Few subgenres of the Spanish *comedia* have garnered as much critical attention as those plays in which a husband kills, or conspires to kill, his wife. As a group, these plays are intensely interesting, not only because of their common focus on violence at the heart of the marital relationship but also because they serve as splendid examples of Baroque theatrical art: they embody the principle of imitation with the purpose of surpassing the original, they combine fast action with sketchy characterization, and they frequently challenge the reader on a number of levels by pressing the credulity of the reader or spectator, by offering some morally repugnant or intensely ambiguous scenarios, and by wrapping the entire edifice in a thick layer of historical and mythological reference, dense and often impenetrable poetry, an epistemological haze that frequently prevents us from knowing exactly who is to blame for the tragedy, and a tone intended to produce a visceral reaction rather than rational clarity. Despite the rigorous application of a variety of critical approaches over the decades, three stereotypes about these plays still persist: that they are somehow unique to Spanish theater, that they accurately reflect the reality of Spanish marital law and history, and that there is one paradigm for all the wife-murder plays, that is, that they are all “honor plays” with similar characters, plot structures, motivations, actions, and moral lessons. As is the case with most stereotypes, there is some truth to these assertions, but it is the purpose of this study to dispel their general validity and to place the plays where they belong, at the heart of Baroque stagecraft.

There is no doubt that the sheer number of wife-murder *comedias* (31 by my count), the fact that the *comedia* drew upon a great deal of earlier Spanish literature from the *Corbacho* to *Conde Lucanor* to the *romancero*,¹ and the critical attention paid to four of them—Lope’s *El castigo sin venganza* and Calderón’s *El médico de su honra, El pintor de su deshonra*, and *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*—have created the impression that

¹ For a more complete discussion of wife-murder in the antecedent texts from medieval and early modern Spain, see Matthew D. Stroud, *Fatal Union: A Pluralistic Approach to the Spanish Wife-Murder Comedias* (Lewisburg, 1990), pp. 34–49.
the Spanish had more interest in the topic than writers of other national literatures, but the assertion that the genre is somehow uniquely Spanish flies in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary. From Seneca’s *Hercules furens* to Hardy’s *Procris* and Dolce’s *Marianna*, to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, it is clear that the murder of a spouse was considered worthy of theatrical treatment in many different places and over a great span of time. An even more compelling argument for the universality of wife murder as an interesting plot is the number of these plays that draw upon non-Spanish sources. There are four versions of the story of Herod and Mariamne, and another four plays based upon the myth of Cephalus and Procris. Lope’s masterpiece, *El castigo sin venganza*, was based on Italian history (as retold in Bandello 1.44), and Moreto’s *La fuerza de la ley* focuses on Antiochus and Seleucus. Virués’s *Atila furioso* focuses on the excesses of Attila the Hun in an imitation of Seneca’s *Hercules furens*, and Calderón and Zabaleta’s *Troya abrasada* is inspired by Helen’s lack of marital fidelity to Menelaus in Homer’s *Iliad*. And these examples do not even take into consideration less specific antecedents, such as Seneca’s *Octavia* and Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* that dealt with similar scenarios in ways not unlike those found in the *comedias*.

The fact that so many wife-murder plays drew upon so many different historical and literary traditions spanning more than two millennia may tell us that wife murder as a theatrical plot was not unique to Spain, but what of those plays based upon incidents recorded in Spanish history? Considerable criticism has sought to establish connections between these plays and Spain’s past, especially the influences of Visigothic, Jewish, and Muslim cultures in the development of the nation, in order to assert

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