

## ABSTRACT

### Theatrical Renovation and Social Criticism in the Post-War Plays of Enrique Jardiel Poncela

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Literary critics have long recognized Enrique Jardiel Poncela (1901-1952) as a precursor to the Theater of the Absurd, but many discount his works, asserting that they provide nothing more than ridiculous word games and hilarious character types. Critics have not concentrated on the satirical and existential elements present beneath the seemingly-innocent façade of the nonsensical. Two of his productions in particular, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (1941), provide harsh criticism of the postwar existence, although Spanish critics have never acknowledged the connections. This work fills in the gaps left by most contemporary scholars. Whether or not intentional on the part of the playwright, these two plays subtly blame the Franco regime for the confusion and devastation which followed the outbreak of the Civil War (1936-1939). My research focuses on Jardiel's theatrical conceptions and analysis of these plays and their social implications.

Theatrical Renovation and Social Criticism  
in the Post-War Plays of Enrique Jardiel Poncela

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Modern Foreign Languages

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## PREFACE

I first became interested in Enrique Jardiel Poncela's work during my undergraduate career, as part of an independent study course under the supervision of Dr. Paul Larson. During the fall of 2004, I translated one of Jardiel's most well-known plays, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*. Fascinated by the witty word games and comedic character types in this play, I focused mainly upon accurately conveying his unique humor in my translation. I revisited Jardiel's theatrical works in the fall of 2005, while taking Dr. Frieda Blackwell's course on Spanish Poetry and Drama of the Twentieth Century, in which we studied *Una noche de primavera sin sueño*. By this time, I began to appreciate Jardiel's work for more than its entertainment value and began to ponder the possibility that there was more behind the extreme hilarity which characterizes his theatrical pieces. I explored the idea of a latent social critique in *Eloísa* as part of my presentation at the South Central Modern Language Association conference in October 2005. While preparing for the conference, I noticed a general lack of critical information available on his works, as American scholars have yet to study in depth Jardiel Poncela's contribution to contemporary Spanish theater. I realized that to understand Jardiel and his work fully, I would need to gain access to such information, not to mention his works themselves.

I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship by an anonymous donor which enabled me to continue my research abroad. In May 2006 I traveled to Spain in order to conduct my thesis research at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid. This library houses an extensive collection of Jardiel's works – including original plays and novels, and also

copies of *Buen Humor*, the humoristic journal to which he regularly contributed. I also had access to numerous studies on his theatrical tendencies and critical information from both his contemporaries and current scholars of his work. I also began to explore the issue of censorship in post-Civil War Spain and its effect upon Jardiel's technique and career. All in all, this experience was invaluable to my understanding of Jardiel's works; I found that it stimulated my interest in the subject even more.

One additional experience greatly contributed to my knowledge of Jardiel's work. In January 2007, the Baylor Theater Department performed a reading of the translation of *Eloísa*, under the supervision of Dr. DeAnna Toten-Beard. Hearing, rather than just reading the words I had translated, I finally understood the attraction that Spanish audiences had to his works. Thus, I benefited greatly by being able to experience another dimension of Jardiel's theater, hearing the text through the voices of the actors rather than just through words on a page.

I feel that these experiences enriched the quality of my thesis and gave me a deeper understanding of Jardiel Poncela's theater as well as its connection to his society and its continuing appeal to audiences today.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Enrique Jardiel Poncela: The Man and His Times

“La verdad es siempre inverosímil”

Enrique Jardiel Poncela

Enrique Jardiel Poncela (1901-1952), a prominent humorist in Spain during the first half of the century, formed part of a literary group dubbed “The Other Generation of 1927.” This second group included celebrated humorists of his day, such as Miguel Mihura, Edgar Neville, and Antonio de Lara (“El Tono”), which made significant contributions to the renovation of the theater as well as contemporary cinema. The group got its start writing for Spain’s humorous journal entitled *Buen Humor* (1921-1931), a publication that included both cartoons and prose. Jardiel Poncela’s first important drama, *Una noche de primavera sin sueño*, premiered in 1927 and received critical acclaim as well as did his first novel, *Pero hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes* (1931). He continued writing both novels and plays until his death in 1952, also spending a great deal of time in Hollywood in the 1930s. Although Jardiel established himself as a novelist, dramatist, screenwriter, and inventor, he is most celebrated for his contributions to contemporary theater. Critics have yet to study in depth the social satire and existential elements present beneath the seemingly-innocent façade of the nonsensical. Two of his post-war productions in particular, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (1941), provide subtle criticism of life in post-war Spain, although Spanish critics have never acknowledged the connections.



In order to understand fully the body of work produced by this playwright, one must first examine his background and early experience. In the introductions to his published novels and plays, Enrique Jardiel Poncela provides many hints to his upbringing and literary influences. The prologue to his first novel, *Amor se escribe sin hache*, provides a brief autobiographical sketch of his early years. However, his anecdotes and self-descriptions were intended to entertain, rather than inform, the reader. The prologues which accompany his subsequent novels and collections of plays vary stylistically, from highly organized lists to self-interviews and personal accounts. Jardiel Poncela presented his personal history in a humorous light, resulting in a somewhat fragmented and distorted account of his life. Jardiel long intended to collect his memoirs, titled *Sinfonía en mí*, but never completed the work due to prolonged illness toward the end of his life. In reality, he was an intensely private man, whose intentions in writing were to emphasize his greatest passion: the renovation of contemporary Spanish theater. Only recently have biographers, including his daughter Evangelina Jardiel Poncela, pieced together the real man behind the façade of a successful writer.<sup>1</sup>

Born to Enrique Jardiel and Marcelina Poncela on October 15, 1901, his artistic parents shaped Enrique's interests at a young age. In his prologue to *Amor se escribe sin hache*, Jardiel refers to his upbringing in Madrid as “esencialmente artístico e intelectual,” and adds that “en fuerza de convivir con la intelectualidad y con el arte, he aprendido a no concederles importancia” (75). His father, an active member of the Socialist party, was a respected journalist for several newspapers, including *La Nación*

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<sup>1</sup>The following sources to offer the most complete biographical information on Jardiel Poncela's early years: Bonet Gelabert, Juan, *Jardiel Poncela: el discutido indiscutible*; Jardiel Poncela, Evangelina *Enrique Jardiel Poncela: mi padre*; and McKay, Douglas *Enrique Jardiel Poncela*.

and *La Correspondencia de España*. He eventually became a court reporter for the Congreso de los Diputados. When Poncela was nine, he began to accompany his father to sessions of the legislature, and through these experiences he developed a fascination for writing, which explains, in part, his fascination with literary myths and motifs, whether that be Shakespeare, Zorilla, or Goethe. At a young age he often accompanied his mother, a painter educated in the Real Escuela de Bellas Artes, to art museums and claimed that by the age of seven “sabía distinguir de una ojeda a Rubens de Teniers y al Greco de Ribera” (76).

In fact, Jardiel began drawing caricatures before he learned how to write. At the age of eleven he completed his first novel, a historical romance entitled *Monsalud de Brievas*. Although Marcelina encouraged his creativity, she destroyed a majority of his earliest works. Jardiel continued to produce poetry and plays secretly throughout his childhood years under a sort of censorship his mother enforced in their household. Her sudden death in 1917 deeply affected Jardiel Poncela for the rest of his life, as her memory shaped Jardiel’s literary production and eventually his political affiliation (*Mi padre* 34).

Of his early education in the Institución de Libre Enseñaza, Sociedad Francesa and Los Padres Escolapios de San Antonio Abad, Jardiel states that “la mezcla no pudo resultar más explosiva” (*Amor* 77). Rather uninterested in his studies, Jardiel immersed himself instead in the world of literature. An avid reader even in childhood, he read such varied authors as Aristophanes, Jules Verne, Lope de Vega, Conan Doyle, Ovid, and Lord Byron (80). After completing two years of study at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, he decided to pursue a career in journalism. He concurrently held positions as a

reporter for *La acción* and also as a desk clerk at his father's newspaper, *La correspondencia de España*. In 1922, the latter began printing in installments his first novel, *El plano astral*.

Also during this time Jardiel Poncela began collaborating with a neighbor, Serafín Adame Martínez, and from 1916 to 1926 the duo wrote and occasionally produced their original plays in small venues. The most notable theatrical production resulting from this collaboration was *El Príncipe Raudhick*, a four-act farce that was mildly successful in Bilbao's Trueba Theater. These collaborative efforts, which Jardiel later called "los cuentos odiosos, las novelas putrefactas y los versos presidiabiles" (*Amor* 76) bear no resemblance to his later style. When he became involved in the weekly magazine, *Buen humor* in 1922, he began to disregard the "light romantic inclinations of his earlier writings" in favor of the "strong vein of humor" which characterized his later works (McKay 101). For the next ten years (1921-1931), *Buen Humor* provided a creative outlet not only for Jardiel Poncela, but also humorists such as Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Edgar Neville, K-Hito, and José López Rubio, who would eventually constitute "The Other Generation of 1927." His connections with these humorists and their regular tertulias at the Granja del Henar café in downtown Madrid further refined his views on comedic theater. Their collective influence on Spanish theatrical conventions will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

After the rupture of his artistic relationship with Serafín Adame Martínez in 1926, Jardiel began working alone on a play he entitled *Una noche de primavera sin sueño*. When it debuted in May 1927, Poncela became a household name almost over night, although by the time this production premiered he had actually authored sixty-four plays

(McKay 28). *Una noche de primavera sin sueño*, a parody on William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, depicts a late-night dispute between a young married couple, Mariano and Alejandra. Mariano storms out of the house, promising to file for divorce the following day. Immediately after his departure a handsome stranger, Valentín, appears through the open balcony window. Valentín, who refuses to leave, engages Alejandra in conversation all night. When Mariano reappears the next day, prepared to begin divorce proceedings, he discovers Valentín's presence and immediately doubts Alejandra's fidelity. In his fit of passion, he threatens to kill the intruder, which has an interesting affect upon Alejandra: she believes Mariano's response to be an expression of true love, and thus decides to stay in the marriage. After the couple reconciles, Mariano reveals that Valentín is an old friend, and the episode was pre-arranged to enable the husband to win back his wife's affections. Love was a popular theme in Jardiel Poncela's works, in this case "amor reconquistado por un truco" (Marquerie 73). Alfredo Marquerie, a theater critic from Madrid later wrote about this production: "Lo que en *Una noche de primavera sin sueño* inicia y apunta e insinúa se confirmará, ratificará, y ampliará en el resto de la producción escénico jardieleasca" (72). This first successful play displayed the most salient features of Jardiel's later work.

Unfortunately, Jardiel Poncela's next theatrical endeavor, *El cadáver de Señor García* (1930), did not receive accolades from critics, who called the production a "fracaso rotundo" (Fernández 29). Douglas McKay characterizes the play as a "bewildering maze of absurdities" with "exaggerated surprises" (34). This work deals with the discovery of the corpse of Señor García, who apparently killed himself upon finding his true love with another man. Eventually the audience discovers that Señor

García mistakenly walked in on the wedding celebration of an unknown couple. As the curtain falls, the audience discovers that the protagonist had not committed suicide; rather, he suffered from a fainting spell. The farce received only negative attention, the most serious accusation being that of treating death irreverently. Spanish audiences and reviewers fell into two parties: ‘jardielistas’ and ‘antijardielistas’, and hence began Jardiel’s life-long conflict with Spanish theatrical critics, with the notable exception of Alfredo Marquerié (McKay 34). Although this production failed commercially, *El cadáver del señor García* does contain elements which later became distinctive of his personal style, including “la ocupación física del espacio, [. . .] la apariencia física [. . .] la acción mediante un constante ir y venir, hablar y gritar, aparecer y desaparecer” (OC I 298). In other words, he has already begun working on his “teatro de lo inverosímil,” to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

In the wake of such a theatrical disaster, Jardiel Poncela waited a year before producing another play, *Margarita, Armando y su padre*, a humorous adaptation of Alexandre Dumas’ *La dame aux camélias*. Margarita and Armando meet and fall passionately in love and make plans to run away together after Armando receives his inheritance. Armando’s father secretly opposes the match and he removes all obstacles from the relationship, hoping that the couple will decide to split on their own. Just as expected, Margarita and Armando end their torrid love affair after growing bored with one another. Although critics heralded the play as “magnificent” (Grano de Oro 299), Jardiel himself was not pleased with the work, later calling it a “facile, insincere comedy” (OC I 305). The traditional structure of *Margarita, Armando y su padre*, lacks many of the stylistic qualities that characterize Jardiel’s subsequent works. Although theater

critics and publics were still willing to sit through a conventional romantic comedy, Jardiel was bored by the results.

Jardiel Poncela then began working on a theatrical adaptation of his third novel, *Pero...¿hubo alguna vez once mil virgines?*, a novel constructed upon the don Juan myth. The result, *Usted tiene ojos de mujer fatal*, premiered in Valencian theaters in 1932 and in Madrid the following year. A group of potential heirs hire Sergio Hernán, a modern-day don Juan, to seduce the fiancée of their millionaire relative. In a twist of fate, the two have met before: she is the only woman with whom Sergio ever fell in love. After discovering that their relationship was staged, she leaves and Sergio then falls into a deep depression. In the final act, she returns, touched by Sergio's delicate state, finally convinced that he truly loves her. *Usted tiene ojos de mujer fatal* was a record-breaking success; it was performed more than one-thousand times in various theaters around the country. Although proud of his work, Jardiel later noted that this play “no perteneció a su teatro renovado,” but it did show signs of the intense parody and satire that would mark his future productions (Grano de Oro 299). By parodying the don Juan myth, prevalent in Spanish literature, Poncela wrote against the grain, so to speak.

Following the extreme popularity of *Usted tiene ojos de mujer fatal*, Jardiel Poncela received a job offer from Fox Studios in Hollywood. Between 1932 and 1935, he worked alongside José López Rubio and Edgar Neville as a screenwriter in the “Departamento de Producciones en Castellano” (*Mi padre* 91), where he adapted screenplays of American movies into Spanish. In 1934, the *New York Herald Times* called Jardiel “uno de los auténticos valores españoles y de los más importantes hoy día. Un gran suceso que brilla con luz propia y auténtica (119). During this time he also

reworked one of his own plays, *Angelina, o El honor de un brigadier*, into a full-length film and supervised its filming in 1935. He established himself as a trendsetter in the field of cinematography as well with his innovative series of short films, entitled *Celuloide rancio*, in which he combined old film reels with humorous audio commentary (McKay 18).

Upon his return to Madrid in 1935, Jardiel immediately resumed his theatrical production and *Las cinco advertencias de Satanás* premiered shortly thereafter. One rainy night, Félix, an aging don Juan figure, is visited by the diabolical figure, Leonardo, who presents him with five predictions, which will lead to his future unhappiness. To his own surprise, Félix soon meets a young woman, Coral, and the two fall passionately in love. After learning that she is, in fact, the product of a previous love affair, he repents of his feelings and sends her into the arms of his rival, thus fulfilling all five of Satan's warnings. The work displays Jardiel's cynicism and disenchantment with love and marriage, which he later expounds upon in *Máximas mínimas*, a collection of aphorisms on theatrical production, love, and the human existence.

*Morirse es error*, an adaptation of a story that first appeared in the pages of *Gutiérrez* in 1932, debuted in the theaters of Madrid in the months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. When the play resumed production in late 1938, Jardiel renamed the work because of its reference to death in the midst of the Spanish Civil War. *Cuatro corazones con freno y una marcha atrás* soon became a success both in the eyes of the public and the playwright himself, who regarded the work as “[una] obra excepcional en su género [...] y de tan alta calidad con respeto a la restante producción cómica contemporánea” (Grano de Oro 303). The play begins in 1860 when Dr. Bremón

discovers a salt solution which stops the aging process and he invites three friends, Valentina, Hortensia, and Ricardo, to enjoy immortality with him. After sixty years, the initial promises of wealth and eternal beauty no longer appease them; instead they suffer from boredom, angst, and frustration. Dr. Bremón then discovers another salt which reverses the effects of their self-imposed immortality; the four will continually grow younger until they finally disappear. Francisco Javier Díaz de Castro labels this work “la más vanguardista y la más genuina de sus piezas inverosímiles” (41). Although profound in its satire of immortality and the human existence, *Cuatro corazones con freno y una marcha atrás* features a light, playful tone and hilarious situations resulting from the work’s inversion of both social and chronological order.

After being detained by Republican officials and fearing for his personal safety, Jardiel spent a brief time in San Sebastian before temporarily relocating to Buenos Aires between 1937 and 1939. During his period, he continued his literary production and enjoyed celebrity status in Latin America, saying “mi éxito aquí ha sido fulminante” (*Mi padre* 132). The three works which Jardiel Poncela produced in the months immediately following his return to Spain, *Un marido de ida y vuelta* (1939), *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (1941) are widely considered among his best productions, each displaying characteristics of his final stylistic preferences.

*Un marido de ida y vuelta* appeared two years before Noel Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*, and its striking similarities prompted Jardiel to say later, “In my time no writer has been more and more shamefully plagiarized than I” (quoted McKay 55). In the original version, two friends, Pepe and Paco, attend a costume party, where Pepe presents the



hypothetical situation of his death and makes Paco promise that he will never marry his widow, Leticia. Moments later Pepe dies of a heart attack and despite his promise, Paco soon marries Leticia. The defunct husband returns from the grave to admonish the couple and soon convinces Leticia to leave Paco. She is involved in an accident at the end of the play and soon joins Pepe in the afterlife. The play, produced in major theaters in both Madrid and Barcelona, received accolades from audiences and critics alike. Its success prompted one critic to write “es difícil encontrar en todo nuestro teatro – y en el extranjero – una situación y una escena mejor tratada que aquella en que *El marido de ida y vuelta* sostiene [...] Magnífica, deliciosa, la sátira de Jardiel Poncela” (Díaz de Castro 201). The play remained extremely popular in theaters around the country, and was eventually adapted into a full-length movie in 1957.

Jardiel’s next production, *Madre, el drama padre* (1941), written under the conventional “conservatism” of the Franco regime, a fascist regime intolerant of criticism or satire, proved to be one of the most controversial works of his career. Two sets of twin sisters marry two sets of twin brothers. Immediately following the ceremony, suspicions arise that that they are, in fact, siblings separated at birth. Throughout the course of the play, admissions of infidelity and deception cause further confusion of the matter. The situation is finally resolved and they are proven to be of no relation. This “caricature of the modern melodrama” instantly captured the attention of both critics and censors (Conde Guerri 12). In his introduction to the play, María José Conde Guerri notes that “los críticos más importantes atacaron la obra con saña, dedicándole un calificativo común: <inmoral>” (17). Although the play is humorous and satirical in nature, it was condemned for insinuations of incest and an irreverent view of marriage. The harsh

criticism of his work prompted him to write a short essay *Lo moral y lo inmoral*, which accompanied the printed editions of the play. All of his works came under scrutiny because of their questionable social values and religious convictions which provoked attack from both the government and the church, neither of which could stand up under any scrutiny at all. In an open society, his work is a healthy indicator of a free-exchange of ideas, but in a closed, fascist society his work would wither and die. Franco's national Catholicism was based on a totalitarian oligarchy which adopted Catholic values to repress a working class. Jardiel would prove a liability to the conservative Franco regime.

Over the next eight years, Jardiel wrote and produced twelve more plays, including *Blanca por fuera y Rosa por dentro* (1943), a comedy about a man and his bipolar wife, and *Tú y yo somos tres* (1945), in which the protagonist is a Siamese twin preparing to marry. Jardiel Poncela traveled extensively until 1946, conducting a series of radio and public lectures in Spain, Latin America, and the United States. After his final production, *Los tigres escondidos en la alcoba*, debuted in 1949, Jardiel withdrew from public view. He died in Madrid on February 18, 1952, following a long illness.

Throughout his extremely successful career, Enrique Jardiel Poncela wrote four comedic novels, *Amor se escribe sin hache* (1929), *Espérame en Liberia, vida mía* (1930), *Pero... ¿hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes?* (1931), and *La 'tournee' de Dios* (1932), all of which received critical praise. He also published collections of short stories, *Pirulís de la Habana* (1927), *El libro del convaleciente* (1938), *Lecturas para analfabetos* (1938) and *Exceso de equipaje* (1943). Although he was successful in his novelistic endeavors, he is most celebrated for his innovations in contemporary theater.

Most of his productions were met with condemnation by intolerant censors and harsh disapproval from the church. However, contemporary scholars recognize Poncela as “uno de los más brillantes ingenios literarios españoles” (Escudero 9).

In *Historia del teatro español*, franquist literary historian Valbuena Prat refers to Poncela as “el gran cómico de la Generación del 27” (631). Poncela received more negative attention than any other member of his literary generation; however, his contributions to the genre make him among the most prominent of his contemporaries. In order to grasp the extent of his influence, Chapter Two will examine the theories and conventions surrounding “humorismo,” or “el teatro de lo inverosímil” and Spain’s literary environment in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Then in chapters three and four, this thesis will offer a detailed analysis of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, two of his best-known plays, to examine how each expresses Jardiel Poncela’s unique style which simultaneously responded to problems in Spanish society in the decade immediately following the Spanish Civil War.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The “Other” Generation of 27: Renovating Theater and Sidestepping Censorship

Enrique Jardiel Poncela was a member of a group of playwrights dubbed by contemporary scholars as “The Other Generation of 1927.” Humorists all, including Miguel Mihura, Edgar Neville, Antonio de Lara (“El Tono”) and José López Rubio, they worked to renovate traditional Spanish theater. These playwrights began their literary careers at the same time as the group of poets generally referred to as “The Generation of 1927,” whose most prominent members included Federico Garcia Lorca, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Vicente Aleixandre, Rafael Alberti, and Luis Cernuda. María Luisa Burguesa Nadal expresses the importance of the poetic Generation of 27 thus; “ha eclipsado a otros autores coetáneos y contemporáneos que en el devenir de la historia literaria poseen también su importancia e indudable significación” (95). In other words, the members of “The Poetic Generation of 1927” received so much more critical attention than their contemporaries, that the contributions made by other authors in other genres seemed to pale by comparison. Indeed, “The Poetic Generation of 1927” and “The Other Generation of 1927” both endeavored to purify and renovate the Spanish literary scene of the day. The literary theories that Jardiel and his contemporaries propounded are similar to the characteristics of the “arte nuevo” explained by José Ortega y Gasset in his essay, *La deshumanización del arte*. These same techniques proved useful for the theatrical generation in sidestepping censorship in the post-War years, since the poetic generation was either dead or in exile immediately following the Spanish Civil War.

*La deshumanización del arte*, published in 1925, proposed innovation to the art which prevailed in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The works produced by the previous literary generation (“La Generación del 98”) reflected a common theme of national identity, the passage of time, and death. The members of The Generation of 1898 doubted the authority of Spanish institutions and religion, resulting in a tendency toward cynical and pessimistic undertones in their works. They experimented with new forms of expression, such as the “esperpento”, the grotesque deformation of reality in “un espejo concavo” conceived by Ramón de Valle-Inclán and “greguerías”, the humorous metaphors pioneered by Gómez de la Serna. In contrast to the works produced by the Generation of 1898, Ortega y Gasset detailed the creation of an “arte nuevo,” utilizing the theories of dehumanization and depersonalization and emphasizing the creative use of language on the part of the artist.

In his essay, Ortega y Gasset outlined the stylistic tendencies of “arte nuevo” as follows: “1. °, a la deshumanización del arte; 2. °, a evitar formas vivas; 3. °, a hacer que la obra de arte no sea sino obra de arte; 4. °, a considerar el arte como juego, y nada más; 5. °, a una esencial ironía; 6. °, a eludir toda falsedad, y por tanto, a una escrupulosa realización. En fin, 7. °, el arte [...] es una cosa sin trascendencia alguna” (57). In essence, *La deshumanización del arte* describes the movement towards art forms that playfully and ironically depict situations far removed from daily life. Ortega y Gasset labels the tendency to distort or even omit human form and sentiment as ‘dehumanization’ or ‘depersonalization.’ The resulting art does not reflect realistic situations or sentiment, nor does it lend itself to a literal interpretation. Instead, the artist employs creative metaphors to disguise the expression of underlying or profound truths

and to further the reader's distance from reality (74). In other words, the metaphor not only conveys meaning to the audience but, more importantly, presents a distorted view of reality, perhaps disguising the critique found therein. The author further complicates the work through the use of brilliant, if not shocking, rhetorical devices (especially the metaphor), play on words, and a sort of irony permeating the work. This masking or subversion of reality invariably limits the understanding of the audience, thus dividing them into "los que lo entendien y los que no lo entienden" (50). Jardiel Poncela and the other members of "The Other Generation of 1927" incorporated many of Ortega y Gasset's theories into their conception of Spanish humoristic theater. Critic Pelta notes that these humorists' works shared a common "cualidad inherente a la naturaleza del arte nuevo, iconoclasta, hipervitalista, jovial, y antisentimental" (42).

"The Other Generation of 1927," including Jardiel himself, produced a substantial body of work documenting their own theories about their proposed renovations to contemporary theater. José López Rubio, summarizes the attributes of his fellow humorists as follows: "dotados de amplia imaginación, de certero instinto teatral, dueño ya cada uno de su técnica, de sus efectos, de sus voces, tan diferentes como similares, con el aire de lo imprevisto en sus hábiles manos. En sus obras se intenta, se experimenta todo [ . . . ] Lo contrario había empezado a ser una norma" (16). Originality, improvisation, and innovation formed the basis for each of these playwrights' works, and although they may differ stylistically, all share these basic characteristics. Above all, López Rubio notes, "el humorista del '27 no trató de contentar ni de adular, sino de alegrar" with their creative theatrical techniques (36). Miguel Mihura, another prominent member of this generation, explained this conception of humor thusly:

El humor es un capricho, un lujo, una pluma de perdiz que se pone en el sombrero; un modo de pasar el tiempo. El humor verdadero no se propone enseñar o corregir porque no es ésta su misión. Lo único que pretende el humor es, por un instante, nos salgamos de nosotros mismos [ . . . ] El humor es ver la trampa a todo darse cuenta de por donde cojean las cosas; comprender que todo tiene un revés, que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera, sin querer por ello que dejen de ser como son, porque esto es pecado y pedantería (Quoted Pelta 50).

Implicit in his remarks is the problem of how a healthy society laughs at itself – it can withstand self-criticism. An unhealthy society, such as that built by Franco, cannot withstand humor in any guise because the humor will point out its faults and weaknesses. Humor feasts on failed conventions, uptight mores, and false piety. According to Mihura, the playwright does not use humor with the purpose of instructing his audience, although it may be a by-product. Instead, it functions as a means for escaping the pain and monotony of daily life, by offering the audience a glimpse into a world of possibility – or impossibility.

In reality, many aspects of Jardiel Poncela’s plays produced after 1927, reflect the theories of his contemporaries, namely the incorporation of fantastical elements (Escudero 69), innovative situations and character types throughout his works, as well as the insistence on what he labeled “la originalidad de la expresión como valor literario superior” (139). In 1933, Jardiel wrote *Un ensayo sobre teatro*, that concisely reflects his thoughts on the school of “humorismo”, the artistic tendency on which his most prominent plays are based. The essay constantly reiterates that a fixed definition of this technique is difficult to create, asserting that “fijar exactamente lo humorístico es intentar clavar una mariposa utilizando para ello un palo del telegráfo” (*OC I* 145). Nonetheless, Jardiel Poncela provides his reader with insight into its use with such statements: “el humorismo no es una escuela: es una inclinación del alma, la cual resuelve en risa su

análisis. De aquí que en lo humorístico estén comprendidos lo irónico, lo sarcástico, y lo satírico, con las naturales y propias diferencias de matiz cada uno y aún de las circunstancias en que se produce cada uno...” (145). In other words, humoristic theater combines irony, sarcasm, and satire to induce laughter in the audience. Importantly, Jardiel also notes that “lo cómico y lo humorístico no son conceptos antitéticos [ . . . ] lo humorístico abraza muchas veces dentro de su órbita a lo cómico” (145). In Jardiel’s opinion, humorism and comedic theater have much in common in their application and formation.

Throughout his career, Jardiel also expounded and revised his ideas of “Teatro del inverosímil” or “Theater of the Unlikely”. His theories appear mostly in the introductions which accompanied his published plays and also as aphorisms throughout the body of his work. In his short essay, “87 General Reflections upon Theater”, Jardiel described the importance of originality in all aspects of the work, especially the characters’ manner of speech and the plot (*OE* 31). His essay, “El teatro y la realidad,” offers the following concept which minimizes the need of a work to resemble reality: “el teatro no tiene que ver nada con la realidad,” (quoted *Máximas* 204). A fascist critic cannot, by definition, criticize himself – it is essentially an oxymoron. Jardiel further expanded upon this idea in his *Obras escogidas*: “Y cuanto más inverosímil, más se acercará a lo que debe ser el teatro” (Quoted Ruiz Ramón 270). In other words, Jardiel Poncea attempted to create a theater which presented situations that differed drastically from those in everyday life. Jardiel also stressed the importance of innovation in Spanish theater in the following way: “El verdadero revolucionario del arte no lucha por destruir lo viejo, sino lucha por construirlo de nuevo” (*OE* 31). In this same vein, he later wrote



that “el autor teatral que es realmente artista tiene que hacerse un público que no existe aún” (*Máximas* 155).

Jardiel Poncela received more negative attention from critics than any other member of the “Other Generation of 1927.” José López Rubio noted that criticism was unjustly directed toward Jardiel: “Jardiel tuvo algo increíble que no tuvieron otros autores de su momento: enemigos. Enemigos sin la menor razón. Hombres resueltamente opuestos, furiosamente contrarios” (47). Jardiel Poncela’s disdain for the critics who attacked his works formed the basis for many of his aphorisms, such as “los críticos son los parásitos del artista” (*OE* 26) and “de todos los espectadores que llenan un teatro suelen ser los críticos quienes demuestran tener menos sentido crítico” (*Máximas* 151). In his dedication to his work, *Agua, Gasolina y Aceite*, Jardiel named those who challenged him most often, including newspaper critics Antonio de Obregón and Cristóbal de Castro, calling them his “gratuitos y rencorosos enemigos.” (*OC II* 599). In fact, only one prominent theater critic, Alfredo Marqueríe, consistently reviewed his works in a favorable manner. With the passage of time, critics began to evaluate Jardiel’s work more favorably, praising his contributions to the theater of his era.

In recent years, contemporary scholars have begun to study in-depth Jardiel’s techniques and stylistic preferences. Ruiz Ramón notes that Jardiel incorporates the previously mentioned aspects of both Theater of the Unlikely and Humorism, as his work “expone [ . . . ] de modo meridiano su concepción del teatro como el reino de lo inverosímil, de lo absurdo, de lo fantástico, opuesto al realismo de lo cotidiano, así como su voluntad de renovación no sólo del teatro cómico español, sino más radicalmente aún, de la risa” (271). García Pavón notes that “el absurdo lógico” provides the basis on

which Jardiel founded his theater, and this basis on the unlikely provides his audience with “una nueva visión de la vida” (Quoted Ruíz Ramón 274). Along this same vein, Gómez de la Serna explains that Jardiel masters thematic innovation in his works because he filled his plays with “cosas sacadas de los más extraños rincones de la vida” (*OCI* 11). Critic García Pavón recognizes Jardiel Poncela’s influence upon Spanish theater in general as follows: “[Jardiel] enseñó a disintegrar el átomo. Los demás pudieron hacer la bomba atómica” (752). In other words, his theories and ideas proved a foundation for later theatrical innovation. Díaz-Plaja simply refers to Jardiel as “el gran revolucionario” in the theater of his era (Hammarstrand 3). Nonetheless, Ruíz Ramón indicates, Jardiel faced several difficulties, calling them, “exteriores, puramente históricos; otros, interiores y personales, propios del autor mismo” (Ruiz Ramón 271). Jardiel faced external obstacles of many kinds throughout his tenure in the Spanish literary and theatrical scene, not just from critics and audiences, but also from the system of censorship implemented soon after his career began to thrive.

In 1939, as soon as the Nationalists consolidated their victory in the Spanish Civil War, the Franco regime instituted an exceedingly oppressive censorship machine. This highly-organized system of censorship, which would remain effective even after Franco’s death in 1975 (Abellán 22), mandated that all texts be inspected and approved before their circulation in the public sector (Neuschäfer 48). The Franco regime established three departments to control the publication of media or literary texts, as well as the production of theatrical and cinematographic pieces (Abellán 22). Each censor considered the work’s treatment of political, religious, and social issues, and evaluated all works based upon the following criteria:

- 1) ¿choca con el proyecto presentado con las buenas costumbres, sobre todo con la ‘moral sexual,’ es decir, con la ley de la pureza de la venerable opinión?
  - 2) ¿Repugna al dogma católico u ofende las instituciones religiosas y sus servidores?
  - 3) ¿Socava los principios políticos fundamentales del régimen?
- ¿Ataca a las instituciones o a sus colaboradores? (Neuschäfer 49-50).

Journalists, playwrights and screenwriters were subject to even stricter guidelines before publishing or producing their work, as they had the greatest influence upon public opinion (50). After consideration, each theatrical production received one of six ratings, ranging from complete approval for an indefinite or a limited number of representations to restriction of audience members to adults, or even complete prohibition (Abellán 32).

In spite of his apparent support for the right, Jardiel Poncela himself received a reprimand from Spanish censors. Although no documentation of forced revisions of any of his theatrical works exists, his popular novels, *Pero...¿hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes?*, *Amor se escribe sin hache*, and *¡Espérame en Siberia, vida mía!*, attracted negative attention from censors, resulting in their complete prohibition from 1939 to 1958 because of sexual content (Valls 255). According to Abellán, the Department of Literary Censorship focused upon *Pero...¿hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes?*, requiring revisions on two-hundred eighteen of the novel’s three-hundred fifteen pages (20). For example, the original text included phrases such as “mi primer amante,” “intimidades del sexo,” and “tranquilamente en tu cama,” which respectively appeared as “mi primer marido,” “intimidades del amor” and “tranquilamente en tu alcoba” in the published version of the novel (21). Besides sexual insinuations, Abellán notes that “mucho más importante que estas ingenuas modificaciones fue la supresión de palabras, frases, párrafos, citas de autores y alusiones fortuitas a personajes de la época de la República” (21). Spanish censors disapproved of words and phrases that had any possible political

implications, therefore expressing concern over the following phrases in the novel: “la esposa del militar ha muerto heroicamente en la guerra” and “porque la mentira es la única verdad del mundo.” Jardiel revised these sentences and they later appeared as “la esposa del abogado ha muerto en la vista de una causa” and “porque mentir es lo propio de sinvergüenzas” (21).

Although Enrique Jardiel Poncela and other members of the “Other Generation of 1927” were subject to censorship, none faced the forcible silence because they acquiesced – death or exile – at the hands of the Franco regime as did the certain members of the Poetic Generation of 1927, such as Lorca. In order to avoid censure from the Franco regime, Neuschäfer notes, playwrights and authors alike tended to hide any such criticism through the use of irony, humor, or manipulation of previously-established literary techniques (77). Jardiel publicly aligned himself with the Franco regime; however, his reasons for doing so were fairly superficial. Valls identifies the reasons for Jardiel’s apparent political affiliations as: “la incautación de su Ford 8V en 1936, su detención y la profanación de la tumba de su madre in 1937” (*Máximas* 12). Therefore, Jardiel based his political affiliations more on superficial or personal reasons than any deep political or philosophical beliefs. Nonetheless, Jardiel’s disdain for politicians and critics reappears consistently throughout his body of work.

Bearing in mind the techniques of the “Theater of the Unlikely” and “humorismo” propounded by Jardiel’s contemporaries, a close examination of two of Jardiel’s post-war plays in particular, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, provide subtle, yet poignant, criticism of Spanish society immediately following the war. *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* treats the themes of evasion and

insanity, through the strange Briones family and a closely-guarded family secret. *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* explores the problem of misleading appearances and ulterior motives through a band of thieves who prove to be more honest than the “upstanding citizens” that surround them, although they never really change their essentially dishonest character.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro: Secrets, Silence and Insanity*

*Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* debuted in March 1940, only months after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Madrid lay in shambles, both economically and structurally. Oddly enough, the characters in *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* repress almost all direct references to the conflict and seemingly have no knowledge of the war that crippled the country, acting as though the war had never occurred. Jardiel Poncela's work seems to follow the previously discussed conventions of the "teatro del inverosímil" and the apparent disregard of the war appears intentional. However, a deeper examination of the themes and implications presented throughout the work reveals hidden criticism about the social conditions brought about by the newly-empowered Franco regime and the playwright's concern over Spain's uncertain future. Jardiel uses extremes of hilarity contrasted with undertones of violence, disparities in social classes, detective conventions with alteration and situations paralleling his society to question the forcible repression of any mention of the recent Civil War.

Like many of Jardiel's theatrical productions, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* contains a Prologue and two subsequent acts, with the action occurring on one single evening. However, the play differs stylistically from a majority of his previous works in that the prologue "does not plunge the spectator into the central action of the play" (Hammarstrand 69). The Prologue takes place in a neighborhood theater, and the "purely incidental characters" presented therein do not appear later in the work (Hammarstrand 70). Just before the movie begins, Mariana Briones and her aunt Clotilde enter the

theater and Mariana confesses her love for Fernando Ojeda. She admits that her suspicion that Fernando hides a mysterious secret only intensifies to her attraction to him. Fernando and his uncle Ezequiel enter the theater moments later and, after a brief exchange, Mariana and Clotilde exit unexpectedly. Fernando follows them. Act One presents the audience with a view into the disorderly Briones household. Everyone who resides in this chaotic environment, even the household staff, exhibits some sort of erratic behavior. Fernando, who left the movie theater in search of Mariana, comes to the Briones home and the two depart for his country estate. The Briones family, particularly her father Edgardo, is troubled by their departure and decides to follow them. Act Two takes place on the Ojeda manor, where Mariana makes some odd discoveries leading her to believe that a woman was murdered in the house. After the rest of the Briones family arrives, the audience discovers that these clues are evidence of the death of Mariana's mother, Eloísa, who is buried beneath the almond tree in the back yard. In essence the play has a felicitous conclusion in that Edgardo is cured from his feigned insanity, and the two lovers can pursue their relationship with the blessing of their families. Nevertheless, the supposed "happy ending" leaves spectators with a vaguely unsettled feeling in that no one ever takes full responsibility for Eloísa's death.

Jardiel Poncela uses the frivolity, hilarity, and extreme optimism of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* to introduce the themes of evasion, suppression of reality, the consequences of repressing the truth, and the avoidance of punishment for the murder of innocent victims. Living in Madrid, Jardiel could not ignore the terrible violence of war and the long-lasting effects it would have upon both the actors and the audience. The initial hilarity of Jardiel Poncela's "comedy" simultaneously suggests serious failures of

Spanish society in the post-war era: the violent, senseless deaths of many innocent victims and the social and economic inequality brought about by the war and the new political structure. Jardiel warns, perhaps, that by refusing to acknowledge the atrocities of war, Spain may be in danger of going insane. Read this way, the play is an indirect commentary on Spain's post-Civil War experience. Thoughtful analysis shows patterns and themes which covertly comment on the suppression of truth and the violent repression – and instances of murder – of the losing Republicans, of which everyone was aware but which no one acknowledged publicly.

The opening sequence in a smelly, dingy neighborhood movie house obviously hints at the suffering of the economically-crippled madrileños and reflects the situation faced by the actual audience. Significantly, the Prologue takes place in a movie theater rather than a theater that staged live productions, supported primarily by the elite. This “cine de barrio” offered common, everyday citizens refuge from their dreary existence rather than catering to individuals looking for upscale entertainment. Movies were the cultural diversion of the middle and urban lower classes. The bourgeoisie and upper class audience would have supported the Franco regime, whereas the working classes would have supported Spain's now defeated, democratically-elected Republican government. Jardiel's use of the stage also plays an important role in the Prologue. The actors sit facing the actual audience, implying that “what the audience is watching is really a reflection of themselves and their reality” (Blackwell 7). Jardiel himself said that, “el arte de hacer reír se basa en exponerle al público cara a cara con sus propios defectos” (*Máximas Mínimas* 81). The prologue accomplishes precisely this goal – showing madrileños what their existence was really like – grim, violent, and depressing.



The upper-class audience watching *Eloísa* in 1940 was probably too distracted by the Prologue's entertainment value to notice that Jardiel actually criticizes their way of life.

The opening scene introduces both the upper and lower class characters; the latter receive hardly any attention in the drama and, by extension, from the Franco regime. In fact, these "incidental" characters are referred to only in terms of their occupation or gender; the audience never learns their names (Ariza Viguera 111). This aspect further insinuates the importance placed upon the Briones and Ojeda families, who typify the elite class in both appearance and action. Ezequiel, a member of the prestigious Ojeda family, is the only individual who expresses interest in purchasing concessions because clearly, he is the only who is able to afford that luxury (*Eloísa* 57). Upon her arrival, Clotilde complains about a foul odor, "Al entrar se nota un olor algo chocante; pero luego, cuando se ve al público, ya no le choca a una nada" (69). She then demands that the usher apply air freshener to cover the smell, which she attributes to the lower-class madrileños who already occupied that space. Mariana and Clotilde, dressed in elegant evening gowns, capture the attention of every individual in the cinema, inspiring awe in the men and evoking jealousy in the women (61-63). The usher chases the lower-class men out of the theater and two young women leave hurriedly, offering the ridiculous excuse that if they stay in the theater they will suffer physical damage: "nos deslumbramos y se nos estropean los ojos" (65). The blatant separation of the classes within the movie house and their disdain for each other in general further reinforce the marked differences between the two social castes and the two combatant sides in the Civil War.

While Jardiel provides a physical description of the members of the Briones and Ojeda families, he offers no further characterization of the common madrileños. The only aspect that unites these spectators is that all of them have gone to the movies to escape from their daily life. Unlike the absurd comings and goings of the subsequent acts, the Prologue provides an accurate view of daily life through its “costumbrista” tone (*Teatro nuevo* 315). One man is asleep during the entire Prologue. A pair of young lovers attempt to communicate by distracting their chaperone. Three other individuals engage in a conversation comprised solely of antics, quips, and repartee, thus avoiding any real conversation or any true communication (McKay 51). This exchange contains sugar-coated colloquial Spanish phrases - including “al fin y al cabo, no hay mal que cien años dure” or “Después de un día viene otro, y Dios aprieta pero no ahoga” – and its overly-optimistic tone stands out when one considers the dire social and political situation the speakers surely experienced (*Eloísa* 59). Interestingly, all of these proverbs have to do with enduring trouble and hard times, obviously appropriate for Spain’s immediate post-war miseries. The lack of genuine communication suggests further criticism of the Franco regime and its “attempt” to restore traditional values in the post-war era. Living beneath rigid censorship, where true communication brought punishment, many resorted to expressing themselves using subversive modes of communication and experimented with new art forms in order to avoid official reprimand.

On the most superficial level, the Prologue seems otherwise “unrelated to later plot development” (McKay 51). This scene, however, prepares the audience for the subsequent acts through its introduction of macabre elements. The theme of death is

delicately and strangely woven throughout the play subtly evoking the atrocious casualties that Spain suffered in the months before the play's production. First, the feature film in the "cine de barrio" on the particular evening in which the action takes place is *Camille* whose protagonist dies a tragic death. Also, before the movie begins, a woman reads aloud an article featured in a Mexican newspaper, recounting the gruesome details of a murder, captured on film by a freelance photographer who did nothing to prevent it (*Eloísa* 55). This reference also suggests the general desensitization of the Spanish people during the post-war era. Since death and bloodshed had become such a part of their daily lives, they were no longer shocked by its presence in the media.

The subsequent acts introduce other members of the Briones and Ojeda household as well as their eccentric actions. Micaela, the certifiably insane member of the Briones family, has two pit bulls that she takes with her everywhere. She lovingly calls them "Caín y Abel," an obvious allusion to the Biblical story, emblematic of civil war between brothers. Unamuno and other writers of the Generation of 1898 had used the Cain and Abel motif to explore the Carlista Wars, the three Civil wars of the nineteenth century (Brown 19-20). Micaela's violent pets, one of the few literary allusions present in the work, are important symbols for the audience. "Caín and Abel" appear in the final scene when the situation surrounding Eloísa's death is exposed; their presence acts as a subtle reminder to the audience that Micaela's insanity, or perhaps feelings of jealousy, caused her sister's death.

Ezequiel Ojeda's medical experimentation on female kittens constitutes another blatantly morbid aspect of the play (*Eloísa* 119). While the audience understands that he conducts scientific experiments on felines in search of a cure for pellagra, Clotilde

Briones finds a the notebook in Ezequiel's smoking jacket and begins to read entries such as "Juanita, [ . . . ] La llevé a la finca, aunque se resistía, al día siguiente. La maté el tres de mayo. Tardó en morir hora y media," their graphic details lead her to believe that he brutally murdered women (119). The audience perceives the situation as humorous, for they recognize that Ezequiel has named all of the cats. Nevertheless, from Clotilde's point of view, Ezequiel is guilty of the heartless, senseless murders of innocent victims, exactly like many of the casualties resulting from the Spanish Civil War. Although their interactions are supposed to be amusing, the exchange is quietly disturbing in its clinical description of the death of numerous animals as Clotilde coldly accounts his experimentation upon and elimination of the "cats." It also underscores, as had the random use of proverbs, the problem of miscommunication; Clotilde's assumption about Ezequiel's evil motives leads to an incorrect assumption that is funny but also horrifying in its implications.

Eloísa's murder clearly constitutes the most violent aspect of the work. Although referenced throughout the play, details of the circumstances surrounding Eloísa's death only become clear in the final scene. Micaela killed her sister twenty-one years before the play's action begins, believing that Eloísa had committed adultery with Federico Ojeda. Eloísa, however, was completely innocent. Edgardo and Federico were the only other individuals who knew the true circumstances surrounding Eloísa's death. The feelings of pain and guilt manifested themselves differently within these characters. Federico committed suicide shortly thereafter, abandoning hope of recovering emotionally (*Eloísa* 138). Edgardo acknowledges the two ways in which he could have coped with the tragedy as "matarme o sepultarme ahí en esa cama" (121). The choice of

the word “sepultarme” is telling in that Edgardo “dies” for the outside world, buried alive in his cluttered bedroom. Edgardo’s decision to live “como una cosa sin alma” (122) and conceal his shameful secret from the larger community eventually led to further degradation of his mental state (McKay 52). In many ways, Jardiel’s characters have died emotionally, suggesting by extension that Spanish society faced the same problem as it sought to erase any evidence of the recent civil war and its continuing consequences.

Micaela exhibits characteristics of genuine insanity, including emotional outbursts leading to violence and paranoia. Every Tuesday evening, Micaela wanders around the family’s home, anticipating the arrival of the thieves she believes are going to appear in the night, but they never come (*Eloísa* 96). The imminent invasion possibly refers to the “rojos, masones, y judíos,” or the other people groups that the Franco regime blamed for the subversion of traditional Spanish values and against which his regime tried to defend Spain. Micaela also collects stuffed owls; an animal traditionally associated with death and also used as a Masonic symbol (Larson). The Briones family controls Micaela’s emotional outbursts through the use of tranquilizers and prescription drugs; they simply humor her eccentricities (*Eloísa* 114). Although Micaela’s insanity “is used for comic effect,” her erratic behavior and the lengths to which her family goes to cover her indiscretions remind the audience of the play’s repeated incorporation of morbid elements (Hammarstrand 124).

On the other hand, Edgardo’s abnormal behavior is merely feigned insanity stemming from his desire to protect his sister and the secret of the circumstances surrounding Eloísa’s death. His “calculated and constructed” madness has led him to remain in his bed for twenty-one years (Ariza Viguera 123). To occupy his time, he

indulges himself in imaginary train rides around Spain, with his servant playing the part of the conductor (*Eloísa* 95). His bedroom is cluttered with random objects, from violins to microscopes, which point to short-lived hobbies, quickly abandoned when they did not help him forget (85). The “extreme absurdity” of Edgardo’s prolonged stay in his bed chamber certainly strikes the audience as humorous; however, it masks the sad reality that he lives only in his imagination, allowing his guilt to immobilize him (Escudero 37). Renown theatrical critic Conde Guerri describes, Edgardo’s function as follows: “el desdén frente a la realidad y el logro de la evasión por lo inverosímil” (90). Certainly, staying in bed for twenty-one years is an unlikely means to avoid an unpleasant truth.

Servants in the Briones household are forbidden to comment on the strange happenings therein, trying in vain to uphold the appearance of normalcy. The environment is strictly controlled, denying them the freedom to confront any issue whatsoever. The servants themselves eventually begin to exhibit strange behavior as a direct result of their rigid working conditions, thus mirroring their masters (Marquerie 73). The maid Práxedes’ manner of speech, very rapid and erratic, manifests the negative effect of existence in the Briones’ household on her mental state: “¿Qué lo hago demasiado de prisa? Es mi genio. Pero ¿lo hago mal? ¿No? ¡Ah! Bueno, por eso...Y no hablemos más” (*Eloísa* 98). By posing questions and refusing to elicit a response she never truly communicates with anyone and in fact, appears to talk only to herself, a classic symptom of madness. Furthermore, her comment “y no hablemos más” points again to the problem of censorship discussed above.

Fermín makes a habit of running around the garden naked, exhibiting all the signs of someone with no healthy outlet for his pent-up frustrations (*Eloísa* 91). Running

around naked is another a common symptom of madness, feigned by don Quixote in the episode of the Peña Pobre. Leoncio, the newly-hired butler, immediately recognizes the oddity of the Briones household and conveys his amusement to Fermín:

LEONCIO: (*Riendo*) ¡Hombre! Eso me ha hecho gracia...

FERMIN: ¡Chis! No se ría usted, que aquí las risas están muy mal vistas (97).

Fermín immediately reprimands Leoncio for laughing at the family's eccentricities, thus perpetuating the idea that household staff must also refrain from expressing themselves. Not surprisingly, the Briones household has an extremely high turnover rate among household employees. Fermín explains his past coworkers as follows: "Cocineros he conocido veintinueve [...] De chóferes, manadas. De doncellas, nubes. Y de jardineros, bosques..." (90). The over-abundance of servants in the Briones household is itself problematic, as the aristocratic family's extensive employment of lower-class individuals implies "a society in crisis" (Escudero 98). The Briones family's mutual dependence upon their servants not only puts the lower-class individuals themselves at risk, but hints at a possible lack of personal identity within this social group.

Jardiel Poncela constructs the play upon the same principles as Edgardo does his household: he constructs a façade to cover a painful past. María Burguesa Nadal notes the following; "si la realidad española de posguerra se define como una angustia en el vivir, el humor es o podría ser su máscara" (29). In other words, Jardiel uses humor to mask his social criticism. The Briones household's wild collection of furniture, paintings, statues, and assorted bric-a-brac mirrors the chaotic political and social situation in post-War Spain.

In fact, there is only one specific reference to the Spanish Civil War in the entire play, spoken by the concessions boy in the Prologue. The lad, about seven years-old,

tries to explain to the usher how difficult his occupation has become. He explains that nobody buys concessions anymore as follows:

BOTONES: ...que cuando la Guerra entró muy bien el mercado...

ACOMODADOR: ¿Y por qué no trabajas el cacahué, la pipa, el altramuz, y la pilonga? (57).

Whether the usher switches the subject away from the war so fast to protect the child or merely to avoid the subject, he instantly censors the boy's speech. The child's comment is the only remark which acknowledges the war, and the adults quickly suppress any reference to the recent past although everyone has suffered its devastating effects. Of course the audience would have immediately sympathized with the boy's comments being censored, since they themselves lived under strict censorship imposed by the Franco regime. The other passing reference to the war appears in Act 2 as Mariana comments on finding a woman's dress reflecting a style before the war. It functions simply to date, not discuss.

Stylistically different from the Prologue and Act One, Act Two presents a critique of Spanish society through the use and subversion of the convention of detective literature, Blackwell explains this connection stating: "Well-recognized conventions and facile solutions also invite parodies and subversions of the genre, not only to expose its obvious limitations, but also to make pointed criticism of society" (171). Colemeiro identifies this sub-genre of detective literature as "policíaca negra," or an author's use of detective conventions to articulate a moral problem facing his society through inversion of social order (61). Eloísa's mysterious death and the circumstances surrounding her murder constitute the elements of mystery in the work. Fernando and Mariana uncover clues of the murder that took place on the Ojeda property – a torn dress, blood-stained



knife, and leaves from the almond tree – which not only identify the location of the victim’s remains but also her identity. Nonetheless, the murderer is not revealed until the last moments of the play’s action. Edgardo finally explains the circumstances surrounding Eloísa’s violent death, but only in a private venue, among family members, giving few details of a murder committed by his sister, whose identity he has protected for decades. Immediately after the confession, Edgardo’s son-in-law, undercover police agent Luisote Perea, posing as Ezequiel’s aged servant Dimas, announces the contents of his official report to the police bureau (178):

DIMAS: Mañana presentaré el informe de mi actuación aquí.

EDGARDO: ¿Y qué dirá usted?

DIMAS: Que no hubo tal mujer asesinada. Pero a la enferma hay que recluirla.

This blatant cover-up strikes the audience as odd, for not only does Luisote withhold the truth that Micaela murdered Eloísa twenty-one years earlier, but promises to suppress the truth further by confining the murderer. The conventions of detective fiction would lead audiences to expect that the guilty receive punishment, the innocent are exonerated, and that the forces of law and order uphold the social order. However, Jardiel Poncela thwarts these expectations. Through his use of the “policiaica negra” convention, Poncela suggests that society’s institutions do not provide justice or righting of wrongs. Eloísa’s murder goes unpunished and the innocent victim receives no justice from police, which parallels the lack of punishment for the atrocities committed by the Nationalists during the Civil War. The information about the murder stays within the family and the police agent, supposedly an agent of the law, actually perpetuates the cover-up.

The almond tree, in a literary sense, represents the idea that something essential is hidden beneath a façade of the ordinary (Protas). Even at first glance, *Eloísa está debajo*

*de un almendro* follows this convention. We infer into the play's title that Eloísa leisurely sits under an almond tree, pointing from the outset to the problem of miscommunications commented on previously in the scene with Clotilde and Ezequiel. The audience does not immediately presume that she is buried in a shallow grave beneath its limbs. Likewise, the characters in Jardiel's play have more purpose and depth than first meets the eye. If Eloísa symbolizes the victims of the Spanish Civil War, her violent death, like theirs, lies shrouded in secrecy. Micaela, the real murderer of the play, is also the only certifiably-crazy character. Because the family cannot deal with the unpleasant reality of having a murderer in the family, they ruthlessly suppress the truth, forcing her to live in a silence induced by drugs, tranquilizers, and her mental illness. The Francoist uprising against the Republicans occurred in part because of the upper classes' jealously preserving their privileges. Spaniards who voiced their opinions or even attempted a public discussion of the war were forcibly hushed by death or imprisonment by the Franco regime. Thus, Edgardo embodies this forcible repression of the truth, which gives him the appearance of insanity. Jardiel Poncela also uses Fernando's character to criticize those who did not attempt to deal with the truth. His father, Federico, was in love with Eloísa and resorted to suicide out of grief over her loss. Even though his feelings for Mariana's mother were never made known to Fernando, he inadvertently followed in Federico's footsteps by falling in love with Eloísa's daughter. In other words, the truth will eventually surface because its repression, as the play underscores, has detrimental and long-lasting effects both within the family and, by extension, the nation as a whole.

Jardiel purposely and carefully avoids mentioning Spain's agonizing Civil War and the painful memories arising from the recent political situation. The lack of extensive acknowledgement of the Spanish Civil War in this play provides the most powerful and poignant critique. Its absence on stages makes its presence, both in the context of the play and in contemporary Spain, even more obvious. He does, however, offer a plot with striking parallels to Spain's contemporary situation. The audience could relate to the topic of avoidance, for addressing issues related to the death of innocent victims in the Civil War or post-war reprisals was neither encouraged nor socially acceptable. The characters in *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* illustrate Jardiel Poncela's point that avoidance would not help heal the wounds inflicted by the Civil War and exacerbated by the Franco regime's strict censorship. Avoidance, after all, leads to insanity, and does not provide justice. Only after the truth of Eloísa's death is revealed, do the play's remaining characters such as Edgardo, have any hope for resuming a more normal existence. In similar fashion, Jardiel warns if Spaniards, especially the upper-class, keep their embarrassing and uncomfortable past buried, they too face completely empty relationships, or worse, national insanity. In conclusion, the "war" is under erasure. It is, quite literally, the elephant in the room with the audience as it watches the play. In the opening scene, Jardiel holds up a mirror to his play's audience, yet his audience is quite unaware of this fact, consumed by the convention that theater audiences expect to see a reality different than their own unfold on stage. While the audience believes they are watching a play – artifice and conventions – they are really staring at themselves, helpless to understand the truly dire nature of their real situation. In essence,

the war-torn and destroyed country was being erased by the monsters that brought about its destruction.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Los ladrones somos gente honrada: Separating Reality from Pretense*

Less than a year after the success of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, Jardiel Poncela's next major successful play, *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* premiered in Madrid's Teatro de la Comedia in 1941 (McKay 120). Spaniards attempted to cope with the devastating emotional and economic consequences of the Spanish Civil War that ended only two years earlier. Instead of offering the country hope in the wake of the Civil War, the newly-empowered Franco dictatorship imposed harsh restrictions upon their everyday lives, constantly reminding everyone of who were the victors and who were the losers. Jardiel's characteristic style of the "unlikely," while once again very humorous, masks deeper criticism of the post-War experience and conveys the necessity to distinguish reality from pretense or misleading appearances.

The play's action occurs over a span of six months, with the action in the Prologue occurring on one evening. Daniel, the mastermind of a robbery plot on the prestigious Arévalo family household, assumes a fake identity and attends a party at the family's summer home in San Sebastian while they celebrate the coming-out party of their daughter Herminia. Just before the theft is to occur, Daniel meets Herminia and then calls off the heist because of his strong feelings for her. The subsequent acts occur six months later, during a party honoring the newly-married Daniel and Herminia. Tío and Castelar, two of the thieves who conspired with Daniel during the initial scheme, return to the family's home with plans to steal the contents of the family's safe, as retribution for the failed plan six months earlier. However, as the evening progresses,

various members of the Arévalo family and household staff attempt to steal the contents of the lockbox for themselves. Only later does the audience discover that the safe contains don Rodrigo's will, which names Herminia as the sole heir to the family fortune. The audience also learns of an ongoing murder investigation into the suspicious death of the family housekeeper Doña Andrea six months earlier, and also the blackmail attempt of infamous criminal, Díaz, to gain possession of the fortune. The last moments of the play reveal Daniel's true identity as a career criminal; also that Herminia's birth parents are Señor Díaz and Teresa. It also reveals that Tío and Pelirrojo have aided the police investigator in solving the murder and foiling the theft of the safe's contents.

The genesis of *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* dates back to 1936. Jardiel had relocated first to San Sebastian and then to Argentina, partly because Republican militia had subjected him to questioning and detainment for accusations of harboring conservative politician Salazar Alonso (Valls 51). An explanation of the situation and its eventual inspiration of the play accompanied published editions of the work (*OC* II 155). After his formal questioning, Jardiel Poncela remained under surveillance by Republican militia. One afternoon while in a local café, Jardiel spotted the officers assigned to keep watch on him (167). In order to give the appearance of normalcy, Jardiel began to write furiously and without putting thought into the words as they appeared on paper. The officers left after watching him a short while, apparently pleased with his concentration, because as Jardiel states: “un hombre que escribía tranquilamente en un café era – en el verano de 1936, en Madrid – un hombre que no tenía miedo. Y un hombre que no tenía miedo – en el verano de 1936, en Madrid – era un simpatizante” (169). Following their departure, Jardiel read the paper before him, which contained the framework for a play

dealing with the problem of honor and, as he phrased it, “que los personajes aparentemente honrados fueran en la realidad delincuentes, a los que los otros desenmascarasen en sus fechorías” (170). After returning from Argentina in 1940, Jardiel revisited this theme and named the work *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*.

From the onset of the work, Jardiel introduces the theme of mistaken identity – whether accidental or intentional – and develops this theme throughout the play’s entirety. All of the principal characters deliberately misrepresent themselves in order to pursue their own agenda. Daniel, an experienced thief, gains entry into the Arévalo household using a falsified invitation bearing the name “Juan Togores,” an Argentinean nobleman (*Ladrones* 208). Pelirrojo, one of Daniel’s accomplices in the initial heist, gains employment in the household also using a pseudonym, “Peter” (224). During their second attempt to steal the Arévalo fortune, Tío and Castelar gain entry into the party when Felipe mistakenly believes that they are Daniel’s distant relatives (272).

Criminals are not the only characters who misrepresent themselves; even the apparently “upright” characters lie about their identity or connection to one another. In the Prologue when Daniel and Herminia first meet, Herminia introduces herself as a thirty-four year old woman who has been the victim of many unfortunate circumstances throughout her lifetime. A short time thereafter, Daniel discovers that Herminia has falsified her past and is in fact a naïve, innocent eighteen-year old girl (*Ladrones* 221). Germana and Felipe maintain the appearance of being Herminia’s parents when, in fact, they are of no relation (318). Even police agent Menéndez conceals his identity, posing as a member of the household staff (279). The constant manipulation on part of all the principal characters eventually takes its toll on the audience. Although entertained by the

situations arising from mistaken identities, they become accustomed to the deception which underlies the play's action.

As previously discussed in the case of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, Jardiel Poncela utilizes the subversion of the traditional detective literature as a basis for the play and specifically denotes this connection in the play's subtitle: "una comedia casi políaca en un prólogo y dos actos" (*Ladrones* 205). Constructed in typical Jardielesque fashion, the play is often interpreted as nothing more than a "humorous spoof on the genre" (McKay 57). Nonetheless, Jardiel's use of this convention allows for a broader interpretation of the play, because, as Valls explains: "funciona simplemente como excusa o armazón para desarrollar una visión crítica de la sociedad" (54). Although Poncela's "clever manipulation of false clues, misleading data and shifting suspicions" provide entertainment for the audience, Jardiel Poncela parallels the deception and ambiguity of the political situation in post-War Spain (McKay 57). Furthermore, as McKay also notes, by the play's end, Jardiel has included an authentic murder mystery (51).

The most obvious implication of this genre is "the clash between appearance and reality" (McKay 57). None of the characters, including police agent Menéndez, have the ability to identify the villains. When discussing the details of the case with Tío and Castelar, who he mistakenly believes are fellow detectives, he names the truly guilty characters but immediately discounts their involvement in Doña Andrea's murder or the attempted robbery of the Arévalo household.

MENÉNDEZ: Que me parecía que muchos de ellos tenían pinta de ladrones. (*El CASTELAR y el TÍO se miran*) Y ya han visto ustedes: ni ladrones ni cosa que lo valga...Luego me dio la ventolera de que el que tenía facha presidiabla era el mayordomo (*Nueva mirada de CASTELAR y el TÍO*) ¡Otra plancha! Después se



me metió entre ojos uno de los criados, ese guapito que llaman Antón. (*Nueva mirada entre CASTELAR y el TÍO*) ¡Y nada! Hubo un rato que tuve la sospecha de que el doctor Laredo estaba enterado de algo en el asunto de doña Andrea ...(*Vuelven a mirarse*) ¡Nada tampoco! En fin: con decirles a ustedes que, al final, ya he desconfiado de la dueña de la casa...(*Ladrones* 314).

Menéndez does not provide substantial evidence in this explanation either to indict or absolve the named suspects. Nonetheless, his judgments about innocence and guilt are based solely on appearances and he does not appear to pursue actively leads in his investigation. His judgments, based upon lack of sufficient evidence, parallel those of the representatives of the Franco regime, who condemned many to death based upon their so-called association with communist or socialist groups. As a result, many innocent individuals were condemned to death without substantial evidence, based solely upon appearances of improper political associations. An additional interesting aspect of the investigation, Tío and Castelar, who originally entered the Arévalo home in order to steal the contents of the family safe, become interested in the household's mysteries and collect pieces of information to explain the unusual occurrences therein. Eventually, the career thieves aid the police in the investigation.

Police agent Menéndez's noticeable incompetence clearly parodies the astute "hard-boiled detective," traditionally appearing in detective fiction (Craig-Otters 77). However, Jardiel's presentation of this character carries more significance than a mere caricature of a literary genre. Craig-Otters explains the significance of an inept police agent in Spanish detective literature as follows:

The Spanish police system has been the institution most directly associated with the authoritarian government by the citizenry and the one that, other than the church, had perhaps the most direct effect upon their lives. [ . . . ] The Spanish police have been characterized as corrupt and incompetent, with an important addition to this characterization related to the authoritarian government during the Franco years – in Spain the police are also seen as the primary agents of

repression. In post-Franco detective fiction, the police are often the most striking reminders of the dictatorship (79).

The characters in both *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* could not depend upon the police to administer justice; the same held true for audiences in the years immediately following the Spanish Civil War. As a representative of Spanish law and order, police inspector Menéndez's shortcomings can be seen as parallels to those of the Nationalist government officials who took power immediately after the war ended. Just as Menéndez shows no genuine concern for identifying and punishing doña Andrea's killer, so Jardiel implicitly accuses the Franco regime of apathy in providing justice for the victims of the war. His presence alone in the play serves as a reminder to the audience of the dictatorial Franco regime and its apparent disregard for righting of wrongs.

The "hard-boiled detective," according to Craig-Otters, "usually has a high sense of honor and integrity and stands out from the rest of society which is seen as lacking these qualities" (78). However, as Jardiel constantly reiterates throughout the course of the play, the genuinely praiseworthy individuals are the least likely: felons. Critics Valls and Roas identify the central theme of the work as "la honradez del delincuente" (53), a topic which regularly surfaces in regards to Daniel's character. Although Daniel entered the Arévalo household under false pretenses, he is the only character who desires to reveal his past indiscretions. When he attempts to confess his true identity and profession, both Herminia and Felipe respond in a similar manner; they are hesitant to confront a painful truth. The following conversation between Herminia and Daniel illustrates this point.

DANIEL: En todas las vidas hay un drama, Herminia

HERMINIA: ¿Y qué drama es éste?

DANIEL: El haberme enamorado de una mujer hasta el punto de casarme con ella sin descubrirle mi pasado.

HERMINIA: (*Poniéndose de pie con un brusco mal humor*) ¡Tu pasado no me interesa! Otras veces te lo he dicho ya. El pasado hay que olvidarlo como se olvida la infancia; porque, como la infancia, no tiene más valor, ni ha servido para otra cosa que para llegar al presente. (*Excitada.*) ¡No me interesa el pasado de nadie! ¡Sólo oír hablar del pasado de alguien ya me crispa! Y los seres a quienes quiero no tienen pasado para mí (*Ladrones 258*).

Herminia's blatant refusal to discuss Daniel's background stems not only from her own unwillingness to divulge details about her falsified, sordid past (or lack thereof) but also a lack of desire to confront any issue whatsoever. In Herminia's own words, the past serves no other purpose than bringing the future, thereby insinuating that examining the past holds no value. Jardiel presents this situation as a parallel to the Franco dictatorship, who forbade any mention whatsoever of the previous political situation or even attempting to uncover what actually occurred during the country's three-year long civil war.

Although Daniel has a truly unsettling past, he still earns praise from Felipe, one of the play's supposedly "upstanding citizens." After two failed attempts to reveal the truth about his past to the character posing as his father-in-law, Daniel learns that Felipe knew of his previous lifestyle all along. Felipe explains that Daniel's sordid past bears no weight on his inherent noble character:

FELIPE: Y además, porque, ladrón o no, estoy convencido de que eres un hombre honrado [ . . . ] Me duele que sea verdad lo que me habían dicho de ti; pero ahí se acaba todo. Por mi parte, yo, que nunca he sido ladrón profesional, no he sabido ser un honrado, Juan [ . . . ] mientras que tú, que has sido ladrón, llevas la honradez dentro y cada palabra tuya me lo confirma más (*Ladrones 306-7*).

Felipe Arévalo's extensive land holdings, hobbies, and even his manner of speaking indicate that he typifies a wealthy, upper-class individual. Therefore Felipe's belief that

Daniel, a former thief, possesses an inherent virtue which he lacks reflects harshly on his social class in general. Felipe, as a prominent member of society, maintains the appearance of integrity and honesty. With this admission, however, he reveals a prominent theme in the work that parallels the social situation in Jardiel's era; appearances can be deceiving. As a member of the bourgeoisie, Felipe obviously represents the wealthy Spaniards who supported the Franco regime. Just as Felipe admits to a lack of moral conviction, Poncela insinuates that those who endorsed the regime could have done so solely to maintain appearances. The individuals who publicly decried the new government did so at great risk for bodily harm or even death.

Although an experienced criminal, Daniel earns the respect of those around him as he proves himself to be a truly honorable man. On the contrary, Daniel's former accomplices, Tío, Castelar, and Pelirrojo, purport themselves to be virtuous when they have not completely turned from their criminal ways. In spite of helping restore order in the Arévalo household, Tío and Castelar continue to steal small items from guests at the family's home. In the first moments of Act Two, for example, Tío and Castelar pocketed Laredo's wallet, and also his wife's necklace.

TÍO: ¡Un tío simpático! ¡Hombre, *Castelar*, dale aquí al señor Laredo su cartera!

LAREDO: ¿Mi cartera?

TÍO: Sí Que se le cayó a usted antes en el salón y la cogimos nosotros pa... devolvérsela en la primera oportunidad.

CASTELAR: Eso es. Tome usted. Y tome usted también el collar de su señora, que también se le cayó en el salón (*Ladrones* 286).

Instead of attempting to keep these items for themselves, however, Tío and Castelar return them to their rightful owners. While restoring the stolen goods initially suggests that Tío and Castelar follow Daniel's example of rejecting their criminal lifestyle, these two characters have not undergone the same drastic change as their former partner in

crime. Daniel reforms from his past delinquencies completely, while Tío and Castelar continue to commit small crimes throughout the evening, including forcible entry and theft (227). Tío repeatedly attempts to convince others of his morality through speech – “Pero somos gente honrada, señor comisario”- and his seemingly altruistic actions – “Te lo he cogido para que no se te perdiese” (337). Nonetheless, the incongruence between their behavior and discourse strike the audience as odd, because they can clearly distinguish the thieves’ true character. While they have helped prevent the theft of documents and money from the safe, they steal the police’s wallet just to prove that they have not lost their pick pocketing skills.

The circumstances surrounding the presence of another veteran thief, Díaz, constitute another application of the “poliáica negra” convention. Díaz, identified in Act Two as Herminia’s birth father, poisoned doña Andrea in order to protect the secret of his true identity and to gain access to his daughter’s inheritance. As the individual responsible for Andrea’s death, the traditional detective novel prescribes his punishment in order to provide justice and reestablish order (Craig-Odders 22). However, Díaz dies unexpectedly as he attempts to escape from the scene; he is killed instantly by a stray bullet from Pelirrojo’s gun (*Ladrones* 335). His death, “representing divine rather than human justice,” strikes the audience as odd since Andrea’s murder goes unpunished (Blackwell). Whether or not his death was accidental, however, is unclear. Throughout the course of the play’s action, Pelirrojo gives the appearance of being an accomplice in Díaz’s plot to steal the contents of the Arévalo safe. Pelirrojo cooperates with the investigation and perhaps Díaz’s death was motivated by fear for his own personal safety

in the future. After witnessing the scene, Menéndez scrutinizes the evidence only momentarily before proclaiming the death accidental.

MENÉNDEZ: (A *PELIRROJO*) ¿A ver qué pistola usas, *Pelirrojo*? (*Examinando la pistola que le da el PELIRROJO.*) Una <Astra> del nueve corto...  
 ¿Entonces es verdad que el tiro del jardín se le escapó a Ríos sin querer? (*Al teléfono.*) Buenas noches, señor comisario. Aquí, Beringola. El asesinato de doña Andrea está liquidado (337).

Menéndez immediately reports his hasty judgment to police headquarters, providing no further explanation of the evening's events in his statement. As in the previously discussed case of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, Menéndez perpetuates a cover-up which Jardiel utilizes as a venue for criticizing the lack of justice for the war crimes and murder committed at the hands of the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War. The word "liquidado" would have jarred audiences, as it typically applies to politicians killing their enemies or criminals eliminating individuals who attempt to thwart their illegal activities. The audience has little time to react to the shocking conclusion of *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, for the play ends less than one minute later. Once again, Jardiel has constructed his criticism by basing it on silence and suppression; the characters do not discuss the incident further before the play's conclusion.

Although Poncela did not make direct references to the political situation, which could endanger the play's production, many characters present in *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, mirror the social and religious control exercised by the Franco regime in one way or another. The names of several major and minor characters, for example, make "oblique references to the Spain of 1941" (Blackwell), thereby suggesting additional criticism to the audience. Critic Valls notes that Castelar, who suffers a nervous condition which causes him to speak in unintelligible babble, is a humorous

parody of Emilio Castelar, a Spanish politician of the late nineteenth century, known for his skills as an orator (209). This character in *Ladrones* requires that Tío translate for him in order to make sense of utterances such as “¡Trestriborcies conucio pirepinocies!” (*Ladrones* 266). Blackwell notes that this reference also has political implications, for “underneath the humor lies the serious accusation that politicians are thieves and speak nonsense.” Don Rodrigo also carries important connotations for the Spanish audience; it alludes to Don Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, “El Cid,” the Spanish national hero. In the context of the play, don Rodrigo is the patriarch of the Arévalo family, and the thieves’ attempt to gain control of Herminia’s inheritance can be interpreted as an attempt to also gain control of her legacy. In the same way, Jardiel suggests that the triumphant Nationalist regime has made unwelcome advances in attempts to undermine traditional Spanish values and their heritage in spite of their claims to have revolted against the liberal republican government to preserve traditional Spanish values, especially those of the family and the church.

Other minor characters also have suggestive names. Pelirrojo, who also goes by the name of “Peter” during the course of the play, shares his names with two Biblical characters – Judas and Peter, respectively – both of whom betrayed Jesus. Thus, both names offer a passing reference to religious entities. Eulalia, the Arévalo household’s weeping maid, shares her name with a Spanish saint from the third century who was tortured and killed because she defied the authority of the Roman governor (*Eulalia*). Possibly the audience would not immediately recognize the significance of Pelirrojo and Eulalia’s names; however the culmination of the significant meanings behind several

names of the minor characters makes a poignant critique of the contemporary social situation in the context of the work as a whole.

While the minor characters' names play a minor role in reminding the audience of significant figures in Spain's rich history, Jardiel carefully selects the names of two major characters to criticize the political situation of his era. Critic Seaver notes the importance of selecting well-known points of reference in theater as follows:

Pero en la comedia deja de ejercer el papel de antes puesto que el público teatral entendería mucho menos las alusiones del autor y por lo tanto el sentido [ . . . ] que evocaban. Es por eso que hace muchas de sus alusiones a figuras más conocidas o populares (Seaver 211).

In other words, the more well-known the point of historical, literary, political, or geographic reference connected to the theatrical work, the more likely Jardiel's audience would appreciate its presence in the play as a source of critique or comedy (211).

Keeping this tendency in mind, one can easily find deeper meaning within the names of the two principal female characters in the work. "Germana" and "Herminia" bear similarity to the Spanish and English words "Alemania," and "Germany," thereby suggesting Spain's political ties to Adolph Hitler (Blackwell). The regular repetition of these two names throughout the course of the play constantly reiterates this political alliance. Furthermore, the duality of Germana's character – appearing to be Herminia's devoted and caring mother when, in fact, she also shares in a plot to steal her inheritance – suggests a commentary on Jardiel's behalf regarding the inability to trust the appearances of Spain's newest political ally. Audiences could also make political connections in the marriage of Herminia to Daniel, the chief thief and in that of Germana with Felipe, who shares his name with Felipe II, the monarch of Spain's greatest empire.



As previously discussed, Eulalia's character subtly reminds the audience of a Catholic saint, however, she also exercises a principal purpose within the play. While the audience remains amused by her incessant crying (Escudero 44), Valls notes that crying is the way in which she deals with the stress of the household in which she serves (*Ladrones* 237 n16). While explaining her constant weeping, she tells Pelirrojo the following:

EULALIA: Ahora que así, en gran escala, lo que se podría llamar el llanto navegable, ése no me ha empezado hasta que vine a servir a esa casa. Porque una no quiere decir na, y, a fuerza de empapar pañuelos y de escurrir pañuelos, va tirando; pero ¡en esta casa se ven cosas pa que la instalen a una grifos, señor Peter! (*Ladrones* 237)

In a similar way, Poncela asserts, Spaniards should feel free to express their own feelings regarding the political situation “in their own household” during the post-Franco period. Inasmuch as Eulalia constantly mourns and grieves over the terrible happenings in the family's home, the play insinuates that Spaniards themselves should look at their own situation with such honesty.

The characters in *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* illustrate Jardiel's argument that appearances can be deceiving and thereby underscore the importance of distinguishing an individual's true motives. Throughout this work, which features moral thieves and dishonest nobility, Jardiel shows his audience a seemingly contradictory view of reality, but which actually mirrors Spanish society as much as they wanted to escape from it. Perhaps Jardiel referred to Franco's attempt to develop national unity and the distribution of political propaganda, promising Spaniards relief from their miserable existence during the Civil War. Instead of helping the Spanish people overcome their painful pasts, Franco imposed even more restrictions upon their behavior, adding to their

misery. Jardiel's treatment of the theme of dishonesty and pretense serves as a warning to his audience that they, too, must discover the truth behind those they trust and exercise a judgment that goes past surfaces, rhetoric, and facile appearances.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Enrique Jardiel Poncela and his Context

Enrique Jardiel Poncela's post-war productions, particularly *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, provide insight into the social conditions of this era. Living beneath the forcible repression – including literary censorship – imposed by the Franco regime, Jardiel Poncela could only indirectly criticize the injustices present in Spanish society in the years following the Spanish Civil War. Jardiel Poncela employed the previously discussed theories of humorism and “Theater of the Unlikely” in the creation of his works to criticize the military dictatorship covertly, to point out the misery of the post-war experience, and to highlight the forcible repression of the truth. His works, filled with zany character types, hilarious word games, and convoluted plot lines, masked any social commentary, thereby receiving approval from censors. Audiences and critics alike were so entertained that they missed the serious issues Jardiel's theater treated. *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* in particular subverted the conventions of the traditional detective story in order to comment upon the lack of justice in the newly-formed government and its possible implications. They also used similar structures and thematic concerns, such as repression of the past, to focus this criticism.

The “Other Generation of 1927” renovated the stale comedic techniques of their era and developed their own theories of “humorismo” and the “teatro del inverosímil” in order to breathe fresh life into the theatrical scene. Jardiel Poncela and his contemporaries incorporated improbable situations, outlandish character types, clever

word plays, a sense of irony, and perceptible distortions of reality into their works. However, the Spanish Civil War brought about enormous changes in government and society at large, with the victorious Nationalist government limiting freedoms and diminishing the quality of life for everyday citizens. The regime also began to exercise control over its citizens' freedom of expression by subjecting all literary works to a highly-organized system of censorship. As a result, many writers resorted to indirect methods of expression – such as the employment of devices such as the metaphor or irony - to disguise the critique hidden within their works. As previously discussed, Jardiel's pre-war plays share many technical and conceptual similarities with those produced after the war. However, in many of Jardiel's plays after 1939, his almost slapstick comedies began to serve the serious purpose of offering social critiques hidden in plain sight.

*Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) and *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (1941) debuted in Spanish theaters almost immediately following the end of the Spanish Civil War. Upon closely examining these works, one notes many structural and thematic similarities between the two. Jardiel hides the social criticism in plain sight, although perceptible by discerning audiences, thereby gaining approval from censors for his works. These two plays deal with the forcible repression of truth and the inability to distinguish reality from pretense, which made audiences look at their own reality in a new light, even as the comic elements gave them escapes from the grayness of their existence.

Both plays demonstrate Jardiel's mastery of the conventions of the modern detective novel through his utilization and subversion of audience's expectation for the

traditional model. In both works, Jardiel presents the murder of innocent victims – Eloísa and Andrea – whose deaths are both investigated by inept representatives of the law. The police agents, unlike traditional detectives, perpetuate a cover-up rather than bring the murderers to justice. Micaela Briones escapes punishment for killing her sister Eloísa due to her apparent mental illness while Doña Andrea's killer, infamous thief Díaz, dies instantly when hit by a stray bullet. Jardiel reveals guilt and innocence only in the play's final few lines; thus the works end abruptly, leaving the audience with a generally unsettled feeling, as if all the wrongs still have not been set right. These two circumstances directly reflect Jardiel's implied assertion that the Franco regime neglected to provide justice for the atrocities committed during the country's civil war. By employing this well-established literary convention, which generally prescribes the reestablishment of order through providing justice for the guilty and exonerating the innocent, Jardiel points out that his society lacks any sense of social justice.

Secrets and pretense play a large role in both works, as the Briones, Ojeda, and Arévalo families go to great lengths to protect the mysteries surrounding both households. Although most members of the Briones family display signs of mental disturbance, Edgardo notably extreme in his endeavors, feigns insanity. He takes imaginary train rides from his bed in order to distract both himself and his family from the painful circumstances of Eloísa's death. Although the entire Briones family appears insane, Micaela is the only genuinely unstable member of the family. Even though a minor component of the work, the miscommunication between Clotilde and Ezequiel regarding his medical experimentation on cats constitutes an important symbolic element of the work. Clotilde's misunderstanding of his medical notes guides - or misguides - her

action throughout the piece. Deception is a main thematic element of *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, as the main characters and supporting cast all assume false identities to aid them in accomplishing their own agenda. All four thieves, Daniel, Pelirrojo, Castelar and Tío assume a pseudonym while in the Arévalo household, because of their initial intention of robbing the contents of the family's safe. Jardiel also uses the deception regarding Herminia's personal background - not to mention her ambiguous parentage - to comment on the unreliability of making judgments on the identity and character of others based only on appearances and rhetoric.

Jardiel utilizes the household staff in both works to underscore the themes of evasion, and to demonstrate the toll such behavior takes upon an individual. Both the Briones and Arévalo homes have secrets which make the staff suspicious, but no one openly discusses these issues. In *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, the new servant in the Briones household, Leoncio, immediately notes the adverse affect the working environment has upon Fermín and Práxedes. They have eventually become desensitized to the oddity of the Briones family, and their nervous tics – Práxedes' odd speech patterns and Fermín's habit of running through the garden nude – can be seen as their coping mechanism. Eulalia's perpetual crying is her personal reaction to the odd and tragic events in the Arévalo household. Pelirrojo, a recent addition to the staff, expresses concern for Eulalia; however, he never presses her as to the true cause of her sadness. While the household staff mirrors the "gracioso" from Spanish Golden Age theater insomuch as they function as a source of humor for the audience, Jardiel uses these characters to illustrate how the dark actions of their masters affect every aspect of their lives.

Criticized in his own day for ridiculous plots and unlikely characters, Jardiel's works have received renewed attention some sixty years after their composition. Seen in their own decade as works of "escapism" like those of fellow members of the Generation of '27, dramatists and plays can now reveal this latent criticism of a repressive regime. Finally free of censorship and open wounds of the post-war era as well as personal vendettas of his contemporary reviewers, critics can better evaluate Jardiel Poncela's comic genius but also his reflections of his society. By criticizing his society through humor, he forced audiences to confront their painful reality, even as they attempted to escape it. His works thus set the stage for later theatrical movements, with writers like Ionesco who would use humor in their anti-fascist pieces. They also offered audiences a mirror of their situation, albeit humorously, presented as would social realist dramatists such as Antonio Buero Vallejo and Alfonso Sastre in the 1950s. When *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and other post-war plays were revived in 2001, the centennial year of Jardiel Poncela's birth, they left Madrid audiences laughing as hard as did those in the 1940s. Their success, some sixty years after their premiere, points not only to the timeliness of his critiques of human beings and their society, but also to the timeless quality of his humor.

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