

Introduction

For much of the period covered by this book, Spain – originally a collection of kingdoms and still a country of entrenched regionalism – enjoyed a pre-eminent position in Europe and indeed the world. In the second half of the fifteenth century the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella (1474–1516), had united the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (including Catalonia and Aragon’s possessions in Italy), and later annexed Navarre. They brought internal stability to Castile, and centralized political and administrative power in the Crown. The country assumed its full role in the arena of European politics and diplomacy and Isabella’s enthusiasm for the new learning of the Renaissance infused the country with renewed cultural activity. Religious uniformity and orthodoxy were imposed by the establishment of a Spanish Inquisition in 1478 to stamp out heresy, and then, in 1492, by the conquest of Granada, the last vestige of Islamic Spain, and by the expulsion of those Jews unwilling to accept conversion. In that same momentous year, Columbus discovered a New World and placed it at the feet of his sponsor, Spain.

In 1516 Ferdinand and Isabella’s young Flemish grandson inherited Spain. Three years later he succeeded his other grandfather, Maximilian I, as Holy Roman Emperor as well and became head of an empire that included Spain, the Indies, the Franche-Comté, Roussillon, the Low Countries, Germany and half of Italy – the greatest empire since Rome. The accession of Charles V (1516–56) initiated the period of Spanish history and culture known as the Golden Age. And indeed in literature and the arts Spain during this time produced a glittering constellation of figures of world stature: the painters Velázquez, El Greco and Murillo; the sculptor Berruguete; the poets and writers Garcilaso de la Vega, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Ávila, Cervantes, Góngora, Quevedo; and the dramatists Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina and Calderón de la Barca, to name only the most famous. Charles’s huge and varied legacies, however,

brought with them severe burdens. The extent of Spain's possessions excited the envy and animosity of the two other major European powers, England and France, and involved Spain for two centuries in a series of wars that drained her of resources, human and financial. The colonization of the New World attracted away from Spain manpower it could ill spare, and the influx of American bullion created an inflationary spiral with which Spain's unstable economy was quite unable to cope. Most burdensome of all in an age of religious upheaval was Spain's inherited, self-appointed role as defender of the faith. The ecclesiastical reforms undertaken by Cardinal Cisneros for Isabella had anticipated the attacks on the Church by sixteenth-century reformers and in some measure insulated Spain against them. For a time Erasmus was even the main influence behind Charles V's religious policy. However, in the early 1530s identification with the views of Luther made Erasmus suspect in Spain; persecution of Spanish Protestant groups was systematically undertaken and Spain's liberal intellectuals were forced to choose exile or repression. The existence of a machinery of repression – the Inquisition – meant that at home orthodoxy was fairly swiftly achieved. The violent burgeoning of the Protestant Reformation, however, brought Spain right into the heart of the struggle in Europe. Charles ruled Germany and the Netherlands, the very countries where local princes seized the opportunity of the religious schism to make a bid for independence, and Spain soon found itself in charge of the Catholic conscience of Europe. It became the spokesman for Catholicism at the Council of Trent and the spearhead of the Counter-Reformation. Meanwhile, as political ambition and religious dissent tore Europe apart, Christianity itself was under threat from the Ottoman Turks. In spite of two and a half decades of war with a France frustrated in its own imperial ambitions in Italy and on the Spanish border, and wary of encirclement by Spain, Spain took charge of the offensive against Islam as well.

The defeat of Charles's Spanish and Flemish troops by the German princes and the Council of Trent's failure to produce a solution to the schism drove him in 1556 to abdicate the thrones of Spain, Italy and the Netherlands in favour of his son, Philip II: the German empire he passed to his brother Ferdinand. In the event, losing the Holy Roman Empire added to the strains on the Spanish Crown rather than diminishing them. With Germany gone, the Netherlands, where the battle with Protestantism would be fought, could only be defended from the sea, an uneasy situation that depended on the co-operation or subjugation of France and England. Spanish power in Italy ensured the continuing hostility of France, while as far as England was concerned Philip's reign (1556–98) was the period in

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which Spain and England danced their elaborate galliard of flirtation and deadly rivalry. Philip's ambition was always to win England for Catholicism and Spain, and to this end he married Mary Tudor, wooed Elizabeth I, and finally planned to invade England. From there he intended to subdue the Netherlands, where revolt after revolt had been put down by Philip's troops in a series of campaigns noted for their brutality. In 1588, however, these dreams came to a disastrous end with the defeat by the English, with the help of the weather, of the so-called Invincible Armada. It was the first really crushing blow dealt Spain since the first flowering of her imperial ambitions.

At home, too, Philip's sense of religious mission dictated his policies. Determined to avoid contagion with a Europe riddled with heterodoxy, Spain turned in on itself and closed its doors on the outside world. The publication and import of books were rigidly controlled and Spaniards were prohibited from studying in foreign universities other than Bologna. New developments in learning and the empirical sciences were denied Spain. Secular and religious life, the interests of State and Church, became virtually inseparable, and the Inquisition imposed a religious orthodoxy seen as essential to the well-being of the nation. Spaniards themselves, it must be emphasized, shared their monarch's sense of religious and imperial destiny; the Inquisition was not a tyranny forced upon a terrorized people against their will but an instrument of government which reflected their convictions and prejudices and operated with their implicit consent.

Spain's withdrawal into itself after the accession of Philip II was reflected in the behaviour of the monarch himself. Unlike Charles, who had spent many years away from Spain fighting his wars, Philip, after a few early excursions, never set foot outside Spain again. He made Madrid his capital in 1561, and from there and from his palace-monastery, the Escorial, Europe's first bureaucratic king manipulated the reigns of his unwieldy, far-flung empire. His reign had its moments of euphoria – the spectacular sea victory over the Turks at Lepanto in 1571 and the annexation of Portugal in 1580 amongst them – but the defeat of the Armada and the growing economic problems created by Spain's inability to adapt itself to the emerging capitalist world sowed the seeds of a pessimism that fostered in Spanish intellectuals a psychology of decline which anticipated by half a century any real, irreversible decline in political and military terms. To make matters worse, when Philip died in 1598 he bequeathed to Spain not only an empty treasury but a weak and inexperienced son.

The century that began with the accession of Philip III was a century of poignant contrasts. For this period of unsurpassed literary brilliance and

splendour at court was also the age when the cancer of Spain's growing ills rose to the surface and proceeded to devour the visible as well as the hidden body of Spain. The deterioration was symbolized in the persons of the monarchs themselves. Philip III (1598-1621) and his son Philip IV (1621-65) were but shadows of their predecessors and recognized the fact by handing over the reins of government to their favourites, the Duke of Lerma and the Count-Duke of Olivares respectively. At court the mood of gravity and austerity imposed by Philip II yielded to one of frivolity and extravagance that percolated down to other levels of society, particularly in the capital. In the reign of Philip IV, the morals of the capital and the court, which was the most lavish and ceremonious in Europe, never failed to elicit the disapproval of shocked foreigners. The decline in standards was both a reflection of and a reaction to a grave national malaise. The delegation of government to two *grandees* marked the political supremacy of the landed aristocracy and under Lerma administrative and bureaucratic corruption reached heights unknown since Isabella initiated her policy of appointment by merit. The ravages of war, famine, pestilence and poverty emptied towns and countryside, agriculture foundered and looms fell silent. At the beginning of the century the currency was devalued and thereafter financial crisis followed financial crisis. Peace had been concluded with France, the Netherlands and England in the early years of the century, but war broke out again in Italy in 1615 and when hostilities subsequently erupted between Protestants and Catholics in Germany, Spain was dragged into the Thirty Years War. At home, Catalonia, driven to desperate measures by Madrid's unconstitutional centralizing policies, rose in armed revolt, in 1640 even Aragon tried to secede from the Crown, while in 1658 Portugal regained her independence. Meanwhile, upon the battlefield of Europe the formerly glorious Spanish infantry left their flags and their reputation in tatters – at the battles of Rocroi (1643), Lens (1648) and the Dunes (1658). The Spanish people, for their part, from the late sixteenth century on combated their growing sense of insecurity by despising the material world that was increasingly denied them and embracing vaguer but less painful prizes – religion, honour, purity of blood and nobility. The society of seventeenth-century Spain was a society obsessed with appearances and display, with reputation, self-image and rank.

The reign of the last Spanish Hapsburg, Charles II (1665-1700), in spite of a certain degree of economic recovery, was a sad, confused one. Physically malformed and mentally subnormal, Charles survived for thirty-five years as nominal head of an Empire that was ruled by scheming regents and their favourites. Throughout his reign an enfeebled Spain

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fought to defend her possessions in the Netherlands, Sicily and Catalonia against France, but in spite of help from other countries – England, Sweden, the Austrian Empire, Holland – the Franche-Comté and the great frontier towns of Flanders were lost. After thirty years of war, peace came at last in 1697, but even then not for long. As Charles's pathetic body and mind weakened, France and the Austrian Empire intrigued in favour of their claims to the Spanish throne. Before dying, Charles decided in favour of Philip of Anjou, who succeeded to the throne in 1700 as Philip V, first of the Spanish Bourbons. Austria, however, refused to accept the decision and almost before the new king had replaced the old, the War of the Spanish Succession had erupted. Spain, the first nation to have an empire on which the sun literally never set, for the first time, but not the last, had become Europe's pawn.

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The birth of the drama

The beginnings

In Spain, as in the rest of Europe, it was the sixteenth century that saw the emergence of the theatre as we would still recognize it today – the theatre understood as performances by professional players before a public audience in a secular setting. In spite of their distinctive characteristics these national theatres, which sprang up in response to complex social and cultural circumstances, shared for the most part a common heritage and common origins. The sung tropes (interpolated phrases) which from the ninth century on formed part of church worship evolved into dramatic enactments performed in church – at first in Latin, later on often in the vernacular – as part of the celebration of Christmas and Easter. Naturally the medieval churches were not the only places where performances containing the seeds of theatre occurred. Troubadours and jongleurs entertained palaces and public squares with songs and tales with great potential for dramaticized delivery; mummers still carried on the long tradition of the Roman mime; and in the later Middle Ages, with the growth of the guilds, the processions and pageants which marked the great feast days of the Church calendar became elaborate and colourful spectacles, with floats, scenery, painted figures and, eventually, *tableaux vivants*. Elements of these found their way into the theatre of the sixteenth century and, with the Renaissance, classical influences also came into play, affecting the development of the drama to different degrees and in various ways in different countries. But for all the gaps in our understanding of the way in which the liturgical drama in Europe evolved, the mystery and morality plays represent the single most important influence on the early development of drama as a genre. The public theatre grew out of the ritual of religious worship as this ritual gradually overflowed the confines of churches and cathedrals into the streets and market places.¹

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The problem where Spain is concerned is that it does not quite fit into this scheme of things as historians of the early European drama now see it. It is known that the liturgical drama in Latin was as strong in Catalonia as anywhere else in Europe and probably dates back as far.² Reconquered by Charlemagne from the Moslems within a hundred years of the invasion of the Peninsula in 711, Catalonia was incorporated into the Carolingian Empire as the Spanish March and the flavour of life there remained essentially French rather than Iberian until the twelfth century. The Catalan monastery of Ripoll was in close contact with the French monasteries associated with the birth of the liturgical drama and in all probability played a part in its development. In the centre of the Peninsula, however, there is no real evidence of the existence of any native medieval liturgical drama.

The traditional view of scholars in the face of this inconvenient lacuna was that if the church drama had flourished so long and so vigorously in the eastern Peninsula under the influence of the Catalan monasteries, it was inconceivable that it had not also flourished in Castile: the evidence, like so much other medieval material in Spain, had simply been a casualty of Castile's long and turbulent history of warfare with the infidel. However, in the early 1950s the peg on which the critics traditionally hung their conviction that medieval Castile must have had a religious drama of some sort – the twelfth-century fragment of the *Auto de los reyes magos* (*The Magi*), found in Toledo – was revealed to be probably the work of a Gascon.³ Then in 1958 R. B. Donovan faced the facts more squarely and came to the conclusion that if there is no evidence of liturgical plays in Latin in Castile, in all probability there had not been any.⁴ He did envisage the likelihood of a later flowering, under French influence, of religious plays in the vernacular in Castile which, being informal, even oral, and impromptu compositions, would almost certainly have been lost. H. López Morales subsequently rejected even this crumb of comfort, asserting that the Peninsula's historical past had militated for too long against the emergence of an indigenous religious drama and that in Castile the drama's only early precedents were effectively the mummers, jugglers and performing poets.⁵ Even so, belief in the existence of a religious drama, albeit in the vernacular and albeit primitive, dies hard.⁶ Alfonso X does make a reference, however vague, in his thirteenth-century legal treatise, the *Siete Partidas*, to Christmas and Easter performances and other 'unseemly' religious plays⁷ and for many it makes no sense to believe that on religious occasions of great popular appeal such as Christmas, Epiphany and Easter, celebratory enactments in some way akin to the often elaborate perform-

ances put on in eastern Spain and the rest of Europe just did not form any part of the festivities in Castile before the late fifteenth century – by which time Christmas and Easter plays were, we know, being performed in churches and private halls and chapels.

Recently, work done in the mid-1970s by two archivists on the accounts books of the chapter of Toledo cathedral has turned up new information.⁸ Carmen Torroja Menéndez and María Rivas Palá discovered that elaborate processions were taking place in Toledo not only at Christmas and in Holy Week but at Corpus Christi as well, as early as 1418. Hitherto the earliest known Corpus procession outside Aragon was that of 1454 in Seville. Throughout the first half of the century there are references in the Toledo accounts to processions with *tableaux vivants* and then, in 1445, there crop up for the first time references to ‘juegos’ (games, entertainments or plays) which included shepherd-characters who were paid for their services. In the years that follow references to ‘juegos’ become a constant. From the mid-1450s, the person in charge of the Toledo celebrations for seven or so years was Alfonso Martínez, Archpriest of Talavera and prebendary of the cathedral, who was not only a man of letters with a marked interest in dialogue and popular speech,⁹ but had lived for ten years in Valencia and for a time in Barcelona. The possibility that the ‘juegos’ at this point became more sophisticated and more literary in character is therefore clearly fairly strong. From this time on they certainly became more elaborate, acquired more characters and took up a larger part of the budget allocated to the festivities for Corpus Christi, which themselves began to dominate the celebrations in the Church calendar. In the records for 1476 and 1481 it becomes clear that the plays concerned formed part of the processions themselves and in the 1490s wheeled *carros* (carts) were being used for the performances, sometimes more than one per play, for different scenes. These carts were hitherto thought not to have appeared until the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Between 1493 and 1510 an average of seven *autos* (one-act plays on religious and moral themes) a year were performed in Toledo for Corpus Christi, involving thirty-three different *autos*. Up to 1500 the organization of the festivities was the responsibility of a cathedral officer, who engaged actors (mainly ecclesiastics), bought props and provided texts by writing them himself, commissioning them or adapting existing material. In 1500 charge of the celebrations was handed over to laymen, sometimes to groups such as guilds who provided their own actors and scenery, sometimes to individuals from elsewhere.

As a result of these discoveries the medieval drama debate has taken on new life and the dates of the birth of Castile’s Corpus Christi festivities, to

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become so important in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have been pushed back almost half a century. But we must still be cautious in claiming too much for them. We still do not know when dialogue first transformed the *tableaux vivants* into plays and whether there was an intermediate mime stage. The 674-line *Auto de la Pasión* which Torroja Menéndez discovered written in a discarded accounts book is late, probably 1486–97, and its text in any case consists of a series of stilted, declamatory addresses rather than dialogue proper. There is no evidence that the pieces performed were not still fairly rudimentary in literary terms, and in terms of production, certainly, they were a mixture of the relatively sophisticated and the downright amateur: in 1500 *La Ascensión* used machinery of some sort for the play's dramatic climax but the mountain was a table covered in a green cloth. There was an element of satire in some plays from 1501 on but as yet no sign of the comic rustic or the symbolic figures of later years – scenes, stories and characters are all biblical. So when Torroja Menéndez and Rivas Palá take their discoveries as firm evidence of a rich, flourishing, fifteenth-century religious drama which was the fruit of a long, well-established tradition of such drama in Castile, they overstate their case. The detailed accounts they give if anything argue the reverse. For while these certainly suggest a tradition of public religious celebration going back beyond the fifteenth century even for Corpus Christi, they seem at the same time to show that a real dramatic element only entered these celebrations when the fifteenth century was already well underway and that this dramatic element remained fairly elementary until the century's second half. They do not, of course, provide any evidence for a liturgical drama as such. The use of duplicate, even multiple characters as well as carts – in 1505 there were three Saint Johns for the same *auto* – must have made for stiff, largely static performances – a sort of *tableau vivant* with words added – that was still some distance away from either real dialogue or real action. It is unlikely, furthermore, that things were much more highly developed elsewhere in Castile. What scraps of evidence of dramatic activity there are have always been associated with Toledo and the fact that in 1500 Antonio de Sernisal from Guadalajara produced the Corpus plays there cannot be taken as evidence of a flourishing dramatic tradition in other cities as well: he might well have acquired his dramatic experience in the east of Spain. Torroja Menéndez and Rivas Palá themselves concede that the fact that the *Auto de la Pasión* draws heavily on a contemporary *poem* indicates, perhaps, the lack of suitable dramatic models.¹⁰ Their important discoveries are likely to be far more significant for the study of the development of Corpus festivities in Castile and hence for the history of the *auto sacramental* (the

one-act play about the Holy Sacrament performed on Corpus Christi Day) than they are for our understanding of the birth of the theatre. They do not alter the fact that at the start of the 1490s any tradition of drama in Castile was still rudimentary and quite unlike the rich cycles of morality and mystery plays of the rest of Europe.

So effectively the history of the Spanish theatre begins at the close of the medieval period. There had been a flourishing dialogue literature in Spain in the Middle Ages and critics have been fond of fishing in it for precedents for the drama. A handful of transitional fifteenth-century compositions – no longer narrative but not yet drama – have in particular been singled out as heralding the new genre: Gómez Manrique's *Representación del Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor* (*Representation of the Birth of Our Lord*), written between 1467 and 1481, which must count as the earliest surviving descendant in Castile of the *Officium pastorum*; the anonymous tract for the time, *Coplas de Mingo Revulgo* (*Mingo Revulgo's Stanzas*);¹¹ Fray Íñigo de Mendoza's *Vita Christi* (c. 1480); and Francisco de Madrid's *Égloga* (*Eclogue*), a piece of political propaganda in support of King Ferdinand written around 1495. There is no evidence that the last three of these were written with performance in mind and since performance – impersonation – must be the *sine qua non* of drama it is misleading to think of them as in any real sense dramatic works. Manrique's work is a rather different case, for it *was* performed, at the convent where Manrique's sister was a nun, and although it is a succession of scenes illustrating the work's theme rather than a connected action, it does have an essentially dramatic identity. It is very reminiscent of the *tableaux parlants*, as one might call them, of the Corpus celebrations. These *tableaux parlants*, together with the antics of the mummers and the constitutional dramatic ritual of the day, constitute the only true dramatic precedents for the theatre that was about to emerge. Even so an equestrian leap of the imagination would be needed to transform religious *tableaux* and dialogue texts, even dialogue intended for reading aloud, into drama and the stimulus to that leap in the event came in the form of practical necessity: the need felt by a court poet to find new ways of amusing his lord and lady.

Juan del Encina 1468?–1529

Encina, always dubbed the 'Father of the Spanish drama', emerges from recent research with his reputation as initiator intact, and his first attempts at the genre bear out the idea of an existing though very rudimentary tradition of religious play.¹² His earliest pieces were indeed written to celebrate religious festivities, albeit within the confines of the ducal court