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Setting Sail on *As Barcas*: An Exploration of the Compatibility of Propaganda and the Carnavalesque in Three of Gil Vicente's Religious Plays

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Gil Vicente's trilogy of *autos da moralidade*, *As barcas*, embarks on an exploration of life, death, salvation, and damnation and, according to Luis Alborg, is arguably his most important religious work (692). The allegorical triptych was inspired by a number of cultural, historical, and literary factors including Portugal's maritime tradition, Lucian de Samosata's 10th *Dialogue of the Dead* (2 AD), the medieval *Danza general de la muerte*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to name a few,¹ and consists of the *Auto da barca do Inferno*, the *Auto da barca do Purgatorio*, and the *Auto de la barca de la Gloria*.² The three works dramatize the final judgment of representative figures and stereotypes from all sectors of early modern Iberian society. An ardent moralist, Vicente uses these plays to comment on the Christian desire for spiritual salvation and the all-too-common unwillingness to lead a virtuous life, illustrating the importance of honest over hypocritical devotional practices. As a social critic, Vicente offers a vehement reproach of contemporary Portuguese society in the sixteenth century, especially with regard to the religious sector. But all of his social commentary is not negative; Anthony Lappin suggests in *Three Discovery Plays* that the first work, *Barca do Inferno*, in fact galvanized the sanctity of the Crusades (8). I would add that Vicente relays a similar message in the *Barca de la Gloria* by underlining the privileged status of high ecclesiastical and noble classes, both in this world and after death. The lower classes, however, are not forgotten as their inclusion in *Barca do Purgatorio* indubitably reflects a certain degree of sympathy from the playwright. On another note, the broad scope of characters in the plays has spawned other critical attention, including Fernanda Bastos Moraes's study "A percepção carnavalesca do mundo no *Auto*

da barca do Inferno, de Gil Vicente,” in which she underlines the inversion of social hierarchies in Vicente’s first *auto*. By using both Lappin’s and Moraes’s observations as points of departure, this paper navigates the remaining two *autos*, explores their similar, carnivalesque character, and then considers the three plays as a unity, discussing how such an inversion of society is consonant with the propagandist message embedded within the collection.

In early modern Portugal, theatrical representations were commonly used to celebrate religious festivals, serving as a more accessible vehicle to transmit Church doctrine. The *auto da moralidade*, or morality play, is a one-act religious piece that uses allegory as a basic element to its structure and to the development of its didactic and dogmatic message. Vicente’s three *Barcas* take a processional format and narrate the judgment of dead men’s souls and their subsequent embarkation on one of two ships: the first, piloted by Angels, leads to salvation, and the second, with the Devil at its helm, symbolizes damnation; although each play features characters from different social strata, each person has the same goal, which is salvation. The *Barca do Inferno* presents a wide array of characters ranging from a corrupt judge to a go-between to a hanged criminal,³ all of whom have knowingly sinned and are unrepentant for their misdeeds. In fact, most are quite confident that they will be granted salvation, believing it is their divine right, the most obvious example being that of the Dominican Friar, who asks the Devil “E este hábito nam me val?” (401) (“And this habit means nothing?”).⁴ As it turns out, all are condemned with the exception of the four Knights of the Order of Jesus Christ, who died for their faith, as well as the Fool, whose humor has no malice. The *Barca do Purgatorio* presents the minor sins of the peasant class, a farmer who moved boundary stones, a woman who watered down milk for sale, a shepherd who tried to seduce a shepherdess, a shepherdess for minor failings, and, in this case, everyone is saved after a period of repentance, except for a blaspheming Gambler, who is rather dramatically grabbed by devils and forcibly carried to their boat. The *Barca de la Gloria*, set apart by its being written in Castilian, treats the sins and divine judgment of the noble and high-ecclesiastical classes. They, even more so than their counterparts in the other plays, mistakenly assume that their salvation is assured due to their high social standing, when in fact, the opposite is true, and the Angels refuse them admission onto their ship. However, the tide turns when, as the Angels leave with

their empty boat, they furl the main sail and a crucifix appears, triggering the abandoned characters to pray for salvation one last time. Jesus Christ suddenly appears and allows them to embark on the boat to salvation.

Vicente used his drama not only to moralize but also to interrogate societal norms and religious dogma. *As barcas* portrays reprehensible abuses of power in the church and rampant corruption in the secular society. This wholesale displeasure leads Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo to state that Vicente has transformed the lugubrious nature of the ancient *danzas de la muerte* into a general satire of the vices, states, classes, and conditions of human society (Alborg 692). Furthermore, such a synthesis of didactic projects compels Luciano Stegagno Picchio to assert that *As barcas* is Vicente’s master religious work, noting how the trilogy unifies religious and civil distrust into one set of texts (559). One of the most gifted playwrights of the time, Vicente was also one of the boldest since his broad portrayal of society and religion put his career and reputation at risk, but such daring paid off since his plays offer insight not only into contemporary society but also into the creative process of playwriting.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the theory of the carnivalesque into medieval and renaissance literature in the attempt to unlock crucial cultural, social, and personal themes that provide clues to help explain man’s transformation to modernity in Europe (66). Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* served as a literary foundation that demonstrated his insistence on the materiality of the body. He celebrates the carnal and grotesque elements of popular culture, and seeks to mobilize them against the humorless seriousness of official culture (66). Bakhtin orients his argument of Carnival around the concepts of grotesque realism or the exaggerated carnal actions that he himself says is “the collective ancestral body of all people” (67). The carnivalesque principle is based on the degradation of society, but not in a harmful respect, rather it suggests a rejuvenating force of both man and culture.

Bakhtin’s approach informs Bastos Moraes’s study in which she defines Carnival as an environment where so-called “normal” life is inverted, resulting in the abolition of hierarchical social order. It is a world where normal taboos are suspended but, echoing Bakhtin, this does not have negative implications because Carnival is seen as ambivalent, that is to say that degradation and renovation occur

simultaneously (57-58). Following the lead of Laurent Jenny, who states that the carnivalesque environment is the product of hyperbole, repetition, and oxymoron, Bastos Moraes then explores these three literary devices in the *Barca do Inferno*, showing how each factor augments the carnivalesque atmosphere in the play: the characteristic excesses expressed by hyperbole affect the perspective of reality experienced by the public, repetition codifies the sense of carnival since it fights the illusion-reality referential, and the use of oxymoron unifies opposite concepts, increasing the chaotic sense (58).

In *Barca do Inferno*, Bastos Moraes highlights the hyperbole found in both the characterization of the archetypal figures as well as the destruction of social order, explaining that “[a] ruptura do código hierárquico demonstra-se ambivalente na medida em que revela uma verdade diante da morte e da justiça divina não prevalecem os títulos e as honrarias da vida material” (59) (“the rupture of the hierarchical code is seen as ambivalent in that it reveals that at the moment of death and final judgment neither noble titles nor earthly honors prevail”). Repetition, too, is evident as the same action occurs repeatedly: a dead person approaches the shore, argues with the devil, pleads with the angels, and finally embarks on the boat corresponding to salvation or damnation. Also in the play, oxymoron unifies opposite concepts, especially “enganho e desenganho” (64): while living, the characters are sure of their salvation and upon dying they find out that they are bound for damnation. Finally, the carnivalesque is further exemplified in the sarcastic character and cynical discourse of the devil who denounces the Christian faith (59).

By applying this model to Vicente’s other two morality plays, we see how the same carnivalesque attributes rise to the surface. Like in the first *auto*, the presence of the Devil adds to the festive and inverted environment of the plays, which is even greater in the *Barca de Gloria* with the addition of the figure of Death, who escorts the characters to the boats. In terms of the literary devices mentioned by Bastos Moraes, we see in the *Barca do purgatorio* that hyperbole arises in the figure of the Gambler, whose blasphemies are so great that he cannot be saved by any means, a situation comparable to that of those damned to Hell in the first play. In the *Barca de la gloria*, hyperbole manifests itself in the social positions of the characters and their resulting presumptuousness, which initially bars them from salvation. The repetitive structure of procession is present in both works. Finally, the oxymoron presented

by the concepts of *enganho* and *desenganho* is also developed in both plays, but is fleshed out even more in *Barca de la Gloria* since the noble and ecclesiastical leaders assume that they are above divine law. Vicente, however, insists on the democratic treatment of all classes, where no one is spared final judgment and where salvation is based on penitence and contrition instead of on social position. Clearly, it is easier for some to be saved more so than others; nevertheless, in all three plays the boat to salvation ultimately has passengers, leading us to the notion of social commentary—and even a propagandist agenda—in the *autos*. Vicente successfully interrogated societal norms but, at the same time, supported the royal agenda.

Since theater is ultimately written to be performed for an audience, the reception of a play is of the utmost importance. For Vicente, the performance had both didactic and entertainment goals that needed to reach out to all members of the public. Such a strong portrayal of Portuguese society may have been a daring venture for Vicente, but such a representation would have undoubtedly piqued the interest of the public, who would have seen reflections of themselves and others in the plays, urging them not only to contemplate their own social condition but also to think about society in general.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines propaganda as “the systematic propagation of information or ideas by an interested party, especially in a tendentious way in order to encourage or instill a particular attitude or response” and Lappin asserts a propagandist message embedded in the *Barca do Inferno* in the form of the immediate and unquestioned salvation of the crusading Knights, which constituted a well-timed message during an era when the Crusades were under scrutiny. He also suggests that this message is reinforced by Vicente’s juxtaposition of the Knights with the lascivious Dominican friar, which highlights the holy mission of the Crusade and overtly criticizes the gluttonous behavior of the cleric.⁵ But this grotesque portrayal of the Dominican Friar as a buffoon, dancing onto stage with his lover, whom he supported with church funds, could constitute one or more of Vicente’s criticisms of the order: the questionable morals and practices of the Dominicans at the time, their hard-line approach to the conversion of Jews, a stance that King Manuel did not share,⁶ or even an underhanded jab at the Inquisition itself. It is a harsh condemnation nonetheless and indicative of the anti-clerical sentiment that permeates the play.

In the *Barca de la Gloria*, echoes of Erasmus also resonate in another none-too-favorable portrayal of the clergy. From the outset Vicente's anti-clerical message is clear just by the fact that church officials are rejected entrance onto the angels' boat; a surprise to each one, evidenced by the explicit mention that they are promised entrance to heaven because of their holy vocation. The holy figures, this time a bishop, archbishop, cardinal, and pope, are guilty of such sins as avarice, excessive pride, misuse of church funds, ambition, the sale of dispensations, and abuse of power—mirroring many of the sins in the *Barca do inferno*. Furthermore, the repeated assertion that they are promised salvation reminds us of the Dominican Friar's presumptuousness in the first *Barca*, especially in the case of the Pope, who asks the Devil: “¿Sabes tú que soy sagrado / vicario en el sancto Templo?” (*Gloria* 738-39) (“Don't you know that I am the holy vicar of the sacred temple?”). The Devil asserts that they have even more responsibility due to their religious posts, and do not have the license to sin. Clearly, Vicente was not hesitant to condemn the misdeeds within the church and this censure is made even stronger since the criticism comes in the form of a morality play that is performed during Holy Week. But, on the other hand, the gravity of their sins is paralleled by the great degree of their contrition, and each leaves behind his transgression in the material world and wholly devotes himself to God and, before being saved by Jesus Christ, each accepts their fate.

In the same play, Vicente's criticism of the upper nobility is no less daring or severe, though, as is the case with the clergymen, the nobles are saved at the end of the play after reaching a point of absolute contrition. Their sins—sloth, greed, injustice, cruelty, and tyranny—all stem from an abuse of power and their mistaken assumption of salvation, once again explicitly stated while arguing with the Devil. Like their ecclesiastical counterparts, the secular leaders accept their fate and evoke the passion of Jesus Christ, an explicit religious message (the play was performed during Holy Week), making themselves models of piety.

Clearly, salvation is achieved through contrition, and the characters in the third piece offer a model of repentance that must be emulated in order to be saved by God. Each figure quotes from the Book of Job, accepting his fate as divine punishment. In the introduction to *Gil Vicente: obras dramáticas castellanas*, Thomas Hart explains the condition in which the characters of *Barca de la Gloria* find themselves:

No tienen deseo alguno de volver a pecar. Han llegado a un estado de contrición perfecta . . . ya no tienen voluntad propia, porque su deseo ha venido a identificarse con el de Dios; al renunciar sus pecados, renuncian también a una parte de su personalidad humana . . . porque esta ha sido formada por la suma de sus buenas y malas acciones. (xxxvi) They have no desire to sin again. They have reached a state of perfect contrition . . . they have lost their own will because all of their desire is now tied to that of God; by renouncing their sins, they also renounce part of their human personality . . . because it has been formed as the sum of their good and bad actions.

While they did commit sins, the characters are saved by their state of absolute remorse, an attitude distinct from the *Barca do Inferno*, in which the characters do not repent, actually attempting to carry the material symbols of their sins aboard the boat with them, i.e., the Friar brings his lover, the Usurer desires to bring his money, etc. This *auto* has sparked much commentary because of its clear message that the high/noble class will be saved by Jesus Christ, which is true; nevertheless, Vicente also opts to recognize their sins and to allegorize the need for repentance. Clearly, Vicente cannot damn—literally or figuratively—the higher nobility to Hell since this could be harmful to his career as a court poet. Always the moralist, he leaves intact the message that his patrons are not above sin but he also exemplifies their moral standing at a different and more pious level than those of previous *Barcas*. So this propagandist implication simultaneously affirms the humanity of the noble class and demonstrates its divine favor.

As a side bar, it would be interesting to investigate Vicente's choice of language in *As barcas* since the first two plays are written in Portuguese and the last in Castilian. He composed in both Portuguese and Spanish, often mixing the two languages within the same play. In fact, of his forty-four dramatic works, seventeen are bilingual. It is most certain that there was a reason, whether symbolic or practical, though it is impossible to know what it may be. It could be a reflection of his admiration of Spain, since the characters were high born, or, conversely, it could reflect his distaste for his neighbors, pointing at their corruption (for example, in *Farsa de Inês Pereira*, Castilian was used by the Hermit to seduce a young lady, who was bedazzled by its eloquence (1020-61, 1070-80), offering a sort of Manichaeistic interpretation of the language), or finally—and most practically—it may

have been a way to distance himself and the spectators from the direct criticism of the play due to obvious parallels of social class between the characters in the play and the audience.

Vicente does not forget the peasant class, and in *Barca do Purgatorio* their sins are recognized and then forgiven after a time in Purgatory. Although, their sins do not escape the critical eye of the playwright, they do, however, receive a sympathetic nod from Vicente, who describes the hardships the peasant class faces, in the words of the Farmer:

Sempre é morto quem do arado

Há de viver.

Nos somos vida das gentes

e morte de nossas vidas (93)

Those who are forced to live by the plow are forever dead. We are the life of the people and the death of our own lives.

His explanation is simple, explaining that he did what is necessary to survive, paradoxically concluding that life and death coexist all of the time. They knowingly sin but then are given the chance to redeem themselves during a period of penitence that leads to salvation. This recognition of the grueling lives led by the lower classes offered some consolation but it is the promise of heaven that makes for a positive message.

By looking at the works from different perspectives we see how Vicente was able to please the members of his audience, interrogate contemporary society, and, at the same time, reinforce established power structures. An examination of the contiguous plays reveals how each work would hold different appeal because of the characters attempting to set sail on the boats. It is also interesting to look at the plays as a unity, held together by their carnivalesque feel and the common thread of the story line. Interestingly enough, the three plays followed a standard pattern of events that would later be seen in the Spanish *comedia* where, at first, social order is compromised but is then restored, reinforcing the existing power structure. Indeed, Vicente was an innovator on the boards who recognized the need to simultaneously please his heterogeneous public and underscore social norms established by the noble class. The benefit of exploring Vicente's three *autos* is twofold: it not only allows a deeper understanding of the

intricacies involved in the playwriting process but it also offers us a glimpse at sixteenth-century society in the Iberian Peninsula.

NOTES

¹ Besides those mentioned at the beginning of the essay, numerous scholars have voiced opinions about possible inspirations for Vicente's trilogy of plays: Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos states in *Notas Vincentinas, II: Rainha velha e o Monólogo do Vaqueiro* that *As barcas* constitutes "an admirable *Danse macabre* or a popular *Divine Comedy*" (Parker 54). Lappin adds the possible influence of the medieval tradition of visionary accounts of the judgment of the soul (3), in these, a visionary describes his death: where his soul escapes from the grasp of demons thanks to the intervention of angels or saints, then appear before the judgment seat where they plead for their salvation and are subsequently returned to reanimate the fallen body. Finally, in *Gil Vicente*, Thomas Hart points at Johann Geiler's 1511 *Navicula penitentiae*, which describes the Christian life in the extended allegory of a figure on a boat, as another possible source (4).

² *Inferno* was performed at Christmas in 1516 for the ailing Queen Maria in her chamber, *Purgatorio* was represented at Christmas in 1518 for Queen Leonor, the new wife of King Manuel, in the chapel of the Hospital de Todos os Santos and *Gloria* was staged the next year during Holy Week for the King and Queen in Almeirim.

³ In addition to the four Knights of the Order of Jesus Christ and a fool, the other characters include a pompous gentleman, a greedy usurer, a dishonest cobbler, a Jew, an embezzling functionary, a hanged man, and a lascivious Dominican friar.

⁴ All translations to English are mine unless otherwise specified.

⁵ The anticlerical implications of this dialogue are clear. When questioned about his unbecoming attitudes and actions, the Friar shrugs them off, saying that others in his monastery do the same:

DIABO	Essa dama: é ela vossa?
FRADE	Por minha a tenho eu, e sempre a tive de meu,
DIABO	Fezestes bem, que é fermosa! E não vos punham lá grossa no vosso convento santo
FRADE	E eles fazem outro tanto!
DIABO	Que cousa tam preciosa! (Lappin 56, 58)
DEVIL	This lady: is she yours?
FRIAR	I consider her my own and so I've always kept her.
DEVIL	You did well, for she's beautiful. And didn't they make a big fuss in your holy monastery?
FRIAR	But they all do the same!
DEVIL	What marvelous news! (Lappin 57, 59)

⁶ As a condition of the marriage with Isabella, Manuel was required to "purify" Portugal of the Jews who had been welcomed by John II after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Manuel gave them two choices: to leave by October 1497, or to convert. Many left but the rest were "converted" under the pretense that no inquiry would be made into their beliefs for 20 years. As a result, these "new" Christians could not be forced out of the country, though they still faced persecution from "old" Christians. After a slaughter of many of the converts in Lisbon in 1506, Manuel offered them protection and allowed them to go to Holland, where they prospered.

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