

‘Reinventing the legend of King Roderick: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s  
*Egilona*’.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the little-known play *Egilona* penned in 1845 by the talented Cuban writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, renowned for her poetry, novels and letters yet virtually unrecognized as a playwright. The play’s source of inspiration is the legend of King Roderick and La Cava, in which the last Visigothic king of Spain’s passion for the beautiful daughter of Count Julian, his governor in Ceuta, was deemed to have precipitated the Muslim invasion of Spain in 711. Gómez de Avellaneda joins three other women writers from different eras, Mary Pix, María Rosa Gálvez and Dana Broccoli, who all found literary inspiration in the Hispanic king’s dramatic love affair. Yet the great originality of Avellaneda’s drama lies in her innovative creation of the tragic figure of Egilona, the wronged wife of King Roderick, never before depicted as a protagonist in the reception of the legend. Its dramatic plot uncovers the complex issues of racial and religious marginalization which also characterize Avellaneda’s prose works, as the depiction of her heroine boldly challenges issues of patriarchy and politics as pressing in the mid nineteenth-century as they were in the early middle ages.

KEYWORDS

Drama and theatre; King Roderick and La Cava; *Egilona*; Christians and Muslims; medieval history; myth and legend; gender; political crisis; racial and religious conflict

The Cuban writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda is best known for her poetry, novels and letters, and in particular for the novel *Sab*, which movingly portrays the evils of slavery in her native country. Gómez de Avellaneda is not generally thought of as a playwright, yet she had a remarkable dramatic talent and wrote sixteen full-length plays, the first of which, *Leoncia*, was staged in Seville in 1840. She is also one of four interesting women writers who sought inspiration in Spain's founding legend, the eighth-century story of King Roderick and La Cava, in which the last Visigothic king's passion for the beautiful La Cava allegedly led to the Muslim conquest of Spain in 711. Avellaneda's play *Egilona*, written in 1845 and inspired by the Roderick myth, is a work which both aligns her with these three women writers, yet also sets her apart from them in her innovative creation of the female protagonist Egilona, the wronged wife of the Visigothic king Roderick. This article explores the complex issues of racial and religious marginalization more familiar in Avellaneda's prose works, as she addresses dilemmas of gender and political crisis through depiction of her eponymous heroine, underlining her virtuosity and originality as a playwright who boldly tackles difficult contemporary issues through the vehicle of theatre.

In order to establish the literary context of the subject of Gómez de Avellaneda's play *Egilona*, it is necessary to outline the historical and legendary background to the King Roderick legend. The established facts relating to the conquest of the Visigothic kingdoms of Spain by North African invaders remain frustratingly sparse and obscure, in spite of extensive treatment of this subject by medieval historians. While the Visigoths had entered Spain in the fourth century and established a thriving kingdom under the aegis of Catholicism, the expansion of the Arab states came about four hundred years later, corresponding to the rise of Islam, which was gaining power by the eighth century. As the Arab Muslims swept west through north Africa, Spain's geographical proximity made it vulnerable to attack. At the same time, Roderick, newly crowned Visigothic king in 710, was vulnerable from the outset

of his reign, since his legitimacy as ruler was in question. Roderick was not a royal heir, but had been put forward by certain members of the nobility who were at odds with the son of the previous king, Witiza. So the salient point is that Roderick was perceived by a number of powerful factions to be a usurper.

It was against this backdrop of hostility within his own court that Roderick sent an army to the north of the Peninsula to fight against the Basques, but while this campaign was underway disaster struck. With most of north Africa under his control, the Arab governor of Ifrikiya, (the new northern Africa), Mūsa ibn Nuṣayr sent an expedition to Spain in 711, thought to be a probing raid, under the command of his former slave Tarīk. Roderick hastened south to meet the invaders but was defeated in the valley of the river Guadalete, probably near Medina Sidonia, a demise expedited by the collusion with the Arabs of the usurped sons of Witiza. The battle of Guadalete ended Roderick's reign and the Visigothic kingdom, and the invasion of Spain came to be viewed by western eyes as a disastrous defeat for the Christian Spaniards. However, it was the association of that invasion with sexual morality that became important to the creation and future development of the Roderick legend.

The essential elements of that legend are sexual passion, vengeance, and treachery, at the heart of which is King Roderick's desire for a beautiful girl who was the daughter of his general, Count Julian. Finding herself in an impossible and compromised situation, the girl informed her father of the illicit sexual relationship, illicit in particular because Roderick was already married to the Visigothic Queen Egilona. In his overwhelming desire for vengeance, Count Julian was believed to have colluded traitorously with the Arabs to bring about the invasion of his own country. From a historical perspective, only Roderick is known to have existed unquestionably, although the earliest accounts of the invasion give credence to the existence of Count Julian as the king's governor in Ceuta on the north African coast. There is

no historical evidence whatsoever for the existence of Julian's daughter, known as La Cava, and later as Florinda, although it is not implausible that Julian may have had a daughter. Whatever the historical reality may have been, the triangular relationship fuelled by transgressive passion and treason engaged the talents of creative giants such as Lope de Vega, George Friedrich Handel, Sir Walter Scott and Juan Goytisolo, fostering a legend of perennial relevance which has been continuously appropriated in diverse artistic forms from the Middle Ages to contemporary times as a means to confront political crises, issues of national identity, gender, and the nature of history and fiction.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the enduring appeal of the story as a fount of creative inspiration, there have only been four women who reinterpreted the Roderick legend, and all four saw its dramatic potential. The late seventeenth-century English dramatist Mary Pix arrived on the London stage in 1696 having written a novel and two plays in one year. Her themes were focused upon women and their vulnerability, and she showed an enthusiasm for Oriental and Spanish subjects in her first two plays, *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks*, and a farce entitle *The Spanish Wives*. At the time she was writing there were significant changes in the London theatrical world, whose audience consisted mainly of nobility and royalty. As a result, the preferred types of play were heroic tragedies with themes of love and honour, and licentious comedies. The presence of women was becoming increasingly influential, both in the audience and as playwrights themselves, and Mary Pix, undoubtedly a proto-feminist, sought to defend women against attacks upon their character and intelligence, serving as a model for other women to aspire to in her success as a dramatist.

She was the first to tackle the Roderick theme in her five-act play, *The Conquest of Spain*, successfully performed at the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket in May 1705. Her prologue excuses the choice of tragedy, and uses the male voice throughout, the latter

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<sup>1</sup> For a full account of the history of the reception of the legend of King Roderick and La Cava, see Drayson, 2007.

suggesting the diffidence she felt in presenting the play as a woman dramatist writing in 1705. However, this diffidence did not extend to the portrayal of the play's two female heroines, who demand maximum sympathy on account of their abuse and betrayal by men. In this powerful work, Pix presents the unfailing purity of her two principal female characters, drawing a parallel between the body of her protagonist Jacinta and the Spanish nation. Interestingly, through the dying speech of Jacinta, Mary Pix addresses a problematical aspect of the Roderick legend, namely that violation was not a sufficient reason for Julian to betray his country, when it could have sufficed to kill the king to avenge his honour. The two main axes of her play are first, the vulnerability of the female sex, and its natural goodness, which become powerful destructive forces when abused by men, and second, the violation of Spain by the Moors which mirrors that of Jacinta. The playwright exploits contemporary political issues for dramatic purposes, for the subject of Spain was no less engaging in the early eighteenth-century than it had been a hundred years earlier. Her play was written during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702 – 13), and the ambivalent feelings of the English towards Spain seemed even more acute. Hinting at the equivocal political situation between England and Spain at that time, Mrs Pix defines imperialism negatively as the immoral pursuit of power which leads to tyranny. In her play, contemporary political issues are effectively exploited for dramatic effect, although religious issues are absent from the play, unlike that of Gómez de Avellaneda, as will be seen. The future, in her play, lies in a new, non-Catholic regime, and in the life of her heroine Margareta and her child.

A century later, an exceptional woman dramatist, María Rosa Gálvez, born in Málaga in 1768, published her neoclassical three-act tragedy in verse entitled *Florinda* in 1804, although it was never staged. It was a play written in hendecasyllables, and in accordance with the classical unities, lasts from dawn until midnight, taking place in the Visigothic camp on the banks of the river Guadalete. As the striking title indicates, Gálvez places La Cava,

later known as Florinda, at the heart of the plot and action in an unprecedented way in order to explore her true status in this tragic and passionate tale. Gálvez also introduces the major innovation of a love affair between Florinda and the Asturian leader Pelayo, and in doing so poses two important questions. What would have happened to the destiny of Spain had Florinda married Pelayo as was planned, and what was Florinda's real role in this drama? Her aloneness in the male world of the play, and the vexed issue of family honour, are both instrumental in her tragic downfall. The play is a depiction of her destruction at the hands of implacably cruel men and family members, and presents all the male characters as severely flawed.

The elevation of this drama to an almost Racinian level of tragedy, with which it shares austerity and intensity of emotional focus as well as a set of ruthless and extreme characters, is of great importance in the development of the legend in artistic terms. While the play does have political undertones in the implications for Gálvez's era of a flawed monarch who loses his nation through betrayal, this is secondary to the instatement of Florinda as a tragic heroine who is the victim of sexual violence, family treachery and cruelty. It is significant that the first published woman dramatist in Spain should place the female protagonist of the legend on centre stage at a time when Enlightenment women were beginning to make an impression on the political and cultural hegemony enjoyed by their male counterparts. Florinda is firmly established in a powerful central position in the legend at the start of the nineteenth century, and this aspect was echoed much later, in the twentieth-century novel *Florinda* written by Dana Broccoli. Published in 1977, this short novel, aimed at a popular readership, is written largely from Florinda's point of view, and she exerts considerable power over the events of the narrative. The novel was converted into a musical by the author's film-director husband Cubby Broccoli, and was very successfully staged in London in 2000. The title of the musical was taken from the solo song of Exilona (Egilona),

Roderick's wife, in which she accuses Florinda of stealing her husband, calling her by her ancient epithet, La Cava, and defining her role in terms of sexual misconduct.

Although historical documents and the earliest creative reworkings of the King Roderick legend had marginalized and scarcely mentioned Egilona, Roderick's Visigothic wife and widow, the dramatic exploration of her character had begun long before the London musical hit the stage. Egilona, or Exilona or Esilena in some versions, was believed to have been captured by the Moorish leader Abd al-Aziz ibn Mūsa after Roderick's defeat and supposed death in the battle of Guadelete. In line with Muslim tradition, Abd al-Aziz ibn Musa, a ruler victorious in battle, was permitted to marry a prisoner who was a widow, and in the year 717 AD Egilona is said to have agreed to be his wife. She was alleged to have been able to influence Abd al-Aziz ibn Musa to show more clemency to captured Christians, an act not well received by the Umayyad Caliph Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik in Damascus who had Abd al-Aziz ibn Musa killed for attempting to establish his own monarchy. Ignored in versions of the legend up to the eighteenth century, her appearance was sudden and lasting. Egilona takes a leading role for the first time in the history of the legend when the composer Handel makes her a strong, noble character in his opera *Rodrigo*, first performed in 1707. In spite of the title of the opera, Roderick's wife, named Esilena in this case, is undoubtedly the heroine of the piece. Although she is Rodrigo's lawful wife, she is barren, and can never be the mother that Florinda becomes unwillingly in this work. Yet Esilena wields extraordinary power on both personal and political levels, is skilled in diplomacy, noble, selfless beyond the norm, devoted to her husband and the source of wisdom and rationality. Rodrigo is saved on every level by her, and is transformed into a repentant, just and loving man by her constancy and devotion.

In 1760 C.M. Trigueros published a Spanish play entitled *La Egilona, viuda del Rey don Rodrigo*, in which the widowed Egilona marries the Moor Abdalasis and is proclaimed

queen of Spain, narrowly escaping the clutches of the lowly nephew and son of Pelayo, both of whom want to marry her. In 1785 a play along very similar lines, and with the same title, by the prolific dramatist Antonio Valladares de Sotomayor, was staged and appeared to have had little merit, with Valladares following the same plot line as Trigueros, but inventing two entirely different Rodrigos and Pelayos bearing no relation to those in the original story. A further anonymous play about Egilona was put on in 1788, in which Julian dies from drinking poison while Florinda falls in love with the Moor Abdalasis, thereby invoking Egilona's jealousy. What is interesting about these first plays about Egilona is that they cast her as a potentially interesting figure as the originator of the Gothic-Arabic kingdom in Spain.

In the Romantic period she continued to arouse interest as a persona with dramatic potential, and that interest was not limited to Spanish writers. Egilona appears as a minor character in the English writer Walter Savage Landor's play, *Count Julian*, published in 1812. Landor had fought for Spanish independence on Spanish soil, and his experiences as a soldier and the passionate feeling and heroism his words convey lie at the heart of his depiction of the dishonoured father of La Cava. Landor had also been reading instalments of the poet and renowned Hispanic scholar Robert Southey's long narrative work entitled *Roderick, the last of the Goths*, which was begun in 1809 and published in 1814. In it, Egilona is a minor presence who cannot provide the king with an heir due to her barren womb, as in Handel's opera. In Landor's work, Egilona is again barren, and is duly cast off by Roderigo in order to marry Julian's daughter. Torn between love and hate, she flees to the Muslim side and finds happiness with Abdalasis.

She also features in two Spanish plays written in the first part of the nineteenth century, both predating Gómez de Avellaneda's work. The first, *Rodrigo*, by Antonio Gil y Zárate, dated 1825, was immediately prohibited by the notorious censor Padre Carrillo on the basis of inappropriate portrayal of kingship. Gil y Zárate's play was unashamedly similar to



María Rosa Gálvez's *Florinda*, although the king is the focus of his drama and not Florinda. Egilona acts only in the margins and is scorned by her husband, who is willing to abandon her because she is sterile and set Florinda on the throne as queen instead. Yet the second play, Miguel Agustín Príncipe's *El Conde don Julián*, written and performed 1838, presents Egilona as the most moving and dignified character in the cast. This dark, Gothic drama aims to vindicate the actions of Count Julian and erase the stain cast on his character by history, but it is at the expense of the Jews, who are the villains of the play, although it would not be fair to say that it is anti-semitic. Often Jewish characters are portrayed with sympathy, and their actions show the consequences of generations of tyranny and oppression. While Egilona expresses her hatred for the Jewish race when imprisoned in Roderick's palace, she also shows her nobility and forgiveness of Roderick in her own devotion to Florinda, and in offering her rival to her husband as his queen instead of herself in a way reminiscent of Handel's interpretation of her character.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's play *Egilona*, written in 1845, simultaneously aligns the Cuban dramatist with these writers inspired by the legend of King Roderick and La Cava and yet sets her apart from them. In particular she shares this subject with the three women discussed above, Mary Pix, María Rosa Gálvez and Dana Broccoli, but what is remarkable and original about Gómez de Avellaneda's play is her choice of Roderick's queen, the wronged wife, as her main protagonist. Her play was written in three days, while Gómez de Avellaneda was suffering from a debilitating nervous condition at a time when she was seven months pregnant by the poet García del Tasso, who had left her. It was performed briefly in June 1845, and was well received, but in later years she did not deem it worthy of inclusion in her complete works, as in her view it was not sufficiently reformist. It is a play which has received scant critical attention, along with the rest of La Avellaneda's dramatic output, in spite of its radical and innovative nature.

It was one of seven plays with tragic subject matter written by her between 1844 and 1858, and has been categorized as a romantic tragedy. José Luis González Subías points out that La Avellaneda's use of Spanish history, and in particular of medieval history, was highly unusual in Romantic tragedy, and unlike Mary Pix, she gives no apology for using medieval themes in tragedy. In the preface to another of her plays with a medieval subject, *Munio Alfonso*, she justifies her interest in medieval history as a tragic subject as follows:

‘[...] me pareció muy propia para el coturno, probando una vez más que la edad media - desdeñada por la mayoría de los autores clásicos dramáticos- podía suministrar argumentos y caracteres no menos dignos de la tragedia que los rebuscados todavía en las historias de los antiguos Griegos y Romanos’.<sup>2</sup>

While the temporal context of the previous plays discussed does not extend beyond Rodrigo's reign, this play hinges upon the terrible dilemma in which Rodrigo's queen finds herself in Seville at the end of 715 A.D, after the defeat of the Visigothic army four years earlier, giving further evidence of Avellaneda's originality. In this three-act tragedy written in hendecasyllables, the apparently widowed Egilona marries the Moorish emir Abdalasis, only to find that Rodrigo is not dead, but living among the other Visigothic prisoners taken by the emir's troops. Because of his love for Egilona, Abdalasis struggles with the temptation to kill Rodrigo, but in the end he nobly returns Egilona to him, and even defends her against Muslim conspirators, who finally kill him and allow Rodrigo to escape unharmed. In a moment of heightened dramatic power, Egilona rejects Rodrigo, and kills herself in order to be reunited with Abdalasis.

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<sup>2</sup> *Obras de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda*, BAE 278, ed. J.M. Castro y Calvo (vol. 2, Madrid, 1978), p. 9.

These are the bare bones of a plot whose complexity and conflicts are not a matter of straightforward interpretation. María Prado Mas claims that the theme of the play is love (Prado Mas, 249), and certainly Egilona is a woman loved by three men simultaneously. In the opening speech of the play, the treacherous Berber Caleb reveals his infatuation with her, as well as his jealous hatred of his master Abdalasis, and it is this Achilles heel which unravels the plot in a way that allows Egilona to dissuade Caleb from killing Rodrigo and permit him to escape instead. Abdalasis's deep devotion to Egilona is such that he cedes his considerable authority to her, symbolized by the act of giving her his ring of office: "de todo mi poder depositaria/te hago al cederte tan preciosa joya." (I: 3, 100-101), while her third lover, Rodrigo, is roused from his moribund state by the furious jealousy and outrage he feels when he learns that she has married Abdalasis. So the love for Egilona is a powerful catalyst for the action, while her own passionate love for the Moor clashes with a sense of duty which makes her feel bound to honour her former marriage to Rodrigo, and which forms one of the major conflicts of the play.

But the conflict of love and duty is not the only dilemma which Egilona faces. From the first Act, she is beset by guilt because she loves Abdalasis, but feels she is betraying her country, her religion, and Rodrigo. She speaks of her "criminal amor" [criminal love] (I: 2, 92) after seeing a vision in which the former king chastises her. Her willing marriage to the conqueror of her people and of Rodrigo creates a puzzle for the audience. Is Egilona a helpless victim of love and circumstance, or is she a betrayer of her people? Cotarelo and Mori, writing in the 1930s, noted that the play was poorly received on the grounds of immorality. In his analysis he denies the importance of Egilona: "...no reparó la autora en la enorme consecuencia de que Egilona, en lugar de seguir a su marido, como había ofrecido, como era su deber y como le había ordenado el Emir, se quede para ver morir a éste y matarse a su vez." (Cotarelo y Mori: 150). She, and Gómez de Avellaneda are condemned for

the immorality of love between Christian and Moor. However, more recently, Christina Maria Fox-Balli has remarked on how Gómez de Avellaneda reinvents Spanish history in creating female characters who transgress or transcend the limits established by patriarchal hegemony (Fox-Balli, 108). Her view is that Egilona uses marriage and religion for personal and political ends, to manipulate her Muslim husband for the good of the Visigothic people he has conquered. Evelyn Picon Garfield reveals a similar viewpoint when she describes Gómez de Avellaneda as demythifying the patriotic legend, while restoring the power of the Muslim subaltern and displacing it through the feminine subaltern in the figure of Egilona (Picon Garfield, 78). Yet her opinion that the conflict that besets Egilona is of greater importance than that of Abdalasis might be called into question, and demands a more nuanced reading of the Moor's character.

First of all, the emir is portrayed in an extremely favourable light throughout the play. The more conventional depiction of Moorish characters as cruel and alien is turned on its head in the case of Abdalasis, who is praised by Egilona's friend and confidante Ermesenda:

Su mano por la tuya dirigida  
mil beneficios próspera derrama  
sobre el pueblo español, que fiel amigo  
y no opresor le juzga. (1: 2, 174-177)

The jealous and treacherous Berber Caleb remarks that the emir is rather more Christian than Muslim: "y más que el alcorán se reverencian/en su palacio los cristianos ritos" (1:4, 50-51), while Ermesenda has high hopes of her mistress converting him to Christianity:

¿Y quién sabe, responde, si a la dulce  
y elevada misión no estás llamada,

de someter el alma de tu esposo  
del verdadero Dios a la ley santa? (1:2, 195 – 198)

These examples might suggest that Gómez de Avellaneda is aligning Abdalasis with the religion of the people he has conquered, in particular since the dramatist has clearly wished to create a character of great religious tolerance and beneficence. Yet the emir's words are at times ambiguous. At the end of Act 1 scene 3, when he has handed the ring of authority to Egilona, he ends the conversation by saying: “¡Y es el tuyo mi Dios! ¡mía tu patria!” Words of love, no doubt, which speak of the union of husband and wife, yet which also hint at the possibility that the different divinities they each worship may be considered as one and the same.

Abdalasis's religious tolerance is further emphasized during another act which demonstrates his generosity of spirit. He reproaches Caleb for his prejudice against the three Visigothic prisoners in his charge by invoking divine tolerance:

Omnipotente Dios, ser infinito,  
que acoge grato los sinceros votos  
con cualquier culto que le son rendidos. (1:6, 60-62)

He clearly believes that sincere vows are what count, regardless of religious difference. At this point, Abdalasis magnanimously releases the Christian prisoners, but Gómez de Avellaneda creates a masterly plot twist which shocks in its unexpectedness and its power to wreak havoc. One of those prisoners is Rodrigo. The latter asks the emir about the fate of Egilona, and upon discovering that the Moor is now her husband, he reveals his identity and claims his lawful wife. Abdalasis is greatly disturbed but reaches the conclusion that the prisoner is a madman, and sends him back to jail.

From Act 2 onwards, the plot becomes highly complex as those on stage hatch different plans, both good and evil. Tormented by the impossible situation he is in, Abdalasis orders Caleb to enter the prison and kill Rodrigo without Egilona's knowledge, but the Berber has his own agenda, which is to murder the emir. Meanwhile Egilona discovers through Ermesenda that one of her countrymen has been sent back to prison, and resolves to release the captive herself and find out what has angered her new husband so greatly. Here, two supposedly minor characters, Caleb and Ermesenda, hold the strings of the plot in their hands. By the start of Act 3, Caleb has Rodrigo in a trap. Instead of following the emir's orders to kill him, he gives him a dagger, and shows him a letter which has come secretly from Muza, the Arab leader in Syria, ordering Abdalasis' death. He assures Rodrigo that if he kills the emir, he will go free. Rodrigo sees through the trick, at which point Egilona arrives and discovers that Rodrigo still lives. At this crucial dramatic point, Abdalasis himself arrives in the dungeon amid the noise of the mob outside demanding Egilona's death. Besieged on all sides, the emir intends to kill Egilona and Rodrigo with a hatchet, but cannot bring himself to do so.

The second scene of Act 3 is, unusually, set in a mosque in which the emir has sought sanctuary. At another moment of high drama, in a deeply moving scene, Abdalasis makes an almost superhuman sacrifice and declares that he will allow Rodrigo to go free, and take Egilona with him. Although Rodrigo forestalls Caleb's attempt on the emir's life, Abdalasis is killed by the traitorous Arab Zeyad and his men, according to Muza's orders. Unable to overcome her feelings for him, Egilona kills herself to be with him, rather than leave with Rodrigo, and the play ends on a positive note for the Christians, with the familiar refrain that Rodrigo and Pelayo, founder of the kingdom of Asturias and originator of the Christian reconquest, still live.

*Egilona* is a moving and original play which centres upon the theme of interracial love that is recurrent in Gómez de Avellaneda's work, and which refashions those essential elements of the King Roderick legend, sexual passion, vengeance and treachery, in a new way. It also addresses, and gives a possible answer to, the kind of question repeatedly posed by nineteenth-century Spanish writers as to what might have happened to Rodrigo and in this case, *Egilona*, after the defeat in 711. The drama creates terrible personal and moral dilemmas for *Egilona* and *Abdalasis* when they discover that Rodrigo is not dead but alive. Although *Egilona* is the pivot of the action and the title suggests she is the central protagonist, she does not have the nobility of heart or the dignity of Handel's *Esilena* or Agustín Príncipe's *Egilona*. She could be perceived as having a certain weakness in her status as a victim of circumstances, and also perhaps in her final betrayal of her first husband, Rodrigo. In my view she has a vital role as the instrument through which the character of *Abdalasis* comes to the fore as a noble man defeated by destiny. His sensitively portrayed greatness of spirit and tolerance are unappreciated by both the Visigoths and his own people, and one is left with the impression that Spain might have been a much better place had he lived than it was before and after his brief rule in the play. *Abdalasis* has a moral superiority over the Christian and other Arab characters, akin to that of Avellaneda's novelistic character Sab, and he also shows religious tolerance and magnanimity. As a woman dramatist, Gómez de Avellaneda's evident sympathy for her main female character ultimately gives way to her sympathy for a man maligned by tradition both racially and in religious terms, like the Cuban slaves about whom she writes so tellingly in her prose works. *Abdalasis* is an Arab Muslim free from religious prejudice, and as such sends out a powerful message about the need for a religious tolerance which must not be punished.

In this little-known drama, Gómez de Avellaneda shows her striking originality in addressing dilemmas of gender and political and religious crisis with contemporary relevance

through the depiction of her eponymous heroine, underlining the importance of Egilona for the first time, and expressing Avellaneda's sympathy for those marginalized by race and religion. Perhaps her scruple about the play's lack of potential to be reformist lies in her lionizing of a personage who, although he represents the racial and religious other, is nevertheless male, and a colonizer. Whatever the case, Gómez de Avellaneda's *Egilona* is a remarkably innovative work within the compass of writing on the Roderick legend which has a bold and subversive message, charting new ground in the depiction of its eponymous, agonized heroine, and in its presentation of a Muslim leader superior in every way to the Christian king he conquers.



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