Lope’s Use of Foreshadowing in *La imperial de Otón*

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Despite what he may have said in the *Arte nuevo de bacer comedias*, Lope often allowed his audience to foresee the outcome of his plays. In many of his serious dramas the characters were tormented by dreams and omens, they spoke with ghosts or heard strange voices, or astrologers gave solemn predictions about things to come, yet the audience rarely left the theatre before the play was over. On the contrary, Lope’s technique of foreshadowing served to involve the spectators more than ever in the drama they saw unfolding before them, for their foreknowledge caused them to feel pride in the destinies of national heroes, cruel pleasure in the future punishments of villains, and sentimental pity for the innocent victims of an unjust fate.¹

Lope’s talent for manipulating the emotions of his audience was no doubt partially responsible for his great popularity, but the protagonists of his better plays did not pattern themselves along the lines of commonplace heroes, villains, and victims. These protagonists were neither perfect nor evil nor entirely innocent; instead, they came much closer to the Aristotelian concept of the hero driven by his hamartia to commit the sort of human follies that would inevitably lead to a tragic conclusion. They were all incited by passions they could not control: pride forced them to seek revenge, ambition made them long to wage an unjust war, erotic desire moved them to court an unobtainable lady, or jealousy led them to their eventual downfall. Many of the characters were heroes with a tragic flaw in their battle against a world whose rules they understood, but could not, or would not, accept. In these cases foreshadowing was not used merely to excite an emotional response from the audience, but also to force the protagonist himself to foresee some of the consequences of his actions, and gain a greater awareness of his own motives and desires.

Lope stresses the irony of Otón’s tragic destiny from the first moment he appears on the stage. He enters with his servants in a state of great agitation, for he has just learned that one of his favorite falcons was ignominiously killed during the hunt by another more humble bird of prey.² This scene naturally brings to mind the famous episode of the goldfinch and the hawk in *El caballero de Olmedo*, and Lope uses it to achieve a very similar purpose. The spectators are warned by this omen of what lies in store for Otón, for they already know that Count Rodulfo has been elected Emperor. Neither the King nor the Queen, however, has yet been informed of the outcome of the elections, so their reactions to the strange hunting accident are full of ironic overtones which are, of course, understood only by the audience. Queen Etelfrida, however, correctly guesses the meaning of the ominous accident, and she tells her husband that she fears he has lost the election. Otón’s response is almost predictable if we keep in mind the way in which Lope generally handles omens and the reactions that they elicit: one character is always troubled by the implications of the omen, while the other one always reacts with skepticism and disbelief. This dramatic stratagem serves the same purpose every time: the doubts of the troubled character forewarn the audience and sometimes raise conflicts in the character himself, while the skeptical character’s carefree attitude serves to deceive both himself and the other characters into acting with the sort of false confidence which ironically leads them right into the trap. Otón’s reaction, then, is one of disbelief, but a disbelief which is touching because it reveals a disarming trust in human nature. He insists on believing that the best man must

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win, a false notion which leads him to interpret the omen in a way which is favorable to his case: the falcon, he says, represents the Kings of England and Spain, two proud and capable men who have been competing for the Empire; but the “ave ratera” represents himself, for he has been humble and retiring in his struggle for the Empire (with the expectation that he would be elected for his own intrinsic worth), so the victory of the “ave ratera” over the falcon is a good omen, indicating his own imminent election (576a). The irony of Otón’s misinterpretation of the omen is clearly evident to the audience; perhaps somewhat less evident is the fact that his apparent humility is really an inverted hubris, so sure is he that the Empire will soon belong to him.

Shortly after this episode a messenger presents himself before the King and Queen and announces that Count Rodulfo has been elected Emperor. Otón is practically speechless, but the Queen is by no means at a loss for words. After the inevitable “I told you so” (“no, de mi recelo/ tan vanamente creído” 576b), she goes on to demand that her husband take up arms against Rodulfo, threatening to lead the army herself if he should refuse. He immediately complies with this extraordinary ultimatum, rallying his troops to march against the new Emperor for the sake of Bohemia’s “honor”. The humility of which he boasted earlier seems to melt away in the excitement of his speech (“la corona imperial tendrás mi frente, y el sacro Imperio mis valientes hombros, y yo tengo hombros para todo” 577b). The Queen knows exactly how to manipulate him by promising to love him only if he carries out her ambitious and unjust demands, claiming all the while that what moves her is his display of “courage” and “honor.” Lope, aware no doubt that his portrayal of Otón’s overly-obliging character might be poorly received by his spectators who had their own ideas of what a king should be, quickly began to emphasize Otón’s role as lover over his role as King, so that his complaisance should not be mistaken for a sort of weakness unbefitting a royal personage. As a lover, Otón was naturally concerned about Etelfrida’s opinion of him, and he was, of course, willing to do anything at all to gain her respect and admiration, so he served her and dutifully carried out her wishes just as any courtly lover would have served his lady. Lope’s emphasis of Otón’s passionate love for Etelfrida accomplishes another purpose as well, for it helps to explain the King’s initial blindness to the morally questionable goal of his military enterprise. Having been asked by his ambitious and unscrupulous wife to attack the new Emperor, the devoted King Otón marched off to battle without a thought as to whether or not he was undertaking a just cause. As a lover, he is blind to the injustice of his military aggression, but as a King, he will be unable to disregard either its implications or its possible consequences. This conflict soon becomes the core of the dramatic tension, and ultimately, leads to his tragic death.

When the two armies are finally lined up for battle, Merlin appears on stage dressed as an old hermit, and he announces to Rodulfo that he has nothing to fear from his enemy. He will not only win the battle, but he will some day bring glory to Spain through his progeny, many of whom will belong to the House of Hapsburg. Merlin’s prophecy clearly invites the audience to place its sympathy with Rodulfo, who now becomes the prototype of the fearless warrior-king who appealed so much to the average spectator. Once again Lope has found a way to liberate himself from the necessity of presenting Otón as a stock character for the purpose of pleasing his audience and fulfilling its expectations: now that Rodulfo can play the part of “national hero”, Lope is free to develop those aspects of Otón’s behavior that would otherwise be unacceptable in an admired King: confusion,
fear, indecision, and, of course, the eager complaisance mentioned before. Thus Otón emerges as one of the most interesting and original characters in Lope’s entire repertory, as well as one of the most sympathetic, for it is love that inspires complaisance, a strong conscience that makes him indecisive, a sense of justice that causes him to fear the implications of his actions, and a courageous self-awareness that makes him prey to the forebodings that are to worry him until his death.

These many conflicting emotions merge in a crisis of dramatic tension immediately after Merlin foreshadows the ending with his prediction, for just as Otón is readying himself for battle, there appears before him a silent sombra, “con su espada ceñida” (585b–586b). Although this scene does not have the poetic depth of the episode of the silent sombra in El caballero de Olmedo, it is nevertheless the one which sheds the most light on the function and meaning of the various silent sombras who mysteriously appear before the terrified protagonists of other Lopean dramas. In each case the characters who saw the specters were already troubled by an uneasy awareness of their guilt, so their initial fear is not so much a reaction to the supernatural as it is a manifestation of their own inner conflict when faced with an “accuser”. On the one hand they brazenly challenge the sombra in an attempt to protest their innocence; on the other hand the presence of the ghost causes them to face with greater honesty the conflict they were hoping to deny or overlook. Thus Otón, after calling his servants to help him banish the specter, ends up acquiring real insight into the meaning of his fear and oppression: he clearly understands that he has no right to challenge his just opponent, and he correctly interprets the sombra as being a heavenly warning to this effect.

There was a definite moment of anagnórisis for King Otón when he was forced by the silent sombra to recognize the underlying truth of his situation. He saw beyond the immediate problem of his own passion, and perceived, finally, both the nobility and the absurdity of human strivings. Lope’s characters were often brought to their moment of Recognition as a result of this rather graphically symbolic form of self-confrontation with the silent sombra (as opposed to the talkative variety whose function was entirely different). The sombra was seen by the hero as a representation of himself, an extension of his own being, and the experience filled him with a feeling of dread, inspired by his self-knowledge and loss of innocence. From that moment on he began to lose his character as ironic dupe, and acquired the tragic dimensions of the hero who knows, but cannot accept or even admit his knowledge.

This moment of insight is dramatically emphasized in a curious conversation between Otón and his confidant Alberto at the beginning of the third act. They are trying to discover some “scientific” explanation for the appearance of the silent sombra, and Alberto comes up with a certain Aristotelian (according to him) theory which describes how men, when they are very weak or frightened, sometimes see a mirror-image of themselves before their eyes (587b–588a). Otón’s extreme emotional stress before the battle might certainly account for his having seen his double, but in Lope’s plays it would seem that the mirror-image reflects much more than the physical self or an emotional state. It seems, indeed, to reflect what could be called the viewer’s “true” self, or perhaps his “higher nature”. In every case the protagonist emerged from this experience with a new self-awareness that was lacking before the sombra appeared. Siquén (El robo de Dína) became conscious for the first time of his “agravio”, Jelando (Las justas de Tebas) realized that his love was doomed, King Alfonso (Las paces de los reyes) admitted “y perdida la razón, / conozco el
daño, y le sigo” (Aguilar, 1, 526). Otón's case is original in that he has the courage to act immediately on his new insight by refusing to fight, whereas the other lovers were unable to come to terms with their knowledge, a fact which directly or indirectly brought about tragic results. What is even more tragic about Otón, however, is that he ultimately turns his back on what he had once accepted as a just and righteous decision, and he pays the consequences with the full knowledge of what he has done.

In the light of what has been said about the function of silent sombras, then, it would be difficult to accept Menéndez Pelayo's hasty assertion that “esta sombra es el deus ex machina que determina la súbita cobardía de Otón, el cual sin combatir se entrega a Rodulfo”.4 He seems to agree with Farinelli's general position on the subject of Otón's so-called cowardice,5 but Vossler correctly interprets the sombra as being a symbol of remorse.6 It is not cowardice but moral conviction which prompts Otón to abandon his plans to take up arms against his enemy. In continuing to act according to his conscience, he must necessarily go against the honor code that dictated the behavior of his dramatic counterparts in the Golden Age theatre, and in so doing he inevitably invites the spectators to take a scornful view of what they must consider to be his abject cowardice. This ready-made explanation of Otón's behavior has already been voiced by the arrogant Don Juan de Toledo, and it will be repeated by the warlike Etelfrida, but these characters are limited creatures, products of a literary and theatrical convention whose rules they never hesitate to follow. Otón, however, is a highly original character who challenges convention by refusing to obey the rules, but unlike other defiant characters in Lope's theatre, his challenge probably fails to capture the sympathy of the audience. Commoners who stood up to their oppressors in defiance of rigid social conventions were enthusiastically supported by their theatre viewers; countless lovers whose passion led them to violate the marital conventions were appreciated and forgiven by the spectators (even though the play itself demanded that justice be served), but a leader who chose not to engage the enemy, no matter what his reasons might be, was bound to be misunderstood in Lope's day.

Thus Otón is constantly excoriated by the characters who represent traditional heroism: Toledo deserts him after declaring that such a “pusilánime príncipe y cobarde/ no hará cosa jamás que buena sea” (586b), and Rodulfo accuses him of “infamia y cobardía” (590a). But the most scathing vituperation of all comes from Queen Etelfrida, who has mounted one of the turrets of the castle and appears before him dressed in full armor. She refuses to allow him and his men to enter the castle, claiming that their very presence within its walls would rob her of her honor; she calls him an “hombre vil”, fit only for sewing and other household chores; he is infamous, cowardly, dishonorable, weak, effeminate, not worthy of being a King... finally she ends up threatening to lead his army herself if he cannot, or will not, attack Rodulfo. Her words have their intended effect on Otón, who once again promises to do her bidding. This time his change of mind is an act of love, and if he appears to have quickly forgotten the moral insight the silent sombra inspired in him, it is because lovers very often tend to see themselves through the eyes of the loved-one. He had been called a coward and weakening before, but now that Etelfrida has repeated the accusation, he accepts her judgment without question, anxious only to prove to her that he can overcome his “cowardice” and live up to the image of what she would like him to be, even though he foresees that it will cost him his life. One cannot help but see in this almost desperate about-face another example of King Alfonso's (Las paces de los reyes) “y perdida la razón/ conozco el daño, y le sigo” (Aguilar, 1, 526), an
insight which could well serve as a leitmotiv for almost every one of Lope’s tragic figures, endowed as they are with a foreknowledge which nevertheless cannot prevent them from becoming victims of their own hamartia.

The concepts of “courage” and “cowardice” are not easy to define, nor is it always possible to keep the two qualities from merging with each other within the same character. A man can be courageous and decisive when inspired by hope or insight, and yet totally lack even the slightest vestige of courage on another occasion when he feels deeply confused or threatened. So it is with Otón, whose initial courage gave him the strength not to attack Rodulfo even after being insulted in front of both armies, and despite full knowledge of the honor code; but his second sally, like his first, was prompted not so much by a sudden mustering of “courage” as it was by a passionate need to be loved and respected by the Queen. The very fact that his decision to attack is so hasty and compulsive makes his underlying fear and frustration almost self-evident. He must go against his better judgment for the sake of the woman he loves, and the only way to do this is to take a sudden plunge, a decision which is ironically applauded by even his closest confidant. Ataulfo assures him that “ese valor es digno de tu pecho” (594a), and the Queen once more praises him: “Ahora quiero yo darte mis brazos, / ahora eres, Otón, mi bien y esposo” (594a). The mere decision to act is too easily mistaken for courage, while a refusal to do so is often interpreted as cowardice. In Otón’s case, however, the very opposite is true, a fact which constitutes the central irony of the entire play. What moves us to the classical pity and terror is our knowledge that Otón himself shares our insight.

The clear-sighted self-recognition of the forewarned protagonist is perhaps better expressed in this play than in any other, as evidenced by the weary yet passionate soliloquy delivered by Otón as the battle surges around him (595b). He is pitifully aware of the inadvisability of this second attack; he recognizes the uselessness of bloodshed, he mourns the loss of his men whom he has led to the battlefield as “lambs to the slaughter”, he knows the power of passion-love against which reason has only rarely been known to prevail. Above all he understands that his dilemma is part of the human condition, as his wide perspective and historical sense make clear to him. He is a philosopher miscast in the role of a general, a poet who is forced against his will to undertake a campaign which is repugnant to him. Finally, he is a lover resigned to his fate, and willing to sacrifice everything for his beloved.

Just as he is about to enter the fray, the silent sombra suddenly appears again, but Otón is unwilling to pay any further attention to its urgent warnings. One cannot help feeling that Otón is not only physically worn out by his trips back and forth from castle to battleground, but also emotionally exhausted from weighing moral subtleties in his mind, a task which entailed as many different decisions as trips. While in a state of exhaustion men can be driven to undertake wreckless or “heroic” deeds, resigned as they are by sheer fatigue to accept whatever consequences may result, and it is in this frame of mind that Otón, spurred by his passion, goes to meet his death. Neither the sombra, nor reason, nor the demands of his conscience hold any sway now over his tragic resignation.

Shortly afterwards he is mortally wounded by a lowly soldier who does not even realize that he is the King, and so the prophecy predicted in the episode of the falcon and the “ave vil” is fulfilled. Lope treats his death with evident sympathy, inserting in his last soliloquy certain verses from a ballad about the Marqués de Mantua (595b).

It is as if Otón himself were trying to explain what happened in terms of a literary des-
tiny, a quixotic tendency which is also shared by Don Alonso in *El caballero de Olmedo*. Etelfrida arrives just as he is commending his soul to God, too late for him to recognize her or receive any comfort from her presence, but his thoughts were with her to the end. He has sacrificed his life for her sake and for her honor, a gift which does not go unappreciated by the Queen. The rigorous rules of the honor code required that he die, but perhaps the most ironic aspect of his death lies in the fact that he was only then able to win his wife’s affection. His marriage was not a marriage in the conventional sense, but rather a long and often tormentcd courtship in which the hopeful yet despairing lover woos his *belle dame sans merci*, for whom he willingly undertakes even the most impossible deeds. Etelfrida must be one of the most demanding and least merciful ladies in Lope’s entire theatre, awesome qualities for which she is rewarded by the dedicated service of her admiring husband. The various devices of foreshadowing constantly warn him of the risks involved in carrying out his lady’s demands, yet despite full knowledge of these dangers, (and to some extent *because* of them), he is driven by his passion to make the supreme sacrifice. This he does willingly, and lovingly, but he cannot forget that he is not only a lover but also a King, for which reason he sorrowfully laments the loss of his soldiers who died for the sake of a woman (595b). Although he has proven to be a noble and even a heroic lover, he has nevertheless failed as a King, for he has sacrificed the lives of his men to a cause which he had always recognized as unjust. The honor code exonerates him, no doubt, but his experience with the *sombra* has led him to see deeper than convention, and so he becomes the tragic victim of a fate he foresaw but could not, and would not, attempt to modify.

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**Notes**

1 For a fuller explanation of the topics covered in this article, see my unpublished doctoral dissertation, “The Devices of Foreshadowing in Lope de Vega’s *Comedia.*” Harvard, 1971.


3 Irving Babbitt (*Rousseau and Romanticism*, 1919; rpt. Meridian Books, Ohio, 1966) mentions the fascination that the phenomenon of the double (Doppelgängerei) had for Hoffmann and other German romantics (p. 204). He refers the reader to Brandes, *The Romantic School in Germany*, ch. XI, and also makes the following observations: “Alfred de Musset saw his double in the stress of his affair with George Sand (see *Nuit de Décembre*), Jean Valjean sees his double in the stress of his conversion. Peter Bell also sees his double at the emotional crisis in Wordsworth’s poem of that name” (n. 18, p. 313).


5. *Grillparzer und Lope de Vega* (Berlin, 1894), pp. 65—78.