

THREE MANUSCRIPT PLAYS BY EUSEBIO VELA

OF the recreations popular among the Spaniards in Mexico, the theater held first place. Even during the sixteenth century, dramatic performances of Biblical stories were promoted by the church officials. By 1700 the vice-regal theater was in existence, and during the second half of the century the Mexican capital was not far behind Madrid in either the type or the number of dramatic performances. But not until early in the 18th century did a playwright and theater manager appear who is claimed by the Mexicans as a native. This honor is laid at the feet of Eusebio Vela, whose work covers the period from 1718 to 1740.

Of the life of Vela, few facts are known.¹ The principal source of information is Beristáin de Souza, who states² that Vela was born in New Spain and was the author of fourteen plays whose titles he cites. Most of these, he adds, have been published. The information that Eusebio and his brother became in 1718 the lessees of the Coliseo, a theater in Mexico City, and that Eusebio alone contracted in 1736 for its control for nine years, during which period he died, is given by an article in the *Diario de México*,³ but no additional light is shed on his work as a playwright. That two plays bearing such titles as are credited to him by Beristáin were actually given during the period in which he worked is attested by contemporary items in the *Gazeta de México* in referring to events which took place in connection with the annual celebration of the birthday of the king.⁴

¹ Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari, *Reseña histórica del teatro en México*, Mexico, 1895, I, 24 and Francisco Pimentel, "Historia crítica de la poesía en México," in *Obras Completas*, Mexico, 1904, IV, 147.

² *Biblioteca hispano-americana septentrional*, Mexico, 1816-1821, III, 279.

³ "Memorias del teatro de esta corte," in numbers 844-45, January 21-22, 1808.

⁴ *Gazeta de México*, December, 1729 and December, 1730. José de Núñez y Domínguez in *Un Virrey limeño en México*, Mexico, 1927, pp. 271-72, refers to these plays as the work of Vela.

Although various Mexican historians have interested themselves in Vela at different times, none have been able to unearth any further information concerning the man or his works. As compilers of Mexican bibliography, such as León⁵ and Medina⁶ have failed to find any of Vela's plays published in Mexico, it is generally believed that none of his plays exist. In reaching this conclusion, investigators have overlooked several possible channels of information. One of these is Barrera,⁷ who lists, as existing in the Osuna library, two manuscript plays by Vela entitled *El Apostolado en las Indias, y martirio de un cacique* and *Si el amor excede al arte, ni amor ni arte a la prudencia*, both of which titles appear in the list given by Beristáin. With the Osuna library, these manuscripts passed to the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and are described by Paz y Melia⁸ in his catalogue of the manuscripts in that institution as written in an eighteenth-century hand. Another channel which has been overlooked is the catalogue of the manuscripts in the British Museum, which lists a "Comedia nueva. La pérdida de España (De Dn. Eusebio de Vela)."⁹ The first two acts of this play are written in an earlier hand than the third, whose date is fixed by a note on page 188: "Se copio en Zaragoza a 29. de Abril del año 1775."

Here, then, are three plays by Vela of which only the titles, as cited by Beristáin, have been known to historians of the Mexican theater. The subject matter of the three varies widely. One is concerned with the classical figure of Telemachus; another has for its inspiration the King Roderick legend; while the third is based on Mexican tradition concerning the work of the first Franciscans in converting the heathen natives. A brief study of the plots, probable sources, and style of these plays is sufficient to enable one to estimate, fairly accurately, Vela as a playwright.

⁵ *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVIII*, Mexico, 1902.

⁶ *La Imprenta en México (1539-1821)*, Santiago de Chile, 1907-12.

⁷ *Catálogo . . . del Teatro antiguo español*, Madrid, 1860.

⁸ *Catálogo de las piezas de teatro . . . de la Biblioteca nacional*, Madrid, 1899.

⁹ Manuscript number 33,479, pp. 130-206.

Si el amor excede al arte, ni amor ni arte a la prudencia presents the adventures of Telemachus on Calypso's isle, on the coast of which that hero, together with Mentor and his other companions, were ship-wrecked. Calypso, after hearing Telemachus' tale of hardships, becomes enamored of him. Cupid, disguised as a shepherd boy, further complicates the plot by causing Telemachus to fall in love with another nymph, Eucaris. But the wiles of the two jealous women are rendered futile by the wise counsel of Mentor, who is Minerva in disguise. In spite of Calypso, who summons to her aid not only Cupid but Pluto, Telemachus and his companions take to their ships, thus proving, as the title of the play suggests, that wise counsel is superior to both love and cunning.

In the first act of *La Pérdida de España*, which deals with the well-known Roderick legend, the king of Spain, who is yet unmarried, dispatches Count Julian on a mission to the Moors, meets his daughter Florinda, and falls in love with her. In the second act, outraged at the loss of her honor and jealous because of the recent marriage of the king to a Moorish princess, Florinda escapes from the court and flees to her father to whom she confesses her shame. In revenge, he betrays the country to the Moors. In the hope of finding gold which would furnish means to offer resistance to the Moors, the king enters the enchanted palace of Toledo, where, instead, he learns the dire fate which confronts him. In the third act, Roderick's forces are speedily defeated, and he himself lost to view. Florinda, who for a time thought only of revenge, becomes remorseful, as she realizes the consequences to Spain and Christianity of her treachery, and retires to the mountains.

In strong contrast with these plays is *El Apostolado en las Indias*, which is founded on a well-known incident in the career of Fray Martín de Valencia, an early Mexican missionary. Cortés, according to the version given by Vela, received in Tlaxcala the twelve Franciscan missionaries who went to Mexico in 1524 to convert the natives. Several miracles credited to Fray Martín win for them

many converts, among whom one of the most zealous is an Indian boy, Cristóbal. As his father, a noble of Tlaxcala, persists in clinging to the Indian religion, the son destroys the household idols and sets up in their stead a statue of the Virgin Mary. One of the noble's many wives, who is jealous of Cristóbal and his mother, urges her lord to punish the son; but when this is attempted, two angels protect him. Then the noble assembles all of his vassals for the purpose of destroying the Christians. After removing Cristóbal from Fray Martín's school, his father tries to weaken his resolution by torture; when this fails, he murders him outright. Upon learning of this fact, Cortés offers battle to the stubborn lord, captures the heathen, and executes him. The mother of the martyred boy is given in marriage to an Indian who had aided the Christians.

The sources from which Vela drew these plays are varied. *Si el amor excede al arte* is probably based on Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse*. The first seven chapters of this work deal with the shipwreck of Telemachus on Calypso's isle, the tale he told her of his previous wanderings, his love for Eucaris, and the vain efforts of Calypso to captivate him. The introduction of Pluto, who with his fire and thunder affords a magnificent scenic effect in the last act of the play, seems to be an invention of Vela.

In *La Pérdida de España* he uses the essential incidents of the Roderick legend. From the many differences, both in subject matter and in method of treatment, it is fairly certain that Vela did not attempt to follow Lope de Vega's *El último Godo*, which treats the same legend.¹⁰ From what version of the story Vela drew his incidents is not clear.

The basis of the third play is historical, but details are altered to suit the playwright's purposes. The main facts of the play were first set forth by two sixteenth century chroniclers, Motolinia,¹¹ one of Fray Martín's companions,

¹⁰ Vela's play was evidently unknown to Menéndez y Pelayo, for he does not include it among those of the 18th century that deal with this legend. Cf. his edition of *Obras de Lope de Vega*, Madrid, 1897, VII, lvi.

¹¹ Toribio de Motolinia, *Historia de los Indios de Nueva España*, in *Documentos para la Historia de Mexico*, Mexico, 1858-1866, I, 148-161; 217-221.

and Mendieta¹²; but as the work of these writers remained in manuscript until the 19th century, Vela must have followed Vetancurt¹³ or Torquemada,¹⁴ both of which were undoubtedly available. He differs from these authorities in having the friars met by Cortés in Tlaxcala instead of in Mexico City,¹⁵ and in having the martyrdom occur at that time instead of later, for both Cristóbal and his mother were murdered through the machinations of a jealous wife who desired the favors of the father for her own son. The naval battle pictured by Vela as occurring in Tlaxcala has no historical foundation, but the idea was probably drawn from the battle fought by Cortés on Lake Texcoco in 1521.

In none of these three-act plays is there any detail which distinguishes them from those written by the extravagant 18th century imitators of Lope and Calderón, with whom Vela should undoubtedly be classed. The plots fairly bristle with the fantastic and the supernatural. Characters apprise the audience of what is happening in long speeches full of empty phrases, bombastic in tone, and lacking in true inspiration. The attempts at humor are puerile and inane. The ballad meter predominates; indeed, the writer is never at his ease except when using it. His favorite rhetorical device, also frequently employed by Calderón, appears in the following lines:¹⁶

Pues el cielo
en mí contra se declara
obscureciendo sus luces,
y la tierra amontonada
me embaraza mis intentos;
el viento oprimido brama
por asombrarme, el abismo
conjurado se desata

¹² Gerónimo Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, Mexico, 1870, 236-241; 571-605.

¹³ *Teatro Mexicano*, Mexico, 1870-71 (a reprint of the 1698 edition), IV, 171-175; 297-304.

¹⁴ *Monarquía indiana*, Madrid, 1723, III, 82-94; 392-424. The first edition was published in Sevilla, 1615.

¹⁵ H. H. Bancroft, *History of Mexico*, San Francisco, 1883-1887, II, 162 ff.

¹⁶ *El Apostolado en las Indias*, Act II.

en mí ofensa, ni el abismo
viento, tierra, cielo, ni agua
no han de poder estorbar
el rigor de mi venganza
pues escondida en el pecho
la tendré para lograrla.

These plays add nothing to Vela's reputation as a playwright, but they are interesting examples of the *comedias* which amused the Mexican capital in the early decades of the 18th century. Of his activity as a theater manager, meager but hitherto uncited information is given by a manuscript report in the Archivo de Indias¹⁷ which shows that Vela was the lessee of the Coliseo in 1733. Whether he should be classed as a Mexican dramatist, or whether he was born in Spain and merely worked in Mexico, remains to be definitely established. That he belonged to a family of writers is suggested by the following lines which preface the first act of *El Apostolado*:

Eusebio, de los Eusebios,
es escribir con acierto
en todo; ¿como lo muestran?
Las obras de quatro Eusebios.

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¹⁷ Archivo General de Indias, 62-4-11: *Secretaría de Nueva España. Secular. Audiencia de Mexico. Expedientes sobre el Hospital Real de Yndios de aquella ciudad. Años de 1701 a 1731.*