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Alexander A. Parker

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# Introduction

## Plays and playhouses

The Spanish Drama of the Golden Age (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) is one of the most important in world literature. In most respects it differs from other contemporary dramas, being most like the Elizabethan and most unlike the French. It grew out of the demand for popular entertainment in the streets and squares of the towns, and never became entertainment directed exclusively at an educated upper-class audience.

The plays are divided into three classes. The *auto sacramental* derived from the oldest tradition, representing the Liturgical, Miracle and Morality plays of the Middle Ages, a tradition which in Spain alone survived the classicising culture of the Renaissance and the religious turmoils of the Reformation. As in the rest of Europe these plays were open-air performances on the Feast of Corpus Christi. Around the middle of the sixteenth century they had become directly associated with the celebration of the Feast in the sense that they became connected with the theology of the Eucharist in the desire to bring the plays into direct relation to the purpose of the celebrations. Their connection with sacramental theology, which can be made in a variety of ways and through many different themes, made them 'Eucharistic Drama'. They were allegorical and symbolical plays performed on a fixed stage in a main square, round which were grouped carts on which were placed two-storey tower-like structures, containing painted scenery and symbolical figures. Each storey could open and close during performances, and the actors emerged from them and could re-enter them. This was a dramatic tradition and a religious festival that survived until 1765, when they were prohibited by government decree as being unsuitable in the Age of Enlightenment. This book will not deal with the *auto sacramental*, except in the last two chapters, when this tradition and the last stage of the Calderonian secular drama coincide in symbolical technique and a certain type of theme.<sup>1</sup>

There were two types of plays written for the public theatres: a three-

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act play, called *comedia*, and a one-act play, or interlude, called an *entremés*. The latter was a comedy or farce, written in prose and performed between the acts of *comedias*. In modern Spanish, the latter term means 'comedy', but in the Golden Age it meant any kind of stage-play more than one act in length. So characteristic is the structure and metrical form of Golden Age plays that *comedia* has become a technical term and is invariably used when referring to the drama of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was no special term for comedy as such; comedies were distinguished descriptively, as will be explained in chapter 11. In addition to *tragedias*, there were *tragicomedias*, the last-named plays being at first tragedies with more than the average amount of comic relief; later the term was used of tragedies that did not fulfil the conventional requirements, by having middle-class persons or even peasants as protagonists, in other words with a social milieu not limited to the 'heroic'.

When its form was once established from about 1580, the *comedia* retained its essential structure and conventions until the emergence of neo-classicism in the middle of the eighteenth century. The formal structure was established by Lope Félix de Vega Carpio (1562–1635), called Lope de Vega, or simply Lope for short. A phenomenally prolific dramatist, he had a flair for sensing what the still unformed public taste would want the stage to offer. He rejected the various attempts that had been made to approximate Spanish plays to the dramas of Greece and Rome and refused to follow the neo-Aristotelian Italian dramatic theorists. He deliberately set out not to follow alien traditions but to write plays that reflected the impulsive temperament of his countrymen and that would so engage their interest as to keep them rooted to their places for the two-and-a-half hours of a theatrical entertainment. The five classical acts were replaced by three, on the straightforward principle of a Beginning, Middle, and End. Thus the first act would, so to speak, place all the cards on the table by introducing the characters, with their aims and intentions, their sympathies and antipathies, indicating the potential clashes between them. Act II would develop the conflicts arising from the clash of temperaments and intentions. Act III would bring the conflict to a crisis and provide the solution (the Spanish word *desenlace* has the same literal meaning as *dénouement*, an 'untying').

A feature of the *comedia* was its polymetrical structure. Nearly every metre (and by this is meant not only scansion but also stanza forms with blank verse, rhyme or assonance) made its appearance in a *comedia* on the general principle that the metres should convey the particular tone required by the action and the dominant emotion of particular scenes. This polymetrical structure is unique to the Spanish *comedia*. Lope

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suggested the metres that would be most appropriate to particular scenes, but did not conform his practice to any consistent patterns. Variety and flexibility characterised his poetic diction as much as they did the structure of his plots. There was thus no fixed dramatic metre; all the verse forms of literary tradition could be utilised – epic, ballad and folk-song with their assonance, as well as the more ‘cultured’ verse-forms adopted from Italy at the Renaissance, with their sometimes complicated rhyme-schemes. Even the Petrarchan sonnet could be employed (regularly used as Lope recommended, for a soliloquy representing a break between scenes). In the Lope period plots tended to be crowded. There was no unity of plot; a sub-plot was frequent, sometimes even two. As the *comedia* developed to maturity, sub-plots became closely connected with the main plot in theme, this being particularly characteristic of Calderón, in whose plays unity of theme instead of plot is a universal feature. The unity of action was thus not observed; neither were the unities of time and place. In *Don Quixote*, Part I, chapter 48, Cervantes delivers an attack on Lope de Vega for failing to uphold the principles of literary art and pandering to uneducated taste, the non-observance of the unities being the main grounds for condemnation. Cervantes’ own plays, however, did not hold the stage, and before the end of his life he was breaking the unities himself, recognising that times had changed and that fashions had changed with them.

For plots, Lope turned to practically every form of prose literature, ancient or modern: histories, chronicles, pastoral romances, the Italian *novella*; and his fertile imagination could invent any number of plots that mirrored the preoccupations, the ideals and the problems of contemporary social life. One feature was universally followed: no matter what period of time or what country was being represented, the costumes and the customs were all made contemporary. This applied to Assyria, to Old Testament times etc.; ancient Romans fought duels, and ancient Greeks could fire pistols. The principle behind this was that no illiterate member of the audience should be alienated by an unfamiliar world, and that every dramatic conflict should be a human situation that could be as contemporary as it was ancient. By accepting these conventions and anachronisms and the reasons for them, the modern reader should have no difficulty in feeling at home in this dramatic world.

Plots were full of movement; the characters tended to be types rather than ‘rounded’, falling into groups that became conventional. The characters representing young men were called *galanes* (gallants), the young ladies were called *damas*, and older men were called *barbas* (beards). Every gallant has to have a servant (*criado*), and one of these

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servants generally provided the comic relief (and was then called the *gracioso*); similarly every lady had to have her servant (*criada*), and one of these *criadas* supplemented the comic relief of her male counterpart. The servants received the confidence of their masters and mistresses and thus fulfilled an essential dramatic function beyond their status. Women's parts were played by women. Plots in which young women, dressed as men, went in search of lovers who had betrayed them were very popular; this was probably because male attire showed off the shape of a leg and because the faces of the actresses were uncovered, which they otherwise never were in public in the streets.

This structure and these conventions endured in essentials until the eighteenth century. There are very great differences between the early plays of Lope and the late plays of Calderón, but they have the same recognisable framework. Much greater is the difference between Lope's plays and those of his immediate predecessors. Because of this difference, his type of drama was called *la comedia nueva*, 'the New Drama'.

The public theatres in which the *comedias* were performed grew out of the early practice of erecting fixed stages in suitable open spaces. The most convenient of these were courtyards between buildings. If a yard was specially suitable, it could be adapted into a permanent playhouse by alterations to the surrounding buildings or by new constructions. Such playhouses were called *corrales* ('yards') and had the general type of a large Spanish house with an internal patio. There were two entrances into the 'yard' or quadrangle from the street. At the far end was a fixed apron stage. The buildings at the back and on each side became part of the playhouse. The windows at the back and sides of the stage were used in performances as part of the stage for conversations between the inmates of a house and persons in the street. At the back of the stage, on an upper floor, there ran a gallery connected to the stage by stairs, and this gallery also formed part of the setting, not only to represent upper floors, but also, if the setting was in the country, the top of a hill or the slopes of a mountain. Calderón's play *La vida es sueño* (Life is a Dream) opens with the heroine supposedly riding on horseback dressed as a man through rugged mountainous country. She is presumed to be thrown by her horse, which plunges to its death, leaving her to tumble down the mountainside. This would have been represented by her stumbling onto the gallery, and then down the stairs. There were two doors at the back of the stage, leading into the building, which provided exit and entrance for the actors. They could also be used to indicate change of place. Thus in Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* (The Libertine of Seville), the first version of the Don Juan theme, a stage direction reads 'they leave by one door and enter by the other'. In between these two doors there was a

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covered area that was curtained off. The drawing of the curtains provided the space for what were called 'discoveries'. For instance, in Calderón's *El médico de su honra* (The Surgeon of his Honour) a servant has rushed to tell the king that his mistress has been bled at the order of her husband, who is allowing her to bleed to death, and that there may still be time to save her. They rush into the house, the curtain is drawn, and Doña Mencía is 'discovered' lying dead on her bed, with the bandage loosened from her arm.

The stage area was covered, but the *corral* floor itself was not. The parts of it adjacent to the stage could be brought in to supplement the stage space, steps or ramps being used to join the two levels. The open quadrangle provided space for the audience. Men were separated from women, and the upper classes from the lower (the effective division resulting, of course, from the price of the tickets). The floor of the quadrangle was the cheapest area for men, who stood throughout the performance, there being no seats. At the front of the quadrangle, above the entrances, was the gallery reserved for women; along each side were benches arranged in tiers. The windows in the buildings at each side of the quadrangle had chairs for the well-to-do auditors, and here men and women could mix. These seats were the equivalent of our 'boxes'. The 'boxes' on the upper floor at each side were reserved for the clergy. As regards the public theatres 'cultural' distinctions thus occurred in the distribution of the auditors and not in the type of play. It is a striking feature of the sociological history of Spain that throughout the long life of the *comedia* this form of entertainment had a vast popularity embracing all social classes, with the exception of king and courtiers, who came to have their own theatres. Madrid had two public theatres, and each city had its own.

A special room was reconstructed in the Madrid Alcázar for the performances of plays. This was in use before 1623. Later the Palacio del Retiro was constructed for Philip IV just outside Madrid, in what is now the Park of that name. This was opened in 1634. The Palace complex contained a special building for a theatre, known as the Coliseo, which was inaugurated in 1640. This was a theatre of our modern type, with a proscenium arch separating the stage from the auditorium. At first, there was no differentiation between plays for the people and plays for the court, those written for the *corrales* were repeated in the Alcázar; but with the opening of the Coliseo, there arose distinctive palace plays, requiring sumptuous productions such as the public theatres could never provide. But nonetheless the distinctive feature of the Spanish drama as a form of entertainment uniting the whole population of Madrid from the king downwards survived because after the first

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performances of a palace play to the court and state officials, the general public was admitted to the Coliseo for later performances. These distinctive court plays are the *comedias palaciegas*, which constitute another species within the genus of *comedia*. They led to the development of opera in Spain.

The separation of the *comedia* from the *auto sacramental* did not mean that religious themes were excluded from the former. They were distinguished by different staging requiring a different dramatic technique that came to make the themes of the *autos* more abstractly theological. Representational religious subjects, however, such as themes from the Old Testament and episodes from the lives of saints formed part of the *comedia*; hagiography provided plays known as *comedias de santos*.

Performances were of course by daylight. The programme consisted of a short *Loa* or Prologue; Act I; an *entremés*; Act II; dancing, clowning or singing in the second interval; then Act III, followed by more dancing or singing. The whole performance would last about three hours, and was continuous, the auditors being allowed no time to get bored. The theatrical season lasted from Easter to the beginning of Lent, and was broken only by periods of national mourning. Although stern clerics would inveigh against the 'immorality' of plays and against the allegedly scandalous lives of actors and actresses, they never managed to have the *corrales* permanently closed. This was because the *corrales* were hired by the municipality to professional actors' companies, and the money thus obtained was used for the support of hospitals and other charitable institutions.

The enormous popularity of the stage meant that a constant supply of plays was needed, especially since the most successful play lasted barely a week, the average play lasting perhaps three performances. The fact that necessity was the mother of invention explains the extraordinary productivity of the dramatists. Lope de Vega claimed to have written over 1,000 plays, but 800 would be nearer the mark. Tirso de Molina (alias Fray Gabriel Téllez) (1580?–1648) said that he had written between 300 and 400, Calderón wrote just over 100 *comedias* and about 80 *autos*. Exact figures are difficult to determine because many plays did not survive and those printed were not always attributed to their rightful authors. Also, dramatists could collaborate by each writing one act of a play. As the seventeenth century advanced, the inventiveness of dramatists flagged. Old plays that few might perhaps remember were reworked (*refundiciones*) in the newer, more regular and tighter structures, and thereby improved. Agustín Moreto (1618–69) was a dramatist of considerable distinction whose output consisted almost exclusively of

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*refundiciones* of old plays. Generally the titles were altered, but this was not always the case; two of Calderón's most famous plays, *El alcalde de Zalamea* (The Mayor of Zalamea) and *El médico de su honra* were *refundiciones* of plays attributed to Lope de Vega.

### Biographical outline

Calderón has struck most of his readers as a quite impersonal dramatic poet. Not only do his plays seem remote from real life, but they do not seem to disclose their author's character, experience and feelings. His work appears abstract, or at least too intellectual. This book will suggest that such a reaction, while valid in part, is far from being a true judgement of the man and his works. The support for this statement will be found in different sections of this book, but the main outline of his life may serve as a preliminary introduction.

Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca was the leading dramatist in the second period of the Golden Age drama. He was born in 1600, when Lope de Vega, the 'founder' of this drama, had begun his phenomenal success in the Madrid theatres. The two periods have sometimes been called 'the school of Lope de Vega' and 'the school of Calderón'. The term 'school' can be applied to Lope more properly than to Calderón, for Lope was an innovator who carried all before him; and his immediate success as a playwright made it inevitable that other would-be dramatists followed in his footsteps immediately or adapted themselves quickly to the new theatrical style. Calderón began to write plays around 1623 and inevitably followed the patterns and conventions of Lope's *comedia nueva*. In the ten years or so that passed between Calderón's first compositions and the death of Lope in 1635, Calderón had already written or was engaged in writing some of his most famous plays, such as *El príncipe constante* (The Steadfast Prince), *La vida es sueño*, and *El médico de su honra*. In these he had developed a style and a technique distinctively his own, and such plays cannot be confused with the productions of other dramatists. The technical framework of these plays, however, is that of the theatre of Lope. From then onwards his distinctive style developed into a distinctive structure and form that, while preserving conventions established by Lope, moves away from the Lope drama into a more disciplined, tightly knit and mannered art. The characteristics of this dramatic art are further developed until his death in 1681. In fact, with the court plays of the 1650s onwards, Calderón merges his art into what is essentially a new type of play. Though he tends in the last period of his life to repeat details of plots, stage devices, imagery, and even copy long passages of verse from an earlier play, he never really ceases to develop.

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The changes he effects in the structure of Lope's *comedia nueva* are naturally determined by his social position and his education, which were very different from those of his famous predecessor. Lope came from the lower middle class, a man of the people who never reached the University. He acquired a wide education in his reading, but without an academic training. As the title 'Don' indicates, Calderón was an *hidalgo* or nobleman, although of low rank. His father, Don Diego, had an important position as an official (or civil servant) in a government office. Pedro's secondary schooling was the highest that Spain could offer, the Colegio Imperial, or Jesuit College, in Madrid. The Jesuit scholastic training left a profound mark in his disciplined manner of thinking and writing. He was destined for the Church, in order to qualify for a living in the gift of a grandmother. To prepare for this, he underwent academic training in a two-year Arts course at the University of Alcalá, followed by four years of Logic, Philosophy and Theology at Salamanca, which formed his mind in the scholastic mould, probing definitions and making distinctions. In short he had an intellectual formation, of which his own personal gifts were able to make full use. When he finally abandoned an ecclesiastical career, he had to seek, like all the younger sons of *hidalgos*, the support of a noble of higher position. He entered the service of the Constable of Castile, one of the great offices of State. But his heart was in poetry and the stage.

As a later chapter will describe, his boyhood witnessed domestic scenes of stress, strain, and even violence, which had moulded his temperament away from academic intellectualism into the emotions and passions of drama. There is evidence that he mixed in the rowdy life of actors, that he was involved in a duel, and on one occasion he allegedly profaned the sanctuary of a convent in which an actor who had stabbed one of his brothers had taken refuge. The whole affair created a scandal and was denounced from the pulpit by the famous court preacher, Fray Hortensio Paravicino. The young Calderón retorted by making a satirical reference to the preacher in *El príncipe constante*. The outraged preacher accused Calderón of blasphemy and *lèse-majesté*, and it needed the tact of the President of the Council of Castile to restore peace. The offending passage in the play was removed and Calderón and his brother escaped severe punishment. There were two sides, then, to Calderón's character; the intellectual, philosophical and religious, and the passionate and potentially violent. Together these qualities, at times separated, at times juxtaposed, gave him his distinctive mark as a dramatist.

One last difference from Lope was the fact that Calderón's standing as a young *hidalgo* and his connection with the Constable of Castile gave



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him an entry into the Court. Philip IV, who came to the throne in 1621, was an ardent devotee of the theatre. The king attracted young dramatists to his palace theatre, and of these Calderón soon became the leader. He never lost his position as court dramatist, and this became, in the last fifty years of his life, the major element in the development of his art. Lope de Vega had always wanted to be accepted as a court poet but never achieved this position.

Calderón's connection with palace performances made him the principal writer of *libretti* for music dramas, a new fashion imported from Italy. Calderón's first production of this kind was in 1648 or 1649; a two-act opera entitled *El jardín de Falerina* (The Garden of Falerina) with music possibly composed by the court composer, Juan Hidalgo. In 1660 he wrote the text for *La púrpura de la rosa* (The Crimson of the Rose), a music drama in which the two acts were reduced to one. At the end of the same year there was performed the first full-length opera in three acts, with words by Calderón. *Celos aun del aire matan* (Jealousy, even of the Wind, can Kill) was the title, and it was in fact a normal *comedia* with sung parts. This was later thought too long, and one-act operas became the norm. Calderón's association with music dramas gives an added stylisation to his court plays from this year onwards. In these three-act plays only certain choruses are sung, with some main speeches in recitative. This makes Calderón develop balanced metrical schemes with the numbers of the stanzas balanced from chorus to chorus or from speaker to speaker.

Two other events in Calderón's life after the death of Lope de Vega are important. After the opening of the Palacio del Retiro and a spectacular performance out of doors and on a lake in the park of *El mayor encanto, Amor* (Love, the Greatest Enchantment) in 1635, followed the next year by a performance of *Los tres mayores prodigios* (The Three Greatest Marvels), the king decorated Calderón in 1636 with the Commandership of the Military Order of Santiago. As a member of this Order Calderón was required to fight in any war. The occasion came with the Revolt of Catalonia in 1640 and its attempt to break away from the Union with Castile. Calderón fought in part of this campaign until illness caused him to be invalided out of service. The second incident was a liaison he contracted with a lady whose name he never disclosed, and who bore him a son. This was no ordinary love-affair but obviously a *matrimonio clandestino*, or 'secret marriage', to which custom attached no moral stigma, despite its illegality in the eyes of the State, and its invalidity in the eyes of the Church. This lady died and Calderón publicly recognised the boy as his son, thus removing his illegitimacy. Shortly afterwards he announced his intention of taking orders, thus belatedly fulfilling his

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father's wishes and making provision for the care of his son. He was ordained in 1651; the boy died shortly afterwards, aged about twelve.

'Secret marriages' will be described below (chapter 14). The reasons for the secrecy in this particular case are not known. Calderón was careful not to reveal the identity of the lady, and only referred to her when legitimising his son. His treatment of love, marriage and women in his plays is based on experience. It has been assumed, and there is no reason to doubt this, that the lady's death was the reason for his decision to take orders. The genuineness of his religious faith cannot be doubted in any period of his life. The concept of *desengaño* or 'disillusionment', which is so important in the moral philosophy reflected in his plays, is intimately bound up with his religious feeling. This is almost certainly a real experience and not just an abstract doctrine. It denotes that when faced with the loss through death of what one holds most dear there must come the realisation that enduring happiness cannot be found in this life.

After his ordination he announced his intention of writing no more for the theatre, but was prevailed upon by royal command to continue to write plays for the palace. The period of his ascendancy as a writer of *autos sacramentales* had now begun. Earlier, when presenting *autos* for the competition to select the plays for Madrid, he had had to compete with dramatists of established reputation, some of whom were clerics, but now he was commanded to write the two *autos* for Madrid each year, and did so until his death. The feast of Corpus Christi and the *fiestas palaciegas* thus directed his dramatic activity during the last thirty years of his life. After his ordination he was given a benefice in the Cathedral of Toledo, but later at his own request he transferred his residence to Madrid, where he lived until his death, enjoying universal respect. He died on 25 May 1681. In his will, drawn up five days previously, he stipulated that in the funeral procession to the church he should be carried with his face uncovered, 'in case it be possible to atone in part for the public vanities of my misspent life with the public disillusionment of my death'.

It can be said that from the first duels and scandals to the final clerical seclusion Calderón's life presented every aspect of the society of his age, including ones that are not normally to be found in the life of a popular dramatist: the religious, ecclesiastical aspect and the intellectual, almost academic aspect, not to speak of the sophisticated minority entertainment of opera.