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**MARÍA  
MARTÍNEZ SIERRA:**

**A GREAT PLAYWRIGHT  
HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT**

THREE PLAYS FROM SPANISH THEATRE'S SILVER AGE

TRANSLATED BY HELEN AND HARLEY GRANVILLE-BARKER  
EDITED BY RICHARD NELSON & COLIN CHAMBERS

**María Martínez Sierra:  
A Great Playwright Hidden in Plain Sight**

**Three Plays translated by  
Helen and Harley Granville-Barker**



**María Martínez Sierra:  
A Great Playwright Hidden in Plain Sight**

**The Kingdom of God  
The Romantic Young Lady  
Take Two from One**

MARÍA MARTÍNEZ SIERRA

*Plays translated by*  
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**María Martínez Sierra** was a dramatist, librettist, narrator, essayist, feminist, translator, screenwriter and politician. She was born María de la O Lejárraga in San Millán de la Cogolla, La Rioja, 28 December 1874. After marriage in 1900 to Gregorio Martínez Sierra (1881–1947), she adopted his name and started writing with him. As he became intensely involved in ventures such as publishing, editing and directing, he left the writing to María, who signed everything as Gregorio even after he left her in 1922. María translated works from several languages (e.g. Dante, Ibsen, Ionesco, Jonson, Maeterlinck, Miller, de Musset, Pirandello, Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilder and Williams), and her vast output includes librettos for operas, operettas, ballets (e.g. *The Three-Cornered Hat*) and other musical works. Her plays include *El reino de Dios* (*The Kingdom of God*, 1915), *Sueño de una noche de agosto* (*The Romantic Young Lady*, 1918), *Triángulo* (*Take Two from One*, 1929) – all translated by Helen and Harley Granville-Barker – and her daring tragedy *Sortilegio* (*Bewitched*, 1930), which was performed successfully all over Europe and South America but never in Spain. *Canción de cuna* (*The Cradle Song*, 1911), María's signature success which develops the story of an infant girl abandoned in a convent, has been seen in many translations and five film adaptations (including one by María).

She left Spain in the early 1920s and lived in France for a decade before returning to Spain and, in 1933, being elected Granada's Socialist representative to parliament. The Civil War forced her abroad again, living in exile in France and Buenos Aires, where she died on 28 June 1974. Although after Gregorio's death, she used her own name for publication, her role as author of about sixty plays along with other works attributed to Gregorio was not officially recognized until after her own death when, among her possessions, letters from Gregorio written on world tours surfaced to establish firmly her sole authorship. Her singular achievements and fascinating life have inspired contemporary novels and dramatic works.

**Helen Granville-Barker** (1867–1950) was a poet and novelist, and with her husband, Harley, a translator of Spanish and French plays. Her novels include *Ada*, *Living Mirrors*, *Come, Julia*, *Moon in Scorpio* and *Traitor Angel*. She is also the likely author of the anonymously published best-selling novel *Madame Solario*.

**Harley Granville-Barker** (1877–1946) was an actor, playwright, director, producer and theatre visionary. His plays include *The Voyage Inheritance*, *Waste*, *The Madras House* and *The Secret Life*. A key figure in the movement to transform British theatre, he was a champion of ensemble playing and the repertory system. He ran groundbreaking seasons at the Royal Court (1904–7) and his Shakespeare productions at the Savoy Theatre (1912 and 1914) were considered revolutionary. Following his marriage to Helen in 1918, he dedicated his life to writing; as well as translating with Helen and completing two full-length plays, he also wrote numerous essays, articles and reviews, a major book on the theatre, four others based on his lectures and his influential *Prefaces* to Shakespeare.

**Colin Chambers**, a former journalist and theatre critic, was Literary Manager of the Royal Shakespeare Company (1981–97), and since 2014 has been Emeritus Professor of Drama at Kingston University, UK. He is co-author with Richard Nelson of *Kenneth's*

*First Play* and *Tynan*, and he adapted with Steven Pimlott Molière's *The Learned Ladies*, selected and edited for performance *Three Farces* by John Maddison Morton and adapted David Pinski's *Treasure*. He edited *Peggy to Her Playwrights*, co-edited with Richard Nelson *Granville Barker on Theatre* and edited the *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*. He has written extensively on the theatre, including *Other Spaces: New Writing and the RSC*; *The Story of Unity Theatre*; *Peggy: the Life of Margaret Ramsay*, *Play Agent* (winner of the inaugural Theatre Book Prize); *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company*; *Here We Stand: Politics, Performers and Performance – Paul Robeson, Isadora Duncan and Charlie Chaplin*; and *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History*.

**Richard Nelson** is an Olivier and Tony Award-winning playwright and director. His plays include *The Apple Family: A Pandemic Trilogy* (three Zoom plays) as well as *The Michaels*, *What Happened?*; *The Michaels Abroad*; *Illyria*; *The Gabriels*; *The Apple Family Plays*; *Nikolai and The Others*; *Farewell to the Theatre*; *Conversations in Tusculum*; *Goodnight Children Everywhere* (Olivier Award, Best Play); *Two Shakespearean Actors* (Tony Award nomination, Best Play) and *Some Americans Abroad* (Olivier Award nomination, Best Comedy). His musicals include *James Joyce's The Dead* (with Shaun Davey, Tony Award Best Book of a Musical). His screenplays include *Hyde Park on Hudson* (Roger Michell, director). He directed *Uncle Vanya* in 2018 for the Hunter Theater Project. With Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, he has co-translated plays by Chekhov, Gogol, Turgenev and Bulgakov. He is an Honorary Associate Artist of the Royal Shakespeare Company and recipient of the PEN/Laura Pels 'Master Playwright' Award. He co-edited with Colin Chambers *Granville Barker on Theatre*.

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# **1 María Martínez Sierra**



## Introduction

### HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: SPAIN'S MOST SUCCESSFUL WOMAN DRAMATIST

‘Gregorio has a merchant’s soul. Until now, he has exploited the talent of his wife, who writes his works.’<sup>1</sup>

*Rufino Blanco-Fombona, literary historian*

‘Gregorio Martínez Sierra never wrote anything that circulates under his name, whether it be novel, poetry or theatre. That is something that . . . I know very well. . . . But the ones who knew it best were the actors who were always nervous: “The third act that doña María has to send isn’t here, so rehearsals will be cancelled.”’<sup>2</sup>

*Xavi Ayén, writer and journalist*

### Recognition

When the Granville-Barkers published the first two translations contained in this collection in 1923, the author was presumed to be Gregorio Martínez Sierra. It is now known that María, Gregorio’s wife, was often the sole author of the works that appeared under Gregorio’s name, and this is the case with all three plays published here. Although María Martínez Sierra was in plain sight as a well-known feminist, she was not recognized as the author because, wanting all the credit to go to her husband, she did not sign the works. After her death in 1974 in Buenos Aires, a large steamer trunk was sent to her relatives in Madrid containing, among many other possessions, 144 letters from Gregorio, written on tour between 1915 and 1931, and during his years in Hollywood (1931–5). These proved definitively María’s exclusive authorship of many, if not most, of the plays. In these letters, Gregorio acknowledges receipt of specific works, lauds them, and presses her to write him prologues, translations, lectures and even letters of sympathy.<sup>3</sup>

The Authors’ Society of Spain credits the Gregorio Martínez Sierra name with approximately 200 works: plays, novels, short stories, essays, operas, operettas, poetry, translations and adaptations. Critics wondered how one man could produce so much; the answer, of course, is that two very gifted people with many different but compatible talents and interests were responsible. Gregorio was the businessman, journal editor and theatre director while María wrote works about the subjects that mattered most to her: freedom, love, the maternal instinct, women’s rights and help for the less fortunate. These plays featured contemporary settings and tended to centre on strong women protagonists who resolved conflicts usually to produce a happy ending. María is the sole author of most of ‘Gregorio’s’ works, a large number of which have been translated to other languages performed to critical acclaim in major theatres around the world. Without any doubt, she is Spain’s most accomplished woman dramatist.

For María finally to be recognized as author of so many significant plays is important in historical and literary as well as in human terms, for few women have successfully

written for the stage. Since the Greek poet Sappho wrote lyric verse in the sixth century BCE, there have been numerous women poets, novelists, short story writers and essayists whose works continue to be read, but plays by women are rarely revived. Spain has had female dramatists for centuries, but what Spaniard, besides specialists, could recall any of their names? Plays by women, staged and admired in their lifetimes, typically remain unperformed and forgotten afterwards. For example, plays by Ana Diosdado (1938–2015) are no longer performed, while those of Antonio Buero Vallejo (1916–2000) continue to be presented and admired.

Europe and North America have had women dramatists, but they too have largely been forgotten until efforts were made in the twentieth century to rectify the situation. In France, for example, an organized endeavour called *matrimoine* proposes to give belated recognition to French women playwrights and encourage revivals of their works in order to keep alive the values that women playwrights have long communicated through their theatre. Canada has started its own *matrimoine* with the additional goal of giving creative women their deserved place in online encyclopedias. A case in point is Wikipedia, with a mere 20 per cent of its pages devoted to women.

I hope that the plays in this collection will not only be read and enjoyed but that they will spark an interest in the many other works of Spain's most successful woman dramatist and will inspire the reading of other works by women in Spain and other countries.

### María and Gregorio

María de la O Lejárraga García, better known as María Martínez Sierra, was born in San Millán de la Cogolla (La Rioja) on 28 December 1874. The first of seven children of Leandro Lejárraga, a doctor, and Natividad García, María lived in La Rioja until her father was transferred to Carabanchel, a town in the province of Madrid close to the capital. At five María discovered what was to become her life's passion when she saw a magic show for children in Madrid's Teatro Español.<sup>4</sup> Her favourite toy then became a cardboard theatre with painted walls and paper characters for whom she could create scenes and dialogues. Initially home-schooled by her mother, María learned world history and geography in both Castilian and French, and at sixteen began training to become a language teacher of French, English, German and Russian. At twenty, after having passed all exams, she took a teaching position in a working-class neighbourhood of Madrid, an experience that brought her face to face with poverty for the first time.

Gregorio, the eldest of nine children, was born 6 May 1881, and his family, like María's, was comfortably middle class. Six years younger than María, he had known her only as the older sister of a playmate. But at a village dance in 1897, María, already a teacher, and Gregorio, sixteen, sat together on the side lines, as neither cared to dance. Soon, their common interest in theatre would activate a multi-faceted relationship. They started writing together and, in the next three years, had four of their works published; three with Gregorio's name as sole author, and the fourth, *Cuentos breves*, with María's name, because these short stories were for children. When María's intellectual parents took little notice of her first book, she decided that they would never see her name on another. After she and Gregorio were married on 30 November 1900, María even shed the name 'Lejárraga' and adopted the surname of her husband.<sup>5</sup>

Initially María's teaching supported the couple as they wrote together. But as Gregorio became involved in publishing, editing literary journals and directing plays, María gave up teaching to take over the writing.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the only work known to have been written entirely by Gregorio, *La casa de la primavera* (*The House of Spring*, 1907), is a volume of poems in which María figures exclusively as muse for Gregorio's poetic expression of marital bliss. Ironically, it was about this time that Gregorio met Catalina Bárcena, the beautiful ingénue actress born in Cuba and reared in Spain, who would join his theatre company and, under his guidance, become Spain's leading actress in the years 1915–30.

Besides plays, María composed under Gregorio's name librettos for operas, operettas, ballets and other musical works with important composers including José María Usandizaga, who chose to base his first work with María on a story of hers from *Teatro de ensueño* (*Dream Theatre*, 1905), *Saltimbaquis* (*Tumblers*). The final product, *Las golondrinas* (*The Swallows*), performed in 1913, was successful, but Usandizaga was already fatally infected with tuberculosis, and their only subsequent collaboration, *La llama* (*The Flame*), was performed in 1918, three years after the composer's death.

María also wrote librettos for two of Joaquín Turina's operas, *Margot* (1914) and *El jardín de Oriente* (1924). In 1915 Turina had composed a musical portrait ('Retrato') of María that initiates his piano series entitled *Album de Viaje* (*My Trip Album*), with all parts dedicated to her. In the introductory portrait number, the modest but harmonious chords suggest María's attractively placid temperament, and a subsequent segment illustrates her greatly admired musical laughter via a series of gracefully dancing thirds.

María's libretto with Manuel de Falla, *El amor brujo* (1915, performed in English under various titles: *Love, the Magician*; *Spellbound Love*; *Wedded by Witchcraft*), was commissioned by the famous gypsy flamenco dancer Pastora Imperio and features distinctively Andalusian music. The libretto concerns Candela, a widow now attracted to her childhood sweetheart, but who continues to be haunted by her deceased husband's ghost who dances with her nightly. She tricks Lucía, a woman with whom her husband had had an affair, to come one evening, and when the ghost appears to dance, Candela allows Lucía to be taken away by her departed lover.

María and Falla also produced a version of Alarcón's popular novel *The Three-Cornered Hat* that was successfully produced in Madrid as *El corregidor y la molinera* (*The Judge and the Miller*) in 1917. When Serge Diaghilev, choreographer of the Ballet Russe, saw the production, he requested a ballet version. Now with the title of *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*), the work opened in London in 1919 with sets and costumes by Pablo Picasso.<sup>7</sup>

While María worked with and became close friends with musicians, Gregorio was on tour in Spain with Catalina Bárcena. On his return, Gregorio, never hesitant to promote his own name, launched his theatre group as the Gregorio Martínez Sierra Company with Catalina as star at the Eslava Theatre, conveniently located just off the Puerta del Sol in the centre of Madrid.<sup>8</sup>

Along with the considerable financial and artistic success of the Martínez Sierra name came personal pain for María. As Gregorio became more and more openly involved with Catalina, María kept the anguish she felt to herself, and provided the outward appearance, at least, of marital harmony. Catalina, on the other hand, was

María's opposite. Although demure and captivating on stage, off stage she could be loud, rude and childish. She was vocal about her jealousy of María, and wanted Gregorio to leave her. In 1922, when Catalina gave birth to Gregorio's child (Catalinita), she demanded that he live with her or she would no longer perform with his company. Gregorio now found himself in a terrible predicament: he needed both the writer and the actress for the success that was so important to him. Knowing both women well, Gregorio acquiesced to Catalina's demands, and María, never openly critical of him, simply left for France and established residence near Nice. There, incredibly, she continued to write works for Gregorio to perform and publish as his.<sup>9</sup>

Gregorio may have thought it prudent to leave Madrid as well, for in 1924, he took his company to Barcelona and performed for a year at the Novedades Theatre before leaving in 1925 on a five-year performance tour of Europe, the United States and South America. With Gregorio far away, María wrote feminist essays, supported socialist causes and composed plays reflective of the more liberal attitudes of her French surroundings, but she continued to reconstruct her own life and values in her theatre, although now by using more experimental techniques. She mailed these plays to Gregorio, and his company performed them on tour.

In 1930, several of María's dramatist friends left for Hollywood to assist in the preparation of films in Spanish. At first, Gregorio refused to support this audacious rival, but eventually he recognized that motion pictures could be an important source of income and accepted an offer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and later with Fox Studios. In 1931, Gregorio sold movie rights to *Mamá* (1912), evocative of *A Doll's House* (1879), which María, an admirer of Ibsen, had written, and in 1933 Paramount filmed a major production of her signature play *The Cradle Song* (*Canción de cuna*). Back in Spain, María became Granada's socialist candidate for parliament, won the election and represented that region's interests until the eruption of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

After spending several lucrative years in Hollywood, Gregorio returned to Spain in 1935 to contribute to Spain's emerging film industry with several plans, one of which was to create another movie version of *The Cradle Song* with Catalina as star. But filming was delayed, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War ended that project. When an Argentine film company offered to produce *The Cradle Song*, Gregorio and Catalina embarked for Buenos Aires, where they remained until September of 1947, when, ill with abdominal cancer, Gregorio returned to Spain, where he died two weeks later. María, who was living in exile in France at the time, heard the news via a British radio broadcast and composed a tribute, written, as she says in her first words, 'with love and pain', yet another proof of María's enduring devotion for Gregorio and her incredibly forgiving nature.<sup>10</sup>

She then moved to Buenos Aires, but getting work there was difficult; not only was she not recognized as an author, but Gregorio had spread the word that she had died in order to present Catalina as his wife. To make matters even worse, the rights to all the plays that María had written, and whose royalties were morally hers, were legally Gregorio's, and he had left everything to Catalina. At seventy-four, therefore, María had to support herself. Instead of going into a rage, she simply faced reality and considered her options. Her favoured solutions included writing, translating, contributing to newspapers, magazines and radio, and to give lectures. She also planned to publish the

complete works of Gregorio under his sole name with her Introduction, but because of Catalina's fanatical objections the publishing house cancelled this project.

In Argentina, María produced two semi-autobiographies: *Una mujer por caminos de España* (*A Woman along Spanish Roads*, 1952), about her political activities during the Republic, and *Gregorio y yo, Medio siglo de colaboración* (*Gregorio and I, Half a Century of Collaboration*, 1953), but without revealing her absolutely essential role in the success of the works published under her husband's name.

On 28 June 1974, when María was six months from being 100 years old, she died, taking to her grave details of all that she had written under Gregorio's name, and why she had protected him by keeping the secret so long. The mystery of her decision has challenged and inspired several important women writers to delve into her life via novels and plays for answers.<sup>11</sup>

## The plays

### *The Kingdom of God*

In 1909, during a trip to Italy, María read a newspaper story about an infant girl abandoned in a convent and wondered if this might serve as subject for a play. Finding the baby and showing the reactions of the nuns who want to keep her could account for the first act, and a second act would show how that child, now a young woman, felt as she was about to leave her 'mothers' to marry. *Canción de cuna* (*The Cradle Song*) was the hit of the 1911 season, won the prestigious Royal Academy award, has had numerous translations and performances in Spain as well as abroad and has enjoyed five movie adaptations in four countries: Spain, Mexico, United States, Argentina. When the play opened, many wondered how Gregorio could know so much about convent life. But the real writer did; María's sister, with whom she was very close, was a nun, and parts of *The Kingdom of God*, a work that also touches on the spiritual life, were written in her sister's abbey.

*The Kingdom of God* (*El reino de Dios*), María's favourite play, premiered in 1915. The title is symbolic of the celestial happiness on earth that the protagonist, Sister Gracia, hopes to create for the world's needy. It enjoyed considerable success in Spain as well as abroad.

In the first act, Sister Gracia, just nineteen and whose vows are annual rather than perpetual, serves in an old people's home surrounded by the ill and helpless who have no other place to go. The second act takes place ten years later, and Sister Gracia is serving in a maternity home for unwed mothers. While there, a doctor falls in love with her and begs her to leave this life to serve humanity by his side. For this quintessential protagonist, charity is not enough; she refuses to allow herself the luxury of worldly love for she wants to give her life as an offering to the unfortunate. In the third act, Sister Gracia, now seventy, serves in an orphanage. A child who has grown up there becomes a bullfighter and returns to offer his 'mother', Sister Gracia, the gift of the bloody ear of a bull. When the children at the orphanage complain about the food, she reminds them that some people have no food at all or even a roof over their heads, and that they must remedy the misery of the world with their good works, for only in this way can they help to create the kingdom of God on earth.

### *The Romantic Young Lady*

One of María's gently feminist and very successful plays, *The Romantic Young Lady* (*Sueño de una noche de agosto*) premiered in 1918. The protagonist Rosario, twenty-three, who lives with her grandmother and three brothers, very much favours equality of the sexes and would like to work, but her conservative brothers think she should marry and live a traditional woman's life. One night when the brothers are out and she is reading a sentimental novel by her favourite author, a hat sails through the window. When a man appears to retrieve it, he notices the book she is reading and claims to know the author, who, by coincidence, is looking for a secretary, so he writes her a note of introduction. When Rosario suggests that he should now leave by the window, he tells her that because the concierge of the building across the street is standing outside, he will see him leave and that her reputation will be compromised. Although Rosario agrees, she believes that both reputations should be compromised, for rights and obligations should be equal. When voices announce the return of the brothers, the stranger has no choice but to disappear through the window.

When Rosario applies for the secretarial position, she sees that the author she had admired is really the stranger with the hat, but she is disillusioned on witnessing a scene between him and an immodestly dressed chorus girl with whom he seemed to be involved. In spite of his pleas that she become his secretary, the disappointed Rosario refuses. When she leaves, the author sits down to write a novel he will entitle *The Romantic Young Lady*.<sup>12</sup>

In the third act, while Rosario and the grandmother are saying the rosary to pass the time, a hat again sails through the window. When the servant throws the statue of a dog at the source and it hits the author on the head, he is brought into the house for care and bandaging. After a short conversation in which he proposes marriage to Rosario, the grandmother serves them hot chocolate before conveniently falling asleep to allow them to resolve their problems. If they ever marry, Rosario demands not only equal rights with him but that he make certain modifications in his literature, suggesting that the two will collaborate on his novels. As Juan Aguilera Sastre observes of María's theatre: 'The collaboration of spouses is presented as the ideal of happiness and stability in marriage.'<sup>13</sup>

### *Take Two from One*

When Gregorio's theatre company returned to Spain in 1930 to perform the four new plays María had written in France, critics noticed a new seriousness as well as innovation in the works attributed to Gregorio as the characters explore the meaning of reality and of life itself.<sup>14</sup> Continued, however, are the painful triangles in which romantic love, rarely rational, is seen as a form of black magic,

*Take Two from One* (*Triángulo*, 1929) uses symbolic names and the triangular structure of the love conflict, but in this play the problems of the male protagonist are central. Faustino, a handsome attorney husband, and his goddess-like bride, Diana, are on a honeymoon cruise when one of the passengers develops a crush on Faustino. Because she admires a ring of Diana's that Faustino had worn as a child, Diana allows her to try it on. Then a fire breaks out, and passengers immediately board the lifeboats to abandon ship. We later learn that Diana's boat overturned and what was presumed to be her body was found at sea.

In the second act, Faustino, married again, has been happy for a year with Diana's opposite: kindly, serene, smart Marcela (who shares the first three letters of her name with María as well as her characteristics).<sup>10</sup> The conflict begins when Diana suddenly reappears. The living Diana was rescued at sea and sold to a primitive tribe in Africa, whose aboriginal peoples worshipped her as their idol. Eventually, a plane downed in the jungle allows her to escape back to Europe.

The solution to this predicament is more complicated than in other plays, for the resolution is not simply Faustino's personal preference but rather involves both religious and legal regulations and precedents. Which of the wives is legitimate? Who is the sinner? The women compete in their own ways for their husband, and Faustino continues to love both. In the third act, as tension builds, Faustino, true to his Faustian name, adds a philosophical dimension to his character as he steps off the stage from one truth into another. When the two women try to follow him, they find themselves trapped in their literary reality. When the stage lights begin to fade, Faustino assures them that he, like other non-entities, will fade as well but that they may meet again the following day, referring to another reality: the next performance of this play.

Patricia W. O'Connor

**Patricia W. O'Connor** is Professor Emerita at the University of Cincinnati, and renowned expert on María Martínez Sierra; her books include *Gregorio y María Martínez Sierra: Cronica De Una Colaboracion* (1987) and *Mito y realidad de una dramaturga espanola: María Martínez Sierra* (2003).

## Notes

- 1 Juan Aguilera Sastre, 'María Lejárraga y el teatro', *Homenaje del Ateneo Riojano a María de la O Lejárraga* (Logroño: Ateneo Riojano, 1994), 51–61.
- 2 Xavi Ayén, 'Esposa y negra en la vida', *La Vanguardia*, 17 November (2000), 50.
- 3 These letters are published in *Mito y realidad de una dramaturga (Myth and Reality of a Woman Dramatist)* (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2003).
- 4 Antonina Rodrigo, *María Lejárraga: una mujer en la sombra* (Madrid: Ediciones Vosa, 1994), 27.
- 5 Without the 'de' (of) in front of the husband's surname, as is traditional in Spain.
- 6 Her writing included translations from several languages, e.g. of Dante, Ibsen, Ionesco, Jonson, Maeterlinck, Miller, de Musset, Pirandello, Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilder and Williams.
- 7 For abundant and fascinating information regarding María's work with musicians, see articles by Joseph R. Jones: 'Lejárraga as Librettist and Lyricist: The State of the Question', *Estreno* 29, no. 1 (spring 2003), 18–22, and 'María Lejárraga de (sic.) Martínez Sierra (1874–1974), libretista y letrista', *Berceo*, 147 (2004), 55–95.
- 8 At Teatro Esclava, Gregorio performed plays attributed to him as well as works by other established or new authors, including, in 1920, Lorca's first play, *El maleficio de la mariposa (The Butterfly's Curse)*.
- 9 After the separation, defenders of Gregorio as exclusive author of the works observed that the author's plays continued their regular and successful performances and therefore felt

their position had been vindicated, for a feminist would never continue to write for a husband who had left her for another woman, as this one did. Truth can be stranger than fiction.

- 10 A copy of this two-page tribute, 'In Memoriam', is in the Archives of the University of Cincinnati's Blegen Library.
- 11 A few contemporary and published novels and plays that probe the enigmas of María's life include: *Llevaré tu nombre* (2002), a novel by Laura Hynes; *Firmado Lejárraga* (2019), a play by Vanessa Montfort; *Luz ajena* (2020), a novel by Isabel Lizárraga; *La mujer sin nombre* (2020), a novel by Vanessa Montfort.
- 12 This play would later be made into a film in Hollywood (1932) starring Catalina Bárcena, but because Catalina was forty-two at the time, the film adaptation by José López Rubio and Paul Pérez is entitled 'A Romantic Widow' while following the general plot of the play.
- 13 *Take Two from One: A Farce in Three Acts*, trans. Helen and Harley Granville-Barker (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1931), 60.
- 14 The four plays María wrote in this period include *Sortilegio* (*Spellbound*, 1930), the text of which was contained in the steamer trunk that arrived after her death. Her most daring play and only tragedy, it concerns a homosexual who has helped waste his family's fortune and feels compelled to marry for money a woman who irrationally adores him, but he can never give her the love she needs. It was successfully performed in Buenos Aires but was much too daring for any theatre in Spain at the time and would have been forbidden by censors in the Franco years (1939–75).

## A Critical Appreciation of the Plays

*This was first published in 1922 in Plays of G. Martínez Sierra (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.). The volume contains The Cradle Song, The Lover, Love Magic, Poor John and Madame Pepita. All were translated by John Garrett Underhill, who also contributed a Foreword, which at the end mentions María as an important collaborator of Gregorio's. The critical appreciation was reprinted in 1929 as an introduction in The Kingdom of God and Other Plays (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.). As well as the title play, this volume contains The Two Shepherds, Wife to a Famous Man and The Romantic Young Lady, all translated by the Granville-Barkers.*

While there may be much to say, there is really very little to explain about the plays of Martínez Sierra, for they have in the first place the supreme dramatic virtue of explaining themselves. They are not (those at least now under review) strikingly novel in technique. They certainly carry no abstruse philosophical message. But they are notable, the present writer holds, for simple excellence as plays, for the directness with which they set out to – and the fine economy with which they do – achieve their purpose. And what better, in this sort, can be said? Take, for instance, *The Cradle Song*. Sierra has the idea – the charming, unrecondite idea – of a foundling baby thrust upon the mercies of a convent of nuns, who bring her up, spend upon her all they can recover of their suppressed motherly instincts, give her to a young man in marriage, and so back to the world. Mark his means to this effect. The foundling, a varied chorus of nuns – among them one who is emotionally the play's protagonist, an old doctor (the child must acquire a legal parent) and the young bridegroom. No intrigue, no thesis, no rhetorical enlargements; two acts because his theme needs two, and no convention-satisfying third, which it does not need. The whole result is a story perfectly told for the sake of its innate humour and feeling, a picture filled and rounded. And – not that this affects the matter – it is interesting to note that with the Spanish public this play, conceding little or nothing to what is usually understood to be the popular demand in such things, was yet a great success – interesting from the point of view of public and theatre manager. The playwright at this juncture stands aside; his work is done, he bows with one emphasis or another to success or failure, advising himself merely of the future. But the *elements* of success – this is the important conclusion if it may be drawn – are probably pretty constant, though its incidentals may vary from country to country and year to year; and it might pay theatre managers to keep a tame crowd-psychologist or so to analyse them. Then all the English-speaking public – that part of it at least which has developed some taste and judgement – would not always be left asking, as they read translated, instead of hearing in their native tongue, plays like *The Cradle Song*, why – in the name of 'What the public wants' – they should be fobbed off, time after time, with entertainments which, with every well-tried appearance of being entertaining, do not *entertain*. To return, however, to Sierra, less occupied as a playwright with theatrical economics even than with an obtruding philosophy, though as a theatre manager – a second and successful occupation that has unluckily been thrusting aside his playwrighting lately – his opinion on this point would be worth having.

*The Two Shepherds* may be coupled with *The Cradle Song*. It has the same simplicity of scheme, the same directness of approach. It is perhaps the more remarkable in that

its action swings upon a stark fidelity of vision. And here is the chief of Sierra's dramatic (distinct for the moment from 'theatrical') virtues; he paints faithfully the thing he *sees*. Once he has his outline clear and true he may sentimentalise a little in filling in the detail; it is a venial fault. We could forgive, if need were, even more affectionate weakness on his creator's part for snuffy, frowsy, garlic-smelling old Don Antonio with his frayed cassock and his battered image of the Virgin, pummelling (as he says) his ill-conditioned village flock into righteousness, dragging them up to God by the scruffs of their dirty necks. Again Sierra needs his two acts and no more, seventy minutes, perhaps, of playing time, but in that space he shows us a dozen characters, individual and alive, and a picture of a Spanish village so consistent that, experience apart, we know it to be true. Mr Sam Weller remarked that if instead of eyes he had been gifted with a pair of double hextra million magnifying glasses he might have been able to see through two brick walls and a door, but having only eyes his vision was limited. Sam, though not given to literature was a bit of a genius, apt, as his creator was, at seeing the realities of cockneydom through things even more opaque to most sights than walls and doors. It is the one gift worth having. Sierra translates for us his Spanish village in terms, no doubt, of his own happy, humorous, ironic temperament. But he has seen it first without illusion, seen it naked, seen it true and, thanks to him, so can we – and have our fun into the bargain.

*Lirio entre espinas* ('Lily among Thorns') and *El enamorado* ('The Lover'), one-act plays, sound dominantly the note of irony, the one in its elaborately developed situation, the other in its treatment of the character of the Lover himself. The chancing of the timid little nun into the house of ill-fame, the circumstance by which her healing touch at a sudden sick-bed brings the inmates like good little children fetching and carrying at her call, disposes of the rowdy patrons in a sulky silence – all that is ironic and amusing enough; and (a carping critic might continue) we have had that sort of thing before (Maupassant!) and many another playwright could make as much effect with it! But mark again, the clarity of vision. Sierra has seen each single figure and has informed it with a life of its own before he started the mere making use of it for his group. Even the rather fantastically unpleasant little figure of the half-witted child (it reminds one, dependent for knowledge of Spain chiefly on books and pictures, of a Velázquez dwarf) has a pitiful little individual place – and a purpose. For – and this is what every clever dramatist fired with a good idea would not give us – one is struck with the fine humanity of Sierra's treatment of his theme. No condescension either! He writes about the nun and the fallen women and the gay young blackguards, their visitors, alike without vulgar astonishment, unselfconsciously, with a perfect courtesy of mind. He writes as a gentleman should.

The saliency of 'The Lover', as a study of the entirely absurd gentleman who spends his life, regardless of his personal affairs, in rapt and unregarded worship of the Queen, is technically the sureness of the touch – it is drawn in spare outline so that one false stroke might be fatal – and above and beyond that the fearlessly comic treatment of the subject. No spice of ridicule is spared. The fellow has even a foolish-sounding name; he ran a margarine factory before he ruined himself trapesing over the world after his Dulcinea (*aliter visum*); cruellest stroke of all, he has to confess that as he watches in the palace grounds through winter nights for the Queen to come out at dawn to feed her pigeons, he has, lest he perish with cold, to seek the comfortable cage, the friendly

society of the orang-outang. He has a ridiculous collection of souvenirs, for which he has refused some Englishman's offer of a good round sum (Englishman = eccentric, c.f., of course, the Danish gravedigger's 'They are all mad there.' How odd – an Englishman writes – that this should be still the typical European joke about us!); he refuses the costly ring the Queen offers him – for after all, while her courtiers stood by helpless with etiquette, this preposterous being did really save her life. He asks to be allowed to kiss her hand. Is he, then, to turn heroic after all? No! for his final request is a free pass over the State railways that he may continue his foolish, useless trapesing as before.

Surely that is good art. And, with the courageous consistency, note the final effect. The fellow wins us, we take off our hats to him; the Queen is stirred to a passing emotion she never felt before. 'She feels' (it is also a warning to the actress of the part not to tumble into sentiment) 'that for the first time in her life she has really been loved.' Sierra is not Cervantes' countryman for nothing; and, quoting that great name, we need enlarge the general argument no further. But glancing at the purely dramatic value of irony it is perhaps worth while to consider for a moment the peculiar difficulty of its use in the theatre. This resides, of course, mainly in the natural constitution of the actor himself. It is not, as some contemptuous critics of the art would say, an objection to being made ridiculous (though let us admit that one may now and then meet that in the self-conscious or over-popular actor), so much as a far more reasonable desire that his audience should, from the beginning, have no doubt of his intentions, should be sure that, however big a fool he is making of himself, he is doing it deliberately with his eyes open. There is nothing the actor hates more than to be at cross-purposes with his audience. Hence the practical difficulty for a dramatist of the gradual disclosure of an ironic purpose, but the necessity of a ruthless consistency, by which the end shall justify both the beginning and the means. And we rule out of course any concluding claptrap of a sudden direct sentimental appeal for sympathy. 'The Lover' is a simple admirable example of what an ironic play should be. For it is by the sustaining of the irony that our proper sympathy is won. The actor can round off his performance, the play's last scheme come full circle. Still something more than technique is involved. If Sierra did not love his man well enough to want to tell the truth about him and love him the better for truth being told, the silly fool could not touch the Queen's imagination and ours as he does. It is respect for poor humanity that counts. Sierra has that.

*El Reino de Dios* ('The Kingdom of God') is in some ways the most considerable of Sierra's work. He devises for himself a larger canvas than usual and, if for nothing else, the play would be remarkable for the number, variety, fidelity, vitality of the sketched characters with which it is so economically filled. He demands great assistance from his actors, no doubt, but he sets them no problems of psychology, no modelling, so to speak, is asked of them, they have but to colour in 'on the flat' the firm outlines of his drawing. And for more immediate effect he places them against a background which is in itself dramatic, which in itself and in its changes, develops the action and purpose of the play. The action itself is unconventional more or less – though there is little in the shape of transgression against the unities which has not been tried in the post-Ibsen period of European drama by one dramatic experimenter or another. We mark Sierra yet once more as the accomplished man of the theatre by the ease and certainty with which he transgresses. He sacrifices everything to his purpose and contrives to sacrifice

nothing. The play has, as its main thread, the story of a girl – in her girlhood, her middle and old age – who gives up her share in the things of this world to ensure, rather than seek, such a portion as she may snatch in this life of the kingdom of God. She joins a sisterhood. We find her in her girlhood ministering in an asylum for old men, foolish, tiresome and – if a stray peseta opens the door of an inn to them – drunken old men. Womanhood brings her to a home where the children of fallen women come into the world, a sadder beginning of life than was the preceding picture – so pitifully comic – of life's end. She refuses release from it in marriage (the vows of her order are not final) to a worthy doctor who worships her, with the flashing phrase 'And you dare to talk to me of love . . . here!' Old age finds her the Mother of an orphanage, with one of God's adopted returning in laurelled triumph as a bull fighter to lay his trophy – his first bull's ear – at her feet (How one envies a Spanish dramatist that scene, but with an admiring envy for Sierra's quite perfect treatment of it!) and as a crown and edging to the play we have her passionate plea with a young revolutionary in embryo (Spain has no immediate copyright in these at least) to abjure violence, to seek his kingdom of God in pity and in love. A very stirring play; and it is instructive to the student of drama to note the use made of the material, the means by which Sierra appeals – and most legitimately – to our emotions. He is not concerned (as an English dramatist choosing such a theme today would almost certainly be) with the growth or wane of the woman's religious belief, nor yet – but for that one flash already recorded – with her mental reaction to the social conditions she faces, not even with developing her 'character'; in fact, it is part of his theme that she does not bother, as certain of our self-conscious philanthropists do, with any such self-righteous thing – so why should he? He relies upon making as clear in his picture to us, as in the reality it was clear to her, the human needs and their claim upon us of disreputable age, sordid sins of the flesh, and of childhood, that will bate no claim, and should not, since upon it all the claims of the world must fall. And that he does so in terms which not the simplest soul in his audience can mistake, nor the most sophisticated deny, is, it may be claimed, an achievement – complete of its kind – in the reality of art.

*La mujer del héroe* ('Wife to a Famous Man') makes far fewer pretensions. It is a sound playable play, little more, interesting to us mainly for the peep that it takes into working-class Madrid. The dramatist, in fact, frankly tells us in a spoken epilogue that it is a passing tribute to the virtues of the Spanish woman of the people as you may walk down any street in any city to find her – as you might find her, *bien entendu*, had you Sierra's power to see and show beauty, pathos, humour in this laundry, and in the kindly, rough-tongued, honest-minded woman earning her family's living there; as good fun and as great a beauty, so felt and seen, as some of us go seeking in remoter places. He selects the rest of his material a trifle carelessly, perhaps; he has used some of it before. But it is an admirable notion, this, of a national hero made in a moment out of the winner of an air-race (this was in the days before the war); a common fellow, reckless and stout of nerve, but with a head which, though he can keep it in the air, is only made to be turned on earth; not too much of a hero to have lived on the laundry, rapidly too spoilt to live contentedly in it.

Sierra might have added in his epilogue almost as legitimately that the play is tribute in the shape of opportunity to the actress upon whom the chief burden is to fall. But this again might be remarked of all his work (though surely it should not call for particular

remark in any dramatist!) how grateful his plays are to the actor. It comes of course partly from the extreme simplicity of his method and from his never trying to force into a play more matter than it will easily hold. He seems incapable of writing anything ineffective, though now and then he may yield to the too obvious effect. That is a venial fault – in the actor's eyes at least. And Sierra, one may judge from this, does genuinely like, admire and understand the art of acting.

It is a taste that every dramatist should have. It may sound superfluous to say so, but of late years there seems to have developed in certain dramatists a distrust, even a positive dislike, of acting, an unreasoning, if sometimes excusable anger with the actor himself and all his works. Now this reflects quite inevitably upon their own work and its result is to be seen in a stiff unyieldingness, a drabness and dryness, a self-sufficiency, as if to say, 'You actors are my megaphone merely. Please don't presume.' Upon such a perverse misunderstanding of what the free and full collaboration between actor and dramatist should be, the drama can never flourish. The trouble springs partly, one fears, from the quite uncalled-for acclaim of the modern dramatist as 'a literary man'. He bows, a bit snobbishly, to the intended compliment and then from literature's present pontifical height is apt to begin to look down on the motley theatre. In a short time, if he's not careful, he'll soon be writing plays fitter for the study than the stage. There is no good play of which that can be said. There are good plays enough that need better acting than our present theatre with its stupid system and its artistically uneducated public, by whose favour it must live, can be expected to supply. But no progress is possible in the art as a whole unless all concerned – dramatists, actors, yes, and public too – such a selection from the mob as can form a conscious third – move forward together. In England we are still far from that happy state of things. The theatre is commercially prosperous, artistically at cross-purposes. Dramatists may complain of their actors, but actors are bitterer about managements, and managements alternately curse at and despise the public – save, of course, during the runs of luck that most of them, gambling long and good-temperedly enough, may look for. Spain no doubt has her theatrical troubles too; we are not here concerned with them. But it is at least a sign of artistic good health to find such plays as Sierra's among its living drama, apt above all things for acting, and for such acting as, one is sure, is bread and meat to the appetite of the audience, wholesome and familiar fare that they know the good and the bad of.

If one comments no further it is not for lack of material. The author's works, his plays alone (there are novels and poems besides. He is forty. What is the secret of this amazing fecundity of the Spaniard?) would take a page or more only to list.

Plays like *Madame Pepita*, *Mamá*, *Sueño de una noche de agosto* (played in English as 'The Romantic Young Lady') and the little fantasy *Hechizo de amor* ('Love Magic') are of a content to which we are more accustomed in the French and English-spoken drama of today. There are yet others, less usual in form and content too, but these will find their way to translation some day and may then more appropriately be dealt with. This must suffice now, an inadequate introduction, perhaps, to a playwright whose adequacy is, in any case, beyond question.

H. Granville Barker

