

Explore the dramatic
function of honour in
both *el medico de su
honra* and *el alca...*



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The theme of honour is omnipresent in Calderon's comedias *El medico de su honra* and *El alcalde de Zalamea*, a theme which was key in Spanish Golden Age theatre. The issue of social hierarchy is deeply inscribed in these plays as well, portrayed by characters ranging from kings and aristocrats to messengers and servants. Calderon displays different views of honour through his characters. For example, in *El alcalde de Zalamea*, Pedro Crespo's honour makes him act humbly towards higher authority as can be seen through his attitude and behaviour towards Don Lope de Figueroa. Pedro Crespo's ideas of honour and good name are not the conventional ones, but come from his heart. 1 For example when Don Lope asks Pedro Crespo sit down with him, Pedro Crespo replies: " Pues me dais licencia digo, seï¿½or que obedezco, aunque excusarlo pudierais." 2 It is somewhat surprising that Pedro Crespo should reply in such a way, as he humbles himself far more than he should have to, as although he is not of noble blood but a mere a peasant, he is considered of high enough regard by the town council to be elected mayor and magistrate of Zalamea. Pedro Crespo's ideals regarding honour do not falter in any situation, and the same can be said of his morals. When Isabel tells her father of her rape by the Captain, he swears to kill him. However, he is then told by a clerk that he has been elected magistrate and mayor by the town council, and so decides that he cannot kill the Captain: " ¿½Cï¿½mo podrï¿½ delinquir yo, si en esta hora misma me ponen a mi¿½ por juez, para que otros no delincan?" 3 In this situation it would be commonplace for Pedro Crespo to kill his daughter in order to retain his and his family's honour, but instead he chooses to take appropriate action as a magistrate and regain honour through the justice of the law. Even his daughter, Isabel, thought this would be her fate. What is <https://assignbuster.com/explore-the-dramatic-function-of-honour-in-both-el-medico-de-su-honra-and-el-alcalde-de-zalamea/>

more surprising, however, is Pedro Crespo's contrast in behaviour when he is told by the clerk about his new position. He keeps his composure and manages to act rationally whereas before he after swearing to kill the Captain for revenge. In this part of the comedia, Calderon has taken an approach, through his character Pedro Crespo, that was probably a little ahead of his time, as it would have been typical of someone in Pedro Crespo's position and time (1580)⁴ to kill his daughter, or even kill his daughter's rapist. To try to understand Pedro Crespo's conception of honour it would be best to look at his address to his son, Juan, just before he leaves to join the army with Don Lope: " Eres de linaje limpio mäs que el sol, pero villano; lo uno y lo otro digo: aquello, porque no humilles tanto tu orgullo y tu brío, que dejes desconfiado, de aspirar con cuerdo arbitrio a ser mäs; lo otro, porque no vengas, desvanecido, a ser menos." ⁵ This sententious speech confirms Pedro Crespo's good nature and that he is man who values his honour and of those close to him. Calderon may have meant him to be an exemplary model of an honourable man as he is endowed with other qualities such as common sense and an abundance of good will. Pedro Crespo's son, Juan, has a different concept of honour to that of his father's; it is more conventional for his day. To demonstrate the difference between Pedro Crespo's and Juan's concepts of honour, Calderon writes for his character Juan to suggest to his father that he should buy a patent of nobility so he would not have the army overruling his house. Pedro Crespo then replies, " Yo no quiero honor postizo." ⁶ Juan is also less consistent with his views of what he may think is right or wrong. For example, when he hears Isabel calling for help he remembers his father's words to him, " No hables mal de las mujeres; la mäs humilde, te digo que es digna de estimaciön

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porque, al fin, dellas nacimos," 7 and goes to defend the woman he hears calling out. However, when he learns of what has happened to Isabel he decides to kill her in order to regain his honour: " Vengar así ½ la ocasiõ ½n en que hoy has puesto mi vida y mi honor. Tengo que darte la muerte, viven los cielos." 8 Juan would rather kill his own sister to defend his honour, as seen in Act III when he says to his father: " Es satisfacer sei ½ or, una injuria y es vengar una ofensa y castigar." 9 This is a huge contrast to Pedro Crespo's course of action for regaining honour, who tries to persuade the Captain to marry his daughter, and then eventually to give the Captain all his property and even sell himself and his son into slavery. Calderon emphasises this moment between the two when 'Pedro Crespo falls to his knees with tears in his eyes and begs the Captain to right the wrong he has done.'10 At this point we see a change in Pedro Crespo's character; he now demeans himself in order to defend his daughter's honour. Critics have questioned why Calderon 'demotes' Pedro Crespo and Sturgis E. Leavitt suggests that Calderon " is trying to condition his audience to accept without protest the death of the Captain." 11 This suggestion would make sense, as the play is largely about honour and how one should attain and defend it. Through his character development, Calderon manages to portray Pedro Crespo as a good man, mainly through his ideas of honour and his morals. What is admirable of Pedro Crespo is not found in the Captain: Pedro Crespo would fight to the death for his honour to stay intact (and for his daughter), whereas the Captain would not. Whilst fighting the Sergeant and Rebolledo, Pedro Crespo says to them, " Soltad la presa, traidores, cobardes que habi ½ is que he de cobrarla, o la vida he de perder," 12 expressing his determination to get his daughter and honour back. We see the Captain's

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view of honour in Act III when he says to Rebolledo, " que en la justicia, es forzoso remitirme en esta tierra a mi consejo de guerra: conqu aunque el lance es penoso, tengo mi seguridad." 13 If one interprets the term 'seguridad' to mean security of his life then it can be said that the captain has more regard for his life than his honour. In Calderon's 'drama de honor'¹⁴, *El medico de su honra*, we see similar and new concepts of honour. The metaphor in the title refers to Don Gutierre who is the 'medico' and his patient, 'su honra', translating to the surgeon of his honour. Don Gutierre calls himself this as he believes that his wife, Doña Mencia, has dishonoured him by betraying him, and so seeks to avenge his honour. Don Gutierre called it 'curing' his honour, and the malady was his wife Doña Mencia. " A peligro estáis, honor,/ no hay hora en voz que no sea/ critica... Y os he de curar, honor." 15 Through Gutierre, Calderon personifies honour. Don Gutierre addresses honour as he would do a person and talks of his honour defensively. It is clear that Don Gutierre highly values his honour, and would do almost anything to defend it. His honour becomes an obsession which can be seen from his jealous ranting and his growing suspicions of betrayal. Eventually, this obsession becomes fatal when Don Gutierre calls a doctor to kill Doña Mencia which is somewhat ironic on more than one level. Firstly, Doña Mencia was innocent and so Don Gutierre's suspicions were invalid. Secondly, it is Doña Mencia who first talks about honour in the play when Don Arias asks her why he must not yet ask why she was in the house in which they took Prince Enrique to rest after his fall. Doña Mencia replies: " Va mi honor en ello." 16 This line from Doña Mencia shows that her character is careful about not destroying her honour, and from the very start the audience is given this impression. It is

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ironic then, that Doña Mencía who was so very careful about not being caught by Don Gutierre with Prince Enrique in her house should be killed when her actions were entirely innocent. If we are to compare the concept of honour with regards to Don Gutierre with that of Juan Crespo from *El alcalde de Zalamea*, some differences can be seen. Juan was ready to kill his own sister, Isabel, after she had been raped and had destroyed the honour of her family. Don Gutierre was also more than ready to kill (or have killed) his wife, Doña Mencía because of his growing suspicions of her infidelity and so this would 'cure' his honour. King Pedro plays an important role in *El medico de su honra* " the life of each character in the play is altered by his judgements." 17 He gives help and advice to those who ask for it, and is described by Doña Leonor to be, " Pedro, a quien llama el mundo Justiciero." 18 Throughout the play King Pedro's character becomes more developed and the audience learns that he takes his position as King seriously as can be seen from his reactions to the honour-related complaints from Doña Leonor and Don Gutierre. He goes about trying to restore Doña Leonor's honour and in the end succeeds, by forcing Don Gutierre to marry her after killing his wife. This produces a cycle of losing and restoring honour between Don Gutierre Doña Mencía and Doña Leonor. King Pedro's commitment to Dona Leonor is proved when he says to her, " que yo os di/palabra, y con gran razón, /de que he de satisfacer/vuestro honor." 19 Prince Enrique, King Pedro's half brother, has less regard for the honour of others, made obvious by his constant pursuit of Doña Mencía, even after he discovers that she is a married woman. This complete disregard for the honour of others may have been brought about the premonition he saw of his own death. Even his personal aide, Don Arias refuses to continue to help

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in his dishonourable scheme of trying to win Doña Mencía. When he accidentally cuts King Pedro's hand whilst taking his dagger from him, Prince Enrique chooses to run away: " porque de mi no imagines/que puedo verter tu sangre/yo, mil veces infelice." 20 He then sends a message to Doña Mencía saying that she is the cause of his departure, a message that later proved to be fatal for her. This behaviour from Prince Enrique is very much like that of the Captain; neither respects the honour of others, and sometimes their own. Prince Enrique chose to run away and let himself be thought of as a traitor to his brother, rather than stay behind and prove himself. Doña Leonor is an admirable woman in this play, a pursuer of justice. " She is assertive and outspoken- perhaps because it is her nature" 21 or because she believes that after her honour has been taken away she has nothing else to lose. Doña Leonor goes to King Pedro when he arrives in Seville asking him to sponsor her in a convent. Her life would have been protected and some of her honour restored. Through the character of Doña Leonora Calderon shows what good can still be done when one has lost their honour. Unlike Prince Enrique who ran away instead of facing consequences, Doña Leonora goes to the king and tells her story with the risk of no one believing her. Fortunately, Don Arias comes to her rescue and Doña Leonor's honour is restored when she marries Don Gutierre, a somewhat superficial result. Calderon's dramatic function of honour in both comedias plays a large role, as it is essentially what the comedias are about: the earning of honour and the restoration of it. Each character has a different view of what he/she think honour should be and this in turn effects their actions and most importantly, the lives of others. By making the audience

sympathise with certain characters, such as Pedro Crespo, Calderon manages to show what honour should be and how one should treat it.