

Glossing Scripture: Calderón's Sonnet Artistry in *Sueños hay que verdad son*

Michael Sullivan
Cornerstone University
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Abstract

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play, Sueños hay que verdad son exposes the author's abilities at aesthetically "glossing" a Scriptural text, an incident from the life of Joseph. With the use of diptych, contiguous sonnets Calderón skillfully leads the reader through Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, the fat cattle and thin cattle and the fruitful head of grain and the withered head of grain. In his aesthetic glossing of the biblical passage Calderón highlights the themes of the inexorable passage of time and man's reaction to these seemingly uncontrollable events. The article also discusses practical teaching strategies and textual implications for Christian teachers of literature.

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 70 *Autos sacramentales* are widely praised by critics. Parker, Kurtz, Sloman and Wardropper, among others, have lauded them for their technical merit, for their precise articulation of biblical and secular themes, and for the exaltation of the Eucharist invariably found at the end of each play.¹ One of Calderón's frequent verse forms found in the *Autos* is the sonnet. In the present study I will elucidate the poet's creative artistry in the sonnets "Yo sueño, que de un río a la ribera" ("I Dreamed That on the Banks of the River"), and "Que el río, geroglífico haya sido" ("Oh, May the River Be a Hieroglyph") from the play *Sueños hay que verdad son*, a dramatic presentation of key incidents from the life of the biblical character, Joseph. Specifically, I will analyze Calderón's diptych (a term referring to the parallel panels seen on the altar pieces of many European churches) sonnet treatment of the Pharaoh's dreams of seven

fat and seven lean cattle and the contiguous dream of the seven bountiful and the seven withered heads of grain. My interest here is to explore Calderón the Glossator's artistic use of the sonnets to recast a famous bible passage. I also intend to posit that Calderón's recasting of biblical themes provides teachers of foreign language and literature with ample ground for serious classroom reflection and discussion and opportunities for spiritual growth.

First, an explanatory note is in order. My use of the word 'glossator' is borrowed from Kurtz's book, *The Play of Allegory in the Autos Sacramentales of Calderón de la Barca* (210). The Spanish word "glosa" (according to the *Diccionario de la lengua española* of the Real Academia) is an "explicación o comentario de un texto oscuro o difícil de entender" (1042) ("an explication or commentary on an obscure or difficult to understand text"). Calderón the glossator, then, serves as an intermediary between the author and his audience. In Kurtz's words, he brings to light in a creative, aesthetic way

the belief in the possibility of perfect coincidence among human creative activity and communication, human perception, and divine intentionality, and the concomitant conviction that the human author can give 'new testimony' to God's continuing presence by praising Him in his own form (210)

This method of revelation is my focus here.

Extra-biblical accounts of the life of Joseph abound. Edward Glaser sees in Calderón's play the influence of St. Ephraim of Syria (*Liber sermonum beati Joseph*), St. Ambrose (*De Joseph*), the historian Flavio Joseph (*Antiquitates Judaicae*) and others. Spanish sources for *Sueños hay que verdad son* include Lope de Vega's *Los trabajos de Jacob o Sueños hay que verdad son* and Mira de Amescua's *El más feliz cautiverio y los sueños de Josef* (8). Calderón's play surpasses the previous versions in all aspects. McGaha's comment in regard to the afore-mentioned drama by Mira de Amescua explains Calderon's superior artistic competence:

A pesar de los muchos defectos de *El más feliz cautiverio*, contiene intuiciones, conceptos, y situaciones que, en manos de un dramaturgo más dotado, han dado resultados

excelentes. Calderón supo minar esa veta de metal de baja ley, convirtiéndola, como por arte de alquimia, en oro puro.(9)

In spite of the Happiest Enslavement's many defects, it contains intuitions, concepts and situations that, in the hands of a less skilled dramatist, will give good results. Calderón knew how to mine this vein of unrefined metal, converting it by art of alchemy, into pure gold. (My translation.)

I shall attempt to mine this pure gold of sonnet artistry.

The Genesis story of Joseph chronicles the meteoric ascent of the young Hebrew man from the status of a slave to a place of power and prestige in Pharaoh's inner circle: vice-regent of the entire region of Egypt. Why would Calderón choose such a series of events for his treatment in an *Auto*? Kurtz posits that the story obviously, "abounds in incidents which readily lend themselves to dramatization." (43) The scenes emphasize the "grist" of human experience with its roller coaster of emotions and reactions to the vicissitudes of daily life. A case in point is the moving reunion between Joseph and his brothers as they unknowingly come to him in Egypt for grain for relief from the severe drought. This scene is charged with high emotion as Joseph finally reveals his true identity to his brothers and is reunited with them. (Gen: 45). In fact, this emotionally charged dual sonnet scene of the *Auto* anticipates the subsequent reunion scene of Joseph and his brothers. The anticipation is achieved in essentially one way: the dramatic tension continues to rise until the culminating recognition scene. The reader/audience is carried along on this "wave" of expectation.

Also the scriptural account of Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's subsequent interpretations of said dreams strikes a cord with a dramatist wishing to artistically portray God's working in the life of young Joseph and, at the same time, to extol the Eucharist, the typical climactic scene of the Spanish *Autos*. Calderón the glossator is at his best here as he echoes the theme of dreams and the ephemerality of time, treated so adeptly in his famous earlier play *La vida es sueño* (Life Is a Dream) (1636).

The two sonnets of interest mentioned earlier appear at the approximate mid-point of the *Auto*. The scenes leading up to the double-sonnet sequence are highlighted by an earlier single sonnet, "Hermosas luces, en quien miro atento" ("Beautiful Stars at Which I Gaze Intently").

This sonnet, likening the stars to calligraphy, portrays Joseph's distress at being out of favor with Pharaoh because of the incident with Potiphar's wife in which he flees her sexual advances. Likening the stars to calligraphy anticipates the second diptych sonnet's description of the Nile river as the hieroglyphic of time. Thematically, the previous scenes highlighting the dreams of the baker and the butler flow smoothly into the interpretation of dreams sequence punctuated by the dual sonnets:

Yo soné que de un río a la ribera
siete vacas bellísimas salían,
y cuando de sus márgenes pacían
las esmeraldas de la primavera,

vi que otras siete de laudosa esfera,
tan flacas que esqueletos parecían,
saliendo contra ellas consumíam
la lozanía de sus dad primera.

Después vi siete fértiles espigas
Lágrima cada grano del rocío,
Y otras siete que en áridas fatigas

Sin granarlas abril taló el estío;
Y lidiando unas y otras enemigas,
Venció lo seco con lloverlo el río. (Osuna, 105)

I dreamed that seven lovely cows came up from the river to its banks, and as they grazed on its springtime emeralds, I saw another seven emerge from those waves, so skinny that they looked like skeletons, and came towards them. They devoured all the fatness of those cows in their prime. Then I saw seven fertile ears of corn—each grain sparkling like a teardrop of the dew—and another seven parched by the summer's heat before April could prosper them. They struggled, the dry ears won, and the river carried them all away. (McGaha's prose translation, 169)

The sonnet form is particularly appropriate for Calderón for a number of reasons. First, the Baroque sonnet is arguably one of the primary vehicles of poetic expression in the Spanish renaissance. The sheer number of sonnets penned in the Spanish renaissance and Baroque periods attests to its popularity. Although Calderón's total number of 74 sonnets is relatively low when one considers the many hundreds of sonnets written by Boscán, Garcilaso, Lope de Vega, Góngora, Quevedo, Herrera and many others, he did show an affinity for this verse form. The sonnet possesses a flexibility and variety of uses, most certainly including the poeticizing and interpretation of Scripture.

The diptych parallel nature of the two sonnets is also noteworthy. The sonnets appear back-to-back with no intervening dialogue to separate them, just as Pharaoh's dreams appear to be contiguous. The dual nature of the sonnets and the lack of interspersed dialogue arrest the readers' and the spectators' attention. They mark, I believe, a pivotal turning point in the drama: a point at which Joseph's fortunes take a definite turn for the better. The king's appointment of Joseph as vice-regent almost immediately follows the interpretation of dreams scene. The turning point in the drama is anticipated by the *volte*, or internal turn of each sonnet. The first sonnet's *volte*, "Sin ganarlas abril, taló el estío" ("What April Couldn't Do to the Cattle, the Drought Did"), occurring between the eleventh and twelfth lines, rapidly propels the reader/audience into the climax where the dryness ("lo seco") and waste win out in the end, but the dried up ears of corn float away in the river.

As we have seen Calderón's use of the sonnet form to elucidate Pharaoh's dreams is not surprising. What is of interest, however, is how Calderón uses these sonnets to "gloss" scripture. Calderón's gloss proceeds from the original biblical account of Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's successful interpretation:

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream. He was standing by the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. After them seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven, sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up. He fell asleep again and had a second dream. Seven heads

of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted--thin and scorched by the east wind. The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream

It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. (Gen 41: 1-7 and 28-30, New International Version)

This passage in Genesis flows directly out of the previous accounts in which Joseph successfully interprets the dreams of the butler and the baker.

So, how does Calderón give, in Kurtz's words "new testimony" to God's continuing presence? A cursory examination of the first sonnet, "Yo soné que de un río a la ribera" ("I Dreamed That From the Banks of the River"), reveals that the chief elements of the scriptural account are intact. The sonnet "glosses" Pharaoh's recounting of his disturbing dream about the fat and lean cattle. A more detailed reading, however, reveals some interesting artistic departures from the scriptural text, largely in the form of metaphors. In line two, the "siete vacas bellísimas" ("seven fat cattle") are not simply grazing as scripture indicates, but eating grass described as "spring emeralds" or "esmeraldas de la primavera." In the 10th line the grains of wheat are metaphorically "grano del rocío" or "grains of dew." The most arresting metaphor comes in the final line: "venció lo seco con lloverlo al río" ("the drought remained triumphant although some crops were supplied with moisture") (Glaser's translation, (62)). This metaphor, "lloverlo al río," is indeed intriguing. The river, originally mentioned in line one, is invested with the all-powerful, devastating quality of a soaking rain. It is even more fascinating given the fact that an overabundance of rain may lead to devastating floods, a common occurrence in Egypt. The rains also bring fertility and new life. Some non-metaphors also enhance the poetic artistry here. The lean cattle are aptly described as "esqueletos" ("skel-etons"). The consumption of the fat cattle by the lean cattle removes them from their "first state" or "edad primera," perhaps an echo and certainly a consonant rhyming of the word "primavera," "spring." Later "abril" ("april")

is mentioned, providing further emphasis on the season of spring.

How does Calderón utilize these metaphors and how do they heighten our appreciation of the Scriptural passage? First of all, Calderon's metaphors cast the incident into a new dimension: a dimension of colors and an environment imbued with subtle artistic nuances like the strokes a painter would use on a canvas. Calderón the glossator draws on the commonplace that people dream in colors and hues. The "spring emeralds" obviously suggest a dark green color. The "grains of dew" suggest the interesting combination of yellow and a transparency that is both of color and the absence of color. These metaphors enhance the visual appreciation of the scene. Calderón, as a man of his age, reflects the Baroque dramatist's preference for visual representation.²

Not only do the metaphors paint word-pictures in color, but they also create intimacy. Ted Cohen argues that metaphors as used in everyday speech lessen aesthetic distance between the speaker and the hearer. Put another way, Cohen argues that metaphors create a bridge of intimacy between the speaker and the hearer or, in the present case, artist and audience. Cohen traces the connection between the author and the reader in the following way: "(1) The speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgement of a community" (21).

How does this intimacy occur? In the case of the Scripture passage before us, the intimacy occurs in the context of a familiar biblical passage that narrates a common human experience: dreaming. Calderón's poetic images dressed in metaphors are, according to Cohen's view, the invitation. The reader is inextricably drawn into the world of the metaphor, accepts the invitation, and is engaged by the text.

The Second Sonnet

The second sonnet in the diptych pair, "Que el río jeroglífico haya sido" ("That the River May Be a Hierglyphic"), flows directly out of the first. The central image here is the flowing river as a metaphor for the inexorable passage of time, a common Baroque theme. One only has to recall Francisco de Quevedo's sonnets, "¡Ah de la vida!" ("Oh, Life") and "¡Fue sueño ayer," ("Yesterday Was a Dream")³ that lament the ravages of the passage of time. Calderón's second sonnet reads thusly:

Que el río jeroglífico haya sido
 Del tiempo, gran señor, prueba es bastante,
 Que siempre corre y va delante,
 Sin que nunca haya atrás retrocedido.

Luego es el tiempo de quien ha nacido
 En espigas y vacas lo abundante,
 Y es el tiempo también el que instante
 Todo lo deja a nada reducido.

Siete fértiles años imagina
 En espigas y vacas, cuyo halago
 En otros siete estériles termina;

Y pues te avisa el golpe en el amago,
 la abundancia prevén contra la ruina
 y la felicidad contra el estrago. (Osuna, 106)

It's obvious that the river was a hieroglyphic representing time, Great Lord, for it always flows and always moves forward, never turning back in its course. Therefore it is time that has produced this abundance of cows and ears of grain, and it is also time that in its fickleness has reduced all to nothingness. Your dream is seven fertile years in grain and cows, but their delight will end in seven sterile years. Since you have been warned of the damage that is to come, now store up plenty against want, and happiness against woe. (McGaha's prose translation, 169)

Calderón connects the last word in the first sonnet, "río" ("river") with the central image of the second. The transition is smooth as Calderón metaphorically describes the river as a hieroglyphic of time. The hieroglyphic designation suggests an Egyptian ambience, appropriate for Joseph's dealings with Pharaoh. It also suggests imaginative pictures since hieroglyphs are pictorial symbols that represent words. The picture evoked here is the flowing river out of which the cattle came. The river, like life,

runs (“corre”) and always moves forward (“siempre va delante”). It also never flows backward (“nunca haya atrás retrocedido”). Calderón goes on to say that life (the river) possesses the power to create life-giving abundance or, on the other hand, to create great destruction: “Luego es el tiempo, de quien ha nacido/ en espigas, y vacas lo abundante/y es el tiempo también el que inconstante/todo lo deja a nada reducido” (“Then the river which has provided abundance for the head of grain and the cattle has also left everything devastated and drought-ravaged”). Thus we see a connection between the image of the river as abundant and eternal and the ancient Egyptian ideology of the Nile as life giver. The extended metaphor likening life and time is Calderón’s effective technique of poeticizing scripture and bringing it to life. Calderón is very insistent here.

As we have seen, the second stanza highlights time’s dominion over periods of want and periods of plenty as it moves inexorably ahead. The thought is related to that expressed in Ecclesiastes 3.2: “a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to sow and a time to reap.” This stoic acceptance of the supremacy and ravages of time is again typical in Baroque thought. The third stanza summarizes the first sonnet and the first two stanzas of the second with no additional images or metaphors. The final stanza containing the *volte* stresses Calderón’s optimism: “la abundancia preven contra la ruina/y la felicidad contra el estrago,” “abundance prevails against ruin and happiness against havoc.” The optimism seems to be related to Joseph’s advice to store up grain for the famine, thus preventing widespread loss of life, and more importantly, saving the Hebrew people from certain death by starvation.

Concluding Thoughts

As we have seen, the Calderonian diptych sonnets effectively poeticize and enhance the Scriptural account of Joseph’s successful interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream. What practical principles and helps for Christian foreign language teachers can be drawn from the previous discussion of Calderón’s sonnets?

First of all, I note the importance of metaphor in the biblical canon, the interpretative commentaries, and for Calderón himself. One need not look far within the canon of Scripture, or any substantial work for that matter, to find ample use of metaphor. One notes the parables of Christ which are, in effect, extended metaphors. We remember in the gospels the kingdom of heaven being likened to many common everyday things (the mus-

tard seed) or to common everyday activities such as building a house (on the rock or on the sand). Encouraging students to ponder the wonders of metaphor aids in their critical thinking skills as they ponder Scriptural issues and issues of life comparatively. In developing a Christian worldview students must be encouraged to grapple with scriptural treatment of universal life themes. Earlier in *Sueños hay que verdad son* Chastity says:

...quiere Dios
 que para rastrear lo inmenso
 de su amor, poder y ciencia,
 nos valgamos de los medios
 que, a humano modo aplicados,
 nos pueden servir de ejemplo (64)

“In order to understand the enduring love, power, and wisdom of God, He wants us to use those measures that can serve us as examples when applied to the human condition.” (My translation.)

Calderon’s model of drawing from scripture applications to the general and individual condition serves as an impetus to the teacher and student to do the same.

Calderón’s glosses of the Joseph and Pharaoh scene also aid students in imaginatively engaging their affections. How does this happen? We first see the foundational Scriptural rendering of the interpretation of dreams scene. Our appreciation is nourished by Calderón’s nuances of metaphor, suggestion and implication. The metaphors lend an extra layer of meaning to the scriptural text. A new world of colors, textures, and hues is unfolded. The next step in the process is the revealing of meaning latent in the sonnets and, perhaps, not immediately or easily discernible. Then, we are moved to an emotional reaction. This systematic process is analogous to looking at the world through a microscope in which its subtleties become obvious. Kurtz describes the process thusly:

What the dramatized metaphors of the allegorical *auto* “get done,” less obviously but more significantly, is that sensory appeal to the audience which will elicit movement of the soul’s affections and, thereby, spiritual reflection, emendation, and redemption. (212)

Serious class discussions may further fathom these issues of reflection, application and redemption. For example, students may enjoy delving into the second sonnet's likening of time and the river Nile, a comparison barely touched on in the scriptural account, but deftly handled by Calderón. The related question of how Calderón's treatment enhances or even surpasses the scriptural rendering may also be discussed. Then, personal application and reflection can be made regarding the ravages of time, how the Christian reacts to the passage of time, or the positive and negative aspects of growing old, etc.

Calderón's aesthetic choices elaborated in the *Auto* reflect and communicate his particular philosophical and theological worldview. Calderón uses the allegorical *auto sacramental* as his choice of dramatic medium. He elects the philosophical dual sonnets for this scene with Joseph and Pharaoh.

The poetic metaphors are carefully chosen in order to enhance scripture and to mine the nuances of meaning. Calderón, the glossator, builds on scriptural truth with his frequent metaphors and allegories. The metaphors and allegories "gloss" Scripture and serve as additional windows into the world of God's Providence that becomes increasingly accessible to man. Our task as Christian foreign language teachers of literature is to effectively "mine" these truths and thus aid in students' spiritual, moral, theological and academic development.

NOTES

¹ See A. A. Sloman. *The Dramatic Craftsmanship of Calderón: His Use of Other Plays*. Oxford: Dolphin, 1958. Bruce Wardropper's *Critical Essays on the Theatre of Calderón*. New York: NYU Press, 1965 and *Introducción al teatro religioso del Siglo de Oro: La evolución del auto sacramental* Madrid: Anaya, 1953. Barbara Kurtz's *The Play of Allegory in the Autos Sacramentales of Calderón de la Barca* and A. A. Parker's *The Allegorical Drama of Calderón: An Introduction to the Autos Sacramentales*. Oxford: Dolphin, 1968.

² Donald Dietz, "Baroque Art and Sacramental Drama: Calderón's *No hay instante sin milagro* convincingly establishes the connection between Baroque art and the *Auto*. Although Dietz does not specifically refer to *Sueños hay que verdad son* the article is, nevertheless, very enlightening.

³ See Quevedo's poems in Rivers' *Poesía lírica del siglo de oro*. 314-315.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cohen, Ted. "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy," *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (78), 3-12.
- Diccionario de la lengua española*. Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1992.
- Dietz, Donald. "Baroque Art and Sacramental Drama: Calderón's *No hay instante sin milagro*." *BCom* 46 (1), 1994., 83-101.
- Glaser, Edward. "Calderón de la Barca's *Sueños hay que verdad son*." *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 82, 1966, 41-76.
- Holy Bible* (New International Version), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989
- Kurtz, Barbara. "No Word Without Mystery": Allegories of Sacred Truth in the *Autos Sacramentales* of Calderón de la Barca," *PMLA* 103 (3), 1994, 262-273.
- _____. *The Play of Allegory in the Autos sacramentales of Calderón de la Barca*. Washington: Catholic UP, 1991.
- McGaha, Michael. *Sueños hay que verdad son*. Pamplona: Kassel, 1997.
- _____. *The Story of Joseph in Spanish Golden Age Drama*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1998.
- Osuna, Rafael. *Los sonetos de Calderón en sus obras dramáticas*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in Romance Languages and Literature, 1974.
- Parker, A.A. *The Allegorical Drama of Calderón: An Introduction to the Autos Sacramentales*. Oxford: Dolphin, 1968.
- Rivers, Elias. *Poesía lírica del siglo de oro*. Madrid: Catedra, 1983.
- Sloman, Albert. *The Dramatic Craftsmanship of Calderón: His Use of Other Plays* Oxford: Dolphin, 1958.
- Wardropper, Bruce. *Critical Essays on the Theatre of Calderón*. New York: NYU Press, 1965.