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Theatre in Spain

1490–1700

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For Olivia and Cornelia

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Preface

I have set myself within the limited space of this book a formidable task: to give an account of the rise and reign of Spain's extraordinary national theatre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in all its aspects – the commercial theatre, the court drama and the Corpus *autos*, the organization of theatrical life, the theatres themselves and their public, the literary and moral controversies, and the plays as literary texts. As far as I am aware, no other existing work examines the theatre from this multiple perspective. Difficult decisions obviously had to be made and some account of my procedure is therefore necessary.

I have devoted more space than is usual in literary histories of the Golden-Age theatre to the experimental drama of the sixteenth century before Lope de Vega arrived on the scene, not only because it contains much of great interest in its own right but because it seemed to me that a true understanding of the phenomenon of the *comedia nueva* depends on an awareness of what had gone before, of the slow and very varied processes by which a flourishing commercial theatre evolved from the court mimes and from the *tableaux vivants* and enacted dialogues of religious celebration. In my discussion of the early drama my aim has been constantly to bear in mind this evolutionary process. One great and influential work enters only peripherally into the discussion. *La Celestina* (1492), Fernando de Rojas's enormously successful novel in dialogue form, portrays a courtly lover, Calisto, who engages the services of a witch and bawd, Celestina, to further his love for Melibea and in the process brings the world of idealized romance into deadly collision with the realities of lust, greed and deception. The work was influenced by Latin comedy and in its turn influenced Spain's early dramatists. Its racy depiction of life's seamy underbelly, its low-life humour and characters, its sophisticated dialogue and its depiction of the destructive power of passion are clearly detectable in the works of Spanish dramatists for decades after and occasionally direct references to it

surface even in plays written over a hundred years later. *La Celestina*, however, was not conceived or written as a dramatic action and is certainly much too long to be performed as it stands, so while it is mentioned on a number of occasions it is not presented as part of the development of the idea of the play.

Where the seventeenth-century theatre is concerned, limitations of space made selection of plays inevitable. Obviously in a drama as huge as the Spanish *comedia* such selection runs even greater risks than usual of creating a distorted picture of the whole. Nonetheless, since this book does not set out to be a comprehensive manual, I have chosen to include what I consider to be a reasonably representative selection of plays so that I could linger over a few and thereby try to give a better idea of what the drama at its best and most interesting could be. I make no apology for exercising the author's privilege of choosing some personal favourites, nor for making what in some cases may appear to be predictable choices – the best-known works of literature after all, like the best-known beauty spots, generally speaking owe their popularity and renown to their own attractions. If any seventeenth-century dramatists seem in this respect to have been given short shrift, it was to allow room at various stages for general discussion of the nature and significance of the *comedia* as a genre, which I regarded as essential to the purpose of this book. Since the playwrights of this time, unlike those of the sixteenth century, were writing to a general pattern, such discussion is relevant to all the dramatists of the period and to some extent subsumes detailed and possibly repetitive discussion of individuals. My focus has been the growth and the success of the theatre as a national institution rather than the individual playwrights themselves, although I have tried to do justice both to those principally responsible for innovation and change and to distinctive individual achievement. While my aim has been to make the overall pattern I trace as coherent and interlocking as possible, I am aware that many readers will not read this book from cover to cover and I have therefore attempted to make each chapter relatively self-contained.

I have chosen for the most part not to give dates for seventeenth-century plays since the dates of composition of so many of them are either conjectural or unknown, and dates of publication, often years later, would not in the present context be particularly helpful. Information about dating may be obtained from studies mentioned in chapter notes and in the bibliography. The bibliography itself does not and could not pretend to be comprehensive, and for the most part collects together the references and suggestions for further reading given in the notes to the chapters. For the

Preface

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sake of readers without Spanish, the suggestions have a slight bias towards criticism in English and titles of plays are translated into English in brackets, normally when first discussed.

My thanks are due to those who have helped in the preparation of this book: to the University of Cambridge for two travel grants to allow me to study in Spain; to the University and to Girton College for study leave in 1986; to Jonathan Brown, J. H. Elliott, N. D. Shergold and J. E. Varey for kindly giving or lending me photographs for the illustrations; to Sarah Stanton, Victoria L. Cooper and Margaret Jull Costa of Cambridge University Press for their help at the editing stage; and to Rosangela Nigro and Jean Smith for word-processing the typescript. As always my warmest thanks go to Neil McKendrick for his unfailing interest, encouragement and advice.

Girton College
Cambridge
3 May 1988

Abbreviations

<i>BCom</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Comediantes</i>
<i>BHisp</i>	<i>Bulletin Hispanique</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Bulletin of Hispanic Studies</i>
<i>BRAE</i>	<i>Boletín de la Real Academia Española</i>
<i>FMLS</i>	<i>Forum for Modern Language Studies</i>
<i>Hisp</i>	<i>Hispania</i>
<i>HR</i>	<i>Hispanic Review</i>
<i>JHP</i>	<i>Journal of Hispanic Philology</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>RF</i>	<i>Romanische Forschungen</i>
<i>RFE</i>	<i>Revista de Filología Española</i>
<i>RHisp</i>	<i>Revue Hispanique</i>
<i>RJ</i>	<i>Romanistisches Jahrbuch</i>
<i>RPhil</i>	<i>Romance Philology</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Romantic Review</i>
<i>SPhil</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>