

# Shakespeare's Lost Play

In Search of *Cardenio*

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'The travellers [Don Quixote and Sancho Pança] see a ragged man [Cardenio] leaping among the rocks', from Gustave Doré's *Illustrations for Don Quixote* (1863)

## Introduction 'Built upon a Novel in Don Quixot'

'Fantastico!' cried the King of Spain when I told him that Shakespeare may have written a play based on Cervantes. England's greatest writer inspired by Spain's greatest: an irresistible combination. *Cardenio* is named after a character in Cervantes' great novel, *Don Quixote*. If only the play hadn't been lost for the last four centuries...

In 2006, the Royal Shakespeare Company was awarded one of Spain's highest honours, a 'Bellas Artes' gold medal for excellence in the fine arts. I was dispatched to receive it from His Majesty, King Juan Carlos. The RSC had toured a number of productions to Spain in recent years: a whole season of Spanish Golden Age plays (supervised by Laurence Boswell) which played in the Teatro Español in Madrid in 2004, and Mike Poulton's adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* which I had co-directed earlier that year. The medal ceremony was to be held in the magnificent mosque in Cordoba, La Mezquita.

The train from Madrid climbed from the flat arid planes south of the capital into the steep impenetrable hill country of Andalucía. I had a copy of *Don Quixote* on my knee, and

realised that this desolate terrain was the very wilderness into which Cardenio escapes in his madness, the wild, unpeopled mountains of the Sierra Morena. This was the place where the whole story starts. Here were the crags among which Don Quixote and Sancho Pança first find a dead mule with a curious letter in its saddlebag. Here where they encounter the hero of our story, leaping from rock to rock, his face 'toasted by the sun'. Here in a hollow cork tree, the madman made his shelter. And here the wronged Dorotea, dressed as a herdsboy, sang her lament as she bathed her feet in a mountain stream.

The Sierra Morena (literally, 'dark-haired mountain') forms a natural border between Andalucía and the rest of the country. In medieval times it was the frontier between Muslim and Christian Spain.

On the first evening in Cordoba, a reception for all the 'medallistas' took place in a huge seventeenth-century mansion in the Santa Marina district, called the Palacio de Viana, a grandly aristocratic edifice with endless arcaded patios and courtyards leading one into another, each more lush and beautiful than the next, heavy with the scent of jasmine and oleander, twinkling with lanterns, and loud with the chatter of fountains and pools: a townhouse worthy of Luscinda's wealthy father, Don Bernardo.

My twin sister Ruth has joined me for the trip, with the RSC producer, the fastidiously stylish Jeremy Adams.

Emilio Hernandez, then director of the Almagro Festival (a classical theatre festival in La Mancha), is there to welcome us. Emilio has been instrumental in inviting the RSC to Spain, and is a key player in inspiring closer connections between our two countries. *Cardenio*, therefore, is for him the perfect project to further that relationship.

Over dinner, in one of the larger courtyards, he points out some of the famous celebrity guests who are to be honoured with a Bellas Artes medal the following day. An elderly gentleman, with a look of Salvador Dalí, with waxed moustache and oiled hair, who is wearing a suit jacket and a tangerine sarong, turns out to be a famous fashion designer. The

fiercely handsome señor who holds his square-cut jaw high in the air is, inevitably, a great toreador; and the lady in the pink crape with a sweeping black shawl is, Emilio tells us, one of Spain's great flamenco dancers. And there is an historian, a philosopher, a pop star and a film director among others.

Emilio is Cuban by birth and makes up for his shortness of stature by the size of his gestures. He ignores his plate of *lubina* in tomato and capers, and concentrates on mapping out an entire future co-production of *Cardenio* while I try and finish my dinner. Suddenly with an emphatic sweep of his hand, he tips his entire glass of *vino tinto* over me. I wish I hadn't worn a white jacket: I look as if I have been shot.

The following morning we all arrive by coach at La Mezquita, the great mosque of Cordoba. The huge golden walls are studded with great Arabic arches, tiles and stone fretwork. Inside, a forest of columns support double tiers of horseshoe arches in stone and ochre brick. It is a reminder of how the city was once a world centre of knowledge, with enormous libraries and colleges where the study of mathematics, science and architecture flourished.

The mosque has stood for over a millennium. And yet for more than half that time, it has had a Catholic cathedral imposed at its very heart. Monsignors in their black cassocks and pink sashes are sweeping about. Although one of the speeches during the ceremony refers to the Mezquita representing a fusion of East and West, I can't help feeling rather that it bears witness to the fanatical attempts of Christian Europe to dominate its Islamic neighbours.

As I sit on the platform with the rest, awaiting the arrival of the King and Queen, I look out across the baroque vandalism of the cathedral recalling the words of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who is reputed to have said on viewing the church, 'You have built here what you or anyone might have built anywhere else, but you have destroyed what was unique in the world.'

A gentleman seated next to me, representing the Hispanic Society of America, points out the late arrival of a very

distinguished elderly lady with a shock of white hair tinged with fuchsia. 'Juan Carlos and his wife may be the King and Queen of Spain, but that,' he whispers, 'that is the Duchess of Alba.' Apparently the Duchess is the grandest grandee in Spain. Her family stretches back to the Hapsburg dynasty, making the present Bourbon rulers look like newcomers. 'She has more titles than Juan Carlos, and he's got a few. He's still King of all the Sicilies,' he says, 'and King of Jerusalem, which is a claim I'd like to see him try asserting in Israel.'

Then suddenly we are all on our feet and the Royal party arrive.

After the award ceremony is over, we process out to have our photograph taken with the King among the orange trees in the Patio de los Naranjos. Chris Hickey, the head of the British Council here, steers me expertly to have my few words with the King, explaining the importance of the award as we go. It is a sign that Spain regards the RSC very highly and would like to emulate us by establishing their own properly funded classical theatre company. He insists I tell the King about *Cardenio*. I am delighted with the King's reaction to the very idea that Cervantes and Shakespeare are somehow linked through this story.

Later on in a little bodega in the Calle Linares, over some bull's tail stew and a glass of Pedro Ximénez, we try and work out how we can make *Cardenio* happen with some sort of Spanish connection. There is so much goodwill here to make such a project work. I now have the inspiration I need to pursue a production. We could even have a Royal endorsement on the poster: 'Fantastico! – *The King of Spain*.'

'But I thought you said this play has been lost for four centuries,' Jeremy Adams reminds me.

'A-ha,' I grin, 'but I think I know where it is.'

Five years before our trip to Spain, I had received a parcel from Jarndyce Booksellers in Great Russell Street, London. I was inordinately excited. When I opened it up, a slim volume with a plain blue-grey paper cover slipped into my hand. It looked like an old school exercise book. On the

inside cover someone had scribbled in pencil 'THEOBALD. Based on Shakespeare? £65.' Opposite on the title page, I read the words:

'DOUBLE FALSHOOD  
OR, THE  
DISTREST LOVERS.  
[Price One Shilling and Sixpence.]

The next page elaborated further:

A PLAY  
As it is now Acted at  
The Theatre Royal in COVENT-GARDEN  
Written ORIGINALLY  
By W. SHAKESPEARE;  
And REVISED  
By Mr. THEOBALD

There followed a quotation from Book Nine of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

— *Quod optanti Divum promittere nemo  
Auderet, volvenda Dies, en! attulit ultro.*

['What the Gods themselves could not promise to  
accomplish, revolving Time has brought to light.']

This was the third edition of the play, printed in London for 'T. Lowndes, in Fleet Street'. The roman numerals then spelled out the date: 1767.

It was the closest I was ever going to get to owning a Shakespeare quarto. I have been obsessed with this play for a number of years. Somehow, now that I possess my own copy, in a genuine eighteenth-century edition, I feel a little closer to understanding its extraordinary story.

What I held in my hand was what the author, Lewis Theobald (pronounced 'Tibbald'), claimed was a lost play by William Shakespeare. The quotation from *The Aeneid* which he chose to put on the frontispiece acknowledges just how unlikely that claim seemed to be. It was nothing short of miraculous.

To lend weight to his claim, on the very opening page of the script, Theobald printed the licence he had acquired from the King himself to publish his play. This Royal decree outlines Theobald's petition to the new monarch:

He having, at a considerable Expence, Purchased the Manuscript Copy of an Original Play of WILLIAM SHAKSPEARE... and with great Labour and Pains, Revised and Adapted the same to the Stage... (we) grant him Our Royal Privilege and Licence for the sole Printing and Publishing thereof for the Term of Fourteen Years... Given at Our Court at St James, the Fifth Day of December, 1727, in the First Year of Our Reign.

Just under three weeks later *Double Falshood* opened at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane and ran for ten consecutive performances, a successful run in those days. Theobald himself writes of 'the Universal Applause which crowns this Orphan Play'. My third edition, printed forty years later, demonstrates that the play was thought worthy enough (or had sufficient curiosity value) to warrant a revival, this time at Covent Garden.

The question that has been debated by scholars for many years now is simply this: did Lewis Theobald really have the manuscript copy of a Shakespeare play, or was *Double Falshood* an elaborate forgery? And if he did have such a rarity, what happened to the original manuscript?

Theobald writes a rather defensive editor's preface to his edition, in which several things caught my attention, requiring further exploration. The tale, he writes, is 'built upon a Novel in Don Quixot'. In tracing the play's lineage he says:

There is a Tradition (which I have from a Noble Person, who supply'd me with One of my Copies) that this Play was given by our Author, as a Present of Value, to a Natural Daughter of his, for whose Sake he wrote it, in the Time of his Retirement from the Stage.

One of the manuscript copies he has is 'of above Sixty Years Standing, in the Hand-writing of Mr Downes, the famous

Old Prompter' and used to belong to the great Restoration actor Thomas Betterton, 'and by Him design'd to have been usher'd into the World'.

Theobald also provides some intriguing details about the circumstances of that first production at Drury Lane Theatre, and his dealings with the management, which have an all-too-familiar ring about them.

So it was that in 2001 I joined the fray and began to consider Theobald's adaptation from a theatrical standpoint. I started to delve into the play's fascinating history, with the result a decade later that we mounted a production at Stratford for the Royal Shakespeare Company. We described it as: 'Shakespeare's "Lost Play" Re-imagined'. This is an account of that often surprising journey of exploration, and of my growing admiration for the literary chancer, and bardolator *par excellence*, Lewis Theobald.