Gil Vicente (1465–1536) must be considered one of the founders of early Spanish drama along with Juan del Encina and Lucas Fernández. With his theatrical production he contributed to the creation of the unique cultural triangle formed among Lisbon, Salamanca, and Badajoz, in conjunction with other dramatists such as Diego Sánchez de Badajoz, Bartolomé Torres Naharro, Luis de Miranda, and Micael de Carvajal. Reflecting on the importance of Gil Vicente in Peninsular drama, Horace Parker has rightly affirmed that

it would be difficult, or impossible, to find a literary figure from the Iberian peninsula who would better represent Hispanic (Portuguese and Spanish) letters. . . . He has, in addition, I believe, the unique distinction of belonging almost equally to Spain, on the account of his place in the history of Spanish theater.1

Long before Parker, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo also maintained that Gil Vicente belongs to “la grande y universal literatura hispánica, dentro de la cual son meros accidentes las divisiones políticas y aun las diferencias dialectales,”2 reminding critics that “[n]o colocándose en este punto de vista, es imposible entender a autores como Gil Vicente, cuya obra protestará eternamente contra el separatismo de una crítica infecunda.”3 In the same vein, John Lihani has also explained that Gil Vicente’s early works, especially his Auto pastoril castellano, were clearly influenced by Lucas Fernández and Juan del Encina.4

For my part, I would add that Gil Vicente’s themes and motifs are closely related not only to the theater of Juan del Encina and Lucas Fernández, but also to the broader cultural, intellectual, and religious issues of

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15th- and 16th-century Spain. In a comparative study on Gil Vicente and Juan del Encina, I have argued that the Portuguese dramatist developed a philosophical and religious discourse that was diametrically opposed to the one adopted by the Salmantine author.⁵ As I intend to demonstrate in this essay, Gil Vicente’s religious works are imbued with a deep sense of transcendence, a transcendence that characterizes medieval and Renaissance Neoplatonic and Christian ideas on the Soul, the Good, and the One (= God). As Ernst Cassirer has stated, “The Neo-Platonic system is dominated by the Platonic idea of transcendence, i.e., by the absolute opposition between the intelligible and the sensible.”⁶

Among the numerous definitions given of transcendence by philosophers and theologians, I consider Lucas Siorvanes’s to be one of the most appropriate for the present study, because this definition can help us understand the cultural, moral, and religious environment of Gil Vicente’s age, as well as his works themselves. According to Siorvanes,

Neo-Platonic transcendence has at least two senses. To transcend meant to walk from one place to another (metabasis), or to rise above (hypairein). For Proclus (and Porphyry) our soul ascends through every level of being. The last step is ambiguous and poignant: the psyche wishing “to be attached to that which is ineffable and beyond all being” (synapteshai tōi arrētōi kai pantōn epekeina tōn ontōn) “terminates its ascent in the principle of beings” (aniousa teleutēsei tēn tōn ontōn archēn).⁷

I shall argue that this transcendence, much like that portrayd by Pedro Calderón de la Barca more than a century later in such philosophical plays as La vida es sueño, El mágico prodigioso, El príncipe constante, and Los dos amantes del cielo, is present in the theater of Gil Vicente. In the case of the Portuguese dramatist, a close reading of his religious works will demonstrate that many of his protagonists want “to be attached to that which is ineffable and beyond all being.” As I have already pointed out in the case of his Christmas plays, characters like Gil in the Auto pastoril castellano, as well as the Fraile and the Caballero in Auto de los Reyes Magos, actively

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