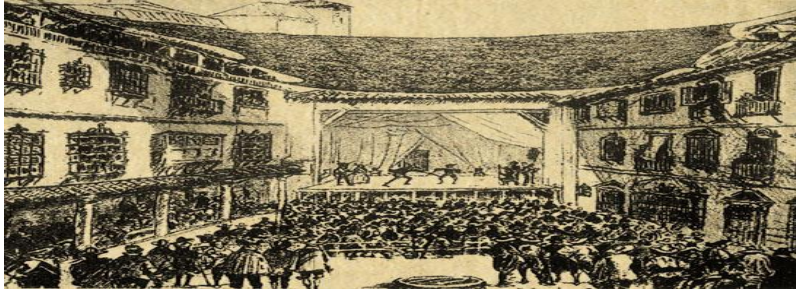


UCLA Diversifying the Classics: Class and the Comedia



Corral del Príncipe in Madrid, established in 1582

In the open-air courtyard theaters or *corrales* where comedias were first performed, audiences of different classes commingled. Built between houses in the central areas of the city, the *corrales* offered seating based on social position: nobles in the balconies, women in the *cazuela* (stewpot), and *mosqueteros* (groundlings) on patio benches. This cross-section of society enjoyed a truly popular art, which staged the customs, concerns, and anxieties of the early modern city.

As Madrid rapidly grew into an imperial capital and gold from the Americas poured in, hierarchies appeared increasingly fluid. Social mobility likewise became a central preoccupation of theater, which modeled urbane behavior that anyone could learn. In this drama of mobility, chance, the dictates of passion, or the engine of wit may triumph over a status imposed by birth. The *gracioso*, or servant sidekick, for instance, is often shrewder than characters of higher social status, who become the butt of his jokes.

The star dramatist of the period, Lope de Vega, explored class mobility in his widely-admired *The Dog in the Manger*, which tells the story of the countess Diana, who falls for her secretary, Teodoro. Teodoro, already betrothed to Marcela, Diana's servant, assents to Diana's wishes and eventually "marries up." Though their union depends on an improbable trick in which Teodoro claims to be the long-lost heir to a nobleman, the tension in the play involves the conflict between the demands of Diana's status and the commands of her heart.

Lope's *Women and Servants* is more radical in its representation of class mobility. Set in Madrid, the play tells the story of two sisters, Luciana and Violante, who are in love with Teodoro and Claridán, house staff of the Count Próspero. The Count pursues Luciana and Violante is courted by the hapless Don Pedro, yet the sisters manipulate the action to favor the men they love over their noble suitors. Meanwhile the servants realize that they could leave a feudal household and find a new master, in what is a rapidly transforming world. Focusing on figures who must rely on wit rather than status to achieve their desires, *Women and Servants* provides an alternative social vision, in which class exists on a continuum rather than a rigid hierarchy. As Luciana says, "Women and servants shall turn Spain upside down!"

Produced by artists who were able to make a career from the theater for the first time in Spain's history, at a time of rapid social change in which many were questioning the divisions of their society, it is no wonder that the comedia airs class concerns. The question of how we might interrogate and challenge inherited hierarchies is a pressing one for us today, and the comedia remains an engaging and challenging theatrical art.