

BEYOND RIVALRY AND HOSTILITIES  
SHAKESPEARE AND HIS SPANISH CONTEMPORARIES

First of all I would like to express my thanks to the Somerset House Conference Committee for inviting me to lecture at the commemoration of the treaty of London. There has been a lot of talk recently with the enlargement of the European Union about the need for more translators and interpreters and some amusing tales from the past. I particularly enjoyed the story of the translator of the time of Spain's admission to the Union who commented on the "introduction of a Spaniard in the works". I must congratulate you on your courage in allowing the same thing to happen today ."

The treaty of London created, and facilitated, new cultural and literary relations between early modern England and Spain, or if you prefer between Shakespeare and Spanish dramatists of the Golden Age. The playwrights of that period stand as national icons that represent and characterise two different nations and cultures beyond-outside-rivalry and confrontation. And this is precisely the aim of my talk: to show not only that they shared dramatic interests and expectations but also –and what I think more important- to show that Calderón, Lope and Tirso's drama can illuminate Shakespeare's from a new perspective. If it is true that they were never engaged in a literary war, it is also quite clear that they were never close friends

Of course it was not their fault but ours since until recently we seldom compared or judged them in relation to each. They were presented as having parallel lives and literary achievements. But there was always some resistance to teaching and studying them on the same level because Shakespeare's uniqueness was feared as possibly overshadowed by his Spanish counterparts. I think it is time we looked at them in a different way to recover the spirit of the Treaty of London because the parallels and similarities between Shakespeare and the Golden Age dramatists also provide a productive way of finding out more about Shakespeare.

The Almagro Festival –held every summer since 1977- is a good example of this cultural harmony and coexistence. Every year Shakespeare is a staple of the festival together with Spanish Golden Age dramatists. Shakespearean and Spanish classical productions form the basis of the programme which give particular emphasis to Shakespeare. The 2004 programme, for example, includes 5 plays by Shakespeare and 5 by dramatists of the Golden age.

However it seems to me that there is a previous question to be answered. Can we compare Shakespeare, the genius, the Briton of the Millennium, the Inventor of the human with Lope, Calderón and Tirso? Can we establish particular links between their literary masterpieces? Is it possible a literary exchange in a global context? And the answer must be yes. Simply because they experienced a similar historical situation, had common literary expectations, and

used similar conventions and topics in the creation of such paradigmatic literary worlds.

Moreover in them we acknowledge the otherness of the human. The greatness of their literary achievement is not only due to artistic considerations but also to the fact that they could “reach deep into the wells of human consciousness”<sup>1</sup>. They came to know “the human question” described by Unamuno as the knowledge of “the man in the flesh and spirit, the one who is born, suffers, and dies – mainly dies, the one who eats, and drinks, and plays, and dreams, and thinks, and loves, the man we can see and hear”<sup>2</sup>. Their drama involved central questions related to cultural, aesthetic and political issues. Although Shakespearean criticism has paid little attention to them. Shakespeare had his Spanish contemporaries. It sometimes seemed as if Shakespeare had only English contemporaries who rewrote and reproduced Shakespeare’s dramatic patterns and themes. It seemed as if there were no comparable contemporary across the English channel or the Bay of Biscay dramatist the English channel. Their contemporaneity –then and now- reveals common ground that needs exploration if one is to explain fully the potential and possibilities contained in their paradigmatic creations.

It is possible to derive a more challenging and rewarding comparative approach by looking at the works of Lope, Calderón and

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<sup>1</sup> S. Wells, “Millennium Masterworks: Shakespeare”, *Sunday Times*, Cultural Section, 15.08.1999, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1973, p. 7.

Tirso. Though they lived in different countries and belonged to a different literary tradition, they shared with him a time of historical confrontation and unparalleled literary creation. So I propose to take contemporaneity seriously, and extend it to writers beyond England geographical boundaries. To reduce Shakespeare's contemporaries to Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists deprives Shakespeare of valuable comparisons with other cultures and traditions which "can illuminate and animate his plays"<sup>i</sup>. Shakespeare's drama was not written in uncontaminated isolation but in full knowledge of traditions and cultures of Renaissance Europe. So "a dialogue with other theatrical writers on an equal basis"<sup>ii</sup> will be of help in understanding the full potential of Shakespeare's drama. It, therefore, becomes an imperative if we want to know and fully explain it.

Besides *the Spanish Contemporaries* of Shakespeare will facilitate our contemporary understanding of the bard since their works show similar dramatic interests and use similar theatrical conventions and devices. Since John Joughin's influential *Philosophical Shakespeares*, philosophy has become a recurrent topic and discussion within current criticism. This kind of philosophical instinct, that shaped his dramatic genius and helped him to dramatise human contradictions, is also found in Calderón's drama. The fundamental problems that worry us prompted their dramatic art. Their questioning cast of mind acted as a precondition of their theatrical creativity in the exploration of human truth and nature. Philosophy was never closer

to drama than in their plays where they challenged the audience's conceptions. They dramatically anticipated the debates about, and suggested solutions to, central aspects of man and of the world. Their drama severely modifies our conception of man. It shows not only that drama and philosophy are closely related but also that the former has a stronger influence on us<sup>3</sup> and makes possible a different and livelier analysis and examination of big philosophical issues illuminating particular aspects of human nature. It facilitates a different apprehension of truth through visual dramatisation. It makes possible a different exploration of the problems and questions that urge an immediate answer.

Shakespeare and Calderón have invented man and a way of approaching and exploring his limits, expectations, and possibilities. It brings a deeper insight into man's heart beyond the intellectual apprehension of philosophical discourse. Their drama shows that there are other means of analysing truth "in the quest for the ontological certainty..."<sup>4</sup> beyond the boundaries of rational thinking that appear rather schematic. Therefore drama provides an intuitive method that challenges the rigid and intellectual tone of philosophical systems that reduce man and the world to a kind of abstract entelechy. Shakespeare and Calderón dramatise contemporary worries as they turn up in life outside and beyond the constraint of intellectual and philosophical boundaries.

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*, London, Fourth State, 1999, p. 717.

<sup>4</sup> John Joughin (ed.), *Philosophical Shakespeares*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 14.

They invite us to a dramatic questioning of key paradigms. Their plays present a different way of contemplating and questioning reality, of seeing things. They are a seminal representation of the contradictions of human existence where uncertainty and ambiguity prevail over definitive conclusions. Thus drama and philosophy are perpetually linked in the unending search for truth in the plays of Shakespeare and Calderón<sup>5</sup> though final truth will always be beyond the dramatists and the philosophers' reach.

Shakespeare and Calderón's theatre is deeply concerned with problems of human life and nature, though their philosophical tone and dramatic approach is different. Whereas Shakespeare takes a practical stance, Calderón looks for metaphysical explanations to fundamental questions about man and the world.

Both dramatists show an unusual interest in radical questions that dwell inside the human heart as they experienced the vicissitudes and contradictions of their times. It may explain the common philosophical interest of their dramas. They are not just writers and their plays are not only dramatic pieces. They are thinking playwrights who ask and answer questions on the stage and their plays are nothing if not theatrical examinations of man's nature. Thus Calderón's theatre like Shakespeare's reflects the tensions and contradictions of contemporary trends of thought. Though it is perhaps too obvious to assert that "Generally speaking we may advance the thesis that Shakespeare and Calderón, as

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<sup>5</sup> Eugenio Frutos, *La filosofía de Calderón en sus autos sacramentales*, Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico, 1981, p. 79.

Ciricaco Morón points out, coincide in the anthropology and sociology by which their dramas are characterised because the two dramatists based them on scholastic anthropology and on Aristotle's *Poetics*"<sup>6</sup>. Besides, the influence of the mainstream of the philosophical thought that pervaded seventeenth century culture in England and Spain can be seen in their plays.

But where do we see this philosophical concern ? In the soliloquies, of course. They are a good expression of their questioning mind. They reveal their intellectual fears and doubts. Hamlet and Segismund become temporary philosophers giving voice to the sea of troubles as they look for an immediate solution to their state of confusion and despair. Their soliloquies are paradigmatic and representative of philosophical inquiry. They question fundamental aspects of human existence but do not get a satisfactory answer to their repetitive obsession of asking questions that have no answer. Hamlet and Segismund manifest their existential complaint as they cannot find a way out of the tragic dilemma that they must confront. Their alienation produces their existential maladjustment. They are forced to be who they are not. This is why to be or not to be becomes the key question for them. They are compelled to search for their identities as the condition for their final success in a context of chaos and political manipulation.

It is interesting to notice how some key philosophical questions are repeated time after time in the plays of Shakespeare and

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<sup>6</sup> Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, "Calderón y Shakespeare: La vida como sueño", *Calderón 2000*, op. cit., p. 571.

Calderón. The problem of free will and tragic fate becomes an almost dramatic obsession for them. They mainly explore its consequences and effects on human life. The power or capacity to choose and act in certain situations independently of tragic restraint is a major issue in their plays where the tragic hero is confronted by the workings of an inexorable fate that has an unhappy outcome. Shakespeare's tragedies as well as Calderón's tragic drama "...repeatedly portray the struggle of a remarkable individual against implacable, impersonal forces, a struggle no less impressive for its failure."<sup>7</sup> In *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, on the one hand, and in *Life Is a Dream*, *The Daughter of the Air*, *Jealousy, the Greatest Monster*, and *Eco and Narcissus* on the other, "Tragedy...plots the urge of the individual to assert his freedom against the restrictions imposed by the community, against power as it is embodied in the existing social system."<sup>8</sup> The acceptance of tragic fate means that personal freedom is an illusion. It is Segismund who expresses his desolation when he acknowledges his lack of freedom

[Were not the rest born?

Well, if the rest were born,

What privileges did they receive

Which I never enjoyed.

The bird is born, and with the festive dress

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<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Watson, "Tragedy", *The Cambridge Companion to English Drama*, A.R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 304.

<sup>8</sup> G.K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642. The Age of Shakespeare*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1997, p. 418

That gives it the greatest beauty,  
It is no sooner a flower of feathers  
Or a bouquet with wings,

When the ethereal rooms  
Cut it off with swiftness,  
Denying it the comfort  
Of the nest which it left calmly,  
And should I who have more soul  
Have less liberty?]

Segismund's metaphysical complaint voices his existential limits. He is demanding his right to be free like birds that fly freely in the sky. He reproduces Caliban's anxieties for freedom in Prospero's island. Their existential imprisonment has transformed them into monsters that are no longer human in their appearance and behaviour. Segismund is nothing but "un hombre de las fieras/ y una fiera de los hombres" (1.2.211-212) [A man among beasts and a beast for men].

Semíramis also experiences the lack of freedom in Menón's country house in *The Daughter of the Air* where Calderón depicts the legendary queen of Assyria. She complains about her present state of physical confinement where she has languished for years as she wonders and imagines what life must be like outside. She is explicit in her demands for freedom asking herself about the nature of free will: "Mi albedrío, ¿es albedrío/ Libre o esclavo? ¿Qué acción/ o qué

dominio, elección/ tiene sobre mi fortuna,/ que sólo saca de una para darme otra prisión? [Is my free will free or slave? Which influence, power or choice does fate hold for me/ As it takes me out of one prison to bring me to another]. Unless she is aware of her personal situation. She learns that freedom is an illusion since her capacity for decision and choice has been drastically limited by “The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. But unfortunately once released from physical confinement she becomes a prisoner of her own passion and imagination<sup>9</sup>. Hamlet’s famous soliloquy reproduces her existential concern. “To be or not to be” is also for him a question of being free or not to decide beyond the impositions of wretched fortune when he examines the possibility and transcendence of the act of choosing in a state of anxiety and despair.

However in Calderón there is a permanent tension between a distrust of senses in search of truth and the necessity of certainty as dramatised in *Life Is a Dream*, *The Wonder-Working Magician*, and *The Daughter of the Air*. A seminal Cartesian anticipation might be found in Calderón’s drama where there is concern with the distinction of truth from falsehood - a dividing line that is constantly blurred. In this respect Ángel Valbuena Prats points out that Calderón anticipates Descartes’ philosophical doctrine in his *Discourse on Method* where he accepts nothing as true unless clearly recognised as such arguing that “... el ciel, l’air, la terre, les couleurs, les figures, les sens et toutes les autres choses exterieures

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<sup>9</sup> Everett W. Hesse, *Theology, Sex and the Comedia and Other Essays*, op. cit., p. 110.

ne son rien que des illusions et reveries...”<sup>10</sup>. It has its dramatic counterpart in Segismund’s words: “Y adviertas/ que tal vez los ojos nuestros/ se engañan y representan/ tan diferentes objetos/ de los que miran, que dejan/ burlada el alma...” [And note/ that our eyes fail us and represent/ objects very different to the ones we see / that leave our soul mocked]. In Shakespeare there is also a certain reserve and a sceptical attitude about the possibility of the knowledge of reality and truth since fiction and illusion coexist in life and we can be misled by our perceptions.

The dichotomy reality-appearance is also a major topic in Shakespearean drama where characters experience the twofold nature of human life. They put into question the reality of the senses since they create confusion and contradiction between what they see and what they imagine. They produce a state of suspicion and deception as they experience as real what seems to be illusory. Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker in *The Taming of the Shrew*, is the new Segismund who suffers from existential confusion as a result of a mockery devised by a group of noblemen who treat him as a lord. Sly, once woken, is told that he has been sleeping for fifteen years. To be “that a mighty man of such descent, Of such possessions, and so high esteem” shocks and confuses him. He needs to acknowledge who he is and have answers to his questions.

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<sup>10</sup> In Ángel Valbuena Prat, *Historia de la Literatura Española*, Barcelona, G. Gili, 1937, pp. 375-377.

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Sly is much more explicit than Segismund about his identity. He needs to know who he has been and what he has done to be aware of his present identity. Shakespeare and Calderón's dramas also explore the complexity of the tragic aspects of human existence. They dramatise the anguish and despair in which man is forced to live with no expectation of being able to get rid of his wretched condition.

Calderón together with Lope and Tirso are not only are Shakespeare's contemporaries and share his dramatic concerns but also complete some of the interests of Shakespearean drama as can be seen in the dramatization of radical feminism by the Spanish dramatists whose plays present a new prototype of female heroine. It means a further stage in the dramatic treatment of female characters as seen in the RSC productions of Spanish Golden Age plays in the 2004 Stratford Festival. Incidentally it is interesting to notice how at last Lope, Tirso and Calderón have become contemporaries for the RSC. Their mastery has been recognised in the organisation of such a great theatrical season devoted to some of their plays showing they finally have been admitted to the Shakespearean Olympus,.

Lope de Vega's *The Dog in the Manger*, Tirso's *Tamar's Revenge*, and Calderon's *Daughter of the Air* are representative of the drama and individual dramatists of the period who laid the

foundations of Spanish national drama. It is a good selection of both authors and plays. give a complete picture of the interests, achievements and conventions to be found in the Spanish drama of the time. They contain a great variety of topics for establishing positive links and relations between these dramatists and their English contemporaries. One of the first things to attract the spectator's attention is the new prototype of female heroines who appear in these plays. They represent a further stage in the dramatic treatment of female characters in seventeenth century drama.

Spanish Golden Age Dramatists made possible a new construct of the feminine beyond the traditional gender barriers projecting a world of disintegrating boundaries. They were interested not only in the dramatisation of gender struggle but also in the exploration of female psychology and identity. Women in their plays are not only simple victims who complain about their social status but agents of their destinies and plotters of their revenge as seen in Tirso's *Tamar's Revenge*. They invent new forms of living and experiencing the feminine within a feminist-minded drama, particularly in Tirso's plays where we find a detailed analysis and examination of female psychology. These modern heroines show the inadequacies of the traditional representation of women based on early modern gender struggle "through which resistance to gendered forms of subordination and oppression were articulated"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> JEAN E. HOWARD, JEAN E., (2000). «Was There a Renaissance Feminism?», *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, M. Hattaway (ed.), Oxford, Blackwell, p. 651.

However we cannot expect a complete and sudden revolution in the presentation of women in the plays of Lope, Tirso and Calderón. They still suffer from social oppression. They are marginalised in society by the dominant male ideology which tries to adapt itself to the new situation using different strategies to maintain its predominance at any cost. Nino and Amnon, represent a patriarchal order based on female exploitation and sexual possession. This female opposition and subversion must, therefore, be viewed from a still male-dominated context as “actual changes for the better in the position of women at this time were distinctly limited”.<sup>12</sup>

Female heroines like Semiramis, Tamar and Diana cannot be wives but partners and plotters of mischief. They are aware of the urgent need to free themselves from men alienation using new weapons and to redefine their identity to live fully as women. They must fight men using their own strategies and means to become the new rulers who subvert and contradict male expectations within a materialised context the pre-industrialised society brought about. But they cannot accept such degradation. They cannot accommodate themselves to this new situation. These tragic heroines should behave like “...assert [their] freedom against the restrictions imposed by the community, against power as it is embodied in the existing social system”.

In the three plays, women are presented as powerful and intellectually equal to men. They appear morally stronger, more

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<sup>12</sup> JONATHAN DOLLIMORE, (1984). *Radical Tragedy*, Brighton, Harvester, pp. 239-240.

perceptive, and wittier than men. Though they may finally be the victim of a patriarchal system, they try hard to get rid of male tyranny Tamar in Tirso's *comedia* where sexual transgression brings about subversion. The story comes from the Second Book of Samuel and tells of the incestuous passion of Amnon, King David's eldest son, for his half-sister Tamar, and the subsequent murder of Amnon by his brother Absalom who is determined to be the new king of Israel contravening his father's decision. Political ambition and sexual obsession transform Tamar's world into a dark and tragic one, full of torments, melancholy, and madness. It resembles the corrupted state of the dramatic universe of Jacobean plays where nonsense, confusion, and political intrigue rule. Besides women live in a situation of tyranny and exploitation where love only means sexual pleasure. This is the kind of love Amnon feels for Tamar. He, like De Flores in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, is obsessed with the possession of his half sister to satisfy his instinct. It is a physical need which requires immediate action. To seduce Tamar he tells her of his love and passion for a princess who died asking her half-sister to replace the unfortunate princess in his heart.

Lope's drama is also concerned with female subversion as dramatised in *The Dog in the Manger* where Diana fights to get the man she loves at any cost beyond social barriers and considerations. She seems to be one of the female characters of Tirso's *comedia* who

are characterised by 'aggressiveness', a common dramatic feature shared with Tirsian heroines who appear as

These self-confident young ladies sweep away prejudices –Don't they remind us of those

contemporary unruly girls who have been popularised in movies, making them a kind of social

explosive?– and they challenge men to be their equals. I'm not sure if as much in importance as in

freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Women's subversion is more socially concerned in Lope than in Calderón and Tirso's plays where it is more a personal attitude and disposition. The tension between social barriers and limitations is manifested in the social conflict between class and love. Diana asks for equal opportunities for women in the game of love. Her resolution can be seen as an intrusion in a social sphere which has traditionally been man's redoubt. She is a nonconformist who introduces a new social role bringing about chaos and confusion as she undermines the traditional social order where a patriarchal ideology has prevailed over feminist claims of equality and promotion. She challenges a world picture in need of change as she dramatises new possibilities for which women were longing. Lope criticises a historical situation in which class limited women's choice. Finally she gets what she wants as finds in Teodoro's lower condition "the colour she wanted" (3307-3308).

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<sup>13</sup> JUAN LUIS ALBORG, (1977). *Historia de la literatura española. Época barroca*, Madrid, Gredos, p. 450.

But it is in *The Daughter of the Air* where the most radical picture of female subversion is presented. Ambition and erotic passion characterises Semiramis's behaviour from the beginning of the play. It is the second part of the play where her insatiable ambition is shown by her abuse of power revealing her moral corruption which ultimately brings about her fall and death. In this way she becomes the new ruler who, for purely personal motives, exposes her kingdom to unnecessary risk. It is interesting to notice the importance of disguise as an instrument of her political strategies. Crossdressing enables her to achieve all her ambitions though she is aware of the transitory nature of her male identity that finally will bring chaos and nonsense.

Carmen Bravo-Villasante, who has discussed in depth this *comedia* convention<sup>14</sup>, suggests that male clothing "is not only used to investigate but also to subvert and to provoke in order to show that women are also equal"<sup>15</sup> But the disguise, is not only an instrument to disrupt and mock masculinity for "it goes deeper than a mere stage trick"<sup>16</sup>. It becomes a part of the character. It is not, therefore, something merely external. When female characters don male clothes, they

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<sup>14</sup> She particularly refers to its two most popular manifestations: the woman dressed as a man [la mujer tapada] and the amazon [la mujer heroica-guerrera]. CARMEN BRAVO-VILLASANTE, (1976). *La mujer vestida de hombre en el teatro español*, Madrid, Sociedad Española de Librería, p. 15

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 143,

<sup>16</sup> HENRY W. SULLIVAN, (1991). «The Incest Motif in Tirsian Drama: A Lacanian View», *Parallel Lives Spanish and English National Drama 1580-1680*, Louise and Peter Fothergill Payne (eds.) Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, p. 186.

change not only in physical appearance, but also in the roles they play as the result of their change of costume moving from passivity to independence.

These dramatic attempts of Lope, Tirso and Calderón to challenge a patriarchal order became more explicit in women drama of the period that was also concerned with female subversion in plays like Ana Caro's *Courage, Offence and Woman* where Leonor appears as a new Don Juan seducing and plotting intrigue. She is the new seducer and trickster who looks for emancipation and equality using his tricks and strategies. The play warns us of the danger of abusing and victimising women like Leonor who appropriates male identity to subvert and ridicule the legendary figure of Don Juan. Thus radical feminism of seventeenth century drama in Spain showed new ways of dramatising and experiencing the feminine though it was not as successful as might have been expected.

Shakespeare and the dramatists of the Golden Age, therefore, were not only contemporaries. They have become our contemporaries. Lope, Tirso, and Calderón, as Francisco Ramón suggest in his *Calderón nuestro contemporaneo* are our contemporaries because they, together with Shakespeare, share our fears and expectations. Thus the tragic sense of life is present in plays like Calderón's *The Surgeon of His Honour* and *Othello* where the characters appear as victims of dramatic nonsense that ends in bloody actions and horrible deaths as voiced by Don Gutierre when his anxiety for revenge cannot be fully satisfied with the murder of

Doña Mencía. His irrational passion and revenge ask for more “inhuman deeds”. He, like Othello, remains blind in his confusion and existential contradiction. However it is in Calderón’s *The Constant Prince* where we see in Don Fernando a man “distressed in his career towards nothingness...”<sup>17</sup> He, like Lear, is shaken by tragic fate and driven to existential nonsense. He is a broken man whose reward is final defeat as “Fortune, that arrant whore,/Ne’er turns the key to th’ poor (*King Lear* 2.4.50-51). All this dark context brings an attitude of scepticism that pervades the dramas of Shakespeare and Calderón where we find “strong scepticism stained with agonic existentialism”<sup>18</sup>.

The philosophical interest and the feminist concern, among other topics, manifest the modernity of the plays of Shakespeare and the Spanish dramatists of the Golden Age that dramatise the wearisome condition of man. They anticipated in their dramas what we have experienced in our time as we have also witnessed the break-up of ideologies, the disturbing progress of scientific discovery, the growth of uncertainty and scepticism, and the difficulty of apprehending truth in a context of intolerance. It is in their dramas that we can find new answers to the questions of the new philosophy that still “calls all in doubt”.

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<sup>17</sup> Felipe B. Pedraza, *Calderón. Vida y teatro*, op. cit. p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, *Calderón*, Madrid, Síntesis, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>i</sup> Emma Smith, "Studying Shakespeare and His Contemporaries", *Talking Shakespeare*, ed. Deborah Cartmell and Michael Scott, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 55,

<sup>ii</sup> Smith, p. 57.