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CALDERÓN  
LA CENA DE  
BALTASAR

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-61909-8 - Calderón: La Cena De Baltasar  
Frontmatter  
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## NOTE

IN the *Autos Sacramentales*, PEDRO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA (1600–1681), the lyric dramatist, the Catholic poet of his age, expressed his firm faith by means of a kind of pious symbolism. The salient points of his theatre are Honour, Loyalty to the King and Loyalty to the Church, and the intensification of this last theme converts his Autos into “Sermones en representable idea.”

The name “Auto” came to be applied to a dramatic representation in one act with the Eucharist as its theme, played only on Corpus Christi day. The Auto Sacramental is a difficult form of composition as the characters, usually allegorical, are liable to become monotonous, and the ending must always be the same. Consequently the first known examples are very short. Gil Vicente’s *Auto de San Martinho* contains 81 lines and has only three characters. In the hands of Calderón, the best writer of the “starry Autos,” they attain a length of 1700 lines and require as many as 14 characters.

In drama, the Eucharist can be treated by means of a discussion between two characters, by an accepted allegory as in *La Primer Flor del Carmelo*, or by an invented allegory sustained by abstract characters; parables may be employed and mythological stories may be adapted; Old Testament stories, well known to the audience, can be used allegorically, and at times a hospital scene or a hunting party can be pressed into service to lend variety. Various Old Testament themes lend themselves readily to allegorical interpretation. These stories were frequently used by Calderón, and he was especially fond of the Babylonian theme. Babylon figures in *La Torre de Babilonia*, *La Primer Flor del Carmelo*, and *La Cena*. The reason is obvious. In the *Siglo de Oro* the Spaniards were interested in theological questions, in Mysticism and in the doctrine of the Real Presence.

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Calderón wrote *La Cena* whole-heartedly; he knew that the people would welcome the story. First printed in 1664, it must have been written before 1659, as we know the names of all Autos played after that date. Apparently it was written shortly before 1640 and produced in Madrid (as *Idolatría* says), for a *Loa* prefixed to Pando's edition (1717) mentions the *Acates* of Philip IV. This *Acates* must be Olivares, and he fell from power in 1640. Hardly any *Auto* or *Comedia* could better illustrate the beauties and defects of Calderón's style and technique. Like *La Vida es Sueño* (the *Auto*) it contains beautiful lyrical passages. There is a lyric force in the speech of *La Muerte* in Scene IV, though the later portion is disfigured both by *Culteranismo* and *Conceptismo*. The speech of *Idolatría* beginning with "Baltasar generoso" shows the fine phantasy and imagination which distinguish Calderón. The dramatic power of Daniel's refrain "La mano de Dios" in Scene II is striking. Baltasar's long address to *Idolatría* in Scene II illustrates Calderón's fondness for long speeches, and contains further *Gongoristic* passages.

Calderón was essentially a man of seventeenth century Spain, and as the *Gracioso* was an essential in the *Capa y Espada* plays, he introduced a comic type into *La Cena*. *El Pensamiento* in his motley dress typifies frail man's foolish thought.

Drama in the *Siglo de Oro* was accompanied by essential rather than incidental music. The *Autos* were always played with great solemnity, with elaborate scenery and contrivances to represent Heaven, Earth and Hell. The music was, however, one of the principal features, and in every *Auto* of Calderón are directions for *chirimías* and popular or sacred songs. The final scene nearly always ends with a *villancico*. In *La Cena*, Scenes II, IX, XIII and XVII have either instrumental or vocal music, and the last scene ends to music. Music in this *Auto* generally means "chorus."

There is much that is conventional in Calderón's language. If one of two characters is about to leave the

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stage, the other will say, "Oye, advierte, óyeme, mira." See, for example, Daniel's opening speech in Scene 1. The order of the words may be changed or slightly altered as in Scene xv. Under slightly different circumstances one of the following phrases will always begin the scene: "¿Quién me llama? ¿Qué es esto? ¡Ay de mí!" This sameness and monotony of language and subject led to the decline of the Auto after Calderón. Just as Lope de Vega had worked out all the variations possible in the *Capa y Espada*, so Calderón had exhausted the resources of the Auto. Drama declined and no other Auto of merit was written after Calderón's death in 1681. In the eighteenth century the *Intelectuales* attacked the Autos, partly on account of the growing French philosophic ideas, and partly because they only saw the very evident defects. It is, at times, impossible to understand whether a character is meant to be real or allegorical, and there are many anachronisms. In the *Indulto General*, Adam, David and Solomon converse on the same stage. Moratin's three verse satires, *Los Desengaños del teatro español*, led to the prohibition of the Autos in 1765.

J. W. BARKER

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