

Introduction

Shortly after he met Erasmus in Louvain in 1518, Juan Luis Vives wrote the *Fabula de homine*.¹ Since it is one of the pivotal Humanist texts for the problems of form and theme that I shall be discussing in Calderón, I want to begin by recounting it. What I call the theatrical “idea” in connection with Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, as well as most of what I have to say about the importance of theatrical form in Calderón’s development of the thematics of illusion, has immediate roots in the Humanist notion, exemplified in Vives’ fable, that all the forms of human self-imagining bear directly and critically on the substance of that self-image. Theatre for Calderón, I shall be arguing, serves this function of self-imagination and critique.

At Juno’s birthday feast, the goddess asked Jupiter, her brother and husband, to arrange some entertainment. At Jupiter’s command, an amphitheatre appeared – stage and galleries. The divine spectators were seated in the uppermost gallery, in the skies; the earth was placed in the middle, as a platform for the actors. Jupiter was the director of the troupe; they knew tragedies, comedies, satires, farces, and mimes. Juno was greatly pleased. She walked among the gods and asked them which of the actors they considered the finest of the group. In the opinion of prominent critics, man was deemed worthy of highest praise.

Looking carefully at man, the gods who were seated near Jupiter could see some similarities between him and his master. In his wisdom, his prudence, his memory, in many of his talents, man seemed god-like. Peering through his mask, man the actor seemed to partake of Jupiter’s immortality. He was gifted with the capacity to transform himself. He could change his costume and his mask. He appeared disguised now as plant, now as animal – lion, wolf, boar, cunning fox, sow, hare, envious dog, ass. He withdrew behind the curtain and, after a brief time, once again appeared as *man*. He went

about the cities of the world with his fellow men. He partook of political and social life. He had authority over others, and was himself obedient.

Man's metamorphoses pleased the gods. They watched in expectation of further transformations. Finally, man was changed into one of their own race. A long, loud round of applause followed. The gods begged Juno to allow man into the gallery, to sit with the onlooking gods. Peering several times at Jupiter's stall and glancing at the stage, the gods could barely distinguish Jupiter from his creature. Some argued that this was not man at all on stage, but a sly and cunning Jupiter himself.

The gods prevailed upon Jupiter to allow man to be seated among them, to have him take off his mask and cease to be an actor. Jupiter complied. He recalled man from the stage. Mercury proclaimed his glory and saw to it that he was seated in a place of honor among the gods. There was a great silence as man took his place.

Mercury carried the costumes and mask into the gallery. The gods inspected them with interest. The head was proud and intensely thoughtful. The ears were bound with sinuous cartilage; they did not droop with soft skin nor were they rigid with bone. They were able to receive sound from all directions. They acted as filters, keeping dust and gnats from entering the head. There were two eyes, set high in order to observe all things; they were protected by lashes and eyelids to guard against tiny insects, dust, bits of straw. The eyes were the noblest part of the mask; they were the guides of the soul. The costume was remarkable in its own way. It was divided into legs and arms, which were long and ended in fingers. Together, the mask and costume were the most useful garb that could be imagined for man.

The gods praised him greatly. They deemed it unworthy of him to appear on a stage as an actor and participate in the disreputable business of the theatre. They saw that his mind was fertile, full of inventions, that it brought forth towns and houses, that it conceived useful applications of stone and metal, that it gave names to things. With language, through writing, man established doctrines, religions, the worship of gods, the cult of Jupiter himself.

Seeing themselves and Jupiter so well portrayed in man, the gods looked at the creature as if at a reflection in a mirror. They were curious to know how he was able to act so many different parts and assume so many different guises. They hailed man's abilities, drinking ambrosia and nectar in celebration. The gods drew near man and

tugged at his cloak. They bade him sit down with them. At Jupiter's signal, Mercury led man to the orchestra, to sit among the first rank of gods, to watch with them the games that would follow. Then, at Juno's request, Apollo dimmed the lights and man reclined at table with the gods. He put on his mask and enjoyed a sumptuous feast.

The roots of Vives' fable reach deep. Tracing backward, they touch seminal sacred and secular texts: Genesis, the *Republic*, the *Symposium*. Cicero voiced his praise of man in passages of *De legibus* (I, 8–9) and in *De natura deorum* (II, 60–1). Pico della Mirandola's *De hominis dignitate* and Giannozzo Manetti's praise of human dignity are immediate antecedents. The theatrical simile is anticipated in the writings of the Neo-Platonists (e.g. in Plotinus, *Ennead*, III, 2) and in the Stoics, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; the metaphor of human life as a fable (“quomodo fabula sic vita”) is a topic of Seneca's *Epistles* (75–6). As a meditation on the problem of self-imagining, Vives' fable fits into the mainstream of Renaissance essays on human knowledge, from Cusa's *De docta ignorantia* to Petrarch's *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*. Ficino and Pomponazzi (especially in *De immortalitate animae*) stand in the immediate background of Vives' text. If the *Fabula de homine* is an ingenious and engaging fable, still it could be said that Vives says nothing particularly new in it. Partly for this reason it is good to keep the *Fabula de homine* in mind when reading Calderón; plays like *La vida es sueño* and autos like *El gran teatro del mundo*, which I shall discuss, have also been seen as formulaic in philosophy and as lamentably traditional in thought. But this is because the theatrical form in which that thought is given has largely been ignored. The *Fabula de homine* will stand as a reminder of the “theatrical idea,” which assumes even greater importance in Calderón.

Working along these lines, Ernesto Grassi in a recent book has redeemed Vives from any possible charge of complacent conventionality. The *Fabula de homine* can now be seen as one of the most radically original works of the entire Humanist movement, indeed of the Renaissance as a whole. The *Fabula de homine* offers a complete “reversal of the medieval interpretation of metaphysics and a renunciation of the primacy of all speculation about nature, a disowning of every form of a priori or formal thinking.”² The claim is large. What Vives does is to offer a definition of man in which the very form of the definition becomes part of the definition itself. The piece is, first of all, a fable (literally, an “idea”), such as was supposed to

offer truth under the guise of fiction. Vives makes the fictional form essential to its philosophical content. He defines man and human culture in terms of each other, just as man in the fable gives evidence of himself by the products of his mind. In this double definition, the theatrical metaphor is more than an embellishment, it is part of the very substance of Vives' vision of man. Theatre and thought are bound together because the true object of Vives' meditation is man's own nature as a reflective animal.

In his "reversal" of medieval metaphysics Vives rejects taking the objects of contemplation as first principles – unchanging, static, or eternal. He takes the changing, thinking mind as the object of thought. This attempt at self-knowledge is possible only to the extent that the subject–object distinction is not rigid. Whereas Hegel would later solve this problem by the invention of his dialectic, Vives solved it by erasing the absolute polarity between viewers and viewed, containing both terms within a single space. At first, man and gods are apart. But that separation is gradually blurred. As man ascends to the gallery, and as the gods see themselves in him, a continuity emerges between spectators and actors, as between gallery and stage. No one really knows if man is made in the image of the gods or if the gods are fashioned in man's image.

The fable is "about man," but it is driven by a question. Vives asks: Who is man? He knows that this question entails finding out how man can know himself. He sees that the human mind cannot give direct evidence of itself. Man cannot know himself immediately. He is defined as a series of skins, a costume, a mask. Never does Vives say what the human essence is. He refuses to define man in terms of the philosopher's *quid*, or implies that when the human mind asks this question of itself, no satisfactory answer can be found. Instead, he turns to the question of *use*. He defines human nature through the products of human culture – cities and towns, human language and religion, the cult of Jupiter, indeed the whole attempt at human self-imagining of which his fable is a part. Through the things of human making, through things fashioned in his image – not directly – man comes to self-knowledge. Because Vives' aversion to the question of essences is balanced by a will to interpret nature itself in terms of use, rational uncertainty, fuel for skeptical thought, is overruled by the claims of custom and law, domains of the statesman and politician. In *La vida es sueño*, Calderón's Segismundo faces the possibility that life is a dream, the world an illusion; but he succeeds in defining himself in

terms of the social relationships that he orders in his well-made state.

The theatre, like the polis which it mirrors, becomes the principal locus for human self-definition. If man can come to no knowledge of his essence in the images he makes of himself, the image-maker must accept the responsibility of fashioning ethically and socially useful, morally sound products, works good for the improvement of civic life. The burden which falls upon the dramatist as a primary exponent of human culture is exceedingly large. But this is the social standard which Calderón implicitly accepts for himself; it is also his strongest defense against charges of wanton promulgation of illusory forms. His strength as an artist lies in his ability to wage a constant war against the unrestrained use of illusion.

Calderón's best characters all have a large capacity for self-imagining and reflection. Not all have the success of Segismundo. Angela of *La dama duende* can fashion roles; Basilio of *La vida es sueño* can dramatize those around him. They mobilize a theatrical space according to their respective needs. But the primary goal of Calderón's characters is not to find out *who* they are, for most of them find that their self-definition is contextually, situationally, or socially formed. The moral consequences of social relationships, understood theatrically through dramatization and role-playing, the central metaphors of his work, are part of Calderón's broader awareness that man himself is defined in terms of these relationships.

One of Calderón's "versions" of Vives' fable – there are several, and none follows it exactly – is the *auto sacramental* *El gran teatro del mundo*. Written by 1635, and probably in 1633, the play is roughly contemporaneous with *La vida es sueño*.³ In thought, plot, and style, it is a fair sample of one large segment of his work: the abstract universality of the theme, the intellectual order and carefully measured order of the poetry and, of course, the theatrical conceit, are typical also of plays like *La vida es sueño* and *En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira*. Calderón uses the topos of the world as a theatre and life as a play, which by the mid-sixteenth century was common coin. Yet the conceit is carried out with remarkable authority and confidence of design. The poetry itself is an admirable weld of the precision and exuberance such as is characteristic of the finest style of the Baroque.

The "argumento" of the *auto* is familiar and quickly summarized: the stage director, *Mundo* (World), distributes roles and costumes to various characters; these are human types, actors in the "Great

World Theatre” – Rich Man, Peasant, King, Beauty, etc. Each character is charged with playing his or her role well. The role is a gift, an endowment which must be used to its full potential. Thus the costumes and roles disguise a shared dignity and deeper common worth. Doctrinally, Calderón teaches the same lesson of responsibility as the Biblical parable of the talents, although in Calderón the individual moral has a necessary adjunct in the social dimension. Yet what is most interesting, and to my mind particularly significant, about the arrangement of roles in this *auto* is that the impresario of the Great World Theatre, the *Autor* who is responsible for the play-within-the-play, is not included in it. The *Autor*, who is of course also the Creator, authorizes the characters’ roles and anchors the perspective from which they will be judged, yet he stands apart from the characters as they act in the great “theatre of the world.” This may be meant to imply that the characters have the requisite freedom to choose their actions, even though their roles are assigned. But beyond this the *Autor* provides a meaningful encasement for the Great World Theatre; without this, the vision of the world as a play-within-a-play might well be suggestive of the radical instability of self-embedding forms such as we see in Gnostic fables. Calderón’s conception of the world as a theatre always implies the existence of some greater level which comprehends the representation but which is not itself comprehended by it. The function of the play-within-the-play as a locus for the realization of human value hinges on this dependence on the englobing figure of the *Autor*: Calderón imagines a world which, like a theatre, is not sufficient unto itself and for which value rests on a higher plane.

There is no reason, however, to restrict the interpretation of this theatrical conceit to the ostensibly moral dimension of human actions, to the exclusion of the aesthetic sphere. On the contrary: there are reasons in this *auto* and other plays to believe that Calderón would accept judgments of *actual* theatre, and indeed of all aesthetic objects, along the lines sketched above. The allegorical *Hermosura* (Beauty) summarizes the conventional, mistaken assumption about the self-sufficient status and function of the aesthetic object:

Yo, para esto, Hermosura:
a ver y ser vista voy. (III, 212a)⁴

(My role is Beauty: I go to see and to be seen.)

She understands that the beautiful object must be persuasively

INTRODUCTION

7

attractive, but she forgets that she must also lead *away* from herself. She takes herself as autonomous and represents the temptation to mistake the theatrical space for the whole space, to forget the one greater term which encases the representation, and to which the dramatist must be held responsible.

Because the Creator stands apart from the play-within-the-play in Calderón's *auto*, he is easily identified with the dramatist himself. Calderón knows that the artist is in danger of overlooking the limits of the theatre, and he is on constant guard against such abandon; this concern figures prominently in Calderón's pastoral play, *Eco y Narciso*, with its characteristic emphasis on the natural world, as we shall later see. Calderón's constant recognition of the limits of theatrical representation, and of the separation of poet-maker and Creator, would have helped him to avoid the dangerous Spinozistic equation, "Deus sive natura" (roughly, "God equals nature"), inherent in the conflation of the divine realm and the space of human activity. Kenneth Burke derived a tellingly theatrical description of God from Spinoza's formula, a description which would seem to put Spinoza close to Calderón; Spinoza, he said, takes God "as the kind of scene in which . . . an action would be possible; namely, a scene allowing for human freedom."⁵ In Calderón's *auto*, the theatrical space of the World Theatre is a place in which the characters try the limits of their freedom, but Calderón avoids the Spinozistic equation which makes it impossible to say whether God is a concept of any wider purview than the space in which human freedom is enacted. Traditionally, and in Calderón, God is of broader bounds than nature; but Spinoza claims they are of identical reach, thus making it impossible to tell whether he deifies nature or whether he naturalizes God. In the first definition in the *Ethics* – that God is self-caused (*causa sui*) – Spinoza resolves the potential antinomies between freedom and necessity, and between action and passion, within an Absolute Space; but this is a directionless space, with no higher plane in which to establish and value the qualities which Calderón so highly esteems: virtuous action, prudent judgment, and forbearance in suffering. The purely "intellectual love of God," to which the human mind is prone, and which Spinozism exaggerates, is fundamentally equivocal and unsatisfactory for Calderón, because in a space where God and Nature are coterminous it is virtually impossible to construct a point of view capable of *transcending* man's position in the play-within-the-play.

In Spinoza's conception, the human vision of the world will change with each man according to his body:

Those who have more frequently looked with admiration upon the stature of men, by the name man will understand an animal of erect stature, while those who have been in the habit of fixing their thoughts on something else, will form another image of man, describing man, for instance, as an animal capable of laughter, a featherless bird, a rational animal, and so on, each person forming universal images of things according to the temperaments of his own body.⁶

In contrast to Vives, where the "perspectivist" idea is expressed, as in Calderón, through the metaphor of the world as a theatre like the mind, Spinoza's perspectivism is guided by the "temperaments" of the human body; in this he is not unlike some of the eighteenth-century rationalists (e.g. Locke), who described the workings of the mind in terms of the physics of ideas. As I shall discuss in connection with Calderón's Herod and Hercules plays (*El mayor monstruo del mundo* and *Los tres mayores prodigios*), Calderón always seeks to overcome the determinism of physical substance, even if he discovers that this is not entirely possible. In a play like *La vida es sueño*, which I will consider at greater length in the following section, something like a Spinozistic perspectivism can be embraced, man and the world can be defined situationally, but only if these relationships are not limited to physical nature; indeed, an important part of Segismundo's achievement consists in learning to overcome his passions (what he calls his "fiera condición," his "bestly nature"). But the suppression of the natural passions also means that some of Calderón's characters will misunderstand the metaphor of intellectual perspective and err in the opposite direction, as is the case with Prometheus of *La estatua de Prometeo* and Gutierre, the surgeon of *El médico de su honra*, who practices his profession as a "science" and who keeps himself at a cool distance from the terrible bloodletting of his wife. Thus Calderón can accept what Kenneth Burke, writing on Spinoza, called the "paradox of substance," but only if this paradoxical definition of substance in terms of relationships is extended to include an element of self-conscious awareness. Burke described the "situational" conception of (human) nature which I have been discussing in Vives and Calderón as a "dramatistic" notion, whereby "a character cannot 'be himself' unless many others among the dramatis personae contribute to this end, so that the very essence of a character's nature is in large measure defined, or determined, by the other characters who assist or oppose

him.”⁷ Clearly, this could be said of almost any character in any play, but Burke is not describing a play, or is only incidentally doing so; he is describing a certain conception of nature in terms of a play, and my claim for Calderón is that his own theatrical or “dramatic” conception is only successfully embodied in self-conscious individuals. What this means in terms of theatrical representation and the dramatist’s use of illusion, however, is that the theatrical illusion will have to be *both* dispelled and embraced. I shall be arguing that Calderón’s most successful plays owe their virtues, in large measure, to an effective theatrical handling of this delicate thematic paradox.

Calderón’s use of perspective is more humanistic than what we find in either Spinoza or Vives. But this has certain paradoxical implications for his own aesthetics. Calderón shows us the use of theatrical space as a locus for cementing social relationships because theatrical space is bounded and limited. It is a space which allows man to define himself in terms of the restrictions which others place on his freedom of action. Calderón does not, like Spinoza, circumscribe God within nature. He posits a more ultimate, transcendent anchor of the human relationships he sets in motion. If his stage mirrors the mind as an arena of action, it always suggests some larger space, some greater limiting – but not itself limited – circumference. Thus his theatre will efface itself, despite the stylistic and technical exuberance that goes into its making; and Calderón will accept the painful proposition that the aesthetic object is insufficient in itself. He will say, with Renaissance thinkers like Giordano Bruno, that beauty itself is, and must necessarily be, elusive:

Whatever species is represented to the intellect and comprehended by the will, the intellect concludes there is another species above it, a greater and still greater one, and consequently it is always impelled toward new motion and abstraction in a certain fashion. For it ever realizes that everything it possesses is a limited thing which for that reason cannot be sufficient in itself, good in itself, or beautiful in itself, because the limited thing is not the universe and is not the absolute entity, but is contracted to this nature, this species or this form represented to the intellect and presented to the soul. As a result, from that beautiful [*sic*] which is comprehended, and therefore limited, and consequently beautiful by participation, the intellect progresses toward that which is truly beautiful without limit or circumspection whatsoever.⁸

The beautiful always stands just *outside* a particular space. Unlike the allegorical Beauty in Calderón’s *auto*, who thinks herself self-sufficient, who takes herself as autonomous, the ideally beautiful

object must lead away from itself, like Rosaura of *La vida es sueño*, emblematic of beauty in the sublunary world.

Given these restrictions, there is a pronounced vein of self-constraint in Calderón's work. He recognizes the need to limit illusion because he understands that the forms of representation are not ultimate and must not be taken as such. Yet as a dramatist Calderón was by trade a maker of illusory worlds, representational spaces, many of them impressively brilliant in stylistic and technical effect. The result is a wide-ranging tension between form and theme in his work. As the following chapters will explore in greater detail, "illusion" in Calderón's work nearly always involves, as a formal principle, the idea of a theatre; but thematically the matter reaches to questions of social responsibility and role, of authority, of politics, and of collective concerns which are mirrored publicly. The tension between form and theme is not always resolved in favor of "reality" at the expense of "illusion"; the choices are not that simple. Some of Calderón's characters are able to relinquish their interest in illusion and to mature by doing so, but for others there are heavy costs involved. In some of his most interesting plays, the route to responsible action in the world in fact passes through illusion and requires its embrace.