

Para citar este trabajo: SANZ AYÁN, C.: “The economic crisis and the *vellón* issue, and how these were reflected in the theatre in Calderón’s Time” Documento de Trabajo 3. Proyecto NOBINCIS, 2013. (Añadir enlace WEB). Versión completa en SANZ AYÁN, C.: *Hacer escena. Capítulos de historia de la empresa teatral en el Siglo de Oro*. Madrid, RAH, 2013. pp. 115-146

PEOR ESTÁ QUE ESTABA: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE VELLÓN ISSUE, AND HOW THESE WERE REFLECTED IN THE THEATRE IN CALDERÓN’S TIME¹

Peor está que estaba [“Worse than it was”] is the actual title of a play of honour written by Calderón and published in 1636² in his *Primera Parte de Comedias*, The title reflects a general attitude of pessimism towards changes taking place at the time and was taken up by the anonymous authors of 17th century political satire who made use of it to create mock advertisements for comedies that parodied the real ones intended to attract the public to the *corrales*:

“Peor está que estaba y enfermar con el remedio;
comedia famosa de disparates nunca vistos ni representados (..)
para reir y llorar a un tiempo. No tiene papel en esta ridícula
comedia reies, reinas ni damas, lo más de ellas es apariencias
y tramoias, con bofetones de vengança y con pescantes de Hacienda
(..) sus principales insignias son ventosas y lancetas
para sangrar y sajar a un tiempo (..)³”

The terms *bofetones* and *pescantes* refer to two types of stage machinery used in the theatre at that time. *Bofetones* were concealed wings to one side of the theatre that could quickly be shifted to centre stage. *Pescantes* were sets with a vertical motion that appeared and disappeared from the stage, again with great speed, which required a movement from those operating them that resembled that of casting a fishing line. Use of this term to level criticism at the *Real Hacienda* or Royal Exchequer was evident. The *pescantes de Hacienda* were the underhand methods used by some *arbitristas*. These were planners of projects proposing financial remedies in which the inventor of the plan would be the sole beneficiary from it, the equivalent of one who sets the bait then immediately disappears.

¹ This study was first published in “Peor está que estaba. La crisis hacendística, la cuestión del vellón y su reflejo teatral en tiempos de Calderón” in *Calderón de la Barca y la España del Barroco*. Madrid. Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales y Sociedad Estatal Nuevo Milenio. 2001, Vol. I pp. 189-210

² CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA, P.: *Obras completas. Comedias*. Vol. I. Madrid, Aguilar, 1987, p. 311ff.

³ The text is cited in: ETREROS, M.: *La Sátira política en el siglo XVII*, Madrid, FUE, 1983, p. 173.

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This must have been how most of the Monarch’s subjects perceived the situation as they contemplated the attempts to solve the structural crisis affecting the Royal Exchequer by means of projects or *arbitrios* that seemed like stage illusions. This text is an example of how an analogy with the theatre, in this case imaginary, reflected the difficult economic reality at that time.

If the theatre was the most universal manifestation of art and recreation in the 17th century, and if the economic crisis affecting Castile in the second half of that century was one of the most tragic realities felt by people at all levels of society, it is hard to believe there was no interaction between both realities, and that the complex universe of the theatre in those years did not reflect those grave difficulties in both business and purely literary contexts. The theatre formed part of the mental universe of the people of the 17th century and what was expressed in dramatic format ranged from subtle criticism of a particular economic situation to institutional propaganda on monetary or economic reform.

1. The economic problems of the 17th century as reflected in theatrical texts: Criticism

Baroque theatre in general should not be judged as an organ of propaganda. While some texts were propagandistic, there were others, within the context of Baroque subtlety, that could be described as critical. The most brilliant age on the Spanish stage coincided with a temporary period of crisis commonly known as *La crisis del siglo XVII* and we know that certain non-theatrical literary genres soon began to reflect the difficulties. Picaresque novels, for example, clearly outline a panorama of the subjective perception of decadence, both in form and substance. However, Maragall’s theory held that the theatre was diametrically opposed to these literary manifestations. According to his interpretation, it was a means of persuasion used by those who, without leaving the slightest opening for criticism, “were willing to participate in the propaganda campaign

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of monarchical absolutism”⁴. Such a judgement seems too categorical, given the quantity and variety of dramatic texts we have available from that time, although, admittedly, some theatrical genres were more inclined to use propagandistic effects than others.

There is no denying that Baroque theatre was limited by the diverse pressures – ideological, institutional, social and censorial – that were typical of the times. It was also conditioned by the very successful formula consolidated by Lope de Vega through the *Comedia Nueva* or New Comedy, which implied certain limitations with regard to the plot, although it would be an exaggeration to consider the vast output of the Baroque theatre in its entirety as a regular mouthpiece for the dominant powers. Taken as a whole, it was an instrument for maintaining the pressure of an established system of power.

The social reality was that 17th century playwrights were not against the monarchy as such or monarchs in general. Their values system not only accepted the monarchy, but considered that without authority the society and the political community of which they were a part could not exist. The power of the absolute monarch was therefore embraced and applauded in their plays but as soon as the monarch on stage showed himself to be a tyrant, his actions were criticised and denounced. If he did not change his attitude and repent for his deeds, or if he became a despot, a bad king would be condemned, even to death, by the playwrights of the time. *La Gran Zenobia* by Calderón de la Barca portrays the tyrant emperor Aurelius thus:

: !Que cansados pretendientes!
¿Qué más premio han de tener
los soldados? ¿El servirme
no basta para interés?
Si pelearon y vencieron,
yo también vencí y peleé;
pues yo los dejo, bien pido
en que me dejen también.
Si son pobres, no nacieran,
demás de ¿Qué importa a un Rey

⁴ On the propagandistic character of Baroque theatre as compared with picaresque literature as a manifestation of “rebels” against the system, see the prologue to the well-known work by MARAVALL, J.A.: *Teatro y literatura en la Sociedad Barroca*. Barcelona, Crítica, 1990, pp. 10-11

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que haya pobres en su imperio?
sufran y padezcan pues;
que pues el cielo, los hizo
pobres, el sabe por qué,
¿puedo yo enmendar el cielo?

Aurelius finally dies at the hands of one of his most valiant captains. There is no other way the character of the tyrant could come to an end. He did not appreciate the work his subjects did for him, he took no interest in their general and individual welfare and his tragic end was well deserved.

Evidently, if we place special emphasis on certain passages when reading plays of honour and power⁵, which, for various reasons, are both the best known and the ones most used by critics, we may well conclude that the literary content of Baroque theatre is like a huge propaganda machine to promote and strengthen the interests of the monarchy and the rigid class system that protected the socio-economic position of the privileged⁶. By doing this, however, we are engaging in excessive reductionism because the theatre of the *Siglo de Oro* was not only concerned with literary work. It also implied universal spectacle and business in its many forms, aspects that were too specific to be at the exclusive service of propaganda. Together with the three-act *Comedia Grande*, with the leading man and woman in each act, or the commissioned religious play associated with universal indoctrination campaigns serving Roman Catholic orthodoxy, Baroque theatre also made use of subtle comedians who brought a practical philosophy with which the ordinary public could identify. Mention should also be made of the ironic short plays or farces, in which the transgression of carnivalesque criticism was applied to everyday spectacle. Neither should we forget the stylistic resources used by poets, such as symbols or allegories, or the narrative resources – for example, setting the intrigue in a distant time or place – that provided their creators with a margin of freedom to develop their plots, themes and storylines.

⁵ The historian who has contributed to this interpretation becoming authoritative is J.A. MARAVALL, thanks to his insightful analysis and the wide range and variety of his sources. For a comprehensive overview of his prolific work, the article by M^a C. IGLESIAS in Vol. I of *Homenaje a Jose Antonio Maravall*, Madrid, 1985, pp. 17-41 is essential reading.

⁶ Something similar happens when the contents of religious plays are analysed. They reveal religious doctrine and a behaviour model.

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In those cases where they make reference to a particular economic reality, this could range from a simple presentation with no critical content whatsoever (a particular characteristic of comedies of manners) to direct propaganda related to certain political, military and economic initiatives proposed by the Monarchy. This was found above all in religious plays, as we shall see, which passed through the subtle censor of power, and was frequently put in the mouths of comedians.

Although most of this text will be concerned with the issue of propaganda in works of drama concerned with economic reform, I do not want to ignore the theatrical texts that were clearly critical and reflected the economic realities that were being experienced by the people of that time.

A recurring theme in any discussion of the economic crisis of the 17th century is that of the increase in the tax burden caused by rampant spending on foreign wars, fought in an attempt to maintain European hegemony. This can be seen in the words of the farm labourer in *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* by Calderón de la Barca:

“en cargando algún tributo
de aqueste siglo pensión
encara la puntería
contra el triste labrador”

While it is true that the burden of both existing and proposed tax rates fell on the large social body of the unprivileged, almost ninety per cent of whom worked on the land, it is also true that as a percentage, it was the inhabitants of the cities who bore the brunt of the multiple charges levied on food and other commodities.

The content of these verses changes from being a simple description of the economic situation of the peasantry to a statement hinting at criticism, uttered by an anonymous farm labourer, speaking not only for himself but for a whole category of people, whose words are imbued with an immediate reality: the growing tax burden during the 17th century.

This rise in taxes was not enough to completely satisfy the financial demands generated by the new war fronts, making it necessary to resort to a series of extraordinary measures, including the sale of privileges, offices, jurisdictions, barren land and the

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manipulation of the *vellón* coinage. These provided a temporary solution to the shortage of means but generated a wave of criticism levelled at those who proposed them and those who applied them.

The theatrical texts of the period contain satirical and ironic references to *arbitrios*, or grand projects, and their authors, the *arbitristas*, in general. These are frequently in a tone that makes fun of the creators of these remedies, although we find texts as forceful as that of Lope de Vega in his play *El Rey Don Pedro en Madrid y el Infanzón de Illescas*. At the beginning of the second act, the monarch, who has the leading role, has this to say to an *arbitrista* who presents him with a project:

Rey.- ¿Quién sois vos?
Arbitrista.- Traigo, señor,
 un arbitrio
Rey.- ¿Es éste?
Arbitrista.- Si
Rey .- Consúltolo así (*Rómpelo*)
Arbitrista.- De los reinos a favor
 es todo.
Rey.- El rey descargallos,
 y no arbitrallos, desea;
 que no hay arbitrio que sea
 a favor de los vasallos”.

When the thorny question of the *arbitrio* is raised in the text, the laudatory treatment of the figure of the monarch cannot be denied. However, this should not be interpreted simply as an act of pretence or hypocrisy towards the holder of power, or a response to censure. The poets of the day were well aware that flattery could live side by side with criticism and defended its use as an instrument of education for these monarchs. This is shown by Antonio Feros⁷ in a text by Erasmus, in which he justifies his *Panegírico Congratulatorio a Felipe el Hermoso, en su viaje triunfal a España* [Congratulatory panegyric to Philip the Beautiful on his triumphal journey to Spain]:

"Those who think panegyrics are nothing more than simple flattery forget the intention of the great men who invented this sort of composition, which consists of

⁷ FEROS, A.: "Vicedioses pero humanos": el Drama del rey" in *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna*, nº 14, 1993, pp. 103-131. This excellent work uses a multitude of examples to illustrate the great variety of images of the king that can be found in Baroque Comedy.

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presenting princes with examples of goodness in such a way that they can reform the bad governor, improve the good one, educate the peasant, condemn he who is hurtful, stir the indifferent and make even the most incorrigible dissolute person feel shame⁸.”

The Lope de Vega play that includes the episode of the frustrated *arbitrista* is dated around 1618⁹ and was first performed at a time in the 17th century when the *arbitrio par excellence*– the manipulation of the *vellón* – was beginning to have strong repercussions. Irrespective of the fact that in part of the play the Duke of Lerma is eulogised (indicating that it was probably written before his fall from grace and that he saw it performed), the public who watched the scene had experienced the full effects of the *arbitrio* and its consequences, and the position adopted by the King of Comedy was clearly diametrically opposed to the one practised by King Philip III at that moment. The words of Erasmus take on real meaning in this passage from the play as it presents, for the King’s eyes and those of his closest collaborators, exemplary conduct as it ought to be.

If we examine the texts of Calderón de la Barca, we once more find a hint of criticism that, if anything, is more destructive, as it alludes to the system applied by absolute monarchs in general and the Spanish monarchy in particular for the concession of honours during this century. Whether for economic or political reasons or both at the same time, money was considered to be the fundamental agent for social climbing.

Thus, in the first act of *El alcaide de sí mismo*, when Frederick, Prince of Sicily, tries to pass himself off as a rich Spanish merchant, he says:

“Pensé volver a mi patria
rico de hacienda y de honra
(baste que dijese rico,
porque en los tiempos de ahora
la riqueza es el honor
sin atención de personas,
porque ya el pobre se vende,
como ya el rico se compra);”

⁸ Erasmus to Jean Desmarez, February 1504. Cited by FEROS, A.: Op. Cit. Ibid.

⁹ According to SAINZ DE ROBLES, the play must have been written in 1618 although the first known copy dates from 1626, as shown on the licence on the manuscript for it to be performed in Zaragoza by the Andrés de Claramonte company. In *Obras selectas de Lope de Vega*. Madrid, Aguilar, 1969, vol. I, p. 608.

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This statement is made in a play that, from what we know, was written and performed in 1636. Its content reveals a rare topicality since it was a widespread practice at court at the time to confer honours on businessmen who were particularly committed to the cause of the Monarchy through covenants and loans. Their noble origins might have been dubious but this did not prevent them from embarking on a path to social climbing and political influence through the “purchase” of honours¹⁰.

2. The economic problems of the 17th century reflected in theatrical texts: institutional propaganda

While Baroque theatre as a whole was not a product of simple propaganda, there are certain texts arising from subgenres that were.

Increasing tax burdens could not prevent the endemic deficit of the Royal Exchequer throughout the whole of the 17th century, in spite of the fact that in terms of financial resources the Hispanic Monarchy was still the most powerful in Europe.

Nevertheless, the acquisition and management of these resources were based on a series of premises that limited their distribution and punctuality¹¹. One of the most restrictive was the absence of a mature bureaucratic apparatus capable of directly controlling, collecting and distributing taxes. This created the obligation of relying on individuals, who offered their private infrastructure to the Crown in order to solve problems arising from the lack of liquidity at a given moment and the incapacity to distribute the product

¹⁰ On the means of social ascent through “economic services” to the Monarchy, used by businessmen of that period, see BOYAGIAN, J.C.: *Portuguese Bankers at the Court of Spain 1626-1650*. New Brunswick, Oxford University Press, 1983. GELABERT, J.E.: *La Bolsa del Rey*. Barcelona, Crítica, 1997. SANZ AYÁN, C.: “Blasones son escudos. El ascenso económico y social de un asentista del rey en el siglo XVII. Bentura Donis” in *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna*, nº 20. Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad Complutense. Madrid, 1998, included in the book *Estado, Monarquía, Finanzas. Estudios de Historia Financiera en tiempos de los Austrias*. Madrid, CEPC. 2004.

¹¹ The other two characteristics that defined the Royal Exchequer in this period were: 1) tax inequality, understood as the legal difference in the obligation to pay, which was a universal limit in stratified societies, and 2) the survival of different fiscal systems in each of the territories making up the Monarchy, Castile being by far the greatest contributor to maintaining its expenses, while the rest of the outlying kingdoms contributed much less, both in absolute and relative terms. Furthermore, these funds practically never crossed their frontiers. In contrast, taxes set by the Royal Exchequer in Castile were substantial and were spent wherever the Crown considered it appropriate. These included: *alcabalas* or sales taxes and the so-called *cientos*, the supplements on these that accumulated throughout the reigns of Philip III and Philip IV; the *servicios*, *millones* and *8000 soldados*; leased or general rents, including *almojarifazgos*, or import taxes, and the *diezmos* applied to the maritime trade and dry ports, in other words, customs duties.

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of their own incomes, an act of delegation that incurred additional social and economic costs.

During the 17th century, all monarchs were aware of the situation and tried unsuccessfully to undertake reforms to modify their dependence on private credit. This gave rise to the idea of establishing *erarios* or public treasuries and *montes de piedad* where individuals deposited their savings and, in exchange for modest interest, lent their money directly to the Crown to free it from its dependence on bankers and contractors. The proposal was made manifest in the 17th century in the ruling of the Royal Charter of October 20th 1622¹², which came about as a result of the deliberations of a committee for reform, the *Junta de Reformación*:

“(…) Having been able to know from detailed information and attention the means by which other republics are maintained, it is declared that the only way of achieving these ends that are accredited by the experiences of other provinces, are those of the *Erarios* and *Montes de Piedad*, And in these parts these have been recognised for this purpose for many years and their institution has been discussed on diverse occasions, particularly in the times of my lords the Kings, grandfather and father¹³; and a resolution was made, although it could not be carried out through lack of means for its funding, because of the huge obligations faced (…). Judge the institution of *Erarios* and *Montes de Piedad* not only for their usefulness but also for the fact that in them is found the only salvation of the Monarchy.

Their purpose will be to receive and give money on lease; receiving will normally be at five per cent and giving at seven per cent. They are also required to give for a limited time in exchange for pledges, for any amount, whether great or small, to any sort of person (…)”

When the benefits of establishing *erarios* were highlighted in the Royal Charter it was held that:

“(…)The *asientos* [trading contracts] of foreigners will be revoked, for this is what most ruins the wealth of my Royal Exchequer today, because with the credit and wealth of the said *erarios* the amounts I require can be provided or sent out of the Kingdom with little interest, greater punctuality and to better effect (…) and the institution of the *erarios* will be available as a means to reduce and eliminate the *vellón* coinage, the one pitiful ruin of this Crown and its vassals (…)”

¹² *Actas de las Cortes de Castilla*. Published by agreement of the *Congreso de los Diputados*. Volume XXXVIII, Madrid, 1915, pp. 281 ff.

¹³ The first known plan for establishing a *Monte de Piedad* dates from 1567. The most significant plan put forward in the 16th century was theoretically that of Pedro de Oudegherste in 1575. Towards the end of Philip II’s reign, Oudegherste’s plan was taken up once more by Valle de la Cerda who proposed it to the King. As a result, it was passed in the *Cortes* in 1602 but was not put into practice. In 1622, the Royal Charter reproduced here showed there was willingness on the part of the Monarchy to execute Valle de la Cerda’s old plan but in this case it was the Castilian *Cortes* that rejected the measure in 1623 because its content exceeded the faculties granted in 1602. A final attempt to establish it in 1626 also failed.

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At that time, apart from the declared problem of the *asientos* with private bankers, another serious difficulty had arisen which required an urgent solution: the so-called “inflation of the *vellón*”. Indeed, the most negative aspect usually cited when describing the Spanish economic panorama in the sixteen hundreds is the *arbitrio* – the project conceived during the reign of Philip II and put into practice under Philip III – which involved altering the face value¹⁴ and nominal value¹⁵ of the copper coin.

Altering the *vellón* meant that in the short term the Monarchy could clear its debts more easily, but the harmful effects of this measure became apparent almost immediately: a galloping increase in the silver premium that caused a steep rise in inflation of prices expressed in *vellón*, the stockpiling of silver coins, the loss of purchasing power of landlords and holders of public debt, who were paid with this unstable and devalued coin, and general disarray with respect to domestic trade. Any inflationary or deflationary measure associated with the *vellón* would inevitably have strong repercussions on each and every Castilian as between ninety-two and ninety-five per cent of the coins used inside the Kingdom during the 17th century were made of copper. Meanwhile, silver was being stockpiled and was hardly seen in normal transactions. The squire in one of Calderón’s farces, *La Rabia*, had every good reason to say of those years:

“Yo rabio ser escudero
sin que nunca escudo traiga”.

This lament was not only a denunciation of the situation of one individual. It actually reflected the financial state of the most people.

As soon as the negative consequences of the manipulation of the *vellón* began to be felt, there was talk of reforming it, first in the Castilian *Cortes* between 1598 and 1602 and

¹⁴ The most comprehensive study to date on the difficulties of the *vellón* in the 17th century is that of GARCÍA GUERRA, E.: *Las acuñaciones de moneda de vellón en Castilla durante el siglo XVII (1594-1665). Análisis de las consecuencias de un arbitrio*. Madrid, Universidad Complutense, 1997. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Part of this study is published in: GARCÍA GUERRA, E.: *Las acuñaciones de moneda de vellón durante el reinado de Felipe III*. Madrid, Banco de España, 1999.

¹⁵ The first restamping carried out in the 17th century took place on September 18th, 1603: “On the old *vellón* coin a sign and a mark are made, with which the value of the quarter rises to eight *maravedies* and the half quarter to four.” In A.G.S. C.M.C. (Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas) 3^a ép. Leg. 317, cited by García Guerra, E.: “La moneda de vellón: un instrumento al servicio de la fiscalidad del Estado Moderno castellano” in *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna*, 1998, n° 21, monograph IV, pp. 59-101.

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then as a condition of the ordinary and extraordinary *servicios* or tax allocations granted in 1607, which stipulated the cessation of minting for six years. At the same time, the *servicio de millones* was passed with the express requirement that no more *vellón* coins be minted for twenty years, a condition that was never fulfilled¹⁶. Neither were plans to ‘eliminate’ the *vellón* made in 1627, 1638 and 1657 ever brought to fruition. They all failed because neither the Crown nor the *Cortes* were able to persuade the people to take their copper to mints to be exchanged for new money. Experience had taught them that decisions made by the government on monetary matters did not stand the test of time. In only fifteen years between 1627 and 1641, this coinage had undergone three inflations and four deflations. However, interspersed with these projects were some initiatives for reform. When these were put forward, they were considered in theory to be “universal remedies”. It was therefore essential that every effort should to be made by those who held power to put them into practice. One initiative was the proposal by the above-mentioned *Junta de Reformación* of 1622, whose declared intention was to solve the problems of the *asientos* and the *vellón* at the same time.

It is important to take into account the mood of those who were required to pass this measure. Despite the efforts of the *corregidores* or town magistrates of Castile to make progress on the matter, the proposal was very badly received. Felipe Ruiz¹⁷ describes the almost universal opposition of the municipalities that had a vote in the *Cortes*. Such resistance was understandable, given that, in accordance with the *arbitrio*, it was those who belonged to the urban oligarchy who would be obliged to become depositors in the newly created *erario*. The amount stipulated by the *Junta de Reformación* was to be two thousand *ducados* on top of which anyone who possessed capital, whether a noble, layman or cleric, would be required to deposit at least five per cent of his monetary assets in the *erario* in order to guarantee sufficient funds for the project to be undertaken.

¹⁶ On the proposals by the Castilian governors regarding monetary matters see García Sanz, A.: “Las Cortes, la economía y la política económica” in *Las Cortes de Castilla y León en la Edad Moderna*. Valladolid, 1990, pp. 387-388.

¹⁷ RUIZ MARTÍN, F.: *El Banco de España una historia económica*. Madrid, 1970, p. 92ff. Only Soria, Guadalajara, Madrid, Toledo and Cuenca said yes to the project. Zamora, León Burgos, Toro, Valladolid, Salamanca, Segovia, Ávila, Córdoba, Seville, Jaén, Granada and Murcia rejected it, as announced in the dispatches of their respective magistrates.

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The rejection of the Castilian municipalities was ratified at an assembly of the cities convened for March 18th 1623, although before calling the city governors Olivares had a decree issued on February 10th for the creation of the *Erarios* and *Montes de Piedad*. While the Church and members of its hierarchy also resisted the plan, a different position was adopted by the aristocracy, families with distinguished titles who either “took no action or intervened in a conciliatory manner¹⁸ ” in an attempt to move it forward.

The assembly began work on April 6th 1623 and remained active for six years. There was much discussion throughout this period on establishing *erarios*, although the Monarchy always made it clear to the assembly that while some aspects of the project were open to modification, its existence was non-negotiable, however, as the decision had already been made and the decree issued¹⁹. The *Cortes* were only prepared to accept its introduction if was not a “tax of the Kingdom or (...) to the detriment of the parties²⁰”, with the result that it remained open to discussion.

It is highly likely that in a context of so much controversy²¹ there was a place in the Corpus Christi festivities in Madrid in 1624 or 1625 for a theatrical performance containing parts that were explicitly in favour of the *erario*. On this occasion, apart from the general public that was typical at these religious plays, there must have been a very special audience present: the governors of the *Cortes* themselves²².

¹⁸ RUIZ MARTÍN, F.: Op. Cit., p. 76

¹⁹ GELABERT, J.E.: Op. Cit. p. 72

²⁰ In *Actas de Cortes de Castilla*, vol. XLIII, p. 51 cited by GELABERT, J.E: Ibid., p. 74

²¹ During those years, concern over monetary and financial matters could be felt even in the most frivolous court circles. On October 14th 1624, Gascón de Torquemada, most of whose work centred on recording appointments to offices held at court, announced the publication of the proclamation which forbade bringing the *vellón* into these kingdoms, and on March 27th 1625 he recounted how the Duke of Guissa had taken from the Genoans at sea a hundred and sixty thousand *ducados* which they were taking to Italy in small boats. See GASCÓN DE TORQUEMADA, J.: *Gaceta y nuevas de la Corte de España desde el año 1600 en adelante*. Madrid, 1991, pp. 204 and 216

²² Pablo Fernández Albaladejo has pointed out that in the *Cortes* of Castile, despite moments of tension and resistance due to the demands of the Crown, there was a greater spirit of cooperation than of confrontation as the aim of the governors was to obtain something in return in the process. On these issues, see FERNÁNDEZ ALBALDEJO, P.: “La Resistencia en Las Cortes” in *Fragmentos de Monarquía*. Madrid, Alianza Universidad, 1993, pp. 325-349.

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El Monte de la Piedad o Auto del Erario y Monte de la Piedad is a religious play by Mira de Amescua²³. Specialists have been unable to determine its exact date but, given its theme and what we know so far, I am inclined to think it was written between 1624 and 1625. Little consideration has been given to its literary quality, perhaps because of the judgement passed on it by Cotarelo, who said that “it is not very good as it mixes things that are alien [presumably to the dogmas of the Church] with unnecessary trivialities²⁴.”

During these years, this poet from Granada lived in Madrid, where, from July 24th 1622, he held the post of chaplain to the Cardinal-Infante Don Fernando²⁵. He was evidently introduced to Palace theatrical circles and belonged to the literary court that accompanied the Count of Lemos to Naples. On returning to Madrid in 1616 he maintained good relations with Lemos²⁶, despite the latter’s fall from grace. In 1617 the playwright organised a performance of festivities in one of the Palace courtyards and in 1620 he found lasting success at court after being put in charge of producing the fiestas and plays to celebrate the beatification of San Isidro²⁷.

The plot of *El Monte de la Piedad* revolves round the conspiracy by Heresy, Heathenism and the Sect of Mohammed to make the Catholic Monarchy, the mainstay of the Church, disappear for good. The scheme devised by these ancestral enemies of the Monarchy is to weaken it by introducing the *vellón*, leading Heresy to assert:

“Yo causaré con mi engaño (v.139)
un confuso barbarismo
en la moneda de suerte
que, aterrándolo yo todo
apenas hallen el modo
para su remedio, (..)

²³ An edition of the play is currently being prepared by Manuel FERNÁNDEZ LABRADA, who is working on the project to publish the complete works being undertaken by the *Aula Biblioteca Mira de Amescua* del Departamento de Filología Española de la Universidad de Granada. Project directed by Agustín de la Granja.

²⁴ COTARELO Y MORI, E.: “Mira de Amescua y su Teatro” in *Boletín de la Real Academia Española* vol. XVIII (1931) pp. 7-90, p. 70

²⁵ GASCÓN DE TORQUEMADA, J.: Op. Cit. p. 128

²⁶ This was despite the fact that in 1617 Lemos, with direct connections to Lerma’s faction, had fallen from grace and resigned his post as President of the Council of Italy. See BENIGNO, F.: *La Sombra del rey*. Madrid, 1992, p. 95

²⁷ See CASTILLA, R.: *El Arcediano Antonio Mira de Amescua: biografía documental*. Úbeda, UNED, 1998, p. 53.

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yo pues, quiero introducir (v. 157)
moneda falsa, opiniones
herradas que confusiones
les causen para extender
mis errores, y la plata
de la verdad sacaré
de ese reino, cuya fe
por el orbe se dilata.

The effects of the action unleashed by Heresy are described by Heathenism:

“..Ansí harás que suban luego (v. 165)
Los precios, y de este modo
Es fuerza alterarse todo
Su gobierno y su sosiego ...”

Once the ploy has been planned and put into practice, Justice appears on stage bearing a sword in her right hand and scales in her left while Mercy carries her cloak for her. Mercy announces that the Kingdom desires an audience with Justice, who sits down on her throne ready to listen. The Kingdom has brought two representatives, which in the play are called “States”. One of these States is the allegorical figure of Nobility and the other is that of Simplicity. The first is dressed as a noble knight and the second as a peasant. Nobility starts to speak on behalf of the Kingdom, while Simplicity takes on a comic role more in keeping with the figure of a simpleton or fool.

Nobility then accuses Heresy of the evils caused by the *vellón*:

“Como nuestra moneda han confundido (v. 377)
su estimación en mucho se ha bajado
y el precio de las cosas ha subido
de suerte que tendré mísero estado
en tanto que no viere consumido
tanto vellón segunda vez sellado(...)
¡Oh cuanto sin temor eresiarcas
su moneda en tus puertos introducen
y en bajeles sin fe, de viles barcos
a tierra ocultamente la conducen;
si esta desdicha por mis culpas crece
la cristiana república perece...”

Simplicity then takes it upon herself to describe the effects of the bad coinage that she has noticed in the street:

Señora, lleno de afrecho (v.419)

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El pan en la plaza dan (..)
No hay quien vino puro beba
Ni barato, yo lo juro
Pues seda y paño una bara
Nos cuesta el sudor de Adán
Todas las cosas nos dan
Por los ojos de la cara (..)

Nobility firmly pursues his petition to Justice when she rises to her feet after listening to them:

“... Vuestra majestad atienda (v.455)
a lo que el Reino le dice
porque es razón que me escuche
como es bien que le suplique
Advierta que soy el Reino
Que atentamente le sirve
Y que soy esclavo suyo
Siendo mi albedrío libre ...”

The tone of the demands made to Justice is raised and Mercy, the mediator between Justice and the Kingdom, announces that a series of *arbitrios* has been ordered to remedy the situation:

“... Ya la Justicia ha pedido (v. 641)
que algunos arbitrios den
para remediarte bien
y aunque ella los ha sabido
quiere que del hombre sean
porque ayude de su parte ...”

The *arbitrios* come from the hand of David, Isaiah and Solomon, fathers of the Church who embody human wisdom. Meanwhile, Heresy wants to make use of Simplicity to introduce the bad coinage. She tempts her to take it several times, but Simplicity resists. Justice then reappears and sits on the throne to make this announcement:

“... Habiéndose consultado (v. 832)
en el divino Consejo
en quien vio tres personas
de una voz y de un acuerdo
los daños y las miserias
que ha padecido este reino
porque subido el vellón

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las cosas suben de precio (...)
Nos el Católico Rey (v. 849)
Único, absoluto dueño
De cuanto el planeta hermoso
Alumbra en dos hemisferios
Ordenamos que se haga
Un tribunal estupendo,
Misericordioso y santo
Para castigar a aquellos
Que introdujeren moneda
De opiniones y de yerros;
Conozca la Inquisición
Del delito que en mis puertos
Se cometiere en tal causa ...”

After punitive action is taken, the next corrective measure is the foundation of the *erario*, or the *Monte de Piedad*, which amounts to the same thing:

“... Haya un Monte de Piedad (v. 863)
un erario que esté lleno
de tesoros de la Iglesia.
Diputación en gobierno
General, unida y santa ...”

Throughout the play, a feeling of platonic love is apparent between Justice [allegory of the Monarchy, played by a woman] and Nobility [representing itself and played by a knight]. Nevertheless, it is in this particular part of the play that the allegorical transpositions find their fullest expression. Until this moment, Money has been identified with religious precepts, the King with Justice, the *vellón* with heretic texts and those who introduced it – the Dutch – with Heresy, foreign *asentistas* – especially Genoans – with Heathenism, the *Monte de Piedad* with the Church, the capital sustaining the *Monte de Piedad* with good works, the governing members of the *Monte de Piedad* with priests, and silver with the Body of Christ. According to what is reflected in the play, participation in the project is an act linked to the highest function of the Monarchy, that of Defender of the Faith.

It is also announced that after the founding of the *Monte de Piedad*, there will be no more contracts in the form of *asientos*:

“.....y censos (v. 888)
no se tomen de otras leyes
y religión, pues es cierto

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que hallan en este socorro...”

The staging is made to look convincing in order to emphasise the ultimate benevolence of the three proposed *arbitrios* (elimination of the *vellón* coinage, persecution of those who introduce false coins and the founding of the *Monte de Piedad*). One side of the Scales of Justice contains the *arbitrios* and the other an apple, the symbol of sin and the evils of man. The *arbitrios* outweigh Sin in a demonstration of their intrinsic benevolence, after which Nobility confronts Heresy and declares:

“...mi remedio (v. 984)
tengo yo en esta balança
tus amenazas no temo...”

and Solomon, representing human wisdom, goes on to assert:

“que la mayor calidad (v. 1000)
de las leyes y verdad
que para el hombre ha salido
es haber instituído
este Monte de Piedad...”

The solutions are proclaimed and application of the remedy begins. There is a burning of books by Luther, said to be “the currency of the *vellón*”, and characters begin to appear who make their deposit in the new *Monte de Piedad*. The parade is joined by repentant sinners: Mary Magdalene and a thief, to be followed later by other characters from the Bible. After the procession of people has filed past, Mercy appears in a chariot with a seven-headed dragon at her feet and chants the following:

“Al Monte de mi Piedad (v. 1165)
lleguen los hombres, pues hoy
en la fuente de la gracia
beben celestial licor.
Mortales venid a mí,
Que ricos tesoros doy
En este carro triunfando
De los cuellos del dragón
Albricias, albricias
Oh! Reino español
Que ya la Justicia
Te muestra el Sol...”

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Finally, at the crowning moment for the stage apparatus, the coffer where the deposits have been made appears from behind a cloud, symbolising the Ark of the Alliance. It opens and the Chalice and the Host come out with two angels at the side, accompanied by music and the loud acclaim of all the characters that have appeared in the play.

This play by Mira de Amescua, which I believe was performed in Madrid in front of the governors of the *Cortes* would have considerable symbolic value even if it were just an isolated example, but this is not the case. There is at least one other theatrical play in which the theme and argument of the religious play are used as a tool for propaganda to try and convince people of the excellence of political reform with respect to the economy. In this case, the reform in question was related to the last financial decision taken in the reign of Philip IV and, once more – this time with all certainty – it was the governors of the *Cortes* who made up an exceptional audience and were the most direct recipients of the messages emanating from the stage.

The monetary measure adopted by Philip IV towards the end of 1660 and reflected in this new religious play consisted of minting a new *vellón* coin with a minimal amount of silver, known as the “*moneda de molinos*”. This was not the first idea Philip IV had had. His initial proposal, in August 1660, had been to mint five million *ducados* of pure *vellón*. However, the opposition of the *Cortes*, inaugurated in Madrid on September 6th 28, was so great that Philip IV was forced to retract. He must also have been very much aware of the clamour of the Castilian governors, the great majority of whom demanded the minting of a “good *vellón*”, in other words, a coin that contained at least a small quantity of silver.

²⁸ On this session of the *Cortes* see LORENZANA DE LA PUENTE, F.: “Política y hacienda en 1660-1664. Las últimas Cortes de Castilla” in FORTEA PÉREZ J.I and CREMADES GRIÑAN, C. (eds.) *Política y Hacienda en el Antiguo Régimen*, Murcia, 1993, pp. 343-358. It should also be pointed out that although successive volumes of official proceedings as from the end of the 19th century have been published at the request of the *Real Academia de la Historia* and the lower house of the Spanish Parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados*), the final sessions of the *Cortes* in the reign of Philip IV, held between 1660 and 1664, are unpublished and it is therefore necessary to consult the original records of the proceedings found in the *Archivo del Congreso*, Serie Cortes de Castilla, legs. 64 and 65.

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This is why in October 1660, following the deliberations of the *Junta de Medios*²⁹, Philip IV proposed minting a new *vellón* coin “with silver alloy” which was to enter circulation while at the same time the “bad *vellón*”, estimated to be circulating to the equivalent worth of seven million *ducados*, was being destroyed.

In order to set this process in motion, the *Cortes* had to approve a tax to the value of a million *ducados* on the silver used to finance the operation. The measure was finally passed by the Castilian assembly on November 11th 1660³⁰, although not without the opposition of some of the governors “and of the common people who are never fairly governed”³¹.

In a context as complex and difficult as this, it is understandable that the Monarchy would want to create a favourable opinion towards putting the measure in place, although those who were openly against it did not remain silent, as we shall see. On the institutional side, it seems a religious play was commissioned. This is now found in the collection of manuscripts of the *Real Academia Española*³² and was brought to public attention by Rafael Valladares³³. The play is titled “*Auto sacramental Alegórico: El Consumo del Vellón*” and was written by Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Despite this attribution, the Academy’s Catalogue of Manuscripts not only lists it as unpublished, but indicates that there is some doubt as to whether Calderón was in fact the author. What is accurate is the date it was written because at the end of the play the following annotation is found: “End of the Play on the New Currency and the 1660 *Junta de Cortes* or elimination of the *vellón*”. I have been able to verify that this play was

²⁹ This *Junta de Medios* was formed by: The President of the Council of the Exchequer (Don Miguel de Salamanca), the Supreme Inquisitor, Don Juan de Góngora, the Count of Castrillo, José González, the Duke of Medina de las Torres, Friar Juan Martínez, Don Antonio Contreras, Manuel Pantoja, the Marquis of Monesterio (Centurión), Friar Nicolás Bautista and Andrea Piquinoti. Also taking part were Don Juan de Arce Otalora who cast a private vote against the measure as he understood that monetary inflation was a tax, and a heavy one at that. For more on this matter, see DOMINGUEZ ORTIZ, A.: *Política y Hacienda de Felipe IV*. Madrid, Ediciones Pegaso, 1983, pp. 257-259

³⁰ DOMINGUEZ ORTIZ, A.: *Política y Hacienda de Felipe IV*. Madrid, 1983, pp. 257-259.

³¹ This was said by Don Juan de Góngora, when he heard the news that the *arbitrio* on the new currency had been passed by the *Cortes*. In A.G.S. C.J.H. (Consejo y Juntas de Hacienda), leg. 1.111 Consultation of November 9th 1660.

³² Real Academia Española (RAE) Ms. 192, fols. 41-59.

³³ VALLADARES, R.: “El Vellón Bueno”. Notas sobre un auto sacramental de 1660” in *Ingenio Fecundo y Juicio Profundo. Cuadernos de Historia Moderna*. 1999, n° 23, monograph V, pp. 129-140

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performed in 1661 in Valladolid³⁴ by the José Carrillo Company³⁵ so it possibly had its first performance in Madrid a year earlier in June 1660.

Without digressing on the possible authorship of the play – although it is true that during these years Calderón had the monopoly of religious plays performed for the first time in Madrid, and was therefore most probably the author – its historic interest is indisputable. In it, as Valladares indicates, the alliance between ideology, politics and propaganda is so immediate and tangible that the work should be interpreted in terms of the conflicts within Castile itself, in other words, between those in favour of monetary reform and those against, the same as occurred with the supporters and opponents of the *erario* in the play by Mira de Amescua.

The characters in this play are just as familiar: Religion, identified with the Catholic Monarchy; the World, with the king, Philip IV; Sin, associated with the *vellón*; Betrayal, an allegory for dishonest ministers, and finally, the Synagogue, identified with the *asentistas*. It is worth looking more closely at this last characterisation as it implies an interesting variant with respect to the play by Mira de Amescua. In the decade of the 20s, the allegorical figure of Heathendom represented the *asentistas*, idolatrous pagans who worshipped money and not the true God, in other words, the Genoans. Now, however, a variation appears in the form of the Synagogue, that is, the Jews, a clear allusion to the Jewish *conversos* who were particularly active at that time.

The characters speak among themselves about the need to save Religion (the Monarchy) which is threatened by the Sin (the *vellón*) that has come to the World. The Synagogue represents the Jewish *converso* bankers who have lent money to the King and have

³⁴ José Carrillo produced two religious plays in the Corpus Christi festival: “De la Nueva Moneda y Cortes del año 1660” and “Divino Parnaso”. The scenography of the “Auto de la Nueva Moneda” required: “that on one cart an apparition takes place, with the opening up of a cloud where Religion stands, before descending along a chute, and in the other half cart, up above, a lamb with a *banderilla* that disappears, and underneath, a dragon spewing fire, and above it Sin (...), and in the same play there finally appears an apparition and in it Religion with the lamb, the chalice and the host on the other side, with the dragon coming out again so that Sin has to hide...” The text is from the Archivo Provincial de Valladolid (A.P.V.) leg. 2153 fol. 242 and is included in ROJO VEGA, A.: *Fiestas y comedias en Valladolid. S. XVI y XVII*. Valladolid, 1999, pp. 32-33.

³⁵ As well as writing comedies he was also a musician. It is known that he had his own company between 1659 and 1666 and, judging by its size and the quality of the actors who performed in it, it must have been one of the best of its time. On this author, see SHERGOLD, N.D. and VAREY, J.: *Genealogía, origen y noticias de los comediantes de España*. London, Tamesis, 1985, p. 209.

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profited from the issue of *vellón*. Betrayal represents the dishonest ministers who have used underhand tactics to prevent the replacement of the bad *vellón*, cause of the ruin of the World, with a good one, which from the beginning of the play is compared to the Lamb of God – Christ, the white fleece, colour of silver and redeemer of men’s sins – in other words, the bread of the Eucharist, as in Mira’s religious play.

The way these allegorical characters relate to each other in a religious play once more makes it possible for a theme as worldly as the monetary reform sought by the Crown to become consecrated, and so it is, at the end of the play, with the new coin triumphant, that this proclamation is made:

“Que en la nueva moneda de Gracia
que aguardan los hombres
con la cándida plata deshacen
los yerros del cobre”.

The existence of these two plays is confirmation that institutional propaganda was used as a means of publicising economic reforms proposed by the Monarchy, and that at certain times the particular format of these sacred plays, which were otherwise used to exalt the legitimacy of the Monarchy’s conflicts with its foreign enemies, served to point the finger at internal enemies, link them to foreign ones and mark out the desirable path to take as advocated by those in power. As the *vellón* was one of the main problems facing the Royal Exchequer, it received particular attention, as the themes of these two religious plays demonstrate.

3. The response to institutional propaganda: political satire in theatre format

The reforms proposed in plays like these, which were full of institutional propaganda, were not without their detractors. These were very active, having seen the disastrous consequences of some of the reforms already undertaken. A particular case was the monetary reform of 1660, which had a more devastating effect than Philip IV and his ministers could ever have imagined. The coins proved very easy to forge, which led to even greater financial chaos than before, and it was not long before this easily preventable disaster became the subject of political satire. One of the many forms this

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took³⁶, was, interestingly, based on posters of burlesque comedies, like the one mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, in which imaginary theatrical plays were announced, together with a plot summary and a list of the main actors³⁷. By using a hypothetical theatrical format, these pamphlets were able to incorporate a response to the propagandistic texts of the institutional stage.

Two known burlesque posters that made direct reference to the monetary reform of 1660 come from the Colombina Library in Seville³⁸. In the first, titled “*Comedia famosa, jamás vista ni representada de tres ingenios los mejores de España*” [‘Famous play never seen or performed, by three virtuosos, the best in Spain’], among the characters who appear are those who took part in the *Junta de Medios* and eventually proposed the *arbitrio* on the coinage in 1660. All of them are denounced as plotters who profited from this.

The first act of this play is about “what Castrillo did from Madrid to Vallecas”³⁹; the second about “the arrival of Medina de las Torres⁴⁰ at the Palace laden with metals from

³⁶ One of the best known of these, also referring to the *vellón*, is the hieroglyph put on the palace gate in Madrid which showed:

“The arms of Spain between two Eagles, one white and the other black. Between their claws is the lambskin of the Fleece, beneath which are the councillors in the shape of starving wolves looking at the lambskin, with this poem below:

“Dice el corderillo a las águilas:
En aquesta confusión
Aquestos que me atropellan
Aunque veis que me dessuellan
No me quitan el vellón.”
[“The lambskin says to the Eagles:
In this confusión,
Those who trample over me
Although you see them remove my skin
They do not take my *vellón* (fleece)]”

In ETREROS, M.: Op. Cit. p. 467 I

³⁷ Mercedes Etreros showed that political satire made prolific use of mock announcements of plays, which included the titles, the characters and actors who played them, a longish description of the plot and a list of the acts. This sort of representation served the objectives of satire by graphically portraying and parodying the characters cast as governors. In ETREROS, M.: Op. Cit. pp. 173-174.

³⁸ REYES PEÑA, M. De los: “Dos carteles burlescos del siglo XVII” *Dicenda. Cuadernos de filología hispánica*, nº 3, Madrid, Universidad Complutense, 1984, pp.247-261.

³⁹ Don García de Avellaneda y Haro (1588-1670). Grandnephew of the Count-Duke of Olivares. President of the Council of the Indies (1632-1658) and that of the Exchequer (1643-1665). As well as viceroy of Naples (1653-1658), he was also Chief Steward to the King from 1658 to 1660

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the North” and the third “what Peñaranda⁴¹ did from Naples to Madrid to fulfil the designs of the Abbé Arnolfo”. Rehearsals of this hypothetical play were supposed to have taken place in the *Junta de Medios*, in such a way that all its members take on a “dramatic” role. The prologue is written by Friar Nicolás Baptista, while the short farces are the work of Don Miguel de Salamanca, according the author of the satire. The dances are attributed to Don Miguel de Oyanguren and the scenery to Don Juan de Góngora.

On the second poster are the titles of two imaginary plays in which the main plot revolves around the *vellón*:

“Today. the fourth part of *La fúnebre y lastimosa tragedia del cruel Martirio del cobre y exaltación de la Moneda Nueva* [“The mournful, pathetic tragedy of the cruel Martyrdom of copper and the exaltation of the New Coin”], never seen before, will be performed by three virtuosos of “Juan Ranas”.

The following people speak in it:

Verdad.....”Moneda subida, España perdida”
Ignorancia.....¿En qué va errada, si no pierde nada?
Discurso..... Ignorante, mira adelante
Experiencia..... Mejor lo verás si miras atrás
Reparo..... No se que diga en tanta fatiga
Lisonja..... Yo sólo quiero que haya dinero
Prudencia Este extremo sólo temo
Malicia.....Todo se ataja con una baja
Castilla..... A tanta insolencia, no hay resistencia
Inglaterra..... Si eso haces, hagamos paces

The second play on this burlesque poster is *El destierro de la Plata* [“The Banishing of Silver”]. We only need look at both these titles to see that such posters were a form of

⁴⁰ Don Ramiro Nuñez de Guzmán (1600-1668), Duke of Medina de las Torres, principal adviser to Philip IV on foreign policy matters, at that time characterised by the re-establishing of relations with Holland, hence the reference to Medina de las Torres facilitating the arrival of “metals from the north”.

⁴¹ It would be worth doing a detailed study on Don Gaspar de Bracamonte y Guzmán, the Count Consort of Peñaranda, who was involved in the political life of the Monarchy for more than sixty years after becoming chamberlain to the Infante Cardinal upon his graduation from Salamanca in Canonical Law. His administrative career began in 1626 when he was appointed Attorney to the Council of Orders. He then rose to become Plenipotentiary in Münster, State Counsellor, President of the Council of the Indies, Viceroy of Naples and member of the Government Junta, as already mentioned. In Court circles, the higher nobility considered him as a defender of outsiders; for example, one of his main protégés was the President of the Council of the Exchequer, Don Lope de los Ríos, the minister who was probably the most skilled in handling negotiations with the *asentistas* during the reign of Charles II.

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active opposition that aimed to parody institutional propaganda with weapons that were outwardly similar – since the plays did not really exist – to those used by the Monarchy.

A clear conclusion can be drawn from the existence of these texts: The theatre enveloped the lives of both its protagonists and the anonymous people who lived in the 17th century. With respect to the most prevalent realities of the century, it could be a simple reflection, a magnifying glass or a distorting lens, depending on the circumstances. Whatever it was, almost everything was reflected in the most universal recreational and cultural manifestation of the time. Even the parts containing the most scathing and cryptic criticism of the economy assumed a common theatrical format that everyone could outwardly relate to and understand.