In this study, I analyze early modern Spanish drama in the context of the epistemological changes facing Europe at the turn of the 17th century known today as the Scientific Revolution. My approach is twofold. I present the *comedia* as a performative genre that responds to emerging scientific discourse and reflects Spanish society’s attempt to assimilate new ideas that are simultaneously forward-looking and threatening to existing ways of thinking. I also discuss the potential richness of contemporary theoretical approaches, such as chaos theory (or literary chaotics), in the analysis of structural and thematic aspects of the *comedia* that articulate the instability and uncertainty of the period. In order to illustrate these concepts, my analysis will focus on two plays by Pedro Calderón de la Barca: *La vida es sueño* and *El médico de su honra*. Both of these plays, composed within a few years of the 1633 trial of Galileo, are notable for their dramatization of social and political instability as well as their implicit or explicit reference to scientific debates as theatrical motifs and images that underscore unstable social orders.

The early modern period, in Spain and throughout Europe, was characterized by a cultural fascination with mechanization resulting from the transformations ushered in by scientific and technological modernization. This period of epistemic crisis, which corresponds to what we now call the Scientific Revolution, fostered a change in outlook toward human relationships with the natural world and a cultural fascination with technology and machines.¹ Caught between practical necessity in administering its empire and the desire to enforce Counter-Reformation Catholicism, Spanish intellectuals, clergymen, and artists found themselves grappling with the material benefits of technological advances that simultaneously held heretical implications. This paradoxical attitude toward scientific progress helps explain how Spain embraced an increasingly irrelevant, but

¹ Complete discussions on the Scientific Revolution and the debate over its nomenclature may be found in Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago, 1996), and A. Rupert Hall, *The Revolution in Science, 1500–1750* (London, 1983).
theologically acceptable, scholasticism in the face of an inevitable march toward empiricism and modernity whose hallmark was technological advancement.\textsuperscript{2}

The first decades of the 17th century represent the culmination of a period of transition, begun a century earlier, that effected significant change in what we now call the scientific disciplines as well as in social, political, philosophical, and artistic contexts. The new Copernican cosmology reversed the centuries-old authority of the anthropocentric Ptolemaic-Aristotelian model nurtured by medieval scholastics and the church. The rise of humanism as an intellectual endeavor sought a reconciliation of classical authority with Christian doctrine by recuperating original Greco-Roman texts and abandoning the interpretations written by the schoolmen or by Muslim commentators. The development of mechanics promised greater efficiency in labor while increasing human domination of the natural environment. In politics, the era witnessed the advent of the modern nation-state, the consolidation of political power in the monarchs and their bureaucracies, and the development of a citizenry whose sense of national identity was participatory by way of the taxation and election of local officials. In many ways, Spain found itself developing and utilizing the practical applications of new scientific theories before Counter-Reformation theology discovered heretical possibilities lurking within them. For example, Salamanca was the only European university to actively incorporate the Copernican model into its curriculum in the mid-16th century, before the new system was understood as a heretical challenge to church doctrine and its traditional hold on education.\textsuperscript{3}

Despite its increasing deference to dogmatic Catholicism, Spain remained in the forefront of technologies it found useful in pursuing its political interests and expanding its empire abroad. Spain was competitive in the development of artillery, navigational technologies, and the related field of cosmography, which sought to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the world through the methodical study of astronomy and geography, with an emphasis on the practical application of new scientific advancements. Several treatises on navigation date from this era, including Pedro de Medina’s widely translated and reprinted *Arte de navegar*


\textsuperscript{3} López Piñero, *Introducción*, p. 18.