

Staging and Stage Décor

Early Modern Spanish Theater

Edited by

Bárbara Mujica

Georgetown University

Series in Performing Arts



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Table of contents

	List of Figures	vii
	Introduction	ix
	Bárbara Mujica <i>Georgetown University</i>	
	Part 1: Props and Space	1
Chapter 1	Supplementary Aesthetics, Affordances, and Dynamic Props: Added Objects in Isabel Ramos's <i>El perro del hortelano</i> (2004)	3
	Christopher D. Gascón <i>State University of New York: College at Cortland</i>	
Chapter 2	Sketching <i>Portugalidade: Reinar después de morir</i> for the Twenty-First Century Stage	19
	Esther Fernández <i>Rice University</i>	
Chapter 3	Staging the <i>Comedia de magia</i> in the Reign of Felipe V	37
	Susan Paun de García <i>Denison University</i>	
Chapter 4	Incarcerated Performance: The Space and Context of Prison as Stage	57
	Megan M. Echevarría and Iñaki Pérez-Ibáñez <i>University of Rhode Island</i>	
	Part 2: Costume	75
Chapter 5	“¡Dios me guarde, que estoy bella!”: <i>Los empeños de una casa</i> and Castaño's Performance of Pretty	77
	Mindy Badía <i>Indiana University Southeast</i>	

Chapter 6	Dressing the <i>Comedia</i>: Textual, Archival, and Practical Considerations	91
	Emily C. Tobey <i>Miami University</i>	
Chapter 7	The <i>Guardainfante</i> Exposes More than Legs: Adapting Tirso's <i>Marta the Divine</i> for the Stage	109
	Elizabeth Cruz Petersen <i>Florida Atlantic University</i>	
	Part 3: Staging Archetypes	125
Chapter 8	(Re)Performing Isabel I of Castile: Pious Cruelty, Sainly Hypocrisy, and Lope de Vega's <i>El niño inocente de La Guardia</i>	127
	Susan L. Fischer <i>Bucknell University</i>	
Chapter 9	A Bicephalic Melancholiac: Acting a Royal Pathology in Spanish Golden Age Drama	153
	Eduardo Paredes Ocampo <i>University of Oxford, UK</i>	
Chapter 10	Staging Female Melancholia: Calderón's <i>No hay burlas con el amor</i>	171
	Bárbara Mujica <i>Georgetown University</i>	
Chapter 11	"<i>Streleros</i>" buenos y malos: Staging Astrology in Early Modern Spanish Theater	189
	Valerie Hegstrom and Dale J. Pratt <i>Brigham Young University</i>	
	Part IV: Music, Movement, and Adaptation	207
Chapter 12	Reading Music in Cervantes's <i>Entremeses</i>	209
	Yoel Castillo Botello <i>Deerfield Academy</i>	

Chapter 13	Finding the Beat in <i>¡Risas aquí y después, ganancia!</i> by The Grupo La Hormiga	221
	Sharon D. Voros <i>United States Naval Academy</i>	
Chapter 14	Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's <i>Mudarse por mejorarse</i> and Changes over Time	237
	Edward H. Friedman <i>Vanderbilt University</i>	
	Our Contributors	253
	Index	259

List of Figures

- Figure 1.1:** Teodoro (Dario Tangelson) rests an elbow on Diana's throne. Photo by Awymarie Riollano, courtesy of Isabel Ramos and Repertorio Español. 9
- Figure 1.2:** Diana's servants (Belange Rodríguez, Yaremis Félix, and Mariana Buoninconti) cover behind their sheets. Photo by Awymarie Riollano, courtesy of Isabel Ramos and Repertorio Español. 11
- Figure 1.3:** Ricardo (Ricardo Hinoja) kisses the coffee-canned feet of Countess Diana (Karina Casiano) as Fabio (Dan Domingues) looks on. Photo by Awymarie Riollano, courtesy of Isabel Ramos and Repertorio Español. 13
- Figure 2.1:** Overall view of the stage. Concave structure covered in gigantic Portuguese tiles. From right to left: Blanca de Navarra (Manuela Velasco), Alvar González (Ricardo Reguera), King Don Alonso (Chema de Miguel), Don Pedro (David Boceta), Brito (Julián Ortega), and Inés de Castro (Lara Grube). *Reinar después de morir* (2019). Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico (CNTC)/Teatro Nacional de Almada. Teatro de la Comedia (Madrid). Photo by Sergio Parra. Courtesy of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico (CNTC). 27
- Figure 2.2:** Inés de Castro and wet nurse in Inés's estate. From right to left: Lara Grube (Inés) and María José Alfonso (nurse). *Reinar después de morir* (2019). Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico/Teatro Nacional de Almada. Teatro de la Comedia (Madrid). Photo by Sergio Parra. Courtesy of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico. 28
- Figure 2.3:** Inés de Castro (Lara Grube) after a vision of her own death on the banks of the Mondego River. From right to left: Alvar González (Ricardo Reguera), King don Alonso (Chema de Miguel), Blanca de Navarra (Manuela Velasco), and wet nurse (María José Alfonso). *Reinar después de morir* (2019). Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico/Teatro Nacional de Almada. Teatro de la Comedia (Madrid). Photo by Sergio Parra. Courtesy of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico. 29

- Figure 2.4:** Inés de Castro (Lara Grube) in her final act of resurrection. *Reinar después de morir* (2019). Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico/Teatro Nacional de Almada. Teatro de la Comedia (Madrid). Photo by Sergio Parra. Courtesy of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico. 32
- Figure 4.1:** Photograph of the Royal Prison, taken from calle Nueva and dated in 1909 shortly before its demolition. Municipal Archive of Pamplona. Photographer: Aquilino García Deán. Reference: AMP001806. 64
- Figure 4.2:** Photograph depicting the entrance to the building of the Royal Council and the adjacent building of the Royal Prison. Photo taken from the Guendulain Palace in the Plaza del Consejo. Municipal Archive of Pamplona. Photographer: Aquilino García Deán. Reference AMP001777. 66
- Figure 7.1:** An 18th-century illustration of the crinoline skirts. James Francis Driscoll collection of historical American sheet music/The Internet Archive, CC BY-SA. 111
- Figure 7.2:** Early modern Spanish actress wearing a *guardainfante*. Colección de trajes de Juan de la Cruz y Olmedilla, 1777. <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?lang=en&id=0000051081>. 114
- Figure 7.3:** Lucía (Samuel Bosworth) dancing. (Jon Crispin/ joncrispin.photoshelter.com). 118
- Figure 7.4:** Marta (Monica Giordano) and Lucía in the garden scene. (Jon Crispin/ joncrispin.photoshelter.com). 120
- Figure 7.5:** Marta and Lucía in the opening scene. (Jon Crispin/ joncrispin.photoshelter.com). 121
- Figure 9.1:** Arcangelo Migliarini, *Atamante preso dalle Furie*, 1801, oil on canvas, Academy of San Lucas. 160
- Figure 9.2:** El Bosco, *San Juan Bautista en meditación*, c. 1489, oil on canvas, 48,5 × 40 cm, Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid, Spain. 165
- Figure 9.3:** José de Ribera, *Media figura de mujer*, 1636, oil on canvas, 67 x 59 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. 165

Introduction

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The “plays” traditionally studied in literature courses are really not plays. They are merely words on a page, texts that come alive only when they are staged. Staging requires actors, a performance space, and often (but not always) some sort of set, which may or may not include painted flats, props, or special lighting. A play also requires spectators, for, without an audience, there is no performance.

The first early Spanish theatrical works used few props or none at all. They were performed in town squares, patios, and private residences. In churches, unscripted reenactments of Bible stories were often performed at Easter or Christmas. Entertainments in Latin also took place in universities, where students and their instructors performed *juegos de escarnio* [games of jokes and jibes] on profane (non-religious) subjects such as unrequited love, usually following Latin models. *Juegos escolares*, composed by students and priests, dealt with religious themes. In 1574, the humanist Lorenzo Palmyreno composed a play in Castilian, the language spoken by the masses, thereby taking a significant step toward the creation of a theater targeted at a general audience.

From the beginning of the fifteenth century, strong cultural and political ties existed between Spain and Italy, due to the conquest of Naples in 1442 by Alfonso V of Aragon, uncle of the future King Ferdinand. In time, Spain came to govern Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, and Milan. Ferdinand and his wife, Isabella I of Castile, were strong supporters of the arts and often sponsored theatrical entertainments. Many Spanish writers went to Italy, where the Renaissance was blossoming. One of these was Bartolomé de Torres Naharro (1480?-1530?), who lived in Rome and was influenced by the Italian humanists. While most playwrights of his time developed religious or pastoral themes inherited from the Middle Ages, Torres Naharro wrote lively, amusing plays with novelistic plots that were performed mainly for aristocratic audiences.

At the same time, another kind of theater was developing in Spain, one intended for a mass audience. Lope de Rueda, called Spain’s first true man of

the theater because he wrote, directed, acted, and produced plays, headed a traveling troupe of actors that performed in public streets or plazas. Their repertoire consisted largely of short, humorous, fast-moving plays called *pasos*, in which most characters came from the lower strata of society. Many featured archetypes that would later become stock characters in early modern Spanish theater. The *pasos* could be performed independently or as part of a *comedia* (a term that at the time referred to any full-length play). Furthermore, traveling troupes from Italy performed plays in the style of the *commedia dell'arte*, a kind of improvised theater based on a fixed corpus of themes.

In 1558, Lope de Rueda requested money of the city council of Valladolid to build several permanent locales, a sign that interest in professional theater was growing. These theaters, called *corrales*, were open-air patios with a platform at one end on which plays were performed. The early *corrales* were very simple. Scenery might be painted on the wall of the building that housed the theater or on curtains that could be changed easily. The balconies and windows of the main and adjacent structures formed *apostentos*, boxes occupied by aristocrats of either sex. Lower-class men, called *mosqueteros*, stood in the uncovered area in front of the stage or sat in the *gradas* [bleachers] on the sides of the stage or at the back of the patio. Lower-class women sat in the *cazuela* [cooking pot], an area of the *corral* reserved for them. Props for these productions were generally kept to a minimum.

By the early sixteenth century, playwrights had begun to compose plays that were similar to the early modern *comedia*. The term *comedia*, which is used throughout this book, originally referred to a full-length play—sometimes with four or five acts—of any genre. Lope de Vega, who is credited with creating Spain's national theater, redefined the *comedia* in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* [New Way of Writing Plays in These Times] (1609). The *Arte nuevo* is not a set of hard-and-fast rules, but rather a practical guide to composing successful plays. Lope wrote for a wide range of viewers, and his *Arte nuevo* is a compendium of recommendations based on his experience of what worked for a *corral* audience. It influenced playwrights during his own time and for generations to come.

Lope limited the number of acts—called *jornadas*—in a *comedia* to three, after which the term *comedia* referred to any three-act play. He recommended using a variety of verse forms and specified the function of each one. He mentions that love and honor are themes that appeal to audiences. He thought theater should mirror reality, and so he included characters from all walks of life in his plays, mixed comedy and tragedy, and rejected a strict adherence to the three unities of time, place, and action that prevailed in classical theater.

Lope's earliest plays are quite simple in terms of staging and stage décor, but over the years, *comedia* productions became more intricate. Stage devices called *tramoyas* were incorporated into different types of plays. The *tramoya* was a type of fly system consisting of ropes, pulleys and counterweights that enabled the crew to hoist objects or people into the air for scene changes. Eventually, thanks to *tramoyas*, actors could appear to soar through the air, while trapdoors allowed them to suddenly disappear.

The second half of the seventeenth century saw a decline in the *corrales*, and playwrights turned increasingly to the court for patronage. Philip IV (1605-1665), who ascended to the throne in 1621, loved spectacles. He had many plays performed at the Palace of the Buen Retiro [Good Retreat], which he had constructed in the 1630s. He also sponsored tournaments, masques, bullfights, and other entertainments. At first, the court plays were performed by courtiers, but as the theater became increasingly professionalized, impresarios and acting troupes were contracted to produce ever more elaborate spectacles. Especially popular were the *comedias de tramoyas*, that is, plays that made extensive use of stage devices, which were more sophisticated and extravagant than those used in the *corrales*.

The famous Italian stage designer Cosimo Lotti came to Spain in 1626, and after the Buen Retiro was constructed, began to mount productions in the many dramatic spaces of the palace. In addition to ever more intricate stage devices that made possible multiple set changes, he introduced Italianate perspective scenery and extensive props. While the *corral* performances were usually in the afternoon, the use of artificial light made night performances possible at court. Outdoor performances were sometimes held in the Buen Retiro park, where full-scale naval battles could be reproduced on the artificial lake. In 1638, a thoroughly equipped theater called the Coliseo [Coliseum] was constructed.

Toward the end of Lope's life, a new generation of playwrights, headed by Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681), began producing complex and spectacular plays for the court. The extraordinarily talented son of a noble family, Calderón was introduced to elite circles at an early age and began writing plays for King Philip IV in 1623. Unlike Lope, who wrote for the masses, Calderón wrote for aristocrats. Although he preserved the structure of the *comedia nueva* [new type of play] described by Lope, he imbued his characters with greater psychological depth than his predecessors. At first, he wrote for the *corral* theater, but later in life became a Franciscan friar and wrote principally *autos sacramentales* [one-act religious plays] and mythological plays for the court. These were complex productions that made use of sophisticated stage machinery. Angels or mythological characters soared through the heavens to the delight of the spectators below. Scenery

was painted on backcloths that could be easily changed. The public could attend these performances for a fee, and court theaters maintained the general layout and popular atmosphere of the *corral*. Sometimes spectators engaged in catcalls and whistles. Sometimes fights broke out, to the general amusement of the King and Queen.

The *corral* theater enjoyed support in Spain until the first decades of the eighteenth century, when Philip V, grandson of Louis XIV of France, ascended to the throne. Neither he nor his wife, Maria Luisa Gabriela de Saboya, spoke Spanish well, and they were quick to introduce French and Italian cultural norms to Spain. Nevertheless, the *corral* continued drawing popular audiences—in particular the *comedia de magia* [magic play], which made use of stage devices to create the illusion of magic.

Audiences had always been drawn to the spectacularity of theater, even before the age of sophisticated stage machinery. Romantic intrigue, fast-moving swordplay, and, for the mostly male audience, the sight of pretty actresses in revealing breeches in plays in which women dressed as men, were only a few of the attractions of the *comedia*. Yet, for decades, this aspect of theater was nearly overlooked by scholars. Students of early modern Spanish theater read plays as though they were stories, analyzing characters, plot, and underlying philosophical messages, but without paying much attention to staging.

However, in the 1970s, scholars' attention shifted from the written text to the practice of theater. Research into early modern theater spaces, stage devices, costumes, actor training, acting techniques, and audience composition has enhanced our knowledge of how plays were actually presented and experienced. In 1984, the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater, Inc. (AHCT) was formed to promote greater appreciation for Spain's classical drama in production. The AHCT meets once a year for a conference in El Paso, Texas, in which staging issues are explored. In cooperation with the National Park Service, every evening the participants attend a modern production of an early modern Spanish play, then meet to discuss it.

The advent of postmodernism also influenced the ways in which historical plays are studied. For one thing, by blurring the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, postmodernism directed attention to previously neglected genres such as the *entremeses*, *jácaras*, *mojigangas*, and *pasos*. (The *entremés* [interlude] is a jocular one-act play performed between the acts of a longer play. The *jácara* is a short, humorous play in verse, with music and dancing, that usually deals with the antics of crooks and criminals. The *mojiganga* is a short farce, and a *paso* is a short humorous play in prose in which most characters come from the lower strata of society; it may occur in a longer play or be performed independently.) By challenging the dichotomy between “center”

(nucleus of power) and “margins,” postmodernism made possible a new focus on previously neglected groups such as women, gays, and ethnic minorities.

The fourteen essays in this collection continue these trends and carry them further. The focus of all the articles included here is staging and stage décor, and how these have evolved over the years. The playtext has never been static. Early modern playwrights, impresarios, and actors constantly tweaked their scripts, adding, changing, or omitting words, reworking stage choreography, or making other alterations—sometimes right in the middle of rehearsals or even performances. Today’s directors continue this practice, imbuing the *comedia* with a new vibrancy and meaning to appeal to the twenty-first-century audience.

The authors of these essays explore both early modern and contemporary stagings of the *comedia*. They ask themselves: How might these plays have been performed in the seventeenth century? What stage properties and devices were used? How have modern directors adapted the text for a new generation of theatergoers? How has technology enhanced the staging of these plays? How do modern directors use scenography, props, and costuming to make statements relevant to contemporary audiences? How might theatrical archetypes that were familiar to early modern audiences be staged in such a way that contemporary audiences can relate to them?

The essays are divided into four categories: Props and Space; Costume; Theatrical Archetypes; Music, Movement, and Adaptation, although there is necessarily some overlap. For example, although the essays in Part 1 deal specifically with props and space, several authors mention these topics in their discussions of stage movement and costume, and although the essays in Part 2 deal specifically with costume, this topic is also relevant to props and archetypes.

Of the four essays in Part 1, Christopher Gascón’s is perhaps the most theoretical. In “Supplementary Aesthetics, Affordances, and Dynamic Props: Added Objects in Isabel Ramos’s *El perro del hortelano* (2004),” Gascón discusses how Ramos uses objects not mentioned in Lope’s original play to enhance the performance or indicate absences in the work. In “Sketching *Portugalidade: Reinar después de morir* for the Twenty-First Century Stage,” Esther Fernández discusses the innovative staging of Vélez de Guevara’s play by Ignacio García and Pepa Pedroche, noting how the directors of this hispanolusa co-production capture the *Portugalidade* [Portuguese-ness] at the core of the play. In “Staging the *Comedia de magia* in the Reign of Felipe V,” Susan Paun de García discusses the influence of Italian scenographers in the staging of the *comedia de magia*, which continued to be popular in Spain long after the death of Calderón. In “Incarcerated Performance: The Space and Context of Prison as Stage,” Megan M. Echevarría and Iñaki Pérez-Ibáñez

broaden our understanding of performance space in early modern Spain. Plays were not mounted only in theaters and palaces, but also in other venues, such as private residences, convents, and even prisons. In their article, Echevarría and Pérez-Ibáñez share their research on legal proceedings resulting from two prison performances.

Part 2 of this volume is devoted to costume. In “¡Dios me guarde, que estoy bella!” [Heaven help me, but I really am pretty!]: *Los empeños de una casa* and Castaño’s Performance of Pretty,” Mindy Badía examines four productions of *Los empeños de una casa* [*The Pawns of a House*], by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She argues that critical discussions of the subversive nature of gender in this *comedia* cannot be based solely on text, but must consider the effects of the crossed-dressed character Castaño in performance. In “The *Guardainfante* Exposes More than Legs: Adapting Tirso’s *Marta the Divine* for the Stage,” Elizabeth Cruz Petersen examines how director Gina Kaufmann uses the *guardainfante* [farthingale], a wide hoop skirt that impedes a woman’s movement, and unconventional casting, to subvert gender norms in a modern production of Tirso de Molina’s *Marta la piadosa* [*Marta the Divine*].

Part 3, Staging Archetypes, deals with some less commonly explored *comedia* character types. Although much has been written about the Monarch on the Spanish stage, and staged versions of Isabella I of Castile have also been the subject of numerous studies, Susan L. Fischer casts a new light on Spain’s much glorified late-medieval queen. In “(Re)Performing Isabel I of Castile: Pious Cruelty, Saintly Hypocrisy, and Lope de Vega’s *El niño inocente de La Guardia* [*The Innocent Child of La Guardia*],” Fischer examines the legend of Isabella I of Castile, focusing on how she herself constructed an image of piety and religious zeal for public consumption—an image her biographers perpetuated. However, Fischer argues that in reconstructing Isabella for the stage, Lope de Vega suggests that the queen manipulated Catholic piety for reasons of political expediency. Eduardo Paredes Ocampo explores a relatively overlooked archetype in early modern Spanish theater, the melancholiac, in “A Bicephalic Melancholiac: Acting a Royal Pathology in Spanish Golden Age Drama.” Paredes Ocampo shows that by carefully examining the paralinguistic signs in Lope’s text and representations of melancholia in early modern paintings and medical manuals, it is possible to glean clues about how Lope’s *El Príncipe melancólico* [*The Melancholic Prince*] was actually performed. “Staging Female Melancholia: Calderón’s *No hay burlas con el amor*,” by Bárbara Mujica, also deals with melancholia, but this time, in women. Mujica argues that while male melancholia was associated with genius and creativity, female melancholia—often diagnosed as hysteria—was associated with inarticulateness and antisocial behavior. The female melancholiac was often represented on the Spanish stage as a *mujer*

esquiva [standoffish woman]. One example is Doña Beatriz, protagonist of Calderón's *No hay burlas con el amor* [Love Is No Laughing Matter]. Although fewer examples of female melancholiacs exist in art than of male melancholiacs, medical manuals, letters, and diaries provide descriptions of the "babbling," gestures, and rebellious attitudes of female melancholiacs that can help guide directors. In "Streleros" *buenos y malos* [Good and Evil Star-Gazers]: Staging Astrology in Early Modern Spanish Theater," Valerie Hegstrom and Dale J. Pratt examine a popular type in early modern Spanish theater: the astrologer. Hegstrom and Pratt show that serious astrologers used complex instruments and had their own professional jargon, which made them easy to spoof onstage. Furthermore, many superstitions grew up around the power of astrologers, sparking the public's curiosity. While astrology and astrologers could be represented onstage with a few stereotypical props and actions, some playwrights and directors engaged in extravagant staging.

Part 4 of this collection explores three fundamental components of early modern staging: Music, Movement, and Adaptation. Early modern theater made ample use of music. Performances typically ended with a *fin de fiesta* [end of the festivities], a short, cheerful piece with music and dance. The *entremés* between the acts of a *comedia* also included music. In "Reading Music in Cervantes's *Entremeses*," Yoel Castillo Botello explains that Cervantes used music and dance not only to entertain, but also to provide social commentary. However, since the *entremeses* were never performed during Cervantes's lifetime, it is difficult to assess how music might have been integrated into the stage action. "Finding the Beat in *¡Risas aquí y después, ganancia!* [Laughter First, and Afterward, Profits!] by The Grupo La Hormiga," by Sharon Voros, analyzes four short burlesque plays and shows how dividing them into "beats" can assist in developing a production concept. An understanding of "beats" can point to moments of intensification within the play and help track the movements of actors. In "Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *Mudarse por mejorarse* [To Change in Order to Improve One's Lot] and Changes over Time," Edward H. Friedman discusses the staging, social, and cultural issues involved in translating / adapting this play.

Staging and Stage Décor: The Theater of Early Modern Spain covers a wide range of topics. Some essays deal with early modern productions, attempting to decipher how plays were mounted and costumed, and how they spoke to seventeenth-century audiences. Other essays deal with modern stagings and show that not only the *comedia*, but also minor genres such as the *entremés* and *mojiganga*, are evolving for modern theatergoers. Directors have adapted early modern Spanish theater forms for twenty-first-century spectators with innovative, technologically sophisticated staging and costuming, sometimes imbuing their productions with political or social messages. To remain vibrant

and relevant, any theater creation must change and adapt. The abundance of new productions of the *comedia* and other early modern plays shows that these theater forms continue to thrive.

Part 1:
Props and Space

Chapter 1

Supplementary Aesthetics, Affordances, and Dynamic Props: Added Objects in Isabel Ramos's *El perro del hortelano* (2004)

Christopher D. Gascón

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Abstract: Director Isabel Ramos adds numerous objects that do not appear in Lope de Vega's text to her 2004 staging of *El perro del hortelano* [The Dog in the Manger]. These may be considered in light of supplementary aesthetics: elements in a live theatrical production that add to the performance while also pointing to absences in the work. Several of the objects that Ramos adds to her staging are figurative in nature, metaphorically commenting on the characters and their values. Others function as affordances, eliciting gestures or behaviors that clarify characters' dispositions and visually manifesting the power dynamics operant in the play. Several of the objects in the production are of a dynamic nature, shifting in meaning over the course of the action, suggesting certain ideas at one moment and the dissolution of those ideas the next. By using objects this way, Ramos explores the ironic duality of signs onstage: the disparity they reveal between aspirations and outcomes, appearances and reality. The director's supplemental objects work to displace the type of sympathetic, *omnia vincit amor* interpretation of the characters and action that we see in many productions and analyses of the play, and to support her satirical reading of Lope's text, in which virtually all of the characters play the part of the *gracioso* [fool] and express cynical views of romance and social hierarchies.

Keywords: *El perro del hortelano*, theater props, Lope de Vega, theater performance, Repertorio Español, semiotics of theater, supplementary aesthetics, Isabel Ramos, early modern Spanish theater

Lope de Vega's *El perro del hortelano* [The Dog in the Manger] (1613) features several literal props mentioned in the text and various implied props suggested by characters' actions: hats, feathers, letters, pens, handkerchiefs, and money all exchange hands in significant ways throughout the play. In her 2004 production of the play at New York City's Repertorio Español, director Isabel Ramos nevertheless adds numerous additional objects neither mentioned nor implied in Lope's playtext.¹ Ramos brings into play a colorful variety of additional objects that occasion stage action and express ideas that are vital to her aesthetic. These enrich the visual, aural, comic, and conceptual dimensions of the performance. This analysis explores the nature of Ramos's added objects and reveals how they clarify the ironic view of society she presents.

Competing interpretations

Most scholars interpret *El perro del hortelano* as a critique of seventeenth-century Spanish aristocracy. It condemns *honor estamental* [caste honor], based on class privilege rather than virtue, and presents an upper class that lives according to its own material impulses, guided more by power and wealth than honor and love (Fernández 314, Rubio 95). The play is primarily about "putting a spin on things"—the ability of language to deceive (Friedman 8). For Margaret Wilson, despite the protagonists' tendency to idealize themselves in their own minds, Lope reveals that "Teodoro is not Icarus, but a monkey dressed in borrowed finery" and "Diana is not the sun, only a silly, selfish dog" (279). In sum, the prevailing critical view is that the play is a devastating critique of an aristocracy that Lope saw as "podrida y carente de toda buena cualidad" [rotten and devoid of any good qualities] (McGrady 162).

Lope has nonetheless written the play in a way that allows for other interpretations: Some analyses focus on the romantic aspects of the play while downplaying its satirical elements. Several scholars and directors have read the play as a story of genuine love triumphing over the established norms of hierarchical society. Bruce Wardropper maintains that Teodoro demonstrates a

¹ The crew and cast of Repertorio Español's *El perro del hortelano* (2004) include: Dirección, adaptación y diseño de sonido, Isabel Ramos; diseño de vestuario, escenografía y fotografías, Awymarie Riollano; diseño de luces, María Cristina Fuste; Diana, Karina Casiano; Teodoro, Dario Tangelson y Victor Tirado; Tristán, Emyliano Santa Cruz; Marcela, Belange Rodríguez; Fabio/Federico, Dan Domingues y Jorge Dieppa; Ricardo, José Enrique y Ricardo Hinoja; Anarda/criada de Ricardo/Ludovica, Silvia Sierra y Yaremis Felix; Dorotea/criada de Federico, Mariana Buoninconti.

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Index

A

Actor xii, 112-113, 117, 155, 156-169, 177-187, 193-194, 197-199, 201, 224, 248; Actor, female xii, 93-94, 100, 112, 202
Actress: see Actor, female 112
Adaptation 227-250
Adler, Stella 182
Admiratio 186
Alfonso V of Aragon ix
Allen, Woody 177
Almada, Teatro Nacional de 21-33
Ana de San Bartolomé 175 N8
Anagnorisis 51
Anti-Semitism 135-136. See also Jews
Appia, Adolphe 21 N2
Aranda, Conde de 52
Aristotle 81, 172: *Poetics* 81, 212
Association for Hispanic Classical Theater (AHCT) xii, 222, 253
Astrológo borracho, El (anonymous) 191
Astrólogo embustero, y burlado, El (anonymous) 196-199
Astrology / astrologer xv, 189-204
Audience xiii, 68, 71, 181, 187, 201, 202, 226, 248, 249; Audience composition 70; Audience reception 78
Auto de los Reyes Magos, El 189
Auto sacramental xi, 61, 189
Autor (Impresario) 57, 58, 59-73, 62, 70, 105
Avicena 172
Avuso, Manuela de 91-92

Azevedo, Ângela de: *El muerto disimulado* 196-197

B

Baccio del Bianco, Luigi 42, 43
Baltasara, Francisca 62, 91
Bances Candamo, Francisco 190
Baroque 6, 19, 21, 22, 22 N5, 38, 39, 47, 48, 51, 52, 78, 177, 239, 241, 249
Bascone, Diez de 62
Beat (in theater) xv, 221-235
Belbel, Sergi 25
Berfield, Dennis 113
Bermúdez, Jerónimo 24 N10
Black Legend 128
Blood libel 127, 135, 135 N8
Body language 158-161, 185,
Bosch, Hieronymus (El Bosco) 32, 165
Bosco, El: See Bosch, Hieronymus
Brahe, Tycho 190
Buen Retiro, Palace of the xi, 42 N9
Burton, Robert 155, 157-158, 163, 166

C

Caballero, Leandro 58, 61-62, 66, 67, 68, 69, 72
Cabrera de Córdoba, Luis 168
Calderón de la Barca, Pedro xi, xiii, xv, 23, 167, 190-191: *El alcalde de Zalamea* 25; *Andrómeda y Perseo* 42; *El astrologo fingido* 193, 194-196; *Darlo todo y no dar nada* 112; *La fiera, el rayo y*

- la piedra* 42; *Los flatos* 221, 222, 223; *La garapiña* 221, 222-223, 225, 228, 229, 230; *No hay burlas con el amor* xv, 172-187; *El médico de su honra* 20, 182; *El pésame de la viuda* 221, 222, 223, 224, 226, 227, 228, 230; *El toreador* 221, 223-224, 230, 231; *La vida es sueño* 155, 229, 176, 193; *Las visiones de la muerte* 221, 222-223, 226, 228, 231
- Camões, Luis de 24; *As Lusíadas* 24
- Cáncer y Velasco, Jerónimo 214
- Cancioneiro Geral* 24
- Cañizares, José de 39, 50; *Marta la Romarantina* 39; *Juana la Rabicorta* 50; Don Juan de la Espina plays 39
- Carducho, Vicente 153, 155, 162, 163, 164, 166
- Carlos, Prince of Asturias 168
- Carlos II of Spain 37
- Carlos III of Spain 50
- Carlos V of the Holy Roman Empire, I of Spain 92
- Carnestolenda 222
- Casona, Alejandro 25 N11
- Castanheira, José Manuel 20, 25-33
- Castro, Francisco de 190
- Castro, Inés de 19-33
- Castro y Bellvis, Guillén de 102; *El Narciso en su opinión* 102-105
- Catholic Monarchs: See Isabel I of Castile; Ferdinand II of Aragón
- Cazuela* x, 41, 200
- Cervantes, Miguel de xv, 96, 178, 213; *La cueva de Salamanca* 218; *Don Quixote* 213; *La elección de los alcaldes de Daganzo* 218-219; *Entremeses* 178, 209-220
- Chamizal Festival: See Siglo de Oro Theater Festival
- Charcot, Jean-Martin 176
- CNTC: See Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico 25
- Coliseo* 37, 41; Coliseo del Buen Retiro 43; Coliseo de los Caños del Peral 40; Coliseo de la Cruz 38 N4, 50, 52
- Colón, Juan 61
- Colonization 128
- Coloquio* 201, 203
- Columbus, Christopher 128
- Comedia* x, xi, xii, xiii, xvi, 20, 21, 22, 43, 47, 48, 58, 61, 63, 66, 68, 102, 73, 79, 80, 83, 86, 91, 92, 100, 105, 110, 134 N6, 179, 191, 193, 200, 203, 209, 213, 216; *Comedia de capa y espada* 80 N4; *Comedia de enredos* 80 N4, 86, 178; *Comedia heroica* 41, 52; *Comedia de magia* xii, xiii, 37-53; *Comedia palatina* 6; *Comedia de santos* 41, 52; *Comedia de teatro* 39; *Comedia de tramoya* xi, 39, 46, 52; *Comedia militar* 41, 52
- Comediante*: See Actor
- Comédie Française 25 N11
- Comedy x, 5, 15, 81, 155, 156, 211, 212, 242, 249, 250. See also Humor
- Comic effect 77-88
- Commedia dell'arte* x, 40
- Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico (CNTC) 20, 25, 32, 33, 213
- Conversos* 135, 136, 137, 142, 147, 148, 149 N17
- Convivencia* 130
- Coronel, Bárbara 91, 100, 101

Corral de comedias x, xi, xii, 37, 40, 41, 48, 58, 63, 67, 155, 161, 168, 186-187, 191, 193, 194, 200, 210, 211, 213; Corral de la Cruz 41; Corral de la Pacheca 40; Corral del Príncipe 40, 41
 Cosmetics 80-81
Costumbrismo 50
 Costume xiv, 67, 77-122, 185, 190, 194, 198, 200, 202, 204; Costume Price 98-99, 101
 Covarrubias, Sebastián de 192
Criada 103
 Cromwell, Hannah J 185
 Cross-dressing 78-88, 97, 115-120, 241

D

Dama 80 N4, 84, 86, 100
 De la Cruz, Rodrigo 61
 De la Torre, Gabriel 61, 70, 72
 De las Llamosas, Lorenzo 190
 De los Reyes, María 100
 De los Ríos, Nicolás 62
 Depression: See Melancholia
 Didascalía 48, 50, 117, 161-162, 183, 191, 198
 Dido, Ángela 100
 Director xiii, xiv, xv, 3, 4, 5, 6, 16, 20, 21, 25, 31 N19, 33, 51, 60, 62, 87, 95, 99, 109, 110, 115, 117, 171, 174, 179, 182, 194, 196, 221, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 248, 249
 Discovery space 41, 49, 186, 191, 200, 202, 203, 204

E

Echarri, Bernardo 68, 71
 Enrique II of Castile 139 N10

Enrique IV of Castile 130 N3
 Enrique, José 12
Entremés xii, xv, 61, 67, 112, 178, 189, 191, 193, 203, 209-222
 Erdman, Harley 109-122
 Erras y Eraso, Pedro 70
 Escorial, El 154
Escotillón 41, 46, 47, 51
 Espinosa, Pablo 61, 70
 Esquivel Navarro, Juan de 116-117

F

Fado 33
 Farce 210, 213, 215, 217, 219
 Farthingale: See *Guardainfante*
 Felipe: See Philip
 Ferdinand of Aragon ix, 128, 129, 130 N3, 148-150
 Ferreira, António 24 N10
 Ficino, Marsilio 172
 Figurón 102
Fin de fiestas 210
 France, influence on Spanish theater 37
 Francisca de Santa Teresa 190;
Coloquio para representar en la profesión de Sor Ángela María de San José 201
 Franco, Francisco 129
 Freylas, Alonso de 158

G

Galán 177, 210, 223
 Galen 163, 172, 172 N1, 174, 229
 Gallego, Fernando 200
 Galli Bibiena family 44-45
 Galli Bibiena, Fernandino 44-45
 Ganassa (Alberto Naseli) 39-40
 García Lorca, Federico 29 N14
 García Vicente, Francisco 177

García, Ignacio xiii, 21-33
 Gasque, Juan 63
 Gender roles 77-88, 109-122
Géneros menores 213
 Gesture xv, 3, 9, 10, 12, 84, 88, 118,
 134, 153, 155, 159, 160, 163, 166,
 171, 172, 175, 176, 179, 184, 190,
 194, 198, 199, 204, 239, 246
 Góngora, Luis de 12, 181
Gracioso 3, 14, 62, 78, 78 N2, 81, 82
 N5, 86, 97, 103, 193, 200, 241,
 248
Guardainfante 109-122
 Gulbenkian ballet 29 N15
 Guzmán, Leonor de 139 N10
 Gynecology 175

H

Habsburgs 167, 173
 Henry IV of Castile: See Enrique IV
 of Castile
 High and low culture xii
 Hippocrates 163
 Honor x, 4, 10, 20, 176, 180, 181,
 182, 183, 198, 214, 216, 217, 218,
 219, 239; *honor estamental*
 [caste honor] 4
 Hormiga, La (theater group) 221-
 235
 Hornby, Richard 224, 225
 Huarte de San Juan, Juan 155, 162
 Huarte y Mendicoa, Fermín de 70
 Huarte, Fermín de 57-73
 Humor x, xii, 82, 83, 85, 191, 194,
 198, 202, 203, 210, 214, 221-227.
 See also Comedy
 Hysteria 172-173, 180

I

Ibáñez, Juan de 57-73

Ibn Sina: See Avicena
 Innocent VIII 140 N14
 Inquisition 128, 135, 140 N14, 142
 Invincible Armada 149, 153, 172,
 211
 Irony 14, 16, 147-148, 249
 Isabel (Isabella) I of Castile ix, 127-
 150
 Italy: Italian influence on Spanish
 theater ix, xi, ix, xiii, 37-53

J

Jácara xii
 Jews 128, 128 N1, 129, 130, 135,
 135 N7 and N8, 136, 137, 138,
 140, 141, 142, 143, 147, 148, 149,
 172 N1: Edict of Expulsion 141,
 142
 John Paul II, Pope 129
 Jonson, Ben 156
Jornada x
 Juana (la Beltraneja) 130
 Juana Inés de la Cruz xiv: *Los*
empeños de una casa xiv, 77-88,
 96, 97; *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*
 86-87; "Hombres necios" 86-87
 Juana of Castile (Juana la Loca)
 168
Juegos de escarnio ix
Juegos escolares ix

K

Kaufman, Gina xiv, 109-122

L

Laban, Rudolf 115-116
 Labanyi, Jo 26 N13
 Lanini y Segredo, Francisco 214: *El*
parto de Juan Rana 214-215

Lazzi 226
 Leff, Thomas 21
 León Marchante, Juan Manuel
 190, 199; *Loa de planetas, y
 signos* 199
 León, Melchor 62
 Lighting x, 27, 42, 43, 44, 52, 117,
 185, 186, 250
Loa 67, 78, 190, 199, 200, 201, 203,
 222, 226, 227, 228
 Lotti, Cosimo xi, 38, 43, 42, 42 N8
 Lope de Vega: See Vega
 Ludic: see Humor
 Luis I 37 N1
 Lusophilia 23
 Luzán, Ignacio de 52

M

Machiavelli, Niccolò 127, 128 N1,
 150
 Madrigal y Tamayo, Jerónimo de
 57-73
 Malachite, Felicia McNeill 113
 Maria Luisa Gabriela of Savoy xii
 Mariana de Austria 172, 213
 Marieta, Juan de 134-135
 Marsillach, Adolfo 20
 Martínez, Ana: See Baltasara,
 Francisca
 Medieval theater 189
 Melancholia / Melancholy xiv-xv,
 153-169; female melancholia
 172-187
 Melanchthon, Philip 172
 Melo, Francisco Manuel de 24 N10
 Mendoza, Bartolomé de 57-73
 Metalinguistic conventions 249
 Metsu, Gabriel 175
 Mexía de la Cerda, Pedro 24 N10
 Mieris, Franz van d.Ä 175

Migliarini, Arcangelo 160
 Mira, Magüi 5
 Miró, Pilar 5
Mise-en-scène 20, 38-53. See also
 Set design
Mojiganga xii, xv, 190, 221, 222-
 231
 Montero, Jorge 70
 Montherlant, Henry de 25 N11
 Movement (stage) 115-117, 156-
 161, 189, 193-194, 198-201, 202-
 203. See also Gesture
Mujer esquiva xv, 172, 176-177,
 178, 180
 Murillo, Bartolomé Esteban 104
 Music xv, 38, 47, 184, 209-214, 216-
 220
 Muslim 22, 94, 128, 128 N1, 129-
 130, 172 N1

N

Naseli, Alberto: See Ganassa
 Neoclassicism 38
 Netherlands 174-175
 Newton, Isaac 190

O

Opera 38 N4, 39, 40, 42

P

Palencia, Alonso de 129, 136, 129
 N2, 149
 Palmyreno, Lorenzo ix
 Paralinguistic signs and signifiers
 xiv, 38m 153, 154, 155, 161, 166,
 195, 199, 209, 210. See also
 Music
 Parody 15, 17, 83, 85, 155, 181, 222
Paso x, xii

Pasoaes, Texeira de (Joaquim Pereira Teixeira de Vasconcelos) 30 N17

Patricio, António 29 N16

Pavis, Patrice 120

Pedroche, Pepa xiii, 21-33

Pérez, Cosme 82 N5, 213, 230, 231

Performance space ix, xiii-xiv, 57-73, 68-69, 185-187: cloister as 201-203; prison as xiii, xiv, 57-73. See also *Corral*, Set design

Persiani, Giuseppe 25 N11

Perspective (in stage design) 43-44, 52

Peruzzi, Baldassare 44

Philip II of Spain 42 N8, 153, 154, 167, 168, 172, 211

Philip III of Spain 172

Philip IV of Spain xi, 42 N8

Philip V of Spain xii, xiii; theater under 37-53

Piccinini, Filippo 42

Pinedo, Baltasar de 62

Poetic justice 32, 216, 238, 241, 248, 249

Porres, Gaspar de 61, 62

Portugal: representation in Spanish theater 19-33; War with Castile 141

Prisons, as performance spaces. See Space, performance

Props ix, xiii, 3-16, 41, 66, 183, 189, 190, 194-199, 201, 202, 204, 250

Pulgar, Fernando de 130 N3, 136, 149

Q

Quevedo, Francisco de 81; *Sueños* 178

Quiñones de Benavente, Luis 213: *El guardainfante* 112-113

R

Racine, Jean-Baptiste 23

Ramírez, Jerónimo 134

Ramos, Isabel xiii, 3-16

Rana, Juan: See Pérez, Cosme

Renaissance ix, 38, 82, 172, 187

Repertorio Español 3, 4, 4 N1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14

Ribera, José de 165, 174

Rich, Joshua 184

Robles, Luisa de 104

Rodríguez, Belange 11

Rodríguez, Rafael 5, 25

Rojas Villandrando, Agustín 62

Rojas y Sandoval, Cristóbal 62

Rojas, Fernando de: *La Celestina* 209

Romance 212, 216-220, 227, 228, 230

Romancero 24, 209, 210; *Romancero general* 216

Rueda, Lope de ix-x, 58

Ruiz de Alarcón, Juan 237, 238: Mudarse por mejorarse (Trading Up) xv, 227-250; La verdad sospechosa 227, 228

Ruiz Moreno, Cristóbal 66, 67, 68, 71, 72

Ruiz, María 25

Ruiz, Miguel 59, 61-62, 62 N4, 63, 69-70

S

Sabbatini, Niccola 43, 46, 47

Sachetti, Giovanni Battista 41

Salvo y Vela, Juan: *El mágico de Salerno* 38

Sánchez, Germán 62

Santa Cruz, Alonso de 173

Sanz, Julio 25

Sarao 78
 Satire 12, 15, 16, 85, 86, 144, 210, 215, 217
Saudade 33
 Scenography 38-53. See also Set design, Props, *Corral de comedias*
 Sebastian I of Portugal 22
 Segovia, Manuel 32
 Semantics 117, 174
 Semiotics of theater 3, 210, 239, 249
 Serlio, Sebastiano 38, 43-4
 Set change 44, 50; 52. See also Set design
 Set design xi, xiii, 20, 3-16, 25-33, 37-53, 66-68, 183, 185-187, 191, 202-203, 204, 245, 248, 250
 Shakespeare, William: *Hamlet* 155; *Macbeth* 225, 228; *The Merchant of Venice* 142, 143, 143 N15, N16, 144, 147; *Othello* 224
 Sierra, Silvia 8
 Siglo de Oro Theater Festival, El Paso, Texas 79, 102, 109, 121, 221, 222, 225
 Sixtus IV 140 N14
 Sixtus V 190
 Soares de Alarcón, Juan 24
 Sound: See Paralinguistic signs and signifiers
 Stage directions: See Didascalia
 Stage machinery xi-xii, 15, 37-53, 54, 128, 195. See also *Tramoya*
 Staging xiii, xiv, 19-33, 78, 177-187, 190, 197. See also Performance space, Props, Set design
 Stanford, Klyph 185
 Stanislavski, Konstantin 182, 224, 225

Stanlake, Christie 224, 225, 228
 Steen, Jan 174, 175
Stile recitativo 42
 Sumptuary laws 92-95, 100, 105

T

Teatro breve 215. See also *Entremés*, *Mojiganga*
 Téllez, Gabriel. See Tirso de Molina
 Teresa of Avila 175 N8
 Tertulia 41
 Tickets: prices of theater tickets 38 N4, 58
 Tijera, Juan Francisco 190
 Tirso de Molina 23 N7, 109-122: Antona García 134 N6, El amor médico 134 N6, Doña Beatriz de Silva 134 N6, Marta la piadosa xiv, 109-122, El melancólico 154, 155
 Toquemada, Tomás de 135-136
 Torelli, Giacomo 45-46
 Torres Naharro, Bartolomé de ix, 22
 Torres, Francisco de 63
 Tragedy x, 19, 21N2, 23, 24, 24 N9, 26, 28, 212
Tramoya xi, 39, 41, 43, 46, 47, 50, 52
 Trap door. See *Escotillón*
 Traveling troupe 191
 Trufaldini 40, 48

U

Unamuno, Miguel de 30 N18, 31
 Unities (in theater) x, 52, 193, 211
 Urbina, Isabel de 153

V

- Vaca, Josefa 101
 Valdés, Pedro de 63
 Vázquez Freijo, Norberto 221-231
 Vázquez, Diego 61
 Vega, Félix Lope de x-xi, 24, 24
 N10, 42 N9, 190: *El Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* x, 211, 221, 229, 249; *El caballero de Olmedo* 178; *El castigo sin venganza* 176; *El cerco de Santa Fe* 134 N6; *¿De cuándo acá nos vino?* 25; *La hermosa aborrecida* 134 N6; *Los locos de Valencia* 176; *El mejor mozo de España* 96, 97, 134 N6; *El niño inocente de La Guardia* xiv, 127-150; *El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* 134 N6; *El perro del hortelano* xiii, 3-16; *El príncipe melancólico* xiv, 153-169
 Velázquez, Andrés 157
 Velázquez, Diego de 104
 Velázquez, Jerónimo de 62
 Velez de Guevara, Luis xiii, 19-33:
La corte del demonio 134 N6; *El diablo cojuelo* 229; *La luna de la sierra* 134 N6; *Reinar después de morir* xiii, 19-33; *La Serrana de la Vera* 25, 96-97, 134 N6
 Verse xii, 121 N4, 30, 50, 98, 103, 113 N1, 135 N7, 193, 212, 213, 217, 219, 228; verse forms x, 87 N8, 203, 210, 216, 229; *Verso dulce* 211
 Vicente, Gil 42 N8
 Villamil, Asunción 25
 Villanueva, Diego de 52
 Vitruvius 44
 Vives, Juan Luis: *The Education of a Christian Woman* 118

W

- Wagner, Richard 46 N13
 Wassenbergh, Elisabeth Geertruida 175
 Weyer, Johann 172
 Williams, Tennessee: *Streetcar Named Desire* 224, 225

X

- Ximénez de Luna, Pedro 70

Y

- Yepes, Rodrigo de 134-135

Z

- Zamora, Ana 21 N3
 Zamora, Antonio de 40; *Diablos son los alcahuetes* 48-49
Zarzuela 31 N19, 40, 41, 48
 Zingarelli, Niccolò Antonio 25 N11
 Zurbarán, Francisco de 104