

**THE GREAT GALEOTO: FOLLY
OR SAINTLINESS; TWO
PLAYS DONE FROM THE
VERSE OF JOSÉ ECHEGARAY**

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The Great Galeoto: Folly or Saintliness; Two Plays Done from the Verse of José Echegaray by
José Echegaray & Hannah Lynch

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JOSÉ ECHEGARAY & HANNAH LYNCH

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FOLLY OR SAINTLINESS

TWO PLAYS DONE FROM THE VERSE OF

JOSÉ ECHEGARAY

INTO ENGLISH PROSE BY

HANNAH LYNCH

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INTRODUCTION ¹

THE Spanish theatre has for so long been out of fashion that a revived interest in it would carry us into a sort of renaissance. It is not virgin soil, like the drama of the north which has so lately caught the ear of Europe. This, perhaps, accounts for its lack of distinctive originality. For even in Echegaray's notable plays, strong and original as they are, there is an unmistakable ring of the past. We feel it is more a revival than a youthful outburst, with all the promise of novelty. True, it is dominated by the modern need and its restless searching note; it must prove its mission as something more than the mere desire to divert. Not even a sermon could be more remote than this theatre from the old comedy of manners, of loose morals and diverting intrigue, all weighing as lightly on the dramatist's conscience as on the audience's. And it may be questioned if Echegaray, a professor of mathematics as well as a dramatist and poet, could be induced to accept Mr. Stevenson's well-known and not inappropriate classification of the artist as of the family of Daughters of Joy. His is no neutral voice between vice and virtue, concerned solely for the pleasure or

¹ Part of this introduction is reprinted from an article in the *Contemporary Review*, and my thanks are due to the publishers for the permission.

interest of the hour, suing approbation through laughter and wit, or sympathy through dramatic tears. Lest his audience should fail to carry their musings on the problems of life to the theatre in the proper modern spirit, he starts by pricking their conscience and exciting thought that as little relieves them from the pressure of reality as one of Ibsen's plays—though with the latter his having nothing else in common but this determined purpose.

José Echegaray was born at Madrid in 1832. The years of childhood were passed in Murcia, where at the university he studied and took out his degrees. His tendency in youth was towards the exact sciences, with which he still coquets in the same spirit of pride that pushed Goethe to glory in his devotion to painting. He more readily offers to his friends a volume of his *Modern Theories of Physics* or the *Union of Material Forces* by which he is known to a select few, than one of his popular dramas. Of the scientific value of these works I am not in a position to offer any opinion. For career, he chose that of engineer, and, we are told, gave evidence in this line of quite exceptional diligence and quickness. Certain it is that in this department as well as in others that followed, he has amply proved that in individual circumstances the Don may be carried into a permanent frenzy of industry. In 1853 his studies in engineering terminated. Echegaray was appointed successively to posts in various provinces, until he returned to Madrid as professor of the School of Engineers. Here he taught theoretical and applied

mathematics, and while building up a serious reputation in science, he found time to study political economy, and devour every form of literature, thus preparing for his future honours as poet and dramatist. He took part in the revolution of 1868, and was appointed Director of Public Works and Minister of Commerce. This post he resigned in 1872, and shortly afterwards that of Minister of Finances, which he was forced to give up on proclamation of the Republic. Then he emigrated to Paris, where he composed his first play *El Libro Talonario*. In 1874 the political situation permitted his return to Spain, and he was nominated Minister for the third time. After that he began to hold himself more and more aloof from public life, and took to writing for the theatre with prodigious activity. Well advanced in middle age, he seems to have taken Lope de Vega for his model in the matter of production. Within twenty years he has written more than fifty plays. In a letter before me, he offers me a choice of his recent plays (whose appearance can only cover a couple of years, I believe), and thus names them off:—*El Critico Incipiente*, *Los Dos Fanatismos*, *El Haroldo*, *El Milagro en Egipto*, *Siempre en Ridiculo*, *Sic vos non vobis*, etc. etc., the double etc. suggesting at least half a dozen more, I suppose.

This fatal facility is one of the drawbacks of Spanish talent. The race writes without difficulty, which perhaps is the reason that it writes without finish or distinction. Add to which in adopting French romanticism, upon which wave it was irresistibly carried, it

did but accommodate the adoption of the natural bent of its own still mediaeval nature. For modern Spanish romanticism belongs more probably to the sixteenth than to the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note the rebound with which Victor Hugo's bell cast this semi-civilised and dreaming people back into their own appropriate century. They prate to-day in Madrid glibly enough of English improvements, clubs, electricity, French vaudevilles, and all the pernicious refinements of our modern civilisation. But these elements are extraneous, a sort of diverting masquerade in their daily life. At heart they are purely mediaeval. In all the great moments on and off the stage, they forget the silk hat and coat of civilisation, and walk and talk as if a sword still absurdly cocked the cloak of romance.

In this hour, when foreign Shakespeares are springing up around us with incredible profusion, it would be an agreeable task to come forward with a Spanish Shakespeare. But Don José Echegaray is no such thing. He bears no resemblance to the new geniuses hailed with such delight. He has none of the subtlety of Maeterlinck, and certainly offers entertainment by means of tricks less reminiscent of our start in modern languages. His literary baggage reveals neither the depth nor the flashes of luminous thought with which Ibsen startles us through an obscurity of atmosphere, a childish baldness, and an unconventional disregard of all the old-fashioned theories upon which the laws of dramatic criticism have been formed. But if Echegaray is less original, he is creditably more sane. The lack of depth

carries with it a corresponding absence of crudeness and of an artlessness often so bewildering as to leave us imperfectly capable of distinguishing the extreme fineness of the line between genius and insanity. The lucid air of the south clarifies thought, and produces nothing less sober than Latin bombast and the high-phrased moods of the Don.

What is more to be deplored in Echegaray's plays is the absence of French art. An artist in the polished, complete sense he cannot be described. He has none of the French dramatist's incision, none of his delicate irony, his playfulness and humorous depravity, none of his beautiful clarity of expression, still less of his polish, his wit, and consummate dexterity. Poetry is his favourite form of dramatic expression, but it is not the suave measured poetry of M. Richepin; and while he often takes his inspiration from the Middle Ages, he offers us nothing like the ethereal and fanciful verse of M. Armand Silvestre, when that author condescends to forget that he is *fin de siècle*, and seeks to please through the sweetness and delicacy of some mediæval legend. Echegaray is poet enough to delight in these thrilling ages. But his treatment of them generally leaves us cold. It lacks fancy and buoyancy. Sombre passion does not adequately fill the place of absent humour. It is often thin and false, and glaringly artificial, like the mediæval romance of an inefficient author. It is a remarkable fact that such a play as *Mar sin Orillas* (Shoreless Sea) should have achieved popularity in a town so imitatively, not intellectually, modern