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# Secrets and Secrecy in Calderón's Comedies and in Spanish Golden Age Culture. Outline of a New Research Focus in Calderonian Studies<sup>1</sup>

## El secreto en Calderón y en la cultura del Siglo de Oro. Un enfoque nuevo de investigación

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**Resumen.** La escenificación pública del secreto forma parte de la cultura del Siglo de Oro español. Este artículo presenta un proyecto de investigación en sus objetivos centrales: un estudio del secreto entendido como una característica intrínseca de la cultura barroca española basándose en estudios historiográficos, fuentes y teorías culturales del secreto; un estudio de las comedias de secreto de Calderón en el contexto del teatro del Siglo de Oro y una edición crítica de *El secreto a voces* con especial énfasis en el análisis de la estética del secreto y en la historia de las representaciones en Madrid y Viena. Este enfoque triple del proyecto apunta a un mejor entendimiento tanto de la originalidad de Calderón como de los mecanismos secretos de la cultura barroca.

1. This text is based on the proposal of the granted project «Secrets and Secrecy in Calderón's Comedies and in Spanish Golden Age Culture; including a critical and annotated edition of *El secreto a voces* from Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca» supported by funds of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project number: P 24903-G23 and by funds of the Oesterreichische Nationalbank (Anniversary Fund, project number: 14725).

**Palabras clave.** Teatro barroco, secreto, Calderón, comedias de secreto, escenificación.

**Abstract.** The public enactment of secrecy is part of the Spanish Golden Age culture. This article presents a research project, which pursues three objectives: a study of secrecy as a core characteristic of Spanish Golden Age culture, on the basis of historiographical studies, sources and cultural theories of secrecy; a study of calderonian comedies of secrecy in the context of Golden Age theatre and a case study of the comedy *El secreto a voces*, including a critical edition that also explores the aesthetics of secrecy and the history of early staging in Madrid and Vienna. With this threefold approach we aim at a deeper understanding of both Calderón's originality and of the secret patterns of baroque culture.

**Keywords.** Golden Age Theatre, Secrecy, Calderón, Secret, Comedy, Enactment.

#### SOCIAL THEORY OF SECRECY

Social theory has cured us of the habit of viewing secrets as facts that are hidden so as not to disturb the public course of life. Secrets in one way or another are part of social communication; they circulate, but they do so differently from ordinary data. Georg Simmel views secrecy as «a universal sociological form»<sup>2</sup>, a specific way of organising and processing information<sup>3</sup>. Secrecy not only structures the distribution of knowledge, it draws a dividing line between the more and the less relevant. It privileges some pieces of information over others, and consequently certain times and places in the culture to which they belong. To share a secret creates intimacy and marks a difference between those who belong to a group and those who do not: insiders and outsiders, criminals and detectives, stars and paparazzi, those who try to conceal shameful or dishonourable behaviour and those who are keen to expose it publicly. The dividing lines between secret and public spheres are therefore constantly challenged and redrawn. Thus, secrecy focuses attention, arouses specific emotions, structures behaviour, creates zones of tension and distension in social time. Quite regardless of their content, secrets and zones of secrecy excite the imagination of those who perceive the outside of secrets but cannot penetrate into the secret «space» (a sealed envelope, the signs of an encoded message, the *celosia* that concealed the king's presence in a public theatre). Zones of secrecy are part of our dealings with reality as a whole, just as what goes on (or seems to be going on) behind the scenes<sup>4</sup> shapes our perception of a performance in theatre.

«Secrecy», as Simmel saw, «procures enormous extension of life»; it «secures [...] the possibility of a second world alongside the obvious world, and the latter is

2. Simmel, 1906, p. 463. The July-August 2012 issue of the *Revista de Occidente* was dedicated to this subject: *Revista de Occidente. El secreto*. 374-375, Julio-Agosto, 2012.

3. Ángel María García Gómez contributed an engaging re-appraisal of Simmel's theory in his article «Poder, secreto y violencia en *Nadie fie su secreto* y *No hay cosa como callar*» (2013).

4. In what semiotics of theatre calls the *espacio latente*.

most strenuously affected by the former»<sup>5</sup>. Karma Lochrie, following Michel Foucault, views secrets and secrecy as «dark matter» inhabiting «the realm between what is said or seen and what is not» so that we cannot establish a «binary division» between what one says and what one does not say»<sup>6</sup>. It is no wonder that secrets have always been so central to fiction. Secrecy is a key characteristic of drama, a genre which habitually secludes secret spaces, mystifies identities through veils and masks, and divides identities between public and secret.

Using secrecy to create the «sweet ecstasy»<sup>7</sup> observed in seventeenth-century audiences of comedy, Spanish comic playwrights perhaps understood what Foucault later made a key proposition of his theory of Western civilization: secrets, and the subsequent process of endless interrogation and confession which they originate, are not just codes or techniques of communication. They create an interplay of actors that carries social energy and provides a main source of pleasure<sup>8</sup>.

#### SECRECY IN GOLDEN AGE SPAIN

Pedro Calderón de la Barca was the master of this type of comedy. In what can be seen as his most lucid reflection on the communicative aspect of secrets<sup>9</sup>, the comedy *El secreto a voces* (written and first staged in 1642)<sup>10</sup>, he places the secret and its story right at the heart of ducal Parma. Secret lovers, a secretary and a lady-in-waiting, exchange encoded messages in a shared public space while surrounded by a jealous duchess, a foolish fiancé, an authoritarian father and a double-crossing servant. Laura and Federico are the only ones who possess the key to their secrets, yet all the bystanders are mesmerized by the suspicion that there must be a «second world» behind the apparent one. Meanwhile the audience, who takes part without taking part, enjoys being admitted into both the secret reality of the couple and the secret intrigues of their opponents.

In Calderón's time, most spheres of public life had their equivalent in some secret space. Politics at the Habsburg —as other European courts— court were governed by secret councils, secret *informes*, secret intrigues and secret plans to control the conspiring parties of the nobility and to dodge the intrigues of ambassadors<sup>11</sup>. The propensity to fight out differences openly and violently had its counterpart in secret conspiracies and aggressions, poisoning being the most devious one. Secretaries were key figures at court, where the most talented mathematicians were hired as *secretarios de la cifra*, charged with protecting the king's secret cypher and decoding messages intercepted from couriers<sup>12</sup>. Alongside the bloody battlefields

5. Simmel, 1906, p. 462.

6. Lochrie, 1999, p. 1.

7. Valbuena Briones, 1962, p. xLi.

8. Lochrie, 1999.

9. Luhmann/Fuchs, 1989.

10. Cruickshank, 2009, pp. 250, 262 y 265.

11. Elliott, 1986; Carter, 1964; Seiz Rodrigo, 2010; Usunáriz 2013.

12. Navarro, 2009, pp. 42 y 365-366.

of Europe, the secret war for information was constantly waged and was sometimes decisive for the outcome of a military operation.

Religious orders used the secrecy of the confessional to promote their political and moral program<sup>13</sup>. Religious life was permeated by suspicion and an obsessive desire to uncover dissent or heresy. While the strictest moral codes seemed to dominate love and marriage, a great many people indulged in secret affairs and their intimate consequences. Secret offence called for secret vengeance. Courtiers were advised to conceal their own passions while scrutinizing the most insignificant gestures or expressions of their fellows in order to guess the hidden intentions behind them<sup>14</sup>. Secrecy, however, was not always caused by fear of shame. Entertainment at court and in town sprang from secret encounters and nocturnal adventures, secret signs emitted from windows and balconies, secret letters discreetly handed over in churches or concealed in gloves. Theatre performance enchanted with secret marriage, secret doors, secret tunnels which communicated the gardens of adversaries and lovers. Much social energy on stage and in real life was spent promoting or preventing traffic between the hidden and the public sphere, by tracing and retracing the line between the visible and the invisible.

Thus, the public and the secret were strangely opposed and connected at the same time. While power and prestige depended on the splendour of celebrations with their magnificent costumes, display of animals, architecture, fireworks, perfumes, ballet and music, things of «real» political or military relevance were mostly negotiated and dealt with secrecy. But these secret spheres were always felt to be present and hence enthralled all social life. The king and the queen perfectly enacted the sequencing of concealment with momentous appearances in public.

Each historical period and social sphere seems to possess and enact its own ratio of secrecy. And we do not assume that in Calderón's time and culture secrecy played a more important role than in those of Chaucer, Edith Wharton, John Le Carré —or Julian Assange, for that matter. However, secrecy in Golden Age Spain seems to have been guided by its specific cultural patterns and to be connected to specific circumstances. This leads to a first cluster of questions:

Where do we find secrecy in Golden Age Spain? How are public, private and secret spheres related to each other? How is the interplay among these spheres organised? Who controls it? Which techniques and media allowed for and secured secrecy? Letters were the particular purview of «specialists of secrecy»: secretaries, agents, courtiers etc. Their usage of written communication, or of a combination of the written and the oral, seems to contrast with fields reserved for secret speaking, listening, gossiping. A quite different use of secrecy is practised by those who, protected by the coxcomb, could penetrate secret spheres or else divulge open secrets (*segreti di Pulcinella* as the Italians would have it) without risk of punishment<sup>15</sup>.

13. Lozano Navarro, 2005.

14. Rodríguez de la Flor, 2005.

15. Remarkably, when Don Juan José took over power at court in 1677, he immediately substituted the king's confessor for one that was loyal to him, and he chased away the court buffoon Alvarado «al que

At certain places secrets were converted into gossip and rumour, for example, the famous *mentideros* at Madrid, and certain practices allowed to comment on open secrets, such as the attachment of anonymous *papeles* to the palace walls in Madrid. The life of Spanish princesses married to their Austrian uncles and cousins and the Viennese *infantas* joined in marriage to the Spanish kings and princes was affected by secrets and secrecy as well: their lives, and those of their household, were shadowed by the suspicion that they were secretly promoting the political interests of their country of origin. Contemporary scholarly debates about the role of women in secret affairs plays a crucial role in this assessment<sup>16</sup>. Finally: what are the underlying patterns of emotions and social values that motivate secrecy? How are manifestations of secrecy in different social fields connected to each other? Is it possible to reveal a grammar, a social and cultural logic of secrecy?

The aim is not to write an entirely new history of seventeenth-century Spain or of Catholic and Habsburg baroque culture. But by systematically placing secrecy at the centre of the investigation, a richer and more nuanced picture of the age of extremes in Spanish history will emerge. Research as outlined so far points at the social relevance of secrecy. Yet, in the baroque age, social and cultural spheres were not divided exactly as they are today. Moreover, in a time of all-pervading religious (and magical) beliefs and practices, otherworldly mysteries interfered with social communication. The use of cryptograms provides a good illustration for this: they served military-diplomatic purposes and at the same time promised a key to the penetration of a hidden divine order through the manipulation of symbols and numbers<sup>17</sup>.

#### SOURCES AND METHOD OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Work by historians such as Martin Hume, John Elliott, Bartolomé Bennassar, Rodríguez de la Flor, Jon R. Snyder, Fernández Albaladejo and Diego Navarro, and by anthropologists such as Michael Taussig and Julian Pitt-Rivers, could provide the guidelines for this inquiry and could be brought into dialogue with general studies on the history and anthropology of secrecy as mentioned above. Seventeenth-century sources, however, could be highly relevant. Their shades of style and nuances of language, the way they foreground some things and obliquely refer to others, what they say and what they allow to be read between the lines, will be highly relevant for our subject. Such sources will be chronicles, (secret) memorandums, newsletters, reports from ambassadors, personal letters, *diarios* and *avisos*: in short, all the treasures that series like the *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España* keep for the curious researcher. Many of them have not received the fine-grained analysis they deserve. We will not only be interested in their style and content but also in their communicative status: who was meant to

todos conocían como el correveidile de la Reina» (Contreras, 2003, p. 109).

16. Navarro, 2009; Rubio, 2010; Sánchez, 1998.

17. In the comedy *El secreto a voces*, Fabio is firmly convinced that his master Federico, assisted by diabolic forces, communicates across time and space without the need of a material support.

know and to read them? by what means was secrecy guaranteed? We will look at sources already well-known to the historian (e.g. Pellicer's *Avisos*), but we will also include handwritten and unpublished documents, such as the «account in MS. of all that happened in the Court from 1636 to 1642, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid H. 38»<sup>18</sup>. A third set of documents will be provided by scientific writing on problems of secrecy, such as the treatise on cryptography, *Cifra, contracifra. Antigua y moderna* by Tamayo de Vargas, which we are the first modern scholars to study.

In this way, we aim at a major contribution to the history of private life initiated and promoted by the great French historians and their followers, or, more precisely, to the history of the relationship among the public, private, secret and intimate<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, we will probe the explanatory force of current concepts of secrecy and examine the validity of categorisation according to different criteria. Our criteria will include:

- The social sphere secrets belong to: court secrets, family secrets (which are never just private affairs), diplomatic secrets (which can deal with most intimate family secrets when a royal marriage is negotiated), etc. Diverging roles assigned to men and women in the processing of secrets will thereby be a particular focus of our attention.
- The psychological motivations and social interests in which secrets originate: the desire to avoid exposure and shame, the need to cloak crime and conspiracy, the wish to promote intentions which will eventually be made public (e.g. secret marriage plans); or most interestingly: the desire to enhance the value of some knowledge and to endow the social spheres it belongs to with power and authority. This last is the atmosphere of secrecy created around kings, priests, encoded messages sent by secret agents, cryptograms, occult sciences, etc.
- The communicative status and communicative function of secrets: every secret is located at a specific point on a scale that spans from «nobody knows (or will ever know)» to «everybody knows but all pretend not to know» (Cervantes' *Retablo de las maravillas* and *The emperor's new clothes* by Andersen providing literary instances of these tacit agreements). Here, the distinction between *simple* and *reflexive* secrets as drawn by media theory proves to be essential. The first are secrets whose existence is known, while the second are hidden pieces of information that also hide the fact that something is concealed at all<sup>20</sup>. As comedy frequently shows, each type triggers different reactions in a communicative circle. In this context, we will examine the «open secret» and similar terms and concepts in different languages to come to terms with the broad spectrum between complete silence and total publicity.

18. Hume, 1907, p. 310, n. 1.

19. Ariès and Duby, 1986.

20. Merten, Schmidt and Weischenberg, 1994, pp. 56-58.

- The relation secrets entertain with time: some clearly point at a moment of revelation (e.g. the opening of a testament) while others are meant to remain secrets forever and to be «taken to the grave»<sup>21</sup>.

#### SECRECY ON THE CALDERONIAN STAGE

Calderón's life combined detachment from worldly affairs with strongest involvement in the sound and the fury of his age. Matters of secrecy played a crucial role in it. He was born into a dynasty of court secretaries and served as a secretary in the house of the Duque de Alba. He witnessed intrigues and conspiracies at the court of Philipp IV and his *valido*, the Count-Duke of Olivares, fulfilled important duties during his military service in Catalonia, taking secret messages from the battlefields to *El Escorial* in 1641<sup>22</sup>. It is quite probable that Calderón's childhood was overshadowed by obscure family secrets, and this might have led him to keep the greatest discretion in his own private affairs<sup>23</sup>.

From the beginning of his artistic career, he shows acute concern for the problems and implications of secrecy. In the cosmos he creates on stage, human interaction is permanently coloured and intensified by secrecy. The first encounter of Rosaura and Segismundo provides a good example for this: both protagonists are mystified by the strange appearance of the other, both try to explore the secret identity and intentions of the other. One may also look at any of the supposedly lighter *comedias de capa y espada*, *comedias urbanas* or *comedias palatinas*. The figures involved in the play act under the sign of secrecy all along the evolution of the drama. These dramas always tell the story of a secret as much as they tell a story of love, treason, jealousy, etc.: *La selva confusa*, *El astrólogo fingido*, *La dama duende*, *Agradecer y no amar*, *El escondido y la tapada* and so many others. Right at the beginning of his career, he creates an imaginary *San Secreto* who will be evoked again in no less than five comedies and in *La vida es sueño*. Around 1623, Calderón composes the comedy *Nadie fíe su secreto* where the conflicts and dilemmas caused by secrecy are placed at the heart of the plot. In 1642, he creates comic action around the paradoxical title *El secreto a voces*, thus adding a new dimension to the subject.

This is not to say that Calderón's contemporary authors did not value the subject. Most of Lope de Vega's comedies also deal with secrets. The concern is reflected in titles like *Sin secreto no hay amor* or in the plots of *El secretario de sí mismo* and *El perro del hortelano*, which provided inspiration for Calderón, as did Tirso de Molina's *Amar por arte mayor*. There are, however, several aspects of Calderón, which reveal that his concern for secrecy is a special one:

21. «Que nadie mejor que el muerto, / guarda un secreto», says Leonido in *Hado y Divisa de Leonido y Marfisa* (*Comedias*, ed. Valbuena Briones, 1960, p. 2128).

22. Cruickshank, 2009, pp. 246-255.

23. Cruickshank, 2009.



Firstly, explicit references or hidden allusions to the political and social affairs of his time are scattered all over Calderón's work, the references to cryptography in *El secreto a voces* being just one case in point. Plot structures, constellations of characters and communicative structures, although they do not simply mirror life at court, provide one view of the social codes of his time and culture.

In plays like *Nadie fie su secreto*, *No hay cosa como callar*, *Amigo, amante y leal*, *Basta callar* or *El secreto a voces*, Calderón thoroughly explores the emotional and affective side of secrecy.

Secondly, Calderón's plays offer provocative questions about secrecy: Can secret love be kept in long-term «emprisonment» in a woman's heart? (*El astrólogo fingido*). Is it possible to act according to moral standards when being taken into confidence by both of the opponents in a love affair? (*Nadie fie su secreto*). What happens to secrets once they are released of the sphere of oral communication, that is, when they are confided to letters? (*La devoción de la cruz*). Can a servant ever be trusted, and what are the consequences of knowing things one should not know? (*La vida es sueño*). How long can secrets remain secret once more than two people know them? (*Amar después de la muerte*). Calderón's figures must not be taken for their author's mouthpieces. Still, the semantics and rhetoric of secrecy dispersed over his plays constitute a polyphonic philosophy of secrecy.

Thirdly, while developing and improving models provided by others, Calderón shows the greatest mastery in his use of secrecy as a dramatic technique. In his plays suspense springs from concealment, mystery from the creation of a secret world which permanently interferes with the apparent one (*La dama duende*, *El galán fantasma*), surprise and discharge of emotion from the great moments of anagnorisis. Dramatic effect and comical entertainment, though following their own specific rules, cannot be detached from emotions and conflicts which the audiences knew from real life. Therefore, even though we take into consideration the logic of literature, it can probably be shown that the literary world presented on stage could only fascinate because it commented, transformed or parodied «real» life.

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