

## ◆ Chapter 3

### **The Classics in Vignettes: *La vida es sueño* as a Case Study in Adapting Literary Classical Works to the Comic Format**

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#### **The Comic Adaptation of Literary Classics**

Graphic novels, as well as other types of comics, have become an important part of literature, language arts and cultural studies curricula in recent decades, paving the way for the teaching of comic adaptations of the classical works of literature in classroom settings. Authored by Ricardo Vílbor, Alberto Sanz and Mario Ceballos and published in 2016, the comic adaptation of *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*), Pedro Calderón de la Barca's famous baroque drama, provides an excellent example to explore how the current upsurge in graphic representation of classic literature can be leveraged as a pedagogical tool. Although there is a tendency to view the use of comics in teaching contexts as a recent development, comics have been used as instructional tools in the classroom since at least the 1920s—both comics published for explicit instructional purposes and conventional comics published in all formats. Mirroring the resurgence of the medium through comic books aimed at adult audiences, the 1970s see a turning point in the acceptance of comics as instructional tools also. However, it is in the early 2000s, when comics gain more widespread cultural credibility, that the real momentum for using comics in schools appears. A constellation of relatively recent programming at academic, library and conference venues, together with the creation of awards and honors specific to the re-emerging genre, have transformed how instructors perceive comics. Graphic novels and comic-strips have started to appear in K-12 courses and have also been included in courses at the university level, including ESL classes for non-native speakers. Comics studies programs at

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the undergraduate level (University of Florida), and Master's degrees in comic studies (University of Dundee, Scotland) have emerged to serve the growing academic interest in the genre. The comic book has transcended its customary place on the newsstand, appearing even in college libraries, where librarians employ comics to introduce students to library resources and organize book discussion programs (Tilley and Weiner 358–64). Including comics in instruction provides the opportunity for explorations in multiliteracy, and multiliteracy theorists argue that traditional conceptions of literacy as reading and writing verbal texts are insufficient. Instead, literary pedagogy must encompass the more complex communication forms and semiotic messages of a wide variety of cultural artifacts, especially visual ones, that students need to critically examine and understand their world as they become good global citizens.

The comprehensive collection of essays *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen E. Tabachnick and published by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), reflects on how the study of comics has become increasingly important for the teaching and learning of languages. Alison Mandaville and J.P. Avila, in their impactful essay on interdisciplinary approaches to teaching comics, note that “comics offer today’s visually-oriented students an engaging and challenging literary form on their own, which also, when taught as a regularized part of thematic courses, can serve as a motivating connection to other forms of literature” (245). Comics afford a particularly effective lens through which to study issues ranging from social constructions of power and privilege, to structural textual dimensions and narrative perspective. Moreover, the analysis of comics may allow teachers, relying on students’ awareness of popular stereotypes, to effectively convey the daily currency of often derogatory and limiting cultural constructions. In the same volume, Ana Merino has reflected on the teaching of the cultural dimensions of Hispanic countries through their graphic novel production. For Merino, comics are a rich part of the cultural expression of a highly diverse Hispanic world; thus, it is necessary to integrate them as authentic materials in courses devoted to the teaching of the Spanish language, as well as in Hispanic cultural studies courses. She points out that Argentine scriptwriter Héctor Germán Oesterheld “invented the graphic novel, a form widely considered a United States creation” (“The Cultural” 272), and that the traditional comic with its detailed and sometimes irreverent *costumbrista* traits is ideal for introductory language and culture courses, which need materials that feature the language while challenging cultural stereotypes. Graphic novels for adults are more appropriate for courses that require a different set of skills, such as an advanced knowledge of the language, a greater ability to contextualize the reading theoretically and historically, and a more nuanced cultural and literary analysis.

With this in mind, comics can be an especially useful pedagogical tool in courses that seek to offer a different approach to students' exploration of the Spanish Early Modern period. In several works, David Castillo has defended the need to teach literature, and specifically the Golden Age, through a trans-historical and trans-cultural approach that breaks with traditional notions on the teaching of the classics: "the literary classics are most effectively (and productively) engaged in the new humanities classroom in practical exercises of strategic re-historicization" (26).<sup>1</sup> Instead of using popular culture only as a pedagogical resource to get students interested in the authors, works, and historical contexts of the Spanish Golden Age, the author envisions trans-historical and trans-cultural encounters as opportunities to critically examine our present media contexts, as much as the cultural contexts of Cervantes, Velázquez, Lope de Vega, Zayas, Calderón or Gracián.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Castillo's approach welcomes historical connections with our world today through a dialogue with both the classics and contemporary popular-culture artifacts. Comics function particularly well within this methodology given that, as the critic has noted, in the current digital age it is crucial to be able to critically understand the mechanics of mass culture and the codes used to conceptualize and represent the world around us. As the events and actions of the Trump Administration have made abundantly (and painfully) clear, the very survival of democratic societies depends on essential notions, such as responsibility and citizenship, that classical texts help elucidate in particularly effective ways. Graphic novels may accomplish the same goals thanks to the vastness and richness of their expressive resources, their capacity to convey deep stories, and their ability to appeal to a general audience of children and adults alike. Consequently, graphic novels can enrich literary and cultural studies disciplines, helping them play a key role as free-thinking spaces devoted to the critical examination of the cultural codes and social practices that structure individual and social identities.

As noted above, the didactic potential of the comic book was recognized early in the previous century, but this was not the only purpose for which the communicative potential of the comic form was leveraged in 20th-century Spain. A consideration of Spanish comic production during the Franco regime reveals a deliberate employment of the genre to provide an accessible and carefully curated version of the nation's history, especially the period from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, and to then draw parallels with the dictatorship in power at that time. Cloak and dagger comics, adventure comics and pirate stories abounded, and they frequently took place in exotic settings where heroes would end up defeating some very bad fellows (Altarriba 188–96).

Set in the Middle Ages, *El Guerrero del Antifaz* (The Masked Warrior) and *El Capitán Trueno* (Captain Thunder) become the highest representatives

of true Hispanic values. *El Guerrero*, created by Manuel Gago García between 1944 and 1966, is an apocryphal character from the Reconquest, raised among Muslims, who one day discovers his Christian origins and becomes a warrior and fervent defender of the Christian kings against the Muslim powers. His adventures are marked by a Christian morality that yearns for the Medieval Spain that fought for Catholic unity. In 1956, Víctor Mora created the script for *El Capitán Trueno*, drawn by Miguel Ambrosio Zaragoza, better known as Ambrós, which humorously narrates the adventures of a crusader knight who fights on behalf of the weak. The story achieved a resounding success, selling as many as 350,000 comics weekly. Similarly, the representation of the Golden Age epoch also proved significant during this period. *Roberto Alcázar y Pedrín*, by Juan Bautista Puerto and Eduardo Vañó Pastor, was the most notable series of the time and it remains the longest-lasting booklet in the trajectory of Spanish comics (1940–1975). The series is most often associated with the ideological principles of Francoism—the protagonist’s surname evokes one of the most mythologized episodes of the Civil War, while his physical traits resemble José Antonio Primo de Rivera’s—but there is no absolute consensus among the critics. Antonio Altarriba notes that, if we pay attention to the procedures used by the evildoers and the response of the heroic protagonists, the latter “are champions of rationality with much more reason than spokesmen for the prevailing fascism” (251).

Due to this traditional association between historical comics and Francoism, the 1980s and 1990s are dominated by adult comics and do not produce graphic stories set in the Early Modern period. Pedro Pérez del Solar has shown how the comic magazines that emerged in the Transition—such as *El Víbora* and *Cairo*—did not want to prolong the adventure genre that had been so fundamental in the formation of their own cartoonists, preferring to bet on comics that featured the present and left little room for historical fantasies of ancient times. There was, however, room for parody, which had already gained a foothold in underground comics, with *El Guerrero del Antifaz* being a favorite target for several authors. Pámies’ character *El Guerrero del Ultrafasz* references fascism, while his nickname “El Cruzado Mágico” references both the crusaders and the popular brassiere brand *Cruzado Mágico de Plaitex* (Altarriba 198–206). The protagonists of *Roberto Alcázar y Pedrín* are lampooned in *Nuevas Aventuras de Roberto el Carca* (The New Adventures of Robert the Caveman), also by Pámies, who clearly subverts the conventions of the adventure genre. The parody of this genre reached its zenith with the series *Pepito Magefesa*, by Miguel Gallardo: Magefesa is the secret personality of *El Fantasma* (the character in the classic comic *The Phantom*), who hides behind a disguise; in turn, Villain Mr. X hides behind the secret personality of Jamón Despaña (comics critic), who jokingly refers to the *Cairo* editor

(Ramón de España), in an absurd succession of masks that mocks the topic of the hero in disguise. It should be noted that Magefesa's misadventures respond more to the typical scheme of misadventures in Spanish comics, where the protagonists end up quixotically beaten, than to the classic American comic (Altarriba 107–8).

While Transition era comics tended to limit their treatment of historical periods to satirical exploits, some of those published in recent years have returned to the Spanish Golden Age with a different perspective. The most acclaimed is arguably *Las Meninas*, by Santiago García and Javier Olivares, which won the Premio Nacional de Cómic (National Comic Award) in 2015. *El capitán Alariste* (*Captain Alariste*) (2005), by Carlos Giménez and Joan Mundet, based on Arturo Pérez-Reverte's series of novels *Las aventuras del capitán Alariste* (*The Adventures of Captain Alariste*), has become a best-seller. Other works, to mention just a few, include *El siglo de oro valenciano* (*The Valencian Golden Age*) (2015), by Cristina Durán y Miguel A. Giner, which focuses on the Valencian printing industry to highlight the cultural and architectural splendor of this region, as well as on poets such as Roís de Corella, Bernat Fenollar, and Jaume Roig; *Teresa de Jesús. Escritora, fundadora y santa* (*Teresa de Jesús. Writer, Founder and Saint*) (2014), by José Luis Serna Romera, which depicts the life and work of Teresa de Jesús, represented as a feminist heroine; and lastly, *Alonso de Contreras: Soldado de los tercios* (*Alonso de Contreras: Regimental Soldier*) (2018), by Juan de Aragón and Alberto Pérez Rubio, which recounts the wanderings of this famous captain of the Spanish Army. *Lazarillo de Tormes: A Graphic Novel* (2021), by Enriqueta Zafra and Jesús Mora, published by Toronto University Press for readers of English, proves that the comic depiction of the Spanish Golden Age is of interest beyond Spain. All these works seem to indicate how today's comic rendition of the past is intended to offer a reevaluation of the social and cultural importance of Spain's national history free from the traditional association between historical comics and Francoism.

However, despite the recent resurgence of the genre in certain areas of the market, a consideration of the wider cultural scenario reveals that, in the new millennium, comics aimed at children have lost the privileged spot that they once held in the 20th-century popular imagination. Video games, television, digital channels, console games, and digital social networks have conquered the children's audience, sparking public debate about whether and how digital media fosters passivity and repetition instead of imaginative thinking. Add to this panorama the reductive nature of the latest styles and narrative preferences in children's comics, in particular the Manga aesthetic that has come to dominate television cartoons and other media as a result of the significant exposure this Japanese style enjoys globally, and the risk becomes clear: the sumptuous

array of formats and styles that has long been a hallmark of children's comic books and graphic novels is in danger. As Ana Merino has pointed out in "El tebeo español en vías de extinción," the outlook for the future of comic books for kids is bleak: "Mientras la historieta para adultos se va canonizando, los tebeos de la niñez se convierten en un espacio para la nostalgia" (43) (While the adult comic is being canonized, childhood comics are becoming a space for nostalgia); moreover, the lack of a cultural policy for the protection of children's and young people's literature that would include comics, which Merino asserts could complement reading training in very efficient ways, has yielded an unfortunate result: "El tebeo infantil está en vías de extinción porque ha perdido su espacio masivo y no ha tenido un reconocimiento cultural que le consolidase" (44) (the children's comic is on the way to extinction because it has lost its space as a mass media and has not received the cultural recognition that would preserve it). Hence the importance of reclaiming comics for the training and education of children and youth, for which adaptations of the classics, including masterpieces of the Spanish Golden Age, are fundamental.

In addition to original content presented in the form of comics and graphic novels, the genre also offers alternative access to traditional literary works through adaptations of the classics to the comic format. Together with the graphic novels that represent the Spanish Golden Age, we find a number of comic adaptations of the classics, such as *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Cervantes's groundbreaking novel has inspired at least seven comic versions, including a Manga one and an English adaptation illustrated by Rob Davis and translated into Spanish by José C. Vales. Miguel Gómez Andrea (Gol) penned a Cervantine biography in six *cuadros* (acts) that recounts several significant moments of the author's life. Finally, *La sombra de Don Quijote* (2014) by Patricio Clarey and Lara Fuentes offers a bitter and lucid reflection on the tremendous contradictions of today's society through the dreamlike journey of a character that is an exact imitation of Don Quixote. Other adaptations of Spanish literary classics include *Amadís de Gaula*, originally published in 1508 by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, authored in the comic format by Ricardo Gómez and Emma Ríos and published in 2009; and the medieval chivalric romance *Tirante El Blanco*, by Joan Martorell (finished posthumously by Martí Joan de Galba), adapted into a graphic novel by Maria Aurèlia Capmany, Jaume Marzal Canós and Andreu Martín for publication in 2019. However, the adaptation of the literary classics into a comic format, and into other artistic forms as well, is not free of controversy, as critics debate whether adaptations can safeguard the merit of the original source.

At the most basic level, one could claim that adaptations, created by authors from various periods and in differing styles, have helped the classics survive the passage of time by updating, with each new rewriting, everything

from their value as literary and cultural artifacts to the social and moral values they project, to their underlying messages in the new cultural context. Of course, the types of adaptations vary widely, depending on the intentions (playful, educational, informative) of the adapting author. The comic versions take famous works of literature and make them more accessible to a specific audience, most often children and young people, but also adults not specialized in the world of letters who might not otherwise find them approachable as a text. Some adaptations can contribute in important ways to enhance social inclusivity; they can provide access for people with disabilities, people with limited literacy, immigrant or elderly populations, and others who may not have the resources to easily engage with a cultural heritage. Literary adaptations can mitigate some circumstances that could lead to greater social exclusion for those traditionally disadvantaged communities. Some scholars emphasize how adapted readings encourage the survival of the classics, help disseminate culture among all types of audiences, and improve various communication skills. However, other scholars defend the need for teaching authentic readings, since the altered texts can give the student a wrong impression by eliminating important stylistic and structural aspects of the original work. In her essay that asks “¿Debemos ‘adaptar’ los textos clásicos?” Zoraida Sánchez Mateos suggests that, at a didactic level, the most effective option may be “combinar el uso de material original y simplificado con el objetivo de poder extraer de ambos los máximos beneficios didácticos” (to combine the use of original and simplified materials to be able to extract the maximum didactic benefits from both).<sup>3</sup>

Cross-media adaptations are not only extremely common but also markedly successful, and adaptations that connect literature, comics, and film are the most prominent. Original comics have been adapted into other art forms, most especially cinema—Hollywood blockbuster action films have made the phenomenon hard to ignore—, a natural transition given that comic and film media are similar enough that comic-to-film adaptations are particularly effective. Scholarly studies on the adaptation of comics revolve around the notion of viability, that is, the degree to which it is possible to adapt into or out of comics while preserving the original sources’ essential formal traits, moral values, and meaning. Viability depends on media specificity, that is, to what extent the media places constraints on the narratives that can be told by utilizing them. Medium specificity is a controversial idea, rooted in the belief that some art forms are more distinctive than others, so the artwork unavoidably loses value when adapted. For example, if employing the standards of traditional literary criticism, evaluating the comic version of an original work of literature by using theoretical tools typically applied to the latter usually means that even the best comics are judged to be pretty bad books. That is why

Henry John Pratt has claimed that “a comic should be evaluated by attending to its own media-derived conventional features, and not merely in terms of how good a film it would make or how well it achieves the aims of literature from which it is adapted” (236). Adaptation may be considered problematic insofar as medium-specific differences are important. The arguments offered in defense of medium specificity go both ways: some question whether and how the length and detail in deep literature stories can be achieved properly using the textual and visual space of the comics; others hold that the expressive capacities afforded by the drawing conventions of comics (i.e. gutters and thought balloons) are eliminated when graphic texts are adapted to other media. In addition to the different industry factors that influence the production and dissemination of artifacts, scholars have pointed out the difficulty of accommodating various artistic elements. Some of these include: metafictional content; the various kinds of imagining demanded by different media; the collision between the spatially-juxtaposed basic units of comics and the temporally-juxtaposed basic units of films; and the tabular arrangement of the panels in comic texts with the consequent need to create a tabular fashion in literature-to-comic adaptations.<sup>4</sup> On close consideration, however, these objections rely on generalizations and do not point to essential features, so there is little reason to think that cross-media adaptations cannot be successful. In fact, sound adaptations depend to a great extent on the degree to which they minutely address medium-specific traits.

Apropos of teaching the literary classics in the comic format, Paul D. Streufert has noted that, although visual texts may appear easier reads at first, graphic novels are frequently far more complex than most students anticipate, which makes them very appropriate vehicles to convey the complexity and richness of the classics (211). J. Caitlin Finlayson’s study on the translation of William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to the comic format shows how the visual elements of the graphic novel lend themselves to the medium of classic theater and, more specifically, to the visuality of performance: “the fact that the graphic novel is itself an interpretation of the play text becomes part of the dynamics of the student’s confrontation of the gap between the text and its enactment of presentation” (198–99). By displaying a wide array of strategies, such as the style of the illustrations (as analogous to costuming and set design), penciling and coloring (lighting), and the succession of panels (the staging of scenes and the blocking of actors), the graphic novel offers an alternative means to the discussion of dramas. In Finlayson’s words, it “plays on their interpretation and performance, providing teachers with an additional medium through which to approach issues of performance theory, genre, textuality, adaptation, and popular culture” (189). Moreover, the graphic novel adaptation of dramatic texts establishes correlations between the textual and



the visual in ways that films do not, as its iconic representation does not presuppose a reader/viewer completely involved, nor primarily identified with, the reality of the fictional experience.

### *La vida es sueño* in Comic Vignettes

*La vida es sueño* (2016), the comic adaptation of Calderón de la Barca's famous homonymous drama, authored by Ricardo Vilbor, Alberto Sanz, and Mario Ceballos, is an excellent case study of a classical drama successfully translated into the comic format. This graphic rendition closely follows Calderón's original drama (c. 1635) in terms of both text and action. The storyboard focuses on the adaptation of the play from the outset, including a first page entitled *dramatis personae* with the face drawings of the cast and an accompanying description of who is who in the play. Three other pages, presented as theater curtains, contain a specific motif and a text that signals and introduces the three different acts that compose the work. As Finlayson has proved apropos of the comic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, graphic renditions "are consciously play text and performance" (188). In a similar manner, the graphic novel *La vida es sueño* becomes play text and performance by deploying specific comic conventions such that it becomes a perfect tool for the study of both Calderón's drama and the comic genre.

The only time the authors deviate from the original verse storyline or plot development occurs at the very beginning of Act I, a deliberate move to capture the reader/viewer's attention by altering the temporal order of the plot. In comics, time can be controlled through a variety of means, ranging from the number of panels and the closure between them, to the timeless quality of borderless vignettes that linger in readers' minds (McCloud 101). In the comic version of *La vida es sueño*, the authors use the expressive potential of the panels' content to create a prolepsis. This alteration of the timeline anticipates the story, and in so doing, advances the trigger of the plot: how the stars foreshadowed the tragic and doomed birth of destined-to-be tyrant Segismundo, King Basilio's son, "monstruo en forma de hombre" (10) (monster in the guise of a man), "víbora humana del siglo" (11) (human viper of the century).<sup>5</sup> The reader encounters first a crimson page, with a solar eclipse at the upper center and the words "Acto I" at the bottom. The next page, in the same solid color, evokes a red curtain in a theater, and the following one initiates the prolepsis consisting of fifteen vignettes that partly anticipate what King Basilio will announce about his son's fate in a long speech in the middle of Act I of the *comedia*. Here, the comic depicts in intensely saturated colors—red for blood and black for death—the natural disasters which accompany

Segismundo's tragic and damned birth: the red sky of the solar eclipse, the huge dark hailstorm, the bloody river full of dead fish, and the newborn child covered in blood emerging from Clorilene's womb and causing her immediate death (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The prolepsis consists of fifteen vignettes that anticipate what King Basilio will announce about his son's fate in the middle of Act I of the *comedia*.

The rest of the vignettes continue to illustrate how these apocalyptic events were foretold in Basilio's astrological reading, as the King explains the situation to Clotaldo, his right-hand man. From page 12 on, the storyline follows Calderón's in every way, the strident crimson tones easing into ochres, browns, and greens as Rosaura and Clarín enter the kingdom of Polonia thirty years later. And while in the original *comedia* the audience must wait until scene vi of Act I to know more about the consequences of Segismundo's birth, in the graphic version they are disclosed on page 26.

Basilio appears with an important announcement to his court. He explains that he has a son, but that before the child was born the stars had warned him that this son would bring chaos to the kingdom, would prove to be a most cruel and impious monarch, and would overthrow his own father. To avoid this fate, Basilio ordered Segismundo imprisoned in a tower from birth. This astonishing measure precipitates the action, which allows Calderón to delve into many aspects of the human soul, creating a superb parable of power, passion, undeception, revelation, internal conflict, freedom, and self-control. This parable is the kernel of one of the most brilliant literary pieces ever written, certainly one of the very best dramas of the Spanish Golden Age. As Calderonian expert Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros perceptively points out in her prologue to the graphic novel:

La acción requiere, primero, el lenguaje *mudo* de un espacio y un tono cromático que crea una atmósfera icónica precisa y acotada escénicamente—la *viñeta*—; y que requiere, luego, las voces o el diálogo encapsulados en los *globos* o *bocadillos*. Dicho de otro modo, es como si el *storyboard* de un cómic fuera la traducción gráfica perfecta del hecho teatral. El *ut pictura poesis* clásico que recoge el Barroco—y en el que tanto creyó Calderón—se transforma en el potente y trágico *ut pictura theatrum* que es *La vida es sueño*. (“Prólogo” 4) (emphasis in the original)

(The action requires, first, the *mute* language of a space and a chromatic tone that creates an iconic atmosphere that is precise and scenically enclosed—the *vignette*—; and that then requires the voices or the dialogue encapsulated in *balloons* or *speech bubbles*. In other words, it is as if the storyboard of a comic were the perfect graphic translation of the theatrical event. The classic *ut pictura poesis* re-articulated by the Baroque—and in which Calderón believed so deeply—is transformed into the powerful and tragic *ut pictura theatrum* that is *Life is a Dream*.)

Rodríguez Cuadros's insight deftly explains the deliberate inclusion of the three motifs that, functioning as theatrical curtains, epitomize the particular thematic conflict of each act: in the first, the eclipse that announces the apocalyptic foretelling around Segismundo's birth; the second, the flask or vessel in which opium, poppy, and henbane have been mixed to put Segismundo to sleep and to return him to his prison believing that everything he experienced was a dream; and in the third, the symbols of both the sword, which stands for the power that Segismundo must regain to reverse his destiny and the mirror, whose elusive reflection reproduces only the mirage of reality. Another example of Rodríguez Cuadros's notion of "mute language"—those spatial and chromatic aspects of the vignettes that create an encapsulated, theatrical feel to the print work—is the earth-toned palette in which a large part of the comic is rendered: beiges, oranges and variations of dark to ruddy browns tell most of the tale, but this palette aptly changes at critical points to create different atmospheres and convey specific meanings. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which artistic expression manifests through a subjective palette and, consequently, the centrality of color for comics. The enormous expressive potential of color, including the emotional impact of color saturation, explains the variety of colors, tones, lights, modelling and other subtle hues used to express mood, add depth, reflect an environment, or create a sensation. It is also important to keep in mind that color has traditionally been an expensive option for publishers, which makes *La vida es sueño* (and other graphic works) an upscale artistic project in recent years in Spain.

In *La vida es sueño*, violence is depicted by either using different grades of crimson and orange or by intensifying the color with white lightening effects (19, 41, 45–57, 69, 90–91); the courtly scenes are rendered in light blues and reds (23–31); and in the amorous ones, reddish blush pinks prevail (58–62). However, there are several instances in which the illustrator and the colorist have deviated from the overall color patterns and spatial layout of the vignettes with a particular objective in mind. On four separate occasions (21, 26, 41, 86), greyscale or sepia tones dominate as the characters revisit the past. When depicting Segismundo's inner conflict in his first monologue on lack of freedom, which starts "Ay, mísero de mí . . . Ay, infelice" (14–16) (Oh, unfortunate me, oh unhappy one) and is delivered from his cell tower, the comic's creators revert to the earth-toned palette but include white lightening techniques to intensify the readers' experience. Additionally, the design of the vignettes morphs as the authors employ extreme close-ups of his hands and feet shackled in thick chains in contrast to the sense of freedom evoked by references to the "ave" (bird)—a dove flying in the sky—, the "animal" (animal)—a prison rat on top of another animal sketch—, the "pez" (fish)—a fish bone—, and the "arroyo" (stream)—a knocked-over jug spilling liquid onto the stone floor (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The authors portray in extreme close-ups the contrast of Segismundo's hands and feet in thick chains with the freedom enjoyed by the "ave," the "animal," the "pez," and the "arroyo," elements that, from a semiotics point of view, rely on the highly iconic nature of the comic medium.

From a semiotics point of view, the dove, the rat and the fish exemplify the highly iconic nature of expression in the comic medium, which has been extensively studied by, among others, Román Gubern in his well-known book *El lenguaje de los cómics*.

However, expressing intensity is not limited to color schemes and tight focus; comic book illustrators also use space on the page in an opposite way. While the last vignette on page 15 uses a close-up to show a discouraged protagonist grasping his chest as he speaks of tearing out pieces of his heart, the panel on the following page zooms out to depict an enraged Segismundo raising his head up to the heavens with open arms and claw-like hands, reproaching the Almighty: “¿Qué ley, justicia o razón niega a los hombres privilegios que Dios le ha dado a un arroyo . . . a un pez . . . a un animal . . . y a un ave?” (What law, justice or reason denies men privileges that God has given to a stream . . . to a fish . . . to an animal . . . and to a bird?). The tortured intensity of the scene is communicated through the rupture of the panel’s limits, Segismundo’s head and both hands breaking through the gutters that delineate the space, his outstretched fingers almost reaching the physical edge of the page. Gutters are essential for comics because they provide for closure, allowing the readers to connect two separate images to comprehend the meaning of the action. Thus, the lack of closure produced by the rupture of the panel limits successfully conveys the infinite frustration that Segismundo feels when he cannot comprehend the nature of his predicament. This same device will be utilized again later in two scenes in which Segismundo attacks his adviser Clotaldo and his father Basilio, and where the protagonist’s rage is emphasized by a brusque fight movement represented through an orchestrated use of body volume, character placement, standing positions and, most importantly, character proxemics, as the space between the protagonists shrinks. The violation of panel limits for expressive purposes appears several more times in the comic: the figure drawings exceed the regular limits of the contiguous panels to reach and fill the page edge completely (19, 41; 90–91), or even overlap and occupy space within nearby vignettes (41).

Communication of meaning through visual design choices manifests in other forms as well. On several occasions, the illustrator and the colorist demonstrate the opposed positions of the characters in the same vignette by using background colors that are naturally opposite from each other on the color wheel, like orange vs. blue (39–43) or by deploying horizontal panels that run from left to right showing Basilio’s army against Segismundo’s, pitting father against son and occupying the entire page, including the pagination (90–91). They sometimes alter the width of the panels to convey specific ideas or feelings (26–27; 44–45), such as when portraying Segismundo’s second iconic monologue at the end of Act II: as Segismundo recites the iconic verses that have made his character famous, contemplating the futility of life and its resemblance to a dream, the wide-screen consecutive panels are getting narrower—reflecting the protagonist’s growing disillusionment—, the colors are gradually fading—like life into a dream—, the typography is getting progressively smaller, and the

last panel fades to black with the words “. . . y los sueños, sueños son” (66) (and dreams, are dreams) (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. As Segismundo recites the verses about the futility of life and its resemblance to a dream that have made him famous, the wide-screen consecutive panels are getting narrower, the colors are gradually fading, the typography is getting smaller, and the last panel is fading into black.

In addition, illustrator Sanz has intelligently substituted the long-standing comic conventions of the motion lines—abstract lines that appear behind a moving object or person, parallel to its direction of movement, to make it appear as if it were moving quickly—by the elements of figure placement and garments, which are more theatrical in nature.

At the beginning of Act III, Segismundo argues with himself as to whether what he sees is real or is part of a dream, as he had previously been told: “¡Cielos! Y si . . . aún no sé si estoy despierto” (75) (Good heavens! What if . . . I still don’t know if I am awake). Like Hamlet, he appears to struggle with a sense of self-doubt, but unlike the Shakespearian prince, the Calderonian one instantly overcomes it, for in Segismundo’s case it seems more a moral quandary than an existential one. Therefore, he states “me conviene contenerme. No debo precipitarme” (75) (I should contain myself. I should not rush); then, desperate, he closes his eyes—the speech balloons become thought bubbles—and he asks himself “¿Cómo saber si esto es real . . . ? ¿. . . O un sueño?” (75–76) (how do I know if this is real . . . ? . . . Or just a dream?). The next two pages of the comic embark on an imaginary dreamlike journey that constitutes Segismundo’s dialectic conflict between *el gusto* and *lo justo*, that is, the urge to enjoy life unrestrained, as opposed to the self-governing of his passions. In depicting Segismundo’s imagination, the panels, gutters, and pagination disappear entirely, and the atmosphere is saturated in magenta and teal. The *mise-en-page* focuses exclusively on recreating the path to mental awareness on which now three simultaneous Segismundos—child, teen, and adult—must tread to break free from the chains of destiny (see fig. 4.1; fig. 4.2).



Fig. 4.1 and Fig 4.2. The *mise-en-page* focuses on recreating the path to mental awareness to which now three simultaneous Segismundos, the child, the teen, and the adult, have to arrive to break the chains of destiny.



This creative use of comic techniques works as a perfect mechanism to represent the character's flow of consciousness. It also serves to briefly both recapitulate and remind the reader—something not included in the original *comedia*—the unfolding of the events that brought Segismundo to this state: the omen that foretold his liberation; his “palace dream” (76) auguring his father's defeat at his own hands; and the fact that, regardless of whether he is dreaming or not, he must seize the day for life is short, without forgetting that doing good is what matters. “CRAAAAASH” (77), the teal shackles are suddenly split apart by a violent strike from a magenta hammer, a blow that shakes his consciousness and brings a final realization that he must do good, “obrar bien” (77), whether all he is experiencing is real or not; he must accept his fortune and become king.

In the pages that follow the reader witnesses the consequences of such a realization. Segismundo fights his father for the crown and makes Basilio kneel before him as the stars predicted. He later uplifts the king, convinced now that he must do good in any circumstance, and teaches Basilio that his fear and consequent decision to take away his son's freedom is precisely what made Segismundo the monster he became. Basilio's son acknowledges that a person's destiny is written in God's design (96), but that design is compromised when men like King Basilio dare to intervene in God's plan (96), and in so doing they unleash trauma and sometimes tragedy. Therefore, as Segismundo claims: “El destino no se vence con injusticia y venganza; al contrario, se incita más. Y así, quien espera vencer a su destino, ha de ser con prudencia y con templanza” (96) (Fate is not conquered with injustice and revenge; on the contrary, it is more incited. And so, whoever hopes to defeat his destiny, it must be through prudence and temperance). Hence, he relinquishes his sword and kneels before his father. By means of these noble words and actions, the reckless prince becomes prudent and consequently worthy of wearing the crown. King Basilio recognizes his mistake, embraces his son in tears, and enthrones him, proudly stating “tus hazañas son las que te coronan” (97) (your deeds are what crown you). For Calderón, actions, not thoughts or words, make humans worthy of being children of God.

Vílbora, the script writer, has done an excellent job recreating the characters' voices and the dialogues that constitute the scaffolding of the plot. He maintains the storyboard using the play's original words as much as possible, even respecting occasionally the rhyme and sound of the original verse. In one instance, he shows so well his appreciation for the original that he has placed an asterisk after “ojos hidrónicos\*” (18) (insatiable eyes) and explained the meaning of the adjective in the page footer—the latter otherwise being reserved exclusively in the entire work for the words that signal the end of the act.

This graphic novel is an innovative and effective tool to teach the particular themes of Calderón's drama that appear intertwined: illusion/reality,

wakefulness/dream, free will/predestination, love/vengeance, honor/dishonor, loyalty/rebellion, the art of just governing/vengeance, prudence/instinct, and father/son conflict. It also works well to illustrate many baroque topics propagated by the *comedia* genre in general; *el desengaño* (undeception), *honor/honra* (honor), *artificio/artificialidad* (artifice/artificiality), *fugacidad de la vida* (transience of life), *desilusión* (disillusionment), *orden vs. desorden* (order vs. disorder), *lo justo vs. el gusto* (reason vs. instinct/passion), *teatralidad* (theatricality), the clash between light and shadow, intrinsic to the chiaroscuro technique,<sup>6</sup> as well as key aspects of the Counter-reformist religiosity and ideology. The comic version of *La vida es sueño* closely follows the original, tackling the philosophical and theological intricacies of the *comedia* without watering them down in the slightest.

The very title ‘Life is a Dream’ implies more than the transience of life, it indicates that earthly life is fictitious when compared with the heavenly one. For that reason, one must “do good” even when dreaming, as Clotaldo scolds Segismundo “aun en sueños deberías obrar bien” (65) (even when dreaming you must do good), and Segismundo replies “Es verdad . . . hemos de reprimir nuestra fiera condición, nuestra furia, nuestra ambición, por si alguna vez soñamos; y sí, soñaremos, pues el vivir sólo es soñar. Y la experiencia me enseña que, el hombre que vive, sueña lo que es . . . hasta despertar” (65) (It’s true . . . we have to repress our savage condition, our fury, our ambition, in case we ever dream; and yes, we will dream, because living is just dreaming. And experience teaches me that, the man who lives, dreams what he is . . . until he wakes). To be sure, everyone who lives plays a role in this earthly life until awakened by death to true life, life in God, as Segismundo remarks: “Sueña el rey que es rey y vive con este engaño mandando, disponiendo y gobernando; y el aplauso, que recibe prestado, en el viento lo escribe y en cenizas lo convierte la muerte. ¿Y que haya quien, aun así, intente reinar sabiendo que ha de despertar en el sueño de la muerte?” (65) (The king dreams that he is king and lives with this deception, commanding, arranging and governing; and the applause, which he receives on loan, writes it in the wind and death turns it to ashes. And that there exists someone who, even so, tries to reign knowing that he has to awaken in the dream of death?). In the comic, this idea is reinforced when uttered by Segismundo’s shadow projected on the cell wall, the figure’s upright hair creating the optical and baroque illusion of him wearing a crown. The image epitomizes the heart of the drama.

Then, Segismundo’s second monologue sets off: “sueña el rico en su riqueza . . .”, “sueña el pobre que padece su miseria y su pobreza” (65), . . . “y en el mundo, en conclusión, todos sueñan lo que son, aunque ninguno lo entiende” (66) (the rich man dreams of his wealth . . . the poor man dreams that he suffers his misery and poverty, . . . and in the world, in conclusion, everyone

dreams what they are, although no one understands it), a reference to another of Calderón's plays, *El gran teatro del mundo* (c. 1634) (*The Great Theater of the World*), where God is an Author who writes the actual Play that is the world. In this world, humans are given characters according to the Author's will, among them: the king who has power, the poor man who suffers, the rich man who enjoys very much his stay in the Play, the farmer who complains of his hard work. All of them are being tested, and those who perform their roles well in the brief Play will be judged at the end of it and rewarded by the Author, while those who perform badly will receive their just punishment. And if in the *comedia* and the graphic novel we must do good even when dreaming, and more so given that "toda la vida es sueño" (66) (all life is a dream), in this sacramental auto the verse that is repeatedly sang by the allegorical character Ley de Gracia (Divine Grace) in quasi-tautological terms is "obra bien, que Dios es Dios" (v. 667, ff.) (do good, that God is God). Therefore, both baroque plays seek to educate the reader-public on central themes of the Christian moral doctrine.

When talking about how Calderón structures his *comedias*, Rodríguez Cuadros contends that "primero, el eje de las obras en Calderón es la acción; segundo, los personajes se subordinan a la acción; tercero, la acción se subordina a un conflicto; cuarto, el conflicto se ancla en un tema; y quinto, el tema nunca es casual" ("En torno al cómic" n.p.) (first the axis of Calderón's dramas is action; second, characters are subordinate to the action; third, action subordinates to a conflict; fourth, the conflict is anchored in a theme; and fifth, the theme is never fortuitous). Accordingly, in the context of the theological dispute brought to the fore this time by the Counter-Reformation regarding the importance that the notions of predestination and free will have in Christianity, Calderón puts forward his *comedia* as the best way to support humans' free will against predestination.<sup>7</sup> As is the case up to this point, the graphic novel again closely follows the drama, showing king Basilio's realization that "el peor de los destinos, la naturaleza más violenta, sólo el albedrío inclinan, no lo fuerzan" (27) (the worst of fates, the most violent nature, only incline the will, they do not force it). Consequently, the central theme in this work is the freedom of the human being to dispose of their life, without getting carried away or forced by a supposed fate, and how the responsibility of being granted free will requires humans' self-mastery to govern themselves, as Segismundo declares: "pues que ya mi valor aguarda vencer grandes victorias, hoy ha de ser la más alta vencerme a mí" (98) (well, my courage already awaits to win great victories, today the highest one must be to be victor over myself). Thus, according to Calderón, earthly life is nothing more than a world of appearances, of ephemeral illusions, of mirages, where happiness vanishes like a dream, having to wait for death to awaken to true life, life in God—hence "el delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido" (14) (the major crime of man is to have been born). However, that does

not serve as an obstacle to embracing the *carpe-diem* of the Renaissance and the Baroque.

The final pages of the comic version of the play continue to illustrate the famous Calderonian verses, but the presentation of the verses takes an interesting metafictional turn. The last panel of the comic's penultimate page proposes an alternate gaze that reveals Segismundo on stage, a prompter hidden at his feet, with VÍlbor himself depicted as the stage director and a technician in the wings<sup>8</sup>; the narrative has suddenly become performance (101) (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The panel proposes an alternate gaze that reveals Segismundo and a prompter on stage, and then VÍlbor himself as stage director and a technician in the backstage. The comic has suddenly become performance.

On the last page, Segismundo is now framed differently, bathed in a spotlight and turned toward a heretofore unacknowledged theater public, as he expresses his will to transcend the futility of life precisely by enjoying it, by seizing the day as much as possible: “pues fue así como llegué a saber que toda la dicha, toda la felicidad humana, al fin, pasa y se desvanece como sueño, por eso hoy quiero disfrutar esta felicidad lo máximo posible” (102) (and so, that’s how I came to know that all joy, all human happiness, finally, passes and fades like a dream, that is why today I want to enjoy this happiness as much as possible). The comic ends with two clearly metafictional panels: in the first one the main characters ask the “queridos lectores” (dear readers) for their forgiveness for any errors committed during this rendition, as was customary for the cast to do with the audience in the Early Modern *corrales* (theaters), while the prompter repeats the line; the final one shows the complete cast bowing to the public at the end of a performance on the stage of a modern theater (102) (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. The comic ends with two panels: in the first one the main characters ask the “queridos lectores” (dear readers) for their forgiveness of any errors committed during this rendition, as it was customary for the cast to do with the audience in the Early Modern *corrales*; the final one shows the complete cast bowing to the public at the end of a performance on the stage of a modern theater.

This final transfiguration from narrative text to metafictional performance brings the piece full circle, reminding readers of the opening pages of the graphic novel that deliberately mark the theatrical nature of the original while at the same time highlighting the power of the comic form to communicate that. This abrupt, intentional, and multi-level rupture of the fourth wall is achieved by capitalizing on the aesthetic and narrative effects of each possible tabular arrangement of panels.<sup>9</sup> Given the fact that non-graphic literature has no tabular organization, literature-to-comic adaptations have to assemble tabular arrangements with great care, at the risk of adding features where there should be none. Thus, in this case, Vílbor clearly designs those three panels to ironically distance himself from the original, but in so doing, he reveals the genuine purpose of his adaptation: to underline the deep theatricality of both the comic and the dramatic text.

This baroque meta-theatrical device, by which authors such as Vílbor become part of their work, very much like Velázquez in *Las Meninas*, or when Cervantes invites the reader to be co-creator of his artifice in *Don Quijote*, points inward to show the artificiality of fiction, with the clear intention to reveal both the inner workings of representation and the scaffolding of the process of artistic creation. By highlighting the two aspects that forge graphic novels, the verbal and the image, the authors wink at the reader/viewer. Given the fact that neither the printed text nor the graphic discourse is primary, graphic novels bind visual and textual elements in ways that re-envision the terms of both the original text and its dramatic performance. Moreover, graphic novels give life to the artist's interpretation of the play script, appealing to the visual acuity of contemporary audiences. The consequence is that effective comic adaptations of the classics may help negotiate the historical and cultural differences that exist between classic literary works and contemporary world views, reactivating classical discourses.

The authors of *La vida es sueño* fuse the textual and the visual with the key elements of the theater, the dramatic text and its enactment, in order to underline the essence of theater as "text in performance." With this strategy, Vílbor and Sanz effectively transform the reader/viewer of the comic into a spectator of the play. Calderón's baroque *comedia* takes on a new life in an excellent graphic adaptation that not only does not distort the original but rather elevates it by both reiterating its main themes and revealing its utmost theatricality in a medium that proves perfect to capture the attention of contemporary audiences more accustomed to the visual and the cinematic. This comic proves a very useful tool to shed light on the intricacies of Early Modern theater, the mass spectacle of the 17th century—Europe's Hollywood-style blockbusters of the time, if you will—, and to help bring into the classroom the depth, modernity, and universality of the classics such as Calderón's *La vida es sueño*.

## Notes

1. The essay “The Literary Classics in Today’s Classroom: *Don Quixote* and Road Movies” is a good example of David Castillo’s approach to the study of literary classics.
2. Castillo’s work is a response to the need for self-justification that literature scholars face working in the revenue-driven universities of the 21st century, and the demand to explain their dedication to commentary on texts written centuries ago, often in foreign languages.
3. For an explanation of the benefits of combining original and simplified materials for pedagogical purposes, see: [lacuevademontesinos.wordpress.com/2016/06/04/debemos-adaptar-los-textos-clasicos/](http://lacuevademontesinos.wordpress.com/2016/06/04/debemos-adaptar-los-textos-clasicos/)
4. For an explanation of these issues, see Pratt 232–34.
5. All translations are ours. All illustrations from *La vida es sueño* are used here with the permission from the publisher and the authors, both of whom hold the copyright to the images. We would like to thank both of them for this permission.
6. As the authors reveal to us in the last section of the comic called “Cómo se hizo *La vida es sueño*” (103) (The Making of *Life is a Dream*): “este cómic siempre ha estado pensado y realizado para que la luz y las sombras fueran el factor más importante, más incluso que el dibujo en sí” (109) (this comic has always been conceived and created so that light and shadows were the most important factor, even more than the drawing itself).
7. A human’s life is written in God’s plan, but God grants humans free will, which allows them to decide between good and evil. That freedom of choice liberates humans from predestination, giving them full responsibility for their actions, and with it, some control over their destiny, though it is ultimately in God’s hands. This theological discussion involving free will, predestination, and salvation *in extremis* led to the *De auxiliis* controversy, which confronted Molinists (followers of the Jesuit Luis de Molina) and Bañecists (followers of the Dominican Domingo Báñez) positions in Spain and Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries and was a source of preoccupation for several Spanish Golden Age playwrights. These dramaturgs used their battleground, the theater, to sponsor one side or another and tried to position the public in the theological current of their choice.
8. Note the close similarity between the rendering of the stage director in this page and the depiction of the author VÍlbor that appears on the comic’s last page.
9. Panels are organized sequentially and also in tabular fashion. That is, they have a particular shape and position on the page in relation to the borders and other panels. Panels can be nested, varied in shape and size, all the same size, at varying distances from the page margins, bleeding out from those margins, and so on.

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