Aristocracy and Reason
Behavior Patterns of Calderón’s Secular Characters

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When dealing with a Golden Age author about whose works a convincing social history has yet to be written, the critic faces a double uncertainty. In studying the literary text, in this case Calderón’s comedias, the difficulty is to pick out the key words, scenes, characters, etc., which will provide anchorage points for a historical interpretation. On the other hand, the critic must sift through the available historical material to single out the facts and tendencies that will illuminate the literary texts. Although he may begin his task with the firm belief (or even an unmistakable intuition) that there is a connection to be found between the given works of literature and the social life of their time, the discovery and full description of these links is a difficult and tricky process, particularly so in the case of Calderón. This difficulty is due partly to the sketchiness of our biographical knowledge about him and partly to the prevalent types of Calderonian criticism.

When critics of Calderón in the first fifty or sixty years of the 20th century have attempted to link his comedias to the society for which they were written, at least two grave errors have been committed. At times the critic’s view of “Golden Age society” has been derived solely from the works of literature and ideas of the period, and thus the Spanish 17th century, however sombre it may have been politically and economically, is seen as an age of high spiritual values. Karl Vossler, for example, in Literatura española: Siglo de oro, refers to the reigning conception of the epoch as “la idea estoico-cristiana”. This view makes the connection between literature and society relatively easy to find, but it falsifies history in the process.

In other cases, the decadence of late Hapsburg Spain is squarely faced: the weakness of the monarchy and the tyranny of aristocracy are recognized, but Calderón as an "enlightened" individual, is seen as the upholder of true Christian values which implicitly or explicitly criticize the predominant behavior of Baroque society. The latter position has been taken by many 20th century ethico-religious critics of Calderón’s comedias. In this case, there is a specific avoidance of connecting the comedias with real socio-political facts of their epoch.

Neither of these methods does full justice to the facts we know about Calderón and his society. They will not help us to find Calderón’s function in Spanish social history, unless we can clarify exactly what ideologies are present in the comedias and in what manner they are present. The texts must be read on a different level, as the critic keeps in mind certain essential facts about late Hapsburg Spain, of which I shall mention several in the course of this study. They all refer to the preoccupations of Spain’s ruling class as the Empire entered into its crisis and decline. Thus while witnessing the words and actions of Calderón’s fictional aristocrats, we should look for parallels with the aristocratic character that historians have gleaned from the documents of the period: an increased aggressiveness as the threats from external enemies became greater, occasional frankness about pragmatic means to self-preservation, a resigned religious sentiment combined with Neo-Stoicism that sometimes perceives the decline of the whole Spanish power structure and opts for “inward” values like honor. Many more traits could be added to this list.

The present study does not attempt to perform a complete socio-historical analysis of the Calderonian comedias, but rather to suggest a new perspective on the ideological content itself. It is hoped that the clues given here could aid in the construction of a fully historical portrait of Calderón as secular dramatist.

The ethical criticism on Calderón’s comedias, which has become so prolific in the years since the first epoch-making articles of A. A. Parker, contains two methodological principles which need to be corrected. First, it sees Calderón as a remodeler of earlier plays and of historical and mythological sources with the intention of using them to exemplify a moral or theological insight. Secondly, it elevates Calderón’s autos sacramentales into the position of a canon of interpretation for the comedias. With respect to the first difficulty, many critics have tried to state unequivocally what Calderón’s “message” was in individual comedias or in his handling of the genre as a whole. They have then organized the dramatic material created by Calderón in accordance with the abstract theme. It is usually found that Calderón was a master craftsman in making all the elements of a play contribute to the illustration of precepts. As an orthodox Counter Reformation dramatist, critics have usually limited his
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Yet if we take a closer look at the characters that Calderón employs, it becomes clear that he is not portraying the behavior of human beings in general, but rather of a group of aristocrats of various epochs and places, a group whose concerns tend to run in certain well-defined directions. The characters are involved in these conflicts willy-nilly because they are born into the aristocratic group by virtue of their sangre ilustre; this trait was considered in Spanish baroque ideology to be one of the causas ministras that God’s providence used for its inscrutable ends. It is true that these heroes strive after virtud, but their virtue cannot be adequately defined in terms of Biblical or even Thomistic Christianity. It is tied to the needs of a social estate to maintain itself in its prestige and power. In personal and matrimonial life, this implies maintaining one’s honor; in political life, it means exercising successfully the art of statecraft; and in religion, it implies saving one’s soul. In one sense it could be said that the subject-matter of the comedias consists of conflicts between the contradictory patterns of virtue which the nobleman is called upon to fulfill.

Most of Calderón’s comedias are court dramas, which posit in dramatic form and with heightened conflictiveness the personal and social factors which enter into the art of survival in the highest strata of an absolute monarchy. The ideology of 17th century Spain (fervent Catholicism, inherited honor, nationalism, and courtly love) and the practical realities (competition for honors and posts, imperial wars, economic collapse) find their way into Calderón’s comedias in the form of absolute demands on the characters’ ingenuity and loyalty. The plot of the drama shows how they navigate their way through these obstacles.

Given the exigencies of the anguished conflicts into which Calderón throws his characters, it often happens that the traditional domination of reason over passion is reversed: characters who are in the grip of passion will use reason to justify an action already performed or about to be performed. At certain moments of insight, they become aware of what they are doing with reason’s help. In La estatua de Prometeo, for instance, the populace of the Caucasus has split into two factions led by the twin brothers Epimeteo and Prometeo. The two groups argue verbally until their discussion breaks down and it becomes necessary to resort to arms. Epimeteo declares: “Ya no es tiempo, / si han de razonar las armas, / que lidien los argumentos.” This sentence summarizes the attitude toward reason that I have just described; thoughts are weapons in a battle whose cause was not originally determined by reason. Yet the orthodoxy of 17th century

repertory of themes to Christian doctrine or to classical Aristotelian or Stoic ethics, in short, to the officially accepted dogmas of his time.

In the second place, it is assumed that Calderón’s thought is most “pure” in his doctrinal autos and that the best way of unlocking the secrets of the comedias is to find equivalent phraseology, characters, and dramatic situations in the autos. Thus Calderón’s whole dramatic output, both secular and religious, is seen as the expression of one consistent world-view, which turns out to be more or less congruent with orthodox Thomism.

The doctrines of Thomism, as can be gleaned from certain portions of the Summa Theologicae, posit intellect as man’s highest faculty in his dealings with worldly beings, including his fellow human beings. Since intellect converts material things into non-material concepts and non-materiality automatically brings any creature closer to God, it is nobler, according to Thomism, for a human being to comprehend his fellow creatures intellectually than to love or to hate them. In his relations with angels and God, the reverse is true: it is nobler for a human being to love God than to know about him. The conclusion to be drawn from these doctrines is that human conduct should be guided by “right reason” and that all desires and aversions should be filtered through the human being’s free, rational will (called appetitus intellectuvs in Scholastic Terminology.)

There is no question that this view is verbally expressed in countless passages from Calderón’s comedias. These very passages, however, are set in dramatic contexts that give them a different orientation. It is one thing to hear the above doctrines proclaimed in a sermon or to read them in a theological treatise and quite another to hear them expressed by a dramatic character who has vital interests at stake. From the minute the curtain rises on Act I, Calderón’s characters are involved in a worldly situation which conditions their behavior. This aspect of the comedias is lost if we take certain characters as mouthpieces for the ideas that Calderón was trying to put across. The same happens if we regard certain other characters merely as examples of behavior that Calderón condemns. A. A. Parker has rightly observed that there is a mixture of prudence and imprudence in most Calderonian protagonists, but he uses this fact to support the Christian doctrine that even the best human actions are tainted by man’s general sinfulness. He never relinquishes the idea that his version of the Christian moral code is the right measuring-stick by which to pass ethical judgments on the characters.
Spain required that this instrumentality of reason be hidden and that the characters verbally insist that their actions are based on Reason as transmitted by the authority of the classics and the church. Thus classical precepts and religious dogmas are submitted to a sophistical distortion so that they can be used to prove the points which the speaker needs to prove in order to rationalize his desires and obligations.

We may illustrate these tendencies by examining the four principal characters of one of Calderón’s political dramas, La gran Cenobia.

The first character to appear on stage is Aureliano, who begins the play dressed in the animal skins that are often used by Calderón to symbolize the natural man who is ruled by sense appetite. He comes across a crown and scepter which have been left on the rocks in the forest. It turns out that the former Emperor had passed that way after defeat in battle and had left the crown and scepter there. Aureliano takes the royal accoutrements, drawn by an instinctive desire for the power they represent. All through the play, Aureliano is characterized by the same irreflexive passion, which makes him take things at their face value and react emotionally on a superficial understanding.

When the leader of his army, Decio, returns from the war against Cenobia and admits defeat, Aureliano immediately strips him of his position and proudly boasts that he is going to conquer Cenobia himself. His rashness is due to two factors: a lack of forethought and a lack of experience. Decio has an advantage over the new emperor in that he has already tried to vanquish the Oriental queen and knows how powerful she is in military strength and personal attractiveness. In other words, Decio has gone through a process of desengaño, not so much in the Christian sense of learning that worldly things are transitory, but rather in the secular sense of learning just how things stand in this world. The most important fact these characters have to learn is that, as Aureliano says, esto es mundo. Aristocratic valor must be tempered by pragmatic knowledge of facts, often referred to by Calderón in the term tocar la ocasión. Aureliano is not blameworthy because he has strong desires. Quite the contrary; such brio is one among several signs of noble blood. It is his inability to subject the passions of the blood to the active power of practical reason that makes him ineffective in maintaining his position.

This pragmatic faculty is, in its turn, a product of experience and not of abstract speculation. Such a lesson was taught time and time again to the aristocratic class of Spain as it discovered that naming an armada Invincible did not necessarily make it so; that the “wisdom” employed in expelling the moriscos did not make this policy any less disastrous for Spain’s welfare; and that theologically-based notions of the king as a “god on earth” did not prevent court favorites like Lerma and Olivares from practically taking the reins of government into their own hands. These experiences and others underlie the typically Calderonian image of Aureliano boasting about his superiority over Cenobia in one scene and in the next scene fleeing from her army in the heat of battle.

Aureliano’s rashness puts him in grave difficulties when, in flight from the pursuing enemy, he promises his crown to a masked soldier who offers to safeguard his escape; the stranger is none other than Decio. When the latter appears before the Emperor in the middle of the triumphal procession, unmasked, and demands his reward, Aureliano shields himself with an ingenious syllogism: 1) A man without honor is not capable of receiving any honors, “... porque un hombre sin honor no es capaz con tanta afrenta, / de honra alguna.” 2) Decio was stripped of his rank, therefore he has no honor. 3) Therefore, Aureliano cannot and is not obligated to share his crown with Decio. The reasoning is sophistic, but Decio cannot question it because Aureliano wields the imperial power at the moment.

The antagonism which Aureliano has created throughout the play, however, catches up with him and he dies at Decio’s hands, having lost the support of the people and the army. He has practiced a politics of self-aggrandizement like that of Gracián’s Héroe, but has not learned the razón de estado de sí mismo, the art of governing oneself, which the Jesuit philosopher considers absolutely necessary to become a hero in the circumstances of monarchical and imperial states. For instance, when Aureliano has heard Libio’s plan to capture Cenobia, he wants to proceed to action immediately and exhorts: “Pues no hagan las razones / estorbo con sus vanas ilusiones.” There is a scorn for deliberation and judgment in his words.

The emperor’s antagonist is Cenobia, queen of the Orient, who really has no more legitimate claim to her throne than Aureliano has to his, since according to the custom of her kingdom, a woman should not succeed to her husband’s throne when there is a male heir, in this case a nephew, Libio. She gains favor with the nation by winning several important battles, so that when her husband Abdenato dies, she is acclaimed by the people and the army. Unlike Aureliano she becomes a razón de estado unto herself and her prudence allows her to navigate the turbulent waters of
politics with greater security. She runs into difficulty because she falls in love with the Roman general Decio, and at an important juncture at which the latter is the only soldier guarding the passage to Aureliano's tent, she does not push her troops forward ruthlessly, but respects Decio's life and his moral position of loyalty. Thus spared, Aureliano has a chance to kidnap her. At the beginning of Act III, when Cenobia is dragged through the streets of Rome in a triumphal procession, it seems as if she has been led to political downfall by two motives that form part of every normal human being: family ties and erotic love. Yet Cenobia's prudence receives its reward at the end of the play; Decio assassinates Aureliano and offers to marry Cenobia and rule jointly with her. Cenobia's desire for power and her love are both satisfied in some measure. Her fortunate condition at the close of the play can be said to be a result of her intelligent balancing of two passions: ambition and love. If she had been like Aureliano, she would have steeled herself against Decio's manly charms. If she had succumbed completely to love from the beginning, she would have surrendered her kingdom's sovereignty without a fight.

To equate the practical-intellectual prudence of Cenobia with a sort of single-minded following of abstract moral principles would make Calderón's drama infinitely less interesting than it is. Even the most innately moral of his characters are not unwilling to use all the means at their disposal to achieve a prudent goal. In Cenobia's case, she is obliged to use her natural beauty to try to melt Aureliano's heart by pretending to be in love with him. She reasons that, since women are generally weak, beauty is their natural weapon. She therefore is now fulfilling her natural role by trying to conquer Aureliano in this way: "ahora sí que soy mujer, ahora sí lo he parecido; pues con mis armas ofendo, / cuando a un bárbaro pretendo / vencer con amor fingido." Since Aureliano has mastered her by cunning, she must do the same to gain her freedom.

Each of the two protagonists has a male subaltern who plays a role almost as important as that of the ruler. Decio, the general of the Roman army, both before and during Aureliano's reign, represents from the very beginning the rational or prudent man which Segismundo becomes at the end of his play and which Aureliano never becomes. Upon his return in Act I from a war against Cenobia, he confesses his defeats, both military and amorous, to Aureliano, who has nothing but scorn for his "cowardice". Decio is offended, but remembers that "la continua mudanza / del tiempo me da esperanza; / que no hay en leyes de amor, / ni tirano sin temor, / ni ofendido sin venganza."

Note at this point that Decio is not renouncing his desire to gain Cenobia's love, but is merely postponing it. There is an important psychological difference between the humble-minded character who refuses worldly things because continual change will eventually take away all possessions, and the patient but determined man of action who depends on time's changeability to bring around an opportune moment for him to take vengeance or fulfill his desires. In the 17th century Spanish concept of morality, J. A. Maravall points out the following essential feature:

[Sí en algunos casos se escucha el eco arcaizante del tema medieval y ascético del 'de contemptu mundi' como preparación a una disciplina religiosa, en el siglo barroco se observa comúnmente en la materia un considerable grado de secularización que hace que de la práctica de la desconfianza ante el mundo y el hombre, todos procuren sacar las convenientes artes para vencerlos en provecho propio.]

Decio is certainly the character who holds the most abstract concept of duty: in this sense he fits best into the traditional Scholastic idea of a wise or prudent man. He subordinates both his love for Cenobia and his hatred for Aureliano to the requirements of his patriotic duty as general of the Roman army. Even when personally confronted by Cenobia on the bridge leading to Aureliano's tent, he stands firm and refuses to let her pass, combating her persuasion with the word of honor he gave to defend the emperor's person. At the beginning of Act III, although he does not repent of having been loyal, he nevertheless admits to himself that his loyalty has resulted indirectly in the capture of the woman he loves: "[P]ues la ventaja que muestra / en este triunfo Aureliano, / es que en sus fortunas tengan / él un leal que le guarde, / y ella un traidor que la venda." Once again we see the typically Calderonian contrast between the viewpoint of a particular moment at which loyalty seems a mistake and that of the play as a whole, from which it appears that Decio's loyalty is ultimately instrumental in making him emperor. The people trust him because of his refusal to surrender to Cenobia in previous battles. In other words, in spite of his final act of regicide, Decio is loyal to Rome in the abstract, and ends up satisfying his love interest as well.

Decio is finally determined to commit regicide by the sight of Cenobia imoring Aureliano and apparently in love with him. Since this love is leigned, the final emotional jolt that stirs Decio to action is accidental since he reacts to a situation he does not understand and since his arrival on stage at that moment is contingent and unmotivated. No matter that shortly thereafter Cenobia
explains the real situation to him and their lovers’ quarrel is resolved; Calderón has seen fit to use a dramatic peripécia, which is typical of the Lopesque style of comedia, to detonate the growing thoughts and emotions of indignation against Aureliano. Again the Scholastic doctrine of reason and passions is superceded by a more modern psychological representation. Just like the Calderonian “husbands of honor”, Decio requires a “last straw” to serve as a catalyst for an action that in this case appears reasonable and laudable to the other characters. It is peculiar that the more personal motive of jealousy is a stronger force than military or political revenge; Decio makes his resolution in these terms: “[M]uera un fiero emperador; / no porqué ofendí mi honor, / no porque triunfó de ti: / porque me dio celos sí, / que ya me agravingo mayor.” There are other passages in the play which suggest that love toward the opposite sex is an almost invincible passion that must be given its due for a person to be fully human. Aureliano, the real hombre-fiera of the play, is surprisingly the one who resists Cenobia’s charms, although he is forced to admit at one point: “[S]in duda no advirtió / tal belleza el que pensó / que era libre el albedro.”

Decio’s opposite is Libio, the traitor, who instead of being activated by a wide range of human motives, has only one facet to his character, the ambition to rule. Cenobia is superior to him however, in popularity and military prowess, so Libio resorts to treachery in order to obtain the throne. His strategy is to offer his services to Aureliano as kidnapper of Cenobia. When this plan backfires, Libio’s second attempt at power is to try to murder Aureliano, which occurs coincidentally at the very moment Decio attempts the same act. In the final scene, both the loyal Roman and the treacherous Oriental attempt at different moments to kill Aureliano in his sleep, but each is forced to hide because the other arrives. Two patterns of behavior, as morally different as night and day, end with the same act, thus relativizing the sharp distinctions that moral theologians liked to make between the consequences of virtue and vice.

In fact, both Libio and Decio, when they try to stab the emperor, hurl the same four epithets at him: bárbaro, tirano, soberbio, cruel. This symmetry is either due to a love of exact parallelisms on Calderón’s part or it shows that such value judgments tend to lose their sharp contours in the arena of royal politics, a fact which becomes clear in the final scene. Decio orders Libio put to death, presumably for having kidnapped Cenobia, Decio’s wife-to-be. For this act, he deserves the designation of traidor. Libio, on the other hand, calls Aureliano cruel because he deprived the former of the reward he had promised in return for the kidnapping. Although Decio claims to be executing Libio and Irene for their crimes, we know that another fundamental motivation is to assure his life and Cenobia’s against further assassination attempts.

The entirety of La gran Cenobia, then, presents a veritable labyrinth of political and personal means and ends. This, of course, can be said of most of Calderón’s dramas of royalty, but what stands out here is the character of Decio as the most well-rounded and at the same time contradictory. We may venture to suggest that he turns out to be the most “positive” character precisely because of his sensitivity to several opposing demands on his emotions, his judgments and his actions. His prudence consists in being a middle term between the passion-bound Aureliano and the cold calculator Libio. He contains the one grain of madness, in the form of jealousy, that puts a rational prudence into motion, a prudence which by intellectual considerations alone might have remained forever deliberating and never have acted. Without a doubt, Calderón has repeated in La gran Cenobia his characteristic parallelism of virtuous characters and treacherous characters with the final triumph of the former. Yet the virtuous man’s triumph here is not a merely providential act, as in certain other plays. It depends also on a strong will which is determined to obtain whatever it wills, whether the object be proper or improper according to classical ethics. This can be done because the very Scholastic method of argument from authority has been developed to such a subtle degree that any measures taken can be justified by the ingenious application of a traditional precept.

All of the above tendencies in Calderón’s secular dramaturgy make the plays into a reflection in some sort of the epoch lived by the Spanish aristocracy under the final century of Hapsburg rule. The increasing divorce between the ideological foundations of the Spanish empire (mainly Scholastic theology) and the actual course its rulers followed is reflected in the profound ironies of Calderón’s discourse and in the contradictions between speech and action which characterize his dramatic style.

For one matter, in spite of the fantastic atmosphere and the “irrealism” of Calderón’s style, his comedias do share with the social milieu in which they were performed the sense that, in Calderón’s own phraseology, las armas razonan. The most intense intellectual debating between characters can be interrupted by the offstage cry, ¡Guerra, guerra! Likewise, sweet music and idyllic love scenes are cut off by the outbreak of battles and contention. Many characters recognize, either with admiration or with horror,
that might can override abstract right and, in an absolute monarchy, must do so to maintain a situation of power. Compulsion is recognized as a force that manipulates its victims without their consent. Eraclio of *En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira*, when forced to flatter a tyrant he despises, mutters an aside: *Tiranía, ¿qué no arrastras?* This phrase could have been uttered by innumerable Spanish courtiers who, under late Hapsburg rule, were forced to fawn and flatter their superiors in order to maintain their ecclesiastical and bureaucratic posts. Arms, as well as economic necessity, social convention, the will of tyrants, and fate, have a hard logic of their own which, time after time, comes into conflict with intellectual reasoning or the desires of the heart.

The other half of the expression (*los argumentos lidian*) expresses the notion that reason is not only capable of being crushed by force, but also becomes a type of weapon in its own right. In intellectual matters, the prime requisite is *invencción*, the art of finding (*invenire*) arguments and rhetorical devices to win practical battles, to justify victories or to excuse failures. In this connection it is interesting to study how the doctrines of the divine right of kings had to be modified when it became evident that a *valido* like Olivares could be a better ruler than the king himself. The same tendency is found in the religious controversies of the 17th century, in which the Company of Jesus, for example, saw its theological debating against heretics as a quasi-military operation. The intellect is not the discoverer of new truth, but a rearranger of old truths for new purposes.12

Thus, the fate of Calderón’s secular characters, their successes and failures, the passions they undergo, and the plans they carry out, instead of merely reinforcing a divine teleological view of life, such as that which so many ethico-religious critics uphold, actually undermines this view in an unconscious way and shows how inadequate it is to explain occurrences and advise patterns of behavior in the circumstances in which Calderón’s aristocrats find themselves: a secularized state, powerful enemy nations with new religious, political, and economic forms, all of which posed great theoretical and practical problems for a regime of aristocratic privilege.

NOTES


2. Perhaps the essence of this type of criticism can be found in A. A. Parker, “Towards a Definition of Calderonian Tragedy”, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 39 (1962), pp. 222-37.


4. Witness W. J. Entwistle’s preference: “It was much better for Calderón when, in the autos of his last period, he was able to present his thoughts as a play of symbols only. It is hardly possible to avoid incongruence when making the abstract local and concrete.” (“Justina’s Temptation: An Approach to the Understanding of Calderón”, *Modern Language Review* 40 [July, 1945], p. 189.)


6. See A. A. Parker, *op. cit.*


8. “La fosi est imploré por apaisar la tempête, la raison est mobilisée pour servir la crovaye, mais toute idéologie n’est qu’un effort de conjurer des forces irrationnelles par des suggestions irrationnelles.” (Anton Constandse, *Le Baroque espagnol et Calderón de la Barca* [Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1951], p. 131.)


10. He performs a work of self-realization: “El hombre realiza sobre sí mismo y sobre los demás un trabajo de alfareo. Esto es lo que representa una obra como la de Gracián y en ella su más radical significación: el paso de una moral a una moralística, o digamos simplemente a una reflexión sobre la práctica de la conducta que... podemos llamar un ‘arte de la conducta’—dando a la palabra *arte* su valor de una *técnica*.” (J. A. Maravall, *op. cit.*, p. 346.)

11. “Calderón constructs his plays to emphasize the will, which, no matter how powerful the obstacles to its functioning, always functions and always succeeds.” (J. E. Maraniss, *On Calderón* [Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978], p. 14.)

12. “A la primera obejada, el raciocinio de Calderón parece poseer el aspecto de una busca sin fin de la verdad nueva; pero un escrutinio más detallado muestra que es siempre una verdad, que, en efecto, en su filosofía se considera como fija y completa por toda la eternidad. El método dialéctico no es nada investigatorio; es un invento de Aristóteles, que en el teatro de Calderón extrae las consecuencias de las verdades conocidas por la enseñanza de la Iglesia, más bien que buscar verdades nuevas.” (Everett W. Hesse, “La dialéctica y el casuismo en Calderón”, in Durán y Echevarría, *Calderón y la crítica* [Madrid: Gredos, 1976], pp. 580-1.)