

DOÑA PERFECTA AND IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA

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Galdós was an ardent devotee of good music throughout his long life. As a boy in the Canary Islands he took piano lessons, and he continued to play this instrument until his final years. Late in his life he learned to play the organ in order to compensate for his loss of timing at the piano. While a fledgling novelist, he also worked as music critic for a Madrid newspaper, and frequent allusions to the masters of the concert hall and the operatic stage fill his novels. No one has brought out more clearly the relationship between music and Galdós's novelty than Vernon A. Chamberlin in his study *Galdós and Beethoven: Fortunata y Jacinta, A Symphonic Novel*. Galdós was particularly fond of Rossini (Berkowitz, *Pérez Galdós* 46), and he alludes to him in several novels, most particularly in part 1 of *Fortunata y Jacinta*, where the old raconteur Estupiñá is described in reference to a portrait of the aged Rossini. Michael Nimetz (189-90) has shown how, in Estupiñá, Galdós combined this picture of Rossini with a psychological portrait of Mesonero Romanos, the old storyteller to whom Galdós was greatly indebted for the commercial history of Madrid presented by his character.

An almost identical portrait has gone unnoticed, that of Don Juan Tafetán in chapter 12 of *Doña Perfecta*, where the aging *tenorio* is described as having a «carilla vermellonada,» «bigote teñido de negro, sus ojuelos vivachos,» and «su pelo con gran estudio peinado para ocultar la calvicie» (443). Not only is such a portrait congruent to the many surviving likenesses of the Italian composer (Till 74, 96, 111, 130, 131, 135; Toyle 108, 172, 212), but it is strikingly similar in some respects to a verbal description offered by the brothers Escudier, Parisian music publishers, in 1823:

His countenance revealed a lofty and congenial expression. His subtle, quick, penetrating eye held one magnetically before him. His smile, benevolent and caustic at the same time, reflected his whole disposition. The clear line of his aquiline nose, his vast and prominent brow, which his prematurely receding hairline entirely revealed, the even oval of his face enclosed in jet-black sideburns, all formed a kind of virile and fascinating beauty. (Cassou 195)

Don Juan Tafetán, in addition to his physical similarities to Rossini (and Mesonero), was likewise «simpático,» of «felicísimo ingenio para contar aventuras graciosas,» «reía mucho,» and demonstrated a «disposición a las picantes burlas,» although «no era maldiciente» (443). His most salient psychological trait is his «afición a las muchachas guapas» (443), and the reader gradually infers that the now only farcically «scandalous» Don Juan at one time enjoyed liaisons with many of Orbajosa's leading ladies. Stendhal, whose biography of Rossini appeared in 1824 and is the most widely known, is very frank about the many different mistresses whom the Italian maintained during the earlier years of his career (109, 154-55, 371, 415). Pepe Rey also informs

the reader that Don Juan Tafetán was reputed to have had a beautiful voice, to which the old *tenorio* responds: «Yo no canto» (444). This was the same response that Rossini, a promising tenor in his youth, gave when his voice broke down and he was forced for a time to become a musician (Stendhal 341, 415; Azevedo 37-38; Cassou 195). In fact, Rossini was the son of another impoverished musician who had eked out a livelihood playing in various bands and orchestras (Azevedo 12-19). It is most curious, then, that Galdós's narrator should tell the reader that Don Juan, the former singer, «completaba su pasar tocando gallardamente el clarinete en las procesiones y solemnidades de la catedral, y en el teatro» (443).

If Galdós installed such a Rossini-like character in a rather enigmatic chapter often condemned for its loose relationship to the rest of the novel and if this almost *opera buffa* chapter—with its constant shenanigans and running to and fro by the Troyas, Don Juan, the caricaturesque *penitenciario*, and his equally comic nephew Jacinto—is set in a larger context replete with allusions to Verdi's *La Traviata* as well as Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* and *La Grande Duchesse* (one a story of tragic frivolity, the others standard-bearers for the French *opéra bouffe*), perhaps we should take a careful look at this novel in the light of a Rossini opera. Since *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) is not only the composer's acknowledged masterpiece but a work conspicuously set in Spain and since Galdós possessed the piano score of this opera (Berkowitz, *La biblioteca* 35), it seems most reasonable to examine *Doña Perfecta* in the light of *Il Barbiere*. Because the opera's libretto is even more tightly knit than Galdós's novel, I will discuss the novel in terms of the structure of the opera.¹ Both in my subsequent tracing of structural congruities and in my earlier noting of biographical parallels, I have received guidance from two biographical and loosely musicological accounts, Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini* and Alexis Azevedo's well-known *G. Rossini, sa vie et ses oeuvres* (1864), which, along with other studies, would have been available to Galdós.²

Il Barbiere di Siviglia revolves around the attempts of Count Almaviva, with the help of his factotum Figaro, to win the favors of a pretty maiden named Rosina, a wealthy orphan. Rosina has virtually been locked up by her guardian, Dr. Bartolo, who covets both her money and her affections (*Il Barbiere* 436; I.1). Even in the broadest terms, there is a similarity between the situation of the opera and that of Galdós's novel, where the innocent, young Rosario, whose father died soon after her birth, is locked away from her suitor, Pepe Rey, because she is the eventual, intended bride of the lawyer, Jacintito. In Act I, Scene iii, Rosina, carefully chaperoned by her guardian, drops a letter from her balcony to the admiring Almaviva, disguised as the lovesick serenader Lindoro. Thus is initiated a lengthy series of scenes and verbal exchanges involving both balconies and letters. Dr. Bartolo, in almost Cervantine fashion, immediately declares that Rosina's continued protection will depend on his having her balcony walled up (437). Rosario's balcony will prove to be the focus of nightly encounters and a thwarted elopement with Pepe Rey. Lindoro's sweet singing, which touches Rosina's heart even before she ventures out onto the balcony to gaze upon the distinguished nobleman intoning plaintive melodies, excites her forbidden curiosity. Like Rosario, who

came to know Pepe first through her mother's stories and his father's letters («Desde antes de conocerte, te quería» [428]), the innocent, *commedia dell'arte*-like Rosina falls in love with the *persona* (Lindoro) before she knows the flesh-and-blood man (Almaviva). Just as Rosario responds willingly to Pepe's opening kindness as he takes possession of his room and chats with her privately in Doña Perfecta's garden, Rosina is eager to shake off her enforced circumspection and chaperonage:

Le vostre assidue premure hanno eccitato la mia curiosità. Il mio tutore è per uscir di casa: appena si sarà allontanato, procurate con qualche mezzo ingegnoso di indicarmi il vostro nome, il vostro stato, e le vostre intenzioni. Io non posso giammai comparire al balcone senza l'invidibile compagnia del mio tiranno. Siate però certo che tutto a disposto a fare per rompere le sue catene... (438)

Figaro, barber to Dr. Bartolo, informs Lindoro that Rosina is obliged to take piano lessons from one Don Basilio, an intriguing matchmaker disguised as a music master in order to snare her affections for her guardian. In *Doña Perfecta*, after a tiring conversation with the priest Don Inocencio, Rosario too will play the piano mechanically. Figaro poignantly calls Basilio a «collo torto» or hypocrite (438), thus characterizing the single trait that will distinguish the bass's role throughout the opera. *Doña Perfecta* also has a character who is disguised as a «teacher,» the reactionary priest Don Inocencio, who has put on the garbs of a Latin scholar and spiritual adviser to Rosario. Not only is hypocrisy the controlling motif in Galdós's novel, where every kindness of the priest and Doña Perfecta overlays an all-consuming cruelty, but so blatant is this trait in the conversation of the canon that the narrator feels called upon to generalize: «Pepe Rey no sabía lo que le mortificaba más: si la severidad de su tía o las hipócritas condescendencias del canónigo» (449).

In order to get Almaviva past the vigilance of Dr. Bartolo and into the house where he may woo Rosina, Figaro advises the Count to disguise himself as a drunken soldier. Just by chance, «Oggi arriva un reggimento» (441), and Almaviva will be able to place himself at Bartolo's door with a billet ordering that lodgings be prepared for him within the house. A similar stroke of luck is followed by an almost identical plan in *Doña Perfecta*. Already in chapter 2, Caballuco mentions that the Madrid government will be dispatching troops to Orbajosa. At the conclusion of chapter 17, Pepe hears the coronet announcing the arrival of the regiment. In chapter 18 («Tropa»), Pepe's old friend Pinzón turns out to be an officer with the invading regiment, and he fortuitously appears with a billeting order to be lodged in the most important house in town, Perfecta's. In both this chapter and the ensuing one («Combate terrible.—Estrategia»), Pepe puts into effect the scheme whereby he will move to an inn, while Pinzón, feigning disdain of Perfecta's nephew, will remain in the house to gain information and arrange clandestine meetings between Pepe and his imprisoned cousin. In both *Il Barbiere* and *Doña Perfecta* the billeted military men play the role of «Hamlet,» feigning drunkenness or confusion in order to appear harmless to the owner of the house. There is also a similar sound to their names, since Pinzón, the conquistador-like surname of Pepe's friend, is a partial homonym of Alonzo, the military alias assumed by Almaviva.

In Act I, Scene v Rosina begins to complain incessantly to Figaro about her imprisonment in Bartolo's lugubrious house, comparing it to a tomb: «Che giova la bellezza, / Se chiusa lo sempre sto fra quattro mura, / Che mi par d'errer proprio in sepoltura?» (446). In Scene ix her maid, Berta, echoes this tomb motif, lamenting the fate of her mistress, who is on the verge of insanity: «Alla fine farà qualche stortura? / O anderà dalla noja in sepoltura» (454). There is a great deal to say about the possible relationship of these lyrics to *Doña Perfecta*. First, as in *Il Barbieri*, it is a maid, Librada, who acts as go-between and carrier of letters in *Doña Perfecta* (468; ch. 20). Second, in Galdós's novel Rosario actually does go insane (499; ch. 32) when her break for freedom is brought to a tragic end by two gunshots from the «centaur,» Caballuco. Third, in chapter 17 of Galdós's novel Pepe Rey and Rosario, who has been imprisoned in her room, carry out a rendezvous in a subterranean chapel that turns out to be the crypt where the remains of Rosario's father have been laid to rest. In this tomb scene Galdós makes it abundantly clear that Rosario's fate will be identical to the life of insanity feared by the operatically romanticized Rosina: «Quiero volverme loca contigo. Por ti estoy padeciendo...» (455).

Both Almaviva and Pepe Rey are outsiders and, as such, are unwelcome in Seville and Orbajosa. In *Il Barbieri* it is Don Basilio who reminds Dr. Bartolo that his rival comes from elsewhere (447; I.v). In *Doña Perfecta* it is Rosario who makes a similar comment to Pepe: «—Lo que yo creo—dijo Rosarito, clavando en él sus ojos con expresión cariñosa—es que tú no eres para nosotros... Tú vienes de otro mundo...» (426). What will Dr. Bartolo and Doña Perfecta then do to prevent this outsider's theft of their wards, Rosina and Rosario? Bartolo's answer comes by way of advice from the hypocrite Basilio. In his famous aria, «La calunnia è un venticello,» Basilio proposes that they slander Almaviva. It is an aria built on a crescendo of volume, speed, and rhyme that justify Rossini's fame as «Monsieur Crescendo,» as the standard bearer of an effect that he was to use and abuse throughout his career (Stendhal 180; Azevedo 61-62; Cassou 195):

Dalla bocca fuori uscendo,
Lo schiamazzo va crescendo;
Prende forza a poco a poco,
Scorre già di loco in loco,
Sembra il tuono, la tempesta,
Che nel sen della foresta,
Va fischiando, brontolando,
E ti va d'orror gelar.
Alla fin trabocca, e scoppia
Si propaga, e si radoppia,
E produce un'esplosione
Come un colpo di cannone.

(448; I.vi)

Slander is likewise the scheme employed to perfection by Doña Perfecta and Don Inocencio (Cardona 21), and if the result is not precisely «un colpo di cannone,» it is at least two thunderous discharges from Caballuco's pistol.

These two conspirators so exaggerate Pepe's thoughtlessness in touring the Orbijosa Cathedral during the saying of mass that Pepe cannot believe they are talking about him: «Sin duda, me han tomado por otro» (431). When they accuse him of trying to drown religious devotion with secular philosophy, he can only say: «ni yo he despreciado las creencias de nadie, ni tengo las ideas que usted me atribuye» (431). They go on to accuse him of wanting to cart off the cathedral to a museum stone by stone, to which Pepe uncomprehendingly retorts that he prefers «la fama de necio a poseer esa ciencia de Satanás que aquí me atribuyen» (432). In subsequent chapters they and the other *orbajosenses* spread the rumor that he is an atheist, that he is not an engineer but a destitute playboy come to live off his aunt's wealth, that he has come to tear down the cathedral and erect a shoe factory in its place, that he is an «ateo luterano» (444), that he is going to demolish the cathedral and build a tar factory on its foundations. As a result of this slander, Pepe is doubted by Rosario, attacked by Perfecta's friends, ridiculed in the casino, and thrown out of the cathedral. His only defense is once again to call their sin by its name: «he protestado desde el fondo de mi alma contra tal calumnia...» (455). In a type of choral reprise, Galdós has Doña Perfecta's slanders spill over onto Caballuco, who begins to feel the effects of an apocryphal tale associating him with acts of cowardice, to which the «centaur» can only echo Pepe's own protest: «eso... es una calumnia... Todos hablan de mí...» (470). This concatenation of lies is accompanied by the well-known crescendo of chapter titles: «¿Habrà desavenencia?» «La desavenencia crece,» «La discordia crece,» «Un 'casus belli,'» «La discordia sigue creciendo, hasta que se declara la guerra.» This is a true crescendo, based on an intensification of denotation and rhythm, and it is so labeled by countless critics such as Eoff (7), Shoemaker (2: 65), and Gullón (40, 49).

Initially presented as a fainthearted weakling, Rosina quickly begins to show her inner feistiness and strength: «Povero sciocco! [i.e., Bartolo] l'avrà da far con me» (*Il Barbiere* 449; I.vii). Soon she openly is seeking the disguised Almaviva's attentions. The same is true of Rosario. At first a picture of timidity, circumspection, and pallor (Mazzara [50] correctly equates her with a parody of a romantic heroine), she ultimately dares to send forbidden letters, to make secret visits, to run off with Pepe, and to declare that she hates her mother. The letters, sent and received via the hands of the maid Librada, serve to ridicule the useless precautions of Perfecta and all Orbijosan society, just as the letters of Almaviva and Rosina act to burlesque the efforts of foolish old men like Dr. Bartolo to sequester young girls like Rosina from attractive young men like the Count. It is worth noting, as perhaps Galdós did, that Rossini's original title constituted an apt and clearly framed thesis, *Almaviva, ossia L'inutile precauzione* (Till 62), a thesis that echoes as an important motif in Galdós's novel. In *Il Barbiere* Dr. Bartolo's response to the letters is to convince Rosina that both Don Alonzo (Count Almaviva in a second disguise) and the crafty Figaro want merely to hand her over to the evil designs of Almaviva (whom Rosina knows only through Bartolo's slander). In *Doña Perfecta* the response is the attempt, by the *penitenciario* and Doña Perfecta herself, to convince Rosario that Pepe Rey is the incarnation of the devil. In each case the warning to resist evil is but a single

manifestation of the overall scheme to employ slander; however, neither heroine ultimately lets such flimsy evidence stand in the way of her feelings.

While temporarily under the sway of Bartolo's calumnies, Rosina confesses her complicity in a plan that would bring about her elopement with Lindoro (Almaviva). Figaro and Don Alonzo (Almaviva) are to position a ladder at her upper window and bring her down to her lover, who would summarily reveal his true identity as the Count. When Alonzo and Figaro are safely inside the chamber with Rosina, however, Bartolo's men trap the trio inside the room by removing the ladder. In *Doña Perfecta* all of chapter 29 constitutes a similar elopement scheme by which Rosario is to come down from her room and rendezvous with Pepe Rey in the garden. However, Doña Perfecta and the vigilant María Remedios succeed in trapping Rosario in her room, and they then successfully cut off exit or entrance via the stairway. As in Rossini's opera, Galdós's heroine confusedly reveals her complicity in the elopement attempt during a calumnious interrogation by her possessive adversary.

All of this evidence needs to be evaluated in terms of what good readers already have concluded in regard to *Doña Perfecta*. It often is pointed out, for example, that Galdós's novel is excessively melodramatic and propagandistic (Lowe 53; Sánchez, «Histrionic Projection» 176; DeCoster 150). It usually is alleged that one of the reasons for Galdós's quickening tempo and exaggerated delineation of character is the novel's publication in installments and the corresponding need to motivate purchase of the succeeding section. Yet Galdós's procedures may have roots more complex than questions of format or economics, and they certainly do not betray novelistic incompetence. *Doña Perfecta* does, indeed, verge on melodrama. In fact, in a highly meta-literary exchange in chapter 9, when Pepe Rey accuses all of Orbajosan society of scheming to vanquish him, his aunt replies: «—Deseo que me enseñes ese traidor de melodrama» (441). This statement is a covert admission that *Doña Perfecta* is deliberately caricaturesque in emotion, ideology, and movement, a judgment corroborated on different grounds by Roberto Sánchez («Las Troyas» 57). Allusions to the stage, operas, and singing abound in the text. Richard Mazzara has likened the beginnings of the novel to «a musical composition» (49), its heroine to a parody of romantic conventions (50), its conclusion to a musical coda (54). We already have discussed in detail the degree to which *Doña Perfecta's* power depends on its crescendo of scenes, chapter titles, and epithets that climax with Pepe's murder in the garden. One must recall again Rossini's nickname, «Monsieur Crescendo,» and the degree to which *Il Barbiere's* characters are drawn from the *commedia dell'arte* (the braggart soldier, the charlatanesque doctor or scholar, the old lecher, the innocent maiden). Many of these same caricatures and situations are recreated in *Doña Perfecta*, as if to imply that Orbajosa and all Spain are to be seen as an *opera buffa* created to expose the hypocrisy and useless precautions taken by those seeking to keep the national character «pure.» I submit that Galdós structures much of *Doña Perfecta* in imitation of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and that, in order to make it clear that Spain was being compared to the farce within Rossini's delightful opera, he placed Rossini

himself (Don Juan Tafetán) and myriad operatic allusions within this most musical and tempo-conscious text.

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NOTES

¹ Galdós also owned a copy of the *Théâtre* of Beaumarchais (Berkowitz, *La biblioteca* 184). The libretto of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, written by Cesare Sterbini, was based on Beaumarchais's play *Le Barbier de Séville*, part of the dramatic trilogy that also gave rise to Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and a number of now forgotten operas.

² Azevedo himself quotes from a number of other accounts, including Stendhal's, pointing out on two occasions: «On a bien souvent écrit la vie de Rossini (5) and «Rossini, en un seul mot —et ce seul mot dit tout—, ne pouvait manquer d'historiens» (6). The personal library of Don Benito in the Casa-Museo Pérez Galdós does not appear to contain any of these accounts. However, given its superior richness of detail, its psychological penetration, and its uniquely ironic presentation of Rossini's escapades, Stendhal's commentary—which takes the composer's life only up to middle age—would have given Galdós everything he needed to know.

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