

# THE LONDON LIBRARY

## Special Collections: Spanish Plays of the Golden Age

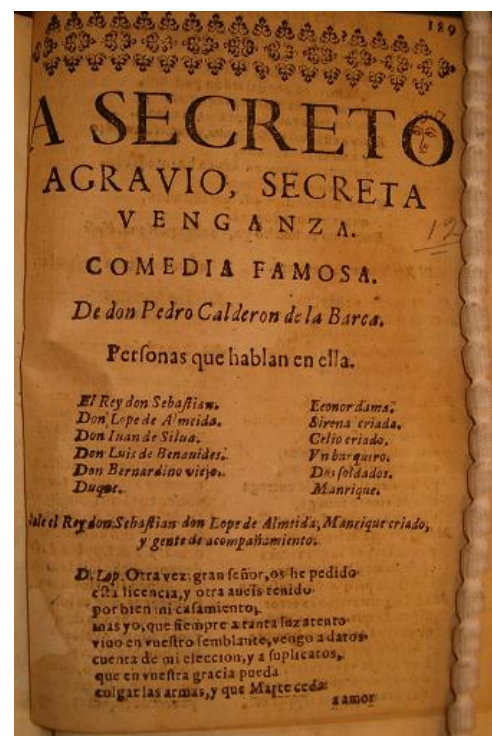
In medieval Spain theatre was a popular entertainment in every respect. While some heroic and mythological plays were performed at court, the rest, mainly comedies, were staged by travelling troupes of actors in the courtyards of inns and communal dwellings. These dwellings, known as *corrales*, were built around a central patio. In later years, when purpose-built theatres began to appear they replicated the structure of these communal dwellings and the term *corral* was then extended to apply to playhouses as well.

The popular character of Spanish theatre at this time is also evident in the way numerous plays were distributed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. There were two very different methods and formats:



*Partes*. Predominantly a 17<sup>th</sup>-century development, these were sets of volumes made up of 12 plays; some comprise works by a single playwright, but many are compilations from different authors. The separate plays in the *partes* were sometimes also sold individually as *desglosadas* (unbound). *Partes* were often edited by the authors themselves and are usually the most faithful reproductions of the original texts of plays.

*Sueltas* (loose). A uniquely Spanish phenomenon, these were plays printed separately and intended to be sold individually. They were meant for public consumption and not intended to last. As an ephemeral, inexpensive product, they were often printed on 4 or 5 quarto gatherings of poor quality paper using worn type. The text was often abridged and the type size changed halfway through the pamphlet in order to fit the paper. The printing of *sueltas* began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continued well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the term usually refers only to Golden Age plays. An estimated 8,000 *comedias sueltas*, often with the words *comedia famosa* in the title, were printed in up to 5 different editions, resulting in some 40,000 editions with impressions of 1,200 to 1,500 copies per edition. These editions are an invaluable tool for the study of Spanish Golden Age theatre and the history of Spanish printing.



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### The Spanish plays collection at The London Library

The London Library houses one of the largest collections of Spanish plays outside of Spain. There are over 1,400 plays in *partes*, *desglosadas* and *sueltas* as well as *sainetes* (one-act comic plays) bound together in factitious volumes. Most of them were presented to the Library by John Rutter Chorley (1806-1867), scholar of Spanish literature and poet, and a close friend of Thomas Carlyle, the Library's founder. The collection was later enlarged by a gift from Mrs. G.H. Dawkins of plays previously owned by W.B. Chorley, brother of J.R. Chorley.

The earliest dated play held in the collection was printed in 1616 and the latest dates from 1849. The collection includes plays from all the key playwrights from this period: Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, Ramón de la Cruz, etc. There are many examples of the work of all the specialist printers in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Salamanca and Pamplona. It is a broad and rich collection, which includes some rare examples of editions not identifiable with holdings elsewhere, such as *Los Médicis de Florencia* by Diego Jiménez de Enciso, possibly published in Cologne in 1697 (London Library pamphlet no. 968, item 17) and a copy of *Quién hallará mujer fuerte* (*Who will find a strong woman*) by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, possibly published in Madrid in 1677 (London Library pamphlet no. 1056, item 8). The rarest play is one entitled *La adúltera virtuosa* (*The virtuous adulteress* in London Library pamphlet no. 996, item 9) by Antonio Mira de Amescua of which only one other copy is known to exist (Munich Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 711).



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A complete list of the plays can be found in:

Gregg, Karl C. *An Index to the Spanish Theatre Collection in the London Library*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Biblioteca Siglo de Oro, 1984 [The Library has a loan copy shelved at Bibliog., Drama (on 5<sup>th</sup> floor), and a reference copy is available on request at the Issue Desk.]

Hagberg Wright, C.T. and Purnell, C.J. *Catalogue of the London Library, St. James's Square, London*. London: The London Library, 1914. Vol. II, pp. 969-981

The plays are bound in 107 Pamphlet volumes numbered P901 to P1000, P1050-57 and P1353. Additionally, there are 2 pamphlet boxes of loose plays, numbered P1120-21.

The contents of the various Pamphlet volumes are detailed in the Library's red leather-bound Guard Book catalogues in the main Issue Hall, in volume number 33, under 'Spanish Plays'.

All Pamphlet volumes and boxes may be consulted by Library members or reference ticket-holders in the main Reading Room; simply request your volumes at the main Issue Desk and they will be delivered to the Reading Room.

For more information on the Spanish Plays Collection, please contact:

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