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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

The birthplace: Madrid in 1600

En Madrid, ¿qué quietud
 hay como el ruido? y ¿qué cuadros,
 aunque con más tulipanes
 que trujo extranjero mayo,
 como una calle que tenga
 gente, coches y caballos,
 llena de lodo el invierno,
 llena de polvo el verano ... ? *(El agua mansa)*

(In Madrid, what peace is there like noise? What flowerbeds are there, though they have more tulips than were ever brought by foreign May, like a street with people, coaches and horses, full of mud in winter, full of dust in summer?)

When Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca Henao y Riaño was born in Madrid on 17 January 1600, the city had been the capital of Spain for less than forty years, since May 1561; until then, the court had been peripatetic, following the monarch from place to place. At the time when Philip II chose the city as his seat of government, the court was in Toledo; before that, it had been in Valladolid. All three cities are in central Castile, but it has often been alleged that Philip chose Madrid in particular because the city was at the centre of the Iberian peninsula. When we hear the allegation, and consult a map, with Madrid equidistant from the sea in every direction, the apparently cold logic seems plausible enough. It is at least as likely, though, that Philip was motivated by centrality on a smaller scale. Madrid was in the middle of a circle containing his favourite resorts and palaces, some of which he had ordered refurbished as early as the 1540s: Valsaín (near Segovia, modified and added to in the 1540s and 1550s); the Casa de Campo (just to the west of the city, on land bought by Philip in 1556, although reconstruction began only in 1562); El Pardo (just north of Madrid, re-roofed in the Flemish style in 1559); Aranjuez (south-east of the city, on the Tagus: regularly used by Philip as a retreat in the 1550s, although the residences and magnificent

gardens were developed in the 1560s and 1570s); and Aceca (also on the Tagus, near Toledo, ordered to be rebuilt in 1556). Philip's most famous palace, the Escorial, was not ready to be lived in until 1566, and not completed until September 1584, but the site, some 27 miles west of the city in the foothills of the Guadarrama mountains, was chosen in 1561, soon after the decision to move to Madrid.¹ Quite probably, too, Valladolid was tainted in Philip's eyes by the discovery of a Protestant group there in 1558. Philip's choice, then, may have had more of an emotional content than the common explanation suggests. Besides, Madrid had several advantages. The climate, at 2,300 feet above sea level, was dry and healthy. There were reliable sources of good water and of firewood, at least at first. There was a suitable palace (Plate 1), a squat unhandsome *alcázar* of Moorish brick, situated pleasantly enough at the top of the rise on the western outskirts, with a view of the Manzanares river, the uncultivated countryside of scrub and evergreen oak, and, in the distance, the Gredos and Guadarrama mountains. Philip liked the view, and chose the western façade for his apartments to take best advantage of it; he also supervised major improvements and extensions, including the new Torre Dorada, on the south-west corner.²

The river Manzanares, compared with the Seine or the Thames (or indeed the Tagus or Guadalquivir), left a good deal to be desired, especially in summer, when it was reduced to a muddy trickle, provoking many jokes. In 1561 there was no stone bridge. The Puente de Segovia (Plate 2), the first to be constructed, by Juan de Herrera, Philip's principal Escorial architect, was the only stone bridge in Calderón's lifetime,³ but at least it was impressive, even disproportionately so: 'No eres río para media puente' ('You're not a river for half a bridge'), Góngora imagined people saying to the river, while the bridge 'es puente para muchos mares' ('is a bridge for many seas').⁴ Lope de Vega imagined the river pleading with Madrid's councillors to take away the bridge, or bring it another river: '¡Quítenme aquesta puente que me mata, | señores regidores de la villa ...! | ... tráiganle sus mercedes otro río' ('Take away this bridge that's killing me, sir aldermen! Bring it another river, your worships').⁵ Even Calderón joined in:

Que para ser la 'Florida'
 estación de todo el orbe
 la más bella, hermosa y rica,
 solo al río falta el río.

(II, 1249a)⁶

(For La Florida to be the most beautiful, pretty and exquisite situation in the whole world, all the river needs is the river.)

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Nevertheless, the Manzanares was a favourite spot for picnics, for washing clothes, and even, in hot weather, for bathing.⁷ Moreover, Madrid did have a royal history. It had been captured from the Moors in 1083 (or 1085, according to some sources) by Alfonso VI. The palace had been refurbished by King Peter. Henry III had been crowned there, in 1390. It was one of the favourite residences of Henry IV; Juana, ‘La Beltraneja’, the daughter of Henry’s queen (and perhaps of Henry himself) was born there in 1462, and Henry himself died in it, indeed, in December 1474, and was buried in the city. The palace was also chosen, in 1525, as the prison of King Francis I of France, captured at the battle of Pavia in February; he remained there and in the Torre de los Lujanes (Plate 3) until the signing of the Treaty of Madrid in January 1526. The palace had also been one of several to be restored, in the 1540s, by Philip and his father, the Emperor Charles V. While the court was still peripatetic, Philip had occasionally stayed there, for example between 1551 and 1553. On the other hand, even by sixteenth-century standards, the city’s population prior to 1561 was pretty modest for a capital: by some accounts, as few as 9,000 in mid century, with only 16,000 even by the end of 1561, after the court had arrived.⁸ Growth was very rapid thereafter: by the time of Philip’s death in 1598, the population was around 75,000; by 1617, 150,000.⁹ In *El hombre pobre todo es trazas* (1627), the *gracioso* Rodrigo refers to Madrid’s rapidly changing urban geography:

[¿]En Madrid, no es cosa llana,
 señor, que de hoy a mañana
 suele perderse una calle?
 Porque, según cada día
 se hacen nuevas, imagino
 que desconoce un vecino
 hoy adonde ayer vivía.

(II, 201b)

(Is it not obvious, sir, that in Madrid a street gets lost between today and tomorrow? Because, given how they make new ones every day, I suppose that today a resident can fail to recognise where he lived yesterday.)

This rapid growth was achieved by immigration, and the poorest immigrants lived in the outskirts, in wooden shacks of one or two storeys, not unlike the *favelas* of modern Rio de Janeiro. It was still possible, however, even in 1600, to walk across the city in little more than half an hour.

Perhaps we should think of Liverpool in Victorian times: an old but originally modest settlement, its ancient past swamped by a later influx of immigrants, most of them living in the squalor of jerry-built tenements which have had to be demolished since. An air of bustle, an appearance of

prosperity: a great city in a vast empire. In the side streets, poverty, filth, disease; and waiting unseen, largely unguessed-at in the future, horrendous wars, recession, decline from greatness, loss of empire. Largely unguessed-at: for even in 1600 González de Cellorigo, writing in the aftermath of the plague outbreak of the 1590s, was in no doubt about the decline from greatness, or that its cause lay in contempt for

las leyes naturales, que nos enseñan a trabajar, y que de poner la riqueza en el oro y la plata, y dexar de seguir la verdadera y cierta, que proviene y se adquiere por la natural y artificial industria, ha venido nuestra República a decaer tanto de su florido estado.

(the natural laws, which teach us to work, and that our country has come to decline so much from its prosperous state due to placing wealth in gold and silver, and to abandoning the pursuit of true and certain riches, which arise and are acquired through natural and applied industry.)

Anticipating Adam Smith by nearly two centuries, he argued that ‘la verdadera riqueza no consiste en tener labrado, acuñado o en pasta mucho oro, y mucha plata’ (‘True wealth does not consist in possessing much gold and silver, whether it has been worked or coined or is in bullion’).¹⁰ But the bookstalls were full of the pamphlets of ‘projectors’. The Spanish term, *arbitristas*, soon acquired derogatory connotations, and few people, including those in government, were capable of distinguishing the perceptive from the lunatic, or of enforcing appropriate laws. Since the 1570s the Cortes had been calling for legislation to control extravagant consumption, and in 1623 the Olivares regime, conscious that the possession of ‘much gold and silver’ manifested itself in ostentatious dress and huge retinues of servants, would introduce a series of sumptuary laws, in which the government would set an example. Government officials and civil servants were to be reduced to a third; the king would halve his household expenses; nobles would cut down on servants and clothes, and spend eleven months a year on their estates, administering them personally, and employing their former court servants on their lands. Yet the only obvious casualty of these new laws was the old starched linen ruff, which was replaced by the simple collar called the *golilla*.

In 1561 Madrid was still, technically at least, a walled city, although some of the surviving walls were of mud brick, with many buildings already outside them. The centre of the city was not, as at present, the Puerta del Sol, which was then the city’s eastern administrative gateway;¹¹ even the splendid Plaza Mayor did not take on its present shape until the reign of Philip III, whose equestrian statue now stands in the middle.¹² Most of the old buildings were *mudéjar* (built by Moors living under Christian rule).

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The original dwelling-houses were mostly of one storey, of whitewashed brick or adobe, as can still be seen in many small towns in Spain. Since the city was not yet a diocese (not until 1885), it had no cathedral. The main church was Santa María de la Almudena, supposedly once a mosque, at the junction of the present Calle Mayor and Calle de Bailén: it was pulled down at the end of the nineteenth century, when work was begun on the modern cathedral, a little to the south-west. The story was that an image of Our Lady, hidden in the defensive wall just before the city fell to the Moors in the early eighth century, was miraculously rediscovered nearly 400 years later. (The word *almudena* derives from Arabic *almudayna*, 'fortress', but it has often been thought to derive from *almud*, a measure of grain, and so to mean 'grain market', 'grain store'. This is the meaning Calderón gives it in his *auto*, *El cubo de la Almudena*, written for 1651. He also wrote two plays on the subject, *Nuestra Señora de la Almudena*, parts I and II, but they are lost. We can guess, though, that they resembled his *Origen, pérdida y restauración de la Virgen del Sagrario* (?1629), which tells a similar story of an image in Toledo.) Surviving examples of *mudéjar* architecture can be found in the churches of San Nicolás de los Servitas in the Plaza de San Nicolás, and San Pedro el Viejo, in the Costanilla de San Pedro. Both have impressive *mudéjar* towers, that of the former dating from the twelfth century. Other *mudéjar* details are visible in the original part of the Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales (in the square named after it), founded by Charles V's daughter Juana in 1559, in the building in which she had been born, or in the Torre de los Lujanes in the Plazuela de la Villa. Buildings outside the old walls included the churches of San Jerónimo el Real, in the present Calle de Ruiz de Alarcón, founded by Ferdinand and Isabella just before the queen's death in 1504, and Nuestra Señora de Atocha, founded by the Dominicans in 1523. The image of Our Lady of Atocha, supposedly carved by St Luke himself, had, according to legend, been hidden from the Moors like that of La Almudena, and miraculously rediscovered at the reconquest of the city.

Buildings which have not survived from this period include Madrid's two public theatres, the Corral del Príncipe and the Corral de la Cruz. The site of the former, on the east side of the Calle del Príncipe, is now occupied by the Teatro Español, which faces the statue of Don Pedro across the Plaza de Santa Ana. The site of the Cruz, a few hundred yards away on the corner of the Calle de la Cruz and the Calle de Espoz y Mina, is now marked only by a plaque. As the name *corral* indicates, both had originally been yards, open spaces surrounded by tenement buildings. By 1600, some twenty years into their life as theatres, the yards had acquired high apron stages at one end, as well as arrangements to allow part of the audience to sit, but they remained

open to the elements.¹³ Even Philip IV, the first Spanish monarch to be a true patron of the theatre, had to take part in this improvisation, sometimes attending these public playhouses, sometimes (from about 1623) using spaces in the *alcázar*, notably the *salón* (from 1640, the *salón dorado*), for performances.¹⁴ Not until 1640 and the completion of the Coliseo del Buen Retiro did Madrid acquire a purpose-built theatre with movable perspective scenery and artificial lighting. The new design made possible new kinds of play, but a species of nostalgia for the old public theatres meant that some of their features were preserved, including their general layout. Thus, although the Coliseo was part of the new Retiro palace complex, it was opened to the public, and 'efforts were made to simulate for the amusement of the king and queen the kind of atmosphere to be found in the public theatres'.¹⁵

While Philip IV's predecessors had not been notable theatre patrons, they had presided over the development of a major new art-form. The first 'plays' to be printed in Spanish, in 1496, were the eclogues of Juan del Encina, eight of them, probably written for the ducal court of Alba in the previous decade. Encina is called the father of Spanish drama, but the father of the commercial theatre was Lope de Rueda, a Sevillian whose touring company brought theatre to the ordinary public, among them, around 1560, the young Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes remembered the experience half a century later, and perhaps many young members of an audience first encountered literature in this way, an encounter that in some cases inspired them to become writers themselves. Whatever the exact nature of the inspiration, there was no shortage of it: the latest catalogue of seventeenth-century Spanish dramatic works contains about 10,000 titles, which can be compared with the 838 entries in Sir Walter Greg's *Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*.¹⁶ By 1623, the year of Don Pedro's earliest known plays, Lope de Vega had been writing them for forty years, and had probably written over 700: an average of a play every three weeks, for four decades! It took the book trade thirty years to comprehend that printing plays no longer needed to be the sporadic affair it had been in the sixteenth century: by the time the booksellers had realised that Lope had made possible the printing of plays in numbered volumes of a dozen each, many of his early ones were lost.

Printing had come to Madrid only in 1566, nearly a century after Spain's first books were printed in Segovia (1472). The late start meant that Madrid never came to dominate the book trade as London did in England; and the delay was only one symptom of the gradual nature of the process of transformation from a minor town into a cultural capital. Before 1561, Spanish writers and artists were likely to pursue their careers in, or close to, their

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place of birth. This situation changed only gradually. Thus Cervantes, born in Alcalá in 1547, well before Madrid became the capital, settled there definitively only in 1606; Góngora, born in Córdoba in 1561, moved to Madrid in 1617; Mira de Amescua, born in Guadix in 1574, moved to Granada as a student, and settled in Madrid in 1606; Luis Vélez de Guevara, born in Écija (just over 50 miles east of Seville) around 1579, joined the service of the Archbishop of Seville, and eventually settled in Madrid in 1607; Zurbarán, born at Fuente de Cantos (70 miles north of Seville) in 1598, spent most of his life in Seville, but moved to Madrid in 1658; Velázquez, born in Seville in 1599, made an attempt to find patronage in Madrid in 1622, and moved there in August 1623. The Count-Duke of Olivares, a *sevillano* born in Rome, was the main instigator of this Seville–Madrid connection. Another migrant whose career was affected by it was Alonso Cano, born in Granada in 1601, who studied in Seville, and moved to Madrid in 1638. Even Cano’s teacher, Juan Martínez Montañés (born in Alcalá la Real, near Jaén, in 1568), the most esteemed sculptor of his age, had to visit Madrid in 1635–6 to model the head of Philip IV, a stay recorded by Velázquez’s portrait.

* * *

In addition to its surrounding circle of royal palaces and hunting lodges, Madrid was conveniently close to Toledo, once the seat of the Visigothic kings and by this time the ecclesiastical headquarters of Spain; close, but far enough for a monarch who wanted to keep the princes of the church firmly in their place, since 44 miles – less than an hour in a modern car – was two days’ journey by mule, the normal ecclesiastical form of transport. Alcalá de Henares (Complutum in Latin), around 20 miles away to the north-east (and now a dormitory suburb for the capital), provided a handy university, opened in 1508 and made famous by the great Complutensian Polyglot Bible, planned by the university’s founder, Cardinal Cisneros, and completed in the year of his death, 1517. The university moved to Madrid in 1836 and became the Universidad Complutense; the present University of Alcalá is a modern foundation (1977).

The climate of the Castilian meseta has been described as three months of winter (*invierno*) and nine months of hell (*infierno*). In Madrid, however, the weather is pretty mild for much of the year, and the winter months do not always bring frost and snow. Even in the hottest months, July and August, the climate was more bearable then than now, when the hot exhausts of hundreds of thousands of vehicles and air-conditioning units increase the humidity, the pollution and the temperature. Not that the air of

Madrid was pure in 1600: as in many early modern cities, the sanitation arrangements involved emptying everything into the streets (sewerage was not introduced until the eighteenth century). Theoretically, this took place only at night, preceded by the euphemistic warning ‘¡Agua va!’ (‘Gardyloo!’), but the state of the streets in the early morning, or all day during the less dry months, is better not imagined in detail. In *Dar tiempo al tiempo* (by 1650), Chacón, following his master along a darkened Madrid street, falls into a muddy pothole; as he is trying to clean off the mud, a maid pours liquid from above, with the cry ‘Agua va’. ‘Mientes, picaña’, says Chacón, ‘que esto no es agua’ (‘Water away!’ – ‘That’s a lie, you hussy, this is not water’: II, 1332b).

This scene reminds us that even pre-industrial societies produced huge amounts of pollution, rubbish and effluent. There were horses, mules and donkeys everywhere, and their droppings littered the streets, while cleanings from their stables were piled wherever it was convenient, and sometimes where it was not; pigs and chickens roamed freely, since many citizens kept farm animals in their city property (even cows, as was the practice, occasionally, until at least the 1960s); butchers and fishmongers produced large amounts of offal; and some industries, such as tanning, although confined to the Ribera de Curtidores, in the southern part of the city, produced odours and refuse on a scale that would never be tolerated now. Then, people were more tolerant of smells: they had to be. Modern Spanish cities use huge quantities of water, for cleaning the streets, washing the pavements, watering the lawns and flowerbeds, and the frequent showering of the inhabitants in warm weather. Then, not only was the environment smellier for lack of washing: so were those who lived in it, and for the same reason. Yet even then, when germs were undiscovered, there were complaints that effluent from the slaughterhouses and tanneries was polluting drinking water. There were attempts to keep the streets clean; there were even workmen permanently assigned to the task, but repeated complaints about their failure to do the job properly, or about the failure of the authorities to enforce such legislation as there was, show that the battle was not being won.¹⁷ In this respect, Madrid’s reputation was international: Robert Burton could write in 1628: ‘Some find the same fault [carriage lying in the streets] in Spain, even in Madrid, the king’s seat; a most excellent air, a pleasant site, but the inhabitants are slovens, and the streets uncleanly kept.’¹⁸

Not surprisingly, disease was widespread, including many ailments that modern science has almost eradicated. Since no one imagined that bubonic plague was carried by fleas living in the fur of rats, it was endemic, and there

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was no way of preventing regular outbreaks. No single epidemic was as severe as that of two-and-a-half centuries earlier, the Black Death, which had killed a third of Europe's population (and, in Spain in particular, in 1350, King Alfonso XI, the only reigning monarch to die of the disease); but in 1599–1600, hundreds of thousands succumbed in Castile to an outbreak which may have killed 15 per cent of the inhabitants, that is, the entire population growth of the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Fifty years later (1647–52), there was another major outbreak, affecting several Iberian cities, particularly Seville, where '200,000' died (an exaggeration, but one which points to a very high figure), Valencia (where one third of the population of 50,000 supposedly succumbed) and Barcelona.²⁰ Madrid got off lightly, as it had largely done in 1599, but only by establishing 'plague guards', to keep travellers from infected areas from entering the city. In *El agua mansa*, Eugenia (or Mari Nuño, in the printed version) wonders how the obnoxious Don Toribio, who has just arrived in Madrid, managed to get past the plague guards.

The twenty-first century has 'plagues' (AIDS and SARS come to mind) which never troubled our forebears; the difference is that, while some cures may remain elusive, we know how diseases work, and what we should do to preserve health. Then, health was much more precarious, and the average life expectancy half of what it is now. Not all of the illnesses that afflicted our forebears four centuries ago are readily identifiable. Some of the 'tertian agues' or 'quartan agues' they complained of were certainly malaria, but the Madrid area had few suitable breeding-grounds for mosquitoes, and the citizens suffered less than elsewhere. When Calderón wrote in 1648 from the palace of the Duke of Alba in Alba de Tormes that he was 'en una cama con unas grandes tercianas' ('in bed with a severe tertian fever'),²¹ we cannot assume, without more details, that he was suffering from malaria, or draw conclusions about where he might have contracted it. Practised medical observers were sometimes capable of usefully accurate accounts of symptoms. Thus, an experienced doctor like Alonso López de Corella could describe (1574) those of 'tabardillo' in sufficient detail for us to recognise what we call typhus.²² Yet López and his colleagues never suspected that this disease was spread, like bubonic plague and malaria, through insect bites. Similarly, if there were doctors able to distinguish the symptoms of what we call typhoid from those of typhus, they did not realise that typhoid was spread through contaminated food or drinking water. For the non-specialist, there were catch-all terms: *fiebre* or *calentura* might be used for any illness that made the patient feverish, while any malady involving the retention of fluid was *hidropesía*, dropsy (some of the symptoms of 'dropsy'

might point to diabetes). Where causes were not understood, treatment was frequently inappropriate. Ailments which are now controlled, or controllable, but which then were potentially fatal, included influenza, smallpox, leprosy, tuberculosis, asthma, measles, whooping-cough and diphtheria (*garrotillo*). Malnutrition was widespread, both through sheer ignorance about diet, and through shortages of famine proportions, as in the 1590s and around 1650:²³ two of Calderón's *autos sacramentales*, *La semilla y la cizaña* and *El cubo de la Almudena*, both performed in 1651, were written against a background of grain shortage and bread riots.²⁴ The Spanish language is full of proverbs about bread, and bread still plays an important part in Spanish meals. In the seventeenth century, in a society which was still largely agricultural, the role of bread was fundamental. We cannot know how often grain was affected by ergot, the then uncomprehended fungus which made bread poisonous, but the title of a lost *auto* attributed to Calderón, *La peste del pan dañado*, suggests that outbreaks were frequent enough to be significant. The same scientific ignorance meant that even normal, non-pathological physical events such as pregnancy and parturition were extremely life-threatening, even to women who had already borne several children: Calderón's mother was one such woman.

Experience, rather than real understanding, showed that some of the remedies prescribed for the unwell, particularly herbal ones, were genuinely useful; thus infusions of willow-bark, described by Laguna in his great edition of Dioscorides as useful for earache (I, cxv, p. 89), contain aspirin; camphor (I, lxxi, pp. 55–6: 'mitiga el dolor de cabeça procediente de causa caliente', 'lessens headache proceeding from a warm cause') is still used as a decongestant; feverfew (III, cxlix, p. 362: described by Culpeper as 'very effectual for all pains in the head', p. 140) is still used for migraine – and for insecticides!); peppermint (*menta piperita*, cf. *hierbabuena*, III, xxxvii, p. 290; Culpeper, p. 235), used then and now to aid digestion, is a source of menthol; caraway seed oil (III, lxii, pp. 306–7; Culpeper, pp. 78–9) is still a remedy for indigestion; St John's Wort (*hypericum perforatum*, III, clxv–clxviii, pp. 371–2: Culpeper tells us that 'a tincture of the flowers in spirit of wine, is commended against melancholy', p. 203), is still – controversially – used as an antidepressant; rhubarb (III, ii, p. 263; Culpeper, pp. 292–4) is still recognised as a purgative, and so on; finally, Laguna's remark about the ambiguous benefits of the opium poppy, the source of laudanum, morphine and heroin (IV, lxvi, p. 415; Culpeper, pp. 290–2), might have been made by a practitioner today: 'no deuemos administrarle, sino quãdo son los dolores tan inclementes, que à ningun otro beneficio obedecen' ('we should not administer it except when the pains are so severe that they respond to no