

**East and West**  
**Exploring Cultural Manifestations**

*Proceedings of the seminar jointly organized by*  
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## Introductory Questions about the Meaning of 'Auto Sacramental' (An allegorical drama of the Golden Age)<sup>1</sup>

Ignacio Arellano

It is true that there are different functions or intentions more or less secondary at each moment, which should be specified in each allegorical play, but the essence of the auto sacramental intentionality as drama is revealed in the texts themselves, and their representation in a specific environment and moment: the Catholic feast of *Corpus Christi*, within a range of holiday and religious celebrations that frame and define one's own theatrical celebration of the *autos* (allegorical drama). It is therefore a kind of religious drama written for the exaltation of a fundamental doctrine of the Catholic religion.

I should say a few words about the history, training and definition of the *auto sacramental* in order to introduce the subject. The critics often point out three stages in the evolution of the *auto sacramental*:

- a) Before Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681);
- b) During the times of Calderón de la Barca;
- c) The decline after Calderón de la Barca.

In these phases we are interested especially in the first two. After Calderón, the *auto sacramental* falls into decay.

### 1. Before Calderón

The first significant fact is not the theatrical world, but the religious festivals: the creation of a special event dedicated to celebrating the Sacrament of the Eucharist builds the necessary environment for the development of the *auto*. Pope Urban IV, in 1264, established the Feast of *Corpus Christi*.

The Eucharist (a term from the Greek, meaning thanksgiving) reproduces the sacrifice of Christ, who at the Last Supper shared bread and wine with his disciples. The bread and wine changed, according to Catholic belief, in the same body and blood of Christ, thus constituting the sacrament (sign and instrument of God's grace) that believers eat and drink in the Mass. It is a sign of unity, the source of sanctification, spiritual nourishment and centre of Catholic life. The celebration of the sacrament achieved great solemnity, with a series of celebrations that include various theatrical activities.

Altogether, the *auto* is a religious drama marked by the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Authors who wrote pioneering works are López de Yanguas, Gil Vicente and Timoneda. There is a particular work (often it is considered the *Farsa sacramental* by Lopez de Yanguas as the first *auto sacramental*) which opens the genre, but a confluence of elements and traditions are flowing into the *auto*: in fact, it frequently has the presence of the Eucharist in various dramatic and non-dramatic genres such as allegory, which makes the central rhetorical device of the genre.

This confluence of factors behind the *auto* seem to have a special significance in some literary milestones: first the *Farsa sacramental* by Lopez de Yanguas, of which we have only some fragments; also the *Farce of the Blessed Sacrament* (1521) attributed equally to López de Yanguas. There are also important the plays by Sanchez de Badajoz, which are included in the *Recopilación en metro* (Sevilla, 1554). They are doctrinal plays which are usually placed within the evolutionary process towards the *sacramental* gender at least in its allegorical technique. Other works, such as *Farsa moral*, *Farsa militar*, *Farsa racional del libre albedrío*, o *Farsa del juego de cañas* have typical characters as Justice, Prudence, Free Will, Understanding, Reason, etc. But only in the *Farsa de la Iglesia* the Eucharistic element is present.

A second group of important pieces are those by Juan de Timoneda, Lope de Vega and Jose Valdivielso.

After these phases in which they have added the various constituent parts of theme and techniques, it reached the formula of Don Pedro Calderón, who totally dominates the seventeenth century.

### 2. Elements of the Auto Sacramental

#### i) *The Eucharist*

The Eucharistic theme is absolutely fundamental. It does not mean that the content of the play concerned only the Eucharist, but everything is geared to the meaning of the Eucharist. However, the represented stories have very different characteristics. Calderón distinguishes between matter (*asunto*), which is always the same in all *autos*, and

arguments (*argumento*), which are different in each play.

Part of the celebration of the Catholic faith in the *Corpus*, is in close connection with the religious celebration and liturgy, and hence it is necessary to observe the complex drama of the sacramental celebration, which provides an opportunity for collective religious participation. Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera, an erudite friar of the time said that the *autos* of Calderón admire the understanding and the will and provoke deep religious feelings, emphasizing this emotional effect on the viewer beyond the understanding of theology.

#### ii) *Antiheretical Controversy*

Another possible objective of the *auto*, is the defence of Catholic doctrine against the current Protestant Reformation of Luther and others at that time. Although the *auto* begins to develop before the Reformation it can be used as a tool in this confrontation. In many *autos* the heresy appears as an allegorical character, and the contents can be used as a doctrinal weapon against Protestantism. It is neither the root nor the cause of the emergence of the *auto sacramental*, but it is one important reason for its existence in this historical context.

#### iii) *The Allegory*

The literary technique that serves as the basis of this genre of drama, is allegory. The use of allegory and abstract figures was constant in the preaching activity from the Middle Ages onwards. Allegorical formulas are being imposed in the writings of Calderón. Allegorical art is one

category of metaphorical transposition. The allegory allows also (very importantly), the use of many materials interpreted symbolically.

The technique is not limited to allegorical personification of abstract entities, but includes the two kinds of allegory that tend to bring the rhetorical repertoires:

- a) On the one hand, the presence of some characters that embody abstractions such as FAITH, HOPE, CHARITY, are allegorical types indispensable in a genre that works with abstractions of this kind and must show a series of struggles between virtues and vices, good and evil, in short, the ongoing battle inside man and his opposed inclinations towards his salvation and his perdition.
- b) The second type of allegory is the organized system of metaphors: so it is possible to turn a mythological story or a historical event, or a legend ... in an expression of the Eucharist doctrine, by reading in two planes: each element of the plot symbolizes another in the plane of the religious sense.

But if the allegory is a way of interpretation and symbolization eminently doctrinal, quite intellectual in nature, the primary intent of effective persuasion is manifested in two features also important in the construction of the *auto sacramental*: the music and scenic set.

#### iv) *The Music*

Music is basic in the allegorical theatre of Calderón. We

should keep in mind that the ear is the sense of faith (which is to believe what you cannot see) and therefore a privileged receptor in the sacramental play.

Calderón conceives his musical theory on the basis of a number of ideas, about the music as expression of universal harmony. He distinguishes two types of music, true and false, the divine and the human one.

The secular music gets moralistic attacks, and although Calderón is not an enemy of secular music, he separates the profane and the liturgical. Sometimes the secular music is an incitement to sin and temptation for man; this music is facing divine music, the singing of Grace. It has a key role in the purpose of moving the mind of the spectators and provides them a particularly receptive mood.

#### v) *The Theater Stage*

The scenic set has important functions, so as to cause admiration and symbolize doctrinal elements. The *autos sacramentales* were represented initially in the space of the temple, but in the seventeenth century the stage is located in the streets or public square, on mobile platforms (carts: *carros*), more and more complicated. First there were two carts, but in the second half of the century the stage had four. The first performance is made before the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, even before the king and the Councils. After the performances in the big cities, the companies were able to go on tours in towns and villages, probably reducing the spectacular dimensions.

From the end of the sixteenth century to mid-seventeenth century two companies of actors represent four *autos* each

year, with added parts (introitus, prologue, masquerade) in successive sessions for various audiences (first performances for the King and the Councils, others for municipal authorities and the people).

The carts or platforms (*carros*) were machines on wheels, pulled by adorned oxen, and contained complex scenic architectures, paintings, symbolic decorations, etc... Hosts to the actors, including machines for bringing up and down the characters, mountains that hide in their caves animals and birds, scales, levels of different heights, etc... In the late seventeenth the carts measured about five metres long and up to ten metres high.

### 3. Conclusion

The intentionality of the *autos sacramentales*, then, is first to involve the spectator emotionally, integrating the public in the activities that celebrate the basic beliefs of Catholicism: the redemption of mankind by Jesus Christ, particularly expressed in the exaltation of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This incentive is linked to the teaching effect of the *autos* and to the allegorical expression of Catholic doctrine.

In a less general level we can distinguish between different intentions of each *auto* or group of *autos*: for example, the praise to the Virgin Mary, the defence of Catholic doctrine against Protestantism, or even the praise of the family of the kings and the House of Austria in political uses of the *auto sacramental*.

It is important to keep in mind that this is a theatre of complex dimensions. Through artistic mechanisms it poses



philosophical and religious goals about good and evil, human freedom and fate, responsibility, and the virtues and vices in the human struggle to find a right way to respond to the final destination of salvation and grace.

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*Notes:*

1. This work is part of the project *Autos Sacramentales completos de Calderón de la Barca. Edición crítica* (FFI2008-02319/FILO, Subdirección General de Proyectos de Investigación, España), and TECE-TEL, CSD2009-00033 (Programa CONSOLIDER, Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, España).

## Of Travels and Travellers: History of a Literary Genre

Luis Alburquerque

We normally identify as «travel literature» a number of works which differ greatly from each other and whose only link seems to be the topic of travel. The titles do not generally disappoint the reader's expectations, although a great variety of books, such as adventure books, epic, chronicles, as well as travel journals, ship's logs, traveller's guide books, etc. fall within this classification.

A wide amalgam of works is classified in the broad topic of travel, but with such a fragile suture that it is almost evanescent. Always present throughout the history of literature, this genre has progressively become more consolidated and it has presently reached a wide and varied production which, in my opinion, demands reciprocity as for the attention paid to all aspects which look into its generic nature, that is, its poetics.

If we delve into the history of literature, we will see that this fact is clearly confirmed. Following García Gual's article on classical travel literature<sup>1</sup>, we first come across Homer's *Odyssey*, the first great work of travel literature, in which the basic elements of this genre will recur, with slight variants, until the present. Another major mythical