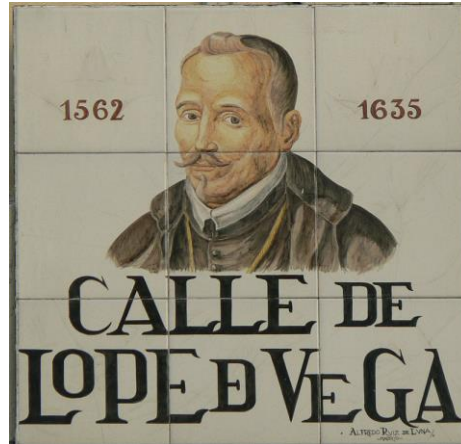


UCLA Diversifying the Classics: Lope de Vega and The New Art of Making Plays



In 1609, Lope de Vega presented a tongue-in-cheek treatise as both justification and blueprint for theatrical writing to the Academy of Madrid, a kind of gentleman's club for working poets. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of this document is the fact that it exists at all: we can access a manual by the most successful dramatist of the time, as though Shakespeare had left a treatise on playmaking. *The New Art of Making Plays in Our Time* begins with a statement that can only be read as deeply ironic, both praising and ridiculing critics of Lope's *nueva comedia*, who create little in the way of theater but want to maintain hard and fast rules for how it should be done. In his opening verses, Lope addresses the perceived gap between popular theater and art, reacting to and preempting criticism of the theater being created by himself and his contemporaries. He then moves on to establish guidelines for the *nueva comedia* and elevate it to the status of "noble theater" (vv. 156).

Lope's engagement of the ancients vs. modern debate shows him willing to break from Aristotelian forms to create commercially viable theater. The first part of his treatise serves as a reminder that what might seem unbreakable imperatives for how to create theater are really the result of a long evolution of form. His conclusions might seem unnervingly modern to us now: change is fundamental to the process of development and creation; art forms that are not flexible or amenable to change will not remain viable in a changing market; rigid precepts are a death sentence for genres.

Audience and art

Lope's most important point is that the dictates of the audience must be followed: "and I say, if the aim is to delight, / whatever serves that purpose must be right" (vv. 210-11). *The New Art* validates the importance of the audience: theater does not and cannot exist in a vacuum; there is a clear market and you have to please it, or you won't be producing any more plays, whether or not they are high art. His recommendations for playmaking highlight this relationship, while creating a recipe for the *comedia* which would become the standard for the next century. Of particular interest is the sly reference to the popularity of cross-dressing, which Lope recommends within the bounds of a certain decorum:

Don't let your ladies be unladylike,
and if they should disguise themselves as men,
since such cross-dressing never fails to please,
ensure they do in ways that may be excused. (280-283)

Lope is unapologetic in his conviction about the efficacy of the theater he is creating, both as art and as a commercially successful product. He ends *The New Art* by making it clear that while Aristotle's principles are fundamental for understanding the history of theater, they certainly are not necessary for creating it:

In fine, I stand by what I've done, and know
that though they might, if different, have been better,
they'd not have proved as pleasing as they did;
for sometimes what is anything but right
will for that very reason give delight.
[...]
Don't hold debates about the ancient rules;
go to the play, and pay close heed -that way,
you'll find it tell[s] you all there is to say. (vv. 373-390)

Resources:

Thacker, Jonathan. *A Companion to Golden Age Theater*. Támesis, 2007.

Vega, Lope de. "New Rules for Writing Plays at This Time," Victor Dixon, ed. In *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo dirigido a la Academia de Madrid de Lope de Vega*, Festival de Teatro Clásico de Almagro/Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, Almagro, 2009.

https://emothe.uv.es/biblioteca/textosEMOTHE/EMOTHE0116_NewRulesForWritingPlaysAtThisTime.php