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“To die and to be born – two actions like one”¹

The analogy of birth and death in an allegorical play of Calderón

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If we had asked Leonard Cohen to summarize the Calderón play that we will discuss in this article, it would probably have been something like “[I came upon a wedding that Body and Soul had contrived; / Bethlehem the bridegroom, Babylon the bride \[...\]](#)”². A wedding is at the center of the allegorical religious play *El Pleito Matrimonial* (1650?), one of the plays in which Calderón experiments most with the two extremes of life, birth, and death. But let’s first have a closer look at the plot of this play.

The play is set on an important occasion, namely the wedding of the two allegorical figures Body and Soul. It is a rather unequal marriage, since Soul is an immortal, almost perfect being, and Body is a vicious, mortal one. This inequality is creating conflict. Two other allegorical figures Death and Sin now plot to annul the marriage between Soul and Body. At the beginning of the play, Soul advises Body not to follow the primitive desires of Will, but to listen to his Mind. That’s how Death and Sin get Will on board with their treacherous plan, for he is jealous of Mind. A wedding banquet is held, but it is a lavish one with food and drink in abundance and not a humble one, as Soul would have liked – the first reason for Soul to threaten Body with divorce. Life, the child of Body and Soul, succeeds in dissuading them by pointing out that without Body and Soul she would be an “orphan without father and mother” (v. 1281). But Death changes sides and allies himself with Mind and together they plan to remind Body of his mortality. The deathlike slumber into which

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² Cohen, Leonard (1971), “Last Year’s Man”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryHsUGUeMkc>, last consult: 5.6.2022.

Death puts Body seems to work: Body remembers his transitoriness, yet, if life is short, can't we at least enjoy it? Soul doesn't want to agree with that. She therefore demands again the annulment of the marriage and this time, not even Life can stop her. She addresses God and pleads for justice: "[...] mi tormento es el tormento / del tirano que ligaba / juntos a un vivo y a un muerto, / pues que sus torpezas, deseos, / apetitos, iras, gulas / y liviandades padezco. / ¡Justicia, Señor! ¡Justicia!" (vv. 1247–1255) Now, it is not so easy to claim that the marriage took place against Soul's will. After all, she has only had a will since her union with Body. The marriage is therefore only temporarily suspended, and things take their course. The flame of Life slowly goes out, Body becomes naked again and moves towards his cave from whence he originally came. Once again, Sin takes possession of Soul, but Jesus hears her lamentations in purgatory and sends her the last sacrament. Body hopes for reunification on the Day of Judgement. Soul ascends to heaven.

Birth as death and death as birth

Calderón not only uses birth and death as innovative figures of speech and meaningful isotopic compositions, but he confronts us with the notion that death and birth are almost indistinguishable³. He even describes how a cervix ("esa gruta, / cuya boca⁴ se espereza") opens and Body leaves the womb in order to marry Soul:

Y para que veas si tengo
para esto ocasiones muchas,
los ojos vuelve a mirar
el corazón de esa gruta,
cuya boca se espereza
para que su centro escupa
al Cuerpo, que en ella agora
como en el seno se oculta

³ Here Calderón takes up an idea that already appears in *La vida es sueño* (1636): "En Clorilene, mi esposa, / tuve un infelice hijo, / en cuyo parto los cielos / se agotaron de prodigios, / antes que a la luz hermosa / le diese el sepulcro vivo / de un vientre, porque el nacer / y el morir son parecidos. [...]" (v. 660–666) Calderón de la Barca, Pedro (1998), *La Vida es Sueño*. [Edition by Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros], Madrid: Austral.

Similarly, in *El Año Santo De Roma* (1650): "[Amor:] Que es el hombre peregrino / en su Patria, pues el centro / de la Tierra, que le engendra, / en sí, le tiene violento, / hasta que vuelva a cobrarle, / cuando en cenizas resuelto, / entrañas, que fueron cuna, / le sirven de monumento, / principio tan asentado / es de todos, que no tengo / necesidad de probarle / con ociosos argumentos, [...]" (vv. 212–226) Calderón de la Barca, Pedro (1995), *El Año Santo de Roma*. [Edition by Igancio Arellano & Ángel L. Cilveti], Kassel: Edition Reichenberger.

A similar equation of womb and tomb, although in a different context, can be found in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 86": "Was it the proud full sail of his great verse, / Bound for the prize of all-too-precious you / That did my ripe thoughts in my brain in-hearse, / Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?" Shakespeare, William (1978), *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 95.

⁴ See the etymology of "orificio materno": Latin "orificium" (from "os" – "mouth" and "facio" – "I make"): "Boca o agujero de alguna cosa." *Diccionario de Autoridades*. Tomo III. (1732). <https://apps2.rae.es/DA.html>, last consult: 29.5.2022.

materno, que poco o nada
 la significación muda
 la explicación del concepto
 porque sean peñas duras
 las entrañas que le aborten,
 puesto que su primer cuna
 el centro⁵ fue de la tierra,
 que ha de ser su sepultura,
 donde el nacer y el morir
 son dos acciones tan una
 que no son más de pasar
 desde una tumba a otra tumba. (vv. 167–186)

Death, in his function as midwife, pulls out of the earth (“sacar de ella”, v. 1388) the “shapeless embryo of a corpse without a figure” (vv. 115–116). The first cradle of man (“primer cuna”) is therefore also his grave (“sepultura”), into which he returns (again naked, vv. 437–438) at the end of the play. Death himself oscillates between birth and death and so does his own appearance:

Ya de aquel tronco que mi cuna fue,
 de quien naciendo rama soy raíz,
 rasgué el seno, y rasgándole dejé
 yerta su pompa, mustio su matiz. (vv. 33–36)

As we can see, there is reason enough for Soul and Body to wonder whether it “is birth or death” (vv. 297, 307) when they make their scary acquaintance with Sin and Death.

The assumption of the soul

The final scene of the play leaves some questions unanswered. Why, for example, does Christ appear as a child, and not as a grown man? This fact alone indicates that the depiction was influenced by iconography of the Middle Ages, that used to draw a connection between the Nativity and the Passion of Christ.⁶ However, the iconography of the time perhaps had even more influence on the final scene in *El Pleito Matrimonial* than is apparent at first sight. Some elements of the play may indeed remind us of a so-called “*assumptio animae*”, the death of Mary.

The Assumption of Mary into Heaven was depicted in the Middle Ages through various scenes. Through one of these scenes, we witness Mary dying (either on her deathbed or over her sarcophagus) while Jesus Christ receives the soul of his mother.⁷ The soul is either ascending as a young infant, a girl or as a small image of the

⁵ Engelbert explains the ambiguity of “centro”, that can either refer to the Earth as center of the universe in the Ptolemaic system or to the earth as an element itself. Regarding Engelbert, it should be noted that the latter meaning always has a feminine connotation (in the sense of “Mother Earth”). Engelbert, Manfred, ed. (1969), *El Pleito Matrimonial del Cuerpo y el Alma de Calderón de la Barca*. [Critical Edition], Hamburg: De Gruyter, 193.

⁶ Flechniakoska quoted from Engelbert: *El Pleito Matrimonial del Cuerpo y el Alma*, 165.

⁷ Fournée, J. (2015), “Himmelfahrt Mariens”. In: Kirschbaum, Engelbert (ed.): *LCI. Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*. Volume 2. Darmstadt: Herder, 277–278.

deceased.⁸ In addition to this, Mary is often surrounded by the apostles, assisting her, or praying. Thus, by means of an assumption of the soul, the earthly scene of the funeral is linked with that of the heavenly Gloria-Last-Judgement, a scene that is quite characteristic of 13th and 14th century arcosolia (tomb construction in a wall with an arch above) in Spain.⁹

The final scene of *El Pleito Matrimonial* shows us something not entirely dissimilar to an Assumption: After Body and Soul split up, Body, seeking his “gravity” (v. 1386), meets Death again who, in analogy to what he did at Body’s birth, leads him back to earth, his “center” (vv. 1386–1389, 1482). It is Body’s death that we witness here as he returns to his womb-tomb. But there is reason for hope. Christ appears to redeem Body and Soul, and at the end of the play the stage directions order Soul and Jesus to ascend to heaven. However, they leave us in the dark about who is attending the death scene of Body. Still, just as when man sees the light of the day he is surrounded by his “family” (vv. 493–594), we can imagine Mind, Will and Memory standing gathered around like the apostles to attend the death and the ascension of the soul.

The last parallel we can draw between *El Pleito Matrimonial* and an assumption of the soul concerns Soul itself. We admittedly know little about the appearance of Soul apart from being a “beautiful and noble creature” (v. 110). It is nevertheless clearly femininely characterized (v. 770 and others) and therefore also corresponds to the iconography of an assumption which tends to represent the soul either as a young infant, a girl, or as a small image of the deceased.¹⁰

Conclusion

“What is more like death than to be born?” (vv. 298, 308), is one of the questions Calderón confronted us with in *El Pleito Matrimonial*. However, what at first sight seems to be a curious motif of birth and death, is soon developed into an *analogy* between the one extreme – in Cohen’s words – “where it all began” and the other “[that] is gathering all its children back again”¹¹. The semantic richness and the cultural connotations that the analogy in the play literally ‘bears’, become more visible through an intermedial approach to the text. This applies above all to the scene of the assumption of the soul, where the analogy of being born and dying finds its climax: In parallel to the Assumption of Mary the play invites us to consider the assumption scene as a literary version of this iconographic tradition and in consequence, a thought-provoking variation of already existing, well-known concepts death and birth in the Spanish Golden Age.

⁸ Schmidt, Heinrich / Schmidt, Margarete (1995), *Die vergessene Bildersprache christlicher Kunst. Ein Führer zum Verständnis von Tier-, Engel- und Mariensymbolik*, München: C.H. Beck, 218.

⁹ Philipp, Franz (1981), „El Greco’s Entombment of the Count of Orgaz and Spanish Medieval Tomb Art”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44, 87.

¹⁰ Schmidt / Schmid: *Die vergessene Bildersprache christlicher Kunst*, 218.

¹¹ Cohen, “Last Year’s Man”.

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