

HONOR ON THE SCAFFOLD IN THE SPANISH MONARCHY

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines a number of sensational executions of prominent men, in Spain and in Peru, between 1453 and 1621. These cases - involving don Alvaro de Luna, the favorite of Juan II of Castile, the Peruvian rebel chiefs Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Carvajal, and don Rodrigo Calderon, a corrupt associate of the duke of Lerma - will serve to illustrate a variety of ways in which honor could be salvaged or even enhanced in the innately dishonorable venue of the scaffold. Moreover, the execution ground provides a nearly ideal laboratory for studying the connections between honor and fame (and dishonor and infamy) postulated by Julio Caro Baroja and others, since we can see there a direct connection between the comportment of an individual, presumably denoting the inwardstate of personal honor, and the reactions of onlookers, which control judgments of fame or infamy.

Key words: ethics, public executions, Spain, Peru, 1453-1621

In early modern Spain and Spanish America, public executions provided a stage for the play of honor and dishonor. Judicial condemnation to death obviously implied shame, and the arrangements for carrying out the supreme penalty were designed to emphasize this opprobrium. Nobles and other men of stature were accorded more respectful treatment than the general run of convicts, but even they were paraded through the streets to the execution ground astride mules, their hands bound, while the crier proclaimed the litany of their crimes, each repetition ending in the chilling traditional formula: "quien tal hace que tal pague" (he who does such [deeds], thus shall he pay [their price]). Arrived at the scaffold, usually in a teeming public square, the condemned man was forced to ascend the steps, and then was bound to the chair where he would be killed. Meanwhile, priests harried him to recall his sins and repent them, menacing the recalcitrant with eternal punishment. Many—perhaps most—convicts broke down under these pressures, stumbling on the steps, begging for mercy, sobbing, soiling themselves, having to be carried bodily to the fatal chair.

A convict's loss of dignity would accentuate the lessons that public executions were meant to convey, spurring the crowd to a contempt for the criminal that could only underline distaste for his offenses. Conversely, however, when the convict retained composure and met death well, he might win over the crowd and undermine the cautionary effects of the spectacle of justice. An examination of accounts of executions over a long period, from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, suggests that several patterns of behavior in the face of judicial execution were regarded as praiseworthy or dignified. Simply put, observers regarded, on the one hand, the conquest of fear, and on the other, a demonstration of Christian faith, as the key signifiers of a "good" death by execution. A hierarchy among these patterns can be discerned. What I will attempt to do within the brief compass of this paper is to present some examples that roughly indicate these patterns and their hierarchy, and then offer some tentative conclusions about honor on the scaffold.

In April 1548, the Peruvian rebellion led by Gonzalo Pizarro was effectively crushed at the battle of Sacsahuana (or Jaquijahuana), won by forces commanded by the royal proconsul Pedro de la Gasca. Gasca moved quickly to cement this triumph, condemning the ringleaders of the rebellion to death, and ordering the sentences to be carried out in the army's camp on the day following the battle. Even under these circumstances, the executions were a ticklish business, since many of the victorious captains had at one time or another been comrades-in-arms of Pizarro and his associates. And in fact, although the executions were carried out without significant incident, the convicts elicited considerable sympathy and admiration among the witnesses.

Gonzalo Pizarro himself went to his death with a display of Christian piety. He passed the night before his execution kneeling in prayer, but according to one chronicler, "he could in no way calm his spirit" in the face of imminent death. As he rode, bound hand and foot on a mule, to the place of execution, he clutched an image of the Virgin Mary and cried out in prayer. At the scaffold he had to be helped up to the platform, but once there regained sufficient composure to make what the chronicler rather snidely characterized as "a long and tedious speech" condemning his own offenses, commending his soul to God, and asking Gasca to show mercy to his supporters. This discourse wound down at last. Turning to the executioner, Pizarro asked "have you brought a well-sharpened knife? Look that you don't cause me much pain when you cut off my head." After being reassured on this score he fell to his knees amid a swirl of priests, praying loudly for divine mercy. Then the executioner seized Pizarro's beard, tugged it upward, and cut his throat (Gutiérrez de Santa Clara, 1964, 168-169). Gasca, reporting to Francisco de los Cobos in Spain, concluded that Pizarro "died well, recognizing the mistakes he had committed against God, the king, and his associates" (de la Gasca, 1964). Despite this, and although the chroniclers testified to considerable sympathy among the onlookers, a faint air of disdain or em-

barrassment pervades the accounts. Pizarro had demonstrated faith, but his conquest of fear was suspect. Two of the earliest chroniclers offer an account of Pizarro's demeanor on the field of battle that foreshadows—or was designed to foreshadow—his conduct on the scaffold. On the field of battle at Sacsahuana, as his army melted away in the face of Gasca's forces, Pizarro was left alone with a handful of his last loyal supporters. The captain Juan de Acosta said to him: "Now you see how I have followed you even unto death, which stands before us. There's nothing for it now but a mad dash into their lines, to die like Romans." But Pizarro responded: "No, it will be better to die as Christians," and he and his companions surrendered peaceably instead.¹

Very different was the demeanor of Pizarro's leading captain, Francisco de Carvajal. Perhaps eighty-four years old but still vigorous in 1548, Carvajal was a famous soldier, who had fought in Italy under the Great Captain Gonzalo de Córdoba before embarking on a fierce career in Peru, fighting the Incas during the years of conquest and pacification and then other Spaniards in the kingdom's prolonged civil wars. A heavy drinker with frightening bloodshot eyes, he had earned a reputation for ferocity encapsulated in a Peruvian proverb: "as cruel as Carvajal." Because of this reputation, fully borne out by his actions during Pizarro's rebellion, and lacking the protection of a famous name that had tempered the Crown's revenge against Gonzalo Pizarro, Carvajal was sentenced to be dragged behind a horse to the gallows, there to be hung and subsequently beheaded and quartered.

In contrast to Pizarro's show of piety, Carvajal throughout his final hours maintained a jokey defiance. When informed of the ghastly punishment that awaited him—first on the scaffold and then in the afterlife—he betrayed no emotion but amusement, remarking that "just killing [him] would do" (*basta matar*). When Diego Centeno—a royalist captain whom Carvajal had defeated in one of the principal skirmishes of the rebellion—visited the convict in his prison, the old man pretended not to recognize him; told the name of his visitor, Carvajal sneered: "by God, Centeno, since always before I've seen only the back of you [i.e., in flight on the battlefield], seeing your face now triggers no recognition." Centeno swallowed this, and volunteered to do whatever he could to help Carvajal through the terrible ordeal. This offer evoked peals of laughter from the condemned man, who replied that he was not a child "who for fear of death would resort to cowardly fawning and beg the likes of you for some favor." On the other hand, Carvajal remarked, "I can't remember when I've had such a belly laugh as seeing you making these offers of help." Not even the horrors of the execution wiped the sneer from Carvajal's face. As they placed him in a sort of packing box to be dragged across the parade ground to the gallows, the old soldier laughed again, saying "as a baby, I rode in a cradle, and now again as an old man I'll

1 For this, the earliest version, see the anonymous *Relación*, 1965. Agustín de Zárate tells the same story (see de Zárate, 1968).

ride in a cradle." And arrived at the foot of the scaffold, mobbed by a crowd of soldiers who blocked the path, Carvajal called out to clear the way: "Gentlemen, you must stand aside and let them do justice, for it's already been delayed."

Francisco Pizarro

Carvajal's mockery clearly had an effect on the onlookers that disturbed the authorities staging his execution. The crowd at the gallows as he was dragged there was far from hostile, and the entire spectacle seemed to be sending the wrong message. This spectacle was hardly the grave representation of the king's stern justice against a repentant traitor. Several of Gasca's officers asked him—in vain, as it turned out—to commute the sentence, and instead to condemn Carvajal to a perpetual imprisonment chained in a cage on public display, "where he would chatter like a magpie." There, perhaps, Carvajal's mocking would be placed in a context of shame, instead of appearing a great-hearted show of courage. Additionally disturbing was the fact that Carvajal steadfastly refused the blandishments of the priests and the consolations of religion, remarking at various times that he had nothing to confess beyond having left Seville for the New World years before owing a trifling sum of money to a publican. At the very end, ascending the stairs of the gallows, Carvajal muttered some phrases that the chronicler chose to regard as a commendation of his soul to God. Whether he requested it or not, he was granted absolution by order of the bishop of Cuzco, despite the sentiment of the attending priests that he ought to be excommunicated. Despite all attempts to shape this execution into a spectacle of just retribution and contrition, however, the verdict of the humanist historian Juan Cristóbal Calvete de Estrella seems apt: he wrote, in a near-contemporary history of these events, that Carvajal "died like a pagan more than a Christian".²

Where Gonzalo Pizarro's death pleased at least the authorities for its manifestations of Christian resignation, it was tainted in perception by a whiff of shaming fear; conversely, while Carvajal's courage could not be questioned, his demeanor connoted shamelessness in the face of God's imminent judgment of his soul. This emerges in the report that, on the gallows, the men surrounding Carvajal told him "to shut up and quit uttering so many silly things, and commend himself to God in heaven if he wanted, and otherwise just leave off" (Gutiérrez de Santa Clara, 1964, 164).

Neither of the principal figures in the Peruvian revolt, however, attained honor on the scaffold that matched the famous case of Don Rodrigo Calderón, the notoriously-venal henchman of the Duke of Lerma, who was sentenced to death in 1621 in what was intended by the new government of Philip IV and Olivares as a signal repudiation of the corruption of the preceding reign. Elsewhere I have analyzed Calderón's death in detail (Boyden, 2000): here it will suffice to say that Calderón's execution backfired on its stage managers because throughout his ordeal the convict displayed repentance, intense piety, and the conviction of salvation that denoted true faith in contemporary eyes, while he ended by making a compelling show of courage and spirit on the scaffold in the Plaza Mayor of Madrid. The public embraced Calderón for his absolute detachment from earthly concerns in his final days—a striking contrast to his

² For Carvajal, see especially Gutiérrez de Santa Clara, 1965, 162-165; de Estrella, 1965.

previous reputation for greed, and one that had the effect of calling the justice of that reputation into question. Faced at the very end with the executioner, however, the humble Christian Calderón revealed that his aristocratic spirit remained unbroken. His composure faltered only once, when after being blindfolded he reacted in fear that the executioner would slash his throat from behind, rather than face-to-face as befitted his status as a nobleman and knight of Santiago. Reassured on this point, he again objected in a firm voice when the executioner grasped the blindfold in his left hand to hold the prisoner's head up as he cut his throat with the knife in his right hand. "Don't pull," he said, "I'll stay still." Then the blow fell, "and repeating the sweet name of Jesus, he gave up the ghost."

From the scaffold, Rodrigo Calderón rocketed to lasting fame: his body, accompanied through the streets by an admiring crowd, was buried with honors in defiance of the crown; his death was the subject of memorializing poems by the great writers of the age; and his name has come down through generations in the Castilian proverb connoting praise for honorable comportment, "andar mas honrado que don Rodrigo en la horca" (to conduct oneself more honorably than don Rodrigo on the scaffold). For the government, the full measure of its miscalculation was brought home in a letter of the Duke of Alba to the chief minister Olivares; referring to Calderón's execution, Alba wrote that at the Plaza Mayor, he had seen "not just a Roman dying, but a Roman and an Apostle combined."

And here, perhaps, is the essence of honor on the scaffold in early modern Spanish society. It lay in a synthesis of defiance, indicating courage—defined, perhaps through the influence of humanism, as a proud pagan stoicism— with the Christian resignation that, in the pervasive contemporary literature of the *ars moriendi*, saw the worth of a life validated by the calm faith and pious disengagement of its last moments. In each of the cases that we have examined here, observers resorted to the same counterbalanced terms to characterize behavior: Roman vs. Christian, apostle vs. pagan. From the framing of these comments we can infer that these were terms that defined—for the writers and presumably for their audiences as well—the poles of a continuum, and that for them extracting honor from a trying situation depended upon projecting a demeanor that blended the two extremes. Here is an illustration, clearer than most, of the way in which Mediterranean conceptions of honor reflected and amalgamated the two great—and seemingly contradictory—cultural ideals of their time and place. Honor in this extreme context grew from a worshipful recognition of the majesty of the Christian God expressed alongside an aristocratic rejection of fear or self-abasement before any earthly power.

ČAST NA MORIŠČU V ŠPANSKI MONARHIJI

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POVZETEK

V novoveški Španiji in španski Ameriki so bile javne usmrtitve prizorišče za igro časti in nečasti. Pravna obsodba na smrt je za obsojenca kajpak pomenila sramoto, pred izvršitvijo te najvišje kazni pa so bili v rabi tudi običajni postopki, ki so to sramoto le še poudarili. Plemiči so bili deležni bolj spoštljivega ravnanja kot običajni obsojenci, čeprav so tudi njih gnali na morišče po ulicah, in sicer na mezgih in z zvezanimi rokami, pri čemer je sodni sluga glasno pojasnjeval, kakšna so njihova hudodelstva, in vselej končal s srhljivo in že tradicionalno formulo: "Tisti, ki stori takšno dejanje, mora zanj tudi plačati." Obsojenec se je moral potem, ko so ga pripeljali na morišče (navadno na trg, kjer se je kar trlo ljudi), povzpeti po stopnicah na oder, kjer so ga privezali k stolu, ob katerem je na grešnika že čakal rabelj z nožem v roki. Ves ta čas je obsojenca spremljala falanga duhovnikov, ki so ga rotili, naj obžauje svoje grehe in se pokesa, ter nepokorneža nenehno bombardirali z brezobzirno grožnjo o njegovem večnem trpljenju. Mnogi morda celo najbolj zakrknjeni obsojenci so se pod temi pritiski popolnoma zlomili, se opotekali po stopnicah, prosili za milost, krčevito jokali in se posipali s pepelom, tako da so jih morali zgrabiti in dobesedno posaditi na pogubni stol.

Obsejenčeva izguba dostojanstva je lekciji javne usmrtitve seveda dala močan poudarek, in res je javnost navdala s prezirom do hudodelca in gnusom do njegovih dejanj. Po drugi strani pa je obsojenec v primeru, ko je ohranil prisebnost in se vsaj navidezno pogumno spogledal s smrtjo, lahko pridobil množico na svojo stran, v nekaterih izjemnih primerih pa celo širšo javnost, s čimer je v večji ali manjši meri izničil svarilni učinek teka spektakla pravičnosti.

Pričujoči članek preučuje več senzacionalnih usmrtitev pomembnih mož v Španiji in Peruju med letoma 1453 in 1621. Ti primeri – obravnavani so don Alvaro de Luna, ljubljenec Juana II Kastilskega, poveljnika perujskih upornikov Gonzalo Pizarro in Francisco de Carvajal, in don Rodrigo Calderon, skorumpirani družabnik vojvode Lermanskega - bodo pomagali orisati več načinov, v katerih je bilo čast mogoče rešiti ali celo povečati v nadvse nečastnem okolju morišča. Poleg tega lahko morišče zagotavlja skoraj idealen laboratorij za preučevanje povezav med častjo in slavo (in nečastjo in sramoto), ki so jo terjali Julio Caro Baroja in drugi, saj lahko tu zaznamo neposredno povezavo med vedenjem posameznika, ki domnevno označuje stanje osebne časti, in odzivi gledalcev, ki nadzirajo sodbe slave in sramu.

Ključne besede: etika, čast, javne usmrtitve, Španija, Peru, 1453-1621

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