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Lope de Vega's "El Castigo Sin Venganza" Genre, Structure and Political and Moral Meaning

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Abstract:

"El castigo sin venganza" is a literary work conceived by Lope de Vega in 1631, just four years before his death, when the author was seventy-three years old. This play represents a product of the author's creative activity at an advanced stage of his life, characterised by a mature and perhaps disenchanted Lope de Vega, in a context where the figure of Calderón de la Barca predominated on the literary scene.

In these lines, we will focus on the analysis of three fundamental aspects of the work: the genre, the structure and the political and moral meaning.

Keywords: Tragedy, dramatic genre, Castigo sin venganza, analysis

1. Introduction

Lope elevates his style with a "Spanish-style" tragedy inspired by a play by Mateo Bandello in which the Italian author based it on a real event that took place in Renaissance Italy. Lope's play tells the story of the fateful love between Federico and his step-mother Cassandra, which leads the Duke of Ferrara to struggle between the desire for revenge and paternal pity towards an outcome with no possible redemption. The tragic grandeur of superior forces – love and honour – guides the fate of the characters.

It is one of his greatest dramatic works and one of the most characteristic examples of the manner in which Spanish cultural production in the 17th century acted in ways that had a tragedy-like appearance, using elements drawn from a background not easily identifiable with the Aristotelian tradition.

Lope de Vega has used numerous Mythological, Biblical and Ancient History quotations because, through them, the characters can reveal their thoughts. However, in *El Castigo sin Venganza*, mythology is something more; Lope de Vega has made it a substantial part of the voice of the characters because, being imprisoned by passions that are unspeakable, even to themselves, they need to put on the plane of the symbolic, the debates in which their souls find themselves. They all use myths to channel their thoughts or to disguise them because, unable to speak, they need to express their desires and fears in some way.

However, when the characters use symbols to disguise their feelings, they also reveal them because the disguise reveals what the disguised person himself does not know about himself. In *El castigo sin venganza*, each mythological image (Fortune, Fame, Venus, etc.) has a specific function in its particular context, but, in addition, all of them together, when linked in the mind of the spectator, acquire a deeper meaning, so that they become inseparable elements of the tragic sense of the play and function as irony, as a premonition, warning or admonition of the dangers they face.

2. The Genre of the Play

Lope unreservedly conceptualised *El castigo sin venganza* as a tragedy, both in the dedication, the prologue, and even the final lines of the play. It is in the prologue that he points out in what sense this work can be considered a "Spanish style" tragedy, which, according to the author himself, differs from classical tragedy in that it does not incorporate choruses.

El castigo sin venganza offers, consequently, the ideal and tragic vision (from the author's point of view) of events that are originally non-fictional. From the tragic characterisation that Lope imposes on his work, we can deduce that he intends for it a certain pedagogical, exemplary and moral character.

Tragedy is evident from the beginning due to the Neoplatonic conception of the nature of love that dominates Federico and Casandra. Frederick's words hint at this idea:

"que para nacer con alma / hoy quiero nacer de vos / que, aunque quien la infunde es Dios / hasta que os vi, no sentía / en qué parte la tenía" (vv. 510-514).

Immovable love, impossible to change or overcome except through loving devotion, determines the lovers' ill-fated end, condemned to make a mistake and to pay for it with their death. To the tragic component present in the young lovers is added the equally tragic configuration of the Duke of Ferrara, who twice tries to make amends for his behaviour

but twice fails and tries to justify himself. The second attempt at rectification comes too late and he is met with the news of the betrayal of his wife and son and becomes the executing arm of the tragedy.

As in all the plays he calls tragedy at some point, there is no lack of a source of authority (of historical origin, as the playwright himself considered it), noble characters with public responsibility and an extraordinarily tragic ending. In addition, he makes use of other elements which, without being tragic, help to understand the play as a tragedy, such as the Neoplatonic nature of the love between Cassandra and Frederick or the Duke's impossibility of completing his transformation into a good ruler, husband and father.

Both the Duke of Ferrara and his wife and son enjoy a social position in which their actions have repercussions not only in the private but also in the public sphere. The Duke himself uses this double dimension to keep his dishonour a secret, making people believe that Cassandra's death at the hands of Count Federico is motivated by a succession problem: If a legitimate heir were to be born, he would have to take the title away from him. In this way, from the private action of the play - the relationship between step-mother and son-in-law - Lope projects the problem into the public sphere, bringing both dimensions together at the centre of the tragedy.

The Duke's moral falls are habit and custom, while Cassandra's fall into the river is physical and fortuitous. In these circumstances, the encounter with Federico is fortuitous. Here, too, are the roots of the tragic, premonitory sign that chance creates. The Duke's wedding brought about a radical change in Frederick's relationship with his father. He ceased to be the heir, and his position as a bastard son came to the fore.

The wedding also becomes a disturbing element: in front of Cassandra, in front of the Duke and in front of Aurora, who ends up being spurned by Federico. The roles are reversed in the third act when she refuses to marry her cousin. Tragedy can also be perceived in these multiple relationships. Cassandra is the victim of an imposed destiny. She was politically hired to be the wife and, by the same token, the victim.

The bad decisions of one character result in the death of others, although in the end, the kings also fall into disgrace. Here, after the recognition of the error, we have repentance after its recognition and the attribution of this end, both by the Duke of Ferrara and the monarchs, to divine punishment in payment for their error.

The *fatum*, another of the usual characteristics of tragedy, is presented as a set of fateful coincidences that precipitate the protagonists to misfortune; the lovers' meeting before being introduced as step-son and step-mother is a non-recognition of the incestuous nature of the love they will profess to each other.

In *El castigo sin venganza*, along with a special care to bring in symbols and myths from classical culture that function as embellishers and as irony and premonition, the *Ven muerta tan escondida* (vv. 1999-2005) functions with a strong dramatic sense. And the *Sin mí, sin t'í y sin Dios*, functions as the epicentre of the whole drama, beyond that splendid end of Act II, informing the whole plot of the tragedy, at least from the premonition of Cassandra's kissing (vv. 870-886). Three times, Frederick kisses her hand, once for me, once for you, once for the Duke, he explains.

3. A tragedy in Three Acts

The play is divided into three acts, the last being the longest of them all. In the first act, the situation of the whole play is set out; in the second part, it is developed, and in the third day, the denouement of the play takes place. Each of them is subdivided into the following scenes:

3.1. Act I

1-233: The Duke of Ferrara, in disguise, goes out into the streets seeking adventure. He meets Cintia, who tells him that it is a scandal that such a man should do such an unworthy thing. She tells the story of Ferrara: The Duke has an illegitimate son, Federico, but he already wants a legitimate heir and is going to marry Cassandra, a young woman from Mantua. The Duke says he will give up his liberties when Cassandra arrives. The scene ends with a discussion of the relationship between theatre and life.

234-527: Federico and Batín go to fetch Cassandra; Ferdinand is unhappy because he will not inherit his father. Batín compares the Duke to a horse that a lion can tame. They hear voices and run to help. Federico comes out with Cassandra in his arms. It turns out that Cassandra had an accident, and her car turned into a river; Federico saved her. As they talk, it is clear that Federico and Cassandra are in love with each other. The servants, Lucrecia and Batín, parody the love duo.

528-759: The Marquis speaks to Frederick and comments on the coincidence of Cassandra's rescue. Cassandra admits to Lucrezia that she likes Federico and would be happier with him than with the Duke. Federico also tells Batín that he thinks Cassandra is very beautiful. Aurora and the Duke discuss Federico's bad mood. The Duke thinks it is the result of his marriage to Cassandra: Federico feels betrayed. Aurora asks him to forgive Federico and proposes a marriage between Federico and her. The Duke likes the idea.

760-993: Batín announces the arrival of Cassandra. Cassandra appears before the Duke, who accepts her as his wife. They all know each other, but the words between Cassandra and Frederick reveal the growing attraction between them. The act ends with Federico lamenting his misfortune and trying to forget the mad and dangerous affection he feels for his step-mother.

3.2. Act II

995-1137: Lucretia and Cassandra speak of Cassandra's bad fortune, who would rather have been born humble than suffer, as a noblewoman, the miserable life she now has. After a month of marriage, she spent a night alone with the Duke, who returned to his lascivious life. Lucrezia mentions that Federico is also sad; Cassandra thinks the cause is the

possibility of losing her inheritance and says she will never give the Duke children. The Duke and Federico enter. The Duke tells Frederick that he would never have married if he had known the sadness it would give him. However, the Duke hardly sees his wife. Cassandra says that she will be pained one day by such vile treatment.

1138-1314: The Duke proposes a marriage to Frederick, thinking that he would be in a better mood if he were married. Frederick assures him that he does not feel wrong but will do as the Duke commands. They talk of honour and women, and the Duke is surprised at how Frederick speaks of Aurora. The Duke leaves, and Federico tells Batín that he would like to die for a reason that is impossible to even think about. Cassandra and Aurora enter and discuss the hatred Federico shows Aurora. Cassandra tells her that she should not make Federico jealous of her relationship with the Marquis. Aurora and Batín leave, leaving Cassandra and Federico alone.

1315-1531: Cassandra thinks Frederick is sad about losing his inheritance. She also reveals to him that the Duke has broken his vow as her husband and that she has decided not to give the Duke children. Frederick tells her that he has no need for an estate and that this is not why he is sad. He cries, saying that he would like to die. Cassandra thinks it is the situation with Aurora that prompts his tears, but he explains that he is suffering because of an impossible love. Cassandra suggests he tell the lady of his love, and he confesses that it is she herself for whom he wants to die.

1532-1681: Cassandra realises that she made a mistake in marrying the Duke, that the Duke does not love her and that she cannot resist the love she has for Frederick, even though it is forbidden. Aurora asks her what the Count says, and Cassandra tells her that Federico accepts her love with joy. Then, the Marquis comes and proclaims the love he has for Aurora and that he will never leave her.

1682-2030: The Duke receives a letter from the Pope ordering him to go to Rome to become a general in the army. Batín informs Federico that Aurora and the Marquis are talking alone, and Aurora asks the Marquis to wear a sash, a symbol of love. Batín is surprised that the Count is not angry. Cassandra decides that she is going to face her love for Frederick; she confesses her feelings to the Count using references to history and mythology. The two decide that they cannot love each other but find it impossible to resist love.

3.3. Act III

2031-2204: Aurora realises that her plan to marry Federico will not come to fruition. She sees Federico and Cassandra kissing in a mirror, which means to Aurora that Federico is not as jealous as he claimed. So, with this new knowledge, Aurora decides to marry Carlos, the Marquis. Carlos sees Federico and tells him that if he loves Aurora, he will leave because he has more courage. Aurora interrupts and says that she wants to marry Carlos.

2205-2288: Federico and Cassandra think about what they will do when the Duke arrives. Federico says that there is too much danger in the relationship between the two and decides to pretend to love Aurora to hide his relationship with Cassandra. Cassandra objects to the idea. She does not want Federico to marry Aurora. The conversation is interrupted by Richard, Batín, and the Duke.

2289-2400: Richard recounts the history of the wars and notes that the Duke killed more people than David and Saul. The duke gained much honour in the wars and changed his personality and behaviour: Richard informs us that "the duke is a saint now". Batín disagrees. He thinks that "she who is a cat will be a cat, and she who is a bitch will be a bitch". In other words, the Duke cannot change who he is.

2401-2551: The Duke receives a letter revealing the truth of the intimate relationship between Frederick and Cassandra. His son, in the Duke's eyes, is a traitor. Now, the Duke believes that this situation is a punishment for him. His honour is wronged. According to him, it is necessary to punish Frederick because he is a traitor. He says that punishing him is not revenge, and so he will create a plan to save his honour and punish the lovers at the same time.

2552-2611: Frederick explains that he does not want to marry Aurora but has changed his mind and asks the Duke for permission. The Duke gives it but tells him that he needs to ask Cassandra's permission as well. Federico does not want to because he and Cassandra do not get along, but the Duke says that everyone says they are great friends. When Frederick leaves, the Duke expresses his fury in a soliloquy.

2612-2775: Cassandra and Aurora enter, and the Duke reveals Frederick's desire to marry Aurora. Cassandra cannot believe it; Aurora says that she is no longer interested in marrying the Count because of the disdain he has shown her. Aurora and the Duke leave, but the Duke returns, in hiding, to overhear what Cassandra and Federico are saying. Cassandra is furious; Frederick advises her to proceed with caution; the Duke takes all this as evidence of his crime. As an aside, he says that he wants to give just punishment for this wickedness but cannot do so in public because the dishonour, though redressed, stains the reputation of the dishonoured. It will have to be a secret punishment. The duke leaves. Frederick says he and Cassandra must pretend to like each other to avoid severe consequences; they leave.

2776-2914: Batín asks Aurora for her and the Marquis to take him with them when they return to Mantua. It seems he can no longer put up with the strange behaviour of Federico, Cassandra and the Duke. Aurora says that this will be done. The Duke enters, complaining about the fragility of honour, especially in the hands of a woman. Everyone leaves except the Duke, who explains his plan for divine punishment. He insists that what he will do will not be revenge. It seems that Cassandra fainted when she heard what the Duke knew, and he put her under a cloth, unknown and mute. He will have to kill Frederick as well; he will feel Frederick's death more than Cassandra's.

2915-3021: Federico complains about Aurora's marriage to the Marquis, but the Duke tells him that there are more serious problems. A nobleman of Ferrara has conspired against him, says the Duke, and this nobleman is in a room, fainting, covered, with his hands tied. The Duke orders Federico to go in and kill the traitor. Although he trembles because he suspects something is wrong, the dutiful son goes in to do as his father commands. After Frederick kills Cassandra, the Duke calls his soldiers, telling them that Frederick killed Cassandra because she was going to give the Duke a legitimate

heir. The Duke orders them to kill Frederick for this treachery. The Duke congratulates Aurora and the Marquis and orders them to leave. Aurora does not know what to say. The lovers' bodies are discovered, and the curtain falls.

The exterior spaces that appear during the play, such as the riverbank or the shore, are associated with the chance encounter, while the interior space (the palace) gives rise to love, intrigue, accusation, revenge, and punishment.

4. Political and Moral Significance

The dramatic tension of the play is not only established in the relationship of the characters; the idealised courtly love contrasts with the sexual enjoyment of the two lovers (Federico/Cassandra), and this with the sense of justice and honour and caste imposed by the Duke and affirmed by his own amorous adventures.

The concept of honour in the play is dramaturgically plausible, regardless of the period in which Ferrara's action takes place. However, it does require a historical context in which the private-poetic and the public-symbolic spheres clash. After all, every epoch codifies the honourable in some way and inserts it into a theatricalised social space with its appearances and registers. In this play, meta-theatricality occurs in a double sense: firstly, because everyone is observed by everyone else as characters in the comedy of life, and secondly, because they construct their history by pretending with truths.

There is a dislocation between the drives of the individual and the social-political context that represses them to the point of theatricalising existence. Man, as a historical creature, lives condemned to be a character in a society that imposes itself on him as the great monster of reason. Exemplary punishment protects the logical order of coexistence, but punishers and punished - victims or executioners - are equal; the duke avoids public punishment but does not avoid the pain of killing a son. He silences his private vengeance with an invention, more concerned with his own reputation than with justice.

The Duke chooses to defend his political position and his role as a social being, which obliges him to exemplary punishment in the public eye but is vengeful in the private sphere.

Lope de Vega has set the action in a historical state but in an imaginary time and an imaginary duke, in which he mixes real and fictitious elements to construct the drama. The historical duchy of Ferrara was part of the present-day Italian state and was independent between 1471 and 1598 when it was annexed to the Papal States.

The dukes were great patrons of the arts, especially music. Lope makes the Duke of Ferrara's descendants a central theme in the play, as the imperious need to have a legitimate heir is one of the triggers of the drama.

Although Lope does not specifically refer to any of the historical dukes, he could be alluding to the last Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, who died without descendants.

What does exist in Lope's work is a profound critique of the codes of honour since the playwright refuses to use them as a justification for criminal actions. This critique of the springs that sustain honour, implicit in Lope's work through its eloquent absence, represents a moral stance by the author that is certainly noteworthy and novel. It should be borne in mind that the reparation of honour could perfectly justify the Duke's actions; there was no need to resort to lies, but by opting for a political explanation as opposed to the real moral explanation, Lope seems to place us before a Lope who considered politics and its motives as something much more legitimate than honour and its mechanisms. If Lope's political motives existed beyond mere appearance, everything seems to suggest that they would be placed above the laws of honour.

5. Conclusion

When Lope composed *El castigo sin venganza* in the summer of 1631, he did so after some years in which some of the most significant tragic plays of Spanish Baroque theatre had been written and performed, especially by Calderón. In this sense, the idea of theatrical community allows us to situate the play in a specific context, both from an intertextual point of view (the production of tragedies) and an inter-authorial one (Calderón's definitive consolidation as a leading playwright).

Lope's work responds to two trends that can be detected in the practice of the theatrical community of these years: the rise of tragedy writing in the late 1620s (which would flourish especially in the period immediately afterwards) and the renewed rise of the sub-genre of honour dramas, which also enjoyed a significant production in this same period. It is no coincidence that two major honour dramas composed by Calderón date from these years.

From the beginning of the play, there is also a latent marital and political concern. From the first sequence of the first act, in which the Duke's nocturnal escapades are depicted, it is the prostitute Cintia who waters the party with a moralising speech about his new obligations as a married man.

To conclude, it is interesting to consider that *El castigo sin venganza* can also be interpreted as an allegory of the incorporation of the feminine space into the patriarchal system. The intrusion of this element provokes an imbalance violently corrected by the Duke to preserve the established order. This reading broadens the notion of honour and places the main characters (Duke, Cassandra and Federico) in a hierarchical context that symbolises law and order, authority lost and regained.

6. References

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