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### Second Paper Prompt One

Despite being largely ignored in our age the awe inspiring value of art becomes apparent in a multitude of instances. Be it for the expression of the human condition, one's individual experience, or the perspective of a culture, great art has served as enlightened entertainment for humankind. However, outside of the realm of intellectual pastimes, art finds a rather unique value in its relation to the study of history. For, art of a past age gives the current age a greater understanding of the past's conception of themselves and their world. The most common example of such is the work of the supposive Homer who in his poems expresses the Greek values and mirrors elements of the power struggles of the day. The same can be noted of the Spanish play *The Trickster of Seville*, a work which provides insight into the culture and politics of old 17th century Iberia. As this is art's relation to a historian, a primary source that allows a brief look into the culture and age which produced it.

The seventeenth century saw Spain under the Habsburg monarchy who ruled the most powerful empire in Europe yet the cracks of Spanish society had already come to the forefront of Spanish intellectual discourse.<sup>1</sup> *The Trickster of Seville*, a work produced around the 1600s by the Spanish playwright Tirso de Molina, lived during a time of Spanish history that is characterized by art which describes Spain as a nation filled with those who had an attitude

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, John

which turned away from productive work in the hopes of finding quick success instead.<sup>2</sup> Such can be understood when contemplating the vast wealth acquired by the conquests of the new world. The riches of Mexico and Peru hardly stimulated economic development in Spain while making the mercenaries and criminals who partook in the collapse of the native American kingdoms wealthy to the point that at times they rivaled the Spanish monarchy. Further, such inspired the commons and others at home to emulate the conquistadors in hopes of striking it rich in the same manner. Thus, in the eyes of Spanish artists this age was one in which one's success was by roguery rather than honesty.<sup>3</sup>

Tirso de Molina's aforementioned play expressed the previously discussed common belief of Spanish society as his work features the character, Don Juan, who represents the common literary archetype of one who cannot suppress their base and viceful desires.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout the play our protagonist never ceases to succumb to immorality and ignores all personal restraint. Within the first act alone his actions towards women result in the imprisonment and exile of the Duke Octavio and the attempted suicide of a peasant girl all due to Don Juan's obsession with selfish pleasure and his lack of responsibility. One must note that such was a common critique of Spanish society by conservative artists who condemned the shifting morality towards a libertine culture.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of Don Juan's infamy towards women and the author's description of the man as a plague for women, the character due to his position of birth is offered a royal marriage. Such is arranged by Don Gonzalo, a nobleman, and the Spanish king, who wishes for a marriage between Don Juan and Gonzalo's daughter, Doña Ana. Unsurprisingly, the very night the two

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<sup>2</sup> Bunn, Elaine

<sup>3</sup> Lynch, John

<sup>4</sup> Banham, Martin

<sup>5</sup> Lynch, John

meet Don Juan is unable to control himself and seduces the young Ana before killing her father. After fleeing, the crime is blamed on another man, Marquis de la Mota, due to Don Juan giving him the cloak he wore while committing the murder. Don Juan's lack of restraint and his brash rough-like behavior has resulted in the destruction of a family and the imprisonment of an innocent man. Once more the attitude of the arbitristas writers becomes clear as they believed the social ills of Spain were tied to social and moral degeneration which is captured by this literary figure.<sup>6</sup>

The last act of Tirso de Molina's play features a peasant wedding between Aminta and Batricio. Batricio, a lower class man, is greatly concerned by Don Juan's presence and reputation but due to Juan's position in the unjust hierarchy of Spain Batricio is unable to prevent Don Juan from ruining the wedding.<sup>7</sup> Such reflects a reality of the relationship between the Spanish monarchy and the common men of Spain at the time. Habsburg Spain was in no respects egalitarian. The nobility were free from taxes and, due to the Spanish understanding of work, the upper classes were taught to hate labor and view it as undignified. Thus, the lower classes felt much of the economic burdens and suffered when conditions were not ideal, while being treated in a harsher manner in regards to laws than their noble counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Don Juan's ability to commit immoral actions becomes clear when one considers his position in society and how such is connected to when he is forgiven for adultery by the official Don Pedro due to Don Juan being his nephew, and the breakup of the peasant wedding between Aminta and Batricio. Regardless of Don Juan's adventures and his ability to escape punishment the author makes clear in the end of his work that Don Juan is not invulnerable to the judgement of the next world. As in the end

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<sup>6</sup> Banham, Martin

<sup>7</sup> Banham, Martin

<sup>8</sup> Lynch, John

justice is only delivered to Don Juan by the ghost of Don Gonzalo, the man Don Juan previously killed. The ghost of Gonzalo meets with the brash Don Juan and invites him to dine on an elaborate meal of vipers and scorpions. Juan bravely or perhaps foolishly eats the meal before being struck dead by Gonzalo for his sins. The seemingly strange end to the play becomes clear to our modern eyes when contemplating the common Spanish or Catholic belief of divine intervention to punish the viceful acts of mortal men.<sup>9</sup>

To further explore the reflection of Spanish culture seen in *The Trickster of Seville* one should view the author's effect on Spanish thought and how his work was considered a major influence on 17th century critiques of Spanish society. Later thinkers would address moral issues which mirror the concerns of Tirso de Molina in regard to the changing Spanish political and social world and how one must reconcile morality with the new political-economic order. Those like Tirso de Molina feared the loss of the traditional Catholic conception of morality. Also his critique of the upper class Spanish view of labor and the negative effect the wealth of the new world had on Spain was shared by the arbitristas who argued that the mass amounts of silver and gold arriving from Spain's American colonies was causing damage to the Spanish economy. They also criticized Spain's dependence on the unsustainable resources from the new world and how this easily acquired wealth prevented incentives to develop domestic industry or expand the tax bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup> Such a concern is considered sound when viewing the Spanish Price Revolution, caused by the Spanish treasure fleet, which resulted in quite a high rate of inflation and much suffering.<sup>11</sup> The depth of these men's critiques of Spanish society is rather remarkable as although Spain was currently the greatest power in Europe the previously mentioned

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<sup>9</sup> Banham, Martin

<sup>10</sup> Fernández-Renau Atienza

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, John

economic woes would lead to France replacing Spain as a dominant power and in time Portugal, and the Low countries would be completely lost from the hands of the Spanish Monarchy.

In regards to moral concerns it is truly fascinating yet in many respects predictable that Spanish artists feared the loss of traditional honor and dignity to liberal or libertine movements. Such is a common theme in almost all societies at all times as even the Japanese monk Yoshida Kenkō stated in 1300 that “Modern fashions seem to keep on growing more and more debased ... The ordinary spoken language has also steadily coarsened. People used to say ‘raise the carriage shafts’ or ‘trim the lamp wick,’ but people today say ‘raise it’ or ‘trim it.’ When they should say, ‘Let the men of the palace staff stand forth!’ they say, ‘Torches! Let’s have some light!’” However, one cannot disagree with Tirso de Molina's disgust with men who behave like Don Juan and regardless of religious affiliation most honorable people find that such behavior is ugly and dangerous for society as a whole. His argument is quite strong as even my modern perspective, which is free from religion, has been swayed to once more agree that virtuous and modest behavior is not only necessary for the betterment of an individual's self but is required to prevent harming innocents which is an act Don Juan is most guilty of.

Tirso de Molina's work is considered to be central in Spanish intellectual history and such a place is warranted when completing the far reaching influence his character, Don Juan, has had. It is a blessing that such has survived in order to learn not only of Spanish society but of our own struggles with morality.

Sources:

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