



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 12

Life is a Dream: What's in a Name? Everything!

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

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Episode Resources

Martin, Randall. "Ecocritical Studies." *Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*. pp. 189-200.

Such, Annie R. *Life is a Dream: A Magical Realism Adaptation*. <https://pwcenter.org/play-profile/life-dream>.

Smith College, Climate in Arts and History. <https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/ecocriticism/>.

Episode Transcript

(Musical slowly fades into Introduction)

ALLISON: Hello everyone! Thank you for joining us today. My name is Allison.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream: What's in a Name? Everything!*)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

CHRIS: And my name is Chris.

ALLISON: And welcome to another episode of *Writ in the Margins!* We are thrilled to be joining you wherever you are. In the car, at the grocery store, at the library studying for that exam that's due tomorrow... What else? What else are people doing when they listen to podcasts?

CHRIS: Um.. babysitting the kid next door? Mowing the lawn? Shaving the cat?

ALLISON: Well, wherever you are listening from, we are glad you are joining us as we take you back in time and talk about a play that we have been investigating for the past three months.

CHRIS: *Life is a Dream* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca.

ALLISON: First published in 1636 in Spain, *Life is a Dream* is one of de la Barca's most famous works, as well as "the supreme example of Spanish Golden Age drama". The narrative centers around Segismundo, the prince of Poland who has been imprisoned in a tower under the orders of his father Basillo. The king believes a dire prophecy that his son would bring disaster to the kingdom and be the cause of his death, therefore sentencing Segismundo under the pretenses of "being born". Meanwhile, Rosaura, a noblewoman and the leading female character, feels that her honor has been stolen after her former lover Astolfo left her in Muscovy and travels to Poland to seek him out and reclaim it. *Life is a Dream* focuses on themes of honor, family, and crosses the borders of realism between dreams and reality; all which are constant throughout Spanish Golden Age theater. It has a lush production history that includes productions all over the US and Europe. Have you ever encountered this play before we decided to read it?

CHRIS: No. In fact I was a little disappointed that I haven't come across this play before. I vaguely remember that I was supposed to read it for my theater history class in undergrad, but long story short, I was not a very good student. What about you? Have you ever encountered this play before?

ALLISON: I haven't encountered many Spanish Golden Age plays in general, let alone this diamond in the rough. But I also wish I came across it sooner because this play truly has all the ingredients for a great Early Modern comedy: double marriages, strong, independent cross-dressing females, different names as a form of disguise, a character somehow getting arrested for a thing they didn't do.

CHRIS: Revolutions, bad kings, dungeons and towers: this play has it all. We could spend the entire podcast season covering just this title alone, but we won't do that. Today we are going to narrow our focus really tight to highlight just a few elements of this play. Namely....names.

ALLISON: Yes. Names in the play. Specifically, the power of people's names and the effect of naming others. Before we get too far, shall we read a little excerpt from the text?

CHRIS: Great idea. Although, a quick word on adaptation. De la Barca was from Madrid, and therefore this play was originally written in Spanish. Any text that is translated from the original language to another language requires choosing different words and rephrasing certain phrases from the original source text, and thus strays into the territory of adaptation.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What's in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

ALLISON: So does that mean the original source text for this play even exists?

CHRIS: With editors, is there ever an original source text beyond the first draft?

ALLISON: Touche. The text you are about to hear is from an adaptation of *Life is a Dream* by Annie R. Such titled *Life is a Dream: A New Vintage*. This scene happens near the beginning of the play when Segismundo and Rosaura meet each other for the first time. Let's take a listen.

(Small musical transition)

ROSAURA: Yes, I heard your lament, but I also heard your passion. A man so soft and so frightened, could not sacrifice his humanity with the murder of a poor, empathetic traveler.

SEGISMUNDO: No one's ever called me sir... Nor spoken of me as a human... Who are you, man? Sir? I know very little of the world, forgive me if I offend you with my ignorance. This tower has been my cradle and my grave, the only thing I know is wilderness. I've only known one other man my whole life, but I'm learned. He's tutored me in many aspects of the world. Though my mind has grown... I fear I have no way to apply it. I live like a human beast... Sorry I don't mean to stare, my eyes must be morbidly thirsty... Think you I might have a soul?

ROSAURA: Of course, why wouldn't you?

SEGISMUNDO: I'm not sure if it's something easily lost. When you live like an animal, you may be mistaken for one, and lose your soul entirely.

ROSAURA: You have a name, yes?

SEGISMUNDO: Segismundo.

ROSAURA: Therein lies your soul.

SEGISMUNDO: What is yours?

ROSAURA: I haven't one. My mission is my name.

(Small musical transition)

CHRIS: You know, when I first read this play on an early flight to my friend's wedding, it was this scene that really stayed with me for the whole weekend.

ALLISON: Why this scene in particular?

CHRIS: I think it's because this passage lays out such a powerful thesis of what this play can cover during its two hours of traffic. We have two characters who both have completely different relationships to their names. Segismundo puts no value in his name because he thinks he's an animal. Rosaura tells him that within his name lies

his soul. She does this while admitting that she doesn't have a name, just a mission.

ALLISON: I agree, it's definitely a strange moment of compassion from Rosaura. Throughout the play, we see that she is determined to fulfill her mission of reclaiming her honor from Astolfo, knowing that she could kill him with her own hands. Here, she is comforting a person she just met by giving him hope through classifying him as a named person. A named person with a soul. And technically, she doesn't have a soul either; she says her mission is her name. Her mission is her name, and therefore is her soul. She's not soulless either, she just refers to her soul through her journey rather than a word.

CHRIS: Exactly. This got me thinking about the classification of names and things. Thinking about this led me to Darwin's stages of evolution. Is there an evolution of names? Do our names evolve over time? And if so, do our souls evolve over time?

ALLISON: You've been reading a lot about ecocriticism haven't you?

CHRIS: Guilty as charged.

ALLISON: Although, to your credit, I think it's important that we give our listeners a brief overview of Ecocriticism and Darwin's stages of evolution. So, I devised a little intermission game. Chris, you have exactly 1 minute to tell me and the listeners at home as much about Ecocriticism as possible.

CHRIS: 1 minute?

ALLISON: 1 minute.

CHRIS: Easy, I could do it in my sleep.

ALLISON: Alright. 3, 2, 1, go!

CHRIS: Okay... Ecocriticism studies literature and its connections to the environment. This form of criticism first started in the 1960's and has been gaining steam ever since. With consequences of climate change becoming more dire and apparent, the purpose of ecocriticism is to raise awareness of the natural world in literature. By becoming aware of how we write about and relate to nature in text, hopefully we can raise awareness to the climate and normalize approaches to address the crisis. This form of criticism also has led to the ecojustice movement which focuses on how climate change affects the poorest and most oppressed populations. The three types of ecocriticism are Pastoral, Wilderness, and ecofeminism. Pastoral: City life versus rural life. This form is usually nostalgic for the wilderness. Wilderness: how is the wilderness engaged with, spoken about and written about. Old world portrays the wilderness as scary. New world portrays the wilderness as relaxing. Ecofeminism connects the domination of women and the domination of nature. Nature is often referred to as feminine as in "mother earth" for example. There are two branches on this tree. Branch number one: women are closer to nature than men. Branch number two: neither women nor men are likely to connect to nature. Now, the secret to life can be found within the ecocritical lens, and the secret is this....

ALLISON: And time! Wow, that was a really good job; for a minute, that was really thorough and informative. Now we should move on to Darwin's stages of evolution.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What's in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

CHRIS: Great idea. What say you, you wanna try the 1 minute timer for Darwin's stages of evolution?

ALLISON: Oh boy, I can try my best.

CHRIS: Sweet! Here we go, Darwin's three stages of evolution in 3...2...1.

ALLISON: There are three main stages of Darwin's theory of evolution: heredity, mutation, and survival, or natural selection. Heredity, or inheritance, is pretty self explanatory: it refers to the hereditary traits parents pass to their children. Mutation is also self explanatory: it refers to what aspects of these traits could be altered or changed, which is often the cause of variation within a population. Most of these mutations are often considered beneficial mutations, or mutations that have positive effects on the organism, increasing their likelihood of surviving and therefore more likely to become common across a population. Finally, there's natural selection, referring to what all generations must do to survive and adapt to a certain circumstance. Not quite as self explanatory as the other two stages, this is often in the form of "useful" characteristics that are better at the task of surviving within their environment. Regardless if a trait is inherited or mutated, the "useful" traits are often the ones that evolve within a population in order to survive. Like the Hunger Games, it is a game of survival of the fittest after all.

CHRIS: And that's time. Great job defining evolution in a minute! So now we have a basic understanding of ecocriticism and evolution, let's return to our earlier questions: is there an evolution of names? Do our names evolve over time? And if so, do our souls evolve over time? Is there any evidence of an evolution of names in *Life is A Dream*?

ALLISON: To answer this question let's start with tracking Segismundo's journey through the play. By doing this we can identify how a name evolves as a character evolves.

CHRIS: Great idea.

ALLISON: First we meet Segismundo in the tower...

CHRIS: or dungeon, or cave... depending on the adaptation.

ALLISON: True. Like we mentioned earlier, he has been imprisoned here his whole life due to the prophecy. In this first scene we see Segismundo railing on his circumstance through a lengthy chunk of text concerning his situation. Saying things like....

CHRIS: "Wasn't every other man on this Earth born? What makes me so special to be so grossly punished?"

ALLISON: The speech talks all about animals on the earth having more agency than Segismundo, though he argues he is more refined because he is human. At this moment, is he more refined than a fish, beast, or a bird?

CHRIS: Well... He lives in a cage, without the freedom of the animals he is so jealous of. He has a use of verse in language, which means he is educated to a degree. He is smart enough to realize he is living in a dire situation.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What's in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

ALLISON: In terms of evolution, where would you say he is right now?

CHRIS: In terms of evolution, this seems to be an inheritance from his father. His father was scared of the prophecy, so he imprisoned his offspring, making his son be baser than beasts and fowl and fishes. Segismundo has inherited his lot from his parents. This inheritance includes a fear of the world beyond his baseness.

ALLISON: That fear begins to really play out when we next meet Segismundo in the throne room after his father gives him a chance to play king for a day.

CHRIS: Lock your child up for their entire life in a dungeon, then let them play prince for a day. What's the worst that could happen?

ALLISON: It's not like a servant gets thrown off a balcony or anything.

CHRIS: One could argue that Segismundo may have overreacted at that moment.

ALLISON: When Segismundo wakes up, the hereditary trait from his father is predominantly fear. We see this in the text with him saying over and over again “is this real?” “Heaven help me, is this real.” This inheritance is then mutated into rage and irritation due to his own circumstances being locked up in the tower-dungeon.

CHRIS: Almost immediately he begins to get angry at everyone in the court, demanding respect and obeisance from all. He escalates quickly with text like “Don’t order me, ...I order you.” During his first day in court he acts more like an angry beast than a courtly prince. He threatens the life of just about every servant in the court, he attempts to rape Rosaura, he tries to kill Clotaldo, he fights with Astolfo, and he throws the servant off the balcony.

ALLISON: RIP in the chat for that servant.

CHRIS: Following this hell of a first day in office, Segismundo is drugged by his father and put back into the cave/dungeon/tower.

ALLISON: Lets just call it a prison.

CHRIS: Back into his prison.

ALLISON: And now we have our final form of evolution with Segismundo. Back in the prison he realizes he can revert to his old ways, or evolve and change. The coincidental revolution that takes place gives him a chance to change his ways, choosing to forgive Clotado and allowing the nobleman to fight on his father's side without strife. This is a form of natural selection: he realizes that in order to survive he needs to evolve and be a good, virtuous king.

CHRIS: Okay, so the journey Segismundo goes on in this play moves through the three forms of Darwin's evolution. He inherits fear from his father, he mutates fear into rage when he plays king for a day, and learns that to survive and thrive he has to act against his heredity. How does all of this tie into names?

ALLISON: Well, names are signifiers. They can identify, signify ownership, and indicate status. Each person that is

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What's in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

named demonstrates how they are felt or perceived by the one who named them. Basillo named him Segismundo upon his birth and then immediately cast into prison. His father considers Segismundo a beast and treats him like one.

CHRIS: While in prison, he perceives himself as a beast. In his first scene with Rosaura he calls himself a beast six times, while Rosaura perceives him as a man in suffering. We could argue that the way Segismundo perceives his name in the beginning of the play is what he inherited from his father. After he wakes up in court to be Prince for a day things shift a little bit, right?

ALLISON: Oh, for sure. He calls himself “a hybrid of man and beast”. In court he has the title of King. That should give him all the status that he needs to elevate himself past “beast” and into a man, but his behavior is still wild and irate. There is a mutation in status, but he still holds onto that spite from earlier.

CHRIS: This mutation in his status and name comes from his father playing a big experiment. By pulling his son out of prison and forcing him to play king for a day, the entire court becomes part of this experiment. The servants are expected to treat Segismundo as royalty, but he isn’t acting very royal. Segismundo mutated from his inherited fear into anger, and therefore treats the rest of the court like animals.

ALLISON: In the final act of the play Segismundo evolves past his rage into something more humane. The moment the people learn he is the rightful heir, they use his name as a rallying cry for revolution and to put him on the throne. This chanting of his name suggests a new evolution in his name. In the court he was acting like a monster and was treated as such. With the revolution willing to fight for his freedom, his name becomes a beacon for change and hope. Segismundo has a chance to embrace this new status or remain a beast.

CHRIS: He understands that he needs to embrace this new status if he wants to better his situation, as well as himself. His text sounds different at the end of the play when he decides to spare his father and embrace his new circumstances saying: “My father here, to exempt himself from the rabid fury of my prophesied nature, made me an animal, a human beast. I might have been born humble and tractable, but was never afforded the chance...I stand before you, not as a beast, but as a ruler.”

ALLISON: Beast and ruler are two very different names. Segismundo has shown us that he can be a ruler and a beast in act 2, but here he has also shown that he can be a ruler and a beast but through a different perspective. An evolved perspective.

CHRIS: Speaking of an evolved perspective, how does Rosaura’s perspective evolve? In the beginning of the play she says her mission is her name. How does that evolve during the play?

ALLISON: Considering that at the beginning of the play she came to kill Astolfo and by the end of the play she is married to him. Something must have happened.

CHRIS: When we first meet Rosaura her name has already mutated from its original state to pursue revenge. She is distancing herself from her name by refusing to use it. She is dressed as a man hiding her true form.

ALLISON: When Clotaldo first encounters her and tries to take her sword from her, he asks for her name and she deflects, saying she must “conceal the name of the woman who gave it to her”. Aka herself.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What’s in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

CHRIS: In act two Rosaura confesses to Clotaldo that she is in disguise. Clotaldo tells her “Lady...’tis best to disguise yourself in your natural form. Don’t fight who you are, your voice is bound to break.” This chunk of wisdom encourages Rosaura to drop the disguise and evolve to something more true to form.

ALLISON: She decides to heed this advice, since the next time we see her she’s in court disguised as one of Estrella’s ladies in waiting. In this next mutation, she not only is wearing a dress but she still avoids her own name, calling herself Astrea to maintain her disguise.

CHRIS: So Rosaura is taking the advice of Clotaldo to achieve her mission. Her mission is her name, and her name is her soul and that still seems to be the most important to her. So while her objective is constant, she is still evolving through disguise.

ALLISON: The disguise helps her get to her goal. It sounds like survival of the fittest. Even when Rosaura as Astrea confronts Astolfo, she refuses her name while he continues to use it over and over again.

CHRIS: She is conflicted about his use of her name.

ALLISON: Well, if the name is the soul and she is trying to steer clear from her given name, it must be pretty difficult to hear the name you are fighting to suppress used over and over by your former love.

CHRIS: Rosaura is incredibly tough. When she decides to join with Segismundo and fight against Astolfo, Clotaldo tries to talk her out of it. Rosaura counters by saying “My life doesn’t matter, my name does.”

ALLISON: So she really means it when she says her mission is her name. She may love Astolfo, but not more than she is determined to exact her revenge on him for breaking her heart.

CHRIS: Does she ever embrace her name in this play?

ALLISON: Sort of. At the end of the play the fighting ceases, Basilio surrenders and Segismundo becomes king. Rosaura and Astolfo are forced to get married because, according to Segismundo, they love each other too much to not get married. Rosaura says she would rather kill him, but if they must get married then they must.

CHRIS: So she doesn’t get what she wants. Unless her mission was actually to reconcile with Astolfo.

ALLISON: Not only does she evolve through the play, but so does her mission.

CHRIS: So.... what did we learn today?

ALLISON: Segismundo exhibits all three forms of Darwin’s evolution in his journey throughout this play. He is always evolving. His shifts in his nature are reflected in the way he perceives himself, and in the way he is perceived by others. This shift in perception is manifested in the way that people use their names.

CHRIS: When Astolfo says in act two that “the soul never lies.”, it appears to hold true not just for Segismundo but for all the characters. The way they present and consider themselves is apparent in their name and station.

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What’s in a Name? Everything!)

Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne

ALLISON: Just like when Rosaura says “Do you have a name? Therein lies your soul.”

CHRIS: Exactly! *Life is a Dream* is a great demonstration of how names and souls are evolving throughout the duration of the play. In our next podcast (if we ever did another one) we could examine this idea with other texts. How does Hamlet view himself and evolve?

ALLISON: Does Antipholus of Ephesus feel a shift in his name while his twin brother is running around causing confusion?

CHRIS: What happens to names when twins have the same name? My mind is blown.

ALLISON: Does Queen Margaret ever reach the mutation stage in evolution?

CHRIS: The paper crown scene seems pretty mutated.

ALLISON: Good point.

CHRIS: Now I really want to see a production of this play!

ALLISON: Me too! I think there will be a production in 2023 by Cheek By Jowl.

CHRIS: ROAD TRIP!!!

ALLISON: Well, that's unfortunately all the time we have today. Thank you so much for spending the last twenty minutes with us on another episode of *Writ in the Margins*. Feel free to check out the other episodes, not just on *Life is a Dream* but also about some other plays this season by our brilliant classmates: *The Antipodes*, *The Island Princess*, *Loa to the Divine Narcissus*, and *Presumed Dead*.

CHRIS: Thank you Allison, for hanging out and chatting about *Life is A Dream* with me today.

ALLISON: Right back at you Chris.

BOTH: GOODBYE!!!!

(Music fade out)

Writ in the Margins, 2.12 (*Life is a Dream*: What's in a Name? Everything!)
Hosts: Chris Johnston and Allison Lyne