
Staging Muhammad: A Subversion of the Hagiographic Genre in *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma*

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Abstract

This article examines the subversion of the hagiographic genre in a biographical play from the seventeenth century about the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, written in Spain. In this essay I argue that the contradiction of using a theatrical genre intended to emphasize the holiness of Christian characters in a play about Muhammad unveils the historical tensions and anxieties of Spain's Muslim past. The disparity between form and content reveals the unconscious political aspect of the play and illustrates why it can be read from two opposite perspectives regarding the Islamic leader. Departing from Caroline Levine's use of the term 'affordance', and drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious, I posit that *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* (1642) is more a reflection on Spain's hybrid and ambivalent religious culture than a dramatization of Muhammad's life.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la subversión del género hagiográfico en una comedia del siglo XVII basada en la vida del Profeta del Islam, Mahoma, escrita en España. En el ensayo se plantea que la contradicción de usar un género teatral designado a resaltar la santidad de personajes cristianos en una comedia sobre Mahoma revela las tensiones y ansiedades históricas sobre el pasado islámico de España. La disparidad entre forma y contenido refleja inconscientemente el aspecto político e ilustra las razones por las que la comedia se puede leer desde dos perspectivas contrarias. Partiendo del concepto de *affordance* de Caroline Levine y el concepto de inconsciente político de Fredric Jameson, se sugiere que *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* (1642) es más una reflexión de la ambivalente e híbrida cultura religiosa española que una dramatización de la vida de Mahoma.

Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma (1642) is one of the few dramatic representations of Muhammad in Early Modern Spanish theatre. The play was falsely attributed to Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, who two years earlier had published another play about the Islamic leader, *El Profeta falso Mahoma* (1640). Since the contrast between the two depictions of the Prophet is striking, critics such as Josep Maria

Solà-Solé and Monstserrat D. Solà-Solé, Ridha Mami, Agustín de la Granja and Cándida Ferrero Hernández assume that these *comedias* were not written by the same person. The most compelling argument is that the author of *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* was an anonymous descendant of the Muslims forced to convert to Christianity at the end of the fifteenth century, i.e., a Morisco. To support their claim, Josep Maria Solà-Solé and Monstserrat D. Solà-Solé highlight the positive tone in the depiction of Muhammad in the third act (1972: 15) and Ridha Mami connects the play to Arabic and Aljamiado sources (2010: 25–33). Based on inquisitorial records, Agustín de la Granja (2006: 442–43) demonstrates that the play was written by dramatist and priest, Antonio Mira de Amescua (?1574/78–1636).¹ This discovery exposes the ideological inconsistencies of the playwright as Mira de Amescua staged *The Masque of the Expulsion of the Moriscos* in 1617 to celebrate the Duke of Lerma's role in the decision to expel thousands of Moriscos from Spain in 1609.² In a similar fashion, Cándida Ferrero Hernández observes that the playwright was familiar with anti-Muslim controversy (2014: 53).

While identifying the author is important to understand the false attribution of the play to Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, the focus on authorship has led critics to overlook an aspect of the *comedia* that is key to grasping its meaning; i.e. the subversion of the hagiographic genre. In this essay, I argue that the contradiction of using a theatrical genre intended to emphasize the holiness of Christian characters in a play about Muhammad unveils the historical tensions and anxieties of Spain's Muslim past. The disparity between form and content reveals the unconscious political aspect of the play and illustrates why it can be read from two opposite perspectives regarding the Prophet. Thus, the play is more a reflection on Spain's hybrid and ambivalent religious culture than a dramatization of Muhammad's life.³

The *comedias de santos* or *comedias a lo divino* highlight facts about the lives of holy people from birth to death, feature their positive qualities, and stage their

1 Antonio Mira de Amescua was born in Guadix between 1574 and 1578 to Melchor de Amescua y Mira and Doña Beatriz de Torres Heredia. At the time, Guadix had a considerable amount of Moriscos and, the playwright grew aware of them. He did studies in Guadix and Alcalá de Henares, and, later, finished a degree in Law in Granada. In 1606, he moved to Madrid and was popular among some of the main writers of the period, such as Lope de Vega, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, and Miguel de Cervantes. In 1609, he was named Chaplain of the Cathedral in Granada and, at the end of this year, was asked to go Italy to accompany the Count of Lemos, Pedro Fernández de Castro, who were appointed as Virrey of Naples and who was the son-in-law of Duke of Lerma, Francisco de Sandoval y Rojas, the main promoter of the expulsion. In 1616, Mira was back in Madrid, where he was in charge of approving literary works and participated in poetic competitions. In 1631, Mira de Amescua returned to Guadix to work at the Cathedral. He died around 1636.

2 In an illuminating essay, Lucas A. Marchante-Aragón (2008) explores the interdependence of court politics, imperial policies and national identity in this masque.

3 Drawing a parallel between the lives of Jesus and Muhammad, F. E. Peters insists that hagiography is not exclusively the history of the saint: 'And the retellings of saints' stories become literary shrines on the same scale, and often with similar ornaments, as the buildings that enclose their remains or commemorate their holiness. Hagiography is not the history of the saint; it is his or her monument' (2011: xvii).

miracles.⁴ In discussing the hagiographic genre, Germán Vega García-Luengos shows that the popularity of these plays remained steady during the sixteenth and seventeenth century as is evidenced in the continuous printing of works about the lives of saints (2008: 32), and Leocadio Delfín Garasa observes that the most important aspect of these plays is their dramatic effect (1960: 6). The majority of these works focus on the issue of conversion of sinners and incorporate profane elements to entertain spectators. In addition to promote good moral behaviour, most of these plays could aid the processes of beatification and canonization, which is why many were written while candidacies were under review. In this sense, as Robert R. Morrison posits, these plays have a national and social purpose (2000: 26). Since saints were connected to towns, canonizations played a role in pilgrimages, as was the case with Saint James in Santiago de Compostela. Although plays about saints are placed under one category, they differ in topics, plots and theatrical resources. As J. Dann Cazes Gryj puts it, '[en] los personajes, los temas centrales, la estructura, las tramas, el tratamiento, los recursos escénicos que requieren, se encuentran características muy diversas que varían de unas piezas a otras, por lo que podría decirse que pertenecen a géneros dramáticos bien diferentes' (2015: 40).

In this panorama, the presence of a holy person gives unity to a variety of works that otherwise do not seem to dialogue among each other. Yet Rosana Llanos López argues that 'la presencia de un santo, elemento que se sigue utilizando como rasgo discriminador de este género de comedias, no es un aspecto suficiente para la definición satisfactoria de tal categoría' (2005: 811). In this regard, one must take into account that several plays that do not have a saint character continue to be classified as such, for example, depictions of martyrs, pious people and local saints not recognized by the Church. Therefore, if the presence of a saint is not the only factor to determine what belongs or does not belong to the genre, one must ask how one can classify a play about Muhammad that follows some of the tenets of the *comedia de santos*. Can we consider a play about an Islamic character a *comedia de santo*? Can we speak of a *comedia de santos* without a saint? These discordant *comedias de santos* force us to rethink how we have approached the genre and to reflect on the potentialities of these plays beyond their main purpose of instilling religious devotion.

I propose, then, to approach the *comedia de santos* from the point of view of its polymorphic form. Its various possible elements – exhaustive biographical accounts vs selective events from the life of a saint, staging of miracles vs realistic performances, Christian saints vs Islamic leaders – can be contained in the same structure or create a dissonance with the content. In her study on the concept of

4 The *comedia de santos* have received critical attention in the past few decades. In addition to collections of essays edited by Marc Vitse (2005) and Felipe Pedraza Jiménez and Almudena García González (2006), see the works of Delfín Leocadio Garasa (1960); Elma Dassbach (1997); Robert R. Morrison (2000); Germán García-Luengos (2008); and Joseph Lluís Sirera. For an overview of the criticism, themes, and main features of the genre, see J. Dann Cazes Gryj (2015).

'forms', Caroline Levine uses a term from design theory: *affordance*. According to her, each shape and pattern, social and literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities (Levine 2015: 6). Therefore, rather 'than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent' (2015: 6; emphasis in the original). Levine differentiates between genre and form. In her view, 'More stable than genre, configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience. Forms thus migrate across contexts in a way that genres cannot' (13).

While the *comedia de santos* is a theatrical subgenre, I would like to argue that these plays migrate across contexts as an always transforming adaptation that requires holy persons, miracles and believers. The adaptability of the *comedia de santos* as a form illustrates the relevance of this subgenre to the extent that one can connect it to contemporary representation of heroes by Marvel and DC Comics. In the depiction of these present-day heroes, the notion of sainthood moves to the realm of ethics. On the subject of forms, Terry Eagleton asserts that they 'are historically determined by the kind of "content" they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as that content itself changes. "Content" is in this sense prior to "form", just as for Marxism it is changes in a society's material "content", its mode of production, which determine the "forms" of its superstructure' (1976: 11).

In light of these observations, *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* can be seen as an adaptation of the *comedia de santos* because the genre can afford to be transformed even if this affordance turns into a deviation against itself. Conventional understanding says that the staging of a *comedia de santos* must exclude Islamic characters,⁵ yet we have a play that follows the conventions of the genre and at the same time stages Muhammad as the main character. More or less the same can be said about the plays that have been catalogued as plays about saints but deal with martyrs who have never been canonized by the Church. In a sense, the effects are similar to what Lope de Vega does in *La Dragontea*, in which the emphasis on the English pirate Francis Drake betrays the expectations of the epic genre. Instead of a national hero, the playwright chose to portray an enemy of Spain.⁶ Thus, the content is at odds with the form.

Subverting the hagiographic genre

Given the tension between form and content, *Vida y muerte* is an anomaly in Early Modern Spanish theatre, as the depiction of a follower of Islam is presented using a genre intended for believers of Christianity. This choice problematizes the purpose and meaning of the *comedia* because for the modern reader it is hard to determine whether the playwright wants to highlight the holiness of Muhammad

5 Jewish characters were represented as saints or heroes in so far as they were part of a common source, the Old Testament. However, these representations fell under the category of *comedias bíblicas* more than the *comedias de santos*.

6 For a contextualization on Lope de Vega's depiction of Sir Francis Drake, see Wright 2001.

in a covert way or whether he wants to deny it through the use of a genre known by spectators. As can be seen from the title, *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* is connected to the hagiographic genre in an ambiguous manner. On the one hand, the use of a negative adjective to describe the Prophet minimizes the connection or identification of spectators with the character. As the leader of another religion, Muhammad is a symbol of falsehood, and therefore the play seeks to deny his holiness. On the other hand, the title mimics one of the most common formulas to identify the hagiographic genre, that is, the emphasis on the life and death of people canonized by the Church. Although Mira de Amescua wrote several plays about saints, two of his plays follow the classic formula in their titles: *Vida y muerte de San Lázaro*, which was published in 1655, and *Vida y muerte de la monja de Portugal*, which was published in 1670. In his edited volume on the hagiographic genre, Marc Vitse (2006) provides an onomastic index that clearly shows several examples of plays using similar titles that ultimately come from the tradition of hagiographic narratives. In this case, the title comes as a way of protection from the Inquisition because, as Agustín de la Granja notes, inquisitors demanded that Mira de Amescua should change the original title of *Engaños y muerte de Mahoma*: 'Que se le dé certificación con que no se intitule comedia de Mahoma' in 1624 (2006: 442). While *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* still mentions the name forbidden by the Inquisition, the title is closer to the hagiographic tradition. Perhaps another issue at play is the marketability of the plays about saints in a period of intense religious devotion.

At the beginning of the play, the sudden conversion of Muhammad to Islam, which emphasizes the stereotypical connection of this religion to the supernatural world, contrasts with the majority of conversions staged in plays about Moors.⁷ Usually, *comedias* with characters identified as Moors demand their conversion to depict the triumph of Christianity over Islam. In *Vida y muerte*, conversion appears at the moment that Muhammad decides to follow Islam after fainting and seeing an angel sent by Allah.⁸ However, the conversion is not staged. Spectators learn of the conversion when Muhammad confesses to his wife, Cadiga:

Desmayos son que apetezco,
por ver es suspensión tal,
glorias que admiro mortal,
del cielo a quien obedezco
penetrar cielos merezco
aquel instante: ¡o memoria
del mayor triunfo y vitoria,
que en mortal puede caber! (Mami 2010: 85)⁹

7 In tracing the representation of Moorish characters, Thomas E. Case (1993) illustrates the frequency of conversions to Christianity in Lope de Vega's plays.

8 Elma Dassbach identifies two types of conversion: reflective and sudden conversions. In the first case, there is an effort by the individual to find God (1997: 39). In the second case, conversions are the result of a supernatural process (1997: 40).

9 *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* was first published in *Parte treinta y tres de doze Comedias Famosas de varios autores. Dedicada al muy illustre Señor Don Antonio de Córdoba y Aragón* (Valencia:

By not staging the conversion, the playwright makes spectators doubt that it happened rather than using it as an opportunity for spectacular theatrical effects. In addition, staging a conversion to Islam could be dangerous, as it can blur the distinction between theatre and ritual in a society that expects to see conversions to Christianity at the ends of plays. Muhammad ends up accepting that his conversion is a trick and calls himself a false prophet. The plot follows the structure and themes of the *comedia de santos*, but the virtues of the character are minimized. Through the play Muhammad appears as a sinister person: he kills his master to marry his wife, he orders someone to poison Cadiga and he marries a young girl. In spite of this negative depiction of the Prophet, the author of the play – either Mira de Amescua or the anonymous Morisco – does not resort to the levels of violence and hate with which Rojas Zorrilla stages the life of Muhammad. In *Vida y muerte* the Prophet never renounces his religion, and, for an audience used to seeing final conversions, this choice can be considered suspicious. As Mami observes, while in Rojas Zorrilla's play Muhammad accepts the divinity of Christ as real and unique, in *Vida y muerte* Muhammad humanizes himself at the moment of death (Mami 2010: 42). Thus, it is not surprising that critics have identified a dissonance between the third and the first two acts.

By connecting the play to the *comedia de santos*, the characterization of Muhammad can be placed under the category proposed by Elma Dassbach of saints who make miracles (1997: 68). This choice is not a fortuitous one precisely because miracles are one of the requirements to determine the sainthood of a person. In *Vida y muerte* there is an insistence on the supernatural powers of the Prophet that reveals some anxiety over presenting him as an ideal candidate for canonization since, as Robert R. Morrison asserts, during the period two miracles were required to canonize a person (2000: 40). In this regard, Muhammad as miracle-maker contrasts with his depiction by Rojas Zorrilla. As Mami puts it, 'Mientras que en *El Profeta falso Mahoma*, el profeta intenta realizar un milagro y no lo logra, en *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma*, el caso es contrario, destacando la capacidad de concretar hazañas milagrosas' (2010: 26).

Mami traces the miracles in the *comedia* back to the Hadith tradition – the compilation of deeds and sayings of Muhammad – in an attempt to place the play within the Aljamiado literature of Moriscos and ultimately to Islam (2010: 25–33). However, the depiction of the Prophet's miracles is not excluded from Islamic writings. Ana Echevarría observes that despite 'the efforts of Muhammad and the Koran to prove that miracles were not necessary for his mission, both within Islam and Christendom this aspect was stressed' (1999: 124). This mutual insistence on attributing miracles to Muhammad is due to some parallels between Christianity and Islam. Mikel de Epalza posits that these changes are due to the Islamic model of Jesus: 'la vida del Profeta del Islam se fue enriqueciendo con nuevos rasgos –que

Claudio Macé, 1642). In this collection, the play was attributed to Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla. Mami Rhida edited the play with an introduction as *El poeta Morisco. De Rojas Zorrilla al autor secreto de una comedia de Mahoma* (Madrid: Pigmalión Edypro, 2010). Quotes from the play are taken from Mami's edition.

muchos musulmanes, sobre todo de nuestros días, no consideran auténticos– y que hay que atribuir al modelo islámico de Jesús’ (1999: 123). Moreover, Luis F. Bernabé Pons points out in his essay about Qadi Iyad, ‘los autores mudéjares y moriscos incidirán muy especialmente en la valoración del papel de Muhámmad como realizador de milagros en comparación/ contraposición con los efectuados por Jesús’ (1997–1998: 204).¹⁰

What is striking about the miracles in the play is that most of them are connected to Christianity. Indeed, the depiction of Muhammad’s miracles in *Vida y muerte* is closer to those presented in Christian treatises during the Middle Ages, for example, when Muhammad pretends to speak with a dove or receives the Quran from a bull’s horns. The staging of these miracles allows the use of spectacular theatrical effects, but also problematizes the hagiographic genre by illustrating the hypocrisy of condemning the supernatural powers of the Islamic leader while Christian saints use the same strategy. The playwright avoids criticism of the prodigies staged in the theatre and, to certain extent, of the Prophet. Given the similarities of the miracles, the condemnation of Muhammad equals the condemnation of Jesus. This manoeuvre reminds us of the falsification of the *libros plúmbeos o plomos del Sacromonte*¹¹ by Miguel de Luna and Alonso de Castillo – manuscripts written in Latin, Arabic and Old Spanish, and written as though they dated from the period of Saint Cecilio – in an attempt to fuse Islam and Christianity in response to the challenges faced by Moriscos to preserve their culture.¹² While the *libros plúmbeos o plomos del Sacromonte* want to incorporate the Islamic legacy into Hispanic culture, the play wants to connect the miracles of Muhammad to the ones made by Christ in order to avoid suspicion in front of a Christian audience by tracing analogies between these two religions.¹³

10 In his article, Bernabé Pons analyses the influence of Qadi Iyad’s *Libro del remedio por la enseñanza de los derechos del Escogido de Dios*, including a sample of the translation made by a Granadian Morisco living in Morocco, Al-Hayari Bejarano, on several miracles by the Prophet. Although these miracles do not necessarily match the ones from the *comedia*, they illustrate the popularity of the topic despite their absence in the Quran. See also López Morillas 1994.

11 The *libros plúmbeos o plomos del Sacromonte* were a set of 22 plaques with Latin and Arabic inscriptions found in Granada between 1595 and 1599. They have been interpreted as an alternative history of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula and it has been demonstrated that they were not authentic texts. For the *libros plúmbeos o plomos del Sacromonte*, see the works of Manuel Barrios Aguilera and Mercedes García Arenal (2006); Manuel Barrios Aguilera (2011) and Mercedes García Arenal and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano.

12 Another example is *El evangelio de San Bernabé*, written by a Morisco in exile. The original text was supposedly written in Arabic, translated into Italian and, later, into Spanish. Epalza describes it as ‘evangelio con el estilo de los cristianos pero con los contenidos islámicos de acuerdo con el Corán’ (1999: 157). See Bernabé Pons 1998.

13 In F. E. Peters’ words, ‘The once unmiraculous Muhammad has been provided with many miracles in the Hadith or Prophetic reports that fill the pages of Bukhari’s *Sahih*, and the earthbound mortal, who had been taught by God to resist the notion of a “ladder to heaven” (17:93), mounted to heaven as surely as Jesus was thought to have done. Jesus was to remain there until his distant Second Coming, Muhammad to return to Mecca and his prophetic career on the very same night that his journey began’ (2011: 154).

One of the miracles appears at the end of the second act. Muhammad blinds Zapico because he does not want to see the resurrection of a dead character. After this scene, Muhammad grants Zapico his sight by touching his eyes with his hands. Mami connects this episode with the Hadith tradition and offers the example of Ibnu Qatada, who recovers a lost eye after praying to Muhammad (2010: 28). Although this example illustrates a connection to the Islamic world, a Christian audience would be more prone to associate this miracle with the New Testament anecdote of Jesus healing a blind man, regardless of whether the man was blind from birth. In fact, even writings like the *libros plúmbeos o plomos del Sacromonte* attribute the miracle to Jesus. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad is responsible for Zapico's blindness. The inability to see as a metaphor for practising the wrong religion is an important topic in the play. In fact, this scene is related to the first appearance of Muhammad in *Vida y muerte*: 'Baxa por una montaña Mahoma con Abdimanoples viejo en los braços, vendados los ojos' (Mami 2010: 67), where the blindfold functions as a metaphor for the physical and spiritual nature of blindness. One can easily make the assumption that in early modern Spain, theatre-goers would be more familiar with the biblical example of the blind man than with the story of Ibnu Qatada.

Related to the previous miracle, Muhammad resurrects Jafed to convince his son, Omar, to join the war against the Persians.¹⁴ The miracle occurs when the characters have already accepted the Prophet's supernatural powers. Mami observes that Al-Qadi alludes to this miracle (2010: 27). While death and the afterlife were one of the main concerns in Aljamiado treatises, spectators could correlate this episode more with the resurrection of Lazarus, which appears in the Gospel of St John. Once again, spectators witness a miracle that seems more connected to Christianity than to Islam. In both cases, religious leaders have the power to give life after death, thus provoking a reaction from spectators.

Like most *comedias de santos*, the death of the Prophet in *Vida y muerte* is staged in the last act. Mami asserts that the final verses reflect the Islamic view of death as a transition to another life and as an event that humanizes Muhammad (2010: 42). The depiction of his death contrasts with that of Rojas Zorrilla, i.e., Sergio kills him on stage and puts his body in a cistern. However, the staging of Muhammad's transition to the afterlife hints at the hagiographic genre as well. In this case, the playwright describes the bad smell coming from the body of Muhammad that clearly parodies the odour of sanctity that appears in some plays

14 Mira de Amescua has another play about the war between the Romans and the Persians, *La rueda de la fortuna*. In my view, this connection is important because if we believe Agustín de la Granja's assertion that Mira de Amescua wrote this play, we can trace recurrent themes in his works and enquire further about his connection with Moriscos. It is interesting that an expelled Morisco in North Africa misremembers the title from one of Lope de Vega's plays, *Las mudanzas de la fortuna y sucesos de don Beltrán de Aragón* (1597–1608), and uses Mira de Amescua's *La rueda de la fortuna* instead. Moreover, another Morisco wrote a manuscript in which he alludes to a play about Muhammad that, according to Mami (2010), could be *Vida y muerte*. For Mira de Amescua's possible Morisco ancestry, see Asenjo Sedano 1996; Castilla Pérez 1998; and Hernández Montalbán 2011.

about saints.¹⁵ From medieval times it was believed that God granted a good odour at the moment of death to identify a good person and a bad odour to mark a bad one. In *Vida y muerte*, Zapico connects this smell to the Antichrist:

ZAP. Parece olor de Anticristo
del cuerpo la gran fragancia
divertirá tanta yel. (Mami 2010: 145)

Although there is no evidence that the play was staged, it is possible that the playwright used a substance to make the theatre smell bad. The scene evokes a famous anecdote when a foul-smelling vase appears in the premiere of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *El Anticristo*, ruining the event (1623–1625) (see Ruiz de Alarcón 1957–1968). Here, the conversation about the bad smell turns into a discussion about the need to protect Muhammad's body in a grave that will impress the world:

Om. En urnas de piedra Imán
sepulcro que al mundo asombre,
ha de eternizar el nombre
del profeta, do estarán
sus reliquias en memoria. (Mami 2010: 145–46)

Going from the bad smell to the protection of the relics reflects the playwright's continuous strategy of adding some information that minimizes or nullifies the criticism of the character. In any case, the sudden change in attitude towards him is a bit disconcerting and certainly contrasts with its characterization in Rojas Zorrilla's play. Finally, there is a discussion about the possibility of Muhammad's resurrection in three days: 'No elijáis obeliscos a mis huesos,/ que su vuelo veréis al tercer día/ surcar esferas, sustentar progresos/ al reino celestial de la alegría' (Mami 2010: 143). Once again, the parallelism between the Prophet and Christ is striking. The allusion to the third day is meaningful in Islam because burials should be done within three days after a believer dies and, in fact, the Prophet was buried three days after his death. However, the description offered by the playwright is more in tune with Jesus' resurrection than with Muhammad's passing. The flight to heaven on the third day is part of the Roman Catholic profession of faith and, as such, brings this Muhammad closer to Christianity.

Representing Muhammad as a symbolic act

The selection of the *comedia de santos* form to stage the life of Muhammad could be explained in terms of the issue of safeness. During the seventeenth century these *comedias* were hardly criticized because, provided that they staged a Christian saint, any attack against the play could be considered an attack against the saint.

15 In most plays about saints, the odour of sanctity is proof that the person deserves to be canonized. Although Lope de Vega uses this resource in several plays, such as *El santo negro Rosambuco* (before 1607), *La madre Santa Teresa* (1590–1604), *San Diego de Alcalá* (1613) and *El capellán de la Virgen* (1613–1616), it seems that Mira de Amescua was not fond of it, as the odour of sanctity does not appear in his plays about saints or biblical figures.

For instance, in Cristóbal de Suárez de Figueroa's *El pasajero*, one of the speakers, Luis, observes that this genre is suitable for beginners since the audience would not dare to yell out of respect to the saint (Suárez de Figueroa 1913: 76). Although the next speaker disagrees and talks about how hard it is to please the audience, Luis's assertion hints at one of the reasons why many authors wrote about saints. It was dangerous to criticize a work about a saint in a period of intense spiritual devotion due to the popularity of religious literature and the pride in local saints recognized by the Catholic Church. Thus, I contend that the author of *Vida y muerte* felt safe subverting the hagiographic genre by using a recognizable code shared by spectators. Assuming that Mira de Amescua wrote the play, this will explain his decision to replace the title *Engaños y muerte de Mahoma* with a more familiar formula in order to get inquisitors' approval, i.e., *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma*. However, what is more objectionable in Mira de Amescua's play and was overlooked by inquisitorial readers goes beyond a title change and can be found in the tension between form and content.

This dramatic representation of Muhammad can be read as a symbolic act within the tradition of the hagiographic genre. The form of the play, understood as the selection of a particular genre with its themes and style, destabilizes the meaning that the content works hard to project on stage to the extent that it is impossible to ignore the conditions in which the *comedia* emerges. In *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredric Jameson defines the *ideology of the form* as 'the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production' (Jameson 1981: 76) and insists that 'our discovery of a text's symbolic efficacy [*sic*] must be oriented by a formal description which seeks to grasp it as a determinate structure of still properly formal *contradictions*' (1981: 77; emphasis in the original). Therefore, in Jameson's view, 'the aim of a properly structural interpretation or exegesis thus becomes the explosion of the seemingly unified text into a host of clashing and contradictory elements' (56). By using the hagiographic genre to depict the life of Muhammad, the author of *Vida y muerte* unveils what critics have known for a long time, namely that the *comedia de santos* is more political than devotional or, better yet, due to its devotional component, can hide or sublimate the political more efficiently. Paying more attention to form than content could turn form into a ritual in which any message can be included. In effect, it was after the banishment of the Moriscos from Spain (1609–1614) that the two plays about Muhammad, that by Rojas Zorrilla and the anonymous one, were published.

The play cannot be read as an exclusively individual work since it is necessarily inserted in a social context as an ideologeme. As Jameson explains, 'The individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act: yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged. On this rewriting, the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes' (1981: 85). In the case of the publication of *Vida y muerte*, we cannot ignore the fact

that, despite being an error or on purpose, its attribution to a famous playwright like Rojas Zorrilla helped the author to enter the public debate. The Solà-Solés' claim about Rojas Zorrilla's play 'Se trata de una obra que, a pesar de sus anacronismos y aberraciones históricas obtuvo un señalado éxito, representándose una y otra vez y mereciendo en repetidas ocasiones los honores de la imprenta' (1972: 3–4). Thus, *Vida o muerte* not only dialogued with the previous play about Muhammad, but also benefited from its popularity.

More importantly, *Vida y muerte* took advantage of the controversy about Spain's Muslim past that was at its height during the first half of the seventeenth century. In particular, views on different levels of assimilation of the expelled Moriscos and the economic consequences of the expulsion were points of contention discussed in different venues. As Ferrero Hernández puts it, 'Fue compuesta, probablemente, en la época de mayor tensión del debate sobre la expulsión de los moriscos, época en la que en la literatura española se producen tantos textos en los que se realiza una aproximación al problema desde diversas orillas' (2014: 237). During this period, controversies over Moriscos were discussed in the public arena. In 1627, Philip V commissioned a competition for painters and the theme was the expulsion. Diego Velázquez won the first prize, but, unfortunately, the painting was destroyed in a fire at the Alcazar of Madrid in 1734. In 1632, the *libros plúmbeos o plomos sacros del Sacromonte* were taken to Madrid in order to determine their authenticity, and in 1633, Pedro Calderón de la Barca presumably wrote *Amar después de la muerte*, a play about the Second Revolt of the Alpujarras that seeks to justify the Moriscos' reaction to the laws against their cultural practices.

In this atmosphere of historical revision, the authors of *El Profeta falso* and *Vida y muerte* look back at the origin of the struggle between Christianity and Islam before the Muslim invasion of Spain (711). In other words, they decided to reflect on the life of the Prophet and the birth of a new religion because, ultimately, the existence of the Prophet and his adherence to Islam were at the root of this clash. In effect, despite their differences, the two biographical plays about Muhammad stage the moment in which the Prophet either receives or writes the laws of the Quran.¹⁶ This reflection exposes the final transformation of the text and its ideologemes, i.e. the ideology of the form. Jameson adds that with this final horizon, 'we emerge into a space in which History [*sic*] becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable [*sic*] limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular' (1981: 100). The depiction of Muhammad in *Vida y muerte* displays the confrontation between 'Occident vs Orient', 'West vs East', and 'Islam vs Christianity' that haunts Spain and, unlike the ending of Rojas Zorrilla's *El Profeta falso*, remains unresolved. In his reading

16 The Solà-Solés (1972) insist on the differences between the two plays, such as the names of characters, the depiction of Muhammad and the purpose. However, both playwrights devote several verses to the revelation of the Quran portrayed in the two plays. Fernando González Muñoz hints at the similarities of the plays in terms of ideology arguing that 'ambas se enmarcan en el ambiente socio-político de hostigamiento a la minoría morisca' (2014: 97).

of *The Political Unconscious*, Hayden White argues that ‘it should be recognized that the cognitive authority that Jameson consigns to narrative as a “socially symbolic act” derives from his conviction of the narrativity of the historical process itself’ (1987: 148).¹⁷ In this sense, we can place the play in a larger narrative that goes beyond the Spanish theatre.

The anomaly of *Vida y muerte* is the result of using the hagiographic genre to stage an Islamic character. If we take for granted that Mira de Amescua is the author of the play as suggested by Agustín de la Granja, which I believe to be the case, this does not exclude the possibility that the play was written for two different audiences.¹⁸ The first one, Christian spectators, would easily recognize the structure of the play and would interpret it as a trick to condemn Muhammad. The second one, addressed to those sympathizing with Moriscos after the expulsion, would read the play as a covert recognition of their Prophet. This second possibility could explain why a play about Muhammad was forbidden by the Inquisition, as we learned from the testimony of an expelled Morisco in Tunisia in Manuscript 9653.¹⁹ Moreover, it can also help us to identify its author, the ‘Spanish poet’, as Mira de Amescua:

[...] de adonde sacó el poeta
español antes de nuestra espulsi3n la comedia de los milagros
de nuestro ssanto profeta, la qual se repressentó un día
en la corte mostrando en ella la berdad, y figurándolo
con su bestidura berde sembrada de estrellas, y cómo se partió
la luna y entró por ella y salió cada media por su manga.
(Mami 2002: 263)²⁰

The analysis of the discrepancy between form and content in *Vida y muerte* unveils the historical tensions in early modern Spain. These tensions can be seen

- 17 White’s term *the content of the form* seems suggestive for this analysis. However, his observation that form has content despite the presumed lack of fullness and continuity in the medieval manuscript the *Annals of St. Gall* does not reflect what the author of *Vida y muerte* does. The distinction lies not so much in the selection of the theatrical form but in understanding the ‘content’ of the hagiographic genre.
- 18 Although I propose the possibility of two audiences, I recognize the statement as a reductive one. By definition, the audience of a theatrical performance is always plural. In the case of Christians and Moriscos, there is a tendency to view them as two separate entities, but we must remember that even the Moriscos with a lesser degree of assimilation were exposed to Christian practices and ideological assertions.
- 19 This manuscript is an anonymous commentary on a long religious poem written by a blind Andalusian poet living in Algiers, Ybrahim of Bolfad, during the seventeenth century. The work of an expelled Morisco in Tunisia, the text focuses on the unity of God, the Prophet’s miracles, and the issue of death, among other topics. It can be found in the Biblioteca Nacional de España and was edited by Ridha Mami (2002). In his prologue, the anonymous author mentions that the purpose of his writing is to provide a commentary on Bolfad’s poetry to readers who do not possess knowledge of Arabic (Mami 2002: 56).
- 20 Several authors make the connection between the play and the ‘poeta español’, such as Josep Maria Solà-Solé and Monstserrat D. Solà-Solé (1972), and Ridha Mami (2002). However, Agustín de la Granja is the only one who has identified the ‘poeta español’ as Mira de Amescua (2006: 442–43).

in the incongruity that, although Antonio Mira de Amescua was affiliated with the Catholic Church during his lifetime, several critics have suggested that he might have had Morisco ancestry. In discussing the *Informaciones* (1631), Carlos Asenjo Sedano (1996: 26) suggests that the playwright's mother, who did not raise him and never married his father, could be the Morisca slave Arcángela Angélica. Roberto Castilla Pérez observes that in Mira de Amescua's *Expediente de genealogía y limpieza de sangre* (1609) for a chaplaincy position at the Royal Chapel of Granada, one witness asserted that Isabel Hernández, one of his grandmothers, 'le tocaba algo de morisco natural de los originarios de esta villa' (1998: 84). Despite the fact that only one of the witnesses mentioned the playwright's potential Morisco ancestry, Carmen Hernández Montalbán observes how five of the witnesses of the *Expediente* were members of the Cofradía del Santo Sacramento and states 'Esto nos lleva a pensar que las declaraciones de las pruebas de limpieza de sangre pudieron ser muy bien compradas o amañadas' (2011: 368). While these sources speculate on the playwright's ancestry, more concrete evidence is needed to prove that Mira de Amescua was a Morisco. However, it is striking that the same year that the Moriscos were expelled from Spain and Mira de Amescua was proposed for a position in the Church, he was accused of having a Morisca grandmother.

Conclusion

In this essay I have addressed the contradiction of using the *comedia de santos*, a theatrical subgenre intended to emphasize the holiness of Christian characters, to depict the life of the Islamic Prophet, Muhammad. While the form corresponds to the hagiographic genre, the content is at odds with what it is expected of a *comedia de santos*. The disparity between form and content in *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* unveils the historical tensions and anxieties of Spain's Muslim past, turning the play into a reflection on Spain's hybrid and ambivalent religious culture instead of offering an accurate biographical account of the Islamic leader. This subversion of the *comedia de santos* shows the potentialities of the subgenre. Plays placed under this category surpass their devotional purpose and have the capacity to migrate across contexts. In this regard, *Vida y muerte* can be considered an anomaly in Early Modern Spanish theater, but, at the same time, an innovative way of displaying the complex religious atmosphere that permeated the period.

In a moment of historical revision, the author of *Vida y muerte* looks back at the origin of the struggle between Christianity and Islam before the Muslim invasion of Spain. His representation of Muhammad is ambiguous and challenges the critic to delve deeper into the meaning and purpose of staging contradictory views. Influenced by the culture of the Baroque, the play can be read from two opposite perspectives, i.e., the subversion of the genre to mock Muhammad or the subversion of the genre to minimize or nullify the criticism of the character. The ending of *Vida y muerte del falso Profeta Mahoma* does not resolve this tension and, contrary to Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla's *El Profeta falso Mahoma*, leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. This enigmatic portrayal of Muhammad

should not dissuade scholars from attempting to provide some interpretations. On the contrary, it can serve as an invitation to do more research on Islam and Moriscos in the theatre of Antonio Mira de Amescua.

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