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DEATH'S HEADS AND DEATH MASKS:
HISTORY AS ABSENCE IN JUAN DE LA
CUEVA'S *TRAGEDIA DE LOS SIETE INFANTES
DE LARA*

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ABSTRACT Whereas modern critics have considered Juan de la Cueva's *Tragedia de los siete infantes de Lara* (1579) unappealing compared to Lope's 1612 version of the story and discussed the Sevillian playwright's misguided use of classical tragic genre conventions, the present essay proposes a framework for understanding the play that is neither Lopean nor classicist. Arguing that the heart of *Infantes* is a pervading sense of metaphysical absence, it suggests that the play can be meaningfully construed as an early example of the "mourning play," or that mixture of history play and tragedy which the German philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin presented as the central late-Renaissance aesthetic form of historical contemplation in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). Cueva's history of the House of Lara can be construed, that is, as a play which is concerned not so much with this or that historical person or event as with—unideal, broken, amputated—history itself.

Juan de la Cueva's dramatic production includes noteworthy early examples of the history play, a subgenre that Cueva practically invented in Spain and was among the first to practice in all of Europe. Nevertheless, outside a narrow circle of specialists, very few people today know the work of this late-16th- and early-17th-century Andalusian playwright (1543–1612). For though it would certainly seem unfair to judge a dramatist by the work of others,

this is exactly what happened to Cueva, whose dramatic production has recurrently been measured by the standards of, on one hand, the Renaissance classicist tragedy from which it sprang and, on the other hand, the new *comedia* that it predated. Especially the rising star of Lope de Vega's historical drama has outshone the light of Cueva's history plays: the fact that the two playwrights on several occasions exploited the same medieval materials has invited recurrent comparison, and not to the Sevillian's advantage.

Modern critics who have made the effort to write about Cueva's *Tragedia de los siete infantes de Lara* (1579)—the historical drama that I will discuss in this article—have, for example, considered it both ineffective and unappealing compared to Lope's 1612 version of the same story in the more acclaimed *El bastardo Mudarra* (Cavalho 91–93, 98–100),¹ or pondered how Cueva's transformation of the classical rules of tragedy led to “su propio fracaso y la consiguiente preparación del triunfo de la Comedia Nueva y del teatro barroco” (López Fonseca 288). Thus, even the critics who find Cueva's drama worthy of serious attention in and of itself have felt compelled to take a revisionist stand, either setting out to amend Ramón Menéndez Pidal's influential conviction (121–26) that Cueva's use of medieval ballad material was hopelessly dry and elitist compared to Lope's *romancero*-based drama (Wardropper); or to revise Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo's similarly powerful conviction (315) that the Andalusian playwright misunderstood or clumsily disfigured classicist tragic genre conventions (Sieber; Froldi; Greer). Judging by the critical reception of *Infantes*, it would appear that the key to this admittedly strange play has gone missing and that the best a critic can do for Cueva is to try to sort out the most blatant injustices that have been done to him over the years.

However, in my subsequent occupation with Cueva's history of the House of Lara, I attempt to go beyond revision and propose a framework for understanding the play that is neither classicist nor Lopean. Arguing that the heart of *Infantes* is a pervading sense of metaphysical absence, I will read the play instead as a testimony to the contemporaneous upsurge of a distinctive conception of history that was not the premature prefiguration or “preparation” of Lope's dramatic historiography, but something in its own right. In my

1. See Susan de Cavalho's view that “although Cueva takes an important and influential step in his attempt to stage the *Romancero*, much of the emotive appeal of the ballad is sacrificed to the often erudite and sometimes ponderous dramatic style,” whereas “Lope recreates the legend with ‘todo el vigor de la tradición secular heredada’ [Menéndez Pidal]” (99).

reading, *Infantes* voices what may be termed a secular historical experience which, as I will argue, can explain several of its alleged aesthetic shortcomings, including, first of all, the conspicuous absence of the eponymous seven *infantes* or their presence as mutilated corpses; the so-called “useless” (Menéndez Pidal 124) third act; and the alienated or detached—melancholic—historiographical glance at the heroic medieval past.

These aspects of Juan de la Cueva's play certainly collide both with the stringent decorum of classicist tragic poetics and the dramatic vigor of Lopean *comedia*, yet they can be fruitfully approached through Walter Benjamin's work on the *Trauerspiel* or mourning play.² Thus, *Infantes* can be meaningfully construed precisely as an early example of that mixture of history play and tragedy which the German philosopher-critic presented as the central late-Renaissance aesthetic form of ethico-historical contemplation in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925).³ It can be construed, that is, as a play which is concerned not so much with this or that historical person or event as with—unideal, broken, amputated—history itself.

Tragedia de los siete infantes de Lara

Considering the relative obsolescence of *Infantes*, I begin with a comprehensive annotated summary of the plot before proceeding with Benjamin's theory of the mourning play and my mourning play interpretation of Cueva's drama. *Infantes* is a historical drama in the pre-Lopean four acts, based in more or less equal measure on royal chronicler Florián de Ocampo's 1541 *Crónica general de España* and the *Cancionero de romances* published in

2. With its general emphasis on the darkness and horror of history, my approach sits well with Antonio López Fonseca's reading of *Infantes* as a *tragedia de horror*. However, a major difference between Fonseca's Senecan reading and the following Benjaminian interpretation of Cueva's play is that whereas the former places Cueva's theater of horror in the ancient pagan tradition, the latter underscores the Christian framing of the tragedy. I will return to the Christian backbone of *Infantes* at the end of this article.

3. Subsequent English quotations are taken from the current English translation by John Osborne which, somewhat inadequately, renders the title as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Considering Benjamin's superordinate profiling of the 17th-century mourning play precisely against the backdrop of tragic drama, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* or *The Origin of the German "Trauerspiel"* would certainly be more correct. Thus, in his translation of the text, Osborne wisely retains the German word *Trauerspiel*. For original quotations from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, I use Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 1, hereinafter cited as Benjamin, *Gesammelte* 1.1.

1550 in Antwerp (Coates 2008).⁴ Like most of Cueva's plays, it is written in a variety of metrical forms, ranging from Italian lyrical meters to native Spanish *octavas* and *redondillas* (Morby, "Notes" 214). When the play opens, the seven *infantes* of Lara have already been killed in an ambush contrived by their uncle, Ruy Velázquez, on account of a family feud. Manipulated by his vengeful wife, Doña Lambra, who took offense at the behavior of one of her nephews at a social gathering, Velázquez sent his brother-in-law, the *infantes'* father, Gonzalo Bustos, to King Almanzor in Córdoba carrying a letter which revealed the whereabouts of the seven *infantes* and ordered the killing of the messenger.⁵ The king, wishing to rid himself of an important enemy, took advantage of the Castilian family feud and killed the seven famously brave *infantes* along with their tutor, but spared Gonzalo Bustos's life and kept him instead as a prisoner. During his time as a royal prisoner in Córdoba, Gonzalo Bustos fell in love with his guardian, Almanzor's sister Zayda, who returned his affection and became pregnant with the boy who would eventually avenge the killing of his seven half-brothers and the injustice inflicted on his father: the eponymous *bastardo* Mudarra of Lope's later play. This whole preplot, along with the actual plot of the play, which, briefly stated, narrates Gonzalo's release and Mudarra's revenge, is described in the "Argumento de la tragedia" (Cueva 69–70) which the author provides as background information at the start of the text, complementing the shorter prose plot summaries preceding each of the four acts.

The first act opens with King Almanzor of Córdoba inquiring into the battle in which the *infantes* were killed, ordering his two captains, Viara and Galve, to tell him everything that happened. The captains relate how they succeeded in defeating the seven *infantes* who fought courageously against an army of ten thousand men but were finally ambushed, killed, and decapitated. Upon hearing this account, the king sends for Gonzalo Bustos and reveals Ruy Velázquez's betrayal, reading his brother-in-law's treacherous letter to him. At this point, Almanzor does not disclose the fate of the seven

4. These are the generally accepted main sources of Cueva's play, but the legend of the seven *infantes* dates back—at least—to the *Estoria de España* (before 1289), also known as the *Primera corónica general*. From the legend's recurrence in subsequent chronicles of 1344 and 1512, Menéndez Pidal inferred the existence of a lost ballad "que era ya en la segunda mitad del siglo XIII bastante antiguo" (4). For a short but useful introduction to the *infantes* material in chronicles and plays, see Cavalho 85–90.

5. For a discussion of the preplot and the apple of discord, see John T. Burt.

infantes, but enigmatically invites his prisoner to dine with him in the evening.

The second act begins with Captain Viara's pensive meditation on the vagaries of fortune and the vanity of ambition, followed by a banquet with lively entertainment and music. Gonzalo Bustos and King Almanzor eat and talk amiably until the severed heads of the seven *infantes* and their tutor are suddenly brought in and presented at the dinner table. Recognizing his sons, Gonzalo bursts into lamentation, attacks the king's guards, and is arrested but subsequently pardoned by Almanzor, who announces the prisoner's freedom to return to Salas, the Lara family home in Burgos.

The third act shows Zayda's desperation upon learning that Gonzalo Bustos will depart for Castile. Together with Haja, a local witch, the pregnant princess performs an occult ritual to cast a spell on Gonzalo, all while eloquently lamenting his departure. Then follows the leave-taking of the lovers, during which Zayda gives Gonzalo half of a ring so that their child will be able to identify his father when he is one day sent to Salas to find him. Gonzalo departs, Zayda gives birth to a son, and Almanzor magnanimously embraces his newborn nephew.

The fourth act takes place seventeen years later, when Zayda and Gonzalo's son, Mudarra, is already a young man and sets off for Castile to find his father and avenge his brothers. Mudarra arrives in Salas, identifies his father by the half ring, murders his uncle, and burns down his aunt's house. The play ends with Doña Lambra, who instigated the whole fatal course of events, dying in the flames as Mudarra renders his tribute to the seven *infantes* and claims his kinship with the nobles of Lara.

Mourning Play

According to Walter Benjamin's theory, the late-16th- and 17th-century mourning play—Christian drama addressing a secular (preferably historical) subject matter, partly or ambiguously *sub specie aeternitatis*—was closely related to a contemporaneous change in the conception of history (*Origin* 62–64, 106–10, 111–13). It expressed the period's ambivalent farewell to the medieval view of historical life as a stage in the teleological process of salvation that had found its quintessential expression in Martin Luther's turning away from the eschatological power of good deeds, yet it was by no means

limited to the Protestant confession (*Origin* 78). From the dominating religious perspective of the 16th and 17th centuries, the separation of history and metaphysical meaning implicit in this development was, in Benjamin's account, seen as an almost thoroughly negative thing: another fall from the state of grace intimately intertwined with moral decay, physical death, and the triumphant forces of evil (*Origin* 138–58, esp. 138–42). Cut off from the divine realm, history appeared as a meaningless, desolate landscape subject to the arbitrary power of brutal tyrants (*Origin* 57–100, esp. 65–70, 85–86).

Although *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is—as its title indicates—principally concerned with German drama of the so-called Silesian school,⁶ Benjamin's examination of the mourning play as the long 17th century's most important aesthetic form for ethico-historical contemplation repeatedly touches on Shakespeare and has therefore been applied to English materials in recent studies (Owens; Miller; Kluge, "Deformed, Unfinished History"). My claim here is, of course, that it can also enlighten certain forms of Spanish Golden Age theatre—plays dating from the 1570s and 1580s in particular—and the subsequent mourning play analysis of Juan de la Cueva's *Infantes* will serve as a test case for that claim.⁷ Indeed, there is quite hard evidence that Benjamin conceived his theory of the mourning play in critical dialogue with Spanish dramatists. In a letter to his friend Gerschom Scholem, for example, he wrote, "The virtual object of the dissertation will be Calderón"⁸ (Benjamin, *Gesammelte* 1.3, 881; my translation). Moreover, various passages of the *Ursprung* directly discuss Calderón, and the whole work is informed by a highly ambiguous fascination with this playwright as representative of Spanish Golden Age drama (*Origin* 86–91).

Thus, although it is generally seen as a book about some rather obscure German dramas, the *Ursprung* actually presents a trio of mourning play variations which are made to illuminate each other through a series of contrasts and similarities. Faced with the challenge of secular history, these three mourning play variations, in Benjamin's view, took different aesthetic paths. Whereas Spanish dramatists solved the problem of historical meaninglessness through their exploitation of the Stoic-Christian topos of the *theatrum*

6. Benjamin's primary material is the mid-17th-century German Protestant dramas by Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664), Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein (1635–1683), and Johann Christian Hallmann (1640–1716).

7. For a pioneering theoretical discussion of Benjamin's theory of the mourning play in relation to Spanish materials, see Anthony J. Cascardi's article on *comedia* and *Trauerspiel*.

8. "Der virtuelle Gegenstand der Abhandlung wird Calderon sein."

mundi, German 17th-century drama insisted on the broken, unideal nature of history—not only giving up on metaphysical closure, but, in a furious rage of mourning, tearing asunder every harmonious synthesis and overflowing with images of death and decay. Against these extremes, Benjamin then emphasizes Shakespearean drama, *Hamlet* in particular, as the perfect balance of eschatological hope and historical pessimism through a troubled Christian spirit (*Origin* 157–58).

To varying degrees, the three variants of the European mourning play examined in the *Ursprung* affirmed history as what Benjamin terms a “process of irresistible decay”⁹ (*Origin* 178) and shared in what may be termed a Baroque aesthetics of vanity characterized by a number of elements: stylistic features suggesting fragmentation and incoherence, such as stichomythia (*Origin* 207–10); rhetorical figures regimenting dramatic utterances into stylized patterns and indicative of an enforced or artificial will to order (rather than harmonious organic coherence), such as anaphora and epiphora (*Origin* 185–89); poetic imagery relating to the passing of time and the changing of fortune (*Origin* 177–82); exploration of the witching hour and the spirit world in interludes and other types of secondary dramatization, adding a sense of epistemological *claroscuro* (*Origin* 192–95, 133–38); themes of civil strife, political instability, succession, and the nonideal, creaturely, or even tyrannical sovereignty (*Origin* 65–68, 85–86); and scenographic, dramaturgical and performative exploitation of the dead human body or parts of it as props (*Origin* 215–20)¹⁰ indicative of—in modern terms—a brutal or indeed barbarian “anthropology.”¹¹

Connoisseurs of Cueva’s drama about the House of Lara will recognize many of these features, yet before proceeding with my analysis of *Infantes*, a brief methodological reflection is in order. For compelling though it may be, Benjamin’s theory should not simply be applied, but also interrogated. Several questions present themselves concerning the consistency of its generic and historical paradigms. It may be asked, for example, if the very

9. “Vorgang unaufhaltsamen Verfalls” (*Gesammelte* 1.1, 353).

10. As Benjamin eruditely comments in this subchapter, quoting “a concealed but valuable” Latin source: “The whole human body cannot enter a symbolic icon, but it is not inappropriate for part of the body to constitute it.” In the mourning play universe, the *physis* is emphatically carnal, fleshy, bloody—hopelessly far from the ideal of ethereal natural beauty found in both the preceding and following periods.

11. The second half of Benjamin’s book is dedicated to the various aesthetic aspects of the mourning play, from elements of plot and characters to themes, poetic imagery, and metrics.

concept of mourning play does not rely too heavily on the rather schematic category of postclassical, secular Christian drama influentially put forth in the Vienna *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1808) by August Wilhelm Schlegel (27).¹² Although Benjamin distinguishes between German, Spanish, and English variations, his concept of mourning play is indeed quite monolithic in the sense that all three variants are essentially seen to express the same secular historical experience. In continuation whereof, the very notion of a unitary epochal experience may, of course, be questioned: is there really such a thing as a historical breakthrough, a single point in time when Europeans began to conceive of themselves as historical beings in the modern sense (as different from the ancients)? Moreover, from the vantage point of the 21st century, a good hundred years after the appearance of the *Ursprung*, Benjamin's emphasis on melancholy as the only adequate reaction to secular historical experience and his related promotion of a *vanitas*-ridden allegorical aesthetics as the only ethically defensible artistic response to the horrors of history do appear as historically determined modernist premises (*Origin* 53–56). Last but not least, as I discuss in *Baroque Allegory Comedia*, Benjamin's presentation of the *comedia* as an escapist combination of aestheticism and authoritarianism, a reality-denying presentation of history as a divine comedy, is highly tentative and ignores both the critical and the melancholic aspects of Spanish Golden Age theater (27–28).

Can Golden Age scholars, then, use his ideas? My contention is that some of us can. Or that we sometimes can, depending on materials. Though the *Ursprung* is certainly unfair to Calderón and therefore perhaps not as immediately attractive to *calderonistas*, Benjamin's theory of the mourning play is quite able to illuminate Juan de la Cueva's drama, and the following analysis will hopefully show that. Confronted with a play like *Infantes*, which (like the German materials examined by Benjamin) eschews the conventions of neoclassical tragedy yet clearly pertains to the tragic family, it does seem reasonable to look for an alternative generic affiliation. Obviously, the mourning play is by no means a less comprehensive generic category than

12. I mention Schlegel because Benjamin's aesthetic thinking can, to some extent, be construed as a critical dialogue with 19th-century German aesthetics, of which the Schlegel brothers were at the center. Thus, Benjamin wrote his PhD dissertation, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920; *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*) on Early German Romanticism, and key passages of the *Ursprung* critically discuss German 19th-century aesthetics (*Origin* 159–67).

tragedy; and, all chronological and cultural proximities considered, it should certainly be no less able to harbor Cueva's drama than Attic tragedy, which was, after all, the artistic product of a very distant historicocultural context. Furthermore, like the playwright's other history plays based on ballad materials—*La muerte del rey don Sancho* (1579), for example—or Miguel de Cervantes's contemporaneous experiments with historical drama—notably the acclaimed *Numancia*, published in 1585 (Kluge, "Waking the Dead")—*Infantes* itself fundamentally bears witness to that increasing preoccupation with history outside the domain of historiography proper which characterized the two half centuries on either side of 1600, and perhaps especially the 1580s and 1590s. Modern historians such as René Koselleck and Zachary Schiffman have proposed that this preoccupation was spurred on by a crisis in late medieval thinking about history. This crisis resulted in the emergence of a different notion of historical existence marked, among other things, by a linear conception of chronology and the idea of an unsurpassable distance between the (perfect) past and the (imperfect) present, as epitomized by Francesco Petrarca's famous ode to the ruins of Rome (96).

The generic and historical paradigms of the *Ursprung* thus ultimately being, in my view, uncontroversial, we are left with the issue of its "modernist" bias, which does present somewhat of a problem to Golden Age scholars who want to apply Benjamin's insights to their own material: was melancholy really the long 17th century's most central form of ethicohistorical contemplation? And was the embrace of *vanitas*, consequently, the period's most adequate aesthetic response? Faced with the tragicomic tenor of Lopean *comedia* (Morby, "Some Observations") and Calderón's "anti-tragic theatre" (Kluge, "Calderón's Anti-Tragic Theatre"), we may certainly have our doubts about Benjamin's judgment here. Yet, precisely a play such as *Tragedia de los siete infantes de Lara* would seem to sustain his idea of the period and its dramatic production.

Excepting features dependent on specific aesthetic production circumstances (such as the stock of historiographical sources¹³), many elements of *Infantes* indeed confirm the relevance of Benjamin's theory of the mourning play for the interpretation of this play. These include superordinate characteristics such as the pervasive Christian moral didacticism evident in the final

13. As the section on Byzantine sources (*Origin* 68–69) makes clear, the German playwrights took their material mainly from Byzantine sources—hagiographical material on female saints such as St. Sophia.

reckoning with the play's two villains, Ruy Velázquez and Doña Lambra, and suggesting its generic affiliation with what the literary theorist Alonso López Pinciano would, a few years later, label the *tragedia morata* (*Origin* 98–100);¹⁴ the general presentation of medieval Spain as a discordant, violence-ridden landscape marred by blood feuds and interracial conflict (*Origin* 95–98); and, last but not least, the pervading and indeed ubiquitous element of melancholy, sorrow, and lamentation (*Origin* 118–20, 138–58, 226–30). However, three more specific elements indicating the relevance of Benjamin's theory of the mourning play for *Infantes* stand out: the cadaveric, amputated presence of the seven *infantes*; what may be termed the “interludic” third act; and the generally detached, historiographical glance at the heroic past. In what follows, I will discuss these three points more in detail one by one, with recurrent reference to the poetics of the mourning play.

The Severed Heads

The most striking element of the *Infantes*'s mourning play poetics of vanity is no doubt the simultaneously erudite and perverse use of the corpse: more precisely, the severed heads of the *infantes* and their *ayo* in the second act. This horrific scene fits very well with Benjamin's presentation of the Baroque universe as a violent sublunar world in which everything organic—including the human body—is mercilessly scattered in *dissecta membra* like so many fragments of a beautiful whole that once deceived the senses with the false appearance of totality. Indeed, it illustrates almost to perfection his famous formulation that what emerges in the Baroque aesthetics of vanity is the *facies hippocratica* of history.¹⁵ Like the ruins of ancient buildings that once

14. See Froldi (338); López Fonseca (288). The concept of the *tragedia morata* originally derives from Aristotle's *Poetics* (1453a), which distinguishes between the perfect tragedy (based on *hamartia*, an involuntary error or frailty in the hero, evoking pity and fear) and an inferior kind of tragedy showing the downfall of the utter villain, and hence satisfying the spectator's moral sense, but not evoking real tragic emotion. Golden Age *preceptistas* such as López Pinciano (epistle 9) took up the Aristotelian distinction between the *tragedia pathetica* and the *tragedia morata* but reversed the ancient philosopher's evaluation of the two tragic paradigms, as it were, favoring moral tragedy.

15. “Während im Symbol mit der Verklärung des Unterganges das transfigurierte Antlitz der Natur im Lichte der Erlösung flüchtig sich offenbart, liegt in der Allegorie die *facies hippocratica* der Geschichte als erstarrte Urlandschaft dem Betrachter vor Augen. Die Geschichte in allem was sie Unzeitiges, Leidvolles, Verfehltes von Beginn an hat, prägt sich in einem Antlitz – nein in einem Totenkopf aus” (*Gesammelte* 1.1, 343). [“Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the

stood tall and great but now lie fragmented in pieces, the mutilated human body exhibits the merciless passing of time and the inevitable withering of the phenomena of the natural and historical world, revealing the essential violence of historical existence.

Readers or spectators familiar with the Greek myth of Thyestes, who was unwittingly made to devour his own sons, killed and cooked by their uncle, Atrous, as revenge for Thyestes's seduction of his wife, instinctively freeze when Almanzor invites Gonzalo Bustos to dinner ("Yo quiero darte hoy mi mesa, / y que seas mi convidado, / donde seras avisado / del fin de toda essa empresa" *Infantes* 1.311–14),¹⁶ and their misgivings certainly appear to be confirmed when, during dinner conversation, the king asks if Gonzalo Bustos "liked the stew" ("Bueno á estado este guisado. / ¿Hate dado gusto, Bustos?" 2.132–33). Moments before, Gonzalo Bustos has related how he worries about his sons, and the king has asked if he would like to have them brought before him, making an enigmatic remark about necromancy:

- ALMANZ. ¿No te congoja ni pena
otra cosa en este estado?
- G. BUST. Mis hijos me dan cuidado
más que mi dura cadena.
- ALMANZ. Si es eso tan importante
¿recibiras gran placer
si te los hago traer
a todos siete delante?
- G. BUST. A ser aqueso posible,
me fuera sumo remedio.
- ALMANZ. Si a ti te puede ser medio,
no es cosa tan imposible.
- G. BUST. ¿Por qué arte o por qué vía
puedes hacer tal hazaña?
- ALMANZ. No usaré de arte extraña
si uso de nigromancia.

observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather, a death's head" *Origin* 166.]

16. The most influential version of the story is Seneca's *Thyestes*, dating from 62 AD, a possible inspiration for Cueva (Morby, "Influence"; Frolidi; López Fonseca).

Bueno á estado este guisado.
 ¿Hate dado gusto, Bustos? (2.116–33)

However, although Cueva here obviously plays with his—(partly) erudite (Shergold)—audience’s expectations, his “inhuman” Almanzor (1.30) turns out to be, if not exactly “piadoso” (1.329), then at least not as cruel as his contemporary, Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, who actually does serve his enemy Tamora her own two sons baked in a pie as revenge for their rape and mutilation of his daughter, Lavinia.¹⁷ Cueva’s king “merely” presents his guest with the severed heads of his seven sons and their tutor at the dinner table, expressing a sadistic delight (“Recibiré gran placer”) in the absurd identification scene:

ALMANZ. Han muerto muchos cristianos,
 y hanme del robo escogido
 ocho cabezas, traído
 de ocho fuertes castellanos.
 Recibiré gran placer
 que puestas delante ti,
 me vayas diciendo aquí
 quién son a tu parecer. (2.56–63)

Recognizing his sons, Gonzalo Bustos throws himself into an extremely eloquent, but also highly stylized lament occupying 58 verses in total and regimented at the outset by a striking use of anaphora. Repeating the interrogative adverb “where?” at the head of five out of six consecutive verses (“¿Dó . . . ?” “¿Dó . . . ?” “¿dó . . . ?” “¿Dó . . . ?” “¿Dó . . . ?”), Gonzalo’s lament emphasizes the absence of the seven *infantes*; the extinction of their valor; the nullity of their heroic deeds; and the nonexistence of their famous military skills:

G. BUST. Rey, ya he visto mi fortuna
 y mis últimos desgustos.
 Mis hijos son los que veo,
 los siete Infantes de Lara;

17. See *Titus Andronicus* (written between 1588 and 1593) act 5, scene 3.

ya veo mi muerte clara,
 que es el premio que deseo.
 Hijos, luz del alma mía,
 honor y espanto del mundo,
 ¿dó el valor vuestro en quien fundo
 el prez de la valentía?
 ¿Dó vuestros famosos hechos?
 Hijos, ¿dó vuestras hazañas?
 ¿Dó las belicosas mañas?
 ¿Dó los invencibles pechos? (*Infantes* 2.186–99)

As the emphatic use of interrogatives strongly suggests (“¿Qué . . . ?” “¿Qué . . . ?” “¿Quién . . . ?” “¿Qué . . . ?” “¿Quién . . . ?” “¿Quién . . . ?” “¿Cuál . . . ?” “¿Qué . . . ?” 2.200–43), the lament is dominated by an indignant, inquiring mode. In his soliloquy, Gonzalo Bustos reveals himself as a skilled rhetorician who exploits the ancient elegiac *ubi sunt* motive with great effect—more recently exploited by Jorge Manrique in *Coplas por la muerte de su padre* (1476)—directing his words first to the seven *infantes* and then to Nuño Salido, their tutor.¹⁸ Like Manrique’s coplas, the noble father’s lament oozes with loss and desperation, yet it also has an uncanny or even creepy feel to it, as for example when Gonzalo asks the dead tutor to “move his cold tongue” and tell him what happened: “Y tú, Ayo, amparo y guía / de mis hijos, dame cuenta / de esta dolorosa afrenta, / mueve aquesa lengua fría” (2.224–27). Here, the cadaveric presence of the deceased intrudes on the beautiful lament, and one cannot help but wonder if, at this point, a contemporary actor playing the part of Gonzalo Bustos would have taken the head into his hand and melancholically beheld it, like Hamlet in the famous Yorick scene.¹⁹

Indeed, the banquet scene can be seen as an excellent example of the merciless and even sadistic scattering of the beautiful physis in *dissecta membra*, highlighted by Walter Benjamin as a central characteristic of the mourning play’s aesthetics of vanity. Far from indicating a clumsy disfiguration of classicist tragic genre conventions or lack of understanding of plot

18. See Manrique 95–111, especially copla 16: “¿Qué se hizo el rey don Juan / Los infantes de Aragón, / ¿que se hicieron? / ¿Qué fue de tanto galán? / ¿Qué de tanta invención / como trajeron?” (95).

19. For a less enthusiastic reading of this scene, see Cavalho (98–99).

dynamics, the fact that Cueva chose to have his *infantes* dead before the play begins can thus be seen as a generic marker placing *Infantes* firmly in the category of the mourning play. Neither a tragedy in the classicist tradition nor a historical *comedia* of the Lopean mold, it is a play concerned primarily with unideal, broken, amputated history; with history as a death's head.

The Third Act

The play's obsession with history as absence is confirmed when we turn to the second of the three elements that I set out to discuss in more detail: the interludic third act, discarded by Menéndez Pidal as "inútil para la acción" (124). By "interludic" I am referring especially to the songlike composition of its first part, in which the *romancero*-inspired exclamation "El alma en fuego, el cuerpo en dura ausencia," describing Zayda's mental and physical suffering upon the departure of her lover, recurs again and again as a kind of refrain reminding the audience of the play's lyrical source (in fact, the first part of the act reads as an incantation accompanying the occult ritual which the two women perform), but certainly also sounding its main theme of absence.

At first glance, the transition from the eight severed heads at the king's banquet in the second act to a lover's complaint in the women's quarters in the third act appears abrupt indeed, and one feels tempted to agree with Menéndez Pelayo that the third act seems to be out of place. Yet, remembering Edward Friedman's idea about the conceptual nature of Cervantes's drama (33–38) and Harry Sieber's demonstration of the dramatic unity of *Infantes*, the act depicting Zayda's lament at the departure of her lover and the lovers' sentimental leave-taking can be seen as a variation on the play's central concept of absence. Interpreted this way, the action of the romantic subplot becomes key in the total structure of *Infantes* as an inverted parallelism to the serious or heroic action of the main plot, a construction similar to the one found in many later Golden Age serious *comedias*.²⁰

Thus, the third act's romantically conceived idea of absence (the absence of the lover; the physical separation of Zayda and Gonzalo Bustos) does not contradict, but on the contrary complements the second act's heroically

20. See also Alexander Parker's global set of characteristics of the Spanish *comedia* (355).

conceived idea of absence (the absence of valor and strength). Taken together, these different ideas of absence reveal the mourning play's characteristic emphasis on history as absence—a point which is supported, on one hand, by the fatalistic framing of the king's banquet through Viara's melancholic meditation on the vagaries of fortune and, on the other hand, by Zayda's paradoxical or antithetical rhetoric:

ZAYDA Una eterna memoria
 me consume la vida,
 que poco á poco va desfalleciendo,
 prometiendo vitoria
 de mi pena encendida
 al duro amor, por quien estoy muriendo.
 Estoyme deshaciendo
 cual la cera en el fuego, al sol la nieve,
 en el tenaz cuidado
 que nunca veo apartado
 de mi, ni se verá, aunque amor me pruebe
 poniendo su violencia
 el alma en fuego, el cuerpo en dura ausencia.
 . . .
 ¡Ay amor! ¡Ay amores!
 ¡Ay dulce fuego! ¡Ay amargo afeto!
 ¡Ay vida envuelta en muerte!
 ¡Ay enemiga suerte!
 ¡Ay bien contrario! ¡Ay suave aprieto!
 que pone tu potencia
 El alma en fuego, el cuerpo en dura ausencia! (Cueva 3.1–26)

In order to circumscribe the play's central concept of absence, Zayda's romantic lament explores the paradoxical, eroticoreligious language of the *romancero*, the *novelas sentimentales* and mystic poetry.²¹ Indeed, a conception of the body (and, by analogy, the physical and temporal world) as a

21. See, for example, the "Romance del enamorado y la muerte" tradition, originating in the homonymous poem by Juan de Encina or the *Cárcel de amor* by Diego de San Pedro (1492). In terms of mystic poetry, I am thinking of poems such as Santa Teresa de Ávila's "Vivo sin vivir en mí," but also of her famously erotic description of her vision of an angel penetrating her heart with a spear in *Vida*, chapter 29.

somber recluse from which the love-struck soul longs to escape in order to join her beloved pervades the entire act. When Gonzalo Bustos shows up to take his leave, the lovers perform a kind of sad duet replete with burning hearts, pale faces, captive eyes, pain, sorrow, and confusion. However, in the midst of their plaint, Zayda and Gonzalo also manage to make a few practical arrangements regarding their unborn son, the bastard child who will eventually set things right.

Thus, Menéndez Pelayo's critique of the third act of *Infantes* misses the point on more levels. First of all, the birth of Mudarra—the boy who will bring the play to its “happy,” or at least morally satisfying, dénouement—at the end of the third act obviously contradicts his idea that the act is useless in terms of action. However, more importantly, as I am arguing here, the third act is key in underscoring the play's central concept of absence as a simultaneously secular and metaphysical concept applicable equally to the particular events of history (where one or more persons are absent) and to history itself, in theological-philosophical terms (where the divine is absent). In this sense, like the severed heads of the *infantes*, the interludic third act is key to the mourning play interpretation of *Infantes*.

The Theme of Historiography

Cueva's choice of killing off his eponymous seven *infantes* before the action of his play begins is strange indeed and has few, if any, parallels in contemporary (or later) European drama that I can think of. In comparison, Lope begins his *Mudarra* play with the party at which Doña Lambra took offense at the behavior of her nephew, Diego Bustos, presenting onstage the same occurrences which Cueva relegated to his prose “Argumento de la tragedia.” Strange as it is, Cueva's choice certainly calls for interpretation and, as already intimated, I believe that it can be productively approached as a mourning play element. Indeed, in the light of the Benjaminian mourning play's poetics of vanity and general preoccupation with history as absence—of the divine; of meaning in any positive sense of the term—the conspicuous nonpresence or indeed nonexistence of the very characters which most spectators and readers would assume to be the play's protagonists points rather unmistakably to an underlying conception of the heroic past as something which is not alive anymore: as something that is irretrievably past and therefore, essentially, an object that pertains to the sphere of

historiography in its different guises (*Origin* 62–64). Thus, in various scenes of the play, we find explicit mention of both *memoria* and *historia* as different but kindred means of keeping the past alive, both of which are, of course, based on a recognition of the pastness of the past and the need to “renovar la fama . . . a las memorias de las gentes,” as stated by Lope de Vega in the dedication to the history play *La campana de Aragón* (Case 203–04).²² This quite insistent thematization of historical representation is the third and last mourning play element of *Infantes* that I will discuss.

The play opens with a historiographical account or, more precisely, with Almanzor’s demand that Viara and Galve orally relate the details of the battle in which the seven *infantes* of Lara were killed (“os pido / valientes capitanes, que al momento / me deis razón de todo / recitándome el modo / de tan heroico y alto vencimiento” 1.35–39), although he has already read about it in letters from the front. Faced with this demand, the captains make quite an impressive array of reservations vis-à-vis the challenging task of recounting a battle of such epic proportions:

Querer, gran Almanzor, hacer memoria
 tan por estenso de la horrible guerra . . .
 pide no ingenio de la humilde tierra
 . . .
 a él el recitártelo le obliga [a Galve],
 que tiene el alto impero
 de la sacra elocuencia
 . . .
 ¿Por dónde, ¡o excelso rey! podré contarte
 la total destrucción de los de Lara
 que sea darte gusto y no cansarte . . . ?
 . . .
 Que por Alá te juro que no hay arte
 ni facundia que pueda hacer clara
 tal hazaña, que tiembla mi memoria

22. It lies outside the scope of this article to discuss Cueva’s interesting conflation—in his dramatic historiography of the House of Lara as well as in other plays on medieval history—of popular, *romancero*-based *memoria* and erudite, chronicle-based *historia*. The lack of differentiation between *memoria* and *historia*, typical of the period, has received attention by scholars such as Bruce Wardropper and, more recently, Geraldine Coates.

contártela[.] (1.43–46, 1.53–55, 1.71–73, 1.75–78)

Thus, from the outset Cueva's play recognizes the "use and abuse of history" (Lauer) that is the necessary companion of historical representation—historical stagings perhaps in particular. However, after passing the buck back and forth, making excuses and conventional gestures of humility, the two captains finally manage to comply with their master's demand as Galve "que tiene el alto impero / de la sacra elocuencia" steps into the role of royal chronicler:

GALVE Después que tu estandarte enarbolamos
 con prosperos agüeros consultados,
 y por tu orden bélica marchamos
 para el lugar do fuimos aprestados,
 sobre Almenara un claro día llegamos
 do estaban los contrarios alojados
 a poco trecho, y luego que nos vieron
 se armaron y su campo dividieron.
 . . .
 Pusimos diez mil moros en celada,
 y el ganado dejamos salir fuera;
 los infantes, guardando la orden dada,
 con doscientos alzaron su bandera,
 y deseosos de esta cabalgada,
 sin recelar la muerte horrible y fiera,
 que les podía venir, lo recogían
 y en orden a su campo se volvían.
 . . .
 De nueva ira todos incitados,
 de ver el gran destrozo que hacían,
 arremitimos fieros, denodados,
 a los seis, que a diez mil se defendían.
 Mas ellos ya sin armas y cansados
 a nuestra gran pujanza se rendían.
 Prendimos los y al punto les quitamos
 las cabezas, gran rey, que te enviamos. (1.79–142)

Though history is here—as always—written by the victor, the valor of the *infantes* is underscored again and again, both by the captains

¿Quién te podrá contar la valentía
 de los Infantes y su ayo fiero?
 ¿Quién las muertes que dieron aquel día?
 ¿Quién el valor de tanto caballero? (1.111–14)

and by King Almanzor himself:

Rara virtud y heroica valentía,
 hazaña digna de inmortal memoria,
 que esculpida estará en el alma mía
 . . .
 ¡O jóvenes gloriosos! ¿Quién sería
 el que no os dé, aunque muertos, la victoria
 a todos, que la vida habéis rendido
 y eterna gloria y nombre conseguido? (1.167–74)

Yet what interests me here is less the strikingly hyperbolic celebration of the adversary's worth (a convention in Spanish Golden Age literature, but probably also reflecting the author's patriotism) than the scene's emphatic articulation of a desire to preserve this worth, "digna de inmortal memoria" and "eterna gloria y nombre"—a desire which *Infantes* itself, in its capacity as historical drama, clearly also harbors. This also points once again to a pervading conception of history as absence; as something which has been cut off from the present like the *infantes*' heads have been cut off from their torsos; and as something which is therefore always beheld in retrospect and with a certain air of nostalgia.²³

An array of other passages, including, of course, the chronicle-like summaries or "argumentos" preceding each of the four acts, add to the detached,

23. One of the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript encouraged reflection on which concrete contemporaneous events might have prompted Cueva's sense of history as absence and nostalgia for the past, proposing the beginning of the war in Holland and Sir Francis Drake's capture of the ship *Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion* and attack on the port of El Callao, which demonstrated the vulnerability of the Viceroyalty of Peru. Both historical events indeed symbolize the same dismemberment performed within the *Infantes*, since they both potentially threatened to sever two parts (Holland and Peru) from Spain's imperial body. I would like to thank the insightful reviewer for this interesting suggestion, which nicely complements the more abstract Benjaminian ideas about secular historical experience pursued here.

historiographical feel of *Infantes*.²⁴ For example, following Galve's description of the battle and the death of the *infantes*, Almanzor sends for Gonzalo Bustos and reveals his brother-in-law's malignant scheme to him—not by way of a simple oral narration but by reading Ruy Velázquez's letter to him. Again, the play appears to underscore the indirect nature, as it were, of history, which is never present but always mediated, always framed, always contained within someone's discourse, written, read, related. Indeed, in this opening part of the play, there is a notable insistence on what may be termed the hermeneutics of historical understanding and the intricacies of historical representation: the letters sent to Almanzor from the front; the captains' scruples; Galve's oral account; Ruy Velázquez's letter. The fact that Cueva should choose to open his historical drama with an act which so insistently thematizes the pastness of the heroic past and the pertaining problem of historical representation, supports a mourning play interpretation of *Infantes* as a play concerned not so much with this or that historical person or event as with—unideal, broken, amputated—history itself.

Death Mask

Yet is mourning the completely dominant mode of the play? Throughout most of his study, Walter Benjamin presents the mourning play dramatist as someone who, in a state of mourning, violently negates the value of the historical world and aggressively destroys its beauty. Indeed, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* largely presents the mourning play's contemplation of history as a disillusioning X-ray gaze which mercilessly reveals the absence of the divine and, hence, of meaning from historical existence. However, as Benjamin makes clear near the end of his book, the accompaniment of this mordant historical vision is in fact a reinterpretation of history, an attempt to realign history and meaning through the medium of dramatic art. There is a link here, of course, with Benjamin's essay "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" ["On the Concept of History"] with its famous image of the "angel of history" who returns to the past in order to heal it, to undo all the suffering

24. Viara's monologue in act 2, scene 1 (1–63) is also an important case in point. Though it does not thematize historiography or the intricacies of historical understanding, it underscores the passing of time and the vagaries of fortune by touching on related themes such as time, vanity, and the apparent meaninglessness of historical existence.

and violence of the broken historical world (Benjamin, *Gesammelte* 1.2, 697; *Selected Writings* 392). With his return to the amputated corpses of the *infantes*, Cueva the mourning play dramatist can be seen as just such a Benjaminian angel of history who redeems the past by recreating it anew in his play and giving it a happy ending—or at least a somewhat happy ending.

As the example of Cueva's play demonstrates, like its German kin, the Spanish mourning play unmistakably underscores history as absence on various aesthetic levels, but it does not stop there to communicate an entirely negative historical vision. *Infantes* ends on a semipositive note, as the living bastard son assumes his birthright and takes the place of his dead half-brothers, claiming his lineage ("Claros Infantes, cuya valentía / en la inmortalidad escrita veo, / recibí esta venganza, que declara / que nació del valor de los de Lara" [4.517–20]). At the end of the play, the agents of evil, Ruy Velázquez and Doña Lambra, are dead, and with Mudarra, a new branch of the Lara family tree may begin to prosper. After all, the death's head of history thus appears to harbor the promise of a new beginning for the noble Castilian house, even if this promise lies significantly outside the scope of the drama.

Thus, in the end, after insistently and systematically underscoring history as absence in the course of the first three acts, in the fourth and final "revenge act," Cueva—like another conscientious angel of history—undertakes a reconfiguration of the historical world, infusing it with a (however hypothetical) new meaning. Correspondingly, in Benjamin's interpretation, the mourning play is ultimately governed not so much by sheer negativity as by negative theology and the utopian promise of a new beginning (*Origin* 232). If we follow the argument of *Ursprung* all the way through to the last three pages, the negativity that mourning plays exude is not their final message. In his darkest and most melancholic hour, the mourning play dramatist turns his disenchanted gaze on his own negative historical narrative and acknowledges its "neurotic," arrogant, self-deluding nature (*Origin* 232). He then metamorphoses into an angel of history. Like someone who wakes up after a long and terrible nightmare, he realizes that his task is not to submerge himself in the dreariness and hopelessness of historical existence, but rather to show that although history may appear to be bereft of meaning, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Standing in the middle of a presence marred by meaningless suffering and violence, it can be difficult to grasp the larger perspective, the larger pattern or, in short, the meaning of it all. But this is

where the mourning play dramatist steps in, relating history to grace through the sense-making medium of dramatic art.

In the end, the mourning play aesthetics of vanity described by Benjamin in *Ursprung* thus turns out to be not a tragic—pagan—phenomenon but a Christian art form, preoccupied with the relation between history and metaphysical meaning (*Origin* 220). In this sense, and this sense only, can *Infantes* be seen as the preparation for Lope's dramatic historiography, namely as testimony to the upsurge in Spain of a historical experience that was the basis of the emergence of historical drama as a *facies hippocratica* capturing the decaying features of moribund history.

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