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Calderon's Quest for God in *La Vida Es Sueno*

by Michael L. Greenwald¹

Pedro Calderon de La Barca, a Jesuit priest, was certainly the most Catholic—upper case “C”—of playwrights, a fact which has in some circles caused him to be neglected by scholars, particularly in his Spanish homeland.² Sr. M. Frances de Salles McGarry, in her authoritative, if understandably biased, study of the allegorical dramas of Calderon, tells us that his work is permeated with Catholic dogma and that it is impossible to read him without being impressed by the evidence of the theological study that many of the plays manifest (27-28). McGarry cites Professor Franz Lorinser, who argued in the nineteenth century that Calderon is:

a poet who lives and moves only in the feelings of the Catholic Faith, out of which he has drawn the most sublime material for his creations. Therefore for many he is unenjoyable, not only because they turn from everything that is Catholic with aversion, but also...that they cannot comprehend him. Even if they are learned critics...they are deficient in the knowledge of the Catholic faith and of Catholic Theology, without which it is absolutely impossible to thoroughly understand Calderon. (281)

On May 5, 1984, I attended the London opening of the Royal Shakespeare Company production of Calderon's *La vida es sueno* (called *Life's a Dream* by John Barton who directed the play and adapted it with Adrian Mitchell). The production was revived from the RSC's Other Place in Stratford where it was enormously popular—as it proved to be in London—among audiences largely unfamiliar with Calderon and Catholicism. There is much secular life in the old play yet, and the RSC proved it merits frequent production.³

Edward Honig⁴, in an otherwise perceptive analysis that precedes his translation of the play, suggests that *La vida es sueno*, although Calderon's best-known play, is not a religious but a metaphysical drama:

In *Life is a Dream*, perhaps uniquely among Calderon's plays, a metaphysical problem is

¹ A version of this paper was read at the National Educational Theatre Conference [formerly American Theatre Association] in New York, N.Y., on August 17, 1986.

² Bruce Wardropper explains Calderon's lack of popularity among Spanish critics and his attraction to English speaking scholars effectively in “The Standing of Calderon in the Twentieth Century.” *Approaches to the Theatre of Calderon*. Ed. Michael McGaha. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982. 1-16.

³ The play was also staged to critical acclaim by Anne Bogart at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA in the summer of 1989. See *Theatre Week*, 26 June 1989, 16-21.

⁴ All quotations from the play are from the Honig translation [New York: Hill and Wang, 1970] and will be cited by act and scene number.

supported not by appeals to faith or insistence on ideality but by proofs of experience itself. For the virtue of magnanimity to emerge in Sigismundo, it must be shown to overcome the lesser virtues which breed the brutalization of experience—false pride, rape, murder, and perverted sexuality. By implication the play is a criticism of inflexible rule, of self-deceptive authoritarianism masquerading as benevolent justice. (xxxiv—xxxv)

I am not convinced that *La vida es sueno* is “not a religious play,” and I think Honig’s last phrase [“authoritarianism masquerading as benevolent justice”] suggests, in fact, one of the religious concerns of the play. The drama was written in 1673, very late in Calderon’s long life, and it represents, I would like to argue, a synthesis of his personal, dramatic/theatrical, and philosophical/theological growth. By fusing the purely religious, with its emphasis on dogma and theology, to which he had devoted his writing for almost fifty years, with a more secular subject matter grounded in myth, the romance, and the traditional Spanish comedias of honor, the playwright priest fashioned a more catholic—“universal” theatre that is at once religious, humanist, political, moralistic, and to be sure more entertaining than his earlier works—one of which was entitled *La vida es sueno*. Written about 1635, the earlier “*Dream*” was purely allegorical in the medieval sense. It opens with the four elements of fire, earth, water, and air arguing about each’s supremacy and shows how God creates order Out of chaos—an obsession with Calderon, according to James Maraniss, who opens his valuable monograph, *On Calderon* (1978), by asserting that:

Calderon’s theatre is a sober celebration of order triumphant—a celebration of the order of the universe; of the state; of the family; of the human personality, and, not the least, of language and thought...Calderon is a remaker and rearranger as much as he is an inventor...[his plays] have been made to serve a new end: to serve order as an end in itself. (1)

Near the end of his life, which corresponded to the end of the century in which he lived, wrote, and shared the same intellectual air with the Scholastics, the Reformationists, Descartes, and Galileo, Calderon returned again to *La vida es sueno*, not to rewrite it, but to reconstruct it to fulfill his vision of the world and the theatre as a means of making that view a reality. *La vida es sueno* is then the conflation of a medium and an idea, each perfected during a lifelong quest as thinker and artist.

In a paper presented in honor of the tricentennial of Calderon’s death in 1981, Professor Manuel Duran makes a convincing case that the central event in Calderon’s life was a personal crisis of faith precipitated by his father’s death-bed wish that young Pedro become a priest; for thirty-five years Calderon rebelled against his father’s will—which he equated with God’s will—and suffered profound guilt as a consequence. The majority of Calderon’s plays, Duran argues, were an attempt by a complex and tortured artist to reconcile one’s personal passions with the demands of duty and honor. Like Francis Thompson, Calderon, too, was tracked by the hound of Heaven as he fled through the labyrinthian ways of the world: for Calderon, the labyrinth was

like a carnival fun house, with elaborate mirrors providing illusions about what was real and not real in this dream-like world that is so “chaotic that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction, dreaming and waking, and truth and lie.” Or as Sigismundo, Prince of Poland, kindred spirit to the Danish Prince, states:

for we live in a world so strange
That to live is only to dream.
He who lives, dreams his life
Until he wakes...

I dream that I am here,
Loaded with chains, or dream
That I see myself in some other,
More illustrious, part [e.g. “a priest?”]
What is life? a delirium!
What is life? illusion,
A shadow, a fiction,
Whose greatest good is nothing,
Because life is a dream!
Even dreams are only dreams. (II.17)

To make this incomprehensible world comprehensible, Calderon posits three principles—a Trinity—upon which his philosophy and dramaturgy are based. First, one needs to rationalize and accept the God-given order of the world which permeates the universe, nature, political systems, and, especially for Calderon, the individual. One disturbs this order only at great peril to self and society, as King Basilio, Clotaldo, Astolfo, and Sigismundo learn in *La vida es sueno*, a play which begins amidst chaos and darkness [cf. the world before Genesis]. Rosura—the woman who must dress as a man to combat the disorder of her world: the play’s first illusion—speaks to her runaway horse, which she calls “monster of the four elements without instinct..

I must go on; in the dark, in despair, With no path to follow but the way that lies before
my feet, Down the rough entangled wilderness of this mountain.
Whose great brow is now frowning at the sun. (I.1)

Calderon’s second principle, which evolves from a recognition of the first, tells us that human passions must be controlled and repressed if they conflict with the order established by the cosmos, nature, and society. “He who hopes to master his fate,” says Sigismundo very late in the play, “should act with temperance and prudence.” (III.121)

Finally, Duran defines a third principle necessitated by the first two: the world—and God, and Calderon’s father,

exacts painful sacrifice and becomes tense and bleak to the point that we can accept it

only within the framework of the Platonic and Christian tradition that establishes as unreal the world of appearances that our senses create in our mind...a shadow moving on the ceiling of a cave that gives but a pale and confusing image of the sun shining outside in the real world of Platonic ideas. (27-28)

Self denial—or to put it more positively, the freedom to choose to restrain one’s worldly desires—becomes the foundation upon which Calderon rests his beliefs: self-denial is predicated upon another trinity sacred to the playwright: *humility* [i.e., recognition of a higher authority]; *submission* [i.e. the acceptance of authority]; and *obedience* [i.e., the fulfillment of the law]. In *The Allegorical Drama of Calderon*, perhaps the most useful introduction to Calderonian thought, A.A. Parker notes that this triumvirate of humility, submission, and obedience, corresponds to the three Persons of the Sacred Trinity of Catholic dogma: Power, Wisdom, and Love. “We must have humility before God because he is omnipotent, we must accept his authority because he is omniscient, we must obey his law because he is all loving.” (206) Acceptance of the trinity of humility, submission, and obedience, allows Sigismundo to proclaim in the closing moments of the play that he aims “at the highest triumph, *that* over myself,” which causes his subjects to say to him:

BASILIO: I applaud your wisdom!
ASTOLFO: How he has changed!
ROSURA: Such prudence and discretion— (III.121)

Basilio notes that Sigismundo has attained “wisdom” through his self-denial [i.e., his “choice” to accept the order of the world], echoing not only the message of such classic dramatists as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Calderon’s direct contemporary Racine, but also many Church thinkers, most notably Augustine, whose own dissolute life and conversion is recalled in Calderon’s personal struggles with God and Father. Specifically, according to Parker, Calderon’s beliefs—and correspondingly, his theatre methodology—are derived from Augustine’s theory of Illumination, which says that an “*impulso divino*” give humans both self-knowledge and virtuous conduct. The former embraces two extremes—which fits nicely into Calderon’s theatre of dualities—Man’s nothingness and his greatness. Understanding lets man comprehend his nothingness, the state in which we find Sigismundo in the opening act of the play. Clad in animal skins and chained in a mountain dungeon, Sigismundo lives in a dark [i.e., “non-illuminated”] world and laments that he is “a human monster, man among beasts, beast among men.” (I.I) Rosura’s essential goodness, Basilio’s recantation of his errored past, and Sigismundo’s determination to restore Rosura’s lost honor and to rebel against his own “nothingness”—both acts of free will—lead him to his greatness. As Basilio says in reference to his own dilemma of kingship, “Adverse fate, ill-aspected planets, natural violence [i.e., elements of man’s “nothingness”] /Cannot override free will.” (II.6) It is this conflict between Understanding and Ignorance, Free Will and Self-Indulgence that gives all of Calderon’s dramas—especially *La vida es sueno*—tension and forward movement. Parker describes it best:

Man, having received the enlightenment of self-knowledge and being endowed with the freedom of will, is asked to collaborate in fulfilling the law that God imposed upon the universe when he caused order to prevail over chaos. Everything rests on Man's decision whether or not he will allow himself to be ruled by this order. (216)

At first Sigismundo, representative of all humans who must make similar choices in their individual lives, resists his submission to the natural order of the world. Basilio, who has turned over the reins of kingship to his son, scolds Sigismundo in Act II: "Hoping that I would see you mastering your stars, conquering your fate...I find you instead acting like a savage." (II.6) In the final Act Sigismundo leads a successful rebellion against his tyrant father and reconciles with the older man in an act of Christian forgiveness; i.e., Sigismundo "chooses" to act God-like and forgive his father's past transgressions and submit to Basilio's judgment, to which the old, and now wiser king responds:

My son, by this noble act, you were reborn...You are the victor, May your deeds be your crown. (III.12)

Sigismundo's "rebirth," though "redemption" is the better word, is what Augustine would call "Illumination," and what Calderon's Spanish audience would recognize as a moment of "*disengano*," a word that is most easily translated as "disillusionment." Here the word is not to be taken in the negative sense of being disenchanted, but as the positive act of stripping away all "illusions" about his earthly power; i.e., Sigismundo's free will has awakened him from the illusory dream his life has been. Not only does Calderon's coda look backwards towards the doctrines of Augustine, but it anticipates the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard, who defined a three-stage growth to "selfhood:"

1. *The aesthetic stage*: a Hedonistic period marked by self-gratification and surrender to one's baser instincts; cf., Sigismundo in the first half of the play;
2. *The ethical stage*: the futility and despair of the first stage leads the individual to "choose" duty—an act of free will to which Calderon would certainly ascribe—the "authenticity" of selfhood; cf. Sigismundo's various choices" in Act III which ultimately define his worldly selfhood.
3. *The religious stage*: having chosen submission to the order of the world, the Christian existentialist renders obedience and commitment to God; the finale of *La vida es sueño* implies that Sigismundo makes a similar commitment as he vows to use the newfound knowledge from his "dreams" well.

In retrospect, one might argue that Calderon's own life is itself a paradigm of Kierkegaardian existentialism.

Calderon's dramatic theory, rooted in the notion of *disengano*. provides a perfect vehicle for a life view about worldly illusions. Parker provides a working formula for the theatre of Calderon:

fantasia > *argumento* > *metafora* > *realidad*

Here Calderon is indebted to another Church Father: Thomas Aquinas, whose theory of the “imagination”—one of the four internal senses through which we perceive the world—is central to Calderon’s theatre. The imagination (or “*fantasia*” for Calderon), which is unlimited and unshackled by time and place, includes all possibilities and impossibilities, and provides the intellect with images and concepts of singular and particular things. The imagination is a kind of mental “dream world” which offers limitless possibilities for “*argumentos*” or themes, ideas, dogmas (or to use the Spanish term, “*concepto imaginado*”). In *La vida es sueño* the *concepto imaginado* is, among other things, the dogma of free will as the instrument of redemption. To make that *argumento* accessible to other human minds—i.e., to spark the *fantasias* or *imaginaciones* of the audience—the poet constructs a “*practico concepto* or “*metafora*,” a dramatic picture endowed with movement, action, characters and other trappings of the theatre which Calderon used so well. In *La vida es sueño* Calderon discards traditional religious allegory, which had served him well in literally hundreds of other dramas [including his original *La vida es sueño*] as his *metafora*. Here, as he had done with *The Constant Prince*, he used the world of classic myth, setting his action in distant, but still very Catholic Poland. The play reverberates with echoes of the Prometheus and Oedipus myths, it uses the romance device, in which Shakespeare took such great delight, of the wronged woman who must disguise herself as a man to survive in a disordered masculine world, and its language is filled with allusions to the ancient world. Robert Ter Horst argues that Calderon uses myth, especially in his later plays, because they were an alternative and attractive opportunity for the playwright to make his audiences, perhaps jaded by centuries of purely Christian allegories, accept his *argumentos* anew through “a startlingly fresh vision of the familiar.” (46) Furthermore, myth permitted Calderon to parallel the particulars of Christian dogma with the universal truths of Western thought. Thus, Calderon’s “mythic *metafora*” in *La vida es sueño* brings the audience *realidad* as it watches the *argumento* become alive and visible in dramatic characters and action—i.e., through the “illusion of the stage. More importantly, spectators experience “the invisible reality of the order of being of which the stage action is only the representation or reflection.” (81) When the audience perceives this *realidad* through the stage illusion, it, like Sigismundo, achieves *disengano* as its former, ill-conceived illusions of the world are dissipated. Or, to consider the device from another perspective, recall Hamlet’s words about “guilty creatures sitting at a play.” Calderon, like Shakespeare and Shaw, knew well the theatre’s power to get its audiences to “proclaim their malefactions” as the *realidad* of the illusion: he devoted his life to theatre, says Duran, “to enhance the glory of God.” (17) A reading of another Calderonian allegory, *El gran teatro del mundo* (*The Great Theatre of the World*) suggests that Calderon also saw his audiences as “godly creatures sitting at a play:” from their god-like seats outside of the action, his spectators could objectively judge the actions of those who must play out life’s script. This is an especially effective device when the playwright uses a well known story—i.e., a myth—because the audience, like its Greek counterparts two millennia ago, knows the inevitable outcome and can thereby better judge the choices of the protagonists on the stage.

I have focused primarily on Sigismundo and offered a synthesis of critical opinion on the purpose of both Calderon's *argumento* and the *metafora* he uses to bring it to *realidad*. But as I reread the play and as I recall it on stage at the Barbican Centre, I am fascinated by the role of Basilio, Sigismundo's tyrant-father. If Sigismundo is an Everyman whom experience teaches the need for restraint, then I suggest that Basilio is an "Every-God" who acquires hard-won knowledge about the nature of humanity. And here, in deference to Honig's opinion that *La vida es sueno* is not a religious play, is precisely where I see a most interesting religious theme, one that suggests that God must respond to the will of Mankind every bit as much as Mankind must submit to the order of God.

Calderon goes to great lengths to establish the God-like nature of Basilio. When first we meet him in Act I, he is given an aria-like speech that defines him as "Basilio the Sage," "Basilio the Great," and allows him to boast that:

Time is, in fact, indebted to me:
It has only to repeat what I have foretold...

My thought accompanies
The swift heavenly bodies
In their eternal course. [I.6]

The RSC production effected this godliness in Basilio's costume: Charles Kay wore a cloak, literally covering the entire stage of the Barbican Centre's Pit Theatre, that was covered with stars and symbols of the heavenly bodies. He looked like a walking universe, with a wizened gray head peering from the constellular cloak. More than his words, Basilio's actions proclaim him God-like: he manipulates Sigismundo, first turning him into a captive beast. Basilio, like God before the Flood, laments what his creation has wrought:

I have paid the price,
A terrible price for my skill
in indexing Heaven's pages. [I.6]

One might compare Basilio in Act One to the Old Testament God of Wrath who speaks to Zechariah:

But my people stubbornly refused to listen... They closed their minds and made their hearts as hard as a rock [cf. Sigismundo]...I became very angry. ..Like a storm I swept them away to live in a foreign country [cf. Sigismundo in the Act I prison]. The good land was left a desolate place [cf. Rosura's initial description of Poland]. (Zec. 7: 11-14)

Experience teaches Basilio, as much as it teaches Sigismundo, that wrath and oppression only embitters man and precipitates rebellion. Sigismundo tells Basilio in Act II:

I have lived hitherto without that loving embrace...
A father who has been so heartless,
Who drove me from his side and reared me like a beast,
Who all my life has denied me human rights,
What does it matter now that he withholds his embrace?

How many similar lamentations do we find in the Bible, no more prominently than in Christ's words on the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 45:46)

Basilio recants his harsh treatment of Sigismundo, realizing that depriving his son of his "rights...by laws both divine and human" he has acted against Christian charity. He thus concocts a plan to permit Sigismundo to rise to his birth-given greatness and share in the governance of Poland, complete with a fail-safe plan motivated by "justice, and not from cruelty." (II.6)

The plot is far more complex than my summary can accommodate here, but the key dramatic growth in Basilio is an understanding that he must act in consort with Sigismundo, rather than in a purely tyrannical manner over him; Basilio becomes a more benevolent man, father, and king and his "conversion" suggests a corresponding shift from the God of the Old Testament, the God of Wrath, to that of the New, the God of Love and Compassion. After considerable trial and error—including a military rebellion against Basilio—Sigismundo does indeed mature into "the mirror of Christian kings" when he fights to restore Rosura's honor [i.e., to bring justice to an imperfect world] and, more importantly, when he performs the consummate Godlike act: he forgives Basilio, while admonishing him that "none can conquer evil by injustice and cruelty...he who hopes to master his fate / Should act with temperance and prudence." (III.12) The final moment of the play is a reconciliation between father and son, that most archetypal of images, in which a covenant of forgiveness and mutual respect which makes father and son, God and Man, partners in the ordering of the world, is forged:

From a dream I learned a lesson
And now, before my dream is broken
I desire to use it well.
The forgiving heart is noble,
So may our sins be forgiven! (III.12)

One wonders if perhaps Calderon, himself an old man whom life had taught many lessons when he penned these lines to conclude his play in 1673, was not thinking of his own circumstances, of his own father who lay on a death bed over six decades earlier, and of God the Father from whom, and about Whom, he sought understanding in his theatre of illusions.

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