

Luis Vélez de Guevara. *La Rosa de Alejandría*. Ed. William R. Manson and C. George Peale. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2018. 217 pp. ISBN 9781588713124.

Reviewed by  
James A. Parr  
University of California, Riverside

For almost five decades, George Peale has been focused on the work of Luis Vélez de Guevara, in particular the recovered dramatic works exemplified in the volume that prompts these remarks, a dramatization of the life and legend of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (4th century). 45 of Vélez's estimated 100 plays have appeared in this series to date, and others are at various stages of completion or planning. Each includes a critical introduction by a scholar of standing, a bibliographical essay, a comprehensive bibliography, an accurate text with a complete apparatus of variants, a full complement of explanatory notes, and an index of annotated materials.

A slice of the pertinent and rather unusual back-story to the project is that William Manson accepted many years ago to undertake a major research project proposed to him by the indomitable Ruth Lee Kennedy, the grande dame of U.S. *Comedia* scholars. It was simply to focus his scholarly activity on Luis Vélez. Manson, in due course, welcomed the collaboration of George Peale in what was becoming a very substantial undertaking. Manson passed away in 1984, but George Peale's loyalty is such that he continues to display Manson's name today on each volume as co-editor. My understanding is that the heiress apparent to the editorship of the series is Professor Elisa Domínguez de Paz of the Universidad de Valladolid, author of the excellent introductory study to the present volume.

It should be mentioned here that the official public presentation of this volume took place at the Universidad de Valladolid on April 4, 2018. Homage was duly paid. The April 5th edition of the regional newspaper, *El Norte de Castilla*, quotes Prof. Germán Vega of UVA as follows: "El de George Peale es un trabajo de rigor científico de toda una vida." Peale himself is quoted regarding an aspiration of his that seems quite reasonable: "Me llenaría de ilusión que las obras de Vélez se subieran a la escena. Valen la pena." Perhaps one day we shall indeed see a representative work on stage at Almagro or El Chamizal, or both. My suggestion for the first work to be staged would be *La Serrana de La Vera*. But I may be biased, having collaborated some years ago with Prof. Lourdes Albuixech of Southern Illinois University on the introductory study on that volume for this series.

The painstaking retrieval of the plays attributed to Vélez and the editing of those titles is indeed a major undertaking, and it is notable in its aspirations, which are to restore Vélez to the place of prominence he once enjoyed in the eyes of contemporaries such as Quevedo, that is to say to his place as a peer of Lope and Tirso. The reader may recall that there was a spark of interest some years back in elevating Claramonte from capable director and modest playwright to top-tier dramatist, including an attempt to claim *El burlador de Sevilla* and other important titles for him. The project proved to be unsustainable in the eyes of most specialists, largely because of the paucity or non-existence of contemporary “peer reviews” that would have supported such a major promotion. (N.B. Having directed a dissertation at USC in 1977 on *El Valiente Negro en Flandes*, I am open to Claramonte as playwright, but fully aware of his limitations). Luis Vélez, on the other hand, was respected as a playwright by his fellow poets throughout his career and properly so. His best known work remains, of course, the long narrative, *El Diablo Cojuelo*, the first work of his that caught George Peale’s eye, by the way; indeed, the work on which he wrote a dissertation that became an important book: *La Anatomía de ‘El Diablo Cojuelo.’* (1977). Luis Vélez merits all the attention he may receive as a result of Manson’s and Peale’s efforts, together and separately. It does bear notice, however, that only five of the attributed hundred volumes will be based on autograph copies. The paucity of autograph manuscripts is evidence that Vélez did not write his plays with an eye toward posterity. Thus, an inescapable patina of irony overlays this laudable effort to restore fame and high standing to a writer who merits those accolades but who was apparently indifferent to such vanities.

The select canon (ignoring for now other gradations of canonicity) is another consideration that looms implicitly in the background. Which dramatist now represented in the select canon of the *Comedia* might Vélez displace? Quite possibly Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, and this might not set well with devotees of that writer. Limiting ourselves again for the moment to a hypothetical contest between these two playwrights only, the proper response to someone who might look askance at the idea of such competition is that the select canon functions in precisely that manner. It is not a rarefied enclave established and protected by a handful of influential critics but a very democratic compilation that operates largely on its own and in a simple and straightforward manner: you cast votes for an author by writing books and articles on that person’s work and, of course, publishing editions of their texts, presenting papers at conferences, offering graduate seminars on them, getting their texts into anthologies and onto Golden Age drama course syllabi and graduate reading lists. Over time, authors who have attracted the most votes through these varied but complementary channels will rise in the hierarchy, possibly displacing others, possibly merely sharing space with them. There is no real agreement on how capacious the select canon can be and still be considered “selective,” or even whether size is a real or merely a hypothetical consideration. The limits have yet to be tested. As a sometime specialist on Ruiz de Alarcón, but also an admirer of Vélez, I am not at all concerned by such low-key

competition. It will likely take another hundred years to reach a consensus on where these two may eventually stand in relation one to the other.

Professor Domínguez de Paz strikes me as the ideal person to have done the preliminary study to this volume. Her remarks include a helpful plot summary, a commentary on genre, structure, and poetic justice, as well as pertinent bibliography and keen insight into the major characters and their relations. It is a model of its kind, free of misstatements or misrepresentations, well researched, logically organized, and clearly written. There are two areas she touches upon that have tested the mettle of innumerable readers and viewers over the years, however, and since each has long been a topic of great interest to me, I would offer a note or two on them. One is genre, and the other is poetic justice. Our guide does not subscribe to Parker's orthodox, Aristotelian perspective on poetic justice, but prefers Serralta's more modest alternative, which is only very tenuously connected to the customary view of poetic justice. Rather, it is based on the complementarity of *gusto* and *justo*. Essentially, whatever appeals to the *gusto* of the audience is *justo*, or, conversely, *lo justo* should arouse *gusto*, and the ability of theatergoers of the day to recognize when the two are in synchrony is assumed—presumably an innate talent or perhaps one acquired over time by audiences of the day. But it would be a stretch to view *lo justo* as an extension of Aristotelian Poetic Justice. Clearly Aristotle and his many followers over the centuries have had some notion of *gusto* in mind, but it centered around the premise that the audience would not be pleased if virtue were not properly recognized and evildoing reasonably chastised. That is the classic and standard horizon of expectations, and it need not be an exercise in moralizing. A related perspective would have it that art should improve upon gritty reality, wherein evil often prevails and virtue goes unrecognized. Hence “poetic” justice, since the world of “poetry” can make things turn out as ethically minded people would prefer them to be, righting the abuses and slights of the real world. Parker & Co. even allowed for frustration as a suitable form of chastisement in certain instances, following what amounted to a graduated measuring stick, with damnation to hell as the ultimate in severity. But it is not Aristotle or Parker who holds sway here; rather, it is Horace and his advice to fledgling poets about combining *utile et dulce*, now effectively elevated to doctrine by the Council of Trent and the Counter Reformation, with their very clear emphasis on the *enseñanza* portion of *deleitar enseñando*. I have little interest in defending the British School, having taken rather pointed issue with their over-reliance on poetic justice in *Hispania* in 1974 (in an article that had patiently endured a four-year backlog to see print), but my protest was based on the assumption that the critic has more appropriate, more properly literary-critical matters to attend to than tracing chains of causality against a background of religious orthodoxy and moralizing. I also excoriated the seeming arrogance of Parker's ill-conceived title (*The Approach to...*). E. M. Wilson had his “withers unwrung” by this challenge and, in his letter to the editor, ventured that I was unsuited for this field and wished me godspeed in search of a more suitable environment. Alexander Parker, an extraordinarily fine scholar and gentleman, mailed

me an eight-page handwritten letter, free of rancor or condescension, that I treasure. Ten years thereafter, in 1984, and in his *History of Golden Age Drama*, Henryk Ziomek observed that “since Parr wrote his plea for a more intrinsic approach..., critics have moved in that direction.”

Concerning genre, *La Rosa* is remarkably eclectic, borrowing aspects of the *capa y espada* format, the historical drama (in modern dress) and the tragicomedy hybrid, but it is, of course primarily indebted to the saints’ plays that were popular at the time, risky though they were to stage because of the censors. Here our guide offers excellent insight into that issue, its implications and complications. An imperative more aesthetic than doctrinal that is perfectly illustrated in this play and merits mention by name is *admiratio*. Providing the bulk of the attendant amazement and awe is, of course, the trajectory and martyrdom of the main character herself, a larger than life woman of superlative physical and moral beauty, to say nothing of her classical education, eloquence, and intellect. She is not a convert or late bloomer, but is purposeful and steadfast throughout, from beginning to end. A conversion scene à la Magdalena might have provided a fine dramatic touch, of course, but we should not re-write our sources. Quite likely, the poet had in mind a specific lead actress as he wrote his playtext, one whose physical assets would not belie that text, while at the same time serving to attract an appreciative male audience. Had he shown her at some point in male attire, that would most certainly have assured that the performance had legs, so to speak.

A saint’s play is not likely to offer us that rarified toying with tragedy and comedy that I have dubbed “generic irony,” exemplified, for instance, in *El Burlador de Sevilla* or *El Caballero de Olmedo*. In both, the dramatist winks at the *discretos* of the audience as the climax approaches, insinuating but not fulfilling the possibility of comedy through the integration into society offered by marriage, but always from within a work that clearly is tending toward tragic isolation. Lope did a brilliant twist on generic irony by doubling down on it in his *Médico de su honra*, first providing the anticipated tragic ending, but following that immediately with “comedic” reintegration into society via marriage. As the *gracioso* puts it: “Aquí hay una boda con un entierro, señores. Esto es abreviar parolas.” What we have in *La Rosa* is not generic irony as I have defined it. Paradox rather than irony is the proper rhetorical device for a saint’s play, paradox of the sort we associate with the Scriptures (gaining through losing, living through dying, the first shall be last, etc.). Marriage and integration, the staples of comedy, are realized (on the highest level imaginable and presumably for all eternity), while death of the body, a staple of tragedy, represents the total and permanent isolation from this world, albeit in a positive, not a negative, sense. It is noteworthy nonetheless that we do have a pending *boda* and an implicit *entierro* at the end, paralleling in unexpected ways the more worldly *Médico* of Lope.

To conclude, *La Rosa* is a splendid example of its type. It is hard to imagine this genre ever again attaining the level of popularity it enjoyed in Vélez’s time, of course, given the continuing secularization of society. Plays such as this could well become an

acquired taste for secular society, perhaps based on the attraction to art for art's sake, or an indulgence in nostalgia for a simpler time, perhaps an opportunity to contrast that simpler time with their own presumed sophistication and clear-sightedness. In any event, it is important that we know about these texts and accept them on their own terms, whether we subscribe or not to their faith-based premises, and that the best of them be salvaged from the ravages of time. Those who work in Golden Age should be collectively grateful to all involved in this latest publication and to all who have been involved with other texts in this series in years past or will be involved in years to come. The complete series, as it continues to appear, volume by volume, belongs in the library of every college and university that encourages the study of the Humanities.