

Philosophical Shakespeare v. Metaphysical Calderón?

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Whether philosophy has been a search for the wisdom of life, or an examination of the values of truth, goodness and beauty; whether philosophy “is pursued according to the myth or wish that one may know everything, or else according to the myth or wish that one may know nothing...”¹; whether the philosopher is the one who is concerned with the grounds of fundamental ideas and beliefs, or one who inquires about the problems of human existence, Shakespeare and Calderón are philosophical dramatists as their plays are deeply concerned with philosophical questions and preoccupations about human life and nature. In them we acknowledge the otherness of the human. Their drama involved central questions related to cultural, aesthetic and political issues. The greatness of their literary achievement is not only due to artistic considerations but also to the philosophical questioning of their dramatic discourse as both dramatists could “reach deep into the wells of human consciousness”². 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”³. In this way they gave a dramatic response to the questioning of man and of the world around them.

They had a kind of philosophical instinct that shaped their dramatic genius and helped them to dramatise human contradictions. The fundamental problems that worry us prompted

¹ S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, (1987), Cambridge University Press, 2003, IX.

² S. Wells, “Millennium Masterworks: Shakespeare”, *Sunday Times*, Cultural Section, 15.08.1999, p. 6.

³ Miguel de Unamuno, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1973, p. 7.

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 modifies severely our ideas concerning man. It shows not only that drama and philosophy are closely interrelated but also that the former has a stronger influence on us⁴ 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 means 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..."⁵ 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 beyond the constraint of intellectual and philosophical boundaries. 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 will be perpetually linked in the unending search for truth in the plays of

⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*, London, Fourth State, 1999, p. 717.

⁵ John Joughin (ed.), *Philosophical Shakespeares*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 14.

Shakespeare and Calderón⁶ 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. I, therefore, suggest that any examination of Calderón's dramatic works should include a category of metaphysical drama for plays like *Life is a Dream*⁷, *The Wonder-Working Magician*, *The Constant Prince*, and *The Daughter of the Air* whose metaphysical concern should be placed within the context of Calderón's Christian faith and scholastic learning which provide him with theological answers to those philosophical questions.

Both dramatists manifest 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 mere 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 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"⁸, the influence of the mainstream of the philosophical thought that pervaded seventeenth century culture in England and Spain can be seen in their plays.

⁶ Eugenio Frutos, *La filosofía de Calderón en sus autos sacramentales*, Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico, 1981, p. 79.

⁷ It has been referred to as metaphysical. See Everett W. Hesse, *Theology, Sex and the Comedia and Other Essays*, Madrid, Studia Humanitatis, 1982, p. 79.

⁸ Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, "Calderón y Shakespeare: La vida como sueño", *Calderón 2000*, op. cit., p. 571.

However an intellectual stance is more explicit in Calderón⁹ who studied in Alcalá (1614) and Salamanca (1619) where he became familiar with the new trends of philosophy and theology. His intellectual education facilitated his contact with neo-scholasticism represented by Suárez and Vitoria. Despite the radical Christian dimension of Calderón's drama, the vision of the world in his secular plays is similar to that of Shakespeare because his plays dramatise confusion and discord arising out of the inevitable clash of values in the natural order. This secular consciousness also appears in Calderón's religious plays where we are present at a confrontation between the natural and supernatural order. The depth and consistency of his thought and his literary instinct enabled him to endow abstract concepts with dramatic skill and technique as seen in the *autos sacramentales* that show the extent of his theological and philosophical learning. In Calderón there is "un complejo universo de ideas y pensamientos bullía en su cabeza y tomaba forma ambigua, contradictoria, dialéctica en sus personajes"¹⁰ [the complex universe of ideas and thoughts that boiled up in his head was illustrated through his characters].

The soliloquies 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

⁹ For Ciriaco Morón Arroyo it is more than likely that Calderón had heard of Shakespeare's plays. See "Calderón and Shakespeare: La vida como sueño", *Calderón 2000*, Ignacio Arellano (ed.), Kassel, Reichenberger, 2002, vol. 2, p. 569.

¹⁰ Felipe, B. Pedraza, *Calderón. Vida y teatro*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2000, p. 55)

forced to be who they are not. This is why to be or not to be become the key question for them. They are compelled to search for their identities in a context of chaos and political manipulation as the condition for their final success. However it is Lear who best expresses this state of nonsense and confusion

Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?
I am mightily abus'd. I should e'en die with pity
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I will not swear these are my hands: let's see;
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assur'd
Of my condition.

4.7.51-57

Lear's tragedy lies in the fact that he has lost consciousness of his identity like Segismund whose words can be the tragic expression of Lear's radical questioning: *¿Ay, mísero de mí, y ay, infelice!/ ¿Qué triste voz escucho!/ Con nuevas penas y tormentos lucho.*" (1.2.78-80) [O, wretched and unhappy me/ What a sad voice I hear/ I struggle against new sorrows and torments]. Segismund is aware of his abject state. But Lear is nobody. He has no words even to verify his loss of identity in the wilderness. He needs evidence of his being there. Otherwise life does not make sense. Lear forgets that in the very act of questioning lies the proof of his existence as a person who thinks.

It is interesting to notice how some key philosophical questions are repeated time after time in the plays of Shakespeare and 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 big 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² The acceptance of the tragic fate means that personal freedom is an illusion. It is Segismund who expresses his desolation when he acknowledges his lack of freedom

¿No nacieron los demás?
Pues si los demás nacieron,
¿Qué privilegios tuvieron
que yo no gocé jamás?
Nace el ave, y con las galas
Que dan la belleza suma, apenas es flor de pluma
O ramillete con alas,
Cuando las etéreas salas
Corta con velocidad,
Negándose a la piedad del nido
que deja en calma;
¿y teniendo yo más alma;
tengo menos libertad?
1.2.119-132

[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
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?]

¹¹ Robert N. Watson, “Tragedy”, *The Cambridge Companion to English Drama*, A.R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 304.

¹² G.K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642. The Age of Shakespeare*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1997, p. 418

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]. He, like Caliban, is not free to decide and think. The tower becomes the symbol of his alienation. For Caliban the island also becomes a prison where he is forced to live under Prospero's control.

Semíramis also experiences 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 in which she has languished for years as she wonders and imagines what life must be 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 imagination¹³. Hamlet's famous soliloquy reproduces Semiramis' 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.

Segismund faces a different dilemma in *Life Is a Dream* that urges an immediate solution. The experience of appearance and

¹³ Everett W. Hesse, *Theology, Sex and the Comedia and Other Essays*, op. cit., p. 110.

reality whose dividing line shifts constantly in a dynamic interplay becomes another ground of philosophical interest for him. He needs to investigate why he seems to be who he is not. He cannot understand the contradiction of being a prince but living as a prisoner. His crisis of identity is Segismund's most destructive experience caused by Basilio's political ambition. Besides the interpretation of reality given by Basilio intensifies Segismund's mental and emotional conflict making him angry, frustrated and confused in his perceptions of the world. The senses and the imagination are precisely the source of Segismund's confusion. He can't find a convincing solution to his daily tragedy as his senses evoke false perceptions that confuse him time after time when he tries to discover his identity as he is both the monster of the tower and the prince of the palace.

The darkness of the tower contrasts with the light and everything that is found in the palace. In spite of their contradictory nature (darkness/light, silence/music, fiction/reality) both settings are complementary in the sense that they represent the twofold dimension which is experienced by Segismund's inner division when he awakes from the dream of the tower to dream the dream of the palace for dreams link reality with fiction and fiction with reality showing the double nature of Segismund's life. His sensorial shock -when he comes to the palace- makes him reproduce his existential questions:

¡Válgame el cielo! ¿qué veo?
¡Válgame el cielo! ¿qué miro?
Con poco espanto lo admiro,
Con mucha duda lo creo...
Decir que sueño es engaño,
Bien sé que despierto estoy.
¿Yo Segismundo no soy?
Dadme, cielos desengaño.
Decidme qué pudo ser
esto que a mi fantasía
sucedió mientras dormía,
que aquí me he llegado a ver.
Pero sea lo que fuere,

¿quién me mete en discurrir?
Dejarme quiero servir,
Y venga lo que viniere.

2.3.1224-28/1232-1243

[Heavens! What do I see?
Heavens! What do I watch?
With little fear I admire it
With much uncertainty I believe it...
To say that dreaming is deception
Though I'm awake.
Am I not Segismund?
Heavens, bring me deceit.
Tell me what could it be
That to my illusion
Happened while I was sleeping
To see me in this state
But whatever it might be,
Who makes me think?
Leave me, I want to be of use
And whatever will be, will be]

It is evident that Segismund's self is divided when he awakes from the narcotic dream to find himself in a sumptuous palace where he is torn between illusion and reality, "decir que es sueño es engaño;/ bien sé que despierto estoy" (2.3.1236-1237) [To say that dreaming is deception though I'm awake] However, Segismund moves from an interrogative attitude from asking himself about what he sees to a position of accepting everything that is good for him regardless if it is real or not. This time living a fantasy does not bring deception. On the contrary it produces a sensation of satisfaction and relief as it means experiencing the positive side of human existence. Segismund's confusion has been transformed into uncritical acceptance of everything that makes him enjoy life. And this becomes his most rewarding perception of certainty.

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 ne son rien que des illusions et reveries..."¹⁴. 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, 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 is he and have answers to his questions:

What, would you make me mad? Am not I Christopher Sly, old Sly's son of Burton-heath, by birth a pedlar, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a beard-herd, and now by present profession a tinker? Ask Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot, if she know me

¹⁴ In Ángel Valbuena Prat, *Historia de la Literatura Española*, Barcelona, G. Gili, 1937, pp. 375-377.

not. If she say I am not fourteen pence on the score for sheer ale,
score me up for the lying 'st knave in Christendom.

Ind. 2.17-24

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. For this reason he gives a detailed account of his previous professions. Segismund, for his part, cannot prove who he is because he has no profession. He has no past because his past is his present. Both are dreamers who have experienced the interplay of reality and fiction in their lives. They particularly emphasise the bright side of dreams as they provide them with everything they have been longing for. Dreams may come true as Sly confesses:

Am I a lord, and I have such a lady?
Or do I dream? Or have I dream'd till now?
I do not sleep. I see, I hear, I speak.
I smell sweet savours and feel soft things.
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,
And not a tinker nor Christophoro Sly.

Ind.269-74

This new status carries with it a new identity that does not seem to worry the new lord. His happiness is nothing but an illusion that cannot last for long. Besides the fictional dimension of dreams make them deceptive because they provide the dreamer with expectations that sooner or later will come to an end. Final failure is their only possible reward given their particular nature that brings about confusion. Segismund and Sly are the victims of manipulated illusion. His dreams have been filled with temporary fantasies. When they awake they have the same reaction of deception that produces bitter frustration. They can see the contrast between fiction and reality though it is Macbeth who best expresses the blurring limits between dreams and life:

All your yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

5.5.22-28

Macbeth's speech recalls Segismund whose life is also a "walking shadow". Besides Segismund is the victim of a tale told by Basilio, his father, to justify his ill-starred fate.

Macbeth also refers to the theatrical nature of life. Thus the metaphor of life as a dream has its continuation in the metaphor of the world as a stage. Shakespeare and Calderón presents life as a stage where "...all the men and women are merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts..."(*As You Like It* 2.7.139-142). This is more explicit in Calderón *The Great Theatre of the World* where the Author (God) orders the World to prepare the stage for a performance whose roles will be given by him. It shows that dreaming, like acting, is a part of life where we play different roles at different times. Dreaming and acting are key concepts in Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* and in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where Basilio and Prospero become demi-gods from whom not only political power but also the possibility of being, acting, and dreaming, derive. For them life and acting are strongly interrelated as Prospero, like Basilio, "...behaves very much like the dramatist and producer of his show"¹⁵.

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. The tragic sense of life is present in plays like *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

¹⁵ David Bevington, *Shakespeare*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, p. 213.

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 Don Fernando as a man “distressed in his career towards nothingness...”¹⁶ 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”¹⁷.

The philosophical interest and dramatic questioning manifest the modernity of the plays of Shakespeare and Calderón 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 Shakespeare and Calderón’s dramas that we can find new answers to the questions of the new philosophy that still “calls all in doubt”.

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¹⁶ Felipe B. Pedraza, *Calderón. Vida y teatro*, op. cit. p. 108.

¹⁷ Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, *Calderón*, Madrid, Síntesis, 2002, p. 23.

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