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TIRSO'S WIFE-MURDER PLAY:

LA VIDA Y MUERTE DE HERODES

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Tirso's La vida y muerte de Herodes is a curious play for a number of reasons. Dating most likely from 1620-21, it is one of several plays based on Herod's life both in Biblical accounts and in Josephus' *Antiquities*.<sup>1</sup> Lodovico Dolce was the first Renaissance playwright to take advantage of the historical but very dramatic subject matter in his Marianna of 1565, and, closer to Tirso's era, Alexandre Hardy and Tristan l'Hermite created French versions; Hardy's dates from the period 1625 to 1632 and Tristan's was published in 1637.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Calderón published in 1637 the version best known to Hispanists, El mayor monstruo los celos.<sup>3</sup> Tirso's play is also extraordinarily long (3935 lines), and remarkably poorly structured, never quite succeeding in combining the three dramatic elements in Herod's life: his political maneuvering between Augustus and Mark Anthony; his relationship with his wife Mariadnes and her unfortunate demise; and the Christmas tale of Herod's order to kill all male children under the age of two, including his own. Perhaps because of the limitations and defects of the dramatic qualities of the play, it

has not been the subject of a great deal of criticism.<sup>4</sup> More curious, however, is the fact that it has almost never been mentioned among the wife-murder plays that have been the subject of so much investigation. This study will consider the play as part of a tradition of wife-murder plays, with some speculation concerning its omission from the usual discussions of those plays.

To be fair, this play is not, in a narrow, technical sense, a wife-murder play. Herodes has Mariadnes imprisoned when he is told of the birth of the King of the Jews. His rage over Mariadnes' supposed infidelity is overwhelmed by his greater rage and madness over the thought of losing his kingdom as well:

¿Qué aguardáis temores míos,  
celos sin orden ni ley?  
No ha una hora apenas que reino,  
y cuando acaba un traidor  
de quitarme el ser y honor,  
¿me quita un muchacho el reino? (203a)<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, there are three reasons why it is appropriate to consider this play as a wife murder. First, we know from the history of Herod that he did kill her. Second, the play doesn't specifically say that he does not have her killed. Third, there are many references in the final scenes to a general bloodletting, such as the statements, "Hidrôpico estoy de sangre," and "Mueran todos, pues que muero." (206a)

Nevertheless, despite the lack of focus on the death of Mariadnes as the climax of the play, Herod's relationship with Mariadnes parallels in many respects those of other husbands with the wives they sentence to death.

Consider briefly the following familiar plot elements. Herod falls in love with the beauty of Mariadnes when he sees her portrait (175b-176a).<sup>6</sup> She, however, is the fiancée of his brother, Faseló, and Herodes sets out to steal her away from him (176b-77a). Mariadnes falls from a horse and Herodes happens to be in exactly the right spot to rescue her (181a-82b).<sup>7</sup> Eventually, he wins her love, the honor of both fathers is satisfied, and Herodes and Mariadnes marry (191a-92a). Faseló, of course, is outraged and, to get even, Faseló allies himself with Mark Anthony, Herodes's enemy (192a-b). Anthony also finds Mariadnes' beauty irresistible, and he asks Faseló to arrest Herodes and bring his wife to him (192b-193). Instead, Faseló imprisons the two lovers and their fathers. Herodes cannot stand the thought of his beloved in his brother's arms, so he makes his friend Josefo promise to kill Mariadnes if Herodes is killed (196a). Augustus arrives on the scene, has Faseló imprisoned, and makes Herodes King of Judea (197a-98a). Meanwhile, Salomé, Herodes' sister, is insulted that Mariadnes looks down on her lower social rank, and, in revenge, she sends an anonymous letter alleging that Mariadnes has been unfaithful to Herodes with Josefo (198b-200a).<sup>8</sup> Herodes' reaction to the letter is the standard

stuff of the wife-murder plays: he laments that something so precious and fragile as honor should be entrusted to someone so base and fickle as a woman.

. . . ¡que la honra que es suma  
de todo el valor y ser,  
la fíe de una mujer  
que es viento, sombra y espuma!  
¿Del humo vil, de la pluma,  
confianza se ha de hacer?  
¿Cómo ha de poder tener  
cargas del honor molestas  
una mujer flaca a cuestras,  
sin que le deje caer?<sup>9</sup> (199a)

Then he hides to try to find out if the allegations are true and overhears Mariadnes and Josefo practicing what Mariadnes will say when Herodes returns triumphant (201a-b). The words of love are meant for Herodes but, of course, he believes that his wife and friend are in fact lovers:

¡Vivo está Herodes, traidor,  
aunque por muerto le cuenta  
el honor que me has quitado!  
¡Torpe Flora, Herodes vive,  
que hoy en tu sangre apercibe  
lavar la honra que has manchado!<sup>10</sup> (201b)

He has the two seized and utters a threat of death:

Cerrad esas puertas todas,

llevadme de aquí esta infame,  
ninguno reina la llame,  
que el tálamo de sus bodas  
será un mortal cadahalso.  
Esté en el castillo presa. (202a)

There follows a soliloquy, a sonnet referring to his betrayal and comparing his honor to a "fortaleza abatida" (202a).<sup>11</sup>

For Herodes, the moral is clear:

¡Malhaya, amén, el hombre que confía  
de amigo avaro y de mujer ausente! (202a)

So far the plot is conventional for the dramas de honor. The only things missing are a speech in which Herodes logically tries to rationalize his actions,<sup>12</sup> and the actual death of the Mariadnes on stage. Considering the other, less likely plays mentioned in discussing wife murder, such as El mágico prodigioso and Fuenteovejuna,<sup>13</sup> it seems legitimate to ask why this one is conspicuously absent from these discussions.

Apart from the lack of focus on the death of Mariadnes as the climax of the play (which, by the way, is never mentioned as a reason for excluding it), it appears that there are two reasons for omitting this play. First is the separation of wife-murder plays into "honor" plays and "jealousy" plays. Thus, we encounter such statements as the following:

Existe, sin embargo, una profunda diferencia entre el drama de Tirso y los dramas calderonianos. Los

maridos de Calderón . . . son máquinas pensantes que actúan fríamente de acuerdo con principios y convenciones sociales, a las que se doblegan con inhumana impasibilidad. El Herodes de Tirso mata por celos, pero no por preocupaciones sociales sobre el honor, o, al menos en escasísima medida.<sup>14</sup>

Never mind the fact that Herodes' words, as we have seen, speak as much of honor as of jealousy, and that Calderon's protagonists speak often of jealousy as they try to convince us and themselves that their actions are not jealous revenge. Moreover, for the wives it doesn't matter a bit whether the cause of her death is her husband's jealousy or her husband's desire for honorable revenge; she is quite as dead.

Second is the tendency to limit the discussion of dramas de honor to the three famous plays by Calderón--El médico de su honra, El pintor de su deshonra, and A secreto agravio, secreta venganza. Time after time these three plays are held up as the "representativos dramas de honor," in the words of Angel Valbuena Briones.<sup>15</sup> This prejudice in favor of Calderón's three plays is so dominant that scarce attention is paid to other wife-murder plays except perhaps Lope's El castigo sin venganza and Los comendadores de Córdoba. Part of this limited focus is due to the self-limiting nature of articles that can at best deal with only a few plays, but I for one am suspicious when pronouncements about wife-murder plays, the comedia as a whole; and Spanish society in general

are based on the plots of three plays.<sup>16</sup> Tirso's play is not alone; also omitted are such plays as Lope's El buen vecino and El toledano vengado, Enríquez Gómez' A lo que obliga el honor, and even Calderón's El mayor monstruo los celos, among others. Some studies of Tirso's play do give a passing nod to the fact that it has to do with the wife-murder tradition, but they, of course, do not attempt a general study of wife-murder as a literary theme.<sup>17</sup>

At the risk of oversimplifying some excellent studies in literary criticism, the unresolved debate over the Calderonian plays often boils down to one assumption and two questions. The assumption is that the murder of the wife is the central element in the plays. The questions are, "Do these plays reflect Spanish sociology in the Golden Age?" and "Is Calderón for wife-murder or against it?" Of course, if these plays do not reflect a sociological fact, then Calderón's opinion about historical wife-murder is irrelevant, so much of the controversy involves the way in which we choose to interpret the plays.

There are two important influences underlying the arguments of those who take the position that the plays reflect the times: Américo Castro and his contention that we can learn about historical Spain by a direct knowledge of historical Spanish literature;<sup>18</sup> and Alexander A. Parker, whose ideas of morality and poetic justice have had significant influence on Spanish Golden Age letters in the past



forty years.<sup>19</sup> The two philosophies taken together produce the following syllogism: a) husbands murdered their unfaithful wives with the blessing of society in Medieval Renaissance, and Baroque Spain; b) the comedias were instruments of social order in which evil was always punished and good rewarded in a more or less direct fashion; c) therefore, when a husband kills his wife in a comedia, she deserved death for some sin or shortcoming. Of course, this syllogism does not preclude some punishment for the husband, but such punishment does not exist in every play.

In Tirso's drama, the action is historical, and definitely non-Spanish. To say that Tirso selected the subject matter because of its relevance to Spanish customs of the day would imply that the same was true of the other authors to treat this material in different countries, unless we believe that Spanish playwrights were unique in the way that they chose the sources for their plays. In fact, if anything, the universality of the subject matter would seem to provide substantial evidence in support of the Spanish national theater as part of the general development of drama in Baroque Europe.<sup>20</sup> But to be fair, even if its widespread popularity disproves the notion of something peculiarly Spanish about the plot, it is still possible that Tirso chose the murder of Mariadnes to demonstrate a particular moral lesson useful to a Spanish audience.

Parker states that Mariadne is responsible for her own

death in Calderon's version.<sup>21</sup> She returned to Octaviano his dagger and unknowingly allowed the rest of the ill-fated events to come to pass. Even if we accept such direct responsibility on Mariadne's part, in Tirso's version there is no such scene with a dagger. Instead, if we undertake a study of the chains of cause and effect, we come to the following conclusions:

- 1) Herodes should not have broken up the engagement between Mariadnes and his brother Faseló and he should not have married Mariadnes;
- 2) Mariadnes should not have treated Salomé condescendingly knowing that Salomé, in revenge, would spread lies about her honor, and she should not have rehearsed with Josefo the nice things she wanted to tell Herodes upon his return;
- 3) Herodes should not have been such a compulsive, suspicious, and bloodthirsty person. Herodes does go crazy and his life is in ruins about him, so we can say that he is punished for his errors. But in the case of Mariadnes, either we can assume that she is punished for scorning Salomé or for rehearsing her lines with Josefo; or we can admit that she is the unfortunate victim of circumstance and her husband's ill temper. Haughtiness simply does not seem to me to merit the death penalty; if anyone should have been punished, it should have been the calumniator, Salomé. Moreover, there is absolutely no textual evidence to support any moral with regard to Mariadnes' actions. Indeed, the death of Mariadnes is not the climax of the play. The event for which we have been prepared through the first two and one-half acts, namely the

murder of Mariadnes, is swept aside as unimportant compared to the massive bloodletting that takes place as Herodes tries to kill the prophesied King of the Jews. What we have is a shocking tale of one man's aspirations, and the horror he unleashes when those ambitions are dashed. The only poetic justice here is that Herodes dies from madness. In his wake, Mariadnes is merely a victim.

Fortune is an important concept in this play and in many other comedias. If one considers all references to "fortuna," "ventura," "suerte," "acaso," "cielos," and the like, such words appear practically on every page. Because of the repeated mention of fortune, it is hard to know if it is being used merely as a figure of speech, as in the exclamation, "¡Cielos! ¿Qué es esto que miro?", or if it is to be taken as an integral part of the thematic structure of the play, or both, implying that symbol depletion through repetition did not trivialize the symbol depleted. Regardless, the instances of references to fortune that do not appear to reflect automatic speech are still of a great enough number to be significant to the plot. All events, good or bad, that relate to love, honor, and the other "bienes de la fortuna," are ascribed to fortune, from the opening scene announcing the proposed marriage between Faseló and Mariadnes (173a), to Herodes' "¡Ay suerte infelice!" as he orders Mariadnes and Josefo to be imprisoned (202a). Because characters have so little control over fortune, much of what happens is accidental

Herodes' seeing a painting of Mariadnes, his being at just the right place at the right time to rescue Mariadnes and later to overhear (and misunderstand) the conversation between Mariadnes and Josefo, etc.

Nevertheless, Herodes, just as other characters in the comedia, attempts to overcome fortune. In this case, Herodes' attempt to alter the course of events has dire consequences for a great many people. On a larger scale, the conflict between fortune and free will is one of the most common dramatic situations in the comedia. In Golden Age tragedies, and even in some comedies, fortune prevails. One result of the interest in discovering moral lessons has been the deemphasis of fortune as both poetic theme and dramatic device. Even Parker himself, in discussing El mayor monstruo los celos, included in his chains of causality many actions that he called "unwilled".<sup>22</sup> Such accidents and misfortunes, acazos as Calderón called them, abound in the comedia. Parker explains their existence in such moral plays by saying that, in fact, one of the most important morals of the comedia in general, is that people should be of such moral stuff that the vicissitudes of fortune cannot exert overwhelming influence in their lives.<sup>23</sup> Certainly the assestion is true for some plays in which the message is stated in the text.<sup>24</sup> Even in this play by Tirso, we could make a case supporting the idea that the catastrophes could have been avoided if Herodes had not exerted his will, or at least not in such a

negative way. But even here it should be noted that one character's willful action is another's misfortune. There are victims in life in the comedia; not every sequence of actions is reducible to quid pro quo poetic justice.

The evidence presented so far has tried to set forth the following assertions: 1) that Tirso's play is part of a broad literary heritage; 2) that there is no reason to assume that the story of Herodes and Mariadnes was intended to reflect Golden Age Spanish society; 3) that Mariadnes was a victim of circumstance and misfortune and that she, perhaps unlike other wives put to death, is above reproach in this case; 4) that the poetic justice one would expect of a moral play is present here only in the case of Herodes, so it can hardly be considered an all-pervasive, all-encompassing dramatic force. The play is great drama because it focuses on problems, often created by the characters themselves, to which there are no totally satisfying answers, and it presents the dramatic conflict in accord with the Golden Age ideals of admiratio, irony, artificiality, and complexity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Lee Kennedy, "Tirso's La vida y muerte de Herodes: Its Date, Its Importance, and Its Debt to Mira's Theatre," Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 76 (1973), 121-25.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Marianna, see Marvin T. Herrick, Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 170-77; for discussion of the French versions, see Eugene Rigal, Alexandre Hardy et le théâtre français (Paris: 1889; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), pp. 333-57. Edward Friedman, "Dramatic Perspective in Calderón's El mayor monstruo los celos," Bulletin of the Comediantes, 26 (1975), 43-49, discusses the versions by Tristan and Calderón. A general study of the Herod-Mariamne motif can be found in Maurice Valency, The Tragedies of Herod and Mariamne (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> For a bibliography on Calderón's version, see the notes to Friedman's article cited in note 2 above.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Kennedy article cited above, there exists the following bibliography on La vida y muerte de Herodes: Sol Bonifaci, "Aproximaciones a Tirso," Estudios, 33 (1977), 153-93 and 497-530, and 34 (1978), 37-63; Frederick Fornoff, Tirso's Christmas Tragedy, "La vida y muerte de

Herodes" (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 1977); Esmeralda Gijón, "Concepto del honor y de la mujer en Tirso de Molina," Estudios, 5 (1949), 479-655; Alfonso López, "La sagrada Biblia en las obras de Tirso," Estudios, 5 (1949), 381-414; John G. Morton, "Aspects of Evil and Death in Eight Plays by Tirso de Molina," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1973), 4427-28a (Vanderbilt); André Nougué, "A Propos de l'auto-imitation dans le théâtre de Tirso de Molina," in Mélanges offerts à Marcel Bataillon (Bordeaux: Féret et fils, 1962), pp. 559-66, published as Bulletin Hispanique, 64 bis (1962); and Anita K. Stoll, "Thematic Development in the Biblical Plays of Tirso de Molina," Dissertation Abstracts, 33 (1972-73), 2396a (Case Western Reserve).

<sup>5</sup> All citations are from Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 9, pp. 173-207.

<sup>6</sup> The portrait as a dramatic device and convention has been studied by Myron Peyton, "The Retrato as Motif and Device in Lope de Vega," Romance Notes, 4 (1962), 51-57; E. George Erdman, Jr., "An Additional Note on the Retrato Motif in Lope," Romance Notes, 5 (1964), 183-86; and Mary Gaylord Randel, "The Portrait and Creation of Peribáñez," Romanische Forschungen, 85 (1973), 145-58. Randel makes clear the association between the portrait as icon and the idolatry of which it is the object.

<sup>7</sup> A fall is an age-old omen of misfortune to come and,

if the characters acted responsibly in every case, they might be especially on guard after such a foreboding. That Herodes happened along at that moment can only be ascribed to dramatic circumstance, not from any internal or external thematic motivation. Similar combinations of falls and chance meetings occur in Calderón's El médico de su honra.

<sup>8</sup> Salomé's motive is also part of Dolci's Marianna and Virués' La cruel Casandra.

<sup>9</sup> The lamentation of the weakness of women as the guardians of honor, and the associated metaphors of vidrio, paja, espuma, etc., were commonplace. Cf. Lope's La desdichada Estefanía, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 19, 100-101, and Calderón's El médico de su honra, ed. Angel Valbuena Briones (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1956), II, 74.

<sup>10</sup> The eavesdropping scene can be explained in many ways: 1) the husband, saying that he does not want to act rashly, vows to try to discover the truth, and he wants the entire affair to remain a secret so he hides in order to hear the truth; 2) the ironic situation doubles back on itself because the husband says what he is going to do is a good opportunity for a dramatic soliloquy. The scene is not uncommon in the wife-murder plays. See, for example, Vélez' Los celos hasta los cielos and Enríquez Gómez' A lo que obliga el honor.

<sup>11</sup> Other instances of the metaphor of honor as fortress occur in Calderón's A secreto agravio, secreta venganza, ed.,



Valbuena Briones, I, 75, and in Los comendadores de Córdoba, Lope de Vega, Obras escogidas, ed., Federico Sainz de Robles, 3d ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967), III, 1252b.

<sup>12</sup> The husband's soliloquy, in which he debates the pros and cons of his actions, appears rather late in the development of the wife-murder play. Henry Sullivan, Tirso de Molina and the Drama of the Counter Reformation (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), pp. 40-51, believes that these logical exercises are a direct result of the rise of probabilism in Spain, and that probabilism may also account for the bizarre nature of many comedias.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Jorg Neuschafer, "El triste drama del honor: Formas de crítica ideológica en el teatro de honor de Calderón," in Hacia Calderón. Segundo coloquio anglo-germano, ed., Hans Flasche (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), pp. 89-108; and D. C. Stuart, "Honor in the Spanish Drama," Romanic Review, 1 (1910), 247-58 and 357-66.

<sup>14</sup> Juan Luis Alborg, Historia de la literatura española. Epoca barroca, 2d ed. (Madrid: Gredos, 1977), 423n.

<sup>15</sup> "Prólogo," I, xxxviii-ix.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., for example, Casa, pp. 20-21: "The human condition is such that it continuously places before us harsh alternatives requiring a choice that carries with it an inevitable physical, or moral loss . . . The honor plays represent a fictional formulation of this dilemma and, unless

we seek to reduce the image of man, they must be seen as an important step in the long process of affirming the dignity of man."

<sup>17</sup> Kennedy, pp. 135-36: "What is more, Herod was as jealous and as ready to take vengeance against his wife's infidelity as the most pundonoresque husband from the pages of a Lopean drama of conjugal honor . . . Yet the story of Herod and Mariadnes, as outlined by Josephus, carried within itself all the evils of the honor code."

<sup>18</sup> De la edad conflictiva, 4th ed. (Madrid: Taurus, 1976), pp. 30-31. See also Angel Valbuena Briones, "Prólogo": Jenaro Artiles, "La idea de la venganza en el drama español del siglo XVII," Segismundo, 3 (1967), 9-38. In opposition are C. A. Jones, "Spanish Honour as Historical Phenomenon, Convention and Artistic Motive," Hispanic Review, 33 (1965), 32-39; and also by Jones, "Honor in Spanish Golden-Age Drama: Its Relation to Real Life and to Morals," Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, 35 (1958), 199-210; Frank P. Casa, "Honor and the Wife-Killers of Calderón," Bulletin of the Comediantes, 29 (1977), 11; Bruce Golden, "Calderón's Tragedies of Honor: Topoi, Emblem and Action in the Popular Theater of the Siglo de Oro," Renaissance Drama, n.s. 3 (1970), 239-262. Those who assert that Calderón championed the wife-murders in these plays include Castro, "Algunas observaciones acerca del concepto del honor en los siglos XVI y XVII," Revista de Filología Española, 3 (1916), 1-50 and 357-86; and Ramón Menéndez

Pidal, "Del honor en nuestro teatro clásico," in De Cervantes y Lope de Vega, 2d. ed. (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1943), pp. 139-66. For an example of those who believe that Calderón was criticizing the honor-bound actions of the husbands include E. M. Wilson, Spanish and English Literature of the 16th and 17th Centuries (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 64, 202.

<sup>19</sup> The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age, Diamante series, No. 6 (London: The Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Councils, 1957); rpt. The Drama Review, 4 (1959), 42-59. A revision was published as "The Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Method of Analysis and Interpretation," in The Great Playwrights, ed., Eric Bentley (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), I, 679-707.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Eric Bentley, "The Universality of the Comedia," Hispanic Review, 38 (1970), 147-62.

<sup>21</sup> Parker, "Prediction," pp. 190-92.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 187-89.

<sup>23</sup> "Towards a Definition of Calderonian Tragedy," Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, 3 (1962), 233.

<sup>24</sup> As, for example, in La vida es sueño, ed., Ciriaco Morón (Madrid: Cátedra, 1977):

Mas sea verdad o sueño,  
obrar bien es lo que importa;  
si fuere verdad, por serlo;

si no, por ganar amigos  
para cuando despertamos. (2422-27)  
. . . La fortuna no se vence  
con injusticia y venganza,  
porque antes se incita más;  
y así, quien vencer aguarda  
a su fortuna, ha de ser  
con cordura y con templanza. (3213-19)

<sup>25</sup> Those who favor admiratio, irony, artificiality, and complexity as more important motivating forces of the comedia include Bruce W. Wardropper, "The Implicit Craft of the Comedia," in Studies in Spanish Literature of the Golden Age Presented to E. M. Wilson, ed., R. O. Jones (London: Tamesis, 1973), pp. 339-56; James A. Parr, "An Essay on Critical Method, Applied to the Comedia," Hispania, 57 (1974), 434-44; and Golden.