

TWO CASES OF KLEDONOMANCY IN LOPE'S THEATER

Like his contemporaries in the Golden Age theater, Lope used a great number of devices to communicate foreknowledge to the spectators as well as forebodings to the characters in his plays. One of the strangest of these is the phenomenon known as kledonomanacy,¹ a term used by the ancient Greeks to describe the misinterpretation of stray words overheard by chance. The words are assumed to have a bearing on some critical situation, when in fact they have no connection whatever with the matter at hand. This phenomenon is known today as a symptom of mental illness:

Schizophrenic patients commonly misinterpret the events in the world around them. One method of misinterpretation is so common that it has been given a special designation: ideas of reference. A patient suffering with ideas of reference believes that every irrelevant or coincidental action or happening in the world around him is related to him, caused by him, or arranged for him. If strangers cross the street, it is to avoid him because they have been warned. If three men pass wearing hats, it was prearranged to show him he is a fool for not wearing a hat. If all the traffic lights are red, it has been set up to test his restraint. If some passing stranger spits, it is meant to be a direct insult and challenge his masculinity. Whispered conversation always refers to him, and laughter is always directed at him.²

Far from considering himself insane, the average Golden Age spectator took a keen interest in the interpretation of stray utterances, and Lope, along with many of his predecessors, developed kledonomanacy as a dramatic technique. A.H. Krappe gives a good summary of the historical origins of this stage-technical device,³ reminding us that kledonomanacy occurred in Homer, Plutarch, Aristophanes, the Old Testament, *El poema del Cid*, *El cantar de los infantes de Lara*, and in the literature of India and North Africa as well. "To the Arabs of North Africa," he writes, "the same belief is familiar, ominous stray words of this character being called *fal*."⁴ He later makes the interesting observation that the Arab domination in

¹ This word derives from the Greek "kledon," meaning a chance or casual utterance that contains an omen (or is assumed to contain one).

² *The Abnormal Personality Through Literature*, ed. Alan A. Stone and Sue Smart Stone, Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966.

³ Alexander Haggerty Krappe, "Notes on the *Voces del Cielo*," *RR*, XVII (1926), 65-68.

⁴ Krappe, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

Spain might have contributed a good deal to the reinforcement of this superstitious belief in the minds of the Spanish people.⁵

There can be no doubt that kledonomanancy was well known in Spain during the Middle Ages and the Golden Age. C.E. Aníbal notes that

Alfonso X, *el sabio*, had already condemned, among other evil practices of divination, the 'agüero... de palabras a que llaman *proverbio*,' declaring that those found guilty of this offense should be put to death... The explicitness of this *ley* and the severity of the penalty are evidence of an extant custom, the continued existence of which made it necessary for Juan II in 1410, and Felipe II in 1598, to penalize those officers of justice who failed to prosecute offenses or to exact the penalty already established by the *Partidas*, public reading of the law being now required on one market day of each month."⁶

Pedro Ciruelo, writing some seventy years prior to Lope's most productive period, describes the same phenomenon which he defines with the Latin word "omen":

La tercera especie de agüeros y más vana que las otras, es la que en latín llaman 'omen,' quiere decir adivinar por dichos o hechos que otros los hacen a otro propósito y los adivinos lo aplican a otro. Así como cuando está el hombre con cuidado en algún negocio suyo y no sabe determinarse qué es lo que más le conviene hacer, acaesce que en aquella hora otro que pasa por allí dice alguna palabra o hace alguna obra a otro propósito suyo, y no pensando en el cuidado del otro. Viene el agorero vano y toma aquella palabra a su propósito, y por ella se determina a lo que debe hacer, como si fuera palabra de Dios o de algún angel bueno que le quiso avisar de lo que debía hacer por la boca de otro hombre... Luego creer en aquella vanidad y quererse regir por ella en sus cosas es superstición de agüero y pecado mortal; y aunque haciendo aquello le salga a bien, es por inspiración del diablo con quien tiene pacto secreto."⁷

One must bear in mind, however, that the messages given to the characters through the omens and dreams in Lope's theater could almost always be interpreted as acts of God, for the characters were usually being warned of the dangers that were awaiting them if they did *not* take themselves in hand and face the truth of their situation.⁸ Lope uses the omen to warn the misguided agonists "como si fuera palabra de Dios o de algún angel bueno"; in this way he communicates directly with his spectators, the majority of whom must have believed in the current superstitions, and so the foreshadowing suggested by the omen often turned out to be exactly what the audience actually expected. The unusual irony here lies in the willingness of the characters themselves to interpret the omen as Ciruelo

⁵ Krappe, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁶ C.E. Aníbal, "Another Note on the *Voces del Cielo*," *RR*, XVIII (1927), p. 249. He mentions that both "proverbio" and "arfil" or "alfil" are defined by the *Diccionario de Autoridades* as referring to the phenomenon we now call kledonomanancy, a term generally used by modern students of religion and folklore.

⁷ Pedro Ciruelo, *Reprobación de las Supersticiones y Hechicerías* (1530), Madrid, 1952, p. 50.

⁸ *El servir con mala estrella*, as we shall see, proves exceptional. The foreshadowing turns out *not* to indicate the character's true situation.

would have them do it, for they already know that such a belief is a mortal sin. They refuse to listen to what turn out indeed to be "voces del cielo," and consequently they hurry all the more swiftly to their doom.⁹

Aníbal discusses the well known case of kledonomanacy that occurs in *Don Quijote*,¹⁰ and strangely enough we find the same conflict between the desire to believe the omen and the fear that it is somehow foolish and sinful to do so. Green paraphrases the incident as follows:

As Don Quijote approaches the village for the last time, unable now to accomplish the disenchantment of his lady Dulcinea, he overhears the voices of two quarreling boys, one of whom spouts: "No te canses, Periquillo, que no la has de ver en todos los días de tu vida." (Part II, ch. 73) The reference is to a cage of crickets, but the feminine pronoun "la" suggests, to Don Quijote's depressed mind, the enchanted lady of his thoughts. Sancho upbraids his master for making so superstitious an interpretation, reminding him that the village condemned as silly all Christians who pay attention to such trifles... The prudent safeguard seems scarcely necessary; the reader sees deeper than Sancho and realizes that Don Quijote is being led and admonished by a genuine Voice from Heaven.¹¹

Sancho's attitude is typical of the many skeptical characters in Lope's theater who warn the protagonists *not* to listen to the omens. If the protagonists *had* listened to them, there would have been no conflict and no dramatic irony. The reader and the audience must see deeper than the characters, but the drama is heightened when the characters are semi-aware themselves.

An excellent example of kledonomanacy in Lope's theater occurs in *La inocente sangre*, when Don Juan is in the act of declaring his love to Doña Ana. Suddenly he hears the voice of a gardener who seems to interrupt his declaration by saying "¿Tan temprano lleváis flor?/Tarde gozaréis del fruto." (*Acad.* IX, 182b) Don Juan is upset by what seems to be the gardener's cruel prediction concerning his love, but Ana insists on the rational explanation: the gardener is simply talking to a tree, and there is no connection at all between his prediction and Don Juan's future. Then, just as he asks Ana to give him her word that she will marry him, the voice of the gardener is heard again: "Yo os juro que no os veáis/en vuestra vida con ella." The words are now intolerable to Don Juan, and he rushes out to ask the gardener for an explanation. The gardener tells him that he was talking to an almond tree which had bloomed too early in the season and was therefore in danger of losing its first fruit to the frost. He repeats the whole soliloquy:

⁹ Green mentions several other Golden Age dramatists who use the device of kledonomanacy as an example of God's will (Otis H. Green, *Spain and the Western Tradition*, II, Madison, pp. 237-239).

¹⁰ *Voces del cielo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-248.

¹¹ *Spain*, *op. cit.*, II, p. 238.

¿Tan temprano dais la flor?
 Tarde gozaréis del fruto.
 Aunque almendra dulce y bella
 Prometéis, y en flores dais
 Tales esperanzas della,
 Yo os juro que no os veáis
 En vuestra vida con ella. (182a)

Don Juan has to admit that the gardener's explanation is perfectly reasonable, but he cannot entirely rid himself of the feeling that the words are somehow ominous.¹² Like so many other Golden Age characters, his reaction is ambiguous. On the one hand, he and his counterparts fear the evil suggested by the omen, but at the same time they convince themselves (or they allow themselves to be convinced) that it is either unreasonable or even sacrilegious to pay credence to the warnings. Their inability to see clearly their future makes them ironic figures as we watch them heading for the disaster of which they themselves are only half aware.¹³

Don Juan's semi-awareness is evident to the audience throughout the play, but one of the most intense pieces of verbal irony occurs at the end of the second act when the King, who had unjustly imprisoned Morata for the murder of a nobleman, suddenly frees the innocent suspect. Don Juan is delighted to see Morata again, and confidently claims that "Dios vuelve por la inocencia." (191a) But the audience knows, as the unfortunate protagonist does not, that the King has freed Morata not because he is wise and just, but because he was foolish enough to be convinced (by some flimsy evidence presented to him by envious counselors) that Don Juan and his brother were the guilty parties. So the protagonist's statement that God protects the innocent immediately acquires an ironic significance in terms of our understanding of the King's character and our knowledge of the counselors' malicious plan. Another aspect of the irony inherent in his words is that Don Juan cannot and will not see the evil which motivates the three antagonists, precisely because he himself is too virtuous to suspect them of treachery.

The ironic statement gathers further significance at the end of the

¹² C.E. Aníbal (*Voces del cielo*, p. 250) points out an example of kledonomanicy in *La Celestina* (*Clásicos Castellanos*, I, pp. 156-157). As Celestina leaves her house one morning she overhears a conversation in the street which happens to deal with "achaques de amores." This she takes to be a good omen, for she understands it to mean that she will be successful in bringing together her young clients. This time the omen is used not to warn the lovers about the dangers of passion, but rather to inspire Celestina in her morally questionable enterprise, which provides a good illustration of Ciruelo's contention that whoever believes in such omens does so "por inspiración del Diablo con quien tiene pacto secreto." There is humorous irony in her interpretation of the meaning of the omen which is "good" only from her own point of view, but not in terms of what we know of the lovers' destiny.

¹³ It is interesting to note that the gardener himself is ignorant of the double meaning of his own words, which adds to the irony of the situation a dimension not present in such plays as *El Duque de Visco*, where the "warning figure" is totally aware of the meaning of his *caveat*. This time the spectators are alone in their foreknowledge of the fate of the two young men—a foreknowledge not shared by any of the other characters in the play.

play when the guilty King hears a voice admonishing him for having killed the innocent brothers:

Los que en la tierra juzgáis
 Mirad que los inocentes
 Están a cargo de Dios,
 Que siempre por ellos vuelve.
 No os ciegue pasión ni amor:
 Juzgad jurídicamente;
 Que quien castiga sin culpa,
 A Dios la piedad ofende. (205a)

Shortly thereafter the King and his counselors mysteriously die, punished for their blind and sinful actions by God's justice. It is interesting that the foreshadowing of the play should have been centered around the doomed brothers rather than the King and his counselors. The latter were not unironic figures, however, for the audience was undoubtedly acquainted with the legend of Fernando el Emplazado, so that although the antagonists were ignorant of their fate, the audience was fully expecting it.

Kledonomanacy does not always correctly foreshadow the ending of the play, however, as is evident in *El servir con mala estrella*. The noble Rugero serves King Alfonso to the best of his ability, showing at all times the greatest possible courage, loyalty, and courtesy, yet for some reason the King never rewards him for his exemplary service. But Rugero is not easily discouraged, even when the King confers lavish rewards on those knights who fought less bravely than he, for he feels certain that some sort of special recognition is being reserved for him. His patience and humility finally begin to diminish in the third act, especially when he overhears some musicians singing about the Cid who also served his King faithfully but without reward—they compare him to a dog who meekly dies of hunger at his master's doorstep. Rugero immediately believes that the words of the song apply to him personally, so he decides then and there to leave the King's service. He finds Alfonso playing chess with a Moorish king, and while he is hesitating nearby, he suddenly overhears the King say "check mate" to the Moor. Once again Rugero believes that these words somehow apply to him, and he takes them to be a bad omen. He tells Alfonso that he would like to leave his court, giving as his reason his conviction that he was born under an evil star and is therefore fated to go unrewarded no matter how hard he tries to merit fame and compensation for his virtue. The King presents him with two coffers, telling him that one is empty and one is full of jewels, and he asks the youth to choose one for himself. Rugero selects the empty one, which only seems to convince him further of his predestined ill-luck. Alfonso does not deny that some people have worse luck than others, but he flatly opposes Rugero's belief in predestination. In order to prove that man is capable of overcoming what appears to be an evil fate, he generously gives him not only the coffer of jewels but also the hand of the

woman he loves.

The foreshadowing suggested by the song of the musicians and the check-mating of the Moor spells doom for Rugero only when it is interpreted from his own self-interested point of view. But the spectators surely recall the fact that King Alfonso finally rewards the Cid for his deeds, and they are also no doubt aware that the checkmating of the Moor means victory for the Christians. Once again we find that the irony of the play rests on the self-deception of the central figure who not only misinterprets the meaning of the two devices of foreshadowing, but also deceives himself into believing that he is courteous, humble, and virtuous, when in reality these are only superficial qualities which hide a certain egotism, as evidenced by his interest in rewards and compensations.

While Lope shared with everyone else of his day and age a superstitious belief in both the existence of supernatural phenomena and the power they exercised over people's lives, it should be remembered that he also considered himself a reasonably good Catholic (despite his occasional lapses), and as such he firmly believed that while the stars could influence a man's feelings, they could not ultimately force him to do anything against his own will. However, the vast majority of omens, dreams, and prophecies in his other plays *did* come true, so they served as reliable indicators of the final outcome. The spectators were therefore able to place their confidence in the mysterious significance of these phenomena, certain that their foreknowledge of the characters' fate was accurate. These devices, coupled with the literary foreshadowing inherent in the themes that Lope chose to dramatize, made the ending foreseeable from the start, but the spectators enjoyed being let into the secret as they viewed with various degrees of emotion the slowly developing destinies of villains, heroes, victims, and tragic figures.

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