Juan del Encina Biography

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Biography

Juan del Encina (1468-1529) is called the father of Spanish drama. He was also the foremost Spanish musical composer of his time.

The original name of Juan del Encina was Fermoselle, but he adopted the name of his probable birthplace, a small village in the province of Salamanca. In all likelihood Encina studied at the University of Salamanca under Antonio de Nebrija, the foremost Spanish humanist of his time. He then entered the service of the Duke of Alba, in whose palace of Alba de Tormes he discharged the multiple functions of playwright, poet, composer, and musician for 7 years. Encina published his *Cancionero* (a collection of plays and *villancicos,* or polyphonic songs) in Salamanca in 1496; other works were added to this collection in later editions.

Encina went to Rome in 1498, where he entered the papal chapel and eventually became singer to Leo X. During this time Encina continued to write plays. While in Rome he obtained several ecclesiastical benefices in Spain, and in 1510 and 1513 he was in Málaga as archdeacon and canon. He had obtained, however, papal dispensation to collect his benefices without discharging his duties.

In 1519, aged 50, Encina took holy orders and went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which he described in his poem *La Trivagia*. He celebrated his first Mass in Jerusalem. Encina returned to Spain as prior of León, where he resided from 1523 until his death.

As a poet, Encina was most successful in brief, lyrical pieces, which he set to music himself; his romances were also more lyrical than narrative. His great popularity as a composer is attested to by the fact that 61 of his *villancicos* were collected in the *Cancionero musical de Palacio* (ca. 1500). As a playwright, Encina brought to their final development the theatrical forms derived from medieval liturgical drama. He inaugurated Renaissance drama in Spain. His early dramas (such as *Egloga de las grandes lluvias*) were Nativity plays, with rustic shepherds as protagonists. His later plays (such as *Egloga de Plácida y Vitoriano*) were Italianate in spirit, much longer, and complicated in form. His shepherds were now of classical inspiration. The joy of life he sang about in his later plays was almost neopagan in its exuberance.