

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 2

1932

Religious Spanish Folk-Drama in New Mexico

A. L. Campa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Campa, A. L.. "Religious Spanish Folk-Drama in New Mexico." *New Mexico Quarterly* 2, 1 (1932). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol2/iss1/2>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Religious Spanish Folk-Drama in New Mexico

By A. L. CAMPA

THE Spanish folk-drama of New Mexico is a subject that rightfully merits something more than a brief discussion based on second-hand information. Various articles of a semi-scholarly nature have been written about isolated dramas found in different parts of the Southwest, where Spanish traditions and the Spanish language still exist; numerous theories have been advanced explaining origin of these dramas; and too many conjectures made on a subject that need not be as inexplicable as it may appear to those who for the first time hear of New Mexican folk-plays.

That the Spanish drama of the Southwest originated in Spain; that it may have come to New Mexico by way of Mexico; that the early missionaries may have written it; that it is an arrested stage of the development of the drama proper, and all similar obvious conclusions say very little that is of value, and explain less the existence of the folk-drama. It is obvious to assume that Spanish folk-drama came from Spain, and equally logical to say that it came to New Mexico by way of Old Mexico. It is no revelation to learn that the Spanish missionaries had something to do with a religious theatre.

Within the last few years, an unusual amount of interest has been aroused in things Spanish, and as a result, charlatan and quack scholars have been induced to break out into print with everything that has a Spanish semblance. Much harm can be done and is done by this sort of work under the name of scholarship. Even noted folklorists have fallen under the spell, especially in dealing with the religious folk-drama, and have overlooked three fundamental factors when studying this type of folk-lore. The continuity of tradition is broken when culture is changed to

4] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

the point where the tradition no longer fits in. Due to the changes that have occurred in the last fifty years, most of the Spanish traditions in New Mexico have been discontinued, principally the ones that require a bit of effort to maintain. The religious play is one that has suffered greatly in this respect.

When the circumstances under which the religious drama was introduced into the New World are considered, it is hardly accurate to say that its religious nature is due to the fact that the theatre in Spain at that time was at this stage of development. Neither are all mystery plays in New Mexico of one type, nor was it ever intended that they should be played at the same occasion. To call them all "variants" is to fail in understanding the construction of the play or the purpose for which it was composed. It looks very scholarly to affix a number of annotations and criticisms to a composition that has been mistaken for what it is not. We are often misled by the name given to the Christmas plays: "Pastorelas." In reality they are not all pastorelas.

Looking at the religious folk-plays through the folklore of the people who possess them, it is not difficult to find how these plays differ, and a careful comparison will show that four of these plays fall in a cycle based on the life of Christ. The sequence of this cycle is not maintained today, due to the mixture of Anglo tradition with Spanish customs. But even so, the plays themselves remain sufficiently coherent in themselves to show that they are separate and independent compositions.

The dramatization of Bible stories was European custom, but at the time of the conquest, the religious drama was on the decline and most dramatists in Spain were striving to take it out of the church and popularize it. The missionaries, however, revived the religious purpose of the drama in Mexico. Their problem was to convert the Indians to Christianity, not to provide them with a new type of entertainment. When they sought to convert the strange

RELIGIOUS SPANISH FOLK-DRAMA [5

inhabitants of a hitherto unknown world, they found it necessary to employ a vehicle for the transmission of the new and abstruse ideas. In the absence of a common tongue, one of the methods resorted to was that of the drama, and this is the first introduction of the European theatre in the New World. Cuevas, in his *Historia de la Iglesia en Mexico*, says that the missionaries composed pantomimes in order to convey the plan of salvation. As early as 1538, a religious play called *Adan y Eva* was written in the Nahuatl tongue.² Julio Jimenez Rueda, noted Mexican author, speaks of the early Mexican theatre, saying:

"It is a well-known fact that in Mexico, dramatic literature appears as a school theatre, or directly related to teaching. The Nahuatl mysteries that the missionaries bade the Indians to listen to were nothing more than this. The presentations of Tlaxcala which were given during the feast of Corpus, St. John, and the Incarnation, and which Motolinia describes,³ were a doctrinal means. Fray Juan de Torquemada introduces the 'neixcuitillo' or 'ejemplo,' represented on Sundays after the sermon."³

At the present time, however, the religious plays in New Mexico have lost their original purpose and continue to exist among the Spanish-speaking natives as part of their tradition and folklore. Unfortunately, the presentations are not as elaborate as they once were, and even the players themselves give any one of the four plays of the Christmas cycle indiscriminately.

There is an earlier cycle of folk-plays that still exists in the northern part of New Mexico and I shall presently speak very briefly on it. To date I have found only three major plays called: *Adan y Eva*, *Cain y Abel*, and *Lucifer y San Miguel*. The first two are by far the most complete and best written. The versions of these plays do not differ much

1. Cuevas, Mariano: *Historia de la Iglesia en Mexico*, Mexico 1922, I. 383.

2. Campa, A. L.; *The Churchmen and the Indian Languages of New Spain*, *Hist. Amer. Hist. Rev.*, Vol. XI, No. 4, Nov. 1931.

3. Julio Jimenez Rueda: *Las Universidades y el Teatro*, Universidad de Mexico, Mexico D. F., Nov. 1930, p. 27.

6] *The NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY*

except for a few misspelled words and added lines. The principal characters in *Adán y Eva* are the Great Power, Adam and Eve, Mercy, Appetite, Sin, Lucifer, and an Angel. Adam, seated on a bed of boughs underneath the tree of the "essence of good and evil," opens with a song:

"Guerra es la vida del hombre
en la estacion de su imperio;
de morir en la campaña
irrevocable el decreto."

Lucifer summons all his helpers to dethrone man from the elevated position in which God has placed him. In a long and eloquent speech, Lucifer tells his past glory and how he came to be ejected from Heaven. Appetite volunteers to seduce Eve in the form of a serpent. Except for the colorful interpolations that the characters bring in, the Bible story is closely adhered to. Man finally falls and is brought before the throne of God by the Angel. Mercy intercedes for Man and begs that the penalty be waived. God acquiesces insofar as He promises redemption through the birth of Christ. The author probably thought it wise to convey the plan of salvation at this point of the drama and thereby capitalize the interest that the drama holds at the climax. In a rather concise *decima* the Almighty speaks to Adam:

"Affligido pecadór,
no llores, enjuga el llanto
que ya tienes un fiadór
cuyo caudal vale tanto
cuanto vale el acreedor.
Y para que veas cumplida
esta noticia, escucha atento
que un niño Dios te convida
para que en su nacimiento
le cantes la bien venida."

The Angel then foretells the coming of Christ and the play ends with the song:

"Gloria a Dios en las alturas
y paz al hombre en la tierra."

RELIGIOUS SPANISH FOLK-DRAMA [7

Cain y Abel is given sometimes the secondary title of *El Primer Crimen*. This play has more dramatic force than the previous one, due to the emotional scenes at the death of Abel. "At the rise of the curtain," Adam and Eve are seated upon the rocks outside their skin covered covelet waiting for the return of their two sons who are in the wilderness. It is dusk and Eve is quite worried over their delay.

Eve:

"La tarde toco su fin
y aun no llegan nuestros hijos.
A estas horas nunca tardan,
que les habra pasado?
Se habran despeñado acaso
en el fondo de un abismo,
o en garrar de fiero tigre
los dos han muerto, Dios mío!"

Adam tries to console her, telling her that they will soon arrive, but he too shows signs of worry.

Adam:

"Desecha esos pensamientos
nada les ha acontecido.
Serenate, no te aflijas
con fatales vaticinios
ya no deben dilatar
por ese aspero camino."

Cain commits the hideous crime and immediately realizes what he has done. He flees and tries to hide from the presence of God. When questioned about his brother he answers:

"No puedo darte respuesta.
El guarda soy yo de Abel?
Me diste tal encomienda?"

God stops him and in a solemn manner pronounces judgment:

"Es imposible Caín
que huyas de tu conciencia.
* * *

8] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

Por cuanto hiciste es preciso
que sufras la justa pena.
Mientras existas Caín
maldita sera la tierra
que la sangre de tu hermano
está bebiendo sin tregua.
Solo te producirá
mil abrojos por doquiera. . .”

Adam and Eve lose all hopes of their sons' return and go to look for them. They come upon the murdered body of Abel and understand what has happened. Adam, who seems too unusually level-headed, makes the last speech.

“En la mística creación
es nuestro Dios, es Jehová
que al fin nos otorgará
la santa resignación.”

The Christmas cycle commonly referred to as *Pastorelas* is the most popular of all the folk-plays. There are four different compositions given in logical sequence, but today all of them have been so badly mixed and confused that it is difficult to recognize one play from another. Briefly, they fall in this order: *El Coloquio de San Jose*, *El Auto del Niño Dios*, *El Auto de los Reyes Magos*, and *El Niño Perdido*. The term *Pastores* arises from the fact that most of the actors of the most popularly played drama, *El Auto del Niño Dios*, are shepherds. The sequence of these plays is easily seen through the Spanish custom of celebrating Christmas.

First of all, there is no Santa Claus in Spanish and Mexican tradition, and gifts are not exchanged on Christmas day. Briefly, nine days before Christmas, groups of children led by a couple who represent Joseph and Mary, go from house to house asking admittance in song. The first eight days they are denied entrance, but on Christmas Eve they are admitted, and the merry-making *pinata* broken by the children.⁴ Gifts are not exchanged until the seventh of

4. An earthen vessel (olla) filled with nuts and candy is gayly decorated with paper streamers and suspended from the ceiling by a cord. All the children are given three strokes at the *olla*, and when the blindfolded batter finally breaks it there is a scramble for the contents as they fall on the carpet.

RELIGIOUS SPANISH FOLK-DRAMA [9

January, when Magi Kings arrived to offer their gifts to the child. It is upon this custom and tradition that the Christmas cycle is built.

El Coloquio de San José, the first of the Christmas cycle, begins with a unique interpolation. All the males have been summoned by Simion to appear at the temple with a reed in hand. The purpose of the gathering is to choose a husband for Mary. The man on whose hand the reed blooms shall be the appointed one. Joseph is reluctant to go, because of his poverty, and when he does go he sits in the portico of the temple. Suddenly his reed sprouts forth and he is congratulated by all the patriarchs. Satan, realizing that the Christ is to be born according to the prophesy, sends an envoy to waylay the shepherds. Meanwhile he opens with a fiery account of his fall:

“Caí por desleal y atrevido
del más supremo lugar
mas no sentí el bajar
la gloria de haber subido.
Luzbel soy, hay luz en mí
luz en mi nombre se ve
pues con la luz que bajé
todo el abismo encendí.”

When Feliciano, the herald, voices the wishes of his master he comes to Joseph and says:

“Vuestro patriarca escuchad;
pues ya sabéis que Simión,
cabeza de estas comarcas,
manda pues que los patriarcas
en su real generación
hoy al templo soberano
sean obligados a llevar
unas varas en su mano
y yo de parte de Simión
he venido a te avisar.”

After the annunciation several months elapse, and Joseph and Mary are on their way to Bethlehem. Satan goes ahead of them and hides at the Inns in order to answer the door

as they come to ask for shelter. This last portion of the play is called *Las Posadas* and sometimes played separately in many villages as an introduction to the *Niño Dios* play on Christmas Eve. Joseph knocks at the Inn and sings:

“Quién les da posada
a estos peregrinos
que vienen cansados
de andar los caminos?”

Satan, behind the door, answers, emulating the Inn keeper's voice:

“Quién da golpes a la puerta
que de imprudente hace alarde
sin reflejar que ya es tarde
y a los de casa despierta!”

The Angel Michael recognizes Satan and rushes at him with his sword. Satan is overcome by the courageous angel, who places his foot on his neck and bids him to invite the company to enter. With difficulty, and in a choked voice, Satan says:

“Llegar pastores dichosos,
llegar a adorar al verbo.
Dejaré que todos se salven
como dejes de oprimirme.”

In the second play of this cycle, the shepherds play a very important role. Twelve of them have been singing at night by their campfire when the Angel Michael announces the birth of Christ. After a long and eventful journey, during which Satan tries several times to waylay them, they arrive at the manger. Bartolo, the clown of the play, provides good comic relief by his incessant wit and willingness to do nothing but sleep. Even after having arrived at the altar, Bartolo lies down and goes to sleep. His friends entreat him to go to the altar and offer a gift to the Child, but he can always improvise some ridiculous excuse and continues to sleep. One of the shepherds sings to him:

“In Bethlehem dear Bartolo
is glory born so we hear.”

RELIGIOUS SPANISH FOLK-DRAMA [11

Bartolo:

"If Glory must see Bartolo
bid the Glory to draw near."

Shepherd:

"A mule and an ox Bartolo
the new-born babe adore."

Bartolo:

"The bad mule may kick Bartolo
and the ox his belly gore."

Finally Bartolo sees no way out so he rises on one elbow and addresses his bed:

"Pobrecita cama
te voy a dejar
no tiene remedio
me he de levantar."

When he does go to the altar he tells the child how sorry he is not to have brought a gift for him. One favor he asks and that is that upon His return to Heaven He fix him a bed upon which to sleep forever.

This particular play has more variants than any of the others. Some of the versions are so different from each other that they may be independent compositions badly mixed. Three names are used to designate it, *El Coloquio de los Pastores*, *El Auto del Niño Dios*, and *La Pastorela*. *Los Reyes Magos*, third of the series, is kept fairly uniform. In good medieval fashion, the chorus opens with the introduction:

"Atención noble auditorio
a nuestra composición
a todo este consistorio
repito y pido atención."

In the first act, the three kings, Baltazar, Gaspar and Melchor, decide to go to Bethlehem and offer gifts to Christ. King Herod welcomes the three kings to his court and asks them to stop on their return, for he too would like to see the child and adore him. The kings find the Child but return

through another road in order to evade seeing Herod. The latter sends out a royal decree that all children under two years be killed.

“Y así con furor ordeño
a vos jueces y verdugos
pronto publicar edicto
haced tocar a deguello!
Con todo niño varón
que de dos años a pecho
se hallen en esta comarca. . .”

The angel appears and bids Joseph to flee to Egypt by night. On the way the holy family meet a number of shepherds who recognize them. In the end the chorus sings:

“La primer persecusión
de Jesús Dios verdadero
Aquí en su nombre se acaba.
Perdonen los desaciertos.”

The fourth drama based on the life of Christ is called, *El Niño Perdido*. Christ goes out at the age of twelve and in his journey comes across several kings' palaces. A rich man is seated at a bountiful table when the Child arrives and He answers quite discreetly the questions with which this avaricious rich man tries to confuse him. At the end of his wandering, Jesus arrives at the temple and discusses Jewish law with the doctors. Each of the eight doctors tries to prove that the Messiah has not come. The sixth one tries to prove his point in this fashion:

“Que no ha venido confirmo
y la razón argumenta.
Dios es fiel en sus palabras
como dice el real profeta,
que ha de librar a su pueblo
de la servidumbre adversa.
Luego estando como estamos
en la inaudita bajesa
y servidumbre gentil
que no es venido se prueba.”

RELIGIOUS SPANISH FOLK-DRAMA [13]

When the Child is about to begin his argument against the doctors of the law, the Virgin Mary comes in and reprimands him for having left them. Jesus rebukes her saying:

“Qué hay , ¿ Por que me buscáis?
No sabéis que en los negocios
importantes de mi padre
me conviene más estar?”

New Mexico abounds in poetry, drama, and song. All this folk-lore is not the product of one generation and cannot be studied wholly from the schoolroom or the office. The perspective necessary to interpret the customs and traditions of the Spanish inhabitants in the Southwest is gained only by close observation. It is easy enough to become charmed and enthused, but quite another thing to understand the object of interest. New Mexican culture has three centers of influence: the pre-Columbian Indian, the Spanish, and the Anglo. The fusion of these three elements creates a variation that is interesting.