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Repository Citation

Stroud, M. D. (1994). Rivalry and violence in Lope's *El castigo sin verganza*. In C. Ganelin & H. Mancing (Ed.), *The golden age comedia: Text, theory, and performance* (pp. 37-47). Purdue University Press.

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Matthew D. Stroud



Rivalry and Violence in Lope's

El castigo sin venganza

Cesáreo Bandera published *Mimesis conflictiva* in 1975, at least a decade ahead of its time in terms of its reception by the *comediantes*. Using the ideas of René Girard, Bandera focuses primarily on *Don Quixote*, but a significant section of the monograph is devoted to a discussion of *La vida es sueño*. His discussion is wide ranging, dealing with the relationship between subject and object; the nature of, and processes surrounding, the sacrificial victim; the necessary relationship between truth, violence, civilization, reason, and illusion; the role of desire and (in)differentiation in rivalry; and the all-pervasive influence of the other in human relations. Unfortunately, Bandera's book and his approach to the *comedia* have been largely ignored or vitiated as unable to account for every detail in the play. Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo accuses Bandera (along with Freud and Derrida) of trying "to find a radical principle or a radical reality out of which the rest of things would become meaningful" (85), dismissing most of Bandera's arguments with the statement that literature "cannot be approached only from this point of view" (79). Not only is this assertion unfair to Bandera's work, which in no way excludes the possibility of multiple approaches to the *comedia* or any other literary texts, but it also neglects the interesting perspective that Girard and Bandera have to offer. The purpose of this present study is to continue the discussion of Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, not with respect to *La vida es sueño* but rather to Lope's *El castigo sin venganza*. Considering the nature of Girard's ideas regarding the relationship among sex, violence, the sacred, rivalry, and the double bind, his study would seem to have a natural association not just to this *comedia* but to the wife-murder plays in general.

Let us begin with Girard's observation that "sexuality is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious communities" (35). The entire plot

of Lope's masterpiece revolves around the relationship between sex and violence. So that political violence will not erupt when he dies, the Duke of Ferrara weds Casandra to produce legitimate heirs (676–81).¹ After only one night with Casandra in an entire month, the Duke, a notorious womanizer, abandons her (1034–43). To get even, Casandra resorts to the violence at her disposal. First, she promises that she will bear no heirs for the Duke (1109), then she decides to seduce the Duke's illegitimate son, Federico (1811–25). The two have a sexual relationship while the Duke is away in the service of the pope (during which he is said to have had a religious conversion [2351–63]). When he returns, he discovers the adultery. To punish the lovers, he has Federico kill Casandra as an enemy of the state (2927–53), then he orders his soldiers to kill Federico for murdering Casandra (2981–87). The Duke's sexual habits provoke the revenge of Casandra's sexual liaison with Federico, which results in the final violence.

As with any love triangle, this plot involves rivalry. Girard's thoughts provide an interesting description of the situation of these characters: "Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it.*"² The Duke of Ferrara demonstrates his lack of interest in Casandra by abandoning her and returning to his nightly debauchery. When he learns, however, that Federico and Casandra are having an affair, he responds quickly and violently. He once again asserts his role as husband, and, even though he did not care much for her before, he cannot allow the illicit relationship to continue. The Duke's desire is quite different from that of Federico and is, in fact, much more political than erotic—he asserts his domination over Casandra in order to forestall the threat she has become to the duchy.

Girard continues, "Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus, mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict" (145–46). In other words, rivalry leads to violence because violence is a direct consequence of a loss of difference, that is, a loss of distinctions in identification necessary to the proper functioning of social institutions and taboos.³ In the case of adultery, for example, the husband loses his distinction as the wife's sex partner when the other man assumes that role. Additionally, *El castigo sin venganza* presents another, more socially unacceptable loss of difference, that between parent and child; the sin of adultery is compounded by the sin of incest.⁴ Not only is the difference erased between insider (the Duke, the husband) and outsider

(Federico, the other man) but also the difference between father and son (both identifications based upon sex roles).

One of the ironies of the father-son rivalry is that, in large part, Federico is merely following in his father's footsteps. Cintia, remarking on the inappropriateness of the Duke's womanizing, clearly compares the actions of the father and his son: "si en Federico fuera / libertad, ¿qué fuera en él?" (119–20). Even more to the point, Casandra tells the Duke that Federico was "un retrato vucstro" (2656) during the Duke's absence, ironically referring to the illicit sexual habits of both father and son. A clear indication of the loss of difference occasioned by the illicit love affair is the statement by the Duke: "De que la llame madre / se corre, y dice bien, pues es su amiga / la mujer de su padre, / y no es justo que ya madre se diga" (2624–27).

Even the *gracioso* comments on Federico's loss of identification when he refers to him as a hermaphrodite, suspended as he is between life and death (1216–22), a description that we may easily extend to Federico's dilemma between acting on impulse (as his father has done) and restraining the sexual urge that threatens himself, his father, his stepmother, the state, and the institution of marriage. Finally, Federico's statement, "Yo me olvido de ser hombre" (2215), is significantly ambiguous. It could mean that he has lost his human reason, he has been made cowardly by the return of the Duke, or he has forgotten his role as illegitimate son.

Federico's dilemma between lust and duty, between being a good son and following his father's example, is symptomatic of Girard's concept of the double bind: "Man cannot respond to that universal human injunction, 'Imitate me!' without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder: 'Don't imitate me!' (which really means, 'Do not appropriate *my* object!')" (147). On many occasions, he has wanted to be like his father, as when he wanted to go to battle with the Duke (1695–99). Also, whether he admits it or not, he wants to assume his father's role with the father's wife. In neither case is it permissible. The double bind produces in Federico a great melancholy of frustration and confusion (958–64, 1197–1215), which is typical of Federico's lackluster character.

The Duke, as the aggrieved husband, is placed in his own double bind—he can allow the treason to go unpunished to the detriment of the state, or he can kill the two people he loves the most. More than for Casandra, it is for Federico that he grieves as he prepares the deaths of the lovers: "dar la muerte a un hijo, / ¿qué

corazón no desmaya? / Sólo de pensarlo ¡ay triste! / tiembla el cuerpo, expira el alma, / lloran los ojos, la sangre / muere en las venas heladas” (2868–73). Of course, he chooses action over inaction, violence over passivity, but it is at the great cost of destroying his own image, his own “retrato.”

Thus, violence is the result of the rivalry in the play, but the Duke seems aware, at least at some level, of the nature of violence and its ability to go beyond the bounds of its original purpose. Again according to Girard, violence can be good or bad (115). Good violence is generative and fulfills a necessary function in the maintenance of the society; bad violence is reciprocal. Objectively, there is no difference between good and bad violence, from which we derive a basic irony inherent in all the ambiguous wife-murder plays: a sacrifice is both a sacred obligation and a criminal act at the same time (Girard, 1, 40); it is precisely the controlled execution of violence that allows society to avoid a crisis. So beneficial is good violence that it can even be considered an act of piety or devotion (Girard, 298, citing Gernet, 326–27). In order to avoid reciprocal violence, the Duke must carry out his punishment according to the precepts of the sacred, and he attempts to convince us that his actions are good violence (justice: for the sake of the state) rather than bad (revenge: for personal reasons).⁵

The sacred is a dehumanized and external force that alone is capable of changing bad violence into good violence, and it functions with the approval of society (Girard, 30–31). In other words, the sacred is simply socially acceptable violence. Indeed, without nominal unanimity, sacrificial violence deteriorates into reciprocity. The sacrificial rite is a sacred obligation; the wishes of the individual are clearly inferior to the demands of the society. Because of its inherent violence (both good and bad), the sacred is desirable and fearful at the same time (Girard, 267). As a consequence of the nature of the sacred (eliciting both devotion and terror), societies that revere the sacred are extremely conservative (Girard, 134, 282). The sacred in *El castigo sin venganza*, as invoked by the Duke, is the combination of honor, the authority of the state, and divine sanction. Of great dramatic interest is the fact that all three come to be embodied in the personage of the Duke.

Honor represents a system of codified actions that clearly favors the society over the individual: honor is more important than life itself, regardless of the particular life in question.⁶ Honor is an all-pervasive force in the play, rarely mentioned before act 2 but, due to the nature of sex and its accompanying violence,

always close at hand. Honor alone, however, is not impersonal enough to avoid reciprocity, and revenge is the term most often associated with violence in the name of honor, as we can see in the titles of plays such as *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, *La venganza honrosa*, and *La mayor venganza de honor*.

For the Duke, honor is judge, sentence, and executioner (1746–47). Typical of those who administer sacred violence, the Duke both accepts his duty and condemns the necessity, calling honor a fierce enemy (2811). In the soliloquy in which the Duke laments this turn of events and tries to discover why and how he has been put in this position, his arguments clearly revolve around the ideas of good and bad violence, but he calls them “punishment” and “revenge” (2545). He separates his roles as father (with its attendant political authority to punish) and aggrieved husband (with its imperative to avenge the dishonor). Because he is the embodiment of law and order, there is no external legal system to which he can refer the matter; he alone must decide. His decision is to act as a punishing father rather than to take a husband’s revenge, which would be a sin against heaven:

Noes venganza de mi agravio;
 que yo no quiero tomarla
 en vuestra ofensa, y de un hijo
 ya fuera bárbara hazaña.
 Este ha de ser un castigo
 vuestro no más, porque valga
 para que perdone el cielo
 el rigor por la templanza.
 Seré padre y no marido,
 dando la justicia santa
 a un pecado sin vergüenza
 un castigo sin venganza. (2838–49)⁷

Thus the Duke adds to his arguments his claim to be acting as an instrument of heaven, making the deaths of the lovers satisfy, in one action, the demands of divine justice, parental authority, and honorable revenge (he will still make some of his motives for violence secret, just to be sure [2850–57]). Whether the actions reflect *castigo* or *venganza*, of course, the violence is the same; only the reasons for it change.

The effect of having the cause of the violence exterior to people themselves is that the violence can be seen as unanimous rather than the idiosyncratic deed of an individual. The Duke is, as he sees it, only upholding the prohibitions of the sacred; and in discharging the sentence, he enlists his soldiers, anonymous men whose task it is to carry out orders without question or personal involvement. The Duke as father is the authority figure; to disobey would be treason and could threaten the very foundations of the society. In addition, upholding the law is a positive reinforcement of the social *status quo*; as an instrument of impersonal justice (even though he himself is the incarnation of that justice), the Duke can renounce personal blame for his actions and include himself in the unanimous, restored society that will exist after the executions have taken place.⁸

Another function of the sacred is that it hides the true workings of violence from the members of society. The Duke, who takes on the role of honor's instrument, confesses that he does not understand the nature of the blood expiation:

¡Ay, honor, fiero enemigo!
 ¿Quién fue el primero que dio
 tu ley al mundo? ¡Y que fuese
 mujer quien en sí tuviese
 tu valor, y el hombre no!
 Pues sin culpa el más honrado
 te puede perder, honor,
 bárbaro legislador
 fue tu inventor, no letrado. (2811–19)

The perpetrators of revenge frequently decide to keep their violence secret or lie about its true nature, and the Duke is no exception. Ostensibly, such secrecy keeps the original dishonor from public notice, thus saving the reputation of the husband. As a side effect, the secrecy also keeps the violence from becoming reciprocal (Hesse, 203–10). The concealment of true motives also allows the Duke to perpetrate a falsehood regarding the deaths of the two lovers. A leitmotiv throughout the play is that Federico's unhappiness stems from his loss of inheritance rather than from the love triangle. No one wants to investigate other possible causes of his melancholy. It is easier for society to ascribe his dilemma to a non-sexual—and therefore nontaboo—reason, financial and political interests. This

pretense is carried through to its conclusion, even when the Duke has found out the truth. The public reason for the death of Casandra is that she was a traitor to the state; for Federico, that he killed his mother because of his inheritance (2927–45, 2981–86).

It is in large part the nature of the sacrificial victim that determines whether the violence perpetrated will be considered good or bad. The sacrificial victim, the *pharmakos*, has a dual nature. On the one hand, he is the object of scorn, insult, and violence, and he is weighed down with guilt; on the other hand, he is surrounded with a quasi-religious aura of veneration—he has become a sort of cult object. Moreover, to insure that the ritual violence will not escalate into reciprocal violence, the ritual victim tends to be chosen from groups marginal to society (Girard, 12–13, 271). Such is the status of women in the society depicted in this play; they are both hated and idolized. Throughout the play, women are referred to as untrustworthy (1171–72, 2932) and traitorous (1726, 1845) and are compared to ferocious lions (296–303), sirens (2016), and enchantresses (38–39). Women are also compared to the sun (1442–44, 1628), angels (36, 2597), flowers (625–43), and objects of idolatry (1731–32) and are described as celestial (1861). Women are by no means trivial, since they are both the guardians of reproduction of the human race in their role as mother and are repositories of men's honor in their roles as wife, daughter, and sister. However, they are not central to male society outside of those two roles. It is of interest that the Duke grieves the death of Federico; he hardly even mentions Casandra's. As a wife, she is her husband's property and therefore suitably marginal to the society, so that her death, carried out according to the precepts of the sacred, will not cause social collapse.

Because people do not understand the true nature of violent unanimity, they naturally examine the victims to determine whether they are somehow responsible for their own violent deaths (Girard, 85). As the Duke says of Federico: “pagó la maldad que hizo / por heredarme” (3016–17). The *pharmakos*, the threatening force, has been driven out, and the stage society achieves catharsis, a concept that Girard defines as the “mysterious benefits that accrue to the community upon the death of a human *katharma* or *pharmakos*” (287). From the deaths of Casandra and Federico comes a strengthening of social institutions. Aurora and the Marqués will marry, thus completing the tragedy-comedy cycle of death and regeneration and achieving Arnold Reichenberger's “order restored” (307).

Batín tells us in the final speech that we are to take what we have seen as an example. Tragedy, according to Girard, is in itself an intermediary “between the ritual performance and the spontaneous model that the ritual attempts to reproduce” (132). As with the sacred, violence in tragedy is impersonal and operates without regard to other concepts of good and bad (Girard, 47, 204). It is to be hoped that, just as in the primitive rite, “the spectators will be purged of their passions and provoke a new katharsis, both individual and collective. . . . Every true work of art might be said to partake of the initiatory process in that it forces itself upon the motions, offers intimations of violence, and instills a respect for the power of violence; that is, it promotes prudence and discourages hubris” (Girard, 290, 291–92). In other words, it is Batín’s “ejemplo.”

There is one principal obstacle to the direct application of Girard’s theories of tragedy to Lope’s play: *El castigo sin venganza* is not a tragedy in an Aristotelian sense. Girard notes that in tragedy, the responsibility for what happens is evenly distributed among all (77). What Lope’s play lacks is the concentration in a single individual of the traits of both protagonist and victim. In other words, there is no tragic hero here in the sense that Oedipus is one. Because of the status of Federico and Casandra as (illegitimate) son and wife, there is disagreement concerning their appropriateness as sacrificial victims and concerning the benefits that accrue to society by their deaths. In Aristotelian tragedy, the spectator tends to divide the tragedy and characters into categories of good and bad, focusing on the extremes rather than the nature of the conflict itself (Girard, 149). Here, where there is much less unanimity regarding the validity of the sacrifice, spectators and critics alike vary greatly in their interpretations depending upon individual differences of opinion about the roles of Casandra and Federico in the society.

The debate over the meaning of the play (e.g., is this a moral example or a shocking illustration of violence and perversity?) hinges in large part on whether one agrees that the Duke’s violence has indeed been purified and made socially good. Is the Duke really acting only as an impartial judge? Are the deaths of Casandra and Federico likely to reunite the society? What happens after the curtain falls? Those who are outraged, such as Morris, Pring-Mill, and May, see the Duke’s actions as less than pure: he may indeed be the Duke, but he is also a jealous husband whose own actions cast suspicions on his legitimacy as an authority. Others, including Alonso, Kossoff, and Nichols, assert that the Duke has

a legitimate responsibility to the state and believe that he has truly replaced jealous revenge with pious justice. There is in both arguments a separation of characters into good and bad. It is the nature of Golden Age drama, however, to present characters who share responsibility for the actions.⁹ As Edward M. Wilson stated, they are all bad (292). Bandera notes that with regard to the plays of Calderón, although we may have a desire to establish fixed boundaries, Calderón fully recognizes the danger inherent in such oversimplification and prefers twilight (259). In a sense, the lack of a clear dichotomy between good and bad is what makes this play a masterpiece worthy of study again and again. There is no single, correct interpretation; each spectator and critic is called upon to judge the validity of the sacrifice on an individual basis.

Notes

1. All references are to line numbers in Kossoff's edition of *El castigo sin venganza* (Vega Carpio 1970).

2. Girard, 146. A psychoanalytic basis for Girard's assertion can be found in the writings of Jacques Lacan (1–29), especially in "The Mirror Stage" and "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis." For Lacan, rivalry is the manifestation of the desire for the object of the other's desire, thus implicating the triangle of others, the ego, and the object (19). It is in the mirror stage, through which all must pass between six and eighteen months of age, that the subject's ego is constituted through its relation to the Other and to others. One of its effects, according to Anika Lemaire, is "the constitutional aggressivity of the human being who must always win his place at the expense of the other, and either impose himself on the other or be annihilated himself" (179). By way of example, Lacan cites St. Augustine: "Vidi ego et expertus sum zelantem parvulum: nondum loquebatur et intuebatur pallidus amaro aspectu conlactaneum suum" (20) ["I have seen with my own eyes and known very well an infant in the grip of jealousy: he could not yet speak, and already he observed his foster-brother, pale and with an envenomed stare" (Sheridan trans.)].

3. Girard, 57–58, 146–47, 169, 180, 281.

4. At that time, sex between a son and a stepmother was considered incest. See Wilson, 278.

5. Anthony Wilden notes that violence always accompanies civilization (481). It occurs in the name of education, of rationality, of science, of culture, or of order, and we justify it as a defense against aggressivity coming from those we control. For Juliet Flower MacCannell, the civilization that is promised as the solution for primal violence is itself the source of aggression; it is "uncivilized" (73).

6. Cf. Lope's *Porfiar hasta morir* (719a): "Creo / si ya he vengado mi honor, / que estimo la muerte menos." For general overviews and bibliographies regarding honor in the *comedia*, see Castro, 1–50, 357–86; and Artiles, 235–41.

7. The meaning of lines 2844–45 is open to debate; see Dixon and Parker, 157–66. That revenge was a sin was well known in the Golden Age and caused an ongoing conflict in the drama between what was honorable (revenge) and what was moral (mercy or punishment). See Dunn, 24–60.

8. Parker believes that the Duke ultimately suffers a punishment of frustration for his actions. He may be part of the surviving society, according to Parker, but he pays dearly for it (1970, 698).

9. The idea of shared responsibility for tragedy was discussed in relation to the plays of Calderón by Parker (1962, 222–37).

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