
In Defense of Clotaldo: Reconsidering the Secondary Plot in Calderón's *La vida es sueño*

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There has been much debate concerning Clotaldo and the secondary plot of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*. Menéndez y Pelayo lodged one of the more frequently cited commentaries when he wrote in 1910 that Clotaldo's very presence in the play was meaningless and referred to his relationship with his daughter as "una intriga extraña, completamente pegadiza y exótica, que se enreda á todo el drama como una planta parásita" (278). Although critics since that time have largely argued for the importance of the play's secondary plot, there has not been a clear consensus regarding whether Clotaldo should be admired or admonished.

Some critics strove to advocate a positive view of Segismundo's mentor. Wardropper's 1960 study, for example, emphasized Clotaldo's positive influence on his pupil (242), while Sloman, in the introduction to his 1961 version of the drama, highlighted Clotaldo's loyalty and sagacity and his importance to the play itself (*La vida es sueño* xiii, xix). Wilson argued in 1965 that "loyalty dictates all Clotaldo's actions" (85), and that Clotaldo and Rosaura represent contrasts to the selfish and arrogant behavior of the other characters in the play (85-86).

Since these studies, however, critical opinion has taken an increasingly pejorative view of Clotaldo, considering him not a model of good conduct but a figure characterized by temerity and inconstancy. Whitby, for example, while stressing the importance of the secondary plot in the play as a whole, criticized Clotaldo for his feeble efforts to succor Rosaura (17) and for his deception of Segismundo (18). Ayala also condemned Clotaldo's "carácter débil" (661), and suggested that Rosaura's firm temperament

entra en dinámico contraste con los sinuosos repliegues, desviaciones y elusiones de Clotaldo, su padre, hombre en cambio blando y débil, timorato, que desde su apariencia en escena se nos mostrará retrocediendo frente a los problemas y postergándolos para buscar soluciones de compromiso. (660)¹

Suárez-Galbán affirmed Ayala's assessment of Clotaldo's shortcomings, but was unable to fully reconcile it with the notion of poetic justice,² and therefore sought in 1969 to argue that, while Clotaldo is weak, indeed paralyzed by "culpabilidad ... represada" (82), his failure to resolutely assist Rosaura is based on "razones de índole psicológica más bien que moral" (75). Merrick went further in 1973, arguing that Clotaldo is a self-absorbed brute who revels in his power over Segismundo and dodges his responsibility to Rosaura. As Merrick put it, Calderón uses Clotaldo to portray the bitter irony of how such people often rise in spite of their obvious moral deficiencies (268-269). Honig's 1976 study presented Clotaldo as representative of "los violentos y secretos crímenes de la vieja generación" (749), classifying him along with Basilio and Astolfo as "hombres culpables, bien intencionados e injustos" (753). Lapesa's 1982 article referred to Clotaldo as a "más severo guardián que piadoso maestro" (100), while de Armas' study, published in 1987, echoes earlier criticisms of Clotaldo's treatment of Rosaura. Nelson's 1989 essay affirms May's statement to the effect that Clotaldo is as well-versed as Astolfo in "the art of kiss-and-run" (113).

In the last decade, the bulk of critical opinion has perpetuated this censure of Clotaldo. For instance, Anthony explores more deeply the psychological aspects of the drama that Suárez-Galbán first highlighted, asserting that Clotaldo and Basilio "have shown a willingness to expose their children to torment and death in order to avoid 'incrimination' as progenitors," and concluding that through the play's two father figures, "Calderón has managed to draw the inner portrait of ... the 'paranoid-schizoid position'" (167). Heiple has criticized Clotaldo for his avoidance of action (131), Friedman, like others, for abandoning his progeny (50), and Ruiz-Ramón for dehumanizing his student (112). Carter also points to the "severe shortcomings in Clotaldo's education of Segismundo" (354), and asserts that "Clotaldo's honour [is] as questionable as [that] of many another Golden Age scoundrel" (363). The depth of Carter's contempt is perhaps best seen in his use of the epithet "hatchet man," which he applies to Clotaldo no less than four times in the article. Stroud's critique of Clotaldo is based on Lacanian principles of psychoanalysis; thus he sees Clotaldo as a representative of the repressive social order that stifles the subject, and also maintains that "the audience cannot escape the irony of Clotaldo's position as violator of Violante and keeper of Basilio's law" (53).

That these critiques of the aged chamberlain are well crafted and thoughtfully presented cannot be doubted. Curiously, they even appear to have been forceful enough to move Hesse to alter his own stance: he wrote in 1965 that Clotaldo was "prudent and discreet" in his role as Segismundo's tutor (125) and in 1967 that he was "one of the few characters of noble intent" (147), but thirty years later

remarked on his ability to “equivocate and lie” (203) and asserted that he “mistreated the prince in prison” (204).

Only a handful of recent studies have diverged from this pattern of criticism of Clotaldo. Berenguer expressed ambivalence in this regard: while he affirms the notion that Rosaura and Segismundo “tienen [en común] el ser víctimas de una injusticia, haber sido traicionados—ignorados, olvidados—por sus padres” (115), he nonetheless refers to the author of the *injusticia* against Rosaura as a “siervo fiel” (116). Similarly, in the introduction to his edition of the drama, Ruano de la Haza recognizes Clotaldo’s loyalty and argues that he felt genuine affection for the mother of Rosaura—based on Clotaldo’s reference to “la hermosa Violante” in verse 460; nonetheless, he sees the aged retainer as a “ser limitado, incapaz de trascender las rígidas reglas y leyes de la sociedad en que vive,” and asserts that “Clotaldo entiende la letra pero no el espíritu de la ley” (75). Enebral Casares and Mariscall de Rhett are among the very few recent critics who see Clotaldo in a positive light: the former analyzes the similarities between *La vida es sueño*—the theatrical drama—and the *auto* of the same name, concluding that Clotaldo corresponds to the light of reason sent by the king/King (233), while the latter, similarly, notes Clotaldo’s role as the voice of order, admonishing Rosaura, Segismundo, and even Basilio to subjugate personal desires to social obligations, a standard which he applies even to himself (186-188). Finally, Strother studies Basilio within the framework of psychological theories of spousal loss and bereavement, suggesting that Clotaldo’s presence in the tower with Segismundo may be seen as evidence of the king’s paternal devotion, devastated though he is by the emotional blow of losing Clorilene (88).

My contention is that previous commentators have essentially misconstrued Clotaldo’s role in the play by overlooking the contrast between his comportment and that of his king. The two plots are, indeed, entwined, as Menéndez y Pelayo claimed, but their relationship is symbiotic, not parasitic. Sloman has accurately pointed out, “Reject the subplot and the play itself must be rejected” (“The Structure of Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*” 91), an assertion with which contemporary critics agree.

However, what makes his presence so essential is something other commentators have failed to articulate. This vital element of the play centers on how both Clotaldo’s and Basilio’s actions throughout the drama are illumined by Segismundo’s monologue near the end of Act III. It is this lengthy moralizing discourse that provides the framework within which Calderón’s audience would have interpreted the rest of the work, and it is here that Calderón communicates the moral principles that determined the play’s denouement.

Further, those who have advanced censorious interpretations of Clotaldo, alleging vacillation and irresponsibility, completely overlook his courage in three key instances, in all of which his fusion of resolution and humble dependence on God contrasts with Basilio's arrogance in his treatment of Segismundo.³ By examining Clotaldo's behavior in these three scenes, we will see that Calderón has crafted the action of the play in such a way as to contrast the humble servant with his proud master, bringing this tension to its climax in the third act and unraveling it for his audience through Segismundo's commentary.

Logically, this investigation must begin in Act I, where Clotaldo's character is first tested. Seeing Rosaura with his sword, Clotaldo feels torn between his obligation to his monarch and his duty to his offspring: Rosaura, whom the sword identifies as his child, has also intruded on Segismundo's secret prison, a crime punishable by death according to Basilio's command. In such a conflict of soul, Clotaldo calls on three resources: God, reason, and ultimately humility. As Clotaldo begins to grasp the depth of his dilemma, he laments,

¿Qué he de hacer? ¡Válgame el cielo!
¿Qué he de hacer? (427-428)⁴

Trusting in divine guidance,⁵ he at last comes to the conclusion that he must take Rosaura to the king, hoping that "Quizá la misma lealtad / de mi honor podrá obligarle" (461-62). Thus Clotaldo sets the example of pious humility and reasoned determination against which Basilio's behavior is shortly contrasted. His decision is blessed, of course, when, as if by divine providence, he discovers that Basilio has already decided to remove Segismundo from the tower. The royal decree of secrecy has been annulled and thus Rosaura's offense is now meaningless.

It is especially important to note how Calderón arranged the action here. Clotaldo's decision is followed almost directly by Basilio's speech to the court explaining Segismundo's long incarceration. Immediately afterward Clotaldo appears before Basilio to present his petition on behalf of Rosaura, which Basilio interrupts to assure him that all is well. The contrast between Basilio's treatment of Segismundo and Clotaldo's paternal commitment is thus presented in the opening scenes of the play.

In Act II, Calderón continues the juxtaposition of the two parent-child relationships, and again Clotaldo's quiet resolve contrasts, both thematically and chronologically, with Basilio's abuse of Segismundo. After monarch and minister confer regarding Basilio's plan to put Segismundo's nature to the test, Basilio retires, leaving Clotaldo to deal with Segismundo as the plan is set in motion. When Segismundo chases Clotaldo from the room, Basilio appears on stage only for a

few moments, berating the irate prince for the very character traits that were stamped on him by his confinement.⁶ Segismundo's venomous outburst at Basilio's departure is interrupted when he catches sight of Rosaura and is captivated by her beauty. As Clotaldo watches from concealment, Segismundo grows increasingly frustrated with Rosaura's evasiveness, finally declaring:

... Hoy he arrojado
dese balcón a un hombre que decía
que hacerse no podía;
y así, por ver si puedo, cosa es llana
que arrojaré tu honor por la ventana. (1641-45)

Given Segismundo's indignation toward Clotaldo a few scenes previously and his hurling the servant over the balcony, the old chamberlain knows he would risk violent death by intervening. He agonizes,

¿Qué he de hacer, cielos, cuando
tras un loco deseo
mi honor segunda vez a riesgo veo?" (1647-49)

As in the first act, Clotaldo is fully aware of the potential danger, but nonetheless does what duty demands: resolving, "Saldré a estorbarlo, aunque me dé la muerte" (1669), he interposes himself between his daughter and her potential assailant, thereby becoming himself the object of Segismundo's ire. Clotaldo thus proves he is no vacillating coward as some have asserted. Moreover, his 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 charted for himself in the first act: humble resolution and dependence on divine assistance. Once again, Clotaldo's pious steadfastness is rewarded, as Astolfo prevents the raging prince from killing his former teacher, and Rosaura's honor is preserved.

It is significant to note here that Clotaldo's deliverance is followed by Basilio's terse condemnation of Segismundo's behavior and his command that the errant youth be returned to his former cell.⁷ This leads to the observation that, while in the first act the contrasting parental paradigms were arranged [Clotaldo—Basilio—Clotaldo], in these scenes of the second act the pattern is continued: [Basilio—Clotaldo—Basilio—Clotaldo—Basilio]. Thus, viewing both acts together, it can be noted that the two fathers are constantly alternating on the stage, their two natures in perpetual opposition.

With Segismundo's rebellion in Act III, this tension reaches its peak. As the heir-apparent is freed from his cell once again, this time by a mob determined to resist Basilio's choice of Astolfo as the next king, Clotaldo once again faces dan-

ger. Segismundo is prepared to overlook his previous resentment toward Clotaldo's complicity with the king, and offers a peaceful partnership to his former jailer. Clotaldo, however, knowing the loyalty he owes to Basilio, refuses even to contemplate the possibility, telling Segismundo frankly,

yo aconsejarte no puedo
contra mi Rey, ni valerte.
A tus plantas estoy puesto:
dame la muerte. (2407-10)

He makes no effort to soften his refusal to join with Segismundo, nor to avoid committing to one side or the other. Knowing what the consequence will be, he nonetheless unflinchingly chooses the path of obedience and honor—"aconsejarte no puedo / contra mi Rey"—yet tempered, as always, with his characteristic humility—"A tus plantas estoy puesto." As before, circumstances arrange themselves to favor Clotaldo, as the now-regenerate prince pardons and releases him, admiring his valor.

This scene is followed by a conversation between Basilio and Astolfo in which the monarch expresses his despair at the outcome of events. In the first act he confidently asserted that man can overcome fate:

porque el hado más esquivo,
la inclinación más violenta,
el planeta más impío
sólo el albedrío inclinan,
no fuerzan el albedrío. (787-791)

But he now concludes that resistance is useless:

Poco reparo tiene lo infalible,
y mucho riesgo lo previsto tiene.
Si ha de ser, la defensa es imposible,
que quien la escusa más, más la previene.
¡Dura ley! ¡Fuerte caso! ¡Horror terrible!
Quien piensa que huye el riesgo, al riesgo viene.
Con lo que yo guardaba me he perdido;
yo mismo, yo, mi patria he destruido. (2452-59)

Whereas Clotaldo faced what appeared to be inevitable death with meekness and determination, Basilio's initial self-assurance has now given way to hopelessness.

After Rosaura joins Segismundo, the two fathers appear together at the final stages of the battle, and it is here that the distinction between the two attains its zenith. As they and Astolfo flee, they happen upon Clarín, who is hit by an errant bullet. Before expiring, he warns, "mirad que vais a morir, / si está de Dios que

muráis” (3094-95). For Basilio, the example serves as the final confirmation that what fortune decrees cannot be averted. He despairingly cries,

¡Qué bien, ¡ay cielos!, persuade
nuestro error, nuestra ignorancia,
a mayor conocimiento
este cadáver que habla
por la boca de una herida,
siendo el humor que desata
sangrienta lengua que enseña
que son diligencias vanas
del hombre cuantas dispone
contra mayor fuerza y causa...! (3098-3107)⁸

Clotaldo replies,

Aunque el hado, señor, sabe
todos los caminos, y halla
a quien busca entre lo espeso
de dos peñas, no es cristiana
determinación decir
que no hay reparo a su saña.
Sí hay, que el prudente varón
victoria del hado alcanza. (3112-19)

His words are a reproof not only to his ruler, but also to anyone in the audience who questions the efficacy of human effort. Clotaldo thus becomes the spokesman and chief advocate for the concept of free will in the play. When Basilio surrenders—not only to Segismundo but also to the destiny that he now considers inevitable—what follows is vivid confirmation of Clotaldo’s reminder. Segismundo pays homage to his defeated father and Clotaldo’s daughter is betrothed to Astolfo. Despite all appearances, destiny *is* averted. Clotaldo’s faith proves well-founded.

Upon receiving Basilio’s surrender, Segismundo engages in a lengthy explanation of his altered character, and it is here that the play’s action is framed for our interpretation, as indeed it would have been for Calderón’s public. Condemning Basilio’s imprudent effort to alter Heaven’s decree by unjust means, Segismundo shows how his sire’s oedipal attempts to turn aside fate merely hastened its culmination. He observes,

la fortuna no se vence
con injusticia y venganza;
porque antes se incita más.
Y así, quien vencer aguarda

a su fortuna, ha de ser
con prudencia y con templanza.
No antes de venir el daño
se reserva ni se guarda
quien le previene; que aunque
puede humilde—cosa es clara—
reservarse dél, no es
sino después que se halla
en la ocasión.... (3214-26)

His argument constitutes a meticulous reiteration of the distinction already drawn between Clotaldo and Basilio: while one cannot avoid fate's edict by scheming against it in advance, it is possible to overcome it with wisdom, moderation and humility. These are, in fact, two sides of the same coin, and it is this truth as articulated by Segismundo that gives coherence and clear meaning to Calderón's work.

When viewed within the context of this discourse, the entirety of the play can be seen as a demonstration of the diametrical tension between these two figures. Basilio's godless machinations ultimately lose out to Clotaldo's example of facing what fate ordains with humility and pious reason. Basilio's reconciliation with Segismundo in spite of the dire astrological predictions and his abominable treatment of his son is a testimony to the fallibility of his fatalistic scheming, while the honor bestowed on Clotaldo demonstrates approbation of his unpretentious determination. In addition to ordering the betrothal of Rosaura and Astolfo, Segismundo extols Clotaldo's faithfulness, drawing a contrast between the chamberlain and the rebellious soldier: he says of Clotaldo, "que *leal* / sirvió a mi padre" (3288-89, emphasis added) and promises to grant him any honor he requests, but immediately afterwards condemns the soldier to lifelong imprisonment, stating "que el *traidor* no es menester, / siendo la traición pasada" (3300-01, emphasis added).⁹

If there is any irony in the play's outcome, it is not, as Merrick and Carter suggest, in Clotaldo being honored at the conclusion of the play.¹⁰ Indeed, he is patently not the craven, indecisive wretch that some have asserted him to be. Rather, the irony lies in the fact that Basilio, despite acting more like a despot than a loving father, finds his son as gracious and amiable in victory as he was cruel and indomitable in the palace. The same divine grace that has been Clotaldo's anchor throughout the play has enabled Segismundo to overcome his destiny as well and become the kind of man that no one would have believed possible. By applying the same measure of *prudencia*, *templanza* and *humild[ad]* that Clotaldo typifies,

Segismundo proves Basilio wrong: a person's destiny is ultimately shaped by the vital union of human will and faith, not by fate. At a time when the Catholic Church's teaching on free will was enduring a bitter assault from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Calderón offers a clear repudiation of Calvin's error, which is Basilio's as well.¹¹

In summary then, Clotaldo's presence in the play is not, as Menéndez y Pelayo argued, a parasitic growth that strangles the main action. Rather, he represents a contrast with Basilio, both in terms of character attributes and in their physical presence on stage, which is of central importance throughout the work. The presentation of these polar opposites, as they alternate throughout the drama, is one of the pillars on which the play rests. Their contrary approaches to life's obstacles demonstrate fundamentally divergent perspectives concerning the question of free will and the efficacy of human effort. For this reason, along with such concepts as the fleeting duration of earthly life and the education of a prince, this examination of destiny and will—and thus Clotaldo's presence—is of vital significance.

In addition, Clotaldo is not merely a spineless lackey who emulates his monarch's abuse and neglect of his offspring. Rather, his commitment to his daughter is evident throughout the play, particularly in his intervention on her behalf before Segismundo, while his loyalty and faithful service to the crown in spite of personal danger ultimately earn him the enthusiastic praise of the reformed prince. Instead of being interpreted as dramatic irony, Segismundo's commendation of his former jailer should be recognized as spotlighting one of the work's least celebrated but most important figures. ✱

Notes

¹ I am citing from the version of this article that Ayala published in *Calderón y la crítica: Historia y antología* (Madrid: Gredos, 1976). Earlier versions of the study were published twice under the same title in 1962 and 1963.

² Suárez-Galbán referred to Wilson's assertion (87) that Calderón arranged the action to demonstrate divine reward for virtue and divine chastisement for vice. Parker extensively developed this idea, writing that "En la vida real, los malvados pueden prosperar y los virtuosos sufrir. Pero, en la literatura, durante el siglo XVII español se consideró decoroso que el crimen no quedara impune ni la virtud sin premio" (335). Suárez-Galbán accepted this idea of dramatic causality but nonetheless argued for a frail, vacillating Clotaldo. He attempted to justify Clotaldo's reward at the end of the play by telling us that the chamberlain was not deceptive but merely indecisive, and therefore could be honored without violating poetic justice. However, the notion of a

feeble, irresolute Clotaldo is difficult to reconcile with his behavior when circumstances demand immediate action, particularly in Acts II and III.

³ Many critics have argued that Clotaldo and his monarch are parallel characters as far as their moral standing is concerned, and that their paternal shortcomings create a level of parity between them (see, for example, de Armas 56, Merrick 257, Heiple 131, and Anthony 167). However, I shall strive to demonstrate that their respective actions form a contrast that is central to the work's development.

⁴ This and all succeeding citations of Calderón's drama are taken from Ruano de la Haza's edition (Madrid: Castalia, 1994).

⁵ Heiple has argued that there are few references to God in the play apart from oaths (123), but given Clotaldo's reiteration of this expression, or variants thereof, in this and similar instances, I believe it is justified to interpret these exclamations not as profane idioms but as a genuine appeal for divine illumination.

⁶ This is the first face-to-face encounter between Basilio and his heir apparent. Ruiz-Ramón has noted that, throughout the play, "cada vez que hablan es para afrontarse oponiéndose por la palabra; el lenguaje, en lugar de funcionar como instrumento de comunicación es usado como arma de agresión" (109). However, he argues, the king bears the main responsibility for this, "siendo Basilio que inicia el duelo verbal" (110).

⁷ Ruiz-Ramón has rightly observed the irony of Basilio appearing on stage mere seconds after Segismundo's outburst, both here and in the previous incident of the servant whom the prince hurls from the balcony (109).

⁸ Heiple views this scene as Basilio's great epiphany, in which he realizes the vanity of seeking "to avoid his destiny by refusing to act" (129). However, the king's previous efforts to resist fate cannot be categorized as inaction, misguided though they were. In addition, Clotaldo's, and later Segismundo's repudiation of the fatalism Basilio expresses here demonstrate that this point in the action marks a crisis of despair for Basilio, not a moment of enlightenment.

⁹ In light of these remarks, it is illogical to assert, as have Heiple and others, that the denouement should be considered a repudiation of Clotaldo's actions.

¹⁰ Merrick and Carter insist that, by the closing scenes, the spectators/readers are convinced of Clotaldo's cowardice; thus, they argue, the honor he receives at the end of the play is a bitter shock that Calderón deliberately gives his audience. However, I see no justification for this reading of the *desenlace*. To begin with, Segismundo's hearty encomium of Clotaldo's actions, especially in contrast to his condemnation of the rebel soldier—*leal* vs. *traidor*—negates Carter's assertion that "Segismundo knows [Clotaldo] is at least as much of a traitor as the soldier" (368). Moreover, such an interpretation, rather than elucidating the final scene of the play, would merely lead to an even more troubling question of consistency: why is Clotaldo alone spared punishment for his faults, while Basilio, Astolfo, Clarín and the rebel soldier are all castigated for theirs?

¹¹ Homstad has sought to downplay the theological aspects of the drama, arguing that Segismundo's transformation stems from nothing more than a heightened awareness of Machiavellian principles of political survival, and that "*La vida es sueño* is not a religious play, but a political play" (127). However, I concur with Friedman that the work "may not be so much about the perfect prince as about perfect principles, about the rules that govern existence" (43).

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