

## Some Remarks on the Eden Serpent in Spanish Golden Age Plays \*

Luis González Fernández  
FRA.M.ESPA-UMR 5136 du CNRS  
Université de Toulouse  
luis.gonzalez@univ-tlse2.fr

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### Palabras clave:

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### Abstract:

This article aims to examine a number of representations of the temptation of Adam and Eve taken from Spanish dramatic texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Two texts are discussed from the *Códice de Autos Viejos* collection of plays, *El aucto del pecado de Adán* and the *Aucto de la prevaricación de Adán*. Subsequently, three seventeenth-century *comedias* are studied, two of them written by Lope de Vega: *La madre de la mejor*, and *El nacimiento de Cristo*; the third attributed to Lope, although evidence of authorship is inconclusive. The first part of this study is mainly concerned with the origins of hybrid depictions of the Eden serpent that conferred upon a reptilian body some variable anthropomorphic features such as a human head or torso, or long flowing hair. The second and final part of the study concentrates on the theatrical texts themselves, offering some hypotheses as regards costume and performance details.

### Resumen:

Este artículo analiza algunas representaciones de la tentación de Adán y Eva en piezas dramáticas de los siglos XVI y XVII. Dos

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obras se encuentran en el *Códice de Autos Viejos*, una colección de 96 piezas, en su mayoría religiosas, de mediados del siglo XVI; éstas son: *El aucto del pecado de Adán* y *l'Aucto de la prevaricación de Adán*. Las tres obras restantes pertenecen al fenómeno literario de la comedia nueva. *La madre de la mejor* y *El nacimiento de Cristo* fueron compuestas por Lope de Vega; *La creación del mundo*, fue también en tiempos atribuida a Lope. La primera parte de este trabajo evoca los orígenes de descripciones híbridas de la serpiente edénica que la presentaron como mitad animal, mitad hombre, con cabeza y torso humanos y cabellera larga. La segunda parte se centra en el estudio de las obras teatrales, en particular en aspectos relacionados con la indumentaria.

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Perhaps one of the most well-known Biblical tales is that of the Fall of Man (Genesis, 3) caused by his sworn enemy, the Devil, master of disguise, who had adopted for the occasion the form of a wily snake. Eve, who succumbs to the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit with relative ease, was followed shortly thereafter by Adam, tempted not by the Devil but by the first victim of demonic vengeance, Eve herself. The outcome is known to us all: realization about their nudity, shame, followed by a short appearance before God, the unconvincing excuses, and the subsequent banishment from the Garden, with its dire consequences for Mankind, hardship, toil, childbirth, and finally, the overbearing weight of original sin.

This article aims to examine a number of representations of the temptation of Adam and Eve taken from Spanish dramatic texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The first part of this study is mainly concerned with the origins of hybrid depictions of the Eden serpent that conferred upon a scaly body some variable anthropomorphic features. The second and final part of the study concentrates on the theatrical texts themselves, offering some hypotheses as regards costume and performance details.



## On the Origins of Human-headed Serpents in Literature and the Visual Arts

The Biblical account of Man's Fall constitutes a popular story whose intimate details and consequences were known by heart by any self-respecting Christian of the Early Modern period. It must come as no surprise that the playwrights of the Spanish Golden Age<sup>1</sup> drew from the tale depicted in Genesis material for a number of plays that sought to represent with action and speaking parts the moment in which Mankind went from a happy state of being to a life full of tribulations. Blame for Man's transgression fell inevitably on the tempter, the serpent: its intervention in the Biblical story is brief yet all-important:

The serpent was more crafty than any wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, «Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden?» The woman answered the serpent, «We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except for the tree in the middle of the garden; God has forbidden us either to eat or to touch the fruit of that; if we do, we shall die». The serpent said, «Of course you will not die. God knows that as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods knowing both good and evil». [...] The man said [to God], «The woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me the fruit from the tree and I ate it». Then the Lord God said to the woman, «What is this that you have done?» The woman said, «The serpent tricked me, and I ate». Then the Lord God said to the serpent: «Because you have done this you are accursed more than all cattle and all wild creatures. On your belly you shall crawl, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between your brood and hers. They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel» (Genesis 3, 1-15).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Medieval drama elsewhere in Europe contains numerous examples of representations of the Fall. A non-exhaustive list is given in Bonnell, 1917: 278 and following.

<sup>2</sup> English language quotations are taken from *The New English Bible*, 1975, quotations in Latin from the *Biblia Vulgata*, 1985: «*Sed et serpens erat callidior cunctis animalibus terrae quae fecerat Dominus Deus. Qui dixit ad mulierem: cur praecepit vobis Deus ut non comederetis de omni ligno paradisi? Cui respondit mulier: De fructu lignorum, quae sunt in paradiso, vescimur: de fructu vero ligni quod est in medio paradisi, praecepit nobis Deus ne comedermus, et ne tangeremus illud, ne forte moriamur. Dixit autem serpens ad mulierem. Nequaquam morte moriemini. Scit enim Deus quod in quocumque die comederitis ex eo, aperientur oculi vestri et eitis sicut dii, scientes bonum et malum. [...]. Dixitque Adam: Mulier, quam dedisti mihi sociam, dedit mihi de ligno, et comedi. Et dixit Dominus Deus ad mulierem: Quare hoc fecisti?*



As a source of inspiration, the biblical material at hand, though succinct, is sufficiently explicit as regards the plot, and playwrights ingeniously presented the tale in order to make for fine dramatic sequences, creating longer spells of conversation between the different characters. The roles attributed to Eve and to the serpent are of particular interest in that the dramatists lent free reign to their imagination in order to fashion speeches replete with state of the art methods of seduction.<sup>3</sup> Whilst in literary and artistic representations God, Adam and Eve undergo no notable changes as regards their essence and behaviour as compared to the original tale, the role of the serpent underwent a considerable transformation by virtue of its assimilation to the Devil. The Eden snake, from the Christian point of view, was none other than the Devil himself, and this gave rise to an ever more complex iconographical and literary treatment of the character. The assimilation of the two figures stems, amongst other reasons, from the interpretation given to John's description of an apocalyptic dragon: «Et proiectus est draco ille magnus, serpens antiquus, qui vocatur diabolus, et Satanas, qui seducet universum orbem» (Revelation 12, 9, *Biblia Vulgata*, 1985<sup>8</sup>: 1188). In Patristic writings, the idea was taken up and sustained, whether the commentary was centred on the Genesis account or on the Revelation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, from the time of the early Christian Church, the two

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*Quae respondit: Serpens decepit me et comedi. Et ait Dominus Deus ad serpentem: Quia fecisti hoc, / Maledictus es inter omnia animantia, et bestias terrae: / Super pectus tuum gradieris, et terrae comedes cunctis diebus vitae tuae. / Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, / Et semen tuum et semen illius: Ipsa conteret caput tuum, / Et tu insidiaberis calcaneo eius».*

<sup>3</sup> As regards French mystery plays and the role of the Devil, Pierre Servet makes the following suggestive comment: «*La séduction du diable: l'ambiguïté apparaît dès lors que l'on se demande de quelle séduction il s'agit. Séduction active que le diable exerce à l'égard des hommes? C'est alors le tentateur qui entre en jeu. Séduction passive par laquelle Satan et ses comparses enchantent le public des mystères*», 1995: 311.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly observes that «*Most often the serpent was not taken to be a symbol of Satan, but an animal that was simply used by the devil to carry forward his determination to destroy mankind*», 1971: 302. This theory can be found in many Patristic writings, though the contrary opinion is also amply put forward: «*In serpentis autem figura diabolus est*», Saint Ambrose, (*De Paradiso Liber unus*, Cap. II, 9, *PL*, vol. 14, col. 294). See also Muchembled, for whom: «*Lors de la construction d'un système théologique capable de faire pièce à ceux des païens, des gnostiques ou des manichéens, les Pères de l'Église eurent à donner un sens*



forms of evil were united as it were in one sole figure, that of the Devil, capable of assuming any given form.

In relation to its literary formulation in the Middle Ages, the Eden serpent was transformed from all-beast in the Early Middle Ages to half-beast, half-human in later centuries. According to John K. Bonnell [1917], in his lengthy and well-documented pioneer study of the subject, the mid twelfth century is given as the earliest literary testimony for the serpent with a human head. He cites cautiously Petrus Comestor's commentary on Genesis (*Scholastica Historia Liber Genesis*), in which the serpent is described as having the form of a young woman,<sup>5</sup> Peter the Eater's text reads: «Elegit etiam quoddam genus serpentis, ut ait Beda uirgineum uultum habens, quia similia similibus applaudunt» [Comestor, 2005: 40]. The critic's caution stems from the fact that he believes Comestor to have misread his sources<sup>6</sup> and that he found no contemporary dramatic texts in which the feature appeared, this being one of his stated yardsticks for determining the chronology of the human-headed serpent in art and literature. Neither Bonnell's richly illustrated study nor Henry Ansgar Kelly's equally erudite contribution shed light on any human-headed representations for the Eden serpent prior to Comestor's commentary, though they offer many examples dating from the thirteenth century onwards.<sup>7</sup>

As regards its iconography, a similar chronology can be established: early representations of the Fall have a fully zoomorphic serpent, often vertically placed around the tree. Bonnell, throwing caution to the wind, states categorically:

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*cohérent à diverses traditions diaboliques issues de narrations différentes. Il leur fallut ainsi marier l'histoire du serpent avec celle du rebelle, du tyran, du tentateur, du séducteur concupiscent et du puissant dragon»* [2000: 21].

<sup>5</sup> Bonnell, 1917: 257-258.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnell, 257, note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly's study takes into account a number of Eastern traditions of human-headed beasts such as the Sphinx and sirens, 1971: 316-319; see also Bonnell, 264-265.



That the art form might have preceded the other forms is a possibility that I have deemed hardly worthy of enumerating. The artists of before the thirteenth century so seldom originated anything, so persistently followed tradition or the direction of more learned men, that in the absence of any evidence that the serpent was represented with a human head before the thirteenth century, I am satisfied that we have in this case no original art source [1917: 256].



A human-headed serpent from a twelfth-century capital from the church of Notre-Dame-de-Luzenac, Moulis, Ariège, France.  
[Photographe: Luis González Fernández, 2002.]

More recent studies on iconography, such as Jérôme Baschet's *L'iconographie médiévale* lend weight to the idea of a very active and innovative artistic drive in the eleventh century (a century before Comestor's exegetic activity), in particular as regards the iconography of the Fall and, especially, that of the creation of Eve, which underwent some spectacular changes [2008: 298-341, esp. 305 and following].<sup>8</sup> Though some of the features discussed reached maturity in the eleventh century, many of them can be found in less abundant examples in the preceding centuries. Bonnell, and such scholars that

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<sup>8</sup> For the evolution of another iconographical problem, that of the exact nature of the forbidden fruit, see Hilário Franco Júnior, 2006. My thanks to Amaia Arizaleta for having drawn this article to my attention.

have followed him,<sup>9</sup> seem to advance the thirteenth century as the period in which the serpent's body (still vertical) was depicted with the head and sometimes torso of a human being, sometimes male, but most often androgynous or female.<sup>10</sup> On some other occasions the demonic element is stressed with the inclusion of horns on the figure's head, an element that Bonnell believes is one of the clearest borrowings from theatrical representations of the serpent [1917: 290]. The peak of this artistic current seems to have been between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, running over into the sixteenth century and almost disappearing by the seventeenth.<sup>11</sup> The longevity of the tradition lends considerable weight to Bonnell's theory of at least a possible reciprocal influence of theatrical and pictorial conventions. Agreement has not been reached as to which artistic fashion gave rise to the

<sup>9</sup> Kelly gives a date of the mid twelfth century, or the thirteenth («1220s and 1230s») for the first appearances of anthropomorphic serpents in depictions of the fall: «*Before the time of Andrew of Saint Victor [d. 1175], the usual iconographic representation of the Eden temptation featured an ordinary serpent twined about the fatal tree of knowledge, with Adam on one side and Eve on the other*», 1971: 303 and 321. The twelfth-century church of Notre-Dame-de-Luzenac, near Saint-Girons in Ariège, bears a capital with a carved face with a wavy serpentine (?) body stemming from its chin and winding around the back of the head. If this is indeed an Eden serpent with a human face, it would constitute a very early example, and one contemporary to or preceding Comestor. See Appendix. Kelly seems to advance his theory for the apparition of the human-headed serpent by about a century in a recent book: «*During the European Middle Ages, starting in the eleventh century, all serpents began to be portrayed in the visual arts as being bipeds or quadrupeds [...] and also having dog-heads and dog's ears. Why did this happen? Who knows? Some sort of hidden and unexplainable pictorial evolutionary force was at work. As these painted and sculpted serpents evolved, some of them developed human heads instead of canine ones. It was widely thought that Satan used a woman-headed serpent to persuade Eve to eat the forbidden fruit*», 2006: 149.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly says the following regarding the purported sex of the Eden serpent: «*As for the serpent's sex, apart from the fact that the Hebrew word for serpent (nahash) is in the masculine gender, the Eden serpent was thought to have been very male, since it actually lusted after Eve, thus maintaining for us post-Freudians its reputation as a phallic symbol*», 1971: 301-302, italics in the original. For changing artistic attitudes to the sex of the serpent, see Kelly, 1971: 324-326. For a Freudian appraisal of the Fall of Man, see Bernard Teyssède, 1985: 9-38 and Thierry de Saussure, 2003: 1849-1854. For Patristic and medieval considerations of the sexual aspect of Eve's temptation, see A. Kent Hieatt, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> One of the best known examples of the Eden serpent from the Early Modern period is the very female human-bodied serpent that tempts Eve in Michaelangelo's Sistine chapel, or the more discrete version afforded by the Limbourg brothers in their *Très riches heures du Duc du Berry*, Musée Condé, Chantilly, fol. 25v, where the serpent has a woman's face and torso and long flowing blond hair, very much like Eve's.



other, or whether the emergence of the two forms was coincidental. However, it can be claimed that this aesthetic choice was in vogue at least partially during the period under discussion, when many plays throughout Western Europe depicted humanoid serpents, including plays on the Spanish stage, a field completely neglected by the two aforementioned critics who have concentrated their findings on plays from France, Germany and the British Isles.

As stated above, critics have attempted to establish a link between the half-serpentine, half-human images of the Eden serpent, and the likely forms of representations of the same figure in the theatre. They have in common the vertical depiction of what was, at least in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, an animal commonly thought to slither on the ground. In any event, for the Bible-reading playwrights of the period, the verticality of the Eden serpent offered no particular difficulty in that the feature is present in the Genesis story. The fact that God curses the serpent to crawl on its belly implies that it had hitherto adopted a vertical posture and walked on two or four legs.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, church fathers and writers on zoological matters agreed on the existence of certain types of snake, the viper in particular, that walked on two short legs prior to the divine curse [Kelly, 1971: 301]. A vertical serpent-devil-tempter in the theatre was thus perfectly in keeping with the Genesis story. As far as I have been able to ascertain concerning Spanish plays, before the temptation of Eve arises on stage, there are no examples of rampant serpents in dramatic representations of the Fall. All are based on walking actors.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Comestor's commentary is once again useful: «*serpens erectus erat ut homo, quia malecditione prostatus est*», 2005: 39-40. Kelly observes: «*That the serpent's curse entailed its crawling on its belly thenceforward suggested, of course, that it had previously had legs and feet*», 1971: 301, see also notes 2, 3 and 4.

<sup>13</sup> Bonnell mentions a play from the Chester cycle in which the cursed serpent «*glided out upon its belly*», 263. See also Russell, who states that: «*the closest link between the Devil of art and the Devil of literature is the stage demon [...] art and theater influenced one another from at least the end of the twelfth century*», 1990<sup>3</sup>: 254; subsequent pages offer details of several dramatic representations from various mystery cycles along the lines established by Bonnell.



## The Eden Serpent on the Spanish Stage

The impressive sixteenth-century collection of theatrical texts known to scholars as the *Códice de Autos Viejos* contains several plays that depict tales from the book of Genesis. Two plays in particular represent the Fall of Man in some detail: *Aucto del pecado de Adán* (XL) and *Aucto de la prevaricación de nuestro padre Adán* (XLII).<sup>14</sup>

The first of these plays adopts a practice that we shall see in other plays, that of the possible use of one actor to play the two roles of Devil and serpent. In the *Aucto del pecado*, the list of *dramatis personae* mentions the presence of the following demonic characters: Luçifer, Gula and Avariçia, who come on stage, presumably in that order and with no indications of how they are dressed. The first evocation of demonic attire comes from a comfortable Adam, who has lain down to admire the garden and, describing the soon to be disturbed *locus amoenus*, says:

Por donde va la corriente  
deste muy fresco licor  
que naçe de aquesta fuente,  
con silvos y con rrumor  
viene a nos una serpiente.<sup>15</sup>

A subsequent stage direction reads «Entra Luçifer en abitto de sierpe». The information is clear enough, though beyond the general idea, we have no

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<sup>14</sup> For comments on the serpent costumes in these two plays, see María Luisa Mateo Alcalá's recent thesis, 2008: 416-420. Mateo Alcalá studies other plays from this collection where the Eden serpent is alluded to without it necessarily being a speaking or non-speaking character: she provides extensive examples of other types of costume drawn from the *Códice de Autos Viejos* and from a lesser-known collection of plays, the *Manuscrito Llabrés*, mainly written in Catalan. Her thesis constitutes the first long-reaching comparative study of these two collections.

<sup>15</sup> The quotations from the *Códice de Autos Viejos* follow Léo Rouanet's 1901 edition (repr. 1979). After each quotation I shall indicate the volume, the number of the play and the relevant verse number (2, XL, vv. 132-136) or just the verse numbers if the identification of the play is sufficiently clear. In the fourth volume of his edition, Rouanet offers some brief comments regarding these plays, as well as a list of plays on a similar theme from across Western Europe, 1979: vol. 4, 234-241 and 246.



way of knowing how the costume was actually made up. Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego advances the following information: «Para la caracterización escénica del Diablo como serpiente, seguramente se utilizaba una larga cola de trapo» [1988: 155, note 171].<sup>16</sup> Other later plays are more forthcoming in details, as we shall see. Of particular interest in this play is the apparent change of costume (or actor) between the first appearance of Luçifer and the second. It is of course possible that the character initially stepped on stage in his serpent's costume, together with his two infernal acolytes, but this seems unlikely for two reasons: 1) The plot to bring down Mankind is hatched by the three of them (verses 82 and following), and only then does the importance of the garden (and the required presence of the serpent) come into its own, with successive descriptions of the tree and its fruit. Had the Devil been already dressed in a serpent's costume, the element of surprise would have been lost. I refer here to the surprise caused by the originality or visual appeal of the costume,<sup>17</sup> not to the surprise caused by the appearance of the serpent as a character, which would have been expected in one guise or another (but see below, *La creación*

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<sup>16</sup> He bases his assumption on a play called *Misteri d'Adam i Eva*, where a stage direction reads: «*lo vestit de la Serpent, que està en un rabo penchant als sargüelles*». Pollack offers a similar example from England: «The Grocers of Norwich, producers of the Creation pageant, list an item in their accounts that pertains to the serpent's costume: «*A cote w<sup>t</sup> hosen & tayle for y<sup>e</sup> serpent, steyned, w<sup>t</sup> a w<sup>t</sup> heare*». The type of garments selected for this serpent indicate that he was the possessor of a reptilian tail, plus arms and legs if the cote and hose were cut from normal patterns of the period», 1978: 61. For further examples from the Catalan-speaking tradition, see Mateo Alcalá, 2008; for similar French examples, see Dupras, for whom «*Le plus célèbre des déguisements diaboliques tire son origine de la Genèse: il s'agit du serpent qui tente Eve*», 2005: 50.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the visual appeal of the original Eden serpent, Cotarelo offers an interesting account from an anonymous enemy of the public theatre, and in particular of actresses: «*Quiéroos decir a quién me parece una muger de estas puesta en un tablado representando muy atizada y galana, muy llena de oro y de perlas, con tantas joyas y volantes, enrizado el cabello, llena de afeites la cara y con mil afectados ademanos decir su dicho. De una serpiente llamada Scitale, dice Solino, c. 30, y Isidoro, lib. 12, Ethim., c. 4, que es de tan doradas y resplandecientes escamas que a los que se le van por los pies (porque ella es tarda en andar) los detiene con su hermosura, y así embelesados le esperan hasta que ella llega, que es cruelísima, y cebándose en ellos los chupa la sangre y los deshace. Y ésta dicen algunos que fue la que engañó a Eva y la arrebató [...]*», 1997: 216a. See Leavitt, 1961, for the popularity in the theatre of stage animals, real or man-made.



*del mundo*); 2) The stage direction states that Luçifer has reentered the stage after having supposedly left it. Sufficient lines are uttered by Adán and Eva to permit the actor playing Luçifer to don another costume, or for another actor to take his place. Worthy of note is Adán's comment prior to Luçifer's entrance. Does «con silvos y con rrumor» refer to the Devil whistling or humming, or does it indicate some other musical or non-musical accompaniment?<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to tell. We can certainly observe a change of attitude in the character, from bombastic plotter to subtle seducer: «para que la humanidad / sepultemos en los çentros / de nuestra profundidad» [vv. 144-146], he says to his companions before addressing Eva in the following flattering terms: «O rreyna y enperadora / del terreno prinçipado [...]», [vv. 147-148]. The whistling would of course be highly appropriate for a serpent, but the Devil's speech does not contain any significant number of alliterations in 's' for firm conclusions to be made of Adán's curious information, unless we assume that such an entry was designed to work in quiet contrast to the later noise and uproar of the triumphant devils («con espantables clamores / la Vitoria celebrad» [vv. 245-246]), who exit together after having been joined by Asmodeo.<sup>19</sup> It is highly probable that Luçifer stays on as a spectator as God strolls into the garden to discover the, so to speak, naked truth. Having conveniently interrogated the tempted, he turns on the tempter and curses it in a twenty-five verse tirade beginning with the significant words «Tú, serpentino animal» [v. 362]. Luçifer has presumably kept the incriminating appearance of the serpent, allowing the

<sup>18</sup> For an interesting comparative study of devils singing and playing instruments clamorously see Vicente Chacón Carmona, 2007: 5-6 and following.

<sup>19</sup> The stage direction «*Entranse todos los demonios*» would seem to indicate that Gula and Avaricia are not only assumed to be devils, but that they perhaps sported recognizable demonic attire. Mention is also made of «*Satán*», as Asmodeo addresses a «*Grande enperador Satán*», v. 262. Logic would seem to suggest that *Satán* and *Luçifer* are one and the same in this play. Fleckniakoska makes the following remark as regards Lope de Vega's *autos*, which is highly pertinent to the present case: «*Satán ou Satanás, Lucifer ou Luzbel désignent le même personnage, l'ange révolté contre Dieu et qui a entraîné avec lui le tiers des étoiles [...]*», 1964: 31, italics in the original.



playwright to follow the Scriptural text quite closely. In this respect, the story of the Fall is told here with a number of brief departures from the original framework. Adam and Eve are given slightly longer speeches, for the most part descriptive; the actual temptation of Adam by Eve being dealt with in terms that evoke the banter of newly-weds. The significant difference is to be found in the characterisation of the Devil: the playwright not only opts for a pre-temptation episode in which the Devil presents his scheme,<sup>20</sup> but multiplies the range of demonic characters into a total of five, if we include both of Luçifer's appearances (initial and serpentine), the two Deadly Sins, and Asmodeo, who, curiously enough, is neither named in the list of *dramatis personae* nor in the spoken text.<sup>21</sup> The overwhelming diabolic presence leaves Adam and Eve outnumbered and easy prey, a clear warning to the public of the suggestive power of the Devil, even if in the end it is God's voice that we hear thundering curses. The development of the evil characters makes for a very dynamic play, due to the verbal exchanges, the subsequent festive uproar and hasty retreat before God's wrath.

The second play that I should like to discuss from the *Códice de Autos Viejos*, presents events in a similar fashion. The Devil is once again identified with Lucifer. This is the name given to the character in the «Figuras» [2, XLII, p. 167] preceding the «Argumento», as well as the name indicator in the text [v. 51] when he first speaks, although it is replaced by «Serpiente» on the second occasion [v. 171].<sup>22</sup> That the Devil is in serpentine costume is not actually explicitly stated in any stage direction, but it can be inferred, if not proven, by several other means. First of all, the «Argumento» speaks of «la serpiente y su astuçia» [p. 167]. The abstract noun is repeated several times by Luçifer [vv.

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<sup>20</sup> Let us recall that Genesis has no Devil; it was later writers that assumed that the serpent was the Devil in disguise, or a beast moved by the Devil.

<sup>21</sup> For the use of demonic names in order to impress the audience, see González Fernández, 1998: 31-35.

<sup>22</sup> As in *El pecado de Adán*, the name is not spoken.



66, 123] and once by Eva: «La serpiente me engañó / por su abstuçia muy sobtil» [vv. 281-282; see also Mateo Alcalá, 2008: 417]. Likewise, God refers to him as «Serpiente» when cursing him to bite the dust as punishment for his foul deed. Secondly, the character identified as Luçifer addresses Eva directly, tempting her with the forbidden fruit. After a brief reply addressed to «Serpiente», it seems improbable that a second actor would be used, since this would involve interrupting the fluidity and dramatic tension of the moment with a new and unnecessary entrance. Finally, the Devil, under the name part «Luçifer», speaks consistently in the first person, making extensive use of the pronoun «Yo» at the beginning of a number of verses. Serpiente ends his speech with «Yo digo lo que perdéis» [v. 193, my emphasis]. Whilst the use of the pronoun by the Devil is far from being reliable as a means of determining his appearance, I have suggested elsewhere that it is most often used as a stock opening or recurring word on many occasions in which he is not immediately recognizable as a devil [González Fernández, 2001]. I cannot help but agree with Rhoda-Gale Pollack when she asserts, concerning English Mystery plays, that: «The medieval audience would have to have had to recognize the Devil instantly in order to separate him from his demons, since it was essentially his power that created fear in mankind» [1978: 52]. I believe the same to be true for Spanish sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama. If my hypothesis is well-founded here, it is possible that the playwright wished his audience to specifically identify his Eden serpent with the Devil in a way similar to that presented in the *Pecado de Adán* play, where this was presumably achieved by costume change rather than by the more subtle means presented in this second play. The character is one and the same, but no doubt must be left in the audience's mind that the Devil is behind the reptilian disguise.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Authors of the stature of Johan Wier or Weyer go as far as to eliminate the serpent from their account of the Fall. In the third chapter of his impressive *De praestigiis daemonum*, 1563, where he discusses the temptation of Eve, no mention whatsoever is made of the reptile.



Let us now turn our attention to plays from the beginning of the seventeenth century in which the Fall of Man is represented: *La creación del mundo y primera culpa del hombre* (Lope de Vega?, 1631-1635), *El nacimiento de Cristo* (Lope de Vega, 1613-1615) and to a differing degree *La madre de la mejor* (Lope de Vega, 1610-1612).<sup>24</sup> I shall first of all discuss *El nacimiento*, which is the play offering the most interesting details as regards the costume worn by the demonic characters of the temptation scene. Secondly, I shall discuss the Devil's role and appearance in *La madre de la mejor*. I shall finish with a discussion of a novel way of presenting the elements of the Fall in *La creación del mundo*, where we can see a significant departure from the representations seen in the preceding plays.

*El nacimiento de Cristo* presents its audience with a number of demonic characters comparable to the *Aucto del pecado de Adán*. The *comedia* boasts no less than four in the list of *dramatis personae*: La Sierpe, la Soberbia, la Hermosura and la Envidia. The demonic quartet opens the action of the play, the lead being taken by Sierpe, who, we must assume, is the head devil that should be identified with Lucifer himself. Soberbia, addressed by Sierpe as «amigo», is said to have fallen with the Sierpe «de aquella divina altura» [387a], a clear allusion to the fall of the rebel angels. The initial sequence is designed to present the infernal plot to make Man transgress in what seems to have been a relatively common theatrical depiction of events immediately preceding the temptation and Fall of Man. Unlike the costume-changing devil that we have seen above, the Devil wears his serpentine disguise from his first appearance. A detailed stage direction reads: «Salga la Sierpe con alas de dragón, cabellos largos, y sobre ellos una cabeza de culebra, y la Soberbia con él y la Hermosura» [387]. The image coincides with many pictorial

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<sup>24</sup> The dates from the two Lopean dramas follow Morley and Bruerton's conclusions: *Nacimiento*, 1968: 517 and *La madre*, 1968: 351. The reasons for determining why *La creación* might not be attributed to Lope are discussed on pages 440-441.



representations commented upon by Bonnell and Kelly, who describe all three features independently or thus associated in one sole figure. The flowing hair could be a mark of animal nature or of a feminization of the Devil character<sup>25</sup>. Without further details, it is difficult to ascertain whether the character manifests any particularly feminine features (though see below). The «cabellos largos» might not necessarily represent head hair but exaggerated body hair, a clear demonic characteristic. Of some pertinence to the demonic attire presented in this play are Élyse Dupras' comments concerning demonic costume in French mystery plays:

Les costumes des diables marquent clairement leur univers d'appartenance, un univers de l'anormal, du désordre, de la bestialité. Cette absence d'ordre se manifeste entre autres dans le caractère hybride de l'apparence corporelle que prête au diable leur costume. Celui-ci comporte le plus souvent cornes et queue [...] des caractères sexuelles secondaires féminins [2006: 43].

If we accept an at least partial feminization of the Devil by virtue of his long hair, most of the costume details evoked by Dupras are reunited in his portrayal in *El nacimiento*. It is of course feasible that a serpentine head is placed on top of the actor's head, leaving his face visible below and allowing for clear diction. Though a mask or visor is possible, the wording of the stage direction makes this hypothesis less likely.<sup>26</sup> Another feature concerning Sierpe's representation concerns its feet. When Eva asks the tempting serpent (who had slowly drawn up to her: «Va saliendo la Sierpe», 389b) who it is, the serpent answers «¿No me ves?» [p. 390b], to which Gracia adds: «¡Qué feos pies!». The deformed or animalistic feet of the Devil were a commonplace,

<sup>25</sup> Bonnell describes the following depiction from the Bibliothèque National de Paris MSS. Fr. No. 9561, fol. 8: «*The serpent in this design has head and arms that are human, the head being with its calm features and long hair almost the exact counterpart of Eve's*», 1917: 266.

<sup>26</sup> The following stage direction from Francisco de Llanos' *El hijo de la virtud* is extremely expressive as regards the use of a mask in the representation of a demonic character: «*Sale el Demonio en forma de soldado galán, y traerá una mascarilla de mal gesto en la cabeza, que con facilidad se pondrá en el rostro cuando sea menester*», Ee6r.



though they are also a traditional iconographical aspect associated with negative female figures such as the Queen of Sheba.<sup>27</sup> Without any further information, we can only guess at the supposed appearance of Sierpe's feet. Were they reptilian, clawed or hoofed?

Two final elements should be mentioned concerning this play. The playwright makes little comment on the visual representation of *Hermosura* and *Soberbia*, but a fourth demonic character, *Envidia*, is described thus: «Sale la Envidia con un corazón en las manos, ceñida la cabeza de culebras» [388a]. And shortly before the end of the first act, the Príncipe (Christ) talks of Sierpe in the following terms: «[...] el Dragón arrogante / Que de las luces del cielo / Derribó la tercera parte [...]» [p. 393a].<sup>28</sup> Whilst *Envidia*'s Medusa-like hair arrangement corresponds to its traditional representation as a being with a poisonous tongue, the connection to its master's own appearance is manifest: *Envidia* represents a smaller scale version (albeit many-headed) of Lucifer's own disguise. The second depiction (that of the dragon described by John in the Revelation) unites, in a certain fashion, all of the other elements. The pre-Eden Devil is represented by the plot-hatching trio at the beginning; the Eden Devil by Sierpe, and the rebellious angel who will once again make war on the righteous is evoked by the reference to John's text. In this opening scene of the play, the Devil's untiring ability to tempt and make war on Mankind is purposefully and convincingly portrayed through this multi-referential choice. Though Adam and Eve are tempted (the playwrights had no desire to change what they took as historical facts), the demonic assault represented by the quartet of negative figures is balanced by the heavenly response of three comparable figures: *Emperador* (God); *Príncipe* (Christ); and the Archangel

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<sup>27</sup> For the ugliness of feet regarding both traditions (the Devil and the Queen of Sheba), see Marina Warner, 1995: 111-128.

<sup>28</sup> «*Et visum est aliud signum in caelo; et ecce draco magnus rufus habens capita septem, et cornua decem; et in capitibus eius diaemata septem, et cauda eius trahebat tertiam partem stellarum caeli, et misit eas ad terram*», (Apocalypsis, 12, 3-4, emphasis mine).



Gabriel. Man loses his first battle against the combined forces of Hell, but the result of the final battle cannot be doubted as the act ends with the evocation of Christ's redeeming birth: «Y Adán del encanto sale / En que la sierpe le puso, / Pues para salvarle nace» [p. 393b]. As with a number of other plays, a triumphant Devil at the beginning is transformed into a defeated one.

The Apocalyptic dragon receives a more developed treatment in *La madre de la mejor*, where he is clearly identified as a speaking character and not just as a symbolic manifestation of the Devil's power. Its association with the Eden serpent is marked by its being presented as the figure referred to in the divine curse initially directed at the serpent. Let us recall that God created everlasting enmity between the seed of the woman and that of the serpent. Dragón's intervention in this play is more or less reduced to enacting the fulfillment of the Genesis prophecy. The Devil character enters the stage in a manner familiar from the other plays mentioned above, accompanied by infernal acolytes («dos Ministros», p. 372b). No reference is made to his costume other than his name, «Dragón infernal», which might lead us to assume that he is represented in some kind of reptilian form. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that he addresses his two companions as «¡Oh serpientes!» [p. 373a]. The trio is almost certainly in serpentine attire, as befits the action that follows, where the Biblical prophecy is not only repeatedly mentioned<sup>29</sup> but, to a degree, enacted.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The occasions on which references are made to the crushing of the serpent's head are extremely numerous. DRAGON: *¿Qué la mujer es nacida, / que me ha de quebrar la frente, / Dice esta gente perdida?* [p. 372b]; MINISTRO: *Si aquesta no es la mujer / Que te ha de quebrar la frente* [372b]; DRAGÓN: *Tengo la frente muy dura* [372b]; *¡[...] Para apretar mi garganta, / El tiempo que en que Dios quisiese / Formar la divina planta / Que mi cabeza rompiese! [...] ¡Que está mi cerviz sujeta / A su vengativa espada* [373a]; EVA: *Crece, divina niña que la frente / Pisarás de la sierpe endurecida!* [374a]; DRAGÓN: *Esta niña que mi frente / ha de quebrar [...] ¡Ah, cielos, que esté mi frente / Condenada a humanos pies* [374a]; GABRIEL: *[...] Tu lengua y tu vil poder / Con el pie de una mujer* [378b]; DRAGÓN: *Déjame, no digas más; / Que mirando la serpiente / Que está a su planta, mi frente / Quebrando, Gabriel, estás* [378b].



The last play that I should like to discuss is another possibly Lopean drama, *La creación del mundo y primera culpa del hombre*. Curiously enough, for a play with such a title and on such a theme, the Serpent does not actually appear. The playwright presents us with a rather differing picture than the one seen in the plays discussed above. *La creación* begins in a conventional way if we once again compare it to the other plays: Luzbel appears *prior* to the temptation scene not as a scheming plotter against Mankind but in a state of rebellion before his own fall from heaven, presumably recognisable in his original angelic appearance («Suena música dentro y descúbrese un trono muy bien aderezado. Al lado derecho San Miguel, con espada y escudo, y al lado siniestro Luzbel, ambos con tunicelas»<sup>31</sup>).

After his defeat by the archangel, Luzbel, who appears differently attired («con cota y faldones y tocado de Diablo», 178b),<sup>32</sup> turns his attention to ruining God's ultimate creation, Adam and Eve. In an envy-ridden speech, he describes Adam and Paradise, with only the slightest of allusions to the serpent's future temptation of Eve: «Mas de una diabólica asechanza / Valerme intento» [178b].

The temptation scene itself is worthy of Lope's masterful pen (if he is indeed the author). Eva is presented as the overcurious woman who does not heed her husband's words of warning about not eating or even touching the forbidden fruit. Lope has her answer with a certain anachronistic wit:

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<sup>30</sup> Though we might assume from the last quotation in the previous note that the character of Dragón is cast down by Gabriel and his head trodden upon, the playwright equally offers the scene to his public by way of a popular *apariencia*: «Abrense dos puertas y vese dentro la Virgen, de niña de dos años, puesta de pies sobre una luna, y una serpiente a los pies» [378b].

<sup>31</sup> The placing *left* and *right*, together with the iconography of Saint Michael, would have been sufficient for the audience to determine the good angel from the bad if the «*tunicelas*» were the same. Any doubt would have been immediately dispersed by the Devil's opening words: «*Tan bello en mi ser me vi, / Que porque admirar se pueda / No sé si a Dios le conceda / Primero lugar que a mí*», [177a].

<sup>32</sup> Just exactly what «*tocado de diablo*» refers to is difficult to determine: does the author mean horns, a serpent's head suitable for the occasion or a Medusa-like portrayal? It was clearly important enough to mention this character trait, but sufficiently well-known as to need no further comment.



Hasta ahora ¿en qué lo has visto?  
 Deso nos falta el ejemplo;  
 Que ni curiosos ha habido,  
 Ni ocasionado sucesos [180b].

Adán's untimely departure heralds the arrival of the tempter, but Lope does not have the Devil step on stage in a serpent's garb. He is much more subtle. To Eva's question «¿Qué puedo perder en ver / La fruta vedada?» [180b], an offstage voice responds «Nada». There then follows a conversation in which a slightly bewildered Eva receives one-word utterances from beyond the stage.<sup>33</sup> The dramatic choice is certainly suggestive. With Eva as the sole figure on the stage, the mysterious voice must have been associated immediately with the Devil hidden in the lavish pictorial depiction of the garden,<sup>34</sup> the whole working somewhat like Eva's conscience battling with temptation.

In his next felonious act (the incitement to murder in the Cain and Abel episode), Luzbel makes once again a fleeting reference to the serpent:

Ya en Caín voy escupiando  
 De mi veneno infernal,  
 Y ya con raba mortal  
 De envidia se está muriendo (184a).

As on the previous occasion, though more explicitly here, the audience could have associated the poison and the mention of the Deadly sin of Envy with serpentine traits inherent to the Devil's character, but there is no concrete proof

<sup>33</sup> The utterance of single words must have been quite effective in that they, rather than longer speeches, could be easily heard. This feature of on- and off-stage questions and answers was often employed in Lope's time. C. E. Anibal, 1925 and 1927, attributes the creation of the technique to Mira de Amescua, calling it the 'voces del cielo'; in the present case it would be more appropriate to call them 'voces del infierno' (see González Fernández, 1998: 320-328). For comments on Anibal's theory, see Krappe, 1926 and 1928. For offstage voices and noises as effective dramatic techniques, see: Recoules, 1975; Davis, 1991; and Hicks, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> A stage direction, 179a, makes reference to what appears to be a painted backdrop depicting flowers and trees.



that any of these aspects were depicted in Luzbel's appearance in the play. We must, I think, conclude that Lope presents us with a 'serpentless' temptation, preferring a more sophisticated theatrical technique for his elegant fallen angel.

## Conclusion

The five plays discussed above offer different interpretations of the Genesis story. As has been stated, the major difference concerns the amplification of the original dialogues into longer and more complex exchanges. The clearest example can be drawn from *La creación del mundo*, where the *primeros padres* are not only loquacious, but very contemporary in their manner, and consciously so. The Eden serpent does not appear really in its own right in the selected plays; it is inevitably associated with the more versatile character of the Devil, and this to such an extent that several dramatists decide to multiply the demonic presence to a considerable extent in two plays presenting four or more demonic figures. This tendency, together with the representation of a pre-Fall Devil that either fights his own cosmic battle or plots to undo Mankind, as well as references to the Apocalyptic dragon, lend the plays a scope that goes well beyond the Biblical tale. The dramatists present here an exegetical treatment of the Biblical matter, where God's scheme in its totality is reenacted and commented upon. The serpent is demonized (or even humanized) in order to highlight the danger that it poses for Mankind: the many and disperse Biblical accounts of Satan or Lucifer are combined in one tempting figure, but this combination, which apparently reduces the various manifestations into one sole serpent-devil-dragon figure, is counter-balanced, at least on some occasions, by the exteriorization of other demonic characteristics, such as the Seven Deadly Sins. Patterns can be seen in the different plays, which may be compared with earlier or contemporary dramatic productions from other Western European countries. Without a doubt,



the few costume details that have survived added to the sheer number of demonic characters portrayed in these plays, thus implying that such characters were particularly popular and visually appealing. The omission of the serpent in *La creación del mundo*, a play that stands out in this respect, might be due to its late date. If we accept Morley and Bruerton's conclusions, we are dealing with a dramatic piece written in the early 1630s,<sup>35</sup> when the Devil had almost certainly cast off his most animalistic traits (coils and forked tongue included) and become an altogether more sophisticated creature.

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<sup>35</sup> See González Fernández, 2005.



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