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The Closest Reading: Creating Annotated Online Editions

Matthew D. Stroud

Teaching old literature of any kind to undergraduates is a challenge. The language is difficult, the themes often lack resonance for today's students, and the cultural references are abstruse. When one adds to the mix that the works are in an archaic version of Spanish, not the native language of most students in the United States, and that the plays are written in florid, baroque poetry, the task of helping students to appreciate the Spanish *comedia* for its literary value is made considerably more demanding. A great many students simply do not understand what is going on with the plots and characters when they read a play. One sign of their lack of engagement with the text is the fact that rarely do undergraduates make marginal notes in their editions. It appears they read the texts blankly, waiting for the professor or someone else to tell them what they were supposed to think about them. In class, the students rarely ask questions on their own and do not usually give anything but the most rudimentary answers to questions regarding the basic themes, much less more esoteric topics such as baroque prosody. Faced with fifty minutes of silence, the professor breaks down and lectures, giving the students the information that he or she thinks they need. The overall experience of a class run in this fashion is abysmal for both the students and the professor. The problem is not that students are uninterested in the topics of the *comedia*. Once they understand what the plays are about—sex, honor, intrigue—students are forthcoming with their opinions and insights.

One strategy to help students comprehend the texts is to bring reader and text together much more intensively than usual, through the creation of annotated editions of the dramas. Rarely at the undergraduate level does one even discuss the critical editions they are reading: the variants, the modernizations, sometimes the latter-day additions of lengthy stage directions. As a result, to have students develop critical editions means they must deal with texts and textual issues much more directly. It also requires an enormous amount of preparation on the part of the professor, who must have in mind what the entire project will look like at the end (texts, notes, plot summaries, author biographies, critical studies, and the like); and, ultimately, the professor, as general editor, is responsible for bringing together all the student contributions to form a useful whole. When I had students prepare critical editions, they were excited about the project from the start. Perhaps they were happy that our meetings were not just going to be another lecture course, or perhaps they did not yet realize exactly how much work would be involved. More than anything, though, this kind of project gives students the feeling that they are an integral part of the course and, therefore, they have a significant stake in the outcome—in this case, a deeper understanding of six important *comedias*.

One of the first decisions to be made is how many plays one can handle in a semester; work goes much more slowly when dealing with text at this level of close reading. For one course on the Spanish *comedia*, the class was to focus on only six plays at a pace of roughly one three-act play every two weeks. Even that rate is quite rushed, but at some point one must keep in mind that these are undergraduates and a semester spent on only one *comedia* might not best serve their long-term educational goals. The next decision involved specifying the particular plays to study. To add a bit of interest, the six *comedias* included three by men (Lope's *El castigo sin venganza*, Tirso's *El burlador de Sevilla*, and Calderón's *Lo vida es sueño*) and three by women (Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer*, Zayas's *La traición en la amistad*, and Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una cosa*). These choices were somewhat arbitrary but did reflect a desire to include standard masterpieces and less-studied plays. The three plays by men were readily available in a number of scholarly editions, including online editions. The plays by women were, tellingly, less available in current annotated editions but at least all of them had been printed.

Another early decision was the final format—that is, what the result of the class effort would look like, and we chose to publish the editions online for three primary reasons. First, online publication gave the students the greatest stake in the outcome: knowing that anyone could access the plays and see their work, they tended to be more critical of themselves and one another in order to create a product they could be proud of. Second, online publication was much more feasible, and not just in terms of access to the Internet; publishing otherwise would have involved considerable expense. Third, Web-based pages allowed for the insertion of hypertextual material that would have been difficult to incorporate in a linear publication. More specifically, there was a desire to help readers of these editions by including plot summaries available at the click of a mouse. Since the works were now going to be electronic editions, it was important to establish from the beginning the ultimate look of the plays on the computer screen. Glosses were to appear on the screen with the text itself, to allow us to print out the text and annotations on the same page. Line numbers and versification were also considered essential, as was the more general notion that the text should resemble its counterpart in a regular printed edition—that is, with indentations and other familiar features.

Had this been a graduate course in paleography, we would have started with seventeenth-century editions or even manuscripts, which would have meant dealing effectively with even fewer texts during the semester. For the purposes of the undergraduate course, however, it was enough to start with modern editions. Because five of the plays were already in the database of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater (AHCT), we did not have to type in the complete text of those plays. The decision to include line numbers, though, meant that the AHCT database editions needed to be completely reformatted. Much of the conversion was accomplished using macros created in Microsoft Word, but some of the conversion simply involved a great deal of retyping. In some ways, the play

by Zayas, which was not available online, was easier because it involved no conversion. Based on the version in Manuel Serrano y Sanz, with some changes, the play had to be typed in manually, but I created the tables as I typed, thus omitting the middle step.

An additional problem of conversion dealt with page layout, especially indentations and the spacing between the text and the line numbers. At the time, Web page standards offered few options, none of which was perfect. We could just insert spaces, but all the text would have appeared in courier font, and the goal was for the Web pages to look more like printed than typed pages. The solution came through the use of the color option: I declared the background white and inserted white periods to move the text to its appropriate place. (Unfortunately, some printers do not recognize the white-on-white periods as spaces to be left blank; instead, they print a row of black periods. An alternative would be to create a small white spacing graphic and use it to insert a spacer.) As a general rule, I preferred to limit myself to earlier Web page standards, so that almost any browser could view the texts properly, not just those with the latest technology. Another major advancement is the growing popularity of *Adobe Acrobat* (PDF) files. Anyone with a relatively recent browser can download the *Acrobat* files at no cost. The advantage of using *Acrobat* is that one can format pages in Word or another high-end word-processing program with no limit on special effects (indentations, font, kerning, even graphics). As a result, pages look the same to all viewers both on screen and printed. The disadvantages are minimal: the necessity of using the *Acrobat Reader* and the fact that the files viewed with *Acrobat* are not editable if downloaded the same way that HTML files are. So impressive are *Acrobat* files that the AHCT collection includes PDF as one of its standard formats for dramatic texts.

The preparation of the texts of the six plays, including the input process for the Zayas work, required approximately one hundred hours, spent over the summer before the course, and that figure does not include the creation of title pages, buttons, and other features of the finished product, much less the work done later by the students. Essentially the plays were to be presented along with a brief biography of the writer and a brief introduction to the work itself; then the text pages would include notes to words and expressions students found difficult and a synopsis of the action, together with an analysis of the versification. There were fourteen assignments for each play, or eighty-four in all, and seventeen students; each student had four assignments, leaving sixteen for me to do. (As it turns out, I had to do even more, because one student simply didn't hand in his work.) Finally, at the end of the semester, students were required to submit a study, also in electronic form, of some aspect of a play or plays we had read.

One final consideration was to balance the time students devoted to *comedia* texts with that they spent on Web page creation. I had originally thought about having the students do their own Web page creation, but I abandoned that idea early on because consistency of style was important and because we simply could

not rely on students to have Web-creation skills in a Spanish literature course. Despite what we are told, even today students are not universally computer literate to the same degree. Some did not understand the difference between a Mac and a Power Mac (an important difference at the time, since we were using PC-based formats), and many had no idea how to add accents to their work. Therefore, part of the course involved teaching about computers as well as about the *comedia*. The key here is to evaluate the computer literacy of the class and then decide where to draw the line so that the technology aspect does not overwhelm the study of literature.

As for the *comedias* themselves, I realized immediately that the students understood little on reading the texts the first time (and for undergraduates, the first time is usually the last time). Perhaps it was because they were dealing with raw text, without notes (still to be created), but we spent an inordinate amount of time in class just going over what happens. This experience makes me wonder just how much students in more traditional *comedia* classes have grasped the texts; maybe their usual lack of participation is largely a function of their lack of understanding. At any rate, by dealing with the text on a minute level, the students discovered a number of truths about the plays.

The first thing they noted was that the plays are very difficult. The plots are astonishingly complicated, and the language is poetic and archaic at the same time. Perhaps because of poor training in the essentials of poetry in any language, students had great trouble identifying the different verse forms. Students used to modern literature are not prepared for intrigues built on intrigues or the use of certain names over and over (Juan, Leonor, and Pedro, for example). They also noted the difficulty of the vocabulary and grammar. About a third of the class were native speakers (from Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia), but they seemed to have almost as hard a time with the texts as the native speakers of English did. The students' first impulse was to gloss everything, from every appearance of archaisms such as *agora* and *oilde* to every mention of *Cupido*. Some of the words they glossed left me wondering about their basic ability in Spanish: *aurora*, *furor*, *desespera*, *presagio*, *magnánimo*, *desdichada*, and almost every form of the verb *errar* (*erremos*, *erró*, *yerro*). If they had trouble with these words, one can only imagine their helplessness when confronted with lyrical passages. Not only did they seem to be at sea when dealing directly with poetry; I sensed a lack of commitment based on what I perceive to be their narrative approach to all literature. If a passage did not advance the plot, they tended to discount it; if it was difficult as well, they just gave up. Again, this approach forced the students to confront their worst fears—that is, baroque poetry—head on; they were simply not allowed to pass over difficult passages lightly and then move on to the next scene.

On their own, the students came up with topics of interest in *comedia* criticism: metatheater (without my having mentioned it, the students noted how the intrigues could be seen as theater within theater and remarked on the generally

unreal aspect of the action of the plays); gender studies (they questioned what defines one's sex if a woman can become a man, at least as far as other characters are concerned, just by a change of clothing); theater semiotics (since there are no meaningful stage directions, they learned to read signs in the text: articles of clothing, adjective endings, and the like); themes, such as desire and honor, that motivate the characters; and historical and cultural studies (they asked a surprising number of questions regarding "the way it was" in seventeenth-century Spain, in an attempt to put the action of the plays into context).

Most interesting to me was the reaction to plays written by men versus those written by women. The students' first insight was that the works by women were much harder to read than those by men. It is tricky to generalize from such a small sample, but apparently the works by women are significantly more challenging, in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and plot structure, and they assume considerable erudition on the part of the spectator (or reader). Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa* had the most complicated plot to keep up with (not surprising, considering the three couples, the mistaken identities, and the like); students found Zayas's poetry difficult (not in a Calderonian sense, with words like *hipogrifo*, but in a more organic way; there are six sonnets in the play in which the action stops and all the focus is poetic).

The difference in mythological, historical, and other cultural references proved to be one of the more surprising discoveries by the students. The first act of Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer* presented the densest web of references, many of which had to be explained to us (me included) by experts such as María José Delgado and Vern Williamsen, via e-mail. Both Caro and Zayas made considerably greater use of such references than the other playwrights did. *Valor, agravio y mujer* had 38 references and *La traición en la amistad* had 41 (Lope had 29, Tirso 19, Calderón 28, and Sor Juana 16). Moreover, the references used by all the women seemed more erudite and arcane, at least to us. While Lope referred to Circe (line 2138) and Troy (1472, 1670) and Tirso mentioned Ulysses (816) and Medea (2205), Caro dazzled her audience with references to Mavorte (72), Aeneas Galión (250–51), Marcelo (292), Camila (504), and Sor Juana taxed our general knowledge by referring to Clicie (826) and Garatuza (2395).

Quite unexpectedly, this project ended up being an experiment I had long wanted to do: I gave an essentially naive audience *comedia* texts by men and women with no notes and, therefore, no hints about what students were supposed to find. They found that these texts by men and women differed not only at the level of subject matter (friendship versus honor) but also at the level of the text itself. Why the women's plays were much more difficult than the men's is anyone's guess. It could be that the audience for the plays was different, more educated. It could be that in general the women's plays were written later than the men's, when the baroque was marked more profoundly by excess. It could be something psychological in the relation of women to signification and language. It could also be a function of the particular references chosen by women: not just

the familiar masculine images (Marte, Paris, Adonis, and others) but also less familiar feminine images (Camila, Clicie, and Salmacis). In addition, there are definitely more references to Spanish literature and history in the plays by women: Góngora, Calderón, Magallanes, and Doña Urraca all appear as cultural references. There was no time to investigate this phenomenon during the course, but the students came up with their plausible if impressionistic hypothesis: maybe the women felt they had more to prove, so they threw all their erudition and poetic virtuosity into their work. Whatever the reason, this kind of insight could not have taken place in an undergraduate course without the intimate textual work required by the creation of these online editions.

What did the students think of their project? Without exception, the course evaluations revealed that having their work appear on the Internet was motivating, although several students found it "scary" to have their assignments accessible by anyone in the world. Fortunately, the more frequent descriptions included "stimulating," "a good idea," "exciting," "fun," "important," the reasons given being that computers and the Internet are the wave of the future and that, as one student put it, the results made students feel as though they had accomplished something (I dread to ponder what this says about their other courses). As for the actual assignments (notes, synopses, etc.), while a couple of students thought they were boring (they would have rather expressed their opinions about the plays, for example), almost all praised the effort as an excellent way to get to know the *comedia* up close. The incorporation of technology into literature courses is daunting, but, at least in this class, the rewards made the effort worthwhile. Moreover, and more important, students left the course not just having read those particular six *comedias* but truly understanding and appreciating them.