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Please cite this publication as follows:

Lech, K. (2014) Metatheatre and the importance of Estrella in Calderón's 'La vida es sueño' and its contemporary productions. *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 66 (2). pp. 175-193. ISSN 0007-5108.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/boc.2014.0036>

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*Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 67 (2015)

**Metatheatre and the Importance of Estrella in Calderón's *La vida es sueño* and Its Contemporary Productions**

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This article explores the importance of Estrella in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* in the context of Calderón's text and in the contexts of its Polish and Irish productions. Through combining text and performance analysis with analysis of verse structure, this essay looks at the metatheatrical structure of the play and argues that Estrella, who has drawn very little scholarly comments, is complex, and that this character is essential for the play and its staging. Verse structure as a means to analyse *La vida es sueño* has been discussed before, most comprehensively by Albert E. Sloman ("Introduction" xxiii-xxxiv). However, in contrast to the previous works, the essay links analysis of verse structure to Estrella and (perhaps most importantly) looks at verse structure as a performative tool in the context of multicultural and multilingual contemporary theatre practice.

This approach allows me to argue that in Calderón's play Estrella carries out the idea of an active spectator and an aware actor. She is the character of agency and the character who, in the context of metatheatre, is closer to Segismundo than any other character in the play. Estrella is also key to understanding *La vida es sueño* as a form of theatrical manifesto. This idea is further explored through performance analysis of two productions of the play: the 2006 Polish staging directed by Waldemar Zawodziński in the Nowy Theatre in Poznań (based on Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's version) and the production directed by Tom Creed for Rough Magic and performed in the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 2008 (based on Jo Clifford's translation). Both of these productions use means of performance (verse structure

in particular) and the metatheatrical structure of the play to explore Estrella as a platform for a discussion on various aspects of living in contemporary societies. Zawodziński's Estrella is initially trapped in the process of searching for a social role to perform. She finds her freedom in being "no one." Creed's Estrella is a cross-dresser that, by challenging gendered conventions, empowers herself as a woman.

As an argument for the importance of the character Estrella, this essay goes against the traditional reading of the play. Edward M. Wilson in his article "On *La vida es sueño*" discusses the functions of various characters in the creation of the play's central theme. Wilson examines the importance of even such minor figures as soldiers and servants. Estrella is the only one that he ignores. As Wilson explains, "Estrella is a figure who merely serves to help the plot; I do not see how her part exemplifies a moral lesson as do the others" (87). Most scholars are not as categorical; they tend to ignore Estrella.<sup>1</sup> She is recognized only as a young lover typical of Spanish drama (Appelbaum xiii) or another of Calderón's minor characters who are, as described by Everett Hesse, "enveloped in a misty haze" (43).

Even if the importance of Estrella is acknowledged, its function is restricted to supporting Rosaura's plot.<sup>2</sup> Shelley Chitwood, for example, stresses that Estrella is imperative for creating the love triangle that involves her, Rosaura, and Astolfo, but also to "contrast with Rosaura" (185). Chitwood explains that both Rosaura and Estrella symbolize two different sides of the mythical Ariadne who accompanies Theseus-Segismundo through a labyrinth of illusions. Rosaura is the Ariadne who rebelliously helped Theseus in the labyrinth. Estrella, a passive character who does little on her own behalf, represents the Ariadne whom Theseus abandoned on Naxos (Chitwood 185). Contrary to Chitwood, I would argue that Estrella is the character of agency.

Terence E. May, who notices Estrella's merits, stands out against the general approach of scholars to Estrella. May remarks that Estrella at the end of the play deserves

“the better man and the higher place” (257). May’s point can be understood to have a problematic patriarchal overtone, since it suggests that the possibility of marrying “the better man” is a reward for Estrella for her “good” behaviour. However, one cannot argue with May’s point that the finale of *La vida es sueño* puts Estrella in the spotlight, especially given that this foregrounding of Estrella is additionally accentuated, given that it goes against the common sense of justice. Margaret Greer points out that, for the most part, the audience’s sense of justice will be that Rosaura and Segismundo should get married (55). Thus I would agree with May’s point regarding Estrella’s advancement in the finale, but, in contrast to May, I look for the reasons for this advancement in the structure of the play.

Since I argue that Estrella is central to the play’s metatheatrical structure, some definition of metatheatre is required. This is especially given that since Lionel Abel coined the term in 1963, his idea of metatheatre “has been reshaped and appropriated” several times and the definition itself became unstable, as noted by Jonathan Thacker (*Role-Play* 2-3). I am using metatheatre in a broad manner as a theatrical work that engages with itself as a theatre that is a space of interactions between actors and audiences, in short, a space of performance. This definition opens up Abel’s interpretation of metatheatre as a “thematic study of life as a stage,” which Patrice Pavis marks as problematic in Abel’s theory (210). It also allows for postdramatic approaches to metatheatre that engage with theatre “as a situation not as a fiction” (Lehmann 128). Such a broad definition allows one to notice how the play’s metatheatrical structure functions in various cultural contexts, which, consequently, opens up new possibilities of reading Estrella.<sup>3</sup>

### **1. Estrella as the actor and spectator in the theatre of *La vida es sueño***

To start, I consider the dramatic space of *La vida es sueño*. Christopher Balme defines dramatic space as the space evoked by the text itself (48). While Calderón places the events of *La vida es sueño* in Poland,<sup>4</sup> throughout the play one is repeatedly reminded that theatre, in

the spirit of *theatrum mundi*, is also a dramatic space of *La vida es sueño*. Segismundo defines the world of the play as “el gran teatro del mundo” (2073) [the “mighty world's great stage” (Act 2, scene 17)]. Basilio refers to a Poland under the reign of Segismundo-Monster as “teatro funesto” (2442) [the “fatal theatre” (Act 3, scene 5)].

This links with Clarín’s description of Rosaura and Segismundo which comes at the beginning of the play:

[Y si] humildad y soberia	[If] Humility and Pride'
No te obligan, personajes	Those two figures who have acted
Que han movido y removido	Many and many a thousand times
Mil autos sacramentales. (347-50)	In the “autos sacramentales”. (Act 1, scene 4)

[

Clarín’s lines draw one’s attention to the fact that Rosaura and Segismundo are acting as conventional figures. In each of their three meetings, Rosaura and Segismundo, like actors in the theatre, are performing their roles. This is highlighted by the change of verse structure (into or out of *silva*) and changes of costume (that result in Segismundo and Rosaura not recognizing one another or, in the case of Rosaura, acting as if they did not recognize one another). Rosaura is a boy, Astrea, and finally Rosaura. The alterations of Segismundo’s identities additionally link with changes within the dramatic space: he is a prisoner in a prison and a prince in a palace, while an “open plain” in the third act suits a rebel. The vagueness of

the “open plain” also corresponds to Segismundo’s uncertainty about what is real and what is not and reminds one of the Golden Age stage and its minimal staging.

Building on the fact that one notices the multiple identities associated with the rest of Calderón’s characters, the characters here all seem to be actors that perform several roles in various spaces in front of various audiences. To explore this idea and by extension to explain the importance of Estrella within the play, I now turn to the work of Anne Ubersfeld. In her semiotic analysis, she considers the complexity of the textual character as a meeting point of various independent structures and functions that operate in the text that is also “the subject of a discourse which is marked by the character’s name” (77). One of the tools to understand these functions is looking at the various actorial functions and “roles” that the character performs.

Ubersfeld looks at how characters interact (67). The idea of the “actor” allows one to see how a particular character is related to other characters (Ubersfeld 67). She explains that the “actor” in the dramatic text is characterized by some “differential features” (such as male/female, young/old, loved/unloved, and so on) and by “a process which is proper to him or her” within which “he or she plays the role of a noun phrase in relation to a fixed phrase” (65); for example, the actor Romeo tries to be with Juliet. The “role” is a coded actorial function, imposed upon the “actor” by the code that “underlies the writing process” like a theatrical convention through which the text was originally written: for example a villain or a lover (Ubersfeld 67-69). She also says that the division between the “actor” and the “role” may blur, especially in dramas that are less encoded. The “actor” can also shift from the “role” to the actorial function and back, and in some scenes the actorial function of the character can become more or less coded (68). Ubersfeld gives an example of the Fool in King Lear: an “actor”, whose function is to speak “derisively of royalty” and, who also acts “within the encoded role of Court Jester” (70).

The aspects of analysis are significant because the notion of character has been destabilized by contemporary performance theory. Ubersfeld points out that the definition of “character” has become “the battleground” for contemporary debate among theatre theoreticians (72-73). I will use her definition because it allows me to concentrate on how selected functions of Calderón’s characters operate within the larger metatheatrical structure of the play. This, in turn, helps me to consider the leading characters, Segismundo and Rosaura, and to argue that Estrella is central to Calderón’s metatheatrical organization of the dramatic material.

On this basis, Segismundo can be described as the actor who wants to know whether what surrounds him is real or not. Within this process, he performs various roles: a prisoner, a prince, a rebel, but also a son (of Basilio), and a lover. Segismundo’s performance improves throughout the play: he learns that an actor cannot choose the roles he plays; that is, he does not enjoy complete independence. This process of learning is marked by the *silva* that precedes the first meeting of Rosaura and Segismundo and that links this encounter with the second act, when they meet again. The *silva* highlights that in both cases Segismundo wants to play different roles than those given to him. He wants to be free, when he is a slave; he insists on playing the part of Rosaura’s lover against her (and the playwright’s) will. Consequently, the *silva*, the rhythmical introduction to their third meeting, marks what Sloman describes as the proof of Segismundo’s conversion: instead of claiming a role as Rosaura’s lover, he decides to be “the very champion of her honour” (“The Structure” 96). Segismundo accepts that the role of Rosaura’s lover is not his.

Estrella is similar to Segismundo; she can be described as the actor who wants to know (whether Astolfo loves her), but also as the actor who supports the leads. Estrella in Spanish means star, which in seventeenth-century Spain, with its great seafaring tradition, could have connoted “the one to follow when one is lost.” This could be a sign for the

audience to pay attention to Estrella and consider her as important in spite of her seemingly minor part. Estrella performs the roles of a lover and of a betrayed woman, but also of a throne competitor (for Astolfo). At the same time, throughout the play she is an actor who supports the leads, Basilio and Segismundo. As such, she performs the role of a princess and a subject of Basilio. As a subject, she praises the king and then follows his order to welcome Segismundo. As a princess, she asks Segismundo to mind his manners, as marked by May (257). Later, she plays the part of a soldier to support King Basilio, which is underscored by the appearance of octave verses. At the conclusion of the play, she also performs the part of a future queen to support Segismundo.

Significantly, Estrella is the only character who accepts that all her roles are of equal importance for the story and thus must be performed as such. She is similar to the minor actors of the Golden Age period described by Hugo Rennert as doing “everything which may be required” by the playwright or the autor (181). At the end of her performance, Estrella marries the lead actor and becomes a lead herself. In the context of Golden Age Spanish theatre, Estrella can be read as a supporting *dama*, a less recognized actor, who by performing well (and marrying the lead) becomes the leading lady.

The performance of Estrella, who avoids identifications with her parts, allows one to notice her acting skills: that is, her ability to move from one part to the other without a struggle. In fact, the reason behind the popular judgment that she is not interesting may be the very perfection of her performance: she does not seem to struggle with her roles. Andrea Irvine, who performs this part in Tom Creed’s production, calls Estrella “frustrating” to play. As Estrella seems to shift between the different roles that she performs with ease, she is extremely hard for an actor to understand as a single human being (Irvine, “Personal Interview”). This paradoxically dovetails with Edward M. Wilson’s points; in the same article in which he undermines the role of Estrella, he insists on the need not to consider Calderón’s



characters as human beings (64). Estrella is an amalgam of the roles that she plays. Such a presentation of the character resembles the way postmodern theatre exposes its characters, that is, as a non-psychological blend of words, actions and identities (Auslander 106). In other words Estrella, perhaps the most postmodern character of *La vida es sueño*, may be the best example for Wilson's argument against considering Calderón's characters as human beings.

The similar actorial quests of Segismundo and Estrella ("wanting to know") help one to notice the parallel between these two characters and the spectators in the theatre as the ones "wanting to know" or learning about the production. With that in mind, one may consider the two main plots (one focused on Segismundo and the other around Rosaura) as performances. The former is directed for Segismundo by King Basilio, who casts his son, without Segismundo's knowledge, as the lead. At the same time, Segismundo is the audience for whom Basilio's actors (courtiers, Astolfo, and so on) perform to make him believe that he is a prince (ironically, since he is a prince). The success of the performance depends on Segismundo-as-spectator believing that what he sees is real, which also happens. The performance ends as it started: Segismundo wakes up.

The second performance is independently directed and performed by Astolfo and Rosaura. Astolfo pretends that he is in love with Estrella. His performance is complicated by the arrival of Rosaura, who casts herself as a boy and, later on, as Astrea. This production reaches its climax in the "medallion sequence," when Estrella walks in on Rosaura and Astolfo arguing. This is the moment, when, as pointed out by LaRubia-Prado, the original (Rosaura) is brought together with the copy (her portrait) and the representation (Astrea) (399). Astrea is real for Estrella, but for Astolfo she is only a role Rosaura plays. Rosaura's image is a copy for Astolfo, but for Estrella it is a representation of her rival. Moreover, Laura Bass points out that Rosaura herself is a copy of her mother and her mother's fate (64). The medallion functions also as a "token of love," "a sign of betrayal," and a threatening

object that can expose Rosaura (Bass 8). Bass remarks that in the “medallion sequence” this tiny portrait becomes a centre of a great drama (1). In other words the medallion functions as a catalyst for accumulation and explosion of multiple identities. This can easily confuse a spectator. In the context of the plot, this spectator is Estrella, who creates meaning from Astolfo’s and Rosaura’s performances by saying that Astolfo is “villano y grosero amante” (2009). The key here is the process of her creating this understanding as it is directly connected to Rosaura’s portrait.

Estrella, from the very beginning of the play, signals her awareness that the performance of Astolfo is artificial. Her first lines in the play, directed at Astolfo (who tries to perform as her lover), are:

Si la voz se ha de medir	If the human voice obeying
con las acciones humanas,	Should with human action pair,
mal habéis hecho en decir	Then you have said ill in saying
finezas ten cortesanas,	All these flattering words and fair,
donde os pueda desmentir	Since in truth they are gainsaying
todo ese marcial trofeo	This parade of victory,
con quien ya atrevida lucho;	‘Gainst which I my standard rear,
pues no dicen, según creo,	Since they say, it seems to me,
las lisonjas que os esucho,	Not the flatteries that I hear,
con los rigores que veo. (495-504)	But the rigours that I see. (Act 1, scene 5)

This quotation shows that Estrella realizes that Astolfo’s words of a lover do not correspond with his action as a throne competitor. One knows from Estrella’s dialogue with Rosaura that the reason she distrusts him is the medallion that he wears:

Pesóme que el primer día	I was troubled, the first day
echado al cuello trujese	That we met, to see suspended

el retrato de una dama. (1802-4)      From his neck a lady's portrait.

(Act 2, scene 11)

In other words, Astolfo's medallion does not suit his role as Estrella's lover, which raises her suspicion. Estrella understands that this small detail may be a key to understanding Astolfo's performance. Ironically, Estrella herself is a small-sized star in the firmament of the play and may guide the audience through key elements of the play.

In contrast to Estrella, Segismundo needs to develop his spectatorship, as he initially believes the performances he encounters are real. The *silva*, by linking all his meetings with Rosaura, helps one to notice that in both cases Segismundo pays more attention to the surroundings and costumes than to details. He also becomes emotionally involved in Rosaura's performance. All this prevents him from understanding what or who he sees. By extension, one understands that similar factors underlie the prince's reading of the production directed by Basilio as real. Although he expresses doubts as to whether all he sees is true, soon, amazed by the great "scenography" of the palace that is "telas y brocados" (1229) ["neath silks and cloth of gold" (Act 2, scene 3)], he decides to believe in it. It is the frame of artificiality (or dream), attached to the performance in the palace by Clotaldo, that allows Segismundo to go beyond his passive spectatorship and engage with Basilio's staging on a deeper level. After Rosaura reveals that his dream about the palace was, in fact, reality, he comprehends that human beings learn through the subjective process of perception and interpretation. One can create meaning only by being aware of this.

Therefore Estrella and Segismundo can be read as presenting two models of spectatorship. Spectators, who are aware of the theatricality of the performance, can actively engage in the construction and deconstruction of what they see and can generate meanings, while at the same time being aware that there are other possible meanings. This is most clearly presented in the "medallion sequence," in which Rosaura's identity is perceived as

different by Astolfo (as Rosaura) and Estrella (as Astrea). In contrast to active spectatorship, the suspension of disbelief and the assumption that the performance one views is real (or is a reflection of reality) facilitates emotional engagement with the performance. At the same time, however, it limits one's interpretative abilities.

This theory of spectatorship is in accordance with Susan Bennett's work on the audiences in theatre. Bennett stresses that the frame of artificiality activates the members of the audience as it reminds them that they are the ones who ultimately decide on meanings and the success of the performance (153-56). Both Estrella and Segismundo determine the success of the two performances that they view. *La vida es sueño* does not explicitly mark one approach to spectatorship as better than the other. However, the play, by marking the mechanisms of meaning generation in two modes of theatre, in the context of two approaches to spectatorship, and two modes of performance, helps the play to promote an aware and active spectatorship. This may have been of special importance for Golden Age theatre. Thacker explains that seventeenth-century Spanish audiences often had problems separating reality and fiction (*A Companion* 127).

The character of Estrella which has come across in this discussion in the context of the actor, her role and spectatorship, and the unique link between the characters of Estrella and Segismundo, demonstrates that Estrella occupies a very special place within the metatheatrical structure of Calderón's play. In fact, the ideas on acting and spectatorship that can be encoded through Estrella strongly anticipate contemporary studies of production and reception in theatre. This, combined with the postmodern qualities of this character, opens very exciting possibilities for theatre practitioners. The upcoming section discusses how two contemporary productions of the play build on the potential of Estrella. I discuss them chronologically.

## **2. Estrella in the search for identity in the 2006 Polish production**

Waldemar Zawodziński's 2006 production is an adaptation of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's 1969 translation of Calderón's play under the title *Życie jest snem* [Life Is a Dream]. Zawodziński directs the play (arranges the music and creates the stage design) for the Nowy Theatre in Poznań in Poland. One of main questions highlighted in the pre-show publicity is "Who am I?" This question, according to Zawodziński, is asked by each of Calderón's characters in the context of family background and cultural inheritance, and their influence on one's identity (qtd. in Obrębowska-Piasecka). This is linked with the earlier analysis of the play's metatheatrical structure: the character-actor's role depends on the space around him or her and on the audience, which views the play. In Zawodziński's production, Estrella, played by Antonina Choroszy, is one of the key elements of his strategies to encourage the audience members to interrogate their individual identities.

The New Stage, on which Zawodziński's production takes place, is a small proscenium space with a conventional auditorium divided from the stage. At the beginning, the stage is occupied by three rust-coloured walls framed by a metal construction that represent the mountains. Throughout the performance, the back wall either moves to expose a small space with dirty looking tiles on the back wall (Segismundo's tower) or is covered by the mirror wall to represent the palace. Costumes, designed by Izabela Stronias, are modern, but they cannot be strictly associated with any particular time period. For example, the actors-soldiers are dressed in commando's uniforms, and all the royal characters are played by actors wearing black, elegant clothes. The actors obey the fourth-wall, and their style of acting is believable although certain stylization is used: the actors speak verse and, in general, their gestures are minimally broader and slower than natural motion.

Zawodziński disrupts the text's organization. He cuts and rearranges the scenes and also adds texts from other sources. Unfortunately, naming all the sources is impossible, as the director does not point them out in the programme or on the poster; these changes are also

well blended into the text of *Życie jest snem* (and very often it is only a matter of one line). The most commonly used source is *Księżniczka na opak wywrócona* [The Princess Turned Upside-Down], which is Rymkiewicz's version of Calderón's play, written in two versions under two titles: *La señora y la criada* and *Él acaso y el error*. In the context of *Estrella*, the general narrative of the character is conserved; however, some of *Estrella*'s lines are removed and replaced with other text. One of the most significant decisions is the removal of the medallion sequence, which most clearly reveals *Estrella* as an active spectator and is crucial for her importance in the play. These decisions consequently create a danger that *Estrella* may be overlooked in the production. Nonetheless, one may trace several strategies in Zawodziński's staging that work to highlight *Estrella*'s importance for his production of the play.

First of all, Antonina Choroszy, who takes on the part of *Estrella*, is one of the most eminent actors of the Nowy Theatre, which immediately puts her, and by extension her role, in the spotlight. Moreover, *Estrella-Choroszy* moves in a different way than any other actor in Zawodziński's production. She moves with a lightness of step. Choroszy recalls that the director asked her to walk as if she were floating ("Personal Interview"). In addition, there is a special relationship between *Estrella* and Segismundo in this production. As recalled by Choroszy herself, Segismundo (Radosław Elis) is the only one who notices her ("Personal Interview"). He is the only one who ever asks her "Kim ty jesteś?" [Who are you?]. This happens when the two see each other for the first time. *Estrella-Choroszy* repeats "Kim ja jestem?" [Who am I?].

In Zawodziński's production, *Estrella* does not find the answer, given that everyone wants her to be someone else. In the first scene, Astolfo (Andrzej Lajborek) tries both to physically seduce and sexualize *Estrella-Choroszy* (for example, by pressing her to his body and grabbing her breasts); he tries to convince her to become his queen after he becomes

king, to avoid competition between them. Basilio (Sława Kwaśniewska) needs her as his heiress, but only if Segismundo fails. Creating this special bond between Estrella and the main character draws the audience's attention to her.

Estrella is also highlighted by a musical theme that appears for the first time when Estrella-Choroszy enters. This piece, performed on a stringed instrument, has a sadness inscribed in it and gives the impression that something is deeply troubling Estrella. Keeping in mind that Zawodziński brings up the issue of one trying to identify oneself through relationships with others (pre-show publicity), the public can connect this sobbing of the stringed instrument with Estrella's struggle to understand who she is. This is especially so because this music reappears any time Estrella finds out who she is not. One hears it after the scene in which Basilio announces that his son Segismundo is going to inherit the throne. The agitated Astolfo-Lajborek runs off, and Estrella-Choroszy looks at Basilio as if seeking for an answer to an untold question. According to Choroszy, Estrella waits for Basilio to tell her who she is for him, if she is not his heiress anymore ("Personal Interview"). Basilio-Kwaśniewska does not answer, but instead kisses Estrella-Choroszy's head. Choroszy leaves the stage looking completely lost, and accompanied by her musical theme.

One hears this music again after Segismundo-Elis first kisses her hand and then smashes the head of a servant in front of Estrella-Choroszy. She looks at her hand, which possibly has gotten stained with blood, and again she seems completely lost. One could guess that she is unsure of who she is anymore. First Segismundo treats her with conventionally due respect (as a princess) and then kills someone without conventionally due consideration to her fragility as a royal. At this moment, Estrella-Choroszy does not speak, and yet the music, associated with her struggle, draws one's attention to her. Estrella's music is also heard in the final scene between Astolfo and Estrella. Music is reinforced here by the verse as Choroszy

delivers a monologue of Flora (borrowed from *Księżniczka na opak wywrócona* [The Princess Turned Upside-Down]):

<b>b</b> ędąc <b>tu</b> gdzieś <b>tam</b> to <b>mo</b> że	while <b>being/ here</b> somewhere/ <b>there</b> then/ <b>maybe</b>
<b>j</b> esteś z <b>inna</b> z <b>jak</b> ąś <b>inna</b>	you <b>are/</b> with the <b>other one/</b> with <b>some</b> other one
a <b>nie</b> ze <b>mna</b> <b>i</b> na <b>inna</b>	and <b>not/</b> with <b>me/ and/</b> at the <b>other one</b>
teraz <b>patrzysz</b> <b>cho</b> ciaż <b>patrzysz</b>	<b>now/</b> you are <b>looking/ even</b> if/ you are <b>looking</b>
<b>na</b> mnie <b>i</b> do <b>inne</b> j <b>mó</b> wisz	<b>at</b> me/ <b>and</b> to/the <b>other one/</b> you are <b>talking</b>
<b>co</b> nie <b>śl</b> yszę <b>milcz</b> ąc ze <b>mna</b>	<b>what/</b> I can't <b>hear/ being</b> silent/ <b>with</b> me
<b>i</b> ta <b>inna</b> <b>co</b> ś do <b>cie</b> bie	<b>and</b> this/ <b>other one/ something</b> to/you
<b>mó</b> wi <b>milcz</b> ąc <b>i</b> ty <b>milcz</b> ąc	<b>says/ in</b> silence/ <b>and</b> you/ in <b>silence</b>
<b>od</b> powiadasz <b>teraz</b> <b>inne</b> j	<b>answer/ now/</b> to the <b>other one</b>
<b>o</b> ta <b>inna</b> <b>czy</b> jest <b>inna</b>	<b>and</b> this/ <b>other/ is</b> there/ <b>other one</b>
<b>ni</b> ż <b>ja</b> <b>powie</b> dz <b>i</b> czy <b>inna</b>	<b>than/ me/ tell</b> me/ <b>and</b> is/ she <b>different</b>
<b>jest</b> <b>ode</b> mnie <b>owa</b> <b>inna</b> .	<b>than</b> me/ <b>this/ other</b> one. <sup>5</sup>

(Calderón, *Księżniczka* 17)

This monologue is written in almost pure octosyllabic trochaic verse (within the Polish text, rhythmically strong syllables are in bold). Flora, like Estrella, is a princess who is supposed to be marrying a prince, whom she loves, but who does not love her. The text plays on the Polish word “inna” that denotes both “different” and “other.” The two iambs that replace the first two trochees in the third line highlight the phrase “a nie ze mną” [not with me]: Flora’s lover (Roberto) thinks about the other woman. In the penultimate line, a spondee takes the place of the first trochee to stress the comparison between Flora and the other woman. In



short, Flora's lines suit Estrella, and the spectator who has not read *Życie jest snem* likely will not realize that this speech is not a part of the play. However, it is clear for the spectator that this speech sounds hyper-intense in comparison to all the other lines delivered on the stage (written, in general, in a free verse). Choroszy uses the pulsating and intense trochaic rhythm to create an impression that her voice cracks with emotion. In other words, Estrella-Choroszy's despair reaches its climax through the rhythm of verse and music to emphasize that Estrella is lost in trying to find out who she is. In so doing, the production once again marks the similarity between Segismundo and Estrella.

This speech is the culmination point for Estrella-Choroszy. After this speech, she says to Astolfo-Lajborek that she does not want to see him ever again. Estrella is not a lover anymore. She is not an heiress, and there is no Calderonian happy ending—Zawodziński chooses to cut the final scene—to offer her the role of a queen. As a result, when Estrella-Choroszy appears for the last time during the revolution accompanied by her music and dressed in a white gown covered by black lace, she has no role to play. She knows it, as she says to Basilio (using octosyllabic trochee from an unknown source):

**Kim ja jestem? No odpowiedz.**                      Who am I? Answer.

**Bo ni żywa ni umarła.**                              Because I'm neither alive nor dead.

This link between the fear of not knowing who one is and not “being at all” is highlighted as the bodies of the actors-soldiers appear while Choroszy is walking through the stage. She inspects herself in a mirror, as if checking to see if she is there at all. She does not have a social role there, she must be no one, or she must be crazy, as suggested by the reaction of both Astolfo-Lajborek and Basilio-Kwaśniewska to Choroszy's questioning who she is.

These reactions and Estrella's fear of having no identity emphasise the importance of social roles in society. At the same time, the production suggests that only by losing all social roles could one free oneself. Such a reading is evoked by Estrella-Choroszy's reaction after

Segismundo-Elis for the last time tries to connect with her by saying: “Masz takie smutne oczy...” [‘You have such sad eyes...’]. She laughs and walks off the stage. Staying there would allow her to be someone for Segismundo, but she chooses to leave and make herself free. The choice of whether this is an act of insanity or of courage is left with the audience. The key points are the potential of the character of Estrella to open up a theatrical discussion on one’s identity as being simultaneously imposed, limiting, and indispensable in the society and the efforts that Zawodziński puts into marking Estrella’s importance in this discussion.

### **3. Estrella and the illusionary performance of gender in the 2008 Irish production**

Tom Creed’s production, directed for Rough Magic and performed in the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 2008, is a staging of Jo Clifford’s 1998 translation. Pre-show publicity works to focus the audience’s attention on verse and on the themes of freedom, power, gender, and one’s control over them (O’Riordan). In the programme, a note by Jo Clifford reinforces these issues (“This Play is an Invitation to Dream”). This links with the introduction to her published translation, in which she talks about the idea of power as an illusion. Clifford uses “power” broadly: as one individual having control over another, as well as being the set of rules that influence how one lives, including the values handed down from generation to generation, laws on how women and men relate to each other, and the “value system of beliefs.” She also stresses that being under control, being imprisoned is a matter of choice; any power is illusionary, because one can always choose not to submit oneself to it (“Introduction” xxi-xxii). In the note to Creed’s programme, Clifford reinforces the importance of making a choice by asking the spectators to choose how the play relates to their lives (“This Play is an Invitation to Dream”). The similarities between Clifford’s introduction to the published translation and her note in Creed’s programme link with the fact that Creed, in contrast to Zawodziński, did not change the text of Clifford’s translation, but, instead, built closely on her reading of Calderón’s text.

Creed's production is presented in the Space Upstairs (the largest space of the Project). The conventional arrangement of this black box is re-arranged so the audiences of Creed's production can sit on benches on two sides of the stage. Throughout the performance, one constantly sees the audience on the other side of the stage. The stage design is minimal. For example, Segismundo (Paul Reid) is apparently chained in "a dark prison," as one understands from the words of Rosaura (Hilary O'Shaughnessy). However, the audience sees no prison, only Segismundo-Reid chained to the scaffolding on the side walls. In this sense the production is constantly reminding the audience of the illusionary qualities of what they see and of their own status as spectators (as the ones to make ultimate choices about the production). The issue of the illusion of performance and the power of the spectator's choice are crucial for the performance of Andrea Irvine as Estrella. The following analysis explains how, through Clifford's text and Creed's staging, Estrella gains the capacity to mediate issues of gender. In Creed's production, Estrella can still be read as the actor who learns, but also as the actor who is limited by her gender. Through her active spectatorship, Estrella frees herself from the illusion of values and qualities attributed to woman.

To open my argument, I recall the works of Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber. The former famously explains that the gendered identity of the body is created by the relationship between the performance of the body itself and the pre-existing conventions of how the body "should" act its gender and how it "should" be perceived. All this operates as a mode of belief, shared by the actors and the "social audience", that gender is natural and necessary. This gendered performance is judged by the audience (Butler 271-75) and the breaking of the gendered conventions may initiate "a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (Butler 279). Garber focuses on breaking the gendered conventions. In particular, she looks at transvestism or cross-dressing as the act of breaking the convention of costumes associated with the body's sex. Garber explains that "one of the most important aspects of cross-

dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’” (10). By using the music video “Express Yourself” by pop artist Madonna, Garber shows how transvestism enables a female performer to empower womanhood by claiming “all possible gender space” and to challenge the naturalness (and necessity) of gender (120-27).

All this links very closely to what Clifford says in her introduction and the note in Creed’s programme about values and traditions as a possible source of limitation. In this case historical and cultural conventions impose regulations on what it means to act as a woman or as a man. This lies within the interests of Clifford’s translation and may lie within the scope of her own concerns (Clifford is a transsexual woman). In her translation, Estrella, who performs according to conventions, gains the capacity to mediate these gender-focused preoccupations through Clifford’s use of verse structure. This is important because of the central role that the text per se plays in Creed’s production.

Clifford’s Estrella “speaks” in verses, whose length varies from 5-syllables to 14-syllables; there are three to four stresses per line (with the exception of two lines that I discuss later). This verse does not differ from the rest of Clifford’s translation written in mostly unrhymed verse with the length of the lines varying from one syllabl to 17 syllables. In short, the rhythm of Estrella’s speech does not accentuate her role. It also seems relatively regular. Building on Derek Attridge’s claim that rhythm can imply a certain emotional colouring (14), one can read Clifford’s Estrella as a person who feels secure and stable in her roles.

In her first appearance, she seems aware of Astolfo’s intentions, and this is highlighted by rhymes that mark the importance of three words: correspond, wrong, tongue, as follows:

What we say must **correspond**

With what we do. I think it **wrong**  
 For you to flatter me in such courteous terms  
 When your words are so plainly contradicted  
 By your obvious preparation for war.  
 I'm not afraid to fight against them, Prince,  
 For the flatteries I hear do not **correspond**  
 To the hostility I see before me. Remember,  
 Prince, how vile it is to flatter with the **tongue**,  
 But kill with the intention. (Act 1, 17)

In this way, verse structure highlights in the form of rhyme what Estrella says: her awareness of Astolfo's lying tongue. This rhyme marks the beginning and the end of Estrella's speech: the lines ending with the first "correspond" and "wrong" are the first two and the line finishing with "tongue" is the next to last. This suggests that Estrella's answer is prepared and that she is aware of what is at stake.

This is confirmed by her second answer to Astolfo. As a princess, she informs him, in a polite yet sarcastic manner, that as an heiress she is not going to give up her fight for the throne:

It would be the most enormous pleasure  
 For me to gain the imperial crown,  
 Solely to hand it over to you. (Act 1, 18)

She also marks her awareness that gendered conventions would require her to hand her power over to her husband. These gendered conventions are the tower in which Estrella is trapped, which can be confirmed by her only line with five stresses. During the "medallion sequence," she says to Rosaura:

There are things one should express

**Only in thought... he is to marry me.**

Or at least he will if the world allows

One piece of good fortune to remove

So many other sources of grief. (Act 2, 54)

During the course of this 5-stress line “Only in thought... he is to marry me,” the rhythm changes and in the second line, becomes iambic. This suggests that the thing “one should express / Only in thought” is not her love for Astolfo, but her marital plans with a man who did not officially propose and who still wears a portrait of some other woman around his neck. Against the social rules, she is desperate to marry him. The reason for this desperation may be Estrella seeing the marriage to Astolfo as her only possibility to gain some power, which she desires.

Estrella-as-spectator decides in the finale of the “medallion sequence” that Astolfo’s performance is “gross,” and her comment slant-rhymes with Astolfo’s previous “because” (Act 2, 60). The rhyme dovetails with Estrella’s exit to highlight the moment of Estrella making a choice. As a spectator she decides to end Astolfo’s performance; as an actor she recognizes the end of her part as his lover. She liberates herself from Astolfo and from gendered expectations by taking on the masculine role of a soldier and “Striking men dead with each fierce blow” (Act 3, 78). The war creates circumstances, whereby Estrella, against gendered conventions, can take on a masculine role. She announces her intention to ride into battle by saying:

I have **fought** | a fierce **battle** | **against** | **jealousy**

So a **battlefield**| for **me** | holds **no** | **terrors**. (Act 3, 78)

These lines signal her recognition of the value of her experience in performing a conventional female part (a lover) for her cross-gender performance as a soldier. The rhythm of these 4-stress lines does not differ from the regular rhythm of Estrella’s usual speech. This links her

performance as a soldier with her earlier roles framed by gendered conventions, which suggests that Estrella does not perform a male role, but instead she becomes a cross-dresser. She symbolically puts on the costume of a soldier.

Therefore (using ideas of Butler and Garber), one can say that Estrella empowers herself as a woman, challenges gendered conventions, and marks the illusoriness of the gender binary. In going into battle, Estrella fulfils her always present, but until now only partly activated, potential to take her life into her own hands. In this context, the regular verse structure becomes a sign both of her active potential and of her fulfilment of it. After she comes back from the battle, she takes on the gender-appropriate role of wife. This, nevertheless, may be read as a consequence of her recognizing the power of her womanhood, rather than as an undermining of Estrella's liberation. She does not have to be afraid of being trapped in the tower of gendered stereotypes, because she knows that this tower is only an illusion. This example also demonstrates the openness of the play to be read differently within different contexts. In the context of Golden Age theatre's conventions, Estrella's becoming a soldier is an example of her humble acceptance of conventions. In Clifford's translation, her becoming a soldier is an example of breaking the gendered conventions of this role.

In Creed's production, the strategy to present Estrella as challenging the gender binary via verse structure is enhanced by Andrea Irvine's costumes, designed by Conor

Murphy and visible on the photographs by Ros Kavanagh.



Both these suits may remind one of costumes worn by businesswomen or contemporary female politicians, who claim positions of power, against the gendered convention. Susan Jarratt observes that such female performers are often perceived as cross-dressers (2). This point allows one to read both of Estrella-Irvine's costumes as a sign of her challenge to gender conventions. However, there are significant differences between these two costumes.

In her opening entrance, Estrella-Irvine wears a formal dark suit and smokes a cigarette. The distinctive geometric pattern and the black as the dominant colour present her as a strong person. She does not look seductive, which suggests that she does not want to be perceived as a lover, but as a serious competitor. It also suggests that to some extent she suppresses her femininity to highlight the qualities conventionally associated with men (strength, competitiveness). She is trapped as she perceives masculinity as a source of power, while her femininity is a source of limitations that she cannot escape (as she still wears a skirt), which links well with the effect of Clifford's verse structure. In the later stages of the performance, Estrella-Irvine wears a white suit that highlights her waist and bust, attributes of femininity. Nonetheless, the costume remains formal and Estrella-Irvine still holds a cigarette. In other words, the black costume privileges masculinity, while the white one



incorporates both masculine and feminine elements in a more balanced manner. The white suit can be read as a sign of an empowered Estrella claiming, to use Gerber's idea, a broader "gender space".

*La vida es sueño*'s openness to multiple interpretations has been discussed by many scholars.<sup>6</sup> This article shows once again that depending on the context of the play the theatre of *La vida es sueño* can become a metaphor of other structures based on the relationships between spaces, actors, and active and passive viewers. Most importantly, this discussion demonstrates that Estrella, as a metaphor of a humble actor and active spectator, offers a similar openness to multiple readings.

In both productions discussed here, Zawodziński and Clifford and Creed "translate" Estrella to the specific contexts of their versions. At the same time, they do not disturb the possibility of Estrella still being read in the context of the Spanish source. Instead, in each case, Estrella's compliance is at once contextualized and deconstructed as verse structure and the productions' choices help to present Estrella-as-actor's awareness of her performance being limited by specific circumstances. Zawodziński's Estrella is a metaphor of self-imprisonment imposed by the desperate need to play a part in the social system. Clifford and Creed's Estrella is a metaphor of a body imprisoned by gendered conventions. In each of these cases, Estrella is presented as being charged with the responsibility to choose her own freedom. The broad issue of identity in terms of both its limitation and the stability that it offers must resonate strongly in the context of the global world. This essay has attempted to show that Estrella has the capacity to mediate these issues, and therefore offers a lot of potential to contemporary theatre.

More broadly, the essay draws attention to the importance of verse structure for the re-discovery of *La vida es sueño*, and the *comedia* in general, in the context of the text, its translation, and theatrical performance. This discussion exemplifies that verse structure

facilitates the translation of the textual character from one context to another (linguistic, temporal, and cultural, as well as from the written text to the performance) and allows theatre practitioners to mediate their own preoccupations without disabling the possibility of reading the play in the context of its source. In this sense, both verse structure and the figure of Estrella offer approaches and orientations to contemporary theatre that should be further explored by scholars and practitioners

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<sup>1</sup> Everett W. Hesse discusses all the characters of *La vida es sueño* but Estrella (145-48).

Barbara Louise Mujica writes a whole chapter on the characters of *La vida es sueño*, yet Estrella and Astolfo are omitted (179-240). M. Louise Salstad's *The Presentation of Women in Spanish Golden Age Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* does not mention Estrella even once; however, there are several references to Rosaura.

<sup>2</sup> That is the part of the plot built around Rosaura trying to clear her honour. See Sloman, "The Structure of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*."

<sup>3</sup> Unless stated differently, all the quotations from *La vida es sueño* in Spanish come from the 1961 edition by Albert E. Sloman. The English translations of the Polish texts are provided by the author of this article. The quotations from *Life is a Dream* in the third section come from Jo Clifford's translation. This version has no line numbers. For the sake of clarity, all references to Clifford's translation include the page number in parentheses. For example: (Act 2, 60). The analysis of the Spanish text uses prosodic analysis of *La vida es sueño* provided by Albert E. Sloman in the introduction to this edition (xxiii-xxxiv).

<sup>4</sup> The differences and similarities between Calderón's *Polonia* and seventeenth-century Spain and Poland are treated in critical commentaries. For example, see Davies and Baczyńska.

<sup>5</sup> Line-to-line translation by the author of this article highlights, as much as possible, which words are stressed by metre (in bold), and divisions between rhythmical units are marked by slashes.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, A. J. Valbuena-Briones comments on Calderón's play: "Because of the playwright's genius, each scholar has been able to discover new interpretations of *La vida es sueño*" (54).

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