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THE VARIED RECEPTION AND RESPONSE OF THE INQUISITION TO TWO SAINT CHRISTOPHER *COMEDIAS* IN 1640s SEVILLE[1]

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Censorship was the bane of many literary figures of early modern Spain. In its attempts to "protect" the public from heresy and heterodoxy, the Inquisition regulated many aspects of Spanish society, and its theater was no exception. Jesuit Juan de Mariana complained that drama offered a sensual pleasure that combined with an implicit predilection for teaching bad habits and causing evil thoughts in the spectators (Metford 85). Besides reviewing

[1] This preliminary study was presented at the 2013 Modern Languages Association Convention in Boston, MA. The session was titled "Censorship and the Spanish *Comedia*." A monographic study of this case and other dramatic representations of the St. Christopher legend is forthcoming.

the playscripts before their premieres, both secular and religious officials attended plays to ensure that performances fell between the self-prescribed lines of decency. Indeed, all aspects dealing with the composition and representation were supposedly scrutinized. This article talks about an unstudied case of the expurgation of a seventeenth-century *comedia*. Juan Antonio de Benavides's *La vida y muerte de San Cristóbal* (c. 1643) was censored just days after its premiere, much to the dismay of the public.[2] Here, I briefly juxtapose the text with another *comedia* that also deals with St. Christopher, Cristóbal Monroy y Silva's *El mayor vasallo del mayor Señor, o el Gigante cananeo San Cristóbal* (c. 1638),[3] with the hope that their differences offer us some clues as to why Benavides's work was censored.

The impact of censorship on early modern Spanish literature is controversial. Many, more traditional scholars tend to agree with Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, who asserted that "never was there more written in Spain, or better written, than in the two golden centuries of the Inquisition" (qtd. in Kamen 131). More recently, Hispanists and historians alike have a very different opinion. They blame the Inquisition for suppressing creativity as well as the desire to learn to read and write amongst the people of

[2] Though censored in 1643 when it premiered in Seville, I date the play's composition at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This is based on biographical information about the playwright and a receipt of sale found in the manuscript.

[3] José Sánchez Arjona documents a performance of Monroy y Silva's *comedia* in 1658, nine years after the playwright's death.

the time. Anthony Close mentions that the effects of censorship were more serious than presumed by earlier scholars and that it in fact molded the mind of society (272-73). We know of definitive cases of censorship in both secular and religious works, such as Calderón de la Barca's *auto sacramental Las órdenes militares* (1662), as well as Tirso de Molina's *Santa Juana*—and actually the second half of his writing career after being forbidden by the Mercedarians to produce more secular plays—and now we can add the case of Benavides's *comedia* dealing with Saint Christopher.

As the patron saint of travelers, Saint Christopher presence in Spain has been a long one. His passionary been part of the Iberian oral tradition since the 8th century and the first extant written text is the anonymous *Passio Sancti Christophori et comitum*, which dates between the 11th and 13th centuries (Baños Vallejo 42). The end of the 12th century saw a rise in the importance of martyrologies due to a surge in cultural activity in some of the religious centers of Spain, including Toledo, Santiago de Compostela, and Santa María de Ripoll, Catalonia. In addition, pilgrimages as well the common practice of the *cofradias* to adopt patrons led to a greater interest in the lives of saints. Hagiographic literature gained further momentum in the 13th century with the release of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, the authoritative martyr-ology of the Middle Ages. Popularity and general readership dropped off in the 14th century due to numerous crises in Europe: wars, economic hardship, and the plague, but the 15th century was one of literary renovation and

rebirth—especially in romance languages—which led to the translation of Voragine's work.[4] As a result, Saint Christopher became a predominant common figure in the literature and culture of Castile, Portugal, and Aragon, including a healthy dramatic tradition starting in fifteenth-century Valencia.

In the sixteenth century, the popularity of numerous cults of saints continued to grow and this did not go unnoticed by Church leaders, who sought to rein them in for the fear that their followers were losing sight of the Christian hierarchy. As a result, the 25th session of the Council of Trent (December 3-4, 1563), released an edict titled "On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints and of Sacred Images," which warned against placing the saints above the Holy Trinity. The document served as a reminder that saints were merely conduits to God; therefore, it was inappropriate to worship them alone, which was deemed idolatrous. This directive was not only limited to literature, but also the plastic arts. Though not directly aiming at the cult of Saint Christopher, this attempt to control the powerful and popular cults of saints seems to have succeeded in diminishing at least his appearance in subsequent literature.

To my knowledge, before 1700, there are three extant

[4] According to Fernando Baños Vallejo and Isabel Uría Maqua, the first translation to Spanish was in the 15th century. For additional information about cultural manifestations and literary representations of the St. Christopher, see William Shoemaker, Josep Romeu Figueras, Manuel Milá y Fontanels, Henri Merimée, Alan Deyermond, Hermengildo Corbató, and Anthony J. Grubbs, among others.

post-Tridentine dramas devoted to Saint Christopher. The first is an anonymous *auto* from the late sixteenth century, which faithfully follows Voragine's traditional account of Christopher's conversion. In it, humor complements the religious message by following the trajectory of the tone of the play, which moves from ominous and somber to gleeful and celebratory, as comic components are integrated little by little—possibly to raise the spirit of the spectator. The second is Monroy y Silva's *comedia*, a version that differs greatly from its predecessor for reasons of form and chronology as well as because of its divergence from Voragine's account. Monroy y Silva's play offers more-developed characterizations, is dogmatic in nature, and includes a brutal passion and martyrdom, making for a very dramatic presentation. This is no surprise, according to Gabriel González, as the theatricality of liturgical dramas took precedence over the religiousness of the play in the seventeenth century because it further glorified the life and death of the subject:

> "[T]he immense theatrical production of the Golden Age has profound theological significance, but it is an autonomous dramatic creation and the writers that produced it are, above all, dramatists who actually lived in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their creations were primarily theatrical—designed to entertain—and only secondarily religious."
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> (12)

While I do not entirely agree with this view, I would offer the emendation that performance was put on an equal plane as the storyline in order to emphasize the didactic message

since spectacle is pleasing to the public, especially in the case of the *comedia de santos*, a category under which Monroy y Silva's and Benavides's plays fall. Of course, any playwright at the time understood the importance of theatricality, but they really could not leave by the wayside the work's fundamental religious significance.

The third piece is Benavides's play. The premiere of this *comedia de apariencias*—that is, extravagant in its presentation—in early January 1643 was well received. An eyewitness account found in the Biblioteca Colombina in Seville documents what happened a few days later in the Montería corral on Sunday afternoon, January 25, 1643,[5]

[5] Sánchez Arjona gives an imprecise citation of the location of the document and paraphrases in his *Anales*. It is clear that other scholars have not referenced the document, rather they cite his summary. It is worthwhile to revisit the original account, which states the following (transcription mine):

> El 25 de enero de 1643 en el Corral de Comedias de la Montería se había de representar la comedia de San Cristóbal, para lo cual habían puesto carteles y la habían representado los días antecedentes. El Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición lo impidió este día para quitarle algunas cosas. El autor salió al tablado y contó el impedimento y ofreció otra comedia. La gente baja y popular, que había venido por ser día que no trabajaban en sus oficios por ser festivo, y habían concurrido en mucho número por tener apariencias (de que el

when the *autor de comedias* appeared on stage to announce that the Holy Office had prohibited the performance of Benavides's *comedia* until certain changes were made. He claimed that they were not able to stage the play for fear of drastic punishment but he would stage another one in its stead. The disappointed crowd started to chant "San Cristóbal, San Cristóbal." Then they ransacked the *corral de comedias*, forcing the evacuation of the theater, and the riot spilled out onto the surrounding streets of the Barrio de Santa Cruz. Afterwards, neither the play nor the script were seen for centuries.

The confiscation and destruction of censored texts were

> vulgo y mujeres gusta más que del artificio [ilegible] y traza de la comedia) se alborotó, no queriendo admitir otra comedia, ofreciendo el autor la que quisiesen, y ellos sólo decían: San Cristóbal, San Cristóbal, con voces y ruido grandísimo. Y ésta no la podían representar por la pena de excomunión mayor y otras que tenían impuestas, con que visto que no tenía remedio empezaron a quebrar bancos y sillas, haciéndolos muchísimos pedazos, y lo mismo en las celosías de los aposentos y todo el teatro. Y los vestidos que hallaron de los comediantes en el vestuario los despedazaron y ellos huyeron del ímpetu desbocado del vulgo que ocupaba el patio.
>
> Yo estaba esta tarde en la comedia en un aposento y vi este estrago, y cuando empezó el de las celosías [ilegible] antes que llegasen al mío me salí huyendo del desbocado ímpetu de esta gente.

common at the time (Kamen 120-21), and this is what I assumed had happened with the Benavides *autógrafo*. It turns out that a unique copy found its way to the Spanish National Library, where it was later compiled and bound with other *sueltas* and then catalogued by Antonio Paz y Meliá in his *Catálogo de las piezas de teatro que se conservan en el Departamento de manuscritos de la Biblioteca Nacional* in 1899, but it was then forgotten again, until recently when I rediscovered the work. Since the autographed play script was confiscated and the play was not staged after its expurgation, it is my assumption that this is the original version of the play, and the copy that was censored was a different copy.[6] This is the first published critical work on this text.

That being said, a fitting point of departure for the study is an examination of the two *comedias*, looking at their distinct treatments of the saint. Such a comparison seems appropriate since the playwrights share much in common. Monroy y Silva was from a small town close to Seville, Alcalá de Guadaíra, and was active in the local theater scene where Benavides performed with some frequency and even saw at least one other play performed.[7] and they saw their works staged in the same Sevillian theaters. This suggests to me that even if they did not know each other,

[6] My forthcoming book goes into detail about the history of the autographed manuscript and the idea that the censored manuscript was a director's or actor's copy.

[7] The play was a *loa sacramental*, whose title is unknown, performed during the Corpus Christi celebration in 1630. See Sánchez-Arjona, pp. 364-65.

they were probably cognizant of the other's work, so it seems reasonable to contemplate how one version—or vision—of St. Christopher affected the other. Both plays were staged at the Montería, Benavides's in 1643 by Manuel Álvarez Vallejo's company and José Sánchez Arjona documents that Monroy y Silva's was performed in 1658 by Pedro Valdes's theater company, nine years after the death of the playwright. It is thought, however, that the play forms part of the first cycle of his work, dating it around 1638-43 (Peters 21).

Monroy y Silva's adaptation of the saint's life and death takes many liberties when compared to traditional accounts, making for an entertaining and engaging *comedia*. His use of humor lightens an otherwise austere tone. The common comical aspect of the pre-conversion Christopher is replaced by another character, Talega, the *hermitaño gracioso*. He is a typical clown/buffoon and then some because of his vocation. His banter with a more conventional hermit is sarcastic and laughably irreverent. For example, he does not pray "porque me duermo al instante" (4b), he does not fast because "quien no come, está condenado a muerte…[y] tengo una hambre canina" (4b), and he enjoys wine because "no se puede pasar esta vida sino a tragos. Color, olor, y sabor, las tres propiedades tienes" (10a). His insolence offers some respite in the otherwise serious text and his humorous repartee surely evoked laughter, breaking the tension of the more dramatic scenes and uniting the audience, since, as Henri Bergson reminds us, laughter is complicit by nature and, in this case, by reveling in the cheekiness of the hermit the public

comes together. Once Saint Christopher decides to evangelize in Lycia, Talega decides to join him and adopts a more serious demeanor, serving as a commentator to the public and a witness to the saint's martyrdom.

Monroy y Silva also richly develops the character of Saint Christopher and his staunch faith. Before his conversion, he pokes gentle fun at the character's size and brutish demeanor but he does not break with decorum, afterwards Christopher is seen as a formidable yet stoic defender of Christianity. The play demonstrates Monroy y Silva's predilection for dialectical argument, as the saint goes head-to-head with the King's high priest in a discussion of their faiths. Christopher effortlessly prevails as he presents the grandeur of Christianity in an irrefutable and convincing manner. This discussion follows numerous doctrinal passages explaining Catholic faith heard throughout the play.

The ending of the *comedia* threatens to be irreverent but does not reach that point. After being struck in the eye by an arrow that had been aimed at Christopher, king Dagnus is infuriated not only due to physical pain but also because he sees the religious beliefs of his kingdom slipping through his fingers; even his high priest has converted to Christianity. The king then states "Traidor, también tú les quitas / a nuestros dioses la honra / verásme beber su sangre." (24b). As he approaches the beheaded corpse he bends down to drink the blood, but upon touching it, he is healed and converted:

> En esta sangre alevosa,
> El fuego de mi venganza

He de apagar de esta forma.
Valgame Dios con su sangre
La herida dolorosa
ha sanado; mis engaños
es justo, que reconozca.
Viva Christóval y viva
su fe; mis Ciudades todas
confiessen á Christo a voces
(24b)

The threat of drinking the blood, a gross parody of the Eucharist, is averted at the end of the play. Here, Monroy y Silva toes the line of the impropriety and heresy but does not cross it. It is a titillating and unexpected addition to the conventional end of the story, where the Saint usually instructs the King to make a paste with his blood and rub it on his eye.

Though Monroy y Silva did not see this play performed in 1658, it is probable that the *autor de comedias* was aware of the 1643 censorship of Benavides's play since it occurred in the same theater, the Monteria, in Seville. Therefore, since he flirted with heresy in this later production, the potential for scandal in Benavides's *autógrafo* was huge since it was actually censored after already having been performed. After transcribing and reading the play, however, it is clear that Benavides essentially dramatized Voragine's version of St. Christopher's life and death, or that of the *Flos sanctorum*, a Spanish martyrology based on the *Golden Legend*. The play centers more on the character of the saint, especially his piety and humility, than Monroy y Silva. It also offers a

daunting version of the world on stage. The diabolical characters have a more important role in the *comedia*, and Satan, Lucifer, and Beelzebub form a farcical trinity that contrasts with the traditional one that lies at the foundation of Christian belief and Christopher's conversion of the masses. A dream sequence is also moving and adds to a supernatural character of the play. But all in all, the *comedia* does not stray too far from Voragine's account. So, the censoring of a theatrical adaptation of a saint's conversion and passion based on what was the most respected and accepted collection of lives of saints was doubtful.

Remembering specific mention that the play was *de apariencia*, it seems logical that the staging of the action could have been a point of contention. The play text and the included stage directions suggest a lush and visually appealing scenery that is consonant with the style of play. The last scenes of the play offer a suggestive staging of the death of the saint and the conversion of the king. They are both visually and textually striking. The stage directions are specific: "Corre una cortina y aparece un altar cubierto de negro con la cabeza y el cuerpo del santo y dos fuentes de plata con la sangre y otra para lavarse" (21). The stage properties that appear in the reveal space offer a shocking imitation of a church altar prepared for transubstantiation through the Eucharistic rite. In addition, its black covering and the gory remains of the martyred saint combined with the blood and water escalate the barbaric nature of his murder. The king then smears the blood of the slain giant on his face, after invoking the name of Jesus Christ:

REI. Dame esa sangre al momento
el nombre de Xpo inboco
VIR. Ya en el Rei la sangre toco
y el ojo ya esta ensangriento[8]

His vision is restored after washing the blood off his face with the water in a sort of baptism, and he is converted. The implications of this scene are monumental. In addition to the striking imagery, the substitution of Christopher for Christ in the holy ceremony is sacrilege and an outright violation of the Tridentine edict that I mentioned earlier. True, the two figures have much in common but the Eucharist includes Christ's blood, not Christopher's. Of course, it is not the healing properties of the blood that is scandalous, rather its implied relation to—or replacement of—Christ's blood.

As far as how this work escaped initial ecclesiastical censorship of the Inquisition or the Council of Castile is impossible to know, but perhaps a couple of ideas based on recent scholarship can be of use. Henry Kamen mentions that institutional censorship was not always efficient due to the sheer number of works that needed to be reviewed, in addition to the general incompetency of many of the censors (119). So, it could be that the play slipped through the cracks and did not call any attention until its premiere, when the attending priests or functionaries, charged with

[8] The citation is taken from my transcription of the original manuscript of the play. Diacritical marks are largely omitted and I did not add them in order to remain faithful to the original. When the edition of the play is published, standard accentuation will be included to avoid ambiguities.

assuring the decency of the staging, saw the action and censored the play after the day's production. The contentious feature seems to be the staging of the action that though the definite reason is uncertain at this time. It is a *comedia de apariencia* and the directions were explicit and included in the autograph copy.

If the reason for the censorship is not because of what is on stage, it could be generated by the desire to prolong and further enforce Tridentine law, and its attempts to suppress the major cults of saints. St. Christopher was wildly popular in Seville, which is no surprise because the city was a crossroads in the peninsula and a principal maritime port. So, more general motives behind restrictions can be pondered with some amount of confidence. In *Transnational Cervantes*, William Childers discusses the idea of internal colonization in Spain, mentioning that similar issues arise when colonizing foreign territories and peoples as well as the general populace in the peninsula. While he primarily concentrates on the circumstances of the *conversos*, *moriscos*, and old Christian peasantry, Childers also discusses the imposition of a centralized authority and state-sanctioned culture within the absolutist society. The Inquisition became a part of the bureaucratic apparatus that seeped into all aspects of society and life, reinforcing and imposing a culture of the elite. In the case of this play—and theater in general—its censorship is an imposition of Tridentine reforms that aimed to strictly control the worship practices of the times and in particular, those that dictated that Saints and their worship should only remind the pious of the power of God and not serve to

replace him, which is suggested at the end. The mandates of these sixteenth-century religious reforms were still in effect in the 1640s as they sought to revitalize the worship of the holy trinity and minimize the perceived idolatrous worship of saints.

The correlation between the two plays is impossible to know for sure. We assume that they were written around the same time but their performances were fifteen years apart, and Monroy y Silva's play was staged posthumously. It is reasonable to think that the playwright was aware of the cancellation of Benavides's *comedia* and the aftermath that ensued, but the effect of this on his own manuscript is uncertain and probably negligible since it is thought that he wrote his St. Christopher play before the premiere. What is clear though is that Benavides produced a work that had potential for great success due to its subject matter and the acting company contracted to perform it, but the transgression at the end of the play undermined these possibilities. This is another example of how scholars need to look at all aspects of theatrical production, composition, reception, and performance, when discussing specific works and the art form in general.

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