

THE COSMIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LITERATURE

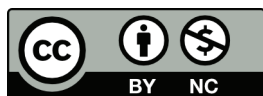
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THE DANGERS OF WATER IN SPANISH GOLDEN AGE LITERATURE

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One of the most striking features of India and its culture, which is immediately apparent to the Western visitor, is the presence of water. The subcontinent is dominated by great rivers which are also creative deities, and its people both suffer and take advantage of these rivers, whose monsoon floods enrich and destroy. Such a visitor might realize that water in India plays a cultural role perhaps even more important than that given to it in Western culture. In the west, Empedocles named water as one of the four essential elements, an idea that is transmitted poetically in the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and became a central part of medieval culture and also in the Spanish Golden Age. Water is the bringer of life and death, the means for eternity and the ultimate end of the ephemeral human being.

The semantic charge of Water, as with the other three elements, is very rich and also, from another perspective, very open. Each of the elements can carry very different, even contradictory values, depending on the tradition to which they are linked, the function they carry out, the context in which they are integrated, and the ideological inclination of the author who defines them.

Fire can be purifying and destructive, sheltering or violent, a medium for contact with the divine or an element related to sin or hell in certain western traditions. This same semantic variability also applies to the other elements.

We can take the same approach with water, but we can note that Saint Thomas Aquinas classified water and earth as inferior elements, as compared to the superior elements of wind and fire. And although

this classification did not have symbolic intention, water and earth seem not to be as positively viewed as the other two elements.

Water, then, takes on associations of various types, but it is not infrequently linked to negative values. These values multiply *ad infinitum* with the lexis and tropes derived from it. This is especially so for atmospheric and geographic agents in which water has a major role: ice, rain, rivers, the sea, storms, and also for the expression of emotions, such as tears. This negative charge is notable in the tears and ice of the Petrarchan tradition. There are many examples in Petrarchan poetry, Spanish and Western, with the love poetry of Quevedo and the Golden Age theatre of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca standing out¹.

We can see an illustration of this tendency in one of the first dramatic works of Calderón de la Barca.

Linked to these petrarchan values, but also simultaneously taking advantage of alternative uses of the word «water», Calderón creates an intricate web of wit and metaphor at the beginning of one of his first works, *Amor, honor y poder* (*Love, honour, and power*)². Water here is a mere dramatic excuse for the apparition of Estela, a beautiful woman:

Enter Enrico with the Princess in his arms

ENRICO	Sister Estela, hurry and bring water from the spring or come with it into the castle.
ESTELA	I'll go immediately; wait here for me.

Exit

But from here on water becomes an element of the Petrarchan imaginative world with its tears insufficient to defeat love at first sight, even if their flow exceeds the sea:

ENRICO	Bring water, as my eyes will not give me a sufficient amount as even the sea would be not be enough to defeat such force.
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¹ For a good general guide to Petrarchism see the manual of Manero Sorolla, 1990, and for Quevedo, Fernández Mosquera, 1999.

² The citations in Spanish are from Calderón, *Comedias II*, 2007 taking into account the unpublished thesis of Zaida Vila which deals with *Amor, honor y poder*.

Water is again an element of the action when Estela appears with the water to drink and provokes the origin of the conflict: the desire unleashed in the King with Estela's appearance:

Enter Estela

ESTELA Here is the water
 But what do I behold?
ENRICO Estela is she,
 who when the Princess fell
 went for water and now returns.

Water, if only indirectly through associated metaphors, also serves in the hyperbolic portrait of the lady by the impassioned King:

KING You might better say that the dawn,
 dressed with splendours
 or crowned with rays,
 another time to the country goes
 and that in her white hands
 brings the frozen dew
 which falls in tears.

The king demonstrates his uncontrollable passion through the presence, or absence, of water. His thirst functions in this regard, a thirst for love that leads him to dismiss the person who disturbs him (the brother of his beloved):

Tiredness and heat,
due return from the hunt
cause my thirst and I want
to drink. Go, then. What are you waiting for?

And from here, the king reflects, using metaphors of water, on his passion and the ways of quenching it, and how the water that refreshes his body cannot satisfy the passion that fires his eyes:

KING Disturbed at your sight I arrive,
 so that, when love provokes me,
 having water in my mouth
 I drink fire through my eyes.
 If in your rays I drown
 as in your waves I burn,
 from one extreme to another.
 Who has seen the same effect

that the crystal should be in the hand
and the flame in the glass?

The stereotypical fight, with a Petrarchan heritage and neo-platonic echoes, is described by the lover, with water the prize of love and at the same time the result of the failure of love exemplified by tears:

I, by your light disturbed and blind,
search for water, but now
my fire will not calm itself.
If my fire is in the water,
I burn, but as soon
as I taste the beautiful glass
the water to my eyes I bring
that in such troubling moments
my lips and eyes have thirst.

Striking in this interior fight is the appeal to the physical plane, as the beloved encourages the King to drink, inciting desires which ought not be fulfilled:

ESTELA Drink now.
KING Now I cannot drink.

This paradoxical mixture of the real and the poetic is a resource well exploited here by Calderón, who uses it to demonstrate the position of the impassioned King and the innocent Estela, the latter who, without knowing it, incites passion in an imprudent manner:

KING I give water to my lips
 having fire in my eyes.
ESTELA (With such contradictory statements
 I cannot understand their meaning).
KING To my mouth I bring water
 and my eyes give me this water
 though they are now with more thirst.
ESTELA Drink now then.

Water gains, according to the description of the lover, all the paradoxes of a love that is not reciprocated:

KING Now I don't drink, then?
 But this glass almost
 kills me through care.

If fire, why does it freeze?
 If ice, why does it enflame?
 If free, why does it solicit?
 If gentle, why does it wound?
 Oh how the water disappoints
 despite its flattery!
 Oh how such fierce pain it gives
 despite its clarity! How it fools me!

Water is clean and clear on the physical level, but at the same time flattering and deceitful on the poetic level of dramatic action.

We can see, then, that in this scene water plays a triple role in the action of the play: in the first place, water has a functional role in the drama—it is the excuse that allows the future lovers to meet. In the second place, water is a symbolic counterpoint to violence in the drama, and in the third place it is also the symbol of passionate love. This passionate love is not satisfied with the water that Estela brings in her hands, nor with her presence and the tears of the impassioned King. Ultimately, water is paradoxically clear and cold (on the physical level) but also deceitful and hypocritical (on the poetic level). The verbal game that Calderón undertakes in these first lines of *Love, honor, and power* is a magnificent example of the negative connotations that water can take on in the context of Petrarchan love affair.

However, it is water as a not necessarily symbolic element of nature that takes on a clear negative role in the work of Calderón. This is clear in its very situation on the planet in its opposition to the earth.

In the first lines of Calderón's autosacramental play *Life is a Dream*³ the struggle between the four elements comes to the foreground. The Earth claims that it was the first to be created:

EARTH	In the beginning God make Heaven and Earth it is said, and therefore I am due service, being the element that anticipates the other three as I was made at the same moment as the heavens.
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³ The Spanish version cited is from *Autos. Obras Completas*, ed. Valbuena Prat, 1959. The English version is mine.

Water, for its part, also claims an important place:

WATER The spirit of God,
 self-inspired,
 floated over the waters,
 which are the face of the abyss;
 so, if over the waters
 the divine spirit
 of God is drawn, to the water
 you should also surrender.

Water presents itself here against the other elements as a vehicle for the spirit of God and therefore claims preeminence.

But even more curious is the dispute between the Earth and the Water when the former requests that the latter keeps itself within its limits, between the river banks:

EARTH You the favourite? Water, leave
 what's mine alone.

Water, for its part, confronts the air:

WATER Leave me air, the arms
 of my seas and rivers.

This debate between the four elements is explained by Wisdom, who again situates Water as an imprisoned element:

WISDOM [...]
 The waters, then, divided
 from the waters of their native
 course, in the skies form
 a beautiful crystal firmament
 so that, Fire, elevated
 to its eminent place,
 calms its ardours,
 communicating gently
 to the air, the air limiting
 in a vague circuit
 the water, which remains
 inferior, does the same,
 softening its wetnesses;
 and she, in her waves
 is an aggregation
 of crystals, whose glasses

though always unquiet
 never break
 the majesty of her prison bars,
 so that, in regions
 removed from earth,
 men discover on who depends
 the universal edifice.

Hans Flasche signaled this conflict some time ago⁴, reminding us of the status of Water as the only element explicitly subject to the others, and also imprisoned, perhaps because of its possible danger. The metaphor that describes Water as imprisoned is often utilized in western literature and Quevedo (in imitation of Pedro Crisólogo) takes advantage of this with the brilliant identification of sand as the soft prison of the sea: that which is absolutely soft and smooth can become the bars and chains of the most violent element⁵.

Without doubt, however, the most violent, spectacular, and well known demonstration of the danger of water is the storm, in which the sea (and even the river with its floods) and the rains move and shake all the cosmic elements. The storm is also the rupture which allows water to escape from its prison. This rebellion against the soft walls of its prison implies the disordering of nature, breaking the system through the means of violent and spectacular actions, a style that is to the taste of the baroque mentality.

E. Wilson understood this in this sense in a work from 1936 when he confirmed Calderón's preference for the storm:

Each element is stable and fixed if it doesn't exceed its limits, but if they do pass them, we find ourselves again in primitive chaos. Thus a storm can be described as a rebellion against the established order of creation. And so the effect of the violence and movement can increase with the increased mixture and confusion of the elements. And Calderón had a taste for these expressions of violence comparable to that of the baroque painters⁶.

The storm, therefore, is one of the most negative aspects of water. This is true also because the maritime storm exemplifies chaos and the disordered conjunction of the other elements: fire, air, and earth

⁴ Flasche, 1980, p. 250.

⁵ Fernández Mosquera, 2006, pp. 159-177.

⁶ Wilson, 1936, p. 36

in the form of lightning, wind, and sand. This confusion of elements that announces evil, although it can often resolve itself to the profit of the protagonists, is present in western literature since almost the beginning, based on the description of Virgil (*Eneida*, I, 81-156), and before this in Homer, if later modified with the contribution of Lucan and his *Farsalia*, above all in the Hispanic tradition⁷. This chaotic confusion of the four elements is present in almost all the descriptions of storms based on traditional literary sources, with the waves becoming mountains of water, the sands of the seabed mixing with the stars, lightning illuminating the night, and the uncontrolled winds the engine of all this confusion.

The storm in Western literature announces evil; it shows the chaos of nature and is the prelude to the calm that characterizes the happiness and good fortune of the characters. Such is the case with the Spanish Golden Age authors, as well as with the classic authors of the European literatures. Thus is transmitted through generations the most spectacular danger of this basic element, water, which is river, tears, rain, and storm, vehicle of the divine but also divine punishment, the water that we all need and at the same time is often superfluous and which can constitute a truly dangerous element.

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⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the storm motif and its development in Golden Age literature, see Fernández Mosquera, 2006.

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