

## ***Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*: Political and Cosmic Irresolution in Ángel de Saavedra's Earliest Plays**

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As a playwright, Ángel de Saavedra, more often identified as duque de Rivas, is largely remembered for *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino*, even though he wrote fourteen other plays, some of which enjoyed considerable popular and critical success.<sup>1</sup> This remains true even as long-lost plays, such as *Ataúlfo* and *Doña Blanca*, have resurfaced, and as scholars have emphasized the need to study all of Rivas's theatrical works, and not just his best-known ones (Blackshaw Naberhaus 373; Materna 603; and Shaw, "Ataúlfo" 231).

Among Rivas's overlooked plays are his first two, *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*, both of which were written in 1814. Due to censorship, *Ataúlfo* was never performed or printed, and Rivas, believing it to be highly inferior to *Don Álvaro* and *El desengaño en un sueño*, requested that the play be omitted from collections of his works (Cacho Blecua 393-94; Crespo 45; Lovett 40; and Peers 31). *Ataúlfo* remained relatively inaccessible until 1984, when Juan Manuel Cacho Blecua published an unedited version of it in the *Anuario de filología española*. In Donald Shaw's assessment, *Ataúlfo*'s publication is important for scholars of Spanish Romanticism because it "serves to illustrate the giant stride forward in technical ability, but especially in outlook, which Rivas accomplished between 1814 [...] and 1834, when he prepared the final version of *Don Álvaro*" (231). Yet, despite Shaw's endorsement, *Ataúlfo* has not garnered further critical consideration.

*Aliatar* did not suffer from censorship, and it had a relatively successful production in Seville in early 1816. Moreover, it has been included in all *ante mortem* and posthumous collections of Rivas's works (Crespo 45; Lovett 40; and Peers 32). Ermanno Caldera has discussed *Aliatar* within the context of Rivas's *oeuvre*, while Shaw has discussed *Aliatar*'s contribution to Rivas's literary and ideological evolution ("Acerca de *Aliatar*"). To date, no scholars have studied *Aliatar* alongside its contemporary *Ataúlfo*, even though they are thematically similar. In both plays, a respectable political leader has fallen in love with an "utterly unsuitable woman" (Shaw, "Ataúlfo" 213), or an ethnic and religious outsider, and this inappropriate affection eventually precipitates the leaders' deaths and the destabilization of their realms. In *Ataúlfo*, the Gothic Aryan king Ataúlfo plans to marry the Roman Catholic Placidia; in *Aliatar*, the Muslim chieftain Aliatar becomes obsessed with his Christian captive Elvira.

Scholars have corroborated Rivas's claim that he was committed to the neoclassical aesthetic and the Enlightenment worldview when he composed these plays (Cacho Blecua 393-94; Caldera 108; Crespo 45; Peers 26; and Shaw "Ataúlfo" 241). Consequently, my focus will not be on the playwright's dramatic technique, or on the plays' similarities to other neoclassical dramas. Rather, in what follows I will examine how Saavedra's emerging, and competing, political and metaphysical preoccupations—absolute monarchical authority and unbridled human passion—converge in *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar* and betray a political and cosmic irresolution that Saavedra, later duque de Rivas, maintained throughout his career, most especially as a playwright.

Biographical accounts attest that during the early years of Fernando VII's reign, Saavedra enjoyed a friendly relationship with his sovereign, at least publicly (Crespo 44; Lovett 16; and Peers 10-24). Nonetheless, they also describe the poet and budding playwright's political ambivalence during this same period. After all, just two years earlier Saavedra had been an ardent supporter of the ultra-liberal Constitution of Cádiz, "which was as perfect [...] in his eyes as Fernando el Deseado had been four years earlier" (Peers 21). Less than a decade after Fernando's return, Saavedra would defend the liberal cause in parliamentary speeches and in *Lanuza*, the last play he wrote in Spain before his decade-long exile (Materna 607-10). Simultaneously, Saavedra's poetry following the War of Independence exhibits both a fervent patriotism—expressed in "Napoleón destronado," composed in 1812—and a growing anxiety concerning "the affairs of love" and how they could potentially interfere with one's duties as a patriot—articulated in "Oda al conde de Noroña," also composed in 1812 (Peers 23).

In both *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*, Saavedra explores the limits of both political authority and human passion through depictions of his protagonists' relationships with women. Thus, as I hope to demonstrate, despite their thematic similarities, *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar* have markedly divergent political implications, and they differ from one another in their exploration, and containment, of self-expression. These variances could account for the plays' markedly different public and critical receptions, and for Rivas's desire for *Ataúlfo* to remain unpublished.

### **The Failure of Conflict: *Ataúlfo***

After heroically conquering the Romans in battle, the Visigoth Aryan king Ataúlfo has fallen in love with Placidia, his former enemy Honorio's sister, and they plan to marry. This troubles the High Priest Vinamáro, who believes the once valiant and noble ruler has become a weakened slave to his passions: "[Y]a olvidó las conquistas, ya no vence y de Placidia en los inertes brazos, abandona el honor del nombre Godo al ocio torpe, al femenino regalo" (Cacho Blecua 402). Moreover, Vinamáro does not believe that Ataúlfo will ever regain his lost virtue because "si los héroes se rinden a una infame pasión, son siempre esclavos" (405). He goes on to warn Sigerico, the leader of the king's armed forces, that Ataúlfo's marriage to Placidia poses not just a political danger, but a cultural one as well: "[V]erás nuestras costumbres abolidas, nuestra gloria empañada, y el preclaro y el excelso nombre goda en hondo olvido [...] ni aún vemos de nuestra Religión el santuario seguro ya" (407).

Initially, Sigerico does not believe his sovereign has fallen in love with a Roman, and he protests to Vinamáro: “Si el encanto, si tal vez la belleza de Placidia su corazón guerrero han penetrado, jamás por ella olvidará su nombre” (401). His faith in Ataúlfo wavers moments later, yet, when the king emerges and informs Sigerico not only of his intention to marry Placidia, but also of the invitation extended to her brother Honorio (the former Roman Emperor) to stay in his palace as a special military guest.<sup>2</sup> Ataúlfo abruptly dismisses Sigerico’s attempt to advise him, and he reminds his soldier of his obligation to carry out his orders immediately (409). At this moment, Saavedra appears to be establishing a conflict between Sigerico’s loyalty to his sovereign and his devotion to the Gothic kingdom and its creed, not unlike the conflict Hernán García experiences in Vicente García de la Huerta’s *Raquel*.

Sigerico does not return to the stage until the third act, and between his appearances the focus shifts to Ataúlfo’s relationship with Placidia, which does not necessarily pose a threat to Ataúlfo’s virtue or his kingdom. In fact, during the second act, Ataúlfo expounds on how his love for Placidia has led him to become more virtuous, not less so. He describes his heart before he met Placidia as “altivo y fiero, [...] sangre y sangre no más eran su gozo, combatir y asolar sus apetitos” (436-37). After meeting Placidia, however, Ataúlfo has learned “que los hombres han nacido para gozar de amor tiernas delicias y no para sembrar el exterminio, y la desolación, y el llanto, y el duelo entre sus semejantes” (437). Consequently, in a statement that affirms Vinamáro’s suspicions that he has lost his bellicose tendencies, Ataúlfo confesses, “Ya no estimo en nada mis conquistas y victorias” (437).

As Shaw illustrates, Ataúlfo’s words in this second act are highly similar to those Athaulpho utters in Agustín de Montiano y Luyando’s play *Athaulpho*, written sixty years earlier (“Montiano’s *Athaulpho*” 156). In the opening act of Montiano’s work, the king describes how his “enojo” and “odio antiguo” towards the Romans have given way, thanks to Placidia’s loving counsel, to peaceful compromise (Montiano 121). Athaulpho’s love for Placidia advances the belief that through “the harmony between reasonable arguments and tender affection in this highly-placed couple, two formerly warring nations will achieve peace” (Shaw, “Montiano’s *Athaulpho*” 156). Consequently, their marriage becomes a “metaphor of the Enlightenment’s ideal of reason and feelings going hand in hand.” Likewise, in Saavedra’s play, Ataúlfo’s description of the transformative power of Placidia’s love “manifest[s...] the Enlightenment’s conception of love as a softening, civilizing influence wedded to reason and moral progress” (Shaw, “*Ataúlfo*” 239).

However, reason and feelings are not the only causes of Ataúlfo’s supposed moral conversion. Rather, both the king and his lover cite divine providence as the primary cause. In the fourth act, facing increasing opposition to his relationship, Ataúlfo assures Placidia that “El cielo quiso que hallara en vos el bien que me faltaba” (437). Similarly, he proclaims that his beloved’s queenship is God’s will, for “su belleza, su sangre, su virtud, todo publica que el cielo la destina para reina” (415). Placidia shares her lover’s belief that their marriage is divinely sanctioned: “Dispuso el Cielo nuestra unión benigno en sus altos decretos infalibles desde el momento en que llegó a mi oído tu augusto nombre y tus

heroicos hechos” (436). Moreover, she believes Ataúlfo will eventually earn his former enemies’ loyalty, nourishing them spiritually because of “su virtud, su valor [y] su gloria” (411).

Even if the love Ataúlfo has for Placidia has fortified him morally, the possibility still remains that the Visigoth kingdom and its Aryan creed are under threat of extinction. Vinamáro certainly believes this to be the case, and Sigerico eventually, and fleetingly, determines that it will be necessary to dethrone Ataúlfo in order to preserve “el bien del pueblo y de la creencia santa” (426). Ironically, Placidia’s former lover Constancio arrives at the same conclusion, though for him this is a comforting one as he contemplates losing her to a former political enemy: “Las costumbres suaves, humanas, dulces y pulidas de su patria, sin duda entre los Godos logrará introducir” (430).

The thought of the Aryan religion succumbing to Catholicism convinces Vinamáro that consenting to Ataúlfo’s marriage will incur “[e]l fuego abrazador del alto Cielo, del justo Dios,” whose “fulminante rayo nos dejará en ceniza convertidos si nuestra fe, si nuestros ritos sacros no sabemos guardar” (407-08). Vinamáro’s religious convictions compel him to rebel against his king, even though the king rules by divine right: “Yo sería perjuro, y para el Cielo delincuente si de Ataúlfo la pasión indigna no osase contrastar. Yo solo, solo combatiré su error, y la voz mía al Cielo pedirá que lo confunda y que con él ejerza su justicia” (428-29). According to Shaw, when Vinamáro utters these words at the beginning of the third act, the play becomes a political tragedy (“*Ataúlfo*” 237). The king has willfully betrayed his obligations as a ruler, at least according to Vinamáro; this leaves regicide, a sacrilege, as the only solution. Consequently, “[t]he choice is a tragic one; not only between two equally justified forces, but between two equally repugnant options.”

Notwithstanding Vinamáro’s fervent conviction that Placidia is proselytizing Ataúlfo and planning to persecute the Aryans, neither Placidia nor Ataúlfo ever imply that the king will convert to Catholicism. History does suggest that Vinamáro’s suspicions were justified, since in 589 the king Reccared I (586-601) formally proclaimed the conversion of the Visigoth kingdom to Catholicism at the Third Council of Toledo (Barton 18). Yet, this conversion took place nearly 170 years after Ataúlfo’s reign, which suggests that the threat was not immediate during his rule. Moreover, during the first act Sigerico is convinced that peace with the Romans is the only way to assure the survival of the Visigoth kingdom against its many other political enemies. He also emphasizes that the Romans were utterly defeated when they surrendered to Ataúlfo, which makes a successful rebellion against him, or a forced conversion of their new king, highly unlikely (402-03).

While Ataúlfo does not present a direct threat to the Gothic kingdom and its creed, it is still possible that, like *Raquel’s* Alfonso, he is the victim of a duplicitous, self-interested lover. The introduction of Placidia’s former lover Constancio early on in the play invites suspicion that this might be the case, even though Placidia assures her servant Julia that she is no longer in love with him (411). However, Placidia and Constancio’s first dialog on stage establishes that he is not a viable romantic rival for Ataúlfo. She immediately affirms

her loyalty to her fiancé, and she defends him against Constancio's criticisms, stating, "El que tú injusto bárbaro apellidas merece más por su virtud excelsa que los cultos Romanos" (421).

Later, when Constancio and Julia present her with the opportunity to return to Rome and escape execution at the Goths' hands, Placidia avers that she has no fear of death, and she refuses to abandon her "adorado amante," who is in danger precisely because of his devotion to her (453). According to Shaw, at this moment Placidia's character "proclaims a message of courage and moral integrity amid the squalid intrigue and mindless jealousy which confront her" ("Ataúlfo" 241). Placidia is also comparable to *El trovador's* Leonor, who offers her hand in marriage to Nuño, her lover Manrique's rival, to free Manrique from prison and to prevent his execution. Nonetheless, rather than fulfill her promise to Nuño, Leonor commits suicide and declares her love for Manrique consecrated, sacrificing not just her body, but also her immortal soul (García Gutiérrez 194).

Because Ataúlfo has not lost his virtue, presented a viable political threat to his realm, or become the victim of a scheming, duplicitous woman, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify his tragic flaw. It is possible that Ataúlfo's tragic flaw is simply his inability to perceive his subjects' discontent with his forthcoming wedding, which becomes painfully evident when he assures Placidia that once they are married, "[e]l pueblo fiel su gozo y regocijo sin duda expresará su algazara, y nuestra unión con sus alegres gritos celebrará cual suele" (437). When Sigerico tries to warn Ataúlfo about the growing unrest in his kingdom, Ataúlfo assures him that a simple decree to his subjects will placate them: "Estoy seguro que me oirá sumiso, y que humillado a mi presencia augusta me pedirá el perdón de su delito" (442). Even Placidia tries to warn Ataúlfo that, despite what he has been informed, an uprising against him is looming. Nevertheless, Ataúlfo refuses to believe his devoted fiancé, and instead he questions her devotion to him (463).

Ataúlfo's obliviousness stems from an unexamined belief in his absolute authority as king. When Vinamáro finally confronts him directly, Ataúlfo cites his kingship as reason alone for the High Priest's continued obedience: "Yo soy el rey, vosotros los vasallos y sólo os toca obedecer sumisos. Obedeced, y respetad mi nombre" (441). Rather than respond to Vinamáro's attack on his character and his virtue, Ataúlfo abuses his authority even further by calling for the priest's imprisonment, a reaction that, according to Shaw, "has more to do with power than with character" ("Ataúlfo" 240).

Indeed, throughout the play, Ataúlfo fails to exhibit any awareness of how his marriage to a former political enemy, who is also a cultural and religious outsider, might compromise his duties as a ruler and a warrior. In addition, his refusal to heed his lover's warnings, or to recognize her sacrificial love for him, undermines his earlier assertion that his love for Placidia has ennobled him. Consequently, as Shaw has argued, Ataúlfo "undergoes no tragic evolution of character and fails to convince us of his tragic stature" ("Ataúlfo" 233). Instead, as a sovereign and as a tragic hero, Ataúlfo remains "unreflecting and resolute" throughout his arc ("Ataúlfo" 235).

Similarly, neither Vinamáro nor Sigerico exhibit the “grandeur of conduct” necessary for the play to follow the formula of the eighteenth-century “semi-heroic tragedy” (Shaw, *Ataúlfo* 235). Indeed, it remains unclear if Vinamáro is completely justified in his rebellion against Ataúlfo, and he never examines critically his own convictions, nor does he express any sorrow when he concludes that regicide, a sacrilege, is the only viable course of action. In fact, Sigerico is the only character in the play who demonstrates any awareness of the tragic nature of the Visigoths’ dilemma. After he reluctantly releases Vinamáro from prison at the end of the fourth act, Sigerico immediately questions the wisdom of his decision: “O Dios, pero ¿qué hice? ... ¿A caso mis deberes he cumplido? [...] amo a los godos, y a mi creencia santa, y respeto a mi rey a un tiempo mismo” (447). He wants desperately to believe both that Vinamáro will suppress the rebellion, and that his own loyalty to Ataúlfo is justified. Consequently, Sigerico pleads to God to intervene on his king’s behalf: “Concédele tu gracia Dios benigno” (460).

Notwithstanding Sigerico’s awareness of his tragic dilemma, it is unclear if he remains loyal to Ataúlfo because he believes his sovereign to be noble—he repeatedly begs Vinamáro to have faith in their king’s inherent virtue—or if he, like Vinamáro, is blindly following a creed. According to Sigerico’s own admission, as a soldier he is more powerful in wielding swords than he is in “las palabras expresivas propias para mover corazones,” and for this reason he finds himself unable to convince Ataúlfo to reconsider his plan to marry Placidia (427). He also confesses that, unlike Vinamáro, he has never contemplated advising the king on such matters since, “En la milicia la primera virtud es la obediencia.”

In addition to maintaining unexamined political beliefs, Sigerico lacks agency. Outside of his single misguided error of freeing Vinamáro at the end of the fourth act, he does little to aid directly in the uprising against the king, nor does he actively attempt to prevent it. Unlike Placidia, Sigerico never attempts to warn Ataúlfo about Vinamáro’s release from prison, despite his reservations about his having freed him, nor does Sigerico actively attempt to protect the king from his conspirators during the final scenes of the play. His indecision and inaction make him, in Shaw’s words, “neither victim nor (in a direct sense) agent” (“*Ataúlfo*” 238).

In *Ataúlfo*, consequently, Saavedra has not presented a definitive conflict. The king is neither a tyrant nor a benevolent, wise ruler. He is in love, but his love poses no direct threat to his realm; at the same time, it does not appear to have been an opportunity for him to cultivate his virtues either, despite Ataúlfo’s and Placidia’s fervent claims that it has. Although Placidia loves Ataúlfo deeply, he is unable to inspire the same decisive loyalty in his subjects, or, more noticeably, in the leader of his military. Despite having been a noble warrior, Ataúlfo lacks the wisdom to understand that marrying a former political enemy, and a cultural and religious outsider, might be politically imprudent. Consequently, while Vinamáro’s political rebellion is not particularly compelling, it is equally difficult to understand or empathize with Sigerico and Placidia’s loyalty to Ataúlfo. This ambivalent portrayal of Ataúlfo oppugns the belief that a monarch is an infallible, enlightened despot who always acts in his subjects’ best interest. While it does not explicitly condone political rebellion, it does not provide an unconditional condemnation of it either.

In addition to being a play in which Saavedra explores the fallibility of both monarchical authority and political rebellion, *Ataúlfo* marks the beginning of the playwright's exploration of the romantic belief that the universe could be governed by an unjust or indifferent providence. Sigerico's fervent prayers to God remain unanswered: Ataúlfo attains no greater political wisdom, and God does not intervene to prevent his death. Similarly, the divinely ordained love between Ataúlfo and Placidia abruptly transforms, towards the end of the drama, into a "destino inexorable" which will lead to "desventura y dolor, sangre y luto," according to Placidia (458). *Ataúlfo* concludes with a promise of political order being restored, and the hope that Sigerico can expiate his own guilt by being an active agent in avenging Ataúlfo's death so that future generations can know "la lealtad que se debe a los monarcas" (465). These promises, however, offer little consolation for Ataúlfo's beloved Placidia.

### **A Dangerous Love: *Aliatar***

Like *Ataúlfo*, *Aliatar* opens with secondary characters discussing how the protagonist's current infatuation with a political, religious, and cultural outsider has compromised his abilities as a ruler. Instead of the religious and military authority conversing, Aliatar's Jewish slaves Ismán and Caleb discuss their captor's abrupt change in demeanor. Ismán recently escaped the palace without Aliatar's noticing, and he has observed that since Elvira was captured, Aliatar "moderó su altivez" and "templó su trato," treating the Christian woman as his consort instead of his captive (Rivas *Obras completas* II 4). Subsequently, Caleb describes how he has seen Aliatar kneeling in front of Elvira professing his love, and he expresses surprise that such a powerful man would submit himself so freely, particularly to a woman (4). Moments later, Ismán reports to Elvira on his conversation with don García, Elvira's lover, whom Ismán believes is her brother. He informs her about the Christians' plan to invade the Muslim fortress and free Elvira later that evening. Even before Aliatar appears on stage, secondary characters make evident the dangers Elvira's presence in his palace has presented to the Moorish chieftain and his dominion.

At the end of the first act, Aliatar and Elvira engage in their first on-stage dialog, which leaves little doubt that the Muslim chieftain's affection for his Christian captive is unrequited. Aliatar becomes forceful with Elvira, informing her that not even the Christians' attempts to liberate her through negotiation will be fruitful, since "[n]i todo el oro que el suelo arabio pródigo engendra el sol, ni las riquezas que esconde el hondo mar, a rescataros bastantes ser [...] que mi dicha consiste en poseeros" (8). Elvira's response to his ardent declarations of love points to a distinction between respecting his authority over her and returning his affections: "Mi pecho os respeta, señor; mas nunca amaros podrá mi corazón" (8). She repeats this claim in the second act: "Señor, mi pecho tu piedad agradece y tus favores; conozco tu poder, y lo respeto; mas no puedo fingir, y de mi labio sólo oiréis la verdad" (17). Her loyalty to her lover don García, even in the face of bribery and force, underscores the uncontrollable, and at times noble, nature of human love.

In contrast, Aliatar's words highlight the dangers of human love, particularly when it is unrequited. He describes his love for Elvira as a "viva llama de amorosa pasión" that

burns in his chest which he, a noble warrior, is powerless to resist (9). Unlike Ataúlfo, however, Aliatar is disturbed by his love for Elvira, and during his first soliloquy he laments that it has rendered him unrecognizable, even to himself:

¿Soy aquel mismo que la dura lanza  
y la ardiente cuchilla fulminando,  
triunfó glorioso en las sangrientas lides,  
destruyendo el poder de los cristianos?  
¿Soy quien burlé de amor y ora me encuentro  
de una cautiva infiel mísero esclavo? (9)

In both *Aliatar* and *Ataúlfo*, characters describe their ideal ruler as one who is more concerned more with military conquests than personal relationships. Vinamáro affirms this belief when he laments, “Ataúlfo, que osado ha resistido las formidables huestes en el campo, no pudo resistir de una belleza las lágrimas falaces y el engaño” (405). This leads him to conclude that Ataúlfo will never recover his lost virtue (405). Sigerico espouses a similar belief about a king’s necessary chastity when, before his first conversation with Ataúlfo on stage, he assures the High Priest that for Ataúlfo “Combatir y triunfar son sus placeres. Nunca entraron en su pecho las débiles pasiones ajenas de su fama” (401). *Aliatar*’s Zayde likewise urges his chieftain that being besotted with a woman is not appropriate for a man of his social stature, for in his current state, he is “indigno de ser noble adalid de sarracenos, que siempre desprecien los placeres, que honor y nada más apetecieron” (18).

Unlike Sigerico in *Ataúlfo*, Zayde does not hesitate to admonish his leader for being a slave to his appetites. Aliatar has become “un hombre afeminado,” according to Zayde (18), and he is a willing agent in his own demise: “[T]ú mismo afrontas tu pasada gloria, tú mismo arrancas a tu frente el lauro” (9). He warns Aliatar that his recent behavior has resulted in his subjects’ having diminished esteem for him: “Tus iguales se mofan de tu estado, tus súbditos te miran con desprecio, y nadie puede obedecer gustoso al que es esclavo vil de sus deseos” (18). Consequently, there are elements within Muslim Spain that could undermine Aliatar’s authority:

No extrañes, Aliatar, si llega un día  
En que el obedecerte desdeñemos,  
Que los que son valientes, se degradan  
A un hombre afeminado obedeciendo. (18)

In *Ataúlfo*, Vinamáro and Sigerico both fear a Visigoth capitulation to the Romans, but the fear appears to be unfounded. In *Aliatar*, by contrast, the Christian threat to Muslim Spain is imminent, and from the outset it is directly tied to Aliatar’s uncontrollable desire for Elvira. In the first act, the audience learns that Elvira’s presence in Aliatar’s castle has caused Ismán, a Jewish slave, to fall in love with her and to betray his master by conspiring with the Christians against him. Aliatar is so distracted that Ismán is able to escape to the Christian realm unnoticed, and Ismán manages to sneak don García into the castle to visit Elvira. During his visit with Elvira, don García is able to identify the weakest defense points in the fortress, which will aid the Christians in their invasion (10).

Unlike Ataúlfo, who demonstrates complete ignorance of his subjects' discontent with him throughout his trajectory, Aliatar remains cognizant of his responsibilities as a ruler. He heeds Zayde's admonitions and warnings, and he acknowledges the political dangers his continued infatuation with Elvira poses: "[T]odos anhelan que al punto Elvira de estos muros salga...mi autoridad peligra" (19). He further concludes that Elvira's continued imprisonment will not regain his subordinate's lost esteem for him: "En condenarla a horrores, a cadenas, a tormentos, ¿qué consigo? [...] El civil fuego de la horrible discordia arde en Granada." Aliatar is also aware that it is not merely his political authority that is in danger. In his monologue, he asks himself how someone of his stature could now repudiate his noble heritage, his past glories, and his future ambitions: "¿Y olvidado de todo, y apagada mi ambición en descuido, en llanto inútil, sólo busco los brazos de una ingrata?" (19). He also recognizes that the "perniciosa guerra que en mi pecho sembró" poses dangers to his spiritual wellbeing (19). Consequently, Aliatar decides to free Elvira so that his soul may recover "su lustre y su poder" (19).

Unfortunately, Aliatar's actions have already proven fateful to his dominion, for the Christians plan to invade his palace that same evening. When he learns this from Ismán, Aliatar becomes so consumed with rage and a desire for vengeance that he no longer heeds Zayde's attempts to save him. Instead, Aliatar determines to demonstrate his "osadía," his "orgullosas lanzas," his "dominios," and his "honor," by murdering Elvira, by taking extreme joy in her lover don García's pain, and, finally, by impaling himself before don García can imprison or execute him (22).

More so than *Ataúlfo*, *Aliatar* raises doubts about the nature of absolute political authority. Like Ataúlfo, Aliatar is powerless to prevent his political defeat, which his love for an "unsuitable" woman has incited. Unlike Ataúlfo, however, Aliatar consciously and actively facilitates his demise. He continues to hold Elvira captive against her will, which disrupts the uneasy peace between the Muslims and Christians in Spain; he also willingly submits to his highly destructive passions, and this submission culminates in the defeat of his realm at enemy hands. While *Ataúlfo* closes with Sigerico's promise to restore political order, no such promise is made in *Aliatar*. In fact, the eventual capitulation of Muslim Spain to the Catholic monarchs in 1492 allows for the assumption that Aliatar's comrades will never regain what has been lost.

*Aliatar* likewise undermines the traditional belief in a benevolent divine authority, since God is unable, or unwilling, to intervene and avert the looming catastrophe. Elvira's trajectory demonstrates this most clearly. Before reuniting with her lover don García, she expresses a belief that God will not allow her to die a violent death at Aliatar's hands because "[e]l cielo, que jamás al inocente niega su protección, de nuestro llanto apiadado por fin, hoy nos concede remedio a tanto mal" (7). When her faith begins to waver, don García assures her that heaven has blessed their union, and it will protect them (12-13). Despite the Christians' faith, however, Elvira dies a violent death, and don García is powerless to prevent it, or to punish her assailant, since Aliatar stabs himself soon after don García discovers him with Elvira's cadaver. The persistent references to fate—Shaw attests that Aliatar and Elvira collectively refer to fate thirty-five times throughout the play—likewise weaken Saavedra's attempt to characterize Aliatar's moral, political, and

spiritual descent as the logical result of his moral error. Instead, they suggest the possibility that the world could be “dominated by cosmic injustice” (“More about *Ramiro*” 4).

### Conclusion

In *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*, Saavedra calls attention to the destructiveness of human passion, and he challenges the long-held belief in a divinely and benevolently ordered universe. A closer reading of *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar* suggests that, while the plays are similar in theme, they present markedly different views of political authority. Although Saavedra likely drew from Agustín Montiano y Luyando’s *Ataulpho* when composing *Ataúlfo*, he diverged from his predecessor when he chose to make his protagonist the victim of conspirators within his kingdom instead of foreign invaders. In Montiano’s play, Rosmunda, the only character not based on an actual historical figure, incites her lover Sigerico to betray his king and foment a rebellion against him, which results in *Ataúlfo*’s death. According to Rosalía Fernández Cabezón, in Montiano’s play the king is a victim of a personal betrayal as opposed to a collective one (96). In Saavedra’s play, by contrast, the Goths’ uneasiness about their king *Ataúlfo*’s personal life incites an uprising against him, and it drives Vinamáro to murder his sovereign. In his ambivalent portrayal of both *Ataúlfo* and his dissenters, Saavedra fails to condemn political rebellion, or to endorse unconditionally monarchical authority. This could account for the vicar’s censorship of the play; it might also account for Rivas’s reluctance to publish *Ataúlfo* even after Fernando’s death, since the playwright became more politically conservative after he returned to Spain in the early 1830s (Lovett 30; Materna 611-12).

In contrast to *Ataúlfo*, *Aliatar* rules over subjects who remain loyal to him, despite their growing concern about his capabilities as a leader. Although Zayde, *Aliatar*’s comrade-in-arms, admonishes *Aliatar* for his behavior, he also remains steadfast in his allegiance to him. The last time Zayde appears on stage is at the end of the fourth act, when he encourages his chieftain to continue the battle against their enemies: “¿Somos pocos? Más gloria nos alcanza; y seremos sobrados, sí sobrados, para tornar en polvo, en humo, en nada, de los cristianos el poder y orgullo” (23). He remains hopeful that *Aliatar* will lead the Muslims in regaining what has been lost to the Christians, and that he will “dar nuevo esplendor” to their empire (22). Zayde’s faith in his leader, and his commitment to the struggle against the Christian invaders, presents a stark contrast to Sigerico’s indecisiveness and inaction in *Ataúlfo*.

The leaders are also markedly different themselves. *Ataúlfo* is a weak and oblivious king who dies at his subjects’ hands; *Aliatar*, in contrast, is more cognizant of his responsibilities, and he exhibits agency even when his demise is inevitable. He murders Elvira and her loyal servant Laura, and then he commits suicide, depriving his Christian enemies of the opportunity to punish him or make him their political prisoner. While incapable of controlling his passions or the impending Christian invasion, through committing suicide he exercises ultimate control over his own destiny, as he himself proclaims in his final words to don García: “Venciste al alcaide de estos muros, no venciste a *Aliatar*” (27).

One of the most dramatic differences between the two leaders, however, is their ethnicity and religion. Ataúlfo is a Gothic King who, though Aryan instead of Catholic, is part of the lineage of Christians who governed the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Islamic conquest in the eighth century. In fact, the *Real Academia de Historia*, founded in 1738, patronized various historical studies of Spain's Gothic era, and, "según decisión de la docta institución" Ataúlfo was considered the first Spanish monarch, from whom Pelayo descended (Álvarez Junco 81). Indeed, in Madrid's *Plaza de Oriente*, Ataúlfo's statue is the first among the five statues that can be found in the north and south boundaries of the Central Gardens. Ataúlfo's place in Spanish history, solidified during the eighteenth century, might account for Saavedra's reluctance to depict Ataúlfo as a king who is a victim of a duplicitous woman, or as someone whose passions completely consume him.

Unlike Ataúlfo, Aliatar is a Muslim Moor living during the *Reconquista*.<sup>3</sup> His identity as a past cultural and religious enemy and invader might have allowed for Rivas to critique the notion of unrestrained monarchical authority while avoiding an explicit connection between Aliatar and Fernando VII or his father Carlos IV, whose personal life was the topic of considerable public scrutiny. As a leader, Aliatar is admirable, and even noble—Zayde, and even Elvira, state repeatedly that he is—however, he is not Christian. Accordingly, audiences, however unconsciously, could attribute Aliatar's flaws as a leader—most especially, his willingness to permit his passion for a woman to endanger his realm—to his status as an ethnic and religious outlander.

Aliatar's Muslim faith and Arab ethnicity might also have allowed for Saavedra, like others of his generation, to draw from Spain's Muslim past to explore, and contain, some of the most subversive aspects of romantic expression, such as murder, suicide, and adultery. Rafael Húmara y Salamanca's *Ramiro, conde de Lucena* (1823), for example, features an adulterous woman Zaida who, jilted by her Christian lover Ramiro, enacts her revenge on him by murdering his wife Isabel and his best friend Alfonso. Like Aliatar, Zaida "embodies the dangers of unbridled human passion" (Blackshaw, "Between Enlightenment" 13), but unlike her predecessor she is redeemed by her rival Isabel's heroic act of forgiveness and her own last-minute conversion to Christianity.

The tension between unbridled human passion and its counterpart, absolute political authority, would become a prevalent theme in Saavedra's later works. Less than a decade after composing *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*, the statesman and playwright openly criticized Fernando VII in parliamentary speeches and in *Lanuza* (1822), a thinly veiled criticism of Fernando VII (Materna 606; Peers 47). Although *Lanuza* suggests that Saavedra had finally embraced fully the liberal cause, a decade later, he composed *Don Álvaro*, a play whose protagonist pays the ultimate price for his father's political rebellion (Blackshaw, "Don Álvaro or the Force of Paternal Impotence" 68; Materna 611-15). In addition to condemning, however subtly, political rebellion, *Don Álvaro* serves as a warning about the dangers of human passion, particularly those experienced outside the Spanish Christian context. Not only does don Álvaro's passion for Leonor precipitate the death of the entire de Vargas family, it also drives the protagonist to commit suicide, the ultimate taboo in the Catholic faith. Moreover, don Álvaro's father's love for an ethnic and religious outsider, in this case, don Álvaro's mother, who was an Incan princess, causes the

protagonist to be a *mestizo*, a “fruto de traiciones,” and, ultimately, an unsuitable marriage prospect for his Spanish aristocratic lover (177).

Scholars have argued that Rivas’s final play, *El desengaño en un sueño*, which seems to be a fervent indictment of political liberalism and unrestrained human ambition, betrays continued contradictions in Rivas’s professed political and religious beliefs, even in his later years (Blackshaw Naberhaus 389; Ganelin 137-38). At the end of the play, the protagonist Lisardo promises his father Marcolán that he will never abandon him or disobey him again, and he repudiates his desire to know the world outside of their island. Lisardo, accordingly, pledges unconditional obedience to paternal authority. Thanks to his father’s machinations, Lisardo concludes that engagement with the world can only lead one to political, personal, and spiritual ruin. As I have argued elsewhere, such a conclusion betrays a lack of faith in a justly and benevolently ordered universe (Blackshaw Naberhaus 389). When *El desengaño* is read within the context of Rivas’s earlier works, however, such a conclusion is not terribly surprising. Even as early as 1814, Ángel de Saavedra, as he was known then, penned two plays with divergent political and metaphysical implications. In neither *Ataúlfo* nor *Aliatar* does Saavedra appear to resolve the tension between political authority and human passion. Instead, he underscores the preoccupations that will define his career as a playwright, poet, and statesman.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Saavedra did not become a duke until his brother died in 1834. Accordingly, in my discussion of plays written before 1834, namely, *Ataúlfo* and *Aliatar*, I will refer to him as Ángel de Saavedra. In my discussions of *Don Álvaro* and subsequent plays I will refer to him as duque de Rivas.
- <sup>2</sup> Ataúlfo states, “[E]n mi palacio alojado será, y [...] en todo servido como yo” (409). According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* an “alojado” is a “militar que recibe hospedaje gratuito por disposición de la autoridad” (112).
- <sup>3</sup> Like *Ataúlfo*, *Aliatar* is loosely based on events in Spanish history, with considerably less commitment to historical accuracy. For instance, at the beginning of the play, the Jewish slave Ismán refers to don Sancho, who ruled from 1284-1295 and conquered Tarifa from the Moors. However, the Muslim warrior Ibrahim Aliatar, upon whom the play is based, lived during the late fifteenth century, and he died during the Granada War (Barton 70-71).

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