

Collection of Satirical Poems (in Spanish) by Manuel de León Marchante (1670)

[Collection of poems by Manuel de León Marchante, a 17th-century Spanish poet, in a single booklet of 16 pages, 15 x 24 cm, numbered, thread-sewn, text in two columns of 32 verses, printed in Madrid probably shortly after June 1670. The paper is in good condition, the text is complete, the pagination and claims are visible. The booklet includes a drawing in pencil, and a signature or initial letter of a surname in ink.]

The satirical poems in this booklet are collected in a single quick-sale booklet, presumably published in Madrid shortly after 1670 clearly for commercial purposes (**Image 1**). The printer left no record of identity, nor has it been reasonably surmised to date. Their readers must have been impoverished gentry, students, clergymen, soldiers, and so on—all people who might have been in contact with the common folk, to whom these humorous verses were surely read aloud in homes, taverns, shacks, convents, and similar places. The poems gathered in this booklet are of poor literary quality, written in coarse, vulgar language, rife with allusions to farts, diarrhea, drunkenness, brawls, swindles, and deceptions, while denigrating people, animals, and everyday objects for their low quality, meanness, cowardice, and vileness. The poems are written—in the style of popular verse during the Spanish Golden Age—in octosyllables, always arranged in *quintillas* (five verses, generally structured in the forms abaab, ababa, abbab, aabab, aabba) and *redondillas* (four verses, with an abba structure).

But what this document lacks in literary value, it makes up for in historical and social significance, as it allows us to understand how the common people entertained themselves by then, and how such entertainment was recorded, at a time when literacy in Europe was growing at an accelerated rate. The themes to which the eight poems that make up this *in-quarto* booklet are dedicated are in themselves eloquent:

- A fight between inhabitants of Meco and their neighbors from Alcalá de Henares, on the occasion of a bullfight held in Meco on June 7, 1670
- A journey made by a Commissioner of the Holy Office (León Marchante himself) on a scrawny mule, which he poetically denigrates
- A nasty description of the effects of a bowel purge on a certain person
- A leech therapy session to suck the menstrual blood of a refined lady, in which very vulgar scatological details are mentioned.
- A dress of very poor quality received by the author of the poem as a gift from a marquis
- A swindler doctor who asked a farmer for a pig and then refused to pay

- A fraudulent notary, only interested in overcharging his clients
- A drunk man in a trance
- A student who ran away from an inn, after a long stay there, without paying

The author of these verses, Manuel de León Marchante (1631-1680), was a Spanish priest, also official of the Inquisition, and a typical figure of the Spanish Counter-Reformation culture (**Image 2**). Educated at the Colegio de los Manriques of the University of Alcalá de Henares (now the Universidad Complutense de Madrid), he had a particular fondness for literature. Thus, when he had time to spare from his duties as a priest and theologian, he composed dozens of poems, mainly satirical, and *entremeses*—short, burlesque plays performed between the more serious *autos sacramentales* (religious plays). His prolific work has been lost, in part, as a result of his own will, since, before dying, León Marchante ordered many of his writings to be burned. Much of it, however, has survived and was published together as *Obras poéticas posthumas* in 1722 and 1733 by his pupils.

Among the poems included in this booklet, one stands out that Francisco de Quevedo particularly liked, namely, *Relación de la fiesta de toros, que corrió la villa de Meco a siete de Junio en el año de 1670, y la guerra que tuvo con los de Alcalá de Henares. Dase noticia de la canela, y azucarpiedra, que repartió, y la grande cosecha, que hubo de palos y pedradas* (*Account of the bullfight that took place in the town of Meco on the seventh of June in the year 1670, and the war it followed between the Meco people and the visitants from Alcalá de Henares. News is given of the cinnamon and rock sugar that was distributed that day, and the great harvest of blows and stones during the fight*). This *relación* (a word that means *narration* or *description*) is attributed to “un Poeta, hijo de la Piedra” (“a Poet, son of the Stone”), the name by which foundling children were known then in Spain—usually abandoned, according to custom, next to a stone in front of cathedrals, which was dedicated to that purpose. León Marchante did not sign many of his poems (this lot of eight poems is unsigned too); in the case of the Meco adventure, the concealment of his authorship may have to do with having participated, already an aged man, along with the students of Alcalá, in the Meco revelry and the subsequent battle, of which the poet would have been an eyewitness and participant. If he had been there, it seems reasonable that he would have tried to conceal this fact from his colleagues at the university.

The poem on the Meco affair is culturally rich, revealing in detail unique customs and situations. At that time, Alcalá de Henares, now a satellite city of Madrid, had about 10,000 inhabitants, 3,500 of whom were students and lecturers at the University. The young people, on their days off, sought recreation, and so they flocked en masse, on June 7, 1670, to a bullfight in the neighboring town of Meco, whose inhabitants they considered unsophisticated and brutish. For unknown reasons, a brawl soon broke out, escalating into open battle. The poem recounts, with a somewhat pedantic tone, that the people of Alcalá managed to kill one man and wound several others, while the people of Meco pelted the visitors with stones, leaving many badly injured. The poem, written from the perspective of the Alcalá side, fiercely describes the brutality of the battle, and the role of the ordinary women of Meco, who provided stones to the men of their town.

The tension between Meco and Alcalá is legendary and multifaceted. For starters, Alcalá’s jurisdictional and cultural superiority fueled Meco’s pride: Alcalá de Henares was then the capital

of the Archdiocese of Toledo, while Meco was just a tiny town within that diocese. This led to disputes over tax payments, the use of grazing lands on church property, and the control of resources, with Meco always occupying a subordinate position. This tension also surfaced when students attended local festivals with the intention of getting drunk and partying, often displaying an air of superiority and a provocative attitude. In addition, a serious problem was the impunity with which the students acted, as they enjoyed of “academic privileges”, namely, their own Courts and Justice. Their crimes and offenses were judged by the Rector of the university, not by the civil authorities, so the punishments were usually just reprimands, creating an asymmetrical impunity compared to neighboring towns. The rivalry between the two towns, moreover, continues to this day, and the expression “quedarse en Meco” (“to remain in Meco”) means “not having arrived to Alcalá”, both because there is a regional prison in Meco, and also because, from Alcalá’s perspective, the inhabitants of Meco don’t possess enough intellectual capacity to succeed in university life.

One detail makes this piece even more interesting: an original drawing in page 4, probably inserted a century after its publication. It is a pencil sketch, that depicts a high-ranking officer showing certain papers to other people, placed right next to a set of verses describing a general from the Alcalá side, who, in a certain moment of the battle, is left at the mercy of enemy stones, while naively urging the enemy to respect his rank (**Image 3**). A certain detail of the drawing is particularly interesting: it depicts this general wearing a type of military hat called *shako*. The *shako* is a hat of Hungarian origin, originally used by *hussars*, cavalry officers, and later adopted throughout Europe and also in America, especially from the second half of the 18th century and during the 19th (**Image 4**). Its presence in our document allows us to conjecture that the drawing was added some 100 to 150 years after the publication of the booklet, thereby also revealing the full reception and validity that this text had, even far from its immediate context of production and circulation.

On the other hand, bullfighting, the subject of the poem, arrived in Europe alongside Mithraism, an early religion of Eastern origin, very popular among the Roman imperial soldiery, whose central myth was the struggle of the hero Mithras against a bull that represented evil, which he defeated. In Spain, bullfights experienced alternating periods of government support and prohibition during the Middle Ages, but from 1418, authorized by king Juan II of Castile, they gained popularity and became established as popular festivals: they were celebrated whenever a significant civic event took place; for example, the Universidad de Alcalá celebrated with bullfights on Sunday, April 19, 1556, the raising of banners for king Felipe II, that is, the demonstration of its unconditional support to the king.

There are many topics of interest that the cultural historian and the *scholar* in general will find in these documents: the popular culture of Madrid in the 17th century, the fights between villages, the popular literature of the Spanish Golden Age, the religious permissiveness in the Counter-Reformation, the circulation of light printed materials for entertainment purposes (**Image 5**), the discourses on scatological practices, etc., without forgetting broader aspects, such as biopolitics, university life, popular games, multi-jurisdictional sociability, etc.

It should also be noted that no copies of this document are registered anywhere in the Americas, making its acquisition a potential store of value for any university or library in the United States or Canada, especially if it is associated with research programs on European intellectual history,

the anthropology of festivals, the sociology of culture, or folklore studies. The document's very good state of preservation, coupled with the unique feature of including an original drawing created well after its publication, makes it a valuable resource, destined to contribute, at some point, to a deeper understanding of the aforementioned fields, due to its rich cultural nuances, textures, and strata.

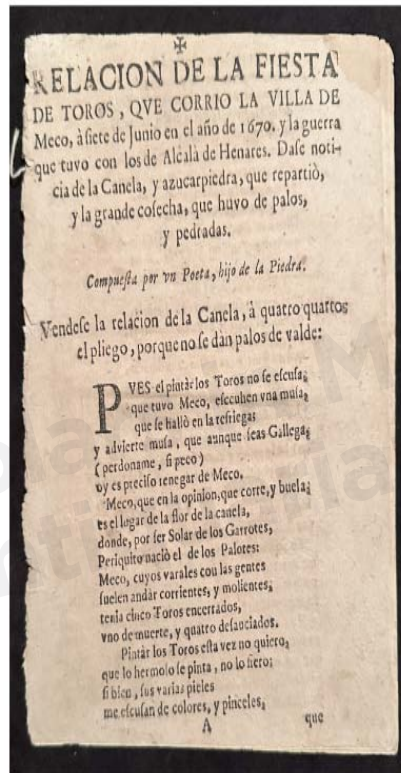


Image 1

Document cover page, which begins with the poem dedicated to the *Account of the Bullfighting Festival, which ran through the Town of Meco, on June 7, 1670*

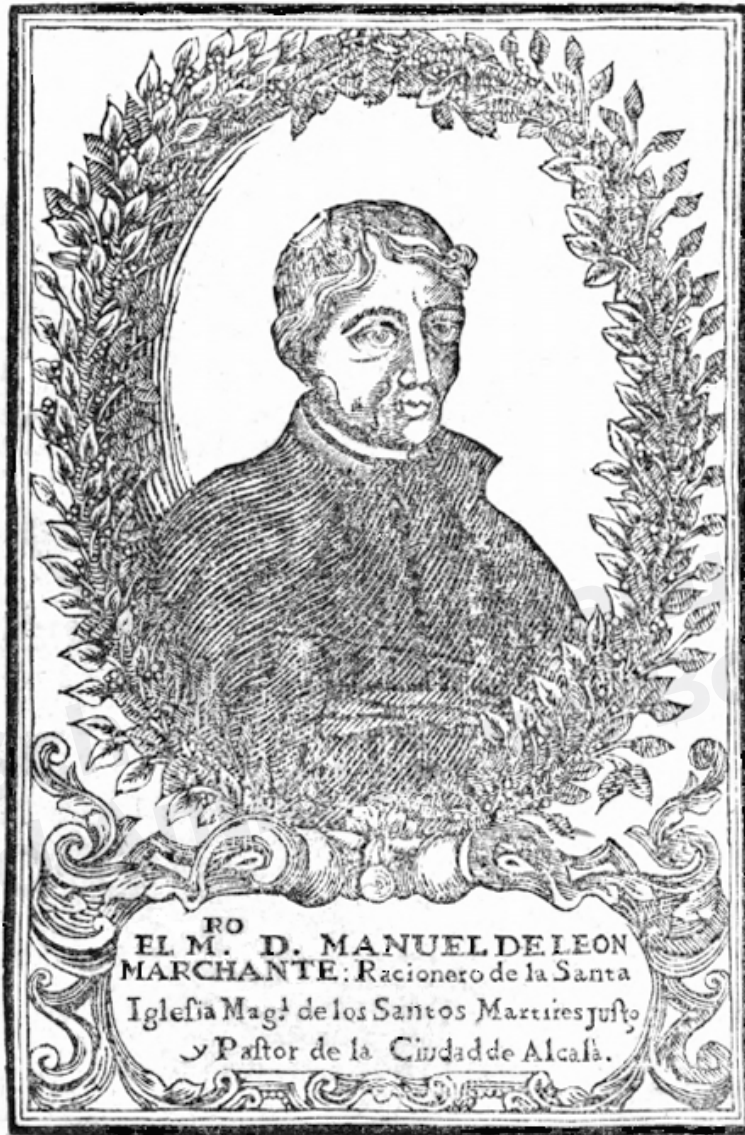


Image 2

Portrait of Manuel de León Marchante, in his *Obras poéticas posthumas*, printed in Madrid in 1722

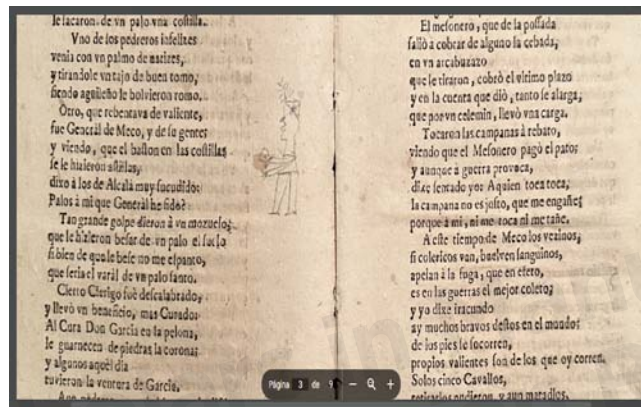


Image 3

Drawing illustrating the passage in which a general of the Alcalá side is left at the mercy of enemy stones, and he ridiculously exhorts his enemies to respect his rank



Image 4

Detail of the *shako* in the drawing (left); French *shako* circa 1829 (center); *shako* from the Mexican War, circa 1847 (right)

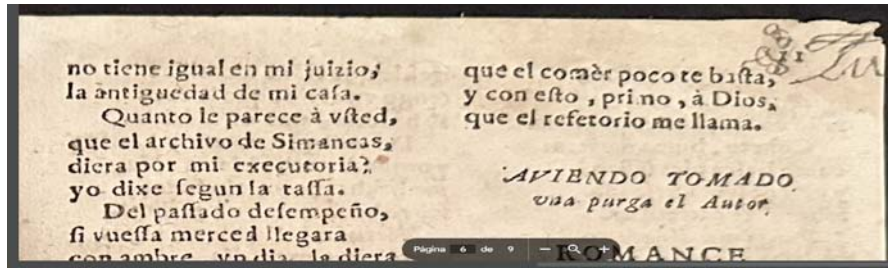


Image 5

Initials of a possessor, apparently with a surname starting with Z, on page 11

R. C. Scholars in Manuscripts
and Antiquarian Books