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Spanish Propaganda Printed in Venice: Two Dialogues by Alfonso de Valdés

Dennis E. Rhodes and James E. Walsh

The first quarter of the sixteenth century was a time of struggle between Spain and France for supremacy in Western Europe, and particularly in strife-torn Italy. Clashes between the forces of the two chief contenders in that struggle, Emperor Charles V and Francis I, king of France, were frequent, and the main battlegrounds were the city-states of northern Italy. Pope Leo X, more concerned with the temporal interests of the papacy and of his own family than with the good of Europe and religion, was at first inclined to support Francis. When he realized that Francis was unable to get credit from the great bankers and lacked funds to finance a strong army, Leo concluded a secret alliance with Charles in May 1521 and backed him in the seizure of Milan the following November. Less than two weeks later Leo died. His successor, Adrian VI, was an unworldly man uninterested in politics, who reigned less than two years. Because Charles had helped influence the election of the next pope, Clement VII, in 1523, his side was strengthened for a while by Clement's allegiance. But after Charles had taken Francis captive following the French siege of Pavia in 1525, all of Europe, including Clement, began to be alarmed at the growing power of the emperor. Clement allied himself with Charles's enemies in the coalition known as the League of Cognac, or Holy League. Realizing that without Clement his hopes for the subjugation of Italy would come to nothing, Charles attempted to win him back by diplomatic means, and, when those failed, by a show of force. Upon the entry of five or six thousand troops into Rome in September 1526, Clement agreed to return to Charles's fold. As soon as the troops withdrew, however, Clement promptly disavowed his turnaround and once again began plotting against the emperor. Charles thereupon decided that something stronger was called for and asked his brother, the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, to send a German army under the Lutheran Georg Frundsberg into Italy. By the time this force reached Piacenza it had been joined by Spanish and Italian volunteers; it numbered more than twenty thousand on its slow march toward Rome. Whether Charles intended anything more than a display of strength to frighten Clement into submission will probably never be known, but the army thus set in motion soon got out of control, and the ensuing events are known as the Sack of Rome. Charles realized that he had to defend himself against the universal horror and condemnation with which news of the pillaging of the Holy City was met. He decided on what we would now call a public-relations campaign.

In 1526 Charles had appointed Alfonso de Valdés his Latin secretary, a post in which the incumbent was responsible for drawing up official documents in that



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& Europa. Ma ciò non



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The initial L's above, all identical, are, from left to right, from Valdés, *Dialogo* (item Ia); Brunetto Latini, *Il tesoro* (Venice, Giovanni Antonio dei Nicolini da Sabbio and brothers, 1528); and Henricus de Herph, *Specchio della perfezione humana* (Venice, Niccolò d'Aristotile, detto Zoppino, 1529). The same initial L also appears in Valdés, *Dialogo* (item IIa).



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rapi ipsam ab orbe Ma.
sum diebus singulis circ
obliquū habeat, superi
est satis. medius autem
equinoctialem fecat in

Above, from left to right, are an initial L from Valdés, *Dialogo* (item IIIa); an initial C from Giovanni Villani, *Croniche* (Venice, Bartolommeo Zanetti, 1537); and an initial H from Girolamo Fracastori, *Homocentrica* (Venice, Bartolommeo Zanetti, 1538). All are clearly from the same alphabet.

language.¹ One of Valdés's first duties was to write something for Charles to send to the Christian princes of Europe that would exonerate him and place the blame for the Sack of Rome on Clement. Valdés did this in the form of a dialogue, *Diálogo en que particularmente se tratan las cosas acaecidas en Roma el año de MDXXVII*. In it he blames the catastrophe on the sins and venality of Rome itself, and particularly the papal court. Another dialogue soon followed, *Diálogo de Mercurio y Caron*. It was for long attributed to Juan de Valdés, but its authorship by Alfonso is now generally accepted.² In it the ferryman of the underworld blames the corrupt state of the Roman church and the perfidy of Francis I for the emperor's political actions and concludes that the real enemies to peace in Europe are Francis I and Henry VIII. Neither dialogue is dated, but there seems no reason to doubt that the first was composed in 1527, not long after the events it describes, and that the second was written sometime after 24 June 1528, the date of a letter from Charles to Francis that is included in the work.

In the sixteenth century both dialogues were printed together in the original Spanish at least five times, the second always preceding the first in the volume.³ Of these five editions, the British Library and the Houghton Library have between them three. All can be assigned to Venetian printers on the basis of decorative woodblock initials, although there remains doubt as to which of two presses was responsible for those we designate as editions I and II. The reason for these anti-papal dialogues having been printed in Venice rather than in Spain is not hard to find. Works critical of church and papacy stood little chance of getting into print in Spain, for press censorship was much more rigidly enforced there than it could be in a large printing center like Venice, where the volume of output was enormous. We know, too, that it was not unusual for some Venetian printers to print books in Spanish.⁴

The bibliographical descriptions of the three editions are as follows:

Ia: Dialogo de Mercurio y | Caron: en que allende de muchas | cosas
graciosas y de buena do | ctrina: se cuenta lo q̃ ha acae | scido en la
guerra desdel | año de mill y Quynjen | tos y veynte y vno | hasta los

¹ *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana* (Bilbao, 1929), LXVI, 500. Valdés was the brother of the much better known Spanish reformer Juan de Valdés. He was born at Cuenca about 1490 and died of the plague at Vienna in 1532. Juan and Alfonso have been mistakenly described as twins (Edward Boehmer, *Lives of the Twin Brothers Juan and Alfonso de Valdés* (London, 1882; appended to Juan de Valdés, *Commentary upon the Gospel of St. Matthew*), but Juan was not born until 1498. He died in Naples in 1541. Alfonso was a humanist much under the influence of Erasmus. Little is known of his early life, but it is not unlikely that he studied at the University of Alcalá, a center of Erasmian humanism. In 1520 he was at the coronation of Charles V at Aix-la-Chapelle.

² M. Bataillon, "Alonso de Valdés, auteur du 'Diálogo de Mercurio y Caron'" in *Homenaje ofrecido a Menéndez Pidal* (Madrid, 1925), I, 403-415.

³ These have been described by Edward Boehmer in his *Bibliotheca Wiffeniana. Spanish Reformers of Two Centuries from 1520* (Strassburg and London, 1874), pp. 101-105.

⁴ Examples are the Nicolini da Sabbio editions of *Amadis de Gaula*, 1533, and *Primaleon*, 1534.

desafios | delos Reyes | de Francia & ynglaterra | hechos al Empera | dor
en el año de | M D xxij. | [leaf ornament]

8°. A-M⁸. 96 leaves, the last blank. 30 or 31 lines to a page. Roman type, measuring 82 mm. for twenty lines. The title is set in gothic, the first line in a larger font than the rest. Woodcut initial L on 2r, showing a man's profile; smaller woodcut initial M on 3r, crudely cut; woodcut initial M, from the same alphabet as the L, on 57r.

Ib: Dialogo : en que particu = | larmente se tratan : las cosas aca | ecidas
en Roma : el año de | M.D.XXVII. | Agloria de Dios y bien vni- | uersal
de la Republica | Christiana.

8°. a-e⁸, f⁴. 44 leaves. 31 lines of the same roman type to a page. The first line of the title is in gothic, the rest in roman. No woodcut initials. Boehmer 58. Copy in Houghton.

The same initial L of this edition is found on fol. 59r of Brunetto Latini, *Il tesoro*, printed by Giovanni Antonio dei Nicolini da Sabbio and brothers at Venice and completed on 20 May 1528; and on fol. 51r of Henricus de Herph, *Specchio della perfettione humana*, printed by Niccolò d'Aristotile, detto Zoppino, at Venice in 1529; the same initial M, with exactly the same small break in the lower right-hand corner of the frame-line, is also found on fol. 36v of Ludovicus Folianus, *Musica theorica*, printed by the Nicolini da Sabbio brothers, Venice, July 1529. It is clear that these two printing establishments shared their decorative initials, but which was the borrower and which the lender it is impossible to say.

Ila: Dialogo de Mercurio y | Caron : en que allende de muchas | cosas
graciosas y de buena do- | ctrina : se cuenta lo q̃ ha acac | scido en la
guerra desdel | año de mill y Qujnjen- | tos y veynte y vno | hasta los
desafios | delos Reyes | de Francia & Ynglaterra | hechos al Empera | dor
en el año de | MDxxij. | [leaf ornament]

8°. A-M⁸. 96 leaves, the last two blank. 33 lines to a page. Gothic type, measuring 74 mm. for twenty lines; two larger gothic types used in the title. Woodcut initial L on 2r and M on 3r and 57r, each showing a man's profile, the same as those in edition I above.

Ilb: Dialogo : en que particu = | larmente se tratan : las cosas aca |
ecidas en Roma : el año de | M. D. XXVII. | A gloria de Dios y bien
vni- | uersal dela Republica | Christiana. | [leaf ornament]

8°. a-e⁸, f⁴. 44 leaves, the last blank. As in the previous dialogue, there are 33 lines of the same gothic text-type to a page; but two differences are that in this dialogue there are no woodcut initials, and that on the title page five of the seven lines of the title are set in a roman type. Boehmer 57. Copy in British Library.

The same statements about decorative initials apply to this edition as to edition I above.

IIIa: Dialogo de Mercurio y Ca- | ron: en que allende de muchas cosas
graciosas y de buena | doctrina: se cuenta lo que ha acaescido en la
guerra | desdel año de mill y Quinjentos y veynte y | vno hasta los
desafios delos Reyes de | francia & Ynglaterra hechos al | Emperador en
el año de | MDxxvij [sic]. | leaf ornament]

4° in 8's. A-I⁸, K². 74 leaves, the last blank. 33 or 34 lines to a page.
Gothic type, measuring 91 mm. for twenty lines. The title is set in
gothic, the first line in a larger font than the rest. Ornamental initials
L and M (six lines of type high) on 2r and 44v respectively; smaller
initial M (three lines of type high) on 2v.

IIIb: Dialogo: en que particularmente se tratan: las cosas | acaccidas en
Roma: el año de | M.D.XXvij. | A gloria de Dios y bien vniuersal dela
| Republica christiana.

4° in 8's. a-e⁸, d¹⁰. 34 leaves. 34 lines to a page. Title set in the same
gothic type as the text. Small ornamental initial V (three lines of type
high) on 2v. Boehmer 55. Copy in Houghton.

The decorative initials and the leaf fleuron found in this edition of the
dialogues are likewise found in Bartolommeo Zanetti's editions of Gio-
vanni Villani, *Croniche*, 1537; Girolamo Fracastoro, *Homocentrica*, 1538;
and in v. 2 of his Italian Bible, 1540.

The dates of these three editions cannot be determined with certainty. Giuseppe
de Gennaro, in his edition of the Italian translations of the two dialogues,⁵ suggests
that the first Spanish edition probably did not appear before 1532, though the
dialogues had been circulating in manuscript for some time before that. There are
also records of the dialogues having been submitted for censorship in March and
September 1531,⁶ though since the printers took care not to put their names to
their editions, it seems unlikely that the dialogues were passed by the censors.

We think, then, that on typographical grounds the three editions can be assigned
to the following Venetian printers, with approximate dates:⁷

I. Niccolò d'Aristotile, detto Zoppino, or Giovanni Antonio dei Nicolini da
Sabbio and brothers, 1532?

II. The same, 1534?

III. Bartolommeo Zanetti, 1538?

We have not tracked down the other two editions recorded by Boehmer (his nos.
56 and 59) as held by German libraries in 1874, but it is probable that they, too,
if they have survived, would turn out to be of Venetian origin.

⁵ Alfonso de Valdés, *Due dialoghi. Traduzione italiana del sec. XVI a cura di Giuseppe de Gennaro* (Napoli, 1968), pp. vii-xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

⁷ The order of our editions I and II is not certain; we have adopted it on the theory that
first editions tend to contain more printed leaves than do later ones.

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