Gil Vicente is, as well as a dramatist, a great poet. Some critics
consider him to be the greatest Portuguese poet after Camoeis. All of his
drama is in verse and it is in the pure poetry that he rises to the heights
of his greatness. This poetry is part of his plays and as a dramatist he is
the best in Portugal and also, in the opinion of foreign critics, the best in
the whole of Europe at that time.

Menendez y Pelayo writes that, as a dramatic artist, “there is no one
who rivals him in the Europe of his time.” And Aubrey Bell affirms that
“no other country produced a dramatic poet so inspired before the second
half of the sixteenth century”, that Gil “was the best lyric poet of his
time” and “one of the most inspired poets in the world.” Among the
greatest students of Gil vicente are the foreigners Carolina Michaelis,
Aubrey Bell, Edgar Prestage, Hendrix. Gil Vicente is a mediaeval dramatist
— mediaeval in the source, in the conception, and in the method of developing
his plays. He wrote autos, farces, comedies and tragi—comedies, besides vari-
os poems. He did not come out of the Middle Ages, and yet all of the
esthetic and religious mediaeval thought is included in his work. No other
has portrayed the life of the Middle Ages with the same vivacity, colour
and grace. We see how the chivaleresque ideology with subtleties of polite
love, and the Christian religion with its richness of symbols and figures,
added to legends, superstitions and myths, were dealt with repeatedly in a
dramaturgy that in all of Christian Europe showed affinities, repeating
themes and the same stories in, at times, very long versifications to whose
representation the mediaeval multitude assisted with a religious and infantile
thirst day after day. Therefore all the Christian theory of mysteries and
moralities, the infinite repetitions of the Nativity theme, of the Resurrection and the Passion, are found substantiated in the autos of Gil Vicente. And also the humour characteristic of the Middle Ages, its enjoyment of games and folly, its picturesque ingenuity, and its impudence, its spontaneous and vulgar laughter, and its turbulence are found included in the farces and Vicentine comedies. A typical mediaeval picture is, for example, that of the Witch in the *Auto das Fadas*, bringing before the kings of Portugal, the instruments of her office: the earthen pan, the candle, the black bag, the blood of a lion, mixed with the tail of a fish, the sign of Solomon engraved on the heart of a black cat, the pebbles gathered near the gallows, the liver of a toad, the beak of a magpie, and the wing of a bat. Sometimes a simple sketch is enough to evoke the whole mediaeval world: “then a philosopher enters, with a fool tied to his foot,” a “shoemaker comes loaded down with his shoe lasts,” a “Jew comes with a billy-goat on his back,” a devil who brings two infernal friars, “a friar enters hand in hand with a girl and you see them dancing and throwing kisses!

Certain types are characteristic of the society in which Gil Vicente lived: the Procurses, the buffoonish Friar, the hard-up Nobleman who pretends to be grand, the greedy Squire, the bourgeois and fanciful Girl. The characterization of these personalities as far as vivacity and humour are concerned, is at times a work of genius.

The devils, almost always humourous, (with the Devil, the Middle Ages creates a villainous type, the Devil is the last of the wicked villains) the criticism of the priests who, only with one exception, are always in love, and are wicked or debauched, the abundance of popular types, treated with realism and ridiculed, the use of professions to extract dramatic effects, the symbolizing of figures, the picturesque variety of customs, the dominant preoccupation with morality, the didactic attitude and the constant defence of the Catholic religion, and of its saints, the horror of sin and the obsession of salvation; and with this the ingenuous wit is expressed frequently in a free style, in phrases of a vulgar plebeian humour, with frequent allusions to the physical necessities (frequent in all of the European theatre of the time, because such an illusion was enough to make the crowds laugh) – all this is the background of the city and of the theatre.
of the Middle Ages throughout Europe. The theatre of Gil Vicente is superior to all the rest because he attains an unequalled poetic beauty, a spiritual level which dominates us even today, a critical irony and fine wit which still enchant and amuse us.

The use of Latin phrases, which have produced so many diverse interpretations among us, is common in mediaeval plays, and does not signify, in Gil Vicente, any particular knowledge of Latin, or a preference for this language, but simply that the religious Latin which he used was understood by his public and was commonly quoted in its speech. Carolina Michaelis found in all of Gil Vicente's work, only one classical Latin quotation from Virgil, and even this was not taken from the original.

There are critics like Aragao Morato and Teixeira Botelho, who defend the influence of French mystery plays in Vicente. There are French songs in *Auto da Fe* and in the *Auto dos Quatro Ventos*. (There are also those, like Antonio Jose Saraiva, who believe that mummery was introduced in Portugal by Bourbon influence). Menendez y Pelayo only admits the Castilian influence.

Gil Vicente himself uses the word *mystery*: "which work I have named the mysteries of the Virgin." (Mofina Mendes). And he calls the Barcas a *morality*.

Whether he knew the French theatre directly or not, no one can deny that such knowledge would reach him via Spain. Gil Vicente also knew Juan del Encina, in whose insipid eclogues he was inspired, Juan Ruiz, the Arcipreste de Hita, Gomes Manrique, Torres Naharro and Lucas Hernandez. He looked to all of these for materials which he used in a work which surpassed them all. Some themes come from far away, like that of Mofina Mendes and the jar of olive oil, which is believed to originate in India and which appears universally, taking on a different flavour in each country, like that of Rubena which branches off in a long vein that begins in a Greek romance of the fifth century, lost, and which appears dealt with in various other European countries.

From England we know that he was familiar with one play which appeared translated into Portuguese.

The English and Flemish *Everyman* is reflected in the famous scene
of "Todo o mundo e ninguem" from the Auto da Lusitania. The theme is a product of Catholic Europe, according to A. C. Cawley, and we do not even know which version appeared first.

We should not forget that in medieval culture two of the predominant aspects, the religious and the popular, contributed largely towards its diffusion. The Church fed the knowledge of scholars and the imagination of the poor, and the latter, due to lack of methods of communication of word, like today’s radio and television, augmented by means of imagination and wonder all the events and news to extraordinary proportions. The ideas, the religious or social symbols of which the Church was an excellent vehicle, carried from one corner of Europe to another, arrived at their destination embellished and coloured by legend or fantasy.

In this manner, if Gil Vicente had not actually read the themes which were repeated in hundreds of medieval plays, he knew them by word of mouth and through tradition. Lisbon, at the zenith of its power, was then the greatest centre in Europe and news of everything reached it in the end. Gil Vicente was not a literary man, he was a free spirit, with quick apprehension and vibrant creation. It was enough for him to know, of the French mystery plays, the names and vaguely the themes, which he certainly knew anyway, in order to extract profitable ideas.

Gil Vicente began with the Auto da Visitacao, which he represented dressed as a shepherd, in the queen’s apartments, for the occasion of a child-birth, in front of King Manuel, his mother, Queen D. Maria and the court. He began his dramatic career under the shadow of the throne, and would continue there until his death. The public celebration in honour of a prince is a tradition throughout Europe. Births, engagements and royal weddings, here as well as abroad, have repercussions in the city and are celebrated and transfigured by means of festive spectacles. The prince is the centre of the medieval festival, as he is the centre of the city and medieval society. Therefore, the theatre is an urban thing. It is an image of a hierarchical society. It socializes the beliefs, the passions and the myths, representing them through the scene.¹⁹

According to Jean Duvignaud, no other epoch represented and staged
the social life as did the Middle Ages. The events of life became spectacular. Pain and joy were dressed and treated in a poetic and theatrical way. The theatre finds its roots in the ways of urban life. It is conceived for a many-sided extension which is the city itself. This characteristic of the theatre explains various aspects of Gil Vicente which are still not understood. Antonio Saraiva criticizes Vicente because his shepherds are created from people who are seen in the court, and therefore, have no individuality. It is a criticism which could be made of any non-regional or rural play. Two or three characters in Carlo Selvagen's play, *Entre Giestes*, possess individuality, but nevertheless this quality does not make the play notable. The countrymen of Chekov, Turgueneff, and of many other dramatists are seen through city eyes.

It is true that Gil Vicente, as a humorist writer, creates types rather than characters with individuality. Individuality is sufferance. Now the Vicentine plays are too short to develop the odyssey of a soul. Bergson observes that the comedy represents the type, and the tragedy represents the individual. Each comic character is a type, according to him, and reciprocally, every resemblance to a type has something of the comic in it. One can see the difficulty in creating a character with individuality through comic processes, by counting the number of truly live comic characters in the whole of literature. Despite the fact that the tragedy is one of the most difficult "genres," it produced a far greater number of live characters than the comedy. The humorism of Gil Vicente, optimistic and gay by nature, did not lend itself to the creation and long preparation of carefully constructed characters. This was either because the tragedy was not the inclination of his genius, or because it was certainly not the "genre" which interested the audience for which he wrote and lived. Lope de Vega and Calderon also did not create individualized characters, and this does not diminish their greatness.

The first four plays written by Gil Vicente, entirely in Spanish, still show a rough simplicity of composition and of effects. The plot and the method of developing it is rudimentary, although the verses are musical and charming. Even in the *Auto dos Quatro Tempos* where he exudes strong
sentiments of the perfumes and beauties of the land, and lyrical and emo­
tional poetry shines, one can sense the imitation of the eclogues of Juan
del Encina and Lucas Fernandes.

Yet, his fifth play, Auto da India, in which he retains Spanish in only one character, written without the hurry which is complained of in the previous works, abandons the single theme of the Nativity, and already shows dramatically consistent characters, treated with a technical accuracy which places it among the most perfect and current that he wrote.

From his first play in 1502, Auto da Visitacao—still a simple sketch inspired by a popular carol, and similar to many other monologues written by that Europe on the theme of the Nativity—to his last, the comedy Floresta de Enganos, in 1536, probably the year of his death, Gil Vicente travels a long road, in which he produces 44 plays: 16 in Portuguese, 11 in Spanish, and 17 bilingual. But if the first play was simple and plain, it can not be said that the last is complicated. It is much more extensive, with many scenes whereas the first play had only one short scene—it traces a range that if it were not for his genius, would result in complexities and confusion. It is as he summarizes: “The following comedy, distinguished and famous gentlemen, is called Floresta de Enganos. The first trick is that of a poor squire who tricked a merchant, disguising himself as a widowed woman. The second trick will be that Cupid, being in love with Princess Grata Celia, daughter of King Toledano, king of Thessaly, and she being the daughter of this king, and a lady of the most excellent and extreme beauty in the world, Cupid not being able to find himself alone with her at an opportune time, became tired of his anguish life and decided to trick the god Apollo so that the latter would trick King Toledano. Then King Toledano, tricked by Apollo, took his daughter, Grata Celia, also deceived, to Serra Minea, where with great anguish, her father left her exiled and imprisoned. When Cupid arrived performed his trick, he descended from the sky to the earth where she was a prisoner, and was deceived by her two times, and she was married to the Prince of Great Greece.” This complicated intrigue of deceits, which in the text of the play is developed naturally, in a plot controlled with ease, in simple and musical verse, to the contrary of what the author’s prose resume
would seem to suggest, begins, after an introduction where the sentences of a philosopher are mixed with the nonsense of a fool whom he brings tied to his foot. The analysis of the last known play by Gil Vicente, which was probably not the last to be written, shows us how much his theatrical knowledge improved in 34 years of practice. It also reveals to us the evolution of his spirit as a writer. Concerning what he learnt of the \textit{metier}, one can say that he became capable of developing a theme with fantasy, multiple plot, and facility of composition. None of this was difficult for his natural ability as in earlier plays he showed himself more able and happier. That which is more important, which I want to note here, is that the last play written by Gil Vicente is still a characteristically mediaeval work: there is no division into acts, the scene are not separated, and the classic rule of the three unities is completely ignored.

When this play was represented to King John, in Évora, in 1536, it had already been ten years since Sã de Miranda had returned from Italy, and had begun to make known in Portugal the novelties of the Renaissance. He had also started to write the comedy \textit{Estrangeiros}, in which he applies all his knowledge of the classical rules of theatrical composition. Without a doubt Gil Vicente was familiar with the new literary ideas brought in by Sã de Miranda and later followed with enthusiasm by Antonio Ferreira, Diogo Bernardes, Andrade Caminha and other admirers. Gil Vicente, however, maintained himself loyal to his own style, and with such tenacity that, according to some historians, a rivalry arose between him and Sã de Miranda, which is expressed in biting allusions in the first of \textit{Clerigo da Beira}. This supposition, raised by Camilo Castelo Branco, and set aside by more modern critics, like Oscar Pratt, who also puts in its place the malicious interpretation given to the letter of Sã de Miranda to Mr. Basto, in which there seemed to be, in two versos “whistling nightingales in the gardens of Enxobregas” a criticism of Gil Vicente.

Even if there were no rivalry between the two poets, it is certain that Gil Vicente never understood the importance of the literary revolution propagated by Sã de Miranda. There are various possible reasons for this. He was already old, or because the examples that the latter gave him in the field of the theatre did not convince him, (the plays of Sã de Miranda
are deadly monotonous and dry). What is most probable is that the new processes were very different from those which he followed, those which were consistent with his genius, and certainly with his public. It was his principal preoccupation to satisfy the public, as he lived and depended upon the sympathy and pleasure of the royalty, for whom he wrote the autos, frequently on their orders. This Vicentine conservatism does not impede him from exhibiting the greatest irreverencies and ferocious criticisms of the customs and eminent persons of his time, with an audacity and violence that no writer of the epoch equals, and very few Portuguese of later centuries equal. It was probably this audacity of criticism and opinions that caused many critics, starting with Menendez y Pelayo, to talk of the Erasmism of Gil Vicente. Others even alluded to a suspected Lutheranism. Nevertheless, none of the reasons produced convince us that Gil Vicente was even familiar with the works of Erasmus. It should be believed that he never realized the importance of the Rennaissance movement. It seems that between certain passages of his simple autos and the erudite doctrines of Erasmus, there would not be more than similar critical attitudes before questions which harmed the moral sentiment of righteousness and justice in things concerning God and man, which are in the moral root of all his autos. Angel Valbuena saw in Auto da Alma a biting Erasmist conception and “possible precedent of El Gran Teatro de Mundo by Calderon.”

These considerations make us go back to the first affirmation that the Vicentine spirit did not surpass the ideas of mediaeval culture, but that it comprises all the values created by that culture, attaining a vision and wisdom, that approximates and in many cases, resembles, humanism. “All that which is rich and lasting in the Middle Ages: the dense idealism of its myths and symbols, the live palpitation of its paganism, united with the mystical passion, the fear of God, and the horror of death; the cruel force of its plebeian realism and the poetry of the ethereal joys of the soul or of the animal pleasure of the senses - all the philosphical, esthetic, moral and human values - that the Middle Ages created are included in the Vicentine Autos. The influence of the Renaissance, or hints of this, can be noticed from time to time in the rythmic purity of the verse, in the elegant simplicity in which he puts over ideas, in the lucid form which
is freed from the harsh dissonance of earlier verse, in the keenness of his criticism, in the subtlety of his skill. But the substance of the ideas on which the autos draw—that is densely and purely mediaeval.”

As was to happen in the case of the great Spanish dramatists who found their inspiration in him, Gil Vicente dramatizes not only the history of Christianity, but also portrays the conflict between the Christian idea and natural impulse. He carries this conflict neither so far nor so deep, but he feels the vital problems connected with the confrontation of the soul and his rational liberty with the theological rules of duty and salvation. Moreover, since theology is a dramatization of good and evil, theological drama is, as writes Eric Bentley, a branch of the drama of ideas. And if as a rule Vicente displays submissive and fervent faith before the mysteries of the Nativity and the Virgin, there dawns in him from time to time a spirit of bold and almost rebellious interrogation, directed at the most elevated and consecrated truths. His interrogation is vibrantly vivid, his theology expressly existentialist, and not in formulas or abstract concepts.

This stretching of the Christian doctrine to its ultimate consequences was developed in depth by Lope de Vega and Calderon. Like certain exalted mystical writers, they ask the maximum of God. They are confused by the disproportion between the infinite mercy of God and the finite in human actions. Does the doctrine of grace by chance signify that good works are enough to save us? Or is only the power of the Cross needed to save a repenting sinner? But is this power indispensable? If it is indispensable, then of what use are good deeds? How do we explain the fact that a world in which there exists so much evil has been created by a God who is infinitely good? As Bentley notes, Spanish drama of the Golden Age was still, in many aspects in the mediaeval tradition. And in this particular, although it is more developed and more perfect in form than the Vicentine theatre, it is involved in the debating of the same moral problems and lives enveloped in the same fundamental anguish—the question of sin and salvation.

The only serious works of Gil Vicente are the religious autos. It is curious to note that he did not write any play which could be described as a tragedy. This proves further that he had not emerged from the Middle
Ages. *D. Duardos* and *Amadis de Gaula* are also written in a serious vein but contain short comic passages: Vicente took almost completely seriously another sacred mediaeval theme—that of chevaleresque love. But it is not only in these works that Vicentine serious thought can be detected—for at every turn in the comedies and farces, under the laughter and the gaiety, gravity comes out, in concepts now formulated with reflection and exactness, at other times expressed through irony or biting satire. In the comedies, farces, and tragi-comedies he introduces serious characters, among them religious figures who give, alongside his comic figures (frequently the shepherds match sacred figures) the serious side of Vicentine thought. But even the comic types are often mouthpieces for the author’s ideas about the life and society of his time.

Huizings writes that the transition from the characteristic spirit of decline of the Middle Ages to that of humanism was simpler than one might suppose. Accustomed as we are to contrast humanism with the Middle Ages, we often suppose that adherence to the new system implies the repudiation of the other. It is difficult for us to imagine that the spirit can cultivate the old forms of thought and of mediaeval expression and at the same time aspire to the old vision of reason and of beauty. But it is thus that we have to visualize who actually happened. Classicism did not appear through a sudden revelation: it grew amidst the luxurious vegetation of mediaeval thought. Focillon affirms moreover that the Renaissance took much from the Middle Ages.

Gil Vicente’s work, being an ideal abridgement and reflection of the Middle Ages, had also to mirror the crisis of the feudal values: thus it reproduces the disturbances of the social and religious crisis which led to the Reformation and the Inquisition. Many of the types he created give us an inkling of the decadence and the end of a crumbling world. He himself, a traditionalist clinging to the throne in the shadow of which he lives, appears at the end of his life already as a figure of the past whose methods come to maturity through genius, but which in the light of the Renaissance are going to appear as antiquated and primitive as the age which he wishes to depict.
There remains another aspect of Vicentine theatre in connection with its mediaeval character. We have already seen how Gil Vicente refused to submit to the rules of the classic theatre. The main reason was perhaps his love of liberty of composition and, because of the free nature of his spirit, he might not have been capable of creating by forcing himself to follow rules and canons which were at the time being rigidly followed. This may have been the reason why we have some comedies as insipid as all those written by Sá de Miranda and Antonio Ferreira. Vicente retained his liberty by his conservatism.

The only work properly divided into acts (Gil Vicente calls them scenes) is that composed of the three Barcas. Basically it is only one play, divided into three acts with a common theme—the destiny of man—but written on different planes and even with different characters with the exception of the Angel and the devils, who are common to all. Also other autos are divided by Gil Vicente into scenes or parts.

_A Comedia de Rubena_ is divided by the author into three scenes introducing different characters in each scene. The end of each scene also provides diversity both in scenic aspect and psychological atmosphere. The end of the first scene entails _suspense_, announcing the continuation of the plot: the second scene terminates on a note of dramatic sadness which is unique in Gil Vicente’s endings; the third scene reestablishes gaiety ending in a "festa". The fantastic argument which is developed without any preoccupations with balancing such diverse elements, does not permit that unity of construction and conclusion which is attained in the autos of the Barcas.

The _Triunfo do Inverno_ is divided by the author into two parts, with different characters in each, the first showing the triumph of winter, the second the triumph of spring: there is continuity between the two parts, but not fusion or unity. The title of the auto is inaccurate, because it is Spring and not Winter that triumphs and presents the garden of life to the King.

In the _Auto de Mofina Mendes_, after the introduction by the Friar, there is a kind of mystery, with Our Lady accompanied by the Virtues and
the Angel Gabriel. This is followed by a pastoral interlude, then comes a scene which the Author calls "a brief contemplation of the Birth", with the Virgin and the Virtues and this ends with adoration of the Child Jesus who cries "placed in a cradle" by the Angels and Shepherds.

A detailed analysis of each piece would show that the structure of each one is different, there is really neither a pattern nor a rule: we are left with the impression that Gil Vicente produced his diversity in order to avoid monotony and for the purpose of creating a greater variety of effects. It is easier to quote the exceptions, those plays which display a certain unity: the Auto da India, Ines Pereira, Os Autos das Barcas, Quen tem Faceios, the Auto da Alma, the Juiz da Beira, the Earsadas Fisicos, the Velho da Horta. With the exception of the last two, in which passages exist which have lost their meaning due to the lapse of time, all these plays still are perfect in their validity, especially the first five quoted, which are the most alive and technically the most perfect of all Vicente's work.

The fact that division into scenes or parts is not adhered to in many of his following autos (the Barcas were written from 1517 to 1519 and Rubena in 1521) shows that Gil Vicente did not attribute any importance to such divisions and that his preference was for free creation and construction. It is probable that he was aware of some morality plays divided into acts and scenes in the manner of Seneca's tragedies which he probably read. The drama however, like all mediaeval literature did not know this form which only became well-known with classic art.

Some autos display a disconnected and varied structure, as the Auto da Lusitania, Romagen de Agravados, Fragua de Amor, Nau de Amores, which, as has already been said suggest the "reviews" of today(10). The Auto da Feire develops a morality beginning which then unfolds "quadros" with comic realism and ends again on a morality note. The construction of the Auto da Fe is even more surprising: the beginning is that of a comedy, then we have a fantastic joking dialogue in which the two shepherds, in their rude simplicity, reply to the serious lines of the Fe with absurdities to make the public laugh. Finally the auto terminates with a religious song. The Auto Pastoril Portugues begins in pastoral comedy and ends in a miracle
and with a hymn to Our Lady.

The *Auto da Lusitania* is divided by the author into an introduction, played by six figures, and a farce, in which enter twelve figures different from the previous ones. This plot of each part is different and there is no relation between the two. This auto introduces simultaneous action, typical of mediaeval plays, going on at the same time on the ground floor and upstairs (in the lojea and the sobrado). A study has never been made of the theatrical structure of the Vicentine autos, and here we have no space to do so. It can be affirmed, however, that they are greatly diverse in composition, if they were to be analyzed in detail. The treatment of the theme, it might be said, depends as much on the nature of the latter as on the disposition of the author's spirit. And at times the treatment depends even on exterior circumstances, such as the time which was at the author's disposal for their composition. "And now we'll finish quickly for more", he says in the third auto he wrote. "No more was written because of the delay in asking for it", he explains at the end of the fourth auto, which is simple and short like all which precede it.

This irregularity, the lack of division into scenes and of a certain order and classic regulation, has been severely criticized by conservative opinion and under the influence of the realist drama where Ibsen established solid and inflexible bases. However today in the light of the liberties which are permitted to the theatre of our time, it would be unjust to censor the Vicentine freedom. The actual classification of dramatic works abandoned the classic denomination: Ionesco labels new classifications to his: “anti-play”, “comic drama”, “pseudo drama”, and “tragic farce”. The genres are confused and mixed up. As for the arbitrary construction of contemporary plays, let us mention only, in order not to expatiate on names and examples, one of the last plays of Arthur Adamov, *Printemps 71*, in which the acts are divided into *tableaux*, between which occur interludes, which he calls *guignol*. The characters in these interludes have names such as: “the Assembly” and “the Bank of France”

Still from Adamov, the play “Intimity” has characters more abstract like *The Incarnate Cause*, *The Man who sees the Causes and suffers the Effects. The Elite* and the *Effects of the Cause Jean Genet*, like Gil Vicente, real
characters with symbols: the Bishop, the Judge, the Executioner, the General, the Envoy, 2 Wounded Men, and 3 Photographers, together with Roger, Luis, Carmen, Georgette, etc. Samuel Beckett, for his symbolic characters, chooses monosyllabic names which, as has already been observed, have no meaning or suggestion and are simple abstract sounds: in *Fin de Partie*, the four characters are called Nagg, Neil, Hamm, and Clov; in *La Dernière Bande*, the name of the only character is Krapp. Lionel Abel, in *Metateatse*, affirms that the two principal characters in "Waiting for Godot" symbolize the literary relationship between Becket and James Joyce (Pozzo seems to be Joyce) and that such a relationship is also symbolized in *Fin de Partie*; yet, even if this were true, the biographic origin did not leave anything concrete in these figures, they were very vaguely classified. In another play "La Cantatrice Chauve" by Ionesco, all the characters are called Smith or Watson. This responds also to another criticism made of Gil Vicente—that he doesn’t create characters, that his people are symbols, social or allegorical types, and that they are not living persons or truly individualized ones, that they are not living persons or truly individualized ones, that "there is an abundance of types, but a lack of characters".

Antonio Saraiva censures Gil Vicente for not having created characters or real personalities. Aubrey Bell, in spite of being accustomed to the long English tradition of a drama with live characters, and for this reason he should be more demanding on this point than point is controversial and open to personal opinion.

Eric Bentley believes that there are no live characters in Calderon. According to his criteria there are also none in the works of Vicente; this does not impede either of them being great dramatists.

It is true that Gil Vicente, even when he makes character sketches, makes them too short, giving too few details, and thus fails to give individual life the character. But nothing proves that the theatre concentrating on psychological realism is superior to that which is constructed with allegories and symbols. And this is undoubtedly true when the creator is called Shakespeare. Nevertheless it is evidently not the character or the morality of the work which gives it greatness, it is its quality.

Gil Vicente introduces, among his figures, a Fe' (Faith), a Probeza
(Poverty), a Humildado (Humility), o Tempo (Time), A Igreja (the Church), o Mundo (the World), A Escritura (The Gospels), o Amor (Love), a Justica (Justice), a Sabedoria (Wisdom), Todo-o-Mundo (Everybody) and Ninguem (Nobody), various Saints and various pagan gods, and even natural elements like the Sun, the Moon, the Wind, Winter, Summer, the mountains of Sintra, and of Estrela, etc. The introduction of these symbols and allegories is made within the tradition which admits them. It is a sign of the times, just as today it is made in many pieces influence of radio and television, as happens in the last play of Dylan Thomas Under Milk Wood, and also in many others which could be mentioned. This is an even more abstract process than that followed by Gil Vicente. The Vicentine method is that adopted by T. S. Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral, the characters of which are: “Choir of the Ladies of Canterbury”, “Three Priests of the Cathedral”, a “Messenger”, “the Archbishop Thomas Becket”, “Four Tempters” and “Four Knights” The only individualized character is Thomas Becket. The concrete loses the Ibsenine relief and, as in the Vicentine theatre, the intemporal values expressed by symbols are heightened. On this point T. S. Eliot wrote that the great vice of the English drama of Kyd and Galsworthy was that their intention of realism was unlimited. In one play, Everyman, and perhaps only in this play, we have a drama within the limitations of Art.

Martin Esslin, in The Theatre of the Absurd, considers the mimes of the Middle Ages and the clowns of Shakespeare - he could also include the devils of Gil Vicente—as predecessors of the theatre of the absurd. Along the same lines, Leonardo Pronko, in The Experimental Theatre in France, sees in the theatre, of the vanguard a reconstitution of the fundamental forms of the theatre, like a return to the primitive theatre and a return to having man as the centre of the dramatic universe.

This approximation of the Vicentine theatre to the theatre of the absurd is not, then, unreasonable.

And if we enter into a more profound analysis, we can find points of contact not only in the synthetical character as well as the symbolism of both, but in the technique of expression. On this point we remember how Ionesco poses the problem, with great clarity, in Notes and Counter-
Notes: “The text of Cantatrice Chauve or of the manual for learning English (or Russian. or Portuguese), composed of expressions for the most tiring and common occasions, reveals to me for that very reason, the automatisms of language, of the way people act, the “talking which says nothing, talking because there is nothing personal to say, the absence of an inner life, the mechanics of daily life; man immersed in his social course was not distinguished from it.” The tragic character does not change, he breaks; he is himself, he is real. Comic characters are people who do not exist.”

Applying these ideas, Lonesco, in the “comic drama” La Lecon, has, between many passages where the words lose their sense and are broken up into the most empty automatism, this passage: Profesor... in Spanish, the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather, who was Asiatic; in Latin: the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather, who was Asiatic. Can you tell the difference? Translate this into.....Rumanian! In the anti-play “La Cantatrice Chauve”: “yoghurt is excellent for the stomach, kidneys and appendicitis, etc.”

Samuel Becket carries the automatism of language even further, emptying it entirely of all sense and rational meaning. In Waiting for Godot, a long passage of more than three pages begins like this: “Lucky (speaks monotonously). Given the existence such as is evident from the recent public works of Poincon and Whattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua of a white beard quaquaquaqua of the time of extension that from the heights of his divine apathy his divine atambie his divine aphasia loves us apart from a few exceptions does not know why he should turn and suffer in the way of Miranda with those which are it isn’t known why but we have time in the torment of the fires whose fires the flames...”

What this row of disconnected words means is that the character (or us, the real people) does not know how to talk, he no longer knows how to think, and he no longer can think because he is incapable of producing a moral impression, he no longer has passions, he is not capable of being, he could turn himself into any other person, another thing, because, not being, he is only the others, the impersonal world, he is, as Lonesco says, permutable. We speak in order to say nothing or we all say the same
thing, comments Claude Mauriac.

Now Gil Vicente utilizes a process, so similar that if Becket were Portuguese, we would do tempted to say that he copied him. Indeed in *Clérigo da Beira*, the Negro converts Salve-Regina in this row of meaningless words: “Know Regina Matho, pity nurture, a blind shad, till we go stop, oxulo, son of mare, high, loose we shackle you lie, you tie vinegar, they broke in vain, I lift our island, you look for ropes, spectacles, our convent, and fast with much fruit, belly, you tremble, you mutter, seuro St. Mary money they give is look this letter give much that steal sings furunando.”

The intuition of Gil Vicente is obviously to make the public laugh with a current of absurdities which imitate the tune of Salve-Regina, even funnier coming out of the mouth of a Negro. But in fact the process which he employed utilizes the automatism of language and implies the idea that not only all the negroes speak like this, they do not know how to speak, nor think, they are not individuals, but also the people who listen are incapable of making distinctions, of stirring themselves, they laugh mechanically without feeling the necessity of attaching significance to the words, they are superficial, empty, failing to be themselves, they impersonalize themselves in a mental torpor, in a laziness of thinking, they dissolve themselves, permutable, in the irrational crowd.

That Gil Vicente was perfectly conscious of the effects of this process is shown by the fact that he made use of it various times. In *Auto das Fadas*, the speech of a Jewess is as abstruse as the previous example.

The most striking example is the following one:

Zeet zeberet zerregut zebet
O filui soter

........
Rezégut Linteser
Zamzorep tisal
Sirefë nafezeri.
None of these words has any meaning. D. Carolina Michaelis suggested that one of them comes from the German *sehr gut* and Aubrey Bell prefers to think the source is the English *very good*. Even if that were so it would not help us much in understanding the text. What do the other words mean?

This last example of Gil Vicente and that of Becket authorize us, in my opinion, to go further than Ionesco in maintaining that there exists in articulated sounds a succession of suggestive pointers of invocations and knockings on the doors of the subconscious, of appeals to the irrational which have nothing to do with either meaning or logic.

The example identical to others which we can read in Ionesco is of absurd language which contains images and ideas falsely joined together and beyond the bounds of logic. The last example of Gil Vicente, like that of Becket, is of purely abstract language or even of disintegration of language. The words are like points, strips of shadow and light, lines of varying shades of colour, and the speech is like a picture within which the imagination of the observer arranges his images or compositions of ideas as they are evoked by suggestion, freely, according to whim or power of invention. In this way Gil Vicente touches on the modern theatre. The work of genius frequently displays vast resources of sentiments which develop along intuitive lines and which are completely exposed only through the passing of centuries.

With these considerations, which are tempting to explore further, we can conclude that theatre opened itself to new currents and bold experiments once the shackles of rigid form had been broken, a process which led to simultaneously freeing oneself from prolonged classicism and dry, narrow naturalism. We can also conclude that the new conceptions and experiments which came in coincided in many points with the old mediaeval theatre. The reason for this coincidence is easy to explain—it is that the mediaeval theatre was free, it had been freely constructed, without following rules or being preoccupied with form. And that is how it is with the theatre of our day. Gil Vicente would agree with Ionesco when he affirms, theatre is liberty” The old Vicentine theatre demanded such liberty.
Man’s fate in Vicentne theatre

The entire literature of the Middle Ages in Europe is preoccupied with the fate of man. In the Middle Ages life is the ante-chamber of death and preoccupation with one’s ultimate fate invades the spirit with terror and superstition, leading to a frenzy of faith. The great Mediaeval works are of a religious character: the cathedrals, almost all the works of the great painters, the Divina Commedia, the Vicentine autos. This involvement with religious sentiment explains why the zenith of Vicente’s work is reached by his autos on the final destiny of man.

It is in the trilogy of the Barcas that he traces the final journey of man. As in the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Tibetan Bardo Thodol, in mediaeval letters and scenes of the Danca dos Mortos, Gil Vicente dramatizes the journey after death, the judgment and the salvation. With the exception of the Divina Commedia none of the numerous mediaeval works which deal with the theme attained the greatness or profundity of the Barcas. As far as the trilogy of the Barcas is concerned one is able to give an example of many parallelisms, some of them very close and of which Gil Vicente was doubtless unaware. For example the Redentiner Osterspiel which, in Germany at Eastertime, developed the theme of the Redemption and where appear flagrant similarities to the Auto de Barca do Inferno. This lends weight to the affirmation that the work of Gil Vicente substantiates the themes and basic values of the Middle Ages. We see his simplicity and mediaeval grandeur: on the beach, facing a vast expanse of sea are two ships one of which is going to Hell and the other to Paradise. In the Auto da Barca do Inferno after the short dialogue between the Two Devils about the parish, there appears a tyrannous Noble, despising the small fry around him. Then there appear in succession: a Usurer with his bag of money; a Fool; a Shoemaker bearing shoe lasts which he had stolen from shoes (as in the Redentiner Osterspiel): a Friar who comes in dancing with a Maiden: a Procuress who possesses a luxuriantly colloquial vocabulary: a Jew with a billy-goat on his back; a Judge who received bribes: a Proctor: a Hanged Thief. All these characters are received by the Devil, but try to get into the Ship of the Angels. They all stop in Hell, with
the exception of the Four Noblemen “Knights of the Order of Christ, who
died in Africa” and the Fool who, when the Angel asked him “Who are
you?”, replies simply: “I’m nobody”.

The Auto da Barca do inferno is the most interesting of the trilogy
because Gil Vicente always excels in the treatment of the popular characters,
and because sin makes better literature than virtue. A stream of light
shining on the lives of these characters furnishes the most living scenes
of mediaeval life, of its affairs, artifices and ingenuous hopes.

In the second act we see new characters, who are a little more honest:
a labourer “with his plough on his back”, hardworking and devout, but
who stole the wool; a milk-woman who used to spill the water into the
milk; a simple Shepherd who doesn’t know the Our Father to the end:
an naive Shepherd Girl who believed that God “was round”; a Boy of
a tender age who plays in a comic scene with the Devil; a Gambler who
denies God. The last mentioned is taken to Hell, while all the others
remain to be purged of their sins “along the riverbank”, with the exception
of the Boy who is carried off by the Angels. There is here one of Gil
Vicente’s lapses: the auto is called Barca do Purgatorio, yet in the auto
there is no such Barca (boat), as Purgatory is situated on the very edge
of the river, where there are great flames. And it is there where the
souls remain to do “purged of their sins”.

Even here Gil Vicente takes advantage of the situation in order to
criticize the customs and make eulogies to the basic professions connected
with the economy of the country and with agriculture. Even though he
eulogizes the work of the Labourer (the Labourer has no time or place/
Nor that with which to clean / The drops of his sweat), he doesn’t fail to
censure him for his covetousness. The innocence of the rustic Shepherd, whose
colourful, popular language amplifies the joke, is not enough to keep him
from trying to take young girls by force. In this very way he confesses,
insulting the Devil.

We saw, in the two preceding autos, the equilibrium of the Author’s
judgment. In Auto da Barca da Gloria, the Angel and the Devils receive only
distinguished and upper class people who do not come by themselves, but
are introduced by Death. The structure of the auto is also more elevated
and ceremonious. Each of the sinners recites, an invocation to God, lesson, begging the Divine pardon. The Devil continues to make accusations: the Count led a slothful, licentious and tyrannical life. Death brings a Duke, whose faults are not revealed by the Devil, a king, accused of believing in flattery and lies, of not taking care of the poor and of fulminating unjust war, and finally an Emperor, whom vain glory killed, who was guilty of cruelty and extravagance. To all these characters the Devil shows the infernal fire and horrible precipices. He threatens them with these elements because they exploited the lower classes and fell into tyrannical ways. Then come the leaders of the Church: a Bishop who, according to the Devil, won his way to Hell through pride, and for this should be put into the fish kettles “where you will cook, your crown will roast, your old age will be fried”. The Devil accuses the Archbishop of taking money from the poor, the helpless and the starving, and of hoarding it avariciously.

For this the Devil promises him Hell where he will suffer for his sins. As for the Cardinal’s sins, besides his pride and ambition to become Pope, he adds his ingratitude towards God. The Devil, not wanting to say more, promises to throw him into the Lake of the Lions, where he will be eaten.

Finally comes a Pope, who is accused by Death, who brings him, to have believed himself immortal. The Devil was delighted to see him and to take him in his little boat to Lucifer whose feet the Pope would kiss. (And you will kiss his feet). And he directs a gloomy attack against the Pope: he accuses him of tyranny, of being worldly and of even greater sins:

Indifferent to the prayers and clamours of these high authorities, the Angel is going to set out for Paradise, in his little boat, empty, though he is sorry that “such gentlemen” and “such chosen souls” are going to roast in the infernal heat. At the moment when the Angels begin to put the boat to sea “Christ came from the Resurrection and distributed among them the oars of affliction and took them with him.”

Gil Vicente did not have the courage to send the most eminent persons of this world to Hell, in the way that he sent the lower classes of society. This is human, so human that the same occurs in other mediaeval plays.
and even in the Japanese farces, Kyogen, where the gentlemen and grandees are mocked, but invariably rehabilitated in the end.

Nevertheless, the errors are enumerated, the punishments of the great are described with justified pleasure and in horrible detail, which Gil Vicente did not include in the punishment of the lowly. In the images of torture appear the black, mediaeval superstition and its sickly enjoyment of suffering. Dante had already imagined them in his Inferno, grandiosely and in all its refinement.

The trilogy of the Barcas, which in fact is a play developed in three acts, with unity of conception and staging, is the zenith of the mediaeval theatre which, in many varied attempts, tries to express the ultimate destiny of man.

His religious sentiment is prolonged in the Auto da Historia de Deus, a long fresco which begins with the creation of the world, describes the manoeuvres of Lucifer to bring about man’s downfall, the temptation of Eve by Satan, the action of the great figures of the Old and New Testaments, including the advent of Christ on earth, where he is tempted by the Devil and predicts that he will be sacrificed. This is followed by a procession of singers bearing Christ in a coffin and finally appears “a figure of Christ at Resurrection,” accompanied by trumpets and bagpipes. “And those prisoners and adventurers will be set at liberty” Impressive in its grandeur, the Auto da Historia de Deus is confused and precipitated in its development, expressed in harsh and on occasion imperfect decasyllables. It was this auto and the Auto da Alma which paved the way for the sacramental auto of Calderon in the following century.

In the Auto da Alma Gil Vicente deals with the problem of destiny in orthodox catholic terms and in a simple manner. The entire Middle Ages did not produce a literary work which was able to reduce this great problem to an expression in more naked terms or composed of such bare essentials. He scorns to dwell on all that which is incidental and we are faced with the roads which man will take, perfecting himself through suffering, purifying himself in the measure that he becomes acquainted with successive degrees of grief. Neither is it man himself who takes these roads, it is his soul. We find ourselves confronted with the quintessence

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of human feelings, we attain a plane of sublimation of all that is human in order to contemplate the absolute destiny of the being. The struggles of the Soul with itself are instigated by the temptations of the Devil and quickened by the exhortations of the Angel; the responsibility for its destiny, however, belongs exclusively to the Soul itself and it is only when it has made this tremendous choice that the Church and its Ministers come to serve it. The auto ends in an act of adoration: the Soul is received in the bosom of Christ, the Creature is fused with the Creator.

The oration of St. Augustine, the blessing, the purification of the water, the adoration of the passion symbols and the final adoration of the tomb of Christ make the Auto Alma a liturgical drama which unites the most elevated and eloquent symbols of Christian liturgy. For this reason Antonio Jose Saraiva affirms that the Auto da Alma is "one of the most finished and lapidary expressions of Gothic art and medieval Christianity"

Theatre and Poetry

In this brief survey of Japanese and Western medieval theatre we tried to go into the roots in which are nurtured the religious rite, the true act of cult of the theatre.

We have seen how the European medieval and classic theatre express the deep individual and social consciousness, the continuity of life, through the myths which inspire the imagination of the community. And we have seen also how the drama of Gil Vicente, as supreme synthesis of the European medieval theatre, expresses, in a vast mythical fresco the figures and ideals common to all Christianity.

As far as the scenic art is concerned, considered under the point of view of the sociology of culture, it is significant this approach between the Japanese theatre—which attained an ideal form which is never abandoned, and the Western theatre—which tried several scenic forms through an evolution full of accidents and changes, never being able of fixing itself with certain permanence in an ideal model which might be the culmination of all the experiments of an epoch. This, we saw, Gil Vicente did in drama, as
Dante did in poetry.

Gil Vicente has created a prodigious gallery of human characters and symbols, in which the entire life and all the ideology of the Middle Ages are fully alive. This immense theory of characters shines through the power of his poetry and imagination and the salt of his wit reveals their hidden aspects, unfolds the intimate traits of their deep humanity. Gil Vicente creates inside the real world, he does not invent anew. He criticises, he attacks, he cuts in human nature, he introduces profound meditations, flashes of thought, but he does not rebel, he does not innovate in ideas nor in morality. Just like Shakespeare or like Racine.

Gil Vicente’s drama derives from an impulse for social criticism—which is the impulse at the root of all drama, especially the modern one—and from his religious fervour. Portugal in his time is the richest and most powerful country in Europe. The arrival of the ships loaded with spices and precious metals, the sailors with their fabulous stories of distant lands, the peasants who left the countryside to come to the capital, the feeling of political power, gave Lisbon the movement and pride of being the greatest capital of Europe and generated a most complex society, agitated by greed, thirst for pleasures, violence and ambition. This is the world of action that inspires Gil Vicente’s drama, from which he takes his characters and plots. Later, a similar movement of expansion and political power would make possible, in Spain, in England, in France, the rising of a powerful drama, expressing the social force, the violence of social conflicts and the variety of characters in an immense gamut of weaknesses and virtues.

In order to express this tumultuous and complex society, throbing between the greed for gold and the medieval terror of sin, Gil Vicente takes his characters from all social classes and all professions, uses all symbols and all theatrical processes. He introduces dance, and music—religious hymns, love songs, jeer songs. The attraction of music and dance and mime, writes Ronald Peacock, has “a more intense sensuousness, than words have, a more direct appeal to feeling, but at the same time touch deeper levels of life, stirring primeval fears and reverences, expressing more mysteriously the emotions of religion and a life that is unseen and unspoken.” Vicente knew well how the various arts can contribute
to the spectacle. Like Zeami, he wrote himself the music for his plays.

To-day, the ambition of all playwrights and theatre directors is to reach a form of theatre in which music, dance, mime, acting, are combined—the total theatre that Europe has lost at the end of the Middle Ages and which, in Noh and in Kabuki, Japan still enjoys, lively and florescent.

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