



## **Rivas and *Don Álvaro*: From the Comforts of *Costumbrismo* to the Cages of Romanticism**

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In Memoriam  
Donald L. Shaw

*[T]he origins of romanticism are to be sought, not in national character or in literary conditions, but in the metaphysical crisis of the end of the eighteenth century and in what Kierkegaard called 'the rift in existence' which it produced. Without embarking on any attempt to describe this crisis in detail, it will be sufficient for our purpose to emphasize here its all-embracing nature: to affirm with Peckham and others that it involved the apparent collapse of previously established absolute values, whether these rested on religion or on rationalism.*

Donald L. Shaw, "Spanish Romanticism" 191

Critics of Rivas's *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* have developed numerous approaches to the play and its place in the canon of Spanish theatrical production. Two areas of concurrence appear in more or less unanimous fashion, at least in those studies carried out during the last fifty years. First, many of the play's elements lend it pronounced qualities of the *costumbrismo* practiced in Spanish culture, in particular that which evolved from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Second, the play serves as one of the most representative works of Spanish Romanticism, specifically that brand of Romanticism described by Donald Shaw above, in which there is a manifestation of the "collapse of previously established absolute values."<sup>1</sup> In the process of arriving at these conclusions, critics such as Casaldueiro (1962), Pattison (1967), Cardwell (1973), Andioc (1982), Shaw (1986), Catalán Marín (2003), Iarocci (2006), and Surwillo (2010) have examined the play's innovations and explored widely varying readings of Rivas's work, including the play's scandalous ideology, its revolutionary use of language and form, its place in the transatlantic dialogue on colonialism, and its importance as a marker in definitions of racial identity, along with questions of ethnicity as it relates to nobility. Each of these analyses delineates Rivas's advancement of the Romantic experiment and his

representation, for good or bad, of Romanticism's moment in general. However, no study to date has tied together the threads that run from *costumbrismo* to Romanticism in *Don Álvaro*. That is, no critic so far has shown how Rivas utilizes *costumbrista* material as the basis for developing a decidedly rebellious Romantic worldview in the play.

The present study uses the play's visual elements to approach *Don Álvaro* from the dual *costumbrista*/Romantic point of view. This double perspective (and its implication of a specific movement forward) was succinctly identified as early as 1841 by Enrique Gil y Carrasco, who noted that the play "arrostró en el teatro los peligros de una innovación repentina y de una transición violenta, abriendo una senda más filosófica y fecunda" (Navas Ruiz xxxix). We can argue that Rivas utilized *costumbrismo*, in fact, to mark an end to its usefulness in describing the current Spanish reality, deploying it in such a way as to show the progression from more traditional and reassuring depictions of life's qualities and struggles toward what came to be known as Romanticism and its attendant (and more unsettling) ethos. In doing so, he specifically manipulates the content and tone of the *costumbrista* material that he deploys in the play, with results that have remained unaddressed by critics to this point.

The subsequent sections of this study delineate the various components of the argument outlined above. First, we must consider key aspects of existing definitions of *costumbrismo* to define the literary tradition(s) within which Rivas was working. Second, we need to examine the ways in which specific material included in *Don Álvaro* meets the criteria of *costumbrismo*. Third, it is necessary to ground our argument specifically in the play's visual elements, as these, along with the text itself, form the basis of Rivas's *costumbrismo*. He creates living, visual versions of the *cuadros de costumbres* that had been evolving primarily in written form in Spain for at least a century. Finally, we can analyze the play at length from these perspectives and discover how Rivas moves his audience from the comfortable, reassuring realm of *costumbrismo* into the much less stable Romantic ethos that had become so quickly predominant in Spanish theater following the death of Fernando VII in 1833.

### ***Costumbrismo: Problems of Classification***

A few words on terminology and practice are in order here regarding the concept of *costumbrismo*, which historically has tended to elude clear classification. José Escobar has clarified for us various components of *costumbrismo*, describing it as a form of mimesis. He outlines how certain *costumbrista* writers defined the term:

En el siglo [XIX], Larra, comentando el *Panorama matritense*, de Mesonero Romanos, indica que "despuntaron escritores filosóficos que no consideraron ya al hombre en general... sino al hombre en combinación, en juego con las nuevas y especiales formas de la sociedad que lo observaban." El principio antiguo de imitación de la Naturaleza se reinterpreta como imitación de la sociedad. El nuevo objeto de la mimesis es la sociedad: "la sociedad—como dice Mesonero Romanos—, en fin, bajo todas sus fases, con la posible exactitud y variado colorido." Esta es la gran novedad de la mimesis costumbrista. (122)

Escobar observes as well that other writers found a different reality. He notes that Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, for example, could not resolve the contradiction between “la mimesis costumbrista [y] la expresividad romántica” (126), a conflict that we find operating in full view in *Don Álvaro*, as we shall see below. In general, though, Escobar has identified *costumbrismo* as part of a greater literary evolution, one that, for example, led to the development of the realist novel (not a surprise, given that the “sociedad” represented in the mimesis of *costumbrismo* is, in his words, “materia novelable” [124]). Rivas conscientiously makes *Don Álvaro* a part of this evolution, using *costumbrismo* as a mechanism to herald the arrival of Romanticism.

We should note also, following Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos with regard to critical evaluation of *costumbrismo* and its place in literary history, that “se dio un proceso devaluador del concepto costumbrista, asimilado a posiciones políticas conservadoras, sinónimo de tradicionalismo, en el peor sentido de la palabra” (“El costumbrismo” 24). He speaks here in reference to the later (simplified) assessment of those writers whose work, especially following the progressive experimentation of Romanticism, could only be perceived as reactionary at worst, and traditionalist at best. This is not to say that such writers did not exist, of course. Even within a certain range there is considerable variation. We need only make reference to the obvious examples of Mesonero and Larra to see how much potential variance there can be in “progressive” thought: Mesonero, who calls for reform in numerous ways in his journalistic writing during the 1830s, seems (and in fact is) definitively conservative when held up to the impassioned radicalism and despair of Larra before the latter’s suicide in 1837.<sup>2</sup> We shall examine below in detail how Rivas uses a certain range of these possibilities himself in *Don Álvaro*.

Álvarez Barrientos underlines as well the increasing value of visual elements in *costumbrismo*, a component that Rivas would develop in significant fashion in *Don Álvaro*. Álvarez Barrientos asserts that *costumbrista* writers, “[p]ara exponer artísticamente ese objetivo [that of creating a portrait of a fleeting moment, rather than a statement of proper moral conduct, as was the case in earlier writing], consideraron que el mejor modo, al usar la palabra, era emplear las técnicas de lo visual” (“El costumbrismo” 29). He also notes that this would proceed a step further, where authors and publications began to include more illustrations “que pueblan los textos y conviven con ellos” (29). This tendency toward the visual could find no greater avenue for expression than in the theater, as much a visual as a literary art. Thus, given that Rivas has chosen to develop in *Don Álvaro* a *costumbrista* portrait of certain elements of recent Spanish culture, in doing so he has the freedom to present his impressions both textually (in stage directions and dialogue) and scenically (that which is produced from the text itself). Whereas a journalist, say, can only use words and static illustrations, the dramatist can create a living moment that has the potential for a more vivid impact on his or her audience. Roberto G. Sánchez has noted this aspect of theater, emphasizing its dual reality: “¿Puede considerarse un drama como algo completo si no es representado? Aquellos que se inclinan hacia lo literario dirán que sí; los de temperamento teatral dirán que no. Y los dos tendrán razón: una obra de teatro tiene una existencia doble” (“Cara y cruz” 21). While the visual component of drama can in fact exist on the page, it is intended for production as part of the symbolic fabric of the work, and a play such as *Don Álvaro*

cannot be properly interpreted (in terms of either physical performance or literary message) without its scenic elements.

We also observe in *costumbrismo*, in particular, its most frequent manifestations in journalistic form, a certain self-awareness—Mesonero, for example, describes his agenda clearly in essays such as “Las costumbres de Madrid,” where he states that “[m]i intento es merecer su benevolencia, si no por la brillantez de las imágenes, al menos por la verdad de ellas; si no por la ostentación de una pedantesca ciencia, por el interés de una narración sencilla; y finalmente, si no por el punzante aguijón de la sátira, por el festivo lenguaje de la crítica” (39).

In short, *costumbrismo* for Mesonero calls for truth, simplicity, and critical (but not satiric) language, and the avoidance of flashy pedantry. While we recognize that Mesonero could in fact be satiric in his *costumbrismo* (see, for example, “El romanticismo y los románticos”), the quality of his writing differed greatly from that of Larra and his desperate pleas for reform in Spain. Furthermore, this brand of rhetoric would of course not be found in the *costumbrismo* developed by a writer such as Rivas, in particular in a work like *Don Álvaro*. Rivas has no interest in defending an agenda that he identifies in so many words, in the fashion of his peers who would take pains to define their work as modern and European (Álvarez Barrientos, “El costumbrismo” 34). Rather, he lets the work make statements to be interpreted by his audience, allowing both the visual and verbal components and their attendant philosophical aspects to become part of an organic whole that depicts the moment. Rivas demonstrates no concern for the didactic tendencies frequently found in *costumbrismo*. He instead instructs in a more subtle fashion, building both an argument and an atmosphere without announcing their significance. The result is more a portrait (cultural, philosophical, psychological) of a people in a certain place at a certain time. It can thus be seen as a *cuadro de costumbres*, following Escobar’s definition as detailed above, but Rivas leaves it to his audience to decide whether or not this portrait provides a reflection of themselves or their moment, and in what way. Rivas clearly believes that it does, and in the mere creation of the play and its protagonist he offers his commentary. He feels no need to overstate it (that is to say, in the way of his journalistic counterparts—on the other hand, it goes without saying that Romantic drama would tend toward “overstatement” of a different sort).

### ***Costumbrista Sketches***

Certain scholars (among them Shaw and Iarocci) have noted that the structure of *Don Álvaro* “is characterized by repetition” (Iarocci, *Properties of Modernity* 116), and, as part of this characterization, that Rivas develops *costumbrista* sketches to introduce four of the play’s five acts. However, as we shall see, in reality all five acts can be seen to open with some element of *costumbrismo*. María Pilar Espín Templado notes the presence of *costumbrismo* in Spanish Romantic theater, citing the following as the key components: *casticismo*, *localismo*, *popularismo* and *lo pintoresco* (128-9). Although she notes that *Don Álvaro* is a “claro exponente de este concepto de costumbrismo” (129), she does not explain it in detail. A simple glance at her commentary on each of the elements listed above, though, demonstrates their applicability in Rivas’s play. For example, she finds “*localismo* en la creación de personajes-tipo vestidos y caracterizados en escena exactamente igual que los

descritos en los artículos costumbristas,” and also in the representation of known physical spaces (129). As we shall see below, there are numerous examples of each of these throughout the play, such as the gypsy Preciosilla, and the use of the Puente de Triana as a key location.

Ermitas Penas Varela argues that Rivas utilizes these scenes for purposes of exposition (1905), an assessment shared at least in part by Shaw (*Literary History* 12), while other scholars, such as Miguel Ángel Muro, note only the inclusion of *costumbrista* scenes in the play (72), going no further with analysis of their significance. To be fair, Muro’s focus in his study lies entirely elsewhere than to describe in any detail whatsoever the significance of *Don Álvaro’s costumbrista* elements, given that the analysis in question is concerned with Bretón de los Herreros and his *comedias de costumbres*. Muro does, however, very usefully define a predominant form of *costumbrismo* at the time:

Frente a la decisión casticista de una parte del costumbrismo canónico de convertir en objeto literario y artístico lo tradicional, lo autóctono o lo popular, Bretón de los Herreros—en coincidencia con Mesonero y Larra, por ejemplo—orienta su «comedia de costumbres» hacia las clases medias madrileñas, como representantes más genuinas de una sociedad en ebullición y cambio, y convierte el escenario a modo de escaparate de sus gentes y usos, donde el espectador pudiera reconocerse y gozar con ese reconocimiento, al tiempo que, mediante la sátira suave, pone de relieve algunos defectos que observa en ella. (67)

This proves revealing in that it is not what Rivas strives for in his use of *costumbrismo*, even though his sketches have these typical elements—there is little intention of holding a mirror up to his audience, especially during the play’s first four acts. Nor does the use of traditional types and customs have the function of glorifying those aspects of culture found in many forms of *costumbrismo*. Furthermore, if there is satire present, it is not the primary purpose of the play’s *costumbrista* components. For example, the dark commentary of the opening of *Don Álvaro’s* fifth *jornada* is not directed at the audience as part of a call for reform by Rivas. Its function is rather more internal to the play and its protagonist, as something that shapes don Álvaro’s continuously darkening perception of his cosmos.

Rivas uses *costumbrismo*, then, with an altogether different intent than many of his peers. We find that, within the abovementioned repetition, that is, the opening of each act with a seeming return to general *costumbrista* style and tropes, there is also a movement forward, a progression from A) traditionalist (though not wistful or programmatic) *costumbrismo* through B) a more Romantic *costumbrismo* to C) a Romanticism that has ceased to be *costumbrista* in any appreciable fashion. The present study attempts to confirm this trajectory, arguing that, seen as a whole, and interpreted from a perspective that identifies the description and utilization of physical space as both textual and visual forms of art, Rivas’s *Don Álvaro* serves as more than just an essential expression of Romanticism in Spanish theater. The play in fact functions as an artistically constructed documentation of Rivas’s perception of philosophical and cultural developments that led to the existing state of affairs in newly liberal Spain.

## The Visual Element

There has been no shortage of commentary on the growing complexity of the scenic component of Spanish theater during the decades preceding the premiere of *Don Álvaro* in 1835, in terms of both physical staging and its symbolic import. Most critics have correctly contextualized these elements in terms of the political, social, and cultural changes recently endured by playwrights and audiences alike. Margaret A. Rees, for example, has traced the development of more involved visual and scenic elements in drama from Victor Hugo and his contemporaries in French Romantic theater through Rivas and his work in *Don Álvaro*, noting among other things Rivas's "eye for composition" (48). René Andioc, for his part, provides a long and vivid description of the plot and many extravagances of Grimaldi's *La pata de cabra*, and concludes with a concise statement of summation: "Obra ideal para una década ominosa" (74). Grimaldi, as we know from David Gies, was "the driving creative force behind the brilliant flourishing of the theatre during the period" when *Don Álvaro* premiered (*Theatre and Politics* 110). Andioc goes on to cite a report from the *Diario de Avisos* from 22 March 1835 that describes the practical difficulties of the complex staging requirements of *Don Álvaro* itself:

Cada acto de este drama tiene dos o más decoraciones que deben cambiarse a la vista del público. Sin embargo de estos cambios, el uno en el primer acto y el otro en el segundo, no podrán verificarse sino a favor de un telón supletorio... Esta operación habrá de interrumpir por algunos momentos la acción de los dos actos indicados; inconveniente grave que no hubiera tolerado la empresa a haber encontrado medios de vencer las dificultades que se le han ofrecido en el actual estado de nuestros escenarios. (80)

This sort of drama, in difficult political and financial times, presented clear challenges: potential delays in performance and disruption of dramatic flow due to changes of scenery, plus the increasing complexity of set decorations and theatrical machinery (what we would today call "special effects"). The newer sensibility developed in Spanish theater in the 1820s and 1830s required heightened visual spectacle, though, in order to convey meaning to supplement what we find in the dialogue itself. It is perhaps ironic that developments of this kind would occur in a national theater in such dire need of infrastructural reform. Rather than interpreting it as mere irony, though, we note that the oft-lamented state of the Spanish theater, in particular at this moment in time, proves to be the result of the greater general atmosphere of woe that led to the emergence of Romantic anxiety in the first place, as the failures of the Enlightenment became continuously more obvious.

Sánchez confirms for us the evolution that passes through Grimaldi to arrive at Rivas and his contemporaries, and underscores a certain superficiality in the former that becomes substance in the latter, due to increased sensitivity on the part of authors (and their audience, for that matter) to changes in society. In *Theater and Politics*, Gies has elaborated Grimaldi's contributions to Spanish theater in terms of its development as both literary genre and entertainment industry. Sánchez's arguments are somewhat weakened by factual errors; for example, *La pata de cabra* premiered in 1829, not 1824, and did not

“initiate” the *comedia de magia* genre (“On Staging *Don Álvaro*” 141).<sup>3</sup> However, Sánchez does correctly indicate how Rivas’s many talents contributed to his success as a playwright, in particular with regard to *Don Álvaro*: “The painter that was the Duque de Rivas shared [the] love of spectacle [found in Grimaldi’s *La pata de cabra*] and it is fair to assume that his *Don Álvaro* represents an attempt to dignify this very sense of the pictorial by rescuing it from the puerile contrivances of the *comedia de magia*” (“On Staging *Don Álvaro*” 141).

Rivas was indeed a painter himself, as critics and biographers have amply noted, following Azorín’s lead: “El duque de Rivas era un pintor. Su obra literaria es la de un pintor” (16-7).<sup>4</sup> María Soledad Catalán Marín, for example, summarizes this aspect of the author’s talent and interests, and its impact on *Don Álvaro*, noting that “El duque de Rivas se inició en la pintura, y ello influyó en sus obras dramáticas y, sobre todo, en el *Don Álvaro*. En las acotaciones de esta obra, Rivas es muy minucioso, tanto que se convierte en el escenógrafo de su obra” (130). Other scholars, such as Miguel Ángel Lama, highlight this characteristic of Rivas’s work even further, and have asserted that the author makes greater use of the visual possibilities of theater in *Don Álvaro*, particularly in terms of the symbolic meaning that works in conjunction with the spoken word (204). Rivas can thus create a more organically unified whole that posits and resolves a number of difficult theses, including the author’s ideas on the growth in Spanish culture of what came to be known as Romanticism.

Most importantly for our purposes, Rivas uses physical space and visual elements as mechanisms to describe the arrival of the Romantic movement. He repeatedly demonstrates the tension between the substance of the play (physical space in particular, but also character and action) and the transitory nature of all things. This tension manifests itself on various levels: scenery/staging, the action of the play itself, and the dialogue that propels the action forward. As a result, the play represents the transition between modes of thought: traditional *costumbrismo* through Romantic *costumbrismo* to Romantic despair. It is therefore difficult to agree with Azorín, whose assessment of Rivas in this regard can be interpreted as somewhat disparaging:

El duque de Rivas es un artista que ve la vida en un solo plano, de un modo no evolutivo, no dinámico, sino estático. Todas sus obras son visiones de un solo momento, ó bien series de momentos independientes. No hay movimiento en la concepción estética de Saavedra; cuando el poeta quiere darnos el movimiento, el encadenamiento de las cosas, la evolución de un hecho ó de una vida, entonces fracasa [...] (17)

Azorín tempers this thought to a certain degree following this passage, but maintains his stance regarding the lack of evolution in Rivas’s work, and in *Don Álvaro* in particular. As we shall see, while Rivas constructs a series of scenes that could be interpreted as independent of one another, he also demonstrates clearly in symbolic terms the path followed to arrive at the present cultural moment. Through his elaborately painted visual textures that create physical spaces, he has crafted a living history of those moments through which Spain has passed, from a comforting and consolingly solid traditional past, to the turbulent and suffocating personal and psychological horrors of the present.

### Rivas's Text: Visual/Verbal Interplay

In addition to the text of the play proper, Rivas has included a series of notes that prove to be revealing in terms of his overall attempt to contextualize the moment that he wishes to describe. Not only does he indicate that costumes should be “los que se usaban a mediados del siglo pasado” (61), but he also recognizes

la mala disposición de nuestros escenarios,” and offers advice to deal with this shortcoming, in particular with regard to the quick and complex change of scenery required during the play's second act: “Si... no se pudiese cambiar a la vista la decoración de la segunda jornada, se echará momentáneamente un telón supletorio que represente una áspera montaña de noche. (62)<sup>5</sup>

These notes serve two functions. First, Rivas places us in what for him is the appropriate time frame. It is not the distant (medieval) past, as is the case in almost every other Romantic drama, but rather the more recent past, the one for which the kind of *costumbrismo* elaborated throughout the play is more appropriate.<sup>6</sup> Several scholars have approached the question of *Don Álvaro*'s setting in historical time: for example, David Quinn claims that the play takes place in the sixteenth century (483), while George Mansour has responded to this claim, refuting it with both textual and historical evidence, concluding that the play could only be set in the middle years of the eighteenth century (353-4). The definitive study on the matter was done by John Dowling, though, who describes in detail the specific eighteenth-century chronology of the action of *Don Álvaro*. He determines that “[i]n the case of *Don Álvaro*, Saavedra's meticulous attention to time undergirds the action, inducing in the public a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and making the emotional impact of the drama more forceful” (361). As we shall see, Rivas's use of recent history as a structure on which to build his drama proves to be more than just a technique for enhancing believability, as Dowling would have it, but the setting in time is indeed our first indication that *Don Álvaro* attempts something beyond merely describing its moment and the tensions particular to it. The play does describe its moment, in fact. However, it also wants to show us how we got to that particular moment, it wants to show us the nature of the moments that immediately preceded it, the qualities of the life that existed before things came to the “mala disposición” of the present (the mention of which grounds us in that present, and serves as the second function of Rivas's explanatory notes). *Don Álvaro* does not, thus, belong with those other nineteenth-century works that reference the previous century for mere reasons of “ambience,” as Gies describes it (“Playing the Enlightenment” 237).

*Don Álvaro* then begins with a traditional and recognizable *costumbrista* scene, the first in a series of moments that will evolve, gradually and systematically throughout the play, in terms of tone and significance. Jesús Rubio Jiménez has called these scenes “tempranos ejemplos de pintura costumbrista andaluza y paisajismo” (1831). The opening “sketch” (a terminology on which many of the play's critics insist, underlining their perception of its *costumbrista* elements, equating to some degree Rivas's creation with the *cuadros* developed by writers working in other modes) takes place in Seville. The scene commences with stage directions that contain a level of detail not yet common in Spanish theater at the



time. Catalán Marín has acknowledged this detail, noting that “las acotaciones del Duque de Rivas son tan específicas que no deja nada al arbitrio del director” (155). These *acotaciones* establish a complex environment in precise detail that depicts everyday life, much in the spirit of eighteenth-century visual art. We are even told that the benches in front of the counter are to be made of pine.

The scene that Rivas elaborates here at the beginning of the play recalls Goya’s tapestry cartoons, perhaps his 1788 *La pradera de San Isidro*, which, even though it is of and about a particular aspect of life in Madrid, reveals a similarity in tone and scope. In the first act of *Don Álvaro* we are in an urban setting, a Seville neighborhood, with common people doing everyday things: serving drinks, providing entertainment (Preciosilla, herself practically a cliché of *costumbrismo* and Spanish tradition due to her name and the functions that she performs here, strums a guitar).<sup>7</sup> We interpret the scene on the whole as describing a world that is about to change, a stable and relatively positive universe on the verge of being disrupted by violent and emotional upheaval, a people unprepared to experience the paroxysms of Romanticism.

The coming storm is highlighted throughout the sequence as Rivas alternates 1) the traditional *costumbrismo* of the physical space itself and the activity occurring there, including talk of weather, water and *los toros*, with 2) the introduction of the play’s main plot and themes, that is, our first news of don Álvaro himself and his romantic plight. “Romantic” will become a capitalized word and concept by the play’s conclusion, but for the moment the elements of his story have yet to acquire the weight of an entire philosophical (and philosophically despairing) movement: he is a stranger, of unknown origin, and in love with a woman whose family opposes their relationship. The conversation at the *aguaducho* in these first scenes revolves around don Álvaro, but the vehicle for this subject matter (the Canónigo’s defense of doña Leonor’s father’s right to disapprove of don Álvaro as a match for his daughter), displays the temperament of a *costumbrista* article on the subject of marriage, or perhaps the deft touch of Moratinian drama, more than it does the pitched anguish of what we will see in Romantic tragedy, in particular what will follow in this very play.

However, don Álvaro’s first entrance onto the stage prefigures such later developments in the play that will move it toward the Romantic brand of tragedy. Just before don Álvaro arrives, Rivas has called for an alteration in his scenery: “Empieza a anochecer, y se va oscureciendo el teatro” (69). The author thus initiates a pattern with regard to his use of light (or lighting) that carries its own symbolic weight. The entire play proves to be a study in contrasts between light and darkness, in both literal and scenic terms, but metaphorically as well. While there is regular oscillation in terms of this dichotomy, and the lighting of the stage itself, darkness (and despair) will eventually triumph, as we perhaps know it will based on the twilight in which don Álvaro crosses the Puente de Triana here in the play’s opening moments.

In an unusual choice for the theater of the time, Rivas calls for a shift of physical space in the middle of the first act. He repeats this decision throughout the play, creating a complex visual and rhythmic structure that will perhaps prove confusing for an audience not accustomed to such disregard for a more classical simplicity.<sup>8</sup> The rupturing with

such norms, and in general the breaking with the proscribed “unities,” would of course become a hallmark of Romantic drama (Ribao Pereira 71), but if we look closely at Rivas’s description of this scene change we find that there is something more subtle and revealing in the unexpected transition. Rivas provides for us a description of the interior of the Calatrava country house—again, eighteenth-century style is specifically noted, but “todo deteriorado” (71). The room is in darkness, lit only by a few candles, although the sky seen through the opening to the balcony is still clear. The clouds have not yet arrived, even though darkness is falling, reinforcing the motif introduced with don Álvaro’s first appearance in the play just moments earlier. Many of the play’s characters live in denial that smacks of delusion regarding the gathering darkness. The *marqués*, for example, proves incapable of comprehending his daughter’s condition:

Veo la tranquilidad  
que con la campestre vida  
va renaciendo en tu pecho,  
y me tienes satisfecho. (56-59)

His words, flavored by *costumbrismo* (as it would describe a longing for simpler, more traditional lifestyle choices), stand in stark contrast to the fact that his daughter is described by every single stage direction as agitated or afflicted. The maid Curra suffers from similar difficulties of perception, and believes that the current unrest will be temporary, that the *marqués* will come around to doña Leonor’s love for don Álvaro—she believes that with time

volveremos de allí a poco,  
a que con festejos grandes  
nos reciban, y todito  
será banquetes y bailes. (197-200)

This fantasy is, again, *costumbrista*, *pintoresca*. It matches the physical, visual reality of the opening of the play and other moments that prove to be equally tenuous. Yet it is fantasy nonetheless and will be subverted with the passing of the tradition to which the household so desperately attempts to hold. Christine Blackshaw has demonstrated several aspects of this scene and the adherence to established custom, particularly in relation to Curra’s advice to doña Leonor. Blackshaw argues that Curra urges a maintaining of the paternal order, “that Leonor will be redeemed only through mothering [the *marqués*’s] grandchild: a male heir to wash the metaphorical stain to the family honor that she has committed” (71). The remainder of the play reinforces the hollowness of such a fantasy, one more in the chain of such false hopes as developed by Rivas throughout *Don Álvaro*.

After presenting the death of the *marqués*, Rivas crafts another scene of traditional *costumbrismo* to begin the play’s second act. Here we find stage directions on par with those of the first act in terms of detail and atmosphere—a *mesón* in Hornachuelos, outside Córdoba, which contains numerous elements as if, again, from a painting, creating a *tableau vivant* of local color; *arrieros* resting on their tack or dancing *seguidillas* to music played by a student, while drinking wine and aguardiente. It is again night, as during the latter part of the previous act, establishing another moment in the process of passing. The

first scene of the *jornada* serves three functions: 1) to provide another *cuadro de costumbres*, as finely detailed as its equivalent scene in the first act, yet darker in tone; 2) to introduce the mysterious guest at the inn, and to have our *costumbrista* characters ponder who he or she might be (which runs in perfect parallel to the conversation revolving around don Álvaro in the first act); and 3) to have the *estudiante* provide some necessary exposition, summing up events since the end of the previous act (92-3), an account in which we learn that he and doña Leonor's brothers have been hunting for her and don Álvaro, to no avail—it has been reported that doña Leonor is dead, and that don Álvaro has returned to America. At the end of this sequence the characters are required to strip the stage of many of its dressings, “dejando la escena desembarazada” (94)—as though they are clearing out the trappings of *costumbrismo* and preparing for a new sort of decoration. Although this interpretation will not prove entirely to be the case until much later in the play, the moment of stage business here is yet another indication that conditions are not stagnant, that new modes will overcome the old.

This process is advanced further in the third scene, where we have new staging, again in the middle of an act. The visual imagery here is less recognizably *costumbrista* and more what we have come to know as Romantic—a mountain scene, the exterior of the Convento de los Ángeles. The monastery has a skylight, through which light from within shines: we remain in a world where religion can provide comfort, or at least comforting imagery. Rivas directs that we see the *hostería* from the previous scene off in the distance through the mountains, and in doing so he conveys the continuity that he strives to achieve throughout the play, continuity that gradually brings us from the traditional, more stable past to the chaos of the present. It is a clear night, illuminated by moonlight—another indication of safety (clear weather, light to guide us). Doña Leonor enters dressed as a man—her words and demeanor reinforce the comfort believed to be found in such a physical space, and different versions of this are repeated throughout the scene:

Sí... ya llegué, Dios mío;  
 gracias os doy rendida.  
 (*Arrodillase al ver el convento.*)  
 En ti, Virgen Santísima, confío;  
 sed el amparo de mi amarga vida.  
 Este refugio es sólo  
 el que puedo tener de polo a polo.  
 (*Álzase.*)  
 No me queda en la tierra  
 más asilo y resguardo  
 que los áridos riscos de esta sierra;  
 en ello estoy... ¿Aún tiemblo y me acobardo? (404-13)

Doña Leonor interprets the mountains as offering sanctuary, as they are home to the monastery. She does not understand that the mountains in fact represent the dangers of the world, where the only sanctuary is the house of God (and even this sanctuary will prove illusory as tradition fails). She holds onto what might provide consolation for her, she seeks hope where there is none, like her father and Curra in the first act. She had

thought that she had found some measure of safety at the inn (a physical space in the realm of *costumbrismo*), but she has heard the student's tale, and knows that she remains in danger. The safety is an illusion, just as is the clarity of the moon—nothing is safe, nothing is secure. No place, no conditions offer protection.

We find numerous similar moments and visual touches elaborated by Rivas throughout this second act: the light that shines through the peephole of the monastery's door, as well as the enormous cross at whose base doña Leonor converses with el Padre Guardián, to name just two. Their dialogue reinforces Rivas's agenda of using physical space as both comment on the inner lives of his characters and as representative of a changing world, an agenda put on display in practically every scene of *Don Álvaro*. It is not just the setting, though: Catalán Marín has astutely described how in Romantic drama “[s]e llenan de simbología los lugares donde sucede la acción, el tiempo en el que transcurre, el espacio por el que se mueven los personajes, los sonidos que los envuelven, el vestuario que los cubre y los diferentes objetos de que se sirven” (160), and she identifies *Don Álvaro* as the play in which this function of nondialogic detail is first introduced and codified. Furthermore, as Lama has noted, Rivas “presenta una ambientación teatral sugerida por pautas escenográficas que fortalece los significados simbólicos de la acción dramática, en un recurso que ya con *Don Álvaro* se ha convertido en marca de una nueva actitud ante el hecho teatral” (210). In this section of the play, for example, we note how el Padre Guardián explains to doña Leonor that

Libre estáis en este sitio  
de esas vanas ilusiones,  
aborto de los abismos.  
Las insidias del demonio,  
las sombras a que da brío  
para conturbar al hombre,  
no tienen aquí dominio. (577-83)

Here the idea is that certain physical spaces can protect one from that which is not physical, from the anguish of the world, from torments that do not belong to this world, as Catholic dogma would have it. As Shaw (“Introducción” 30-1) and others have described, this particular option for solace in a cruel world is just one of many that cannot follow through on their promise: love, religious faith, action (political or military). None of these offer, in the end, the route to happiness, fulfillment, or salvation. Although the particular power of the physical space represented by the monastery will not be shown as fully false until the end of the play, Rivas is preparing us for that moment, showing us what we want to find in this place, what doña Leonor wants to find in it.

The milieu of action (as Shaw would put it) serves as the foundation for the physical spaces constructed by Rivas for the play's next two acts. The third act opens with much simpler stage directions and description, but they are meaningful nonetheless. We are in Veletri, during the War of Austrian Succession, where we learn that don Álvaro has gone in search of his own brand of escape. We see a room which serves as lodging for soldiers: there is clothing, as well as tack and weapons. Men are playing cards and planning to cheat the new arrival, don Carlos, the first of doña Leonor's two brothers. Rather than a

world of spiritual peril, Rivas presents here the world of random chance and human greed, a different sort of danger than those referred to by el Padre Guardián in the second act. Don Carlos enters and notices immediately what a squalid place it is, and catches the soldiers in their attempts to cheat him. This leads to the fight which calls for a rapid scene change to a forest at night. The world is now tangled, suffocating and dark, and here don Álvaro makes his speech that describes a reality of unrelenting torment, using physical spaces as metaphors:

¡Qué eternidad tan horrible  
la breve vida! Este mundo,  
¡qué calabozo profundo  
para el hombre desdichado  
a quien mira el cielo airado  
con su ceño furibundo! (895-900)

The remainder of the speech uses a number of these metaphors: prison/crib, school/desert, throne, gallows, “espantosa mansión” (960). At last we encounter what we have come to know as the prototypical Romantic vocabulary and imagery. These are the cages of Romanticism, spaces not described in the more gentle and comforting traditional version of *costumbrismo* employed as contrast in the earlier segments of the play. Shaw succinctly describes how don Álvaro’s speech here “sufficiently explains the attraction of the prison for Romantic writers. It symbolizes existence” (*Literary History* 12). Sánchez, furthermore, has identified the soliloquy as “clara evidencia” that “la función histriónica de las figuras [del drama] está ligada como expresión teatral a los elementos escenográficos que las rodean” (“Cara y cruz” 22). He concludes that “El amargo desengaño expresado en ese momento es un clamar en el desierto, o, más aún, en una selva oscura, decoración que domina y empequeñece al protagonista” (22). The central third act of *Don Álvaro* thus serves as the pivot on which the tone of the play’s use of *costumbrismo* turns, and what we see of it during the rest of the drama will grow darker, more Romantic, more akin to the *costumbrismo* of Larra than to that of his less despairing contemporaries.

*Don Álvaro*’s fourth act provides a counterpart to military action, which in this case is civic or political action. The opening sequence takes place again in soldiers’ lodgings, where don Carlos finally reveals his true identity to don Álvaro, who has no choice now but to fight this false friend. We learn here that honor is not important to don Álvaro, that it is an archaic tradition that does not allow for the possibility of the nuances of reality and human behavior. Thematically, this leads us into the next set of scenes, in which Rivas reinforces the archaic nature of honor and the various components of its machinery, such as the duel that will now occur between don Álvaro and don Carlos. We are not surprised that it is the future Carlos III who has banned this backward tradition, the edict regarding which is read publicly in the main plaza of Veletri, a physical space made over for war and utilized for various types of civic activity. The scene is *costumbrista* in that it comments on social norms, and it is Romantically so given the subject matter—that is, it elaborates on an attempt to remove those customs which have kept Spain from becoming a modern and productive nation. The irony here is Romantic as well, given that the king’s new law, intended for good, serves as another mechanism of entrapment for don Álvaro. He had

no desire to kill don Carlos, just as earlier he had no desire to kill the *marqués*. He has considered both of them to be good men, but the world/fate/destiny will not allow the conflict(s) between them to be resolved amicably or productively. Furthermore, don Álvaro is to be executed for having found himself forced into exactly the sort of action that he had been attempting to avoid. Rather than salvation, he finds only its opposite. When the war comes suddenly to Veletri at the end of the act and don Álvaro must again fight, he makes a promise that will force him to seek out another of Romanticism's cages, described once more in terms of physical space:

Denme una espada; volaré a la muerte,  
y si es vivir mi suerte,  
y no la logro en tanto desconcierto,  
yo os hago, eterno Dios, voto profundo  
de renunciar al mundo  
y de acabar mi vida en un desierto. (1866-71)

These verses, in the form of the *silva* regularly used in moments such as these throughout the play, reveal don Álvaro's inner thoughts: he remains faithful to God and promises to remove his own scourge to a remote place, literally and symbolically, where he can do no more harm.

The fifth *jornada* commences with the darkest and most Romantic of the *costumbrista* scenes constructed by Rivas for the play. We return to the Convento de los Ángeles, where el Hermano Melitón is serving food to the poor, a sequence which describes a vision of the world much more in line with Goya's later, darker paintings, for example his *La romería de San Isidro* (1819-23). This mural utilizes the same basic subject matter as the 1788 painting mentioned earlier (*La pradera de San Isidro*), but now shows the plight of the people in a dark and savage world. Rivas's stage directions establish a clear contrast between the stage design itself (the visual component) and the scene that occurs there:

El teatro representa lo interior del claustro bajo del convento de los Ángeles, que debe ser una galería mezquina, alrededor de un patiecillo con naranjos, adelfas y jazmines.... Aparecen el Padre Guardián paseándose gravemente por el proscenio y leyendo en su breviario; el Hermano Melitón, sin manto, arremangado, y repartiendo con un cucharón, de un gran caldero, la sopa, al Viejo, al Cojo, al Manco, a la Mujer y al grupo de pobres que estará apiñado en la portería. (156)

Although the space is small, it is a place of sanctuary and beauty (and natural life). Furthermore, the interplay between el Hermano Melitón and the group of wayward souls described by Rivas even provides a few seemingly comical moments. Yet, the end result is a caustic view of problems that the Church cannot solve: "Los desengaños del mundo, las tribulaciones" (161), in the words of el Padre Guardián.

The play's final series of confrontations takes place in the environment of the monastery and the nearby mountains. Don Alfonso, doña Leonor's other brother, has arrived in search of don Álvaro (disguised as el Padre Rafael), whom we first see in his cell (read:

cage) when el Hermano Melitón comes to announce the visitor. It is the cell of a Franciscan monk, complete with devices of self-harm and a skull lying on a desk. Here, for the first occasion in the play, we are returning to an earlier time, but not even the one referenced in most Romantic plays. Instead, Rivas creates a visual space that recalls the paintings of Zurbarán and his contemporaries, dark-toned paintings that describe an austere monastic life. Don Álvaro has looked to such austerity to find his salvation, which, he will soon discover, will also not provide him with what he needs (and, what Rivas suggests, in turn, that we need). Rivas is looking to a past that describes not the glory of a lost empire, as would a more conservative brand of Romanticism than that practiced here, but uses rather the visual cues he needs to transmit to his audience the correct mood. This is no longer *costumbrismo*, and especially not of the traditional variety—the author has moved beyond it now, recognizing that Spain and its culture have moved beyond it as well. He underlines this repeatedly in what remains of the play: storm clouds lead to storms, lightning to thunder, despair to suicide and the rejection of all possible solutions to the *tribulaciones* of life.

Rivas conveys his advancement (and Spain's) via the visual fabric of his work, and we need not belabor the Romanticism on display in the justifiably (in)famous final scenes of *Don Álvaro* except to underline how different these passages are from the rest of the play. The change, as we have noted, has already occurred, but here Rivas presses forward to describe a new and particularly desperate physical space, one where there is no comfort or safety, nor even the possibility of encountering them. He depicts here a cruel reality that holds no hope for humanity, a world in which paternal order has either broken down or disappeared (Blackshaw Naberhaus 376), in which such forms of order or safety no longer offer the consolation that they did in the past. He has mapped for his audience the transition from an older, more stable and secure existence, and a particular set of customs that manifests the flavor of that existence to one in which none of these things matter. *Don Álvaro* indeed represents a culmination of the Romantic anguish that takes hold in Spain in the 1830s, as many critics have demonstrated, but it also serves as a history in microcosm of the possibilities for expressing, in artistic terms, the recent developments that have brought the country and its culture to such a point.

To conclude, then, Rivas's *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* embodies this moment and how Spanish culture arrived there through the utilization of literary techniques of the recent past and the careful manipulation of those techniques to point its audience in the direction of the new reality of Romanticism. Rivas creates *costumbrista* sketches composed of visual elements that combine to form recognizable physical spaces. These spaces, like those depicted in the *costumbrismo* of the eighteenth century, as well as in the more conservative brand of the movement during the first third of the nineteenth century, are on the surface very reassuring, redolent of comforting and reliable tradition. Rivas, though, subverts this stability with the conflicts that he develops between and within his characters, who are repeatedly beset by crises native to a cruel and uncaring world. No matter how or where they search for answers, for safety, for comfort, they fail, and they suffer the many possible fates of those who live in the dark cages of Rivas's present—unhappiness, loneliness, guilt, pain, and death without redemption.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For an overview on the play's demonstration of Romantic qualities, see, for example, Doménech Rico and Peral Vega 1790.
- <sup>2</sup> Iarocci has summarized the general perception of this stance. He describes Mesonero as the “premier chronicler of the social customs of Madrid during the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s” (“Romantic Prose” 388), and indicates furthermore that “while [Mesonero] carefully avoids explicit political commentary, his even-tempered judgments model the satisfied comfort of the class he represents” (388). Iarocci then moves on to Larra, about whom he asserts that “His sustained, caustic social criticism, his acerbic political commentary, and the very public anguish he expressed in a series of articles that preceded his suicide in 1837 quickly accorded him iconic status as an emblem of liberal martyrdom” (389).
- <sup>3</sup> For the dating of *La pata de cabra*, see Gies (*Theatre and Politics* 63-75). For the development of the *comedia de magia*, see, for example, Álvarez Barrientos, who informs us that “[l]a comedia de magia se encuentra formalizada ya en los primeros años del XVIII” (“Problemas de género” 308).
- <sup>4</sup> See also Rees 42.
- <sup>5</sup> Citations from the text of *Don Álvaro* are by line number, for those passages in verse, and by page number for all other items (passages in prose, stage directions and notes).
- <sup>6</sup> For the predilection toward medieval settings on the part of Romantic writers, see, for example, Derek Flitter's *Spanish Romanticism and the Uses of History. Ideology and the Historical Imagination*. As part of his extensive analysis, Flitter notes that “[the] veneration for the greatest glories of Spain's cultural tradition or inalienable features of Spanish nationhood was intended to counterweight something which, only too characteristically, the perversely irreligious cultural model of the French Enlightenment was felt willfully to have disparaged in the pursuit of its own malignant ends” (22). As we shall see, Rivas's choice of the eighteenth century as the setting of *Don Álvaro* makes use of the Enlightenment and its goals for symbolic effect, given that he demonstrates that the precepts and efforts of that period cannot successfully confront the complexities of the present day.
- <sup>7</sup> See Navas Ruiz xxix.
- <sup>8</sup> See, in particular, Montserrat Ribao Pereira's thorough analysis of these rapid changes of scenery, the difficulties inherent in their execution, and their meaning for the audience (57-71).
- <sup>9</sup> A version of this article was presented at the 2015 Kentucky Foreign Language Conference as part of a session on Rivas. I would like to offer special thanks to Christine Blackshaw Naberhaus (who organized the panel and also provided helpful insights during the development of this project), as well as Jorge Avilés-Diz and Ramón Espejo-Saavedra, who also offered valuable feedback.



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