Critics have often pointed out that Lope de Vega’s play *Peribáñez* exerted an important influence on *La Luna de la Sierra*.\(^1\) However, I think it is unfair to call Vélez de Guevara’s play a “reworking of Lope’s *Peribáñez*,” as Margaret Wilson has done.\(^2\) The differences between the two plays are at least as great as their similarities. The principal elements which Vélez seems to have borrowed from Lope are (1) the use of an idealized rural setting (Castilian in Lope’s play, Andalusian in Vélez’s), (2) the unsuccessful attempt by an officer of a military order to seduce a peasant’s wife, (3) the officer’s employment of a relative of the woman as a go-between, (4) the officer’s attempt to take advantage of the absence of the woman’s husband to carry out his plan, and (5) the introduction of a traditional song as an important dramatic element of the second act. The most notable similarity between the two plays occurs in Act III of *La Luna de la Sierra*, when Pascuala tells the Maestre:

\begin{verbatim}
mas estimo para mi
aquel labrador que a ti
te parece tan silvestre,
más estimo aquel sayal
que cubre como corteza
en aquella rustiqueza
un alma a ninguna igual . . .
\end{verbatim}

(III, vv. 350-56)

words which immediately recall Casilda’s famous lines:

\begin{verbatim}
más quiero yo a Peribáñez
con su capa la pardilla
que al Comendador de Ocaña
con la suya guarnecida.\(^3\)
\end{verbatim}
However, Vélez has thoroughly assimilated the elements he borrowed from Lope and in *La Luna de la Sierra* has transformed them into something quite new and different. Unlike the Casilda of *Peribáñez*, Vélez’s character Pascuala thoroughly dominates the play which bears her nickname. That title is, moreover, the source of an extended metaphor which gives unity to the play. Vélez skillfully exploits all the poetic associations traditionally connected with the moon, and there is hardly a scene in the play without an allusion to at least one of these. The association of Diana, goddess of the moon, with the hunt provides Vélez with a secondary frame of reference within which the play is structured. The extremely effective opening scene portrays Queen Isabella and Prince Juan on a hunting expedition in the romantic Sierra Morena, and the Queen is immediately compared to Diana. It was no accident that Vélez chose Queen Isabella and Prince Juan as the principal representatives of royalty in the play, substituting them for the Enrique III of *Peribáñez*. No Spanish monarch was better suited to symbolize royal majesty and justice than the Catholic Queen. Prince Juan, renowned for his intelligence and virile beauty, died at the age of nineteen, and popular legend attributed his demise to lovesickness. In the play’s first scene he is compared to Adonis, and this allusion ironically foreshadows his tragic death. Both the enamored Prince and Fernán Gómez use hunting trips as a pretext for their attempts to seduce Pascuala, and in the first scene of Act III the Prince has a lengthy conversation with Pascuala’s husband, Antón, ostensibly about hunting but in fact referring in a subtle use of double entendre to the Prince’s pursuit of Pascuala and Antón’s determination to oppose that pursuit. Antón again uses the hunting metaphor in the play’s concluding scene, in which he compares Pascuala to a heron, the Prince and Fernán Gómez to two falcons, and Queen Isabella to “la reina de las aves,” the eagle.

The name “Luna de la Sierra” was given to Pascuala because of her beauty, but she interprets it as prophetic of the change of fortune which she suffers in the play. The use of the moon as a symbol for the variability of fortune had been common in literature since Roman times, but it had become especially frequent in Spain in the poetry and plays portraying the spectacular rise and fall of Don Alvaro de Luna. The moon was thought to cause madness, and Fernán Gómez constantly refers to his love for Pascuala as “lunacy.” Just as the moon is dependent on the sun, Pascuala is dependent on Queen Isabella and on Antón, both of whom are compared to the sun. In opposing Pascuala’s marriage to Gil, Antón says that no vile peasant will be able to eclipse the rays of his “luna.” Later, unable to find her, he wonders how his lovely moon can have waned. When the Prince confides his love for Pascuala to Fernán Gómez in Act II, the latter, also in love with Pascuala, says that his moon is waning just when it ought to be waxing. The Prince applies the words of the song “En los Olivares de junto a Osuna/púsoseme el sol, salióme la luna” to
himself, saying that his sun has set and his moon does not seem to want to rise. Fernán Gómez likens Antón to Endymion, beloved of Luna. The Prince and Antón speak of Antón’s humble cottage as the moon’s sphere. In an incongruous play on words Bartola compares Pascuala to a “lunada” or ham hock, which Antón will not permit Fernán Gómez to taste.

Margaret Wilson, echoing the comments of earlier critics, has complained that in adapting Peribáñez, Vélez has falsified both language and characters, and that because of this, “the conviction and the ‘rightness’ of Lope’s drama have gone.” This criticism betrays the basic fallacy of her comparison of the two plays, which is the failure to realize that the playwright’s objectives were essentially different. Lope set out to write a stirring tragicomedy, which at times verges on melodrama. His play ends happily, but only after Peribáñez has avenged the threat to his honor by three murders. His treatment of the honor theme is thoroughly conventional. The characters in Peribáñez—in particular, the Comendador—are presented as individuals with complex psychological motivation, and in this sense they are probably among the most “realistic” in Lope’s work.

In contrast, no Golden Age play contains more highly stylized characters than those of La Luna de la Sierra. In their simplicity and clearly symbolic function, these characters could almost be described as “allegorical.” Each one is defined in terms of a small number of poetic epithets. If Pascuala is primarily the moon, she is also described as a diamond—beautiful but hard—an Amazon, and a new Lucretia, the Roman matron who died for her honor. Antón is to Pascuala as the sun is to the moon, or as Endymion to Luna, but he is also related to Orlando Furioso when his love for Pascuala drives him to irrational behavior, to an oak or a wild olive tree in his rustic strength and integrity, and to an awkward bat in comparison with Queen Isabella’s sunlike radiance. Prince Juan is a new Adonis—handsome and ill fated—and a phoenix, but in his illicit love for Pascuala he is like a falcon who preys on a defenseless heron or like Icarus, who flew dangerously close to the rays of the sun. Fernán Gómez, the Master of Calatrava, is presented primarily as a youthful warrior whose misbehavior results from the frustration of his martial impulses. Queen Isabella hunts a wild boar as a substitute for war; Fernán Gómez “hunts” Pascuala. If Pascuala is Luna, he is Mars. He is emphatically not a hateful and repugnant character like the Comendador of Peribáñez. The Queen is Diana and the sun; but in her wisdom she is likened to Athena and in her achievements to Semiramis, who surrounded Babylon with brick walls. She is an eagle in defense of her subjects, but in her love for her husband she is like a vine clinging to an elm tree. The other three peasant characters—Mengo, Gil, and Bartola—are constantly dehumanized by being compared to animals—principally donkeys and oxen.

Vélez was clearly not aiming for realism. La Luna de la Sierra is a supremely artificial play, and its unabashed theatricality makes it particularly appealing
to the modern reader who seeks something more than a trompe l’œil slice of life in the theater. Near the end of Act I the spectator is forcibly reminded that what he is witnessing is not life but art when Mengo asks the Queen:

Señora, no quede yo
ya que soy de Antón cuñado,
sin casarme con Bartola,
porque perezca, acabando
con entrambos casamientos,
fin de comedia, aunque estamos
tan al principio de aquésta
que la estoy viendo y soñando.

(vv. 1101-08)

The same character remarks to the audience at the play’s conclusion:

Aquí se da fin, señores,
sin tragedia y sin desgracia,
i ni casamiento a la postre,
la, a La Luna de la Sierra.

(III, vv. 1312-15)

It is not hard to detect a note of self-congratulation in these lines. Vélez was proud of the fact that in La Luna de la Sierra he had created what we would today call an “experimental play.” As he points out, the play’s conclusion is novel, containing neither a wedding nor a tragedy. Departing from the hackneyed treatment of the honor theme, he created a play which exploits the theme but manages to arrive at a just and happy ending without bloodshed. This ending must have come as quite a surprise to the audience, and we can imagine that that surprise was mingled with delight at the playwright’s ingenuity. Vélez set out to create a romantic, lyrical, lighthearted, and entertaining play with no admixture of tragedy. If we judge the play on its own merits and not by comparison with Peribáñez, we have to admit that he succeeded.

Nonetheless, like most experiments, La Luna de la Sierra is flawed. Not content with the traditional love triangle, Vélez created what we might describe as a love pentagon in the play. He did this with a careful eye to symmetry. Pascuala is loved by four men—two noblemen and two peasants. One wonders whether Vélez might have had the example of El burlador de Sevilla in mind; Don Juan seduced two noble and two peasant women. Antón and the Prince are similarly idealized; their love for Pascuala is pure and noble. Gil and Fernán Gómez, on the other hand, seem more lustful than loving, and both attempt to buy Pascuala’s favors. This parallelism has a certain elegance, but it does seem to complicate the play’s action unnecessarily.

Mengo and Bartola, gross and boorish beyond belief, serve as a constant contrast with Antón and Pascuala. Even Vélez seems to have realized that the
enormous gap between these two couples, who were supposed to be closely related, strains the audience’s capacity for the suspension of disbelief. In Act II he has Bartola tell Pascuala that she has never seen a brother and sister who were so unlike as Mengo and Pascuala. Pascuala replies that “el alma parece sola / al cielo” (vv. 131-32).

The play’s structure is also unusual and problematic. The first act, which takes place in a single day and has only one change of scene, constitutes a discrete unit, almost a play in itself. An unspecified amount of time—perhaps weeks—passes between the first and second acts, and the action thereafter is continuous. Acts II and III are closely parallel in structure. Both begin in front of Antón’s house at dawn, then move to the Queen’s lodgings in the village of Adamuz, returning to Antón’s house for their final scenes. The dramatic movement is more rapid in the last two acts; in her edition of the play Professor Luisa Revuelta divides the first act into eleven scenes (constituted by the entrance or exit of one or more characters); Act II contains twenty scenes and Act III, twenty-three. Act I consists of an alternation of two passages in redondillas with two in romance. Act II begins in octavas reales and contains two passages in décimas. Act III also includes a passage in décimas, and, like the first series of décimas in Act II, it is used for a dialogue between Pascuala and Bartola. The first scene of Act II portrays Antón and Mengo’s departure for the threshing floors; the corresponding scene in Act III depicts the departure of the Prince and Gómez after spending a night in Antón’s house. In Act II, after Mengo and Antón have left, Bartola attempts to persuade Pascuala to yield to Gómez’s proposal, offering her a golden chain. In Act III, while the Prince diverts Antón’s attention, Gómez personally attempts to seduce Pascuala, again offering her gold. Antón finds out about the golden chain immediately after Gómez’s departure and decides to follow him to Adamuz and complain to the Queen. In the “palace scene” in Act II, the Prince informs his mother that he has decided to go “hunting” in order to seek relief for his melancholy. In the corresponding scene in Act III he discusses his hunting trip with his mother and tells her that he plans to repeat the experience as often as possible. However, Antón arrives and tells the Queen of Gómez’s attempt to seduce his wife, and the Queen warns her son and Gómez to desist. Immediately after the “palace scene” in Act II, Pascuala is shown anxiously waiting for Antón to come home from the threshing. In Act III she is awaiting his return from Adamuz. In Act II the Prince attempts to take advantage of Antón’s absence to seduce Pascuala; in Act III Gómez does the same thing. In both cases Antón arrives home just in time to prevent the seduction. Here the parallels cease, for in Act III the Queen comes to Antón’s village, he again complains of the danger to his honor, and the play ends with the Queen’s promise to protect him and Pascuala. Just as in the parallel presentation of Pascuala’s four suitors, the parallel action of Acts II and III is clever and aesthetically pleasing but comes perilously close to being monotonous.
In spite of its flaws, *La Luna de la Sierra* should be of interest to all students of the Golden Age theater, since it represents a bold and partially successful attempt to transcend some of the more banal conventions of that highly conventional genre. Its very originality has unfortunately led some critics to misunderstand and condemn it. The play is amusing and contains passages of inspired lyricism. Although it is on the whole a rather frothy and insubstantial work, it does include some biting social criticism. However, its principal appeal lies in its charming, poetically idealized presentation of the joys of marriage. If Vélez did write the play as a tribute to his young fourth wife, as some critics have suggested, she must have found it a very suitable and moving gift.

Notes

1 *La Luna de la Sierra* is one of the most easily accessible of Vélez de Guevara’s plays with three editions in print: that of Ramón Mesonero Romanos, BAE, Vol. 45 (Madrid, 1858), pp. 177-97, with an introduction on pp. x-xvii; that of Angel Valbuena Prat (Madrid, n.d.); and that of Luisa Revuelta, Clásicos Ebro (Zaragoza, 1958), from which references will be cited in parentheses by act and verse. Unfortunately, all three editions leave much to be desired. As far as we know, the play was first published in Diego Díaz de la Carrera’s *Flor de las mejores Doce Comedias de los mayores Ingenios de España* (Madrid, 1652), eight years after the playwright’s death. The edition published by Craesbeeck in Lisbon the following year is a reprint of the Madrid edition The Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid possesses a seventeenth-century manuscript copy in the hand of the bookseller Matías Martínez (MS. 15046). The manuscript contains a significant number of passages which do not appear in the printed editions. Mesonero Romanos, unaware of the existence of the manuscript, adhered closely to the 1652 edition. Valbuena Prat’s edition is an exact reproduction of that of Mesonero Romanos. Professor Revuelta’s edition is a composite one, supplementing the text of the 1652 edition with variant readings and additions from the manuscript. Due to the scope and nature of her edition, she failed to indicate the specific passages which were taken from either the manuscript or the first edition. However, a careful comparison of her text with that of Mesonero Romanos reveals that she has interpolated 218 lines. Because she omits a few passages from the Mesonero Romanos text, she in fact lengthens the play by only 205 lines, bringing the total number of verses to 3,594. This makes the play somewhat longer than average, but this fact cannot be considered an indication that the interpolations are spurious, since three of the four existing autographs of plays by Vélez de Guevara range from 3,185 to 3,619 verses in length—see Courtney Bruerton, “Eight Plays by Vélez de Guevara,” *RPh*, 6 (1953), 248. The largest number of interpolations occurs in the play’s second act, where they total 105 lines. In contrast, a mere thirty-two lines are added to Act III. The effect of the interpolations on the play’s structure and meaning is negligible, since they introduce no new characters or significant plot developments. Three important lines (1008 and 1247-48) are omitted from Act III, but this is apparently due to a printer’s error, since Revuelta includes these lines in her enumeration. The fifth of the seven décimas in Act III lacks its two final verses, although the meaning does not seem to be defective. Revuelta does not supply the missing verses, so we must assume that they are also lacking in the manuscript.


4 Wilson, p. 142.