

CRITICAL SURVEY OF
DRAMA

THIRD EDITION

Critical Survey of Drama

Third Edition

Volume 4

Echegaray y Eizaguirre - Gunderson

Editor
Carl Rollyson
Baruch College, City University of New York

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JOSÉ ECHEGARAY Y EIZAGUIRRE

Born: Madrid, Spain; April 19, 1832

Died: Madrid, Spain; September 15, 1916

PRINCIPAL DRAMA

El libro talonario, pr., pb. 1874

La esposa del vengador, pr., pb. 1874

En el puño de la espada, pr., pb. 1875

La última noche, pr., pb. 1875

Cómo empieza y cómo acaba, pr., pb. 1876

O locura o santidad, pr., pb. 1877 (*Folly or Saintliness*, 1895)

El gran Galeoto, pr., pb. 1881 (verse play; *The Great Galeoto*, 1895)

Vida alegre y muerte triste, pr. 1885

El hijo de Don Juan, pr., pb. 1892 (*The Son of Don Juan*, 1895)

Mariana, pr., pb. 1892 (English translation, 1895)

El loco Dios, pr. 1902 (*The Madman Divine*, 1908)

OTHER LITERARY FORMS

In addition to his dramatic work, José Echegaray y Eizaguirre also wrote critical articles and essays on the nature of drama, some of which were collected in 1894 in his book *Algunas reflexiones generales sobre la crítica y el arte literario*. In 1912, he published a small collection of short stories, *Cuentos*, and wrote *Recuerdos*, an autobiography in three volumes, which was published posthumously in 1917. His true claim to literary importance, however, resides in the seventy-four dramas, satiric comedies, and one-act plays that he produced between 1874 and 1905.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Undoubtedly the most successful Spanish dramatist of the late nineteenth century, José Echegaray y Eizaguirre ruled as undisputed king of the stage from 1874, with

the appearance of his first play, *El libro talonario* (*The Checkbook*), until shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. Highly imaginative and prolific, Echegaray produced two or more successful plays a year throughout his dramatic career. The public response to his dramas, tragedies, and satiric comedies was, with a few notable exceptions, always enthusiastic. Each premiere was received with acclaim, and his works were nearly always judged popular successes before the curtain went up. Echegaray was also the first modern Spanish playwright to enjoy ample recognition and popularity outside Spain; his best plays, *The Great Galeoto*, *Folly or Saintliness*, *The Son of Don Juan*, and *Mariana*, were translated into several European languages and successfully staged in Europe and in the United States. Echegaray was elected to the Royal Spanish Academy in 1894 and was formally inducted in 1896. In 1904, he became the first Spaniard to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (which he shared with the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral).

Echegaray has not fared well, however, at the hands of twentieth century critics. The young intellectuals and writers of the Generation of 1898 strongly criticized the extreme sentiment and exaggerated style of his drama. For them, his plays were hopelessly dated romantic melodramas, reminiscent of the Romantic movement. More modern and contemporary criticism, no more merciful in its appraisal of Echegaray's theater, has pointed out, often justly, some of his shortcomings: his fondness for complicated plots and violent passions; his weakness in psychology and in character delineation; his histrionics, often resorting to sensationalism and bombast to conceal the weakness of his plots; and his almost inevitable concern with outdated romantic themes and devices—honor, duty, adultery, and the role of fate.

In spite of his faults, which critics have been almost too quick to emphasize, Echegaray has to be credited with lifting the Spanish stage from the state of neglect and prostration in which he found it. His lively imagination and fecundity of invention delighted the public. He was a master craftsman with a keen sense of tragedy

and an unusual talent for developing theatrical situations. Above all, Echegaray was the first modern Spanish dramatist to break the bonds of myopic nationalism by introducing to the Spanish stage the dominant literary trends of his time. Strongly influenced by Henrik Ibsen and by the increasingly popular European thesis or problem play, he turned to social drama and the modern realistic theater of ideas. Thus, Echegaray's plays served to bridge the gap between the old-fashioned Spanish theater of the early nineteenth century and the more contemporary theater staged by Jacinto Benavente y Martínez and the Generation of 1898 at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this respect, he can be considered a dramatist of transition, and his contribution to the Spanish stage quite significant.

BIOGRAPHY

José Echegaray y Eizaguirre was born in Madrid, Spain, on April 19, 1832, to a middle-class family of Basque ancestry. When he was an infant, his father moved the family to Murcia, where Echegaray lived the first fourteen years of his life. The boy received a superior education in Murcia, excelling in mathematics and the sciences. In 1846, he returned to Madrid to enter the School of Engineering, where he was graduated first in his class with a degree in civil engineering. Immediately after graduation, he was hired by the Department of Public Works as an engineer in the building of roads in Almería and Granada. Not satisfied with practical work of this kind, Echegaray returned to Madrid in 1858 to become a professor of calculus at his alma mater, a position he held until the Revolution of 1868. Meanwhile, he perfected his knowledge of mathematics and physics and became the most eminent man in Spain in those disciplines. In 1866, at the young age of thirty-four, he was elected to the Academy of Exact Sciences of Madrid.

His second career as a politician and statesman began in 1868 when political conspiracy ended the rule of Isabel II. Echegaray, who had written a few articles criticizing Isabel's economic policies, was appointed director of public works and secretary of commerce in 1868. A year later, he was elected deputy to parliament, and, at various times, he held the important posts of secretary of the interior and of the treasury. Echegaray's political activities, however, virtually ended in 1874 with the change in government and the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty.

It was not until Echegaray was forty-two that he produced his first play, *El libro talonario*, staged in

Madrid in 1874. Previously, Echegaray had shown no indication of being interested in the theater or in any other literary activity. As he wrote in his memoirs, the motivating factor in his decision to become a dramatist was a desire to emulate the successful career of his younger brother, Miguel, who was at that time the author of several comedies and zarzuelas (light musical plays). For the next thirty years, Echegaray devoted himself to the theater with his customary vigor, becoming the favorite of public and critics alike. After the 1900's, when he saw the popularity of his plays wane, Echegaray retired from public life, returning to the spotlight only on one occasion, when he was honored by his countrymen for having received the Nobel Prize. Echegaray died in Madrid on September 15, 1916.

ANALYSIS

José Echegaray y Eizaguirre's literary reputation has steadily declined in the last seventy-five years. Surely he was not the dramatist of genius that many of his contemporaries sought to make him out to be, and no modern critic would insist that Echegaray was "the greatest dramatist that Spain has produced for two hundred years," as Elizabeth R. Hunt stated in her 1914 introduction to Hannah Lynch's translation of *The Great Galeoto*. Yet *Folly or Saintliness*, *The Great Galeoto*, and *The Son of Don Juan*, by virtue of technique and scope, bear comparison with anything written in Europe during the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century. They secure for Echegaray a rightful place in a critical survey of world drama.

Echegaray's success derived from his sensitivity to audiences' tastes and his ability to create a theater that satisfied their expectations. Generally considered a belated romantic, he resurrected the melodramatic plots and the florid language popular in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Aware of the public's receptivity to highly emotional plays, he set as his goal a theater based on "weeping, grief, and death." Although the tone of his dramas can be considered anachronistic, he achieved a degree of modernity and originality in his works through the introduction of contemporary settings and social problems and by gradually discarding legendary settings and the use of verse.

Echegaray's dramas present the paradox of rigid theatrical logic applied to situations loaded with