

Jesús López-Peláez Casellas. 2009
"Honourable Murderers"
*El concepto del honor en Othello de Shakespeare
y en los dramas de honor de Calderón*
Bern-Oxford: Peter Lang

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One of the most promising fields of research on Anglo-Spanish relationships of the Modern Period is no doubt that of contrastive relationships. Scholars working in this field endeavour to work on the un-genetic comparison of both literatures to elucidate terms of affinity and contrast. These may eventually lead to a better comprehension of the situation of both national domains, the context for genetic relationships and, above all, they can tell us a lot about the higher level of general literature, as they reveal pertinent similarities and differences. Because of this, it is most surprising that a topic like the one dealt with in the present book has received so little attention either by English or Spanish scholars of this speciality.

Admittedly, there are several relevant studies on honour in both the English and the Spanish sides. Not to tire the patient reader, or repeat what has been said before, I refer him or her to the author of this book himself in his *Bibliography* and in his review of Fernie's *Shame in Shakespeare*, where he displays his apt and broad knowledge of the state of the art. As to the matter of the Spanish side of the question, there is an abundant output which has exhaustively dissected all the aspects and minutiae of this element of mentality (or, to use the term frequently advocated in the book reviewed here, this element of the structure of feeling) of the Spanish Golden Age. Do I need to quote the studies by Menéndez Pidal, Caro Baroja, Maravall, Castro, Correa, Gutierrez Nieto, Jones, Oostendorp, Ricart, Wardropper? There is even a wider corpus on Calderón and honour, with the inaugural work of Viel-Castel (1841) and the seminal ones

by Parker (1962, 1975) introducing the consideration of Calderonian drama as a Spanish form of tragedy, and the happy continuance of this line at the hands of critics such as Cruickshank, Ruiz Ramón or Antonio Regalado, to quote just three of many. Yes, there are many and good studies on the analysis of Spanish dramas of honour. What is imperatively lacking is an apt output of works which may salvage the gap between the Spanish and the English side in this topic of dramatic literature.¹ If we revise the current bibliography on the subject it scarcely amounts to more than ten items, some of which are brief incidental pieces: Ruiz Silva and Alvarado (1979), Wilson (1980), Mintz (1982), Dañobeitia Fernandez (1992), Romero Cambra (2002), López-Peláez Casellas (1995, 1998, 2004a) are just some of them. And it is here where this book arrives in good time to meet an impending need. For it is the first comprehensive account to broach the many and significant relationships concerning honour in both countries, in a corpus extensive enough to derive general conclusions (*Othello*, *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, *El medico de su honra*, and *El pintor de su deshonra*), bridging thus a gap that has remained open for too long in Anglo-Spanish literary relationships.

The book fully accomplishes its programme, which is rooted in new historicism, cultural materialism, and cultural semiotics. As a new historicist and cultural materialist, the author addresses the question of relevance or political commitment and it is in this capacity that he incorporates into his methodology analyses and references to gender and queer studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial studies (20). The book has thus a clear political agenda and the author himself is as intellectually honest as to openly declare his critical apparatus,

Como todos los análisis de textos considerados “literarios”, éste se encuentra condicionado, en varios sentidos, por el aparato crítico empleado. Frente a la opción de ocultar dicho aparato (lo que a veces se realiza con la solapada intención de ocultar la propia ideología) constituye una cuestión de honestidad intelectual con el lector explicitar las herramientas teórico-críticas puestas en juego para abordar el estudio de estas obras. (19)

¹ The author himself makes reference to this dearth of studies: “lo cierto es que, como ya tuvimos ocasión de manifestar, no existen estudios comparados monográficos de cierto calado sobre el honor en los dramas de honor de Calderón y en Shakespeare” (286). He has rightfully commented on the same circumstance on page 9.

His compromise with transparency leads him to declare later “que toda crítica es política, y que toda producción literaria es necesariamente ideológica” (291). He also enlarges on the exposition of his critical method in section 1.3, and further in sections 2.1 and 3.1., for cultural semiotics and cultural materialism respectively. It is clear then that his research is soundly grounded on rigorous and openly displayed ideological and critical positions. However, the author is not dogmatic, for on page 21, he states that far from trying to impose his approach as the only possible interpretation, he is rather attempting to increase the richness of the perception of the plays.

Of all the lines followed in his critical method, Lotman’s cultural semiotics is the most original. It is also the least politicised part and the one that renders the clearest and most useful results. Situating honour, as a common unifying factor of the four plays, in the passage from symbolic to syntagmatic dominant cultural codes (Lotman), he points to the resulting effect that the prevailing degree of anxiety had on the perception and experiencing of this social apparatus, as regards any form of recognition of the value of the subject and as a means to guarantee his/her social integration. Thus, the man of honour in the four plays analysed finds himself departing from the medieval modelization of the ideal of attaining virtue through one’s own means in what basically is an essentialist, paradigmatic system of symbolic interaction with a supernatural order (symbolic code). He is in the process of passing to the modelization of the modern period, which implies a relational, sintagmatic system of material interaction in the society on this Earth (syntagmatic code) under the pressure of opinion. It is within this general framework that the conflict of honour (and the precarious situation of wives) must be understood in the plays. Hence, similar social forces and pressures may be exposed as underlying and shaping the response to the demands of honour of deceptively autonomous subjects as different as Othello and Gutierre Alfonso, Lope de Almeida, or Juan Roca. To this is added the particular situation of Othello as Other and the anxiety caused by the need of self-fashioning and the fashioning by others in a context of raci(al)ism as well as the hazardous situation of women in the four plays, whose voice is silenced and who are inscribed (i.e., written and read as texts) by men, and deprived of a discourse of their own. With all these accretions, the author fulfils the political programme

inherent in his new historicist-cultural materialist approach: to analyse power relationships as a privileged ground to interpret texts, to disclose the operations of ideology in the mobilization of structures of meaning to legitimate hegemonic interests, and to determine to what extent there is proof of subversion versus containment in the dramatic texts (95, 279-280, 82 n.41).

Equally interesting and convincing is the author's argument for the moral assessment of the plays. He devotes to this issue a whole subsection ("Crítica del asesinato por honor" 3.4) and picks it up again in the general conclusions (294). In agreement with latest developments in criticism, he argues for a subversive interpretation of Calderonian (and Shakespearean) wife-murder dramas in which the tyrannical code of honour is made responsible for the ensuing unjust uxoricides. But different from many of these approaches, which might be termed as humanist, the author is interested not in pointing out the tragical consequences or the moral responsibility of the characters as individuals, but in highlighting the apparatus of honour as the immediate social causes operating behind the illusion of the autonomous subject. For, consequent with his materialist conception, Dr López-Peláez does not believe in the subject as something unified and continuous, but rather as a succession of artificial positions constructed by the pressure of social forces operating behind and alien to him/her. That is possibly why he willingly lets pass the opportunity to link his conclusions in this respect with the lately well-established trend to consider Calderonian wife-murder plays as instances of a native Spanish tragedy (see the critics I have mentioned above) and thus to touch upon the more general question of dramatic genres. This impression of mine is backed up by the fact that he openly declares his preference for Brechtian epic theatre over Aristotelian theatre, i.e., tragedy (274) for the well-known reasons of promoting or exposing alienation respectively.

The content of the book is arranged in three major chapters and proceeds orderly from a sound revision of the meaning and origins of the concept of honour (first chapter) to its conclusion through both a consideration of the dramatization (ch. II) and of the function

(ch. III) of this code² in *Othello* and in the Calderonian “dramas de honor.”

The first chapter supplies us with a neat and comprehensive review of the concept of honour through history, something which is both a very convenient (in both senses of the word) resource for anybody venturing into this complex matter and a very stimulating starting point for serious discussion of the topic. It includes crucial issues such as the social implications of honour, its multidimensional character, its factorization, its historical evolution, and its literary embodiment.

Chapter II is to my mind the weakest part of the whole work. Its function is to present the ways in which honour is dramatized in the four plays under consideration. One would expect a survey of the ways in which the apparatus of honour is presented, enacted or ostended throughout on the stage. But the author does not always accomplish this programme. Instead, he starts with a long dissertation on cultural semiotics, which is interesting and clarifying enough but not appropriate for this section. Furthermore, his discussion of the concepts of the semiotics of drama and theatre is too long for the use that it is going to be put to later. Then he goes on to deal with another theoretical session on metadramatization, and then proceeds to discuss the dramatic function of several signs (handkerchief, dagger, water and fire, etc.). My objection here is two-fold: on the one hand, most of the chapter seems to be more an excursion into the semiotics of drama and theatre or plot construction and bears little relation to the main topic of honour; on the other hand, almost all the sections of the chapter are presided over by, what I believe to be, instances of overinterpretation. I mean overinterpretation as an excessive opening of the semantic scope of the term for *metadramatization*, which allows one to put in the same box a wide range of dramatic techniques such as eaves-dropping, overhearing or confusion of identities with the ultimate end of relating them as part of the same phenomenon and then justifying uniformity of dramatic methods in the four plays analysed; and I would also say that there is overinterpretation in some of the symbolic analyses of the objects proposed, which, given their

² *Honour* is defined by the author, in rather Foucaultian terms, as a *código* or code, i.e., an articulated set of ideas, “a social apparatus with its own internal regulation (“un dispositivo social con una regulación interna propia,” 24).

semantic openness, may justify almost any interpretation.³ Nevertheless, section 2.4 (“Exceso and defecto de honor”) aptly steers the discussion back to its appropriate course and meets the expectations promised by the title of the chapter.

Section III explores the function of honour in the four dramas under study. It starts again with a strong revision of the critical methods of the book, reinforcing the author’s choices and insisting on the incorporation of all kinds of approaches contributing to the uncovering of the ideological mechanisms plus, I may imagine (for he invokes Jameson and his political unconscious), those interpretative practices that guide our unconscious habits of reading imposed by hegemonic forces. In this spirit, he resorts in varying degree to doses of psychoanalysis, feminism, post-colonial studies and gay studies and, though the book indeed reveals several illuminating ways of looking at the dramas and unearthing ways of subversion, it is at the cost of sometimes becoming far-fetched in handling the elusive semiosis of psychoanalysis even if it is put to the effect of counteracting hegemonic social forces. But I must confess that I am generally sceptical about the hermeneutic value of these methods, even as tools for cultural materialism and thus will leave the appreciation of these resources to readers more bent on these critical disciplines.

The conclusion or rather “conclusiones” pick up and summarize all the inferences made in the preceding chapters. They are pertinent and contribute many valuable starting points to the current state of the art mainly from the perspective of new historicism-cultural materialism and the semiotics of culture. In this, and not only in being the first extensive contrastive study on honour, this book also shows its pioneering nature. If anything, the conclusions suffer a little from the incorporation of disparate elements which, though currently admitted by the Neo-Marxist methods called in, here show some degree of discontinuity and lack of cohesion. Some of them are too subservient to the current paradigm of the humanities and give the impression of paying lip service to current trends in postmodernism, rather than being an integral part of the critical

³ Take, for instance, the case posed by Linda Boose (131), and carried forward by the author. Here, symbolic meanings are strainedly added to the sign *handkerchief* parasiting on the patent and arguable dramatic function of this theatrical item, i.e., its character as necessary ocular proof for the unfolding of the plot.

apparatus. However, as I have already said, the book fully accomplishes its goal and will really be a major discovery for those scholars engaged in integrating both interpretation and praxis as part of the same dialectical process.

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