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SCHOOL PROGYMNASMATA AND LATIN DRAMA:
THESIS, REFUTATIO, CONFIRMATIO AND LAUS
IN THE DIALOGUE
ON THE CONCEPTION OF OUR LADY (1578)
BY THE SPANISH JESUIT BARTHOLOMAEUS BRAVO
(1553 OR 1554–1607)

The Library of the Royal Academy of History at Madrid holds the single handwritten copy, unfortunately full of misreadings, of a dialogue on the Conception of Our Lady by Father Bravo.¹ This author has been identified as Bartholomaeus Bravo, who published more didactic books than any other Jesuit teacher ever.² The work also could have been written either by Johannes Bravo (1535–1594), who enrolled in the Society of Jesus in 1555; or by Petrus Bravo, a nephew of Bartholomaeus, or else by any other contemporary priest called Bravo. However, the following facts corroborate the attribution of the dialogue to Bartholomaeus Bravo.

The volume which contains this dialogue also includes other plays written in Bartholomaeus Bravo’s times, and many of them are related to cities and towns of the province of Castile where he lived, such as Segovia, the town where he wrote a number of letters to his pupils and where his treatises on letter writing and on progymnasmata were reprinted in 1591; Valladolid, the hometown of his pupil Ferdinandus; or Alcalá de Henares, where some of his pupils continued their studies.³ On the other hand, more conclusively, the dialogue was composed and performed at Monterrey, a Spanish town near the northern border of Portugal, since the parish of...

³ We know this from his printed letters: *Liber de conscribendis Epistolis cum exemplaribus cuiusque generis Epistolarum. Item Epistolarum libri tres quibus virtutis doctrina iuventuti accommodata continetur* (Burgos: Philippus Iunta, 1601).
Albarillos (also called Albarellos de Monterrei in the native language), as well as the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Remedies, which is only four kilometres away from Monterrey, are mentioned in the play. And Petrus Guerra, director of the Jesuit School of Monterrey, informed on 9 January 1579 that the Congregation of Our Lady had been founded on 8 December 1578, the day of the feast of her Conception, and that a comic dialogue made clear on the same day how important it was for a Christian man to devote himself to Our Lady.4

Father Bravo’s dialogue concludes with the foundation of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Conception in the School of Monterrey, and tells of the Virgin’s help to people devout to her, which fits exactly the plot of the dialogue performed in 1578. Therefore, it is very likely that this play was performed that day by the pupils of the school of the Society of Jesus before the citizens of the town of Monterrey.

This date also coincides with Bartholomaeus Bravo’s first years of teaching, when he was about twenty-three years old, since he enrolled in the Society of Jesus in Salamanca in 1572, and after completing at least two years of apprenticeship in Villagarcía de Campos, he would have spent a few years teaching in Monterrey. At least, the custom of the Society in the province of Castile was to send new teachers to Monterrey to practise during their first years.5 So in 1578, four years later, he could be as acquainted with the social and religious atmosphere of the region as Father Bravo, the author of this dialogue, proves to be.

The work is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, but it belongs rather to a dramatic genre frequently cultivated in the Spanish schools of the Society from the mid-sixteenth century, which derived from humanistic comedy and from other earlier scholarly dramas, and with specific didactic and literary purposes and moral objectives. This kind of performance obeys a practice of the Jesuits with regard to the teaching of Rhetoric and Poetics, who encouraged the pupils of their schools to celebrate with great pomp a feast of the Virgin with speeches, poems, emblems, and other exercises, at least once every year.

The Jesuit author wrote the dialogue on the Conception of Our Lady alternating verse with prose and Latin with Spanish: from its twenty-eight


5 I have dealt with the life and works of Bartholomaeus Bravo in the introduction to my critical edition and translation of his Liber de Arte Poetica (Alcañiz: Instituto de Estudios Humanísticos, forthcoming).
pages, only nine are written in Latin while nineteen pages are written in Spanish, and just ten pages are written in verse while eighteen are written in prose, so that seven pages are written in Latin prose, in two scenes of three and a half pages each. From these two scenes, we shall refer to two and a half pages from the first scene, and to a page from the second one, showing that they are progymnasmata exercises rather than parts of a common drama.

It is not really difficult to analyse these scenes from the point of view of the theory of Bartholomaeus Bravo’s book on Progymnasmata or ‘preliminary exercises’ of Oratory, which was published about ten years after this dialogue had been written. This treatise is based on the works of other ancient and modern authors, but it also takes into account the conclusions of Bravo’s own experiences as a teacher. This experience included the performance of this or at least of similar plays by his pupils. So by bringing together the literary precepts and such a composition written probably by the same person, we can easily observe the interactions of theory and practice in this matter.

The whole dialogue is a kind of narratio or ‘story’, since Bravo’s treatise on progymnasmata also includes the comedies within the third kind of narratio. Like all dramas, it is also an exercise of prosopeia or ‘personification’, since it is entirely written in direct speech. More specifically, the texts we are dealing with contain an example of the four progymnasmata maiora (‘major exercises’): sententia (‘proverb’), refutatio (‘objection’), confirmatio (‘confirmation’) and laus (‘praise’), which comprise the three kinds of rhetoric: deliberative (sententia), forensic (refutatio and confirmatio), and epideictic (laus). Besides this, two major exercises (progymnasmata maiora) such as sententia and laus may also include elements from minor exercises (progymnasmata minora), namely thesis (‘thesis’) and comparatio (‘comparison’).

In the first scene in Latin prose, two children explain a sententia from Seneca’s seventieth moral letter to Lucilius (Seneca, Epistulae 70. 3) in exactly the same way that Bartholomaeus Bravo tells us in his treatise

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6 Progymnasmata siue praexercitationes Oratoriae, cum singulis cuiusque progymnasmatis exemplaribus (Pamplona: Thoma Porralis, 1589). The work was edited in Segovia by Petrus Rhemensis in 1591, and its contents were later included in Bravo’s treatise De arte oratoria ac de eiusdem exercendae ratione Tullianaque imitatione, varia ad res singularas adhibita exemplorum copia libri quinque (Medina del Campo: Iacobus a Canto, 1596).

7 A pupil in the Dialogue calls Seneca a ‘wonderful storehouse of proverbs’ (sententiarium thesaurus admirabilis).
on progymnasmata that a proverb or sententia should be explained. The passage also contains all the conventional parts of this kind of exercise in the same order that Bravo teaches schoolboys in his treatise on how to comment on a well known proverb of Plato: the expositio or ‘exposition’ (ut optandum ...), the causa or ‘reason’ (nam ...), a simile or ‘comparison’ of life with navigation (quemadmodum ...) and a contrarium or ‘contrary’ of childhood, which is adolescence. Two exempla or ‘examples’ come next, which are drawn from the experience of the boys (in me ipse ... expertus ...). As was to be expected from the theory, a testimonium or ‘testimony’ follows, which confirms Seneca’s sententia with two lines of Virgil (Georgics III. 66–67). The epilogus or ‘epilogue’ is preceded by the arrival of a third pupil, whose name is Johannes, who asks the younger boys about the subject of their conversation. After a short answer by the first pupil, Johannes repeats his question and the second boy tells him that they were missing their recently passed childhood, since it was the best age in a man’s life according to Virgil and other ancient authors.

This gives rise to a discussion on whether childhood or adolescence is the happiest age in a man’s life. The discussion includes and mixes the progymnasmata called refutatio and confirmatio, which is the way Bartholomaeus writes in his treatise that it should be practised at school. Since it is a dialogue, each oratorical exercise does not include all its parts nor are they set out one after the other. Once the discussion has been introduced (discutiamus ...), Johannes explains his opinion in opposition to Virgil’s statement (refutationis expositio). Then, one of the younger boys confirms Virgil’s opinion, including in his speech the main parts of a confirmation: praise of the very learned (doctissimus) Varro, who had divided man’s life into ages; the exposition of the opinion that only childhood is the first age, and therefore the best according to Virgil; and five arguments to prove it. Johannes continues his refutation previously explained with three typical arguments: the interpretation of Virgil’s verses by the young boy is not clear to him; that interpretation is incredible, impossible, and useless, and finally it is incoherent. Nevertheless, a second pupil tries then to confirm the point of view of his schoolfellow and to refute Johannes’ opinion.

Fifteen pages written in Spanish precede one page in Latin verse and two pages of a conversation showing the practice of colloquial Latin, which introduce a brief laudatory speech in praise of the Virgin. It is deli-

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8 According to Servius in his commentary on Virgil, Aeneid V. 295.
vered by an older fourth boy, who is asked by Johannes and by the first two children to tell them how he has changed his life, and finally to praise the Virgin’s excellence. This speech of praise also fits in with oratorical and pedagogical theory, categories and methods which Bravo points out in his treatise about the progymnasma called laus, to which it belongs, and whose precepts concerning the parts and the arguments of any praise he follows very closely.

The exordium is based on all the possible circumstances proposed in the treatise: the subject (magnam provinciam ...), the speaker (mihi ...), the audience (imponitis …), the person who is praised (Virginem ...), and the day, since praise of the Virgin takes place the day of the feast of her Conception, 8 December. As was to be expected from the treatise, the argumentation is based on a comparison with illustrious men: while the saints mentioned receive veneration on account of a single virtue, all virtues meet in the Virgin to a higher degree. This includes the count of ten or more virtues and of several saints. As the treatise on progymnasmata states, the conclusion (itaque … qua re) contains a summing up of the argumentation and the request to imitate the Virgin, not only by the speakers but also by other men.

Our literary analysis of the dialogue from the point of view of the treatise of progymnasmata or ‘preliminary exercises’ of Oratory written by Bartholomaeus Bravo confirms his authorship of the play, since it looks more like an occasional composition by a Latin teacher than a play by an experienced dramatist.

The mixture of Latin and Spanish as well as of prose and verse are characteristic features of Spanish Jesuit dramas, as in Johannes Bonifatius’s plays performed in the schools of the province of Castile from 1560, and preserved in MS. 9/2565, which belongs to the same collection as Ms. 9/2566 containing our dialogue. Bartholomaeus Bravo might have been Bonifatius’s pupil, and the dialogue imitates in many respects the style, the Latin and Spanish metres, the characters, and the typically realistic scenes of Bonifatius’s plays.9 The allegorical characters Devotion and Zeal, who represent devotion to the Virgin and fervour in her love and service, are also present in the plays written by Bonifatius. But the excerpts from Bravo’s play that we have commented on have some specific grammatical and rhetorical purposes, which are hardly found in other plays of the Spanish Renaissance.

We have illustrated this by deconstructing two excerpts of the dialogue and by indicating how they fit Bravo’s rules in his treatise on *Progymnasmata*, particularly those of *sententia*, *confirmatio*, *refutatio* and *laus*. We may thus conclude that these are not real dramatic texts by an author of comedies or tragedies, and that they are particularly interesting in their school context, since they are ideal school exercises giving a pattern for boys’ learning, for whom they are written. They are also good examples of what the teacher could expect from the exercises assigned to his pupils. Though the story of this play is a fiction, it shows a real pattern of life to the boys, and its end meets reality, since it tells of the foundation of the congregation by the pupils which actually took place that same day. At the same time, while performed before the citizens of Monterrey, this play aims at showing the piety, erudition and talent of the boys who were educated in the Jesuit schools.

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