

About the Author:

Calderon de la Barca, Pedro(1600–1681)

Pedro Calderón de la Barca was one of the greatest dramatists of Spain's literary Golden Age. Born into a well-established Castilian family with ties to the court, Calderón received his early education at the Jesuit Imperial College of Madrid and went on to study logic, rhetoric, and mathematics at the University of Alcalá de Henares and canon law at the University of Salamanca. As a young man he lived an adventurous life in Madrid and gained the favor of King Philip IV (ruled 1621–1665), who rewarded him with knighthood in the Order of Santiago in 1636. Calderón also spent time in the military and earned a reputation for gallant service during the Revolt of Catalonia (1640–1652). Shortly thereafter he traded his weapons for a priest's vestments, taking clerical orders in 1651 and eventually serving as chaplain to Philip IV.

Despite this rich and varied career, Calderón is best remembered as a dramatist. He began to write plays at an early age and continued to produce dramatic works of high quality until his death in 1681. As Lope de Vega (1562–1635) receives credit for developing early popular theater in Spain, so Calderón is recognized for bringing it to its artistic height. Whereas Lope's drama was lively and spontaneous, focusing on dynamic action, Calderón's was carefully crafted and intellectual, built on subtle constructions of symbolism and metaphor. During the 1630s and 1640s Calderón's writing consisted principally of *comedias*, secular three-act plays that drew on a wide variety of subject matter, both comic and tragic. Among these, the tragedies frequently dealt with themes such as the tension between free will and fate, the conflicts inspired by the obligations of honor, and the role of the individual in a web of social and political ties. His comedies, nearly always placed in contemporary Spanish settings, were known as cape-and-sword plays for plots that centered on nobles caught up in love, jealousy, intrigue, mistaken identities, and the ensuing complications thereof. Whether light or serious, Calderón's works for the public theater always engaged the salient religious, moral, and philosophical issues of his day.

Calderón's best-known works from this period include *La vida es sueño* (1635; Life is a dream) and *El médico de su honra* (1635; The physician of his honor). *La vida es sueño* deals with a young prince, isolated in a tower, whose father tests his abilities by giving him the chance to rule for a day. Failing the test, the prince is told that the entire experience was a dream. When a rebellion gives him the

chance to rule again, he has learned to control himself regardless of the circumstances and demonstrates that he is a worthy successor to the crown. *El médico de su honra* features a husband who suspects his wife of betrayal; though the audience knows she is innocent, he ultimately has her murdered, with the approval of the king. In the first case, Calderón explores questions of illusions and reality, freedom and destiny, and the proper qualities and responsibilities of a ruler. In the second, he pursues the internal logic of honor to its most heartless extremes. Although Calderón had a predilection for challenging themes and contemporary issues, scholars frequently disagree on whether he intended to defend or to criticize the existing social and political order.

After being ordained to the priesthood in 1651, Calderón was appointed official dramatist of the Spanish court. Whereas his earlier work was written for the wide audience of the public theaters, his later plays were often commissioned to celebrate birthdays and other festive occasions for a more limited audience in the royal theaters. Calderón's court drama dealt predominantly with allegorical themes from Greek mythology, such as the stories of Echo and Narcissus, Venus and Adonis, and Andromeda and Perseus. These plays were also more visually striking, taking advantage of the greater resources of court stages and scenery to produce elaborate effects and fantastical illusions. During this second stage in his career, Calderón also wrote *autos sacramentales*, short religious plays that were performed yearly for Madrid's Corpus Christi celebrations.

By the end of his life Calderón had produced over one hundred *comedias*, eighty *autos*, and twenty minor theatrical pieces (including the musical *zarzuelas*). These were performed, published, and translated throughout Europe in the seventeenth century. Calderón was the last great writer of the seventeenth century in Spain, and his death in 1681 drew to a close the Golden Age of literature.

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