pirate and in time becomes a pirate himself and a convert to Islam. This apostasy coupled with his color are a guarantee of future tribulations, but for Muley the free pirate's life provides for the first time a status which power confers. Later he looks back on these years with nostalgia and ill-disguised pride:

un hombre, que ha sido  
 en los dos Mares Pyrata,  
 y en sus costas tan temido,  
 como te ha dicho la fama.

Muley's downfall is his passionate nature. After one of his forays, he falls in love with a beautiful Christian who is supposedly traveling with her brother. In truth he is her lover. By pretending to correspond to Muley's advances the lady places him off guard then stabs him and leaves him stranded on an island.<sup>5</sup>

Near death the Negro is rescued by D. Bartolomé. As with the hermit this kindness touches Muley and brings him back to Christianity. But, at the same time, it means a return to slavery even though in this instance it is a voluntary act in repayment for Bartolomé's help. While the nobleman's attitude towards Muley is that of kindness and trust, from the first Muley is the object of hatred, contempt and fear from the white servant, Soleta. For Soleta only *perro* is a suitable epithet; sarcasm and disdain are his only modes of communication: "oye usted, señor Morisco / de Angola, preten-

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<sup>5</sup> The lady is the sister of D. Bartolomé who has run off with her lover after being surprised by her brother in a compromising situation. Bartolomé is shipwrecked on the island in pursuit of them.

de ser / Cristiano? no ha respondido." Muley bears these insults with the resignation of a man who has already known slavery.

Because D. Bartolomé has vowed to make a pilgrimage to Montserrat before returning home to Valencia, he sends Muley to his wife with a message announcing his arrival. From Muley's very first meeting with doña Francisca, a spirit seems to take possession of his being moving him to the beginnings of a passion for so beautiful and perfect a lady. His dilemma is carefully developed in a long soliloquy following this first meeting. The forces of gratitude and respect owed to Bartolomé and Francisca battle with his desire. He realizes that even if her virtuousness were not proof enough against an illicit love, his pretensions are all the more hopeless because of his color which is the very symbol of evil:

y siendo un nublado horrible,  
un caos, una sombra, un negro,  
à quien la naturaleza  
no concedió privilegio.

Hopelessness breeds frustration and inevitably leads to resentment of an inferiority imposed by accident of birth. All the bitterness of his past mistreatment finds its expression in a complaint not out-of-date in this century:

La misma naturaleza  
antes de tu nacimiento  
te agravió (dice muy bien)  
porque fabula me ha hecho  
del mundo, siendo los blancos,  
sean pobres, ò plebeyos,  
de los hijos de Etyopia  
emperadores supremos.

His response to such repression is that all obligations are negated: "luego no estoy obligado / à guardar ningun respecto." If in the European world he can never be more than an inferior being, a renegade savage, he may as well obey his natural inclinations: "siempre soy aquel que fuy."

Thus Muley is resolved to possess Francisca at whatever the price. However, his guilt is somewhat mitigated in that the spirit that takes control of his reason is not merely a metaphorical expression of love's power. Muley, we see, is the instrument by which the Devil plans to revenge himself on S. Vicente Ferrer, the brother of doña Francisca.<sup>6</sup> Muley's frustration and tenuous Christianity make him easy prey for the Supreme Tempter. Disguised in human form, Satan encourages Muley by providing him with a forged letter from Bartolomé instructing Francisca to await a nocturnal visit from her husband. Because he has been banished from the city the meeting must be kept secret; no lights can be allowed. Muley, of course, impersonates the husband and thus takes advantage of the lady.

Once Satan's vengeance is complete the more diabolic side of Muley's nature subsides. When the horrified Francisca discovers the deception Muley briefly considers killing her but rejects this because he truly loves her. The only course left to him is to accept the consequences of his act and try to save Francisca. As the outraged woman orders him out of her sight he can only offer his own life in repayment:

Si vuestro honor remediais  
con darme muerte, yo mismo  
os entregaré el hacero  
executad el castigo.

Alone with her dilemma the distraught Francisca agonizes over her situation and analyzes her alternatives which she decides are to either denounce Muley, kill him, or keep the matter secret. Each of these solutions she rejects as partial and so too dangerous for the family honor. A true woman of her times ("yo he de cumplir con el siglo") she is resolved in two things: that Muley must be punished

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<sup>6</sup> The Devil seeks revenge on S. Vicente because he has converted more than twenty thousand Jews to Christianity. The indirect method of taking vengeance is necessary because God will not allow him to molest the Saint himself.

and that her husband must not know of the affront. Even her saintly brother cannot be consulted as he is too forgiving ("que èl perdona los agravios, / yo à castigarlos aspiro").

As the act ends the only possible course becomes apparent. With the strength of character typical of an Enríquez heroine, her solution is not for the faint-hearted: acting entirely alone she must murder Muley and bury his body secretly in the garden giving out that he has run away. Then because such a stain is impossible to bear, she must kill herself though appearing to die of natural causes. In this manner no suicide and no violation will blot the family honor.

The anticlimactic third act is a glorification of S. Vicente and the efficacy of his Masses. The earthly struggle is over; Francisca has carried out her plan. The play moves to a higher plane in which S. Vicente's intercession frees his sister's soul from Purgatory. In a miraculous apparition of Francisca with Muley at her feet the true story is revealed to all and she rises absolved to Paradise.

Although Muley is the villain of the piece, the careful development of his motivation indicates that the poet was sensitive to the dramatic possibilities in the Black's sufferings. Muley's apostasy, of course, is the unforgivable sin to an age whose dread of heresy had been effectively conditioned by the Inquisition. That there are "good" Blacks is specifically noted. But the "goodness" depends on Christianity and Muley recognizes that his faith has never been that strong:

Negros ay, donde el honor,  
lealtad, amor y nobleza  
(efectos de su fineza)  
son blasones de su fee,  
que en mi maldad nunca fue  
complice naturaleza.

Even though it would have been dangerous for Enríquez, masquerading as the *castizo* Zárte, to show too much forgiveness towards a lapsed Christian, his insight into the causes of Muley's actions reveals a certain sympathy and comprehension of a fellow

sufferer of prejudice. One could not go so far as to say that that the poet identified with the Negro, but he must have drawn upon his own experiences and feelings in order to create so well this complex and original figure.

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