LOPE DE VEGA AND THE MARTYRS OF JAPAN

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Lope de Vega’s *Los mártires de Japón* (*The Martyrs of Japan*), c. 1621, is the only extant *comedia* from the Spanish Golden Age that dramatizes the presence of Spanish missionaries during what is known today as the Japanese “Christian Century” (1549–1639). This chapter introduces the reader to this little-known play, its major themes, and the historical context from which it sprouts. First, it briefly surveys the state of Japanese-Spanish relations at the turn of the 16th century as well as the circumstances under which Lope was commissioned to write the play. It then provides a critical synopsis of the *comedia*, focusing on Lope’s imaginative merging of two disparate historical events: the martyrdom of the Dominican Friar Alonso Fernández de Navarrete (1571–1617) and the forced exile of Toyotomi Hideyori (1593–1615). The last section analyzes the performative aspects of the play, concentrating on the visual and linguistic representations of Japanese identity.

I. Context

On 30 January 1615, the Japanese ambassador Rokuemon Hasekura, dressed in full samurai regalia, knelt down in front of Philip III and hailed him as “el sol que alumbra la mayor parte del mundo” (the sun that illuminates most of the world). According to his translator, the Franciscan Luis Sotelo, Hasekura had come to Spain from a land “que carecese de la luz del cielo” (which lacked the light of heaven). More specifically, he had come from the kingdom of Boxu (currently, Sendai) in Japan “buscando la luz,
después de auer passado muchos trauajos, encontrando con ella se allegra y recozija” (after many hardships, and happy and joyful to have found the light being sought). A few weeks after his first appearance at court, the samurai was baptized as Philip, after the name of the Spanish Monarch, in the chapel of the Descalzas Reales in the presence of the king himself and the queen. His godparents were the Duke of Lerma and the Countess of Barajas. This ceremony was memorialized in the history of the Spanish church as a miraculous spectacle in which, according to witnesses, “parecía la yglesia un Paraíso” (the church was turned into paradise). Madrileñan observers from all walks of life must have been greatly moved by the idea that nobility from the Far East converted to Catholicism and came to Spain in order to pay homage to their king.

The relationship between Spain and Japan began in 1549 with the founding of the Society of Jesus in Kyushu by Francisco Xavier (Francisco de Jasso y Azpilicueta, 1506–52), a native of the kingdom of Navarre. Although the Jesuits attempted to maintain their sovereignty over the missions and prevent the entry of the mendicant orders, they were not successful. A papal brief issued in 1585 gave monopoly of the region to the Jesuits, but it did not stop the Friars Minor from sending their own missions to Japan. By the time Paul V passed a brief in 1608 officially allowing Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians to enter Japan, the mendicants had already accomplished the conversion of thousands of Japanese,

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5 Ibid.
7 Hasekura had been sent by the feudal lord (daimyo) of Boxu (present-day Sendai), Masamune Date. Date, who was not a Christian, was interested in establishing trade relations with New Mexico and, possibly, Seville. Historian Charles Boxer’s assessment was: “The aims and objects of this party are best summed up by the Japanese historian, Tokutomi, who characterized it as a combination of those who wished to use the Kingdom of Heaven for Trade, and those who wished to use trade for the Kingdom of Heaven” (The Christian Century [Berkeley, 1951], p. 314).
8 Hasekura was the second legate from Japan to visit Spain. The first embassy, composed of four Japanese noble adolescents, was sent by the Jesuit Visitor Alessandro Valignano in 1582 and arrived in Spain in 1584 (see Christina H. Lee, “The Perception of the Japanese in Early Modern Spain: Not Quite ‘The Best People Yet Discovered,’” eHumanista: Journal of Iberian Studies 11 [2008]: 345–80).
9 The Dominican, Augustinian, and Franciscan orders were the only mendicant orders that sent missionaries to Japan.