JONATHAN THACKER

A COMPANION TO GOLDEN AGE THEATRE

TAMESIS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

This *Companion* is intended to be an up-to-date and reliable guide to the extraordinary flowering of Spanish theatre between the late sixteenth century and about 1680. It provides an account of the nature and development of this theatre from the time when the first permanent playhouses were created in Spain until the death of Pedro Calderón de la Barca, the last major playwright of the time – a hundred-year period which Spaniards justifiably call their artistic *Siglo de Oro*.

Although Golden Age theatre is studied as part of university Spanish courses and tends to be admired and highly valued by those who have read or seen plays from the period, it is not a well-known area of European culture beyond the academy. The reasons for this are several: in Spain, the drama, which became known as the *comedia nueva* (or simply the *comedia*), has been successively, although never universally, mistrusted, rejected as formally inept, re-written, abused for political purposes, and misunderstood. It is not possible to talk of a performance tradition for the *comedia* the way it is for English or French drama of the same period. Abroad, despite the attentions of pockets of admirers in different parts and in different periods, it has tended to suffer because of its foreignness: the polymetric poetry in which it was written (in which verse forms change, often to suit different speakers or circumstances) is an obstacle to successful translation, and the concerns of the plots have seemed to some to be rather particular to Spain. In recent years, however, both within and outside Spain, there is some evidence of a renaissance in Golden Age theatre, and the more consistent testing of these plays on the stage, and the renewed interest which accompanies it, should begin to erode the misconceptions and ignorance that so often surround them.

A *Companion* is not strictly a history and this one is no exception. Fine literary histories of Spanish Golden Age drama already exist as single volumes or parts of a larger series. A good *Companion* should be simultaneously authoritative and individual. This may at first seem a contradictory notion but a guide must have a foundation built on a body of knowledge and analysis that is already there and has played a central part in past thinking about its subject. A simple example should demonstrate this point: it is true that a small number of plays from the Spanish Golden Age have come to represent – some would say misrepresent – the whole of the period's drama, and it would be a perverse guide which ignored these fundamental works. Accounts of most of what scholars and critics have taken to be the major works of Golden Age drama are included in these

pages despite misgivings about the justice of their standing for the whole. The authority of the guide depends on its author's choice and fair representation of the views of those many scholars and writers who have dedicated time to thinking about Golden Age drama. And yet the most pressing reason for the writing of a *Companion to Golden Age Theatre* at this time is that the field of study has changed so much so quickly. The past cannot be ignored but neither should it obscure the present. In choosing how much space to devote to developments in areas of investigation which touch upon staging, performance, women's writing, lesser-known plays, minor genres and critical reception, I reveal my own predilections and make judgements on their relative importance for the future. As the array of reactions to the *comedia* over the centuries proves, however conscious one may be of the pitfalls, one can never avoid some degree of enslavement to one's own time and subjective viewpoint.

A couple of further points are worth making to those about to take up this *Companion*: first, in addressing individual works or groups of works, I have attempted to avoid the value judgements that scholars often make about Golden Age plays or playwrights, and that often come back to haunt them as fashions change. I hope that some of the short analyses of the many works under consideration will encourage readers to explore the plays themselves and make up their own minds about them; secondly, I have not become embroiled in the often thorny issues surrounding the dating of plays but have given, in parentheses, the most generally accepted date of composition for each work, when it is examined. At times the date is approximate or is that of the play's first known performance. I have included, in the Bibliography, editions of all the plays that I mention in my text. In citing from a play I give its author, a short title and a reference to either line numbers or page numbers in the edition listed. Where two editions of the same play are recorded in the Bibliography, I also provide the editor's name. Where an editor chooses to recommence line numbering at the start of each act, a roman act number (e.g. II) is included. Orthography has rarely been modernized and when it has been, this is indicated in a footnote.

Finally, I am grateful for the guidance of many scholars whose work on the Spanish Golden Age I have read and admired. In particular, though, for their encouragement and willingness to read drafts of the chapters that follow, I would like to thank Jack Sage, Mike and Sarah Thacker, Victor Dixon, John Rutherford and Alejandro Coroleu. Especial thanks are due to Charles Davis for his thorough reading of the final typescript.

Jonathan Thacker

INTRODUCTION

The early-modern period in Europe, broadly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is regarded, as the epithet suggests, as critical in the development of the way Western cultures view themselves today. Spain experienced the tensions of this period with a particular intensity: its Empire, which had expanded confidently, providentially to some eyes, within the Old World and the New, fell into crisis and gradual but unrelenting decline. The Spain of Philip II (1556–98), Philip III (1598–1621) and Philip IV (1621–65) bred a succession of painters, poets, prose-writers and dramatists, who confronted and engaged with the issues at the heart of the period through their art. This flowering of the arts came to be known as the Golden Age – and for good reason.

The sixteenth century, which began with the kingdoms of Castile and Aragón newly united under Ferdinand and Isabella, and proceeded with expansion in the New World and military hegemony in Europe under Charles V, boasted considerable accomplishment in the arts. It had opened with Fernando de Rojas's extraordinary 'dramatic' work, the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (or *Celestina*); Garcilaso de la Vega had expanded the horizons of Spanish poetry in the 1520s and 1530s with his lyrical verse inspired by classical and Italian models; and the second half of the century would see the flowering of epic and religious poetry, the former represented by Ercilla's *La Araucana*, and the latter by Fray Luis de León and the mystics, San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Ávila. Prose writing, dominated for a time by romances of chivalry, also developed in innovative directions as the picaresque was born. In the theatre two traditions, religious and popular, developed alongside each other, as we shall see. In painting this is the age of El Greco, in which Philip II attracted some of Europe's most prominent artists to his court.

However, in the last years of the reign of Philip II and the entirety of those of his son and grandson, a new sensibility is evident particularly in the form that art takes. This period, not quite congruent with the Golden Age itself, is often referred to, especially within Spain, as the Baroque (*el Barroco*).[1] The extent to which the emergence of Baroque art and literature in Spain is due directly to historical developments in the period is debatable, but it seems likely that the events and currents of the reign of Philip II in particular brought about cultural

[1] Throughout this *Companion* I tend to apply the broader term 'Golden Age' to the theatre of the period.

changes and sparked questions that held artists' attention and therefore influenced their works. The future promised by enthusiastic attitudes towards humanism (which included the attitude of Charles V towards Erasmus) in the third decade of the sixteenth century had failed to materialize, in part because of the association, in Spanish minds, of Erasmus with Luther's Reformation. Some of humanism's legacy remained evident in the arts in Spain, especially in Cervantes's prose works, but the Catholic renewal, pursued under the austere Philip and epitomized by the deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545–63), saw Spain turn back in on itself, and back to its past, to assert conformity through orthodoxy within its territories. The promise of progressive Renaissance currents, though they had mostly run dry, left a trace, and ensured that post-Tridentine Spain could not return unperturbed to a world-view dominated by medieval Catholicism and a concomitant system of hierarchies within society. The tensions, including an uncertainty which resulted from a subsidence of faith in traditional sources of authority, are clear in the period. Some groups did not, or did not want to, accept their allotted place in the world: Spain was not a homogeneous whole but a country with a large population of *conversos* (from Islam and Judaism) and a good number of intelligent and perspicacious individuals who could see fault-lines in the world as it was presented to them. The repressive activities in the New World did not go unquestioned, as the salutary works of Bartolomé de las Casas prove; although monarchy was not seriously questioned as a system of government, individual kings were criticized and the conditions for regicide were discussed; although Machiavellianism as an ideal of government was resisted on principle, there was a creeping acceptance that ruling was not a straightforward business; although the relative positions of the sexes and the classes within Spain were defined by tradition, there were those who were not comfortable with them; new ideas were thrust into the great square of the republic by *arbitristas*. Open dissent, however, was not a sensible option.

Artistically the period, as we noted, is one in which formal limits are exceeded, in which containing skins are sloughed, in which innovation is presented as a challenge to the audience, whether reader or spectator. A consciousness of the pretence inherent to the maintenance of the social status quo, even to the presentation of self (if that is not to go too far), and of the moral and epistemological questions that are raised as a result, leads to a culture of excess, of difficulty and complexity, which dazzles the senses and engages the intellect provocatively. Art requires sophisticated interpretation. In poetry, Góngora and Quevedo, though literary opponents, both experimented with linguistic and conceptual sophistication and exhibited a coruscating wit; in prose, Cervantes's *Don Quijote* lays down a gauntlet to the notion of authority and merges the worlds of reality and fiction; in painting, Velázquez and Murillo question the very nature and authority of representation; in the theatre, playwrights of the generations of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca all but abandon classical norms and expectations to create a world in which performance and identity are often at loggerheads. Meanwhile the 'moralists', notably the Jesuit Baltasar Gracián and Francisco de Quevedo, use their prose works to

shock their readers out of mental complacency, pointing to alarming differences between appearance and reality, and investigating the human capacity for deceit and self-deception.

The theatre of the Golden Age was, it should go without saying, engaged with the society that brought it forth and is a particularly interesting facet of this world of art because of its reach. Unlike poetry, prose and much painting, theatre was able to command the attention of a cross-section of the population, not just a literate minority or social elite. Spaniards from the royal family to the *mosqueteros* (who stood to watch the play), men and women, clergy and laity, the literati and the illiterate, all became connoisseurs of the rich dramatic menu served up to them. This accessibility ensured that the world of the theatre was closely regulated. Its popularity ensured that writers who could satisfy an audience were in demand and produced huge numbers of plays. And yet, in spite of the privileged place that theatre had in Golden Age life, from our standpoint we can only ever know it partially, through texts and documents related to it that have come down to us. The precise ways in which a knowledge of contemporary performances of these play-texts would affect our understanding of their meaning and their purpose have escaped us forever. However, this should not mean that we read Golden Age plays without envisaging them as drama.

Several hundred of these plays, of perhaps 10,000 that were written in the period, have been preserved either in manuscript form or more usually as printed editions, either in *partes* (collections, usually of a dozen plays) or in *sueltas* (unbound quarto editions of single plays, printed in two columns usually on four sheets of paper). Many of these works, whose editing is usually a complex matter thanks to the changes made to them by theatre companies and printers after they left the desks of their creators, are still little read and remain unperformed since the seventeenth century. The sheer scale of the task of reading the extant plays makes it difficult for any individual to form a clear picture of the whole of Golden Age theatre. Indeed, only a small number of plays have tended to form part of a Golden Age canon at any one time, meaning that no century since the seventeenth has been allowed to appreciate the richness and variety of this dramatic blossoming. These difficulties have two implications for the modern-day Golden Age drama enthusiast: first, they complicate the task of writing a full guide to the drama; and second, they mean that there remains a great deal to be discovered and added to the sum of knowledge.

The seven chapters that follow are written with these points in mind. The first four attempt to provide a useful brief account of the emergence of the *comedia nueva*, of Lope de Vega's drama, of that of his contemporaries including Cervantes and Tirso de Molina, and of his successors' works, especially those of Calderón. And the final three explore and comment on the staging and performance of this drama, its generic variations, and its reception over the centuries. The *Companion* also includes appendices on the main verse forms Golden Age dramatists employed, and the *comedia* in English translation. It ends with a list of suggestions for further reading aimed at those keen to explore in more detail issues, plays and dramatists mentioned and discussed in these pages.