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Studies in Discretion, Illusion and Mutability

Edward M. Wilson

Excerpt

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I

The four elements in the
imagery of Calderón

This paper is intended as a contribution to the study of Calderón's diction. It can hardly be supposed that the process described in it has never been noticed by scholars and critics, but as far as the author is aware, it has never before been set out in full. Northup and others in their editions of single plays have illustrated the use of some parts of the system, as when they have noted the frequent equation of horses, birds and boats. They do not seem, however, to have grasped it as a whole. Other aspects of Calderón's imagery would probably lend themselves to a similar treatment.

I have made liberal use of quotations to illustrate the procedure. I could have added very many more, but it is not necessary. Once the system has been pointed out, the reader will come across many more examples whenever he rereads Calderón. My text has usually been the editions of Keil or the Biblioteca de Autores Españoles for the *comedias*, and those of Valbuena, Pando and the volume in the Biblioteca de Autores Españoles for the *autos sacramentales*.

THE ELEMENTS

The elements, fire, air, earth and water, were fundamental in the conception of the mediaeval world. Their order was fixed, and it was their equilibrium alone which differentiated the established world from chaos. This was the doctrine of the ancient world, and it was incorporated into the scholastic system. Ovid's is perhaps the best-known description, at the beginning of the first book of the *Metamorphoses*. Substantially his account was held as a belief by other ancient authors. It could also be reconciled with the account given in the first chapter of the book of Genesis, and accepted as Christian natural science. Probably it was considered theologically useful by Calderón and his contemporaries, as a revelation of physical law. Useful, but imperfect. Although this passage from Ovid culminates in the creation of Man, it is not clear that Man is the central (as opposed to the most important) figure, and that the elements are his servants, the instruments for his salvation. That was the Christian position.

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There is a most interesting account of Calderón's scientific ideas in a brief essay by Picatoste.¹ He thus summarises the poet's position:

Los elementos quedaron constituídos con existencia propia e individual y con cualidades opuestas, lo suficiente para su coexistencia dentro de una gran unidad... Hay pues en la creación dos momentos, dos actos; uno del Poder y otro de la Sabiduría. El sumo Poder distinguió los elementos; y luego entró la Ciencia a disponerlos para que el mundo distinga ambas cosas, y era que el arbitrio es obra exclusiva de la Ciencia.

These ideas are dramatised in some of Calderón's *autos*, notably in the *auto* of *La vida es sueño* and in *La inmunidad del sagrado*. In *La vida es sueño* we are shown the conflict of the elements before creation, and their subsequent harmony, in fine and powerful scenes. In the other play we find this stage direction:

Salen los quatro Elementos asidos a una cadena, que les unirá a todos quatro, y el Mundo en medio del globo que forman, y él se aparta de ellos, quedando formado el globo.

This symbolises the dependence of the stability of the world on the equilibrium of the constituent elements. After Man's creation they are his servants, but after the Fall he is delivered to them for imprisonment. In a sense they are still his servants, but they are also his gaolers, and the World gives them orders as to how the prisoner is to be treated:

<i>Mundo.</i>	Tierra.
<i>Tierra.</i>	¿Qué quieres?
<i>Mundo.</i>	Que no tributas desde oy al Hombre tus frutas, en que hago embargo.
<i>Tierra.</i>	No dudes que desde oy de mí no tenga en mis haveres más útil que comer de lo que afane, y beber de lo que sude.

Similar instructions are also given to the other elements.

But as they can bring pains and penalties, so also can they bring redemption. In the *auto* of *El jardín de Falerina* Lucifer tells Culpa how divine signs promise Grace to Man in all the different elements. The lily grows from stubborn ground, accompanied by the rose, cedar, palm and cypress. The stream turns from a serpent to a clear mirror. The air grows calm, and an eagle flies past. Fire is reduced to a star, which steers the wandering ship to harbour. And after all these happy omens 'Glory to God in the Highest' is sung on all sides.

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CREATURES OF THE ELEMENTS

With the elements went naturally the idea of four orders of creatures that could dwell only in their respective elements. Also that of inanimate bodies native to them. So Ovid:

Illic et nebulas, illic consistere nubes
iussit et humanas motura tonitrua mentes
et cum fulminibus facientes frigora ventos . . .
Neu regio foret ulla suis animalibus orba,
astra tenent caeleste solum formaeque deorum,
cesserunt nitidis habitandae piscibus undae,
terra feras cepit, volucres agitabilis aër.

The same idea was expressed by Spanish poets and dramatists of the Golden Age:

Ni en este monte, este aire, ni este río
corre fiera, vuela aue, pece nada . . .²

Ni el pez, aborto de la blanca espuma,
ni el ave, a quien matiz la dió su pluma,
ni de la salamandra la fe ardiente,
ama tan firme ni con tal firmeza
al mar, al viento, al fuego, a la aspereza,
como yo del esquivo dueño mío
la perfección adoro y desvíó;
porque mi amor excede ya se sabe,
al pez, al bruto, salamandra y ave.³

Fuego, tierra, ayre y agua,
luces, flores, aves, pezes . . .
quantas luzes rayos vibren,
quantos picos plumas peyenen,
quanta espuma perlas sude,
quanta flor ámbar bosteze . . .⁴

Ave, que se calza viento,
pescado, que el mar fecunda,
fruta, que guarda la tierra,
no perdonó; porque en suma,
sirviendo tres elementos
lucieron las mesas suyas
la tierra, el viento y la mar,
en peces, aves y frutas.⁵

In these passages we may observe three stages of the treatment of the elements. There is the element, or the synonym of the element, then there is the creature or inanimate object that is native to that element, and finally a specific quality or characteristic of the creature or object. Thus for the air

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we have the series: *aire, viento; ave; matiz, pluma, pico*. For water: *agua, mar; pez, sierpe, pescado; vidrios, espuma, perla*. For earth: *tierra, montes; escollo; fiera, bruto; flores, fruta; piel*. For fire: *fuego; salamandra, volcán; luces, rayos*. This process is fundamental to what follows in this paper.

CONFUSION OF THE ELEMENTS

Picatoste continues later in his essay:

Todos los grandes trastornos, los más asombrosos fenómenos de la naturaleza, reconocían por causa la confusión violenta de estos elementos penetrándose unos a otros. Calderón lo indica muchas veces llamando motines, rebeliones y confusiones de los elementos a los rayos, terremotos, erupciones, exhalaciones, etc.⁸

Often, however, Calderón let the confusion of the elements tell their own story, merely letting the creature or attribute of one element be that of another. So we find the description of terrible natural phenomena in the first part of *La hija del aire*:

Irene. Los montes contra los aires
volcanes de fuego escupen,
y ellos pájaros de fuego
crían, que los golfos sulquen;
el gran Tigris encrespado,
opuesto al azul volúmen,
a dar asalto a los dioses,
gigante de espuma, sube.

Or this from the *auto* of *Las órdenes militares*:

Segundo Adán. El tren de la artillería,
que disparaban los cielos,
también soldado del mar
restauré, quando los vientos
amotinando las ondas
en su azul campo me vieron
vencer baterías de rayos,
de relámpagos y truenos.

Other passages might be quoted, especially from such plays as *El mágico prodigioso* and *Los dos amantes del cielo*, in which the conflict is due to the intervention of the supernatural.

VISUAL EXCHANGE OF ELEMENTS

I propose to place in this category those metaphors of exchange of elements that are due to visual impressions, as opposed to others in which there also

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enters the idea of motion or violent action. Nearly all my examples are concerned with mountains or flowers.

Calderón's conceits of mountains resemble a beautiful couplet from one of Pope's *Pastorals*:

Here where the mountains, less'n'ing as they rise,
Lose the low vales, and steal into the skies.⁷

The mountain is so high that it reaches up into the skies, in the region of the clouds, where it is indistinguishable from the clouds. So at the opening of *La selva confusa* Fadrique describes a mountain:

Aquí que de esmeraldas
componen estas sombras
colgadas al monte, al valle alfombras,
siendo en tantas colores
gigante de zafir, pira de flores,
pues, vello Adlante, hasta los cielos sube
a convertirse ufano,
si no en pardo dosel, en verde nube.⁸

This was a mild and moderate conceit. The region of the air is next to that of the earth. To give the idea of a high mountain this was not enough; the mountain must reach the heavenly regions. The mountain then becomes a pillar for the palace of the moon or for the moon itself to rest upon, or a support for the shafts of the firmament. So Luis in *Luis Pérez el gallego* talks of:

Este monte eminente
cuyo arrugado ceño, cuya frente
es dórica coluna
en quien descansa el orbe de la luna
con majestad inmensa.

Sometimes, however, the two conceits are combined; the Queen thus describes Granada in *La niña de Gómez Arias*:

Bellísima Granada,
ciudad de tantos rayos coronada,
cuando tus torres bellas
saben participar de las estrellas,
y a cuyos riscos liberal se atreve
tu sierra altiva a convertir en nieve,
cuando eminente sube
a ser cielo, cansada de ser nube.

When the mountain itself enters the heavenly regions it did not need a very wide stretch of imagination to consider its flowers as stars. This happens in many descriptions, such as the following from *La hija del aire*:

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Adonde colocados tus pensiles [i.e. of Babylon],
al cielo se han llevado tus Abriles,
y con sus flores bellas,
a rayos equivocan las estrellas.

This last example is really only a particular and better motivated one of a more general practice. Flowers are the stars of earth, stars are the flowers of heaven. Over and over again we find such lines as the following (taken from *El alcaide de sí mismo*) in the works of Calderón:

Margarita bella,
que fué del cielo flor, del campo estrella.

Among more complicated examples, we may quote Leonor in *Con quien vengo vengo*.

Este cuadro (que es dosel)
de la hermosa primavera,
pues las rosas que hay en él
estrellas son de otra esfera,
cuyos muertos resplandores
a las estampas y huellas
del sol dicen entre olores:
'si esta noche sois estrellas
mañana seremos flores'.

In *El mágico prodigioso* the device becomes poetry in Cipriano's magnificent *décimas* when he talks of:

El clavel que en breve cielo
es estrella de coral.

And also we would quote Calderón's ode to St Isidro, built up as it is on the mixture of the terrestrial and celestial landscapes. Such is Isidro's piety that heaven and earth are confused:

Los campos de Madrid ya cielos bellos,
y los cielos del sol campos hermosos.

It is all a particular case of a more general system. Flowers and stars are the equivalent, in their respective elements, of feathers and foam in theirs. So in *El mayor encanto amor*:

Neutral la vista duda
cual es la yerba, o el agua,
porque aquí en golfos de flores
y allí en selvas de esmeraldas,
unas mismas ondas hacen
las espumas y las matas.

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In *La selva confusa*:

Pues abes que la pueblan de colores
flores de pluma son, abes de flores.

In the beautiful incantation of Aura in *Celos aun del aire matan*:

Ven, Aura, ven.
Ven, y con cláusulas sumas
muevan trinados primores
inquietos golfos de flores,
blandos embates de plumas.
Tus penachos las espumas
sean, y el ámbar también.
Ven, Aura, ven.

To this class of conceit also belong those lines that point out the similarity of land and water under certain conditions. This is to be seen in the passages where Góngora's line

Montes de agua i pielagos de montes⁹

is quoted or remembered.¹⁰ There is the same deliberate confusion in the following passage from *Afectos de odio y amor*:

Y cuando así sea que no hay quilla que corte
los helados carámbanos del norte,
ni tropa que se acerque
al erizado ceño con que el Merque,
más que el Tanais helado,
le impiden el rodeo, pues cerrado
uno y otro horizonte
peñasco el golfo es, piélagos el monte.

HORSES, BIRDS AND BOATS

These three sets of beings are united in that they all move with speed and power, and each is particular to its own element. Calderón, expressing the baroque feeling for force and violence, referred to each in terms of the others. We have seen that he had, roughly speaking, three categories for each element: the element itself, its creature, and a special characteristic, either of the creature or of the element: e.g. the sea, fishes, scales and foam. A land creature that was to be compared to a fish could be called either a fish of the land, a fish with the special characteristics of the land or of the land creature, a land creature of the sea or with sea or fishy characteristics, or simply as a scaleless fish. This formula covers a large part of Calderón's imagery. So we find him calling ships: *ave del mar, caballo del mar, neblí del mar, delfín del viento, pez del viento, volcán del agua; pájaro de*

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espuma, escollo que navega, velera ave; monte de velas, uracán de lino, selva de jarcias; and pájaro sin pluma, pez sin escama. Two passages will serve to illustrate this, the first from *La Sibila del oriente*:

En un delfín que es pájaro sin plumas,
en un águila que es pez sin escama,
. . .
aré los campos de cristal y nieve,
donde bebe en carámbanos la aurora
la blanca espuma, que en aljófar llueve,
y el argentado humor, que en perlas llora
el viento, a cuyo son las plantas mueve
ese del mar caballo.

The second from *El castillo de Lindabridis*:

Seguirla quise, y sobre riza espuma,
huésped ya del cerúleo pavimento,
viví un bajel, que, sin escama y pluma,
águila fué del mar, delfín del viento.
Mas porque Amor de ciego no presuma,
a la venganza Júpiter atento,
fuego introdujo ardiente en nieve fría
y el bajel volcán de agua parecía.

Once at least this practice was given a rational dramatic motivation. In *La aurora en Copacabana* the natives saw a ship for the first time, and one of them, Guacolda, thus described it to her comrades:

Si digo que es
un escollo que navega
diré mal; pues para escollo
le desmiente la violencia;
si digo preñada nube,
que a beber el mar sedienta
se abate, diré peor;
porque viene sin tormenta;
si digo marino pez. . .
velera ave. . .

Horses also were described in terms of more than one element. In *Lances de amor y fortuna* we are shown the horse of Rugero:

Todos los cuatro elementos
hicieron un mapa en él,
tierra el cuerpo, mar la espuma,
viento el alma, y fuego el pie.

There is even more elaboration in Irán's horse, in *La Sibila del oriente*:

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Un veloz caballo, cuyo aliento
geroglífico ha sido de la guerra,
sierpe del agua, exhalación del viento,
volcán del fuego, escollo de la tierra,
caos animal, pues con tan nuevo modo,
no siendo nada desto, lo era todo.

Usually the metaphor is that of a ship or bird, and was sometimes the cause of a long part-by-part analogy. Such is the description of the horses on which the troops of Coriolanus crossed the Tiber in Calderón's first act of *El privilegio de las mujeres*:

Al abreviado piélagos se entregan,
donde por rumbos fáciles navegan
en los brutos bajeles y vivientes;
que, espolones las frentes,
el cuello proa, viento las espuelas,
remos los brazos y los crines velas,
jarcia el arzón más alto de la silla,
el jinete piloto, el viento [*sic*: ¿viente] quilla,
jarcias las riendas y timón la cola,
y si el Tíber crespo se enarbola,
áncoras breves siendo los estribos,
pasó terrestre flota en leños vivos.

Birds of prey, and their prey, also follow the same procedure, but they are also referred to in terms of the celestial fiery region. So (in *Polifemo y Circe*) Ulysses tells Circe of the flight of the heron, 'árbíto igual' between the wind and fire, frozen and burned as it fell and rose in its flight:

Geroglífico era
la garza entre la una y otra esfera.

In *Luis Pérez el gallego* the falcon is called 'cometa sin luz ni fuego', and in *La puente de Mantible* the heron is called 'rayo de pluma'. Continued metaphors of the same kind that we have just examined are also to be found here, e.g. from *El mayor encanto amor*:

Hechos remos los pies, proa la frente,
la vela el ala, y el timón la cola.

Vélez de Guevara also used this type of metaphor; the following passage from his *Auto del nacimiento* is not without charm:

Mirad cubiertos los vientos
de nuevas lucientes plumas,
cuyas doradas espumas
inundan los elementos.

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Mirad como están atentos
 esos Argos celestiales
 a las batallas navales
 de tanto alado baxel,
 que en piélagos de clavel
 son clarines de cristales.¹¹

Other objects also called forth the same type of conceit. So Phaethon in *El hijo del sol*, driving in the sun's chariot, says:

Etéreos campos corro,
 siendo en piélagos de plata
 luciente bajel de oro.

In *El castillo de Lindabridis* the flying castle is a problem; which element does it really belong to?

En África alcancé aquel prodigioso
 castillo, que a su arbitrio se pasea,
 porque los elementos litigioso
 pleito tuvieron, sobre cuyo sea.
 El fuego le examina luminoso,
 la tierra sus campañas hermosea,
 en su estancia le ven mares y vientos;
 y así le traen por lid cuatro elementos.

Part of Calderón's vocabulary is directly due to this type of imagery. I refer to his fondness for words describing monsters and semi-mythical creatures, which express in their names the confusion of two or more opposing characteristics. So he calls rivers: *centauro indiano*, *centauro de hielo*, *hipogrijo de cristal*; a horse: *hipogrijo violento*, *caos animal de cuatro elementos*; a ship: *monstruo de dos especies*, etc. Also we may note his fondness for words that show doubt between two elements, or the strife and boundaries between them: *horizonte*, *árbitro*, *neutral*, *equivocar*, *promontorio*, *escándalo*, *asombro*, *geroglífico*, *guerra*, etc.

SCHEME OF THE ELEMENTS IN CALDERÓN'S IMAGERY

In the following list I include most of the ingredients that Calderón used in these metaphorical recipes. The list is probably not complete or watertight, but it will help to make the process clear.

Earth

Element: tierra, campo, jardín, campañas, arena, yerba, peñas, montes.
 Inanimate creatures: monte, pirámide, torre, alcázar, montaña, escollo,
 selva, muro, columna, sierra, risco, ciudad, pira, roca, peñasco.
 Animate creatures: caballo, elefante, gigante, Atlante, hormiga, flores.
 Attribute of element: flores, matas, polvo, fruta, rosa, clavel.