In an edict dated 5 August 1809, the Mexican Inquisition prohibited Luciano Francisco Comella's melodrama *El negro sensible* with the following criticism: "Por promoverse en ella con capciosidad la insurrección de los esclavos contra sus legítimos dueños." The original manuscript had been approved for Madrid's stage with a routine opinion on 22 August 1798 by the ecclesiastical censor, Fr. Thadeo López: " . . . he visto el melodrama, titulado El Negro Sensible en un acto. Nada contiene opuesta a Na Sta Fe Catholica ni buenas costumbres . . . ." Neither did the work capture special attention from the civil censor's vigilant eye; Santos Díez González gave it a succinct nod of approval: "... no hallo reparo en que se permita cantar."

By the time that the Tribunal of the Mexican Inquisition saw fit to condemn it, the play had already been performed a number of times in Mexico City: November 1799 at the Luis Navarro (Cotarelo 607); May 1803 at the Príncipe (Cotarelo 641); December 1805 at the Coliseo de México (Olavarría 159). Even after the edict, it was performed at least twice: November 1809 at Cruz (BHM Tea 1-50-5-a, 8) and 1814 at the Coliseo de México (Ramos 687, 689).

The Mexican Inquisition's edict makes one ponder several questions. If the original intentions of the author were so cunning, how did this escape the notice of the Madrid censors? What characteristics did the play have that could be interpreted differently in each social context, Madrid and Mexico City? What political situations could have triggered differing responses between 1798 and 1809?

In general, we shall see, the original Madrid censors probably saw race as related to religious and aesthetic issues, not to political threats, as the Inquisition censors in Mexico City did. We will examine the play with regard to the reception of two audiences: the censors and spectators in Madrid in 1798; the censors and spectators in Mexico City in 1809.

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1 AGN, Edictos de la Inquisición, Vol. II, 59r, 5 agosto 1809.

2 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 15v.

3 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 15v.
Religion and Reception in Madrid, 1798

The theme of *El negro sensible* does not concern a slave insurrection, nor does the script even mention a slave uprising. Granted, the play condemns slavery and therefore implies a favorable stance on abolition (cunningly, perhaps, according to the Mexican Inquisition). The main theme is the separation of families by the sales practices of slave traders. The moral of the play is that wealth should be used for the happiness of others: "Martina: O dichoso caudal, quando se emplea/ en la felicidad de los humanos!" The play implies that Christians have an obligation to convert African pagans as well as to free them. Thus, the religious trappings must have reassured the original ecclesiastical censor that the play supported the Faith and set a good example for the audience.

The setting of the one-act melodrama is a sugar mill and plantation on an un-named island in America. The black African slave, Catul, is the central character; his "sensitivity," predicted in the title, is demonstrated from the opening scene. When he awakens, he admires the beautiful dawn and nature surrounding him, but then he remembers that he is a slave, whose wife has recently been sold and taken away, and he proceeds to attend to his small child with great tenderness.

The antagonist is Catul's wicked master, the slave trader, Jacobo. Unmoved and insensitive, Jacobo sends Catul off to work at the mill, leaving the child alone. I believe that Jacobo's name—that is, "Jacob," a patriarch of the Israelites, according to the Book of Genesis—would have implied to the censors and the audience that he is a Jew; this anti-Semitic position would have set up the issue of the mistreatment of African slaves as a religious marker distinguishing Jews from Christians. A pejorative image of the Jew, such as this one, follows a long history of traditional as well as literary sources in Spain (Pedrosa 403-436).

Doña Martina is the other central character in the play, and she represents the good and generous Christian, the benevolent liberator of slaves. A wealthy Spanish woman, she has arrived on the island to wait while her ship is repaired. Unbeknownst to Catul or Jacobo, she had acquired Catul's wife from a slave trader in Havana. As Jacobo shows her around the property, the two have a confrontation, which emphasizes the moral and religious contrast between them. While Martina shows appreciation for the "... precioso y exquisito/ el ameno pais ... " Jacobo only cares for material profit, commenting that it is "abundante en producciones ... ". Of course, this further illustrates the stereotype of the

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4 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 13v.
5 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 5v.
6 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 5v.
Jew, implied in his name. He also informs Martina that he trades in the commerce of slaves and has them working on his estate until buyers arrive to purchase them. Jacobo refers to slaves despectively: "Son viles." Martina contrasts her morality with his, exclaiming, "... son nuestros semejantes, y con piedad merecen ser tratados." Another example of a religious statement that would be considered kindly by the Madrid ecclesiastical censor is Martina's concern that the African child has been baptized: "... anda, y pregunta al dueño, si el Negrito/ recibió el agua del Bautismo Sacro."

The end of the play reiterates praise of the Christian values that Martina represents. The plot culminates in a scene in which she deflects Catul's aggression. While strolling around and admiring the natural beauty of the Island, Martina and her boy encounter Catul's toddler. She cuddles the child and rocks him to sleep, then falls asleep herself. When Catul returns from work, his child is missing from their shanty, and he suspects that Jacobo has sold him. When he sees Martina with a child in her arms—covered with a blanket—he assumes that Martina is rocking her own child, after having purchased his. He pulls out a knife, ready to take vengeance, as she removes the blanket and reveals Catul's child, to his astonishment. She listens to Catul's laments and, moved by his paternal love and great sensitivity, takes pity on him and swears to help him. She acquires Catul and his child, then frees them both, as well as his wife, Bunga; thus the little family is reunited. Martina underlines the message that Africans are pagans and must become Christians: "... me serviréis los dos como criados, siempre que el ciego culto de los dioses/ olvides como Bunga ya ha olvidado." The ecclesiastical censor in Madrid obviously found the ending to be edifying for the audience; they, in turn, would have received a clear message of the religious superiority of Europeans over Africans. Catul's final words emphasize this idea: "Yo tenía aversión al Europeo:/ miraba con horror su culto sano,/ porque no conocía su grandeza,/ su generosidad, sus nobles rasgos;/ pero ahora que por vos he conocido/ con toda fuerza mi fatal engaño,/ venero al Europeo, lo bendigo/ y protesto seguir sus ritos santos." Of course, if we also recognize the contrast between Martina and

7 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 5v.
8 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 5v.
9 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 7r.
10 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 13v.
11 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 13v.
Jacobo prevalent throughout the work, we see that the Christian ideal triumphs over the Jewish stereotype, supporting the religious interpretation understood by the Madrid ecclesiastical censor. In other words, the question of race, and the relationship between a black African and a European, would have been seen as a religious issue. The liberation of slaves, and abolition in general, evidently did not stand out as a social or political threat worth consideration when reading through the play.

**Aesthetics and Reception in Madrid, 1798**

Just as the ecclesiastical censor, Friar Thadeo López, found nothing objectionable, the civil censor, Santos Díez González, looked favorably on *El negro sensible*. His concise opinion could be a reflection of several aesthetic aspects.

Even though slavery was a major theme of the play, Díez González probably saw the work as fitting into the tradition of Orientalism, popular with audiences of the day. The issue of color that appeared in the title conjured exotic images of captive tales that would have attracted spectators to the theater. For example, a few years before, Rita Luna had made a memorable performance in Comella's heroic play, *La esclava del Negro Ponto*. An engraved portrait of her in this role shows Luna dramatically raising a dagger against her captor, similar to Catul's climactic scene (Cotarelo 38).

Another play of a captive woman in Africa, Rodríguez de Arellano's *El negro y la blanca*, appeared on stage in September 1797; according to the original manuscript, the promising actor, Isidoro Màiquez, appeared alongside his wife, Antonia Prado, in the main roles (Tea 1-50-6 B, 1v). *El negro sensible* was first performed by Màiquez's rival, Manuel García, as Catul, and María Vásquez, as Martina (BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 1v). All this exotic emotion would eventually culminate in Màiquez's renowned performance in *Otelo ó el Moro de Venecia* 1 January 1802 (Cotarelo 112). To reiterate, the censor Díez González must have viewed the issue of color and slavery in *El negro sensible* as an aspect of the Oriental aesthetic that attracted audiences of the period.

In addition, Díez González tended to favor melodrama; he was the first to incorporate this genre, called urbane tragedy, into a Spanish poetics (Checa Beltrán 421). His *Instituciones poéticas* included a major section analyzing it and defending it against critics who considered melodrama to be of easy composition: "... no requiere poco fondo de ingenio, eloquencia y filosofía, porque hiera el corazón e instruye en buena moral."[12] A characteristic mentioned here—that "it wounds the heart"—would have attracted Díez to the other theme of the play, revealed in the title: sensitivity.

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The melodramatic theme of sensitivity, in vogue at the time, is established principally in Catul's soliloquys, which are supported by music, according to the stage directions. For example, in the first scene Catul awakens and a piano "imita el silencio de la noche y las acciones de Catul," as he speaks against slavery. Then he embraces his child, and the audience hears "... música patética que de pronto pasa a un piano que anuncia la venida del nuevo sol y el canto de las aves . . . ." Catul describes the beautiful dawn: "Ya parece que en brazos de la aurora/ viene esparciendo el sol sus tiernos rayos,/ coronando las cimas de los montes;/ la hermosa

13 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 2r.

14 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 2r.
perspectiva, el dulce quadro/ que ofrece su venida a los mortales/ infunde
un regocijo extraordinario . . .".\(^{15}\) In another soliloquy, supported by
appropriate music, Catul reiterates the theme of his feelings as a father and
spouse: " . . . soy esposo, soy padre, soy sensible,/ no puedo presindir de
ser humano:/ quise bien a una esposa, quise a un hijo/ y con los dos el
alma me robaron."\(^{16}\)

Also, Comella develops the theme of sensitivity by contrasting Catul's
character and Jacobo's. When Jacobo appears on scene and commands that
Catul leave the child and go off to work, the slave's sensitivity and paternal
love contrast with his master's lack of empathy and cruelty. Arguing that
Africans' souls are not different from those of white people, Catul
emphasizes his own nobility of spirit.

With similar intentions, Comella compares Catul with Martina. When
Martina sees Catul for the first time, he has just collapsed and she offers
him help, telling him, "Quien viene a darte amparo:/ una muger sensible y
generosa."\(^{17}\) He answers, "Ningún blanco es capaz de ser sensible . . ."\(^{18}\)

This melting together of the theme of sensitivity and the characters of a
woman and a slave illustrates Comella's experimentation with the aesthetic
of pathos. Angulo Egea comments the following on the connection
between his plays \textit{El negro sensible} and \textit{Cristóbal Colón}, revealing a sympathetic
view of natives: ". . . las modernas teorías sobre el 'buen salvaje' habían
calado también en la Península y la defensa del indígena y del esclavo se
convirtió en la época en un lugar común dentro de la literatura, entre otras
cosas por el contenido sentimental y emotivo que estas historias
conllevaban" (117). She continues to comment on \textit{El negro sensible} by
affirming that "La pieza derrocha también el sentimentalismo y la
emotividad que las corrientes finiseculares pusieron de moda en la época, y
que el melólogo reflejó especialmente" (118).

The civil censor Díez González, then, would have considered Comella's
depiction of the plight of slaves as part of the aesthetic trend of sensibility
found in novels and plays of the period that showed images of poverty.
Angulo Egea explains this aesthetic as follows:

\begin{quote}
Estas imágenes de pobreza fueron recogidas por el teatro europeo de la
epoca. Comella también participó de esta moda. El moderno teatro
burgués gustaba en ocasiones de retratar esta indigencia para inspirar en el
espectador sentimientos de humanidad y de compasión, más que por
\end{quote}

\(^{15}\) BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 3r.

\(^{16}\) BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 9v-10r.

\(^{17}\) BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 8v.

\(^{18}\) BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 8v.
tratarse de una denuncia social. Era, pues, la sentimentalidad moderna la que inspiró al teatro escenas lastimosas con estos ejemplos de miseria. (121)

Summarizing, for Santos Díez González, these aesthetic aspects—melodrama, orientalism, displays of emotion—would have been reason enough to approve the performance readily.

**Society, Politics and Reception in Madrid, 1798**

The script of *El negro sensible* did not indicate a major social upheaval—certainly not an insurrection—, for once Catul was purchased and freed by Martina, he swore to serve her loyally in Spain, thus respecting the established hierarchy. Comella’s use of Martina as an example of virtue and generosity would have reassured Díez, who was sensitive to any criticism of the nobility. In one instance, Díez requested that a playwright change the title of a work from *El Duque y la Duquesa* to *La razón todo lo vence*, as well as remove a number of lines, because the characters in the play were "directa, o indirectamente mordaz y satírico contra la nobleza" (Ebersole 32). Díez was not oblivious to social turmoil implicit in plays, as can be seen in his comment on Comella’s *Isabel primera de Rusia*, in which he criticized the playwright’s satire on the vanity of coats of arms and then stated, "Supongo q la Moral sea sana, y q en este drama nos muestre el Poeta algunas verdades políticas. Pero dudo si el teatro sea lugar propio para representarlas en unos tiempos en q el mundo malicia demasiado, y se halla confuso, y aturdido por una revolucion de Opiniones" (Ebersole 52).

The script of *El negro sensible* implies a condemnation of slavery, but this issue would have seemed somewhat alien to a Madrid audience. Probably for this reason, it did not occur to Díez that the play could inspire social unrest. According to Domínguez Ortiz, slavery in Spain had declined during the seventeenth century, and, in the eighteenth century, only a few wealthy families—mostly in Cádiz—owned slaves, who worked as domestic servants (337). Although the threat of social unrest did not come from Black African slaves, there were possibilities of uprisings because of other tensions. For example, the Esquilache Riots of 1766—in addition to the political forces behind it—had been provoked by the rise in the price of bread; many of the measures subsequently taken to give relief to the poor—mainly the creation of the Junta de Caridad de Madrid—demonstrate that the problem was one of social and economic inequality (Domínguez Ortiz 343). The issue of race, highlighted in *El negro sensible*, would not have conjured images of such riots. According to Brian Hamnett, there was a great deal of unrest in rural Spain during the eighteenth century, because of unemployment and disparities in land ownership, and poor farmers often became vagrants or bandits, but there were no generalized peasant rebellions (17-18).
In 1798, when *El negro sensible* was first performed, Santos Díez González had been the civil censor for ten years, and he would continue to carry out this function until his death in 1804. Hamnett considers the years 1790-1808 to be the period of political collapse in Spain due to the reforms of the decade of 1790, the tensions of war and growing economic problems (32). However, it seems that Díez did not associate the issues of race and abolition, inherent in *El negro sensible*, with any societal or political tensions on the peninsula.

**Civil Censorship Procedure: el Coliseo de México**

Although we do not have the specific evidence of the original Mexican censors' approval for the performance of *El negro sensible* in December of 1805, we can suppose that they followed the routine procedure. Most of the plays had already been reviewed and authorized previously in Spain, so the censors rarely concerned themselves with "new comedies," a task that kept Díez González quite occupied in Madrid. The procedure included several steps. Each month, the theater manager proposed a list of works to the theater judge, appointed by the viceroy (Ramos 519-520; 530). The judge had two censors working for him, both appointed by the viceroy. Typically, one was from a religious order and the other was secular. According to Ramos Smith, after the 1770's, the theater censors in Mexico City judged plays more and more from the aesthetic point of view (173). With this in mind, we can speculate that the censors who allowed the performance of *El negro sensible* considered its aesthetic qualities in vogue at the time—melodrama, orientalism, sentimentalism—to be reason enough to authorize the performance. Among other works allowed in 1805 were crowd pleasers such as *El mágico de Salerno*, *La maja majada*, *El soldado fanfarrón* and Comella's heroic play, *Catalina Segunda Emperatriz de Rusia* (Olavarría 158-159). The censors had to have been aware of the latest trends, for in April of 1806, Moratín's *La comedia nueva, o El café*, was performed several times (Olavarría 160). Interesting also is that Díez González's neoclassical play, *El casamiento por fuerza*, appeared on the Coliseo stage that month (Olavarría 160). Reiterating, evidently the Mexican civil censors found nothing objectionable in *El negro sensible* and probably thought that it could be of interest to the public, and therefore of benefit to the performers. This particular performance, on December 2, was a fundraiser for the great actor and singer Victorio Rocamora, who played the role of Catul (Olavarría 159).

**Censorship Procedure: Mexican Inquisition**

The influence of the Inquisition on the censorship of the theater diminished during Bourbon reign, because the theater fell under the protection of the monarch, in Spain, and the viceroy, in the colonies. Also, although the Mexican Inquisition received edicts from Spain, it often acted independently "surgidos de las circunstancias locales" (Ramos 110). Thus, while some of the works forbidden in the edict of 1809 in Mexico City had
appeared in an 1806 edict in Spain. El negro sensible was not on the list, so we can assume that the Mexicans believed that "local circumstances" merited a closer look at this work.

Even though the Mexican Inquisition was not involved in the censoring process prior to a performance, it did investigate complaints about different types of improprieties afterwards. Any individual could denounce a play to a deputy of the Inquisition. The process of interviewing witnesses and obtaining opinions from various clergy could take years, as noted in a series of documents pertaining to one play, between 1784 and 1807 (Ramos 564-573). The fact that less than four years passed between the performance of El negro sensible (December 1805) and the edict that forbade it (August 1809) should indicate that the Inquisition considered the matter relatively urgent.

Politics and the Inquisition, 1805-1809

In 1805, when El negro sensible appeared at the Coliseo, the specter of slave rebellions was prominent in the minds of the public of New Spain. There was a slave uprising at El Potrero sugar mill near Córdoba, Veracruz, which brought in many other slaves from the area. The rebels killed the owners of several mills and they demanded the abolition of slavery (García de León 23). This episode, along with the news about the independence of Haiti and Toussaint L'Ouverture's creation of a republic of blacks in 1804, could have alarmed the tribunal of the Mexican Inquisition. The relative geographical proximity of these events to Mexico City, in comparison to Madrid for the peninsular censors, could very well have made the threat of a slave rebellion appear to be imminent. In December of 1806, an announcement appeared in the Gazeta de México about the arrival of a book, translated from French, titled, La historia de la rebelión de los Negros de Santo Domingo. The Gazeta's editor warned readers that the work contained shocking details that could injure "... al tierno y sensible corazon de los hijos de N.E. a una lectura muy agena de sus suaves costumbres ..." It related the frightful events in which "... los Negros de Santo Domingo han ido quitando la vida con los martirios mas atroces e inhumanos a mas de dos millones de Blancos europeos y criollos ..." Copies of the book were on sale by the Gazeta. The book also contained ten prints, portraits of the principal blacks involved in the Haitian revolution. These prints, the editor assured the reader, made the work more interesting because they

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19 Río Barredo 324-325; Apéndice 5, 12, 29. The titles that coincided with both edicts were El falso nuncio de Portugal, L'utilité du divorce and La bandolera de Italia y enemiga de los hombres.

20 Gazeta de México, XIII, Num. 104, 852.

21 Gazeta de México, XIII, Num. 104, 852.
could "... transmitir a nuestros descendientes el conocimiento de los monstruos de crueldad que nos han rodeado a nosotros ...". Curiously, the prints could be purchased separately for framing.

But surely, despite such sensationalist news of images of slave revolts, the members of the Tribunal did not fear that audiences at the Coliseo would incite another slave insurrection at the sugar mills of Veracruz or at a few households in Mexico City. It is more likely that they were nervous about the threat of a general insurrection. Indeed, prospects were tenuous for the Inquisition and for the elite class when the edict of August 1809 appeared. In fact, Mexico City had been in constant turmoil for more than a year.

In 1808, disturbing news about the political turbulence in Spain had gradually arrived. On 9 June 1808, Mexico heard that Carlos IV's son had ascended to the throne; July 16, Mexico City learned the news about Fernando VII's abdication to Napoleon in Bayonne; July 29 brought the information about the May 2 uprising in Madrid and the creation of a junta in Valencia; August 1, they were informed that another junta had been formed in Seville (Anna 37).

Not surprisingly, this trickling pace of information about ever-changing situations caused great confusion. Different groups—among the elites—began to align themselves as they speculated about the political consequences for New Spain. Some, called "absolutists," favored the idea that New Spain should continue to consider itself under the absolute rule of the Spanish sovereign; the Inquisitor Bernardo del Prado belonged to this group. Another position, the "autonomists," which included the cabildo, the municipal council, reaffirmed the Spanish tradition that, "In the absence or during the impediment [of the king], sovereignty lies represented in all the kingdom ...," specifically in the city charters of Veracruz and Mexico City, as founded by Spain in the 1500's. One of the autonomists was friar Melchor de Talamantes, who proposed the abolition of the Inquisition and ecclesiastical tribunals, and backed reforms dealing with free commerce (Anna 41).

Neither the absolutists nor the autonomists favored independence, but they were aware of the threat of a general rebellion that could threaten the status quo. The absolutists, including Prado, believed that the autonomist call for a provisional junta was a veiled and treasonous support of independence (Anna 46). The absolutists thought that Viceroy Iturrigaray favored the autonomist position; therefore, to stave off a possible insurrection, they staged a coup 16 September 1808. They arrested Iturrigaray and detained him at Inquisitor Prado's residence, to be held for trial later by the audiencia (Anna 53).

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22 Gazeta de México, XIII, Num. 104, 852.
Evidence shows that those who organized the coup viewed the independence threat as tinged with a racial hue. New Spain had created a *sistema de castas* that used "six racial phenotypes in their record keeping" ranging from white to black (Carroll *Black Aliens* 85). Generally, the word *castas* was used to refer to all the possible shades of skin color other than *blancos*. According to Patrick J. Carroll, "the very thing Ibero-Mexicans feared most" was "nonwhite subaltern solidarity against whites' power" (Black-Native 262). Before the 1808 coup, the *cabildo* held several meetings, and color appeared periodically as an issue. At one meeting, where they discussed the autonomist idea that sovereignty resided in the people, the *peninsular*, Guillermo de Aguirre, asked, "Who are the people?" (Anna 46). The autonomist, Primo Verdad, answered that they were the authorities in the towns. Aguirre disagreed "and warned that this seditious and subversive liberal doctrine of popular sovereignty would return power to the Indians, the original Mexican people" (Anna 46). At another meeting, many common people were standing at the door listening to the procedures when Agustín de Rivero caused a disturbance "by asking who would represent the castes in the meetings of the cities "(Anna 50). It was quickly affirmed that the *audiencia* would not allow city meetings, evidently for fear of the power of the castes. Significantly, at that point the doors were closed, so the castes could not hear such debates. The principal organizer of the coup against Iturrigaray was Gabriel Yermo, a peninsular and prominent owner of large haciendas and numerous slaves (Anna 51). According to Timothy Anna, "Yermo's chief motivation was his fear of popular unrest among the mulattoes and castes" (Anna 51). Reiterating, the absolutists were afraid that the autonomist position could encourage an insurrection among the castes against the powerful whites. Since the members of the Tribunal of the Inquisition were on the side of the absolutists, it stands that they too saw people of color—such as the Black African character Catul—as a threat to political stability.

The coup that the absolutists staged against Iturrigaray achieved their immediate goals: They prevented the *criollos* from gaining control over the *peninsulares*, they dispersed the autonomists, they punished the *cabildo*, and they placed as viceroy Pedro de Garibay, a retired general whom the conservatives controlled (Anna 53). All these actions served the hopes of royalists, trusting that the political situation in Spain would soon be stabilized in favor of the monarchy.

However, the conservatives, such as the Tribunal of the Inquisition and other absolutists, still had reason for alarm. The rumors about insurrection continued to abound. By July 1809, Garibay was replaced by archbishop Francisco Javier Lizana y Beaumont, who served as viceroy until May 1810. One of Lizana's main activities was "defending New Spain against the easily perceived menace of French propaganda . . . " (Anna 59). In September of 1809, when his gentle admonitions to the people about the importance of obedience to the Fatherland had not reduced talk of independence, Lizana
formed a junta, whose "function was to search out manifestations of support for the French and to ferret out insurrectionary ferment in the capital" (Anna 60).

Let us return to our original question: what political situation in 1809 Mexico City could have triggered the August edict of the Inquisition? The answer is that there was a fear of an imminent general insurrection, powered by the ideas of the French Revolution and by the force of large numbers of people of color. They probably also feared that the autonomist group would begin to favor complete independence, thus uniting powerful elitists with the masses; this, in simple terms, is what would happen one year later, with Miguel Hidalgo's cry for independence, and would eventually bring a complete break from Spain in 1821.

**Society and Reception, Coliseo de México**

Among the audience at the Coliseo, would there likely have been enough slaves to instigate a rebellion "against their legitimate owners"? Not at all probable. If there were slaves in attendance, perhaps there would have been only a few personal servants. Surely the Tribunal authorities were not worried about them organizing an insurrection. The population of Mexico City numbered about 1,500,000 in 1803; about 20% were Europeans or Euro-mestizos; about 70% were indigenous or Indo-mestizos; about 10% were African or Afro-mestizos (Aguirre 233). The crowd at the Coliseo was rowdy, as we can see from attempts to keep the atmosphere under control with proposals for new rules (Olavarría 47-50). However, I think we can speculate with confidence that the entrance ticket would have been too expensive for most of the indigenous people and other castes; it cost a real to sit in the balcony. If they attended performances at the Coliseo—and identified with the slave Catul—the number would have been very small.

More alarming for the Inquisitional authorities would have been the possibility that a portion of the audience—autonomists and those secretly hoping for independence—could identify Catul's situation with that of New Spain, the victim of the abuse of power. They could equate the evil master, Jacobo, with the royal authority, thus changing a religious context, acceptable to Madrid's ecclesiastical censor, to a political context, threatening to the Mexican Tribunal. For example, as previously noted, when Martina and Jacobo meet, while she is enchanted with the beauty of the country, he is only interested in exploiting its abundance. Thus, while the Madrid spectator might consider Jacobo a Jew trying to expand his fortune, the public of New Spain would see him as the peninsular that comes to the Americas with the sole purpose of exploiting the natural resources to his financial advantage. Jacobo does not see the slave as a sensitive individual—as Martina does—but as an economic entity for his own benefit. Similarly, the crown, subscribing to the economic theory of mercantilism, held that the purpose of the colony was to make the mother country stronger and more self-sufficient. New Spain's economy had been
increasingly manipulated for the benefit of Spain, and dependency of the colonists on the mother country was a fundamental tenet of the imperial system. Catul’s soliloquy against an evil master would take on political connotations in New Spain: “De nuestros opresores llega a tanto/ el árbitro poder el despotismo/que... pretenden que el esclavo/ sirva a sus intereses como bruto.”

According to an important participant and historian of the Mexican independence movement, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a major impetus to start the war was the fact that the absolutists had overthrown Iturrigaray, ignoring the cabildo and any possibility of Mexican representation (Anna 56). Mexicans were increasingly taking pride in their indigenous past; the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, of notably indigenous features, would be the banner carried by Hidalgo and his followers. Catul’s color and his expressed opposition to abuse by Europeans, would add race to the political questions that the play conjured up in Mexico City, especially in the opening lines, when he calls slavery "... un derecho cruel que se abrogaron/ los fieros Europeos, sobre el hombre/ que no tuvo la suerte de ser blanco." Toward the end of the play, Catul cries out, "... tiemble de mi la Europa, tiemble el mundo,/ que a todos los provoca un desdichado;/ soy esposo, soy padre, soy sensible,/ no puedo prescindir de ser humano... .” Indeed Europeans like Inquisitor Prado and most of the absolutists would have reason to tremble once the war began. Within eleven years, the Inquisition, slavery and the caste system would all be abolished in Mexico, when independence from Spain was achieved.

Conclusion

We can see from tracing the connotations implicit in performances in the contexts of Madrid and Mexico City, between 1798 and 1809, that the production of a work of theater is truly an artifact generated by a community, and whatever intentions that the playwright may have "cunningly" possessed originally, the multiple meanings that such communities construct from those performances cannot be controlled by the author. Nor, of course, in the end, could the Inquisitional censors control an idea whose time had arrived. Whether or not they truly believed that a slave insurrection could be inspired by a short melodrama, the Inquisitors did perceive that the issues of race and the abuse of power presented on a public stage could be interpreted in such a way that the existence of their institution could be jeopardized.

23 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 2v.
24 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 2r.
25 BHM Tea 1-50-5 C, 9v-10r.
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