

## ABSTRACT

Censorship and Repression in Sastre's *La mordaza* and Jardiel Poncela's *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*

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In the years directly following the Spanish civil war, Spain experienced widespread repression and censorship at the hands of Francisco Franco, the dictator who assumed power after the war. Evidence of the struggle that Spaniards faced as a result of this censorship is present in Jardiel Poncela's 1940 drama *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and Sastre's 1954 drama *La mordaza*. Both of these dramas were written during the time of Franco's repression and thus reflect the underlying social turmoil that Sastre and Jardiel Poncela carefully present while writing under a regime of strict literary censorship. Jardiel Poncela uses a comic theater of the absurd style while Sastre uses the slightly more direct language of neo-realism. Spain experienced great fear during the time of Franco's power which often resulted in executions, disappearances, and widespread starvation. Sastre and Jardiel Poncela portray the themes of fear and censorship in their respective dramas through their characters, plot twists, and details that become symbolic of the repression and censorship Spaniards endured.

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CENSORSHIP AND REPRESSION IN SASTRE'S *LA MORDAZA* AND JARDIEL  
PONCELA'S *ELOÍSA ESTÁ DEBAJO DE UN ALMENDRO*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Censorship in Post-War Spain*

*Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* by Enrique Jardiel Poncela from 1940 and *La mordaza* by Alfonso Sastre from 1954 both deal with the themes of widespread censorship and repression of the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) after the Spanish civil war (1936-1939); however, they employ different theatrical styles and techniques. Jardiel Poncela uses the technique of Absurdist Theater, while Sastre employs the Neorealist style, each reflective of the social context of their respective decades. Both works feature families with serious problems, an oblique attack on the regime who proclaimed family values and whose dictator saw himself as a father figure. Jardiel Poncela exhibits a family going insane because of keeping secret a murder in the family. Sastre presents a father who terrifies family members and threatens them to keep his secret of murdering a stranger. Through the use of their characters and the manner in which their stories unfold, underscored by key symbolic elements, Jardiel Poncela and Sastre effectively offer a sketch of a hurting Spain, all the while conforming to the censorship rules imposed by Franco's government.

Repression, including censorship and executions of Republican prisoners, was a very real concern in post-war Spain that affected the lives of all Spaniards, but especially those who had the misfortune of being on the losing side of the civil war. Spaniards were restricted from speaking freely about the political climate or events that happened during or after the civil war that might reflect unfavorably on the Franco regime. Literary works

that discussed the censorship or that painted Republicans in a positive light were, of course, strictly banned. In the words of one scholar, “The appearance of independent studies of repression” during Francoist Spain remained “all but impossible” (Ruiz 453). Jardiel Poncela and Sastre understood the dangers of writing about the political climate and thus in their works write in a way that is subtle enough to allow their dramas to be staged in Franco’s Spain. Although these dramas were presented during Francoism, they show the unstable political climate and the turmoil that Spain experienced during the decades of greatest repression following the civil war. Through their characters, plot lines, and by symbols and imagery they reveal how refusing to discuss the violence and death of the civil war and its aftermath was slowly driving Spaniards crazy and tearing families apart.

### *Brief History of the Spanish Civil War and Its Aftermath*

To understand fully the social climate of fear and repression around which Jardiel Poncela and Sastre center their dramas, readers/viewers need an understanding of the history of the Spanish civil war and how Spain continued to be deeply divided into the “dos Españas” in the years following it. The war began after conservative forces, including the army, the Church, the autocracy and the upper-middle class rebelled against the duly elected Republican government. Franco and the Nationalists then began capturing cities across Spain and forcing their political beliefs upon all the citizens, regardless of where their political sentiments lay. The Nationalists disliked the changes that the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939) had brought to Spain including redistribution of land, secular education and reduction in the size of the army, and sought to restore the social structure of the previous century. The Nationalists were adamantly

against free elections and wanted to recreate the old Spanish way of life by affirming the influence of the Church. When the Nationalists emerged victorious from the civil war, Franco established his fascist government and imposed Francoism, a version of Fascism, upon everyone in Spain.

Although Francoism is difficult to define, it involved the idea of a “national destiny” for Spain, which included the economic policy of autarky and extreme social and political conservatism (Richards 11). Above all else, Franco sought to completely reverse the changes made in the five years of the Second Spanish Republic. According to Richards, the Francoist ‘New State’ saw its primary task as destroying all that the Republic had represented (Richards 11). The Republic had advocated social change and shifted away from the long-time power of the Church. Franco wanted all of Spain to return to the old social structures and sought to do this through repression and through an economic policy of self-sufficiency, or autarky, which intensified the economic devastation of the war.

Autarky was used primarily as a social, political, and cultural quarantine to keep Spain from depending on other countries or from exchanging ideas, especially about governments, with other nations. Autarky is a closed economy where outside trade and foreign aid are forbidden and the country is self-sufficient and able to produce all consumer goods within its borders. Since autarky forbids trade with other nations, an autarkic nation is forced to produce all products it wishes to consume, whether it can efficiently produce them or not. The end of the Spanish civil war coincided with the beginning of World War II which involved most of Europe. Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy had supported the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War with arms

and supplies. When World War II began, the Axis powers faced opposition from Allied governments in much of Europe. It makes sense that Franco, fearful of losing his control over Spain, would impose policies that forbade the exchanging of materials or ideas with other countries. In fact, although Franco officially remained neutral in World War II, he sent food and soldiers to Italy and Germany while Spaniards starved by the thousands. Franco, always vigilant to maintain his iron control over Spain, valued the support of Germany and Italy more than the well-being of his citizens.

Although Franco wished to bring Spain back to its former glory of previous centuries through his economic policy, autarky remains an inefficient economic system, especially for a country struggling to recover from a socially devastating and violent civil war. According to Richards, Franco saw liberalism and exchange with other countries as causing potential decay in the spirit of Spain (Richards 11). He wanted Spain to return to the status it had once enjoyed during the Siglo de Oro in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and sought to do this by increasing the esteem of Spain and making it self-sufficient. He reasoned that if Spain could be self-sufficient and not depend on other nations for trade then it would be more powerful and Spanish goods, services, and ideas would be viewed with increased respect both within and outside of Spain. Although his goal of increasing Spain's international prestige may have resonated with many Spaniards, his policies of vast censorship and repression squelched artistic and literary production and innovation which was so prevalent during the Siglo de Oro. Even though Franco openly had the lofty goal of increasing Spain's international standing through his policy of autarky, his choice had the effect of isolating Spaniards and keeping them more closely under his watch. By the early twentieth century Spain no longer had the vast



colonies and resources it had enjoyed under Phillip II and Franco therefore struggled to govern the “dos Españas” during his time as dictator.

Autarky therefore was extremely unsuccessful and his economic experiment led to death by starvation of thousands of innocent Spaniards. For example, even though Spain was recovering from a war (and admittedly a drought occurred in 1944-5), Spain’s policy against importation caused many farms’ production to stagnate since fertilizers that otherwise could have doubled cereal production were forbidden to be imported (Black 23). Franco, however, lacked the foresight to see how his economic policies would drastically affect Spain and would lead to the starvation of many Spaniards, about 200,000 between 1939 and 1945 according to some estimates (Cazorla Sánchez 60). In fact, many critics argue that he used food shortages to “punish” political enemies on the losing Republican side. Because of Franco’s economic policies during the years immediately following the civil war, the decade of the 1940s saw widespread famine and disease in Spain with no real economic policies for relief. Additionally, since Spain’s autarkic policies disallowed international trade or foreign relief, the rest of Europe was blind to the massive starvation in Spain while they concentrated on fighting World War II.

Franco’s economic policies created an extreme shortage of food and encouraged black market dealing of essential commodities. The economic devastation that Spain experienced during the years directly following the war appeared like a never-ending cycle. Food was scarce, employers paid low salaries to poor people, a thriving black market gave preference to banks and bureaucrats, and all the while small farmers were increasingly forced to choose either to starve or risk the black market (Cazorla 61). For

the poorest classes, finding work itself was considered a luxury. According to Cazorla, in 1949 there were 400,000 people unemployed in the country, most of who were the lowest possible class of workers in Spain: agrarian day laborers (61).

Strong social distinctions, especially in the years directly following the Spanish civil war existed between the “have” and the “have-nots” in Spain. For the numerous unemployed in Spain, a “sponsor” was often needed to secure a paying job, a practice which continues even today (Gallo 71). This need for bribes along with the black market represents the complete social immobility of those unfortunate enough to exist in Franco’s Spain without his stamp of social and political approval. A poor farmer participating in the black market could expect the harshest treatment if caught while a governmental bureaucrat would not face the fear of execution for simply dealing in the black market. Of course, participation in the black market or any type of market depends on having some sort of resource with which to trade, primarily money. For many poor Spaniards simply finding enough food in order for their families not to starve remained their utmost concern. Additionally, those who had fought on the losing side of the civil war could be guaranteed a harder time adapting to Franco’s Spain than those who were fortunate enough to be on the winning side. On the most basic level of sustenance, Franco’s economic policies divided Spain into the class of people who held favor with Franco and those who did not, or as he often put it, the “vencedores” (the winners) and the “vencidos” (the defeated). Franco’s economic and social policies did not help bridge the gap between the “dos Españas” and Spain therefore remained a divided nation with no real policy implemented for its relief.

In addition to the fear caused by a widespread famine under a new economic policy, old Republicans also had to fear harsh “off-the-books” legal policies, such as disappearances and secret executions that occurred under the Franco regime. In order to “purify Spain”, Franco sought to eliminate anyone who opposed his dictatorship or who had opposed him during the civil war. Franco’s biggest fear was the loss of his complete control over the social and political structure of Spain. According to Franco and the Church, the purging of dissent was necessary because it was “impossible to negotiate with evil” (Richards 27). Franco and his supporters believed in a clear right and wrong and anyone who did not support Franco was completely, 100 percent wrong.

Many executions occurred during the war and in the years following. These executions were supposed to occur after a legal process but in reality many of the executions occurred suddenly, violently, and without just cause (Cazorla 31). Oddly, Franco’s fear of opposition did not disappear even as many of the Republican soldiers were executed in the years following the war. In fact, Franco continued to execute his enemies until the end of the dictatorship in the 1970s (Richards 30). Since many of these executions happened without justice, the government kept them secret. These unexplained disappearances and executions understandably augmented the fear that Spain was already experiencing as the nation starved and watched Franco control the social and political structure.

The fear of being labeled anti-Franco filtered down to all levels of Spanish life including social activities. For example, Spaniards who failed to clap when Franco appeared on the screen at the movie theater were considered seditious (Cazorla 30). Out of fear, Spaniards were constantly watching their actions and words to ensure that

they did not become labeled as an enemy of Franco. Becoming an enemy of Franco or even being mislabeled as one could lead to a swift execution or disappearance and would most likely leave one's family destitute. People therefore watched their words and actions closely in order to stay under the radar of Franco's informants.

Franco held an ideal that Spain must be elevated to its Siglo de Oro levels in terms of economic self-sufficiency and through his social policies. Since he believed so strongly that Spain had to be purged of Republican resistance who fought against the Nationalists in the civil war, he enacted a state-wide policy of strict censorship and repression. This policy affected all levels of Spanish society as families feared that they would be torn apart by a bread winner being labeled as anti-Franco. "What was certain in all cases was the mood of fear and petty vindictiveness that was felt throughout Spain" (Black 15). The certainty of fear contrasts with the uncertainty of the justice systems, economic prosperity, and what was deemed socially appropriate in Spain. Spaniards constantly watched the words they said to their family members, to neighbors, and held a general fear that any conversation could be overheard by an informant who could have them swiftly executed.

The Franco regime, however, did not see the strong censorship and repression as completely senseless. Franco believed strongly in purifying Spain and the repression was "inspired by an ideological purging of the country of those elements that corrupted the pure-Spanish identity" (Black 15). Since the Republicans wanted to change the social structure in Spain, they were seen as a continuing threat with which necessarily the Nationalists had to deal with in order to maintain Spain's old social structure. Violence against any particular persecuted social group, however, never benefits a country in the

long-run and Spain was no exception. The “necessary” repression and censorship caused the underlying tensions against the Republicans and “have-nots” in Spain to strengthen without allowing for an outlet to express their frustrations. Surprisingly though, some playwrights began to deal with this pressing social issue although very subtly and obliquely. Jardiel Poncela and Sastre deal with the themes of censorship and repression in Spain and how they affected the lives of Spaniards on a very basic family level. By presenting dramas about two families, albeit in different manners, Jardiel Poncela and Sastre portray how widespread repression and censorship adversely affected Spain in the 1940s and 1950s, respectively.

#### *Enrique Jardiel Poncela and the 1940s*

Jardiel Poncela writes during the decade of the 1940s, directly following the end of the Spanish Civil War and the beginning of the Franco regime. During the 1940s Spain experienced widespread hunger due partially to famine and largely to the autarkic economic policies imposed by the Franco regime. Repression and censorship were at all-time highs compared to later decades since the war had just ended and Franco wanted to affirm his power. During the decade of the 1940s, adults still remembered the very recent Second Spanish Republic and the social changes that it tried to impose. Families that supported the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War became post-war targets of the regime and experienced the harshest forms of repression. Franco wanted to assure that he could maintain his power over Spain by actively repressing the “vencidos.”

Although the Republicans faced the worst of Franco’s repression, the fact remains that censorship widely affected all Spaniards. Even Spaniards who had supported the Nationalists during the war had the constant nagging fear that they would lose favor and

be pegged as seditionists or as anti-Franco. In a government where food was shipped out of the country to aid Italy and Germany while Spaniards starved, anyone accused of being anti-Franco was not guaranteed a fair trial since Franco ultimately did not care about the wellbeing of his citizens. Especially during the 1940s when secret executions of Republican sympathizers abounded, Spaniards were especially cautious of their words, in public or private, lest they be overheard or misinterpreted as being opposed to Franco's regime.

During the Second Spanish Republic, literature was liberal and people were allowed to speak freely about ideas. After the Civil War, however, the fear of repression and censorship prohibited Spaniards from reading, writing, or speaking about anything that was considered inappropriate by the regime's standards. Writers returned to more traditional literature such as religious poems or non-explicit love poems that were certain to pass Franco's stringent censorship. Jardiel Poncela, however, uses a style of theater called Absurdist Theatre that on the surface appears to be a comedy about a strange family but underneath the surface tells the story of the tumultuous social relationships that Spaniards experienced as a result of the censorship. The style of Absurdist Theatre involves conversations that seem to have no true meaning and a plot that is so absurd that it seems implausible in real life. Jardiel Poncela employed this style of theater in order to pass the stiff censorship rules imposed by the Franco government.

By writing a drama with characters that are entertaining yet crazy, Jardiel Poncela allows the viewers/readers to gain the impression that the drama could be taken as entertainment and does not contain any deeper social meanings. If Jardiel Poncela had not used the Absurdist Theatre style in his drama, most likely the Franco government would

have censored it and disallowed its publication or presentation. In the case of Jardiel Poncela's *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940), the pressure of keeping a family secret quite literally turns the family crazy. Although it is an entertaining drama and surely many Spaniards viewed it as such at the time, 70 years later it is clear that Jardiel Poncela had an agenda to critique censorship and repression of any discussion of a violent civil war in which Spaniards killed Spaniards while having his drama allowed under such strict censorship. I had the opportunity to view a live production of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* in the summer of 2012 in Madrid while studying abroad. The actors certainly were absurd and entertaining, but the deeper social implications of a tumultuous Spanish society in the years immediately following the Spanish Civil War were evident. The backdrop of the play displayed the flag of the Franco regime which indicates the possibility that at the time of the drama's publication, some viewers/readers were aware of the profound social implications of the drama. The Absurdist Theatre style allowed for the publication of Jardiel Poncela's drama and for a small proportion of Spaniards to understand the emotions felt by many Spaniards that he expresses through his use of absurd characters.

#### *Alfonso Sastre and the 1950s*

The 1940s were undoubtedly the toughest time during the Franco regime with the massive starvation, censorship, and secret executions. By the 1950s, life for many Spaniards had improved somewhat although the 1950s are still referred to as "los años grises." Sastre did not use the Absurdist style that Jardiel Poncela employed but rather wrote in the Neo-realistic style and was more daring with his dramas, often offending the censors. According to one critic, "The dramas of social realism or social agitation reflect

Sastre's profound concern with the role of society in the theatre" (Bryan 6). Another critic explains that Sastre's dramas from this time period are "dramatic representations of the excruciating moral ambiguities inherent in significant human action- in particular, action of major social consequence" (Anderson 840). Sastre uses theater as his medium through which to convey his ideas about the social agitation that Spain experienced. Like Jardiel Poncela, Sastre presents the theme of a family secret in his drama *La mordaza*. Also, similar to Poncela in this drama he uses the secret that tears the family apart as an analogy to the secrecy that Spain held about the horrors that Franco committed after the Spanish Civil War but that could not be discussed.

Sastre's characters in *La mordaza* relate more clearly to figures in the Spanish social structure, yet he presents his characters subtly enough that it passed censorship. Sastre uses a family with a repressive father and the drama centers around the relationships that he has with his family. Although this familial situation can clearly be seen as an analogy to Spain, the drama most likely passed the censorship because his presentation of the troubles seemed mundane enough to be allowed under censorship rules. Sastre does not openly express any opinions about Franco or censorship but he does effectively reveal underlying sentiments felt by the Spanish through his use of characters, plot situations and key symbolic elements.

Both *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* by Jardiel Poncela and *La mordaza* by Sastre deal with the themes of widespread censorship experienced by a country that at the time of their debut was recently undergoing extreme social and political change. The different styles that Jardiel Poncela and Sastre employ are reflective of the social context of their respective decades and what was likely to pass censorship rules when they wrote



their dramas. The two dramas however do have similarities in that they both tell the stories of families torn apart by a family secret, an analogy to the censorship that Spain experienced in the years following the Spanish Civil War. Spain was not allowed to talk about what had happened during the war and therefore the secret remained painful and drove families crazy. Furthermore, Jardiel Poncela uses an upper class family which would most likely have supported the Nationalists while Sastre uses a patriarch, Isaías Krappo, and his German-sounding name to link the drama to Franco and subtly hint at his relationship with Hitler's Germany. Both of these dramatists show that repression, including censorship and executions, was a very real concern in post-war Spain that affected the lives of all Spaniards.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jardiel Poncela

Repression and censorship in *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* by Jardiel Poncela

*Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) by Jardiel Poncela is a drama that on the surface appears like a comedic interpretation of Spanish society with no real social significance. In actuality, though, it represents a response to and critique of the strife that Spain felt after the Spanish civil war. The characters in *Eloísa* are portrayed as ridiculous people who are certainly funny to their audience while they subtly represent the anguish that many Spaniards experienced during the Franco dictatorship. The regime implemented extremely severe censorship and repression and Spaniards were kept from talking openly about the events of the Spanish civil war that had just occurred. Many Spaniards lost loved ones during the war and faced persecution after the war for fighting on the wrong side, but Spaniards were prohibited from expressing any opinion other than Franco's. In fact, the phrase "Guerra Civil" was forbidden in any publication. Strict censorship made it impossible for Spaniards to express adequately the upheaval and loss that they felt after the destruction of the war.

Right after the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) and at the height of the intensely repressive atmosphere, Enrique Jardiel Poncela wrote and premiered *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* in 1942 using the style of theater of the absurd. Jardiel Poncela understood that Spaniards during this time were experiencing great hardship and would be responsive to an entertaining theater style. According to critic Yebra, after the Spanish civil war, " Al hablar de Jardiel Poncela y sus contemporáneos, que 'este "falso humor

español” ... decidió, cada vez más conscientemente, ser “de ninguna parte”, precisamente porque “los graves problemas de la sociedad española” obligan a andar con pies de plomo para no suscitar la acción de la censura” (Yebra 287). Censorship was at its strictest immediately after the civil war, banning Spaniards from discussing publicly the three years of killing and suffering that they had just experienced. Jardiel Poncela chose to express some of the frustration that Spain felt in these post-war years by using a theater style that appeared comedic and highly improbable on the surface while actually hinting at Spain’s post-war struggles. This was an artistic choice. The use of any other style of theater which might have made a more direct comparison between the Franco regime and the crazy Briones family would have undoubtedly landed Jardiel Poncela in jail. Jardiel Poncela admits himself that “lo original repugna a los públicos. Una comedia jamás gusta por ser original, sino a pesar de ser original” (Wentzlaff-Eggebert 292). Jardiel Poncela wrote at a critical time in the history of Spain when Spaniards were forced to hold inside their opinions and emotions of what occurred during the war or they would otherwise face the brutal consequences imposed by the Franco regime. Even in the production of live theatrical performances, there was strict censorship. Abellán explains, “A cargo del delegado estaba también la vigilancia de modo que no fueran introducidos durante la representación o la actuación palabras, frases o chistes que no figuraran en el libreto o que hubiesen sido precisamente suprimidos por la censura” (Abellán 31). Jardiel Poncela’s play addresses Spaniards’ inability to discuss the deaths of Spaniards at the hands of Spaniards but does so very obliquely through characters, plot details, and passing references that hint at post-war problems.

The devastating Spanish civil war began in 1936 after conservative forces, including the army, the Church, the aristocracy, and the upper-middle classes rebelled against the duly elected Republican government. These rebels called themselves Spanish Nationalists and started advocating for a return to the pre-Republican Spanish social status which included a set hierarchy in which the Church and the elite were at the top. The Nationalists steadily captured cities across Spain, imposing their values upon everyone and eventually they were victorious. Francisco Franco (1892-1975) established his fascist government and imposed Francoism (1939-1975), a version of Fascism, upon everyone in Spain.

Franco ruthlessly squelched any opposition and imposed harsh censorship standards in order to keep the Republican ideals far from the minds of the Spanish people (Richards 27). Eliminating his opposition often involved executions, disappearances, and strict censorship standards designed to keep “dangerous” ideas from circulating. Because executions and disappearances were ubiquitous, every Spaniard absolutely felt the pressure of watching their words and actions carefully, even in daily life, for fear of being labeled “anti-Franco.” Censorship and massive starvation were at their height in the years directly following the civil war, so Enrique Jardiel Poncela faced a unique challenge of writing a meaningful drama that very subtly criticized the Franco regime. By the time Sastre wrote in the 1950s, the censorship had lightened slightly but Poncela wrote at the most challenging time for a Spanish writer to make a meaningful critique of his society.

During the civil war many Republican soldiers died, yet after the war concluded, Spaniards were still not allowed to talk freely about those deaths, even if they had lost a family member or close friend. The only opinions that one could express openly were

pro-Franco and every action, from talking with neighbors to going to the movie theater, had to be carefully considered out of fear of retaliation by the Franco regime. Someone who openly expressed disapproval of the Franco regime would soon “disappear” and their disappearance, of course, would never be discussed openly. Spaniards lived their daily lives in fear of the power of the Franco regime and without any means to express this fear or lament the deaths of Republican soldiers and their supporters who died in the war; Spain became crazy, like the Briones family who protagonize Jardiel Poncela’s work.

*Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* features the Briones family, a Spanish upper-class family whose members are undeniably crazy. The insane dialogue among the characters and the improbable personalities of the family members give the drama its comedic quality. Jardiel Poncela, however, uses the comedic distraction to portray subtly what was happening in the lives of Spaniards immediately after the civil war. The characters are driven crazy because of a family secret: the death of Eloísa, the mother, some years ago at the hands of another family member. This family secret symbolizes the secret that Spain held during and after the war by not being able to talk openly about what had happened. Just as Spaniards killed fellow citizens during the civil war, Eloísa died at the hands of another family member. Jardiel Poncela uses “extremes of hilarity contrasted with undertones of violence, disparities in social classes... to question the forcible repression of any mention of the recent Civil War” (Shirding 23). Although it was not apparent at the time to many people, Jardiel Poncela uses these parallels to tie in the events of Spain’s civil war and post-war period with its heavy censorship to what occurs in the drama.

The prologue of *Eloísa* begins with a movie theater scene where common Spaniards are talking, presumably to escape the terrible misery of their lives outside of the theater. According to Shirding, “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” (Shirding 25). A boy walks down the aisles, trying to sell candies and peanuts to the viewers, but no one has any money to buy anything. After the usher tells him to move to a different area where perhaps more people will buy candies, the boy says, “¿Pa qué? Si en estos cines de barrio trabajar el bombón es inútil. Aquí to lo que no sea trabajar el cachué, el altramuz, la pilonga y la pipa de girasol, que cuando la guerra entró muy bien en el mercao...” (Jardiel Poncela 55). Jardiel Poncela very subtly implies in this interaction between the boy and the usher that middle and lower class people in this dingy theater have no money to buy items such as candies because everyone except the elite is so poor after the war.

Furthermore his use of colloquial language with letters dropped out such as in “Pa” for “Para” and “mercao” for “mercado” underscore the lack of education for so many after the war. Recall from the introductory chapter that many people lacked basic nutrition in Spain, and that between 1939 and 1945 around 200,000 Spaniards starved while Franco implemented his economic policy of autarky (Cazorla Sánchez 60). Furthermore, the Second Republic founded hundreds of elementary schools, but over half of the teachers died in the war. While the scene in which the boy attempts to sell candies is subtle, the astute viewers would have understood it as an insult to Franco’s economic and educational policies and therefore to his regime.

During Franco's dictatorship Spaniard's words were, of course, closely monitored but their actions were also closely watched. Since Franco was closely aligned with the Roman Catholic Church, he strictly enforced a strong moral code that rejected anything that would be publicly sexually explicit. Following this, in Jardiel Poncela's play, even the young couple who goes to the movie theater has a guardian, the girl's mother, and they sit across the aisle from each other instead of beside each other. Before the dialogue begins in the prologue, Jardiel Poncela's stage instructions include, "El novio y la novia intentan en vano hablarse de un lado a otro del pasillo por entre los espectadores que lo llenan" (Jardiel Poncela 51). The couple is closely watched not only by her guardian, the girl's mother, but also by the other movie-goers that surround them, pervasively, in the theater. The girl attempts to distract her mother by giving her a Mexican newspaper with the story of a crime in order that she can whisper across the aisle with her boyfriend, but the mother and the other viewers in the theater make it difficult for them to have a conversation. This scene appears innocent enough on the surface but tells the story of the strict censorship that filtered into all parts of Spaniard's lives whether public or private. Interestingly, while the lower class couple faces very strict public scrutiny, two upper-class characters, Fernando and Mariana, are allowed to talk alone and in fact are alone on his ranch for some time during the second act. Another subtle hint of critique is the fact that the newspaper with news of a crime is Mexican, not Spanish, since crime was officially nonexistent in Franco's Spain.

Later in the first scene at the movie theater in a working class neighborhood, Mariana and her aunt Clotilde, appear as they attempt to escape from Mariana's fiancé. Mariana and Clotilde represent a stark contrast between the common people in the theater

who cannot afford candy and the upper-class Spaniards who most likely supported the Franco regime. In his stage instructions, Jardiel Poncela writes that “Mariana es una muchacha de veinte o veintidós años, extraordinariamente distinguida y elegante hacia el refinamiento. Viste un traje de noche precioso, que seguramente llevado por otra no lo sería tanto, y va perfumada de un modo exquisito” (Jardiel Poncela 60). The common people in the theater cannot afford candy yet Mariana is dressed in clothes that obviously are expensive and reflect her higher social status. The people in the theater are surprised and amazed at her appearance of wealth and they talk excitedly amongst themselves about the intruder in this neighborhood “Las conversaciones callan cuando se detiene en la puerta; todo el mundo vuelve la cabeza para mirarla, y hay unos instantes de pausa expectante y emocionada. Las primeras frases son pronunciadas en voz baja” (Jardiel Poncela 61).

Mariana is further described as having “la nobleza del nacimiento” (60) which alludes to the fact that Franco wanted to be seen as a “father of Spain” and attempted to trace the legitimacy of his regime back to important historical and cultural figures such as El Cid. As members of the wealthy Spanish class, Mariana and Clotilde would have been supporters of Franco. The prologue in the movie theater provides a stark contrast between the world of those who supported Franco and those who although they did not openly oppose Franco, had to deal with his economic policies firsthand. Jardiel Poncela writes about a very common event: a visit to the movie theater in a lower class neighborhood, yet he does so in a way in the prologue scene in which he shows the divisions between social classes and the intense poverty of much of Spain.



Some argue, however, that the prologue does not directly relate to the events that follow in the other two acts. Critic McKay explains that “the highly regarded prologue to *Heloise* is a veritable *entremés*, an independent vignette of Madrileñan *costumbrismo* (51). The prologue takes place in a working class neighborhood and thus stands apart from the rest of the play which takes place in the Briones’ house and later on Fernando’s ranch. Since Jardiel Poncela wrote directly after the Spanish civil war and in the strictest time for repression and censorship, he very subtly links the characters’ actions in *Eloísa* to the dissatisfaction that many Spaniards felt in their daily lives. Jardiel Poncela is able to discreetly add his opinions about the divergence of social status because most readers (or viewers) see the prologue as an entertaining start to the “show” that is the rest of the play. McKay further explains that “Jardiel is merely teasing his spectators; the lengthy episode in the movie house has no ‘relevant meaning’ other than to entertain us for its own sake” (51).

McKay’s critique, however, has missed Jardiel Poncela’s very explicit references to post-war problems which set up the critiques in the remainder of the work. In the prologue scene Jardiel Poncela establishes his drama as belonging to the theater of the absurd while still throwing in hints of a social critique against the Franco regime. As noted earlier in the discussion about the colloquial language used by the people in the working-class movie theater, Jardiel Poncela structures his characters’ dialogues in a way that can be viewed by many as simply an entertaining dialogue, as evidenced by McKay’s misreading. However further inspection reveals that Jardiel Poncela’s carefully crafted prologue sets the scene for continued subtle criticism in the following two acts.

The first act of *Eloísa* takes place in the Briones' house where the characters' crazy antics provide entertainment but also further the idea that Jardiel Poncela has an agenda to show the social upheaval that Spaniards faced in the years immediately following the civil war. When I watched *Eloísa* in the summer of 2012 in Madrid, the production had the Franco flag with the double eagles in the background of the Briones' house, subtly implying that today some people realize the significance of Jardiel Poncela's careful attention to details in *Eloísa*. One of the most amusing parts of the play happens when the father, Edgardo Briones, takes his imaginary trip to San Sebastián while actually remaining in his bed, aided by Fermín, the servant, while Leoncio, the new staff person, watches amazed at the imagination and craziness of the Briones family. Edgardo asks his servant Fermín, "¿Tiene los billetes? ¿Has facturado los equipajes?" (Jardiel Poncela 96). Even though on some level Edgardo knows that his trip is purely imaginary, he still goes through extreme efforts to preserve his fantasy trip to escape his reality. Furthermore, the audience notices that Edgardo is fixed in his same location after his "trip," having made no progress, just like Spain after the war.

While I watched *Eloísa* in the summer of 2012 in Madrid with a group of American students and professors from Baylor University, I remember the scene in which Edgardo Briones takes his imaginary trip to San Sebastián stood out in my mind and caused everyone - fluent Spanish speaker or not- to laugh. It is easy to find an old man who takes imaginary trips in his bed humorous and thus it would have been easy for Jardiel Poncela to get the censors to approve his play. Edgardo Briones, however, can be seen as a representation of Spaniards who desperately wanted to forget the events of the war. Edgardo Briones has stayed in his bed for twenty years, after the death of his wife,

Eloísa. Although *Eloísa* was published and premiered in 1940 and Edgardo Briones was not a direct correlation to the events of the civil war, he still represents an individual who has completely withdrawn from normal society after a devastating family event. In a subtle manner, Edgardo Briones can be compared to Spaniards who faced strict censorship and were not allowed to talk freely about what had happened. Furthermore, Edgardo remains stationary, stuck in the past, just as the Franco regime looked back to El Cid or the Hapsburgs but made no economic progress. Just like in Sastre's *La mordaza* a decade later, keeping a great secret has driven the family crazy.

Edgardo is only one member of the Briones family who appears crazy. Other members of the Briones family also suffer from madness. While Micaela criticizes Edgardo for taking his imaginary journeys in his bed, she remains convinced that thieves will come to her house that night. Micaela tells Edgardo, "Porque esta noche van a venir ladrones, Edgardo. Te los estoy anunciado desde el lunes" (Jardiel Poncela 92). Micaela believes that thieves come to the house every Saturday night and thus predicts the coming of thieves. She later tells Edgardo, "Cuando yo digo que ésta es una casa de locos... Irse a San Sebastián esta noche, justamente esta noche, que toca ladrones..." (Jardiel Poncela 92). Micaela "lets" Edgardo pretend to go on his trip but continues to prepare the house for the coming of the thieves that night, indicating the unreasonable fear and suspicions that have also driven her crazy. Her critique of Edgardo is ironic since she also suffers from her own delusions.

Although Micaela does not consider herself crazy, even though she patrols the house with guard dogs, awaiting "thieves", she accurately labels the Briones household as a house of crazy people. Interestingly in Genesis, the names of Micaela's dogs are Caín

and Abel, the names of the brothers from the Bible story in which Cain killed his brother Abel. Micaela tells Edgardo again, “Voy a dar otra vuelta por el jardín con *Cain y Abel*” (Jardiel Poncela 101). She apparently paces around the garden with her dogs on Saturday nights, looking for the thieves. Another parallel can be drawn between the significance of the name of her dogs and Spain after the civil war. During the civil war the Republicans and Nationalists fought against each other and afterwards Spain became divided. In “Genesis,” Cain becomes jealous of his brother Abel and later kills him. Just as Cain killed his brother Abel, the Nationalists killed their Spanish brothers who were Republicans both during and after the war. Moreover, the Generation of 1898 had previously used Cain and Abel to refer to the Carlist Wars, the devastating civil wars of the nineteenth century (Brown 19-20). Astute viewers would surely have picked up on this subtle reference to the latest Civil War; however, Franco’s censors clearly did not make this connection.

Another character that personifies the craziness of the Briones family is the maid, Práxedes. In her first dialogue of the play she asks a series of questions which she answers herself, “¿Se puede? Sí, porque no hay nadie. ¿Que no hay nadie? Bueno, hay alguien, pero como si no hubiera nadie. ¡Hola! ¿Qué hay? ¿Qué haces aquí? Perdiendo el tiempo, ¿no?” (Jardiel Poncela 93). Jardiel Poncela describes Práxedes as a maid that “personifica la velocidad” (93). Since she has so much energy and is constantly asking questions which she answers herself it is easy to see how viewers would find her entertaining and not look for any deeper meaning to explain her antics. The energetic (or nervous) maid who asks a string of questions which she answers herself symbolizes how much of Spain felt after the civil war. They had important questions which could not be

answered and in a way this oppressive silence drove them towards their own explanations to try to maintain a degree of sanity. In Jardiel Poncela's drama most of the characters who have stayed in the Briones household long enough become crazy. After Práxedes's long monologue, Leoncio, the newest addition to the household, immediately concludes, "Y ésta es otra loca de la familia, claro" (Jardiel Poncela 94). Fermín, who has experienced the antics of the Briones family for a longer time immediately refutes this statement and thinks that Práxedes is completely sane, pointing ironically how he too has been affected by the Briones' insanity. Fermín no longer knows the difference between sanity and madness.

Through the details of the drama, Jardiel Poncela critiques the Franco regime. For example, Fernando's uncle, Ezequiel, performs a series of experiments on pellagra with female kittens. He tells his nephew Fernando, "la eficacia de mi suero contra la pelagra, latente en la piel de la mayoría de los gatos y transmisible por herencia maternal, va a quedar demostrada completamente" (Jardiel Poncela 141). The fact that Ezequiel is conducting experiments on pellagra, a sickness generally caused by malnutrition, alludes to the widespread starvation that Spain experienced during the 1940s (Cazorla Sánchez 60). If Franco had not enacted his economic policy of autarky, most likely pellagra and other illnesses such as tuberculosis, all caused by lack of certain nutrients would not have been a concern. Again, Jardiel Poncela very subtly adds the experiments about pellagra under the guise of a slightly crazy uncle in order to get past Franco's censorship.

Ezequiel names the cats in which he conducts experiments and writes their names in a book which Clotilde is convinced is a list of every woman that he has killed. Not until the final scene of *Eloísa* does Clotilde learn the truth of Ezequiel's experiments:

CLOTILDE: -Pero ¿es qué son gatos lo que usted mata?

EZEQUIEL: -Pues ¿qué quería usted que fuesen? (173).

This amusing exchange between Clotilde and Ezequiel distracts the audience from the significance of Ezequiel's studies on pellagra, letting Jardiel Poncela again subtly critique the Franco regime without having his work disapproved by the censors.

The second act of the play takes place on Fernando's ranch and the characters continue to act in confusing and crazy ways. The act begins with Fernando talking to Mariana, telling her about his uncle's experiments with pellagra and how he uses chloroform. Throughout the conversation, Mariana appears nervous and becomes frightened when the closet door supposedly opens by itself. The conversation about the chloroform and the strange opening of the closet door set the scene in the second act for clues that lead to the ultimate question of "who killed whom?" The theme of strange deaths continues as Fernando tells Mariana that his father killed himself because of his love for a woman in a portrait. Mariana is surprised to see that this portrait looks almost exactly like her and exclaims, "Este retrato es mío" (Jardiel Poncela 136). Mariana is further shocked when Dimas tells her that the woman in the portrait is buried in the garden.

The mood in Fernando's house is already tense when the rest of Mariana's family, including bed-ridden Edgardo (who has for some reason risen from his bed), also arrives at the ranch. Mariana announces to her family that a murder has occurred and Clotilde, thinking that Ezequiel has been killing women, is not surprised. While the Briones family is discussing the murder with Fernando and Ezequiel, Julia, Mariana's sister, suddenly comes out of a closet. Everyone is surprised to see Julia since she had been missing for

three years. Julia is now married to a police agent who is trying to solve the mystery of who killed the woman in the portrait. As the family is talking, Clotilde suspects Ezequiel but the true murderer turns out to be Micaela, Mariana's aunt. This shocking secret is revealed by Jardiel Poncela's stage directions which say, "Micaela viene en una actitud delirante, semejante a la que tenía en el primer acto cuando vio por primera vez a Fernando" (Jardiel Poncela 168). When Mariana walks down the stairs, wearing Eloísa's old clothes, Micaela immediately calls out, "¡Eloísa!" (Jardiel Poncela 171). Everyone else is confused by her reaction and Micaela insists that Mariana is the long-dead Eloísa and not Mariana.

Although Dimas, the police agent, disguised as the family's old servant, is present during the scene in which the audience and characters in the play realize that Micaela killed Eloísa, no one goes to jail. In fact, no punishment whatsoever takes place even after the murder is solved and the readers learn that Eloísa is literally buried underneath the almond tree. Jardiel Poncela uses this ending to imply that the wealthy, upper-class supporters of Franco could literally get away with murder and suffer no consequences whatsoever. Jardiel Poncela, however, masks this conclusion by incorporating this detail into an entertaining murder mystery. Even though most of the loose ends appear to be tied up by the end of the story, there are some unanswered questions such as "Why did Micaela kill Eloísa?" or "Why is no one being punished for the crime?" Fermín mentions offhandedly, "¿A ver si he hecho yo mal cambiando de casa?" which could imply that Jardiel is critiquing the "change of house" that occurred in Spain once Franco assumed power, yet he throws this critique in subtly, letting the relatively unimportant servant say this line (Jardiel Poncela 147). Since Jardiel Poncela wrote during a time of great

ensorship and repression in Spain, these unanswered questions could also symbolize the questions that many Spaniards had about the deaths and disappearances during and after the civil war as well as the lack of justice for victims of the Franco regime, many of whom were summarily executed and buried in mass, unmarked graves as is Eloísa.

Jardiel Poncela ties up the loose ends to his drama yet according to McKay, “While the playwright manipulates his denouement with convincing intellectual dexterity...he leaves behind an inevitable residue of psychic bewilderment, the normal product of the play’s lavish embroidery of nonsense, which clashes with the spectator’s emotional need to experience a sense of verisimilitude” (52). While it is true that throughout the entire play of *Eloísa* the reader/viewer is continually confused by the crazy dialogue and actions of the characters, Jardiel Poncela has a plan and it is in the details of the crazy dialogue that we find the underlying themes of his, and by extension, Spain’s silent protest against the harsh censorship and repression imposed by Franco.



## CHAPTER THREE

Sastre

### Repression and Censorship in *La mordaza* by Alfonso Sastre

By the 1950s, Spain had settled into a “gray” existence of repression and censorship. The losses and suffering of the Civil War itself lay over ten years in the past, no longer a fresh atrocity. The starvation and economic devastation of the immediate post-war years of the 1940s, portrayed in *Eloísa’s* opening scene, had improved slightly. Nevertheless, the Franco regime continued its policies of strict censorship of all public communication and continued to repress any negative discussion of the Regime or the Nationalists. Alfonso Sastre wrote social dramas that showed the social agitation that Spain continued to experience in the second decade of the dictatorship. According to the critic Anderson, Sastre’s social dramas, “take place in a world that inevitably imposes an awareness of social injustice and responsibility” (84). Sastre is a political dramatist and in the words of critic Paco, “Alfonso Sastre es nuestro primer dramaturgo político, sin discusión alguna” (510). He uses the plotline in the drama *La mordaza* (1952) to show clearly the events that occurred in the new social structure in Spain which was really a return to old social patterns of a government dominated by the aristocracy, the Church and the military as it had been for centuries. In this drama, Sastre explains the harm caused by the violence and censorship of the Franco government, and by extension any dictatorship, through his plot and his characters that represent figures in society, underscored with the repetition of key words and key images (Anderson 13-19).

The image of the “mordaza”, or gag, mentioned in the work’s title, became a symbol of the repression of reports on true historical events because of the censorship that occurred in Spain during the 1950s under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. In the same way in which a gag prohibits a person from speaking, Franco prohibited his Spanish citizens from speaking freely, by way of his censorship laws. The country had suffered a brutal civil war, in which over one million people had died. However, because of the regime’s policies of censorship, no one could publish criticisms of the Franco forces’ brutality nor discuss the waves of executions and concentration camps that Republicans suffered after the war. Thus, the image of a gag in the drama is a clear symbol of repression that squelched social agitation or discussions over events that occurred in Spain during the war and in the years after the end of the Spanish civil war. In the words of the critic Anderson, “The social implications of *The Gag* are undeniable” (97). Sastre writes his drama using the image of the “mordaza” in order to show the censorship and repressions that occurred in all of Spain while he uses the characters as symbols or representations of the two different political sides or the “Dos Españas,” divided between “vencedores” and “vencidos.”

The drama *La mordaza* begins with a discussion between Isaías, the father, and Luisa, the wife of Isaías’s son, Juan. It is evident in the discussion that Isaías does not respect the rest of his family. He insults Luisa and his son, Juan, has to defend his wife, “No diga esas cosas de Luisa. Yo estoy contento de haberme casado con ella” (Sastre 21). In a later scene, a stranger who arrives at Isaías’s house tells him that he wants to kill Isaías because of a crime that the latter had committed during the war. The foreigner, however, changes his plans and intends to leave, declaring that he will not kill Isaías until

later because he wants him to live his life in fear just as Isaías has made others live in fear of his violence and brutality. When the visitor leaves, Isaías kills him and Luisa hears the gunshot. Isaías threatens Luisa with death if she discusses the killing and an atmosphere of fear begins to develop in the house. In the words of Pronko, Isaías has “an almost hypnotic hold over his family” (115). Luisa keeps the secret for a period of time because she is afraid of what Isaías might do to her or other family members. Yet after a while, she tells her husband, Juan. He, in turn, tells the rest of the family the horrible secret of their father’s culpability in the death of “El extranjero”. Later the entire house knows the secret but no one is able to talk to the authorities because the fear of Isaías’s anger stops them. Many weeks pass and Isaías is sick in his bed and still nobody has admitted to knowledge of the secret about the stranger’s death. After even more time has passed, Luisa is not able to keep the secret any longer and confesses to the authorities that Isaías is guilty of killing the stranger and that she is a direct witness to the crime.

Luisa lives with fear after her confession because the authorities do not force Isaías into jail immediately. In a way, Isaías is able to maintain control over the family’s emotions even though he is not present. When Isaías finally is eventually sent to prison, he tries to escape and is killed by authorities. Even though the reason for the fear has left the family, they still feel guilty about the outcome of the events surrounding Isaías’s crime and punishments. Juan talks to his family at the end of the drama, “Si todo fuera como tú dices; si padre se hubiera matado para vengarse, todo sería más sencillo. No habría que sufrir. Nos defenderíamos” (Sastre 79). Even though Isaías has died outside of prison, the family still feels the need to discuss the topic of his innocence or guilt and the reasons he killed the foreigner. Teo tells his brothers, “Pero, ¿no os dais cuenta? Esta ha

sido su venganza... No es que quisiera escapar. Sabía de sobra que no podría escaparse... Lo hizo para vengarse” (Sastre 79). The guilt that the family feels after the death of Isaías continues because his final act was one of revenge. Even though the source of the family’s fears has died, they are still not sure of the correctness of their actions. The family is left to ponder that it is true that Isaías is a murderer, but did the family make the right decision in condemning him by telling his secret?

It is foremost the secret fear of the family that causes the censorship that consumes them. All of the family pressures begin with the actions of the father and the anger that Isaías shows toward his family members. He is like Francisco Franco because he initiates the violence towards the stranger and everyone in his house follows his authority. For all of Spain, Francisco Franco was like a type of father who wants to protect and/or dominate his citizens, albeit with a heavy hand. He thought that he knew what was best for his citizens like a strict father who thinks he knows what is best for his family. Many Spaniards actually did not believe that Franco ordered or even knew about all of the executions in the 1940s. In *La mordaza*, Isaías, as a symbol of Franco, never discloses to his family what crimes he committed during the war in the same way that many Spaniards remained ignorant or chose to overlook Franco’s ordered executions throughout the 1940s. However, revenge against those who had opposed Franco in the war continued to motivate the dictator over a decade into his regime. The mystery of the crimes and the censorship imposed upon all of Spain creates the fear that is symbolized by the gag in Sastre’s drama.

For many Spaniards, it was easier to forget completely about the crimes that occurred during the civil war and to submit to Franco’s authority than to speak out of fear

of retribution. Likewise in *La mordaza*, without a doubt, the family supported Isaías and Juan defended his father, “Mi padre no es un asesino, Luisa. Durante la Guerra luchó como todos; pero no es un asesino” (Sastre 43). Juan defends his father early on in the drama and is a symbol of the Spanish Nationalists. He supports, especially in public, all of his father’s actions and does not like other influences that may insult Isaías or condemn his actions during the war. It is possible that Juan wholeheartedly believes that his father remains innocent because Isaías has repressed any open discussion but it is also possible that it is far easier for Juan to defend his father rather than face an unpleasant and dangerous truth that may jeopardize his own safety.

Luisa represents the Republicans who submit to Franco’s control out of fear yet secretly do not support him or his violent actions. The first scene in the drama is a conflict between Isaías and Luisa. Even though Luisa secretly condemns Isaías’s actions, she continues to obey his authority because she feels that she has no other option. One can make a connection between the relationship of Juan and Luisa. They are spouses and even though Juan is a man and has more control, he still listens to Luisa’s opinions. Their marriage can be compared to the rest of Spain which had different beliefs even though they still lived under one roof and submitted to the same authority. The two differ in their opinions on Isaías’s innocence yet both fear the father figure, just as most Spaniards feared the Franco regime, regardless of which side of the civil war they had supported.

Antonia, the mother, also represents a subsection of Spanish culture that is present before, during, and after the civil war: the Church. Antonia remains silent and never speaks out against Isaías throughout the drama. She, however, urges him on multiple occasions to repent yet has no way to force a confession out of Isaías. Antonia tells Isaías

that she does not believe that someone can be happy in this world, “No creo que en este mundo se pueda ser muy feliz” (Sastre 52). Isaías replies to Antonia by affirming his belief in the present life, “Yo lo soy aún Antonia, Y no me arrepiento de nada de lo que he hecho para ser feliz, para gozar la vida” (Sastre 52). Antonia, representing the Church in Spain, affirms that there must be a better life than the one she and many Spaniards experienced which includes widespread fear and oppression. Isaías, on the contrary, lives his life in order to enjoy the present moment, without thought of repenting or consideration of how his actions harm others. He certainly embodies the mentality of a dictator through his actions towards his family.

The Franco regime officially endorsed supported the Catholic Church and the Church the regime yet repressed all other denominations. Another comparison then can be made between Isaías and Antonia. Isaías, representing Franco, is married, albeit unhappily, with Antonia who represents the Catholic Church. While Antonia supports Isaías, she constantly lives in fear of him, even though he financially supports her while she is living in his house. Although on the surface the Catholic Church supported the Franco regime, there remained repressed tensions between Franco and the Church on certain levels while the Church conformed to Franco’s demands out of fear and in order to continue to garner his support.

The Catholic Church knew who to support and “strongly supported the Nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War” (Blackwell 53). By supporting the Franco regime, the Catholic Church assured their continued financial and political support during a time of a changing Spanish social structure. Although the First and Second Republic both supported the Catholic Church, Republican Spain wanted to change the Spanish

social structure and to take away some of the power of the Church, especially its role in education. The Church, in turn, openly supported Franco and his return to the old Spanish social structure in which the Church retained its power. In fact, during these years, Catholicism was seen as the official religion of Spain, received considerable financial support, and its educational and social-service networks were well-protected (Adsera 206). The Church saw supporting Franco's regime as the best way to retain power and influence in Spain.

Not every facet of the Church hierarchy fully supported Franco. Many village priests held sentiments against Franco's orders and his policies while the upper levels of the Catholic hierarchy wholeheartedly supported the regime because Franco gave the Church great privileges. Antonia symbolizes the entirety of the hierarchy of the Church in her attitude towards Franco. She supports Isaías and keeps his secret for some time but she does on some level feel uncertain about fully supporting Isaías's actions when the guilt of keeping his secret consumes her and the unrepentant attitude he exhibits bothers her. Just as the village priests, those farthest removed from the benefits of Franco's support, who were more able to see clearly his abuses, Antonia is able to see Isaías's true character the more deeply involved she becomes with keeping his dark secret.

Sastre's focus in his drama is principally on the censorship and how it affects Spain living under Franco's dictatorship. According to one critic, "Alfonso Sastre es un escritor cuya trayectoria personal y teatral está íntimamente ligada a las circunstancias socio históricas que le tocaron vivir: la dictadura franquista" (Johnson 195). *La mordaza* uses the lives of the Krappos in order to describe what occurred across Spain during the civil war and the decades that followed. Because Sastre sets *La mordaza* in an amorphous

location and writes about a family, it is easy to see how readers or spectators think in ordinary terms of their daily lives and may not think about the theme of repression and censorship.

If Sastre had used a plotline which presented important people or which had an obvious theme of censorship, it is very possible that the government would not have permitted the drama's publication. Moreover, there are political implications in the relations among the Krappo family. Even the family name "Krappo" represents the political relations that Spain had with Germany at the time since Krappo is not a Spanish name but one of German origin. Isaías is like Franco, Luisa represents the Republicans, and Juan is a symbol of the Nationalists. Like Franco, the only thing that Isaías fears is appearing weak in front of his family. Franco did not want to appear weak towards his family of Spain and for this reason, implemented strict censorship and fear through violence and intimidation in order not to appear weak or lose any control over his people.

The censorship in the drama represents Spain during Franco's dictatorship. The image of the gag is a symbol of the repression and censorship that many Spaniards faced. A gag covers the mouth so that a person is not able to speak freely. The fear that the family experienced is like a gag because the family is silent about the death of the stranger. While Luisa and the rest of the family know the secret of the stranger's death, no one is able to talk about it because they greatly fear the consequences. The family does not want to talk about the truth because they fear Isaías's power. Pronko describes this feeling: "Love is not necessary for him: fear is as effective a gag, and he will count upon that" (115). Sastre explores the theme of mental anguish. According to González, "El diálogo sirve para extraer de lo más hondo del ser de los personajes sus más oscuros



sentimientos” (333). When the truth of Isaías’s actions is finally brought to light, the rest of the family discusses the repression that they felt while keeping such an important secret.

Toward the end of the work, in a key scene, Sastre’s character discusses the image of the “mordaza.” In “Cuadro quinto,” the family is able for the first time to discuss tentatively their feelings toward the repressive family structure that existed while Isaías held an overwhelming power over the family. Teo tells Juan, “Siento como una mordaza en la boca.... Es el miedo...” (59). Luisa and Juan both agree with Teo that they feel as if a gag were covering their mouths, forcing them into silence. Everyone is too afraid to say anything against Isaías yet the silence itself constitutes a fear in the household. Luisa tells her family, “Hay silencio en la casa. Parece como si no ocurriera nada por dentro, como si todos estuviéramos tranquilos y fuéramos felices” (60). The key phrase here is “parece como si;” however, appearance and reality differ radically. An outsider to the family may assume that everything is well with the family yet the family members suffer under the control of Isaías and his secret. Because of this dark secret, only the family feels the “mordaza” covering their mouths. The longer the secret continues, the harder it becomes for the family to keep the secret in Isaías’s repressive house and the greater the toll it takes on their mental and physical health.

In addition to the strong symbolism associated with the drama’s title, Sastre employs images of heat and cold which symbolize fear as well. Sastre uses these repeated words such as “calor”, “miedo”, and “frío” in order to show the underlying themes of the pressures of Isaías’s authority. Before the characters compare keeping Isaías’s secret to having a gag over their mouths, they use these words to describe the discomfort they

experience. A gag is an easy way to explain the fear they feel while the house having too much “heat” or “cold” is fear that is harder to quantify. Even before Isaías kills the stranger, Isaías complains about the heat in the house to Antonia who when asked by Isaías, denies her fear. Antonia says, “Yo no tengo miedo, Isaías... que me ponga nerviosa... No me gusta oírlos discutir” (22). Antonia feels nervous while Isaías admits that he too feels that something is different in the house. They are reluctant to discuss what the heat and the nervousness symbolize, the one because of her fear and the other to avoid recognizing the harm he causes his family by his violence and repression.

The use of these key words like heat and cold shows the situation of the characters and in the words of one critic, “The dramatist hears certain words coming from his characters, but they are the character’s words, and not the author’s and it would be dishonest to ignore them” (Pronko 113). According to Pronko, Sastre shows the character’s thoughts by repeating certain words. At the same time that Isaías has power, the characters say, “hace calor” several times. Antonia complains about heat in the opening scene, “Me ahogo... El calor los ciega y no les importa matar a un hombre” (Sastre 23). It foreshadows what will soon occur. Isaías’s children feel like they are drowning under his oppression and they are choking on the heat. Heat is also a symbol of the repression that the characters in the drama feel and is also a symbol for the feelings of Spain during the dictatorship. It symbolizes the suffocating repression that occurred when the family kept the secret of the murder of an unarmed stranger.

After the incarceration of Isaías, the characters speak of cold, using the phrase “hace frío” to describe the weather. It is as if the presence of Isaías’s power creates heat while its absence leaves the characters complaining of the cold. The word “miedo,”

openly declared, shows the fear that the family feels when everyone knows about the crime. While the word “calor” can symbolize the presence of fear, the word “frío” is a symbol of the presence of guilt. After the death of the dominating man, Isaías, the family feels a type of guilt towards the events that have happened and the role each has played, although they simultaneously feel relief.

*La mordaza* was written in the decades following the Spanish civil war and parallels sentiments felt in households across Spain. The scenes with Isaías and Antonia hint at conversations that many Spaniards had privately in the years following the civil war. Both Isaías and Antonia know that the house is different and somehow has more “heat” that makes Antonia “nervous.” These words symbolize how Spaniards felt about the actions that occurred during the civil war. Since they were not permitted by Franco to discuss them in any manner, they employed self-censorship when they attempted to deal with what happened during the war.

The themes of fear, censorship, and repression that the characters experience in the drama *La mordaza* gives a picture of the actual environment of Spain during the years of Franco’s dictatorship. The years before the dictatorship were years of literary and artistic experimentation and social change. During the years immediately following the Spanish civil war, Spain experienced either a return to very traditional literary styles or to styles like the Escapist Theater style of Jardiel Poncela. Since censorship and repression were extremely strict in the years immediately following the civil war, authors and playwrights had to make sure that their works would pass the stringent censorship rules. By the time Sastre wrote in the 1950s, his style of Revolutionary Theater or Social Realism was allowed to exist under the censorship rules as long as it remained subtle

enough to not be detected by the government officials in charge of determining what got published. Although Sastre's drama *La mordaza* appears less than subtle when viewed from a literary critique standpoint, it is possible that the majority of Spanish readers did not understand his deeper meanings, at least not with one reading or one performance. If Sastre had been more explicit, the Franco regime undoubtedly would have forbade the publication of *La mordaza*.

Franco reversed progress toward human rights and returned Spain to absolutism and repression. Because there was strong censorship in Spain, the only way in which Sastre is able to speak about those themes of repression is in a way in which it is not obvious that he is writing about repression. The drama *La mordaza* is not obviously about repression and government censorship but contains an underlying theme that functions as a symbol of the actions of the government. In a way, *La mordaza* becomes a symbol of repression and the censorship that occurred in Spain during the 1950s under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, but which psychologically represents the negative effects of whichever government maintains its power through violence, fear, and censorship.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Censorship and Repression in Jardiel Poncela's *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1940) and Sastre's *La mordaza* (1954)

As we have discussed extensively, in the years directly following the Spanish civil war, Spain experienced widespread repression and censorship at the hands of Francisco Franco, the dictator who assumed power after the war. Evidence of the struggle that Spaniards faced as a result of this censorship appears in Jardiel Poncela's 1940 drama *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* and Sastre's 1954 drama *La mordaza*. Both of these works were written during the time of Franco's repression and thus reflect the underlying social turmoil that Jardiel Poncela and Sastre carefully present while writing under a policy of strict literary censorship. Although these dramas are written in different styles, one theater of the absurd style and the other in the neorealist movement, as we have shown, they both explore the social impact of the censorship and repression that occurred in Spain after the civil war. Jardiel Poncela and Sastre portray the themes of fear and censorship in their respective dramas through their characters, plot situations and the mention of certain details that become important symbolically or that subtly evoke social problems with the dictatorship while staying in line with the censors. Both of these works directly correlate to repression experienced by Spaniards after the war but people experiencing repression in other countries and times can identify with the issues they raise.

Censorship in post-war Spain pervaded all aspects of life including censorship of books, newspapers, movies, public acts, and theater. Spaniards lacked rights regarding free speech and could not criticize the government in any way, even if they had suffered great loss during and after the war. For example, many families on the losing Republican side of the civil war lost loved ones during the fighting or lost them to “disappearances” following the war. These events resulted from Franco executing his enemies who disagreed with his policies, thus keeping Spain silent and fearful (Cazorla 31). Without an outlet to express their feelings, except in the most private of situations, the intense censorship and repression of any negative reaction to the war or the aftermath, including economic privation and fear of retaliation, slowly drove Spaniards crazy.

Although Jardiel Poncela and Sastre wrote their dramas under censorship, they present scenarios in each of their respective dramas that depict life with censorship for average upper-class Spanish families. Both of the families in Jardiel Poncela’s *Eloísa* and Sastre’s *La mordaza* represent typical upper-class families that would have been Nationalist supporters during the Civil War and thus “approved” by the Franco regime. Jardiel Poncela and Sastre do not try to depict the lives of one of millions of poor families immediately following the civil war nor do they attempt to picture the lives of upper-class Republican intellectuals after the civil war. Instead they respectively describe the lives of a family and social class that are least likely to offend the censors.

Jardiel Poncela and Sastre both lived in a society with strong censorship standards and thus critiqued the regime in subtle ways so their works could be presented and published and so they would not be imprisoned. Unlike books, newspapers, or movies, dramas are presented live to an audience and thus run the risk of having a previously

approved work deemed inappropriate if the actors stray from the script. The Franco regime remained extremely strict on the censorship of dramas and required that scripts be approved by the Vicesecretaría de Educación Popular before a drama could be presented in a theater (Abellán 31). They also sent censors to performances to ensure that no one added unwanted commentary into a performance.

Jardiel Poncela and Sastre thus faced extreme censorship and serious consequences if they strayed from what Franco's censors considered appropriate material. Jardiel Poncela subtly critiques the Franco regime through his use of theater of the absurd in which characters act in outrageous and humorous ways while the details, which are easily overlooked, provide the substance to his critique against Franco. His humorous drama effectively masks his underlying critique and even today, few critics fully believe that Jardiel Poncela wrote *Eloísa* with an agenda in mind. In a disavowal of the realities of censorship, or the literary devices needed to surmise them, critic McKay writes about *Eloísa*, "Their antics, quips, repartee, and rejoinders serve to prepare our minds for the dazzling absurdities to follow, although in substance the prologue is unrelated to the later plot development" (McKay 51). *Eloísa* is certainly an entertaining drama with absurd characters yet underneath these absurdities lies the true critique of the Franco regime in the easily-overlooked details.

Jardiel Poncela's *Eloísa* premiered in 1940, just one year after the end of the civil war when executions, disappearances, starvations, and censorship were at their peaks. Jardiel Poncela therefore had to write *Eloísa* as an extremely subtle critique since the Franco regime was especially observant in the early post-war years. Sastre wrote *La mordaza* in 1954, over a decade after *Eloísa* premiered. In the 1950s, censorship in Spain

still persisted but it had relaxed slightly. Sastre writes *La mordaza*, which literally translates into “The Gag,” about a family struggling under the authoritative leadership of the father and the stifling nature of keeping secret his murder of a stranger. The parallels between *La mordaza* and the social structure in Spain following the civil war are more apparent than the extremely subtle critique that Jardiel Poncela makes in *Eloísa*. However, Sastre writes about the power struggles within the traditional family unit which Franco emphasized during his regime. Even though Franco can be compared to the overbearing father in *La mordaza*, most likely Franco would have approved of the father having strict control over his family.

Although on the surface both of these dramas adhere to traditional family values in that they required the father take charge and the young couple has a chaperone, Jardiel Poncela and Sastre also worked deeper themes into their plays which shows that the political and social events following the civil war are quite literally turning the families crazy. In *Eloísa* the Briones family presents several examples of crazy including Edgardo, Micaela, and Ezequiel. Bedridden Edgardo is convinced that he takes a trip to San Sebastián with the help of his servants and tells them, “¡Ah! Oye... No olvides prepararlo todo, que dentro de cinco minutos salimos para San Sebastián” while he lies in his bed (Jardiel Poncela 91). Micaela calls Edgardo crazy yet she herself is convinced that thieves are coming to the house this Saturday and that is why Edgardo should not go to San Sebastián, “Yo me pregunto si no puedes irte a San Sebastián mañana por la noche u otra noche cualquiera, que no sea la noche de hoy precisamente” (92). Ezequiel tells Clotilde about his research on pellagra using cats, whom he names, and fails to see that Clotilde thinks that he is murdering women. Ezequiel explains to Clotilde, “Lo declaro



con orgullo. Y el día que lo sepa todo el mundo, la Humanidad no olvidará fácilmente mi nombre” (163). Clotilde replies to Ezequiel’s statements about pellagra with disgust instead suggesting, “Y para no dar en un cárcel, supongo” (163). Ezequiel in this instance clearly cannot distinguish social cues between admiration and disgust and Clotilde is representative of a crazy household by immediately assuming that Ezequiel is a murderer instead of a benign researcher. While it is amusing how the characters focus on their own thoughts and how they are largely unaware of what the other characters think, the craziness of the family members represents the way in which each character uniquely deals with the secret of Eloísa’s murder at the hands of her own family, paralleling the deaths in the Civil War at the hands of other Spaniards. Even the servants suffer the effects of the Briones’ insanity, as they too exhibit certain mental instability.

In *Eloísa* the symbolism is less direct than in *La mordaza* but the details still present the themes of repression and censorship through the actions of the characters. The opening scene in the movie theater shows that the lower-class citizens cannot afford even the cheapest snacks in the theater while Mariana and Clotilde are dressed in very nice clothes and contrast with the poverty of the rest of Spain. In fact, this scene holds a mirror up to the middle-lower classes of post war Madrid by critiquing the reality of common Spaniards. The usher at the movie theater expresses this reality by stating, “Si en estos cines de barrio trabajar el bombón es inútil” (Jardiel Poncela 55). Jardiel Poncela critiques the Franco regime by showing the differences in social classes and how the upper-class Nationalists benefited from the Franco regime while the poorer supporters of the Republic suffered privation. In the last scene of *Eloísa* the police officer figures out the mystery of Eloísa’s death at the hands of Micaela yet no one is punished for the

crime. Since Franco favored the upper-class Nationalists, this lapse suggests that Franco's supporters could quite literally get away with murder. The frustrated detective plot symbolizes the inequality in post-war Spain and the corruption of the Franco regime. The mention of pellagra also points to the economic problems of autarky that never appeared in Franco newspapers. Pellagra and tuberculosis, both rampant in the 1940s, resulted from poor nutrition and health care, effects of autarky.

In *La mordaza* the family's insanity is less humorous; the Krappo family is driven crazy by keeping secret the murder of the father's enemy from the war. This type of crazy can be related to "la mordaza" and in the words of Teo, one of the brothers, "Siento como una mordaza en la boca... Es el miedo..." (Sastre 59). In *La mordaza* the characters are constantly fearful of how the father, Isaiás, will react to their actions. Although the rest of the family excluding Isaiás is mentally stable, their fear drives them crazy since they are not able to talk openly about the situation.

In both of the dramas the characters are driven crazy because of having to keep the secret of the murder of someone. In *La mordaza* this connection is more direct than in *Eloísa* yet the ending in *Eloísa* implies that the family is crazy because of the secret of Eloísa's death at the hands of a family member and the lack of punishment for the crime. In *La mordaza* initially only Luisa knows the secret of the murder but the stress of keeping the secret causes her to tell her husband, Juan who later tells his brother. Throughout the drama the characters' words and actions directly reflect the fear that the family feels by keeping secret the father's murder of the stranger. Juan tells Teo and Luisa, "Pienso en Teo, en el padre, en las cosas que nos han ocurrido y en las que todavía

nos van a ocurrir. Y me da angustia” (Sastre 48). The family also fears what Isaías might do in the future that could be worse than murdering a stranger from the war.

Another similarity between the dramas is that both present dysfunctional families that intensify the craziness experienced in each family. As previously discussed, in *Eloísa* the Briones family exhibits crazy behavior. In *La mordaza* all the family members are scared of the father, Isaías, and his strict control dictates the degree to which the family members feel free to discuss something that Isaías may not approve. For example, in the first scene Isaías openly tells Juan and Luisa about his disapproval of Luisa as Juan’s choice of wife, “Es una pena que no tuvieras más ojo para elegir a tu mujer, Juan. El mundo está lleno de mujeres honestas, limpias y obedientes” (Sastre 20). Although Luisa lives in the same house as Isaías, he exercises so much control over the house that she does not feel free to defend herself when she is insulted in the first act. Isaías has a more forceful control over Luisa since she is the wife of Juan and is not one of his daughters. He threatens her after he murders the stranger, “¡Calla! ¡Calla! Yo no he hecho nada. Tú no has visto nada. ¡O te mato! ¿Qué haces aquí a estas horas? ¡Vete a dormir! ¡Silencio! ¡Tú no has visto nada! ¡Vete a dormir!” (32). Isaías does not yell at his children in the same way he yells at Luisa but they still feel the pressures of his disapproval and the fear of how he may act. When Juan and Teo discuss how the murder happened, Teo shares his feelings about the violence of which his father is capable, “Pues ése es nuestro padre; una especie de demonio que nos atormenta” (46). He later admits that he hates his father yet both Juan and Teo are afraid of their father’s wrath and so are reluctant to tell the authorities the secret.

Each drama presents symbolism of the repression felt by Spain during the Franco regime. In *La mordaza* the characters often say the words “la mordaza” “miedo” and “calor” to represent how they feel under the influence of Isaías. The silence of keeping the secret is symbolized by “la mordaza” and according to Teo, “Siento como una mordaza en la boca... Es el mideo...” (Sastre 59). Isaías correctly observes early in the drama that the family is fearful. He asks his wife, Antonia, why she is afraid and she replies, “Yo no tengo miedo, Isaías... Yo no tengo miedo. ¿Cómo voy a tener miedo si estoy con mis hijos?” (22). Isaías knows that the family is fearful yet the family members repeatedly bend to his will in order to avoid conflict, or in Luisa’s case, to avoid being killed by Isaías. The family’s fear is also described using “calor.” Antonia says to Isaías, “Es que estoy nerviosa... Con este calor... Ya está ahí la tormenta” (51). Sastre uses the weather and the image of the gag to express the fear and repression that the Krappo family feels in *La mordaza*. The works subtly points to the repression that Spaniards feel under the dictatorship headed by Franco, a repressive, violent father figure.

Censorship of written and spoken material was Franco’s easiest way to control Spaniards either through propaganda or through fear. According to one source, “La censura suele ser el recurso más utilizado por las naciones que observan una forma de gobierno cercana a lo que es una dictadura” (España Negra). By only allowing works that emphasized Franco’s morals and ideas about society, Franco controlled what Spaniards viewed as the ideal. Jardiel Poncela and Sastre portray the themes of fear and censorship through their characters, plot situations and the mention of certain details that become important symbolically or that subtly evoke social problems with the dictatorship in their respective dramas while staying in line with the censors. Both of these works directly

correlate to repression experienced by Spaniards after the civil war but people experiencing repression in other countries and times can identify with the issues they raise.

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