



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 13

Life is a Dream: History, Feminism, and Avatar The Last Airbender

Hosts: Jess Snellings and Riley Tate

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Bonus Material

Episode Resources

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Episode Transcript

Jess: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Writ in the Margins season two.

Riley: A podcast that takes a dramaturgical approach to the plays from the early modern period and beyond.

Jess: This podcast is sponsored by Mary Baldwin University's Shakespeare and Performance Studies graduate program in Staunton, Virginia, home of the fighting squirrels and Shakespeare nerds.

Riley: My name is Riley Tate.

Jess: My name is Jess Snellings, and today we are going to dissect Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream*. And I apologize in advance for any mispronunciation of Spanish words or names.

Riley: A play that defined the Spanish Golden Age, both literally and figuratively.

Jess: In this episode, "*Life is a Dream*: History, Feminism, and Avatar," we will look at the history of Spanish Golden Age plays, analyze them through a feminist lens focusing on honor, compare Spanish Golden Age and *Life is a Dream* to a popular Nickelodeon cartoon, and consider how the history, feminism, and story comes together in *Life is a Dream*.

Riley: In order to fully understand the importance and significance of *Life is a Dream*, let us start by discussing the history of the Spanish Golden Age, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca himself.

Jess: Born in Madrid in 1600, de la Barca received a Jesuit education and was ordained as a priest in 1651.

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Riley: During his preparation for his career and life in the church, Calderón de la Barca started to write verse in the 1620s, and soon his success in the theatre festivals of the time, like the Corpus Christi festivals, garnered lots of attention.

Jess: The first recorded performance of his first play *Love, Honor, and Power* is 1623 and over the course of his writing career, he wrote over 120 plays including tragedies, comedies of manners, histories, and philosophical dramas. These non-religious plays are often called *corrales* or *comedia nueva* in regards to Spanish Golden Age Drama. Later in life he wrote over 70 autos sacramentales, or religious plays.

Riley: Calderón de la Barca wrote *La vida es sueño*, English title *Life is a Dream*, in 1635, and it was published in 1636. The first English translation came in 1865. To put that into perspective for audience members more inclined towards Shakespeare, Shakespeare died in 1616, and his first folio was printed in 1623. So de la Barca wrote *Life is a Dream* 19 years after Shakespeare's death and 12 years after the printing of the first folio.

Jess: There are different types of Spanish Golden Age plays. Can you expand on that?

Riley: Well, the two most common types of plays written and performed during the Golden Age are *comedia nueva* and *autos sacramentales*. These plays were usually performed in *corrales*.

Jess: Those were rectangular courtyards in the center of three buildings.

Riley: Yes, and the first permanent theatre in Madrid was the Corral de la Cruz built in 1579. But back to the two separate styles. The *autos* were allegorical religious plays that combined mythology and the Old and New Testaments, focusing on the ideas of faith. *Comedia nueva* consisted of three-act plays in varied verse, usually mixing high and low, tragedy and comedy. Just like *autos*, *comedia nueva* also used history, myth, and legend to create their stories.

Jess: *Life is a Dream* contains a lot of mythology, tragedy and comedy, and has a three-act structure, which sounds more like a *comedia nueva*. Was the first edition of *Life is a Dream* an *auto*?

Riley: I am so glad you asked. Originally, *Life is a Dream* was written as a baroque philosophical comedic mythology play, and then re-written into an *auto*. Another example of Calderón de la Barca rewriting his own play from comedy to the *autos* style is *The Charms of Sin*. De la Barca was known for his *autos* and from 1647-1681, he wrote all of the *autos* produced in Madrid. His death in 1681 marks the end of the Spanish Golden Age.

Jess: If his death marks the end of the Spanish Golden Age, where is the beginning? And what constitutes the "Spanish Golden Age"?

Riley: The golden age of Spanish literature starts with Spain's emergence as a European power during the 16th and 17th century, and generally starts after Christian armies took over the Muslim rule after the Battle of Granada in

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1492. Once Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabelle I of Castile were married in 1469, Catholicism was the primary religion in Spain.

Jess: How much influence did the Protestant Reformation have on Spain?

Riley: The Spanish Inquisition actually prevented much influence from happening, and the reformation and previous Muslim occupation of Spain created the focus of honor within the Spanish plays.

Jess: We see honor thematically tie a lot of Spanish Golden Age plays together. How important was honor outside of literature - like, in daily life for the folks attending these plays or reading the literature? I'm assuming it took more than finding the Avatar in the name of the Fire Lord.

Riley: Well sort of, but imagine Zuko pre-Uncle Iroh. Honor is the defining element -

Jess: As opposed to air or fire -

Riley: Right. Spanish Golden Age dramas revolved around the idea of honor and their plots were filled with mythology, legends, history, popular ballads, and the Bible.

Jess: *Life is a Dream* is also considered the end all be all of Spanish Golden age, right?

Riley: Yes, in the 2006 Penguin edition of *Life is a Dream*, Gregory Racz describes it as the supreme example of Spanish Golden Age Drama. And many professors and scholars continue to use it as a prime example of Spanish Golden Age plays because it does contain allusions and sometimes direct references to mythology, legends, history, the Bible, and centers around Segismund's and Rosaura's honor.

Jess: As per custom for the genre, this play contains every marker of a Spanish Golden Age play, especially of the autos.

Riley: Yes it does. Calderón de la Barca was a master at his craft, and rewriting *Life is a Dream* into an *auto* illustrated his skill as a writer, yet it also makes some of the connections a little harder to define.

Jess: We do get a taste of the mythological element in the beginning of the play.

Riley: Yeah in the opening line actually. Rosaura says, "Dash off, you wild hippogriff!". But some other great examples revolve around the myths hiding beneath the surface. The myth of Cronus and Zeus relates to King Basil and Segismund, not literally. But we do see a man hiding his child, and the child coming back and taking the throne that is rightfully his.

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Jess: Oedipus much? I mean, the relationship between King Basil and Segismund are-is so much like the father-son relationship in the Greek classic *Oedipus Rex*, right down to the father sending the son away out of fear of a prophecy.

Riley: And, like Laius, Basil actually causes the prophecy to come true. He tempts fate, if you will. Jess: It's like Uncle Iroh says in season 3 episode 12, "Destiny is a funny thing. You never know how things are going to work out." But what about Rosaura? Is there a mythological connection?

Riley: Absolutely, both Rosaura and her mother have been abandoned by a man who took their honor. This makes me think of Zeus' seduction of Leda, and Aneas' abandonment of Dido. These women trusted men, but were inevitably left crushed upon their abandonment. However, Calderón de la Barca takes a twist from these myths to create his own story. Instead of having this abandonment ruin their lives, Rosaura travels to Poland to get back her honor, and her mother's as well. She searches for her father through the use of the family sword, and also plans on using that sword to kill the man who left her out to dry.

Jess: You know, I know of a certain banished prince whose father left him out to dry.

Riley: Jess...

Jess: Okay, hear me out. Zuko feels he has to regain his honor because his father said so. Like society with Rosaura. Zuko's mother is absent throughout the series - like Segismund. Ozai abandoned Zuko and his mother in the same way Basil abandoned Segismund - expelling them from their home because of their fear of the future. For Basil it was the monstrous son, for Ozai it was the monstrous Avatar. No wonder he had a tough time... Zuko basically took on the role of two protagonists of a Spanish Golden Age drama. And let's not forget the whole honor business.

Riley: You know what, you make a good point. Zuko embodies different elements and backstories from different characters. But we can't leave out the whole Aang connection. Think about it, the destiny, honor, faith of Aang as the Avatar correlates pretty closely to Segismund as the King of Poland. Aang has been missing for 100 years, and no one knows that he is alive. Segismund has been living in a cave his entire life, and no one knows he is alive except for his father and tutor. Both of these characters have been missing and unable to complete their true destiny, and are only able to do so through sheer faith from friends and family.

Jess: Yeah and Rosaura and Clarion saving Segismund correlates to Sokka and Katara saving Aang. They have no idea who he is, but are immediately drawn to him. Honestly, Clarion and Rosaura and Sokka and Katara find Segismund and Aang by what seems to be an accident.

Riley: Of course, this could also be the way their destinies have been designed. Just as Aang was destined to be the Avatar, Sokka and Katara were destined to find him. It is a very easy bet to say that Clarion and Rosaura were destined to find Segismund as well.

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Jess: But, Clarion and Rosaura follow Segismund, and break away for their own purposes and plot lines. They create a sub-plot for this play.

Riley: Yes they do, but Katara and Sokka get their subplots too. Like Katara learning with the water-bending master and Sokka training with the combat master.

Jess: Oh you're talking about season one, episode eighteen where Katara tries to train with Master Pakku!

Riley: Yes exactly that!

Jess: Honestly a great episode to pull from since Master Pakku refuses to teach Katara because she is a woman.

Riley: Right, and in the end her honor, persistence, and lineage convinces Master Pakku to teach her.

Jess: You know, when actively thinking about this, love and honor run through *Avatar: The Last Airbender* just like a Spanish Golden Age play. And honestly a lot of the main factors of a Spanish Golden Age drama are found in this age-less cartoon as well.

Riley: Yes, okay so we have a three-act structure within the three seasons, tragedy and comedy, myths, legends, and lots of allegorical lessons for the audience to learn from. And, a savior so we have our biblical element in there as well.

Jess: Yeah, and the whole love and honor ordeal can easily be seen in Segismund and Aang. Both of these characters inevitably have to choose honor over everything else for their people. And for the icing on top of the metaphorical thesis cake we are currently baking, we learn in the sequel that this story ends in marriage.

Riley: Right, and both Aang and Segismund continue onto their true destiny as Avatar and King of Poland, respectively.

Jess: See! You get it. Any scholarly writers out there, you're welcome for the free thesis topic idea. So anyway, back to our examples of Spanish Golden age plays - we have established the mythological and legendary elements within *Life is a Dream*, but what about the Biblical elements?

Riley: Well the mythical elements, of which I have only discussed a few, heavily outweigh the biblical references. But they are there, and I have kind of touched on them during our *Avatar* tangent. Like *Avatar*, most of the biblical messages are hidden through allegory. Segismund's connection to Jesus can be found through the cave.

Jess: I know of a Greek philosopher who also enjoyed a good cave allegory. Do we get a sense of Plato's cave allegory?

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Riley: It definitely comes into play here, just not in this episode. Anyway, learning that Segismund is the true heir to the throne, the people of Poland come to rescue him. These men can connect to the disciples, and even say “all hail, our prince and rightful liege!” And let’s not forget that the entire ending of this play relies on the salvation that Segismund brings Poland as their heir. Now Segismund is not a complete match for Jesus, but there are moments within this play that lean into it.

Jess: Now we have biblical reflection, mythological connections, and we have discussed honor in our Avatar tangent, but what specifically in this play leads us to the idea of honor?

Riley: Like the majority of Spanish Golden age plays, honor is the main focus of the plot. Both Segismund and Rosaura are trying to earn, revenge, accept, and understand how their honor works in this world. We will go into further detail of Rosaura’s honor, But before we do, let’s hear some brief dialogue from *Life is a Dream* and while you are listening focus on the importance of honor in this world.

Jess: For context, this scene comes from Act 3, Scene 8 where Rosaura, our female lead, and Clotaldo, her father (unbeknownst to her), discuss the restoration of Rosaura’s honor. For the purposes of our podcast, our passage begins around the middle of the scene.

Clotaldo

By the choice that I have made,
Loyal to the land I’ll be,
I am liberal with thee,
And Astolfo’s debt is paid;
Choose then, nay let honour, rather
Choose for thee, and for us two,
For, by Heaven! I could not do
More for thee were I thy father! –

Rosaura

Were that my supposition true,
I might strive and bear tis below;
But not being my father, no.

Clotaldo

What then dost thou mean to do?

Rosaura

Kill the Duke

Clotaldo

A gentle dame,
Who no father’s name doth know,
Can she so much valour show?

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Rosaura
Yes.

Clotaldo
What drives thee on?

Rosaura
My fame.

Clotaldo
Think that in the Duke thou'lt see...

Rosaura
Honour all my wrath doth rouse.

Clotaldo
Soon thy king – Estrella's spouse.

Rosaura
No, by Heaven! It must not be.

Clotaldo
It is madness.

Rosaura
Yes, I see it.

Clotaldo
Conquer it.

Rosaura
I can't o'erthrow it.

Clotaldo
It will cost thee...

Rosaura
Yes, I know it.

Clotaldo
Life and honour.

Rosaura
Well, so be it.

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Clotaldo
What wouldst have?

Rosaura
My death.

Clotaldo
Take care!
It is spite.

Rosaura
'Tis honorur's cure.

Clotaldo
'Tis wild fire.

Rosaura
That will endure.

Clotaldo
It is frenzy.

Rosaura
Rage, despair.

Clotaldo
Can there then be nothing done
This blind rage to let pass by?

Rosaura
No.

Clotaldo
And who will help thee?

Rosaura
I.

Clotaldo
Is there then no remedy?

Rosaura
None.

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Clotaldo
Think of other means whereby...

Rosaura
Other means would seal my fate.

Clotaldo
If 'tis so, then, daughter, wait,
For together we shall die.

Riley: That was Molly Martinez-Collins reading the part of Rosaura and Chris Johnston reading the part of Clotaldo. Thank you both.

Jess: So let's talk about Rosaura in the context of this scene. She's traveled all the way from Moscow to restore her honor. Clotaldo who, unbeknownst to Rosaura, is her father, accepts her request to help her seek revenge against the man who dishonored her before the play's beginning. However, we get the sense that (true to the sentiment of the time) a man's loyalty lies first and foremost to other men, certainly above the loyalty to a woman. Clotaldo has it bad, too, because Astolfo saves his life prior to this scene. Clotaldo feels conflicted about killing someone who rescued him from death; forget the promises to his daughter. So her honor's restitution is, once again, up to Rosaura to acquire.

Riley: This passage really aids in spotlighting Rosaura's road to regaining her honor.

Jess: A woman's honor and virtue were closely tied to—in the early modern period (and for centuries before and after). As we see in Rosaura's case, the loss of her virginity is synonymous with the loss of her honor - especially since her lover leaves her for another woman.

Riley: The disgrace here falls solely on her, even though it takes two to tango, as the cliché goes.

Jess: This was the case with many examples of known or publicly exposed extramarital affairs. If a married man slept with a woman other than his wife, it was frowned upon, sure, but we don't have a lot of stories about how men suffered great consequences for it.

Riley: However, if a married woman slept with a man other than her husband, she was labeled an adulteress and faced greater societal repercussions.

Jess: In more contemporary terms, we never hear of men doing the "walk of shame." But a woman comes home early in the morning or goes to work wearing yesterday's clothes? She doesn't typically get a high five and a wink. In our play, Rosaura actually takes a very active approach and ventures to a new land in order to avenge herself.

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Riley: But then she arrives and must find a man to do the dirty work - she has to find a man to kill Astolfo on her behalf.

Jess: Rosaura's drive and commitment to travel so far from home to restore her honor seems like a bold move for a woman of the time. Even though Spanish Golden Age plays frequently address honor, in such a devotedly patriarchal society, we'd probably expect our protagonist on such a quest to be a man.

Riley: Rosaura recognizes this because she knows that in order to preserve what sense of honor she does have, she needs to conform to some measure of society.

Jess: What also interests me about the situation of the play is how cruelly the male characters of authority treat Segismund. Yet their honor remains intact?

Riley: I mean, imprisonment, gaslighting, manipulation, years of literal physical and mental abuse... how is it Rosaura suffers most?

Jess: From a feminist criticism perspective, Rosaura poses... an interesting fusion of a woman attempting to conform to societal expectations while still demonstrating her own agency. Calderón de la Barca gives us a woman taking on this mission. Although, I say that, but according to Mercedes Maroto Camino, "Despite the constraints imposed on women by the prevalent considerations of mental and physical inferiority, women were more active in early modern Spanish society than we tend to think." Camino goes on to quote Mary Elizabeth Perry on women taking a more active role in "the life of the city" because the men were so preoccupied with war and colonization.

Riley: Basically, Rosaura captures the growing sentiment that maybe, just maybe, women are living beings capable of thought and productivity outside of the home. Gasp. But then, what does it mean that she has to rely on men to restore her honor in the end? Why does her honor's restitution come in the form of a marriage to the man who dishonored her in the first place?

Jess: While she is able to break the mold by evoking her own agency -

Riley: You go, boo!

Jess: - society still places certain constraints on Rosaura because of her gender. There was still the notion that women possessed "mental and physical inferiority" to men.

Riley: To further the other side of the argument, we have an interpretation by Joachim Küpper that Rosaura is imbued with sin in part because her mother gave birth to Rosaura out of wedlock.

Jess: I'd venture to say that if we follow the direction of Küpper's reasoning, we find our way back to the concept of Original Sin and its direct connection to Eve. For centuries, and continuing today, Christianity has placed blame on

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Eve for man's banishment from Eden and the fall of mankind. There's also the sense that women are, therefore, inherently sinful and need men's steadfast guidance. Well, that and their frailty (insert audible eye roll). Also, I specify Christianity here only because during the Spanish Golden Age, Catholicism was the predominant religion in Spain.

Riley: Küpper also argues that Rosaura's attempt at "self-assertion" transgresses against the God-given order and she is, therefore, destined to fail. And to be fair, Mary Elizabeth Perry also states, "[t]he emphasis on gender prescriptions reveals deep social ruptures in this period, and the tension between real and ideal infused everyday immediacy into larger concerns about disorder."

Jess: Yet Camino leans into the power Rosaura wields as an icon through her actions to restore her own honor - through enacting her own agency. Camino writes that for women of the period, "it entails the demonstration that they could be active beings, even if only in the domestic arena.". Then for contemporary female audiences, we can appreciate a portrayal of a strong - of strong women who take command of their own destiny.

Riley: It doesn't feel like much of a choice when the crown prince says, "Hey, y'all are going to get married."

Jess: As far as we know, Rosaura is satisfied. She got what she ventured to Poland for - her honor is restored. But we can't be sure, because she suddenly becomes rather quiet.

Riley: Right, she is silent now that her Original Sin has been cleansed by Segismund.

Jess: Ultimately, Rosaura is kind of epic. She takes control of her life as much so as she can given societal constraints. I'd like to think that de la Barca wrote her in response to a culture shifting towards humanism and enlightenment over strict observance of the Church as an institution.

Riley: Yeah, as a modern reader, her character feels very 'down with patriarchy' to me. She uses the societal constraints against her to manipulate her own way in this society.

Jess: She gets what she wants, mostly. She gets the ending she needs. Whether it be through revenge or marriage, she restores her honor. Maybe hunting the last airbender would have been more her style. Flying bison, hippogriff, they both fly.

Riley: Clarion, Sokka. They both are useful in their own way.

Jess: Now that we have fully convinced you that *Life is a Dream* and *Avatar: the Last Airbender* are basically synonymous for one another, let's leave our listeners with some final thoughts to consider as they watch or read de la Barca's classic Spanish Golden Age drama.

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Riley: When watching this play today, how does the production address the men's honor who treat Segismund cruelly? And how does this differ from Rosaura's perception of her own honor?

Jess: When reading this play, how do the allegories impact the reader's interpretation of the play's conclusion? Do you need to be well versed in Biblical references to appreciate Segismund's character arc and Rosaura's journey?

Riley: We have gone into detail, maybe too much, with how much *Avatar: The Last Airbender* fits in the Spanish Golden Age genre.

Jess: But after listening to this episode, have any other shows or movies come to mind that also fit this genre?

Riley: If so, give this play a read and see what other hidden gems you can find.

Jess: And if none come to mind, read this play anyway. It's well worth the time investment.

Riley: We hope this episode of 'Writ in the Margins' inspires many of you to explore the drama of the Spanish Golden Age.

Jess: For this episode, we pulled dialogue from the 2006 Penguin edition edited and translated by Gregory Racz as well as the Luarna online translation. But we encourage you to reference any edition of the text. Please be aware that there may be wording discrepancies because this is a work in translation.

Riley: Thank you again to our readers, Molly Martinez-Collins and Chris Johnston; Professor Seremet; the Shakespeare and Performance Studies MLitt 2023 cohort; and you, our listeners.

Jess: A quick postscript - we recorded this episode in the second-floor lobby of the Blackfriars Playhouse while an acting class took place onstage. The enthusiastic yelling you hear in the background is the sheer joy of theatre. We apologize for any confusion, but encourage you to embrace theatre at its chaotic roots.

Riley & Jess: Thank you