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## Another Look at Calderón's *El príncipe constante* as Tragedy

Matthew D. Stroud

THE FORMS AND DEFINITIONS OF TRAGEDY HAVE BEEN A FREQUENT PRE-occupation for James Parr over the course of his distinguished career. One of his more influential articles was “*El príncipe constante* and the Issue of Christian Tragedy,” published in 1986. Parr’s approach was primarily ethical and formalist, dealing with the Aristotelian requirements of tragedy: *areté*, hubris, catharsis. He countered the long and distinguished scholarship that maintains that Christian tragedy is an impossibility by reconsidering, even redefining, *hamartia* and *anagnorisis*, and essentially ignoring *peripeteia*. *Hamartia*, in his reading, is much more than a flaw or an error. Instead, relying on the work of Peter Alexander, Parr asserted that *hamartia* involves the responsibility of the protagonist, who brings his misfortune upon himself. Regarding *anagnorisis*, that moment when the protagonist realizes what he has done, Parr accepted that a Christian martyr would experience no such moment of insight, and thus made *anagnorisis* a function of the reader or spectator. By adopting this different model, and by paying much more attention to matters such as suffering and justice, he was able to conclude that, despite its differences from *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, Calderón’s martyr play should be considered tragedy.

Parr himself acknowledged that the models he used allowed martyrdom and tragedy to come together: “The play displays all the ingredients necessary for tragedy as that form is defined in the theoretical models adduced here. Other models would yield different results, undeniably” (172). Rather than revisit the vast and familiar literature on tragedy and the debates on whether or not this particular work meets Aristotle’s definition, perhaps it would be more useful to come at the issue from a different perspective—that of psychoanalysis, the insights of which have radically altered the

direction of literary theory and criticism in the last thirty years. Jacques Lacan, the figure whose work underlies enormous stretches of cultural studies, queer studies, and even feminist studies, dedicated a significant portion of his *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992) to a consideration of tragedy. Many of Lacan's notions are not wholly different from those Parr discusses: the focus on death, the exalted nature of the experience, and the calming effect of catharsis, for example. Some differ with Parr's interpretations because they are more traditionalist, while others differ because they spring from his work in psychoanalysis rather than Greek philosophy. All of them, however, deal with desire.

Desire is in play in all forms of serious drama. Aristotelian tragedy wants to suppress desire, and it is willing to use violence to reach its goals. Christian martyrdom takes the violence offered by others and makes that violence the object of desire. For the Christian martyr, however, life not only does not end at the death of the body, but the promise of eternal afterlife causes one's corporeal existence, and even one's identity, to be essentially meaningless. Moreover, because one's motivations are based on things one cannot see and on the experience of the soul, a part of one's identity that one cannot locate physically, martyrdom is at root irrational, especially when one adds into the mix the additional desire for pain and suffering, for the mortification of the flesh, on the way to death. Despite the best efforts of Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose scholasticism might be oversimplified as "Do irrational things for rational reasons," the discussion of martyrdom underscores how profoundly un-Aristotelian Christian thought is in this regard.

In his *Seminar VII*, Lacan appears to accept on its face some of the terminology of tragedy, although he dispenses with the familiar and comforting notion that tragedy teaches us to be better people. Catharsis, he notes, is intended to calm the spectators, to purge them of fear and pity (245, 248), and he follows traditional definitions of tragedy by rendering *hamartia* as "error" (258). Nothing Lacan wrote, however, was divorced from his notion of the insistence of desire, and all his assertions regarding tragedy are consequently nuanced and altered. At the heart of tragedy is a crime, but *hamartia* alone is not the crime for which tragedy atones. Instead, tragedy results when one crosses a boundary of desire, when something happens that frees humanity from its own laws. Rather than *hamartia*, it is *até*, or blind ambition and reckless impulse, that

fuels the crime. Tragedy, in other words, is about the desire that subverts all law (263–65, 277), about transgressions of the symbolic law that must be punished by death. Indeed, in a very real sense, tragedy is about the "triumph of death" (313), not just a death sentence meted out to punish the commission of the crime. Tragedy is everywhere inhabited by death; there is a quality on the part of the protagonists of being between life and death or already dead in life (248, 271, 280). Tragedy embraces death and the death drive; it highlights "the relationship of man to his lack of being" (298) and points out that to achieve one's desire is to achieve one's own death (294). It is here that the death drive and the symbolic meet in perfect symbiosis, for the symbolic law is enforced by violence. Ultimately, the tragic protagonists are unable to resist the weight and pressure of the symbolic and lose either the objects of their desires or their lives.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the play, as it reestablishes the absolute authority of the symbolic law, tragedy also serves to purify the imaginary register (245, 248). As a result of tragic catharsis, one should leave the theater content to lay down one's desire and reenter the symbolic universe. While tragedy may deal with ethics and the search for good, it is ultimately not moral (323), primarily because the Good, like the Other, is not whole. There is no Supreme Good (300): "The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy" (259).<sup>2</sup>

How does Calderón's *El príncipe constante* fit into this view of tragedy? There is no doubt that this martyr play is about death: death in war, death for one's religious convictions, even intimations of metaphorical death in matters of love. Fénix and Muley are as good as dead because her father has promised her in marriage to another man without regard for her desire, and Muley notes that Fénix should have died before accepting Tarudante's portrait (455–56). Even more pointedly, Muley threatens that the only way Tarudante will be able to have Fénix is if he kills Muley first (1049–50). These familiar metaphors from the tradition of courtly love are incidental to the primary scenes of death in the play: the battle for Ceuta and the martyrdom of Prince Fernando. From the outset there is a pall of death hanging over the entire expedition, one heightened by the fact that we in the audience know that the invasion of Morocco will be a colossal disaster. While Fernando anticipates the upcoming defeat of Morocco as a great victory for

Christendom,<sup>3</sup> Enrique is more realistic as he worries about the inevitable loss of life.

El alma traigo de temores llena  
echada juzgo contra mí la suerte  
desde que de Lisboa, al salir solo,  
imágenes he visto de la muerte.

[My soul is full of fear,  
I judge luck to be against me,  
since I left Lisbon alone  
I have seen images of my death.]

(517–20)

This is, after all, war; it is expected not only that both sides will attempt to kill their enemies but that both sides will die for their respective causes as well. Fernando, the “constant prince” of the title, sums up his mission quite succinctly: “a morir venimos” [we come to die] (870). He realizes that his death is inevitable (“¡Ay Don Juan, cierta es mi muerte!” [Oh, Don Juan, certain is my death!], 1211), and his belief that he has come to die fulfills Lacan’s requirement that the protagonists in tragedy are everywhere implicated in death. After his capture, Fernando, like Antigone, considers himself already dead:

Morir es perder el ser,  
yo le perdí en una guerra;  
perdí el ser, luego morí;  
morí, luego ya no es cuerda  
hazaña que por un muerto  
hoy tantos vivos perezcan.

[To die is to lose one’s being,  
I lost it in a war;  
I lost my being, therefore I died;  
I died, therefore it is not wise  
for so many to perish today  
for a dead man.]

(1371–76)

The trajectory of life leads to death (1441–44, 1598–99); to be born is to live subject to fortune and death (1640–41).

There are other important ways, however, in which Fernando’s plight differs from traditional notions of tragedy. Let us return to the notion of *hamartia*. Parr asserts that this Greek term, properly defined as “error,” as Lacan noted, must be redefined if *El príncipe constante* is to be considered a tragedy, but there is a much longer scholarly tradition that would agree more with Lacan than with Parr.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps “crime” is too strong a word; but even if one uses “mistake” or “transgression,” what does Fernando do that meets the criteria for those terms? Unlike Oedipus, he commits no act that he himself would recognize as abominable once he discovers what he did. Unlike Antigone, he violates no law. He is, again, the “perfect” prince, and the concept of perfection would seem to erase any possibility of *hamartia*. It might be argued that Fernando does exhibit *até*, a reckless, impulsive desire to conquer souls and land for Christianity, but what makes *até* tragic for Lacan is its use in the subversion of the symbolic law. In *El príncipe constante*, there is not the slightest hint that Fernando is acting in any way outside the law. His situation also challenges Lacan’s assertion that the defiance of the law in tragedy is related to the absence of Supreme Good. A situation such as that between Antigone and Creon, which is a battle between one good and another, is impossible in the Christian context of living and dying for God. Indeed, the martyr’s desire is not to subvert the law, but to surrender himself completely to its violence, to give his life for the law, thus bringing into harmony imaginary desire and symbolic violence.

The evidence of Fernando’s surrender is clear and abundant. Instead of resisting capture and confinement, he embraces his misery: “aprendo a ser infelice” [I learn to be unhappy] (1117). His plight provokes no newly revealed moral insight, as was the case with Oedipus. He wants to die, not because he has done anything to deserve it, but for his faith:

porque los cielos me cumplan  
un deseo de morir  
por la fe. . . .

[so that the heavens may fulfill  
my desire to die  
for faith . . . .]

(2420–22; cf. 906)

Blameless himself, he conceives of his duty, like that of all saints, as that of suffering for others, of paying their debts (Lacan 1992, 322). He loses his sense of fear, a hallmark of martyrdom (Lacan 1992, 267). He offers his slavery as a service to God:

si es decirme  
que es mi esclavitud eterna,  
eso es lo que más deseo;  
albricias pedir pudieras,  
y en vez de dolor y luto,  
vestir galas y hacer fiestas.

[if it is to tell me  
that my slavery is eternal,  
that is what I most desire;  
you could have asked for favors  
and instead of pain and mourning  
dressed in finery and rejoiced.]

(1221–26)

This rejection of fear also evacuates fear and pity from the concept of catharsis. Rather than calming desire in the spectator, this religious spectacle is intended to instill even greater fervor among the faithful. Indeed, he explicitly tells us that he hopes that other Christians will look upon his example as one who upholds his faith and reveres God in spite of misfortune and mistreatment (1411–14).

Fernando repeatedly makes manifest and exalts that which is normally hidden: the death drive, the fading of the self. The appeal to the Other is not an imaginary demand for a state of wholeness that the Other itself cannot provide. Indeed, it is to the very lack in the Other that the martyr appeals. By the middle of act 3, Fernando revels in the lack in the Other. He embraces his unhappiness, and he makes of it the object of his desire:

i●h si pudiera  
mi voz mover a piedad  
a alguno, porque siquiera  
un instante más viviera  
padeciendo!

[Oh, if only  
my words could move one  
to piety, then would I  
live to suffer at least  
one more instant!]

(2255–59)

At the end of his life, Fernando urges the Portuguese onward to victory in battle (2603–13). His compatriots understand his death to be payment on a future military victory (2588–91), thus completing the symbolic victory of the law over the individual subject.

At the same time, Fernando's death is so much more than the mere symbolic exchange of individual desire for the supremacy of the law, mostly because Fernando actively seeks out his misery and death. Fernando's desire to suffer and die for God bespeaks the *jouissance* that lies at the heart of this play, the *jouissance* associated with the death drive, the *jouissance* of the martyr, the *jouissance* that is not, of course, pleasure in any usual sense but that is experienced in the conscious as misery, illness, or instability. It is only in the unconscious, in direct contact with the death drive that *jouissance* is perceived by the lacking subject as pleasure (Lacan 1989, 60, 95). In addition, *jouissance* is not just an admission that one is lacking as a subject but that contact with the lack, the real, produces the ecstasy experienced by all martyrs and mystics (Lacan 1982, 147); as such, it is a function of the nature of God. It is here that a certain notion of beauty comes into play. Part of the Christian notion of suffering for one's faith is the idea that a certain essential beauty is revealed by the loss, the cruelty, and the horror. In this aspect at least, Christian and Lacanian notions of tragedy coincide, for Lacan agrees that beauty is revealed in the moment of transgression and its accompanying blindness as related to the death drive (Lacan 1992, 281). It is "precisely the function of the beautiful to reveal to us the site of man's relationship to his own death, and to reveal it to us only in a blinding flash" (Lacan 1992, 295).

All the terms used thus far are also involved in the definition of one's identity, which is formed through the interplay of real lack, symbolic metaphorization and repression, and imaginary fantasies of wholeness. The Aristotelian concepts most closely linked to identity are *areté*, that is, nobility or high rank, and hubris, a pride that

does not allow one to see one's own shortcomings or lack. In Aristotelian models of tragedy, part of the problem stems from one's faith in one's belief in a unified, rational, subject identity. Likewise, much of the drama of the tragic climax and dénouement is also a function of protagonists who act according to what they believe to be the expectations given who they are. In other words, Greek tragedy assumes that the subject is whole, and that one can rationally comprehend one's surroundings. In other words, the Greek tragic protagonist is the quintessential phallic subject. In addition, Aristotelian tragedy posits a number of other givens: that life ends at death, that death can be avoided by making no mistakes, and that one's infliction of pain and punishment upon oneself in the face of adversity is the noblest assertion of the identity of the subject. Indeed, the tragedy in the case of Oedipus resides precisely in the errors he committed in his aggressive, arrogant attempt to overcome his fate, and his assertion of his essential morality in his self-blinding. As a moral subject, one is to assume, he could not fail to atone for his errors, however unintentional they were. The suffering he endured only served to underscore his essential *areté*, even if his actions were misguided because of his overconfidence and pride.

While Oedipus may have suffered to ensure the integrity of his symbolic and imaginary identity, Fernando embraces his *jouissance* as pleasurable unpleasure, as he experiences the real lack that underlies and informs the subject. Unlike either Oedipus or Antigone, the focus is not upon physical suffering as some expiatory punishment ultimately connected to who they are and why they are doing what they are doing. Instead, Fernando, who is not being punished for any crime, rejoices in the physical blows to the body. His suffering is not considered to be a blow to phallic signification but rather the apotheosis (both figurative and literal) of the lacking soul, a position associated in Lacanian psychoanalysis with the feminine. Oedipus may be the phallic tragic hero, but for Lacan sainthood (or, more precisely, mysticism, and, we may assume, martyrdom) is linked to feminine sexuality. Such individuals notable for their religious devotion are either women, like Santa Teresa de Ávila, or "highly gifted people like Saint John of the Cross" (Lacan 1982, 146–47), that is, men who identify with femininity and the way it embraces real lack and experiences the *jouissance* of giving oneself over to the Other.

Fernando's suffering points out the triangular relationship among identity, desire, and the body. The body desires, desire structures identity, and both identity and desire reside in the body. Desire both uses the body and transforms it at the same time that the body experiences desire. Identity, which is in part a function of the symbolically repressed ego, inscribes the body at the same time that the body itself helps determine identity. Between identity and desire, the relationship is more conflicted and dire: identity smothers desire; desire shatters identity. The symbolic culture works tirelessly to maintain identity (and difference) at the expense of desire. If in part one's identity can be said to be constituted by one's signification within and definition by one's society, then it is apparent that desire is antithetical to identity. In other words, desire is opposite from and serves to undermine one's identity. While the body cannot help but serve as the conveyor of one's identity as one goes out and represents oneself physically in society, it is likewise true that the experience of the body in society inscribes, alters, and re-signifies the body, and even influences its very contours (Butler 3, 15, 30).

Into this mix, Bersani and Deleuze add one more essential ingredient that cannot be omitted without eliminating an essential part of Fernando's experience: masochism. The martyr, for whom pain is pleasure, seeks out the shattering of identity and longs to disappear into the gap between signification and identity. In terms of the language used, in terms of the intimacy of the two bodies involved, and in terms of the emotional connection, there is definitely a strong thread of sensuality and eroticism in the play, not between Muley and Fénix, whose relationship is as coldly conventional as any, but between Fernando and the king who causes his body to feel the desired sensations. Central to the plot is violence, the one term that binds body, desire, and identity together more than any other. For Butler (29), materiality is "founded through a set of violations" that has the effect of preventing the establishment of stable signification. The self-image one has of the body is purchased through a certain loss (Butler 75). At the same time, the "symbolic marks the body by sex through threatening that body, through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat, a castration, a privation of some bodily part" (Butler 101). Freud goes a long way toward equating civilization with violence, and Bersani makes the connection explicit: "*destructiveness is constitutive of sexuality,*"

he says; “Sexuality = aggressiveness = civilization” (20, 21). Fernando takes advantage of war and the cruelties that enemies inflict upon one another in order to place himself in a situation in which he will be sure to be punished, humiliated, and mortified. The prince takes additional steps to ensure that his misery is on full public display, calling to mind Theodore Reik’s “demonstrative” or persuasive feature of masochism, explained by Deleuze as “the particular way in which the masochist exhibits his suffering, embarrassment and humiliation” (Deleuze 75). Tragedy also embodies violence, but in a much different way. Tragic heroes participate in violence in the commission of a crime, in resistance to authority, and in acts of expiation, all of which reflect either imaginary desire or symbolic control, but never as a medium toward the goal of experiencing the lack in the real.

A second characteristic is passivity and the concomitant desire to be punished. The masochist specifically seeks out a passive position, even going so far as to enlist another to assume the role of the active subject who will satisfy his fantasy by inflicting punishment (Deleuze 105–6). Although the King of Fez repeatedly seeks a way out of his role as torturer, Fernando will not hear of it and insists on receiving more humiliation. Indeed, the masochist, just as the martyr, refuses to resist the violence of the symbolic society, instead aligning himself with it and using it for his pleasurable unpleasure. Reflecting the characteristic of masochism that Reik termed “provocative fear,” Fernando, in Deleuze’s terms, “aggressively demands punishment since it resolves anxiety and allows him to enjoy the forbidden pleasure” (75). Deleuze even adds another characteristic to Reik’s, the masochistic contract that “implies not only the necessity of the victim’s consent, but his ability to persuade, and . . . to train his torturer” (75). The King of Fez has unwittingly entered into this contract with Fernando. He does not wish to punish the prince, and cannot understand why the prince wants to be punished, but he does Fernando’s bidding and punishes him anyway. In addition, it is not enough for the masochist or martyr to put himself in harm’s way and be dispatched. An important part of the experience is extending the suffering, luxuriating in the anticipation of the pain, waiting for, even delaying, the inevitable death (75). Fernando does not want a quick death; the drawing out of his masochistic dance with the king allows him to suffer all the more, rejoicing in the anticipation of the next application of

pain. Tragedy as traditionally defined is a statement for the dignity of the human spirit, not for its passivity in seeking out its degradation.

Masochism is always accompanied by a “‘resexualization’ of the conscience.”<sup>5</sup> The simultaneous production of pleasure and unpleasure, which clearly describes Fernando’s experience and that of most martyrs, is also a definition of sexuality, according to Bersani in his discussion of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In sexuality, “pleasure is somehow distinct from satisfaction, perhaps even identical to a kind of pain” (34). Moreover, intense feelings and experiences, even terrifying ones, always involve sexuality (37). The escalating cycle of pleasurable unpleasure and its satisfaction is at odds with the civilized and orderly functioning of the individual, a condition that is absolutely related to one’s identity in the Symbolic. For Bersani, sexuality is not “an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world, a condition in which others merely set off the self-shattering mechanisms of masochistic *jouissance*” (41). Sexual excitement, that is, sexuality made manifest, “is intolerable to the structured self” (38); for the masochist, it can only be “relieved and fulfilled by death” (46).

To counter the argument that Fernando’s relationship with the king and others is manifestly not sexual, one notes that even in religious depictions, perhaps particularly in certain religious depictions of saints, the body is represented “as always at least potentially sexualized, as a truly polysemous surface where various significances and expressions—including a variety of erotic ones—compete and collude with each other in making the body meaningful” (Rambuss 268). Freud believed that the body is always and everywhere sexualized, that it is essentially not possible for the body to interact with the world around it in a purely nonsexual way. All parts of the body, including the internal organs, are capable of producing sexual response, but the sexual is detached from “both object-specificity and organ-specificity. We desire what nearly shatters us, and the shattering experience is, it would seem, *without any specific content*” (Bersani 39–40). Fernando not only does not try to rid himself of this “shattering tension,” he takes advantage of his situation as captive to seek it out, to repeat and augment it, to glory in his mortifications that are both unpleasurable and pleasurable at the same time. For Christians, this life is meaningless in

comparison to the rewards to come in life after death, a fantasy we see played out in the final scenes of the play with Fernando's appearance after death.<sup>6</sup> Death is far from a punishment meted out for a crime; it is a reward, the release of the soul through the shattering of the corporeal identity. For the martyr, the suffering and death are the means to the shattering and *jouissance* he seeks, a posture as different as one can imagine from that of the tragic hero, who seeks justice and insists upon the dignity of the human spirit.

In the final analysis, the beauty and the frustration of the notion of tragedy is that, as Parr noted, it all depends upon the terms and definitions one applies. One notes that studies of literary works as tragedy, once a staple of literary criticism, have lost a good deal of their appeal. In our postmodern world, it is hard to imagine either a tragic hero taking a stand at great personal cost for the dignity of the human spirit or a critic fully embracing an Aristotelian definition of tragedy without nuance or exception. For that reason, it would be as wrong to imply that Parr is wrong in his view of *El príncipe constante* as tragedy as it would be to assert that the view presented here is the only correct one possible. Still, the notion of tragedy lingers. At heart in the debate over tragedy and martyrdom is the nature of the desire that motivates the tragic heroes. Oedipus, Antigone, and even modern tragic heroes are willing to sacrifice everything for justice, the law, and the symbolic good, even for a promise that we know cannot be fulfilled. There is no ultimate reward, which makes the sacrifice all the more meaningful. For Christian martyrs, promised the everlasting glory of paradise for their suffering, it hardly seems like a sacrifice at all. Parr does not consider desire and *jouissance*, yet when one explores Fernando's motivations, his insistent desire to die, to be shattered, to experience the unpleasurable pleasure of *jouissance*, it is clear that in this case the traditional definitions of tragedy simply cannot hold.

## NOTES

1. In one of his more famous passages, Lacan describes the "choice" of yielding to the symbolic as essentially the same as the demand, "Your money or your life" (1978, 212–13). If you choose money (individuality, illusions of wholeness), the robber will kill you and you will end up losing both your money and your life. It is a forced choice: to stay alive, one must give over one's money; to be a fully functioning subject, one must submit to symbolic signification. The only real option is

to choose life with the concomitant loss. The payment on account for future happiness would not seem to be too great if, in fact, the symbolic Other were able to fulfill its promises. But the subject and the Other are both lacking, and, as a result, it is impossible for the symbolic to fulfill its promises. The failure of the symbolic leads to yet another source of tragedy.

2. This summary of Lacanian notions regarding tragedy is impossibly brief. For a more comprehensive discussion, see my *Play in the Mirror* (1996), chap. 4, especially 132–39.

3. Fernando's arrogant assertions reveal his extraordinary imaginary pride upon landing in Morocco:

Yo he de ser el primero, África bella,  
que he de pisar tu margen arenosa,  
porque oprimida al peso de mi huella,  
sientas en tu cerviz la poderosa  
fuerza que ha de rendirte.

[I shall be the first, beautiful Africa,  
to tread your sandy shore.  
so that, burdened by the weight of my step,  
you may feel on your neck the powerful  
force that will conquer you.]

(477–81)

4. The literature on *hamartia* is extensive, but the majority of scholars tend toward a definition of the term as "fatal flaw" or "error," if not "crime." The extensive bibliography need not be reproduced here; rather, see J. M. Bremer's *Hamartia: Tragic Error in the "Poetics" of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy* (1969), especially 63.

5. Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 104. There is in addition a close link between masochism and fetishism. There "can be no masochism without fetishism in the primary sense," one manifestation of which is "supersensualism" (Deleuze 32).

6. Christian fantasies are related to the importance of ritual fantasy to the masochist as well (Deleuze 74–75). For martyrs, the ritual of "regeneration and rebirth" is paramount (94); the desire is not to destroy the world but "to disavow and thus to suspend it, in order to secure an ideal which is itself suspended in fantasy" (32–33).

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