

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63986-7 - A History of the Romantic Movement in Spain: Volume I

E. Allison Peers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

THE ANTECEDENTS OF THE
ROMANTIC MOVEMENTROMANTIC SPAIN: THE ROMANTICISM OF THE
GOLDEN AGE

ON A memorable day in the year 1840, “two enthusiastic and romantic young Frenchmen” sat with “passionate expectancy” —“dying with impatience”—in the theatre of a provincial Spanish town, one of them (who narrates the incident) polishing the lenses of his *lorgnette* with “furious activity” lest he should miss the smallest detail of the remarkable spectacle which he was about to witness. And what was this remarkable spectacle? “Just imagine, gentle reader”, recounts the diarist. “For the first time, they are going to see a Spanish dance—in *Spain!*”¹

That eventful holiday of Théophile Gautier, the young Parisian journalist, and his artistic companion, Eugène Piot, led them from Bayonne across the Spanish border, through the Basque Country and Old Castile to Madrid and Toledo, southward to Jaén, Granada and Málaga, and through lovely Andalusia to “happy Seville”, Jerez and Cádiz. They travelled with a keen eye for colour, form and every kind of detail, but were none the less ravished by all they saw—“éblouis, écrasés, souls de chefs-d’œuvre et n’en pouvant plus d’admiration”.² During the century that has elapsed since the *Voyage en Espagne* was written, their experiences have been coveted, shared and even improved upon by millions of tourists as “enthusiastic and romantic” as they. “Romantic Spain, the Land of Mantillas and Matadors” (to quote the title of a typical English travel-book) is the Mecca of every holiday-maker; and if any seeker after orange-groves, bandits, “toreadors”, guitars and the

romántico barniz
de carta, escondite y reja³

fails to find them, he merely travels farther, convinced that he is not yet in the “real Spain”. Eventually, like Gautier, he reaches Seville and

¹ Théophile Gautier: *Voyage en Espagne*, Paris, 1895, Chap. iv, pp. 29–30.

² *Op. cit.*, Chap. v, p. 51.

³ Ventura de la Vega: *El Hombre de mundo*, I, iv.

Granada, where, to a greater or a lesser degree, though probably to an extent diminishing as the years go on, he finds his longings satisfied.

Needless to say, the prestige of Spain is not, save in the most superficial manner, enhanced by all this: no country has suffered so much from being dubbed “romantic” in the loose, popular sense of “strikingly picturesque”. It is a more technical connotation that this History gives to the word when it takes as its text the Byronic salutation “renown’d romantic land”. To the student of literature Spain is indeed a naturally “Romantic” country, for her life and her culture continue in successive ages to display the qualities implied by the word “romanticism”.¹ This romanticism, as has been well said, “is eternal in Spanish art: it cannot die, for it is the very voice of the race”.²

Ever since the word “romanticism” was invented,³ it has been used, by critics of excellent judgment, to describe a fundamental characteristic of literature and art in Spain. The leaders of the Romantic movement in France and Germany turned for inspiration to Spain. To the brothers Schlegel, Spanish drama, down to the time of Calderón, was “almost entirely Romantic”,⁴ while Spanish poetry “remained purely Romantic throughout”.⁵ Sismondi described Spanish literature as “much less Classical than that of other countries”—in fact, as “wholly Romantic and chivalric”, creating “prodigies, adventures and intrigues in abundance” but only “for so long as it feels itself to be unrestrained by the bounds of the possible and the probable”.⁶ Our considered judgment on Spanish literature as a whole will hardly be less definite

¹ Cf. II, 379–82, below.

² “Le romantisme est éternel dans l’art espagnol. Il ne peut mourir, car il est la voix même de la race.” J. Deleito y Piñuela in *Hispania*, Paris, 1919, II, 123.

³ Cf. I, 37, n. 3, below, and É.A.P.: “The term ‘romanticism’ in Spain”, in *R.H.*, 1933, LXXXI (Deuxième partie), 411–18; H. Becher: “Nota histórica sobre el origen de la palabra ‘romántico’”, in *B.B.M.P.*, 1931, XIII, 31–3.

⁴ “Doch damit wir uns gleich mit der gehörigen Einschränkung erklären, so ist unsers Erachtens das spanische Theater bis zu seinem Verfall seit dem Anfange des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts fast durchgehends romantisch.” A. W. von Schlegel: *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, Heidelberg, 1809, 1811 (Zwölfte Vorlesung, II, II, 12–13).

⁵ “Die spanische Dichtkunst überhaupt ohne allen fremdartigen Einfluss und durchaus rein romantisch geblieben ist.” F. von Schlegel: *Geschichte der alten und neuen Litteratur. Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1812*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, Vienna, 1822–5, II, 125.

⁶ Sismondi: *De la littérature du midi de l’Europe*, Paris, 1829, III, 497–8, IV, 254–5. Cf. M. Casella: “Agli albori del romanticismo e del moderno rinascimento catalano”, in *Rivista delle Biblioteche e degli Archivi*, Florence, 1918, XXIX, 106.

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

3

than the judgments of these critics. In every phase and epoch of that literature the Romantic tendencies of the Spanish character find expression—most markedly so in the Middle Ages, when literature had hardly taken definite form and Classical ideals were still imperfectly assimilated in Western Europe, and in the period of Spain's fullest self-consciousness and most triumphant art, the so-called "Age of Gold".

If in the age of Lope and Cervantes—we may even say, if in any age—the Spaniards gave a thought to... the rules, it was to dismiss it promptly, and to follow the current of life, which they invariably preferred to the instructions of the grave doctors of poetry... The aesthetic of the Spaniards was always romantic, leading them to independence and spontaneity. Deviations from it—a certain temporary rigidity of precept—came to them from without; and then back came practice, to the discomfiture of theory. Not rules and precepts, they said, but passion, impetus, instinctive creative force must shape the poet.¹

The Romantic character of the Golden Age, however, is by no means universally granted; and many, while perhaps somewhat grudgingly admitting it, would point to the Classical affinities of the Spanish Renaissance and ask us to see in these the beginning of Spain's declension from Romantic ideals. Although the Renaissance as a whole was by no means exclusively inspired by classicism, it is true that it was partly characterized by a very close attention to form: "that which is not collected in rules or precepts", said a leading Renaissance writer, "is not art".² Nebrija, in the year of the Reconquest of Granada and of Columbus' first voyage, opened his "Latin shop" in Spain³ with the publication of his Latin-Spanish dictionary and his Spanish grammar. Juan de Valdés, a master of careful phrase, though claiming that his style was "natural", took care "to use only words that precisely indicated [his] meaning, considering affectation unsuited to any language".⁴ A stalwart procession of scholars—humanists and erudites to a man—stretches from the earliest years of the Renaissance until well into the

¹ Farinelli: *Romanticismo*, I, 70–1.

² J. L. Vives: *Tratado de la Enseñanza*, trad. José Ontañón, Madrid, n.d., Chap. iii, p. 14: the context of the quotation is also instructive.

³ Antonio de Nebrija: *Interpretatio dictionum ex sermone Latino in Hispaniensem*, Salamanca, 1492, fol. I v.

⁴ "Muy pocas cosas observo, porque el estilo que tengo me es natural y sin afectación ninguna escribo como hablo. Solamente tengo cuidado de usar de vocablos que signifiquen bien lo que quiero decir... porque a mi parecer en ninguna lengua está bien la afectación." Juan de Valdés: *Diálogo de la lengua* (modernized from the edition of José F. Montesinos, Madrid, 1928, p. 150).

Golden Age: Nebrija, Valdés, Vergara, Vives, El Brocense, Arias Montano are names that would give to any epoch a definitive colour. Nor is this colour in any way untrue to life. Latin was used as the medium of serious literature until an advanced stage of the sixteenth century, while de-latinization of style followed but slowly upon the general adoption of the vernacular. We should not associate with Romantic ideals Pérez de Oliva's adaptations and versions of Latin and Greek dramas or the period of Italian influence in poetry which was carried on from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and intensified throughout the early sixteenth century. The "lascivious metres", of which Boscán and Garcilaso were the most inspired importers, have often little but their own somewhat conventional music to recommend them; the "new-born sighs" with which their lesser contemporaries proclaimed "poor Petrarch's long-deceased woes" were as apt as neo-Classical trifles to be "exquisite but empty".¹

But there is another aspect of the picture which can be glimpsed even before the end of the Middle Ages. Against the precision of the grammarians must be set the formlessness of those innumerable "books of chivalry" the hold of which upon Spain was not shaken off for a century. Against tales that are nothing more than adaptations of Latin models, detached, objective and uninspiring, can be cited others as sentimental, as emotional and as violently passionate as anything written in a later day. Across the fifteenth century spreads the vogue of such books as the *Siervo libre del amor* of Juan Rodríguez del Padrón, the *Grimalte y Gradissa* and the *Grisel y Mirabella* of Juan de Flores and the more famous *Cárcel de amor* of Diego de San Pedro, which, with its numerous editions and not inconsiderable number of imitations, stands as one of the earliest triumphs of romanticism in Spanish prose. Incoherence, emotionalism, subjectivity, melancholy are among the principal characteristics of these novels, in which battle, murder and sudden death play a part that no ultra-Romantic could wish greater.

As with prose, so with verse, whether lyric, narrative or dramatic. If at this period there was, in Alcalá Galiano's phrase, "poesía...clásica rigurosa, o sea imitadora", there were also "fogosidad... fantasía... vehementes afectos"² long before the dawn of the Golden Age from whose writers he exemplifies these qualities. If there were those who brought "dictionary's method" into their rhymes, there were also those

¹ Cf. Antonio Alcalá Galiano's estimate of the poetry of this period, in his preface to Rivas' *Moro Expósito* (Rivas: *Obras*, ed. cit., III, xiii ff.). ² *Op. cit.*, III, xvi.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63986-7 - A History of the Romantic Movement in Spain: Volume I

E. Allison Peers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

5

who looked in their hearts and wrote. If there was a Boscán, there was a Castillejo; if a Pérez de Oliva, a Torres Naharro; if there were eclogues and sonnets, there were also *coplas*, *villancicos*, and, above all, *romances*.

Thus the two currents flowed side by side, until by the mid-sixteenth century the native romanticism of Spain had overwhelmed the rival ideal and begun its tumultuous course through the Golden Age, unchecked and almost unadulterated. Boscán's great fourfold apostrophe, beginning

¡O gran fuerza de amor, que así enflaqueces
los que nacidos son para ser fuertes...!

might well be taken as a literary allegory. Inspiration, like the waves of the sea (“¡O piélago de mar!”) came upon the journeymen of the Spanish Renaissance and totally engulfed nice artistic propensities which might have given them more immediate celebrity. During a century and a half, for good or for evil, inspiration became mistress of the literary art, and the criterion of greatness. “Yo soy aquel”, cried the creative artist, proudly,

Yo soy aquel que en la invención excede
a muchos, y, al que falta en esta parte,
es fuerza que su fama falta quede.¹

None said him nay—it was not a critical age, and the faults of romanticism are hard to detect beneath the dazzling light of genius.² So there arose that giant whose name was Lope de Vega,—“el romántico Lope”³—the greatest of all improvisers who never blotted a line, and around him grew up a school distinguished by the dominance of spontaneity, freshness and imagination. There arose, too, great poets—Luis de León, San Juan de la Cruz, the “divine” Herrera, and others only less inspired than these. Despite occasional metrical audacities,⁴ they showed

¹ Cervantes: *Viaje del Parnaso*, Chap. iv, ll. 28–30.

² Cf. here an article by Gil y Zárate entitled “Teatro antiguo y teatro moderno” (*Revista de Madrid*, 1841, 3^a Serie, pp. 112–24, reprinted *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Liverpool, 1930, VII, 55–64), which develops this idea and applies it to Lope de Vega.

³ Lista: *Ensayos literarios y críticos*, Seville, 1844, I, 169.

⁴ We find, for example, *enjambement* (which was never banned by the Spanish Classicists to the same degree as it was by the French) carried by Luis de León, as also by some of the Golden Age dramatists, to the extreme of dividing a word between two lines, thus:

“Y mientras miserable-
mente se están los otros abrasando
en sed insaciable...”

(Luis de León: “Vida retirada”.)

a genuine Classical care for perfection of form, and they retained many traces of both humanism and Italianism; but, with all these traits, they are so Romantic at heart that they perhaps more nearly illustrate the perfect blend of the two ideals than do any other writers in the Golden Age, excepting only Cervantes. There arose, too, the mystics, many of them with great natural gifts of artistry and a potential sublimity as stylists. What, we may ask, would not Santa Teresa have achieved as an artist had she taken the smallest interest in the form of her message instead of reserving her entire regard for the message itself? To what heights of literary perfection would not Luis de Granada have attained, had he polished those wonderful periods, fashioned in old age, which, even as he left them, are often well-nigh perfect? Just so, it may be argued, Lope de Vega might have been a second Shakespeare, had he been able to put his astounding energy into the quality of his work instead of allowing it to evaporate in mere productiveness. But mystics and Romantics, in some ways dissimilar, and even antithetical, are alike in this, that they are carried on irresistibly by a vital force, and they *cannot* obey anything beside. It was a Romantic of the nineteenth century, though it might perfectly well have been a mystic of the sixteenth, who wrote:

El verdadero entusiasmo procede del éxtasis y arrobamiento del alma, que, desprendiéndose de las trabas del mundo real o prosaico, se eleva a las ideales regiones de la belleza poética, arrebatando, por decirlo así, del celestial modelo un rayo de luz divina, que no se presta a los cálculos exactos de la humana razón. *Est Deus in nobis*: he aquí la divisa de todos los talentos privilegiados, y sobre todo la de los grandes poetas y oradores cuyas inspiraciones están destinadas a dirigir el corazón humano.¹

Together with a natural enthusiasm and a firm belief in the efficacy of inspiration went a disregard for form so complete as to make these abundant and fertile writers of the Golden Age the greatest defiers of the ideal of restraint in the history of modern literature. It is customary, and reasonable enough, to follow Victor Hugo in thinking of Lope in connection with this aspect of romanticism—Lope who knew the rules, yet boasted that he flouted them, who locked up the precepts with six keys, mingled tragedy and comedy, put great personages alongside small, varied his types of stanza according to the mood he was conveying,

¹ Agustín Durán: “Discurso sobre el influjo que ha tenido la crítica moderna en la decadencia del teatro antiguo español, etc.”, in *M.A.E.*, II, 290.

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

7

and in general, like the rest of his age, followed the current of popular opinion regardless of rule,

porque a veces lo que es contra lo justo
por la misma razón deleita el gusto.

But it would be as easy to take almost any other dramatist of the time¹—notably Tirso de Molina²—or any other *genre* than the drama, as typifying the impatience of the Golden Age with restraint. Let us, for example, consider the beginnings of the novel. By what test can the *Celestina*, a product of the Renaissance, be reckoned as exemplary in its attitude to the rules of art? Its author's personality changes (or possibly its author changes) at the end of the first act. It has abundant inspiration, and all the skill of a great genius, but its construction is no more clearly defined than its *genre*. In the vagueness of its outlines, as in its passion, lyricism and sensibility, its mingling of sublime and grotesque, and the violence of its catastrophe, it is a work almost wholly Romantic.

What is true of this forerunner of the masterpieces of Spanish fiction applies also to each of the types of fiction that were shortly to emerge. Either *Lazarillo de Tormes* or any one of the picaresque novels which followed it might be lengthened or shortened at will without harm being done to its construction. On the idealistic side, the chivalric novel and the pastoral novel, in which no pretence of subordination to reality imposes restrictions on creative genius, have every right to be reckless of rule—and both *genres* take full advantage of their freedom.

Don Quijote, it may be thought, has some claim to be considered as Classical;³ and, while Romantically-minded nineteenth-century pub-

¹ Cf. Luzán: *Poética*, Bk. III, Chap. ii (Madrid, 1789, II, 64): "Lope de Vega no fué el corruptor de nuestro teatro. Éste jamás tuvo reglas ni obras que se debiesen tener por arregladas: y así ¿cómo pudo Lope corromper ni desarreglar lo que nunca estuvo ordenado ni arreglado?"

² Several recent writers (e.g., McClelland, p. 246; Aubrey F. G. Bell: *Castilian literature*, Oxford, 1938, pp. 189–90) have touched on the Romantic traits in Tirso de Molina. The subject invites further study.

³ I do not here take into consideration the Canon of Toledo's strictures on chivalric novels in *Don Quijote*, I, xlvi (cf. S. de Madariaga: *Don Quixote: An Introductory Essay in Psychology*, Oxford, 1935, pp. 16–17), for, even assuming Cervantes himself to have held the views of the Canon, one could hold them all and yet be a good Romantic. Nor can one fairly bring into the argument the curate's attack on Romantic drama (I, xlvi), with its famous ridicule of plays that disregard the Unities and its two-edged eulogies of Lope de Vega: whatever Cervantes' theoretical views on drama may have been, he flatly transgresses the curate's opinions in his own plays. The issue goes much deeper, and must be decided on much more fundamental

lishers advertised it as “the greatest Romantic work in Europe”,¹ at least one anti-Romantic besought its creator to come to life again and chastise these (so-called) “modern reformers of literature”.² Yet *Don Quijote* has from one point of view a Romantic conception and certainly has many Romantic moments. If Byron thought of it as genially realistic,³ and Ruskin as brutally realistic,⁴ that only means that they could not find in the book all that Cervantes had put there. It is a blend of Classic and Romantic such as only the greatest masters—but they unfailingly—can achieve. Classical as is Cervantes’ imagination “in its sobriety, in the economy of its means, in the admirable restraint of its conception and expression”,⁵ it is Romantic so soon as it allows free play to its instinct for creation. To place in the centre of one of the world’s greatest masterpieces of literature the incarnation of a soul aspiring to the unattainable goal of an ideal was itself a notable achievement of the Romantic spirit. To allow that character, as Cervantes did, to grow in his hands, and in telling his story to leave imagination mistress over precept is to mark one aspect of his work for all time as “Romantic through and through”.⁶

Lacking the universality, the humour, the equilibrium, the humaneness and many another quality of Cervantes, yet for all that an outstanding figure in the Golden Age, is Quevedo. Here is a writer full of “extravagances, dreams and visions romantic”⁷—a writer, too, of vehement and unbridled productivity. Open though he is to Classical influences, tainted though he is by literary vices allied to pseudo-classicism, the Romantic inspiration of the *Buscón* and the *Sueños*, by which he lives, is unmistakable. Unhappily, his impatience of restraint is too clearly recognizable in another way: it destroys his own natural power and makes his uncontrolled fantasy too often simply repulsive.

grounds than these, for the whole of Cervantes’ masterpiece is greater than any of its parts, even than the most diverting of them.

¹ *Diario de Barcelona*, May 23, 1832.

² “El Literato Rancio”, in *Cartas Españolas*, 1832, IV, 376.

³ *Don Juan*, Canto VII, Stanza 3; Canto XIII, Stanzas 8–11.

⁴ *Works*, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, London, 1903, III, 81; XXXVII, 12, 17. It is fair to add that Ruskin believed a few “elevated minds” capable of discovering *Don Quijote’s* “moral beauty” (III, 81).

⁵ Madariaga, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁶ Cf. Farinelli: *Romanticismo*, I, 47 and F. von Schlegel’s twelfth lecture (*ed. cit.*, p. 114), where he uses the same phrase about Spanish drama. Cf. I, 2, nn. 4, 5, above.

⁷ Farinelli: *Romanticismo*, I, 47–8.

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

9

So we might pass in review one after another of the leaders of the Golden Age, as did the Romantics of the nineteenth century—and with not dissimilar results. Even Góngora has his Romantic vein; and one may go as far as Dr Farinelli in discovering it here and there in his *romances* and *letrillas*,¹ though hardly as far as a critic of a century earlier, Agustín Durán, who considered Góngora as one of the “founders of romanticism”.² Nor can one wholly exclude that incomparable ironist who ventured slyly to observe that Nature was an old deceiver and that there was something to be said in favour of “art for art’s sake” after all:

Nos engaña así naturaleza,
porque ese cielo azul que todos vemos,
¡ni es cielo, ni es azul! ¡Lástima grande
que no sea verdad tanta belleza!³

Our brief survey ends with Calderón, the last great writer of the Golden Age, considered an almost pure Romantic by the German, Italian and Spanish revivalists of the early nineteenth century. To Friedrich von Schlegel, Calderón was “in all circumstances, and compared with all other dramatic poets, the most Romantic”.⁴ August Wilhelm saw in his works “the highest summit of Romantic poetry”; in them, he wrote, “is lavished all its magnificence”.⁵ Monteggia, the able young Italian collaborator in the pre-Romantic and cosmopolitan review *El Europeo*, declared that Calderón’s style was as Romantic as Byron’s.⁶ Nowadays Calderón’s plays are often represented as having more in them of the Classic, or of the pseudo-Classic, than of the Romantic. But, granting that the critics who saw in those plays, not Calderón, but an egocentric conception of the universe with which they wrongly credited him, were deceived as by a mirage, we must not pursue the still more elusive mirage of a Calderón “in complete opposition to the Romantic conception of the universe”.⁷ While he

¹ Farinelli: *Romanticismo*, I, 48.

² Cf. I, 13, below.

³ Luperco Leonardo de Argensola. *Soneto* (“Yo os quiero confesar, Don Juan, primero...”).

⁴ F. von Schlegel, *Sämmtliche Werke*, Vienna, 1822–5, II, 123–4. Cf. I, 86–8, below.

⁵ A. W. von Schlegel, *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, Heidelberg, 1809, 1811, II, ii, 374. *Vierzehnte Vorlesung*. Cf. II, 385, below.

⁶ Cf. E.A.P.: “Some provincial periodicals in Spain during the Romantic movement”, in *M.L.R.*, 1920, xv, 377.

⁷ This is the contention of A. Castro (*Les Romantiques espagnols*, Paris, n.d., p. 14).

carried neither freedom nor individualism as far as did the Duque de Rivas in *Don Alvaro*, he pursued in his own way not only these ideals but others equally characteristic of the Romantics. Thus he is Romantic, first and foremost, in his imaginative lyricism, his idealism, the vagueness of his so-called philosophy, his mingling of Christianity and paganism and his love for the *au-delà*. A rare and rather startling objectivity, an occasional unexpectedness in choice of theme and such attention to technique as that which makes so great a play of his *Alcalde de Zalamea*, show that he had a number of affinities with classicism, while his affectations, his verbal formalisms and his love of fine writing remind us that, even before the end of the Golden Age, pseudo-classicism was coming into fashion.

These indications of the essentially Romantic character of the Golden Age will probably suffice to convince most readers: it is right, however, to consider, with the same brevity, the chief reasons which may be put forward for refusing to accept them. There is, first, the unnatural rigidity, conventionality and adherence to the beaten track which we find in much Golden Age drama—a characteristic so striking to the impartial critic that Alcalá Galiano, at a time when the back-to-Lope movement was at its height, could question the justice of its being called Romantic.¹ It is true that, to modern ideas, the fertile dramatist of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seems to have been strangely limited by the roads which were laid out for him to follow, and from the bounds of which he seldom escaped. But it is unlikely that he felt himself in fact to be so limited. His conception of drama led him hardly, if at all, beyond the frontiers which his contemporaries and immediate predecessors had, as it were, tentatively marked out for him. His subjects were prescribed, not by precept, but by custom, and, as a rule, he accepted the custom uncomplainingly. It is certain that, if he revolted against them less than did the Romantics of the nineteenth century, he frequently went as far outside them as he desired. The more fantastic dramas of Calderón, the Romantic heroes of Tirso de Molina and almost any play that Lope de

¹ A. Alcalá Galiano in his (anonymous) preface to the Duque de Rivas' *Moro Expósito* (Rivas: *Obras, ed. cit.*, III, x–xi). Cf. II, 380, below. The passage is noteworthy and should be considered in conjunction with its context. The author is, of course, far from exhausting the subject, which he barely does more than touch. Other characteristics of this drama which support his contention are easy to find.