

“... a ninguno imitó; nació para maestro, y no discípulo”: Calderón’s early debt to Lope de Vega and others

Jonathan Thacker
University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: Calderón had a relatively short period of apprenticeship as a playwright. The speed of his rise to prominence amongst his peers and his achieving success with audiences, popular and courtly, which were the result of the consummate skills he displayed as a dramatist, helped contribute to the rapid condensing of the myth of his having been born fully formed. In this study, I analyse Calderón’s bold engagement with Lope de Vega and some of this writer’s contemporaries as he began his life as a playwright in the early 1620s. In particular, I build upon the work of Eric Coenen and Germán Vega García-Luengos, who have studied the early play, *Cómo se comunican dos estrellas contrarias*, and its possible place in the Calderonian canon. Set in Galicia, in the aftermath of the eleventh-century division of the Christian kingdoms by King Fernando, the drama is a lyrical take on Lope’s *Las almenas de Toro*. Calderón’s dramatization of the same epic material as Lope anticipates some of his later aesthetic concerns, and allows us to glimpse his earliest technical engagement with playwriting. It demonstrates both dependence and single-mindedness and, perhaps curiously given his later reputation, a predilection for comical and lyrical modes.

KEYWORDS: Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, *comedia nueva* and genre, dramatic imitation, *Cómo se comunican dos estrellas contrarias*.

The year after the playwright’s death, Calderón’s friend and admirer Juan de Vera Tassis sent to the press the *Verdadera quinta parte* (1682), a new volume of his plays, in part as a response to the dramatist’s complaints about the unauthorised *Quinta parte*, a collection that had appeared in 1677. The “approved” volume contains Vera Tassis’s appreciation of the late poet and an *aprobación* by Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera. In this lengthy paratext, the cleric makes some important observations about Calderón’s originality as a dramatist, but in one respect he lets his admiration for his drama run away with him. Describing Calderón as a “monstruo de ingenio,” he goes on to write: “Lo que más admiro y admiré en este raro ingenio, fue que a ninguno imitó; nació para maestro, y no discípulo.”¹ Such is Calderón’s stature as the preeminent dramatist of the Spain of Philip IV (1621-65), such the admiration expressed by his peers and by posterity for his theatrical talent, that it has proven difficult to

see beyond this instant myth-making and easy to forget that, like all successful writers, he served an apprenticeship in his discipline.

Even today, despite the regard in which the author of *La vida es sueño* and *El alcalde de Zalamea* is held, comparatively little scholarly attention is paid to Calderón's development of his dramatic craft, the evolution of his playwriting, especially his imitation and emulation of other writers in his earliest plays.² These are, in fact, privileged sites for the study of dramatic influences: the young poet ineluctably spent a period as up-and-coming, with its concomitant self-doubt and competing deference to and defiance of established artistic norms. Calderón was, in fact, a disciple of many masters as he honed his craft, catholic and eclectic in his tastes and in his reading, including in the rich library of don Bernardino Fernández de Velasco y Tovar, the sixth duque de Frías, for whom he exercised the role of *escudero* (Cruikshank, 68). And disciple he inevitably was: he could not, at this stage, depart from the established norms of the Lopean *comedia nueva* and still have his plays performed in the *corral* or at court. Whatever his aesthetic preferences, the benefits of conformity could not be ignored by a writer whose family had hit hard times in the early 1620s and who could glimpse (and then seize) the chance of earning a good living from his pen.³

In what follows I intend to explore Calderón's very early engagement with the *comedia nueva*, arguing that one can indeed glimpse his individuality, his unique *ingenio*, but that his dramaturgy is clearly—indeed, self-consciously—indebted to Lope de Vega and his older rival's generation. Their influence is manifest in all of his earliest plays, including the three that were certainly performed in the summer of 1623: *La selva confusa* (also recorded as *Selvas y bosques de amor* and *Las selvas de amor*), *Amor, honor y poder*, and *Judas Macabeo* (alternatively known as *Los Macabeos*). However, I limit myself here to an examination of the young Calderón's engagement with an identifiable dramatic source in what may be his earliest surviving play, *Cómo se comunican dos estrellas contrarias*.

Cómo se comunican is traditionally omitted from the Calderonian canon, despite appearing in the unauthorised *Quinta parte* along with many authentic plays. However, two *calderonistas* have recently argued persuasively that it is his and that it belongs to an early, perhaps his earliest period of dramatic composition (Vega García-Luengos, “Imitar;” Coenen).⁴ The work takes up the medieval epic material that Lope had adapted for the stage in his *Las almenas de Toro* and re-fashions it in a different mode.⁵ Thus, whether it is his first surviving play or not, Calderón here imitates Lope de Vega (in the Renaissance sense of the term, through competitive emulation).

Set in Galicia, in the aftermath of the eleventh-century division of the Christian kingdoms by King Fernando, the play opens with a certain García, dressed as a pilgrim, being left for dead by two of his companions. His faithful servant, Jaques, searches for him but the ailing man is found instead by the beautiful Sol and nursed back to health in her village. He claims he is a merchant and gives her a diamond. Two further travellers make their way to rural Galicia: Ramiro, who has been told of Sol’s beauty and wants to see her with a view to a potential marriage being arranged, with her father, Vela’s blessing; and the historical *infanta* Elvira, who is thought to be walled up in her city of Toro, besieged by the forces of King Sancho, but who has escaped and arrives on an exhausted horse before swapping clothes with a local peasant girl to ensure her identity remains secret. Sol falls for García, who falls for Elvira, who is also admired by Ramiro, distracted from his pursuit of Sol. The number of disguised characters and a series of coincidences combine to complicate the would-be lovers’ various schemes and feelings but a *deus ex machina* ensures that Sol is paired with her first suitor, Ramiro, and García, who happens to be the conde de Cabra, will take off with and protect the exiled *infanta* Elvira in his own lands.

As is evident from this synopsis of the plot, Calderón’s play deals with love not war, and it thus has a quite distinct generic flavour to Lope de Vega’s. The comic, lyrical intent of

this drama is evident both from the manner of the budding playwright's re-working of Lope's *Las almenas de Toro* and in his deployment of predominantly comic elements from traditions he knew, classical and more contemporary, many of which are additions to or departures from the Lopean source. Vega García-Luengos has noted and explored the nature of the engagement with Lope's play (and with Lope, the *eminence grise*) in *Cómo se comunican*: the chronicle-legend drama provides "estímulo y motivo de emulación" to the young Calderón ("Imitar" 243). And indeed, *both* dramatists are self-consciously aware that they form part of an elaborate artistic genealogy. Lope's *Las almenas* is the mixed-up off-spring of an austere parent and a lax one, a tragicomedy made out of epic material and the desires of the *vulgo*. The "historical" elements were first dramatised by Juan de la Cueva and, most relevantly, in *Las hazañas del Cid*, by Guillén de Castro, to whom Lope dedicates *Las almenas de Toro* in his *Parte XIV* of 1620. The dedication is apologetic: "Obligado etsaba estaba yo a dirigir a Vuestra Merced trgaedia" writes Lope, but the mixture of high and low characters and styles in *Las almenas* makes it a "*tragicomedia*" instead, written to sate the appetites of contemporary Spanish audiences. Castro will have to make do with such a re-fashioning thanks to "la costumbre de España, que tiene ya mezcladas, contra el arte, las personas y los estilos" (all—Vega, *Comedias II*; 402). This Lopean treatment, fairly characterised by Vega García-Luengos as "épico-novelesca-lírico" ("Imitar" 248), mixes dramatisations of some of the old ballads' most engaging material relating to (and, in Lope's play, situated beneath) the battlements of Elvira's Toro as it is besieged by the Cid and King Sancho and the cunning Bellido Dolfos, with invented romantic adventures in the pastoral hinterland between the cities of Toro and Zamora. Lope was probably attracted to the absence of historical or legendary material relating to Elvira, which enabled him to improvise, making her both a "defiant heroine" in defence of her city and an amorous partner (and eventually perfect wife) for Enrique de Borgoña (Coates 141).⁶ The play concludes—unhistorically

though pleasingly in aesthetic terms—with Elvira back in charge of her city. The martial plot, featuring the high-born characters (“dignas de la tragedia” in Lope’s words from his dedication of the play [(Vega-Comedias II: 402)]) predominates: don Vela, the Cid’s uncle who is living in the pleasant village of Villalonso, where the love-plots develop, warns his daughter, doña Sancha, that “cuando es tiempo de guerra, / mal casamientos se tratan” (Vega *Las almenas* lines 3.2763-64). The play cannot be a comedy because of its subject matter. However, the lyrical or novelesque elements of the plot, whilst never complex, are woven deep into the drama’s texture: acts 2 and 3 open in the countryside and a comic resolution makes its presence felt alongside the humbled nobles of Toro at the end, when Elvira takes a moment to marry off Sancha and resolve the remaining “engaño” (lines 3.3048-49).

Lope’s play is a good example of the liberties he was able to take with historical-legendary material to produce the kind of mixed, varied drama so popular with his audiences as the *comedia nueva* reached full maturity. It dates from about 1615 and Calderón either saw it staged in the late 1610s or read it in 1620 when it was published, or both. He will have read too, no doubt, Lope’s prologue to the *Parte XIV* in which, in the guise of “Teatro,” the pioneering playwright praises himself and his role in “facilitando el camino a los de más raros ingenios que me [i.e. the theatre] honran con sus escritos y le [i.e. Lope] han seguido” (Vega-Comedias I: 72). Pointing this out, Vega García-Luengos reckons that the confident young Calderón was “dispuesto a medir sus fuerzas con Lope en su propio terreno: una actitud, pues, paralela a la que, a su vez, habría mantenido el Fénix en relación con Guillén de Castro al escribir *Las almenas de Toro*” (“Imitar” 262). What is fascinating in this early engagement between Lope and Calderón is that the younger man, belying his later reputation, chose “casamientos” over “guerra,” rejecting Lope’s aesthetically rather brutal tragicomic juxtaposition of the two worlds, and wrote a much purer comedy.

Calderón may be alluding to the dynamic of this relationship with Lope through the very title of his play, a communication between two opposing forces of the theatre, two dramatists heading in different directions, an old lag and a “pájaro nuevo.”⁷ Whether this was an intentional implication of his title or not—and if it was, it demonstrates prescience and considerable self-confidence—Calderón is happy to include the character Belardo (frequently Lope de Vega’s dramatic alter ego) as a *vejete* in the village of his *Cómo se comunican*. He is the only dramatist amongst Lope’s followers bold enough to do so (Vega García-Luengos, “Imitar” 263). An audience could only have associated the old villager with Lope, who was approaching his sixties or already into them at the time of Calderón’s play. Most significantly, though, he all but excises the epic material—there are no battlements, no armed conflicts, no cities even in this drama—and he takes the main characters one remove further from historical reality. He is interested in a comic trajectory and his play takes the form of an intrigue, featuring vicissitudes in love in a bucolic setting. Whether this is his first surviving play or simply one of the first, these modifications would suggest that Calderón’s early generic instincts were for a courtly form of comedy.

It is worth giving a flavour of the elements that Calderón rejects, retains and reworks from Lope’s tragicomedy in his comedy before we address the novelty of the play. As already mentioned, the twenty-something dramatist dispensed with the settings familiar from the ballad tradition at the walls of the city of Toro, along with the camps, soldiers, rulers and military leaders in their natural element. Most of the first act of Lope’s *Las almenas de Toro* is set on or outside the walls of the eponymous city, with the opening line referring to the disputed “puerta” (*Vega Las almenas line 1.1*) and the introduction of the bucolic “montes que el Duero baña” occurring two thirds of the way through the act (*line 1.672*). While in Lope’s play, the action is eventually divided almost equally between city and countryside, the epic protagonists—King Sancho, the Cid and Anzures—all enter the *aldea* and much is made

of don Vela's kinship with the Cid. Thus, the primary action and actors shift location after the fall of Toro. All of Calderón's play, by contrast, takes place in the rugged Galician landscape (and eventually don Vela's more orderly garden). The first speeches of *Cómo se comunican* situate its "action," as Celandio and Lisardo look to hide the body of García "en las entrañas desta peña dura" in the "montañas de Galicia" (~~Calderón-Cómo se comunican lines 1.6- and~~ 7). They are interrupted by the arrival of the singing peasants with doña Sol, for whom this backdrop "al margen deste arroyo lisonjero" (~~line 1.26~~) immediately becomes the pastoral *locus amoenus* in which to express her characteristic melancholy.

In terms of the characters featured, a spectator would be forgiven for believing at first that they belong to a Byzantine novel or romantic short story. Elvira is still the historical *infanta*, who has fled from her city to Galicia, but her trajectory is comic in essence, with even her epic back story used to enhance the humour of the comic plot, as we shall see. She represents the last vestige of the epic cast of *Las almenas de Toro*—figures worthy of tragedy, as Lope mentioned—a play that had a heroic role for Elvira and Urraca and major parts for King Sancho (until his death), the Cid, the conde de Anzures, Bellido Dolfos and assorted aristocrats. Elvira is given a fine set-piece speech in *romance* metre, when she arrives in Galicia on her expiring horse. Here she is somewhat reminiscent of Rosaura of *La vida es sueño*, as she comes to terms with her awkward situation at dusk in unknown lands, and also Mencía of *El médico de su honra*. She resolves not to tell anyone who she is:

el secreto
me conviene, y ha de ser
en mí con tan grande extremo,
que aun yo he de dudar quién soy;
porque es sepulcro mi pecho
donde en prisiones de nieve

yace caduco el silencio (lines-1.386-92).

Calderón revels in these lyrical expressions of extreme emotion, as is well known, but the audience's memory of this speech will fade as Elvira blends into the rural setting. Having exchanged clothes with the peasant, Dominga, and become "Aurora," she in fact freely yields up her much-prized identity to García in a game they are playing at night in the garden at the start of act 3 as their love affair continues to develop (line-3.2107) and the comic plot progresses inexorably.

Don García, going by the name "Fortuna," may also be based on a historical character, according to Coenen (Calderón *Cómo se comunican* 12), but a historical or legendary connection is unnecessary for the contrived plot: he simply needs to be aristocratic enough to deserve Elvira's love, and the other characters are middle-ranking or lowly. Calderón retains the name don Vela for the *barba* figure whose daughter becomes doña Sol, rather than (Lope's) doña Sancha, but little is made of his past exploits in the courtly world. He is characterised as the father figure of comedy, confused by the disguises and machinations of the young lovers, rather than as the Cid's uncle who pathetically (and rather unworthily) falls for the beauty of Elvira, in Lope's play. Ramiro is retained too in *Cómo se comunican*, but whereas the name conceals Enrique de Borgoña's true identity in Lope's play, it denominates the necessary second *galán* in Calderón's, the man who initially hopes to woo Sol but who falls for Elvira in the common pattern of comic plot complication.

Thus, Calderón's setting and characters are conducive to the playing out of a love story and so, as might be expected, the epic material of *Las almenas*, whether reported or represented on stage, is downplayed too. The fall-out from the death of King Fernando is merely reported in an exchange of "nuevas" (line-1.210) between Ramiro and don Vela, notable rather for the latter's anxiety about overtly criticising his king ("pero no es dado a mis

canas / el murmurar de los Reyes” (lines 1.247-48)) and for establishing, with later events in mind, that Ramiro has never set eyes on Elvira before, than for its poetic quality or ability to stir the emotions. Calderón returns to the epic material out of which his comedy has grown and from which it has departed, with Elvira’s set-piece revelation of her identity and account of her past in act 3 (lines 3.2631-90), beginning “Hija del Magno Fernando, / Rey de Castilla, nací...” (lines 3.2631-32). The potential gravity of the moment is ironised, however: most of the characters think she is simply humouring the “mad” doña Sol and do not believe a word she is saying. Indeed, when old don Vela is almost convinced by her polished performance of royalty, Ramiro explains to him in an aside that anyone could make up that sort of story:

Caso tan sabido es ese
de Elvira, que ya se canta
en el mundo claramente:
y así que aquesta lo cuente
ni me admira, ni me espanta (lines 3.2702-06).

The “real” epic story of Castile, told, in a moment she has been dreading, by one of its protagonists, bathetically reduced to “aquesta,” falls flat on its face: it has become, for some characters at least, part of an elaborate love plot whose complexity dooms it to a rapid unravelling and whose wit and energy will delight the audience.

In *Cómo se comunican*, it is clear to see how Calderón playfully undercuts Lope’s tragicomic *Las almenas de Toro*, following his own comic instincts to build a love comedy from predominantly epic building blocks, shunning concerns about artistic decorum in turning a historical princess into a (sympathetic) comic figure. It is worth making two further points at this juncture: first, it should not be forgotten that *Cómo se comunican*, while a confident challenge to Lope, also pays homage to him by taking the master’s work (both the *comedia nueva* and a particular play) as a starting point; and second, much of what Calderón

does in his play to make it comic is also imitated from other playwrights, as well as Lope. We shall now turn to comic elements in the play which are less dependent on (an upsetting of) his main source, *Las almenas de Toro*.

Calderón was obviously an avid reader of published *comedias* and an enthusiastic play-goer, well aware of the Madrid drama scene. This early [drama-work](#) demonstrates that he engaged with Lope both instinctually and playfully, in countless minor ways, as well as intellectually and seriously, in that he produced a coherent, satisfying response to a debate about poetics. His employment of and engagement with other writers's works is sometimes difficult to trace precisely—and impossible to record in every detail—but many features of *Cómo se comunican* do echo the form and content of earlier dramas by other playwrights (and, indeed, writers of non-dramatic works) as he finds his own voice and style for court and *corral*. Indeed, one of Calderón's traits will be the self-consciousness of his borrowings. We shall examine a handful of examples from this play, beginning with its opening, to demonstrate further his engagement with dramatic aesthetics and his decision to give prominence (in these early days) to the comic and the lyrical.

As we have already outlined, the comic plot of *Cómo se comunican* is hatched with the discovery of a severely injured and bleeding man (don García), left for dead by his attackers. It is made in the bucolic setting by a woman (doña Sol), out hunting, who will first pity and then fall in love with him, having helped nurse him back to health. Locating the injured man from his moans, she finds the rocks soaked in blood:

se quiebran hoy en líquidos corales,
cuando sembrando horrores
de púrpura salpican estas flores,
verdes nacieron y murieron rojas ([lines 1.91-94](#)).

These conventional beginnings to a love affair, also used by Calderón with variations in *La selva confusa*, the “courtly comedy of intrigue” (Northrup 169) conventionally taken to be his first play, and his much later work *Basta callar*, are fairly common currency. There are similar scenes in Italian Renaissance plays such as Giambattista Guarini’s (1538-1612) *Il Pastor Fido*, where the wounded party is a woman (Dorinda) who is shot and then healed in a sylvan setting by the chaste hunter Silvio, who at last discovers love as a result of the emotions stirred up by these events. The best known example is from Ariosto’s comic-epic *Orlando Furioso*, (XIX, 16-37), however, where the hard-hearted Angelica is finally smitten by the blood-soaked Medoro.

Calderón would have known of these works but a more immediate dramatic inspiration in this case may well have come from Tirso de Molina, as Northrup has noted (174). The source of the novice dramatist’s scene in which the noblewoman discovers a mystery man in his dying throes may well have been *Quien habló, pagó* (dated between 1615-22), an example of the kind of courtly comedy that Tirso de Molina specialised in producing during Calderón’s formative years. In act 1 of Tirso’s play it is doña Blanca de Navarra, also out hunting but lost on the mountainside, who follows the cries of an injured man, the conde de Urgel, to some similarly blood-soaked rocks:

¿Qué voz es esta que mueve
los montes, si en su aspereza
enternecidas parece
que lloran sangre las piedras? (Tirso-534a)

She immediately sees herself as Angelica to his Medoro and in act 2 she has her maid, Estela, bring her a book (Ariosto, of course) to read and has music played to relieve the melancholy brought on by her love for the injured man. Her musician inevitably sings her Góngora’s well-known ballad on Angélica and Medoro, “En un pastoral albergue” (536b).

The violence and bloodshed here is not tragic, not to be taken too seriously, but is a prelude to a love affair and belongs firmly in the lyrical tradition as the intertexts demonstrate. It is an early indication that Calderón's *Cómo se comunican* will be a comedy and have love as its motor force. Many comedies of the period—whether their setting was urban or rural, whether *de capa y espada* or *de fantasía*—began in violence and confrontation, often the aftermath of a duel or a fight.

Beyond this conventional opening to the play, familiar from scenes in earlier comic drama and the lyric tradition, Calderón borrows heavily from other features of the *comedia nueva* which had been honed with such success by Lope and his contemporaries. The identification of precise sources is a difficult matter, especially when Calderón's own poetic tendencies are overtly Ggongorine. While debts cannot always be recorded through close parallels in ~~langauge~~ language or imagery or metre, the broad imitative tendencies are evident. Thus, for example, while the stones of Tirso's *Quien habló, pagó* are moved to shed tears of blood, for Calderón, in *Cómo se comunican*, the rocks spring forth with liquid coral and the flowers are specked with *culto* purple. In this case we have a Calderonian twist on the dramatisation of Angelica's discovery of the bleeding Medoro.⁸

Beyond the borrowed opening scene set in the Galician wilds, the very complication and unravelling of the plot of *Cómo se comunican* happens conventionally and is unashamedly comic. This sort of complex love plot with at least two pairs of lovers and a frustrated figure of authority (usually the father) was well established in the *comedia nueva* by the early 1620s. And plot development is dependent on countless existing comedies made from clay that subsequent dramatists would re-shape, with Tirso's *oeuvre*, in terms of setting, characterisation and tone, perhaps the most influential on the mind of the inexperienced Calderón.⁹ The apprentice imitates and varies, then, a number of comic recourses beyond the lady's well-worn opening encounter with the gallant-in-distress and, indeed, Calderón shows

that he is a more than competent comic plotter, ready to compete with his rivals for the attention of the *autores de comedias*.

Whilst the plot he sketched out might not be identical to any previous play—if he followed Lope de Vega’s advice in the *Arte nuevo*, Calderón will have written a prose plan to structure the play—it is similar to many. We have seen how Calderón was inspired loosely by characters and events from Lope’s *Las almenas de Toro* and how he gave these a more conventional comic thrust, but it is possible to trace as well other elements of the comic flavouring he introduced into *Cómo se comunican*.

The pastoral setting is typical of Renaissance Italian plays such as Guarini’s *Il Pastor Fido* and Tasso’s *Aminta*, translated by Jáuregui (1607/1618), but also of some of Cervantes’s dramas, such as *El laberinto de amor* or *La casa de los celos y las selvas de Ardenia* (both published 1615) which also, as it happens, contains disguised pilgrims.¹⁰ The clothes swapping across social class is also frequent, occurring for example in Tirso’s *El vergonzoso en palacio* (probably written by 1611 and ready for publication in 1621) in which Mireno and the *gracioso*, Tarso, don the finery of the fleeing Ruy Lorenzo and his lackey, Vasco, as their adventures at court begin. The resolution of the love plot in the garden goes back as far as Gil Vicente’s *Don Duardos* and was memorably refashioned by Tirso in *La huerta de Juan Fernández* (c. 1626). When Calderón has don García deceive Elvira with the truth of his identity in the garden (“declararme quiero así / con una industria ingeniosa,” (lines 3.2031-32)), he is following Lope’s advice in the *Arte nuevo* and the practice of his peers and predecessors. The lovers’ subsequent coded conversation as they doubt and then trust in each other’s real identities (and doubt their own sense in risking revealing their true selves) is also present in earlier plays such as Lope’s *Los locos de Valencia*, in which Erífila and Floriano disguise ~~themselves~~ behind the names of Ariosto’s characters in the *hospital de locos*, and talk sense. The game-playing constitutes exquisite comedy for the

audience who know or can guess the truth, are sympathetic to the lovers who are meant for each other, and are awaiting the (much delayed) moment of truth. The use of feigned madness, uncommon in Calderón's later plays but integral to *Cómo se comunican* (and *La selva confusa*), has its most obvious immediate model in Tirso's *La fingida Arcadia* (probably from 1621 or 1622) in which the love-lorn *condesa*, Lucrecia, apparently goes mad thanks to too much pastoral reading (of Lope's *La Arcadia* specifically). Madness and feigned madness were also key ingredients of several of Lope's plays, some of which (such as *Los locos de Valencia*) had been published in his *partes* (numbering seventeen by 1621). Cervantes is by no means the only source of mad characters.¹¹

Pastoral and garden settings (sometimes urban parks), the priority of love over other subject matter, a core of four attractive young people whose feelings of love, desire and jealousy often waver and settle again, the ultimately hapless authority figure, the presence of the *gracioso*, disguises, clothes-swapping, name changes, deceiving with the truth, feigned madness, misunderstandings, eavesdropping, misrecognitions, comic anagnorisis and the happy ending are all fundamental to, or at least common elements of Golden Age comedy, both courtly and city-based. Indeed, many are inherited, then inflected by Spanish dramatists, from classical and Italian traditions—Plautus and Terence, the *commedia dell'arte* and the *commedia erudita*—that were known across Europe and informed Shakespearean and French neo-classical comedy.

We have focussed on elements of Calderón's earliest drama that demonstrate his (albeit precocious) adherence to comic *comedia* conventions, but have so far not commented on the kind of artistic self-consciousness that would be a calling-card later in his career as a comedian.¹² Once again and despite its early composition, *Cómo se comunican* alerts us to what he was keen to engage with. In this regard Lope de Vega's comedies are less influential as they were generally less self-conscious than Tirso's. The latter's metatheatrical instincts

were stronger and he certainly influenced the kind of comedy that Calderón decided he wanted to write from the early 1620s. Calderón knew the Mercedarian's [metathetrical](#) [metatheatrical](#) comedy, *La fingida Arcadia*, whose plot is entirely dependent on Lope's pastoral novel, *La Arcadia* (1598), with which the protagonist, the Italian countess Lucrecia, has become unhealthily obsessed. We have mentioned this play as a possible source for Calderón's "mad scene" in *Cómo se comunican*, but it must also have suggested paths down which the metatheatrical dramatist could travel: apart from the obvious engagement with Lope's pastoral plots and characters, there are examples of in-text literary criticism, references to classical and contemporary poets, citations from them and even comments on play performances, notably through the criticism of elaborate stage effects (*tramoyas*).

As well as emulating Tirso's predilection for breaking the theatrical illusion, Calderón was also heavily influenced by Cervantes.¹³ The admiration is clear in the number of mentions of the author, his works and their characters (especially *Don Quijote*) that recur throughout his drama, but Calderón also imitates and adapts Cervantes's more profound deployment of metafictional and metatheatrical techniques to interrogate generic conventions and raise epistemological questions.

In *Cómo se comunican*, the metatheatre includes intertextual references—beyond the re-working of Lope's chronicle-legend play—and also the breaking of the fourth wall. As far as the former are concerned, as is common, it is the *gracioso* who elicits parallels with fictional characters and stories. For example, on finally locating don García, Jaques compares his master's change into a *labrador's* clothes to a "transformación de Ovidio" ([line-2.1222](#)), the sort of throwaway classical reference common to many plays of the period including Calderón's other earliest ones. References to romances of chivalry—their plots, characters and archaic language—are also frequent. In this play Jaques responds to García's belief that he is meeting a high-born woman in don Vela's garden, with a series of examples of how the

plot might now develop according to “tramoyas / de andantes caballerías” (lines 3.1976-77), including the presence of an enchanted princess, her evil abductor, the arrival of a *dueña* and dwarves and possibly a dragon and some giants too. The parody of the romances of chivalry, with their lack of verisimilitude being a favourite target, was well established, of course, thanks to the popularity of Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*. Whether reference is made to classical or contemporary works or authors, the aim of the dramatist is to amuse the audience partly by acknowledging the outlandishness of the situation: a count dressed as a peasant labourer is an unlikely occurrence and for a princess to be in similar garb in the same place at the same time is beyond the bounds of the possible for the sceptical *gracioso*: “¿qué novela, / o trágica o amorosa, / es ésta?” demands Jaques, anachronistically given the medieval time period (lines 3.1931-33). We would only accept these coincidences in a far-fetched fictional world, yet here we are watching such a plot unfold on stage. The paradoxical effect of metatheatrical (and metafiction) is to draw the reader or audience conspiratorially into the story through shared (cultural) knowledge, while simultaneously undermining its veracity.

Calderón learned this technique from Cervantes, in particular from the adventures of his deranged knight errant, Don Quijote, whose existence depends on the romances of chivalry, but he also came to understand that Cervantes had ushered in a new era of artistic self-consciousness whose purpose and effect went well beyond engaging the audience in intertextual fun and games. The full implications of this Baroque game-playing would not be seen in Calderón’s early plays but it is nevertheless a common feature of them demonstrating a youthful confidence in his engagement with the audience.

Cómo se comunican, convincingly claimed for Calderón in recent years, and a very early play at that, is well worthy of analysis for the light it can shed on the instincts and tendencies of the playwright as he started out on his long and successful playwriting career. Further study of its principal features—its content and form, both borrowed and

independently conceived—alongside tendencies evident in the other earliest works, is required to test the hypothesis outlined here, that in his early works Calderón has aspirations to write in a lyrical and comic mode. This proclivity, whilst persistent even later in his career, is not often acknowledged by a scholarship that has come to characterise him and his drama as predominantly serious.

Jonathan Thacker is King Alfonso XIII Professor of Spanish Studies at the University of Oxford and Fellow of Exeter College. He has edited Lope de Vega's *El castigo sin venganza* (Manchester UP, 2016), co-edited *A Companion to Lope de Vega* (Tamesis, 2008) and *A Companion to Calderón de la Barca* (Tamesis, 2021), and is author of *A Companion to Spanish Golden Age Theatre* (Tamesis, 2007), as well as a monograph and numerous articles on early modern Spanish drama. He has translated works by Cervantes and Tirso de Molina into English, and is Editor of the Aris and Phillips Hispanic Classics series, published by Liverpool University Press.

NOTES

¹ The full text can be found in Calderón, *Comedias: Verdadera quinta parte* with extracts in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo (325).

² This is all-the-more surprising given that he is known for his deliberate, imaginative re-working of others' and his own plays. Vitse, for example, wrote that “se podría afirmar que Calderón es, por antonomasia, el dramaturgo áureo de la reescritura” (cited in Vega García-Luengos, “Calderón, reescritor” 371).

³ One concrete opportunity to shine (for all playwrights, including those who were up-and-coming) was provided by the unexpected visit to Madrid of Charles Stuart, Prince of Wales, in 1623. See, for example, Vila-Zaida [Vila Carneiro](#)'s introduction to Calderón, *Amor, honor y poder*, pp. 45-66.

⁴ The case for the authorship of Calderón is supported by stylometric analysis (Cuéllar and Vega García-Luengos). It is Coenen who argues for its being Calderón's first surviving play.

⁵ Vega García-Luengos (“Imitar”) drew attention to the source as well as its likeness to Calderón's later *Saber del mal y del bien* (performed in 1628, but possibly written earlier) which itself was based on Lope's *Don Beltrán de Aragón*.

⁶ In depicting the *infanta* Elvira's amorous adventures in the bucolic, village setting, after she has fled her city, Lope “confecciona una hermosa historia novelesca” for a character usually seen as a beautiful warrior (Vega García-Luengos, “Imitar” 246). The modern editor of *Las almenas*, Cristina Moya, explains that Enrique de Borgoña is an invented character and that the historical Elvira is not thought to have married (Vega [García-Luengos](#), “Imitar” 386).

⁷ On the new generation of dramatic poets and Lope's reaction to them, see González Cañal. Another hint that Calderón is engaging with Lope, the figure, and his conception of the *comedia nueva* is provided by the peasant-girl, Dominga, who, when dressed in Elvira's finery in act 1, tells Belardo, amazed at a peasant being dressed up as a lady, that “ya / no es el tiempo que solía, / Belardo” ([Calderón-Cómo se comunican lines-1,667-69](#)). The short scene is not essential to the plot and has a metatheatrical function when Belardo asks “¿Quién hay que pueda / estas fábulas creer?” ([lines-1,669-70](#)). Indeed, Dominga's exchange of clothes with Elvira complicates the comic entanglements in a way that challenges belief but will become a speciality of Calderón.

⁸ It is worth underlining too, when it comes to identifying sources, the problems caused by the difficulty of dating plays in the period—both their composition and their premieres or revivals—as well as the uncertainty about what individual dramatists had read in manuscript or print and, especially, seen on stage. Northrup points out, in addition, in his study of *La selva confusa*, that: “some of the incidents are so common that it would be impossible to say from which one of many [plays] he took the idea” (175-76).

⁹ Years later, Calderón praised the Mercedarian's theatre in his *aprobación* to Tirso's *Qunita parte* (1635), in which he noted that “ha dado que aprender a los que más deseamos imitarle” (cited, *inter alia*, in Cruickshank 70).

¹⁰ In truth a large number of *comedias* in the period, notably by Lope de Vega, but also by Tirso, are set in the kind of idealised bucolic backdrop familiar from the *Orlando* tradition and pastoral novels and poetry: mountainsides, woods, crags, river banks and glades. The influence of Ariosto on Lope's early [dharma-drama](#) must have been key in this regard. Cervantes also mentioned a play of his entitled *El bosque amoroso* in his “Adjunta al Parnaso” which may or may not have been an earlier version of *La casa de los celos* (Kahn 469).

¹¹ For obvious reasons scholars are quick to point to Cervantes as a key source for cases of literary madness (e.g. Cruickshank 74-75, citing Northrup) but there are plenty of dramatic precedents to mad figures, including from classical comedy and the *commedia dell'arte* (see Thacker “La locura”).

¹² Calderón's bold metatheatricality is sometimes ascribed to his consciousness of the ossification of *comedia* conventions as the seventeenth century passed (see Thacker, “Calderón” 124-6), but it is still an inherited trait.

¹³ This has been established beyond doubt by scholars over the decades, though the nature of the imitation would bear more scrutiny; see Cruickshank, 2009, 69-70, for examples and further bibliography.

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