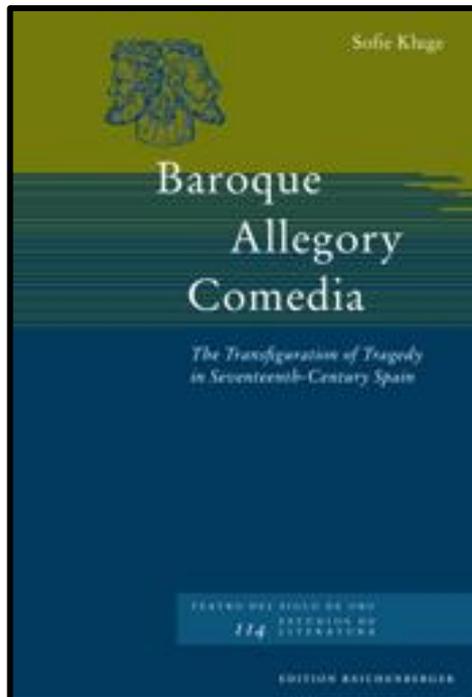


Sofie Kluge, *Baroque Allegory Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth Century Spain*, Kassel, Reichenberger, 2010

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KLUGE, Sofie, *Baroque Allegory Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth Century Spain*, Kassel: Reichenberg, 2010, 330 pp.
ISBN 978-3-937734-60-6

Sofie Kluge's *Baroque Allegory Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth-Century Spain* originated as a PhD thesis, and it is an exhaustive work which aims to explore the reasons why allegory became the main strategy dominating the arts in seventeenth-century Spain, causing for the *comedia*, with its allegorical structure, to become the hegemonic concept of serious dramatic art. Kluge's aim is to show that the hegemony of the *comedia* is the logical outcome of the allegorical outlook dominating Baroque culture, and of the Counterreformation attempt to re-moralize aesthetics. She discusses the ideology permeating Baroque literary criticism,

mentioning some of the most famous literary feuds of the period, and finally analyzes Calderon's masterpiece, *La vida es sueño* (1635), which she considers to be representative of the predominance of allegory and of the transfiguration of tragedy taking place in Baroque Spain.

The book aligns itself with works such as Stephen Rupp's *Allegories of Kingship: Calderón and the Anti-Machiavellian Tradition* (1996), which also considers the impact of secular developments on Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, and asks itself about the extent to which the anti-Machiavellian debate of seventeenth-century Spain informs Calderón's political drama. Kluge's book must also be seen in dialogue with works such as Henry W. Sullivan's «The Oedipus Myth: Lacan and Dream Interpretation», which is part of the volume of essays *The Prince in the Tower: Perceptions of La vida es sueño* (1993), edited by Frederick A. de Armas, and which, although from Lacanian perspective, also seeks to draw the parallels between the Oedipus myth and *La vida es sueño*. The book offers very interesting, illuminating and extensive examples of Baroque allegory in painting, poetry and theatre, and it will be of interest to both specialists and students of the Spanish Golden Age, as well as to anyone with an interest in theatre.

The book is comprised of three main blocks – «Baroque and Allegory», «Re-Staging Comedy» and «Calderón». In the first block, Kluge rigorously defines the concepts of Baroque and allegory, explains the causes behind the Spanish crisis and sense of *desengaño*, and offers many examples of Baroque allegory in literature, painting and sculpture. In the second block, Kluge explains why the *comedia* became the dominant form, and offers a detailed analysis of the re-moralization of aesthetics taking place in Counterreformation Spain. Kluge explains how, out of the Counterreformation's perceived need for art to offer moral instruction, Plato's critique of tragedy dominated literary criticism, eventually leading to the ostracism of tragedy and to the privileging of the *comedia*. Finally, in the third block, she carries out her analysis of *La vida es sueño*, where she claims that the play can be considered a re-writing of Sophocles's *Oedipus*



King (c.429 BC) which transfigures its tragic universe through allegory, that is, through Segismundo's, the protagonist, final revelation as the rightful, Providential ruler, thus overcoming historical pessimism by reinstalling a transcendental perspective.

Kluge's thesis hinges on the notion that the Baroque was a fundamentally paradoxical period, that is, it was already modern, yet, through allegory, it tried to 'freeze' this advancement into a transcendental point of view, restlessly oscillating between worldly and transcendental perspectives. Kluge, indeed, specifically sets out to oppose Benjamin's critique of Calderonian drama as expounded in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). In his book, Benjamin claims that whereas German tragedy or *Trauerspiel* definitively abandoned the metaphysical perspective, Calderón's *comedias* remained medieval, showing «a problematic dependence [...] on the sovereign's trouble-shooting interference» (p. 24), and exemplifying a combination of «aestheticism and authoritarianism» (p. 28). According to Benjamin, indeed, Calderón's allegorical universe is a symptom of an unethical aestheticism problematically entwined with the Counterreformation medieval outlook, and of the attempt, shared by the reactionary political and religious forces of the time, to revive the medieval universe.

Responding to what she believes to be Benjamin's excessively dualistic approach to the Spanish material, Kluge sets out to unveil the theologically defined ethics of the Counterreformation period, and to explore how they reflect in Calderón's *La vida es sueño*. As she puts it, «defining ethics in exclusively secular terms, Benjamin [is] [...] unable to grasp the theologically defined ethics permeating Spanish Baroque culture on a broad scale and Calderonian *comedia* in particular, [an ethics] tirelessly engaged in dialogue with secular viewpoints» (p. 27). Kluge thus reconstructs the theologico-historical background of Baroque allegory and sets out to explore the paradoxical worldview of the seventeenth century.



One of Kluge's most interesting points, indeed, is her discussion, in the first block of the book, «Baroque and Allegory», of the anti-Machiavellian critique that was dominant in seventeenth-century Spain, and which also reflected in Calderón's drama. Machiavelli's political theory of *ratio status* [reason of state], which allowed for the prince's transgression of established moral standards as long as it be for the good of the state alienated Baroque political theorists, who still held Christian virtues to be the necessary basis of power. Spanish Baroque theorists, however, did not simply ignore or reject the secularisation of history that Machiavelli's political theory represented but, in the characteristic equivocal, paradoxical Baroque attitude, they integrated it within a theological worldview. Kluge gives the example of Diego de Saavedra's *Idea de un príncipe político-cristiano* (1640), for instance, which resolves the conflict posed by Machiavelli by claiming that the good prince must be made aware of the uses of *ratio status* of other rulers just in order to avoid them himself. Thus, Kluge demonstrates how the Baroque did not simply reject, but seriously engaged with and integrated historical and secular developments.

Kluge also describes the process whereby the *comedia* became the dominant form of serious dramatic art. In the first chapter of the block «Re-Staging Comedy», called «The literary Republic», she describes the dominant trends of Baroque literary theory criticism, arguing it was permeated by Plato's ethical, moral and ontological critique of tragedy, the ultimate result of which was the creation of an anti-tragic theatre. Plato's critique of tragedy tapped into the Counterreformation's desire to instil art with a moral and Christian purpose. As Kluge puts it, «Platonism and Christianity intersected exactly in the demand for a morally instructive/didactic, yet still delightful art form, which would impart truth to the public [...] without concealing its own fundamental irreality or illusory nature; that is, in short, an allegorical art form» (p. 132-33). Thus, because of the «demand that theatre offer moral *exempla* and seek to strengthen the virtue of the spectators» (p. 159), the term tragicomedy became more



accepted than tragedy. Finally, it was believed that comedy was a more comprehensive term than tragicomedy, and even though the *comedia* had traditionally been mistrusted for its alleged licentiousness or moral permissiveness, it finally became the dominant form.

In the third block of her study, or the block entitled “Calderón”, Kluge finally analyzes *La vida es Sueño*, which she claims exemplifies the Platonic critique of tragedy, as well as Calderón’s serious engagement with Machiavellianism and different aspects of political power (p. 83). According to Kluge, the play evidences the «very essence of Baroque allegorization, as well as its [main] motivation: the transfiguration of the tragic worldview». Kluge calls the play an «Oedipus Christianus» (p. 258) or even an «Oedipus Platonicus» (p. 258), since the play ultimately questions tragedy’s aesthetic glorification of fatalism, and postulates the Christian belief in human freedom. The play, indeed, shows that Segismundo does not become a tyrant, as predicted by his father, but defies this destiny through prudence and virtue, ultimately fulfilling the greater, providential design reserved for him.

Kluge’s thesis is rigorous and well-argued, yet she does not address a number of problematic issues which it inevitably raises. The ethics Kluge refers to are always problematically tied to the need to reinstall a Christian, theocentric universe. It is not clear, indeed, to what extent the Platonic critique of tragedy which Baroque literary criticism supported and which Calderón’s *La vida es sueño* so clearly exemplifies respond to an ethical awareness or, rather, to a desire to adhere to the morality of the Counterreformation. At the same time, Kluge does not address the implications of the closure the play effects at the end – which so worried Benjamin – and whereby Calderón secures the return to a medieval universe. There is a palpable desire in Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, as shown through the final allegory of Segismundo’s apotheosis, to reinsert secular history and ethics within a theological, theocentric worldview.



Segismundo discovers the importance of ethics and changes his deterministic destiny through free will, thus liberating history from tragedy. At the same time, however, Segismundo's conversion and final apotheosis are carried out in the name of a providentialist view of the world, and problematically fulfil a greater, providential design. As Kluge puts it, «Segismundo not only turns to ethics pragmatically in order to make friends [...] but also for fear of losing the 'divina gloria' in the pursuit of 'vanagloria humana'» (p. 277). His apotheosis proves Basilio's Machiavellianism and reason of state wrong, and reinserts the notion of innate nobility and a Providentialist view of history and the universe. Ultimately, and in the light of the final closure, then, Calderón seems to refute Machiavelli's theory of reason of state because it is not in accordance with a Christian universe. Kluge's book is rigorous in detecting the secular ethics of the play, but does not fully acknowledge the closure whereby, as Benjamin argued, the medieval, Providentialist universe is reinstalled.

In conclusion, *Baroque Allegory Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (2010) is a significant contribution to the studies of the Spanish Golden Age, which offers a fascinating and incisive diagnosis of the crisis and *desengaño* Spain was undergoing in the Baroque period. It is a didactic, engaging and comprehensive work that contains many well-chosen examples of allegory not just in literature but in all of the arts. Kluge's book is also a very exhaustive, detailed and ultimately fascinating approach to the equivocal nature of the Baroque period, oscillating between modern and transcendental perspectives. In her unveiling the secular ethics of Calderón, Kluge disengages Calderonian drama from its exclusively religious connotations, and importantly makes it accessible to a contemporary readership. The book thus delights while breaking new ground in the field, particularly regarding the crucial question of Calderon's relationship with ethics.



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