Professor Ohanna offers the first scholarly edition of

Los cautivos de Argel,

by Lope de Vega

In the auto de fe held on November 4, 1576, in the square of the main church of Valencia, Abdela Alicaxet was handed over to the secular authorities and burned at the stake before an audience akin to that of popular comedies. Though more solemn and formally arranged, the act had a great deal of spectacle and fiesta in its colorful atmosphere and the voices of a crowd that had come from the surrounding parishes. Damnation or martyrdom, depending on the viewpoint: the theatrical festival of faith renewed suspicions and fears, hatred and hostility against the Moorish minority that had been violently baptized fifty years earlier. The usual prejudices were now confirmed in the heretic and proxy for his community. That same Sunday Abdela imagined, as he had warned the inquisitors of Valencia’s Tribunal, that across the sea the pasha of Algiers would retaliate. The response, more spontaneous, would also be a public execution. He could not have imagined that twenty-three years later the most acclaimed Spanish playwright of all time would put him back onstage, before the same audience, for the celebration of the royal wedding of Philip III and Margaret of Austria, in La gran comedia de los cautivos de Argel. But Lope de Vega had reason to select him over all of the Moriscos condemned by the local Inquisition. Abdela’s life aroused the fascination of drama because in the eyes of the Valencian people he was the traitor par excellence. He escaped to North Africa and converted to Islam, became a pirate and returned to his birthplace to liberate entire families from religious persecution, and he succeeded.

Professor Ohanna makes this important early modern Spanish text available to a broad audience by producing the first scholarly edition of Los cautivos de Argel (1599), by Félix Lope de Vega. This work comprises an in-depth historical and interpretive introduction, over four hundred annotations to various words, passages, historical events and references, a comprehensive bibliography, and an appendix with a paleographical transcription of the original inquisitorial file of Abdela Alicaxet. It is an essential primary source to understand the imagery of interactions between Christians and Muslims in a period marked by struggle against Islam, privateering and piracy in the Mediterranean, and the systematic persecution of religious and ethnic minorities by means of discriminatory laws, inquisitorial authority, slavery, forced conversions and expulsion.

The work also raises interest for its imitation of the first theatrical piece ever written by Miguel de Cervantes, El trato de Argel (1580). Numerous notes of this edition seek to clarify the matter, since it is, in fact, the longest intertextual dialogue between the most universal figures of Spanish Golden Age literature. Professor Ohanna’s work on this play, beyond providing an in-depth analysis of its language and many contextual references, helps to illuminate the connections between literature, politics, and society, as well as the function of a literary text in its quality as a historical document, capable of bringing us closer to a history of ideas, beliefs and images, and ways of thinking and feeling that contribute to the construction of established reality. The book will be published in Spain, during spring 2017, in the collection Clásicos Castalia.