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EL TEATRO UNAMUNIANO: PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES

Ricardo de la Fuente Ballesteros
(Universidad de Valladolid) y
Denise DuPont
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(eds.)

Hecho Teatral quiere ser un nuevo foro de reflexión sobre el teatro –práctica y también teórica– en el ámbito hispánico. La sección “Ojeadas” se organiza como un conjunto de aportaciones sobre un tema monográfico y la sección “El autor y su obra” se acerca a un dramaturgo vivo y a alguno de sus textos. *Hecho Teatral*, que aparecerá una vez al año, es una revista abierta a cualquier enfoque y tratamiento del fenómeno teatral. Los artículos se pueden enviar libremente, aunque también se solicitarán por invitación, y serán evaluados por dos lectores. En todo caso, para publicar en *Hecho Teatral* se debe ser suscriptor.

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47003 Valladolid

España

Tel. 34 983 377 508 / 629 388 777

E-mail: cuc@universitascastellae.es

www.universitascastellae.es

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NATIONALIZING MEDEA: RIVAS, XIRGU AND UNAMUNO IN MÉRIDA, JUNE 1933

Bernardo Antonio González
Wesleyan University

Insofar as theater history can be understood as written from the stage –as a collective enterprise involving playwrights, stage directors, actors and a cadre of figures and factors from the prevailing social, economic and political infrastructures– few events in the history of the modern Spanish stage surpass in significance and –by most accounts– glory the concertedly produced version of Seneca’s *Medea* in Mérida’s Roman theater in June of 1933. The synergy that resulted from Miguel de Unamuno’s contribution as translator, Cipriano de Rivas Cherif’s as essayist and artistic director, and Margarita Xirgu’s as actor provided the basis for what was widely heralded as a “gran fiesta de arte” (Gomez; Chabás). The editorialist writing for *El Sol*, arguably Spain’s preeminent progressive daily, seems to capture the collective sentiment, at least as far as the intellectual elite and ruling party were concerned, in linking the artistic splendor of this event to the achievements of Spain’s progressive political class: “Un solo grito ha coronado la representación antes que el aplauso unánime sellara con su vuelo inmenso en la noche iluminada por el arte esta fecha, que la República habrá de señalar en los fastos de la resurrección del Teatro Nacional. ¡Viva la República española!” (“República de las Letras”). At a time when the nation was aflutter with a host of reform projects spanning most dimensions of public life, Seneca’s *Medea*, performed before a sell-out crowd that included prominent members of the Azaña government, was transformed into the projection of an enduring national spirit –the “soplo espiritual de nuestra raza y nuestro genio” (Chabás, “La próxima”), “de [nuestra] conciencia nacional” (Rivas Cherif, “Teatro Clásico”)– and into the echo, within the cultural sphere, of the new “revolutionary” vigor dominating Spain since April 14, 1931.¹ For those most closely attuned to the event, *Medea* in Mérida became a corner-



stone of the progressive elite's agenda for redefining the terms in which Spaniards would now identify themselves as a people and as a nation.

It goes without saying that such conclusions imputed thus to cultural manifestations like *Medea* in Mérida can best –perhaps *only*– be appreciated within their historical context. In other words, the notion that the Mérida performance –or any other cultural act or manifestation, for that matter– might convey some universal truth concerning a people or nation, that it might encapsulate some “soplo espiritual” or “conciencia colectiva,” is in and of itself a historical concept and of interest primarily in relation to patterns of thought that dominated Spanish intellectual discourse in the first decades of the 20th century. It bears noting in this regard that at the end of the 19th century, a prescient Unamuno forecasts assertively –“el teatro es . . . la expresión más genuina de la conciencia colectiva del puebló” (“Regeneración” 1133)– a belief that would soon gain ascendancy throughout Spain's –and Europe's– scholarly domain. Américo Castro's early press campaign to reclaim Lope de Vega as a national bard stands as something of a harbinger of these trends. Writing for *El Sol* in 1919, Castro appealed for a “systematic analysis” of Lope's theater –“no ha sido aún sistematizado el estudio de Lope” – in recognition of the fact that the national cultural values inherent in Lope's plays –the very “congruencia” of Spain's “teatro nacional” –had been neglectfully disregarded by critics. His defense was prompted by his reading of H.A. Rennert's *The Life of Lope de Vega* (1904) and it was directed at the dismissive appraisals –George Meredith describes the *comedia* as “esquelética,” Azorín as “frágil” or “infantil,” Pedro Henríquez Ureña as weighted down by some “fórmula artificiosa”– that were linked to the widespread phenomenon of the *refundiciones*. The proliferation of such adulterated versions of Golden Age theater throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries reflected, in Castro's and Rivas' thinking, a broad lack of faith in the quality of the plays and in the ability of the Spanish theater public to identify with those plays as originally written. Castro's appeal heralds his own odyssey through the archive of Spain's classical literature and cultural history in search of a national consciousness, a crusade that would culminate in *La Realidad histórica de España*,² in which

148

Spain's “armonizada conciencia colectiva” (140) is shown to be the product of socio-historical forces. It would find inspiration, meanwhile, in the publication of Karl Vossler's *Lope de Vega y su tiempo*, translated from German by Ramón Gómez de la Serna and published in 1933, the very year, that is, of the Seneca performance in Mérida. By 1933 Rivas was already busy reflecting these trends on stage, in an unstinting defense of the Spanish public's natural propensity to connect with Golden Age theater in its original format. Consider, for instance, his 1930 version of Tirso's *La prudencia en la mujer*, with Margarita Xirgu, in the Teatro Español. His decision to confront the challenge of Seneca's *Medea*, a play that for centuries had eluded stage production for reasons of its long monologues and highly rhetorical style, may be read in the context of these dominant patterns of thought. This is especially true if we consider the concerted effort to nationalized *Medea* that was linked to the 1933 performance.

SENECA'S *MEDEA* AND THE CONSTRUCTEDNESS OF A NATIONAL THEATER: PREPARING THE STAGE

149

Nuevamente se ha despertado el anhelo de una creación poética fortificada en el estilo, arraigada en la comunión religiosa y nacional, afirmadora de la vida por encima de toda diferencia de clases. (Vossler 9; emphasis mine)³

Con *Medea* ha sido otra la labor de Unamuno. ¿Subalterna, de mero traductor? De ninguna manera. Pero tampoco de colaboración simple, porque este verbo “colaborar” es equivoco. Unamuno ha llevado al extremo límite su respeto más absoluto al texto original. . . . Esta *Medea* hablada por Unamuno, en prosa de un ritmo amplio y de un alto decoro, se afirma por sí misma en un texto que ahora sí que pertenece a la literatura de nuestra estupenda y múltiple España. (Fernández Almagro; emphasis mine)

Fernández Almagro commemorates and thereby helps to consolidate Unamuno's *españolificación* of Seneca's *Medea* in his (Unamuno's) combined role as *traductor* and *constructor*. For his part, in his reflection on the timely “despertar” of the “anhelo” for a transcendent national style unencumbered by social class –a *volksgeist* that he

identifies as the *zeitgeist* of his generation – Vossler offers a privileged frame for interpreting this performance, bracketed historically as it is by Ángel Ganivet’s 1897 assertion that Seneca “es español por esencia” (38) and Juan Goytisolo’s 1970 debunking, in *Reivindicación del Conde don Julián*, of the Ganivet-incited myth of a *Senquista* “national stoic morality” (“la aceptación estoica del destino histórico es el primer rasgo saliente de la actitud hispánica ante la vida” 181). In sounding the death knell, via satire, of what had become in the interim a prime tool for the construction of Spanish nationalism (Taibo 23), Goytisolo highlights the constructedness of collective identities in general, as have so many in the aftermath of seminal essays by Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and others, and he thereby reminds us of the *concerted* dimension of all such efforts. Insofar as the *Medea* performance represents a landmark event on the *Senquista* path leading from Ganivet to Goytisolo, the felicitous conjoining of talents – Unamuno’s, Rivas’, and Xirgu’s – bears investigating within the broad network of mechanisms and elements that were orchestrated in early 20th century for the purpose of “making” (Quiroga) or “creating” (Holguín) Spaniards.

150 First and foremost within that network is the site itself, for the significance of the 1933 performance has a great deal to do with the monumentality of Mérida’s Roman theater, with the archeological disinterring of that monument – as a process of collective discovery – and with the resulting general clamor for the reclaiming and reconstruction of that stage as a privileged locus for celebrating Spanish national culture. Rivas and Unamuno both stimulate this process of enlightenment and discovery by evoking the metaphorical intertwining of performance, dramatic literature, national culture and the archeological ruins, in the days leading up to the performance, in press articles intended for educating the general public. Unamuno likens his own effort to that of Ramón Mérida’s, the archeologist in charge of the Mérida site, insofar as his translation is tantamount to the “unearthing” of an ancient, undisclosed treasure:

En ese teatro romano de Mérida, *desenterrado* al sol, se ha representado la tragedia *Medea*, del cordobés Lucio Anneo Séneca. *La desenterré* de su latín barroco para

ponerla, sin cortes ni glosas, en prosa de paladino romance castellano, *lo que ha sido también restaurar ruinas* Pretendí con mi versión hacer resonar bajo el cielo hispánico de Mérida el cielo mismo de Córdoba, los arranques conceptistas y culteranos de Séneca, pero *en la lengua brotada de las ruinas de la suya.* (“Séneca”)

In an article published, significantly, in the “Turismo y viajes” section of *El Sol*, Rivas drew a similar analogy between Mérida’s “tierno cuidado” and his own, by underscoring the millenary dimension of the product he was about to unveil for his spectators: Seneca’s “piedra miliaria de una tradición de cultura, aspirante a la unidad del mundo, sí, pero en la libertad de la conciencia nacional” (“Teatro clásico”). Rivas’ recollection of this episode in *Como hacer teatro* (106-112) in his 1945 prison memoirs⁴ is telling for what it reveals as much as for the striking detail of his account. In the culmination of the book’s “Geografía histórica del teatro español” section, he emphasizes not only that the event was officially sanctioned and financed, but that Fernando de los Ríos, in his capacity as Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts (Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes), had suggested the idea of such a performance in the first place, at a time when Rivas and Xirgu were familiar with the Roman theater only through textbook illustrations and travel postcards. The prestige they both enjoyed within Spain’s official circles plus the sway that they managed to exercise over the archeologist – Mérida had previously declined a similar request from María Guerrero – had much to do with a generational shift in stage aesthetics and sensibilities. The “decorados” and “tramoyas” that were for Mérida the impediment in Guerrero and Mendoza’s proposal – an indication of the bourgeois realism characterized the Guerrero-Mendoza productions – yielded in the Rivas-Xirgu project to what most bonded the translator, director, and actor: a modernist aesthetic founded on the idea of a “desnudez escénica” that they had all promoted in their ongoing campaign for theater reform in Spain.

In this regard, Mérida may be taken as the triumphal moment for a writer whose search for the modernist sobriety of a stripped-down stage – the spatial correlative for Unamuno’s bare bones dramas of human passion – was

forecast in his earliest reflections on the theater at a moment in which the essayist, poet, and novelist had just begun to launch his career in drama. In 1896, Unamuno addressed those features –“psicología espontánea,” “el interior de las almas,” and “religiosidad”– that would vertebrate his modernist approach to the stage (“Regeneración”). Rivas’ March 1918 premiere of Unamuno’s *Fedra* in the Ateneo, six years after that play was written, is fundamental in this regard, for it marks a crossroads in the friendship linking the 27-year-old rising stage director –*Fedra* was his first production—and the maturing Unamuno, whose plays were being treated by Spain’s mainstream theater establishment as more *readable* than *stageable*. *Fedra* in the unconventional arena of the Ateneo –Rivas was appointed the secretary of the Ateneo’s Literature department in 1915– signaled a communion of aesthetic sensibilities that ran counter to the dominant grain of prevailing taste. It planted the seeds of a collaboration that would be celebrated by *Fedra*’s publication in *La Pluma* in 1921 –Rivas and Manuel Azaña were the journal’s co-editors– and by Rivas’ staging of Unamuno’s plays at the Teatro Español, that is, on Spain’s *de facto* national stage at a time when Rivas was campaigning actively for a national theater *de iure*. If his directing Isabel Barrón in *Sombras de sueño* in May 1930 lent support to Rivas’s claim to becoming the Español’s artistic director –he staged Unamuno’s play during the resident Guerrero-Díaz company’s spring recess– his decision to direct Xirgu in Unamuno’s *El otro* in December of 1932 –six months prior to the *Medea* performance– was strategic in his lobbying for a national theater: for a state supported Teatro Español, for the right to direct such an institution, and for the authority, therefore, to create a national repertoire of the highest caliber within which Unamuno would be pivotal.

Rivas’ correspondence with Unamuno during this period provides written testimony to a bond that deepened in time (Aguilera and Aznar 76-83, 157-164, 219-223). The experiences and achievements that meanwhile mark Xirgu and Rivas’ trajectory suggests the accruing of skills, the shaping of an aesthetic vision and, perhaps most significantly, the firming of the resolve that would prove instrumental for the execution and success of the Mérida project. As to Xirgu, Rivas credited her with proposing to Fernan-

do de los Ríos her “deseo de representar alguna pieza clásica de ascendencia auténticamente española” in an outdoor venue (Prats). The path leading to what Margarita Xirgu would later term the “happiest day of her life”⁵ –at what was, by all accounts, the pinnacle of her career on stage– was shaped by her abiding interest in classical tragedy. In April of 1912, at the age of 24, she took on the challenging role of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Electra* (Rodrigo 89-90),⁶ and that role would figure prominently throughout her career. She reprised it in a June 1931 outdoor performance in the Retiro Park’s “La Chopera” (Gil Fombellida 201-205) –sanctioned officially by Madrid’s municipal government, the event was billed as the first “fiestas de la República”– and in subsequent outdoor performances –Barcelona’s Teatre Grec, Mexico City’s Chapultepec Park– that she would cite in support of her petition to Fernando de los Ríos. Her open-air tandem reprise of *Electra* and *Medea* in Mérida, in September 1934, as part of a state-sanctioned “semana romana” –with members of the Alcalá Zamora government in attendance– along with the inclusion of these plays in her 1934 season, at Madrid’s Teatro Español and on tour throughout Spain, reveal how fundamental the paradigms of classical tragedy were for Xirgu’s understanding of herself as the nation’s premiere stage artist.

Xirgu’s activities during the 1930s underscore the importance of her collaboration with Rivas in this regard, and although the question of influence is inevitably elusive, particularly at this incipient moment in the history of stage direction, Rivas’ writings and experiences suggest a systematic drive on his part, in the realm of both theory and practice, toward the accrual of the means and techniques that would make the 1933 Mérida performance possible. His embrace of the theoretical models that have been associated with Unamuno’s drama (Aszyk) stems initially, no doubt, from his early exposure to Gordon Craig, during his three-year sojourn (1911-1914) at the Colegio de San Clemente de los Españoles in Bologna, Italy. Craig’s influence, along with that of Adolphe Appia, Jacques Copeau, Vsevolod Meyerhold and others is manifested by Rivas’ various experimental enterprises that predate his 1931-1935 stint at the Teatro Español, the last of which being the *Compañía Clásica de Arte Moderno* that he founded with Isabel Barrón and that featured Unamuno’s *Sombras de*

sueño (Aguilera and Aznar: *Cipriano* 87-133; *Retrato*). But it is his interest in Max Reinhardt –and, most importantly, Rivas’ campaign to popularize his response to Reinhart in the Spanish press– that have special relevance for the Mérida performance.

Early Spanish accounts highlight Reinhardt’s influence in helping to consolidate the role of the stage director as such, as an indispensable tool within modern European theater culture. This consolidation was viewed as resulting from the innovations in repertoire and staging techniques promoted by Reinhardt and others (Craig especially): namely, the elaboration of a modern aesthetic for reviving classical theater and the development of spectatorship through the establishment of new points of interaction between spectacle and audience. Writing in *España* in 1918, Alvaro del Vayo draws attention to the core directorial “inteligencia” manifest in the “armonía” of Reinhardt’s “conjuntos.” In doing so, the Socialist journalist who would later play a leading political role in shaping the Republican agenda laid the basis for arguments that Rivas would subsequently take up. If as Rivas suggests in 1926 he coveted the “batuta del director” as his own tool for plumbing the classical archives and thereby rendering as stageable (as Reinhardt had done) masterpieces that had long been neglected, in his self-appointed role as a Gramscian organic intellectual he treated the press as his other “batuta” for reaching out to the public and thereby forging a new pact between the intellectuals and the masses. The role of both the press and open-air performance venues are fundamental for this project, especially in view of the way they became conflated, in Rivas’ development, around the Mérida production and around his and Unamuno’s shared concern for the educational role of the arts.

The road toward this conflation begins to emerge in 1928 in one of Rivas’ first public reflections on how the Austrian director managed to deconstruct the seemingly “invulnerable” barricade separating actors and audiences and to thereby construct “la ilusión shakesperiana correspondiente a nuestro tiempo”:

Max Reinhardt ha roto varias veces los límites, que parecían invulnerables, del escenario, interrumpiendo las tradiciones teatrales de tres siglos para restaurar nor-

mas de tradición más antigua: ha dispuesto las localidades en anfiteatro; ha representado a Shakespeare en libertad, en la relativa libertad de un circo, en medio de la pista, y no encuadrado en el marco de la escena; ha interpretado las alegorías de Calderón en escaleras piramidales, y sobre todo ha iluminado violentamente los textos dramáticos de su vasto repertorio en contrastes emocionantes de luz y sombra. (“El Shakespeare”)

Rivas’ “varias veces” alludes no doubt to Reinhardt’s process of achieving these effects in his ongoing collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In 1903 Reinhardt premiered Hofmannsthal’s *Electra* in Berlin, in his Little Theater. In 1920 he established the Salzburg Festival in collaboration with both Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, directing most notably, in the city’s cathedral square, an annual production of the Hofmannsthal’s *Everyman* (*Jedermann*) and *Das Salzburger grosse Welttheater*, plays that took their inspiration from Calderón’s *autos sacramentales* (*El gran teatro del mundo*) (Steinberg). Reservations concerning the heavy-handedness of Reinhardt’s “complicaciones de tramoya” notwithstanding (“Alcalde”; *Cómo hacer teatro* 289-291; Aguilera and Aznar, *Cipriano* 37-40), it is clear that Rivas held the visual effect of Reinhardt’s productions –the “contrastos emocionantes de luz y sombra”– in high esteem. It also became clear, particularly in light of Rivas’ press campaign in the spring of 1933, that the “sistema de relación entre el espectáculo y el espectador” that Reinhardt managed to effect through his modernized outdoor productions of classical theater represented a formidable model for Rivas in anticipation of the Mérida performance and at a time when interest in popular, ideologically inspired outdoor performance was on the rise throughout Europe.

The press campaign in question corresponds to a series of essays that Rivas published between March and June of 1933 –on the front page, no less– of *El Sol*. In the first ten articles he provided his reading public with a chronicle of his experience in Germany, intertwining political impressions with the comprehensive lessons he garnered from both his conversations with Reinhardt and his exposure to the artist’s work. In the last three essays he sought to educate the Spanish public vis-à-vis the upcoming Mérida per-

formance by constructing a framework of understanding for Seneca's play, for the project in its "national" (official) dimension and for the quality of Unamuno's translation. As to his experience in Germany, Rivas leaves no doubt as to the impulse it provided for his efforts to rejuvenate Spanish theatrical culture: "Creo que mi viaje y mis conversaciones con Max Reinhardt y sus amigos y colaboradores pueden fructificar muy provechosamente para la renovación de nuestros medios escénicos" ("El gran Reinhardt"). He was equally explicit regarding the role a performance such as Seneca's *Medea* would play in that project: "No ha sido otro el objeto de mi viaje a Berlín que recabar la colaboración de Max Reinhardt para algún espectáculo en grande -*La muerte de Danton*, he would specify years later- con que reanudar en España la tradición magnífica de nuestro teatro universal" ("El gran Reinhardt"; *Cómo hacer teatro* 290). Finally, Rivas was adamant in relating the quality and size of the outdoor performance space to his broader concern for how a stage director might implement a more intimate interaction between performance and audience -between art and society- since what he came to imagine was a "gran representación ejemplar . . . en un vasto anfiteatro, donde la colaboración del pueblo [cobraría], por el número de espectadores, autenticidad de masa." Rivas states flatly that Max Reinhardt is singularly responsible for having recuperated within the modern arena the ancient "exaltación del espectáculo dramático como una fiesta de excepción, como un rito cultural" ("Danton").

In the multitude of articles that Rivas published in journals and newspapers in the 1920s and 30s, the sensorial and dynamic dimensions of stage production -the harmony of image, movement, and sound- emerge as core values within the aesthetic that he developed throughout these years, in consonance with his European models. On his way back to Spain, these qualities became the focus of his conversations with the artist José María Sert, when the two discussed the need to "restaurar plenamente en España el sentido artístico de los espectáculos . . . un circo ejemplar en cuanto a fiesta de los sentidos y de una feria estética" ("Paz"; emphasis mine). To be sure, Rivas' allusions to the sensorial dimension, inflected by the classical notion of theater as ritual, characterize what lessons he derived from his expo-

sure to Reinhardt's work in Germany. Reflecting upon Reinhardt's production of Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo*, for instance, he praised especially the lighting effects ("luz tenue"), the arrangement of the actors "a modo de viviente grupo escultórico," and the general "tono" and "pompa" that were, for him, a "regalo de los sentidos." Owing to the director's expertise and oversight, all scenic elements related to sound, movement, and design "se acogen y reintegran al pensamiento de Calderón y a su última palabra." What Rivas lauded in Reinhardt's work in 1928 -the means and effect of Reinhardt's breaching the seemingly invulnerable barrier of "batería, bambalinas y bastidores" -became in 1933 a primary objective for his Mérida project and a primary basis upon which Unamuno's translation would be construed, through the press, as a symbol of the Spanish nation. Those means and effects included: the unmediated projection of image, (spoken) word, and idea, brought into full alignment through the intervention of the stage director for the "pura contemplación del público"; the full interaction between actors and spectators ("la confusión de aquellos y los espectadores"); the strongest possible linkage, thanks to elements of *style*, of art and society ("Gran Teatro").

CURTAIN CALL: STAGING A NATIONAL MEDEA

This is, in short, the intersection of aesthetic and ideological values that Rivas chose to telecast to his public in the aftermath of his trip to Germany and in anticipation of the Mérida performance. Faced with the need to find a feasible substitution for the *Danton* project -Reinhardt declined Rivas' invitation, due apparently to the material limitations of the Teatro Español (*Cómo hacer el teatro* 290) -Fernando de los Ríos turned to the idea of Seneca's *Medea*. Rivas rechanneled his efforts, meanwhile, toward framing the upcoming event by justifying both the site and the play, the "porqué de Séneca." Justification, as can be seen, had much to do with the aesthetic values that Rivas had reflected upon while in Germany: the sensual (visual, aural) and lyrical effect of Reinhardt's stage productions. Now, however, those qualities are *projected* rather than recalled, as inherent in the still unfulfilled potential of

Seneca's –and Unamuno's– *literature*, and they are linked *emphatically* to the nationalistic implications of that style:

Y, en definitiva –y esto ya es más importante desde el punto de vista teatral–, el hecho de que Séneca, y precisamente en la *Medea*, acentúe con rasgos esenciales de los que podríamos llamar *acción directa*, es decir, con la representación *a la vista del público*, el horror que los trágicos griegos ofrecían purgado por el relato, la confiere título indudable de antecesor de Calderón en *El médico de su honra*, de Echegaray y de Valle-Inclán, ejemplos literariamente antagonísticos; pero que se corresponden y relacionan, a poco que se inquiera en su carácter *nacional*.

En un ciclo histórico del drama español –de que es *La Celestina* el primer jalón insuperado–, corresponde a Séneca el primer lugar en nuestra prehistoria romana." ("El porqué de Séneca"; emphasis mine)

In such commentary Rivas seems intent upon equating the "spectacular" nature of this work –the unmediated horror of an "acción directa" placed in full public view ("a la vista del público")– to the fertile ground of a style upon which the seeds of a national consciousness were originally sown ("corresponde a Séneca el primer lugar en nuestra prehistoria romana"). The claim that the Austro-German sphere provided the initial stimulus for such a strategic move is hardly speculative, given the explicit connection Rivas makes to Calderón –he attended a performance of Hofmannsthal-Reinhardt's *Gran teatro del mundo*– along with the growing emphasis in central Europe, since the mid-19th century, on the nationalist "ideology of the Baroque" (Steinberg 1-36). But if Germany was his initial stimulus, *Medea* would become the definitive testing ground for fully exploiting the connection between style and nationalism, for re-sowing those seeds within the consciousness of *contemporary* Spanish society.

This is the lesson to be derived not only from Rivas' initial reflections on Seneca but from the manner in which these ideas resonated throughout the Spanish critical spectrum at that time. Seneca was portrayed as figuring prominently within the nation's cultural history on the pages of all of Madrid's leading newspapers –the *ABC*, *El Sol*, the *Heraldo de Madrid*, *El Liberal*, *La Libertad*, and *La Voz*– and Rivas' theories and initiatives drew thoughtful support

from the nation's leading critics (Melchor Fernández Almagro, Enrique Díez-Canedo, Juan Olmedilla). In terms of the sheer "impetus and color" of his own language, Juan Chabás, writing in *Luz*, represents –indeed, *performs*– with singular verve the 1933 triumph of the Baroque ideology fostered by Rivas, in his essays and stage artistry, by Xirgu, by dint of her mastery of acting, and by a host of critics who celebrated all this in the press:

Pasa por la literatura latina del Imperio, con Quintiliano, con Lucano y Séneca, un soplo espiritual de nuestra raza y nuestro genio. El *brillante ímpetu de galas y colores* de la poesía andaluza de un Mena, un Herrera o un Góngora no es sólo gusto barroco que nace de una cultura renacentista, sino también ahincada y hondísima *cualidad de un pueblo*. Ha trasferido siempre Andalucía a nuestras letras *brillantez de adornos y frondosidad y luminosidad y opulencia de formas y de ingenio*. Esas cualidades están presentes en el estilo de Séneca, y hállanse también en su *Medea*. El gusto que se complace en la *xageración de los elementos mágicos*, el refinamiento acentuado que da *relieve* especialísimo a las escenas de crueldad y una constante *energía verbal* que ilumina las *metáforas* y da *vigor y color al estilo* son cualidades andaluzas de Séneca, que luego hemos de ver con plenitud de expresión lograda en nuestro teatro." (Chabás, "Próxima"; emphasis mine)

Borrowing liberally from both the qualitative and quantitative rhetorical registers associated generally with the Baroque style –the cumulative effect of a hyperbolic appeal to the visual, for example: "brillantez . . . frondosidad . . . luminosidad . . . opulencia"– and exercising what may strike us today as lofty or imaginative leaps of historical analysis, Chabás expands upon Rivas' attention to the literary component of the event through his detailed interpretation of Seneca's opulent language, as rendered by Unamuno. Like Fernández Almagro, he pays special attention to what distinguishes Seneca and Euripides, emphasizing how the chiaroscuro effect of the former's *Medea* –the radical swing from the protagonist's "arrebato furioso de celos," "instinto criminal" and "pavor" to her "súbito encendimiento de la piedad y el amor"– acquire, thanks to Unamuno, "la esencial calidad de nuestra tradición liter-

aria y dramática." In his characterization of Seneca's translator as the "recio y barroco poeta humanista" – "duro, sobrio y retórico"; "religioso y moralista" – Chabás places Unamuno center stage as an active and indispensable agent for the collective construction of this national myth.

In assessing the mechanisms and means by which the *Medea* performance achieved its significance and prominence, separating the contributions of the translator and author is somewhat akin to parsing the roles of the actor and director. Chabás himself seems to allude to this by conjoining Unamuno and Seneca in this marriage of a style that, as indicated, gains national stature in a broadly constructed genealogy involving classical and modern Spanish playwrights. Insofar as Unamuno is situated by his contemporaries as the most recent member of this progeny, it behooves us to consider how his contribution to this singular occurrence might be construed as a culminating achievement in his own career.

Days after the play's premiere Unamuno published his own reflections on the meaning of the performance, interweaving some of the more salient threads of his writing and thinking concerning literature in general and theater in particular. To begin with, he broaches the topic of spectatorship and the category of the popular at a time when, as mentioned, outdoor performance was being promoted by artists and intellectuals throughout both Spain (consider, for instance, Lorca's "La Barraca" and Alberti and Casona's "Misiones Pedagógicas") and Europe as a means of forging a new communion between intellectuals and the masses:

¿Y el público popular (laico) iletrado (no inculto), el público del campo y de la calle? Todo debía de sonarle a música. Debía sentir ruinas de tradiciones seculares enteradas bajo el solar de su alma comunal. (*Ahora*)

In petrous metaphors befitting the *monumental* scope of the occasion and reminiscent of his *En torno a casticismo* (1895), Unamuno reminds his readers of a belief that he had linked to the theater decades prior, in "La regeneración del teatro" (1896), by affirming his vision of the "pueblo" as the bedrock of a nation's theater and by forecasting the very pact that Rivas would later procure in his own activist role as an organic or public intellectual:

En el pueblo se conservaron vivas las tradiciones y las fuentes vivas literarias, de la vida dramática coetánea sacaba la suya el drama. Por ministerio del pueblo revivió el teatro a lozana vida . . . La vida toda del teatro español se concentra en el juego mutuo y la lucha entre el elemento popular y el erudito. ("Regeneración" 1131)

If Mérida could be interpreted as the fulfillment of a longstanding dream in terms of Unamuno's social commitment, no less significant is the theme of passion that, in essays and plays alike, Unamuno would place time and again at the very core of his *ars dramática*. His 1896 essay, "La regeneración del teatro," is once again seminal in this regard, given his discussion therein of the liberating power of the stage – "¡Liberar de pasiones!" (1146) – in the face of prudish (false, bourgeois) morality. He frames that discussion, interestingly, with references to the field of psychology and to Stuart Mill's theories concerning the development of human character (etiology). It is significant that Unamuno should recall these assertions – "hace tiempo que creo que a nuestra actual dramaturgia española le falta pasión" – in speaking to the audience prior to Rivas' premiere of his *Fedra* and at a moment in which, as playwright, he was about to embark on a literary journey leading through the various "almas humanas arrastradas por el torbellino del amor trágico" ("La *Fedra* de Unamuno") that would populate his plays prior to *Medea*.

The portrayal of human passion as a liberating force is clearly basic to Unamuno's sense of his own social contract. In relation to the ritualized framework of the 1933 performance, it too would become a major benchmark of the nationalistic tide of 1933. To be sure, the concept of theater as ritual had figured prominently Unamuno's thinking from early on, given the connection he established between theater and religiosity in "La regeneración del teatro" and in view of *Fedra*'s symbolic sacrifice, as composed in 1912 and staged in 1918. In 1933, however, Unamuno attributes to the "cordobés Séneca" a deep understanding of the "pasión tremenda [que] agita las más típicas tragedias de la historia de nuestra España" and that resonates throughout the corpus of his own oeuvre. That Unamuno's abiding faith in the vital link between play and

pueblo should culminate in a translation results indeed from his understanding that this galvanizing element –“pasión tremenda”– was common to both Seneca’s drama and his own. But it stems as well from the interrelatedness of play, public and *place* (Extremadura) that Unamuno exploited in his post-premiere reflections:

¿Que no entendían aquellas arrebatadas truculencias de la pasión de Medea? ¿Que no entendían aquellas relaciones mitológicas de Séneca, a quien algunos soñadores le han querido dar como profeta que *vaticinó el descubrimiento de América en un pasaje de su Medea?*” (*Ahora*; emphasis mine)

His evocation of the legacy of empire and the myth of Seneca’s supposed prophecy of the discovery of the Americas –“la mar destapará nuevos orbes y no será ya el fin de las tierras Tule” (Unamuno, *Teatro* 236)– seems strategic, given the presence of an audience eager to see their own experience reflected in the ceremonies of the new Republican state.

162

EPILOGUE

It is striking that in 1945, shrouded by the painful experience of incarceration, Rivas should recall in such vivid detail Xirgu’s June 1933 performance of Medea’s culminating fury, when the protagonist reaches the height of her sorcery (Act IV): the “rojo sangriento de su túnica sobre aquel mármol opalino con reflejos áureos” and the serendipitous flock of “enigmatic” storks appearing overhead, at the twilight hour, as Xirgu gazed skyward to invoke “los silenciosos dioses funerales” (*Cómo hacer el teatro* 266). The imagery employed by the author-translator team to project, through Medea’s monologue, the supernatural power of her passion –“un viejo serpiente arrastra su gigantesco tronco, esgrime su lengua tripartida y buscando a quienes atacar, mortífero, se detiene al oír el ensalmo, repliega el corpachón hinchado con nudos amontonados y se recoge enroscándose” (*Medea* 249-50)– conveys what critics in general sought to hispanify in their encomia and what Rivas in particular saw as essential to Spain’s dramatic legacy: the rendering of that passion as an

“acción directa” –visual, immediate– through the evocative power of language.

It bears recalling, in this regard, that within the recipe concocted by this “obrera de maleficios” for executing her heinous plan –“plantas mortíferas,” “la baba de las serpientes,” “aves siniestras,” “corazón de triste búho, entrañas arrancadas a ronca lechuza viva”– words reign supreme: “Añade a los venenos *palabras no menos tremendas que ellos*” (249). Seneca’s lesson concerning the transformative power of language was clearly not lost on Rivas, Xirgu and Unamuno, intent as they were on implementing, within the democratic framework of the day, a national *ars dramatica* that would serve as the essential bond uniting intellectuals and citizens. The legacy of the Mérida theater festival, along with other more recent iterations organized elsewhere, stands in tribute to the accomplishment of the Republican artists and intellectuals who struggled for the meaningful marriage of art and society. The death (Unamuno, 1936) and exile (Xirgu, 1936; Rivas, 1946) of the cast who treated such rituals as a tool for achieving just that, however, marks a paradigm shift that Menéndez Pidal seems to capture in 1947:

163

El español, duro para soportar privaciones, lleva dentro de sí el *sustine et abstine*, “resiste firme y abstente fuerte”, norma de la sabiduría que coloca al hombre por encima de toda adversidad; lleva en sí un particular estoicismo instintivo y elemental; es un senequista innato. Por eso el pensamiento filosófico español, en el curso de los siglos, se inspiró siempre en Séneca como un autor propio y predilecto. Mucho le debe, ciertamente, y a la vez también mucho debe Séneca, acendrador de estoicismo, al hecho de haber nacido en familia española. (83)

The triumph of “estoicismo instintivo” as the dominant characterization of a people –of its *sustine et abstine* relationship to authority– must have been a bitter pill for Rivas, who at nearly the same time was recalling the precedence that “elocuencia” took over “estoicismo” in his 1933 framing of Seneca’s *Medea*. That “estilo” would no longer serve to transcend class structures, in the way that Vossler had once celebrated, represents one of the more striking ironies of modern Spanish theater history, given Rivas’ own defense of new frameworks of meaning for writers like Seneca.

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NOTAS

¹ Cipriano de Rivas Cherif was wont to invoke the “voluntad revolucionaria del pueblo . . . plasmada” in the 1931 elections as a basis for his campaign for a state-supported public theater (“teatro nacional”). See, for example, Rivas “Por el Teatro Dramático Nacional.”

² Castro refers in this essay to the “armazón interior de la vida española” (*Realidad* 12) and goes on to historicize it as follows: “Dentro de cada una de esas especificadas unidades, la conciencia colectiva tiene presente sus inmediatos y anteriores momentos y situaciones, del mismo modo que la persona individual siente en sí su mocedad y su niñez” (*Realidad* 13)

³ Ángel del Río (9) bestows upon these words a certain air of officialdom by citing them in a lecture delivered as part of the “Fiesta de la lengua,” organized in Washington, D.C. on April 23, 1935, by the Instituto de las Españas, to commemorate Lope’s third centennial.

⁴ Detained by the Gestapo in southern France in 1940, Rivas was turned over to the Franco police, tried, and sentenced to death for treason in the fall of that same year. His sentence was later commuted to a life term. In 1946 he was released on parole and managed to flee the country to join his family in Mexico.

⁵ Rivas’ testimony bears citing: “Ya en el ensayo general de la *Medea* pude advertir la emoción callada del anciano Mérida, sentado al borde de la «cavea» con las lágrimas saltándosele de los ojos: «-No sabe V., no sabe V., lo que esto es para mí», me dijo luego no más al ver que le miraba. / Lo mismo pude yo haberle dicho, cuando viéndole aclamado en el grito de entusiasmo del público que, con Unamuno y la Xirgu nos unía en la ovación unánime, me decía la gran actriz jadeante de exaltación: «¡Gracias, gracias! ¡Me ha dado usted el día más feliz de mi vida de teatro!»” (*Como hacer teatro* 110).

⁶ Critics and commentators term this role as a *tour de force* for an actor who suffered from a chronic pulmonary illness.

MARGARITA XIRGU AND MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO, ON THE STAGE

Denise DuPont
Southern Methodist University

In recent decades, scholars have noted that the traditional vision of theater history has been narrow, based on the written text rather than theatrical practice (Case 25), and that this emphasis increases with the play’s age, “as the performance recedes from cultural memory” (Delgado, *Other* 3). A newer conception of the theater often intersects with women’s history, in a move away from an exclusive focus on the playwright, and toward the idea of theatrical works as joint endeavors by several authors (Aston 32), including the actors who brought the plays to life. For the theater in Spain and in the rest of Europe, the early twentieth century was a period in which women were increasingly visible, as authors of plays, or as influential actresses, including ones who owned and directed their own theater companies.¹ By the time Margarita Xirgu began her career in Barcelona, this trend was well-established. In this article, I look at Xirgu’s “collaboration” with Unamuno, with “collaboration” defined loosely, in order to include actual stagings of plays, as well as shared ideas and themes. This aspect of the actress’ trajectory has received less attention than her work with Federico García Lorca and other playwrights of his generation, and I believe it deserves closer examination as an important transitional moment. Xirgu’s coincidence with the professor from Salamanca² provides a background for her work with younger authors. Unamuno was a key figure who bridged nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and thought. While the traditional aspects of his theater link him to the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by Thomas Franz and Serge Salaün, Unamuno’s work also reveals an openness – a receptivity to the novelty embodied by Margarita Xirgu, and the innovative Cipriano Rivas Cherif, who formed an essential part of Xirgu’s theatrical enterprise. The transition to a woman-centric theater such as that of García Lorca is merely a hint or suggestion in Unamuno, an impulse that is all the more interesting because the shift is incomplete. This, then, will

