

Calderón's Clotaldo: Coward or Courtier?

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The character of Clotaldo of Calderón de la Barca's La vida es sueño is a very controversial one. As the only human contact the jailed prince has prior to Rosaura and Clarín's entrance into his life, Clotaldo is everything to Segismundo: jailer, teacher, father-figure, the only link to the external world. Because of the inherent injustice in Basilio's decision to imprison his son from birth and Clotaldo's complicity in the plan, some critics have been scathing in their comments about Clotaldo. C.A. Merrick describes him as a man "sinfully preoccupied with honor and self-esteem" (257). Edwin Honig groups Clotaldo, Astolfo, and Basilio together as well-meaning, guilty, and unjust (162). For Rafael Lapesa, Clotaldo es "más severo guardián que piadoso maestro" (100). Other critics, however, cite Clotaldo's loyalty and sense of duty as his most redeeming quality. E.W. Wilson writes that Calderón's rendering of his character makes Clotaldo loyal and humble (87). J Michael Fulton agrees with Wilson, stating that Clotaldo exemplifies pious humility and reasoned determination (14). In spite of the varying opinions critics have had about Clotaldo's behavior and motivations, almost all have agreed that he is a loyal vassal of Basilio throughout the play. With this in mind, I have sought to study this aspect of his character using the most widely read work regarding appropriate behavior and comportment with princes and kings: Baldesar Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier. Clotaldo portrays the correct courtly behavior as laid out by the host of characters in Castiglione's work, but he crucially fails to pass the test of an exemplary courtier in his relationship with the king.

When the Spanish king Carlos V heard of Castiglione's death in 1529, he famously said: "Yo vos digo que es muerto uno de los mejores caballeros del mundo." Castiglione wrote The

Book of the Courtier while in the service of the Duke of Urbino in the 1520's, and it was finally published in 1528. Throughout the Renaissance in Europe, the book became required reading for the nobility (Bull 14), mainly because it proffered a paradigm of conduct tailored to the social and political demands of despotism in the courts (Javitch 17). In Spain, Boscán published a translated version of the work in 1534, yet the book found its way to the Index. Nevertheless, eventually fourteen editions of Boscán's translation were printed between 1534 and 1588 (Ruan 921). Castiglione's son Camillo eventually produced an expurgated version (with all references to Fortune and jokes about priests stricken) in 1584 (Bull 15).

Authorship of literature on courtly behavior was not confined to Renaissance Italy. Intellectuals continued to write about this subject during the Spanish Golden Age. As Boscán's translation of Castiglione enjoyed great popularity during the sixteenth century, Spanish writers sought to expound upon Castiglione's treatise, creating blueprints for behavior in the courts of the Iberian Peninsula. In 1561, Lluís Milá published El cortesano, a work about the Valencian court and the proper courtly attributes in the court the dukes of Calabria, Germana de Foix and Ferrante de Aragón (Escarti and Tordera 16). Closer to Calderón's time, Alonso de Barros wrote Filosofía cortesana in Madrid in 1587, which dealt with the importance of advancement at court in early modern Spain (Ruan 921). Lucas Gracián Dantisco adapted Giovanni Della Casa's Galateo overo d'costumi as El Galateo español in 1593, which became a key work in pronouncing correct gentlemanly and courtly behavior (Álvarez-Ossorio 83). Over twenty editions of the text were published in the two centuries following its initial publication in the late sixteenth century (Ruan 922).

Although Calderón wrote La vida es sueño in the early 1630's, the Spanish court of that time had many of the same characteristics of the courts of Castiglione's time. Felipe IV's court

was chiefly an absolutist one, albeit one marked by the influence of favorites, such as the Conde-Duque de Olivares. Moreover, the court of Basilio in the play is definitely one of absolutist control which clearly echoes those of the courts in the early sixteenth centuries. Thus, in spite of the difference in the works' age, the precepts laid out in The Book of the Courtier are eminently applicable to Clotaldo's role as courtier in La vida es sueño. Courtly behavior and the precepts of correct comportment were still being actively discussed by Spanish writers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as courtly society generated a need for manuals on courtly conduct (Ruan 925).

In the first book of Castiglione's work, the characters discuss the qualities that the ideal courtier should have. Ludovico Canossa mentions that a good courtier should "practice in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless" (67). Federico Fregoso mentions this argument again in Book II by saying "[F]irst and foremost, he should (as the Count so rightly advised yesterday evening) above all avoid affectation" (115). True to their advice, nowhere in La vida es sueño is Clotaldo guilty of such an offense. His words to both Basilio and Segismundo are free of excessive ornamentation, and he feels no need to inflate the ego of his royal interlocutors. His first words to the king are simply, "Podréte hablar?" (858), which reflect the familiarity in their relationship. To contrast Clotaldo's plain-spoken but effective speech, Calderón gives the exact opposite of this ideal in Astolfo and Estrella, the pedantic would-be king and queen who come to Poland to take Basilio's throne. Their praise of Basilio and Segismundo is cloying and is meant to ingratiate themselves with the monarchs. Of the two, Basilio seems to enjoy the adulation rendered to him by the pair, as it serves as an introduction to his first long speech in which he announces his abilities:

pues cuando en mis tablas miro
presentes las novedades
de los venideros siglos,
le gano al tiempo las gracias
de contar lo que he dicho. (619-623)

Segismundo, for his part, ignores the fawning praised heaped on him, rather choosing to respond to Astolfo's high-falluting homage with a rather abrupt "Dios os guarde." By contrasting the styles of speech to the prince and king, and their reaction to it, Calderón gives hints early in the play as to the correct speech behavior of courtier and monarch.

In another respect, Clotaldo also is an exemplary courtier when paired with some of the tenets present in Castiglione's work. In Book II, Fregoso explains to the assembled audience how a courtier should put into practice the qualities put forth by Count Ludovico in Book I. He states that the courtier should "devote all his thoughts and all his strength to loving and almost adoring the prince he serves above all else" (125). Based on this reasoning, Clotaldo must be seen as an excellent courtier to Basilio, for his conduct throughout the play shows attentiveness and a fervent desire to please the old king. Eugenio Suárez-Galbán comments that Clotaldo vehemently clings to the idea of loyalty to the king, and would sooner risk his life than break his oath to Basilio (79). While gauging the depth of love that Clotaldo feels for his king may be difficult, if one substituted the word "loving" with "serving" or "obeying" in Fregoso's statement, Clotaldo would stand out as chief among all courtiers.

Nevertheless, probably the greatest criticism of Clotaldo is his participation in the incarceration of Segismundo from birth. Dian Fox simply states: "The counsellor should have refused to be a party to the King's imprisonment of the rightful heir to the throne" (176). Clotaldo does not seem to have offered much criticism to Basilio on this subject for a number of years; only after Segismundo's impending release does he offer any hint that Basilio may have

erred in his decision: “Razones no me faltaran / para probar que no aciertas” (1150-1152). Prior to this one small rejoinder, Clotaldo makes no effort to argue the evil and folly behind Basilio’s decision (Merrick 259). While these critics are quick to point this out as Clotaldo’s greatest flaw, his complicity reflects the king’s indisputable position at the top of the social hierarchy, and it shows Clotaldo to be an avowed believer in the providential promises of Basilio’s rule. He shows an abiding trust in God and his liege that the problems these characters face are fleeting ones. As Fulton writes, “Basilio’s godless machinations ultimately lose out to Clotaldo’s example of facing what fate ordains with humility and pious reason” (18).

Just as critics’ opinions differ about Clotaldo in his cooperation with the prince’s imprisonment, so do the assembled nobles’ thoughts in Castiglione’s work regarding what a courtier should do in the case that his master behaves ignobly. Fregoso states that “duty should become before all other considerations,” yet “he has the right to and the duty to quit a service which is sure to bring him disgrace among honorable men. For everyone assumes that those who serve good masters are good and those who serve bad masters are bad” (131). Calmeta’s words just prior to Fregoso’s seem more attuned to Clotaldo’s predicament. He says that the courtiers should pray to God to give them just masters, “for once we have them we have to put up with them as they are [...] in this matter courtiers are like caged birds” (130). Clotaldo feels at odds in his role as jailer and tutor to Segismundo and faithful servant. Oddly enough, the solution to these two conflicting responsibilities in the play arises from his undying loyalty to both king *and* prince.

The first conflict Clotaldo faces in the play is in the first act, in which he comes upon Rosaura and Clarín in Segismundo’s prison, because Basilio has decreed that any person—save Clotaldo—who sees Segismundo in prison must die. Once he learns that Rosaura is his son (she

is still in a man's disguise in the first act), Clotaldo has to make a decision: to conceal the fact from the king that he has seen Rosaura in Segismundo's tower, or tell his king, which would condemn Rosaura to death. Clotaldo's anguish is clear:

¿Qué he de hacer? ¡Válgame el cielo!
¿Qué he de hacer? Porque llevarle
¡ay triste!
al rey es llevarle
a morir. Pues ocultarle
al rey no puedo, conforme
a la ley de homenaje. (426-432)

Critics have assailed Clotaldo for failing to take responsibility for Rosaura and for not acting to avenge her dishonor. Since this paper focuses on the qualities of the courtier as evinced by Clotaldo, I will refrain from studying the father-son (and/or daughter) relationship between the two. In one respect, however, Clotaldo's decision to take his prisoners before the king is indicative of much more than a man trying to run away from his past.

By obeying the king's edict, Clotaldo actually shows much more resolve than critics wish to admit. Since contravening Basilio's orders is anathema to him, what he does by taking Rosaura to the king and certain death is none too different than the Biblical precedent shown by Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac to the Lord. Just as Abraham trusted the Lord, Clotaldo trusts both the king and divine providence (Fulton 18). He hints at the possibility of Basilio mitigating the punishment, based on his many years of service to the king: "Quizá la misma piedad / de mi honor podrá obligarle" (461-462). Thus, instead of being an indecisive, weak character, the reader sees that Clotaldo exhibits reasoned determination in this matter. In fact, what he actually shows is faith in himself. He truly believes that the king's decision will be influenced by the many years of devotion to his monarch; Clotaldo hopes that the king will make an exception, and he does.

After Basilio releases Segismundo into the palace, Clotaldo soon is forced to act in order to save his daughter. The prince, understandably, is very confused upon waking in a sumptuous palace, his animal skins and chains replaced by delicate raiment. His behavior, frankly, is rather beastly. He throws a servant from a balcony to his death, and soon after threatens to have his way with Rosaura. In spite of imminent physical danger—and most likely death—Clotaldo intervenes, saying, “¡Oh qué lance tan fuerte! Saldré a estorbarlo / aunque me dé la muerte” (1668-1669). He rushes out, places himself between Segismundo and Rosaura, and struggles with Segismundo as the prince takes out a dagger to kill him. Fulton writes: “[H]is act of kneeling before Segismundo and placing his hand on the dagger with which the prince intends to kill him indicates that he is still following the same course he has charted for himself in the first act: humble resolution and dependence on divine assistance” (15). Like in the first act, Clotaldo emerges unscathed from this encounter, as Astolfo rushes in to save him just as the old man falls at Segismundo’s feet.

Clotaldo’s actions against Segismundo’s rage are also acquitted in Book IV of The Book of the Courtier. Ottaviano points out that an exemplary courtier is duty-bound to dare to oppose his prince if the prince is of a mind to do something unworthy of his station. And furthermore, “[P]rinces lack most of all what they must have in the fullest measure, namely, someone to tell them the truth and remind them of what is right” (285). As the play progresses, Clotaldo’s role as adviser and tutor to Segismundo gains more traction with the prince, and it is in this role that the old man exercises the most effect over Segismundo’s decisions.

In Book II of Castiglione’s work, Fregoso claims that good courtiers, especially those who are much older than their princes, function as oracles to whom all turn for good advice, and give common-sense solutions with dignity and grace (123). Early on in the play, we see that

Clotaldo has not only been Segismundo's jailer; he has been his sole teacher and counselor as well. Basilio says of his son's imprisonment:

Allí Segismundo vive,
mísero, pobre y cautivo,
adonde sólo Clotaldo
le ha hablado, tratado, y visto;
éste le ha enseñado ciencias,
éste en la ley le ha instruido
católica, siendo solo
de sus miserias testigo. (752-759)

In this way, Clotaldo is faithfully following the precepts of a good courtier laid out by Ottaviano in Book IV: "And just as the aim of the doctor should be to make men healthy, so the aim of the courtier is to make his prince virtuous [...] the courtier's final aim is to become his prince's instructor" (320). Many critics, albeit some begrudgingly, credit Clotaldo for teaching the prince in his captivity (Honig 170, Fox 173, Hesse 126). Still, the effects of his tutelage of Segismundo truly come to fruition after he is released into the palace. There, Clotaldo hints that he can emerge victorious against the stars that Basilio believes are aligned against him.

As Clotaldo is explaining the prince's new surroundings, he tells him:

Mas fiando a tu atención
que vencerás las estrellas,
porque es posible vencellas
a un magnánimo varón,
a palacio te han traído
de la torre en que vivías ,
mientras al sueño tenías
el espíritu rendido. (1284-1291)

This is the first hint that Clotaldo believes that Segismundo can overcome his father's oppression and the decree of the stars. In a way, it foreshadows the evolution of Segismundo's character at a time when the brutish side of the prince is on display. For, soon after this, Segismundo defenestrates the poor servant from the window, as for the first time in his life he is able to do

things simply because he feels like it. After years of incarceration, it is understandable that Segismundo is unable to control his impetuous desires, as the prince seems to relish in his newfound incarnation:

pero ya informado estoy
de quién soy, y sé que soy
un compuesto de hombre y fiera (1545-1548)

Soon afterwards Segismundo is back into prison, and he awakes, describing the supposed dream he has just had. And, as always, the only one there to listen to him is Clotaldo, who with his last line of the second act gives Segismundo a final piece of advice: “que aún en sueños no se pierde el hacer bien” (2146-2147). These words succeed in changing Segismundo’s outlook on life and spur him to do good instead of evil (Wilson 74).

Segismundo proves to be a quick study. He closes the second act resolving to repress his wild urges. Clotaldo is conveniently the first person who has the opportunity to see the prince’s change for good. After the soldiers release Segismundo from prison, he comes upon Clotaldo and invites him to join forces and overthrow Basilio. Clotaldo’s answer shows that he is still a faithful servant of the king:

¿A tu padre has de hacer guerra?
Yo aconsejarte no puedo
contra tu rey, ni valerte.
A tus plantas estoy puesto,
dame la muerte. (2406-2410)

In the battle scene in Act III, the two armies represent the liege that he serves and the prince he has raised and taught. Taking a side would have compromised his loyalty. He nobly offers his life rather than betray his king. In doing so, Clotaldo again proves to be a courtier worthy of praise. In Book II, Federico Fregoso states: “Certainly the courtier must not abandon his master when he is at war or in serious trouble, for then it could be believed that he did so to promote his

own fortunes or because he thought that his chances of gainful advantage had disappeared” (131).

Segismundo’s reaction to Clotaldo’s avowal of loyalty to Basilio reflects a marked change in temperament for the better. In these words, the transformation that has taken place in the prince becomes even clearer:

¡Villano!
traidor, ingrato! Mas ¡cielos!
reportarme me conviene,
que aun no sé si estoy despierto.
Clotaldo, vuestro valor
os envidio y agradezco.
Idos a servir al rey,
que en el campo nos veremos. (2410-2418)

The wild, defenestrating prince of Act I has been overcome by the calmer prince whose concerns turn more metaphysical in Act III: “Mas sea verdad o sueño / obrar bien es lo que importa” (2423-2424). And even more profoundly, he shows that he has learned, accepted, and acted upon the lesson that Clotaldo earlier taught him. As his tutor and mentor, Clotaldo must be given credit in showing Segismundo that doing good should take precedence in life (Fox 173).

While Clotaldo’s tutelage of Segismundo finally pays off, one cannot help but wonder what would have happened had he tried to do the same with Basilio. Although he sought to educate and reform the prince, the thought to guide the king to wise decisions never seems have crossed Clotaldo’s mind. Fox writes “While a good privado ought to be outspoken, Basilio’s closest advisor is a flunky. He obeys first and asks questions later” (173). Consenting to the decision to imprison a babe, then aiding and abetting the guilty party is not what the characters in The Book of the Courtier hold to be correct behavior.

Ottaviano in Book IV points out what kind of ruler evolves from an atmosphere of constant flattery and unquestioned obeisance: “[A]part from never hearing the truth of anything,

princes become drunk with power they wield, [...] they become so corrupted in mind that (seeing themselves always obeyed and almost adored, with so much reverence and praise and never a hint of censure or contradiction) they pass from ignorance to extreme conceit” (286).

One has to look again at Basilio’s first oration in the play to see that he has passed into almost a delusional state: he called Segismundo a murderer for having “killed” his mother in childbirth, and claims to have power over time itself. While it is the first time Estrella and Astolfo hear these words, it surely is not the case with Clotaldo. Obviously, he has never tried to dissuade Basilio from such vainglorious praise, nor has he argued against the cruel imprisonment of the king’s innocent son.

Here is the greatest flaw in Clotaldo’s character. Although he sees his role with Segismundo as one of a benevolent teacher, he is never able to apply that same principle with his king. In spite of the fact that Clotaldo is able to “incite his prince to virtue,” as Ottaviano might say, he never thinks to do the same with Basilio. Clotaldo would in this respect be a failed courtier in Ottaviano’s mind, for he in no way ever feels comfortable enough in front of Basilio to speak his mind plainly and tell his king when he thinks that he has erred. There is something almost frightening in his obedience, which effectively strangles any possibility of healthy rejoinders or admonitions. Rather, Clotaldo is so blinded by the majesty of the king that all he can do is agree and hope for the best. As Fregoso states, one must tell the difference between a good and a bad prince based on one’s discretion (131). Perhaps that is Clotaldo’s largest foible: he implicitly trusts a man whose motives he knows to be suspect, yet his unswayable devotion to his lord prevents Clotaldo from mending Basilio’s ways.

Conveniently enough, in Castiglione’s work there appears a voice counseling against the use of knowledge in a way that does not correspond with the Christian tradition, which dovetails

perfectly with Basilio's penchant for divination. In Book IV, Ottaviano states the the prince should be religious, "but not superstitious or given to the folly of spells or fortune-telling; for if he combines true religion and reverence for God with human prudence he will also enjoy good fortune and the protection of God" (307). While Basilio's machinations to keep Segismundo at bay ultimately fail, Calderón uses the figure of the king—and his eventual successor--to present a synthesis of the pagan and Christian worlds. While more pronounced in Calderón's *autos*, this portrayal of the two systems' efforts to reveal life's mysteries—divination versus trust in a higher power--ultimately are resolved by Segismundo's transformation (Suárez Miramón 580). This synthesis becomes clearer at the end of the play, when in Act III Segismundo responds to his father's surrender, as Basilio fully expects his son to take revenge:

Sentencia del cielo fue;
por más que quiso estorbarla
él no pudo, ¿y podré yo,
que soy menor en las canas,
en el valor y en la ciencia
vencerla? Señor, levanta,
dame tu mano; que ya
que el cielo te desengaña
de que has errado en el modo
de vencerle, humilde aguarda
mi cuello a que tú te vengues,
rendido estoy a tus plantas. (3236-3247)

Basilio magnanimously decrees Segismundo king, and the youthful monarch continues to show his newfound enlightenment as he turns next to Clotaldo.

Segismundo rewards rather than punishes his former tutor, and even cites Clotaldo's loyalty to his father as one of his best qualities:

A Clotaldo, que leal
sirvió a mi padre, le aguardan
mis brazos, con las mercedes
que él pidiere que le haga. (3288-32910)

Now that he has become king, Segismundo knows that Clotaldo will serve him as faithfully as he had served his father. Segismundo restores Rosaura's honor by ordering Astolfo to marry her (after Clotaldo finally claims her as his daughter), and he marries Estrella. The very same faith in providence that has sustained Clotaldo throughout the work has taken hold in Segismundo, allowing him to overcome his ill-starred destiny and his baser instincts as well (Fulton 18).

Through Clotaldo's quiet teaching and entreaties to rein in his passion, reason has taken hold in his prince. He may not be fully deserving of the honors bestowed upon him, but he earns his pupil's appreciation at the end.

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