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Ruins of Empire or Tears of Joy? An Intersection of History and the Bible in Lope de Vega's Religious *Comedias*

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Abstract: This article studies a way in which Lope de Vega used biblical theatre as a vehicle for historiographical interpretation. The article does so by situating elements from a number of Lope's religious *comedias* in the context of what has recently been described as Golden Age Spain's "aesthetic-historical culture." The study begins with an analysis of intersections of history and the Bible in Lope's *La hermosa Ester*. The second half comprises a reconstruction of the role of the Bible in Lope's poetics. Via this two-pronged strategy, the article makes a case for seeing a feature of Lope's biblical *comedias* as part of said aesthetic-historical culture of early modern Spain and proposes a way to understand the historiographical profile of Lope's biblical drama. This leads to the claim that Lope's biblical drama effectively contributed to the attribution of a new generic mixture to understandings and interpretations of the course of history itself. This interpretation invites a highly open-ended approach to the end of time between ruin and redemption.

Keywords: history and the bible; early modern Spain; Lope de Vega; *La hermosa Ester*; aesthetic-historical culture; religious *comedias*

1 Theatre in the Republic of Mystics

When touching upon the theme of theatre and the Bible, Golden Age Spain naturally springs to mind. This period's enthusiasm for the interface between religion and theatre was of a remarkable intensity and constitutes an important part of the history of European drama. The artistic engagement with religious topics was so widespread that Spain has been named an early counterpart to the eighteenth-century European Republic of Letters: Seventeenth-century Spain was a Republic of

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Mystics.¹ With his *comedia nueva*, Lope de Vega was the absolute front-runner of an original kind of theatre in early modern Spain. This genre also included a substantial group of plays which might today be categorized as his religious *comedias*. These can be divided into two general groups. One is hagiographical and concerns a genre called *comedias de santos*. The other, smaller group is the staging of Old Testament stories in secular settings.² Following recent interest in the early modern historical drama's contribution to the writing and remembering of history,³ a specific desideratum in the scholarly literature is an elaboration of the intersection of history and the Bible in Lope's religious *comedias*. To address this need, the following article will contextualize a feature of Lope's biblical plays in the developments of what Sofie Kluge has recently described as an "aesthetic-historical culture" of the Golden Age, where a "cross-breeding" of fact and fiction is deemed a "productive agent of historical reflection."⁴ Such a discussion of possible understandings of the "historiographical profile" of certain Lope plays suggests the tendency towards theatre as a means to productive historical reflection. The article will suggest that a subgenre of such a general crossbreeding of fact and fiction can be found in a discussion of how Lope's biblical theatre can be seen to contribute to a comprehensive discussion about the very meaning and direction of history.

In order to initiate such a discussion of the historiographical profile of a group of Lope's religious *comedias*, the article offers two areas of analysis: firstly, a scrutiny of features of *La hermosa Ester* which can be seen to let history and the Bible intersect in a highly constructive manner; secondly, a reconstruction of the role of the biblical stories in the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*. To deepen our

1 This is Bruce Wardropper's suggestion, in Spanish, as un "*pueblo teólogo*." Bruce Wardropper, *Introducción al teatro religioso del Siglo de Oro* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1967), 87. The translation of *teólogos* to "mystics" in this specific relation is offered by Robert. R. Morrison, *Lope de Vega and the Comedia de Santos* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 7. The claim has been contested by Arias and Diéz Borque but serves the present introduction. Compare J. Enrique Duarte, "The Spanish Sacramental Plays: A Study of Their Evolution," in *A Companion to Early Modern Hispanic Theater*, ed. Hilaire Kallendorf (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 59–74 (60n6).

2 According to Canning, there are 29 surviving plays by Lope which could be labelled *comedias de tema religioso*: Elaine Canning, "Sacred Souls and Sinners: Abstinence and Adaptation in Lope's Religious Drama," in *A Companion to Lope de Vega*, eds. Alexander Samson and Jonathan Thacker (London: Tamesis, 2008), 147. According to Morrison, there are 25 hagiographical plays: Morrison, *Lope de Vega*, 9. Burkort counts eight specifically biblical plays: Haydee Burkort, *Typology in the Biblical Plays of Lope de Vega*. Ph.D. Diss. (Florida: Florida State University, 1983), ii. Three of those plays are, however, not definitively attributable to Lope (300).

3 Florencia Calvo, *Los itinerarios del Imperio: La dramatización de la historia en el barroco español* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2002); Cesc Esteve Mestre (ed.), *Disciplining History. Censorship, Theory and Historical Discourse in Early Modern Spain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Sofie Kluge, *Literature and Historiography in the Spanish Golden Age. The Poetics of History* (London: Routledge, 2022).

4 Kluge, *The Poetics of History*, xv.

understanding of this issue, the article proceeds to analyse various meta-comments on the relation between history and religion on stage dispersed across Lope's religious plays, e.g., *La piedad ejecutada*, *Los locos por el cielo*, and *Lo fingido verdadero*. This is also intended to offer a consideration of the role of the sacred archive in the aesthetic-historical culture of the period. Matched against each other, the reading of *La hermosa Ester* and the interpretation of the role of the Bible in Lope's thinking about religious drama offer a way to situate Lope's biblical drama within the historical culture of early modern Spain and allow for a scrutiny of the historiographical profile of this part of Lope's oeuvre. This leads to the claim that Lope's biblical drama contributed to the dissolution of standardised boundaries between tragedy and comedy, and that these plays effectively contributed to the attribution of this new generic mixture to understandings and interpretations of the course of history itself. This resulted in a highly open-ended approach to the conclusion of time between individual and collective ruin or possibilities of secular and religious redemption.

2 *La hermosa Ester* and Mordechai's Dream

La hermosa Ester is Lope's first biblical play to comply with the standards of his concept of *comedias* explained in the *Arte nuevo*.⁵ The piece was written in the spring of 1610 whereby it coincided with the expulsion of the *moriscos* from Spain, which had been decreed in 1609. Structurally, the story follows the short plot of the Old Testament Book of Esther with the exception of the addition of a comic subplot. In the first act of the play, the Persian king Asuero (Lope's spelling) demands that his wife Vastí show herself in full splendour at one of his banquets. When she refuses, she is exiled, and the king begins the search for a new queen. This would become Ester,⁶ a Jewish woman, who initially conceals her faith. When she and her uncle later save the king's life by preventing a regicide, Ester reveals her Jewish identity to save her people from persecution. In the Bible, Ahasuerus accepts Esther's background but only allows the Hebrews across the country to defend themselves (Esth 8:11). In Lope's play, the king actively intervenes in favour of them to ensure their protection throughout the kingdom.⁷

5 According to Edward Glaser, "Lope de Vega's *La hermosa Ester*," *Sefarad* 20 (1960): 110; Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 49.

6 The spelling will distinguish between "Ester" when referring to the character of Lope's play and "Esther" when referring to the Biblical story and the general subject-matter of this biblical person. This also applies to other figures spelled differently by Lope.

7 Even if structurally similar, minor differences also reveal themselves between Lope's story and the biblical original. Canning has observed certain small variations between the story of Esther in Lope's

The first relevant feature to consider for the present purposes is Lope's theatrical introduction of the play's two female protagonists. In the play, Asuero demands that Vastí present herself at a banquet. In front of his guests, he subsequently relates her beauty to the beauty of the crown – and of Heaven, saluting “that divine duplication of the Creator of nature [el divino trasunto/del Hacedor de la naturaleza” (vv. 123–24).⁸ Whilst Vastí is getting ready, Asuero prepares his subjects for said beauty and widens the connection between Creation, beauty and the crown:

Un rostro en quien el sol cifra sus rayos,
Que mis robustos bríos
Convierte en tiernas ansias y desmayos; (I, 134–37)

[A face unto which the sun concentrates its rays so that my sturdy spirit turns into tender yearning and mildness.]

When Asuero sees Ester for the first time, he invokes a similar idea, namely that her beauty has the power to imbue worldly reality with light of Heaven:

Por el supremo Dios que rige el suelo,
Hermosísima Ester, que no pensara
Que se pudiera hallar fuera del cielo
De hermosura y de luz fénix tan rara;
Das en mirarte celestial consuelo;
Toda memoria en tu belleza para;
Que cual huye del sol la noche oscura,
Huye el ajeno amor de tu hermosura. (I, 894–901)

[By the supreme God who rules the Earth, most beautiful Ester, one should not think to find such beauty and such rare light of the phoenix outside of Heaven. You give heavenly consolation by sight; all memory fades in your beauty; like the dark night flees the sun, your beauty vanishes the estranged love.]

These mixed notions of beauty attributed to both female characters range from the literal meaning of the worldly-feminine beauty of queens over the radiant glory of the crown to Neoplatonic imaginations of creation mirroring the form of the beautiful. These introductions and their use of the theme of beauty are important because

play and the Hebrew Bible: It seems Lope made use of the deutero-canonical additions to the Christian canon. Elaine Canning, *Lope de Vega's Comedias de Tema Religioso: Re-creations and Re-presentations* (London: Tamesis, 2004), 31–33.

⁸ Lope de Vega, *La hermosa Ester* (Alicante: Cervantes Virtual, 1999). Further references to this work in brackets after the quotation with act and verse line. All translations of this play are the present author's own. Canning describes this passage as Asuero's “deification of his wife.” Canning, *Lope de Vega's Comedias de Tema Religioso*, 23.

they are structurally linked with a later crucial scene as far as the issue of an intersection between history and the Bible is concerned. At the beginning of the second act, Ester's uncle, Mardoqueo, tells his friend Isaac that he has had an ominous dream. He has seen the sky divide into a thousand parts and unleash its lightning. He has seen two dragons fight and then two strong army divisions attack "the righteous innocent" (II, 39). These happy few were observing the "the sad tragedy of their beloved lives" (II, 40–41) and were praying that Heaven send them a remedy. Then "a humble little spring" (II, 43) arose from the earth and grew into "a large river" (II, 47), the sun arose with "a thousand beautiful rays" (II, 48) and by handing out "a thousand forms of deaths" (II, 49), the weak beat the strong:

Vi que salían
 Dos ejércitos fuertes a batalla
 Campal contra Los justos inocentes,
 Los cuales, viendo la tragedia tristes
 Des sus amadas vidas, con mil lágrimas
 Pidiendo estaban su remedio al cielo.
 Entonces una humilde fuente
 Iba saliendo con pequeña fuerza,
 Pero creció de suerte [...]

Se vino a hacer un caudaloso río;
 El sol salió con mil hermosos rayos,
 Y dándoles mil géneros de muertes,
 Los humildes vencieron a los fuertes. (II, 37–50)

By applying a theatrical vocabulary to the fate of the Jewish people, the play supplies a first hint of its merging a biblical story with a dramatic interpretation of history. This effect is enhanced by two specific biblical symbols. The two dragons symbolize the Jews and the Gentiles respectively. The idea of the little spring transforming to a great river is a likely allusion to John 4:14 where Christ claims that the water he gives will become a spring that will well up to eternal life.⁹ In the recent development of studies in the aforementioned aesthetic-historical culture of the Golden Age, these generic attributions of theatre to the course of history have become a way to study the historiographical profile of the period's theatre.¹⁰ Such a question of the "historiography" of the period's drama implies a discussion of how the dramatists also used theatre to openly question philosophical assumptions of the direction of history.

⁹ The dragon and the spring as Biblical references according to Burkort, *Typology*, 248. In 4:14: "Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁰ E.g., Kluge, *The Poetics of History*, 140–45, who outlines the conditions of a Spanish Golden Age "theatrum historiae" in the theatre and historiography of the period.

Of course, this is not likely to be the primary function of *La hermosa Ester*, but in these peculiar lines, this function is at least *also* visible when Mardoqueo negotiates ideas of history as a sad tragedy and the outlook one of a thousand tears. This negotiation continues throughout the piece and is compatible with the play's generic label of a *tragicomedia famosa*. Mardoqueo's default position is one of tragic notions of history, but they are challenged by the biblical plot. Not yet halfway through the play, Mardoqueo is asked what he thinks the dream means:

Yo pienso que ha de ser para bien nuestro,
Aunque ha de ser por medio de mil penas;
Mas como al sol precede oscura noche,
Así la gloria de las penas sale. (II, 52–55)

[I think it must be to our advantage, even if through a thousand sorrows; like the dark night precedes the sun, glory arises out of sorrow.]

This is a prophecy of the play's imminent *peripeteia* and an enhancement of the sense of tragicomedy through the amalgamation of biblical narratives and world history. As the events take their turn, and the joyful reversal of events results in the salvation of the Jews, Mardoqueo thankfully tells Ester that “el sueño, dulce Ester, se va cumpliendo, / y trocándose el llanto en alegría [the dream, sweet Ester, is coming true, and turning tears into joy]” (III, 669–70). He elaborates that Ester was that humble spring, of which he dreamt, which exceeded its own limits, and that the evil dragon was Amán, the enemy of the Jews, who, in the play, is executed on the scaffold which he himself had set up for Mardoqueo.

The above mentioned structural affinity between the theme of beauty and the play's intersection of history and the Bible relates to Mardoqueo's prophecy of the sun following the dark night and glory arising out of sorrow. This is also the power of Ester's beauty already suggested by Asuero's attribution of the symbol of the phoenix to her life and the power to make dark night flee the sun. Following this specific feature, an initial case can be made for seeing a subfunction of Lope's biblical theatre as a vehicle for historiographical interpretation. This impression is enforced by the many analogies between the play's subject-matter and its two possible analogies to contemporaneous history, as suggested by Colbert Cairns. First, the play is attentive to Ester's keeping her Jewish identity secret from Asuero at the beginning. This could suggest Ester as a heroine of the secret society of Jews in Spain whilst – in the same year as the final expulsion of the *moriscos* from the peninsula – Lope celebrated her as a prototypical Spanish hero.¹¹ The second analogy enforces the likelihood of the

¹¹ Emily Colbert Cairns, *Esther in Early Modern Iberia and the Sephardic Diaspora. Queen of the Conversas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 63.

first's paradoxical nature; it seems that Ester is equally analogized to Isabel the Catholic.¹² To rephrase the argument of Colbert, "Lope draws on a constellation of biblical women that connect with contemporary figures in early modern Iberian society."¹³ There will be more to say on this topic – and more evidence supporting the analogy – yet to appreciate its complicated nature and its dramatic context, a consideration of Lope's reflections of genre and the Bible should prove helpful.

3 History and Genre in the *Arte nuevo*

Lope's most well-known remarks on theatre are found in his speech *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*. Whilst having the primary function of discussing the *comedia nueva* of Lope's time, the treaty also offers discussions of the relation between history and genre. Lope describes that generally "por argumento la tragedia tiene/La historia, y la comedia, el fingimiento; [as a plot, tragedy has history, and comedy has make-believe;]" (vv. 111–12).¹⁴ This is somewhat peculiar as a contemporary audience would not have considered the story of Esther a piece of "fiction" but instead have seen it as something closer to history. To complicate the matter, Barry Ife claims that "categories like fiction and non-fiction are far from being universal and they were by no means clearly differentiated in sixteenth-century Spain."¹⁵ For instance, Lope considered the life of Aeneas, as told by Virgil, true: In the preface to *La piedad ejecutada*, he advanced this argument in interesting fashion defending the addition of love stories to the *Aeneid*. He first acknowledged – perhaps tongue-in-cheek – that it is true that those who write in verse "no merecen nombre de coronistas [do not deserve the name of chroniclers]" because they are allowed to introduce "fábulas [stories]" into matter which is essentially "digno y versímilo [dignified and verisimilar]."¹⁶ But still, he noted, just because Virgil introduced the love story by way of Dido's fate, it did not "dejó de ser verdad que Eneas pasó a Italia y

12 Colbert Cairns, *Esther*, 63–64.

13 Colbert Cairns, *Esther*, 72.

14 Lope de Vega, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, ed. Juan Manuel Rozas (Alicante: Cervantes Virtual, 2002), vv. 58–60; Further references to this speech in parenthesis in the body text. There are two English translations, which have been consulted, but where nothing else is noted, the translations are by the present author. The two translations are to be found in the following publications. Lope de Vega, *New Rules for Writing Plays at this Time*, ed. Victor Dixon (Valencia: Emothe/Universidad de Valencia, 2009), Emothe.uv.es; Lope de Vega, *The New Art of Writing Plays*, trans. William T. Brewster (New York: The Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1914).

15 Barry W. Ife, *Reading and Fiction in Golden Age Spain*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10.

16 Lope de Vega, *La piedad ejecutada* in *Las comedias de Lope de Vega Carpio* 18 (Madrid, Juan González, 1623), 159v.

que salió de Troya [stop being true that Aeneas came to Italy and from Troy].”¹⁷ In the *Arte nuevo*, Lope argues that since tragedy concerned history and comedy fiction, the latter came to be considered “*planipedia*” [low and humble.] (v. 113) It need not be so, Lope reminded this academy, for already “Tulio,” i.e., Cicero, knew the following:

Tulio las llamaba espejo
De las costumbres y una viva imagen
De la verdad, altísimo atributo,
En que corren parejas con la historia.
¡Mirad si es digna de corona y gloria! (vv. 123–27)

[Tully called them a mirror of conventions and a living image of the truth; such a high attribute that they are similar to history. Is that not worthy of crown and glory!]

The lines contain an important movement claiming that *comedias* are “similar to history.” Lope uses the idiom *correr pareja*, meaning to be on the same level: History and drama put on par. The *Arte nuevo* then goes on to explore ideas of confusion and similarity:

Lo trágico y lo cómico mezclado,
Y Terencio con Séneca, aunque sea
Como otro Minotauro de Pasife,
Harán grave una parte, otra ridícula,
Que aquesta variedad deleita mucho:
Buen ejemplo nos da naturaleza,
Que por tal variedad tiene belleza. (vv. 174–80)

[With the tragic and the comic mixed – Terence with Seneca, even if it be like yet another Pasiphaë’s Minotaur – one part will be serious and another part laughable because that variety is very pleasing. Nature, whose beauty comes from such variety, provides a good example.]

Importantly for the present purposes, we see a reference to the topic of beauty, *belleza*, around which the Esther play also revolves. Lope explores how a perceived chaos – everything is “confused” – is observable in the theatre of his time, but also how plays can maintain ideas of beauty in order to help the audience come to terms with this perceived generic chaos. As Jonathan Thacker has noted, Lope elegantly

¹⁷ Lope de Vega, *La piedad*, 159v. Morby takes this quote to prove that Lope considered the events of the *Aeneid* true. Edwin S. Morby, “Observations on *tragedia* and *tragicomedia* in Lope,” *Hispanic Review* 11 (1943): 192. Ferrer Valls notes that “Virgil was one of the classical authors most frequented by Lope to vindicate his own work, and the one he used most often when it came to defend the legitimacy of poetic license in the treatment of history.” Teresa Ferrer Valls, “Lope y La creación de héroes contemporáneos: La nueva victoria de don Gonzalo de Córdoba y La nueva victoria del marqués de Santa Cruz,” *Anuario Lope de Vega. Texto, literatura, cultura* 18 (2012): 40–62 (51).

turns “a negative ‘mixture’ into a positive ‘variety’.”¹⁸ Seen together, the *Arte nuevo* and the Esther play suggest that this group of Lope plays did not amalgamate genres in order to represent experiences of confusion or “chaos” but, contrarily, achieved aesthetic syntheses of secular history and biblical religion. In addition, the important role of Mardoqueo’s dream in the structural unity of the play offers a way of observing how the play also used the breakdown of traditional boundaries of tragedy and comedy to reflect philosophically on the nature of history.

4 The Sacred Archive in the Aesthetic-Historical Culture

The considerations of the Esther play and Lope’s address in this specific light allow for a contextualization within the recently developed notion of Golden Age Spain’s aesthetic-historical culture with respect to the specific question of the intersection between historiographical reflection and religious *comedias*. In 1604, the humanist Francisco Cascales had written his *Tablas poéticas* (not published until 1617) where he claimed that material for new epic ought to be found in Christianity, not in ancient literature because “it is fitting that the Epic material be founded in the true history [historia verdadera] of our Christian religion.”¹⁹ Although Cascales spoke of epic rather than drama, this contemporaneous treatise on literature reveals an important fact: The dramatization of Old Testament material would be regarded both as a religious play and as a historical drama. The biblical account of Esther is in turn also a historically true story of a Persian king and the fate of the Jewish people. This finds support in Lope’s dedication of *La hermosa Ester*. There, Lope notes that he would never have dared use his “*rudo ingenio* [rude ingenuity]” on such a special subject, provided by Heaven, if “esta Historia [this History]” could not have been taken “de tan sagrado archivo [from such sacred archive]”²⁰ – that is, the Bible. In this way, the play can be seen to explore the intersections of theatre, history, and the Bible. The concept of a “true history” is captivating as well. This fusion of fact and fiction was highly popular in the Golden Age. The narrator of *Don Quijote*’s first chapters plays with the idea enthusiastically, and the topos of the lost Arabic manuscript contributes to the same investigation of a lacking boundary between “truths” and

18 Jonathan Thacker, “The *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*: Lope’s Dramatic Statement,” in *A Companion to Lope de Vega*, eds. Alexander Samson and Jonathan Thacker (London: Tamesis, 2008): 109–18 (113).

19 Cascales, *Tablas poéticas*, quoted in Kluge, *The Poetics of History*, 82.

20 Lope de Vega, Dedication to *La hermosa Ester* (Alicante: Cervantes Virtual, 1999).

“stories.”²¹ In a similar line of enquiry, Sofie Kluge argues that Golden Age historiography was attentive to the same porous boundary. Already in 1555, the royal chronicler Juan Páez de Castro had noted what had to change in the Iberian art of history writing. His predecessors, according to Páez de Castro, had lacked a sense of the wit and elegance required to write history because “muchas verdades no hacen al propósito de la historia [many facts do not constitute the intent of history.]”²² This observation calls for the historian’s sense that a unifying principle, a “poetics of history,” in Kluge’s formulation, is needed to transfer from the mere collecting of facts to a reflection upon the meaning and coherence of time. In the present context, one such principle is this highly syncretic use of the “sacred archive” of the Bible in Lope’s works. Lope argues something similar in the *Arte nuevo*, as he discusses the Aristotelian unity of time. He believed it ought to be disregarded, referring to the contemporary Spanish audience’s alleged lack of patience. This led him to a conflation of sacred and secular history:

La cólera
De un español sentado no se templá
Si no le representan en dos horas
Hasta el Final Juicio desde el Génesis,
Yo hallo que, si allí se ha de dar gusto,
Con lo que se consigue es lo más justo (vv. 205–10)

[The fiery temper of a Spaniard who watches a play will not be calmed unless he’s told a story, in two hours, from Genesis right up to Judgement Day; and I say, if the aim is to delight, whatever serves that purpose must be right.]²³

It bears notice that Lope is in the midst of describing a new style of writing *comedias* and alludes to the scope of time from creation to the day of judgement in a terminology and tone of secular history. These works form a natural part of world history alongside “true” events of history, from Aeneas leaving Dido, over the many martyr deaths of early Christianity, to Spanish imperial history. The Bible and Christian salvation history are there for at least two purposes, also in the *comedia*: Firstly, they contribute to the construction of that positive “variety” which runs as an Ariadne

21 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Francisco Rico (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2004), ch. IX.

22 Juan Páez de Castro, “Memorial de las cosas necesarias para escribir la historia,” quoted in Kluge, *The Poetics of History*, 22n16. “Verdades” are translated with “facts” to emphasize the proto-positivist intent of Páez de Castro’s distinction between various true propositions of what has happened in history – the various *verdades* – and the idea which unifies them to form a concept of history in the singular.

23 These lines are Dixon’s translation: Lope de Vega, *New Rules for Writing Plays at this Time*, ed. and trans. Victor Dixon (Valencia: Emothe/Universidad de Valencia, 2009), Emothe.uv.es, vv. 205–210.

thread through the *Arte nuevo*; secondly, they give a direction or a unifying sense to the writing, representation and staging of history. Thereby, Lope's biblical plays can be seen not only to mix comedy and tragedy but also the profane and the sacred. This causes popular delight, but also philosophical variety, which brings us back to *La hermosa Ester* where the various forms of "variety" establish a sense of continuity and coherence of history. The play's Ester is in herself "mixed," in so far as she refers both to the Jewish people expelled from the peninsula in 1492, and, as a biblical heroine, to the "true history" of Christianity. Furthermore, Ester can be perceived as "mixed" in her analogies to the Virgin Mary and to Isabella I of Castile, the Catholic Queen.²⁴ In that light, this identity-and-difference contributes to the establishment of a philosophical coherence of historical time. This tendency towards intense interference between historiography and religious theatre finds further support in recent accounts of early modern historiography, especially in the growing intellectual consciousness of the undesirability of compartmentalizing church history and secular history. The French humanist François Baudouin has recently been listed as an example of the period's intersection of historiography and biblical theology.²⁵ Anthony Grafton demonstrates that Baudouin called for secular historians to master church history and vice versa, arguing that this had been state of the art since the time of Eusebius.²⁶ The Old Testament stories of the Bible were not considered separate from historical reality. This is of course not unique to Spanish Golden Age plays, but Lope's biblical *comedias* do represent a very intense conflation of these two categories, and they attest to his exemplarity of these new insights into the aesthetic historiography of the period.

²⁴ The analogy to Mary has recently been argued by Efraim Sicher, *The Jew's Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* (London: Lexington Books, 2017), 67. The analogy to Isabel argued by Colbert Cairns, *Esther*, 63: "Esther plays for both teams, *converso* society and Christian Spain." In this respect, it becomes important to discern between the names of "Jews" and "Hebrews." Ruiz-Ortiz calls attention to the fact that Lope's play favours "Hebrew" because Christians were considered heirs to the Hebrews, but not the Jews who were connotated to heresy. Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence*, 49. The comparison of a Jewess to Mary and Isabel is somewhat equivocal compared to Lope's general attitude to politics against Jews and *conversos*. In his last years, Lope wrote an aggressive poem on the grievances suffered by Christ by the "Hebrew Nation," entitled "Sentimientos a los agravios de Christo nuestro bien, por la Nación Hebrea." Heiple has described tone and content as "repugnant antisemitic slander." Daniel L. Heiple, "Political Posturing on the Jewish Question by Lope de Vega and Faria e Sousa," *Hispanic Review* 62 (1994): 222.

²⁵ Cf. Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 106–108. This point elaborated by Kluge, *The Poetics of History*, 136.

²⁶ Grafton, *What was History?*, 108.

5 Crazy for Heaven and Feigned Truths

This tendency can be deepened by analyses of various meta-comments on the relation between history and Christianity on stage, spread out across Lope's religious plays. Lope's hagiographical play *Los locos por el cielo* depicting the story of the 20,000 Christian martyrs of Nicomedia during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian offers a consideration of religious-historical subject-matter for dramatic purposes. The play is suited for comparison in the present context for several reasons: It is written in relative proximity to the other plays studied here – sometime just before the year 1604; and its play-within-the-play in the church in front of 20,000 people contains multiple Old Testament references. In this play, the emperor Maximiano consults Dona, a pagan priestess. When she prays to Apollo, she begins to ponder the possibility of the Christian religion being true, as she hears a voice which announces that Christ lives. Accepting the truth of this statement, she converts.²⁷ This hagiographical *comedia* contains an *auto sacramental* as a play-within-the-play – or a ritual within theatre. That ritual begins with a consideration of the appropriateness of biblical religion on stage:²⁸

Representar los pasos y misterios
De tales sacramentos es muy justo,
Porque a mí me mueven y enternecen,
Y he visto en sólo verlos, convertidos
Algunos que a los dioses adoraban. (vv. 2042–46).

[To stage the steps and mysteries of such sacraments is very righteous because they move and affect me, and I have seen people, those who used to worship the pagan gods, convert just by watching them.]

If *Los locos por el cielo* contains this direct apology of religious theatre in a historical setting, Lope's metatheatrical martyr play *Lo fingido verdadero* expounds the idea philosophically.²⁹ *Lo fingido verdadero* was printed in 1620, but was likely written in the year 1608, just before Lope's address to the academy. The play is a *comedia de santos*, dramatizing the story of Genesius of Rome, patron saint of actors. Genesius was a Roman comedian who was executed by Diocletian after playing a Christian on stage whilst simultaneously converting. Seeing that it is Genesius' acting a Christian

²⁷ Lope de Vega, *Los locos por el cielo*, ed. Jesús Gómez and Paloma Cuenca (Valencia: Biblioteca Digital Artelepe, 2014), Artelepe.uv.es, v. 547.

²⁸ First noted by Jonathan Thacker, *A Companion to Golden Age Theatre* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 35.

²⁹ *Los locos por el cielo* has also been considered a forerunner to *Lo fingido verdadero*. See David Castillejo, *Las cuatrocientas comedias de Lope* (Madrid: Ediciones de Arte y Bibliofilia, 1984).

which converts him *to* Christianity, the relation between theatre and religion is of immediate importance to the story. There can be little doubt that Lope considered this a “true story” as these events by all accounts seem to have actually taken place. Lope could, for instance, have read about it in Pedro Mejía’s *Historia imperial y cesárea* (1545).³⁰

When the newly elected emperor Diocleciano desires a play as part of the celebrations, he asks Ginés (i.e., Genesisius), most famous of all Roman playwrights and actors, for a representation. Camila, a breadseller from the Tigris and Diocleciano’s soon-to-be love, entirely in accordance with the *Arte nuevo*’s distinction between tragedy and history, caringly warns the new emperor:

No le pidas tragedia; así los cielos
 Tu Imperio ensalcen de este polo al otro:
 Que si tragedias son ruinas de imperios,
 No es buen agüero, de tu lauro el día.³¹

[Do not ask for tragedy in order for Heaven to exalt your Empire from this pole to the other: For if tragedies are the ruins of empires, that would not be a good omen on your coronation day.]

This is rather bleak conception of time itself, assuming that the way of secular history is that of destruction; but it is also a suited example of how the period’s drama used religious *comedias* to ponder the nature of history via these generic attributions. As tragedy has history for its subject-matter, its main emblem becomes that of Camila’s “ruins of empires.” Staying true to the poetics of the *Arte nuevo*, this would mean that *comedias*, on the other hand, were concerned with the fictitious. Things are, however, more complicated. The way this play changes the nature of the *comedia* is a way of applying it as a poetics to understand the biblical drama as a *tragicomedia*, for instance in the case of Esther: Lope is toying with the generic shift from the *tragedia* to the *comedia* of history, similar to the structure of the Esther plot’s *peripeteia*. In *Lo fingido verdadero*, this happens via a doubling of the play’s two invocations of the *theatrum mundi*. The first act contains a discussion of historical theatre. Carino, the play’s first emperor, is told by his mistress Rosarda that she will play *dama* in the playwright Genesisius’ secular play (I, 387–88). Carino thinks that it must be a bad joke that an actor can impersonate an emperor:

³⁰ According to Michael D. McGaha, “Lope de Vega and Acting is Believing” in Lope de Vega, *Lo fingido verdadero/Acting is Believing*, trans. Michael D. McGaha (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1986), 28 (3–36).

³¹ Lope de Vega, *Lo fingido verdadero*, ed. Maria Teresa Cattaneo (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1992), *Emothe.uv.es*, vv. 1,258–61. Further references to this text in brackets after the quotation with act and verse line.

Cuando sale a hacer Ginés
 Un rey en una tragedia,
 Reinará por hora y media,
 Y no lo será después. (vv. I, 399–402)

[When Genesisius enters to be king in a tragedy, he will reign for an hour and a half and will not be king afterwards.]

At this point, the play is pondering how to stage historical events. It is worth taking into account that Carino changes the category from *comedia* to *tragedia* in his exchanges with Rosarda, corresponding to a seminal feature of Lope's poetics. Carino maintains a similar interpretation of historical existence when he is stabbed some 250 lines later in the same act, now ironically reversing his idea of role-play and reality:

Acabóse la tragedia,
 La muerte me desnudó:
 Sospecho que no duró
 Toda mi vida hora y media. (vv. I, 641–45)

[The tragedy is ended, death stripped me naked: I suspect that my whole life did not last an hour and a half.]

Carino invokes a bleak *theatrum mundi*, having now learned that even kingship is a role of which death marks the end. That is, however, only half of the play's *theatrum mundi*, for Ginés himself invokes the metaphor as well *after* his execution. The emperor has demanded that Ginés stage a play dramatizing a Christian baptism and already whilst rehearsing, Ginés begins to ponder the possible truth of the Christian religion. His conversion is consummated during the performance itself. The emperors praise Ginés' abilities as an actor because it all seems so real, but the rest of the company begin to sense that something is off. During the performance, Ginés conflates theatre and religion. He invokes the biblical stories of Amos, Jonah, Lazarus (Jn 11:1–44), and the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35). In a direct prayer to God, he asks that Christ “representad conmigo desde hoy más; [perform with me from now on]” (III, v. 2755). Ginés' last lines are spoken when a stage curtain is drawn an extra time, and he appears impaled on stage once again negotiating the meaning of time in general terms. The notion of dark tragedy has changed in favour of a meditation of the difference between the human and the divine comedy:

Pueblo romano, escuchadme:
 yo representé en el mundo
 sus fábulas miserables,
 [...]

Cesó la humana comedia,
 Que era toda dispartes;
 Hice la que veis, divina; (III, 3010–2021)
 [People of Rome, listen to me: In the world, I performed its miserable tales, [...] The human comedy ended, it was all nonsense; I did what you see instead, the divine one.]

The fact that Ginés converts to Christianity by acting a Christian implies a philosophical apology for theatre's religious potential; and with its many biblical allusions, Ginés testifies to the dramatological potential of the Bible in Lope's religious oeuvre. In this final apology with the aid of the verb of *representar* (to perform), Ginés additionally suggests that his previous life as a pagan actor-producer and his new life as a Christian convert in continuation with a host of biblical personae are analogical. In performing a religious *comedia* in front of these historical emperors, Ginés becomes the incarnation of this powerful intersection of history and the Bible in Lope's theatre and contributes comprehensively to the scrutiny of historiographical assumptions with the aid of a generical vocabulary.

6 Conclusions

Cervantes famously dubbed Lope a “monster of nature;”³² Francisco Cascales proceeded to describe the new style of *comedias* as hermaphroditic products and *monstruous de la naturaleza*,³³ hinting at that very mixture of comedy and tragedy which Lope had defended in 1609. Ester has a peculiar relation to the predicate of *monstruo* as well. Egeo does not want to “paint a picture” in words of Ester's beautiful face because his pencils are very “groseros [rude]” (I, 863). Asuero replies that “tanta belleza, monstruo será de la naturaleza [such beauty, she will be a monster of nature]” (I, 868–70): In the case of *La hermosa Ester*, Lope used an Old Testament story to refine his abilities to create a dramatic “monster.”

The play interprets history dramatically via generical shifts from the *tragedia* to the *comedia* of history. The play stages biblical and secular history as being on a par – which, to the playwright and his audience, they most likely were. On a secular and non-fictional level, the play stages the story of “a ‘real’ woman who saved her people from annihilation during some earlier period in history.”³⁴ On a philosophical level,

³² This was Cervantes' expression for Lope's extreme productivity in Cervantes' preface to an edition of 16 of his own plays. Miguel de Cervantes, “Prólogo al lector,” in *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos* [1615], ed. Florencio Sevilla Arroyo (Alicante: Cervantes Virtual, 2001), fol. IIIr.

³³ Cascales, *Tablas*. Paraphrased after Sofie Kluge, “A Hermaphrodite? Lope de Vega and the Controversy of Tragicomedy,” *Comparative Drama* 41 (2007): 300.

³⁴ Canning, *Lope de Vega's Comedias de Tema Religioso*, 43.

it demonstrates the typological nature of history with the divine origins of beauty. On that monstrous level of syntheticism, the play investigates a shared feature of theatre, historiography, and biblical religion, making it a prime example of early modern Spain's aesthetic-historical culture.³⁵ Where the role of the biblical religion in Lope's poetics is concerned, it can be reconstructed in such a way as to comprise a dramaturgy of religious poetics in Lope's works which clearly explore the possible benevolent nature of theatre in relation to religion, or, more simply put, a defence of biblical theatre and its use of historical subject-matter.

These two areas of analysis support each other in discerning how Lope's biblical drama contributed to the historical culture of early modern Spain by staging reversals of fortunes and open-ended notions of the direction of history. These suggestions are, of course, not to be understood as the primary function of Lope's theatrical art form. But they do suggest that Lope's biblical drama did in fact contribute to the period's obsession with the question of historical direction and the very intersection of history and the Bible on stage. These analyses demonstrate how Lope's biblical drama contributed to the effective breakdown of traditional boundaries of tragedy and comedy *and* how this "chaos" was constructively applied to issues of historiography. The Mardoqueo of *La hermosa Ester* and the Camila of *Lo fingido verdadero* both begin with historical prophecies of future catastrophe but in Lope's early modern approach to biblical drama where history and the Bible are allowed to intersect, these outlooks are reversed in favour of a much more open-ended approach to the end of time between disaster and salvation, ruins of empire or tears of joy.

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³⁵ This argument could be seen as an analogy to Colbert's "political" reading which also concludes that "beauty *and* virtue trump other values represented in the text." Colbert Cairns, *Esther in Early Modern Iberia*, 80, emphasis added. Expounded further in Colbert Cairns, "Esther among Crypto-Jews and Christians: Queen Esther and the Inquisition Manuscripts of Isabel de Carvajal and Lope de Vega's *La hermosa Ester*." *Chasqui* 42 (2013): 105.

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