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Marta the Divine, Study Guide

To a 21st-Century Student from 17th-Century Spain: A Letter

Dear Twenty First-Century Student,

Though I have learnt much from travel in a foreign land, I did not have enough time in Spain to be enlightened about everything. I did not fail to ask trustworthy people about the things which I could not see for myself, for they alone know those who live there. Everything here, therefore, will appear as I saw it. Dealing with so many diverse matters, it will not be surprising if I tell untruths without meaning to lie and others in which I may err, not knowing that I am astray.

The year is 1615. Felipe III of Spain has ruled for 17 years now. Spain is almost entirely a Catholic country, but the people of the faith are half sinners, half saints. The buildings here in Spain are mostly built with cob and brick; only the rich use stone. The windows are small, have no class, but are barred up with iron grilles. As I walk the streets, I see that the men wear doublets and hose with tunics open at the neck. Women are required to cover as much of their bodies as possible. Their dresses are thus long, as are their sleeves.

As far as food is concerned, I learnt to travel according to the custom of the country, which is to buy what one wants to eat here and there; for it is impossible to find along the way inns which provide both board and lodging. Here is the daily procedure: as soon as you arrive at an inn you ask if there are beds; having taken care of that, you hand over the raw meat which you have brought with you, or else you search for a butcher or give some money to the innkeeper's varlet to buy it for you, as well as other necessities. But as—and this usually happens—they swindle you, the best thing is to carry your victuals in your own saddle-bags and to make provisions each day, wherever you are, for the needs of tomorrow, such as bread, eggs, and oil. It is true that on the road you sometimes meet hunters who have killed partridges and rabbits, which they will sell at a reasonable price. It is very strange that one cannot find in a tavern anything that one has not brought oneself. The reason for this is that taxes are imposed on everything that one eats and drinks.

It has been said that the soil of Spain can be counted as among the best in the world and that no other country has a better climate or greater fertility. However, I observed that, apart from the Biscay area and the regions of the Asturias and Galicia, the dryness of the climate and the starkness of the mountains leave a great part of the country uncultivated and wild. The mountains which cross Spain on every side consist of high, bare, and jagged rocks which are called sierras or penas. If they are smaller and covered with trees, the people call them monts and pasture their cattle on them. Between them are plains of very even ground. The villages are so far apart that one can sometimes ride a whole day without seeing a living soul, except perhaps an occasional shepherd tending his flocks. The greater part of Aragon is even more arid, without trees or vegetation, except for thyme and other plants on which sheep can graze. I am told that more than two hundred thousand of these sheep come from France each year.

It is true that not all of Spain has this hard and desolate aspect. A man can easily draw water from the earth or use streams to irrigate beautiful gardens in the middle of the deserts. I saw a great number of wells, which are called norias. Over them people erect wheels to which earthenware pots are tied.

The discovery of the Indies—the Americas, as you modern folk call it—and the need for emigrants to populate them continue to attract many people each year who want to settle there. They think the new country is better than the one they have left and hope to find new fortunes there. But the treasures of Peru have only given Spain a false wealth, and the conquest of the Indies should be called much more a scourge from heaven above than an act of grace. In fact, the Spaniard, the master of these treasures, has used them not only to finance vast wars in the name of Charles V and his son Philip, but also to buy from other nations the many things of which they were in need. As a result, Spain is merely a channel through which passes the gold of the Indies which will be discharged into the seas of plenty in other countries. It is strange that so many go to Spain to seek their fortune when most of the country is poor.

The moral is that the choicest plants often grow in rough places: and if Spain is dry and arid, this does not stunt her robustness and vigor. Moreover, even though Spain may be poor in produce, she has never lacked great men who have excelled both in literature and in the arts of politics and war, and men equally admirable and redoubtable to their neighbors.

This 'letter' is chiefly inspired by the accounts of three French travelers who visited Spain between 1600 and 1659: *Voyage of Barthélemy Joly in Spain, 1603-1604; Voyage d'Espagne, 1605; Journal du voyage d'Espagne, 1659.* From *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age* (Defourneaux).

About the Playwright

Tirso de Molina (1571? – 1648)



Tirso de Molina was one of Spain's great playwrights of the Golden Age. Little is known about Tirso, which has led centuries of scholars to create myths. We do, however, know that his real name was Gabriel Téllez, and that by 1600, Tirso had become a Mercedarian friar. Between 1616 and 1618, we also know that Tirso traveled on a mission to Santo Domingo. While there, he taught theology and engaged in ecclesiastical work, then returning to Spain in 1618.

But before voyaging across the Atlantic, Tirso had begun his career in the theater. Between 1606 and 1615, he lived in Toledo—the cultural center of Spain—and began writing, allying himself with Lope de Vega and the *comedia nueva*. Tirso wrote *Marta the Divine* (called *Marta la Piadosa* in Spanish) c. 1614-1615.

It is presumed that Tirso chose a pen name in an attempt to separate his religious and

theatrical lives. Not surprisingly, this double life Tirso lived would generally have been frowned upon. At the pinnacle of his writing career, Tirso was censured several times by the church for the obscenities in his plays. He was eventually exiled to a monastery in northern Castile.

Tirso's plays follow the famous dramatic form established by his contemporary Lope de Vega, with a vast subject matter breadth. Tirso's writing tends to be witty, ironic and absurd, and to be bolstered by complex characters and extreme situations. He is most famous for creating the character Don Juan (in *The Trickster of Seville*). He also seemingly had an influence on Moliere, who adapted Tirso's *El Amor Médico* (*The Love Doctor*) into his own *L'amour medecin*. Tirso's *Marta the Divine* might have also been Moliere's inspiration for *Tartuffe*.

Over the course of his writing career, Tirso wrote more than 400 plays. Less than 90 survive today, and only a handful have been translated.

Notes from the Translator, Harley Edman

A few thoughts about what attracted me to translating this play:

I'm fascinated by Marta, a woman who breaks rules, crosses lines, and uses her wits (and skills as an improv artist) to get what she wants and pull off the ultimate scam: sleep with her boyfriend behind her Dad's back. She's a lying, conniving religious hypocrite, but instead of being the bad guy, she is the protagonist we identify with and root for. That paradox, that ambiguity, fascinates me.

That's just one contradiction or paradox. The play is full of them:

On stage, the play is funny and farcical and resplendently bright, but off stage, there's a lot of darkness: murder, mourning, warfare, beheadings, looming execution.

The play is a comedy that starts with a death and ends with a death.

The play is full of patently ridiculous and absurd events but it also, in its own weird way, presents a realistic portrait of everyday life in Madrid at the time it was written.

The play revolves around a character who, because of her gender, has low status and little power but who achieves high status and considerable power.

The play has a frivolous, shimmering surface quality, but for the characters the stakes are super high and very deep: Love and sex. Life and death.

The play is profane, outrageous, and sacrilegious but it is full of sacred language, imagery, and ideas. It starts with a character talking about salvation and damnation. It ends with characters having sex in a Garden.

The play rewards the characters who are best at acting out a phony role and who are self-aware or “truthful” about their phoniness.

The play puts everyday conversation and punchy back-and-forth dialogue into heightened, stylized language.

The play depicts the social epicenter of what was the world’s most powerful empire. But it was an empire in decay: debt-ridden, over-extended militarily, and marred by conspicuous consumption by upper classes. The play exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy at the heart of this powerful empire—but without getting heavy-handed.

The play was written by a monk—who also was a famous professional playwright.

For me, the comedy, energy, and pure joy of the play come out of these contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions. This is why *Marta* is the kind of theater I love: work that explores tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions in human behavior. To me, theater is the best medium ever discovered to express and revel in these contradictions.

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UMass. He is the translator of *Marta the Divine*, and is currently working on translating a collection of 17th-century Spanish Golden Age plays by Spanish women playwrights.

Life in 17th-Century Spain



Economy

At one point in the play, Urbina says he can't travel far from home because he's "expecting the arrival of overseas goods." One of the significant characteristics of 17th century Madrid's economy was that it lived almost entirely on imported goods. In fact, Madrid had no exports. Except from its trade in foodstuffs, Madrid's actual economy was dependent upon the arts and crafts of embroidery, gilding, tailoring, etc. Imported materials became luxury goods with the embellishment of Madrid's embroideries and gold-trimmings, and in turn benefited the courtiers, the government officials, and the aristocratic society in Spain.

At Court

The goal of every courtier was to establish his status and, if possible, to overshadow all

others with his lavish way of life. At the same time, the government repeatedly tried to restrain the extravagance of the high nobility. In 1611, during the reign of Philip III, a decree put a limit on the use of 'furniture, vases, chafing-dishes, gilded and silver-plated carriages,' as well as on the use of silver and gold in arrases, canopies, and tapestries, 'and other objects of pure display which consume even the greatest of fortunes.'

On the flip side, the establishment of the court produced certain improvements. Between 1617 and 1619, under the reign of Philip III, the city of Madrid constructed the Plaza Mayor, a rectangular plaza surrounded by five stories of residential buildings with 237 balconies facing the plaza. It is located near the center of Madrid. At the time it was built, the Plaza Mayor's breadth and majestic style was not only a matter of pride for the people of Madrid but also a source of admiration for foreigners. Five-story stone and brick houses bordered its rectangular shape. The first story stood on porticos which sheltered shops and the stalls of street vendors. The other stories were flanked by wrought-iron balconies which also served as a grandstand from which the king, his courtiers, and the authorities could watch spectacles and festivities, such as *corridos* ("bullfights"), jousting, and *autos-da-fe* (public ceremonies and religious acts in which sentences of heretics were announced). For these events and more, the square had been the natural setting since it was built.

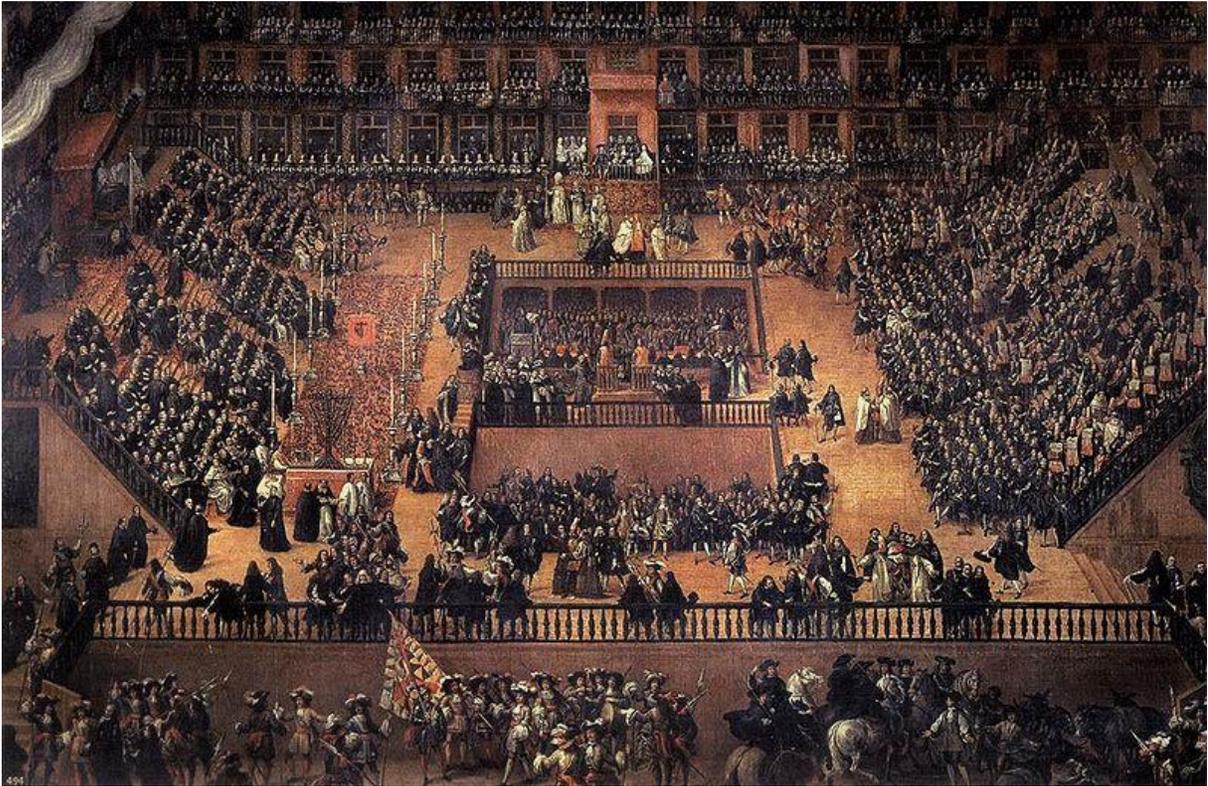
Bullfights

In *Marta the Divine*, the Ensign participates in a bullfight. At this time in Spain, there were no bull rings (*plaza de toros*); the first was built in the eighteenth century. Rather, the spectacle was generally staged in the main square of a town, the entrances of which were blocked up, and stands were erected for the public. More than strictly bullfights, these were *fiestas*. In Madrid, the Plaza Mayor offered an exceptionally fine setting and never did it appear more dazzling than on the occasion of a *corrida*. This is said of the Plaza Mayor:

'It is graced by the high society of Madrid ranged on balconies, which are hung with many-coloured drapes. Each guild had a balcony itself, surrounded by velvet and damask, in colours of their choosing and bearing the escutcheon of their own armorial

bearings. The king's balcony is decorated in gold and is covered by a canopy. His queen and her children are by his side. To the right there is another spacious balcony for the ladies of the court.'

Defourneax (133)



Auto da Fe in the Plaza Mayor

Money

Money is mentioned often in *Marta the Divine*. Currency was measured in *pesos* and *ducados* or *ducats*. Though they were distinctly different coins, *ducados* seemed to be used interchangeably with term *pesos*.

According to calculations and currency conversions, in 2009, the “eight thousand pesos” that Urbina says he’ll give to Marta to put towards her charity hospital would have been about \$435,760. The “one hundred thousand pesos” that Felipe inherits in the play would have been about \$5.4 million.

17th-century Spanish Women

Women in 17th century Spain were under the strict supervision of their elders and, most notably, their fathers. Courtships between men and women were known throughout the communities they lived in. Marriages were almost always arranged by parents. If Marta lived in the 21st century, she might tell her father she doesn't want to marry Captain Urbina, or she might run away with her boyfriend. But in Marta's time, these things would have been unacceptable.

In the play, Marta has only a couple options for getting out of the marriage with Urbina: she could tell her father she and Felipe have already slept together, which would ensure they'd be getting married (though their family honor would be destroyed) or she could take a vow of chastity, become a nun and live in a convent for the rest of her life (though then she could never marry Felipe).

But Marta does neither. Her plan is more clever.

She tells everyone that she has a "holy calling" that she has hidden from the world until now. The brilliance of Marta's plan rises to the surface when we learn that she's only pretending to be religious.

Part of what makes Marta's plan ingenious is that she marginalizes her position—she's a somewhat nun, a somewhat society-daughter. The fact that she doesn't label herself as one thing or the other strengthens Marta's position. By being neither "fish nor fowl," as Urbina says, Marta dodges the deprivations, discomforts, rules and standards of all religious roles.

Beatas

At the beginning of Act 2, Gómez is telling his friend Urbina about Marta's change. He says she has told everyone she has a "higher calling" than that of a nun. In the Spanish text, the word Tirso uses here is *beata*: a woman who takes a vow of chastity, dresses in a habit, and devotes herself to charitable deeds, without actually entering a convent. In 17th century Spain, these women wore religious habits and dedicated their lives to

God, but didn't necessarily follow the rules of any specific religious order.

There is evidence that women during this time became *beatas* for several different reasons—some had been widowed before turning to a religious life, and some lacked a dowry for marriage or the convent (both of which were expensive). Other *beatas* were exposed as “fraudulent visionaries” or “phony prophets.”

While a single women in any other position in 17th century Spain could not even stand in a room alone with a man, *beatas* could share intimate experiences with both males and females—they could laugh, shriek, cry, hug and kiss. In a way, *beatas* held a substantial amount of power, especially as women, in this time.

But Marta refuses to label her calling as that of a *beata*, and her father believes her when she says it is more than that. She frees herself from all different levels of standards and, in the end, shapes her own version of “religious.”

Spanish Golden Age Theater

Before the 16th century, popular Spanish theatre was very limited. Plays were written for private use, were performed at religious festivals, and were performed in Latin classes as students practiced their rhetoric.

Theater as a form of public entertainment did not exist until the 1540s and 1550s, when a number of men responded to the public's growing appetite for dramatic entertainment and started their own theatre companies. These companies performed with primitive equipment, on stages composed of a few wooden planks and with improvised costumes.

The growth of Spanish theater was dramatic and rapid. In the earlier years, the groups specialized in one or two plays at a time; by the 1590s, several types of drama were all competing for the favor of Spanish playgoers. These included the following: tragedies, historical drama, the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the emerging *comedia nueva*. *Commedia dell'arte*, translated as “comedy of art” or “comedy of the profession,” refers

to improvised theater. Characters, character relationships, subjects and situations were all devised before, but the action of each scene was created on the spot. *Comedia* is Spanish for “play” and does not distinguish a play as being either a comedy or a tragedy. The *comedia nueva* genre, however, specifically refers to the type of play written by Lope de Vega and his followers between about 1580 and 1680.

Comedia plays are always in three acts, are roughly 3,000 lines long, and are polymetric (containing a variety of verse meters). The range of subject matter in the genre is hugely varied, including history, legend, mythology, romance, town life, country life, the Bible, the lives of the saints, and many others. As in *commedia dell'arte*, there are some recurring characters in the *comedia* genre. Almost every play includes a pair of lovers, and a comic servant or sidekick. Other common characters include figures of authority such as fathers, husbands or brothers, or figures of subversion such as rivals, jealous suitors, enemies, and even the Devil. These characters often find themselves trapped in a social or biological role, as we see in *Marta the Divine*.

The Production

References to Listen For

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza: Two characters in Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* (published 1604). The word “tilting” is a term which derives from jousting. In the novel, the phrase “tilting at windmills” is used in the context of fighting injustice through chivalry. The two men encounter a field of windmills and imagine them as giants with windmill blades for arms.

Don Fernando: The characters, even close family members, routinely address each other as “Don” or “Doña” as a sign of social status.

General Fajardo: Famous Spanish admiral who led the attack on Mamora in August of 1614.

Chequeens: Means “coins” and is used interchangeably with “pesos.”

Toledo bridge: The bridge over the Manzanares River, on the way out of Madrid, leading to the Illescas-Toledo-Seville road.

Ribbons: During courtship, a girl would give the male she was courting a ribbon from her dress.

Duke of Lerma: Spanish statesman and *el valido* (the favorite) and unofficial prime minister to Felipe III of Spain from 1598 to 1618.

The Characters

[SLIDESHOW HERE]

Further Reading

Information from this study guide comes from the following:

Print

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Corrals <http://www.comedias.org/resources/thtrvu.html>