

When Honor is Not Enough: Masculine Power and Uxoricide in Calderón de la Barca

Xabier Granja Ibarreche
University of Alabama
xgranja@ua.edu

Keywords:

Masculinity. Honor. Power. Uxoricide. Gender.

Abstract:

This essay explores how husbands in Calderón de la Barca's plays *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* and *El médico de su honra* embrace a pattern of masculine domination that systematically silences their wives. These women evoke an early modern Spanish society that can only maintain its coherence by making feminine subjugation intrinsic to its operation. This perspective suggests that the honor code is an insufficient marker of masculine identity: Calderón's corrupted men cannot depend solely on their public reputation, they require uxoricide to perpetuate their sociopolitical dominion over women.

Quando el honor no basta: poder masculino y uxoricidio en Calderón de la Barca

Palabras clave:

Masculinidad. Poder. Honor. Uxoricidio. Género.

Resumen:

Este ensayo explora cómo los maridos en *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* y *El médico de su honra* de Calderón de la Barca adoptan un patrón de dominación masculina que silencia sistemáticamente a sus esposas. Estas mujeres evocan una sociedad española temprana moderna que mantiene su coherencia haciendo de la subyugación femenina un aspecto intrínseco para su funcionamiento. Esta perspectiva sugiere que el código de honor es insuficiente para representar la identidad masculina: los hombres corruptos de Calderón no pueden depender solo de su reputación pública, sino que requieren el uxoricidio para perpetuar su dominio sociopolítico de la mujer.

Early modern conceptions of gender identity established women as the root of societal ailments. This line of thought, based on religious, historical, philosophical and mythological sources can be traced to the

expansion of Christian doctrine throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, when gender inequality took hold of cultural values as «the full establishment of the idea of the husband's authority over an obedient wife» and it became «associated historically with the consolidation of the idea of hierarchy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries» [McKendrick, 1993: 140]. These discourses influenced medieval Spain's views on gender, which progressively emphasized the superiority of the Christian man: «a la virilidad castrense de la resistencia al dolor, al cansancio, al hambre y a otras supuestas debilidades del cuerpo, el monasticismo añade la resistencia a las tentaciones de la carne; a la hombría de la fuerza física se suma la fuerza racional del hombre reflexivo y disciplinado» [Martín, 1998: 83]. Spain's reliance on Galen of Pergamon's theory of humorism strengthened this gendered bias by advocating for the superiority of male rationality and the inferiority of female emotionality in terms of internal humor balance or lack thereof. Among other reputable authors, Fray Martín de Córdoba claimed that «el verdadero varón es el hombre austeramente fuerte y resistente, capaz de contenerse ante el mundo material y sensible, más propio de niños y mujeres» [1453: 56] in his renowned *Compendio de la fortuna*. Renaissance writers further cemented this gender divide: Juan Luis Vives's acclaimed *Instrucción de la mujer christiana* described women as a «naturalmente animal enfermo, y su juicio no esté de todas partes seguro, y pueda ser muy ligeramente engañado, según mostró nuestra madre Eva, que por muy poco se dejó embobecer y persuadir del demonio» [1523: 26]. Similarly, Fray Luis de León's widely read *La perfecta casada* depicted all women as «un melindre y un lixo y un asco. Y perdonenme porque les pongo este nombre, que es el que ellas más huyen, o, por mejor decir, agradézcanme que tan blandamente las nombro» [1584: 291]. These writers' works paint a clear picture of what little value women held in the early modern Spanish social hierarchy.

Using this cultural background to contextualize the cultural values predominant throughout Calderón de la Barca's life, the present study



explores the depictions of this pervasive societal acceptance of feminine inferiority in two of his most popular plays: *A secreto agravio secreta venganza* (1635) and *El médico de su honra* (1637). Specifically, in the following pages I argue that the main characters Lope and Gutierre use their historically assumed patriarchal superiority to silence their love interests (Leonor in the first tale; Mencía and another woman also named Leonor in the other). In doing so, Calderón's men internalize a corrupt interpretation of honorable masculinity: instead of protecting their wives as stipulated by the code of honor, they seek to preserve their reputation and societal power by killing them. With their success despite breaching their legal obligations towards Leonor, Mencía and Leonor, Calderón surfaces a commonly overlooked insufficiency in Spain's laws regarding honor: the contradiction between the requisite protection of women and the simultaneous expectation to cleanse dishonor at any cost. Through this lens, Calderón denounces an insufficiency that has become inherent to masculine honor, the fact that men have come to rely on women's social inferiority by reducing them to resources and exploiting them for the sole purpose of preserving their authority, ignoring the gender expectations for noblemen at the time.

Wife-murder plays: a reflection of society?

Although the corpus of moralistic treatises like those by Vives and León was mostly comprised of «infamously misogynist conduct manuals written by clergy» [Nader, 2004: 2], most agreed on one central tenet established by Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* in 1528 that spread throughout Spain after Juan Boscán released his translation *El cortesano* six years later: «devesi guardare il cortegiano di non parer maligno e velenoso» [1528: 166]. In fact, Castiglione was adamant that honorable men should always protect women and underscored that «a me non paia conveniente morder le donne né in detti né in fatti» [1528: 204], instead considering that «credo che ognun di noi conosca che al cortegiano si non convien aver grandissima riverenza alle donne» [1528: 209]. By the



end of the seventeenth century, his proposed courtly archetype had become dominant throughout Spain. However, the social power men gained because of it did not, as Matthew D. Stroud's argues, guarantee that their newfound «authority [...] will not be subject to error or misuse» [1990: 82]. The nuances of the cultural clash between men's expected protection of women and the possibilities for transgressing this legal requisite by harming and killing women is a tension astutely captured in Calderón's dramas.

Numerous scholarly contributions have been devoted to exploring how men in early modern Spanish literature claimed to protect women while covertly engaging in actions that were harmful to them, both directly and indirectly (see Garza Carvajal, Greer, Lehfeltdt, Mazo Karras, Nader and Velasco). This body of research has largely focused on the ways in which «dissimulation enabled those who were adept in this art to operate under cover» [Snyder, 2009: 29]. Everett Hesse points out that men obtained power through language, silence, invention, role-playing, imagination, and rationalization that caused confusion, misunderstanding, and emotional distress [1952: 203, 210]. Calderón's men render this plainly visible by devolving into transgressive behaviors that mask their dishonorable actions by silencing women, which ensures their honorable appearance and perpetuates their societal control. As Fernando R. de la Flor asserts, «la esfera de la dominación es la que potencia este mismo afecto del silencio, pues es preciso [...] en la Corte, haya que domeñar los corazones a callar, como los cuerpos a servir» [2005: 40]. Calderón's honor plays depict this oppression of women in Spain and illustrate how feminine silence can impact the process of restoration or preservation of men's honor and ensuing power.

Early modern plays often represented tensions between genders, providing abundant evidence of Spaniards' preoccupation with honor. Diego de Saavedra Fajardo clearly identified this in 1640 when he declared that «los imperios se conservan con su misma autoridad y reputación. En empezando a perderla, empiezan a caer [...] un acto solo derriba la



reputación, y muchos no la pueden restaurar, porque no hay mancha que se limpie sin dejar señales» [1640: 194]. Within this mindset, women's sexual purity represented a perilous possession, given that a single impure act could bring the downfall of a wife's virtues and simultaneously disintegrate her husband's honor. In exploring Calderón's wife-murder plays as reflections of societal trends, some scholars have debated whether they truly portrayed real issues in Spain. Melveena McKendrick notes that numerous claims to uxoricide were unreliable and in fact public sentiment regularly sided with the victims [1993: 37-39], not with a generalized pressure to preserve honor at all costs as is common in literature. Stroud adds that «the number of known wife murders over the four hundred years in which they occurred is actually quite small» [1987: 22]. Lawrence Stone also argues that not many wife-murders were recorded between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in most cases violent resolutions were directed outside of the family rather than within it [1979: 77], which suggests that husbands were more likely to take action against the assailants rather than their own already victimized wives. These studies posit that fictional wife-murders are insufficient to demonstrate any endemic wife-killing problem in early-modern Spanish society. However, they all fail to avoid the same pitfall: the regularity with which wife-murder plays were produced and attended points to Spaniards' generalized cultural acknowledgement that men engaged in a recurrent patriarchal subjugation of women. Regardless of the mortality or survival ensuing an attack, the fact that «seventeenth-century writers protest against the observance of the cruel codes of honor is evidence that these were being observed» [Eoff, 1931: 310]. The homicidal nature of the marriages Calderón's plays suggests that he appreciated the implications and breaches of the code of honor and he had a critical view of its repercussions for women.

Other scholars such as Elena Sánchez Ortega argue that uxoricides were actually much more common: as found in the Registro del Sello del Archivo General de Simancas, the cases where men sought royal pardons



for killing their wives were «tan frecuentes que no cabe lugar a dudas. El ‘marido calderoniano’ era una realidad social» [1982: 120]. I have personally searched other archives in Spain that corroborate Ortega’s claims about judicial cases arising from matrimonial gender conflicts, which could reach grave levels of marital violence. Among the sources I researched I found that many grievances involved a relatively low level of bodily harm, such as Miguela de Echarri’s experience in 1552 with Miguel de Lecaroz when he «le dio dos bofetones en la cara y la maltrató [...] queda injuriada y afrontada por el susodicho individuo».¹ However, numerous other cases involved more serious physical consequences: María Ortiz e Ibarrola had long term health repercussions in 1638, after Martín de Maquibar «me dio diez golpes en mi cuerpo, brazos, cabeza y espalda y me tiró en el suelo y me dixo muchas palabras feas».² In 1660, María López de Zumaza sought protection from her husband Juan de Maceras because since they got married «la a tratado y trata mal de obra y de palabra ofensiva poniendo manos en ella» giving her «muchos palos en su cuerpo en tal manera que la a puesto tullida como actualmente está sin que se pueda tener en pies».³ When women did not die as a result of these confrontations, they were silenced in brutal, tortuous ways. Such was the misfortune María de Ursuarán faced in 1593 against Francisco de Mendoza’s ire:

tomó la espada y la desenvaynó, con propósito e intención de matarla y anduvo alrededor de la cama en seguimiento de ella [...] en un aposento y cerradas las puertas la ató los pies y las manos para atrás por las muñecas y por los pulgares y por los dedos del corazón la amarró a un pilar de una cama y después la hizo sacar la lengua y le puso en ella una tenaza y se la ató con una cuerda y la tuvo así mucho tiempo hasta que vino casi a morir desmayada, fuera de sus sentidos.⁴

¹ Archivo Real y General de Navarra, Pamplona. Consultado el 10-11 de marzo de 2020. Referencia F146/197650, f. 1.

² Archivo Histórico de la Diputación Foral de Bizkaia (AHDFB), Bilbao. Consultado el 4-5 de marzo de 2020. Signatura JCR1226/018, f. 2.

³ AHDFB, Signatura JCR1285/010.

⁴ Archivo Diocesano de Pamplona, Pamplona. Consultado el 9-10 de marzo de 2020. Matrimonios, C/91, No. 27.



There is ample evidence of silenced, oppressed and mistreated women in early modern legal processes, carefully detailed in stipulations and testimonies that sometimes surpassed 275 folios. These judicial cases leave little doubt that aggression towards women, and specially wives, was a common situation whether it ended in uxoricide or not.⁵ Unable to defend themselves legally, Echarri, Ortiz, López and Ursuarán had the men in their families bring their misfortune to the public's attention. On the one hand, they needed men to defend them; on the other hand, men themselves had a vested interest in legally supporting and restoring their women's honor: by protecting them, they ensured their own status and power, just as required by the courtly archetype. Because a man's reputation was largely dependent on public opinion, being openly humiliated often meant that the community «singled out, ostracized and gave demeaning nicknames to men who did not live up to the shared standards of masculinity» [Behrend-Martinez, 2005: 1074]. This fact, paired with the relative frequency of legal proceedings on gender violence that correlated with the popularity of uxoricide in theatrical representations, suggests the likely existence of numerous other cases in which men, fearful of revealing their dishonor and facing their male peers' judgment, chose to keep their disgrace secret and cleanse their disrepute behind closed doors. In the *Recopilación de las leyes destos reynos hecha por mandado de la Magestad Católica del Rey Don Felipe Segundo nuestro Señor*, the twentieth chapter of the eighth book clearly states that «si muger casada ficiere adulterio, ella, i el adulterador ambos sean en poder de el marido, i faga dellos lo que quisiere» [1569: 347]. Legal stipulations like this leave little room for doubting that Spanish law certainly gave husbands ample freedom to dispose of wives suspected of adultery.

⁵ In the Archivo del Territorio Histórico de Álava, searching through the judicial documents database for 'mujer' in the 'matrimonios' category between 1500 and 1800 yielded 23,759 results. In contrast, searching for 'marido' provided 441, while 'hombre' showed only 22. Golden Age Spain was notably preoccupied with analyzing and regulating women's carnal activity and, consequently, there are copious judicial cases where women who had been sexually victimized describe their male attackers' abuse in exceptional detail.



Preserving masculine power by silencing women

The two wife-murder plays analyzed herein are primarily focused on men who are anxious about the possibility of having the community discover their suspected dishonor and are paralyzed by the fear of public shaming. In the first play, *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, Lope suspects his wife Leonor of having an affair with Luis, a former lover presumed dead in a shipwreck. Cognizant that his reputation is only as strong «as the weakest link in the social chain» and that «woman offers the least resistant means by which men may be dishonoured» [Cruz, 1989: 157], Lope's suspicions drive him to kill both her and Luis stealthily in order to keep any potential dishonor a secret. Dominated by the fear of forfeiting his social position, Lope embarks on a quest to remain honorable and preserve his status by any means necessary. He loses control to a state of permanent insecurity over his honor's wellbeing, an 'honor panic' that reflects how «it is honour which regulates relationships between men and the acute fear of its loss or absence which makes men extremely, indeed murderously, violent and highly manipulable» [Robbins, 1996: 18]. When he seeks advice from his friend Juan, a close confidant, Lope is terrified to verbalize his suspicion because doing so would make his dishonor public. Both he and Juan are aware that «a single word is enough to destroy the many years that a gentleman spends defending his honor» [Castells, 2012: 18]. Any possibility of unmasking the suspected grievance makes it necessary for Lope to silence his wife's potential disgrace in order to preserve his own honor, and already suspects what Lope is trying to conceal. Therefore, Lope decides that «(disimular conviene; / no crean que yo puedo / tener tan bajo miedo / que mi valor condene)» (vv. 1529-1532). His judgment is left to his rambling imagination in asides such as «(Hoy seré cuerdamente, / si es que ofendido soy, el más prudente; / y a la venganza mía / tendrá ejemplos el mundo, / porque en callar la fundo)» (vv.1563-1567). His lack of certainty upon wondering 'si es que ofendido soy' suggests that whether or not he has been offended is irrelevant, his main preoccupation is averting the



possibility that he may be discovered as a vulnerable man. The core of his plan ensures his wife's silence because as he says, 'en callar la fundo' by eliminating both her and the threat of potential dishonor she represents.

In interacting with Juan, Lope keeps the decision-making authority between men, completely excluding Leonor from deciding her own destiny. He fulfills his masculine superiority by suppressing the voices that can bring dishonor, whether those be his wife Leonor's explanations, Juan's suspicions about what is going on, or the town's murmuring about the presumed scandal. Observing the honor code drives Lope to lament «¿Hay, honor, más sutilezas / que decirme y proponerme, / más tormentos que me aflijan» (vv. 1162-1164), signaling his dissatisfaction towards a legal system that can punish him through no fault of his own. Calderón insinuates that the code of honor is the real enemy in this story, making it responsible for Lope's predicament given that «male psychological traits can reinforce themselves by creating social systems that preserve masculine authority» [Castells, 2012: 17]. Embattled with what he considers to be an indiscriminate law, Lope defies it by telling an imaginarily personified honor «no podrás matarme, / si mayor poder no tienes, / que yo sabré proceder / callado, cuerdo y prudente» (vv. 1170-1173). His silencing of Leonor, of Juan, and of the whole situation is so effective that he manages to stop any further discussion of the topic with anyone. He admits to his own fearful silence even when faced with the maximum authority, the king, to whom «(Cobarde al Rey me llevo / que esta pena, esta rabia, y este fuego / tan cobarde me tiene que sospecho / con vergüenza, dolor y cobardía / que todos saben la desdicha mía)» (vv. 1926-1930). For all intents and purposes, Lope is paralyzed from speech and from letting anyone who may suspect his dishonor speak, thereby exposing the inherent vulnerability of his honorable status.

While Lope is suspicious of everything and everyone, Leonor is in full compliance with the duties of a perfect wife and fulfills many of León's



requirements in *La perfecta casada* for a familial gendered hierarchy.⁶ She repeatedly rejects Luis to protect her familial reputation. She respects Lope's intention to leave for battle despite her fears that «Vos ausente, señor mío, / y por mi consejo ausente, / fuera pronunciar yo misma / la sentencia de mi muerte» (vv. 980-984). She identifies the injustice of her societal and romantic quandary when she argues that «No es liviandad, honra es / la que en la ocasión me puso» (vv. 1386-1387). Her comment again points to Calderón's critical stance regarding the prospect of plausible haphazardness in the code of honor: she has done no wrong, but she might face death nonetheless. Seeking safety, Leonor acts silently and avoids her former lover Luis to shield Lope's public image. Despite her efforts to preserve their marital reputation, she fails to prevent Lope from being erroneously convinced that «Leonor matarme intenta» (v. 1906). With the potential crime silenced, she is unable to speak to defend herself.

Leonor's fear of her husband's likely suspicions, paired with Luis's inappropriate insistence, push her to the edge of morality in the third. She is corrupted by both men into the temptation to have both options: a stable marriage in Lope, and an emotional companion in Luis. However, her lack of *mesura* is not a validation of the popular moralizing texts that attributed immorality to women's fallibility during this time.⁷ Instead, Calderón presents it as a descent into a state of adultery to which Lope's own unrestrained actions have driven her. Despite her speech criticizing the code

⁶ León views marriage as a divine designation where man and wife are reflections of the union between God and the church, in which women act as men's helpers: «Dios, cuando quiso casar al hombre, dándole mujer, dijo: Hagámosle un ayudador su semejante. De donde se entiende que el oficio natural de la mujer y el fin para que la crió, es para que sea ayudadora del marido y no su calamidad y desventura; ayudadora y no destruidora» [1583: 267].

⁷ In his correspondences Vives condemned women's sexual corruptibility, lamenting, «¿Qué cosa más desenfrenada que una mujer? Si le sueltas un poco las riendas, allí no habrá más moderación ni mesura» [1527: 470]. His *Instrucción de la mujer christiana* cemented the opinion that women are easily «arreatadas de pestífero amor, desechando de sí toda carnalidad, aborrecen a los padres, quieren mal a los hermanos, desaman hasta los hijos, cuanto más a los familiares y conocidos» [1523: 43] and urges them to acknowledge their potential for evil with which they may endanger themselves through «cien mil riscos mortales» [1523: 14].



of honor when she exclaims «¡Ay honor, mucho me debes!» (v. 894), Leonor is the ultimate embodiment of Lope's dormant doom: the possibility of publicizing his suspected disrepute. Therefore, in the pursuit of securing his power at any cost, he must silence her. Lope's execution of Leonor is revealed in his final discourse, her assassination concealed by his claims that «en vivo fuego envuelta, / en humo denso anegada, / pues cuando librarla intenta / mi valor, rindió la vida / en mis brazos» (vv. 2706-2709). By overwriting his crime as an unfortunate tragedy, Lope's words render Leonor's subjugation complete and his honor safe through the inalterable quietness of her death. His actions are excused by the king, who proclaims that «secreta venganza / requiere secreta ofensa» (vv. 2743-2744) and establishes Lope's unwarranted murder of his wife as an acceptable legal solution. As the ultimate masculine authority, his validation represents patriarchy's endorsement of silencing women by any means necessary for men to preserve their honor, even in the face of an imaginary threat.

The second play, *El médico de su honra*, tells the story of Gutierre, who promises to marry Leonor. Once he discovers that Arias visited her in his house without permission, he fears for his honor and marries Mencía instead. Eventually the prince Enrique infiltrates Mencía's house, once again leaving Gutierre's honor in question. He, as his own medic, prescribes the only medicine that can cure his honor's ailment: Mencía's death. Given that «ninguna mujer está a salvo de la deshonor, que se ha convertido para él en una verdadera epidemia» [Amezcuá, 1994: 90], Gutierre concludes that it is impossible to cure his wife. In contrast, «es la honra del varón la que todavía puede curarse» [Amezcuá, 1994: 95] and by the end of the second act he has already decided that «yo cubriré con tierra mi deshonor» (v. 2045). He chooses to save his own reputation once he decides that his wife's is no longer redeemable. His solution points to the «masculine fear prevalent in wife-murder plays: familial honor is embodied by women, whose material bodies are seen as penetrable, porous, and vulnerable to moral and sexual failing» [Balizet, 2012: 29]. Because he believes no



woman to be safe from dishonor, Gutierre assumes his honor endangered as long as it is linked to one. Therefore, while Mencía lives he can never secure his reputation. This anxiety, a fear that he will be unmasked as a vulnerable man, drives him to eschew the protection of women stipulated by Castiglione's archetype and to preserve his masculine honor at any cost. Calderón represents Gutierre's «devolution from a man who appears paralyzed by the honor code to a murderer who upholds the code past the point of absurdity» [Balizet, 2012: 33], thereby confirming his corruption of his legal obligations towards his wife.

Gutierre's actions, as well as Arias' and prince Enrique's, silence both Leonor and Mencía in a variety of ways. In the first act, Leonor attempts to defend herself when her reputation is put in question, arguing that «oyendo contra mi honor / presunciones, fuera ley / injusta que yo, cobarde / dejara de responder» (v. 939-942). Arias, the prince Enrique's closest confidant, promptly curtails her speech by ordering her «Señora, espera, detén / la voz... / porque el honor de esta dama / me toca a mí defender» (v.949-952). Even though Arias's behavior is honorable throughout the play, he contributes to silencing Leonor and she is not to be heard from again until much later, when the duel between him and Gutierre is stopped by the king. In the second act, prince Enrique prevents Mencía from upholding her Christian virtues. He continuously disrupts her attempts at defending the importance of her chastity, dominated by his desire to attain her body instead of respecting her morality and expected female behavior:

MENCÍA	¿Qué es esto?
ENRIQUE	Un atrevimiento...
MENCÍA	¿Pues, señor, vos...
ENRIQUE	No te turbes.
MENCÍA	...de esta suerte...
ENRIQUE	No te alteres.
MENCÍA	...entrasteis...
ENRIQUE	No te disgustes.
MENCÍA	...en mi casa sin temer que así a una mujer destruye



y que así ofende a un vasallo
tan ilustre?

(vv. 1082-1088)

This exchange contrasts Mencía's suppressed voice with Enrique's insistence in cutting her speech. Mencía's interactions are limited to unfinished utterances, in sharp contrast with her suitor's negative commands that interrupt her repeatedly to establish his masculine authority over her. She manages to finish her sentence urging Enrique to realize the dangers his impudence brings about for both her and Gutierre's honor; fully complying with Vives and León's expectation that she defend her familial reputation. Despite her honorable conduct, Enrique turns her request for modesty against her, assertively silencing her and, further, forcing her to silence herself to avoid publicly slandering her own name:

ENRIQUE	Ya llegué a hablarte, ya tuve ocasión; no he de perdella...
MENCÍA	Daré voces.
ENRIQUE	A ti misma te infamas.

(vv. 1136-1140)

Besides prince Enrique's efforts to silence her, Mencía's calamity is deepened by Gutierre's anxiety, omnipresent throughout the plot. When he begins to suspect «¿De qué estás turbada / mi bien, mi esposa, Mencía?» (vv. 1381-1382), she is paralyzed due to the realization of her unlikely survival in the face of a husband who already suspects a potential offense that has not taken place. Her conviction that Gutierre will act on a whim to avoid any potential dishonor has her already expecting «que ya en mi sangre bañada, / hoy moría desangrada» (vv. 1384-1385). Her fears of an undeserved punishment due to Gutierre's worsening suspicions are corroborated as all levels of the patriarchal order conspire to protect his masculine power at her expense. As in the previous play, Calderón has Gutierre overwrite his crime as an unfortunate tragedy in which «Mencía's



bloodbath is revealed as a perverse misreading that confirms only the questionable truth of its own assumptions» [Dopico Black, 2001: 112]. In the third act, Gutierre lies about having found her «en su cuarto, pues, / quise entrar esta mañana / - aquí la lengua enmudece, / aquí el aliento me falta – / veo de funesta sangre / teñida toda la cama / toda la ropa cubierta, / y que en ella, ¡ay Dios!, estaba / Mencía, que se había muerto / esta noche desangrada» (vv. 2848-2857). Although he claims that his voice ‘enmudece’, it is only through his speech that he can forcefully rewrite his murder of Mencía moments earlier to establish his innocence. Through her now permanent silence, he ensures that his potential dishonor will remain secret, and his masculine power and social standing intact.

Gutierre successfully ‘cures’ his dishonor and secures his mighty reputation with a complete suppression of its vulnerability to feminine threats. The concealed homicide is once again excused by the king, whose response boils down to a «silencio del rey sobre su deshonra y la aprobación tácita de la venganza» [Déodat-Kessedjian, 1999: 221]. He validates Gutierre’s criminal method and alleviates his worry that if he were to face a similar situation in the future, the «remedio» (v. 2926) will once again be to take his future wife and «Sangrarla» (v. 2929). The king’s validation makes uxoricide fundamental for the stability of Spanish patriarchy, as his approval of the murder represents «an effort to preserve the kingdom» [Fox, 1982: 31]. Arias, Enrique, the king, and Gutierre all render Leonor and Mencía silent with the prospect of impending death in order to preserve their masculine dominion over them. Their actions suggest that suppressing female voices is necessary to preserve the stability of men’s honor within a fragmented patriarchal hierarchy of power, for which women become scapegoats.

As Ruth El Saffar argues, «woman comes into the structure only when her place is one agreed upon by all the men involved, and when that



place fits into the already established order» [1986: 94].⁸ Even Leonor's forceful verbal defense in the second act is no exception to this pattern. Despite her single successful speech in self-representation, she is ultimately suppressed by Gutierre and the king in the end. Immediately after his actions are excused by the king's validation, Gutierre marries Leonor and incontestably warns her, «mira que médico he sido / de mi honra. No está olvidada / la ciencia» (vv. 2946-2948). Their union, based on a renewed threat of Gutierre's homicidal authority as his hands are still covered in Mencía's blood, is endorsed by the king's assurance that «yo sé que su alabanza / la merece» (vv. 2941-2942). All levels of the patriarchal hierarchy guarantee the preservation of Gutierre's superiority, first by his previous wife's perpetual silence in death, and finally in a newly quelled Leonor whose marriage will subject her to the same constant threat of marital suspicion and looming assassination.

Uxoricide for the sake of masculine honor: a theatrical trope?

Seeing the feminine subjugation in Calderón's work, it is worth considering if this was a literary trope in early modern Spanish theater. Domination of women as well as weaker men was a powerful marker that represented the «then-contemporary broad values of patriarchal masculinity prevailing widely in Europe» [Fox, 2019: XIV], and Spain's tendency to depreciate femininity certainly lends itself to this interpretation. However, well-known coetaneous plays do not share Calderón's feminine silencing for masculine gain, in fact, authors often allowed female characters to represent themselves with a powerful voice. In Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* (1619), after it is suggested that the *Comendador* has raped the mayor Esteban's daughter Laurencia, she is given the opportunity to condemn her townsmen as «hilanderas, maricones, / amujerados, cobardes» (vv. 1781-82)

⁸ Although El Saffar is primarily concerned with women as scapegoats in *La vida es sueño*, her view that a woman, when conceived as a lover «triggers passions and emotions that destabilize the order» [1986: 94] is equally applicable to the two honor plays analyzed in this piece.



for their failure to defend «vuestras mujeres / sufrís que otros hombres gocen!» (vv. 1772-72).⁹ Her dishonor becomes the motivation that drives the whole town to assassinate its hateful commander, in a unified search for justice under the chant «¡Fuenteovejuna, y Fernán Gómez muera!» (v.1890). In *La Estrella de Sevilla* (1623), Andrés de Claramonte resolves the intricate political and legal impasse with a third act that grants Estrella the right to self-represent. She establishes her own authority by voicing her decision against marrying her companion Sancho Ortiz, who had successfully killed her brother Busto at the request of his namesake, the king Sancho. Instead of being silenced, she explains her reasoning as a moral imperative to reject the man she loves, driven by honor and loyalty towards her family, because «ver siempre al homicida / de mi hermano en mesa y cama / me ha de dar pena [...] no ha de ser mi esposo / hombre que a mi hermano mata, / aunque le quiero y adoro» (vv. 3006-16). Her authoritative speech leaves everyone present, including the king, baffled at her honor and self-sufficiency.

Another example of a forceful feminine voice is present in Tirso de Molina's *Antona García* (1635), where the heroine Antona clearly embodies powerful female agency. Her strength comes through constantly in her voice, with proud remarks that «Todos los pueblos y villas / que por aquí se derraman / la Valentona me llaman, / porque no sufro cosquillas» (vv. 255-258). Even after marrying Juan de Monroy and receiving queen Isabella's instructions to abandon life as a soldier to adopt a domestic role more appropriate for her gender, Antona refuses to fully accept any sort of subjugation. Unwavering, she tells the queen «mande y rija mi marido, / pues Dios su yugo me ha puesto, / pero no me toque en esto, / que no será obedecido; / que en siguiendo armas tiranas / contra vuesa real corona, / entonces a fe de Antona, / que han de ir rocín y mazanas. / Perdone padre y marido». (vv. 395-403). In partially accepting Isabella's instructions, but

⁹ While Laurencia never explains her physical abuse verbally, her involvement in the rest of the plot makes this conclusion hard to dispute. As Stacey Parker Aronson puts it, only «those versed in medieval imagery will be able to interpret Laurencia's "desmelenada" hair as an indication that she has been raped» [2015: 36].



warning that she will break them if protecting the crown becomes necessary, Antona's words authorize both her past and future actions as a warrior woman and guarantee the preservation of her honor. Without silencing his heroine, Tirso's masterful representation of a strong feminine voice carefully navigates the fine balance between gender expectations and the royalty's dominion over its subjects. His *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630) might seem a play where women are routinely subjugated by Don Juan's sexual appetite. However, although they don't punish him directly, Isabela, Tisbea, Ana, and Aminta forcefully denounce their misfortune to their families, driving the men in their lives to defend their honor for them. In the end, Don Juan is deprived from confessing his sins and, unable to reach absolution, his screams of «¡Que me quemo! ¡Que me abraso! ¡Muerto soy!» (vv. 2770-2771) are finally silenced as the ghost of Ana's father, Don Gonzalo, drags him to the depths of hell.

There are numerous other examples one could add to the list of powerful feminine voices that are not silenced in the name of preserving men's honor. Even Calderón's own *La vida es sueño* (1635) depends entirely on Rosaura's voice throughout the story to lead Segismundo to his reformation and eventual kingship. She is instrumental in initiating his reaction during the first act, jolting him into reacting to her voice wondering «¿Quién mis voces ha escuchado?» (v.175). After unsuccessfully attempting to avoid talking to him in the second act, fearful that he will see through her disguise, she finally criticizes «tu tiranía / escándalos tan fuertes / de delitos, traiciones, iras, muertes» and calls him «cruel, soberbio, bárbaro y tirano, / nacido entre las fieras» (vv. 665-672), inciting his explosive rage that detonates both his return to prison and the events of the third act. In the end, it is Rosaura's words claiming «¿Pues ni una palabra sola / no te debe mi cuidado, / no merece mi congoja?» (vv. 811-813) that lead Segismundo to an honorable conduct where «ni te miro, porque es fuerza, / en pena tan rigurosa / que no mire tu hermosura / quien ha de mirar tu honra» (vv. 825-828). His final recognition that his moral rehabilitation is due to «fue mi



maestro un sueño» (v. 1119) points to Rosaura's awakening of Segismundo in act one, her reflection of his royal unfitness in act two, and her appreciation of his moral qualities in act three; making her speech fundamental to the making of this new king. Women's resoluteness in all these dramas accentuates the uniqueness of Calderón's killing of Leonor, Mencía and Leonor as the only path for Lope and Gutierre to remain honorable.

An insufficient code of honor

A secreto agravio, secreta venganza and *El médico de su honra* implicitly denounce how courtly masculinity, which encourages the protection of women, can be corrupted by men who prioritize their status past the limits of the law. Calderón provides a social commentary on the morality of husbands consuming their wives as a resource to protect masculine power. He condemns the preconceived notion that «women in a patriarchal economy are objects of exchange, both excluded from and essential to male circulation» [Heigl, 2002: 349], as it allows men to justify using and discarding their wives in the face of any threat to their honor, whether real or imaginary. He draws attention to the oppression of early modern Spanish women as a violation of the expected masculine comportment through the «four elements of the honour plot: marriage and the placement of women between men, the heroine's attempts to negotiate her position, the violence exercised on women's bodies, and the means and ends of recognition» [Rupp, 2016: 67]. Leonor's, Mencía's and Leonor's dialogues are suppressed so all levels of the patriarchal hierarchy may preserve the stability of masculine domination in what accounts for a theatrical materialization of seventeenth-century Spain gender norms. Through women's downfall, Calderón depicts how «el silencio, efectivamente, es el broche que se pone a la entera construcción del hombre artificial, y, desde luego, corona el edificio de lo que es el hombre político» [Flor, 2005: 136]. For Lope and Gutierre to have power Leonor, Mencía,



and Leonor must be silenced. Their systematic suppression to avoid public scorn is a devastating condemnation of Spanish society where «women are property to be shuttled about, traded, bought, and sold» [Stroud, 1990: 89]. Calderón's husbands dishonorably reduce women to resources to be consumed, they corrupt the code of honor by renouncing the protection of their wives, they violate masculine courtly principles, and still they still maintain their honorable positions.

Lope's and Gutierre's morally bankrupt methods disqualify them as honorable individuals. By covering up their nefarious deeds against women yet maintaining their reputation and power, Calderón «criticizes the *limpieza de sangre* ideology and the institution charged with preserving it» [Dopico Black, 2001: 117]. He points out a remarkable deficiency in the patriarchal structure of masculine power, a systematic contradiction between the code of honor's expectation that husbands protect their wives and a culture of courtly dissimulation to avoid public suspicion. He understood the incompatibility between these two systems and was sympathetic towards silenced women. In *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* he expresses his dissatisfaction with the law through Juan's laments: «¡Oh, tirano error / de los hombres! ¡Oh, vil ley / del mundo! ¡Que una razón / o que una sinrazón pueda / manchar el altivo honor / tantos años adquirido» (vv. 202-207). In *El médico de su honra* he repeats this criticism through Gutierre's exclamations that the law allows for him to «como inocente pierdo / mi honor, venganza me dé / el cielo!» (vv. 1111-1113). It is the legal system's inability to guarantee Gutierre's honor and his wife's safety that has created a quandary where «os receta y ordena / el médico de su honra / primeramente la dieta / del silencio, que es guardar / la boca» (vv. 1672-1676). Through these condemnations, Calderón points to the code of honor's fallibility for rendering wives' homicides not just legally excusable, but necessary if men want to preserve their power. His representation of the Spanish wife bears «no trace of authorial accomplishment, no crown to proclaim her lineage of glory. Instead, in drama after drama, she is routinely



murdered by her husband in the name of honor» [Dopico Black, 2001: 110] and becomes a symbol for the incompatibility between Spanish expectations of masculine honor and the feminine inferiority generally accepted in his lifetime.

Given the pervasiveness of a culture that was strongly dismissive of women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, where «all Spanish women, lived in a patriarchal society with laws and institutions designed to exclude women from public life» [Nader, 2004: 3], it is not surprising that men would make efforts to distance themselves from being associated with feminine traits that could harm their reputations.¹⁰ Once marked as corrupted women, Leonor, Mencía and Leonor are made into representations of a «silencio trágico [...] hecho de lágrimas, remordimientos y temores» [Déodat-Kessedjian, 1999: 221]. Although the aforementioned *Recopilación de Leyes* also states «que la mujer no se pueda escusar de responder a la acusación del marido» [1569: 347], these women are robbed of the chance to respond because they are never formally accused in the first place. Lope and Gutierre repeatedly curtail Leonor, Mencía and Leonor's speech, and their constant dissimulation reveals their «underlying anxiety, fear, and doubt about the business at hand» [Snyder, 2009: 58] until they execute their final silencing: uxoricide, or its looming threat. Their anxiety points to the fragility of the patriarchal order in the presence of women, and signals Calderón's condemnation that their wives' deaths may be an inescapable requisite to ensure their masculine power. Calderón suggests that the prevailing code of honor demands the protection of women in theory, but in practice it necessitates their oppression for men to integrate

¹⁰ This distancing was common in other European nations. In England, «while relations between the sexes were a primary site for its definition, manhood was often most resonantly worked out between men» [Shepard, 2006: 6]. The separation between men and women was deeply ingrained in culture: «Employing a vocabulary of social, as well as sexual, difference the ideal body imagined by medical writers flattered their elite male readership» [2006: 68] in official documents, further entrenching their dissociation from women. Despite having some degree of power [Wiesner-Hanks, 2008: 277], women's lack of the authority meant they had no public representation, and like their Spanish counterparts, British women were often left without a voice.



into the highest echelons of society. Using early modern Spanish theater as a powerful tool to question the dominant ideological system, and exposing honor by itself as insufficient for the establishment and perpetuation of masculine power within the patriarchy hierarchy, Calderón problematizes that men's honor can only be guaranteed in the certainty of a dead woman.

BIBLIOGRAFÍA

- AMEZCUA, José. «Mujer y enfermedad en *El médico de su honra calderoniano*» en *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 1994, vol. 42, núm. 1, 87-98.
- Archivo Diocesano de Pamplona (ADP), Pamplona. Matrimonios, C/91, No. 27. María de Ursuarán contra Francisco de Mendoza. 1593.
- Archivo Histórico de la Diputación Foral de Bizkaia (AHDFB), Bilbao. Sección Judicial, Fondo Corregidor, Subfondo Criminal, Signatura JCR1226/018, f. 2. «Causa de injurias de María Ortiz de Ibarrola», 1638.
- AHDFB, Sección Judicial, Fondo Corregidor, Subfondo Criminal, Signatura JCR1285/010. «Causa de injurias de María López de Zumaza», 1660.
- Archivo Real y General de Navarra, Pamplona. Serie Procesos judiciales, Referencia F146/197650, f. 1. «Miguela de Echarri contra Miguel de Lecaroz», 1552.
- Archivo del Territorio Histórico de Álava (ATHA), Vitoria. Relaciones Jurídicas, Demandas y Litigios.
- BALIZET, Ariane M. «‘Drowned in Blood’: Honor, Bloodline, and Domestic Ideology in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *El médico de su honra*» en *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2012, vol. 49, núm. 1, 23-49.
- BEHREND-MARTINEZ, Edward. «Manhood and the Neutered Body in Early Modern Spain» en *Journal of Social History*, 2005, vol. 38, 1073-93.



- CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA, Pedro, *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, Santiago Fernández Mosquera (ed.), Alicante, 2014 (1637), *Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/a-secreto-agravio-secreta-venganza--comedia-famosa/html/>>, [consultado el 4-6-2018].
- _____, *El médico de su honra*. María de Quiñónez (ed.), Alicante, 2001 (1637), *Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/el-medico-de-su-honra--1/html/>>, [consultado el 5-6-2018].
- _____, *La vida es sueño*. Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros (ed.), (1635), *Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-vida-es-sueno--0/html/>>, [consultado el 23-10-2018].
- CASTELLS, Ricardo. «The Essential Difference: Contrasting Male and Female Thinking in Calderón's *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*» en *Hispanófila*, 2012, vol. 165, 15-29.
- CASTIGLIONE, Baldassare, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, Torino, Letteratura Italiana Einaudi, 1965 (1528).
- CLARAMONTE, Andrés de, *La Estrella de Sevilla*, (1623), *Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-estrella-de-sevilla-comedia-famosa/html/>>, [consultado el 2-3-2020].
- CÓRDOBA, fray Martín de. *Compendio de la fortuna* en Fernando Rubio (ed.), *Prosistas castellanos del siglo XV*, Madrid, Atlas, 1964 (1453), 5-62.
- CRUZ, Anne J. «Homo Ex-Machina? Male Bonding in Calderón's *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*» en *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1989, pp. vol. XXV, núm. 2, 154-166.
- DÉODAT-KESSEDJIAN, Marie-Françoise, *El silencio en el teatro de Calderón de la Barca*, Madrid, Iberoamericana Vervuert, 1999.
- DOPICO BLACK, Georgina, *Perfect Wives, Other Women*, Durham & London, Duke UP, 2001.



- EL SAFFAR, Ruth. «Way Stations in the Errancy of the Word: A Study of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*» en *Renaissance Drama*, 1986, vol. 17, 83-100.
- EOFF, Sherman. «The Sources of Calderón's *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*» en *Modern Philology*, 1931, vol. 28, núm. 3, 297-311.
- FAJARDO, Diego de Saavedra, *Idea de un príncipe político-cristiano representada en cien empresas*, Madrid, Atlas, 1947 (1640).
- FLOR, Fernando R. de la, *Pasiones frías: secreto y disimulación en el Barroco hispano*, Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2005.
- FOX, Dian. «El médico de su honra: Political Considerations» en *Hispania*, 1982, vol. 65, núm. 1, 28-38.
- _____, *Hercules and the King of Portugal*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2019.
- GARZA CARVAJAL, Federico, *Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico*, Austin, U of Texas P, 2003.
- GREER, Margaret Rich, *Maria de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men*, Penn State Studies in Romance Literatures, University Park, Pennsylvania State UP, 2000.
- HEIGL, Michaela J. «Erotic Paranoia and Wife Murder in Calderonian Drama» en *Hispanic Review*, 2002, vol. 70, núm. 3, 333-353.
- HESSE, Everett W. «Obsesiones en *El mayor monstruo del mundo*» en *Estudios*, 1952, vol. 8, 395-409.
- LEHFELDT, Elizabeth A. «Ideal Men: Masculinity and Decline in Seventeenth-Century Spain» en *Renaissance Quarterly*, 2008, vol. 61, núm. 2, 463-494.
- LEÓN, Luis de, *La perfecta casada*, Madrid, Católica, 1967 (1583).
- MARTÍN, José Fernando, *Sobre caballeros y otras masculinidades descaballadas*, Irvine, U of California P, 1998.
- MAZO KARRAS, Ruth, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, The Middle Ages Series, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.



- MCKENDRICK, Melveena. «Calderón and the Politics of Honour» en *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 1993, vol. 80, 135-46.
- MOLINA, Tirso de, *Antona García*, (1635), *Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/antona-garcia-1/html/dca9ec64-2dc6-11e2-b417-000475f5bda5.html>>, [consultado el 13-8-2019].
- _____, *El burlador de Sevilla*, (1630), *The Association for Hispanic Classical Theater*, <<http://www.comedias.org/tirso/burlador.pdf>>, [consultado el 5-4-2018].
- NADER, Helen, *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain, Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450-1650*, Urbana, U of Illinois P, 2004.
- Recopilación de las leyes destos reynos hecha por mandado de la Magestad Católica del Rey Don Felipe Segundo nuestro Señor*, Madrid, 1640 (1569).
- PARKER ARONSON, Stacey L. «They Said, She Said: Making the Case for Rape in *Fuenteovejuna*» en *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 2015, vol. 67, núm. 2, 33-47.
- ROBBINS, Jeremy M. W. «Male Dynamics in Calderón's *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*» en *Hispanófila*, 1996, vol. 117, 11-24.
- RUPP, Stephen. «Cervantes, Calderón and Matters of Honour: Romance and Tragedy in *El curioso impertinente* and *El pintor de su deshonra*» en *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 2016, vol. 41, núm. 1, 65-83.
- SÁNCHEZ ORTEGA, Elena. «La mujer en el Antiguo Régimen: Tipos históricos y arquetipos literarios» en *Nuevas perspectivas sobre la mujer: Actas de las primeras jornadas de investigación interdisciplinaria*, vol. 1, Madrid, Seminario de Estudios de la Mujer de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1982, pp. 107-26.
- SHEPARD, Alexandra, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England*, Oxford Studies in Social History, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2006.



- SNYDER, Jon R, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe*, Berkeley, U of California P, 2009.
- STONE, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979.
- STROUD, Matthew D., *Fatal Union: A Pluralistic Approach to the Spanish Wife-Murder Comedias*, London and Toronto, Bucknell UP, 1990.
- _____, «Further Considerations of History and Law in The Wife-Murder ‘Comedias’» en *Hispanic Journal*, 1987, vol. 8, núm. 2, 21-38.
- VEGA, Lope de, *Fuenteovejuna*, (1619), *The Association for Hispanic Classical Theater*, http://www.comedias.org/play_texts/lope/fuente.pdf, [consultado el 22-8-2017].
- VELASCO, Sherry, *Male Delivery: Reproduction, Effeminacy, and Pregnant Men in Early Modern Spain*, Nashville, Vanderbilt UP, 2006.
- VIVES, Juan Luis, *Instrucción de la mujer christiana*, Buenos Aires, Espasa-Calpe Argentina, 1948 (1523).
- _____, «128. Vives a Erasmo», en *Epistolario de Juan Luis Vives, Biblioteca Valenciana Digital* (1527), <http://bivaldi.gva.es/es/corpus/unidad.cmd?idUnidad=11866&idCorpus=1>, [consultado el 15-12-2019].
- WIESNER-HANKS, Merry E., *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Cambridge UP, 2008.

