

Producing a critical edition of a Golden Age Spanish play

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Abstract: This article was originally written as a talk at the Humanities Subject Family event at St Anne's College. In it, I give an overview of the methodology for my DPhil thesis, a critical edition of a seventeenth-century Spanish play by Lope de Vega. I also outline some of the issues involved in producing a modern critical edition of an early modern text.

Lope de Vega was one of the most popular, and certainly the most prolific, playwrights of his time. Born in Madrid in 1562, he wrote an impressive number of plays before his death in 1635, in addition to poetry and prose works. Of his plays, approximately four hundred are extant, a staggering figure in itself, although in fact Lope claimed to have written in excess of one thousand five hundred plays. It is generally agreed that he wrote something in the region of at least six to seven hundred, many of which have been lost.¹ In the seventeenth century, they were first published in collections known as *partes* which gathered together approximately twelve plays in each; in total, twenty-five *partes* are officially attributed to Lope. One of the consequences of Lope's vast literary output is that much of his work has been overlooked in academic terms. The *ProLope* group in Barcelona have recently set out to rectify this sad lack of proper scholarship engaging Lope's corpus and are in the process of publishing good critical editions of all of his plays. For my DPhil thesis, I am producing a critical edition of *Contra valor no hay desdicha*, which appears in *Parte XXIII*. Translated literally, the title means 'No misfortune shall prevail against valour'. My edition of *Contra valor* will precede the *ProLope's* production of this *Parte*, and I hope to collaborate with them in the future.



Contra valor no hay desdicha is based on the early life of King Cyrus the Great of Persia (Ciro), the narrative taken from sources by both the Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) and the Roman historian Justin (c. 2nd-3rd century AD). Cyrus is a genuine historical figure, but the action of the play follows the largely mythical accounts of his early life, from his humble beginnings having been abandoned in the wilderness by his paranoid grandfather King Astiages and brought up by the peasant Mitridates (a rather familiar tale from other hero myths such those of as Oedipus, and Romulus and Remus), to his eventual accession to the throne, proving that, as the title of the play suggests, valour wins out over all adversity. The plot is entertaining, but, in addition to being a well-written play with characters of real psychological interest it also contains much of relevance to contemporary debates on kingship.² These debates centred on the qualities necessary for a good monarch and were largely a reaction to Machiavelli's *Il Principe* ('The Prince', first printed in 1532) which was condemned by most Spanish political theorists as

¹ Dixon, Victor. (2004). 'Lope Félix de Vega Carpio'. In Gies, David T., (Ed.). *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* (pp. 251-64). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

² For more on this, Melveena McKendrick's groundbreaking study *Playing the King: Playing the King: Lope de Vega and the Limits of Conformity* (London: Tamesis), 2000, is an extremely enlightening study of Lope's treatment of the kingship theme; McKendrick did not, however, include *Contra valor* in this book.

an evil work that was contrary to Christian ethics and principles.

My work is to produce a scholarly study of *Contra valor no hay desdicha* that encompasses the elements necessary for a modern critical edition. This includes an in-depth examination of: early printings of the play; the date and circumstances of its composition; its sources; its staging; a critical discussion of the work including analysis of its characterisation, imagery and themes; a breakdown of its versification.

No manuscript of *Contra valor no hay desdicha* is known to exist;³ therefore, to set about defining a version of the text for use in this edition, it was necessary to rely solely on early printed editions of the play.⁴ I first worked through *Contra valor* with reference to its previous editions which, of course, contain no critical material but give only the dramatic text, and made informed decisions as to my own rendering of the play. This involved conducting a line-by-line comparison of all seven previous printings (two from 1638, three from the eighteenth century and two from the nineteenth century) and noting where my version differs from any one of them in a list of textual variants.

I should make clear, however, that the definitive version of my text in this edition does not correspond exactly to the *editio princeps*. Much of the punctuation in the early printed editions is not natural to the modern reader. This is added to the orthography of early modern Spanish, which, although not overly problematic to modern eyes is neither of any real advantage in the context of a critical edition.⁵

It is evident from these comments that I have made the decision to modernise both the punctuation and orthography of my edition of *Contra valor*. This is based on careful consideration of the relative merits of both conservation and modernisation, informed by a reading of various scholars on the theory of critical edition. Arellano, Cañedo and others have made a strong case for the modernisation of text for a number of reasons including those I have just outlined. It is also the strategy adopted by ProLope for their new series of editions of the complete works of Lope de Vega (already mentioned).⁶

In a wider sense, however, I have attempted to bring the text back to a version more closely related to the 1638 first edition than the later editions from the eighteenth and nineteenth

³ Presotto, Marco. (2000). *Le commedie autografe di Lope de Vega: Catalogo e Studio*. Kassel: Edition Reichenberger. This compiles a full collection of the plays existing in manuscript by Lope de Vega, *Contra valor* not being one of them.

⁴ Of course, the problems caused by the errors and, at times, intervention of early-modern printers in the work they were printing are well-documented, and it is important to bear this in mind when approaching the play. For more on this, see pp. 134-136 of Profeti's 'Editar el teatro del Fénix de los ingenios', in *Anuario de Lope de Vega*, II (PROLOPE: Milenio), pp. 129-151. Also, see chapters 2 and 3 of Andrés Escapa and Garza Merino, (Eds.). (2000). *Imprenta y crítica textual en el Siglo de Oro*. Valladolid: Fundación Santander Central Hispano, Centro para la Edición de los Clásicos Españoles.

⁵ For more on these issues of orthography and punctuation, see Arellano, Ignacio. 1995. 'La edición de textos teatrales del Siglo de Oro. Notas sueltas sobre el estado de la cuestión (1980-1990)'. In J. Canavaggio. *La comedia*. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez (pp. 13-50, especially pp. 36-42).

⁶ Arellano, Ignacio. 1995. 'La edición de textos teatrales...'; Cañedo, Jesús, & Arellano, Ignacio. 1987. 'Observaciones preliminares sobre la edición y anotación de textos del siglo de oro'. In Cañedo, J., & Arellano, I., (Eds.). *Edición y Anotación de Textos del Siglo de Oro*. Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra'; ProLope (Eds.). *Obras completas de Lope de Vega*

centuries. The last of these was by Menéndez y Pelayo, published in 1896.⁷ This approach was especially pertinent in relation to stage directions, which had been altered significantly by the nineteenth century editors: my edition uses mainly the stage directions of the *princeps*, and those that have been altered are noted.

In terms of punctuation it is difficult to say with any certainty what form the original would have taken; as mentioned in fn. 4 above, early modern printing was neither reliably accurate nor faithful to the playwright's original text. Weight of evidence (such as the two 1638 editions using the same punctuation at a given point for example) can be useful, but due to the inherent difficulty of settling upon what exactly the intention of the author was, it is often a case of making a sensible and considered editorial decision based upon a close reading of the text. This type of decision-making can be seen as not only the prerogative, but the duty of an editor.

The literary aspects of the play and its technical features are essentially interdependent, as a literary reading of the text can aid with editorial decisions, and the opposite is also true, a technical decision sometimes affecting a critical reading of the work. In turn, this demonstrates very clearly that an editor's job is not simply to implement a blanket policy regarding technical issues such as punctuation, but rather to recognise that editorial decisions do have implications for a reading of the text itself, and to be sensitive to this when making such decisions.

To conclude, it is evident that one's chosen editorial methodology will always depend heavily on the purpose for which an edition is being produced. Here I suggest that the main aim of a critical edition for scholarly study in the 21st century is to provide a text which as far as possible is faithful to the original intent of the author, which is accessible for the reader, and which, through proper research and careful referencing has all the information that a reader could need for an overview of how the text has evolved from its first edition to the most recent. This is not to the neglect of the idea of performance, of course; there has been a recent, encouraging upsurge of interest in the performance of Golden Age plays in the UK and the USA in the last decade.⁸ A high-quality edition is of crucial importance in giving a director the tools (s)he needs to understand and appreciate a text fully so that it can be produced onstage.

Editorial decisions regarding technical aspects of the text have consequences for the modern reception of the play, whether by performers or by readers, in addition to leaving a legacy for other scholars as they read an edited play. In my view, it is important to remember that a modern critical edition is just another link in the chain of the evolution of a given text. In the same way that a literary study is expected to be fully supported by a substructure of documentation and referencing, so the modern editor has a responsibility to ensure their text is likewise supported by scholarly evidence of the highest quality, in order to make it as erudite as possible. It is undeniably tempting for the modern editor to see their work as the end result of a finished process. However, it is not inconceivable that in the years to come the edition produced today will take its place and be studied alongside all the other editions published over the years since the play's first run off the press in a seventeenth-century Madrid printing house.

⁷ 1896. *Obras de Lope de Vega: Comedias mitológicas y comedias históricas de asunto extranjero: edición y estudio preliminar del Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo*. Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1890-1913, VI.

⁸ For example, the RSC season of Golden Age plays in 2004, and the recent launch of the 'Out of the Wings' website (www.outofthewings.org), devoted to promoting and translating from all periods with a view to their performance in English speaking countries.