

Cambridge University Press

052126281X - The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderon - Anthony J. Cascardi

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE IBERIAN AND  
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

GENERAL EDITOR:

P. E. RUSSELL, F.B.A.

The limits of illusion:  
a critical study of Calderón

## CAMBRIDGE IBERIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

- STEVEN BOLDY, *The novels of Julio Cortázar*
- JUAN LÓPEZ-MORILLAS, *The Krausist movement and ideological change in Spain, 1854–1874*
- ANTHONY PAGDEN, *The fall of natural man: the American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology*
- EVELYN S. PROCTER, *Curia and Cortes in León and Castile, 1072–1295*
- A. C. DE C. M. SAUNDERS, *A social history of black slaves and freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555*
- DIANE F. UREY, *Galdós and the irony of language*
- ROBERT I. BURNS, *Muslims, Christians and Jews in the crusader kingdom of Valencia*
- MAURICE HEMINGWAY, *Emilia Pardo Bazán: the making of a novelist*
- JOHN LYON, *The theatre of Valle-Inclán*
- LINDA MARTZ, *Poverty and welfare in Habsburg Spain: the example of Toledo*
- JULIÁN OLIVARES, *The love poetry of Francisco de Quevedo: an aesthetic and existential study*
- FRANCISCO RICO, *The picaresque novel and the point of view*
- HENRY W. SULLIVAN, *Calderón in the German lands and the Low Countries: his reception and influence, 1654–1980*
- DAVID E. VASSBERG, *Land and society in Golden Age Castile*
- JOHN EDWARDS, *Christian Córdoba: the city and its region in the late Middle Ages*
- HEATH DILLARD, *Daughters of the reconquest: women in Castilian town society 1100–1300*

Cambridge University Press

052126281X - The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderon - Anthony J. Cascardi

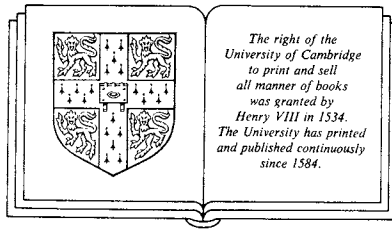
Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

# The limits of illusion: a critical study of Calderón

ANTHONY J. CASCARDI

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SPANISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press  
052126281X - The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderon - Anthony J. Cascardi  
Frontmatter/Prelims  
[More information](#)

---

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1984

First published 1984

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 83-27305

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Cascardi, Anthony J.

The limits of illusion.—(Cambridge Iberian and  
Latin American studies)

1. Calderón de la Barca, Pedro – Criticism  
and interpretation

I. Title

862'.3 P06312

ISBN 0 521 26281 X

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

052126281X - The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderon - Anthony J. Cascardi

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

---

For Trish

## Contents

|  |                |
|--|----------------|
| <i>Preface</i>   | <i>page</i> ix |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>   | xv             |
| <i>Note on texts and notes</i>   | xvii           |
| Introduction   | 1              |
| 1 <i>La vida es sueño</i> : Calderón's idea of a theatre                   | 11             |
| 2 <i>La dama duende</i>  | 24             |
| 3 Calderón and Tirso: <i>El galán fantasma</i>                             | 37             |
| 4 <i>El secreto a voces</i> : language and social illusion                 | 52             |
| 5 Toward tragedy   | 61             |
| 6 <i>El médico de su honra</i>   | 68             |
| 7 Herod and Hercules: theatrical space and the body                        | 82             |
| 8 <i>El mágico prodigioso</i> and the theatre of alchemy                   | 96             |
| 9 The illusions of history   | 107            |
| 10 Authority and illusion: <i>En la vida todo es verdad y toda mentira</i> | 121            |
| 11 The use of myth: <i>Eco y Narciso</i>                                   | 130            |
| 12 Prometheus and the theatre of the mind                                  | 142            |
| 13 Calderón's last play: the <i>comedia</i> as technology and romance      | 152            |
| <i>Notes</i>   | 167            |
| <i>Index</i>   | 177            |

## Preface

This book is a critical study of Calderón. My purpose is to see across a broad spectrum of his work a variety of perspectives on the use and the limits of illusion; each chapter takes up one or another reflex of this formal and thematic concern. Because this is a critical study, I have tried throughout to judge Calderón's theatre according to criteria consistent with the premises implicit in it. Any reader is likely to be struck by Calderón's preoccupation with illusion, but that in and of itself says little: it does not, for instance, tell us how we might distinguish Calderón from Shakespeare, Racine, or Corneille, other dramatists whom I will discuss; nor does it point up the contrast between Calderón and Cervantes, who found the play of illusion to be so central to the making of *Don Quixote*. In seeking the distinctive features of Calderón's engagement with the problems of illusion, I have found it essential to take the theatrical aspect of his work into account. In ways I shall explain, this representational feature of his work is of crucial importance in determining the place of illusion in it.

Seen from one angle, Calderón's entire production is his attempt, as a Christian dramatist, to deal with the fact that he must professionally embrace illusion, which morally he would abjure. Thus there is a tension between theatrical form and the themes of illusion, but we can judge his work on how deeply this tension is felt, on how insightful Calderón's poetic perceptions of it are, and on how successfully it is brought to the stage. The theatre, as a form of representation, is a form of illusion, but Calderón finds that this is no reason to reject it. Indeed, as *La vida es sueño* seems to say paradigmatically, some dose of illusion is necessary. The path to personal transcendence, to responsible action, to political prudence, requires passing through, not around, illusion. Theatre thus may serve ethically justifiable ends. As in the allegorical *auto sacramental*, *El gran teatro del mundo*, this thematic concern is given voice through the

## PREFACE

guiding conceit of the *theatrum mundi*: the world as a theatre, life as a play. In both *El gran teatro del mundo* and *La vida es sueño* we have evidence of Calderón's ability to think theatrically, to formulate the paradox of illusion in a way that is dependent on the idea of a theatre itself.

As a model for these formal and thematic concerns, and as a canonic statement of the cultural and epistemological functions of theatre, I take Luis Vives' *Fable About Man*, the *Fabula de homine*. Vives' text suggests a definition of theatre as a form of self-imagination (and of self-critique) and raises questions which are directly pertinent to Calderón's work: how can we use the theatre to form an image of ourselves, and thereby to know ourselves, if the process of image-making depends on the making of illusion? How can we know how to act, what course of judgment to follow, if we can only form self-reflective images of ourselves? In Calderón, the moral and social implications of these questions are given a full and nuanced range of treatments. His work is of importance precisely at the juncture where we accept the skeptic's threats that we cannot know for certain who we are or that the world exists at all. Life may be a dream – Segismundo says as much – but, as with the theatre itself, this is no reason to reject it. Instead, we must find ways to incorporate this skeptical position into a moral life-plan. Calderón is aware that the theatre, in its paradoxical place between reality and illusion, has enormous potential for this absorption of skepticism.

Thus one concerted thrust of Calderón's work is to explore the options available to us given the fact that the skeptic may well be right. Philosophically, there are close affinities between Calderón's concerns and those of his contemporary, Descartes, and I shall explore the parallel more fully in my discussion of *La vida es sueño*. In both there is a push to counter the skeptic's threats. But whereas Descartes looks to demarcate the limits of certainty and to establish the foundations of knowledge, Calderón looks to absorb skepticism by the power of Christian ethics. Temperamentally, of course, there are vast differences between Calderón and Descartes as well. Perhaps surprisingly, the worn Scholasticism which Calderón inherited places him in relationship to Spinoza. As I shall discuss, there are problems crucial to Calderón's work – the nature of form, the limitations of space, the ethical ramifications of self-imagining – which find their philosophical complements in Spinoza. Their conclusions are of



## PREFACE

course vastly different, but more important is Calderón's continual adjustment of his concerns within the parameters set by the idea of a theatre.

The problem of illusion and its limits in Calderón is thus formal and thematic. The formal concern is always present, because Calderón is always conscious of the representational nature of his work. It shows up in vastly different ways, however: in "encyclopedic" works like *El gran teatro del mundo* and *La vida es sueño*, in the social comedies like *La dama duende*, and in the pageant plays like *Eco y Narciso* and *Hado y divisa de Leonido y Marfisa*. And, thematically, "illusion" runs through the relationships of courtly-type love and social convention (*El secreto a voces*), to role-playing (*La dama duende*, *El médico de su honra*), political authority (*En la vida todo es verdad y todo mentira*), the passions (e.g. jealousy in *El mayor monstruo del mundo*), and the powers of the mind, as in *La estatua de Prometeo*. In some of Calderón's most interesting works, there are overt recognitions of the contiguities between theatrical form and the thematics of illusion. In *El mágico prodigioso* and *El mayor monstruo del mundo*, for instance, religious transcendence and jealousy, respectively, relate directly to the theatre as a form of tangible (i.e. spatial and visible) representation. In *Eco y Narciso*, the temptingly seductive illusions of the natural world are themselves the dramatist's work, and this makes for a remarkable poignancy in Calderón's critique of illusion there.

For the most part, these conjunctions of form and theme produce a healthy means of social self-imagining and critique, one which may account for the viability of the *comedia* as a genre over roughly a century, from 1580 until 1681. But in Calderón's final play for the secular stage (*Hado y divisa de Leonido y Marfisa*, the last play I shall discuss) this balance is destroyed. The play is representative of an entire body of work Calderón wrote in his final years, most of which is impressive in theatrical effect but formulaic in structure. The play shows Calderón's technical mastery, his own capacity for illusion, turned to wholly uncritical ends. This is a hard judgment but not, I think, unfair. Moreover it illuminates certain factors which may have contributed to the demise of the *comedia* following the death of Calderón in 1681. Historically, the *comedia* was fashioned to shore up those collective social values which, after 1580 or so, were felt to be seriously in danger; as I shall explain in my discussion of the "illusions of history" below, those values were the ones we would associate with

## PREFACE

the caste bias of Spanish axiology. The threats came in a variety of different forms, some from within (e.g. the reduction of the castes with the decreed expulsion of the *moriscos* and, earlier, the mandatory conversion of the Jews), others from without (e.g. the increasing capitalistic pressures which were felt as a result of involvement in international trade after the discovery of America). From Calderón's appointment as court dramatist, and the representation of his plays at the new Palace of the Buen Retiro from the 1630s onward, his *comedias* came to express not only the collective values of the Spanish people, but those values as filtered through the royal optic. Politically, this meant that Calderón was expected to congratulate monarchs (Philip IV, Charles II) whom it would be kind to describe as ineffectual. We know that the *comedia* usually conforms to the plot-structure of romance (yet another possible point of comparison with Cervantes' work), and that romance tends strongly toward the positive identification of collective values, but in the case of Calderón's later plays the persistence of romance in the form of the adventure plot weighs heavily against the dramatist's ability to form critical judgments of the society within which his work is inscribed.

In evaluating Calderón's accomplishments, my concern has been to acknowledge the fact that the *comedia* is an eminently public genre, and that its values are highly culture-specific; this has meant that comparison with the work of Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina, the two dramatists without whom Calderón's *comedias* would have been vastly different, has an important place in my discussions. Still, this has left room for contrastive treatment of the work of the other great European dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Shakespeare and Marlowe in England, Racine and Corneille in France. These comparative investigations will, I hope, provide the broad base necessary for my claim that Calderón's finest work shows an unmatched awareness of the possibilities offered by theatre for self-criticism and the absorption of illusion.

Since I hope that my concerns with theatrical form and the limits of illusion will prove to be of interest to a readership beyond professional Calderonistas and students of Spanish Golden Age theatre, I have provided translations of all foreign-language passages quoted in the text. Unless noted otherwise, these translations are my own. In them, I try to negotiate the difficult course between idiomatic English and

## PREFACE

faithfulness to the (usually Spanish verse) originals. If they provide access to this subject for readers who have no Spanish, or who wish to check their comprehension, they will have served their purpose well.

*Berkeley, California*  
1983

## Acknowledgments

Writing this book has placed me in debt to numerous individuals and institutions, and it is a pleasure to record my gratitude here. Roughly half of the material here published was submitted, in a different form, at Harvard University, as part of a doctoral dissertation entitled “The Forms of a Theatre.” I am particularly grateful to Stephen Gilman, who directed the dissertation, for his unstinting help during the period of its preparation, and to Claudio Guillén, who acted as second reader, for his generous comments on the text. Both were supportive of my decision to leave the dissertation behind and to write the present book. Juan Marichal read a portion of the manuscript, and offered recommendations that have been incorporated into Chapter 9 (“The Illusions of History”). Jack H. Parker read the dissertation, and I am grateful to him and to the University of Toronto for an invitation to participate in the symposium celebrating the Calderón tricentenary in 1981. Chapter 1 was also read during the tricentennial year, as part of the University of San Diego symposium on “Calderón y el Siglo de Oro.” I am grateful for the cordial reception given by friends and colleagues there. The final version of the manuscript was read by John E. Keller, who offered encouragement and advice. Chapter 6, “*El médico de su honra*,” appears here by kind permission of the *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*. The translations from the French have benefited by the expert advice of Deborah Lesko and Cynthia Liebow.

I am especially grateful to the anonymous consultant chosen by the Cambridge University Press for having read the manuscript with diligence, care, and enthusiasm, and for numerous suggestions which have been incorporated into the text. I am indebted to Ms Sarah Stanton, my editor at Cambridge, for her sustaining interest in this project, and to Professor Peter Russell of Oxford, who read the typescript and who invited its inclusion among the Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies.

Cambridge University Press

052126281X - The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderon - Anthony J. Cascardi

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefited at various stages of my work from grants awarded by the Committee on Research of the University of California, Berkeley, from a Faculty Mentor Grant kindly endorsed by Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, and from the assistance of colleagues in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Department of Comparative Literature.

Finally, I must record debts which are too large to be repaid. My parents provided the encouragement and support which made possible not just this book but the studies which preceded it as well. They never lost faith that my efforts would yield a book. My wife Trish, to whom it is dedicated, read each chapter and listened to the argument of the whole on more occasions than I am sure she would care to recall, always without complaint, and she offered numerous suggestions which have substantially improved the text.

To all, my heartfelt thanks.

## Note on texts and notes

The notes are principally bibliographical in nature, and give complete references for material referred to in the text. No separate arguments are conducted there. For a full bibliography of the secondary literature on Calderón, readers may consult Jack H. Parker and Arthur M. Fox, *Calderón de la Barca Studies 1951–69* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), which while limited in scope is useful as a critical bibliography, and the annual bibliographies published in preceding and subsequent years in the *Bulletin of the Comediantes*.

At present, no satisfactory text of Calderón's complete work exists. Following the practice of most Calderonistas, I cite from the three-volume *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1960–7, and later reprints). References have been checked against the nineteen-volume facsimile of first editions (Farnborough, Hants: Gregg International Publishers Ltd, in association with Tamesis Books, London, 1973), edited by D. W. Cruickshank and J. E. Varey, and against modern scholarly editions where these exist.

I cite Shakespeare from the text of the Cambridge edition, edited by William Aldis Wright (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1936). Quotations from the works of Marlowe are taken from *The Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, edited by Leo Kirschbaum (Cleveland: World Publishing Company; New York: Meridian Books, 1962). All other references are given in the notes.