

**PLAYS OF G. MARTÍNEZ SIERRA.  
IN ENGLISH VERSIONS, WITH A  
CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE  
PLAYS. VOLUME I. PP. 77-238**

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GARRETT UNDERHILL & H. GRANVILLE BARKER**

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GREGORIO MARTÍNEZ SIERRA

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## FOREWORD

Born at Madrid March 6, 1881, Gregorio Martínez Sierra is the youngest of the established writers for the Spanish stage. Before everything precocious in talent, his mind moves instinctively toward a graceful adjustment with its environment. He was educated at Madrid, where he attended the University, coming to grief in history, doubtless, as he says, because of a settled aversion to battles. During his early teens he had already written much and freely, so that he promptly abandoned all thought of academic preferment with this initial reverse and turned to literature as a career.

At seventeen, with the manuscript of his first book, *El poema del trabajo* ("The Song of Labor"), he presented himself to Jacinto Benavente, who furnished an introduction to the volume, and arranged its publication, which took place in 1898. A series of prose poems, or pastels, as they were called in that day followed, collected under various titles, and in 1900 his earliest short story, *Almas ausentes*, was awarded the prize in a contest conducted by the *Biblioteca Mignon*. This and other tales of the sort, subsequently appearing separately, have been reprinted in two volumes, *Abril melancólico* ("Melancholy April"), and *El diablo se ríe* ("The Devil Laughs"). His most notable work in the shorter form, however, is contained in *Sol de la tarde*, or "Declining Sun," which established his reputation beyond cavil in 1904. To the same year belongs the first of two novels, "The Humble Truth," while a second and more popular venture in the field of fiction, "Peace" (*Tú eres la pax*), was completed three years later.

In the beginning an intellectual by temperament and a

word-painter by inclination, Martínez Sierra may be characterized as an impressionist, well-versed in the procedure of the modern French schools. Perhaps the principal personal influence of his formative period was that of the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, with whom he kept bachelor hall at Madrid. Other associations of these days were likewise predominantly literary, and leaders of the modern movement such as Antonio and Manuel Machado and the Catalan, Santiago Rusiñol, painter of gardens, proved themselves kindred spirits. Under their friendly stimulus, he published a volume of verse, *La casa de la primavera*, a chance excursion into an alien domain, as well as a prose poem upon "Hamlet in the Person of Sarah Bernhardt." With these works his "Dream Theatre" may be coupled, a quartet of symbolic, mystical dialogues with pronounced Maeterlinckian tendencies.

The first decade of the productivity of Martínez Sierra suggests little of the theatre. It was quietistic in feeling, essentially contemplative, a communion with idyllic and elegiac poets. Yet through these days another influence had been active, although less conspicuously, which in the end was to prove decisive. In the year immediately following the publication of "The Song of Labor," the Art Theatre was founded at Madrid by Benavente. The coöperation of the more promising of the younger generation was enlisted, among whom was Martínez Sierra, who played the rôle of Manuel in support of Benavente in the latter's comedy "A Long Farewell" at the opening performance. The ensuing months were months of intimate association with a remarkable mind. "As I listened to him talk, the fundamental laws of the modern theatre were revealed to me, and I have profited by his instruction unceasingly." So, properly, Martínez Sierra had already served an apprenticeship in the theatre before he began to write plays. His début as a playwright was delayed for ten years, and was then made in collaboration with Rusiñol, with whom



he composed a comedy entitled *Vida y dulzura*, presented at the Teatro de la Comedia, Madrid, in 1907. This was followed by *Aucells de pas*, also in collaboration with Rusiñol, produced in Catalan at Barcelona in 1908, and, after a further interval of two years, by *Cors de dona*, in Catalan by the same hands. Meanwhile, during the spring of 1909, Martínez Sierra attained his first independent success with the comedy in two acts, *La sombra del padre*, presented at the Lara Theatre, one of the favorite houses of the capital. *El ama de la casa*, ("The Mistress of the House,") was acted at the same theatre in 1910, and in 1911 he achieved a definitive and permanent triumph with the production of "The Cradle Song," (*Canción de cuna*). A companion piece *Los pastores*, ("The Two Shepherds"), was brought out in 1913, also at the Lara. As Martínez Sierra's non-dramatic prose becomes most nicely expressive, most pictorial and most imaginative in *Sol de la tarde*, his comedy attains perfection in these beautiful idyls of the religious life. Radiant with the bland charm and luminosity of the Andalusian sketches of the Quinteros, these comedies possess, nevertheless, a quality which is distinctive and personal, at once richer and humanly more significant than the work of any competitors in the *genre*. No other plays convey so convincingly, or with equal grace, the implications of environment as it interprets itself in terms of character, not symbolically nor in any didactic way, but directly and visually so that the ambient becomes the protagonist rather than the individual, and the spirit of the *milieu* is felt to express more clearly than words the fundamentals which condition its life.

"The Cradle Song" has been translated into many languages, and has been played and imitated widely throughout the civilized world. It was produced in English by Augustin Duncan at the Times Square Theatre, New York.

Martínez Sierra has written forty original plays which have been acted, in addition to the three composed in collab-

oration with Rusiñol. He has translated and adapted forty-seven plays, chiefly from the French, English and Catalan, besides making occasional excursions into German. Perhaps the most important translation is a five volume edition of Maeterlinck. His non-dramatic works occupy thirty volumes to which five others of translations must be added. In the intervals of composition, he established and edited *Helios*, a short-lived literary periodical, and founded and directed the *Biblioteca Renacimiento*, one of the most prosperous and progressive publishing houses of the capital. He has also edited a library of the world's classics in translation, and more recently has established a publishing house of his own, the *Biblioteca Estrella*. In 1916 he assumed the management of the Teatro Eslava, Madrid, installing there a stock company, the *Compañía Lírico-Dramática Gregorio Martínez Sierra*, for the presentation of the modern repertory, prominently featuring his own plays. Whether from the point of view of acting or of *mise en scène*, this company must be accounted one of the most complete and satisfying in the peninsula.

An artist who is subjected continually to the distractions of business, sacrifices with his leisure opportunity for detachment. Already, previous to the production of *Los pastores*, Martínez Sierra had manifested a tendency to approximate the main currents of the modern popular theatre. An improviser of unusual facility, he composed the slightest of musical comedies in *Margot* and *La Tirana*; a charming light opera libretto, *Las golondrinas* ("The Swallows"), based upon an earlier play, *Aucells de pas*; grand opera in *La llama*, and the scenario of a dancing suite with music by Manuel de Falla for the gypsy *bailarina*, Pastora Imperio. He remade old comedies, reworked juvenilia, republished forgotten stories, and dramatised his novel *Tú eres la paz* as *Madrigal*. He contrived pantomime. The lesser plays of this miscellaneous epoch become an epitome of the activities of the contemporary Madrid stage,

broadened, however, by a thorough cosmopolitanism. They are eclectic, light-hearted, persistently optimistic, and, upon the more serious side, progressive documents considered from the sociological point of view. As he has grown older, Martínez Sierra has come to be interested not so much in the picturesque, in the life which is about to pass, as it lies inert in the present with all the remoteness of objective art, as he is in the future with its promise of the amelioration of the life which he formerly portrayed. He is an apostle of the new order, which is to be assured in his conception, through the dissemination of a wider and more complete knowledge, a more truly international culture and sympathy, a keener social consciousness, and, more precisely and immediately, through the promulgation of certain definite plans of reform. The more significant of the recent comedies, "The Kingdom of God" and *Esperanza nuestra* ("The Hope that is Ours") are indicative of this development. Although not didactic in form, they are purely social in genesis and in trend. In these maturer works, as in those of Linares Rivas and Benavente, the modern movement, which during the earlier years of the century had been predominantly intellectual and æsthetic, turns toward the practical and political sphere, and fixes its attention upon results. It is the completion of the cycle which began in 1898.

María Martínez Sierra, an accomplished writer, and one of the most brilliant women of Spain, has brought to her husband a store of feminine lore and intuition through a long series of collaborations whose precise nature and scope the most patient criticism could not hope to disclose. A woman active in the public sphere must of necessity be a revolutionary, successfully to defy the prejudices of an ancient, conventional social system. With her husband, Doña María has become a leader of the feminist movement in her country, to which their two recent volumes, "Letters to the Women of Spain" and "Feminism, Femininity and the Spanish Spirit," have been contributions of prime impor-