

**Pagan Ritual or Christian Feast?  
St. John's Night in Lope de Vega**

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St. John's Night, or St. John's Eve –falling on June 23, roughly coinciding (and deliberately conflated in the popular imagination) with the summer solstice– serves as what Susan Niehoff McCrary calls the “temporal coordinate” for several of Lope de Vega's plays (Niehoff McCrary [1993]). These include *Flores de San Juan*, *Auto de los cantares*, *Lo cierto por lo dudoso*, *Peribáñez*, *El molino*, *El valor de las mujeres*, *La hermosura aborrecida*, and *El bobo del colegio* (Alvarez-Detrell 5). While there is not space in this essay to examine all of these, two representative works have been chosen to illustrate the diversity of Lope's approaches to this annual event. Written and produced more than a decade apart, *La noche de San Juan* and *El último godo* both rely heavily upon relevant imagery and folk traditions derived from the festival to pack their literary, dramatic and political punch.<sup>1</sup> But in these two plays, Lope offers two distinct visions of the summer solstice: one gay, carefree and pagan; and the other serious, symbolic and spiritual (specifically Christian –although curiously ecumenical also, because this is a festival even the Moors celebrate<sup>2</sup>). How can we reconcile these two seemingly disparate versions?

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<sup>1</sup> As Victor Dixon notes, the characters in *La noche de San Juan* allude to the festival more than 20 times (Dixon 77). To my knowledge, no one has compared these two dramatic works.

<sup>2</sup> The Berbers of Morocco called this day *l'ansara* and celebrated even its sacred resonances, since they considered St. John the Baptist to be a prophet and referred to him as *Alí* (Alvarez-Detrell 2). Lope de Vega chooses to expound upon the Muslims' celebration of this religious festival with the following chorus sung by “algunos Moros” during the first scene of *El último godo*:

Vamos a la playa,  
noche de San Juan,  
que alegra la tierra  
y retumba el mar.  
En la playa hagamos  
fiestas de mil modos,  
coronados todos  
de verbena y ramos.  
A su arena vamos,  
noche de San Juan,  
que alegra la tierra  
y retumba el mar.

(Lope de Vega [1967], Act I, pp. 631-32)

These characters later tackle the seeming incongruity head-on, as Abembúcar explains to Zara:

Bien merece este Baptista  
que el mundo sus glorias conte;  
fue gran profeta de Cristo,  
y allá piensan los cristianos

At the outset, it might be useful to summarize both of these plays briefly and indicate what we know, or do not know, about the original circumstances surrounding their production. *La noche de San Juan* is the most obvious choice of play to study in connection with the festival of the same name. It is a frivolous urban comedy, produced for a specific courtly occasion, and generically it may be classified as of the cloak-and-dagger variety, although clearly Neo-classical in structure (Dixon 61, 68). The cast consists of four noblemen and two ladies, along with their household servants, arranged into two interlocking love triangles in what has been described as a symmetrical dance pattern, or *contradanza* (Stoll 129). A plethora of details have been preserved about this royal spectacle, primarily thanks to an anonymous *Relación de la fiesta que hizo á sus Magestades y Altezas el Conde-Duque la noche de San Juan de este año de 1631* which was later incorporated into Casiano Pellicer's *Tratado histórico sobre el origen y progresos de la comedia y del histrionismo en España* (Madrid, 1804).<sup>3</sup> The production was staged outdoors, commissioned by Count-Duke Olivares for a party held in the garden of his brother-in-law, the Count of Monterrey. Lope's was the second of two plays presented that night, for the beholding of which even the king himself donned a costume. After a sumptuous feast, the royal garden party effectively mobilized to become a parade, with a procession of coaches making its way up and down the Paseo del Prado accompanied by musicians. This magical night of elaborately planned festivities only ended with the coming of dawn.

*El último godo*, in contrast, is a historical drama most famously villified by Ramón Menéndez Pidal for presenting the entire fall of Spain, and subsequent Reconquest, in a single play performed in the space of three hours (quoted in Niehoff McCrary [1982], 261).<sup>4</sup> Labelled by Lope a "tragicomedy," it is only saved from unmitigatedly dire tragedy by Pelayo's launching of the *Reconquista* in the last act. Drawing upon historical chronicles and pseudo-chronicles, most notably an account by the *morisco* Miguel de Luna (Ryjik 216),<sup>5</sup> in addition to a wealth of traditional ballads (Burningham), this play does nothing short of staging a national *Urdrama* of Spain's fall to the Muslims as a consequence of King Rodrigo's rape of La Cava. St. John's Night is foregrounded in the play as the proximate cause for the Gothic monarch's

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que es con nosotros malquisto,  
y adorámosle africanos,  
esclavos, como habéis visto.

(Lope de Vega [1967], Act I, p. 632)

<sup>3</sup> Jordi Pique Angordans believes Lope himself might have been the anonymous author of this *relación* (Pique Angordans 60). The entire text has been reprinted as an appendix in Anita K. Stoll's edition of Lope's play (pp. 167-75).

<sup>4</sup> Niehoff McCrary cites Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Floresta de leyendas heroicas españolas* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1944), II: lx-lxi. To support his point, Menéndez Pidal in turn cites Francisco Cascales' *Tablas poéticas* (1617), which seem to make allusion to the play. This latter connection, if accurate, might provide some chronological context for a work whose original circumstances of production remain unknown (Atienza [2009], 159).

<sup>5</sup> The text in question is Miguel de Luna's *La historia verdadera del rey Don Rodrigo y de la pérdida de España*, published in 1592.

succumbing to lust (“As the sun increases, so does the concupiscence of the Monarch. . . . Rodrigo’s impiety was released by the supernatural forces associated with the summer solstice” [Niehoff McCrary (1993), 119, 121]). On the surface, then, it would appear that these plays could not be more different.

But actually, the two works offer multiple and multivalent points of contact. Some of the same imagery and themes are invoked, such as water rituals, fire metaphors, Phoenix references, cyclical patterns, night turning into day, fertility rites, and the use of *figura* as a dominant rhetorical trope, with either Biblical or political overtones. Let us examine each of these shared components to see what they can tell us about Lope de Vega’s spectrum of approaches to St. John’s Night.

### Water Rituals

*La noche de San Juan* contains multiple references to water rituals associated with this popular feast day. The popular imagination had long since conflated agricultural phenomena such as rainfall and dew with the water used by John the Baptist to perform the baptism of Christ. Thus in this play we find allusions to rainfall (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, l. 1115), dew (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, l. 1010), crystal cups of water (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, ll. 1364-67), fountains (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, l. 1807), foaming oceans (Lope de Vega [1988], Act III, ll. 2582-583-84), and liquid pools (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, l. 1608). *El último godó* is permeated by water rituals, both sacramental and ekphrastic. Susan Niehoff McCrary confirms, “Lope carries the motif of rebirth further than do the chronicles through constant references to baptism, the sacrament that cleanses the soul . . . . The water imagery is particularly essential to the design of the play since it functions as the cleansing element employed in the sacrament of baptism to wash away the stain of original sin” (Niehoff McCrary [1987], 21, 36). The key baptism scene in *El último godó*, following Zara’s request “Dadme el agua divina” (Lope de Vega [1967], Act I, p. 635), even contains an appearance by the same dove who descended from heaven during Jesus Christ’s baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist: “Recibió el agua de aquella / paloma que, entre las nubes, / vio el Bautista en el Jordán, / entre mil cánticos dulces” (Lope de Vega [1967], Act I, p. 637). To solidify this connection, Abembúcar in his clandestine baptism performed by Zara / María chooses the Christian name Juan in a direct allusion to the Paraclete (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 651). In another scene which is not a sacramental baptism but which nonetheless paints a convincing word picture of ritual purification by water, Pelayo emerges dripping from the river which he has swum to escape the Muslim invaders (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 655). As Niehoff McCrary glosses this *tableau*, “[h]is dripping wet appearance on the stage is a remarkably efficient opsis which visually fuses the ideas of confession, ablution and purgation, and regeneration into superior enlightenment” (Niehoff McCrary [1987], 80).

But these water rituals appear in a manner which is not univocally spiritual or positive. Burningham notes that the Moorish Zara's baptismal scene in *El último godo* "erotically echoes a voyeuristic romance that depicts Rodrigo's arousal upon seeing Florinda bathing . . . [she], in essence, becomes 'the last Goth-ette'" (Burningham 44). This romance, in turn, would appear to draw upon a different Biblical tradition of King David spying on Bathsheba as she was taking a bath. Thus we see that Lope de Vega's conflation of pagan and spiritual imagery surrounding St. John's Night cooked up a heady brew of powerful word pictures, often bordering on the heretical. We shall return to possible doctrinal ramifications at the end of this essay.

### Fire Metaphors

Fire is connected to water not just because water extinguishes flame, but also due to shared symbolic resonances, as Niehoff McCrary explains: "Both fire and water are binary symbols, agents of destruction and regeneration" (Niehoff McCrary [1987], 36). Fire is an especially important element for the celebration of Saint John's Night because of the ubiquitous bonfires lit around the countryside, both to frighten away evil spirits and to lend help to the waning sun. In some variations on the traditional celebration, pairs of lovers hold hands and then leap over the flames.

Fire imagery appears in the comic play *La noche de San Juan* both as a metaphor for love's passion and as a literal means of destroying love letters which might prove potentially damaging to someone's reputation (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 106-08). The passage where fire is employed most extensively appears in Act III:

Salid por este balcón,  
pues que no salís del pecho,  
llamas de amor, que habéis hecho,  
incendio mi corazón,  
respire como infición  
este aposento, y no impida  
que viva el alma encendida . . . .

(Lope de Vega [1988], Act III, ll. 2510-16)

Here Leonor addresses an elaborate apostrophe to love's flames in her breast and, in the process, makes glancing allusion to the St. John's Night tradition of listening at the balcony to hear the name of one's future spouse.

On a parallel track, but on a much more serious note, Veronika Ryjik is the critic to have studied most carefully the fire imagery in *El último godo*:

Lope utiliza abundantemente el simbolismo del fuego como energía divina y como fuerza purificadora, sobre todo en relación con la expiación de los pecados

. . . . [E]l fuego como castigo de Dios por los pecados aparece en las palabras de Julián: “¿Qué será de mí, / que he sido de España fuego?” . . . Al mismo tiempo, la imagen de una España en llamas representa también su redención y el renacimiento del nuevo fuego, es decir, del nuevo espíritu religioso purificado y fortalecido por el sufrimiento. Este espíritu se materializa en la figura mesiánica de Pelayo fénix, el guardián de la fe cristiana. (Ryjik 223)

Here we see a very different resonance for fire as a purifying force related to expiation for sin. Fire is also seen as destructive in the remorseful words of Julián, whose wrathful rage in reaction to his daughter’s rape became a “fire” hot enough to destroy his country. However, the connotations of fire in this play are not uniformly negative. We see also its redeeming qualities in relation to Pelayo and the Phoenix, the imagery for which we shall examine in the next section. In the same play, Pelayo’s sister Solmira once again invokes this redemptory, purifying essence of fire in the lines:

Rayo es Pelayo, y yo soy,  
 como de Pelayo hermana,  
 centella que ardiendo voy,  
 tras vuestra gente africana,  
 a quien abrasando estoy:  
 huid de mis ojos luego,  
 que este fuego deja ciego  
 a cualquiera que atropella;  
 mirad que de una centella  
 se suele encender gran fuego.  
 (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 656)

Here this mighty Gothic warrior-woman scorches all the heathens in her path. Like the St. John’s Night bonfires lit to frighten away evil spirits, the fire of Solmira’s zeal repels the invaders who threaten to overrun Spain.

Thus we see that fire, like water, bears multiple valences on St. John’s Night. Lope here plays music on the textual equivalent of a digital keyboard rather than a traditional piano. When he so desires, he can simply hit a foot pedal, thereby shifting an entire octave up or down. We should know better than to expect the same notes to emerge each time his fingers caress the same keys. . . .

### **Phoenix / Rebirth**

Fire imagery is connected in these plays to the Phoenix, that mythical bird who rises from ashes to perennial rebirth. The Phoenix, in turn, generates its own constellation of dramatic references. The most thorough treatment available of the

Phoenix in the first of these plays appears in Theodore Jensen's article "The Phoenix and Folly in Lope's *La noche de San Juan*." This scholar cleverly unpacks multiple layers of resonance associated with this mythical bird:

[W]e quickly perceive that Lope (*El Fénix*) has written a comedy—itsself like a phoenix—which contains within it *El Fénix*, who has written a play . . . Then, on the night honoring Saint John the Baptist, this comedy is performed on sets constructed by a real person named Juan Bautista, the Marqués de Crescensio . . . . On the more humorous side, the guests dine during intermission on roast peacock, a fowl often likened to the mythological phoenix. So we have the self-immolation image of *El Fénix* consuming a phoenix! The frequent references to Troy burning up . . . are reminders of that mythological Phoenix who was one of the soldiers of Achilles. Then, too, these images combined with the fires throughout the play . . . serve to remind us that out of the *lumes* of San Juan come omens of marriage. In effect, the marriage of Juan and Leonor is resurrected, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the frantic fires of their *loco amor* of the night before. (Jensen 216-17)

Jensen further notes that some of Jesus' contemporaries believed He was John the Baptist, raised from the dead, and that the Phoenix was appropriated by the early church to symbolize Christ's death and resurrection (217). Susan Niehoff McCrary offers a similar assessment of the Phoenix imagery in *El último godo*:

Pelayo . . . twice refers to himself as the Phoenix, the fabulous bird that synthesizes many germane meanings. The self-referral to the Phoenix bird and its traditional association with the East and the death and resurrection of Christ, at the very least would indicate that in his own mind Pelayo experiences this moment as reiterative of the spiritual state of the world at the time of Christ's death . . . . The Phoenix emblem serves to align the present with the past and thus to anticipate the contours of the future. (Niehoff McCrary [1982], 268)

Later on we shall see how the Phoenix is but one of the ways Pelayo becomes a type, alternatively, of John the Baptist or of Christ through the deliberate deployment of a rhetorical trope known as *figura*. For now, though, let us turn (as it were) to wheels.

### **Cycles or *Ruedas***

Still another group of images appearing in both plays, related to but distinct from those surrounding the Phoenix, is the constellation of word pictures regarding cycles, *ruedas*, or wheels. By its very nature, the summer solstice celebrated the cycle of

seasons as well as the sun's predictable progression through the sky.<sup>6</sup> In the Roman world, this pagan festival was associated with the goddess Fortuna, often pictured with a wheel in Renaissance iconography (Thomson). The signs of the zodiac, mentioned in these plays frequently (as in numerous other works by Lope de Vega), also appeared arrayed as a wheel (Dixon 217). Almost incongruously for its urban setting, the cycle of seasons is expressly invoked in Lope's comedy *La noche de San Juan*. The passage occurs in the mouth of the not-accidentally named nobleman Juan:

Primavera, que se mueren  
 las rosas, acudid presto.  
 Campos, mirad que os espera  
 un luto de eterno invierno.  
 (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, ll. 1646-49)

Direct references to Fortune appear in the play on at least six separate occasions (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 296, 512, 529, 1043; Act II, ll. 2167, 2185). More literal wheels appear in the same play ubiquitously on the carriages parading up and down the Paseo del Prado. While wheel or cycle imagery does not appear explicitly in *El último godo*, Atienza believes that this, along with most other genealogical comedias, should be interpreted as an extended commentary on courtly intrigue, particularly the "cambios en la rueda de la fortuna" (Atienza [2009], 178). In the absence of explicit *ruedas*, there are however an abundance of circle and cycle motifs. Foremost among these is Rodrigo's circular crown, which topples from his head in what is widely perceived to be an evil omen for his reign: "La corona, que ha corrido / de mi cabeza hasta el suelo" (Lope de Vega [1967], Act I, p. 631). In this context, the circular shape of the crown rolling along the ground may perhaps be read as an oblique allusion to Fortune's wheel. Later on in the same play, Rodrigo explicitly invokes Fortune to explain his sudden and drastic change of estate:

Ved qué golpe de fortuna:  
 ayer el oro, el faisán  
 y otros manjares en suma;  
 hoy una cebolla y pan.  
 (Lope de Vega [1967], Act II, pp. 649-50)

He laments as part of the same speech, "Ayer era rey de España, / hoy, por mi desdicha extraña, / no tengo un palmo de tierra" (Lope de Vega [1967], Act II, p. 649). This swift and absolute reversal is as stark as the contrast between day and night.

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<sup>6</sup> The solstice traditionally celebrated the day when the sun reached its highest point in the sky. This typically resulted in a 24-hour period with the most sunlight, typically referred to as the longest day of the year.

### Night and Day

As we know by now, *La noche de San Juan* takes place on St. John's Night, 1631. The first act allegedly takes place on the morning of St. John's Eve; the second act begins around four o'clock in the afternoon; and the last act begins with a glimmer of dawn. The central act begins with an apostrophe to Night pronounced by one of the *damas enamoradas* around whom the action revolves:

¡Ay noche, que siempre en ti  
 libra amor sus esperanzas,  
 corre, que si no le alcanzas,  
 no queda remedio en mí!  
 Apresura el negro coche  
 donde las mías están;  
 ya que fuiste de San Juan,  
 que es la más pública noche  
 de Europa, en el mar te baña  
 sobre el amoroso toro,  
 y ven con máscara de oro  
 desde las Indias a España.  
 Si coronada de rosas  
 esperan otros amantes  
 la aurora, yo los diamantes  
 de tus alas perezosas.  
 Despierta, noche, que estoy  
 sin vida por ti.

(Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, ll. 1186-1203)

This speech is echoed by her counterpart male character, who similarly invokes the night's mantle to cover mischief: "que ya con su manto negro / nos viene a cubrir la noche, / y sin ser vistos podremos / salir, llegar y jurar" (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, ll. 1751-54). As Caparrós Esperante notes, this play incorporates also a figurative or poetic eclipse when Leonor pretends to faint, causing her shining face to grow dark:

podríamos destacar, en un plano metafórico, la aparición de un eclipse poético cuando Leonor, mediado el segundo acto, finge estar muerta ante el huidizo don Juan. Ese eclipse, verdadero anticipo de la noche, ocurre en el cénit de la obra. (Caparrós Esperante 103)

We see a similar eclipse, or rather the threat of one, in *El último godo* when Abraydo threatens to use the mantle of night to rape Solmira: "Ya la noche va tendiendo / su manto negro y prolijo . . ." (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 653). In response,



Solmira defends her chastity by employing light and dark images deliberately: “soy sol, como el nombre” (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 653). The use of darkness and light to reflect moral states appears as a persistent authorial strategy throughout the play. Rodrigo’s reign, dismissed by Araluce Cuenca as “un paréntesis” (Araluce Cuenca 477), may be read as the Night of St. John in all its lawlessness before the dawn of the new day (“el sol de Pelayo”) which is Pelayo’s rule (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 659). Niehoff McCrary extends the night and day imagery even further to encompass also blindness and sight: “blindness functions emblematically to call attention to the unenlightenment and the limitation of moral consciousness from which Rodrigo suffers” (Niehoff McCrary [1987], 32-33). She further relates Rodrigo’s declining political power to the astronomical phenomenon of the sun’s declining rays in the days following the summer solstice: “[t]he decline of the sun’s power thereafter is indicative of the diminution of Rodrigo’s power following his fall” (Niehoff McCrary [1987], 36 n. 7). Conversely, the sun at its highest point at the exact moment of solstice is seen in the *comedia de capa y espada* to bring good luck and good fortune: “hoy está de gracia toda / la luz del zafir eterno; / alguna conjunción magna / de benévolos aspectos / influye fiestas, Bernardo, / paces, gustos, casamientos” (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 521-26). Thus we see in both plays how light and dark imagery connect both to natural phenomena accompanying the summer solstice and to hidden spiritual truths which the natural world was supposed to encode for the initiated.

### Wedding and Fertility Rites

The fertility rites and wedding motifs associated by rural peasants with St. John’s Night appear front and center in the love triangles which become tangled and then untangled in *La noche de San Juan*. At one point Leonor specifically likens nubile women to ripe fruit: “somos las mujeres / fruta que con flor agrada, / y del tiempo en que se coge / siempre es mejor la mañana” (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 179-82). In an even less flattering comment, the servant Inés compares childbearing women to rabbits: “Muchas melindrosas vemos, / y después, todos los años, / paren como unas conejas” (Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 1098-1100). At the end of the play, as is customary, multiple weddings are announced. These agriculturally-inspired hymns to Hymen might not seem as relevant to historical drama, but *El último godo* contains important wedding scenes as well: Zara’s wedding to King Rodrigo, preceded by her baptism, and her subsequently planned wedding to her fellow convert Abembúcar (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 651). Belén Atienza takes the wedding motif to a whole new level with her assertion that at the end of the play, Spain appears as the bride of Pelayo:

Esta idea de España como la novia de Pelayo queda reforzada cuando aparece tras una cortina una mujer personificando la nación. Los cantos de

los godos celebran a Pelayo mientras lo coronan e invocan una imagen de boda. . . . De alguna manera la coronación de Pelayo es una boda simbólica con España. (Atienza [2009], 177)

Finally, at the end of the play when this canvas curtain appears, the audience bears witness to a painted proliferation of portraits –a virtual gallery– of Spain’s future kings: “España entre, y córrese una cortina en que se vea un lienzo con muchos retratos de reyes pequeños” (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 658). This simple *acotación* introduces a promise of future fertility to the Spanish monarchy and would seem to draw upon this sacred night’s connotations of agricultural and biological / reproductive fecundity.

### Figura

Finally, these two plays share the use of *figura* as a dominant rhetorical trope. Antonio Sánchez Jiménez defines *figura* as it is used in multiple plays by Lope de Vega as “el recurso exegético y retórico . . . según el cual ciertos personajes funcionan como anuncios o reflejos de otros” (Sánchez Jiménez 118). In this view, for example, John the Baptist appears as a prototype or prefiguration of Christ. This kind of prefiguration works retrospectively too, as when scholars make “de Rodrigo una *figura* de Adán; de Pelayo, una de Cristo; y de Julián, una de Judas” (Sánchez Jiménez 119). When applied to the providential view of Spanish history, St. John’s Night in *El último godo* effectively serves as a transition from the barbaric rule of the Goths (represented by the previous king, Betisa, whose eyes Rodrigo orders plucked out in retaliation for a similar crime) to the enlightened one of the Habsburg monarchs –figuratively speaking, a transition from the Old Covenant to the New. This was the same transition heralded by John the Baptist. The new Spanish leader, Pelayo, is also figuratively associated with Christ’s maternal cousin (who lived in the desert) by his preferred habitat in the rugged wilderness, away from the court (Lope de Vega [1967], Act II, p. 643).

The situation gets really interesting when the rhetorical trope of *figura* takes on overtly New Historical or political elements, for example when John the Baptist appears as *privado* to Christ the King. Perhaps the strongest clue pointing in the direction of this possible interpretation comes not from either of these plays, but from a different work by Lope de Vega, the *Bodas entre el Alma y el amor divino*. In this work, the Duke of Lerma is compared to John the Baptist, while King Philip III becomes a type of Christ:

El Duque de Lerma es comparado con Juan el Bautista, y señalado solamente como una sombra de la luz divina / real. Juan el Bautista aparece solamente en una escena final, y Lope pone en labios del

personaje unas palabras de humildad: “el rey es Dios, yo soy hombre.”  
(Atienza [2000], 46)<sup>7</sup>

Atienza’s New Historical reading relies on such scholarly detective work to unpack this Biblical *roman-à-clef*.

Despite these indisputable points of contact, nonetheless we are still faced with inescapable differences between these two dramatic works. Here we have a historical play straining under the weight of the entire psychodrama of Spain’s national history, compared to a lightweight, superficial “fluff” piece Lope composed in a frenzied rush to fulfill Olivares’ commission.<sup>8</sup> It almost seems perverse to compare the serious treatment of baptism as a sacrament in *El último godó* to the use of the baptismal font in *La noche de San Juan* as a place for lovers to exchange letters (Lope de Vega 1988, Act I, ll. 87-96). Similarly, *El último godó* is framed by the temporal coordinate of St. John’s Night in deference to a providential view of Spain’s history, while in *La noche de San Juan* the festival serves more as an excuse for bad behavior.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the latter play is so grounded in the mundane and the quotidian that it has been viewed as an allegory of nascent capitalism (Simerka 522), while the former has been described as an *Urdrama* depicting mankind’s fall and redemption (Niehoff McCrary [1987]). In *La noche de San Juan* the saint’s feast day is trivialized to the point of blasphemy, becoming the butt of jokes about loose women whose houses are pointedly *not* deserts

<sup>7</sup> Atienza cites Lope de Vega, *Bodas entre el Alma y el amor divino*, in *El peregrino en su patria*, ed. J.B. Avallé-Arce (Madrid: Castalia, 1978), pp. 193-235, at pp. 227, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Dixon describes the pressure Lope must have felt to comply with the *privado*’s request: “A Lope el encargo apresurado de Olivares le habrá parecido un reto. En pocos días había de componer una comedia capaz de seguir y parangonarse con otra, de dos de los ingenios predilectos de Palacio . . . . Al mismo tiempo, le ofrecía una ocasión, inusitada ya, de hacerse valer delante del público cortesano” (67). The other dramatic entertainment for the evening was a play composed jointly by Francisco de Quevedo and Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza.

<sup>9</sup> Early in the play, Don Juan pronounces a long speech defending St. John’s Night as an occasion for “joy” (read: licentiousness):

No es noble, ni hombre de bien,  
quien no se alegra, pues vemos  
que del Sol viene la luz,  
como del entendimiento  
a las acciones del hombre  
la razón; y, fuera desto,  
dijo un ángel a los padres  
de San Juan, que el nacimiento  
de su hijo había de ser  
alegre al mundo universo.  
Luego alegrarse esta noche  
es justo, como decreto  
de Dios por boca de un ángel.

Lope de Vega [1988], Act I, ll. 545-57)

since they are frequented by so many men.<sup>10</sup> One possible way to resolve these tensions is through the theoretical concept of *bricolage*, whereby an artist draws from the same repertoire to produce divergent works in terms of both style and emphasis. Let us see how this essential part of the creative process works in these two cases.

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### **Lope as *Bricoleur***

Both plays show a general tendency toward *bricolage*, defined as the recycling of cultural materials at hand to direct them toward new purposes.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the *bricoleur* in these terms:

His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do . . . with a set of tools and materials which is always finite . . . but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. . . . He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. . . . The elements which the “*bricoleur*” collects and uses are “pre-constrained” like the constitutive units of myth . . . . (Lévi-Strauss 143)

Within Lévi-Strauss’s thought, the *bricoleur* can be a person, a playwright or even a non-human entity such as the construct he labels “mythical thought”:

Mythical thought, that ‘*bricoleur*,’ builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events. . . . Mythical thought for its part is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning. (Lévi-Strauss 146)

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Mendoza declares, “Es muy Baptista / aquella dama, aunque pasa / no por destierro su casa, / según cierto cronista” (Lope de Vega [1988], Act II, ll. 1899-1902).

<sup>11</sup> The concept of *bricolage* has been problematized by Jacques Derrida, who objects that

[a]s soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer [a *bricoleur*] and in a discourse which breaks with the received historical discourse, and as soon as we admit that every finite discourse is bound by a certain bricolage and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of bricoleurs, then the very idea of bricolage is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down. (Derrida 285)

Derrida does, however, attempt to “rediscover the mythopoetical virtue of *bricolage*” (Derrida 286).

He further describes their eventual recycling or transformation into new cultural products or artifacts:

[I]n the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying, and vice versa. This formula, which could serve as a definition of “*bricolage*,” explains how an implicit inventory or conception of the total means available must be made. . . . (Lévi-Strauss 145)

When it comes to St. John’s Night and the myriad legends and traditions associated with it, this essay is merely a starting place for establishing this “implicit inventory.”

This process of *bricolage* described by Lévi-Strauss was in fact what the early church did originally in adapting a pagan festival to make it a saint’s feast day. This is also what dramatists routinely did when adapting source material such as the pseudo-historical chronicle used in *El último godo*. Tamara Alvarez-Detrell notes that pre-Christian versions of the summer solstice included rituals of both human and animal sacrifice (Alvarez-Detrell 2). These were evidently assimilated by the early church into a Christian feast day celebrating a saint who was martyred. Lope de Vega’s historical drama contains direct echoes of John the Baptist’s decapitation in a gruesome scene where two recent converts from Islam, Zara / María and Abembúcar / Juan, have their new faith tested immediately and choose martyrdom over renunciation of Christianity. Stage directions indicate that their decapitated bodies are to be viewed onstage (Lope de Vega [1967], Act III, p. 653). Niehoff McCrary quotes William Walsh regarding a further amalgamation of astronomical phenomena connected to the solstice with Biblical teaching about the saintly figure of John the Baptist:

With the summer solstice the days reach their maximum length, and thenceforth decrease until the minimum is reached with the winter solstice, when they once more increase. In connection with this fact the words of the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” acquire a new and fanciful meaning. St. Augustine says, “At the Nativity of Christ the days increase in length, on that of John, they decrease. When the Savior of the world is born, the days lengthen, but when the last prophet comes into the world, the days suffer curtailment.” (Niehoff McCrary [1993] 114)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Niehoff McCrary cites William Walsh, *Curiosities of Popular Customs and of Rites, Ceremonies, Observances and Miscellaneous Antiquities* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott, 1925), pp. 567-68.

Here we see in this syncretistic feast day a near-total conflation of supernatural with natural phenomena.

### Literary, Cultural, and Religious Syncretism

In fact, this technique or method may effectively be extended to encompass a sort of contemporaneous Renaissance theological *bricolage* applied to theories of evangelism, whereby existing elements of a native culture could be used to point toward the true faith. Similar statements of method were made by Spanish missionaries to the New World, Asia and the Philippines where they spoke of building upon existing cultural traditions. For example, Jerónimo de Mendieta in his sixteenth-century *Historia eclesiástica indiana* describes a colonial Mexican conflation of indigenous beliefs with Franciscan doctrine:

Y dice [la mujer recién convertida] que en la mañana de la resurrección vio su casilla toda entoldada de paños de corte, y luego vio venir una procesión muy ordenada de mancebos muy hermosos, que excedían en hermosura a los hijos de los españoles, y traían en medio una cruz muy grande y resplandeciente, y al cabo de la procesión venía un niño más hermoso de todos, con un libro muy precioso en las manos, el cual se llegó a su lecho y le llamó por su nombre y la consoló y le dijo que él era el *Tepapaquiltiani*, que quiere decir Consolador. (Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, cited in Morales 89, n. 60)<sup>13</sup>

Francisco Morales glosses this passage thus: “The features of this narrative are worthy of note because of their mixture of European and Nahua elements. Above all, it is worth noticing the name given to the ‘niño más hermoso de todos’, namely *Tepapaquiltiani*, which means ‘the Comforter’” (Morales 89). “The Comforter” was of course the Biblical term for the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Franciscan and other Spanish missionaries could have potentially used this indigenous mystical Easter vision as a springboard for teaching the natives about the Holy Spirit and its broader context of Trinitarian doctrine. It is this same type of syncretistic thought which Mendieta’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century compatriots such as Lope de Vega, across the ocean, incorporated into their literary treatments of religious feast days such as St. John’s Night.

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<sup>13</sup> The text cited is Jerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1997), Book 4, ch. 26, 2:132-33.

### Conclusion: An Even More Protean Lope

This is all well and good—but how does this view of Lope as *bricoleur* add to our understanding of him as a dramatist?

Among other things, this research problematizes some of the received wisdom about the trajectory of Lope de Vega's career, running on parallel tracks with the ongoing saga of his personal life. Lope's biographers note that he became a priest in his old age, and some have tried to paint a picture of an aging libertine who ultimately repented of his youthful transgressions.<sup>14</sup> We may wish to use Lope's divergent treatments of the San Juan theme as a test case to investigate whether this scenario holds water. If this biographical sketch were accurate, we would expect his frivolous treatment of this subject matter to pertain to an earlier period of his life, when he himself remained notoriously engaged in amorous exploits. We might similarly assume that his more serious probing into St. John's night and its spiritual significance should belong to his twilight years. But in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Lope wrote *La noche de San Juan* in 1631, when he was already 69 years old, only four years before his death (Caparrós Esperante 95). Although he does complain in a contemporaneous letter to the Duke of Sessa of "cansancio" and "aflicción de espíritu," and even acknowledges that his advanced age "pide cosas más severas" in terms of subject matter (*Epistolario*, quoted in Caparrós Esperante 95), he still cannot resist the chance to seek patronage by impressing Olivares in response to the call to produce one last, great Baroque spectacle.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the younger playwright we see milking the same subject matter for universal, eternal religious truths in *El último godo* appears infinitely more spiritual than his frequent caricature as a Golden Age alley cat. Through this comparison, a more complicated picture emerges of a conflicted artist, at once more spiritual and more sensual for the duration of his life than critical binaries have tended to allow.

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<sup>14</sup> An admirably nuanced exception to this dichotomy is offered by Alonso Zamora Vicente:

Sería muy fácil, desde el punto de vista de las normas morales de hoy, censurar a Lope de Vega su proceder subsiguiente a la ordenación. Nada más equivocado. En la España del siglo XVII, la vida sacerdotal era casi un oficio como otro cualquiera, al que se llegaba después de los años universitarios o a través de decisiones familiares . . . . A nadie le es lícito dudar de la sinceridad o de la hondura de sus creencias religiosas, de su fe, de su disposición para el arrepentimiento y para la honda amargura por sí mismo. En Lope se da admirablemente la postura maltrecha y dividida del hombre que, sin abandonar la Edad Media, con su ascetismo, su renunciamento, ha alcanzado la plenitud renacentista, con su exaltación pagana de la carne y de la vida en general. Ese hombre partido, desgarrado entre dos mundos en pugna . . . forzosamente había de andar en inestable equilibrio. (Zamora Vicente 67)

<sup>15</sup> This was in fact the last royal commission Lope ever fulfilled (Caparrós Esperante 109).

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