

Melissa Figueroa – Dissertation Abstract
Moriscos on Stage: Law, Memory, and Violence in Early Modern Spanish Theater

My dissertation examines the intricate relationship between law, violence and memory in dramatic representations of Moriscos—descendants of Muslims forced to convert to Christianity—during the seventeenth century in Spain. Whereas the previous century has a copious production of texts idealizing the Moors, there is a limited corpus of dramas about the Moriscos during the same era. The lack of treatment of Moriscos in the 16th century, as compared with the modest but real concern with them in the seventeenth, is to be understood as evidence of the influence of the state, including the legal system, on popular entertainment. I contend that the scholarship on this area has not sufficiently explored these few plays. Despite their marginal position, these plays are of crucial importance for understanding the complex social interactions between Old and New Christians, on the one hand, and problematizing the role of theater and its alignment with official state policy, on the other. Therefore, my dissertation project challenges traditional studies of Moriscos on the stage by examining their widely varying representations from a legal perspective and deriving from them deliberations concerning the law in plays written by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Gaspar de Aguilar, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and an anonymous playwright. My objective is to display examples of dramas in which Moriscos facilitate a dialogue with the law through elements of violence and memory, and, at the same time, to demonstrate how Moriscos on stage demand a more critical approach than their simple characterization as religious “enemy,” “villain,” and “other.” These plays, in effect, highlight the difference between a real external opponent that haunted the emergent Spanish singularity during the Middle Ages (Moors) and the construction of a fictitious internal one that came to being after the Conquest of Granada (Moriscos).

My aim is to provide a new point of departure for the literary historiography of the Moriscos. In an attempt to systematize the variety of works studied, this project approaches the Moriscos from a legal perspective. Due to the enormous difference between these plays and the popular *comedias de moros y cristianos*, it is not useful to employ the same approaches typically found in criticism of the idealizing plays. The selection of this particular theoretical approach corresponds to a necessity of developing a new framework in which these plays can be placed. This representation of the law comes into being in literature because fiction allows an examination of the procedures of the law that cannot be achieved through the law itself. The connection between law and literature, moreover, helps to explain the prominent role of law in these dramas. Surprisingly, religion is a rather marginal issue one in the majority of these works. Against the tendency to interpret theatrical representations of Moriscos from a religious perspective—as “enemy,” “villain,” and “other”—I argue that these productions must be analyzed from a position that regards the potential legal and political challenges that Moriscos represent for the emerging Spanish state.

In the first chapter, “From a Religious Opponent to a Legal Enemy: A Paradigm Shift of the ‘Morisco’ in *Los moriscos de Hornachos*,” I argue that the notion of the ‘Morisco’ suffers a paradigmatic shift in this work (1619). By exploring the process of surveillance and punishment of one of the most conflict-ridden communities in Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, one can see that the new Christian turns into a legal enemy. Unlike the religious antagonists who threaten the distinctive beliefs of Christians, the Moriscos pose a legal question that problematizes the unstable political and juridical structure of the Spanish monarchy. In fact, the double classification of Moriscos as New Christians and as covert Muslims complicates the jurisdiction of their offenses that can be split among inquisitorial, criminal, and civil institutions.

This chapter contextualizes the series of plays included in the dissertation and proposes a new mode of reading these dramas as the staging of legal documents—several monologues are edicts or lists of accused Moriscos as emulating the practice of Inquisitorial announcements—that requires a distinctive spectator. In the play, this approach unveils the theatricality of the legal process and the inability of a trial to uncover the trauma provoked by the Morisco in Spanish history.

In the second chapter, “Beyond the Verdict: the Limits of the Law in Juan Ruiz de Alarcón’s *Quien mal anda en mal acaba*,” I analyze the staging of the legal case of a witch Morisco doctor (1617). I contend that the play shows the limits of the law by considering residual issues not resolved at the moment of the verdict, such as the fear and anxiety provoked by the Moriscos. Thus, I propose that this drama offers the spectator a cathartic experience through which to express emotions that may not be accessible via a judicial decision. The play turns into an effective foreground of the emotional investment of the verdict’s aftermath. I suggest, moreover, a surprising correspondence between the structure of magic and the structure of the law in the play.

In the third chapter “The Return of the Religious Enemy: Legal Avoidance in Gaspar Aguilar’s *El gran Patriarca don Juan de Ribera*,” I analyze how the insistence on explaining the expulsion of the Moriscos from a religious point of view attempts to cover up the legal procedures and consequences of this political measure (1611-1616). By celebrating the banishment as one of the most important achievements of the historical figure of Juan de Ribera, the play reintroduces the concept of the religious enemy who minimizes the role of baptism and conversion. The analysis focuses on the displacement of the Moriscos from Spain and explains its elusive treatment in early modern theater. The expulsion turns into a celebratory act that eludes representation due to its debatable ideological position.

In the fourth and last chapter, “The Morisco’s Case: Law and Sovereignty in Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *Amar después de la muerte*,” I offer a reevaluation of this drama on the grounds that staging the rebellious Moriscos of the Second Revolt of the Alpujarras allows a reflection upon the execution of the law, the violence it produces, and the resistance it provokes (1633). Although critics have extensively defended the play as an example of a compassionate approach, I demonstrate that Calderón is more interested in analyzing the case of the Moriscos to deduce a political theory of power and to establish a dialogue with early modern philosopher Jean Bodin and his concept of sovereignty. Law always provokes resistance; therefore, revolt is also a possible response to the sovereign’s commands. Calderón gives a lesson to the sovereign and, by extension, to his subjects. In putting the Moriscos on stage, Calderón reflects on the inability of Moriscos to adapt to the new laws, an inability that turns them into “rebellious subjects” and “domestic enemies,” allowing Calderón to deliberate on the role of the sovereign. In a sense, the “case of the Morisco” serves as a legal precedent that helps in the resolution of new conflicts.

The examination of these plays follows an approximate chronological order. Although the scant documentation regarding their staging makes it almost impossible to date them with certainty, this series of texts comes to light during the first half of the seventeenth century, close to the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain. Therefore, it is imperative to explore these works carefully within the context of this political measure. They should be read not only as evidence of historical events but as an integral part of the process of making history. The selection of contemporary events—except in the case of Calderón’s play—aims to immediately affect the audience and confront spectators with an enemy that haunts them.