

# Spanish Classical Theater in Britain and North America

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**I**n his *History of the Theatre in Europe*, John Allen begins the five pages allotted to Spanish classical theater by declaring that “the Spanish people have not on the whole been distinguished for their contribution to European drama” (140). More recently, Oxford University Press published a four-volume history of the American theater from 1869 to 2000 (Bordman; Hirschak), in which, as one would expect, Shakespeare’s presence is pervasive. The authors also mention with some frequency seventeenth-century French playwrights, especially Molière (thirty-seven occasions), and the Italian Goldoni (nine occasions). By contrast, there is not a single allusion in the 2,000-plus pages of the series to Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, or Calderón. The same pertains to Eric Bentley’s popular *What Is Theater?* Whatever theater may be, seventeenth-century Spaniards do not seem to have contributed to it, for they do not appear in his book. Nor do they figure in Richard Southern’s *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, which deals not only with English, French, and Italian drama, but also Tibetan, Chinese, and Indian. These are not isolated cases of theatrical history’s neglect of Spanish drama. Alfredo Hermenegildo remarks on “la ignorancia casi total que del corpus teatral [del Siglo de Oro] hacen gala, consciente o inconsciente, los repertorios, tratados y estudios teóricos sobre el fenómeno dramático de la llamada cultura occidental” (5). Harold Bloom, for example, excludes Spanish dramatists from his *Western Canon*. A canonical author is one whose influence in Western culture is incontestable; in Bloom’s perspective Spanish dramatists of the Golden Age are not influential.

In recent years, thanks mainly to the effort of some British hispanists, the drama of Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, and Calderón is receiving some recognition, at least in theater histories published in Britain. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, for example, contains a thirty-page article by Victor Dixon on

Spanish classical theater, practically the same number of pages allotted in this collective volume to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French and Italian drama (Brown). *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* mentions Spain's "rich contribution to world drama" (Banham 911). But it is worth noting that the descriptive word is "contribution," rather than "influential," as the Italian Renaissance theater is considered to be, or "transcendent," as the theater of Corneille, Racine, and Molière is deemed to be. The sad fact is, as Melveena McKendrick points out in her *Theatre in Spain*, that "the dramatic genius of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain is virtually unrecognized outside the circle of Hispanic studies" (270).<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of North America. In the foreword to a collective volume entitled *Comedias del Siglo de Oro and Shakespeare*, Bruce Wardropper laments that "the extraordinary quantitative florescence of drama under the Spanish Habsburgs has indeed been strangely neglected by cultivated readers and theatergoers in the United States" (11). It is significant that the section devoted to British and North American scholarship on Spanish classical theater in the *Actas de la I Conferencia Internacional "Hacia un Nuevo Humanismo"* includes only articles on playhouses, theatrical companies, staging, and sources (Bernardo Ares 1289–1380) and none on the plays themselves.

Until recently Spanish classical theater has also been largely absent from British and North American playhouses. According to McKendrick, when Calderón's *El alcalde de Zalamea*, translated by Adrian Mitchell, opened in London's National Theatre in 1981 British theater critics "hailed the discovery of a remarkable 'new' dramatist" (270). After that date, which marked the third centenary of the "new" dramatist's death, an increasing number of Spanish classical plays by Calderón and others were translated and performed in Britain and the United States. However, apart from the handful of pieces staged by the National Theatre of London and the Royal Shakespeare Company of Stratford-upon-Avon, most of the productions were performed at university theaters, small theaters, and at theater festivals, such as El Chamizal in Texas.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, most of the plays were adapted, since as Dawn Smith remarked, "para establecer contacto con sus respectivos públicos, los traductores y/o directores [. . .] utilizaron estrategias diferentes. Adrian Mitchell y Michael Bogdanov impusieron su propia ideología a los textos de Calderón" (309). One such ideological adaptation of a key play in the Spanish classical repertoire was produced in New York City in 2000. *The New York Times* critic D. J. R. Bruckner reviewed it: "[T]he audience is caught in the dream, in which a parade of bondage, rape, torture, mutilation, murder, treason and civil war, accompanied by the music and rhythms of flamenco, arouses the uneasy laughter of confusion" (n.p.). Specialists may have some difficulty in recognizing in this description Calderón's *La vida es sueño*. Despite the flamenco, Bruckner's verdict on Calderón was that he is

a superb poet with deep psychological insights, [who] explored astonishingly modern concerns: an intellectual elite manipulating nature, determinism undermining free will, child abuse producing criminality, men subjugating women. His play should translate easily into captivating present-day theater. (n.p.)

In the critic's estimation, the New York production unfortunately left a great deal to be desired, since it seemed to have turned the play into a soap opera.

Another adaptation was produced by the Fundación Bilingüe para las Artes de Los Angeles. That group announced for its 2004 season a play entitled *Los clásicos . . . enredos*, which was advertised as an amalgam of four comedies, each by a different dramatist: Calderón's *La dama duende*, Lope de Vega's *El anzueto de Fenisa*, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa*, and Ruiz de Alarcón's *La verdad sospechosa*.<sup>3</sup> The English equivalent would be, I suppose, a production based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, and Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*.

My article attempts to analyze the reasons behind Britain and North America's general lack of interest in a theater that in its day rivaled, if not surpassed, in importance and influence the theater of Shakespeare and Molière. Is it a question of prejudice, a by-product of the Black Legend, a lack of understanding, or is it simply that the theater of Lope de Vega, Tirso, and Calderón does not measure up, according to present standards, to that of their English and French contemporaries?

Initially, prejudice does not seem to be the cause of neglect, for it does not apply to other areas of Spanish culture. Is it possible to imagine a history of art without a mention of Velázquez, Goya, and Picasso? In 2003 *The New York Times* headlined an article on the Metropolitan Museum "Manet and Velázquez" exhibition with "The Masters of the French Masters Were Spanish." Its author, Michael Kimmelman, considers Velázquez "the greatest painter who ever lived" and mentions that after seeing his paintings, Manet allegedly said that "he didn't know why anyone even bothered to paint" (n.p.). Cervantes, who is placed by Bloom at the center of the Western canon with Shakespeare, occupies a similar position in the British and North American intellectual world, as attested by the two recent translations of *Don Quixote* (Rutherford; Grossman).

Perhaps the best way to begin the search for an answer is with the book *Spanish Influence on English Literature*, published in London in 1905. Its author, Martin Hume, was a corresponding member of the Spanish Royal Academy and the Royal Academy of History as well as extension lecturer in Spanish at the University of London. In his last two chapters, which deal with Spanish influence on English dramatists, Hume alludes to "the vivid dramatic instinct of the Spanish race," which he is able to detect even in the surviving fragment of the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* (246). For Hume, Elizabethan and Spanish drama were similar in that they both "broke with the classical tradition, and adopted a modern and more colloquial presentation"; however, "in most other points they were dissimilar, because the national character is dissimilar":

Reverie and speculation, cogitation with oneself, musing on things seen, are the natural bent of the English nature. An Englishman wants to get at the springs that turn the human wheels of life round; he wants to understand the works, to sound the reasons for action. The Spaniards, like most semi-Latin peoples, care little for that.

They wish to see and participate in the movement itself; to talk, to enjoy the surface of things whilst they may: in short, to follow the story, to weep with the afflicted heroine, to see themselves reflected in the unselfish bravery of the hero, to laugh at the buffoon, and to curse the villain. (254–55)

Today, we would dismiss Hume's racial arguments without a second thought. But critics appear to generally acknowledge that he was to some extent right in believing Shakespeare's theater to be somehow more profound than, for example, Lope de Vega's. What precisely makes it more profound? Most commentators immediately point to the complexity and humanity of Shakespeare's characters. Bloom, for example, argues that Shakespeare's characters are individualized: "no other writer, before or since, gives us a stronger illusion that each character speaks with a different voice from the others"; furthermore, "Shakespeare so opens his characters to multiple perspectives that they become analytical instruments for judging you" (*Western Canon* 60). In a later book on Shakespeare, Bloom attributes to him "the invention of the human." In a section titled "Shakespeare's Universalism," he claims that in his book, "Shakespeare's originality in the representation of character will be demonstrated throughout, as will the extent to which we all of us were, to a shocking degree, pragmatically reinvented by Shakespeare" (*Shakespeare* 17).

Bloom is not alone in emphasizing the importance of characterization in Shakespeare's theater; he is the last in a long and illustrious line of Shakespearean scholars that reaches back to John Dryden. Recently, Leslie O'Dell published a book titled *Shakespearean Characterization: A Guide for Actors and Students*. I do not believe it will be possible to find a similar title in the extensive bibliography on Spanish Golden Age drama. Why? Because for the great majority of specialists in the field—and I include in this category actors and theater directors in and outside Spain—characters in Spanish classical drama are stereotypes, abstractions, and personified qualities, rather than true, rounded dramatic figures. This belief goes back at least 150 years to 1855, when George Ticknor, first professor of French and Spanish at Harvard, proclaimed that one of the fundamental principles in the theater of Lope de Vega,

which may be considered as running through the whole of his full-length plays [is] that of making all other interests subordinate to the interest of the story. Thus, the characters are a matter evidently of inferior moment with him; so that the idea of exhibiting a single passion giving a consistent direction to all the energies of a strong will, as in the case of Richard the Third, or, as in the case of Macbeth [. . .] does not occur in the whole range of his dramas. (222–23)

His categorical assertion seems to have been based on his reading of at most a dozen plays, one of which, *La estrella de Sevilla*, we now know not to have been written by Lope de Vega. Ticknor does not mention, and appears not to have read, masterpieces like *El perro del hortelano*, *Peribáñez*, and *El caballero de Olmedo*.

Exactly half a century later, in 1905, Hume further fueled the myth that the characters in Spanish classical plays are stereotypes. He wrote that the characters

in *La estrella de Sevilla* (also wrongly attributed by him to Lope de Vega) “are ticketed unmistakably with their characteristics the moment they appear on the stage, and they are invariable throughout” (259). Spanish classical characters, according to Hume, do not develop because “this needs introspection, patient thought and study on the part of the author, which neither Lope nor Calderón [. . .] could give, or indeed their public desired” (260). The same applies to the *graciosos*: “There is no differentiation of them. They are all turned out of the same mould, and from the beginning of the play to the end, whatever happens, they never change” (263). What a difference in characterization, laments the former professor of the University of London, when compared to Shakespeare’s comic figures, let alone his Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello!

A third and far more damaging contribution to this myth of characterization was made half a century later, when Alexander Parker published *The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age* in 1957. The distinguished hispanist and former professor of the Universities of London, Pittsburgh, Austin (Texas), West Indies, and Edinburgh read Spanish Golden Age plays far better than did his predecessors, but he also relegated the playwrights’ character-drawing to the lowest rung of the dramatic ladder by subordinating it to action, theme, unity, and moral purpose. The nearly universal adoption of Parker’s “approach” by a generation of British and North American students in the sixties and early seventies contributed to the perpetuation of the myth. With some notable exceptions (Dixon, *Lope de Vega, Characterization*; Evans), Parker’s ideas on the Spanish Golden Age’s relative lack of emphasis on dramatic characterization are still general currency among hispanists and theater professionals. For example, in a recently published *Diccionario de la comedia del Siglo de Oro*, one of its editors, Frank Casa, concludes in “Caracterización” that “el personaje autónomo es un concepto caro a la literatura moderna pero de poca utilidad dramática para el teatro clásico” (40). Why? Because the all-important theme of the play demands that the dramatic character “cumpla la función que la obra le exija y las características que exhibe no pueden alejarle del papel que le corresponde en ella” (40). But if an actor is assigned a role even before rehearsals begin, that character cannot surprise the audience with its individuality, humanity, or originality. He or she will be subordinate to the exigencies of the plot, to the illustration of some aspect of the theme, to the fate assigned by dramatic convention, and will fail to give the spectators the illusion that they are seeing a real person on stage. If Casa is right, then Spanish classical drama is indeed a theater of puppets, of actors wearing invisible masks, of abstractions speaking in verse. In short, it is not real theater, and its irrelevance in today’s world should surprise no one.

It should be evident by now that if critics as well as actors and theater directors are convinced of the impossibility of extracting an ounce of humanity out of Spanish classical characters, the plays of Lope, Tirso, and Calderón will become a theater of ideas, of intellectualisms—a religious sermon or a circus performance. The plays will have to be adapted, modernized, altered, pruned, or transformed, and they will appear strange, grotesque, and/or an extension of the

tourist's Spain: Segismundo as a bullfighter, Peribáñez as a flamenco singer, Marta *la piadosa* in gypsy dress. Why should Spanish classical theater be given such treatment? A possible explanation is that Ticknor, Hume, and Parker are right; that is to say, that there are not, aside perhaps from Don Juan, true characters in Spanish seventeenth-century drama. One may even argue that the reason for this anomaly lies in the fact that, unlike Shakespeare and Molière, no Spanish playwright, with the exception of Andrés de Claramonte, was an actor or a director of his own company. But is it plausible that such a creative, diverse, and popular theater could have succeeded in attracting audiences for well over four centuries without lifelike characters? Are not characters the essence of drama? Or put another way, is it possible to communicate emotions of fear, pain, shame, pride, honor, revenge, love, and despair through puppetlike characters?

Two years ago, in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Jonathan Thacker dreamt of the day when "Lope, Calderón and Tirso are mentioned in the same breath with Shakespeare, Racine, Molière, Chekhov, Brecht, Ibsen, or the other acknowledged giants of European theatre;" but he cautioned that "it will take the sustained testing of their works on European stages for this to come about" (5). Thacker suggests a number of reasons for the neglect suffered by the Spanish classical theater, among them the sheer volume of plays written during the period and the fact that Golden Age dramatists "became associated with the forces of conservatism in twentieth-century Spain" (6). But I believe that there is another, perhaps more powerful, reason: the scarce attention that both hispanists and theater professionals have paid to characterization. It is true that, as Stephen Orgel says, characters "are not people, they are elements of a linguistic structure, lines in a drama, and more basically, words on a page" (8). Yet, audiences continue to identify with many of them. Hamlet, Othello, Don Juan, and Molière's misanthrope are true dramatic characters in the sense that audiences recognize their own humanity in them. Until Segismundo, Peribáñez, Pedro Crespo, and Doña Ángela are perceived in a similar way, it will be impossible for Spanish classical theater to transcend the narrow confines of university classrooms. Yet, in the last twenty years, the great majority of academic articles, doctoral dissertations, and books on Spanish Golden Age drama published in English—the only publications that may succeed in attracting the attention of North American and British theater professionals—has shaken off the Parkerian shackles only to follow the tenets of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, Marxism, deconstructionism, and other "isms." These theories often use (and abuse) the text as a pretext to address issues that, although possibly of great import to the contemporary world, have little to contribute to Bloom's invention of the human. Spanish classical theater has become for many not an object of study, but a means to analyze, often anachronistically, today's world. I would say that the scholarship of Spanish Golden Age drama has jumped from the scholasticism of the thematic-structural approach—an approach that believes that reason alone can explain all without resorting to observation and experimentation, that is to say, to the staging of plays—to the mannerism and baroqueism of poststructuralist and post-

modernist approaches. In the process, it has skipped the humanism of the Renaissance, an important stage during which scholars perhaps might have succeeded in placing the characters created by Lope, Tirso, and Calderón where they belong, at the center of the dramatic universe, next to those created by Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and Chekhov. Golden Age drama is not likely to be appreciated, or staged, because of its “scholastic” or “baroque” features; its significance, if any, will be found in its humanity, which is after all what brings audiences to playhouses. English literature specialists may now analyze the baroque aspects of Shakespeare’s theater because others already have established its human values. They now may suggest controversially that Caliban is a new Spartacus who rebels against Prospero’s colonial tyranny because there exists a long and distinguished critical tradition—from Dryden and Dr. Johnson to Auden, Browning, and others—that studied him as an authentic dramatic character—half a wild man, half a sea beast, but one with, as Bloom argues, legitimate pathos (*Shakespeare* 665). Shakespeare’s drama, already established as significant, can withstand such assault, but Spain’s classical drama, which is still in search of credentials in the British and North American theater world, runs the risk of becoming a mere jumble of words and images poorly understood and badly acted on a stage. Golden Age characters have been transmogrified into abstractions, signs, and aberrations before they were given the opportunity to inform us of their humanity. Segismundo, critics say, is a New Man, a bourgeois individualist, a Christian prince, a Machiavellian prince, a politician that institutes universal suffrage, an abstraction, a myth (Ruano, “Introducción” 69); but he never seems to be an authentic dramatic character. But is it credible that a culture that has given the world *Celestina*, *Lazarillo*, and *Don Quixote*, and paintings as realistic as those of Velázquez, Zurbarán, Murillo, and Ribera, could deprive the characters of its most popular artistic manifestation of their humanity? Does Spanish art offer realism and humanism in all except the theater?

Fortunately, it is now possible to explode the myth of Spanish classical theater. Jesús Puente’s bravura performance as Pedro Crespo in José Luis Alonso’s 1988 production of *El alcalde de Zalamea*, Carlos Hipólito’s Don García in Pilar Miró’s *La verdad sospechosa* (1991), and Emma Suárez as Diana and Carmelo Gómez as Teodoro in Pilar Miró’s 1995 film version of *El perro del hortelano*—to mention but four memorable performances in the last two decades—should suffice to show that at least some of Spain’s classical characters (and there are many more) can be infused by the right actors with enough psychological depth and complexity to take their place alongside some of the greatest creations in world drama.<sup>4</sup> What do these performances have in common? The fact that actors as well as directors approached the text believing in the truth of the characters and therefore managed to portray them as genuine human beings. In general, however, the lack of serious study generates not rounded characters, but stereotypes and circus performers, as attested by the tendency of so many modern actors to execute a pirouette, or to leap, fall down, crawl, stand on their heads, sing flamenco, laugh or scream while recit-

ing the verses of Lope, Tirso, and Calderón, to the increasing confusion of an audience who cannot believe what it sees on stage because it clearly does not correspond to what it hears.

To what do we owe this method of acting? Probably to the widespread belief, encouraged by some scholars both in Spain and outside Spain, that Golden Age drama is more interested in themes, religion, kingship, and ideology than in human nature; that it is a theater of ideas rather than characters. As these performers do not really understand what the text says nor what motivates the characters, they resort to the hackneyed tricks of an actor, often a poor imitation of *commedia dell'arte* "business."

It is not, nor should it be, the critic's job to tell an actor or a theater director how to create a character. But this does not imply that the critic has nothing to contribute. As Francisco Ruiz Ramón points out, actors as well as directors often complain, and with reason, that scholars do not deal with matters that are truly of interest to them:

¿Cómo funciona realmente el texto en la escena? ¿Cómo solucionar física, materialmente los problemas del texto? ¿Cómo conciliar el texto clásico y las convenciones actorales del siglo XVII [. . .] con la tradición (o falta de tradición) actoral actual? [. . .] ¿Qué hacer o cómo hacer con el verso?" (144)

These are essential questions to which I would add: How many valid interpretations are there of what a particular character says and does? Are there dramatically interesting ways to play characters on stage without falling into anachronisms or betraying the text? What should one look for in the text so as to be able to get under the skin of a character? How can one make a modern audience understand and identify with a seventeenth-century character?

Through a close analysis of the text, and with the help of linguistic, historical, ideological, literary, and theatrical knowledge, scholars will be able to offer actors and directors a whole gamut of interpretations, meanings, possibilities, contexts, potentialities, and perspectives, not all of them readily apparent to the nonspecialist.<sup>5</sup> Bloom does not hesitate to give more or less controversial interpretations of the whole Shakespearean gallery of characters, to criticize Ralph Fiennes's recent *Hamlet*, or to applaud his all-time favorite, John Gielgud's. He does not shy away from writing pages and pages about *Hamlet* and *Falstaff*, his favorite characters, whom he considers not just real people, but characters more real than average human beings. Shakespeare is important, says Bloom, because he teaches us to understand human nature, and he does this through his characters, for "the representation of human character and personality remains always the supreme literary value, whether in drama, lyric, or narrative" (*Shakespeare* 413). If this supreme literary value is denied to Spanish classical characters, the plays in which they appear will inevitably have little or no impact in contemporary Western culture.

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## NOTES

1. Checking with <<http://www.amazon.com>>, I found that the bestseller among Spanish plays is Calderón's *Life Is a Dream*, ranked 1,234,865 overall. Compare this with Shakespeare's bestseller, *Hamlet*, ranked 5,541, or more significantly, since it is also a translation, with Molière's *Misanthrope*, ranked 54,605.

2. Among the most important productions over the last twenty years are the following plays: (by Calderón) *Life Is a Dream*, translated and adapted by Adrian Mitchell and John Barton, and performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1983; *The Great Theater of the World*, also translated by Mitchell and performed in 1984; *The Painter of His Dishonour*, translated by David Johnston and Laurence Boswell and performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, in July 1995; and *The Phantom Lady*, English version by Matthew Stroud, performed in 2000 at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas; (by Lope de Vega) *The Dog in the Manger*, translated by Victor Dixon and performed in Trinity College, Dublin, in 1986; *The Knight from Olmedo*, translated and adapted by David Johnston and performed at Gate Theater in 1991; *In Love but Discreet*, translated by Vern Williamsen and performed at El Chamizal, Texas, in 1986; *Fuenteovejuna*, translated and adapted by Mitchell and performed at the Royal National Theatre, London, in 1989; and *The Incomparable Doña Ana (La gallarda toledana)*, translated by Harvey Erdman and performed at El Chamizal Festival in 1991; (by Tirso de Molina) *The Balconies of Madrid*, translated by Kenneth Stackhouse and performed at El Chamizal in 1994; *The Joker of Seville*, translated and adapted by Derek Walcott and performed in Toronto by students in 1984; *The Last Days of Don Juan*, another version of *El burlador de Sevilla*, translated and adapted by Nick Dear and performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1990; *Damned for Despair*, translated and adapted by Laurence Boswell and Jonathan Thacker and performed at the Gate Theatre in London in 1991; *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*, translated and adapted by Laurence Boswell, Jonathan Thacker, and Deirdre McKenna and performed at the Gate Theatre in London in 1990; *The Rape of Tamar*, translated by Paul Whitworth and performed in London in 1992 as well as in the Santa Cruz Shakespeare Festival, California, in 1994; *The Outcast in Court (El vergonzoso en palacio)*, translated by Harley Erdman and performed at El Chamizal in 1993. North American audiences also were able to see Mira de Amescua's *Gambler's House*, translated by Vern Williamsen and performed at the Chamizal Festival in 1990; and Ruiz de Alarcón's *Love's True Lies (La verdad sospechosa)*, translated by Kenneth Stackhouse and performed at El Chamizal in 1995. See the Web page of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater (<<http://www.trinity.edu/org/comedia>>) and Smith 299–309.

3. See its Web site: <<http://www.bfatheater.org/pages/calendar.htm>>.

4. Unfortunately, only the film of *El perro del hortelano (The Dog in the Manger)*, with subtitles from the English translation by Victor Dixon, has reached British and North American audiences.

5. I have attempted something of the sort in several articles: see Ruano "Teoría," "Pedro Crespo," and "Tirso a escena."

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