Calderón's *La dama duende* and the Theater of Suspense

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Résumé : *D'une part, le suspense est implicite dans la structure d'une pièce de théâtre selon la façon dont le lecteur est interpellé par les événements. D'autre part, le suspense est aussi le produit d'une excitation cognitive et limbique. La dama duende de Calderón, un chef-d'œuvre dans la tradition de cape et d'épée, sert ici d'exemple pour illustrer la manière de constituer une pièce de théâtre afin de créer un état de suspense en rapport avec la constitution du cerveau darwinien.*

Plots in fiction should . . . be constructed in such a way that by . . . keeping the mind in suspense, they may surprise, interest, divert, and entertain.¹

Conventionally, we speak of suspense as a feature of plotting, and rightly so. But it is also a feature of the mind, or perhaps only of the brain and its electro-chemical responses to playfully or distressingly ambiguous stimuli. This is to accept that within literary texts there are properties that have the power to move us, that these are subject to analysis in the way that Aristotle analyzed the parts of tragedy in order to understand how cathartic effects are produced, and that nothing in these texts is actualized until a mind has processed it. Hence Mark Turner's assertion that "culture, society and language do not lie outside of the brain" and that "the meaning of an artifact is a pattern in a human brain."² Bringing together plot suspense and brain suspense, as it were, is no self-evident critical act, and yet common sense dictates that they are two aspects of the same phenomenon. The topic of suspense in drama is clearly a candidate for such double consideration, for as Richard Gerrig has stated, "suspense will arise when readers possessing some particular range of cognitive processes interact with a particular range

of narrative features.”³ That would seem self-evident, as long as we understand what cognitive processes and what range of narrative elements are involved. Therein lies the challenge.

Eric S. Rabkin in *Narrative Suspense* identifies curiosity as the principal drive in suspense arousal, while Dolf Zillmann, in “The Psychology of Suspense in Dramatic Exposition,” concentrates on empathy or “empathic mediation” and “relief as enjoyment.”⁴ Such theories, largely derived from affective psychology, are numerous and useful. But to counterbalance them I offer one of my own that is drawn rather more from the cognitive side of the debate. Suspense I take to be the mind state of threshold fear and anxiety over an incapacity to act in the face of perceived stressors brought to bear on dramatic situations that arouse interest, but that delay resolution. As a proactive condition, suspense both registers and promotes stress, insofar as it serves to incite the cerebral cortex to step up the state of attention and information processing in order to reassure the organism of its fundamental safety. Even Kant’s theory of laughter is based on a cognitive shift that takes place when things deemed threatening are revealed to be merely trivial.⁵

Almost by definition, then, suspense is a fear reaction mechanism, but that fear is subject to many constructions. Hans J. Wulff argues that suspense is aroused by giving to spectators the “picture of a situation so they can see a field of dangers, resistances, and obstacles. It is not necessary for a possibly dangerous situation actually to come about. Complications in actions are, for example, often only hinted at.”⁶ The danger may be constituted by a simple computation of desirable and undesirable options which the spectator calibrates and analyses in terms of probabilities, motivated by concern for the respective characters in the play. I would argue further that the incomplete action is itself disorienting, that the mind goes on the alert in its search for the data of resolution, and that suspense is both cognitive as well as empathetic.

To understand what suspense is, we may do well to ask what suspense was before there was story-telling, for clearly it is an ancient response system. Presumably it exists because it served the organism in some beneficial way, one which has been confirmed by evolutionary selection. This in turn may tell us something about the contents of art that play most directly on the limbic system, given that art is, in this regard, parasitic upon response systems not initially designed to respond to the fiction-maker’s craft. The question then becomes, what circumstances feigned in art are best suited to excite this primitive hard-wired defense system? Can such reactions be feigned, or must the suspense reaction pertain only to an artistic *trompe l’œil* that becomes an efficient reality in its own right? How does suspense provide

advantages to the organism, and is it feasible that an artist targets this "mind state" as one of the specific goals of his artistry?

The nature of mental states is a much contested issue among neurobiologists and cognitive philosophers. We cannot pause here to ask whether suspense is a property of the brain, a state, or whether it is, in Hilary Putnam's words in speaking about pain, "a functional state of a whole organism."⁷ Is suspense merely a neural by-product of cognition, or does it have qualia-like properties possessing only the verifiability of things which seem and feel to the individual?⁸ Can we speak in any but metaphorical terms of mental states or properties, or conditions of anxiety? States of the mind must also be states of the brain, and the nature of that interface is far from settled. Perhaps for our purposes we can slip through here by arguing that suspense is a hard-wired incitatory phenomenon that conditions and interacts with other neuro-cognitive processes, and which, at the same time, has cross-wiring relationships to basic emotions.

There is, finally, the hermeneutic challenge of linking art forms to mental responses, in other words, of treating the strategies of language, volition, and act in art as mental stimuli and stressors. The result is a particular form of the hermeneutic circle whereby an activated brain state becomes the ontological conditioner of the spectator in a way that calibrates the work of art, just as the work of art is the catalyst to that very state of excitation. That is to say, brain states are both causes behind art and reactions to artistic works.⁹

To find the connectors in this hermeneutic circle, let us agree, as a premise, that *La dama duende* — arguably among the finest of Calderón's "cloak-and-dagger" plays — is a masterpiece in theatrical suspense. Axiomatically, as such, it seeks to arouse a suspenseful reaction. Its motifs act upon the spectators as cognitive puzzles, teasing them with pieces of information about the incomplete realities featured in the play. It is this epistemic state of uncertainty that Zillmann identifies as the necessary precondition to suspense.¹⁰ This controlled release of information arouses curiosity on levels ranging from the factual and material to the cultural and the aesthetic.¹¹

All successful works of art are suspenseful to the degree that they elicit interest in what will happen next. Such curiosity, however, is the most passive, entry-level expression of suspense. Arguably, suspense is a more urgent form of anxiety resulting from the "riddles" of the play, a form of personal investment both cerebral and emotional. Hence we would say that there are degrees of suspense that slip from curiosity to anxiety. One may begin with a sensation of vague concern for the characters, accompanied by

a general interest in how the perplexities, desires, and enormities of the action will resolve themselves, but conclude, through identification, with a sense of deep concern for one's own prospects of happiness. Intensity, however it is conceived, is a crucial feature of suspense and may create an axis of its own between amused attention and visceral fear. The challenge for critics is the positioning of specific works of art along that continuum.

Not only is *La dama duende* a suspenseful play, but it is the perfect test case concerning the nature of suspense in art. What resides in the play, and what transpires in the psyche — such is the hermeneutic crux where a “mind state” conditions the reception of the text, even as the text generates the excited state. Suspense thrives on uncertainty and the aleatory. But will the suspense aroused by this play trick us into believing that its ethos of honor and defiance is more menacing than it really is? Should we feel suspense because we fear for lives? What drives the “reading” of this play? Shall we dictate the play's cathartic effect in terms of a cultural critique of the institutions in the play apt to arouse felt alarm? Or shall the galvanic responses to the play empirically legitimate the quasi-archetypal terms of conflict and stress? Suspense, after all, is real — it cannot be feigned — which fact, in its own right, carries a certain lie-detector cogency, thereby underscoring the efficiency of anything that causes it. At odds with this notion of alarm is that *La dama duende* is a comedy, and a hilariously lively one at that, at times coming close to farce of a kind that casts its own ethos over the entire play, turning all that is menacing into a virtual parody of itself. There is every reason to think that a satiric duplicity undercuts everything that poses as pompous and serious in the play, and that, if suspense is to be named the defining ethos, it will have to find other grounds than fear and the narrow escape from imprisonment of the kind Aristotle associated with tragedy.¹² Or else it must be argued that the play exploits some of the most “primitive” scenarios of risk in relation to survival, while, through its distancing irony, it undercuts the cultural constructs of seventeenth-century Spain, whereby strategies of survival are invested with artificial dangers. The thesis in hand demands complex accommodations, and the ideal balance is not easy to strike.

If we look at *La dama duende* as a play of suspense, we see strategies of trickery, a mystified don and his lackey, volatile brothers, and desires at odds in a claustrophobic family situation. But what do we dare define as the efficient causes of suspense in the play itself — those things that account for the rising and falling levels of attention and felt qualities of experience? Undoubtedly, suspense levels are dependent upon the kaleidoscopic alterations in the circumstances of the characters in relation to what they wish for

themselves and impose on others. At the same time, the play is a constructed artifact, having its many discrete parts emerging toward the uncertain terms of the denouement. It engages the spectator by imposing ambiguous data as problem-solving situations.¹³ Hence, there are incomplete social data and incomplete structural data as potential stressors. Noël Carroll is right, moreover, in making a distinction between “reaction to whole narratives, or in response to discrete scenes or sequences.”¹⁴ The analysis to follow will reflect this distinction between suspense attached to the teleological design of the entire play as a comic romance and the suspense produced by individual scenes — the macro- and micro-structures of the play.

Germane to this approach to theatrical experience is an understanding of the processes by which the epistemic lack that excites states of cognition is linked to the disorienting or incomplete data that inaugurates that lack — before moving on to secondary ethical and cultural considerations.¹⁵ By epistemic lack I mean that state of curiosity that, among other things, craves the information necessary to bring new impressions into conformity with our assumptions about the nature of reality and our place in it. By disorienting or incomplete data I mean everything from strange objects, to being lost in physical space, to being mystified by the social intentions of others. Resolving these matters can be agreeable; the activity is included among the pleasures of travel, of meeting new people, of seeing new works of art. The stress these new data place upon our curiosity and sense of well-being figures into a gradient that stretches from the briefly baffling or the slightly menacing to the existentially absurd. This is one way of endorsing suspense without moving on to the underlying master narratives of survival relating to agon and romance; suspense may remain a local phenomenon.

The epistemic lacks experienced by the various characters in Calderón's play are not the same as those experienced by the spectators, but they are closely related. Those affecting the characters can be expressed readily in a series of questions, particularly those troubling Don Manuel. Who is the phantom lady? How does she manage to get into his room? What does she want from him? Does she really love him? How dangerous is Don Luis? Is she his mistress? Must he not defend the lady's honor at all cost? Once he is far away from his own house, how is it that Cosmé comes to be there as well? The entire action is built around these cognitive mystifications; to the very end of the play Don Manuel moves from confusion to confusion. His presiding disposition of mind is one of sustained anxiety, casting its ethos over the entire action, even though audience members simultaneously enjoy the farcical absurdity of his situation. Don Manuel is, in effect, so driven to learn the identity of this intriguingly mysterious woman that he submits to

her proposal to be led blindly through the city to a strange house for a secret tryst — an exercise in disorientation that leads him, for his intrusion into the women's quarters, towards a potentially dangerous ritual male combat over matters of honor. The result is a claustrophobic romance quest in search of dangerous knowledge doubling, unwittingly, as a search for an eligible and worthy mate. In the process we realize that the circumstances and obstacles arousing suspense are closely attached to fundamental issues of survival. We are back to the master narratives, unavoidably, to be addressed in due course.

The origins of this particular configuration of events can be traced to a signature grouping of narrative elements. Frederick de Armas first made the connection between *La dama duende* and Masuccio de Salernitano's twenty-sixth novellino, which was passed on to Calderón through an intermediary version by Céspedes y Ménezes.¹⁶ It is not the variants that matter here but the generic story type involving a lady of means and class, married and hence fearful for her honor and safety, who longs for a secret lover. The suspense is generated by an elaborate ruse engineered by the lady whereby she can enjoy the young man in her own house without danger to her reputation. The candidate must first be tested for his secrecy and honor, and then led to her bed in semi-darkness after being blindfolded and taken through the streets, thereby making it impossible for him at any later time to identify either the house or the lady. It is a tale of assignations, high risks, preliminary promises, hidden identities, agents and guides, and night-time wanderings concluding in a purely erotic adventure for both parties.

Calderón would seem to have decentered this plot, but in fact its components are still in force: the loyalty tests, the unidentified lady and the taboo of forced disclosure, the secret encounters, and the excitement of risk on both sides.¹⁷ To this narrative nucleus Calderón brings his own reading of the masked lady motif, together with the disorientation of her lover during his trip to her door and her subsequent refusal to identify herself. To the theatrical exploitation of doors he adds a defining new feature by extending the plot to include mysterious visitations of the lady and her waiting woman to Don Manuel's rooms — visitations marked by fresh linen, enigmatic letters, and tricks, followed by encounters and phantom-like escapes. Angela's eligibility as a widow now allows for a romance solution to the ensuing imbroglio, which is made urgent by the framing circumstances imposed by two officious brothers, who are more than merely jealous of the honor of their household. In this configuration lies the fuse to the play, its high-tension challenges to the cognitive balance of Don Manuel, who at rare moments comes to doubt his sanity, not to mention Cosmé, whose superstition concerning ghosts is notorious.

To read *La dama duende* as suspense comedy oriented toward its own manifestation of comic catharsis is an attractive thesis, but such a reading cannot sidestep perceptions of the play as a mediator of social values or as a window into seventeenth-century Spanish cultural priorities, concerning which there is a substantial quantity of critical writing. No social drama can generate purely archetypal conflicts and resolutions without passing through some historically contextualized frame of human volition with its local coloring and assumed mores. Culture entails the arbitrary as determined by individual and collective wills in relation to matters political and ethical. Readers will not be satisfied that any social system apt for producing suspense is *ipso facto* beyond criticism in cultural terms. In the forefront of that critical inquiry is the code of honor that circumscribes the conduct of all the characters in the play — a code espoused by Don Luis for his own therapeutic reasons, by Don Manuel as a matter of course for a gentleman, and by Doña Angela as a means for gaining a champion. Disapprobation of the code on moral grounds can only compromise the capacity of that code to generate suspense, but the issue cannot be ignored.

The paradoxical fact is that even a full satiric deflation of duelling, and the honor code that informs it, merely serves to confirm the institution as a social reality. The question is whether any degree of satiric deflation can eliminate from the reception of the play a degree of suspense related to the outcome of the agon. Ter Horst found himself defending the so-called honor code at least as a social reality, like death itself, in the interests of preserving a principal feature of the play's action.¹⁸ For him, it was an unimpeachable social fact. Yet for so many others, it is Calderón's implicit or explicit position concerning the honor code that has become the critical touchstone of the play. That he was wrong to have endorsed it, or that it was anything more than ceremonial, are two sides of the question, both confusing the effect of duelling on the arousal of suspense.

In the face of considerable critical opposition, then, and in spite of a full appreciation for the quintessentially comic and at times farcical dimensions of the play, I will continue to endorse the presence of at least the vestigial and still efficient "survival" narratives axiomatic to romance comedy, if only to demonstrate their potential for arousing a quality of suspense that is different in kind from the evanescent jags of local *beffe*, and to point out the degree to which this play, despite its self-conscious satire and parody, not only embeds but intensifies these underlying narratives. *La dama duende* is a play of territories, male and female, those possessed and those merely visited, separated by a liminal device known only to the women. The negotiations between those spaces are rendered suspenseful by the emotional

energy invested in the transgression into forbidden space (in both directions, as it appears to Don Luis) through the hidden door. Not only is the crossing point kept secret by the women, but its integrity is protected by a male code of honor; to be apprehended on the other side meant, for Don Manuel, submitting to the probative trial of duelling; those were the received conditions of the game, even if one knew nothing of the glass cupboard or of how one came to find oneself on the forbidden side.

The dramatic leverage invested in that honor code was, for Edwin Honig, the substance of Calderón's entire art.¹⁹ It was for William R. Blue the principal blocking force to all the stratagems of romance.²⁰ Peter N. Dunn laments that such values are pursued as an ultimate good, and that for those who adhere to them, they take precedence over love and mercy;²¹ yet this is the very point, for better or for worse — that a set of binding principles of conduct inaugurates a climate of danger. Donald Larson comes closer in seeing the code as a form of "overt masculinity" generally recognized throughout the Mediterranean region as a means of male display, used to establish pecking orders, exclusions, and group bonding through combat.²² The code's status as an institution is ambiguous in the play. Cosmé mocks the bravado and empty heroics, and surely the play offers no special pleading for the vengeful measures motivating Don Luis under the pretext of the pursuit of honor. Nevertheless, even Angela exploits the code in order to test the loyalty of her future innamorato, and Don Manuel is as ready on his side as all the others to use the code as a means of breaking the impasses he was otherwise powerless to resolve: "the laws of honor override friendship. If we must quarrel, let us quarrel according to the rules" he tells Don Luis.²³ In this way, love and honor, thematically polarized, become "axiological contradictions" in a world where honor is the counterweight to flighty eroticism, "a necessary agency of control."²⁴ The irony, as Maraniss recognized, is that repression, the more it is arbitrary and oppressive, the more it makes love devious.²⁵ In this approach, ethical matters are secondary to the intrigue. Where the oppositions to love are potent, the courtship risky, and the lovers ruseful, for the strong-hearted the comedy is good. In effect, Calderón had found an efficient formula for creating a fully rhetorical, ceremonial, aleatory comic drama of slippage in an ostensibly closed system of territoriality and the possession of females. It was a half-imitated, half-constructed vision of society, in which seventeenth-century Spanish audiences were willing to believe for the sake of celebrating the comic victories of narrow escape. Suspense of this kind was a market-driven commodity, according to Melvina McKendrick.²⁶ It was what the audiences wanted and

what Calderón gave them: empathetic stress on behalf of characters under even greater stress.

Comedy in these terms becomes the celebration of escape from the ludic practices men have devised to settle matters of dominance and bride selection. High-risk combat is one of the most paradoxical, however, because it is so essentially ceremonial. Seemingly, it functions on the principle of one survivor only. As Don Manuel says, "whoever survives the duel can use it [the key] to escape."²⁷ We are at the least metaphorical moment of the play; the *frisson* of high-stress survival combat takes the forefront. This is a zone of human activity outside of the Christian order, an order which has always been at odds with masculine rituals of territoriality and sexuality.

Huizinga, in his work on man the playing animal, revealed the underlying agonistic patterns of social behavior, while Walter Ong went on to see such gaming in the rituals of male identity and competition, and explained the place of agon in the evolution of consciousness itself.²⁸ "Intraspecific male ritual combat" for Ong is reflected in territorial games from chess to football.²⁹ In courtly love, the ritual confrontation of primates over females is joined with the ritual of war, and with anxiety over the rites of passage by which masculinity is achieved. It is not an impulse to be denied, says Ong, because it is "ritual fighting among themselves that marks male behavior quite generally in higher animal species."³⁰ The greatest fear, that which makes prospective combatants incur such high risks, is that of disqualification as sissies, as "women" unfit for participation in the male world. Angela, in a sense, invokes the contest in order to determine her secret champion's tolerance for risk, which, in the mirror of Cosmé's cowardice, is reinforced as an even greater necessity. If such ritual combat allows for quarter, it is only after the bravery of both parties has been demonstrated. In these archetypal agons, no matter how ritualized, "death is in the air, literally and figuratively, and is meant to be,"³¹ even though men rarely die, for as Edward O. Wilson says of this phenomenon, "typically they do not fight to the death, but rather to a stand-off, though occasionally they do kill, and not by accident."³² Hence, the source of suspense goes deep, for Don Luis is a man of volatile passions and bitter disappointments provoked by scorn. At the same time, the playwright surrounds this agon with the *Erwartungshorizont* of genre. Comedy establishes its own perimeters of expectation, even where the mechanisms of the peripeteia that permit the escape are hidden.

The comedy of archetypal agon and miraculous escape will not reconcile the tender-hearted to the injustices and brutalities of male strutting and posturing. But it will serve to explain why, in spite of our better selves, we rally to the play at the level of hard-wired suspense mechanisms, for the play

touches directly upon survival skills relating to spatial orientation, the identification of unknown persons, and combat. It advances the same set of challenges that are not met in the Duchess of Amalfi group issuing independently in plays by Lope and John Webster. These playwrights tell the story of an aristocratic widow, kept under house arrest by jealous and overprotective brothers, who is ultimately slain because she deigns to marry in secret a man below her station — an affront to family honor and dynastic ambitions, significantly coupled with latent incest. Those plays exchange all of the merriment and mistakes in the dark of *La dama duende* for revenge in a spirit of sadistic black humor. Nevertheless, all of these plays, in their comic and tragic manifestations, trade on the stress imposed by the ludic tradition by which men negotiate personal esteem, the sanctity of family honor, the possession of women, and exogamous marriage in conflict with endogamous interests. Herein other gradients apply in determining by rules and conventions the degree of exposure and risk involved, just as they circumscribe the levels of danger in bull fighting, wrestling, thesis defenses, trials in the courts, or duelling. *La dama duende* functions within that economy of conduct in which combatants negotiate terms and engage in ritual agons which are suspenseful in the extreme because skill and fortune meet to determine destinies.

Nevertheless, if *La dama duende* claims its final happiness out of agonistic confrontation, at its core the play is a situational romance comedy through and through, based on the suspense of a man meeting a woman under charmingly improbable circumstances. It is about marriage appearing suddenly, as if from nowhere, as the self-evident and most satisfactory of all solutions to a male stand-off. Even the duelling and bravado, from that moment, take on a certain degree of self-parody. There is so much ado about broken swords and supernumeraries that one may wonder whether anything more than posturing was ever intended. Far more central to the winding of nerves is the play of apparitions that works so actively in the imaginations of Don Manuel and Cosmé. By dint of the secret door, Angela creates her own double as a phantom, as mercurial in deed as she is as a woman.

If we return, at this point, to Zillmann's definition of suspense, we recognize the qualifications that become necessary. Certainly, for the spectators there is no "noxious affective reaction that characteristically derives from the respondent's acute fearful apprehension about deplorable events that threaten liked protagonists, this apprehension being mediated by high but not complete subjective certainty about the occurrence of its anticipated deplorable events."³³ Cosmé may keep up his chatter about his certainty of a palpable ghost, the Capuchin monk, but for the spectators the irony is

complete. We know that Don Manuel has nothing to fear from a woman-specter who leaves him fresh linen, love letters, and romantic invitations. How then do these scenes arouse so much excited expectation? The answer is complex, for the play involves empathy on the part of spectators; it involves the generic anticipations associated with incomplete romance plots, the execution of sustained trickery, the tensions surrounding identity and orientation, and the double time-scheme of the courtship juxtaposed with the incremental urgency imposed by eavesdropping and spying.³⁴ Equally important, too, is the theatrical exploitation of micro-routines and effects producing the cognitive mystification of the principal characters with regard to simple matters of reality.

To romance belongs the suspense arising from our well-wishing for two attractive people whose barely recognized courtship is carried out in intense secrecy through a medley of cross-purposes, and under the surveillance of snooping brothers who come ever closer to their trysting places. Angela begins her intrusions as a leisure game, but realizes in due course that she must acquaint herself in a severely limited period of time with the man who may become her husband. She must first discover her own mind in the matter, then instruct Don Manuel in what he must be to her, beyond the maker of Petrarchan compliments and the ceremonies of *Frauendienst*.³⁵ This challenge brings to mind the efforts of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, who likewise must find out, through the use of her disguise, whether Orlando can mature beyond the phase of writing her name on trees and worshipping her in second-rate poetry. Don Manuel, despite his acuity in many things, is a bit dull-witted in these matters, and in fact shows no real understanding before marriage is thrust upon him, much as it is upon Orlando. Even as the play moves toward closure, he remains "in a maze . . . a labyrinth of indecision." He reasons only that he is a traitor to hospitality if he protects her, yet a dog to reject her devotion. Unable to escape this confusion, he sees no other choice for himself "except to die in arms." He is blinded to the solution before his eyes, thereby forcing none other than Don Luis to announce to him that if he has any intentions of "leading her forth," he would have to marry her first. Calderón shares Angela's identity with the spectators from the outset, but not the means to her eventual union with Don Manuel, nor the success she will have in maintaining her anonymity, or in teaching Don Manuel what he must know to love her.

The suspense aroused by the overarching uncertainties of the romance plot is accompanied by a rapid progression of miniatures. If our well-wishing extends over the entire play, our attention is meanwhile focused upon micro-moments, farcical routines, disorientations, each situation forcing us

to reconfigure facts and events and to recalculate probabilities for the characters. Contingency of a kind that baffles wits is the very essence of comedy. The “climax of the imbroglio” for Angel de Valbuena-Briones is the scene in which Don Manuel and Cosmé return to the house in the middle of the night to gather up the forgotten papers, only to find the phantom again present — a Calderonian technique fully developed in *No hay cosa como callar*.³⁶ Don Manuel at last sees a beautiful woman, while Cosmé takes for reality something diabolic. The heaven of the lady’s beauty then enters into comic competition with the infernal fantasies of the *gracioso*. There is something fundamentally cinematic about this sequence, for it concentrates on details — the placement of the writing desk, the candle, the movement of light in the room, the indeterminate elements. It is for this reason that Gordon Gow urges that “in matters of suspense . . . the cinema still has the advantage over theatre,”³⁷ for there are more artificial contrivances to keep up the mystery: the turning doorknobs, the squeaking floorboards, the intimacy of the close-up. Yet Calderón has found just such suspense in the hidden door, the movements in semi-darkness, and the undisclosed identities. These impressions are abetted, moreover, by preliminary expectations associated with “cloak and dagger” plays, expectations studied in relation to suspense in general by Ohler and Nieding.³⁸ These micro-moments constantly refix our attention and arouse our curiosity, adding to the simmering uncertainties of male ritual combat that bookend the play, and the strategies of mating that control the central romance plot. These epistemic jags touch upon the most fundamental needs of consciousness, namely to know who people are, whether their intentions are benign or malign, to know which way is home, which locale is safe. A merely imaginative experiencing of the spatial disorientation that overcomes Don Manuel in finding himself in his own room when thinking he was far away in an unknown household is an absurdity shouting for resolution at the most fundamental level of cognitive orientation. Our excitement concerns the ways in which that disorientation will be resolved for the character.

Central to the action, meanwhile, is Angela the phantom trickster.³⁹ Her plan is to destabilize reality itself in a spirit of adventurous play. She sets the pace of the plot through her visitations and her elaborate scheme for bringing Don Manuel to her apartment, together with all the contingencies she must negotiate along the way. Her trickery makes Don Manuel the unwitting correspondent in a courtship game which she controls through “fraud.” This is Angela’s designated quality of response in circumstances where a competitive show of force is not among her options. Trickery is a precalculation of desired ends through the preparation of circumstances that

lure, shape and control the responses of others. The activity is suspenseful by definition in setting up expectations subject to all manner of contingency. Angela, the quick-witted impersonator, continues to create illusions in order to maintain her competitive edge. The suspense relating to agon arguably takes second place, ultimately, to this masterful show of fraud, bifurcating the play between the genders, their strategies, and stresses relating to survival.

Of course, the distinction must be maintained between the experiences we imagine for characters and our own experience in superimposing the reality of the play upon the reality of our stream of consciousness. That is to say, consciousness is the scene of constant competition among neuron clusters for momentary attention, most of them firing too feebly ever to find a place in the record. In this sense, a play is a set of strong stimuli, pre-organized to prevail over all competing neuron firings, and to gain a complete ascendancy over conscious attention throughout the duration of the action. In this way, the order of the play becomes a segment in the history of an individual's consciousness, successfully tricking the brain into believing that what is presented deserves the same complete engagement of the mind demanded by primary experience. The organism hence seeks orientation in the fiction as though it were a reality, identifying objects by analogy, calculating spaces, risks, probabilities — all that the brain does to alleviate the stress of disorientation caused by the unknown. Because the notion of a director of neuron traffic may be little more than a late manifestation of the Cartesian theater fallacy,⁴⁰ we may have to revert to the notion of consciousness fragments as determined by the survival of the strongest, or possibly the most threatening, or those most associated with the actualization of the self. The work of art structured around these priorities will enhance its attention-gaining potential. We are, by instinct and inheritance, self-orienting creatures, something which we continually practice culturally in order to perform culturally. We hone our skills and retreat from boredom through simulated combat in games, and through intensely simulated social realities. Calderón, in this play, makes gaming and virtual reality nearly synonymous, while the play itself captures consciousness through the capacity of its artistry to drive the process of neuron selection. Once again, it is the corollary states of aroused interest abetted by limbic responses that are under examination here, just as the suspense elements invested in plot and characterization, in games of force and fraud, must be calibrated in relation to cognitive experience and suspense arousal. Suspense is both the cause and the effect of heightened cognitive activities necessary to our orientation in a world of potentially "hostile" data.

Fear is but one component, and we cannot be certain that the fear we may attribute to characters, imagining ourselves in their place, is what audience members feel in relation to this play — it is a vital distinction — for we see the work with the advantage of generic imperatives. We see the ceremony, the reassuring presence of comic routines, the containment offered by wit and high spirits. Yet the nature of plot is contingency, a mystification of facts, an invitation to empathy, and uncertain terms of closure. Whether or not the suspense so aroused is a pleasure in itself (and there is some doubt in this matter⁴¹), it is certainly a mode of mentation that accompanies activities we engage in for pleasure. Equally certain is that we rate works of art by their power to commandeer attention, and to build toward the realization of some wished-for cathartic response. At one extreme we are brought to feel very real pity and fear for those deemed worthy of survival but who perish, while at the other we participate in that real resolution of the self that comes through sharing in the escape of sympathetic people from seemingly insuperable odds. The challenge in this play is to avoid confusing the rigor of the odds with the nature of the enterprise, for to do so is to make all comedies into “problem” comedies on social grounds and read them in turn as tragic. That hermeneutic slippage haunts the critical history of this play.

In the causal and reactionary relationships of suspense to narrative, there is evidence of yet another hermeneutic loop. As *La dama duende* serves to illustrate, the action that becomes for a time one with consciousness itself achieves full experiential status, including access to those parallel “mind states” that control the urgency of the activities in the cerebral cortex. The mind-brain interface relating to suspense becomes a primary condition, at the same time, for the reception of art. This is to state inversely the more familiar idea that the most skilled makers design their narratives in the most efficient ways to excite suspense — recognizing that suspense is a by-product of the epistemic cravings set up by the “ambiguation” of critical facts and outcomes. Moreover, to complete the loop, the reading of those “signs” is affected by the excited state of the mind generated by prior stress. This may then amount to a reading of *La dama duende* that gives precedence to suspense over all other considerations, for the play is remarkable in the degree to which it engages spectators at the level of primary cognitive orientation and anxiety, setting off hard-wired alarm systems along the way. It is built up around a well-seasoned formula. As the final act comes to a close, suddenly, all that had been both mysterious and dangerous regarding identity, place, and agon is rendered trivial by the sudden proposal of marriage. Once again the union of lovers, as yet barely known to each other, becomes the epitome of comfort and joy, of strangers made family, of

feasting after war, of laughter after confusion. Meanwhile, the well-defined and well-paced peripety of escape remains in this play one of the defining orders of art, making its appeal to our most primitive mechanisms of survival.

It does not matter to this reading of the play that Calderón seeks, at the same time, to expose the excesses of fraternal jealousy and the absurdities of an outdated code of honor. It does matter, however, if, by irony, the reader is so distanced from the play that the urgency of ritual aleatory behavior and the obstacles to an attractive union are no longer felt qualities of experience. This would deactivate the survival narratives, leaving them in a kind of vestigial limbo. In that event, suspense belongs only to the desire to see a comic action completed as an aesthetic artifact, the stressors in the play being limited to the micro-sequences and the miniature cognitive puzzles which they impose. Curiosity and empathy keep their place as part of the aesthetic contract, and the novelty of Calderón's inventions comes to the foreground. Suspense remains something close to the cerebral, a need to reconcile new data with the familiar, and to take delight in the process whereby that understanding is spread to all the characters in the play. In my *La dama duende*, however, the survival narratives, though surrounded with farce, and challenged through irony, are still very much in force.

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Notes

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Joseph R. Jones and Kenneth Douglas (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 374.
2. Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 30.
3. R. J. Gerrig, "The Resiliency of Suspense," in *Suspense, Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analysis, and Empirical Explorations*, ed. Peter Vorderer *et al.* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), p. 93. This double perspective is by no means new, although the latest work in the cognitive sciences, with its implications for literature, suggests that the natures of mind processes should not be taken for commonplaces. Gerrig does not take such a cognitive approach in this article or attempt to determine which side of this hermeneutic circle has priority, but he does cite the two sides of the issue clearly. Suspense is a "reception phenomenon" (Peter Vorderer, "Toward a Psychological Theory of Suspense," in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., p. 233). Readers perform upon the narrative what they must to experience it, and the author performs upon the readers, through the design of the work, what he or she must to achieve the interests, concerns, and desires associated with suspense. Gerrig calls these two necessary components "what authors know" and "what readers know" (pp. 93 ff.). They are not as symmetrically harmonious as they would appear, however, and the article closes by proposing merely that by separating them we should gain a clearer

perspective on “how narrative structures are situated with respect to cognitive structures” (p. 104). The work remains to be done.

4. Eric S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense: “When Slim turned sideways . . .”* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), pp. 5–6; Dolf Zillmann, “The Psychology of Suspense in Dramatic Exposition,” in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., pp. 199–231.
5. Theories of laughter are, by definition, closely related to theories of suspense because both deal with cognitive stimulation that generates responses in the limbic system. Arguably, both produce a form of pleasure, first in the contemplation of mental paradigm shifts and then in the emotional release that ensues when ambiguities are resolved. That we feel suspense and that we hold up information in anticipation of laughter refer to two distinct sets of neural wiring, but they may share common origins in evolutionary terms. Both may be systems pertaining to a heightened awareness of danger and the preparation of the body for action, or the reaction of the body to the discovery of a false alarm. One of the reactions to the release from suspense is laughter — a complex cerebral-limbic interface that would have interested Aristotle in relation to the definition of comedy!
6. Hans J. Wulff, “Suspense and the Influence of Cataphora on Viewers’ Expectations,” in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., p. 7.
7. Hilary Putnam, “The Nature of Mental States,” in *A Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Peter Morton (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1997), p. 322.
8. See Andrew Brook and Robert Stainton, *Knowledge and Mind: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 167. Putnam studies the relation of pain to brain and mind. Suspense falls into a similar kind of indeterminate condition between a state of knowing, a limbic response, an anticipatory state of the entire mind, a neuronal activity accompanying the primary cognitive processes. Nothing can be more problematic than assigning to this phenomenon a status as a property, field, or condition. For an argument against qualia properties, see Daniel C. Dennett, “Quining Qualia,” in Morton, ed., pp. 409–34. See also J. J. C. Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes,” *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959): 141–56.
9. I am, of course, using the traditional notion of the circularity of interpretation arising from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Wilhelm Dilthey, to name but three, in my own particular way. Text relates to context, and it is through the understanding of text that we read context, but only through the reading of context that we can read the text. That context has here been extended to mind, which is its own conditioning world of the reading experience, even as the mind is driven and filled by what it reads.
10. Zillmann, p. 199. Zillmann discusses how the expert suspense-plot maker must parcel out information strategically both among the protagonists and to the spectators. Surprisingly, however, this has not been treated as a cognitive lack, or a state of anxiety that produces suspense as a state of cognitive indeterminacy.
11. Roland Barthes, in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), suggests in his enigmatic way that suspense may likewise pertain to our reaction to structures, perceptions of which begin with the realization that we are not the characters but outside them looking on. To such forms as are perceived he attributes unsettling capacities to challenge the intelligibility of the world (p. 119). That challenge can be read in both cognitive and affective terms, and may depend upon an aestheticizing factor. The experientiality of literary forms is a point for further investigation.
12. In this regard, the book by Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, with an Adaptation of the Poetics and a Translation of the ‘Tractatus Coislinianus’* (New York:

Harcourt, Brace, 1922), takes on interesting new significance. How, indeed, would Aristotle have described the cathartic effect of comedy in limbic terms?

13. See R. J. Gerrig and A. B. I. Bernardo, "Readers as Problem-solvers in the Experience of Suspense," *Poetics* 22 (1994): 459–72.
14. Noël Carroll, "The Paradox of Suspense," in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., p. 74.
15. On the issue of controlled information for the purposes of arousing emotional responses see Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding, "Cognitive Modeling of Suspense-Inducing Structures in Narrative Films," in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., esp. pp. 130–33. The mind forms mental models of what it perceives, taking in situation, motive, risk levels, themes, and tendencies. This flow of data determines the order of cognitive action and its attendant emotions.
16. Frederick de Armas, "Céspedes y Meneses and Calderón's *La dama duende*," *Romance Notes* 11 (1969–70): 599–603.
17. Bárbara Kaminar Mujica ("Tragic Elements in Calderón's *La dama duende*," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 16 [1969]: 303–28) and Sharon D. Voros ("Love, Women, Wit," in *The Calderonian Stage: Body and Soul*, ed. Manuel Delgado Morales [Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1997] have examined *La dama duende* as a social document on the status of women in seventeenth-century Spain, resulting, predictably, in views of Angela as the incarcerated woman, the victim of male jealousy and patriarchal codes of control. Such a condition cannot be denied; it constitutes a very real obstacle which the romance heroine, like the princess in the tower, must countermand through her "high" fraud as a trickster. It is, for these readers, not acceptable that her house arrest be endorsed, even though it serves as the precondition to her genius as shape-shifter and *femme fatale* — roles which, it is to be noted, she abandons at the end in favor of returning to the simple woman of flesh-and-blood she chooses to be in the eyes of a prospective husband. The question is how we are to align such objections on cultural grounds with the uncooked experience of suspense relating to imprisonment and escape at a more emblematic level of existence.
18. Robert ter Horst, *Calderón: The Secular Plays* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. 47.
19. Edwin Honig, *Calderón and the Seizures of Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 19.
20. William R. Blue, *Spanish Comedies and Historical Contexts in the 1620s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 81.
21. Peter N. Dunn, "Honour and the Christian Background in Calderón", in *Critical Essays on the Theatre of Calderón*, ed. Bruce Wardropper (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 30.
22. Donald Larson, *The Honor Plays of Lope de Vega* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 7.
23. Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La dama duende*, ed. Angel Valbuena-Briones (Madrid: Catédra, 1976), Act III, lines 2789–90; all translations are my own.
24. James E. Maraniss, *On Calderón* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 57.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
26. Malveena McKendrick, *Theatre in Spain 1490–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 74.
27. This and subsequent quotations from *La dama duende* may be found in Act III, lines 3005–34.

28. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949); Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
29. Ong, p. 59.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
32. Edmund O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 247.
33. Zillmann, p. 208.
34. Anthony Cascardi's appraisal of the play as an expression of baroque aesthetics is a reminder that plays of high artifice call attention to themselves in ways that elevate the illusion-making power of theater to the level of theme (*The Limits of Illusion: A Critical Study of Calderón* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], *passim*). Herein appears another hermeneutic loop, in which all that is effectively feigned in the theater is at the same time ineffectively feigned because it is constantly reminding spectators of the power of the theater to create such illusions. This awareness of the illusionary constantly perceived is at cross-purposes, at least ostensibly, with the arousal of galvanic experience through empathy and limbic excitement. Yet artifice buried in the work may contribute a great deal to the incremental momentum of the play. Henry Sullivan touches on the matter in seeing the structural resemblances between the play and a Bach fugue ("The Art of the Fugue: Inevitability and Surprise in the Works of Calderón and J.S. Bach," in *Estudios sobre Calderón y el Teatro de la Edad de Oro*, ed. Alberto Porqueras-Mayo [Barcelona: PPU Francisco Mundi Pedret, 1989], pp. 121–32). In this way, the play achieves its "restless and compelling energy" (p. 124). This is the nature of a drama of *conocimiento*, of knowledge apprehended from moment to moment, a drama of contingencies in relation to security and desire. The pacing of episodes, the incremental jolts to cognition, the acceleration of demands, for all their artifice, are the stock-in-trade of suspense intrigues, intensified by the curiosity generated from the earliest scenes of the play by the lady-whirlwind in flight and the enigmatic first encounter with the volatile brothers.
35. Blue, in contrast to the feminist objections to Angela's patriarchally inspired incarceration, sees the play as an assault on *Frauendienst*, pointing out that throughout the play it is the women who seek, through their mystifications and disguisings, to teach men what women want them to know (pp. 28–29). It is the male psyche that has been imprisoned by its own abject reverence of women. This too is "archetipal" in its repercussions, for the suspense surrounding the "phantom lady" is not merely finding out who she is, but casting guesses at her chances of refashioning her man in acceptable terms as a crucial rite of passage before the allotted time expires.
36. Angel de Valbuena-Briones, *Perspectiva crítica de los dramas de Calderón* (Madrid: Rialp, 1965), pp. 34–35.
37. Gordon Gow, *Suspense in the Cinema* (New York: Coronet Communications, 1971), p. 16.
38. Ohler and Nieding, p. 131.
39. There is considerable potential for bringing to suspense theory the study of the trickster as a character within dramatic actions who controls information, often with the intent of baffling and deceiving others to their dismay and the trickster's advantage. In this way the order of narrative that arouses suspense with regard to its outcome is abetted from within by the machinations of a strategist. Plot and trickster intent may become one. This is one

of the several ways in which writers generate intentionality, probability, and contingency as suspense-inducing factors. Typically, in Roman comedy, it is the servant-class members who undertake the fraud necessary to advance the interests of their masters, and the *gracioso* of the Spanish theater often carries on in kind. But in this play Cosmé is splendidly ineffectual in these matters. Rather, it is Angela who achieves her ends through the execution of elaborate and undisclosed plans.

40. See Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), *passim*.
41. See Lothar Mikos, "The Experience of Suspense: Between Fear and Pleasure," in Vorderer *et al.*, eds., p. 48.