

2012

King Alfonso XI in Lope's Amor, pleito y desafío: A Practical and Just Model of Kingship in a Time of Moral Ambiguity

Terri Carney

Butler University, tcarney@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers



Part of the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carney, Terri. "King Alfonso XI in Lope's Amor, pleito y desafío: A Practical and Just Model of Kingship in a Time of Moral Ambiguity." *Bulletin de los Comediantes*, 64.1.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

King Alfonso XI in Lope's *Amor, pleito y desafío*: A Practical and Just Model of Kingship in a Time of Moral Ambiguity

Terri Carney
Butler University

It is an axiom that the king is a pillar of Spanish Golden Age drama. Indeed, whether fictional or historic, on the stage or in the audience, the figure of the king is prevalent in the world of the *comedia* as a site of cultural anxiety surrounding the role of the monarchy in the newly urbanized and litigious seventeenth-century Spanish society. Scholars such as Melveena McKendrick (*Playing the King*) and Frank Casa ("The Duality of the King in Golden Age Drama") have explored the personage of the king in a variety of these plays. Neither of these studies makes mention of Lope's *Amor, pleito y desafío*, even though the king plays a prominent role in the drama. Here I propose to examine this particular play and the role of the king in determining justice in an increasingly hazy moral universe. Written in 1621, the year of the transfer of power from King Felipe III to King Felipe IV, *Amor, pleito y desafío* presents us with a monarch who stands in stark contrast to the remoteness, pageantry, and spectacle of Felipe IV's court. Indeed, Lope's King Alfonso is accessible, a good listener, and respectful of the opposing codes of conduct that hold sway over his populace, including chivalry, courtly love, and the proliferating, nascent legal system. Simply put, he is an unusually sensitive, humane, and just king for the cultural context of Lope's Spain.

The king in this play is easily identifiable as a fictionalized Alfonso XI, something that William Blue recognizes in his analysis of the play in *Spanish Comedy and Historical Contexts in the 1620s*, though he limits his treatment of Alfonso to observe that he "stands curiously aloof" from the legal goings-on (191). In *Amor, pleito y desafío*, there are clear references to "Caballero de la banda," the battle of Salado, and Pedro el Cruel, all of which point to the historical Alfonso XI. While somewhat eclipsed in the history books by his philosophy and arts-loving predecessor Alfonso X el Sabio, Alfonso XI is generally known to be the promulgator of the *Siete Partidas*, as well as a popular, effective king.¹ As a text of civil law, the *Siete Partidas* intended to promote justice and rectitude, and became one of the most influential law books ever written, serving as the basis for early U.S. and western European law. Believed to be written collaboratively, with Alfonso X as the primary author, it was meant to replace the local and regional municipalities (*fueros*) with a more unified, centralized set of laws.²

The historical Alfonso XI (1311-1350) was given the nickname "El Justiciero," another marker of his role in shaping Castilian law and justice during the tumultuous medieval period, which was characterized by tension between the nobility and the monarchy, between the regional and the prenational. In what I read as an attempt to bridge these sets of polarized forces, Lope's characterization of Alfonso XI in *Amor, pleito y desafío* creates an engaged and savvy king who holds authority over his subjects but is not an absolutist. He brings abstract notions of truth and morality down to a practical level and functions as what many have referred to as the early modern subject, a self in-process who maneuvers in a changing landscape of subject-positions.³ His son Pedro el Cruel appears in the play as well, another historical figure with an ambiguous, if paradoxically polarized, reputation in the annals of history: alternately characterized as cruel or just, depending on the teller. In the vacillation between these poles, we glimpse the push-and-pull between agency and nostalgia for a more stable, if limiting, way of being in the world.

Moving from the absolutism of the Middle Ages to the tremendously liberating and disorienting urban capital of Renaissance Spain meant upheaval in the notions of subjectivity. It seems fitting that theater was the dominant genre in this emerging modern period. The dialogic, temporal urgency of theater underlined the flourishing presence of the historical now of the chaotic city, taking us far from the abstract glories of the epic and down to the here and now of self in process: a messy and protean entity in a world of proliferating laws and conflicting codes of professional and personal behavior.

In her seminal study *Playing the King*, Melveena McKendrick points out that most of the kings in Lope's plays are fallible, human, and plagued with frailties.⁴ She also contends that Lope fantasized about a "personal king" in the face of the growing remoteness of the Spanish crown, and this play would likely fall under the nostalgic impulse to go back to a time when kings were accessible and involved in the dispensation and definition of justice in their smaller, more manageable kingdoms.⁵ Lope's nostalgia toward the king is shared by his characters, who, on the one hand, take active roles in decision-making and judging, yet, on the other, work to minimize their role in the outcome of things. Their anxiety regarding agency stems from the changing moral universe and new questions that emerge: Is morality predicated on unfettered human agency or just a by-product of fate, fortune, and destiny?

King Alfonso of *Amor, pleito y desafío* is referred to as a judge, mediator, and arbiter in his kingdom, and this vocabulary underwrites a morality that requires choices and human agency. Throughout the play, we see him engaged in conversations with his circle of nobles and even with other, lesser subjects. In many ways, he embodies the spirit of the *Siete Partidas*, which was one of balancing the strong regional identities with a centralized prenational one. While respectful of the law, Lope's king Alfonso recognizes and considers the local traditions and codes of behavior that hold sway over his subjects, so every consideration of a particular set of circumstances is always open to a future reworking and to supplanting by a more convincing argument. Yet, the conflicting codes create a longing for a center, or a soul, which maneuvers the self between and among the endless combinations and possibilities.

The king's principal function in the play is to serve as judge to his subjects in all manifestations of conflict or confusion. Throughout the work, characters will use the phrase "Juzgatú, señor," as they seek guidance in a world of contradictory truths and multiple allegiances. They praise his skills as arbiter; he is sort of a pragmatist, more like a casuist than an abstract theorist. He weighs different sides of an argument, seeks the fuller picture by calling in witnesses and corroborating sources, and is generally depicted as dialogic and reflective. This is not a king who makes pronouncements or acts rashly. He is a good listener, as evidenced by his detailed, yet tidy syntheses of others' cases at key moments in the work.

In her intriguing study "¿Qué he de hacer?: The Comedia as Casuistry," Hilaire Kallendor analyzes the *comedia* as a genre that foregrounds a "conscience in process," which is made manifest through characters who reveal their self-doubt and uncertainty as they verbalize inner struggles to negotiate a complex landscape of possibilities without resort to absolute paradigms. Such a model of the self in process, one who picks through thorny choices, applies very well to the characterization of King Alfonso in *Amor, pleito y desafío*, who must make practical arguments in the face of moral haziness if he is to maintain order in his kingdom.

The king makes decisions, but tries to align them as though meant to be, by conflating them with divine will or "fortuna." The primary dispute before the king-judge is the case of Juan de Padilla vs. Juan de Aragón, two nobles vying for the hand of the same woman, Beatriz. The question of who deserves to marry Beatriz is brought to different agencies for consideration, creating a series of competitions between the two Juans: Both request permission from the father of the bride, both have intermediaries who request permission of the King, the court system must choose between them, Beatriz herself chooses between them, and, finally, one Juan challenges the other Juan to a duel. At a pivotal point in the play, the king creates a tripartite formula for determining the value of a nobleman, and this formula becomes the basis for deciding which of the two men will marry Beatriz. This formula, echoed in the title *Amor, pleito y desafío*, represents an imagined colligation of competing codes as indicative of "truth" and reveals a nostalgia for an integral or essential self even on the part of the king-judge. Just as the king tries to dovetail his decision with formulas, other characters conjure destiny to explain their decisions and behaviors, as though the concept of agency and free will were too daunting.

Unsurprisingly, this just and reasonable king has respect for the legal system, and he encourages subjects to seek justice through the courts. He grants his subjects positionality, as in this passage, where he notes that a nobleman has a duty to uphold the law and to abstain from fighting while awaiting legal judgment: "Licencia a este

pleito doy; / El que tuviere derecho / le alcance, pero advertid / que en tanto que fuera el pleito / no habeis de sacar las armas, pena de traidores” (Act 2, 53).⁶ However, the king is also sensitive to the demands of the codes of chivalry and courtly love, two pillars of medieval society that do not articulate neatly with the newly emergent legal system. Consequently, when he insists that the two men submit to the legal process to settle their grievance, he recognizes that, as noblemen, they must not ignore the challenge to duel: “No podeis, en ley de hidalgo / ni caballero, excusar / el desafío en lugar tan seguro” (Act 3, 103). The king narrates his thought process from the ground level, without access to a vantage point of ultimate and definitive clarity.

Such casuistry, or judgment without recourse to absolutes, can seem irrational when looked at from a distance, in a synthesized overview. For example, in this play, one could sum up the king’s dispensations of justice in the following way: He gives two men named Juan permission to marry the same woman, he tells one man it is okay to accept the challenge to duel yet arrests the first for calling the challenge, he arrests one of the men for treason and then on the same day makes him a count. His actions seem indiscriminate, even random, when presented this way, but, when taken in their fullest context, each determination is the product of a thoughtful evaluation of the specifics involved. His maneuvering is not immediately evident as some externally validated, univocal truth, or as an expression of his unquestioned will, but rather needs to be explained, as it transparently and discursively plots to meet competing demands. By requiring accompanying narrative, we realize that no “self” can ever be apprehended or judged by one perspective or facet of their identity, by one moment in the course of a circuitous life.

The dialogues in the play clearly and frequently document the king as a “consciousness in action” who justifies his reasons for his rulings.⁷ In the following passage, the king patiently and thoughtfully explains his reasoning to an inquisitive subject, Álvaro, who wants to know why the king would give permission to Juan de Padilla to accept the challenge to duel while simultaneously calling for the arrest of the challenger, Juan de Aragón, who had resorted to arms before the end of the legal process.

ALV. Si has concedido

Con voluntad declarada

Al de Padilla el salir,

¿Cómo pones en prision

Al de Aragón?

ALF. La ocasion

Es muy fácil de advertir;

No cumpliera con su honor

Don Juan, si no se la diera,

Pero, pues al que le espera

Puse pena de traidor,

Puédole agora prender,

Y así volverá á Castilla

Con su honor el de Padilla.

ALV. ¿Quién como tú pudo ser

Arbitro en esta ocasion? (Act 3, 104)

While his subjects clearly praise his ability to successfully judge cases, the king must also be able to admit when he makes a mistake, or at least must accept logical argumentation from others who use the codes and the laws to make compelling claims. In this example, Juan de Aragón argues persuasively that the duel should indeed go on, and the king accepts his logic:

ARAG. Dicen que prenderme mandas;

Tu gusto es ley, pero yo,

Gran señor, no hallo causa

De ofensa en mi obligacion.

[. .]

ALF. Mandé no tomar las armas,

Pena de traicion; decid

Si tiene el prenderos causa,

Pues le habeis desafiado

Públicamente á la raya

De Castilla y Aragón,

Amaneciendo en las plazas

De toda Valladolid,

Siendo vos el que le agravia,

Carteles contra don Juan.

ARAG. Señor, cuando yo tomára

Las armas sin ocasion,

[. . .]

Tú mandaste al de Padilla

Y á mí no sacar las armas

Mientras que durára el pleito,

Y así mientras él duraba

Se cumplió tu mandamiento,

Luego la disculpa es clara,
Y que es justo el desafío,
Conforme el fuero de España.

ALF. ¿Cómo sabré yo que el pleito
Se acabó?

ARAG. Porque doña Ana
Es mi mujer, que no quiero,
Con desprecios y mudanzas,
Apelar de la sentencia.

ALV. Señor, la disculpa es llana,
[. . .]

ALF. Mandéle que no sacára
Las armas durando el pleito
Que de su prision fue causa,
Dice que ya se acabó
Y se casa con doña Ana,
Con que yo estoy satisfecho.
A lo que de vos se agravia
Vos podeis satisfacer,
Que a su noble sangre y casa
Debeis dar satisfaccion. (Act 3, 112-14)

Here we see the tension between the king's authority ("tu gusto es ley"), which is embodied in his figure and not available through a process or law, and the power of agency, here defined as an ability to make cogent or persuasive arguments. Álvaro tries to root the decision in the king as unique subject, while the king himself is trying to find external validation to bolster his own choices. This passage captures what I claim is a general anxiety over the interrelation of agency and law.

The king reaches a conclusion as to how the quarreling men should proceed, arrests one Juan for disobeying him, then decides that Juan really was not disobeying him after all, and therefore changes his mind when presented with new evidence. If we accept that the concept of "absolute" means "not limited by law," "subject to no exterior circumstance or condition," "supreme consciousness," and "changeless truth," we get a clear idea that this

king operates somewhere outside of the absolutist realm. In fact, the king's pardon of Juan de Aragón and his rethinking of his previous ruling is a stunning example of Partida I, Título 1, Ley 11 of the *Siete Partidas*: “[N]o debe tener vergüenza en mudra o enmendar sus leyes, cuando otros le mostraran la razón para hacerlo pues gran derecho es el de enderezar cuando erraren los demás, que lo sepa hacer consigo mismo.” So in the end, he accepts the changed circumstances, product of a kaleidoscopic shifting of truths and choices. The king is able to survive in this world and manage to stay on his feet, and he embodies a human-centered morality and legal system. Yet his nostalgia for destiny or fortune impels him to make codes or formulas to avoid the tremendous weight of unfiltered, godlike agency.

If the king's willingness to reconsider cases recalls the “king as judge” spirit of the first *Partida*, his ideas about what qualities make a good knight speak to another section of the *Siete Partidas*, but in a more pragmatic way, once again revealing a very grounded and casuistic stance towards justice and truth. The king invites several of his knights/nobles to discuss with him what defines a knight, and each man involved gives his thoughts. According to Partida II, Título 21, Ley 4 of the *Siete Partidas*: “Bondades son llamadas las buenas costumbres que los hombres tienen naturalmente en sí, a las que llaman en latín virtudes; y entre todas son cuatro las mayores; así como cordura y fortaleza y mesura y justicia.” Nonetheless, the king translates the constellation of ideal concepts into a triad of attainable items when he says: “Aunque habeis dicho las cosas en que se puede probar, *no fue mi intent llegar a virtudes generosas*. Y así por el voto mío, prueban de un noble el valor tres cosas. [. . .] amor, pleito y desafío” (Act 3, 86; emphasis mine). Note that virtues are character traits while the three items the king suggests are possessions in the material world: love of a woman, a winning lawsuit, and a successful duel. In his reworking of the formula, he reconfigures an idealized, static subject into one defined by his actions, where there is room for change and development, room for agency.

In a sense, Lope's fictionalized King Alfonso XI translates a Platonic notion of virtue to the material, quotidian reality of the urban Madrid of 1621, again highlighting a model of kingship that emerges between extreme poles. There is a parallel shift in notion of subjectivity: no more Cartesian, Platonic wholeness, but rather a clear recipe or checklist. The king throughout manipulates this formula, which moves the truth production from the consciousness of an individual to one that seems to have other methods of substantiation, yet those maneuverings on his part are undermined or played down.

Other characters in the play also struggle with anxiety about agency, and this anxiety manifests as a linguistic slippage that creates confusion about how to interpret an event or how to identify a particular individual. In such situations, characters cling to notions of “alma” and “voluntad” as sites of agency and possibility in a world in which one can no longer rely on appearances to understand the world and each other. Beatriz turns to free will as a way to emphasize a fuller definition of consent to marry when she poignantly states: “Para ligar voluntades ha de haber consentimiento” (Act 2, 65). The synecdoche “voluntad” signals a human being endowed with free will and responsibility, and Beatriz insists that personal choice, and not trickery or misunderstanding, is the foundation for consent:

BEAT. El sí que dí

No fue sí, porque en el sí

Ha de ir el alma también,

Y toda el alma faltó;

De manera que si un sí

No la tiene, desde allí

Se va convirtiendo en no;
Si es forzado no me toca,
Doña Ana, su cumplimiento,
Que no es naípe el casamiento,
Donde hace juego la boca. (Act 2, 64-65)

Linguistically, the two “sí’s” are equal in function and appearance, as in the case of the two “Juans,” but once again the character insists on a vocabulary of agency that differentiates between them. The resultant linguistic play is a grammatical gesture of ambivalence and tension between extremes, where paradox and antithesis bespeak the dissolution of clear boundaries and neat truths about who we are and what we know. In this exchange between Ana and Beatriz the confusion surrounding Juan de Aragón and Juan de Padilla continues to challenge the women’s linguistic dexterity:

ANA. ¿Qué hay de don Juan?
BEAT. ¿Qué don Juan?
ANA. Vuestro marido.
BEAT. Si dan, Doña Ana, ese nombre á quien
mi amor se le tiene dado, Don Juan de
Padilla tiene salud.
ANA. Eso no conviene con el sí que le habeis
dado al de Aragón, que es por quien os
pregunto. (Act 2, 64)

The subject cannot be “caught” in language, as illustrated by the central theme of the two men named Juan, and the pressing need for human choice emerges in talk of free will and the soul, as bastions of a flexible, yet centered, individuality. One both defines and is defined by his “alma” or “voluntad,” which is not controllable by others. Padilla reserves el “alma” as his own place, outside the will of the King: “que más me importa servirte / que la vida que poseo / pues cuanto no fuere el alma, / Mi Rey y señor, te debo” (Act 2, 57). Even in this expression of fierce loyalty, Padilla reserves the site of his “alma” as his, as a site of potential resistance. He owes the king his loyalty, but his soul is his alone.

Lope featured many historical kings from the medieval period in his plays, inscribing a sustained effort to problematize monarchy and the absolutism it symbolizes.⁸ His theatrical exploration of the figure of the king sought to find answers to the political, cultural, and social complications of his time period, what McKendrick calls “the turbulent transitional ethos of the early modern period, with old allegiances and unquestioned assumptions challenged though not yet displaced by different ways of seeing and understanding” (167). *Amor, pleito y desafío* captures a historical moment marked by a tension between the universalizing impulse of the *Siete Partidas* and the perduring local traditions and codes of conduct in Spain, and connects that moment to that of Lope’s 1621: a transitional period that saw the crown passed from a king who showed little interest in laws and legal matters to one who would become what some say was Spain’s true absolute monarch.⁹ Perhaps Lope looked nostalgically at the historical moment of Alfonso XI as a key to solving one of the most pressing questions of his day: how to restore

royal authority without devolving into absolutism? And how to embrace agency and positionality without succumbing to nostalgic longing for a wholeness and security, for truths that we do not ourselves create?

Notes

1. See O'Callaghan's section on "Promulgation"(xxxviii).
2. See O'Callaghan's section on "Authorship" (xxxvii).
3. See Dyck and Martin (Introduction): "At least since Burckhardt's discussion of 'The Development of the Individual' in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), the Renaissance or early modern subject has been the hero or villain of a number of historical and critical discourses. The uncertainty surrounding the appropriate period term to apply to this subject under question is symptomatic of its discursively contested nature, a subject subjected to a variety of constructions by an array of differing and often antagonistic Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment renderings of European history. If literary as well as political and historical liberalism has venerated the period it calls the Renaissance as the cradle of the triumphant liberal individual, then Marxism and its variants consider the period to be early modern, the embryonic period of modern capital and its alienated, disciplined, consuming subject. These two metanarratives have provided, and continue to provide, theoretical frameworks for the literary study of the period and its literature, but the theory revolution in literary studies has seen the development of a number of powerful alternative models of the period and its subjectivities: psychoanalysis, new historicism, cultural materialism, and feminism. In collaboration or conflict with each other, these recent theoretical approaches analyse the contours of early modern subjectivity in order to revise our understanding of the period, of the lives of those who lived during the period, and of the period's relation to the present. Other scholars have argued that our understanding of early modern selfhood should be grounded in the terms and models of self-understanding available to early modern individuals and that such an understanding problematizes the linear narratives of transition from medieval to Renaissance or early modern that explicitly structure the metanarratives of liberalism and Marxism and are frequently invoked by or implicit in more recent theoretical approaches."
4. See McKendrick: "The vast majority of Lope's kings are dysfunctional both as kings and as human beings. If we search through his plays for kings who represent a viable ideal of monarchy we find precious few"(185), and "the theatre's constant stream of fallible kings" (26).
5. William R. Blue ("Politics") finds Lope's treatment of the king in *Fuenteovejuna* to be similarly nostalgic: "Lope, rather than accurately representing the weak, indolent king who ruled Spain, draws from nostalgic popular beliefs and invents strong, involved, practical monarchs who, without reliance on favorites, hold both the common folk and the nobility in check, attracting both into their service. It is the myth of the Reyes Católicos, the myth of the utopian state" (297).
6. As defined by Maher and Tetreault, *positionality* is a term used to describe how people are defined, "not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed" (164).
7. See Kallendorf for discussion of "conscience in action" as applied to *comedias* in general (328).
8. See Frances Exum for an in-depth study of the figure of King Pedro in the works of Lope.
9. As McKendrick states, "Felipe IV, the 'Planet King,' came nearer to being perceived as an absolute ruler than any other monarch in Spanish history" (150).

Works Cited

- Alfonso X el Sabio. *Las Siete Partidas*. Librodot.com. Web. 13 November 2010
<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2091282/Alfonso-X-Las-Siete-partidas>>.
- Blue, William R. "The Politics of Lope's Fuenteovejuna." *Hispanic Review* 59.3 (1991): 295-315.
- , *Spanish Comedies and Historical Contexts in the 1620s*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996.
- Casa, Frank P. "The Duality of the King in Golden Age Drama." *LA CHISPA '87: Selected Proceedings*. New Orleans: Tulane UP, 1987. 51-59.
- Dyck, Paul, and Mathew Martin. "Constructions of the Early Modern Subject." *Early Modern Literary Studies: A Journal of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Literature* 9 (2002): 1.1-3
<<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/si-09/martdyck.htm>>.
- Exum, Frances. *Metamorphosis of Lope de Vega's King Pedro*. Madrid: Playor, 1974.
- Kallendorf, Hilaire. "¿Qué he de hacer?": The *Comedia* as Casuistry." *Romanic Review* 95.3 (2004): 327-59.
- Maher, Francis A., and Mary Kay Tetrault. *The Feminist Classroom*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
- McKendrick, Melveena. *Playing the King: Lope de Vega and the Limits of Conformity*. London: Tamesis, 2000.
- O'Callaghan, Joseph F. "Alfonso X and the *Partidas*." *Las Siete Partidas: Volume One*. Ed. Robert I. Burns, S.J. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001. ix-xl.
- Vega, Lope de. *Amor, pleito y desafío*. Madrid: M. Rivadeneyra, 1873.