

**The Theatrum Mundi of Celebration**

**Pedro Calderón de la Barca and the World Theatre as Aesthetic Theodicy**

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The *Theatrum Mundi* of Celebration



The *Theatrum Mundi* of Celebration.  
Pedro Calderón de la Barca and the World Theatre as Aesthetic Theodicy

Rasmus Vangshardt.  
Centre for Medieval Literature,  
University of Southern Denmark.  
2021



This is the day the Lord has made;  
We will rejoice and be glad in it.  
—Psalms

Preiset die Tage.  
—J.S. Bach

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## Contents

<i>Texts and Translations</i>	11
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	12

### I. Plaything or Purpose. Introduction

Topos, Absolute Metaphor, Mighty Truth	21
Pessimism versus Celebration	26
The Challenge of Historiography	29
Modernity: A Tentative Definition	30
On the Right Side of History	35
Between Philology and Comparative Literature	37

### II. Medieval Practices, Modern Taxonomies. Contexts

Medievalism Between Continuity and Break	46
Early Modern <i>Vanitas</i> (State of the Art)	51
The <i>Theatrum Mundi</i> in Early Modern Context	57
Geography	58
Genre	60
Old and New Sources of the <i>Theatrum Mundi</i>	62
Homer; Democritus and Heraclitus;	
Plato; Stoicism; St. Paul	63

### III. '*En aplauso de este día.*' A Poetic of Festivity

The <i>Auto</i> as an Autonomous Art Form	75
The <i>Transiturus</i> and the Celebratory Origins of the <i>Auto</i> in the Middle Ages	77
Calderón on the Nature of the <i>Auto</i>	81

Polysemy and the Ecstasies of Time in the Medieval <i>Quadriga</i>	86
Heidegger on the Phenomenology of Time	88

**IV. ‘*El circular Coliseo.*’  
The *Loa* to *El gran teatro del mundo* Reconsidered**

The Philological Problem	93
Authorship in Light of Performance Dates	97
¿ <i>El gran quínico del mundo?</i>	98
Four Features of the <i>Loa</i>	100
Metalepsis: The Puzzle of Intrusion	100
<i>Fiesta</i> and the <i>día del Señor</i>	106
Theodicy	111
The Three Divine Laws	115

**V. *El gran teatro del mundo.*  
A Close Reading**

The Purpose of Creation	120
<i>Representación</i> as <i>Vorstellung?</i>	122
The <i>Negro Velo</i>	124
¿ <i>Fue corta la comedia?</i> The Play’s Deep Temporality	127
Excursus: Gadamer on Celebration and Temporality	134
“Obrar bien que Dios es Dios”	138
Rehearsals	138
The Fall of Man in the <i>Theatrum Mundi</i>	141
The Flower Motif	145
Medievalism I: The <i>Danse Macabre</i>	150
The King’s Three Bodies	158
‘In the Soul, Beauty Rules’	162
The Painting of the World: Textual and Metaphorical <i>Chiaroscuros</i>	167
The Judgement	175
Medievalism II: The <i>Tantum Ergo</i>	178
The Play’s Apology	181

## VI. The World Theatre as an Aesthetic Theodicy

The Principle of Plenitude in Augustine and Calderón	191
Calderón's Dramatic Theodicy	195
Metalepsis and Ritualistic Transformation	196
Cosmic <i>Theatrum Mundi</i>	201
Metalepsis as Cosmic Liturgy	205

## VII. Two Modern Comparisons

Gadamer on <i>Verwandlung</i> and Participation	212
Kierkegaard and the Question of Equality in the <i>Theatrum Mundi</i>	217

## VIII. When the Heavens Kept Watching. Perspectives and Conclusion

'Horrible, Intolerable Anachronisms'	228
'Modernity Began as an Act of Theodicy'	230
' <i>Tierra y Cielo</i> '	232
<i>Bibliography</i>	238
<i>Summary in English</i>	254
<i>Summary in Danish</i>	256



## Texts and Translations

In order to make the work accessible to non-Spanish readers, I provide prose translations of all longer quotations of Calderón's verse. As I am not a native speaker of neither the English nor the Spanish language, these translations are tentative work tools which cannot do justice to Calderón's baroque verse. They are, of course, open for discussion. I also provide English translations—printed or, in the absence of current printed translations, by me—of all Spanish and German philosophy and commentary literature with original terminology in brackets. In the cases of particularly important passages, I add the full original quote for the sake of transparency.

To lower the number of footnotes, references to Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo* along with its *loa* as well as all quotations of Shakespeare and the Bible are given in parenthesis in the body text. Information about the preferred editions of Calderón and Shakespeare will be inserted at first quotation. The preferred edition, along with all other consulted editions of Calderón's works, can also be found under section A in the bibliography. When nothing else is noted, biblical translations stem from the New King James Version. The bibliography's section D supplies a complete account of the Bible editions and abbreviations used.

A version of chapter IV on the *loa* has been accepted for publication in *Bulletin of the Comediantes* and is scheduled to appear in the Spring 2021 edition. Therefore, it is likely that the journal article will be published before the official assessment of the present dissertation. Both article and chapter benefitted from the comments of the journal's two anonymous peer reviewers, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their help in improving the text. The same relates to the basis for the continuous comparisons to Shakespeare's multifarious fascinations with the *theatrum mundi* in the following. These considerations have been published as "Antonio's Sadness and the Stoic Theatrum Mundi of the Early Modern City" in *Orbis Litterarum* 74, no. 4 (2019). Certain formulations on medievalism and the so-called 'great divide' between the Middle Ages and modernity have been used in the article "Coherence and the Longing for Modernity in Literary Historiography, or: Why History and Historicism Are Two Things," published in *Res Cogitans* 15, no. 2 (2020).

## Acknowledgements

“Instead of that bleak image of linear world history, which one can only uphold by closing the eyes to the predominant amount of facts, I see a spectacle of multiple, mighty cultures which flourish with primeval force from the wombs of their maternal scenery.” In a characteristically prophetic tone of voice, the German historian Oswald Spengler invokes the *theatrum mundi* and relates it to the spectacle of sceneries on the world stage. This dissertation has benefited from several old European sceneries during the course of the last three years. I do not believe it would have been a work of such comparative nature if these places had not exerted their primeval force. Therefore, I wish to begin by paying my small homage to the places where this dissertation was written: The cities of Copenhagen, York, Heidelberg, and Oxford. *Humano cielo*, this Europe.

The experience of these spectacles had not been possible without a three-year PhD fellowship at the unique work environment of the Centre for Medieval Literature (CML) and the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Without the centre, funded by the Danish National Research Foundation, and an Elite Researcher’s Travel Grant from the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, this work would have been much less ambitious than it hopefully is. In this context, I would like to thank prof. Elizabeth Tyler (York), prof. Gerhard Poppenberg (Heidelberg), and prof. Jonathan Thacker (Oxford) for letting me spend full terms at their institutions. This is also the place to thank my co-supervisor, prof. Christian Høgel (CML/SDU), for his unlimited enthusiasm and medieval-like learning. The present study had definitely been a work of poorer quality without his advice.

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I am grateful that the following people took time from the play of their own lives to read and criticise excerpts of the full text. Thank you, Ole Vangshardt, Jonas J.H. Christensen, Ida Aagaard Mikkelsen, Joachim Wiewiura, Kristoffer Garne, and Andreas Riis Damgaard. I also thank the latter three for endless adventure, universal fighting spirit and shared beliefs in what the humanities ought to be. The following work is—to the best of my ability—a humble attempt at an example of what that is.

Finally, one person more than anyone else deserves—and long has—my immense gratitude: My treasured *Doktormutter*. I thank Sofie Kluge for her unprecedented generosity, her wisdom, spirits, and ambition. I hope that many more years of cooperation and friendship are to come.





# I. Plaything or Purpose.

## Introduction

This staging begins with a blatantly private experience. Once one begins to discover the classics of European literature, the startling idea that perhaps the world is a great theatre presents itself. This occurrence is anything but private for it is accessible to anyone who begins to travel the literary canon. The private nature of the experience consists in the peculiar feeling of being moved or touched by this image; be that Zeus' reluctance to turn his shining eyes away from the spectacle of human affairs and folly in *The Iliad*,<sup>1</sup> St. Paul's claim that the apostles have been made a *theatron* to the world and to the angels,<sup>2</sup> that deep, dark wood of Dante's divine comedy,<sup>3</sup> Antonio's sigh that he has been given a sad part on the world stage in *The Merchant of Venice*,<sup>4</sup> or Ernst Jünger's watching the bombing of Paris with a glass of strawberry Burgundy in his hand from a hotel rooftop, noting that the world had become "a theatre" of "stupendous beauty."<sup>5</sup> The peculiarity of the feeling arises through encounters with many large-scale histories of European literature. To be sure, few fail to mention the importance of the image, yet many assume that the experience that maybe all the world's a stage—clearly transcending any

<sup>1</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, 16, 652–53, trans. Barry B. Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 391.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 4:9.

<sup>3</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, 1, 2, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.78. All Shakespeare references are put in the body text and refer to the Arden editions. They denote act, scene and lines. See the bibliography for details.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Jünger, *A German Officer in Occupied France*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 325, entry of May 27, 1944. The German original supports the connection to the *theatrum mundi* tradition further: "Die Stadt mit ihren roten Türmen und Kuppeln lag in gewaltiger Schönheit, gleich einem Kelche, der zu tödlicher Befruchtung überflogen wird. Alles war Schauspiel, war reine, vom Schmerz bejagte und erhöhte Macht." Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen*, vol. 2 (Munich: DTV, 2008), 270, emphasis added.

historical boundary—would always spring from an inherently pessimistic disposition; if life is a play, we all wear masks. If history is a script, the freedom of the will is rendered impossible. If the world is a stage, everything is an illusion. The problem is that these explanations of the nature of the trope hardly explain why the reader or the audience would be moved by the image, its beauty or by (life in) the world theatre.<sup>6</sup>

The initial motivation for this study is a personal puzzlement in the face of these analyses of the driving forces behind such an essential metaphor of literary history: Surely, this image must also derive from an experience of the meaningfulness or of the beauty of the world? What is it, therefore, about the *theatrum mundi*'s aesthetical and metaphysical register that is still not accounted for? Why does Zeus' eyes become bright when he spectates the ways of the world? Why does Antonio infer the will to sacrifice himself for those he loves if the world is *but* a stage? Why does Jünger think the bombing of Paris is a spectacle of stupendous *beauty*? And, finally, why is the theatre of the world so *great* according to Pedro Calderón de la Barca?

There can be little doubt that the *theatrum mundi* is a core feature of literary modernity. It literally hovers over the entrance to the canon of the modern period as one of its fathers made it the motto of his Globe Theatre: *Totus mundus agit histrionem*.<sup>7</sup> It is everywhere in the Shakespearean text corpus, and it seemingly has not lost its attraction since. It is echoed—if not fully invoked—in some of the greatest pieces of modern literature: From *King Lear* and *Don Quijote* to Goethe's *Faust*, Beckett's *Godot* and Musil's *Man Without Qualities*.

This trend in modern literature generated a second related series of questions which do not so much pertain to aesthetics or metaphysics as to historiography; for one can also encounter a popular idea in our literary histories that the *theatrum mundi* is an exclusively modern experience. The eternal but unsubstantial mask-play of modern politics, the anticipation of an author who will never appear, or the absurdness of one's longing for a role in a history which has lost its purpose. Yet there is nothing necessarily modern about the idea that the world is an all-encompassing stage. The image is—as already suggested—as old as literature itself and can be found in Homer, in the Pre-Socratic philosophers, in

<sup>6</sup> The bluntly generalising nature of this claim about 'many' of 'our' large-scale histories of European literature is evident, but in this prelude, one example of a sweeping idea of the image's long history and its pessimistic denotation must suffice. In a recent book on Shakespeare, Brian Walsh writes: "The comparison between life and playacting normally worked to emphasise the powerlessness of humanity as a kind of plaything of the gods. Eventually, in the Middle Ages, a homiletic tradition developed from this perspective. *Theatrum mundi* became a means of staying focused on the reality of the afterlife and Christian salvation rather than getting too caught up in the false and fleeting reality of the world. By the time Jaques speaks his melancholy version in *Arden*, the expression had become also a vehicle for a proto-nihilism that is developed further by Shakespeare in his tragic figures Macbeth and Lear." Brian Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men and the Elizabethan Performance of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 163.

<sup>7</sup> Literally "all the world plays the actor," the 'motto' put over the main entrance to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.