

SPANISH DRAMATISTS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

*A Bio-Bibliographical
Sourcebook*

Edited by
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LUIS VÉLEZ DE GUEVARA (1578/79–1644)

C. George Peale

BIOGRAPHY

The life and works of Luis Vélez de Guevara are riddled with lacunae that may never be satisfactorily filled. Because documentary evidence is sometimes ambiguous and layered with irony, it is not easy to ascertain some of his life's circumstances. Similarly, because his works were never collected for publication, less than one-fourth remain of the some 400 plays he claimed to have written, and less than half of those have been edited. As a consequence, critical assessments of his oeuvre to date have been limited in scope.

Born in 1578 or 1579—the evidence here is contradictory—in the Andalusian city of Ecija, Luis Vélez was the second child of middle-class parents, Diego Vélez de Dueñas and Francisca Negrete de Santander. He studied at the University of Osuna, graduating Bachiller en Artes in 1596. Soon thereafter he entered the service of Don Rodrigo de Castro, Cardinal-Archbishop of Seville. Vélez left his patron in June 1599 and joined the military, serving in Italy and the Levant. On returning to Spain in mid-1602, he lived briefly in Seville before moving to the royal court in Valladolid. In 1606, Vélez followed the king and government to Madrid, where he enjoyed the favor and patronage of nobility and royalty until his death in 1644.

Critics have unanimously portrayed Vélez de Guevara as a wheedler and bothersome hanger-on. Credit problems were constant throughout the playwright's life—a fact noteworthy, but not unusual, especially when considered against the sociological context in which seventeenth-century artists and writers lived and worked. Clearly, more insight on the dramatist is gained from his relationship to social and artistic power than from his penurious condition. Vélez was highly regarded both as a courtier and as a poet. He was never far from the center of power in Spain's political and artistic life. His first patron, Don Rodrigo de Castro, was, after all, the duke of Lerma's uncle as well as a member of the Holy Inquisition's Supreme Council. His presence in the royal retinue, from the moment of Philip II's death in September 1598 until the conclusion of

the Cortes in Barcelona following Philip III's marriage to Margarita of Austria the following year, was doubly powerful, owing to his dual role as prelate and as personal counselor to his nephew, the newly appointed *privado* to King Philip. Events during those months were a political, social, and cultural watershed that the twenty-year-old future playwright was able to observe close up in the company of his new friend and mentor, Lope de Vega. Later, until 1623, Vélez served in the households of two of the court's most powerful figures, the Count of Saldaña until 1618 and then the Marquis of Peñafiel. Besides being the Duke of Lerma's second son, Saldaña was an influential patron whose salon, or "academy," was attended by nearly all the court's nobility and virtually the entire pantheon of Golden Age poets—it will be remembered that it was in the "distinguished company" of Saldaña's academy that Lope aired his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*. From 1623 onward, Vélez enjoyed a succession of appointments from the Count-Duke of Olivares, first as steward to the Prince of Wales during his six-month sojourn of courtship in Madrid, then briefly as majordomo for King Philip's uncle, the Archduke Charles of Austria, and finally as doorkeeper of the royal chambers, a lifetime appointment signed by King Philip in 1625. Among Philip IV's poet-pensioners, Vélez enjoyed unparalleled access to the corridors of power, but only as an observer and with nothing even slightly approaching the honors bestowed on Calderón and Rojas. In 1642, two years before his death, Vélez retired from his post in the royal household, succeeded by his son, Juan, who by then was also a playwright of note.

DRAMATURGY: MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Vélez de Guevara's theatrical career coincides with the regimes of Lerma and Olivares. He was closely linked to both, so it is natural that he would compose plays on the theme of *privanza* and that those works would have especially distinctive features. His earliest dramatic effort, *El espejo del mundo* (1602–3), is the Comedia Nueva's most succinct dramatic statement on the topic. *Don Pedro Miago*, attributed until recently to Rojas Zorrilla, is the first work to bring Gongorism to the stage; it is also the direct textual source for Lope de Vega's masterpiece, *El villano en su rincón*. The song "Duro escollo de hiedra armado" in Act 3 of *El lucero de Castilla y Luna de Aragón* [Castilla's shooting star and the moon of Aragón] was one of the great "hits" of the century. Calderón incorporated it into four of his own plays. *El Conde don Pero Vélez y don Sancho el Deseado* was commissioned by the Duke of Lerma for an after-dinner performance in the gardens of his palace at Lerma on St. John's Eve, 1615, before the most privileged circle of the royal court. Drawing his plot from one of the best-known stories and songs of traditional balladry, Vélez ingeniously took advantage of the site and time of its staging, utilizing the palace service staff, the architecture and landscaping of the newly constructed dining pavilion, the duke's table and silver service, and even the moon's phase on that particular evening to confect a highly theatrical, original work. Another *privanza* play, *A*

lo que obliga el ser rey, is artistically quite unsatisfactory, yet it offers a problematic “insider’s” view of palace life, and the play’s “bureaucratic” solution to the honor problem, in which the villain is dispatched not by blood but by official bulletins posted by the perpetrator himself, is an engaging parodic counterpoint to the Comedia Nueva’s traditional honor play.

As with Lope de Vega and Guillén de Castro, the center of gravity of Vélez’s oeuvre lies in Spain’s history and legends as handed down by tradition from chronicles, balladry, folklore, and proverbs. Whether the poet appropriated entire stories or only small elements from his sources, the cultural bindings of his plays were always tied closely to the audience’s knowledge and sensibilities. In this sense, Vélez’s comedies, even those in a more courtly vein, have a decidedly “popular” and “authentic” feel, as in *Los hijos de la Barbuda*; *La niña de Gómez Arias*; *La serrana de la Vera*; *La montañesa de Asturias*; *El Alba y el Sol*; *La Luna de la Sierra*; *El alcalde de Zalamea*; *Los novios de Hornachuelos*; *El diablo está en Cantillana*; *Si el caballo vos han muerto*; and *Más pesa el rey que la sangre*.

A number of Vélez’s plays portray recent history. Some, like *La mayor desgracia de Carlos V y jornada de Argel*, *La jornada del Rey don Sebastián en África*, *El cerco de Peñón de Vélez*, and *Los amotinados de Flandes* theatrically re-create historical events both large and small. Others paint spectacular, dramatic portraits of heroes in Spain’s recent history: *El Hércules de Ocaña* (Don Gonzalo de Céspedes), *El hijo del águila*, and *El Águila del Agua* (Don Juan of Austria). *Las palabras a los reyes y gloria de los Pizarros*, like Tirso de Molina’s well-known trilogy, was commissioned by the conquistadors’ descendants as part of their concerted campaign to revive the family’s fortunes at court. The play essentially reteaches the story of the Peruvian conquest by drawing heavily upon recorded history and official documents; its didacticism is manifest in frequent restatements and paraphrases to clarify American words and empirical realities whose significance would not be immediately understood by audiences in Madrid; its dramatic structure creates a “historiography” in which the Pizarros’ deeds are woven tightly into the grand imperialistic design of Charles V and his successors.

Vélez did not confine his repertoire to Spanish history; he penned foreign histories as well: *Julián Apóstata*; *Atila, azote de Dios*; *El cerco de Roma por el rey Desiderio*; *El renegado de Jerusalén*; *La nueva ira de Dios, Gran Tamorlán de Persia*; *El capitán prodigioso, príncipe de Transilvania*; *La cristianísima lis*; *El jenízaro de Albania*; *El príncipe esclavo, I*; *El príncipe esclavo, II*; *El gran Jorge Castrioto y Príncipe Escanderbec*. The latter four are noteworthy because they document the entire evolution of Vélez de Guevara’s dramatic vision and craft applied to a single theme, the life of Balkan hero Scanderbeg. The first was written for public venues. The poet reworked his play for performance in the royal palace under the title *El príncipe esclavo*; its success prompted a second part and also a recast for the *corrales*, *El gran Jorge Castrioto*, which exists in two different versions.

Vélez’s novelesque plays, in the main, have a decidedly courtly flavor. *El Caballero del Sol* [The Knight of the Sun] was commissioned for the king’s *privado* and staged with elaborate special effects before Philip III’s court and the international diplomatic corps in the palace gardens at Lerma in 1617. There are two eyewitness accounts of the performance. Large platforms were constructed on each side of the Esla River, one for the players, the other for the audience, both projecting into the river like quays. Revolving sets enable the company to make rapid scene changes, from Naples to Plymouth, from solemn interiors to mountain scenes with clouds, thunder, lightning, rain, hail, and mist. Trapdoors were variously used to swallow characters or sweep them up into the heavens. A ship sailed up the river and was used several times in the course of the action to transport characters from one place to another. Ostensibly an allegorical romance of chivalry, *El caballero del Sol* takes place outside empirical space and time; the sweep of its plot is immense. Vélez took full advantage of the park setting and of his technical resources to make the impossible appear not only plausible but real.

On a less grandiose scale, there are Vélez’s *capa y espada* [cloak and dagger] plays. Critical consensus has long held that Vélez did not write in that vein, but *Los sucesos en Orán por el Marqués de Ardales* and *Correr por amor fortuna* were clearly conceived and executed in the *capa y espada* tradition. Also *Cumplir dos obligaciones*, which, like the Castrioto plays, was revised by Vélez for a later palace production as *Cumplir dos obligaciones y duquesa de Sajonia*, and revised yet again for the *corral*, probably in the 1620s, with the title *La obligación a las mujeres*. In these, Vélez fuses *capa y espada* conventions with the grotesqueries of Calderonian wife-murder plays. A number of Vélez’s novelesque works revolve around the identity of princes and nature of kingship: *El Rey en su imaginación*; *El niño diablo*; *El rey muerto*; *El príncipe viñador*; *El Rey naciendo mujer*; *Virtudes vencen señales* (1617); *Amor es naturaleza* (1617–18); *El Conde don Sancho Niño* (composed before 1628). The latter three are noteworthy for their explicit connections to Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*: the Segismundo character in *Virtudes* is black; the “Segismundo” of *Amor* is a woman; *Sancho Niño* clearly appears to parody scenes from Calderón’s masterpiece in a quid pro quo manner, which raises serious questions about *La vida es sueño*’s date of composition.

Vélez was especially renowned for his religious plays. His dramatizations of biblical stories—*La hermosura de Raquel, I and II*; *Santa Susana*; *La Magdalena*; *El nacimiento de Nuestro Señor*—of the lives of saints—*El negro del Serafín* (Rosambuco); *La bienaventurada madre Santa Teresa de Jesús*; *El mejor rey en rehenes* (St. Louis the King); *El lego de Alcalá* (Fray Julian of Alcalá); *La rosa alejandrina* (St. Catherine); *El milagro imposible, Santa Rita de Casia*—and of moral issues with allegorical figures—*La devoción de la misa*; *Las tres edades del mundo*; *Los tres portentos de Dios*; *La corte del demonio*; *La abadesa del cielo*; *La mesa redonda*—showcase the art and craft with which Vélez so successfully animated Catholic orthodoxy onstage: inventive, original

twists on well-known dramatic premises, spectacular special effects, and a rich mix of pathos, insightful lyricism, and ironic humor.

Vélez's extant short works number five *loas* and dances—*Loa curiosa* (prologue to *La hermosura de Raquel, I*); *Baile de la Colmenarueta* (epilogue to *La hermosura de Raquel, I*); *Loa curiosa y de ingenio* (prologue to *La hermosura de Raquel, II*); *Baile de los moriscos* (epilogue to *La hermosura de Raquel, II*); *Loa sacramental*—and six interludes, *Antonia y Perales*, *Los atarantados*, *La burla más sazónada*, *La sarna de los banquetes*, *Los sordos*, and *El hambriento*.

Collaborative composition is one of the fascinating and little-understood practices of the Spanish *comedia*'s second generation. Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla and Vélez de Guevara figure prominently in the rosters of known collaborated plays. Perhaps they were the catalysts of the phenomenon by reason of their palace appointments as well as their talent. The two collaborated on *También tiene el sol menguante*. With Coello, Vélez and Rojas wrote *La Baltasara*, *También la afrenta es veneno*, and *El catalán Serralonga y bandos de Barcelona*. The two also composed *El pleito que tuvo el demonio con el cura de Madrilejos* in collaboration with Mira de Amescua. Vélez collaborated once with Calderón and Cáncer, on *Enfermar con el remedio*, and he participated in the extraordinary seriatim composition of two plays, each involving nine authors: *Algunas hazañas de las muchas de don Garcíá Hurtado de Mendoza, Marqués de Cañete* (Act 1 by Mira de Amescua, el Conde del Vasto, and Luis de Belmonte; Act 2 by Ruiz de Alarcón, Vélez de Guevara, and Fernando de Ludeña; Act 3 by Jacinto de Herrera, Diego de Villegas, Guillén de Castro, and Belmonte) and *La luna africana* (Act 1 by Belmonte, Vélez de Guevara, and his son, Juan; Act 2 by el Maestro Alfaro, Moreto, and Antonio Martínez; Act 3 by Sigler de Huerta, Cáncer, and Pedro Rosete).

Vélez's undisputed masterpiece and one of Spanish literature's truly great works is *Reinar después de morir*. The lyrical tragedy re-creates the story of Doña Inés de Castro and Don Pedro of Portugal. Drawn from earlier works by Antonio Ferreira and Jerónimo Bermúdez, the play is superbly crafted, reflecting a composition whose poetics are more akin to Calderón's than to Lope's: every character is strongly delineated; the plot is exceptionally taut and well paced; the poetry and music are exquisitely fused; the internal structure is unified around a finely nuanced cluster of metaphors. So singularly effective is Vélez de Guevara's *Reinar después de morir* that it is the wellspring for many of the dramas, operas, and ballets that have recast one of Europe's great modern myths.

In general, Vélez's plays can be distinctly characterized by their theatricality; his trademarks are, in the words of Cervantes, "pomp, tumult, pageantry, and grandeur." Because of these qualities and his fondness for special effects, Vélez's name is synonymous with the *comedia de ruido*. His protagonists are bold and strong-willed individuals whose actions and introspection frequently belie the notion that Vélez de Guevara's characters lack psychological depth, for example, Gila in *La serrana de la Vera*, Filipo in *Virtudes vencen señales*, Inés

in *Reinar después de morir*; Vélez moves even Attila and Desiderius onto an ethical point. The comic figures in his plays are quite distinct from the standard *gracioso*. In Vélez they are usually not dependent servant types but characters whose social role is not clearly identifiable and who move and act with far greater autonomy than their counterparts by other playwrights. Critics have recognized in Vélez's poetry a refinement that is more courtly and artificial than in Lope's. As noted before, Vélez introduced Gongorism into the *comedia*. But whether popular or *culterano*, risqué or elegant, mordantly ironic or tenderly moving, his versification is always masterfully facile, and no playwright was as adept as he at incorporating popular balladry and music into scenes. Two features that uniquely characterize Vélez's oeuvre derive directly from his life experiences. One is his fondness for Andalusia, especially Écija: evocations of the Andalusian landscape and of its famous horses abound, and Écija and her infamous pillory are mentioned frequently. The other feature stems from his years of military service: Vélez's knowledge of Levantine geography and history is quite apparent in many of his court plays, and his scenes with soldiers or sailors have a distinctly authentic ring. Another distinctive feature of Vélez de Guevara's dramaturgy is his penchant for spectacular execution scenes: *La serrana de la Vera* and *Reinar después de morir* close with a discovery scene depicting the execution of their respective heroines; *El alcalde de Zalamea* stages a double hanging; *La nueva ira de Dios*, a double suicide; *Attila, azote de Dios*, a double crucifixion. The discovery at the conclusion of *La jornada del Rey don Sebastián* reveals the execution of the cast's three *galanes*, the heads, respectively, of Portugal's monarchy, clergy, and nobility. But it is in *El capitán prodigioso* where Vélez takes the execution motif to its macabre extreme. His stage direction speaks for itself: "sounds of chains and fire offstage, a curtain opens and OTOMAN appears from the waist up, sitting on a tomb, wearing a tunic, mask and black wig. Burning torches on each side of the tomb, and on its steps all of the Sultan's brothers, as many as possible—[fourteen of them speak]—each one shown in the way in which his death was commanded by the Grand Turk MAHOMETO."

CRITICAL RESPONSE

In his time, Luis Vélez de Guevara was universally acclaimed as one of Spain's foremost poet/playwrights. Quevedo cited Vélez with Lope and Calderón as the three great figures of the Spanish *comedia*. Cervantes, Lope, and Montalbán praised his wit and poetry with glowing terms of affection and admiration. Ironically, Vélez is known today primarily for his only venture into prose fiction, *El Diablo Cojuelo* (1641).

It is commonly stated that the popularity of Vélez's works waned after his death. In fact, a substantial number of his plays remained in the repertoire and were performed widely, and numerous *suelta* editions were published through the end of the eighteenth century. Following Lista, Mesonero Romanos, La

Barrera, Menéndez y Pelayo, and Cotarelo y Mori, all of whom criticized the playwright for his "lack of originality" and "carelessness" with plots, twentieth-century historians have continued to place Vélez de Guevara in the first rank of the Golden Age's second-rate dramatists. While the perception of carelessness may be due, in no small part, to Vélez's tendency to rhetorical excess, especially in his court plays, the perception may also be due to the flawed state of texts that have come down to us, usually in multiple versions, all of them at least twice, and usually thrice or more removed from the author. Only since 1965 have analyses of Vélez de Guevara's dramaturgy from philological and theoretical approaches begun to displace assessments based on moralistic readings of his biography.

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