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Matthew D. Stroud
Trinity University, mstroud@trinity.edu

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**DEFINING THE *COMEDIA*:
ON GENERALIZATIONS ONCE WIDELY
ACCEPTED THAT ARE NO LONGER ACCEPTED
SO WIDELY**

MATTHEW D. STROUD
Trinity University

“All generalizations are false, including this one.”

—Mark Twain

Defining the *comedia* is a challenge that is rarely addressed directly in the pages of the *Bulletin of the Comediantes*. Those of us who spend our professional lives working with the plays that are brought together under this cover term have a visceral or intuitive understanding of what falls into the category of *comedia* and what lies outside of it. We are hardly exempt from having to articulate our definitions in concrete terms, however, because students, colleagues, and organizations to whom we write grants all want us to establish the limits, scope, and parameters of our field of study. Sometimes it is easy enough just to toss off a working but imprecise definition such as “the cover term for sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish theater,” sometimes we go into more detail, noting that the term is applicable not just to early modern Spanish comedies but to serious and religious works of theater as well. Frequently mention is made of the *corrales* or the fact that, in general, *comedias* are written in verse and presented in three acts. Categorical definitions always involve a process of establishing criteria that include some plays under the rubric of *comedia* and exclude others, and demarcating the boundaries

at the fringes where one finds gray areas of indeterminacy and difference of opinion. The purpose of this overview is to take another look at some of the generalizations that were taught and accepted as essential characteristics of the *comedia* thirty years ago, and to note the ways in which assertions that were widely, if perhaps not universally, held when I began my studies of the *comedia* are no longer considered to be eternal and incontrovertible truths.

In some ways, thirty years does not seem like a long time. When one focuses on history and historical artifacts, things on the surface do not seem to have changed very much. No one has discovered a previously unknown monarch wedged between Philip III and Philip IV, and, as historical documents, the texts of the plays we study have not changed in any radical way. In many cases we still use as standard editions that were published well more than thirty years ago; among many others, the magnificent edition of Tirso's *Obras completas* by Blanca de los Ríos comes to mind. At the same time, we have witnessed remarkable changes in our lifetimes. The widespread use of the personal computer and the creation of the Internet has so radically altered the way information is collected, interpreted, and disseminated that describing to today's students the process of looking up a book in a card catalog and having to read the material and take notes on it on the spot because there were no photocopy machines is very much like describing life before indoor plumbing. The ease with which one can access a *comedia* text online, search it for key terms, crosslink it to critical studies, and download pictures of performances was simply unimaginable thirty years ago.

Likewise, the *comedia* texts may not have changed much, but how we read them and what we think of them as a collective body of work have undergone amazing transformation. The canon has been enlarged to include many more plays, most significantly and fortunately plays by women. And thanks in large part to the annual Chamizal festival and directors, actors, and theater companies on three continents, *comedia* scholars now speak routinely of such theatrical matters as staging and performance, topics of discussion that were almost unheard-of before 1975. Without doubt, however, the greatest changes in the profession have occurred as a result of the proliferation of approaches available for viewing old texts and the application of theories elucidated in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is hard now to remember, and even harder to explain to younger colleagues, that once upon a time "literary

theory” meant the search for and establishment of totalizing, regularizing, authoritative generalizations that would tell one how to read all *comedias*. It was no accident that one of the most influential *comedia* scholars, Alexander A. Parker, chose to entitle the first version of his seminal work “*The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age*” (emphasis added). But lest one think that Parker was alone in his attempt to describe a “grand unified theory” of the *comedia*, one needs only to look at the titles of books and articles of the era to see the importance of the attempt to lay out the parameters of a singular, comprehensive “definition,” “method,” or “approach” that would provide the key to finding “the meaning” of not just an individual work but of all *comedias*, and, indeed, imitating the model of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, all literature as a whole. Consider, just to take three examples at random, Bartolomé Bennassar’s *The Spanish Character* (as if it were possible to generalize a character applicable to all the inhabitants of the various regions, classes, and diverse populations of Spain); Eric Bentley’s “The Universality of the *Comedia*” (as though the *comedia* were a single entity that was universal enough in scope to fit nicely into the larger frame of “literature” which was itself considered to be generalizable); and Bruce W. Wardropper’s “The Implicit Craft of the Spanish *Comedia*” (which not only reduces the thousands of plays to a single entity but which posits a singular “craft” that went into its production). The point here is not to deny the validity of many of the points found in these excellent works, but merely to point out the overwhelming tendency of the era to look for a single, correct, privileged way of reading the *comedia*. Essential to that project was the establishment of certain truths that pertained to every *comedia*, generalizations that could be used as templates for a uniform study of early modern Spanish theater. Richard Pym reminds us, of course, that the approaches taken by Parker and those of his generation attempted to recast our understanding of the *comedia* according to “essentially ahistorical formalism and moralism” (37), and that this movement was itself a reaction to the earlier generation of scholars who considered the play texts to be objects of historical or aesthetic curiosity (Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo and Ramón Menéndez Pidal immediately come to mind). Pym’s contextualization of the project of New Criticism, however, in no way invalidates the view that the principal goal was the discovery of the one, true approach to the *comedia* that would

explicate all plays by all playwrights written during the entire span of the Golden Age.

A few of these generalizations, which were proposed as virtually uncontested facts just thirty years ago, are the focus of this overview of the state of *comedia* criticism. But let me repeat: the examples given here are not intended to impugn the excellent scholarship of the authors. Indeed, one of the reasons that their ideas were so influential was precisely because of the persuasiveness of their arguments. Nor is this list intended to be comprehensive. Others of my generation and older will no doubt be able to add other generalizations that have slipped my mind. In every case, however, it would be fair to say that these truths are no longer considered to be quite so self-evident. Some of these assertions were already being met with skepticism at the time. I had the good fortune to pursue my graduate studies under the direction of James A. Parr, whose rigorous intellectualism insisted upon validating every bit of received wisdom for oneself and whose 1974 article, "An Essay on Critical Method, Applied to the *Comedia*," caused quite a stir and essentially ushered in a thorough reevaluation of the way we read these old plays. Some truisms fell under the weight of evidence by the plays themselves as the canon expanded to include a wider variety of plays by a wider variety of authors. Some fell under the scrutiny of new readings informed by the revolution in literary theory (which arrived earlier in other fields but, perhaps because of the conservative or, as Parr has put it, "marginalized" nature of *comedia* criticism, did not take hold until the 1980s). Before we ponder the ramifications of these changes in our core belief about the object of our inquiry, let us take a look at a handful of the generalizations that came together to define the *comedia* a generation ago.

The *comedia* is monolithic and conventional.

No one was probably more influential in, or at least gets more credit for, insisting upon the monolithic, conventional nature of the *comedia* than José Antonio Maravall. His 1975 study, *La cultura del barroco*, lays out his beliefs that Baroque culture was marked by values shared by the masses and by mass culture as a whole, that it privileged an urban perspective over a rural one, that it was articulated, directed, and enforced by powerful elites, and that it was reflected both in its particular aspects and in its essence as a whole by the *comedia*, all of which taken together

allowed little leeway in the interpretation of themes, plots, and views of the human condition found in the genre. Maravall had and continues to have enormous influence today, but, of course, he was hardly alone in asserting the totalizing unidimensionality of the *comedia*. Díez Borque (*Sociología* 32-33, 99) went so far as to characterize the *comedia*, and the honor plots in particular, as propaganda of the establishment, about which we shall have more to say later.

Not all assertions regarding the monolithic and conventional nature of the *comedia* are so extreme, of course. In its most elemental form, this generalization is simply an overstated, and even misleading, way of noting that the individual works that fall under the rubric of the *comedia* have enough characteristics in common that we can study them as a discrete and delimited *corpus* the way entomologists can study insects or paleontologists can study dinosaurs. These scientific comparisons are not accidental; one of the overarching projects of twentieth-century literary criticism from formalism through structuralism and New Criticism was the idea of applying scientific methods as much as one could to the study of literature. When one combined one's own apparently objective observations and such contemporary descriptive evidence as Lope's "Arte nuevo," the areas of overlap, it seemed, pointed undeniably to the "truth" of the *comedia*. Are such definitions, however, even those based on supposedly objective criteria, as ironclad as we used to think? While clearly one can devise criteria that apply to the vast majority of plays, it is also easy enough to point to numerous examples that lie on the margins or that statisticians would call outliers. Did the *comedia* start with Lope de Vega? Are the early sixteenth-century plays by Naharro and Encina *comedias*, or does the *comedia* not really start until the second half of that century? What about four-act plays? Are Cervantes's *La Numancia* and *El trato de Argel* and others that do not adhere to the three-act format introduced by Cristóbal de Virués (and not Lope) to be exiled from our study of the *comedia*? Does the *comedia* include works like *Celos aun del aire matan* that were fully sung and were, therefore, essentially opera librettos? And if so, does the term also include the shorter play, *La púrpura de la rosa*? What about plays written in the New World or, if one is willing to grant the point that Spaniards, at least, considered their colonies in the Americas to be as much a part of metropolitan Spain as Andalucía or Cataluña, what about plays written in Portugal? What about plays, especially those by women, for which we have no indication whatsoever that

they were ever actually presented on stage and may have even been written more with the idea of a dramatic reading in mind than with the notion that they would be presented on stage as fully-realized productions? The fact of the matter is that such categorical generalizations were made on the basis not of a thorough analysis of every play that might be considered a *comedia* by whatever criteria, but, in a rush to certainty, on a handful of characteristics observed in a majority of plays (but not necessarily all of them) found in a canon that included entirely too few plays by too few authors. When a reliance on a reduced canon was coupled with a theoretical tendency to try to arrive at the one true interpretation of a work, the result was the type of scholarship criticized by Sidney Donnell, who takes Díez Borque to task for relying so heavily on “a few ‘*obras maestras*’” that obscure pertinent facts and lead to “‘definitive’ readings of the *comedia*” (25).

Even in the period marked by studies attempting to describe and analyze the *comedia* as a single unit, there were hints that something was wrong with the project. As a prime example that there were major obstacles to generalization one can point to the habit of dividing literature into categories and subcategories each of which shared traits with others in its category and were supposedly different in discrete, observable ways from those texts that were assigned to other categories. Consider the following taxonomy of the *comedia* provided by Juan Luis Alborg: *Comedias religiosas* (under which there are four additional subheadings), *comedias mitológicas*, *comedias sobre historia clásica*, *comedias sobre historia extranjera*, *crónicas y leyendas dramáticas de España*, *comedias pastorales*, *comedias de argumento extraído de novelas* (further subdivided into *orientales*, *italianas*, and *españolas*), *comedias de enredo*, *comedias de “malas” costumbres*, *comedias de costumbres urbanas o palatinas*, and *comedias de costumbres rurales* (295-96). From the fact that they appear in different subcategories, one must assume that *comedias de enredo* were different in some substantial way from *comedias de argumento extraído de novelas*, which were in turn substantially unlike *comedias religiosas*. (It is additionally surprising that the well-known category, *comedias de capa y espada*, does not appear in Alborg’s list.) My guess is that every single reader of this list can think of numerous examples of plays that might be classified in more than one category or that don’t seem to fall completely within any category. While all the subcategories may have shared some structural elements in common, in some very important

ways the notion that there is such a thing as “the *comedia*” with monolithic, uniform, and common characteristics starts to fall apart. It may very well have been true that it was possible to create something like the hierarchical taxonomy we use to describe living creatures: all vertebrates do have common characteristics, but not all vertebrates were primates. What was missing, however, was the discrete terminology that would allow one to speak of one definition of *comedia* on roughly the level of phylum, class, or order, and another term to denote a definition of *comedia* on the level of genus and species. While the subcategories were apparently an attempt to resolve this dilemma, the repetition of the term *comedia* in all the terms proves unwieldy, confusing, and ultimately unhelpful.

The alleged conventionality of the *comedia* was based primarily on matters of structure and technique. In addition to the number of acts and the use of *polimetría*, other conventions discussed included the staging of the plays in *corrales*, the lack of explicit and detailed stage directions, and the like. As was the case with other characteristics, a generalized discussion of the *comedia* based upon such conventions tended to leave out plays performed in other settings, especially the palace, and ignored the existence of plays that included copious and detailed stage directions or that otherwise did not fit into the generalization. This ignorance was not necessarily willful or malicious, but was rather, again, a function of the relatively small number of plays taken into consideration when establishing these early generalizations.

In the final analysis, it would probably be fair to note that most *comedias* share a great many characteristics and that it is possible to discuss general tendencies. However, as the canon has opened up and we have begun to study vastly more plays by much more diverse playwrights, and as we have adopted extravagantly diverse ways of looking at early modern Spanish theater, the monolithic definition of the *comedia* simply cannot hold. As Richard Pym has noted, citing the work of Melveena McKendrick, Paul Julian Smith, and others, “this monolithic view of the theater of the period has now been seriously challenged” (39). And yet, in a sense, this generalization provides the basis for all the others. If one does not believe that the *comedia* is generalizable, then all the generalizations that follow should fail by definition. My intention here, however, is not to adopt a nihilistic or anarchistic approach to the study of the *comedia*. There *is* such a thing as the *comedia*; there are common attrib-

utes one can ascribe to all the plays that fall under the rubric of early modern Spanish theater: the *comedias*, the *autos sacramentales*, the *entremeses*, the *loas*, and the rest. As we investigate some of the “talking points” common to *comedia* studies of a generation or two ago, the purpose is merely to show that the particular generalizations that were considered to be indisputable facts thirty years ago no longer seem to be as inconvertible as they once did, and we may never reach full agreement on the precise boundaries and characteristics of the *comedia*. Personally, I think that is a healthy development.

The *comedia* reflected contemporary society.

Lope ended his *Arte nuevo* with a restatement of Cicero’s assertion that the theater was a mirror on the society that produced it, so it is not surprising that one of the guiding principles of *comedia* studies used to be that these plays reflected the reality of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. José María Díez Borque took that idea to its logical extension and systematically studied the *comedia* as a historical and sociological record of Golden Age Spain in his book, *La sociología de la comedia española*. Even Reichenberger’s arguments regarding the uniqueness of the *comedia*, as well as those by such eminent figures as Américo Castro (*De la edad*) and Juan Bautista Avallé-Arce, among many others, rested in large part on his acceptance of the plays as faithful mirrors of a Spanish society that was radically different from those of contemporary France, or Italy, or England. So pervasive was the notion that the *comedia* could be read as social history that a colleague of mine once commented on my study of the wife-murder plays that she could think of no scenario more Spanish than that of a husband killing his wife for reasons of jealousy or honor. Indeed, essential to Reichberger’s argument in favor of the uniqueness of the *comedia* was the notion that honor in these plays was essential, rigorous, codified, unyielding, consistent, and specific enough that it could be referred to by the shorthand expression, “the honor code,” that everyone would immediately know exactly what was meant, and that one could understand daily life in Golden Age Spain by understanding honor as it appeared in the *comedia*. More than one scholar set out to write down the code in the same way that one would codify the civil and criminal laws of a state; the efforts of Jenaro Artiles and Albert S. Gérard are excellent examples. Even those who may not have wanted to go to such

lengths, including such iconic names as Américo Castro (“Algunas”) and Ramón Menéndez Pidal, nevertheless believed that honor in the *comedia* was presented in such a uniform, historically accurate way that it provided one of the unifying principles of the genre.

In the course of my own studies, this was one of the first generalizations that fell in light of significant evidence to the contrary. While it is true that a few husbands did kill their wives in late medieval and early modern Spain, just as some do now in the United States and elsewhere, the fact is, as I noted in *Fatal Union*, that wife-murder was actually quite rare in Spain and, in those few cases in which husbands were brought to justice for the demise of their wives, they were not pardoned, and their actions were not sanctioned by society. Even within the confines of the world of the *comedia*, honor was not only not a reflection of a rigorously applied code of conduct in contemporary Spain, but the plays themselves presented astonishingly diverse approaches to the theme. If honor were such a guiding and unyielding principle, how is it that we have some plays in which wives are killed by the husbands, and others, like Lope’s *El castigo del discreto*, in which they are not? If sex roles were so dependent upon their relation to the social values embedded in honor, how could we possibly have some women who suffered as impotent victims and others who took matters in their own hands (and, even there, some ended up married, like Juana in *Don Gil de las Calzas Verdes*, and others ended up dead, like Gila in *La serrana de la Vera*)? If honor was the exclusive province of the nobility, why were there so many plays, like *Peribáñez*, that exalt the honor of the commoner? Honor was indeed a common and, according to Lope, popular theme, but the notion that it was a rigid code repeated without variation throughout the entire corpus of early modern Spanish theater, is simply not true.

The same can be said of other very common *comedia* scenarios, perhaps none so common as women dressing as men usually but not always to avenge their lost honor. Recent research, such as that by Israel Burshatin, has shown that there were extraordinary cases of women cross-dressing for different reasons, but to deduce from the popularity of the figure in the *comedia* that Spain was populated by women going about dressed as men is to make assertions of fact that are simply not supported by historical evidence. The fact of the matter is that drama almost always begins with a grain of historical or sociological truth, perhaps based on a rare and exceptional historical fact, but then distorts the reali-

ty of the society it depicts. To believe that works of theater that depend upon dramatic conflict and the placement of characters in extraordinary situations, even when there is a kernel of truth behind the plot, is to mistake fiction for reality. One modern example to prove the point is the view of the United States held by others around the world who know our culture only through our movies and television programs: most Americans never come in contact with gangsters or violent criminals even though it is a fact that such people exist. Likewise, and this is a point in favor of Maravall's positions, in a country whose population was still largely rural and agricultural, the *comedia* is overly concerned with urban, noble men and women who spend their days in idle pursuits, who live at court, who rarely eat, who only occasionally speak of money, and who, apparently, do not have young children. The famous lack of mothers as characters (which is also a generalization that is not so absolute as we once thought) is a clear indication that the *comedia* does not come close to anything like an accurate representation of the panorama of Spanish society of the time. The list of what is rarely if ever shown in the *comedia* may actually be longer and more typical of daily life in Golden Age Spain than what is shown: people at work, pregnant women, petty thieves, homosexuals punished for their activities, people attending mass, people caring for their aging parents, people going to the bathroom, happily married people, people engaged in non-violent sex, and the like. If one were to look for a literary genre that draws a more comprehensive picture of what life was, one might be better directed to narrative genres, especially the picaresque novels, although in no way am I proposing that they reflect their society in any substantial way either. Like most works of literature produced in a certain time and place, they distill certain factual elements, heighten the dramatic value of the situation, and then create a parallel universe that has its own internal logic and structure but that is not accurate in historical, sociological, psychological, or any way other than literary.

The *comedia* is profoundly conservative.

Few generalizations were so frequently repeated as the assertion that the *comedia* was a conservative genre, so conservative in fact that Pym correctly summarizes the work of Maravall and Díez Borque as offering "a vision of seventeenth-century Spanish drama as one expression of an essentially propagandistic culture, unrelentingly univocal in its support

for the power structures of the state and unwavering in its attempts to naturalize the power of Spain's social elites" (39). What one means by "conservative" is not always spelled out in detail, but, looking at the various studies that supported the view of the *comedia* as conservative propaganda, it would not be incorrect to state that the *comedia* has been alleged to be conservative from at least three major perspectives: the social, the political, and the moral. Social conservatism usually meant class stratification, the privileging of the elite over the masses, and strict limits on one's rights and responsibilities based on sex, class, race, religion, and economic status. Even the great egoistic and individualistic theme of the *comedia*, "soy quien soy," is for Maravall "un principio que se enuncia siempre en relación al comportamiento social, como una obligación de obrar de cierta manera" (*Teatro* 100). Mariscal (20) criticizes Maravall's reduction of the "great individuals" that populate the *comedia* stage as merely "exaggerated figures molded by the limitations of a rigidly aristocratic and exclusionary society," but it is undeniably true that the *comedias* are full of situations in which men, the nobility, Caucasians, Catholic Christians, and the wealthy had markedly more freedom and opportunity for a better life than women, commoners, blacks, Moors, Native Americans and those of other races and ethnicities, Muslims and Protestants, and the poor. That does not mean, however, that it is valid to state that the *comedia* always and in every case came down on the side of privilege and the status quo, and, in fact, there are several strategies employed in the *comedia* that call into question the various mechanisms of social stratification and whether the way society was organized was a good thing or not. Although wealthy, noble, Christian ladies and gentlemen are most frequently depicted according to one stereotype, and much is made of those of the same category who stray from the norm, it is nevertheless surprising and meaningful that the *comedia* gives us so very many examples of eccentric, even subversive characters. Women are supposed to be subservient and extremely circumspect lest their honor be called into question, yet Ángela in *La dama duende* is a remarkably self-empowered woman. Men are supposed to be the guardians of honor and the ones who take revenge for offense, but there are scores of women who take matters into their own hands to resolve their dilemmas, from Rosaura in *La vida es sueño* to Juana in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, to Leonor in *Valor, agravio y mujer*, to name just three. Likewise, men are supposed to be strong, resolute, and bellicose, yet we often run into characters like

El lindo don Diego and César in *Las manos blancas no ofenden*. Noblemen are supposed to be paragons of virtue, yet we have members of the nobility who, at least sometimes, are able to wiggle out of the dire consequences for dishonorable behavior. Although he is finally brought down by divine intervention, Don Juan Tenorio escapes responsibility for his actions time and again, due both to his own cunning and the corruption of the privileged class that is supposed to represent the model of good and decent behavior. There is enough evidence of these transgressions by those who ought to know and do better that it is not inappropriate to suggest that the *comedia* actually provides a coherently critical view of the society we see on stage. Sometimes the criticism is overt; no one could believe that the Comendador in *Fuenteovejuna* represents anything other than a condemnation of the abuse heaped on his subjects by a corrupt and degenerate *caballero*. In other cases, the situation is more nuanced, and a great deal of our perception has to do with how we view the characters, and whether we agree with their actions or we think they acted in error. Even in those cases, such as often happens in the wife-murder *comedias*, there is enough textual evidence to create reasonable doubt, to use a legal concept, that the protagonist may not be someone the playwright intended for us to imitate and admire. Indeed, frequently, the ends of the plays are at odds with everything we have learned about the protagonist before the final resolution. Gutierre in *El médico de su honra* may finish the play with his honor intact, but it is extremely difficult, for many of us, to cast his actions in a favorable light, especially when considering Mencía's innocence and his previous relationship with Leonor. Likewise, despite her death by arrows, Gila in *La serrana de la Vera* has been presented to us repeatedly as an extraordinary woman. We may not be expected to approve of her actions, but she is far from being a uniformly evil character whose demise we are expected to cheer.

The term propaganda, already used to describe the monolithic nature of the *comedia*, is today most closely related to the realm of politics. The political conservatism ascribed to the *comedia* is most frequently taken to mean that as a genre these plays were intended to strengthen and rally support for the monarchy, the nobility, and the empire. Mariscal has described Maravall's notion of the *comedia* as "little more than a well-oiled propaganda machine designed to reproduce and disseminate the ideology of the ruling elites" (21), and he goes on to criticize Maravall for failing to understand "the complicated functioning of the public *corral*

and seriously understate[ing] the potential for multiple and even contestatory responses within the performance text itself." Donnell (25) generalizes the view of Díez Borque in *Los géneros dramáticos en el siglo XVI*: "the *comedia* defines itself through its support of king and country, signaled by its total adherence to happy endings." It is true that it was probably not desirable or even possible to write and stage a play that was overtly critical of the reigning monarch. It is also true, however, that the *comedia* frequently presents kings, some of them historical and related to the reigning Hapsburgs, in a less than becoming manner. While Isabel la Católica was almost universally presented as a monarch without fault, her relatives, Pedro (el Cruel or el Justiciero, depending on the point of view) and Enrique de Trastámara, are seen as much more craven, even dishonorable, characters in *El médico de su honra*, and Juan II is not presented in a very flattering light in Mira's *La adversa fortuna de don Álvaro de Luna*. Most of the problems that set in motion the action in *La vida es sueño* can be ascribed to the arrogance and pride of King Basilio. Henry VIII in *La cisma de Ingalaterra* is depicted as a barbaric criminal, which is, of course, not surprising since he was an enemy of the Spanish royal family, the nation, and the Catholic faith. The *comedia* also presented a number of fictional rulers whose actions are roundly condemned. The Duke of Ferrara, already mentioned for murder of his wife Casandra in *El castigo sin venganza*, is held in such low regard that even his own subjects, commoners like Cintia, berate him for his mistakes and bad judgment. If one believes in the right of a monarch to rule, divine or not, then an unflattering portrayal of any monarch, Spanish or foreign, real or fictional, is at least an indirect criticism of any monarch, including the current king.

Perhaps the riskiest scenario that in essence criticized the current reigning monarch was that found in the many plays dealing with *privanza*. Again, the *comedia* did not dare attack directly the Duque de Haro, the Duque de Lerma, or the Conde-Duque de Olivares, at least not at the time of their influence at court, but plays in which a *privado* oversteps his authority, and in the process makes the king look weak and ineffectual, are so common that it is hard to believe that anyone, then or now, could have seen them as anything other than criticism of the way a weak monarch governed his realm through a strong subordinate. One need look no further than Christopher Weimer's study of Tirso's *Privar contra su gusto* and Germán Vega García-Luengos's edition and study of the little

known Segunda Parte de *El acomodado don Domingo de Don Blas*, by Ruiz de Alarcón, to notice the pattern. In other words, while some works might properly be categorized as propaganda, the assertion that the *comedia* as a genre served uniformly to depict the monarchy in a flattering light simply can no longer be accepted as factual. Criticism written today is much more comfortable with arguments such as that put forward by Catherine Connor, who wrote that state propaganda and subversion were produced simultaneously on the *comedia* stage and that these texts “were baroque in the most complete sense of the word: paradoxical, contradictory, disorderedly or chaotically ordered, highly theatrical, self-reflexive, and extravagantly excessive” (377).

From a moral perspective, the conservative nature of the *comedia* was quite neatly summed up in an assertion by Bruce W. Wardropper, one of the most sensitive and influential critics of his generation. In “On the Fourth Centenary of Lope’s Birth,” he stated that Calderón’s plays were miniature summae, “calculated to demonstrate conclusively a sacred or secular truth” (118). Wardropper, as always, provided a nuanced and convincing argument to back up his assertion, but the point was clear: the *comedia* as a genre was dedicated to the exposition and inculcation of a moral truth that could be gleaned by reading carefully and correctly. Alexander A. Parker, never one to mince words, couched the issue in terms that were both more direct and more rigorous. In his enumeration of the five principles that underpinned his totalizing “approach” to understanding the *comedia*, he noted that conservative, Catholic morality lay at the core of all *comedia* plots and that one needed only to untangle the web of causality to discover the singular and incontrovertible truth behind the plot of any particular *comedia* (698-99). Through his application of poetic justice, he was able to assert that the Duke of Ferrara in Lope’s *El castigo sin venganza* could indeed be considered more of a righteous victim rather than a licentious villain (697). As it turns out, so repellant was Parker’s reading of Lope’s masterpiece that it was met by surprising resistance from such respected critics as T. E. May (154, 161-2) and Everett W. Hesse (7). The debate over “the meaning” of *El castigo* raged for a good thirty-five years and represented a serious challenge to the notion of a single, “correct” reading of a *comedia* based on the notion that all *comedia* plots were intended to be read as moral lessons. If well-respected critics of the *comedia* could come to quite different conclusions regarding the meaning of a particular play and how we were to

understand it, then how could one possibly continue to argue for a privileged interpretation of a play based on morality? Once New Criticism itself began to yield to new ways of reading informed by Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, for example, the very definitions of what was moral and what was immoral came under scrutiny. How, for example, could one assert that keeping women silent and subservient was considered to be morally good if one believed in the ideal of equality for women? What does “morality” even mean in a Lacanian view of the human condition in which all subjects are characterized by lack and all desires are always ultimately unfulfilled? Moreover, as an increasing number of scholars began to look at more and more plays by a far broader range of authors, it became overwhelmingly clear that many *comedias* showed morally reprehensible actions perpetrated by characters who appeared to be rewarded, or at least to escape punishment, at the final curtain: Duke Octavio and the Marqués de la Mota in *El burlador de Sevilla* are just two who come immediately to mind.

Perhaps the final nail in the coffin of the *comedia*-as-morality-play theory of criticism lies in a reconsideration of the words of the fiercest critics of the genre on moral grounds: the contemporary moralists. Padre Juan de Mariana was only one of a seemingly endless stream of *preceptistas* who railed against every aspect of the *comedia* because they were examples not of morality but of “deshonestidad y desvergüenza, donde muchos de toda edad, sexo y calidad se corrompen, y con representaciones vanas y enmascaradas aprenden vicios verdaderos” (413a); for Mariana, the *comedia* represented “una peste gravísima de las costumbres cristianas... que acarrea al nombre cristiano gravísima afrenta” (414a). If moral arbiters of the day could find no moral *exempla* in the *comedia*, it was not just odd but culturally insensitive for those engaged in twentieth-century literary criticism to assert exactly the opposite.

Comedia plots follow a trajectory from order disturbed to order restored.

Reichenberger’s famous dictum, also found in “The Uniqueness of the *Comedia*,” is not unrelated to the notion of an essentially conservative perspective because of the emphasis upon social, political, and moral order over the individual desires of any single character. From a specific and limited perspective, the one that Reichenberger chooses to adopt, it is also not invalid; the final scenes famously reestablish a certain level of

harmony by having the characters come together again once the cause of discord has been eliminated, or by having the characters marry, or by having a character reach his or her greater reward in heaven. The problems with this generalization are three: how one defines “order,” the particular perspective from which one views the concept of order (the king or the subject, the society or the individual, the character or the audience), and whether or not one views the final scene as the end of the story. If “order” only means tying up loose ends, regardless of the way those ends are tied up or the consequences of the resolution of conflicts, that is one thing. If “order” means the harmonious integration of various disparate elements into a functioning whole, that is quite another. The first meaning of order can be applied equally to the resolution of slapstick misunderstandings resulting in the marriage of two people who ought to be married (regardless of one’s criteria for why two people should marry—love, property, political power, etc.), to the authoritarian imposition of rules and norms that can create enormous misery and abuse, and to the discovery of a solution that benefits political goals at the expense of any higher-order principles whatsoever. To use specific examples, “order restored” applies equally to the somewhat troubling marriage of Rosaura to the man who deceived and abandoned her in *La vida es sueño*, a ruler’s successful plan to have his wife kill his son without revealing to his subjects the reasons for the deaths in *El castigo sin venganza*, and the exoneration of a mob of angry people who killed their governor in *Fuenteovejuna*. I have, of course, left out a number of pertinent details in these overly brief summaries, but the imposition of order in these three most famous *comedias* can essentially be described in the terms laid out here. Is order a concept that must be viewed from only one point of view, usually that of the protagonist, at the expense of another? Do the Reyes Católicos really believe that letting the people of Fuenteovejuna off the hook because they cannot identify the exact murderers of the Comendador is a decision that ultimately upholds a larger concept of social order? (It is important to remember that, if one of the villagers had confessed, the play would have had a much different ending.)

Perhaps the most troubling aspect to the insistence on “order restored” appears when we cease to see these plots as complete unto themselves, unrelated to the way similar situations would play out in the real world. As I have written on other occasions regarding some of these allegedly “happy endings” in which order appears to be reestablished, what hap-

pens the day after the final scene, the month after the final scene, the year after the final scene? When one looks at plots not as well-wrought urns with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but as examples of human behavior with consequences, frequently unexpected, that continue to unfold long after the particular action is concluded, we find that these plays leave their characters in some truly disturbing situations at the final curtain. Gutierre's marriage to Leonor in *El médico de su honra* has so many embedded clues that point to a violent, tragic future that to call it an example of "order restored" is to be willfully blind to what is going on, and more than one play, including most of those that deal with the Spanish conquest of America, have to be read in complete ignorance of history as seen by the conquered populations in order to conclude that they come to some kind of desirable state of law and order by the final curtain. And these examples do not even take into account the scenarios in religious plays in which the protagonist dies, sometimes under truly atrocious conditions as happens in *El príncipe constante*, but, because the play is religious in nature, death is considered not to be a punishment but a reward. In other words, if "order" can mean everything from birth to death, liberation to conquest, and peaceful harmony to violent oppression, then the term effectively means nothing at all.

There are other generalizations that come to mind, such as Otis Green's assertion that the popularity of the *comedia* itself dictated the structure, themes, and basic character of the *comedia*, yet another idea that is grounded in Lope's *Arte nuevo* but that does not take into account the large number of plays that were performed only infrequently (*El castigo sin venganza* had *one* performance) or not at all. Or another of Wardropper's claims, also included in "On the Fourth Centenary of Lope's Birth" (121) and elsewhere, that the *comedia* was a genre marked more by its poetry than its theatricality. While no one can deny the importance of poetry to the genre, seeing these plays performed today before live audiences who are not engaged in close readings but who nevertheless appear to enjoy the play would seem to suggest that matters of theater were at least as essential to the *comedia* as its poetry. Readers who have been engaged in *comedia* scholarship for any considerable length of time could no doubt add to this list; my purpose, as I stated at the outset, is not to present an exhaustive compendium of earlier generalizations but merely to provide a few illustrations of how our general perceptions and definitions of the *comedia* have changed over the past few decades.

Moreover, the counterexamples I have given are not intended to deny validity to the generalizations of a previous generalization; it is all too easy to find one or two exceptions to every rule. Rather, these examples are illustrative rather than probative and are intended to underscore the fact that the generalizations mentioned have *already* fallen significantly out of favor. The essential point, however, is clear: what once was considered to be a defining characteristic of the *comedia* has been found wanting or has disappeared from our critical discourse altogether.

Thanks to the ever-widening variety of perspectives from which to view the *comedia* as a discrete genre—psychoanalysis, deconstruction, cultural studies, queer theory—we see that these plays are remarkably porous, that their meanings are not always stable, that they exaggerated, subverted, perverted, or ignored the real life of the real people who went to the *corrales*. We in the profession have created our own monument to otherness as we have seen, read, and thought about these plays in new ways. One only has to look at the formidable body of criticism regarding women characters, women playwrights, cross-dressed characters, even queer characters, to appreciate just how far we have come. And yet, it would be both disingenuous and unhelpful to assume that, because scholars today publish many fewer treatises that attempt to stake out the general parameters and essential characteristics of the *comedia* as a whole, that we, both as individuals and as researchers working collectively, do not hold general notions of the genre. In the first place, not everyone has rejected these various generalizations. William Egginton provides a solid and spirited defense of the core of Maravall's view of the culture of the Baroque in "An Epistemology of the Stage: Theatricality and Subjectivity in Early Modern Spain." In the second, there are competing views of the nature of the *comedia*; there are many who still view the genre through a historical prism while others look at the plays from more thematic perspectives and still others that have adopted ways of looking at the *comedia* that are informed by cultural studies, gender studies, stagecraft, and other, very different ways of approaching a play text. Our notions of the *comedia* are informed by our particular vantage point in the history of ideas, informed by the theoretical revolutions of the last thirty years, but, of course, it is just as much a generalization to say that *no* unified theory can describe the *comedia* as it is to try to describe any particular unified theory as applicable to all *comedias*. The underlying question brought to the fore by the shift in the acceptance of these generalizations as valid and

truthful is one that faces all disciplines that undergo paradigm shifts. If we believe our current version(s) of the truth as much as the brightest minds in the field believed their contradictory version of the truth a generation ago, it is tempting to ask, "Were we wrong then or are we wrong now"? The short answer is that we were right then and we are right now, we were wrong then and we are wrong now. It is the obligation of each generation to reformulate its understanding of the traditions it receives from those who came before, which is, of course, good news. If there were only one way to read every work and genre, the *comedia* would wither and die as a living, breathing expression of the human condition, and that would indeed be the greatest tragedy.

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