

Account of an Unknown Representation of the Spanish Revolution

John Robertson's *Riego*

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Abstract. In 1842, the Virginia congressman and lawyer John Robertson published his play *Riego, or the Spanish Martyr*, which appeared on *The Southern Literary Messenger*. Thirty years later, an abridged version of this drama would be also published. Beyond this second publication, the play has remained shadowed to the present day, even obviated by biographers and historians who have addressed Riego and the *Trienio Liberal*. Only small mentions in American literary histories have survived. As the title indicates, the play is about the Spanish military and political leader Rafael del Riego, head of the liberal outbreak of 1820. More specifically, it is about his last days in prison. Riego, and his revolution, with that aura of martyrdom, surely served as a model to Robertson, a liberal politician.

In consequence, the aim of this article is to rescue this drama from the oblivion in which it has been located during the last 180 years. Between 2020 and 2023, several Spanish universities were commemorating the bicentennial of Riego's revolution. Although these homages have been mainly promoted from the field of History, Literary and American Studies can also offer a testimony to one of the most relevant figures of the Spanish nineteenth century.

Keywords: Rafael del Riego, liberal revolution, tyranny, John Robertson, political drama.

As has been exposed in a recent publication (Correoso Rodenas 2020a), when dealing with the presence of literary representations of historical figures, we usually run the risk of falling under the scope of “myth-genesis,” especially if those figures have been hoisted for political or social reasons.¹ It is commonplace that we tend to idealize the past and some of the historical moments that took place there. That is what happens today with several episodes of the Spanish nineteenth century, seen as an ideal scenario in which the postulates of political Liberalism could be freely spread and applied. Of course, if the actual facts are examined, the exposed reality is far from that ‘Romantic’ conception. Repression, conservative and corrupt government, and unsuccessful and violent revolutions constitute the reverse of what the narration of episodes and figures has left to the present mainstream audience.

¹ This paper is part of the activities of the research project “ANDROMEDA” (PHS-2024/PH-HUM-76), the research group “Poetics and Emerging Textualities: 19th to 21st Centuries” (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain), the research group “Multidisciplinary Studies in Literature and Art –LyA–” (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain), the Complutense Institute for the Study of Religion and the Institute of Humanism and Classical Tradition (Universidad de León, Spain).

The Spanish *Trienio Liberal* (1820-1823) has traditionally attracted the attention of historians and writers since the advent of the liberal political system in Spain in 1833-1834. The short glimpse of constitutional liberty contributed to lighting the hopes of a generation of liberals who had fought against the French in order to obtain the restoration of Ferdinand VII on the throne, only to discover that his aims were those of going back to an Absolutist regime. Different uprisings had taken place between 1814 and 1820, but all of them remained unsuccessful, with their leaders usually exiled or executed. Everything changed on January 1, 1820, when a regiment of soldiers on their way to Cádiz (the American Vice-Royalties were fighting against the Spanish Crown and troops were needed) successfully uprose at Las Cabezas de San Juan and provoked a domino effect affecting most of the country. This regiment was led by Rafael del Riego (1784-1823). At this point, the Absolutist king was forced to pledge to the Constitution of 1812, which he apparently did, while his left hand was sending letters to the Holy Alliance seeking their support (Jarrett 2013). During the following three years, an experiment of a liberal state was attempted in Spain, with Riego as an ambivalent figure halfway between a Prime Minister and a military dictator.² The timid innovations that were introduced (due both to turmoil and lack of time) ended with the French military intervention led by Louis Antoine, Duke of Angoulême (1775-1844), commissioned by the Holy Alliance to restore Ferdinand VII's power.³ As it usually happens in the aftermath of a revolutionary moment, the repression was fierce, with hundreds of exiles and executions. Rafael del Riego, visible face of the past years of unrest, was the 'big prize' of the absolutists, for he was captured, trialed and hanged on November 7, 1823, at the age of 39,⁴ becoming a martyr of the liberal cause. Those last days are the object of the hagiography that is going to be explored in the following pages.

As mentioned, writers have started to pay attention to the Spanish revolutionary process since the immediate aftermath of its conclusion. In Spain, the most relevant nineteenth century approach to these historical events is arguably that of Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920), whose *Episodios Nacionales*' second series (1875-1879) covers Ferdinand VII's reign.⁵ Cañas de Pablos (2021) offers an accurate journey through some of the most outstanding European depictions of this crucial historical moment, seen as a model for liberal revolutions crossing Europe from France to Russia. To this list, we have to add

² Paradoxically enough, Riego spent almost the three years out of Madrid, for the liberal government successively sent him to different peripheral locations as military governor (i.e., Galicia or Catalonia).

³ For questions about the historical reality of Spain during the nineteenth century see, among others, Álvarez Junco ([2001] 2010).

⁴ In the following pages, multiple references to Rafael del Riego's life will be included. However, we advise the reader to approach any of the biographies that have been written about him. Probably, the most relevant one produced in the last few years is the doctoral dissertation authored by Víctor Sánchez Martín in 2016.

⁵ The *Trienio Liberal* is depicted in the novels *La segunda casaca* (1876), *El Grande Oriente* (1876), *7 de julio* (1876), *Los cien mil hijos de San Luis* (1877) and *El terror de 1824* (1877).

the Virginia congressman and lawyer John Robertson (1787-1873),⁶ who, in 1842, made a brief incursion into the field of literature with the serialized publication of his play *Riego, or the Spanish Martyr*, which appeared on the prestigious journal *The Southern Literary Messenger* during that year and the next one.⁷ In 1850, the first independent publication of the play would appear in Richmond (P. D. Barnard),⁸ receiving a multitude of reviews between 1851 and 1857. Finally, in 1872, a new version of this drama would be published in Richmond in the form of an independent leaflet. Although it was announced as an abridged version, Johnson (1909, 84) states that these two last versions are actually the complete editions of the play, for the serialized publication had omitted the fifth act, including a brief note explaining the outcome of the plot. However, the version published in 1872 omits some scenes that had appeared in the previous ones and includes other sections of dialogue (sometimes in substitution of the deleted scenes) that are completely new, as will be discussed below.

Beyond this, the play has remained shadowed to the present day, even obviated by biographers and historians who have addressed Riego and the *Trienio Liberal*. Only small mentions in American literary histories have survived (i.e., Adams's ([1901] 2020, 318) *A Dictionary of American Authors*). Just to outline a couple of examples, it is not included in Carmen de Burgos's biography *Gloriosa vida y desdichada muerte de Riego* (2013), although she does refer to a previous play based on his life: *Spanish Martyrs or Death of Riego* (1825), by the British playwright Henry M. Milner. He is probably mostly recognized as the author of a stage version of *Frankenstein* (1826). About Milner's play on Riego, Cañas de Pablos mentions: "En 1825 se estrenó en el Royal Coburg Theatre la obra *Spanish Martyrs or Death of Riego*, de Milner, quien, aunque con algunas inexactitudes históricas, narra la vida del general durante el Trienio" (2021, 162). Robertson's drama is not included in either of these accounts, not even in Sánchez Martín's (2016) doctoral dissertation, one of the best and most recent approaches to Rafael del Riego in Spain in recent years. In consequence, the aim of this article is to

⁶ He was an anti-Jacksonian politician who served as Attorney General of Virginia from 1819 to 1834 and as a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1834 to 1839. Little is known about his work as a writer. One of the few mentions that we have appeared in Oscar Fay Adams's *A Dictionary of American Authors* ([1901] 2020), in which the play *Riego* is mentioned along with a book of verse entitled *Opuscula* (Adams [1901] 2020, 318). *Opuscula* (1870) is an interesting publication in itself, for it presents a mixture of political reflections and gothic romance. Besides, it appeared anonymously, only with the signature "Our Farrago" on the cover, in a clear reference to Hugh Henry Brackenridge's (1748-1816), *Modern Chivalry's* (1792-1815) main character. Johnson (1909) also mentions a romance authored by Robertson, entitled *Virginia; or, The Fatal Patent* (1825). Even the allusions to Robertson as a politician are scarce. Probably the most reliable source is the entry about him posted in the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* (available at <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/R000323>).

⁷ This literary and miscellaneous journal was one of the main pulpits for the diffusion of information and pieces about Spain in antebellum America, as proved by Watts (1955), González-Gerth (1962), Minor (2007) or Correoso Rodenas (2019).

⁸ A more obscure edition today than those of 1842-1843 and 1872, only referenced in general accounts of American literature, such as Johnson's (1909, 75) *Southern Fiction Prior to 1860: An Attempt at a First-Hand Bibliography*.

rescue this drama from the oblivion in which it has been located during the last 180 years.

Commencing with the comment of the play itself, the present article will be focused on the two leaflet editions published in 1850 and 1872. Comparing these two versions, as mentioned, notable modifications can be easily appreciated, besides the inclusion of the actual development of the fifth act in 1872. For instance, as the 'biography' of the drama progresses, certain characters are substituted in specific scenes. This is especially relevant in the case of Francisco Espoz y Mina (1781-1836), who progressively replaces Francisco López Ballesteros (1771-1833). Moreover, part of the plot is expanded, with more dialogues in specific scenes; thus, as the decades go on, Robertson recreates his own composition, giving to press longer and longer versions of the original serialized play. On the contrary, the version published in 1850 includes a brief biographical note concerning each of the relevant characters included in the drama (Riego, his wife, Espoz y Mina, Ballesteros, Quiroga, Ferdinand VII...), something that was erased in the final version of 1872, substituted with the earlier *Dramatis personae*. One of the most visible modifications introduced by Robertson is that of the first scene of the play. In the version published in 1850, the first scene of the first act is located at Riego's house, with the liberal leader conversing/arguing with his wife and other prominent political figures. However, in the version published in 1872, the first scene has been moved to the Royal Palace, with King Ferdinand VII as the main figure, discussing with some loyal members of the aristocracy about how to suffocate the rebellion.

As John Robertson announces in the introduction of the drama (reproduced in both editions), the objective of the play is to narrate the last days of the Revolution of 1820-1823, focusing on "[...] the fate of its ill-starred champion, RIEGO" (Robertson 1842, n.p.). So, what is going to be depicted are the last moments of the *Trienio Liberal*, leading to Riego's execution and the exile of the other liberal leaders. Right after this, Robertson justifies his own actions, for he "[...] will not say he has followed history in every particular, with scrupulous exactness" (Robertson 1842, n.p.). His aim is clear: to offer an ideal picture of a liberal leader who was starting to be turned into a myth in opposition to tyranny and absolutism. The fate of Espoz y Mina also lies within the main differences with historical reality, for the last scene in both versions show Riego's burial, in which Espoz y Mina plays a crucial role as conductor of the procession. However, this is only explained in the version published in 1850, closing the version of 1872 with the open dialogue: "The Procession passes, MINA and Soldiers standing with arms revered; and the Curtain falls to Solemn music" (Robertson 1850, 104). Obviously, there is no evidence of the action depicted in this scene. Actually, what is historically known is that Espoz y Mina, after been defeated by the Duke of Angoulême, left the country for England, and then France, where he remained until Ferdinand VII's death.

The issue of John Robertson's intention is particularly interesting, especially if we consider the context in which the play was created. As mentioned, the drama was first serialized in 1842, during the American presidency of John Tyler (1841-1845). However, Robertson's political career had already had an extensive development during Andrew Jackson's time in office, a President that he fervently opposed. Those were years in which the shadow of the Mexican War, and even the

American Revolution, were already flying around the country. So, besides reclaiming a European hero who fought against tyranny, Robertson aimed to warn his fellow US citizens of the dangers of a progressively more conservative and aggressive political reality at a moment of American history in which political satire had acquired a special relevance. An outstanding example of this was the publication, in 1845 of Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1849) "Some Words with a Mummy."⁹ This context is contrasted with an idealized revolutionary past, set during the American Revolution. In consequence, George Washington (1732-1799) was assimilated to Riego in the version published in 1872 (an inexistent scene in the previous versions):¹⁰

Mina. Thou. Riego—
The man of Arcos¹¹ and Cabezas: raise
Once more the Charter of our rights, and give
To rescued Spain a name like Washington's
To bless and honor (Robertson 1872, 12).

This assimilation of Riego with the revolutionary leaders of America also contributes to enhancing the differences between the characters of the play. Riego and some of his companions have already been introduced, but there is a different set of characters representing the opposite side and accompanying King Ferdinand. Besides different noblemen, the depiction of the Nuncio,¹² the Papal diplomatic representative in Spain, is interesting, for he closed the alliance between the throne and the Church.¹³ The inclusion of this character also opens a debate that lies within the biggest weaknesses of the play: the representation of good and evil. Robertson is a political playwright, and so his drama is clearly taking sides with Riego and his followers, while King Ferdinand and his court are undoubtedly evil (the Cardinal Nuncio among them). So, while the King is depicted as clement with the rebels, the Cardinal guides him in the right direction:

K. Ferd. [...] What thinks your Eminence? Should rebels look
For pardon?
Nuncio. Here nor hereafter. By them
Hell first was peopled (Robertson 1872, 18).

As seen, Robertson is clearly defining the sides of the conflict that he is portraying. This is one of the most archaic characteristics of the play, for it clearly shows the

⁹ For further information see, for instance, Murison (2011).

¹⁰ An assimilation also put into practice by Benito Pérez Galdós in his novel *Los Ayacuchos* (Pérez Galdós [1900] 2020, 127), belonging to the *Episodios Nacionales*, in reference to Martín Zurbano (1788-1845).

¹¹ A lesser known episode of Riego where he was taking control of the troops intended to travel to America happened at Arcos de la Frontera. See Sánchez Martín (2016, 271-289).

¹² At that time, the office was held by Giacomo Giustiniani (1769-1843), although his name is never mentioned. His work in Spain has been studied by, among others, La Parra López and Casado (2013).

¹³ This resembles the Carlist motto "Dios, patria y rey." As known, the Carlists, led by Ferdinand VII's brother Carlos María Isidro de Borbón (1788-1855), the self-proclaimed Carlos V, tried to re-establish an Absolutist Monarchy after Ferdinand's death.

position that the author was defending. The literary conscriptions of the play are sacrificed in order to promote a political ideal.

This support to political liberalism is also depicted in the passages devoted to reflection, in which key characters (the King, Riego, etc.) meditate about the importance of their respective positions for the future of the Spanish nation.¹⁴ One of the key scenes presents Riego after being captured, in front of the Nuncio and several Loyalist officers. There, Robertson, by mouth of the liberal leader, offers interesting reflections about the concepts of tyranny and nation. The first of these terms is explored following the American tradition traced back to the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and remaining to the present day, as Alexandra LaRose argues:

Central to American political discourse is the concept of tyranny. From the Pilgrims' desire to escape religious persecution in England to President George W. Bush's use of tyranny to describe the attacks of 11 September 2001, tyranny continues to occupy a central place in America's political vocabulary (2013, 75).

Thus, Riego goes on questioning who the rightful bearer of the authority is, either the King or the nation, clearly taking sides for the second:

Riego. Who here may speak for Spain? Who rail
'Gainst tyranny, and yet so well enact
The tyrant's part? Their will sole arbiter
Of death or life? Who talk of justice; yet
Would in her sacred seat instate mad vengeance?
No! Spaniards! Tyrant, murderer, as he is,
Let us not stain our soul with crimes like his,
And turn to frowns the smiles of Heaven, now gilding
Our noble cause (Robertson 1872, 20;).

Then, the author of the drama turns to the consideration of a related concept which also had a great importance for the development of American liberalism: Quixotism, the vision of a rightful quest against a superior power, usually loaded with negative or tyrannical connotations, and with a strong reflection in literature (see, for instance, Davison 1986, 187-192, among others).¹⁵ In Robertson's drama, Quixotism is seen as negative, for it is seen as a characteristic of the liberals, who are leading a hopeless quest: "Verily, verily, thine is a land of Quixotes" (Robertson 1872, 20). Thus, Robertson is assimilating the ideals that had arisen in key moments of the history of North America (e.g., the Puritan pilgrimage, the

¹⁴ Regarding the historical construction of the national concept in Spain, see Pérez Garzón (1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d, 2000 and 2001).

¹⁵ The appreciation of Don Quixote (and other Spanish historical or mythical figures) as a symbol of resistance against tyranny has remained in American letters to the present time, permeating the production of authors such as Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816), Tabitha Gilman Tenney (1762-1837), William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), Mark Twain (1835-1910), John Dos Passos (1896-1970), William Faulkner (1897-1962), Thomas Pynchon (born in 1937) or Paul Auster (born in 1947), among many others. For further information about the climate of Quixotism in which John Robertson lived, see, Ginés (2000 and 2002), Hanlon (2014 and 2017), Ivana (2019) or Correoso Rodenas (2019 and 2020b), among others.

American Revolution, the Whiskey Rebellion, etc.¹⁶) to what happened in Spain in 1820-1823, when, according to the author, the Iberian country had had the opportunity to change its fate towards a democratic, liberal path.

One of the biggest and most important devices of early Spanish liberalism was the creation of a Parliamentary system regulated by the *Cortes* (the precedent of today's Congress and Senate). During the Spanish War of Independence (1808-1813), the first *Cortes* had started to work in Cádiz, with their climax in the proclamation of the Constitution of 1812 (i.e., the constitution that Riego wanted to recover).¹⁷ During the *Trienio Liberal*, the *Cortes* were briefly recovered, although their legislative power was certainly reduced to a minimum due to the social and political unrest.¹⁸ Due to the importance of this factor, the *Cortes* also appear in Robertson's drama. The version of 1850 presents the following scene in the third scene of the third act, while the definitive version of 1872 transfers the parliamentary debate to the first scene of the same act. What happens in both depictions is a continuation of the Manichean debate between the representatives of reason and of tyranny. However, Robertson opens both scenes with a description of the *Hall of the Cortes* (at that time meeting at the *Colegio de la Encarnación*):

The Hall of the Cortes. The Cortes in session. RIEGO, President near a table on which are books, papers, &c. On one side of him the Secretary; on the other SAN MIGUEL. – Behind is a throne, on which sits KING FERDINAND in the act of taking the oath, which RIEGO is tendering, to support the Constitution. Over the throne is inscribed FERNANDO VII, THE FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY. In front of the lower gallery, SOVREIGNTY [sic] RESIDES ESSENTIALLY IN THE NATION. On slabs in letters of gold the names of PORLIER, LACY, ALVAREZ, ALCEVEDO, &c, Separate Tribunes are occupied by the QUEEN, the INFANTS, Officers of Government, Ambassadors, Spectators, &c. (Robertson 1872, 23).

Here, we are witnessing one of the few literary representations of the *Trágala*, the moment in which the King is forced to swear the Constitution, one of the darkest moments in Spanish monarchic history, for Ferdinand VII treacherously pronounced the words “Let us march frankly, and I the first, by the constitutional path” prior to his call for European aid.

After Riego's defeat and imprisonment in the play, the reader/spectator has the opportunity to witness one of the biggest historical inaccuracies of Robertson, arguing that the liberal leader was incarcerated at the Inquisition's prison, something that Sánchez Martín (2016, 939-949) clearly negates in his recent biography. From the original publication of the play in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, we can deduce John Robertson's familiarity with Spain and Spanish

¹⁶ See Brackenridge ([1795] 1972), Brackenridge (1859), Baldwin (1939), Clouse (1994) or Hogeland (2006).

¹⁷ A fact that is also linked to the American political system that Robertson was defending, as proved by Gurpegui Palacios (2017, 2018a and 2018b).

Joaquim Oltra (Oltra 2003, 377) has also disserted about this topic, more specifically about the role played by Thomas Jefferson.

¹⁸ See Pérez Díaz (1996), Palma González (2001), Medina Plana (2002), Calles Hernández (2003), Maldonado Polo (2003), Gómez Rivero (2006), Broseta Perales (2007), Pérez Juan (2011) or Bustos (2017), among other historical approaches.

affairs, conveying a romanticized vision of the country and its history (more than an academic one, something also perceived in his linguistic mistakes when trying to reproduce Spanish expressions).¹⁹ The Spanish Inquisition, as one of the beacons of the black legend, populated those pages. This confusion is even greater if we consider that Riego had communication with his companion Georges Matthews,²⁰ as stated by Sánchez Martín: “Su fiel amigo inglés Matthews apenas pudo despedirse de él. Ambos se habían comunicado en las primeras etapas del cautiverio por medio de pequeñas notas escondidas en la comida que Riego remitía por medio de los carceleros al enfermo inglés” (2016, 951), and that this character has been totally erased in Robertson’s versions.

There are many other aspects that would deserve a closer attention. However, this article will finally focus on Riego’s execution. Even if this was an infamous, public spectacle, as narrated by Benito Pérez Galdós in *El terror de 1824*, and as reconstructed by Sánchez Martín (2016, 956-957), John Robertson decided to omit the most truculent passage in the hero’s life: its ending. On the contrary, an ellipsis moves the attention of the reader/spectator from the prison to the Royal Palace, where the King is informed of the execution. The last scene of the play shows Francisco Espoz y Mina solemnly reclaiming Riego’s body,²¹ in an interesting recreation of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea reclaiming Jesus Christ’s body after his death on the cross (Mt. 27, 57-60; Mk. 15, 42-46; Lk. 23, 50-53; Jn. 19, 38-42).

In conclusion, we are in front of an interesting historic exercise. On the one hand, John Robertson recovered a historical figure who had been sent into oblivion after his execution, even in liberal Spain; on the other hand, the author clearly manifests his support towards the liberal cause, proposing Spain as a paradigmatic example, but clearly addressing his fellow Americans at a moment when the debate about tyranny and the limits of power was in vogue in the United States. At the beginning of the present article, we mentioned that one of our main objectives was to recover this silenced play, which has remained unaccounted by historians, biographers, etc. for the last 180 years. Although it includes many contextual references, and its quality is not as high as other literary productions, *Riego* is still an interesting example to illustrate how the interest in Spain (Correoso Rodenas 2023) was shaped in antebellum America, a vision that included “heroic” figures as models of behaviour. We consider that that objective has been addressed, although many other aspects of this play have remained unmentioned and deserved a further, more extensive research (perhaps accompanying an edition of this second-rate play). In our time, recovering the ideal Robertson had in mind when writing *Riego* (even if far from historical reality) is always worth the effort.

¹⁹ In this regard, we need to mention Correoso Rodenas’s (2023) recent article on the image of Spain depicted in *The Southern Literary Messenger*.

²⁰ Author of *The Last Military Operations of General Riego* (ca. 1824).

²¹ Something that never happened, for he had already left the country, as seen above.

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