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THE PROPHETESS AND LIFE IS A DREAM Two Early Modern Plays on Worldly Prerogative

todo el poder [es] prestado

[all power is on loan]¹

(*La vida es sueño*, TLN 2386)

This article points to a striking thematic similarity (perhaps only a concurrence) between Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (Life is a Dream, 1635) and an earlier English play, *The Prophetess*, by John Fletcher and Philip Massinger (1622). The central idea of both plays is the tension between individual will and its power over the outer world. Both plays end in what has become to be termed a Baroque mode: holding worldly power while, simultaneously, recognizing its relativity and transitoriness.²

Edward M. Wilson, in his chapter "On *La vida es sueño*",³ says that Calderón's play 'has something not to be found in ordinary versions of the folktale of the Sleeper Awakened, such as the story of Abu Hassan in *The Arabian Nights* or of Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play expresses a view of life, and so does the title' (30). Arguably, Wilson is not absolutely correct in his rather superficial reading of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Nor is it the cogent metaphor of life as a dream that makes Calderón's play so powerful. I will depart from the concept of the dream to the question of how worldly power is

¹ The English version of *La vida es sueño* which I am using is by John Clifford (*Life is a Dream*, London: Nick Hern Books, 1998). Through-line numbering (TLN) is based on the Spanish original (published by Olympia Ediciones, 1995). Quotations from *The Prophetess* are taken from Fredson Bowers (gen. ed.), *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, Cambridge UP, 1966-96, vol. IX.

² This commonplace notion of life as loan that comes to an end at any time was nothing new in the early seventeenth century. In *Everyman*, it is Death who interrogates the hero in the same vein: 'What, weenest thou thy life is given thee? | And thy worldly goods also? [...] | Nay, nay, it was but lent thee' (*Everyman*, 161-64).

³ In *Spanish and English Literature of the 16th and 17th centuries: Studies in Discretion, Illusion and Mutability*, Cambridge UP 1980, 27-47. Although published in 1980, the texts were actually written as early as 1938-9.

executed and—most importantly—passed on in *The Prophetess* and *La vida*.

The connection between *The Prophetess* and *La vida* goes beyond the *locus communi* of the relativity of worldly power. The heroes (be it Calderón's Segismundo, or Fletcher and Massinger's Diocles or Maximinian), who are *potentially* capable of evil resulting from their (human) nature, go unwittingly through a trial, a second chance, or—if you will—an 'educative simulator'. What they do is always conditioned by a mundane power, which in case of their failure or misbehaviour, removes them from the office they hold. This trial is not conducted by a medieval God but by humans, who nevertheless have, to a certain extent, providential qualities; for the hero's subjective world they enact and 'simulate' the role of Providence. The objective of the trials is to reconcile the universal problem of ambition and power, and—spiritually—seek an answer to the question from St Matthew:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

(Mt 16,26; KJV)

In *La vida* it is the old Polish King Basilio and his counsellor and agent Clotaldo, who function as providential, worldly correctives to Segismundo's evil behaviour. For fear that Segismundo's horoscope will come true and he will prove 'a monster in the shape of a man' (TLN 673), his father isolates him as a hermit, and has him tied in chains in the mountains. Clotaldo acts as his father until, in his sleep, Segismundo is transported into the royal palace and told on the morning who he is in reality. When he virtually immediately kills a man and threatens to kill Clotaldo as well as his natural father, he is again removed to the mountains in his sleep, and told that everything has been a dream. Later, when Segismundo has learnt his lesson about the nature of his rule, he is—strikingly enough—invested with the office again.

In *The Prophetess*, Diocles is promised by a prophecy that he shall be a Caesar in Rome; however, he has to promise to the prophetess Delphia that he shall marry Drusilla. When eventually he is invested with the office of 'half partner in the Empire' with Charinus and is offered Charinus' sister Aurelia in marriage, he ambitiously forswears his former vow and wants to marry Aurelia forsaking Drusilla. The prophetess Delphia obstructs the marriage and ensures that Dioclesian (as he is called now) is bereft of friends, happiness and hope of recovery: his friends are abducted, his nephew Maximinian is made ambitious and covetous of the throne, and Aurelia is made to fall in love with Maximinian. When Dioclesian returns to Drusilla, all turns to good; the abductors (Persians) are vanquished. He learns his lesson and retires with Drusilla 'to a most private Grange / In *Lumbardie*' (5.1.9-10), while Maximinian marries Aurelia and is invested with Dioclesian's title of co-emperor.

When Dioclesian defeats the Persian kidnapper Cosroe, he also acquires a providential, yet not supernatural, position within the play. Being himself a variation of the merciful pardoner, he passes on to the defeated Persians the

same experience he has received from Delphia: he prepares a trial for them and gives them a second chance. Having punished their wrongs, he liberates them and returns them to power:

[*Dioclesian.*] Now by my hopes 50
 Of peace and quiet here, I never met
 A braver Enemy: and to make it good,
Cosroe, Cassana, and the rest, be free,
 And ransomlesse return.

Cosroe. To see this vertue 55
 Is more to me then Empire; and to be
 Orecome by you, a glorious victorie.

(4.6.50-56)

At this point in the play, after Dioclesian's retirement, it is Maximinian who becomes the Segismundo of the English play. Although the emperor, he is uncomfortable with the insecurity of his power (because it was not self-invested, but 'lent', that is, granted, given conditionally):

[*Aurelia.*] What then can shake ye?
Maximinian. The thought I may be shaken: and assurance
 That what we doe possesse is not our own,
 But has depending on anothers favour: 25
 For nothing's more uncertain (*my Aurelia*)
 Then Power that stands not on his proper Basis,
 But borrowes his foundation.

(*The Prophetess*, 5.2.22-28)

In a quest for self-reliance, Maximinian first attempts to get rid of his co-partner, Charinus (but fails), and kill the harmless Dioclesian, the 'lender' (or granter) of his power. Charinus warns him in what may be a definition of the Baroque conception of worldly power:

[*Charinus.*] When the receiver of a courtesie
 Cannot sustain the weight it carries with it, 110
 'Tis but a Triall, not a present Act.
 Thou hast in a few dayes of thy short Reign,
 In over-weening pride, riot and lusts,
 Sham'd noble *Dioclesian*, and his gift:
 Nor doubt I, when it shall arrive unto 115
 His certain knowledge, how the Empire grones
 Under thy Tyranny, but hee will forsake
 His private life, and once again resume
 His laid-by Majestie: or at least, make choice
 Of such an *Atlas* as may bear this burthen, 120

Too heavie for thy shouldiers. To effect this,
Lend your assistance (Gentlemen) and then doubt not
But that this mushroom (sprung up in a night)
Shall as soon wither.

(5.2.109-24)

Throughout the play, it is the prophetess Delphia who is the providential, corrective figure for the characters' wilful actions. Even perhaps more unambiguously than Prospero in *The Tempest*, she appropriates divine attributes by interfering with other men's lives. And although her prerogative is subject to trial and is herself often mistreated and abused, she never loses her authority, and even less so her power.

In the second part of the play, with Dioclesian's retirement, the latent providential prerogative of Delphia is now extended to him but remains latent until Maximinian attempts to make his position absolute and become an unlimited tyrant, and eventually transgresses the rights given to him as a human individual and prince. When eventually Maximinian is defeated, by means of a divine '*hand with a Bolt* [which] *appears above*' (5.4.112 SD), which Delphia has brought on, he repents to Dioclesian for his wrongs:

[*Maximinian.*] We are sorry for our sins. Take from us, Sir,
That glorious weight that made us swell, that poison'd us;
That masse of Majestie I laboured under,
(Too heavie and too mighty for my manage) 130
That my poor innocent days may turn again,
And my minde, pure, may purge me of these curses;
By your old love, the blood that runs between us.
The hand taken in.

(5.4.127-33)

Dioclesian at this instant takes on again the providential, benign role of the merciful pardoner, and gives Maximinian another chance:

[*Dioclesian.*] Once more I give ye all; learn to deserve it,
And live to love your Good⁴ more then your Greatnesse.
(5.4.139-40)

Before doing so, Dioclesian renounces his place as an emperor for his own 'little world of Man' anew:

[*Dioclesian.*] I mine own Content make mine own Empire.
(5.4.138)

⁴ Note the (likely) early seventeenth-century pronunciation of 'Good' [go:d]. The interchange of 'Good' and 'God' in spoken word must have been very common.

It is of great significance that Dioclesian, unlike Delphia, does not use, nor has he recourse to, supernatural powers, and exerts his prerogative by the force of his virtue and authority. This is the situation in which—metaphorically—*La vida es sueño* takes over.

In comparing the two plays, one should not be misled by formal differences. The conditions from which the plays developed were different; if not so much in staging, then definitely in the political approach to public religion. While in Spain, the religious *autos sacramentales* were staged with great popularity and audiences would kneel and beat their chests whenever St Anthony said '*mea culpa*' on stage,⁵ in England, James I's Parliament issued *An Acte to Restraine Abuses of Players* (on 27 May 1606) 'For the preventing and avoyding the greate Abuse of the Holy Name of God in Stageplayes, Interludes, Maygames, Shewes, and such like'.⁶ In effect, all public-playhouse plays had to be purged of all oaths and other references to the Divinity which the Reformation had not yet suppressed. Naturally, the development of theatre as a means of communicating spiritual (i.e. Christian) experience went formally in two different directions. Thus while in *La vida* there are frequent explicit references to God, *The Prophetess* has to—as I wish to claim—make up for this coerced absence of Divinity by providential figures, such as the supernatural Delphia and the 'natural' Dioclesian.

God's decree in *La vida* parallels Delphia's prophecies. Similarly, its (fallible) agent, Basilio, parallels Delphia (who is not spared abuse and dishonour either) and Dioclesian. In the Spanish play, as has been said above, the relation between the subject and reality is carried through with the central metaphor of a dream. The trial, which is prepared by King Basilio and which Segismundo has failed, brings him to express his new conception of life as a loan-like dream. This speech parallels the above speech by Charinus:⁷

Segismundo [alone].

What if he's right? What if we suppressed
This ferocity, this ambition and this rage
Just in case it is a dream.

[...]

That's what experience teaches me:
That everyone who lives is only dreaming
Who they are till they awake.

Es verdad; pues reprimamos
Esta fiera condición,

2155

esta furia, esta ambición,
por si alguna vez soñamos. [...]
y la experiencia me enseña,
que el hombre que vive, sueña
lo que es, hasta despertar.

(*La vida*, TLN 2154-63)

Later in the play, Segismundo further develops this notion into a full-fledged philosophy of life:

⁵ Vladimír Mikeš, *Divadlo španělského Zlatého věku*, Praha: Divadelní ústav 1995, 16.

⁶ E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage IV*, 338-39.

⁷ Towards the end of *The Prophetess*, the retired Dioclesian has a crucial speech on power and greatness (4.6.23-50, 57-62, 64-74), which parallels thematically many speeches of Calderón's play.

Appendix

Calderón's Segismundo, the lawful Polish King, is kept forcibly in a recondite tower by his father Basilio. Basilio bases this action on the horoscope cast at Segismundo's birth, a prophecy saying that Segismundo would become a tyrannical prince, a 'great [...] monster in man's history, [...] savage, bloody, terrible, and impious, |Who, should he live, would tear his country's entrails' (TLN 712-16). The fear of Segismundo's nature is to be prevented by his seclusion. Basilio decrees that Segismundo is made an involuntary hermit, placed in retreat before the sins have even been committed.

Calderón, when writing his *La vida es sueño*, may have been inspired by the legend of a hermit who lived near Salamanca sometime in the fifteenth century, and was believed to be the Polish King. This legend is recorded by Václav Šašek z Bříkova, the supposed author of the humanist travel book *Commentarius brevis et iucundus itineris atque peregrinationis* (A Short and Delectable Commentary on the Journey and Pilgrimages).¹⁰ Václav Šašek was a Czech squire (zeman) and a member of the retinue of Lev of Rožmitál and Blatná, travelling through Europe in the years 1465-67.¹¹ In Chapter 5, 'Through Spain to Salamanca', the company come to Cantalapiedra (40 km north-west of Salamanca) and hear about a hermit, who is supposedly the Polish King. This king is said to have been defeated by pagans and to have sworn to live in seclusion to expiate the breach of a vow he had made. They travel to the village, 4 (Czech) miles off (ca 18 km), and eventually meet him and verify the story.

From the hermitage it is only 9 miles to Salamanca (ca 40 km) where Calderón went to university some 150 years later.¹² If any credit may be given to what is written in the *Commentarius*, there is grounds to believe that this sensation survived for a little more than two life spans, and that, eventually, it could have reached Calderón. If this was so is, however, pure speculation.

From *Commentarius brevis et iucundus* (c1470, 1577), by Václav Šašek z Bříkova (?)

From Medina del Campo it is six miles to *Cantalapiedra*. This town belongs to bishop. Four miles from it lies a village and not far from it, there lives an eremite. It is supposed that he is the Polish King, who was said to have been killed by pagans; I do not claim this myself though. Even Sir Lev was told he was a king who, having been vanquished by pagans, made a vow of eternal solitude to expiate a breach of his word he had given them. When we came to a

I would like to thank Ondřej Kvas for helping me with research for this article.

¹⁰ The extant text is a Latin translation by Stanislav Pavlovský, a 16th century humanist and clergyman, later to become the Bishop of Olomouc, who published it in 1577. The Czech original, attributed to Václav Šašek, written sometime around the year 1470, is lost.

¹¹ Sir Lev led a diplomatic progress through Europe on behalf of the Czech King Jiří z Poděbrad. The mission was to make allies among European kings against the threat of a Papal invasion into Bohemia against the 'king of two faiths'.

¹² Vladimír Mikeš, *Divadlo španělského Zlatého věku*, Praha: Divadelní ústav, 1995: 102.

fort we were told that the hermit lived three miles off. Sir Lev desired to see him. Thus digressing from our course, we went to see him even though forewarned that the place around his hovel was woody and that if the hermit saw us approach he would take flight.

Despite all that, Sir Lev took with him Jan Žehrovský, a herald, Frodnar and Šašek, sending the rest of his retinue onwards in their course. Whereupon the man who was our guide warned Sir Lev, saying:

“Sir, the man in the hermitage may see us approach and hide.”

Whereupon my lord, keeping another man to guide us, sent him on and ordered him to find the hermit and prevent him from hiding until we came. When we were approaching his hovel in the desert, the hermit came out from his shelter to meet Sir Lev; and when Sir Lev addressed him through his herald asking which country he had come from, he answered, saying:

“What avail is it to the lord or prince to know my homeland that he asks where I come from, whether from this land or another? I know not this noble man, but he can certainly see that I am a poor hermit living here in the desert.”

There was a pilgrim with us, a Pole by birth, who had been accompanying us for some fifty miles, walking alongside the packhorses. He asked Sir Lev to order the hermit to take off his shoes, for, he said, if he had six toes on one of his feet, he was for certain that Polish King vanquished by pagans. When Sir Lev asked the hermit to do so, he refused for a long time until at last he succumbed to my lord's entreaties and took off his shoes. And thereupon the Pole, seeing six toes on his foot, fell to his knees clasping the leg in his arms saying: “Thou art our heir and king, who wert vanquished of the heathens in the war.”

But the hermit answered saying:

“I wonder that you fall to your knees before me and embrace my legs knowing well enough that I am not worth such honour as I am a man burdened with manifold sins, which I have taken upon myself to expiate in this desert if the merciful and almighty God grants me to persevere in this my mission.”

Upon those words he stood up and went into his hovel with tears in his eyes. When we were going away from there the Pole said to Sir Lev:

“Be certain, my noble lord, that that person and the sign that I have seen on his foot, bear witness that he is in truth the Polish King, since I remember those things very well from the time of my youth.”

At that time the hermit was very old, about seventy years of age, of a slender figure and an oblong countenance, a dark complexion with a projecting nose, black hair and a long and grey beard. His clothes were long, of the colour of ash, and beneath his clothes he wore a horsehair shirt; but he was trying to hide it so that it could not be seen.

(Author's translation of the Czech version by Bohumil Mathesius, revised by Bohumil Ryba. Václav Šašek z Bířkova, *Deník o jízdě a putování pana Lva z Rožmitálu a z Blatné z Čech až na konec světa*, Praha, Československý spisovatel 1974: 88-90)