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Pedro Calderón de la Barca

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PEDRO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA

(1600–1681)

Matthew D. Stroud

BIOGRAPHY

Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca was born on January 17, 1600, to parents of noble lineage. Although little is known of the early years of his life, it has been determined that Calderón attended the Jesuit Colegio Imperial in Madrid from about 1608 to about 1613. His mother died in 1610, after which his brother Diego left abruptly for Mexico, his sister Dorotea entered a convent, and his youngest sister Antonia went to live with her grandmother. In 1614, Pedro entered the University of Alcalá, and in 1615, after the death of his father, he went to study at the University of Salamanca, where he obtained a degree in canonical law in 1620. Soon after, Pedro, with his brothers Diego and José, was allegedly involved in a murder case, but all three of them were let off with a fine of 600 ducats. His first play to be performed in Madrid was *Amor, honor y poder* in 1623. The details of his activities between 1623 and 1635 are quite sketchy, but in 1629 he was implicated in another scandal in which one of his brothers was stabbed, and Calderón, over the protests of the nuns, entered a convent where the perpetrator was alleged to be hiding. Later he would be received into the Order of Santiago and fight a war in Cataluña in 1641. The years 1630 to 1650 mark the high point of Calderón's literary output in the public theaters, or *corrales*, followed by his most intense production of court spectacle plays. In 1651 he was ordained a priest and moved to Toledo, returning to Madrid in 1656, living at court until his death on May 25, 1681.

The literary career of the young poet was launched by the competitions from 1620 to 1622 in honor of the patron saint of Madrid, San Isidro, during which he earned the praise of the preeminent literary figure of the day, Lope de Vega. Calderón's poetry, coming as it did at the culmination of the baroque in Spain, contains all the brilliance and the difficulty of the baroque style that he inherited and refined. Reflecting the baroque ideals of accumulation and virtuosity, his work is full of plays on words and wide and insistent use of such poetic devices as metaphor, simile, oxymoron, and catachresis. His imagery is vivid and ap-

peals to both sight and sound and uses contrasts in much the same way the painters of the day played with light and darkness in the techniques of *chiaroscuro* and *tenebrismo*. His cosmos is one of a perpetual conflict among the elements, among people, and among ideas. Although in general his philosophy is strongly scholastic, and decidedly un-Cartesian, there are frequent Erasmist touches in his approach to the human condition.

Calderón's principal contributions to the *comedia* were the philosophical and religious treatment of plot and character and the astonishing artistry of his poetry. Following the standards set by Lope de Vega, his *comedias* dealt typically with characters drawn from the nobility and their servants and were written in three acts and in verse, using diverse meters and rhymes. Calderón excelled at drawing individual characters even with standard types: the father, the *galán*, the *dama*, and the *gracioso*. He was able to weave strong main and secondary plots together with brilliant displays of *cultista* and *conceptista* poetry, while avoiding the danger of converting the stage into a venue for declamatory poetry. He frequently used soliloquies and long narratives in order to vary the pace of the plot and to ponder philosophical questions. Perhaps because he had the luxury of writing for the court theater, many of his plays incorporated music and extravagant staging using the most modern machinery available. According to Otis Green, Calderón's theater in many ways manifests the author's response to a demanding audience no longer satisfied with mere plot, character, and elegance. They demanded more paradoxes, more spectacle, more wit, and more displays of technical virtuosity, more *admiratio*, especially in the plays presented at court. At the same time, Calderón sought to present more than an interesting plot; his plays frequently reveal profound insights into the human condition. Not only was he the outstanding literary figure of his day, with his works appearing in two different publications of his collected plays, but his dramas remained popular for a century after his death.

DRAMATURGY: MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

For the most part, Calderón wrote three distinctly different types of plays. For the public *corrales*, he wrote *comedias* typical of the genre: works full of intrigue dealing with the principal themes of love, honor, death, and faith. Among his most famous works of this type are three *capa y espada* plays, *La dama duende*, *El alcalde de Zalamea*, and *El médico de su honra*, along with a saint play, *El príncipe constante*. In *El alcalde de Zalamea*, a reworking of a previous play of the same name by Lope de Vega, the honor of the villagers of Zalamea is at stake when a military noble, a captain, enters the town and rapes the mayor's daughter. Intrigue here is played not for comic effect but for the seriousness of the attack on the human dignity of the villagers. The play has a happy ending in that the noble is condemned to death, the king approves the fate of the captain and the actions of the local residents, and harmony is restored to Zalamea. *La dama duende* is a comic story of misidentification in which

Manuel, a friend of Juan, stays at the latter's house with his brother, Luis, and his sister, Inés. Inés, the sprite of the title, is not content to be kept prisoner in her own house by her brothers, who are intent on guarding her honor at all cost. Not only does she go out in disguise (and unintentionally inflame the passion of her own brother, who does not recognize her), but she discovers a secret passageway into Manuel's room, through which she enters and becomes a "phantom lady." The various serious plotlines, veering on incest and death, are resolved in the traditional comic fashion with the marriage of Manuel and Inés. *El príncipe constante* is both historical account of the invasion of Morocco by the Portuguese King Sebastian (whose defeat ultimately led to the unification of Spain and Portugal under Philip II in 1580) and a study in martyrdom that turns on their heads the ideas of honor and virtue seen in his other plays. Fernando, unlike the other nobles who bristle at the merest slight, embraces his humiliation when he is captured by the Moroccan king. As a Christian, he offers his honor and his life rather than surrender Ceuta to the infidel. The more the enemy king punishes him, the greater is his glory until he finally expires and becomes a spirit leading the Christian forces.

El médico de su honra deserves a bit more attention because it represents an unusual subgenre of *comedia*, that of the wife-murder play. As in *El pintor de su deshonra* and *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, *El médico de su honra* depicts the death of a technically innocent wife in order to protect the husband's honor. Gutierre, the husband of Mencía, suspects that his wife is still involved with an old flame, Prince Enrique. He is quite wrong, and Mencía does everything in her power to avoid even the merest suspicion of wrongdoing, but he is so driven by his jealousy and his punctilious sense of honor that he causes his wife to be killed. The king, who knows the real story, accepts Gutierre's fiction that Mencía died through no fault of his own and weds him to Leonor, the woman whom he had previously jilted. Because of its extraordinarily uncertain internal moral compass, this play, as well as Calderón's other wife-murder plays (including *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* and *El pintor de su deshonra*), has provoked a great deal of critical speculation over Calderón's point in writing them. Does he approve of the husband's actions, thereby allowing all the husbands to remarry at the end? Does he disapprove, as shown by the fact that all the women are technically innocent, highlighting the irony of their needless deaths? Or does he see in these ambiguous plots great dramatic potential, made even more astonishing by the murkiness of the moral lesson? The plays themselves do not allow for a final critical conclusion, which may be one of the reasons for their enduring interest.

After his appointment as court dramatist, Calderón wrote plays to be performed either at the Royal Palace or at the Coliseo in Buen Retiro Palace. Unlike the public plays, all these works are based on mythological stories and make significant use of Italianate staging with perspective scenery, sumptuous costumes, and music. At least two of the plays, *Celos aun del aire matan* and *La púrpura de la rosa*, were fully sung. Typical of the genre is *El mayor encanto*

amor, based the story of Ulysses and Circe and the first of Calderón's plays produced in the new Coliseo del Buen Retiro. Taking full advantage of the setting of the new palace, Calderón produced a festival of music, spectacle, and poetry that opens with a storm at sea and ends with the formative eruptions of Mount Aetna. Although Circe is able to enchant his men quite easily, Ulysses is not as susceptible to her charms, thanks, in part, to the help he repeatedly receives from Juno, as well as his own greater stature as epic hero. Most of the play revolves around the love duet between Circe and Ulysses, neither of whom is willing to declare the love that they apparently feel for each other. There are numerous games, riddles, and dissimulations, including an attack by a simulated army that causes Ulysses to leave Circe in the company of his rival, Arsidas. Ulysses finally confesses his love for her in the form of a story about a hunt for herons. His men, fearing that he will stay on the island forever, place Achilles' armor next to him while he sleeps, and the strength of the Greek warrior gives Ulysses renewed resolve to get on his way back home. Circe tries to bring him back, but Ulysses, again with divine protection, escapes. Circe, forlorn and overcome, sinks herself and her island into the sea, giving rise to the formation of Mount Aetna. Typical of these court extravaganzas, the familiar plot elements take a secondary role to the artistry of the poetry and the spectacular effects of the lavish productions.

The final dramatic genre in which Calderón distinguished himself was the *auto sacramental*, a one-act allegorical play performed on Corpus Christi day. In some cases Calderón recast his secular plays, such as *La vida es sueño* and *El pintor de su deshonra*, in the form of *autos*. In others, such as *La cena del Rey Baltazar*, he used either biblical or ideological material. In *El gran teatro del mundo*, Calderón's most famous *auto*, the characters are assigned roles by the director at the beginning of the play, and they act out the behaviors of their respective roles. At the end of the play, they return their costumes and end the play as equals. On the allegorical level, the director is God, and the characters include the world, Mundo, as well as human beings (Rey, Labrador, Pobre), human attributes (Hermosura, Discreción), and religious doctrine (La Ley de Gracia). When God ends the play of life, each character dies equal to all the others. As in all the *autos*, the moral is explicit: life is short, its pleasures are illusory and fleeting, and one must always do good in order to achieve the ultimate reward in heaven.

La vida es sueño

Without any doubt, Calderón's most famous play is *La vida es sueño*, or *Life is a Dream*. Not only does it occupy an almost unique position within Spanish literature, but it is one of the few Spanish works to be universally included in the canon of world literature. Written for the public theaters, it is one of Calderón's most philosophical pieces, but it abandons neither the strong plotting

and interesting intrigues nor the themes of love, honor, and death found elsewhere in his theater. Essentially, *La vida es sueño* is the story of two people in search of their fathers. Segismundo is the son of Basilio, the King of Poland, but he does not know that at the opening of the play. His father interpreted the omens surrounding Segismundo's birth, including the death of his mother, to mean that Segismundo would be a tyrannical ruler and that Poland would be better off without him. Basilio did not have him killed, however, but imprisoned him in a tower with a tutor, Clotaldo, who is the only human being with whom the Prince has had contact until Rosaura and her servant Clarín stumble upon his hidden prison.

Rosaura has been deflowered and jilted by Astolfo, the Duke of Moscovy. Now dressed in men's clothes, she seeks her own honorable resolution to her dilemma. Her mother gave her a sword and told her to show it in Poland. Clotaldo recognizes the sword and agrees to help the young visitor. Meanwhile, Basilio has been having second thoughts about having imprisoned Segismundo. Before he cedes the throne to Estrella and Astolfo (the same man who betrayed Rosaura), he decides to test his interpretations and bring Segismundo to court. In order to give Segismundo an opportunity to rule without installing him permanently as king, Basilio orders Clotaldo to drug Segismundo and bring him to court with the admonition to be careful, because what he is experiencing might be just a dream.

Act 2 takes place at the court of Poland, and Basilio's worst fears are realized. Segismundo, emboldened by his new power and status, treats others with arrogance, contempt, and violence. He sentences Clotaldo to death for having kept him imprisoned all those years, and, when a servant tries to protect Astolfo's honor, he picks him up and hurls him into the sea. Basilio is convinced that he was right in his initial interpretation. Meanwhile, Rosaura, now dressed as a lady-in-waiting named Astrea, meets Segismundo, and he recalls having seen her before. Reacting to Segismundo's threats, Basilio warns Segismundo that all that he sees may be a dream. Meanwhile, Estrella is jealous of the portrait of another woman that Astolfo is carrying in a locket around his neck. She tells Rosaura (as Astrea) to retrieve it for her so she can see who the other woman is. Rosaura confronts Astolfo and tries to retrieve the portrait, her portrait, from him. They argue and almost tear it to pieces when Estrella interrupts them and seizes the portrait. Rosaura makes up a story that the portrait in question was not the one Astolfo was wearing but just one of her own. Astolfo loves Rosaura but wants to rule Poland with Estrella; Rosaura's arrival at court can spell only trouble for him. Basilio has Segismundo drugged again and returned to his tower. Clotaldo tells the Prince that what he experienced was only a dream, and Segismundo ends the act with his famous soliloquy about dreams: life is nothing more than an illusion, a fiction, a dream, and even dreams are dreams.

In Act 3, the people rise up and demand to be ruled by their rightful Prince. Soldiers come to Segismundo's tower to retrieve him and bring him back to court. Segismundo thinks that he is dreaming again, but he goes along, even

swearing to take up arms against his father. A civil war is in the offing, and Clotaldo comes to Segismundo on his knees. This time, however, Segismundo does not order him executed, because he may be dreaming, and even in dreams, it is good to do good. Basilio recognizes that he himself brought on the disasters that he foretold. Clotaldo, now allied with Rosaura for the restoration of her honor, promises her his aid, even if it means committing the treason of rebelling against his natural lord. Segismundo once again meets Rosaura, this time dressed as both man and woman and using her own name. He has seen her in every act, and he comes to understand that neither is he dreaming now nor was he in his earlier visit to court. Instead of reverting to his previous tyrannical ways, however, Segismundo reacts with wisdom and respect, promising to restore her honor. More violence breaks out, and in the chaos, Clarín, who hides to avoid injury, is killed. Basilio and Astolfo admit defeat, and Segismundo, with great wisdom and justice, sets things right. Once the uprising has been quelled, he has one of the soldiers who aided him imprisoned as a rebel and a traitor against the crown. He accepts his father's defeat (and in the process fulfills the prophecy of his triumph over his father), but he does not gloat. He offers himself to Basilio for punishment, but Basilio now believes that he will be a good king and installs him on the throne. He arranges the marriage of Rosaura and Astolfo and promises that he will marry Estrella. The play ends with Segismundo's musing on the central lesson: life is as uncertain as a dream.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

La vida es sueño, like many of Calderón's plays, has been studied from an extraordinary variety of perspectives. His rich philosophical perspectives, his vibrant poetry, his interesting and provocative characters, and his intriguing plots and subplots have provided enormous possibilities for critical thought. Except for the critics of the eighteenth century, who disdained anything baroque, Calderón has always been revered as poet, playwright, and philosopher. In this century, without any doubt, the majority of the criticism followed the New Critical lead of Alexander Parker. Focusing on thematic unity leading to a coherent, didactic message based on the principle of poetic justice, the prevalent critical approach, developed by Parker, E. M. Wilson, R. D. F. Pring-Mill, William Whitby, Bruce Wardropper, and others, sought to explain all plot elements as part of a structural whole in which characters shaped their own destinies, and the play as a whole offered a unified presentation based on a close reading and an explanation of the symbols, a reading of the signs, that are to be found in the play. There was most definitely an underlying assumption that the play had an absolute meaning, upheld by the various interpretations of the symbols and actions of the plays, pointing toward a Christian lesson regarding the necessity of self-sacrifice for the good of secular society and in order for the believer to enter heaven after death. Starting with the 1980s, however, a growing body of criticism was unwilling to be satisfied with the search for a singular truth, and

various newer theories were applied. James Maraniss has viewed the play as a moral lesson in support of a repressive political system, while Christopher and Teresa Soufas have studied the play in the light of contemporary history and ideology. Frederick de Armas has done exhaustive research into the astronomical references and the thematic repercussions of important physical phenomena of the day. Cesáreo Bandera has used the ideas of René Girard and his notions of mimesis and the sacred, and several critics, including Parker and Julian Palley, have seen the actions of the play through Freudian psychoanalysis, especially in light of the Oedipus conflict. In the past few years, influenced by deconstructionism and other postmodern theories, there has been an attempt to turn New Criticism on its head and assert that the play reveals the impossibility of ever finding the truth.

In one sense, the action of the play can be read as a metaphor of the workings of civilization and the place of the individual subject in it. Civilization promises love, happiness, order, and a sense of place and role if one will only submit. The tranquillity promised by civilization through law and order can come about only through repression and even violence. For both Rosaura and Segismundo, it is representative of the civil law and symbolic parental power (Basilio for Segismundo and Astolfo for Rosaura) that expels them from society. Since one can be part of civilization only when one knows one's name, both Rosaura and Segismundo search for their fathers. Basilio, who does not even get to know his son before he exiles him, points out the normally oppressive and tyrannical nature of civilization. Basilio's ignorance (despite the supposition of great erudition) sets in motion the events of the play. He misread the omens, which do not have any meaning other than what he gives them. Rather than merely reading signs pointing to reality, Basilio creates reality by isolating Segismundo and by not giving him his name, partly because of his own egoistic rivalry with his son. He cannot accept Segismundo as his mirror image; he is unwilling to be usurped by his son. But Basilio will not be immortal, even if he kills his son. In Rosaura's case, Astolfo, as her rightful ruler, violated the trust placed in him by deceiving and abandoning her. Clotaldo notes the contradiction between his position, which is due respect and reverence, and his actions, which are reprehensible, by first claiming that it is not possible for him to have dishonored her. Civilization likes to keep authority to itself, even at the expense of its constituents. Both of the main characters sacrifice for their community: they look for their desires in the desire of the Other. Rosaura ends the play married to a man who abandoned her and who clearly prefers another woman. Segismundo renounces his own egoistic desires and even his desire for Rosaura, opting instead for a marriage to Estrella based on duty to his symbolic responsibilities as king. In a sense, they have internalized the violence committed against them, in the process suppressing through *autodominio* the self-assertion so necessary for the life of the community.

At the heart of the philosophical fabric of the play is a set of contradictions. Segismundo discovers that he was not dreaming in Act 2; Basilio discovers that

the truth he divined from the omens was not the truth; Segismundo's reality is constructed by Basilio in the first two acts and by his obligations as king in the last act. In other words, dreams are not dreams, truth is not truth, reality is not reality, fiction is not fiction. Civilization always promises, but does not deliver, happiness. The best one can hope for is a tranquillity based on the acceptance of a contract at whose root is the word as metaphor. Civilization is literally metaphorical in nature, based on the linking of an image and a concept. Meaning is created by the presence of an absence, an absence that is the result of repression and suppression. The "absent" dream leads Segismundo to his realization of the "truth," and only through his "metaphorization," that is, through his self-effacement, which allows for his symbolic presence, can Segismundo reenter society.

THE CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA PRIZE

During the Franco years, the Spanish Ministerio de Información y Turismo created a Premio Calderón de la Barca, which was presented to playwrights from 1954 to 1972. Among the recipients were Gerardo Diego (*El cerezo y la palmera*, 1961), Antonio Gala (*Los verdes campos de Edén*, 1963, and *Los buenos días perdidos*, 1972), Miguel Mihura (*Ninette y un señor de Murcia*, 1964), Víctor Ruiz Iriarte (*La muchacha del sombrerito rosa*, 1967), Joaquín Calvo Sotelo (*Una noche de lluvia*, 1968), and Jaime Salom (*Los delfines*, 1969).

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Prose

Calderón wrote no prose works of fiction, but he did author several essays that speak of his theories of artistic production. Especially noteworthy are the *aprobación* written to accompany Cristóbal Lozano's *Soledades de la vida* (1658) and his *Deposición a favor de los profesores de la pintura*.

Poetry

In general, Calderón's poetry, apart from his plays, was minor academy pieces or occasional poems. His longer poems were more typical of the eloquence seen in his dramatic poetry. Especially important is his *Psalle et sile*, a meditation on the inscription of the choir-screen in the Toledo cathedral dealing with the values of religious poetry and priestly duties.

Dramatic Production

Calderón numbered his full-length plays at 110 (in 1681), and in 1677 he published twelve *autos sacramentales*. Today his works are considered to include twenty short pieces (interludes, *loas*, and *jácaras*), eighty *autos sacramentales*, and 120 *comedias*.

Editions and Translations

Collected Works in Spanish

Two multivolume editions appeared in the seventeenth century. The first was published in five volumes of twelve plays each that appeared in 1636, 1637, 1664, 1672, and 1677. Calderón approved of the first four volumes of the edition and even wrote the prologue to the 1672 *parte*. The last volume, however, did not receive his authorization, because, he said, “the *comedias* in it are not mine.” The Juan de Vera Tassis edition, in nine volumes, appeared posthumously from 1682 to 1691, but it was based on a list of plays that Calderón sent to the Duke of Vergara in 1681. In the nineteenth century, Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch published Calderón’s plays in the Biblioteca de Autores Españoles (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1848), volumes 7, 9, 12, and 14.

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