

**KING LEAR and Galdo's EL ABUELO:  
A Critical Reassessment**

**Alfred Rodríguez and Susan Dorich**



Critical opinión directed at *El abuelo* when it first appeared stressed a direct and massive influence of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1). Recent criticism either disregards the influence of the English dramatist (2), or foregoes it as a significant critical tool (3).

A reappraisal of the early criticism will afford us a basis for a new comparison. Two truly prestigious critics dealt, in its own day, with Galdós's *El abuelo: Clarín* and *Andrenio* (4). Both agree that Galdós's source and inspi-

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(1) L. Alas, *Galdós* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1912), pp. 291-304; and E. Gómez de Baquero, "Crónica literaria," *La España Moderna*, 1 (1898), 146-151.

Galdós unusual dramatization of novels originally written in dialogue is not the subject of our study, so we will not distinguish here between the two versions of *El abuelo*. For a study of that Galdosian process, see, for example, G. Sobejano, "Razón y suceso de la dramática galdosiana", *Anales Galdosianos*, 5 (1970), 39-53; and M. Alvar, "Novela y teatro en Galdós", in *Estudios y ensayos de literatura española* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971), pp. 52-110.

(2) See, for example, E. Anderson-Imber, "Un drama ibseniano de Galdós", *Sur*, 16 (1948), 26-31.

(3) See, for example, J. Casaldueño, "El abuelo de Galdós", *Cuadernos*, 57 (1962), 64-70. A significant exception is H. C. Berkowitz's "Introduction" to B. Pérez Galdós, *El abuelo* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1929), pp. XXXIV-XXXV. Berkowitz's brevity does not allow depth.

(4) These are the pseudonyms of the critics cited in note 1. The date referred to is 1897, publication date of the novel version of *El abuelo*. In and around 1904, the date on which the theatrical version

rational model is *King Lear*; and *Clarín's* perspicacious analysis, in particular, convincingly enumerates the literary elements that, although modernized by the Spanish author, are common to the two works.

The most obvious of these parallels is the human condition fixed in the respective protagonists: old men, fallen from high station, beleaguered by family troubles, yet doggedly intent upon retaining status or its semblance. In effect, the common elements are many and qualitatively precise.

A second parallel is Gloucester-Coronado. *Clarín* states his view unequivocally, stressing the relational equation: Gloucester is to Lear what Pío Coronado is to the Conde Albrit (5). His perception is convincing, and it is easily confirmed when the two Shakespearean characters are viewed as esthetically complementary:

The interrelationship of Gloucester and Lear and of their children are essential to the play, and the ironic duplication of parental experiences is a way of showing dramatically the universality of the theme. The two tragic heroes, however, do more than duplicate each other. Lear is a man of great force who imposes his will on the world, whereas Gloucester too much accepts the will of the world. One is violently active on wrong principles; the other's wrong principle is really passivity, a hope to get along with both sides... (6).

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appeared, there were other critical appraisals. See, for example, Luis Marote, *Novela y teatro* (Madrid: Fernando Fe, 1906), pp. 59-75; Manuel Bueno, *Teatro español contemporáneo* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1909), pp. 79-92; and E. Martinenche, "El abuelo de B. Pérez Galdós", *La Revue Latine*, 4 (1905), 419-428. All three understate the Shakespearean presence.

(5) Alas, p. 294-295.

(6) *Reader's Companion to World Literature*, Edited by C. S. Brown (New York: Dryden Press, 1956), pp. 244-245.

The same effect is achieved by Galdós with the complementary relationship of Albrit and Pío Coronado, so that the parallel that *Clarín* underscores goes beyond the simple similarity between two separate pairs of characters. Involved, as well, is the complementary nature of their relationship and its studied literary effect.

A third common element noted by *Clarín* is the question of offspring legitimacy, despite a fundamental alteration by Galdós (7). The matter touches only the secondary plot in Shakespeare; while the Spanish writer doubles its presence, carrying it over into the main plot as well. Despite this difference, offspring legitimacy is difficult to disregard as a common thematic element (8).

Still another signal parallel between *King Lear* and *El abuelo* is the matter of filial ingratitude. In its most direct manifestation (daughters of Lear; daughters of Pío Coronado), the obvious parallel is noted by *Clarín* (9). The possibility of a Shakespearean influence is greatly enhanced by the degree of ingratitude projected, for it seems unlikely that a set of daughters so viciously inclined toward a loving father-figure would arise coincidentally in the Spanish writer.

Two less significant parallels are also noteworthy. Both protagonists endure the sufferings associated with being unwanted guests in their fallen state (10); and although the differences in kind are appreciable (a fallen king; a fallen count), the parallel is unmistakable. And the scenic parallel between the worlds represented in Shakespeare and Galdós, both geographic and meteorological (11), can

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(7) Alas, p. 293.

(8) Gómez de Baquero, p. 148.

(9) Alas, p. 294.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 303.

(11) *Ibid.*, pp. 294, 304.

only with great difficulty be considered coincidental when viewed in the light of a whole series of structural, thematic and characterizational parallels.

Our re-appraisal of the Shakespearean elements noted by the first major critics of *El abuelo* prompts, to begin with, an unequivocal acknowledgement of Galdós' Shakespearean debt. The number and specificity of the literary parallels can lead to no other sensible conclusion. In the followings pages, we propose to determine precisely how the Shakespearean elements are esthetically accommodatd by the Spanish writer. We may, thus, hopefully acquire a new perspective on the Galdós work, and even, perhaps, an overview into its artistic creation.

As noted, the most striking Galdosian debt, and possibly the most significant in terms of the genesis of *El abuelo*, is the character and condition of the protagonist. The Spanish writer could have chosen no more appropriate literary model for fixing in a single human the tragic-albeit, pathetic-aging of the once vital and mighty. *King Lear* is, primarily, the tragedy of old-age (12). This timeless human anguish was brought by the genius of Shakespeare into incomparable relief: subjectless king, rejected father, hapless old man; and all built into the haughty and uncompromising soul of a life long patriarch. And Galdós was hardly alone in borrowing the Shakespearean model to this end, for the other two major Western authours attracted to the figure of Lear perceived in Shakespeare's great character, primarily, the anguish attendant upon man's inevitable aging: Balzac (*Pere Goriot*) and Turgienev (*A Lear of the Steppes*).

As for Galdós, old-age and its disturbing human consequences were very much on his mind in the period in

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(12) *Reader's Companion to World Literature*, p. 245.

which he produced *El abuelo*. His great novel of old-age, *Misericordia* (1898), was written simultaneously with or immediately after *El abuelo*. Galdós was himself in his fifty-fifth year. So that the Spanish writer's special interest in personalizing the traumatic reality of growing old may well explain a significant departure from his model. Whereas in Shakespeare's day decrepit old-age might have been realistically portrayed in the father of relatively young women (Lear), in Galdós' time a paternal figure would not have been as credible. The Spanish writer had to go a generation beyond his Shakespearean model, a factor stressed (precisely in its gerontological dimension) by its use as the work's title.

The complementing function of the Gloucester-Coronado parallel (*vis a vis* Lear and Albrit, respectively) is significantly altered by Galdós. A very weak Pío Coronado, far waker than Gloucester (13), makes for a much stronger polarization of characters in Galdós' work, a personality differentiation that is given direct relief in dialogue (14). This, too, seems tied to the special old-age insistence hypothesized for the Spanish writer. It makes all the more explicit the message that is already in Shakespeare: strong-willed individual or weak-willed individual, old-age is the great equalizer in tragedy by reduction.

The third and fourth parallels noted, filial ingratitude and offspring legitimacy, we will deal with as a unit. The two are clearly bound by subject: children. Besides, the functional inversion that the two undergo in Galdós' work is so precise that a careful esthetic re-arrangement is suggested. The legitimacy question, a secondary plot factor in

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(13) The character's name is clear and accurate, his physical description is telling, and even his profession (schoolteacher) is, in Galdós world, demeaning.

(14) See, for example, Jornada IV, escena XII and Jornada V, escena XVI.

Shakespeare (Edgar, Edmund), becomes the primary plot of *El abuelo* and carries over into its secondary plot as well, as represented by Pío Coronado and his daughters. The matter of filial ingratitude, common the primary and secondary plots of *King Lear*, and the main thematic element of Shakespeare's play, is reduced in Galdós to a factor in the secondary plot. The thematic inversion indicates a conscious Galdosian re-elaboration: minor element in *King Lear* (legitimacy) to major and minor element in *El abuelo*; major and minor element in *King Lear* (filial ingratitude) to minor element in *El abuelo* (15).

In Shakespeare, the combination of the two thematic elements in the secondary plot serves to intensify the more fundamental of the two, filial ingratitude. Edgar, the beloved bastard son, is unfaithful, a much graver manner of filial ingratitude than the legitimate Edmund's might have been. In Galdós, the combination of the same thematic elements in the secondary plot also serves to intensify the more fundamental of the two, the matter of legitimacy. Pío Coronado's six illegitimate daughters, fruit of his wife's adulterous escapades, are extremely cruel and unloving toward the poor soul. The extreme example of illegitimate offspring behavior has its calculated effect upon the primary plot, centered on the question of legitimacy: it sets the stage for precisely the opposite behavior in Albrit's illegitimate granddaughter.

Shakespeare and Galdós both achieve the reinforcing effect intended by using the same but reversed thematic materials. Galdós' reversal of those materials represents, of course, his major alteration of the Shakespearean model: offspring legitimacy, not filial ingratitude, ranks as the

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(15) For antecedents to Galdós alterations of Shakespeare, see, for example, A. Rodríguez, "Shakespeare, Galdós y Zaragoza", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 166 (1963), 89-98.



key issue. This fundamental shift, while still carefully scoring the trauma of human aging, suggests that the Spanish writer intended a wider representational role for his protagonist. Albrit is the old aristocrat, reflecting all that aging can hold of traumatic come-down for the once vital and mighty; but he may well also be Galdós' moving personification of the aged dying of an entire class and culture: the nobility itself (16).

There is little doubt that focussing on the offspring legitimacy issue brings the protagonist's class identification powerfully to the forefront, for it stresses the intense preoccupation with biological continuity that is the keystone of aristocracy. In this respect, the Albrit-Coronado parallel serves to underscore a human difference of a socially relevant character: Coronado, the commoner, has no difficulty coming to love the fruits of his cuckoldry; whereas Albrit, the noble, dedicates the very last days of his life to determining which granddaughter is legitimate.

This effectively underscored class identification allows Albrit his broader representational role, and a vital individual problem is projected, with little or no dilution, to a significant socio-historical level. The trauma of old-age in the specific individual comes to symbolize the collective trauma of a decadent social class, a relevant extension from the Shakespearean model (17).

Galdós' ending, as readers have always noted, is an illustration of the triumph of love over legality. But there is more to it than that. If *El abuelo* was conceived as an

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(16) See Sobejano, p. 49, for Galdós' presentation of other aristocrats in his theatre.

(17) *King Lear* might be interpreted, in political terms, as a lesson on the unwise division of a Kingdom in an age of political centralization, but certainly does not express the disappearance of an aristocratic social structure.

in-depth study of traumatic aging in the strong individual (and largely structured, therefore, on a parallel preoccupation in Shakespeare's *King Lear*), but also, simultaneously, as the symbolic reflection of the disappearance of an entire social class, then Galdós' surprise ending simultaneously proclaims the survival of the individual and the demise of the social class. Dolly will lend basic dignity (love and self-respect) to the last days of her old men, Albrit and Coronado, but that is precisely what prescribes the end, given her illegitimacy, of an aristocracy's essential blood continuity. It is clear that had Nelly proved to be the truer granddaughter, in human and ethical terms, the aristocratic concept would have been reinforced rather than demolished.

The two remaining Shakespeare-Galdós parallels (the protagonists seen as unwelcomed guests and the scenic elements common to both works) are far less significant.

In *King Lear*, the unwelcomed guest situation serves to reinforce the play's key filial ingratitude dimension. Lear feels unwelcomed precisely in his daughters' homes. Galdós availed himself of the same type of situation (albeit, under different circumstances and with differing details) in order to reinforce Albrit's broader symbolic class projection. The aged count is made just as unwelcomed, is just as mistreated, but by his ex-serfs and in his former country residence. Nothing could have more efficiently fixed the demanding protagonist's representation of a dying social class (18).

The common scenic conditions are, we feel, the one Spanish writer might well have avoided. This is particularly

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(18) The attempt to relegate Albrit to what amounts to an old-age home for the well born lends a modern touch to Galdós work and ties it even closer to *Misericordia*, his contemporary novel on old-age.

so in the case of the storm. The English playwright is able to heighten, thereby, the culpable ingratitude of Lear's daughters (poor old man out on the moors during a terrible storm), and, perhaps more significantly, is able to reflect in Nature's own upheaval the terrible inner turmoil of the protagonist and a chaotic moral universe. In Galdós' re-elaboration, only the reflected inner turmoil of Albrit is possibly achieved; but any such success is dearly paid for in esthetic terms. The *pathetic fallacy* implicit in such a use, although quite proper and effective in Shakespeare's human context, is, at the very least, problematically anachronistic in Galdós' day (19).

In conclusion, our focus on Galdós' transfer, with significant modifications, of selected Shakespearean elements permits a keener penetration of the Spaniard's creative interest and procedure in *El abuelo*. Galdós, vitally interested in the human trauma of aging, saw in Shakespeare's creation the most appropriate literary model (20). The Hispanization and modernization of the model, especially the Spanish writer's desire to extend the individual human reality into a macrocosmic social verity (the functionless decrepitude of the nobility), account for the most significant alterations.

*The University of New Mexico*

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(19) Romanticism's exaggerations in this direction had had a revival under Echegaray, a Galdós contemporary, but the latter's theatre is usually credited with representing a healthy realistic reaction.

(20) For Galdós' special liking for Shakespearean materials, see H. K. Goodale, "Allusions to Shakespeare in Galdós", *Hispanic Review*, 39 (1971), 249-260.