The Love-Honor Dilemma in *Tristan and Isolde*:
Calderón and the Tragic Conception of Wagner’s Opera

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This study examines a number of similarities and differences between Calderón's theatre and Wagner's music drama in *Tristan and Isolde*. It focuses on the love-honor dilemma as tragic motive, trying to determine in an exploratory approach the possible significance of Calderón's plays in the genesis of Wagner's opera.
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Introduction

Arising from a multitude of intellectual and artistic streams, the mixture of sound and meaning characteristic of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* revealed itself as a turning point in music drama upon its premiere in 1865. Its double significance as a radical vision of human existence, as well as a vehicle for a new variety of musico-poetic language has been widely recognized in learned criticism since Nietzsche’s early remarks on the opera.

Through the years, written work regarding Wagner’s *Tristan* has increased immensely, giving rise to a beneficial confrontation among many concerns and disciplines. Vibrant discoveries have been made in several domains, including the historical, biographical, philosophical, literary and musicological.

As regards its dramatic conception, which this paper will partly address, comprehensive reconstructions of the genesis of the opera carried out by authors like Henry Edward Krehbiel, Ernst Newman, Roger Scruton and Eric Chafe have clearly established its tragic ancestry, both with respect to its literary origins, in mediaeval, German writer Gottfried von Strassburg, as well as in its philosophical ascendance, in German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Additionally, biographical evidence has revealed a close relation between the tragic character of the opera and the blistering events of Wagner’s personal life, as in the case of his affair with poetess Mathilde Wesendonck.

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Yet a number of questions concerning a precise determination of the dramatic character of the opera could be posed. Does Wagner’s Tristan pertain to tragedy as a species of drama? Does it define a particular expression of tragedy, just as Othello is to be regarded as Shakespearean, or Oedipus Rex Sophoclean? Prominent Wagnerians would not agree in this respect, even if they would concur in asserting the opera’s overall tragic character. As for the composer himself, it would seem that he did not consider his work as a musical drama, since in the opera’s subtitle he described it as merely “an action,” as Carl Dahlhaus has rightly pointed out. However, Wagner’s prose works seem to move in the opposite direction, as they assert on the whole the dramatic character of Wagner’s operas, Tristan and Isolde included.

All this considered, this paper explores the influence of Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca on the conception of tragedy in Wagner’s Tristan. Following a suggestion made by Eric Chafe, in his book The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, we suggest that Wagner’s reading of Calderón was decisive in his appropriation of Gottfried’s narrative, concretely with respect to the tension between love and honor as a guiding principle of the story. Calderón’s lively plays served as an effective counterbalance against the omnivorous sway of Schopenhauer’s skepticism, which tends to deny the significance of honor in a loving relationship. But Gottfried’s story lost significance when the protagonist’s tragic dilemma is reduced to mere appearance or illusion. Thus Calderón’s influence on Wagner led the composer to maintain a favorable disposition towards Gottfried’s idea of love as coextensive with honor and its

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ideals. This vision was decisive in the incubation of his opera, and determined its final shape both in a literary and musical sense.

Calderón’s influence reached Wagner’s creative process through complex routes of transmission. It is worth taking into consideration two preliminary observations in this regard. On the one hand, it is well known that any consideration of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* is to be understood in reference to Schopenhauer. Calderón’s influence is not an exception. It could be described as a tempering, a frequency modulation on a primary conceptual flood—the Schopenhauerian—by a secondary one—the Calderonian—whose combined influxes nest finally in Wagner’s imagination. The relation between Schopenhauer and Calderón in Wagner’s mind is analogous to that of subject and countersubject in a fugal composition: the first leads the second, while the second follows the first, providing a new dimension to the musical discourse.

On the other hand, three perceptible levels of influence are apparent in a Calderonian perspective on Wagner’s *Tristan*. Firstly, Calderón’s theatre reached Wagner directly, mainly through Wagner’s own reading of Calderón’s plays. Secondly, Calderón had an effect on Wagner indirectly through Schopenhauer’s thought, prior to any contact with the composer. Therefore Calderón’s sway on Wagner was felt twice: once in an immediate manner, the other through the intervening agency of Schopenhauer. Finally, it is worth taking into consideration that Calderón’s dual impact on both Wagner and Schopenhauer was just a particular instantiation in the context of a broader, determinant influence of Calderón and Spanish Baroque on German culture.

It is not possible to put forward here a comprehensive view of the question of Calderón and his influence on Wagner’s music drama. In its place, the present paper will
focus on a few aspects worth noticing in trying to perceive the tragic imprint of Wagner’s *Tristan*. For this purpose, Chapter 1 will present a general portrayal of Calderón and the literary tradition in which he came into being. Chapter 2 will focus on Wagner’s reception of Calderón on the basis his prose writings.

The following chapters will address the main topic of this paper, namely, Calderón’s significance in the dramatic conception of Wagner’s opera. To this end, Chapter 3 will depict a general portrayal of the genesis of *Tristan and Isolde*, calling attention to the composer’s peculiar attitude towards operatic creation, and emphasizing the turning point in which both Schopenhauer and Calderón exerted their influence on Wagner’s appropriation of the saga magisterially reworded by Gottfried von Strassburg in his celebrated mediaeval romance.

To pave the way for a profitable inquiry on the way Wagner perceived Tristan’s tragic conflict between love and honor, Chapter 4 will carry out a comparative analysis of the idea of the tragic in Gottfried, Schopenhauer and Calderón, and will put forward a hypothesis about the possible impact of Calderón on the tragic conception underlying Wagner’s opera.
CHAPTER 1  
Calderón and Spanish Baroque drama

In the domain of drama, Spanish Baroque literature comprises the period known as Siglo de oro (Golden Age), which extends approximately from late sixteenth century to late seventeenth century. Its flourishing period corresponds approximately to the lifetime of one of the greatest dramatists of all times, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, who was born in Madrid in 1600, and died in the same city in 1681.

a) Spanish Baroque theatre: a brief overview

Dramatic texts were relatively scant in mediaeval Spain, compared with other European countries. However, under the influence of Italian Commedia dell’arte, and thanks to an increasing revival of classical culture, significant dramatists began to appear in Spain from 1500 onwards. Among pioneering Spanish playwrights, it is worth mentioning Juan del Encina (1468-1530), Bartolomé de Torres Naharro (1485-1520), and Gil Vicente (1460-1539, Portuguese born, who wrote plays both in his native language and in Spanish). Their plays were written for, and staged in, royal and aristocratic scenarios.

Open-air theatres for lower-class audiences were already active in Madrid by the 1550s, and by 1600 permanent theatres had already been established in major Spanish cities. Plays by Lope de Rueda (1509-1565) and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616, author of the novel Don Quixote), were featured in these scenarios, paving the way for the coming of Lope de Vega (1562-1635), the phenomenal dramatist who firmly settled the
dramaturgical conventions of the Golden Age. With Lope de Vega, Spanish theatre reached one of its maximum peaks, at the same time that the terrain was prepared for the advent of other great dramatist of the period, Madrilenian writer Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca, whose theatre is the subject matter of this chapter.

Active dramatists during Calderón’s career include to Gillén de Castro (1569-1631), Juan Ruiz de Alarcón (1580-1639, Mexican-born), Tirso de Molina (1580-1648, author of the play El burlador de Sevilla (The seducer from Seville, the first complete dramatized version of the Don Juan legend), Francisco de Rojas (1607-1684), Agustín Moreto (1618-1669), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695, Mexican-born, poetess and dramatist, whose villancicos—carol songs—were set to music and performed both in Spain and the New World). Therefore Calderón’s plays superbly arose at the culmination of Spanish Baroque drama, representing the crowning of a lengthy and venerable tradition.

In Calderón's time, theatre performances were given mainly in outdoor theatres called corrales de comedias. As is well known, the Spanish word corral meant a closed, uncovered place inside a home or in the countryside, which was usually used for livestock farming. Improvised theatres were constructed in places like these and in open areas between preexisting buildings. As for the word comedia, it referred not just to comedies—in the modern sense of the word—but to many kinds of dramatic representations, ranging from pastoral plays, Biblical episodes, saints’ lives, and philosophical allegories, to comedies (in the modern acceptance of the term), tragedies, amorous intrigues, chivalry plays, and so on. Apart from the public corrales, private playhouses steadily multiplied.

Golden Age theatre was a living social phenomenon, a public celebration in which the community as a whole took part. Many questions regarding politics, social concerns,
moral issues, and religious matters were raised on the Golden Age stage along with plain amusing entertainment.

Regarding the overall form of *comedia* plays, four elements are worth mentioning in relation to mid- and late seventeenth century dramaturgy. First, they consisted of three acts, one corresponding to the exposition, other to the complication, and the last to the denouement. Second, the neo-Aristotelian unities of time and space did not have a binding, obligatory character, as in the dramaturgy of French classicism. Third, changes of scene were produced mainly by means of spoken dialogue, while costumes and scenery were reduced to the minimum. Fourth, they used a great variety of verse forms, with rhyme or assonance, according to the content of the dialog.4

Golden Age *comedias* did not remain unchanged through time. One of the modifications worth mentioning here occurred by the second half of the seventeenth century—therefore coinciding with Calderón’s later career—and consisted in a tendency to produce richer sceneries, both in public *corrales* and courtly theaters. Furthermore, scenery and decoration became quite gorgeous in royal and noble theatres, and music began to acquire an increasing importance. Moreover, aside from plays with progressively more musical interventions, there were also operas, sung from beginning to end, as well as a special variety of Spanish music dramas with spoken dialogue and sung parts which were known as *zarzuelas*.5

Calderón was much in keeping with these changes. Apart from favoring the tendency towards elaborated sceneries and decoration, he was a pioneering author in the

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zarzuela as a genre, as well as the first writer composing a libretto for an opera entirely sung in the Spanish language.

b) An outline of Calderón’s dramaturgical production

As stated in a list arranged by Calderón himself one year before his death, he wrote almost 200 plays. From these, nearly 120 were comedias, therefore secular in character, and were written for the communal corrales or the king’s reserved theatres. They were regularly performed in both kinds of scenarios. The remaining eighty plays were religious plays, the so called autos sacramentales (sacramental plays, similar to English morality plays), which were intended for the yearly Corpus Christi celebrations, and therefore somehow related to the subject of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The autos were staged in public squares, in a much elaborated fashion, and undoubtedly represent the second more important dramatic genre of the Spanish Baroque after the comedias.

Calderon’s comedia plays show a wide variety of themes, as well as highly diverse situations and characters. Trying to classify them in a straightforward scheme is completely impossible. In what follows we will address three important categories established by Canadian scholar Henry W. Sullivan in his book Calderón in the German Lands and the Low Countries: His Reception and Influence, 1654-1980. These categories are: (a) comedia plays descending from the comedy of intrigue, (b) tragedies, and (c) religious plays.

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7 However, the autos sacramentales were acted not only in Spain, but also all over Europe, especially in the German lands. They were also produced in the distant territories under Spanish dominion, the New World included.

Calderón’s plays descending from the comedies of intrigue constitute the most numerous secular genre represented in his dramaturgical production, with a total of about forty-five. Though influenced by Lope de Vega’s comic conventions, they surmount his predecessor’s in two points: on the one hand, their plots are more articulate and consistent; on the other, they aim at functioning positively as a vehicle for social commentary. One example is his hilarious comic play *No siempre lo peor es cierto* (The Worst is Never for Sure, c. 1640), where the comic element adjoins the earnestness, adopting even tragic tones. According to Sullivan, the dramatic efficiency of these kinds of plays is accomplished in Calderón by criticizing the conventions of the honor code, “a system of social values that became stylized in the Spanish drama, while remaining a reflection of real life and morals.”

As for tragedies, Calderón wrote approximately twelve *comedia* plays pertaining to this genre. This group of dramas rejects the rigid, conventional honor code more decisively than his comic plays. For example, in *El médico de su honra* (The Surgeon of his Honor, 1935), a virtuous wife is unjustly murdered because of a doubtful suspicion of adultery. The story is told in a way that moves its audiences to outrage and indignation. Other tragedies that deal with honor are *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* (For Secret Affront, Secret Revenge, 1635), which deals with the subject of deep grievance and revenge; and *El alcalde de Zalamea* (The Mayor of Zalamea, c. 1643), dealing with the juxtaposition between formal and true justice.

The great variety of subject matter, disposition and atmosphere of Calderón’s tragedies is remarkable, and the reader is struck by his ability to regain elements of ancient

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tragedy in a Christian milieu, as for example in *La devoción de la Cruz* (Devotion to the Cross, 1625), or *Las tres justicias en una* (Three Retributions in One, 1637), where protagonists err because of their ignorance of the context and implications of their actions, as in Sophoclean tragedy. However, as Sullivan states, “Calderón’s heroes can be destroyed by forces that even the most prudent series of decisions and actions may not avert.”

Though less numerous than his comic pieces, Calderón’s tragedies have created a great impression in his audiences because of the tragic appreciation of life which they convey. Yet interpretations of Calderón’s tragedies have divided his critics. They all agree that Calderón’s idea of the tragic is based on a wide conception of human interaction, and not merely in the flaw of an individual, whereas others remain innocent. In this respect, for example, Alexander A. Parker wrote in 1962:

> The human world, as Calderón presents it, is not one to arouse in us any exaltation; his view of human predicament is not a heroic but a sad one. It is the predicament of man individualized from all other men yet in intimate solidarity with them, caught in circumstances that are the responsibility of all, whose ramifications the individual cannot see, prisoner as he is of the partial perspectives of a limited time and space, yet both the sufferer of acts that come in from outside the partial perspectives and the agent of acts that have their repercussions beyond them. From the recognition of the human predicament as consisting in the solidarity of all men in this inextricable intermingling of their actions, and therefore in their solidarity in wrongdoing, flows that sense of sadness which is the hallmark of the most typical Calderonian tragedy, and with this sadness a sense of compassion—not only pity for the wrongdoer because, although he is guilty, he is so to a large extent because others, both before him and with him, are guilty too, but also “co-suffering”—the realization that the solidarity in wrongdoing of each one of us with the whole of humanity makes us sharers in the afflictions of human life.

However, Calderón’s idea of the tragic does not necessarily have to lead to sadness and compassion. Certainly, some of his characters are rightly described by Professor

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Parker. Yet there are some kinds of tragic personages in Calderón’s *comedia* plays that do not fit within this mold. However, Sullivan himself agrees with this interpretation. For him, Calderón’s concept of tragic guilt (where the sufferer is partially or almost wholly innocent, and others are guilty) is therefore an inversion of the Greek concept (where the sufferer is guilty and others innocent). The originality of this concept has been a major obstacle for any modern coming to grips with Calderón’s serious dramas and tragedies. That the innocent suffers for the sins of the guilty is true tragedy, if certain matters lie beyond the individual’s control. This is the least ‘fair’ conception we can have of life, the least comprehensible, and hence the least acceptable.12

Certainly, this idea of the tragic is incontestable, if we think of the tragic as is represented in some of the highest examples of Western literature, as is the case with Plato’s dialogs *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, and *Crito*, which depict Socrates’ self-defense and the details of his death; or with Christian Passion, as narrated in the Gospels of the Four Evangelists. However, these stories of unfair suffering representing the sacrifice of these great masters of humanity still portray the sufferer as linked to the inscrutable destinies of existence in general. Contrarily, Baroque tragedy, both in Spain and England, developed a new kind of tragedy in which tragic fate resides entirely in decisions and acts made by the individual alone, independent of the religious links in which he or she is immersed. Examples of this new kind of tragic subject abound in Shakespeare and, of course, in Calderón. We shall further address this topic in a following chapter.

Calderón’s religious dramas—about thirteen—characterize human nature facing a divine and transcendental order. He drew highly on themes of conversion and martyrdom, in particular of the early saints. In *El mágico prodigioso* (The Wonder-working Magician, 1637), St. Cyprian of Antioch pacts with the Devil to win Justina’s love. The play tells Cyprian’s and Justina’s conversion to Christianity, and the subsequent martyrdom and

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salvation. Martyred lovers in stories with complex theological implications appear also in *Los dos amantes del Cielo* (The Two Lovers of Heaven, c. 1936) and *El príncipe constante* (The Steadfast Prince, 1629).

Finally, a comment on the other branch of Calderón's production—apart from the *comedia* plays referred to so far—the so-called *autos sacramentales*, will close this section. Calderón wrote seventy-six *autos*. The term *auto* derives from the Latin *actum*, which by the late fifteenth century already had dramaturgical associations. Golden Age *autos* are one-act allegorical, sacred plays in a moral fashion, descending from the mystery dramas of the Middle Ages.

By 1648, until his death, thirty-three years later, Calderón was commissioned to compose two *autos* per year for the Corpus Christi events in Madrid. Robert L. Fiore, cited in Sullivan, offers a vivid description of the festive context in which this plays were given:

The *autos sacramentales* were magnificent spectacles, with splendid decoration, scenery, costumes, and music; they were performed throughout Spain as an integral part of the Corpus Christi feasts. The procession which was part of this cheerful feast was very colorful. First came the figure of the *Tarasca*, a dragon-like serpent with a women riding on its back. This was followed by men and women performing folk dances, children singing hymns, and several *gigantes*, huge Moorish or Negro figures. Then, amid angels playing musical instruments, people bearing candles, and singers, came the bishop and priests bearing the Holy Eucharist beneath a canopy. Finally came the decorated *carros* carrying the actors from the various public theater who were going to perform on this occasion. Special platform stages (*tablados*) were built at several points in the city, and the *carros* were grouped around these stages. *Comisarios* appointed by the city selected the theatrical managers (*autores*) whose companies would represent the *autos*.  

Calderón developed an amazing ability to enrich the poetic, dramatic and theatrical

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13 Sullivan points out that "until 1647, four *autos* had been performed yearly, but the change of two in that year henceforth committed Calderón to a regular production of two *autos* annually, a commission that he met almost without interruption until his death." Sullivan, Henry W. *Op. cit.*, 22.

qualities of these dramas by including the representation of thoughtful theological arguments, showing a skillful command of patristic and scholastic sources. Themes and plots were often taken from mythological or historical sources, although systematically reinterpreted in allegorical terms. Music played an important role.

Influenced by the Jesuit school-dramas of the sixteenth century—which were both written and acted by schoolboys—, Calderón’s *autos* aim at a didactic and propagandistic purpose.\(^{15}\) In this respect, one element of the Jesuit school-dramas emphasized by Sullivan in his book is worth mentioning here. It refers to the recurring motive of the dream-like quality of worldly existence as opposed to the reality of the Beyond. This ontological difference between transcendent reality and everyday appearance was taken up by Calderón in his secular dramas. As it will be seen later, Schopenhauer’s reading of Calderón gave a great importance to this theme in Calderón’s dramaturgy.

Among Calderón’s well-known *autos sacramentales* are included the following: *El laberinto del mundo* (The Labyrinth of the World, 1677), *El pastor fido* (The Faithful Shepherd, 1678), *La viña del Señor* (The Vineyard of the Lord, 1674), *La protestación de la Fe* (The Protestation of the Faith, 1656), and *El pintor de su deshonra* (The Painter of his own Dishonor, c. 1647). They all share a common ending: an important exposure of the Host and Chalice, as well as a Eucharistic and rejoicing event of salvation.

According to Sullivan, in Calderon’s *autos sacramentales*,

The rudimentary polemical genre was finally raised to a synthesis of popular spectacle, Christian allegory and poetic insight, a unique blend of revealed religion.

\(^{15}\) According to Sullivan, “Calderón may even have acted in them in his boyhood, or participated in their composition for the Colegio Imperial.” See Sullivan, Henry W. *Op. cit.*, 23. The Colegio Imperial was a Jesuit educational foundation allocated in Madrid that Calderón attended from 1608 to 1614.
and modern poetry and music unlikely ever to be repeated.\textsuperscript{16}

c) \textit{Calderón and the world of opera}

We have already considered the increasing tendency in Golden Age drama towards producing developed sceneries, decoration and abundant use of music, as well as Calderón’s fondness for these innovations and his commitment with the nascent genre of opera.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, alongside his dedication to composing his annual couple of \textit{autos}, the last period of his creative life was determined almost exclusively by his contributions as a librettist, as well as his promoting the operatic genre in Spain by working together with architects, painters, stage producers, technicians and engineers, as well as with singers and composers, in his purpose of fulfilling the increasing royal demand for these kinds of spectacles.

According to Charles V. Aubrun, Calderón was the author that established the musico-dramatic conventions of the Spanish genre of the \textit{zarzuela}.\textsuperscript{18} The new genre, consisting of a two-act music drama that included spoken dialog, was named in this way after the hunting-grounds of the same name in which Fernando, the King of Spain’s brother, constructed a magnificent palace for his retirement. The musical parts, written in a Renaissance-Baroque fashion, were composed by authors like Cristobal Galán, Juan Hidalgo, Fray Juan Romero, Gregorio de la Rosa, and Sequeira y Benet, among others.

\textsuperscript{17} See the end of section a) in this chapter, p. 7.
According to Sullivan,

When we consider the extraordinary care with which Calderón prescribed the characters' balletic movements and the laboriously involved details of the staging required, we may fairly say that the culmination of Calderón's art was the achievement of a Gesamtkunstwerk in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{19}

As it was shown in the previous chapter, during the seventeenth century Calderón exercised his genius over several theatrical genres of his time and succeeded in becoming one of the greatest representatives of Spanish Baroque drama. He embraced the religious and secular fields, both the comedy of intrigue and the tragedy, as well as the religious drama. When he died, on May 23, 1681, his theatre was widely known and had obtained unanimous recognition in Spain, both in courtly theatres and the popular corrales.

However, Calderón’s fame was not circumscribed by the limits of the Iberian Peninsula. He went beyond his own country’s frontiers, and was soon acclaimed in Europe as well as in the Spanish colonies all over the world. By the last third of the seventeenth century his plays had been translated into several languages, including Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian.

Calderón’s plays remained popular in the early eighteenth century, although they were less highly regarded during the Enlightenment. Yet they underwent a tremendous revival during the Romantic period, especially in Germany, which explains the extraordinary significance of his works in the emergence of a national theatre and opera in this country. Richard Wagner’s operas, essays and theoretical writings were no exception.

The translated dramas passed by varying means into the repertories of Germany from 1660 onwards. In chronological order of importance, the four main routes of translation included: 

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20 See p. 7 above.
transmission were those that lead: (1) through the Netherlands to Hamburg, (2) into Austria via direct connections in Hamburg-ruled Austria, (3) via Italy, and (4) through France, the literary center of Europe.21

a) Calderón in Wagner’s letters

As a matter of fact, Wagner knew Calderón’s plays in his maturity. At an earlier time he was familiar with Spanish dramatists Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and Lope de Vega. Mathilde Wesendonck was the one who, during Wagner’s years of exile in Zürich, introduced him to Calderón’s theatre. After that, Wagner read Calderón incessantly. Several testimonies attest to this fact.

The richest available sources for a study of Wagner’s adherence to Calderón are Cosima’s diaries and letters. According to Sullivan, “The diaries of Cosima Wagner and her letters to her daughter Daniela von Bülow, and to Prince Ernst zu Hohenloge-Langenburg, convey a vivid impression of the Wagner’s household and their readings of Calderón.”22 Moreover, Cosima’s writings provide a convincing testimony of the feverish pathos is which Wagner read basically all the Calderonian literature available to him.

Searching for testimonies of the amount and variety of Calderón’s plays read by Cosima and Richard Wagner, Margarita Garbisu provides a list of 17 plays (which do not pretend to be exhaustive) mentioned in Cosima’s diary: La dama duende (The Elfin Lady), La gran Cenobia (The Great Zenobia), El mayor monstruo los celos (Jealousy the Greatest Monster), El médico de su honra (The Surgeon of his Honor), La devoción de la cruz (Devotion to the Cross), La sibila de Oriente (The Prophetess of the East), Amor, honor y

poder (Love, Honor and Power), Apolo y Clímenes (Apollo and Clymene), El verdadero Dios Pan (The True God Pan), El hijo del sol, Faeton (Phaeton, Scion of the Sun), El monstruo de los jardines (The Monster of the Gardens), Céfalo y Procris (Cephalus and Procris), La divina Filotea (Divine Philotea), La niña de Gómez Arias (The Maiden of Gómez Arias), La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream), El mágico prodigioso (The Wonder-working Magician), El príncipe constante (The Steadfast Prince).23

As can be inferred from a revision of Cosima’s writings, Wagner did not limit himself to a specific kind of genre or subject matter. El verdadero Dios Pan (The True God Pan) y La divina Filotea (Divine Philotea) are autos sacramentales. Unfortunately, Garbisu does not indicate if the play La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream) mentioned in her account refers to the drama or the auto sacramental, since Calderón used the same title for plays of both types.

b) Calderón in Wagner’s essays and theoretical writings

Turning now to Wagner’s theoretical writings, it is necessity to fix their point of insertion in the composer’s career. Two perspectives need to be taken into consideration in this respect. It is necessary to find the exact position in which Wagner’s operatic production was located by the time of his encounter with Calderón. When Wagner came into knowledge of Calderón’s plays, he was already immersed in his career as operatic composer. After his first, not very fortunate two incursions in the genre, with the composition of Die Feen (The Fairies), completed in 1833 but premiered until 1883 (after the composer’s death), and the abortive premiere of Liebesverbot (The Ban on Love), in

1836, followed the triumph of Rienzi, finished in 1840 and premiered in 1842. Then came the three operas of the so-called middle-period, which began with Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman), premiered in 1843, Tannhäuser, in 1845, and Lohengrin, finished in 1848 and performed in 1950.

Given the organic unity characteristic of the composer’s entire creative life, it is imperative to determine the theoretical framework developed by the composer in regard to his conception of the poetics of music drama. Wagner began his career as a writer in parallel with his operatic production. His first published works were essays, which dealt with the practical situations that appeared in his career. Wagner’s writings published during his first compositional period—from Die Feen to Rienzi—, include papers like Die deutsche Oper (1834), Der dramatische Gesang (1837) and Bellini, ein Wort zu siner Zeit (1837), in which, according with his operatic style at this time, he shows worries about Romantic opera and the proper character of German opera. A little bit later, also within this first compositional period, coinciding with his stay in Paris, between 1839 and 1842, he made his debut as a journalist. In Paris his contributions to the Revue et gazette musicale were mainly on aesthetic topics. By that time the political issue also appeared for the first time. Wagner collaborated in German periodicals, where he made contributions to Schumann’s Neue Zeitschrift für Musik.

During his middle-compositional period, from Der fliegende Holländer to Lohengrin, Wagner’s writing production diminished. He wrote a series of pieces of uneven level and extension, among which stand out his Autobiographische Skizze (1943), Das Oratorium “Paulus” von Mendelschon-Bartholdy (1843) and Zu Beethovens neinter Symphonie (1846).

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After *Lohengrin*, Wagner’s writing activity reached its critical point, coinciding with a period of six years of composition inactivity. According to Brian Magee,

*Lohengrin*, which for many years was the most often performed of Wagner’s operas, was finished in 1848, when he was still only 34. From then until the age of 40, when he began the music of *The Ring*, he composed nothing at all—the only such gap in his creative life. What he did instead, having developed to its limits the form of German Romantic opera he had inherited, was to carry out a complete reappraisal of it. This was done, characteristically, in public, in a series of books, most of them written between 1848 and 1851. The most important of then were *The work of Art of the Future* (1849), *Opera and Drama* (1850-1), and *A message to my Friends* (1851). They embodied and entirely new theory of the opera, which he then went on to realize in his remaining works: *The Ring, Tristan and Isolde*, and *Parsifal.*

I quote this passage in full because it points out various peculiar facts in a composer’s life and career. First, as already mentioned by Magee, it was completely unusual for a composer to appear in the public arena talking about his or her art. Second, Wagner’s need to address his audience and publicly defend his productions represents the first apparent embodiment, in the domain of music, of Hegel’s thesis of the death of art, since from then onward any musician can but feel the lack of an evident justification of his art, and as a consequence, the necessity of offering public defense of his personal convictions. Third, it is relevant that the first musician who publicly announced his aesthetic program would have been able to follow it with such fidelity and efficacy.

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CHAPTER 3
Calderón and the Love-Honor Dilemma in *Tristan and Isolde*

This chapter focuses on the way in which Wagner understood the love-honor dilemma as a dramatic element of his opera, as well as on Calderón’s impact in this respect. *Tristan and Isolde* is looked at here from a dramatic perspective, and Wagner basically as a dramatist. Certainly, he was a special kind of dramatist, since he composed both the music and the libretto of his operas—in the case of *Tristan*, both at the same time. Furthermore, as an operatic composer, the vehicle of his music dramas is fundamentally musical sound, even if words are logically mandatory. However, none of these peculiarities excuse the composer from wholly determining and appropriating—in some stage of the creative process—the dramatic substance of his work.

Now, even accepting the legitimacy of considering Wagner’s opera exclusively from a dramaturgical point of view, the kind of treatment that the story of Tristan undergoes in Wagner’s hands drastically defies an ordinary understanding of drama. This determines that the sole idea of proposing a dramatic analysis of *Tristan and Isolde* be polemical, since the dramatic nature of the opera altogether can be questioned. It makes no sense to dramatically consider a work that is not dramatic at all. In order to shed some light on the supposed dramatic character of Wagner’s opera, this chapter will consider two fundamental aspects: (a) the dramatic character of Wagner’s opera; and (b) the role of the love-honor dilemma in *Tristan’s* dramatic structure and its relation to Calderón.
a) Wagner’s Tristan as drama

Thus we have arrived at the exciting topic of determining the dramatic character of one of the most revolutionary musico-dramatic works in the history of Western art. We will not obviously enter the broader discussion, but some remarks are worth being considered here.

Some commentators have said that Wagner’s Tristan “is neither a drama nor a stage epic,” to put it in the words used by German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus in his great essay on Wagner’s operas.26

However, not everybody agrees with Dahlhaus’s assessment. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the great interpreter of mythology, for example, recognized in Wagner “the unimpeachable father of the structural analysis of myths,” and underscored the fact that “it is highly revealing to note that such analysis was first made in music.”27 We will refer briefly to one significant aspect of the way in which Lévi-Strauss understood Wagner as a forerunner in the domain of structural analysis of myths. For him, Wagner grasped myths as inseparable of the mythical background in which they are inserted. That is why Lévi-Strauss said that

In suggesting that the analysis of myth was comparable to the perusal of a great score, we were only drawing the logical consequence of the Wagnerian discovery: the structure of myths is revealed through means of a score.28

And further, in relation to the temporal understanding of myths as compared to

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music, Lévi-Strauss states that

In order to be properly taken in, mythology demands that the mind of the listener sweep thoroughly back and forth across the field of the narrative as it spreads out before him. This applies equally to music.\(^{29}\)

Thus, the idea of the tragic in *Tristan and Isolde*, at least as is evident in the legend’s conflict between love and honor, is to be understood in terms of the literary context to which it pertains. We will offer two arguments in favor of this hermeneutical posture: (a) the action of the opera is inseparable from the legend because of its plotting and the temporal dimension in which it is inserted; and (b) Wagner's operas embody an altogether exploration of mediaeval romance, to such an extent that all his operas, considered in their wholeness, encouraged an astounding revival of the literary corpus in which they are immersed; then Wagner's *Tristan* is inseparable from Wagner's commitment to mediaeval romance in general.

It is true that Wagner himself wrote, in *The Music of the Future*, that

One look at the size of this poem will show you that that expansive particularity devoted by the poet of a historical subject to the explanation of the outer circumstances of the action, to the detriment of the clear exposition of the inner motivations, I have dared to devote to the latter alone... The whole gripping action only materializes because the innermost soul demands it, and it appears before us in the shape given it from within.\(^{30}\)

However, Wagner's description does not authorize us to split a poem, in this case the libretto of his opera, from “the whole gripping action” that “only materializes because the innermost soul demands it.” That is to say, Wagner's dramaturgical position highlights the inner dimension of the story alone, but it does not suppress the external aspects in which it materializes. Certainly, the way in which Wagner takes up the story of Tristan in


his opera—i.e., its poetic aspect—can reveal that his understanding of tragedy and drama departs completely from a traditional estimation of these dramaturgical conceptions, in the sense that it focuses on the inner aspect of the action; but its poetic attitude in the whole is properly dramatic, and inherently tragic in its nature. This tragic-dramatic character clearly emerges when the opera is taken in its mythical, legendary context.

\textit{b) The love-honor dilemma in Wagner’s Tristan}

At this point, it is inevitable to return to Eric Chafe’s book referred to in the introduction of this paper.\textsuperscript{31} Even if the author does not address explicitly the problem of a possible antidramatism of Wagner’s \textit{Tristan}, we can assume that he implicitly acknowledges that Wagner’s opera is to be understood in dramatic terms. The main part of title of this important essay: \textit{The Tragic and the Ecstatic}, so indicates, since the book is intended as a musical-hermeneutical enterprise.

Chafe’s fidelity to the opera allows us to understand that Wagner’s reading of Gottfried had led the composer to a careful consideration of Gottfried’s “religion of Minne,” and its relation to honor and its ideals, which in turn was related to Wagner’s reception of Calderón. According to Chafe,

\begin{quotation}
For Gottfried there could be no honor without Minne. Gottfried’s allegories of the lovers’ cave make abundantly clear that deceit was an abhorrence for him where love was concerned. The essence of his religion of Minne was that in that world, the world apart of the cave, ideals were of the highest.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quotation}

In Chafe’s mind, Calderón impinges Wagner’s appropriation of Gottfried precisely in the point in which the composer intends honor as a genuine human experience related to

compassion, and through it, to a discernment of true existence:

Wagner’s understanding of honor was indebted to both Schopenhauer and Calderón while composing Tristan. Very soon after completing act 1, Wagner wrote to Liszt on the question of the conflicts surrounding honor in a way that suggests that the honor music was devised to represent those conflicts. Wagner was overwhelmed by how in the works of Calderón the “fine and deeply passionate spirit” of Spain had “sized upon the concept of ‘honour’ to express an idea in which all that is most noble and, at the same time, most terrifying assumes the form of a second religion.” Wagner took the conflict surrounding the question of honor to represent that between the world and a “deeply human sense of fellow-suffering (Mitleid)” that sought refuge “in an almost unspoken melancholy which, for that very reason, is the more deeply embracing and the more truly sublime: in it we see how terrible and how empty is the world’s true essence.” The concept of honor led to “denial of the world,” which was confirmed in the lives of “almost all the great Spanish poets,” which revealed their complete “spiritual victory over life.” Honor, therefore, has both worldly and religious qualities, a negating and a transcendent aspect.

This passage successfully highlights the importance of Calderón’s lofty sense of honor in Wagner’s conception of Tristan. Chafe cites one of Wagner’s letters to Liszt, dated January 23-24, 1858, some three weeks after Wagner’s conclusion of act 1 of Tristan, which suggests that Wagner’s reading of Calderón was made along with the composition of his opera, having caused in the composer a great impression. Furthermore, in the footnote to which Professor Chafe consigns the reference to Wagner’s aforementioned letter, he refers to another letter by Wagner, also addressed to Liszt, which demonstrates the significance of the Spanish dramatist for his opera. This letter is dated January 1, same year, i.e., three weeks after the just cited Wagner’s letter, namely, the following day of his finishing act 1 of Tristan. In this letter the composer confessed to Franz Liszt that his readings were “at present confined to Calderón.”

Returning to Eric Chafe’s interpretation of Wagner’s Tristan, it is worth taking into consideration how Chafe’s exegetical skills, extensively developed through a dedication of a lifetime to the study of two major composers from the Baroque, Monteverdi and Bach,
prevented him from obviating the antithesis that support the plot of Wagner’s music drama, namely, the substantial role of the conflict between love and honor in the story of Tristan and Isolde.
It goes without saying that the way in which Wagner appropriated the story of Tristan and Isolde is crucial both in the genesis of the opera and in the way in which commentators interpret it. On this matter, it is well known how Schopenhauer’s influence was determinant in Wagner’s reading of Gottfried’s romance. On the other hand, the significance of Calderón in this respect was also relevant, as has been emphasized throughout this paper. In order to better understand the way in which Wagner intended the tragic import of the love-honor dilemma in his opera, this chapter will offer an interpretation of the different ways in which Gottfried, Calderón and Schopenhauer understood the phenomenon of the tragic in their own works.

a) Idea of the Tragic in Gottfried’s Tristan

Since there are excellent syntheses of the legend of Tristan and Isolde in both the literary and the musicological literature, we won’t provide a new summary of the story. Instead, we will refer to the method through which the analysis of Gottfried’s idea of the tragic will be produced.

In the first place, it is suggested that in order to acquire an idea of the particularity of Gottfried’s narrative, it is necessary to compare Gottfried’s version of the story with
those referred in the different versions existing and constituting the long and rich literary tradition in which the story has been preserved. Moreover, the saga of Tristan and Isolde is a story of long tradition. When Gottfried took it up for reworking it in his thirteenth-century romance, the tale had already been told many times, by anonymous rhapsodists or troubadours in the oral tradition.

Naturally, the achievement of a study of the kind we propose would require not only the whole lifetime of one, but of several specialists. For our purposes, we will rely on the synthesis of the mediaeval existing versions of the Tristan story made by French medievalist Joseph Bédier, in an outstanding prose in the French language, which was rendered into English by Hilaire Belloc in 1945.\(^{33}\) We will take this version as representative of the mediaeval tradition of the story altogether. As for Gottfried’s version of the story, we will rely on the translation of the romance made by Arthur T. Hatto, whose first edition was published in 1960.\(^{34}\) Our analysis of the idea of the tragic in Gottfried’s \textit{Tristan} will consist of a comparison between his story and Bédier’s summary of the mediaeval sources of the Tristan legend, concretely in regard to particular narrative elements significant for an understanding of the love-honor dilemma.

To begin, let us refer to the episode in which Isolde discovers the true identity of Tristan and tries to slay him with his own sword. It’s interesting to note how in Bédier’s synthesis, Tristan, who speaks to Isolde when she is at the point of killing him, stops just before his clarification of the second time that she saved his life. Instead of explaining what

\(^{33}\) Bédier, Joseph. \textit{The romance of Tristan and Iseult}. Translated into English by Hilaire Belloc. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945.)

motivated Tristan’s decision to fight the beast, Tristan says: “But let us leave these things. I
would but show you how my life is your own.”35 It is true that Tristan does not lie frankly.
However, if he does not lie in words, he does indeed in omission and commission, since he
knows that he is distorting the King of Ireland’s offer of bestowing the hand of his daughter
Isolde on whoever rid his kingdom of the dragon. Thus, for example, the King’s promise
does not determine two important elements. First, it does not establish if the killer of the
dragon, and his daughter’s future husband, can be a stranger. Second, and more decisive, it
does not settle upon if the winner’s right to marry his daughter is transferable.

Gottfried changes this episode in various important aspects, so that what appears as
a blatant lie in Bédier’s synthesis is skillfully avoided. On the one hand, in Gottfried’s telling
the episode in which Isolde discovers Tristan’s true identity, the German writer inserts the
participation of Queen Isolde, who arrives at the scene just in this moment. In this way, he
avoids a private conversation among Tristan and Isolde and its personal implications. On
the other hand, instead of artfully omitting the actual reason for which he decided to kill
the dragon, making believe to Isolde that he did it because he pretended to her hand, it
seems that in this scene Gottfried prefers to sacrifice a little the showcasing of Tristan’s wit
in favor of his truthfulness, so that the future loving relation does not appear as somehow
motivated by the happenings before the drinking of the love potion.

A significant difference between Gottfried and Bédier’s synthesis is that in
Gottfried’s story, Isolde recognizes in Tristan the man she had healed some time before,
who presented himself as the minstrel Tristan. This happens before Isolde’s discovering of
Tristan’s true identity. Trying to guess the reason why Gottfried introduces this element in

this narrative, the answer could be that from a poetic perspective he felt the need to draw the conclusion that Tristan, deprived from his knightly apparel, must have had a very similar appearance to when he arrived Ireland for the first time, wounded by the poisonous shaft of Morolt.

But a great artist is rarely moved by an isolated purpose. In addition to giving credibility to his tale, he was also enriching the plot, and provoking increased expectation in his audience. But beyond this skillful device, the recognition of Tristan as Tantris opens up the possibility of understanding the Tristan/Isolde relation as having a past and a future, that is to say, existence, as not merely dependent upon the drinking of the love potion. This spatial and temporal resonance is crucial both from the point of view of the story and its essential eroticism, irrespective of the effectiveness attributed to the love potion in the deployment of the plot.

Tristan's response to Queen Isolde, when she asks him—thinking that he is Tantris, the minstrel—when and why he came to Ireland, is that he and his fellows are merchants, and that given their condition, they had to “dwell in foreign lands without knowing whom to trust.” As for his killing the dragon, Tristan—Tantris—explains that he accomplished that feat because he wanted to achieve official recognition in Ireland, since “recognition abroad will make a merchant wealthy.”36

This episode, which does not appear in Bédier either, is also significant in Gottfried as regards to Tristan and Isolde’s intentions. Appearing before Isolde as a trader, it was unthinkable that he would pretend to the hand of Isolde, not only because of the enormous difference in social status between a princess and a merchant, but also because the King of

Ireland’s royal oath specified that “he would give his daughter to whoever would make an end of it, provided he were a knight of noble birth.” Meanwhile, Isolde accepts Tristan’s explanation without reservation, and gladly commits herself to give him protection: “Here is my hand to assure you on my honor that so long as I live no ill shall befall you in Ireland!” She asks him, however, to thwart the arrogant pretentions of the Steward and take the matter up, while Tristan promises her to “be at your service in this combat, as in all other perils…”

In sum, Tristan’s response to Queen Isolde and her daughter in Gottfried’s story makes evident that he has no intention of betraying his promise to bring Isolde from Ireland to marry his uncle, King Mark, by entering a loving relationship with Isolde, in spite of having the right to lay claim to Isolde for himself. And Gottfried takes great care to make this known to his readers, so that the falling in love of Tristan and Isolde happens suddenly, with no particular intention.

Moreover, in Bédier’s synthesis Tristan’s speech to Isolde is remarkably ingenious. First, Bédier’s protagonist acknowledges he owes his life to Isolde since she saved his life twice. In doing so, he appeals to her goodness and greatness of heart. She can damage him, if she wishes, he is not going to oppose resistance; everything is upon her. But the reader knows this is trickery. He knows that, actually, Tristan intended to evade Isolde’s blow, with no success because of the weakness of his body. In this way, Tristan does subtly manage to alter his role from victimizer to victim. Then, Tristan aims at convincing Isolde that she was right when healing him of Morolt’s poisoned shaft. In fighting Morolt, he acted in legitimate self-defense, since Morolt had defied him publically. Tristan does not

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emphasize Morolt’s shameful act, about which Isolde was well aware, since he could have
injured Isolde’s family pride, given her near kinship with Morolt. He pretends to keep the
case a matter of honor. But the hit had been given. Now Isolde was obliged to restore family
honor. Finally, when Tristan comes to the thorny issue of why he risked his life for Isolde
by accepting the challenge of killing the dragon, he stops wisely, instead of revealing his
cunning stratagem.

Tristan’s wit is commonly intended as a means to satisfy mediaeval public fondness
for games of ingenuity. More important than this, however, is that Tristan’s stratagem
makes evident, from the perspective of the plot, that he was not at all sentimentally
involved with Isolde at this moment, and therefore that his trip to Ireland was intended to
somehow fetch Isolde and to bring her to marry King Mark. At the same time, it prepares
the ground for the truly tragic event, his unexpectedly falling in love with Isolde.

A second motive to be considered here is the episode of King Mark’s response to his
barons about their request about King Mark’s marrying a King’s daughter in a neighboring
kingdom. It is also quite ingenious. However, ingenuity here has a very different meaning.
King Mark knows his barons’ request is only a palace intrigue. He is not willing to yield to it.
His response poses to them an impossible conundrum to solve, therefore a polite rejection.
However, Tristan also wanted a wife for his uncle. The saga leaves the question of Tristan’s
motives to this specific behavior unanswered, a virtual space for the expansion of a lyrical
poem to come. Wagner also understood a mythical space as opened up to many successive
poetic recreations.

Tristan has no justification for betraying the vow he swore to King Mark about not
returning alive without having conquered for him the lady with the hair of gold; or his oath
to the King of Ireland of carrying Isolde to Cornwall to marry King Mark; or his own intention of settling the peace between the realms of Ireland and Cornwall, etc. Gottfried’s narrative makes clear that Tristan does not follow the precepts of reason when he allows himself to fall madly in love with Isolde, unless we accept as a reason the idea that the overwhelming power of love threatens our senses and our will, and ends up turning human beings into slaves to their passions.

As a conclusion about the way in which Gottfried poses in his narrative the opposition between love and honor, it will be said that, in his story, there seems to be no justification or intent of explanation of the falling in love between Tristan and Isolde. The only fact that marks the beginning of their relation is that they drink the love potion together. Thereafter they are unable to resist their passion for more than three days, the reason why they refuse to yield to their love being: for Isolde, her resentment against Tristan; for Tristan, his loyalty to King Mark, his beloved uncle. The tragic sense of Gottfried’s story resides then solely in juxtaposing the world of honor and that of love, causing the reader to reflect on their consequences. Some authors consider that the love potion is “a brilliant device” to justify a prohibited relationship; others, that it has no real significance, but is merely a symbol of the inevitability of falling in love when that event occurs. In any case, Gottfried makes no evident attempt to justify Tristan and Isolde’s loving relationship. It seems as if he did not have in mind a purpose other than depicting the vicissitudes of amorous delirium. It is to Gottfried’s credit that he was one of the first authors in the history of literature to develop powerful literary devices to express the passion of love.
b) Idea of the Tragic in Calderón’s Life is a Dream

When researching Wagner’s writings for evidence about the way in which he approached Calderón’s works, it is surprising to find that he seemingly did not give preference to any Calderonian play over others, including *Life is a Dream*, in spite of its having been referenced emphatically by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation*. On the contrary, Wagner’s reading of the Spanish playwright seems to have been so wide, that it permitted him to reach a comprehensive view about the dramatist’s production as a whole.

Thus, the main reason to focus on an analysis of Calderón’s *Life is a Dream* is not that it was singled out by the composer’s preference, nor that it embodies an exceptional position in Calderón’s output. Rather, the selection of this particular drama suits the existential and philosophical imprint of Wagner’s opera. However, the famous play by Calderón took an important place in Schopenhauer’s treatise *The World as Will and Representation*. Thus, an analysis of this Calderonian drama suits very well our aim of grasping the philosopher’s understanding of the Spanish dramatist.

Calderón’s *Life Is a Dream* tells the story of Segismundo, Prince of Poland, whose being is fated by misfortune even before his birth. Both his mother—a pregnant queen who dreams of the unborn as a half-human monster who kills her—and his father King Basilio—who through his ability to read the future in the stars draws the prediction that Segismundo will ruin his realm and kill his father upon arrival to the throne—had terrible forebodings about the prince’s imminent coming to life. As the birth of Segismundo causes his mother’s death, his father cannot help but think that the queen’s dream premonition came true of Segismundo, which confirmed the truth of the stars’ omens. King Basilio
imprisons his son Segismundo in a tower at the foot of a mountain. When the prince attains his majority age, King Basilio orders his servants to bring the sleeping prince to the palace and free him for a while. By allowing him temporarily to reign, his father gives him the opportunity to prove the prophecy was wrong. Segismundo behaves as a tyrannical ruler. After Segismundo enters a dispute, King Basilio orders his servants to induce Segismundo to sleep, imprison him again, and persuade him that it was all a dream. At the end, Segismundo is freed by Polish people, once they find out that their king has been imprisoned in a tower. Finally son forgives his father.

In analyzing this passage, interesting things come to light.\textsuperscript{38} First, as it has been recognized in specialized literature, the father-son conflict posed by Calderón’s drama is comparable to that of the famous Theban King; it has been considered a Christian version of \textit{Oedipus Rex}. Yet some changes occurred. The mother’s death replaces incest; the father’s humiliating subjugation substitutes for patricide. Whereas Oedipus’ incestuous marriage is an intentional action, Segismundo’s birth’s aftermath is a natural event. Oedipus’s vicissitudes remain in the realm of individual fate; Segismundo’s go beyond it, entering the domain of history. Thus a tragic dialectic remains as a foundation for Calderón’s play.

Tragedy’s transplantation from Greek Antiquity to the Catholic Baroque kept its basic framework unaltered; only new tragic moments were required. Peter Szondi emphasizes two of them:

\begin{quote}
In \textit{Life Is a Dream}, prophesy no longer takes place in the universally valid,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} The following observations are based in an analysis made by Hungarian, literary critic Peter Szondi, in his \textit{An essay on the Tragic}. (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2002). His book has influenced in many ways the dramatic considerations carried out in this paper.
institutional form of the oracle, but rather makes use of two contradictory sources: the dream and science [the king’s astrological knowledge]... Because prophesy in Calderón no longer bears the authority of the oracle, it turns to deception. If prophesy’s first part comes true on its own, man lends credence to the second part and acts accordingly. This action... is what first tragically draws him into guilt... The irony of fate in Calderón consists in the king trusting his science because the unconscious seems to have spoken the truth.39

From this we may draw two conclusions. First, the tragic conflict, divided into science and dream in Calderón’s play, has come to reside in the humans being’s subjectivity, and as such, is understood in terms of internal consciousness of guilt. Second, the internalization of the conflict challenges notions relating to the integrity of human wholeness. Both conclusions are significant in relation to Tristan. His dilemma concerning honor and love is deeply rooted in his own consciousness and puts into question his own reliability, both for himself and his fellows. The Baroque drama permits us to understand the conflict of love versus honor in terms of a split between desire and reality, first nature and second nature. This conflict is tragic because in any resolution of the conflict, there would emerge inevitably a betrayal of something beloved and deeply respected. In this way, Tristan’s dilemma leads him to achieve a better understanding of existence, in a process that Wagner described as a progression from the unconscious to the conscious, and that he believed to be the object of a music drama.

Szondi referred to another significant motive posed by Calderón’s play Life is a dream:

There is [another] tragic factor that no longer lies in knowledge’s dependence on the unconscious, but in science itself. The king’s famous ability to read the future in the stars, after it has established his greatness, turns into his destruction: ‘For the unfortunate ones,/Merit itself becomes a knife;/And he who warms himself through

knowledge/ is his own murderer.40

This conflict has to do with the impossibility of simply renouncing action, since if
Basilio pays attention to his knowledge, and acts in consequence, the uncertainty of the
consequences hang over him, yet if he ignores it, the result is the same. This leads to
Schopenhauer and his thesis of a self-destruction and self-negation of the will, leading to
resignation, as a culmination of the process of deployment of the will as the only
manifestation of the thing-in-itself.

c) Schopenhauer’s reading of Calderón

In the previous section it was said that Tristan’s love-honor dilemma permitted us to
understand him as a tragic character. Some reasons were given in this respect. However,
his tragic character cannot be determined only from this dramatic motive, since it is to be
understood in the context of a comprehensive interpretation of the opera.

The compressed dramaturgical style of Wagner’s Tristan, that is to say, the fact that
his work cannot be understood merely from the explicit elements in the musical drama,
implies that it should be put in relation to external elements. These are elements that the
poet-composer merely alluded to in his work but that need to be made explicit on behalf of
the listener. These implicit, barely insinuated elements can be grouped in two categories:
(a) those related to Wagner’s conception of music drama; and (b) those that refer to the
relationship of the opera to the general mythological context from which its dramatic
elements were taken and that give it sense. This section would necessitate an
interpretation of Tristan’s character different from the one indicated in the previous

40 Peter Szondi. Ibid.
Disregarding the possibility that the “action” committed by the protagonist of the opera could be understood as iniquity, instead of in tragic terms, Tristan as a character can be understood as fitting the figure of Segismundo. Both of them are suffering subjects, but more than being tragic subjects, they are understandable as victims of the circumstances around them. In this pessimistic aspect of Calderón’s tragedies lies the interest of Schopenhauer in the Spanish dramatist.

In the case of *Life Is a Dream*, the real tragic character is King Basilio, on whose hands falls the responsibility of Segismundo’s destiny. In spite of the fact that Segismundo’s great charisma leads him to appropriate the foreground of the story, he is not a tragic character since he has no possibility of deciding his own future.

To better understand his dramatic type, let us pause a moment on Segismundo’s reflections on the exercise of royal power at the end of Act II:

> The king dreams he is a king,  
> And in this delusive way  
> Lives and rules with sovereign sway;  
> All the cheers that round him ring,  
> Born of air, on air take wing.  
> And in ashes (mournful fate!)  
> Death dissolves his pride and state:  
> Who would wish a crown to take,  
> Seeing that he must awake  
> In the dream beyond death’s gate?\(^4^1\)

His attitude towards tragedy brings him closer to Plato and Aristotle than to Aeschylus or Sophocles, since his lament is more theoretical than practical. And Tristan

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tends to be a character of this lineage, hence the philosophical imprint of the opera. Yet both Tristan and Segismundo demonstrate that the contemplation of the tragic, when envisioned from a deep suffering, can also provide the poetic vision.

It would seem that in Wagner's *Tristan* the tragic is only accessible to its protagonist through a philosophical contemplation of this kind. Tristan deplores at the emptiness of existence, in the same way that Segismundo bitterly condemns the vacuity of political power. They are not actual tragic characters; both perceive, however, the tragic dimension of existence from their own suffering.
Works Cited


