

Priestly Playwrights and Authorial Authority: The Moral Formation of Authorship in Early Modern Spain

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It is a little-known fact that almost every major playwright during Spain's Golden Age of drama was either a priest or lay religious. In addition, almost all of them received a Jesuit education. But how did it work to be a popular secular playwright, writing about the most scurrilous of worldly themes, and still remain true to one's vocation as a priest? Like contemporaneous nuns who composed secular music (the popular *villancicos*), these clerics frequently tried their hands at secular *comedias* as well as theological *autos sacramentales*. The results, such as Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*, were some of the greatest dramas world literature has ever produced.

Previous critics such as José Antonio Maravall (in his landmark study *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*) have seen the religious and secular drama of this time period as one seamless unity, reflecting the totalitarian authority of the hegemonic church / state. In this reading, the plays being performed upon the popular stage were simply the didactic instrument of an overtly religious monarchy. This argument could even be extended to encompass a social authorship of texts of the sort described by Foucault and Barthes in their parallel essays on the death of the author.

A careful reading of these stage plays, however—especially when juxtaposed to the same period's confessional manuals—reveals a sharp divergence between playwrights and confessors in the area of proposed solutions to moral problems. Maravall, anticipating more recent arguments by New Historicists, assumed that in the monolithic Spanish state, little or no authorial autonomy was possible. My research on hundreds of stage plays and over 50 confessional manuals demonstrates that this was simply not the case. This paper will explore the role of Jesuit casuistry in the moral formation of authorship (and, by extension, subjectivity in general) during Spain's greatest period of literary accomplishment.