Fuenteovejuna

By Lope de Vega
Adapted by Adrian Mitchell
Directed by Keith Byron Kirk
Dramaturgy by Rob Kimbro and Chelsea Taylor
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Lope De Vega, whose plays dominated the stages of Madrid while Shakespeare was the toast of London, wrote *Fuenteovejuna*, one of his most famous plays, to glorify the past of a recently unified Spain. This play tells the story of a lascivious nobleman’s pursuit of Laurencia, a young peasant woman, and the brutal aftermath that follows. Lope’s political drama provides a fascinating exploration of gender and power in the formation of Spain.

*Fuenteovejuna*, based on historical events, provides Lope with an opportunity to revisit a period in Spanish history when two women were fighting for the throne of Castile – Isabel and Juana. The victory of Isabel and her husband Fernando of Aragon began a golden age that saw the conquest of Grenada, the exploration of the New World, and the creation of the nation of Spain. As a soldier for King Philip II of Spain, Lope fought against Queen Elizabeth of England, the most powerful woman in the world, sailing in (and surviving) the doomed Spanish Armada. In our production, Lope’s play is presented by another fascinating character of the age – the Goddess Folly, as created by the scholar Desiderius Erasmus. *Fuenteovejuna* shows the immense power women, such as Laurencia, Isabel, and Folly, can achieve in a man’s world. On the following pages, you will find more in depth information about Lope, Erasmus, Isabel and Fernando, and the origins of modern Spain.
Timeline

April 22, 1451 Isabella born to John II of Castile and Isabella of Aragon. She has an older brother, the 26-year old Enrique.

March 10, 1452 Ferdinand II of Aragon born to John II of Aragon and Juana Enriquez.

November 17, 1453 Alfonso, Prince of Asturias born.

July 20, 1454 John II of Castile dies.

July 21, 1454 Enrique (Henry) IV crowned King of Castile.

1465 Spanish nobles, unhappy with the rule of Enrique, rebel in an effort to put Alfonso on the throne.

1466 Desiderius Erasmus is born in the Netherlands.

August 20, 1467 Second Battle of Olmedo between Enrique (Henry) IV and Alfonso for the crown. The battle is indecisive and the struggle continues.

July 5, 1468 Alfonso, Prince of Asturias, dies of sickness, possibly the plague. His nobles shift their support to his sister Isabella.

September 19, 1468 Enrique (Henry) IV names Isabella his heir and successor.
October 18, 1469 Isabella and Ferdinand marry, against the wishes of Enrique.

October 2, 1470 Isabella of Aragon, daughter to Isabella and Ferdinand, is born.

December 11, 1474 Enrique (Henry) IV dies.

December 13, 1474 Isabella’s coronation as Queen of Castile. Her niece Juana, now married to the King of Portugal, claims the throne as well. This leads to the Castilian War of Succession and the events of the play.

January 15, 1475 Ferdinand’s coronation as King of Leon.

1476 The peasant rebellion in Fuente Obejuna.

June 30, 1478 John, Prince of Asturias born to Isabella and Ferdinand.

November 1, 1478 Isabella and Ferdinand begin the Spanish Inquisition.

1479 The Treaty of Alcâovas ends Juana’s claim to the throne of Castile and Isabella and Ferdinand’s reign is secure.

November 6, 1479 Joanna I is born to Isabella and Ferdinand.

June 29, 1482 Maria of Aragon is born to Isabella and Ferdinand.

December 16, 1485 Catherine of Aragon is born to Isabella and Ferdinand.
November 25, 1491 Treaty of Granada and the surrender of the Moors completes the Reconquista.

August 3, 1492 Christopher Columbus begins his first voyage to the New World funded by Isabella and (reluctantly) Ferdinand.

November 26, 1504 Isabella dies.

1509 Erasmus writes *In Praise of Folly*.

January 23, 1516 Ferdinand dies.

November 25, 1562 Lope de Vega is born.

1612-1614 Lope de Vega writes *Fuenteovejuna*.

1619 *Fuenteovejuna* is published in Madrid as part of *Docena Parte de las Comedias de Lope de Vega Carpio* (Volume 12 of the Collected plays of Lope de Vega Carpio).
Family Tree

The Kingdom of Aragon

Juana Enriquez  
1425-1468  
Mother of Ferdinand II

John II of Aragon  
1398-1479  
Father of Ferdinand II

Maria of Aragon  
1396-1445  
Mother of Enrique IV

John II of Castile  
1405-1454  
Father of Enrique, Isabella, and Alfonso

Isabella of Portugal  
1428-1496  
Mother of Isabella and Alfonso

The Kingdom of Castile

Ferdinand II  
1452-1516  
Succeeds John II of Aragon as King

Enrique (Henry) IV  
1425-1474  
Succeeds John II of Castile as King

Isabella I  
1451-1504  
Succeeds Enrique as Queen of Castile

Alfonso  
1433-1468  
Challenges Enrique for throne

Joanna la Beltraneja  
1462-1530  
Daughter of Enrique. Challenges Isabella I for throne.
United Kingdoms

Ferdinand II
1452-1516
Marries Isabella I in 1469. Becomes King of Aragon by succession. Becomes King of Castile and Leon through marriage.

Isabella I
1451-1504
Marries Ferdinand II in 1469. Becomes Queen of Castile and Leon by succession. Becomes Queen of Aragon through marriage.

Isabella of Aragon
1470-1498
First daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. Marries Manuel I to become Queen of Portugal. Successor as Queen of Castile, but dies before taking the throne.

John, Prince of Asturias
1478-1497
Only son of Ferdinand and Isabella to survive into adulthood. Successor as King of Castile, but dies before taking the throne.

Joanna of Castile
1479-1555
Eldest surviving daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. Succeeds as Queen of Castile and Aragon; however, she is later deemed "mad." Ferdinand and her husband Philip act as regent for her.

Maria of Aragon
1482-1517
Daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. After Isabella of Aragon's death, Maria marries Manuel I, her sister's former husband, to become Queen of Portugal.

Catherine of Aragon
1485-1536
Youngest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. Married Henry VIII of England and became Queen of England. Marriage is ruled illegal, and she is replaced by Anne Boleyn. Mother of Mary I of England.
Isabella and Ferdinand: Co-Monarchs

Ferdinand and Isabella. Their marriage turned the separate Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon into a united “Spain” that could take back Grenada from the Muslims, send Columbus to the New World, and become the most powerful nation in the Western Hemisphere. That’s the simple version of the story. But the reality is somewhat more complicated.

Spain wasn’t truly united as a single kingdom until the time of Ferdinand and Isabella’s grandson, King Charles I. The domain of Isabella and Ferdinand was a collection of separate realms: Castile and Leon, ruled by Isabella; and Aragon and Sicily, ruled by Ferdinand. Each had some authority in the other's kingdoms, the exact nature and limits of which were governed by specific agreements. It was an intricately balanced system and it is remarkable that these two royals, who were only teenagers when they wed, managed not only to avoid chaos but to enjoy incredible success.

Isabella’s Castile was the larger and more powerful of the two kingdoms, but Isabella’s road to the crown was rocky. She was second in line to the throne of her older brother, King Enrique IV. Enrique was deeply unpopular with the Spanish nobility, who resented his attempts to assert authority over them and who was also seen as unwilling to vigorously pursue war with the Muslim kingdom of Granada. These dissidents maneuvered to put her younger brother Alfonso on the throne in his place. When Alfonso died, the
rebels transferred their support to Isabella. There was precedent for a ruling Castilian Queen, but it had not happened in over three hundred years. Isabella walked a careful line. She did not directly challenge her brother, but successfully pressured him into naming her his heir (over the claim of his daughter Juana). She then refused to let Enrique choose her husband. His preferred suitor, Pedro Girón, (the father of the young Grand Master of Calatrava in Fuenteovejuna) may even have been poisoned by Isabella’s supporters. Instead, she defiantly married Ferdinand of Aragon and Sicily.

It seems clear looking back that Isabella was determined to be a Queen Regnant - a ruling Queen - and not simply a Queen Consort. Achieving this was a daunting task. A century later, Elizabeth I of England would manage it only by avoiding marriage and ruling as the Virgin Queen. That path was not an option for Isabella, whose subjects demanded a monarch that could take the battlefield against the Muslims to the south. In many ways, Ferdinand was a perfect match for the ambitious Princess. He had a reputation as a capable military commander. He was already King of Sicily and stood to inherit the throne of Aragon as well, so he brought considerable resources to the match. But at the same time, his position did not overshadow hers. He was younger than Isabella by a year. And his mother had often acted as regent and proxy for his father, the King of Aragon. He might well have been amenable to a wife who was a true partner in monarchy.

If that was Isabella’s hope, history shows that it was a successful one. When Enrique died and his daughter Juana, now married to the King of Portugal, pressed her claim to Castile, Ferdinand’s military leadership proved critical to establishing Isabella as Queen. (This War of Castilian Succession is the conflict depicted in Fuenteovejuna). Isabella, in turn, brought her political acumen and considerable learning to the union. She, unlike Ferdinand, was literate in Latin, the language of scholarship and diplomacy across Europe. And she could be aggressive in asserting her rights. The marriage contract gave Isabella lordship over the city of Syracuse in Sicily. When Ferdinand’s father attempted to remove her appointed governor, she successfully forced him to back down and reinstate him.
The terms of Isabella and Ferdinand’s co-rule were laid out in documents signed at the time of the marriage and at her ascension. She determined where they would travel and live within Castile. He would have command of military forces. She had an unusually large degree of control over their children. Appointments and many policies would have to be determined and signed jointly. There was ambiguity in these documents. The use of the royal “we” made it arguable who exactly was agreeing to what sometimes. The co-monarchs could have struggled for the upper hand. But the historical record shows little evidence of that. Isabella and Ferdinand presented a united front and a narrative of partnership and mutual affection – even love. This became part of their legend.

Still, their kingdoms remained technically separate and many policies associated with their reign are most accurately credited to Isabella alone. She reformed the judicial system of Castile in ways that constrained the power of local nobles. (One might interpret the plot of Fuenteovejuna, which takes place in Castile, as an illustration of this). It was Isabella and Castile who sponsored the voyages of Christopher Columbus and it was Isabella who expelled Jews and Muslims from Castile while they were still tolerated in Aragon. To a modern sensibility, it is a mixed record. But it is undeniably an impressive one. There is no doubt that Isabella was a Queen Regnant – a ruler, not simply a consort.
Lope de Vega:  
The Phoenix of Wits

The Beginnings of Genius

Born November 25, 1562 to Felix De Vega and Francisca Fernandez Florez in Madrid, Lope Felix de Vega Carpio started life with humble beginnings. The son of an embroiderer, Lope de Vega surprised his family and relations by showing early signs of genius. His friend and later biographer Perez de Montalban claimed (and possibly exaggerated) that he was reading Latin and Spanish at the age of five, translating Latin verse at the age of ten, and writing his first plays by the age of twelve. His young talent brought him to the attention of several mentors who would become responsible for Lope de Vega's education. He first began studying under Spanish poet and musician Vicente Espinel but moved to the Jesuit Colegio Imperial at the age of fourteen. The Bishop of Avila took him under his protection and sent Lope de Vega to University of Alcala in hopes that he would join the priesthood. Despite his early social and educational advancements, Lope de Vega dropped out of school several times, once to join a military expedition to Portugal and another time due to falling in love. After leaving school, de Vega tried his hand at several careers, including secretary to aristocrats and sailor in the Spanish Navy.
Love and Exile

After his time in the Navy, Lope de Vega returned to Madrid to start his playwriting career. He found his muse Elena Osorio, daughter of a leading theater director and wife to Cristobal Calderon, and began a five year long affair. Eventually, Elena (separated from her husband) left de Vega for another suitor, and he did not take the rejection well. De Vega’s attacks towards Elena and her family were vicious enough to land him in jail for libel and earn him eight years of banishment from court and two years of exile from Castile.

Not completely heartbroken, de Vega took young Isabel de Alderete y Urbina, sixteen year old daughter of court painter Diego de Urbina, with him into exile in 1588. After being forced to marry Isabel on May 10, 1588, de Vega rejoined the Spanish Navy and deployed on May 29, 1588. He sailed with the Spanish Armada against England, and after suffering vicious defeat, he returned on the San Juan, one of the few spared ships, from his expedition unharmed, possibly to the disappointment of his in-laws. By the end of 1588, de Vega settled in Valencia for the rest of his banishment from Castile. Until 1590, de Vega concentrated on perfecting his dramatic formula by joining the Academia de Los Nocturnos, a collection of Spanish dramatists and writers. During this time, he perfected imbroglio, the technique of weaving several plots together in a single play and violating the unity of action. From 1590 to 1595, de Vega moved to Toledo to serve aristocrats, such as Francisco de Ribera Barroso and Antonio Alvarez de Toledo, as well as join the court of the House of Alba. In the fall of 1594, Isabel died due to complications in childbirth, leaving de Vega completely free to return to Madrid at the end of the his exile in 1595.
Spain’s Most Prolific Playwright and Poet

After returning to Madrid as a widower, de Vega seemed to immerse himself in new love affairs, scandals, and trysts, including a lawsuit brought on by Antonia Trillo de Armenta, four children birthed by Micaela de Lujan, and a new marriage to Juana de Guardo. The first decade of the 17th century was incredibly productive for de Vega both romantically and artistically. In 1602, de Vega published 200 sonnets in his first book of poetry, and by 1604, he had written 230 three-act comedies. His personal records claim the number of comedies rising to 480 by 1609 and eventually to 1,500 by 1632. De Vega boasted he wrote a number of his comedies in 24 hours, or less. The second decade of the 17th century brought tragedy with the death of his son Carlos Felix as well as the death of his second wife Juana in 1612. By 1614, de Vega finally joined the priesthood and published a book of religious poems; however, he continued to take lovers for the rest of his life, most notably Marta de Nevares from 1616 to 1632. In 1634, de Vega published a third book of sonnets entitled Rimas Humanas y Divinias del Licenciado, which is now known as his poetic masterpiece. On August 27, 1635, Lope de Vega died in his bed of Scarlet Fever, leaving behind roughly 3,000 sonnets, 3 novels, 4 novellas, 9 epic poems, and around 500 plays.

Even though he produced a great amount of art in a short amount of time, Lope De Vega is still considered one of Spain’s greatest writers and poets. Nicknamed “The Phoenix of Wits” or “The Phoenix of Spain” by his contemporaries, de Vega is one of the lucky artists who experienced appreciation and success both during his life and after his death. Drawing on the various popular trends of his time, de Vega morphed his dramatic style and structure to fit the tastes of his audience. Influenced by Spanish history (as with Fuenteovejuna), the Bible, mythology, romantic experience, and religion, de Vega introduced a new array of topics and more complicated plots to the Spanish stage and changed Spain’s Golden Age.
Lope de Vega’s Advice to Playwrights

The author of literally hundreds of plays, Lope de Vega could certainly be considered an expert on playwriting. In 1609, he shared his expertise in a 389-line verse essay called *Arte Nueve de Hacer Comedias en Este Tiempo* – in English, *New Art of Writing Plays in This Time*.

According to the author, there was insistent demand for such a playwriting manual from the “learned gentlemen” of his day:

They’ve told me, learned gentlemen, who are
the cream of Spain’s intelligentsia  
(lines 1-2)

... to write a set of rules for plays that’s based
on what will satisfy our public’s taste.  
(9-10)

Lope is clear. The goal is to make the people happy. And he’s demonstrated that he can do that with over a decade of success on the stage.

But he has a problem – in 1498 Aristotle’s *Poetics* was rediscovered. By the time Lope is writing, the learned men of Europe had been arguing about the ideas in this ancient Greek text for over a century and had turned them into a rigid set of rules.

Unfortunately, Lope’s been breaking them:

but what in this regard must give me pause
is having written them without such laws.  
(15-16)
But it’s not really his fault. He learned the rules as a child, he writes, and it isn’t ignorance that makes him break them:

Rather, in fact it was because I found the plays performed in Spain around that time were written not as those who’d led the way considered that they should be everywhere, but scribbled by a host of barbarous men who taught the common folk their own crude ways, and so they flooded in on such a scale that any playwright now who keeps the rules dies without fame or recompense, (22-30)

That doesn’t mean that he agrees with all of the rules, though. For example, the rules say that tragedy is to deal with the historical acts of kings and other great persons, while comedy tells fictions about common men and the two are to be kept strictly separate. Lope will have none of that:

But since we stray so far now from the rules, and here in Spain commit crime after crime, let men of learning hold their tongue this time.

To mix the tragic and the comic modes, makes one part serious, one ridiculous; and that variety gives great delight.

Nature provides a pattern clear to see; its beauty lies in such variety. (177-180)

Lope shows more respect for other rules. He approves of Unity of Action:

One needs to bear in mind the matter covered should have a single action, and ensure the plot-line is in no way episodic; I mean, does not involve extraneous things that deviate from the essential aim, and that no part of it could be removed without the whole play crashing to the ground. (181-187)
But Unity of Time simply won't do for an early modern Spanish audience:

All need not happen in a single day, though Aristotle counselled that it should, (188-189)

... I find the fiery temper of a Spaniard who sits to see a play will not be calmed unless he's told a story, in two hours, from Genesis right up to Judgment Day; and I say, if the aim is to delight, whatever serves that purpose must be right. (205-210)

With most of the classical rules disposed of, he has practical advice. Suspense is important:

... don't allow the outcome to be obvious until you reach the very final scene, for once the audience guess the end they turn their faces to the exit, and their backs on actors who've been three hours on the go; how all concludes is all they want to know. (234-239)

Suit your language to your characters and the situation. Take care with female characters:

Don't let your ladies be unladylike, and if they should disguise themselves as men, since such cross-dressing never fails to please, ensure they do in ways that may be excused. (280-283)

And don't neglect to end your scenes with a button:

Conclude your episodes of action neatly with aphoristic wit, with well-turned verses, in order that when actors leave the stage the audience isn't left dissatisfied. (294-297)
Clever language is a plus:

Ambiguous speech and devious double-entendre  
have always gone down well with common folk,  
for each spectator fancies he alone  
is smart enough to grasp what's being said. (323-326)

Affairs of honor make good plots and people love a hero. Don't get carried away:

ninety-six pages is the proper length  
to suit the time and audiences' patience. (339-340)

And be careful with satire:

Mock without malice; if you put to shame,  
don't hope to win applause or merit fame. (345-346)

Having given his advice, Lope admits that it won't please everyone.

... Italy and France  
will label me an arrant ignoramus.  
What can I do though, if the plays I've written,  
including one I finished just this week,  
add up to -let me count- four eighty-three? (365-369)  
...  
In fine, I stand by what I've done, and know  
that though they might, if different, have been better,  
they'd not have proved as pleasing as they did;  
for sometimes what is anything but right  
will for that very reason give delight. (372-376)
And in closing, he reminds us that musty academic arguments aren't really the point:

Don't hold debates about the ancient rules;
go to the play, and pay close heed -that way,
you'll find it tell you all there is to say.  

(397-389)
Erasmus: In Praise of Folly

Our production script of Fuenteovejuna contains framing material adapted from In Praise of Folly, by Desiderius Erasmus. Who was Erasmus and what is this work?

Desiderius Erasmus, born in 1466 (give or take) in Holland, was the best-selling author in Europe in the early 16th century and the first great scholar of the printing press era. His greatest accomplishment was a combined Latin and Greek edition of the New Testament that became the basis of many translations — including the King James Bible in English. The work he’s best known for today, though, is In Praise of Folly, in which the Goddess Folly sings her own praises.

According to legend, Lope de Vega could read Latin from the age of 5. If so, he would certainly have been familiar with the prolific Erasmus, who was a near-contemporary of Isabella and Ferdinand. The Dutch scholar would have been a child of about ten at the time in which Fuenteovejuna is set, but already preparing for his academic career. Erasmus, who wrote only in Latin and Greek, lived his life in the academic environment that Leonelo (and Lope) mock in the first scene of Act II. But it’s unlikely that Erasmus’s feelings would have been hurt. The same sort of critical, but light-hearted sensibility can be seen in the early part of Folly. The Latin title itself, Moriae Encomium, is a play on words, as it can be translated either as the praise of Folly or the praise of “More," as in Sir Thomas More, English scholar and statesman and friend of Erasmus, to whom the work is dedicated.
In the essay itself, Folly argues that her very presence brings joy and restores youth. Further, she argues that she is everywhere and that it is her spirit that allows men to live together in spite of their faults. The work becomes less light-hearted and more scathing in its middle section, which attacks fools of all sorts – lawyers and princes and priests. Finally, it concludes by praising the “folly” of true Christians, whose disregard for the earthly realm looks like foolishness, but is truly wisdom.

Unfortunately, a spirit of lighthearted criticism became harder and harder to sustain late in Erasmus’s career as Luther’s attacks on the church’s hierarchy and doctrines turned into the Protestant Reformation. Erasmus was sympathetic to Luther’s criticisms of the Church, but was unwilling to break away, preferring to work for reform from within. He tried to reconcile the two sides, but was ultimately unsuccessful and finally repudiated an important tenet of Luther’s theology in his Discourse on Free Will. However, conservative elements in the Church continued to feel that Erasmus’s writings had paved the way for Luther’s schism and he ended his career caught between the two camps.