

# Life is a Dream



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PEDRO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA

Calderón was born into an upper-middle class family in Madrid, Spain, in 1600. His mother died when he was just 10 years old, and his father, a member of the Spanish nobility and secretary to the treasury, died when Calderón was 15. Calderón studied at the Jesuit College in Madrid, and he later studied law at Salamanca, a university west of Madrid. From 1625 to 1635, Calderón served in Italy with the Spanish army, and in 1636, he was made a knight in the Order of Santiago—a religious and military order—by Philip IV, King of Spain and Portugal. Calderón fathered a son, Pedro José, during the late 1640s, but the boy's mother died not long after giving birth. Calderón then entrusted his brother with the infant's care before joining the priesthood. Throughout the course of his life, Calderón was a prolific writer, and he is generally accepted as one of the foremost playwrights of the Spanish Golden Age, a period of increased artistic expression that coincided with Spain's emergence as a European power. Calderón began writing poetry, and he won several contests in the city of Madrid. He then moved on to playwriting, and by the time he was in his 40s, Calderón had penned over 70 plays, including *Life is a Dream*, *The Phantom Lady*, and *The Mayor of Zalamea*. He wrote both religious and secular plays, and even wrote an opera, *Celos aun del aire matan* (translation: *Jealousy, even groundless, still kills*) in 1660. Calderón is known most for his complex plots, rich characters, and poetic imagery. He was a staunch observer of the Christian faith, and his plays often promote moral integrity and instruction. Calderón wrote his last play in 1680 before dying just a year later at the age of 81.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream* is often described as the epitome of Spanish Golden Age literature. The Spanish Golden Age was a period of prolific artistic expression that occurred alongside the rise of the Habsburg dynasty, which included both Carlos I and Felipe II of Spain. The Habsburg dynasty lasted from 1516 to around 1700, and the rise of this dynasty coincided with the rise of the Spanish empire as a whole, a kingdom that was one of the largest and most powerful empires in all of history. The Habsburgs were huge supporters of the arts, especially the theater, and they formally commissioned some of the greatest writers, artists, and architects in all of Europe, including Calderón, sculptor El Greco, and painter Diego Velázquez. A specific type of literature, known as Spanish Baroque literature—of which

Calderón's writing is a prime example—flourished during the Spanish Golden Age. Spanish Baroque literature defined the early 17th century, when *Life is a Dream* was written, and is known for its highly ornate and embellished language. Key elements of Spanish Baroque literature include escapism and the avoidance of reality, as well as satire and moralizing, all of which are amply present in Calderón's *Life is a Dream*.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a key player during the Spanish Golden Age, Pedro Calderón de la Barca is often associated with Lope de Vega, another prominent writer of Spanish Baroque literature during the 17th century. Lope is perhaps best known for his play *Fuenteovejuna*, which is based upon a historical event in Castile during the 1400s, in which a commander of the Spanish military mistreats the local villagers and is killed in revenge. Other notable playwrights of the Spanish Golden Age include Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Mexican playwright, poet, and nun whose famous play *Loa to the Divine Narcissus* was published in Mexico in 1689 during the Spanish colonial period; and Tirso de Molina, a Roman Catholic monk whose 1630 play, *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*, features the legendary character Don Juan for the very first time. Perhaps the most famous literary work to come out of the Spanish Golden Age is Miguel de Cervantes's [Don Quixote](#)—published in two parts in 1605 and 1615—which is widely regarded as the most important piece of Spanish literature and the first modern novel. Like many works of the Spanish Golden Age, Calderón's *Life is a Dream* focuses on the moral implications of revenge and the restoration of honor. Other famous plays throughout history that also examine revenge and honor include [Electra](#) by Sophocles, William Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), and [The Spanish Tragedy](#) by Thomas Kyd.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Life is a Dream
- **When Written:** 1635
- **Where Written:** Madrid, Spain
- **When Published:** 1636
- **Literary Period:** Spanish Golden Age
- **Genre:** Dramatic Play
- **Setting:** Poland
- **Climax:** Segismundo refuses to help Rosaura avenge her honor by killing Astolfo, thereby establishing his own honor and proving wrong the prophecy that claims Segismundo is destined to be a monster.
- **Antagonist:** King Basilio

- **Point of View:** Dramatic

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Rosaura Lives On.** In 2016, writers Paula Rodriguez and Sandra Arpa staged an adaptation, *Rosaura*, based on Calderón's character and the struggles she faces in trying to restore her lost honor.

**Honor Killing.** The Spanish phrase *honor calderonian* began with Calderón and refers to a mindless sense of honor that can force a husband to kill his wife, even if he suspects she is innocent. Through depicting such displays of honor, Calderón condemns the immoral and senseless codes of honor that were popular during the 17th century.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Flying high over an unknown mountain range with her servant, Clarín, Rosaura's hippogriff unexpectedly lands. Rosaura, wearing men's clothing, steps off the winged beast and has no idea where she is. She is full of heartbreak and despair, yet she knows that fate has brought her to this strange place. Rosaura remarks that Poland has not been kind to her thus far, and she notices a rustic building up a wooded path. There is light pouring from an open door, and Rosaura and Clarín can hear the rattle of chains and sad lamentations coming from within. As they move closer, Rosaura is struck with deep sympathy for the crying man, and they stop outside to listen. The man, dressed in animal skins "like a wild beast," claims that his only crime is having been born, which everyone is surely guilty of. Still, the man, whose name is Segismundo has less liberty than any man or animal, and his only contact with the outside world is his jailer, Clotaldo.

Suddenly, Segismundo becomes aware of Rosaura and Clarín's presence and demands to know who is there. He grabs a frightened Rosaura and threatens to kill her, but when she explains she is only an unfortunate soul looking for consolation, Segismundo begins to soften. The sound of Clotaldo and a group of guards comes from deep inside the prison, and they hear Clotaldo order the guards to kill the intruders at once. As Clotaldo and the guards approach, Rosaura and Clarín beg for their lives and surrender their weapons as directed. When Rosaura hands over her **sword**, Clotaldo immediately recognizes it. He had left the very same sword with Violante, the mother of his unborn son, in Muscovy, so that the boy might later use it to find his father. Realizing that Rosaura, whom Clotaldo believes is a man, is actually his son, Clotaldo knows he cannot kill them—even if that means King Basilio will order Clotaldo's own death for disobeying his order to kill anyone trespassing at the secret prison. Leaving Segismundo locked and shackled in his cell, Clotaldo brings the two strangers to the palace in Warsaw.

Back at the palace, Astolfo watches as his cousin Estrella enters with her ladies-in-waiting. Astolfo and Estrella are the nephew and niece of King Basilio (their mothers had been his sisters), and since the king has not fathered a living heir, they are both vying for the crown. Astolfo, thinking that it might be most advantageous to marry Estrella, flatters her beauty, claiming she is "queen in [his] soul." Estrella, however, isn't impressed with Astolfo's efforts to flatter her and considers him full of "deceit and treachery." As trumpets sound the arrival of King Basilio, Estrella points to the pendant hanging from Astolfo's neck, which, she insists, contains the portrait of another woman. Basilio enters and lavishes his niece and nephew with love, and while he promises to treat them equally in their desires for the crown, he says he must first make a confession.

The king claims that his late wife had given birth to a son, Segismundo, whose astrological prophecy claimed he would be a tyrant who would murder his father and cause dissent and division within Poland. In an effort to save his country and his life, Basilio immediately locked Segismundo up after birth, "to see whether a wise man / can prevail over the stars." Now, however, Basilio questions his decision to imprison his son and deny Poland of their rightful prince, and he has decided to free Segismundo on a trial basis. Basilio believes that perhaps Segismundo's evil nature won't surface, or that he will be able to resist his violent tendencies through his own free will. Moments later, after Astolfo and Estrella exit, Clotaldo arrives at the palace with Rosaura and Clarín and asks to speak with the king. He begins to explain to Basilio that he did not kill the strangers whom he found trespassing at the secret prison, but Basilio cuts him off. He has already revealed the secret, Basilio says, so there is no need to kill the strangers. Clotaldo is relieved; now he won't have to tell Basilio that the stranger is his son.

Sometime later, Clotaldo enters the castle and informs Basilio that his orders have been followed. Clotaldo has given Segismundo a potion made of opium, poppy, and henbane, and, after he fell into a deep sleep resembling death, brought him to the palace and placed him in Basilio's luxurious bed. Now, Clotaldo says, he demands to know why Basilio has requested Segismundo's presence—and in such a state—after all these years. Basilio claims that he wishes to discover if he can change the stars, so to speak. Or, at least, see if the prophecy was wrong. He wants to know if Segismundo can overcome his evil nature. If not, he will send him back to prison at once. The point of bringing Segismundo to the palace in his sleep is so they can convince him the experience was just a dream, should the prophecy prove true and they have to send him back to prison. If that happens, Basilio says, then Segismundo's imprisonment will be punishment and not merely precaution. As they hear a very confused Segismundo approaching, Basilio orders Clotaldo to tell Segismundo that he is the prince of Poland, and then he slips out of the room.

Segismundo enters. He knows that he is awake, yet he still feels as if he is dreaming. Clotaldo immediately asks if he can kiss Segismundo's hand, and Segismundo is even more confused. Why, he asks, should his jailer, who normally treats him poorly, now want to kiss his hand? Clotaldo explains that Segismundo is actually the crown prince of Poland and has been imprisoned all this time because a prophecy claimed he would bring only pain and ruin to his people. Segismundo is incensed. How could Clotaldo treat his prince so badly? Segismundo threatens to kill Clotaldo with his bare hands and throws a servant from the balcony. Clotaldo begs Segismundo to behave and tells him that he is only dreaming, but Segismundo can't be calmed. Astolfo enters and saves Clotaldo's life, and Segismundo challenges him to a duel. King Basilio arrives to investigate the commotion, and Segismundo verbally attacks him for locking him in the secret prison. He calls his father a "tyrant" who has robbed him of his liberty and freedom, and Basilio, too, tells Segismundo that he is only dreaming.

Meanwhile, Estrella approaches Rosaura—whom she knows as Astraea, her lady-in-waiting—and asks her to retrieve the pendant from Astolfo. Estrella doesn't intend on ever speaking to Astolfo again, but she refuses to let him keep the portrait. As Estrella leaves, Rosaura is distraught. Clotaldo, who now knows that Rosaura is his daughter, has advised her not to reveal her true identity. Suddenly, Astolfo enters and recognizes Rosaura as the woman he had fallen in love with in Muscovy. She tells him that her name is Astraea and demands he give her the portrait, so she may in turn give it to Estrella. Astolfo refuses and tells Rosaura that the portrait in question is of her. Estrella enters, and Rosaura quickly lies and tells her that the portrait in Astolfo's hand is her own. She had brought along her own, Rosaura claims, and when she stopped to look at it, Astolfo took it and now refuses to return it. Estrella takes the portrait, and, agreeing that it is certainly Astraea's portrait, demands to see the portrait from the pendant. Astolfo again refuses. "Damn you, Rosaura!" he exclaims, just as Segismundo, sound asleep and dressed in animal skins, is carried through the room.

Back at the secret prison, a peasant uprising storms Segismundo's cell to free their rightful prince. They won't accept a foreign king, they claim, and they plan to revolt. Segismundo again assumes he is dreaming, but he plays along anyway and decides to prove the prophecy true. He will fight his father and claim his rightful place on the throne. When Clotaldo realizes that Segismundo has been freed from his cell, he throws himself at his feet and begs for mercy. Segismundo, however, thanks Clotaldo for taking care of him over the years and spares his life. He pledges his loyalty to Clotaldo and says that good deeds, even in dreams, are never wasted. Clotaldo thanks Segismundo for his kindness but says he cannot take up arms against the king, to whom he has sworn his own loyalty. Segismundo understands, and he lets Clotaldo go, promising to see him on the battlefield.

At the palace in Warsaw, Rosaura begs Clotaldo to help her seek revenge on Astolfo. It is Clotaldo's duty as her father, Rosaura says, to defend her honor. Astolfo stole Rosaura's honor back in Muscovy and left her to come to Poland and marry Estrella, and the only way to right the wrong is to kill him. Clotaldo refuses. Astolfo saved his life when Segismundo wanted to kill him, and he can't possibly kill Astolfo now, regardless of his ill-treatment of Rosaura. She is furious and curses Clotaldo as her father.

Clotaldo and Rosaura exit, and Segismundo, accompanied by his armed men, enters. Suddenly, Rosaura enters again, this time dressed in a long tunic and carrying her sword. She pledges her loyalty to Segismundo and explains again how Astolfo has stolen her honor. She implores Segismundo to help her avenge her lost honor, but Segismundo doesn't answer. Rosaura is angry that Segismundo is ignoring her, but he assures her that he will avenge her honor through actions, not words. The sound of drums indicates that Segismundo's men have taken the castle, and Clotaldo and Basilio enter, surrendering to Segismundo. As Basilio bows at his son's feet, Segismundo tells him to rise. He will honor him after all, Segismundo says, and accepts him as his father and king. Basilio is impressed with Segismundo's good nature and, since Segismundo has effectively proved the prophecy wrong, Basilio immediately makes Segismundo king. As his first order of business, Segismundo commands Astolfo to marry Rosaura and restore her lost honor, and then he claims Estrella as his own queen. Segismundo is finally happy, yet he worries he will wake in his prison cell. Even so, Segismundo decides, to wake in prison after this joyous day will be enough, as all "human happiness / passes by in the end like a dream."



## CHARACTERS

**Segismundo** – Segismundo is King Basilio's son and the protagonist of *Life is a Dream*. After a prophecy claims that Segismundo will be an evil tyrant, Basilio locks him up in a secret prison, and his only human contact is his jailer, Clotaldo. One day, Segismundo wakes up at the palace in Warsaw, and Clotaldo informs him that he is really the crown prince of Poland. Segismundo is enraged. He throws a servant from a balcony and is further irritated by Astolfo, his cousin and potential heir to the throne. Segismundo threatens to kill Clotaldo and challenges Astolfo to a duel, and when Basilio enters, Segismundo curses his father for robbing him of his divine right and freedom. Basilio tries to convince Segismundo that he is dreaming, and when he later wakes up back in his prison cell, Segismundo is indeed convinced it was a dream. He tells Clotaldo all about it and the terrible way he behaved, and Clotaldo tells him that "good deeds are never wasted," not even in dreams. A mob of rebelling commoners soon breaks Segismundo out of prison cell and hails him as their prince.

Segismundo doesn't know if he is dreaming, but he vows to affirm the prophecy and take up arms against his father. Clotaldo surrenders at his feet, but, softened by Clotaldo's words about good deeds, Segismundo spares his life. At the palace, Clotaldo's daughter, Rosaura begs Segismundo to kill Astolfo and avenge her lost honor, but Segismundo refuses. After the uprising defeats the king's soldiers and Basilio surrenders, Segismundo forgives his father and shows him mercy. Convinced by Segismundo's kindness that the prophecy is wrong, Basilio makes Segismundo the new king, and Segismundo immediately orders Astolfo to marry Rosaura and restore her honor. Segismundo takes the beautiful Estrella as his wife, and he is so happy, he feels as if he is dreaming. The character of Segismundo illustrates the conflict between dreams and reality, and his character also suggests that fate is not predestined but decided by one's free will. Through Segismundo, Calderón argues that life itself is an illusion while simultaneously underscoring the importance of morality.

**Rosaura/Astraea** – Rosaura is a noblewoman from Muscovy, Astolfo's former lover, and Clotaldo's daughter. Rosaura comes to Poland to find Astolfo and restore her honor by getting revenge on him, but her hippogriff drops her on the top of an unknown mountain with her servant, Clarín, and they stumble across Segismundo and his secret prison. Rosaura is dressed in men's clothing, and the jailer, Clotaldo, believes she is a man. She surrenders her **sword**—a symbol of her true identity and a gift from her father—and Clotaldo spares her life and takes her to the palace in Warsaw. There, Rosaura tells Clotaldo that she is a woman, and Clotaldo tells her that he is her father. He advises her to change her name to Astraea and pose as one of Estrella's ladies-in-waiting, and he tells her to stay away from Astolfo. Estrella soon asks Rosaura to recover a pendant from Astolfo, which, Estrella claims, contains the portrait of another woman. Rosaura doesn't know what to do, and when Astolfo enters and discovers her, she tries to pretend that she really is Astraea. Astolfo knows Rosaura is the woman he fell in love with in Muscovy, even though he intends to marry Estrella, and he can't give up the pendant, he says, because the portrait is of Rosaura. Rosaura lies to Estrella about the portrait to buy some time, and she tries to convince Clotaldo to kill Astolfo on her behalf to avenge her lost honor. Clotaldo refuses, and Rosaura curses him. She then tries to convince Segismundo to kill Astolfo, but he refuses, too. Segismundo, however, promises to restore her honor in a different way. After Basilio makes Segismundo the new king, Segismundo orders Astolfo to marry Rosaura and restore her lost honor. Through the character of Rosaura, Calderón explores the morality of revenge and the importance of honor. While he seems to imply that one's honor is certainly important, Calderón ultimately suggests that there is nothing honorable about revenge.

**Clotaldo** – Clotaldo is Segismundo's jailer, Basilio's faithful servant, and Rosaura's father. When Clotaldo is first

introduced, he responds to two intruders in the secret prison and discovers that one, who unsheathes the **sword** Clotaldo left with his unborn child in Muscovy, is his long-lost son (since he believes Rosaura to be a man). King Basilio reveals his secret about Segismundo, and he orders Clotaldo to sedate Segismundo and bring him to the palace. Clotaldo obeys and later learns that Basilio plans to tell Segismundo that he is only dreaming, should he behave badly and need to be sent back to prison. When Segismundo wakes, Clotaldo tells Segismundo who he really is, and when he does, Segismundo threatens to kill him. Astolfo intercedes and saves Clotaldo's life, and Segismundo is sent back to prison. Clotaldo learns that his son is actually a woman, and he tells Rosaura that he is her father. When Rosaura asks him to kill Astolfo—who stole her honor and abandoned her in Muscovy—on her behalf, he refuses. Clotaldo cannot bring himself to kill the same man who had saved his life. Clotaldo tells no one else that Rosaura is his daughter, and he imprisons Clarín to keep his secret. After the uprising breaks Segismundo out of prison, Segismundo forgives Clotaldo for treating him so badly, and he thanks him for educating him and helping him along. Segismundo spares Clotaldo's life and swears loyalty to him, but Clotaldo won't betray King Basilio and refuses to take up arms against him. After the uprising defeats Basilio's soldiers and the king is forced to surrender, Clotaldo finally admits that Rosaura is his daughter, so that Astolfo will recognize her royal blood and consent to marry her. Clotaldo represents integrity and loyalty within the play, and he convinces Segismundo that "good deeds are never wasted," not even in dreams. His morals are repeatedly tested, and he is constantly trying to do the right thing; however, he also behaves in ways that aren't quite ethical. He seduces Rosaura's mother Violante and abandons her, treats Segismundo poorly when he is his prisoner, and selfishly deprives Clarín of his freedom.

**Basilio** – Basilio is the King of Poland and Segismundo's father. Basilio is a "learned" man, especially in science and mathematics, and he hopes to use his knowledge to overcome fate. When Segismundo is born under an "astrological conjunction" that implies he will be a cruel and tyrannical king, Basilio locks him up. However, as years pass, Basilio begins to question his decision and wonders if Segismundo might be able to resist his evil nature and act instead based on his own free will. Basilio decides to free Segismundo and bring him back to the palace as a prince, but he first has Clotaldo sedate him with a potion made of herbs, so that they can tell Segismundo his experience has all been a dream should he behave badly and need to be sent back to prison. Segismundo reacts badly when he finds out his true identity, and he curses Basilio for robbing him of his divine right and freedom. Basilio sends Segismundo back to prison, and informs his nephew, Astolfo, that he is to be the new king, but the damage has already been done. The commoners refuse to accept a foreigner as king and begin to revolt, and they break Segismundo out of prison, overthrowing

Basilio. Basilio surrenders at his son's feet, but Segismundo shows him mercy. Impressed by his son's good deed and convinced the prophecy is wrong, Basilio makes Segismundo the new king after all. The character of Basilio illustrates the conflict between fate, or predestination, and free will. Instead of believing that one's destiny is fixed, Basilio believes that one can decide their fate through exercising free will.

**Astolfo** – Astolfo is King Basilio's nephew, Segismundo's cousin, and Rosaura's former lover. Astolfo is the Duke of Muscovy, and he comes to Poland to convince his uncle, whom Astolfo believes to be childless, to make him the new king. Astolfo's cousin, Estrella, wants the crown, too, and Astolfo thinks it most advantageous if they marry and ascend the throne together. Before coming to Poland, Astolfo seduced Rosaura and left her, and while Estrella doesn't know this specifically, she knows that Astolfo has a portrait of another woman in the pendant around his neck. Astolfo refuses to give up the portrait, which he later admits is Rosaura's likeness. He comes to Clotaldo's aid when Segismundo threatens to kill him, and he remains loyal to King Basilio through the uprising and resulting battle. After Basilio declares Segismundo the king at the end of the play, Segismundo orders Astolfo to marry Rosaura and restore her lost honor. Initially, Astolfo is reluctant to marry Rosaura, even though he loves her, as she does not have royal blood. However, after Clotaldo admits that Rosaura is his daughter, Astolfo quickly agrees to marry her. Astolfo is an opportunist who wants the crown at any cost—even if that means betraying Rosaura and her honor—but he also displays integrity when he saves Clotaldo's life.

**Clarín** – Clarín is Rosaura's servant. Clarín is incredibly talkative, as his name—which is derived from the word *clarion*, or trumpet—suggests, and he frequently interrupts to tell jokes or offer insightful humor. He accompanies Rosaura from Muscovy to Poland to restore her lost honor, and he is with Rosaura when she discovers Segismundo at the secret prison. Segismundo is especially fond of Clarín, and he is the only one Segismundo does not threaten to kill. Near the end of the second act, Clotaldo imprisons Clarín for knowing Clotaldo's secret identity as Rosaura's father, but Clarín escapes when the rebelling commoners mistake him for Segismundo and break him out of the cell. He is killed near the end of the play during the uprising while attempting to hide from the violence of battle. Clarín serves as the play's comic relief and represents loyalty and honor. Despite his silliness, Clarín is dedicated to Rosaura and is often the voice of reason.

**Estrella** – Estrella is a princess, King Basilio's niece, and Astolfo's love interest. Like her cousin Astolfo, Estrella wants to ascend the throne when she believes her uncle to be childless. However, unlike Astolfo, she does not wish to marry in order to become Poland's ruler. Estrella believes that Astolfo is full of "deceit and treachery," and she knows that he keeps another woman's portrait in the pendant around his neck. Segismundo

is immediately taken by Estrella's beauty, and after he is made king, he takes her as his wife and makes her the queen.

**Violante** – Violante is a noblewoman from Muscovy and Rosaura's mother. When Violante is young and beautiful, Clotaldo seduces her on a trip to Muscovy, stealing her honor and leaving her pregnant and alone. Before he returns to Poland, however, Clotaldo gives Violante his **sword**, so that his unborn son might later use it to find him. Violante, of course, gives birth to a daughter instead, and after Rosaura's own honor is stolen by Astolfo, Violante encourages Rosaura to go to Poland and restore her lost honor. She tells Rosaura to take the sword and be seen by many noblemen. One of them, Violante says, will step forward as Rosaura's savior. Violante hopes Rosaura will reconnect with Clotaldo, and she wants her to fight for her stolen honor, which Violante herself was never able to do.

**The Servant** – A servant at Basilio's palace in Warsaw. When Segismundo wakes as the prince of Poland and runs amok, threatening to kill everyone and generally acting in an inappropriate way, the servant attempts to calm Segismundo down. Segismundo threatens to throw the servant out a window, and when the servant continues to insist that he calm down, Segismundo throws him from a balcony. Segismundo's poor and irrational treatment of the servant implies that perhaps Segismundo is an animal, just as the prophecy claims.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### FATE VS. FREE WILL

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *Life is a Dream* explores the conflict between fate and free will. Fate, or destiny, assumes that one's life follows a predetermined path that can't be altered through individual choices or actions. Free will, on the other hand, assumes that one is able to freely choose a path from multiple courses of action. In Calderón's play, Basilio, King of Poland, imprisons his son, Segismundo, from birth because an astrological sign prophesizes that Segismundo will be "the most insolent man, / the most cruel prince, / and the most impious monarch." Segismundo is destined to be a monster, and under his rule, Poland will be "fragmented and divided." To save his kingdom and himself, Basilio denies Segismundo his role as prince and locks him away, but Basilio soon regrets his decision and frees Segismundo on a trial basis. While Segismundo initially behaves in a way that reflects his destiny as monster, he ultimately

discovers that his actions are entirely his own. Through *Life is a Dream*, Calderón argues that one's existence is not ruled by fate or destiny; rather, one has the ability and free will to control their destiny through their actions.

Throughout the play, Calderón's characters constantly challenge fate and try to change their destinies, which hints from the start that fate isn't fixed after all and is instead based upon free will and independent actions. When the prophecy predicts that Segismundo will be the end of his father, Basilio locks Segismundo up "to see whether a wise man / can prevail over the stars." According to the prophecy, it is Basilio's fate that his son will kill him, but Basilio hopes to change this by locking him up. As the years pass, however, Basilio begins to doubt his decision to imprison Segismundo and questions whether the prophecy is a true indication of his son's nature. Basilio reasons that perhaps Segismundo's violent nature won't dictate his behavior, saying: "[E]ven the most dire fate, / the most violent inclination, / the most evil planet, / merely dispose our free will in a certain direction, / but never compel it in that direction." Simply put, while Segismundo's prophecy makes it more likely that he'll have a violent nature, it does not *force* him to behave violently. When Clotaldo, Segismundo's jailer and his only contact with the outside world, tells Segismundo that he is actually a prince imprisoned because his fate "promises a thousand disasters," Clotaldo reminds him of his free will. Clotaldo believes that Segismundo's "good sense" will "cancel out the planets' decree— / because a highminded man / can resist them." Like Basilio, Clotaldo believes that Segismundo is capable of changing his destiny with his own free will.

Despite Basilio and Clotaldo's belief that Segismundo does not have to be a monster simply because fate decrees it, Segismundo behaves in a way that suggests he really is a violent "animal." Once Segismundo is released from prison and told he is a prince, he throws an innocent servant from a balcony simply for suggesting it is inappropriate for Segismundo to kiss the hand of Estrella, a woman who is betrothed to another. Segismundo's violent reaction to the servant's reasonable warning suggests that perhaps Segismundo is destined to be a monster after all. When Clotaldo tries to calm the violent rage Segismundo flies into after discovering his true identity, Segismundo quickly turns on Clotaldo and threatens to kill him. "I'm a tyrant," Segismundo says, "and by now it's no use trying to pacify me." Segismundo, it seems, *is* a monster, and Clotaldo can't talk him out of it. Segismundo even threatens to kill Astolfo, his cousin and heir to the throne, when Astolfo saves Clotaldo from Segismundo's wrath. Just as the prophecy claims, Segismundo is a violent monster and there seems to be nothing that can be done to change his fate.

By the end of the play, after Basilio has returned Segismundo to prison, the kingdom begins to revolt over Basilio's decision to keep the rightful prince from the people. The rebellion breaks Segismundo out of prison and, in a violent uprising, quickly

gains control of the kingdom. With Basilio at his mercy, however, Segismundo no longer behaves violently. Segismundo realizes that it is his father's actions—of imprisoning him and treating him like an animal—that turned him into a monster, not fate. "I might have been born tractable / and humble," Segismundo says, "all that was needed / was that way of life." As it is Basilio's actions that have made Segismundo into monster, it is Segismundo's actions that can deliver him from this same fate. By simply choosing not to be a monster, Segismundo ultimately takes control over his own fate and destiny, demonstrating that free will can indeed triumph over destiny.



## DREAMS VS. REALITY

Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream* tells the story of Basilio, King of Poland, who imprisons his son, Segismundo, after a prophecy claims it is the young prince's destiny to kill his father and divide his country. Years pass, and Basilio begins to doubt his decision to imprison Segismundo and deny the people their rightful prince. He decides to free his son, but just in case Segismundo really is a monster who will only bring ruin to his country and people, Basilio tricks Segismundo into believing he is dreaming so that, if need be, he can easily be placed back in prison without knowing his true identity. After being drugged with opium, poppy, and henbane, Segismundo, in a slumber resembling death, is brought from his prison cell to the palace in Warsaw and placed in his father's luxurious bed. When he wakes, Segismundo indeed finds himself part of an unbelievable world that surely must be some sort of dream. Through the blending of dreams and reality in *Life is a Dream*, Calderón effectively argues that like dreams, life itself is an illusion.

Throughout much of Calderón's play, reality turns out to be something other than what it seems, which suggests that reality itself is merely perception. When Rosaura, one of the play's main characters, is first introduced, she is dressed as a man, and when she next appears, Rosaura is disguised as a lady-in-waiting at court. In reality, Rosaura is really Clotaldo's secret daughter and Astolfo's jilted lover, but she appears to be something else entirely. After Rosaura, disguised as a man, is apprehended by Clotaldo for unwittingly wandering into Segismundo's prison cell, Clotaldo is convinced that Rosaura is his long-lost son. Rosaura carries Clotaldo's **sword**, which he had left, many years before, to be given to his unborn son. In reality, Clotaldo has a daughter, not a son, but his perception is that Rosaura is his son. Furthermore, Astolfo, the Duke of Muscovy and Basilio's nephew, believes that his uncle is without children and that he is next in line for the throne. In reality, Basilio's secret son, Segismundo, is the rightful heir, but Astolfo nevertheless believes that he will be king, which again implies that reality is only a matter of perception.

When Segismundo wakes up as the Prince of Poland after spending his whole life in prison, his new existence is

completely unbelievable. Even though he doesn't quite believe it, this new perception is still Segismundo's reality. In short, that which is real feels like a dream, just as that which is false often seems to be real. "To say I'm dreaming is mistaken," Segismundo cries when he wakes in a lavish bed surrounded by servants, "I know very well I'm awake." Segismundo is used to prison and isolation, not luxury and indulgence, and he is dubious from the beginning, but he still accepts his dreamlike new reality. As the Prince of Poland, Segismundo is overwhelmed and unsure of himself. "As for me," he says to his servants, "all of this is making me angry. / Nothing seems right to me." However, when Basilio attempts to convince Segismundo that his experience as the prince was all just a dream, Segismundo refuses to believe him. "I'm not dreaming," Segismundo claims, "because I feel and believe / that which I was and that which I am." Segismundo makes it clear here that humans have little choice but to accept perception as reality—even when that reality feels like a dream.

Once Segismundo wakes up back in his prison cell, he decides that it doesn't matter if his experience was all a dream or not. "Living is merely dreaming," he claims. Through Segismundo's experiences, Calderón suggests that life is only "an illusion, / a shadow, a fiction," and one can never be fully certain that their perception is in fact reality.



### MORALITY, HONOR, AND VENGEANCE

Calderón's *Life is a Dream* is often interpreted as a didactic play of moral and Christian instruction. In addition to the story of Segismundo and his

transformation from monster to righteous and good man, the play also examines the moral dilemmas encountered by Clotaldo and Basilio. Special attention, however, is placed on the story of Rosaura, a woman of noble birth whose honor is stolen by Astolfo, the Duke of Muscovy and the potential heir to the throne of Poland. Just as Rosaura's mother, Violante, was seduced by Clotaldo and left to fend for herself, Astolfo seduces Rosaura and then abandons her. Disguised as a strange man, Rosaura arrives at the palace in Warsaw with the intention of seeking revenge on Astolfo for stealing her virtue and honor, but she is unable to convince either Segismundo or Clotaldo to help her kill Astolfo. In refusing to help Rosaura kill Astolfo to avenge her honor, however, Segismundo actually restores both Rosaura's lost honor and his own. Through the characters of Rosaura and Segismundo, and the unexpected way in which Rosaura regains her honor, Calderón effectively argues for the importance of morality and implies that there is nothing honorable about revenge.

At the start, both Rosaura and Segismundo are convinced that revenge is the key to regaining their lost honor. Clotaldo, however, tries to persuade them otherwise, which implies that seeking revenge is not moral. Clotaldo is not initially against killing Astolfo, until Astolfo intervenes on Clotaldo's behalf when Segismundo tries to kill him. Astolfo arrives "disregarding

his own peril, / to display in [Clotaldo's] defense / his good will." Despite his poor treatment of Rosaura, Astolfo proves himself to be a good and decent man in at least some situations, and Clotaldo can't bring himself to harm his savior. Even though Clotaldo wants to help Rosaura and defend her honor, he refuses to kill Astolfo for her. Though the decision is difficult for him, Clotaldo essentially decides to prioritize integrity and gratitude over revenge. Clotaldo also tries to convince Segismundo that his desire to seek revenge on his father, King Basilio, for imprisoning him is not the right thing to do either—even if Segismundo is only dreaming. Clotaldo argues that Segismundo should honor his father at all times, and he explains that "even in dreams / good deeds are never wasted." Clotaldo's argument suggests that it is most important to always behave in a way that is moral and righteous, even if that means forfeiting one's chance for revenge.

Segismundo recognizes the consequences of revenge and the importance of morality before Rosaura does, and, like Clotaldo, he refuses to help Rosaura exact her revenge on Astolfo. His refusal again suggests that Rosaura's desire for vengeance is not righteous or moral. After Rosaura swears her loyalty to Segismundo and pleads for his assistance in defending her lost honor, Segismundo says "it is essential to honor" that he refuse Rosaura's request. The honorable thing, Segismundo claims, is *not* to seek vengeance. "My voice doesn't answer you," Segismundo says to Rosaura, "so that my honor *can*." In this riddle of sorts, Segismundo implies that while it may seem as if he is doesn't wish to help Rosaura, he actually does want to—but to him, helping her means focusing on honor rather than revenge. Segismundo vows that he will restore Rosaura's honor and good name before he recovers his own crown, although it will not occur in quite the way Rosaura envisions it.

It is through Rosaura, and with the help of Clotaldo, that Segismundo ultimately discovers that he cannot realize his rightful role as king if he seeks his own revenge against his father. After Segismundo spares his father's life following the people's revolt and is made king of Poland, he decrees that Astolfo must marry Rosaura to restore her lost honor. In ordering the marriage between Astolfo and Rosaura, Segismundo demonstrates that while honor is important, it doesn't require revenge—and in fact, vengeance actually goes against honor. It is more honorable, Calderón thus implies, to always behave in a way that is moral. Segismundo's actions restore both Rosaura's honor and his own, as he has officially redeemed himself and proven that he is not an animal as the prophecy claims, but is instead a man of deep morals and righteousness.



### SYMBOLS



Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## ROSAURA'S SWORD

Rosaura's sword, which she brings with her from Muscovy to Poland to avenge her lost honor, is mentioned several times in *Life is a Dream*, and it is symbolic of Rosaura's identity as Clotaldo's daughter and as royalty within the play. Upon her arrival to Poland, Rosaura knows nothing of her father or of what her sword signifies. Her mother, Violante, tells Rosaura to take the sword with her to Poland and be seen with it in the company of noble and eminent men. One of these men, Violante says, will step forward and be Rosaura's savior. When Rosaura is captured at the secret prison for trespassing, the sword indeed saves her life. Clotaldo recognizes the weapon as the same sword he had left behind in Muscovy for his unborn child, and he assumes that Rosaura, who is disguised as a man, is his son.

Rosaura's sword doesn't just identify her as Clotaldo's daughter—since Clotaldo is a nobleman, the sword also signifies Rosaura's royal blood and her identity as a noblewoman. It is Astolfo who has stolen Rosaura's honor in Muscovy and left her to marry Estrella, and Rosaura plans to kill him and recover her lost honor; however, Segismundo orders Astolfo to marry Rosaura instead. That way, Rosaura's honor is restored and her morality doesn't suffer through needless and unethical revenge. Astolfo, however, is hesitant to marry Rosaura because she is not of noble blood, but when Clotaldo admits through the sword that Rosaura is indeed his daughter, Astolfo finally agrees to marry her. Thus, the sword allows Rosaura to assert her true identity, allowing her honor to be restored and her morals and integrity to remain intact.

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of *Life is a Dream*, after Rosaura and Clarín are caught trespassing at the secret prison, and it is significant because it sheds light on Segismundo's story and explains why he is in prison. Segismundo has been lamenting his plight as a prisoner to Rosaura and Clarín, which Clotaldo likens to bragging. A “heavenly law,” or prophecy, has predicted Segismundo will become an evil and tyrannical man, and he has been imprisoned and chained to keep his “arrogant fury” in check. Clotaldo implies here that Segismundo should be too ashamed to tell Rosaura and Clarín his story, and he completely dismisses Segismundo and his pleas to spare the lives of Rosaura and Clarín.

This passage also highlights Clotaldo's poor treatment of Segismundo, which complicates Clotaldo's identity as a man of integrity and honor. Clotaldo subtly insults Segismundo and implies that he is a monster, even though Segismundo has not yet done anything to warrant such an insult. At this point, Segismundo's imprisonment is a precaution, not a punishment; however, Clotaldo still treats Segismundo like a criminal. He silences Segismundo by shutting his prison door in his face and locking it, relegating him to the “cramped,” and likely uncomfortable, space inside. Clotaldo is portrayed as a moral man, and he is constantly struggling with loyalty and ethical decisions. Yet Clotaldo so easily treats Segismundo with disrespect and disdain while he is in prison, suggesting that Clotaldo isn't as moral as he pretends to be.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Life is a Dream* published in 2012.

### Act One Quotes


●● Segismundo, if you know  
that your misfortunes are so great  
that you died before you were born  
because of a heavenly law; if you know  
that these shackles are a bridle to your arrogant  
fury to keep it in check,  
and reins to call it to a halt,  
why do you brag? Guards, lock  
the door to this cramped prison;  
hide him within it.


**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Clarín, Rosaura/  
Astraea, Segismundo



●● Heaven help me! What's this I hear?  
 I still can't decide whether what's happening is  
 an illusion or reality.  
 This sword is the one that I  
 left with beautiful Violante  
 as a token that the man who bore it  
 girded to his waist would find me  
 as a loving son  
 finds an affectionate father.  
 So, what am I to do (woe is me!)  
 in a dilemma like this,  
 if the man who wears it for his benefit  
 is actually wearing it for his death,  
 seeing that he has surrendered to me  
 under sentence of death! What a singular  
 dilemma! What a sad fate!  
 What a changeable fortune!

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Violante, Rosaura/  
 Astraea

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Rosaura is caught trespassing at the secret prison and is forced to surrender her sword, and it is important because it identifies Clotaldo as her father and establishes the significance of the sword, which is symbolic of Rosaura's true identity as a noblewoman. Clotaldo had left the sword with Violante, Rosaura's mother, before he left her, pregnant and alone. Despite abandoning his unborn child, however, Clotaldo implies that he loves his "son" like an "affectionate father," and he assumes that Rosaura, disguised as a man, is that son. As Rosaura hands the sword to Clotaldo, he can't believe his eyes and can't decide if it is "an illusion or reality." Calderón ultimately argues that reality *is* an illusion, and this passage first introduces this theme in the play.

Of course, since Clotaldo has also discovered the stranger he believes is his son trespassing at the secret prison, Clotaldo must kill Rosaura, which is his "singular dilemma" and his "sad fate." By calling his predicament a "changeable fortune," Clotaldo likely means to say it is unpredictable, but this choice of words has additional meaning within the context of the play. In referring to his dilemma as his "fate," Clotaldo implies that there is nothing he can do about it, yet the word "changeable" also suggests that this fate isn't fixed

and can be modified through free will. Calderón argues throughout the play that one's life is not predestined by fate or destiny but is instead dictated by individual decisions and actions, and Clotaldo's words reinforce this idea.

●● Besides that, if I now pay heed  
 to the fact that he said he had come  
 to take revenge for an affront, a man  
 who has been affronted is base.  
 He isn't my son, he isn't my son  
 and doesn't bear my noble blood!  
 But if it was some  
 critical situation of the sort that no one  
 can avoid, because honor  
 is of such brittle stuff  
 that it is broken with a gesture  
 or besmirched by a puff of air,  
 what more can he do, what more,  
 on his part, as a nobleman,  
 than to come in quest of his honor  
 at the cost of so many risks?  
 He *is* my son, he bears my blood,  
 since he possesses such great merit!

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Rosaura/Astraea

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 12-3

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Clotaldo catches Rosaura—who is disguised as a man—trespassing at the secret prison, and it is important because it highlights Clotaldo's inner struggle and establishes the themes of honor and revenge within the play. Here, Clotaldo quickly parcels out his dilemma: he thinks the stranger is his son, but he can't be sure—and he doesn't want to kill his own son. Rosaura has said only that she has come to Poland to seek "revenge for an affront," but she doesn't tell Clotaldo who has insulted her or how.



Clotaldo claims that an affronted man is "base"—meaning that a man who has been insulted by another is the lowest form of man—and he initially considers this proof that the stranger *is not* his son. The son of a nobleman, Clotaldo contends, could never be insulted in such a way.

However, Clotaldo concedes that honor is "brittle stuff" and can be upset by nearly anything, even a "puff of air," and avoiding affronts to one's respectability isn't always possible. In cases such as these—"critical situation[s]"—the

son of a nobleman would have to avenge their honor, which is ultimately why he decides the stranger is his son. Clotaldo's deliberation reflects the importance of honor within the book. Honor is of utmost importance, and to have it compromised renders one "base," but Calderón argues that it isn't worth sacrificing one's morals and ethics to seek revenge, since this only tarnishes rather than defends one's honor. While Clotaldo sees revenge as a necessary response to a "critical situation," Calderón implies that one's honor is restored not through revenge, but through restraint and righteousness instead.

●● By Clorilene my wife  
I had an unlucky son,  
during whose gestation the heavens  
exhausted their miracles  
even before he emerged into the lovely light  
from the living grave  
of the womb (because birth  
and death are similar).  
Infinite times his mother,  
amid the visions and delirium  
of dreams, saw her entrails  
being burst by a bold  
monster in human shape;  
dyed in her blood,  
he was killing her, born  
to be the human viper of the age.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Estrella, Astolfo, Segismundo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 18

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as Basilio tells Astolfo and Estrella that he has a son, Segismundo, and it is significant because it reflects Segismundo's fate as a human "monster." Basilio describes Segismundo as his "unlucky son," which implies that neither Segismundo nor his parents had any control over the unfortunate circumstances of his birth. In this way, Segismundo is a victim at the mercy of his fate, and not even a miracle can save him. The description of the womb as a "living grave" foretells the ominous nature of Segismundo's life as a prisoner unfairly held against his will in the secret tower, and the association between birth and death implies that Segismundo's life was over even before it began.

The visions and delirium of Segismundo's mother's dreams hearken to the play's theme of the fine line between illusion and reality within the play, and such dreams make her reality a nightmare. Even before Segismundo was born, he was seen as a "human viper," or a "monster," and this image of Segismundo as a monster follows him throughout his life and the play. The image of Segismundo's mother's bursting entrails and Segismundo "dyed in her blood" has the effect of making Segismundo look like a murderer who's committed the ultimate crime of "killing" his own mother. From the beginning, Segismundo is destined to be a monster, and it seems as if there is nothing anyone—including God—can do about it.

●● The day of her delivery arrived  
and, the forecasts coming true  
(because evil forecasts never lie,  
or, if so, only belatedly),  
he was born at such an astrological conjunction  
that the sun, tinged with its blood,  
was fiercely entering  
into a joust with the moon,  
and, with the earth for their barrier,  
the two celestial lamps  
were struggling light to light,  
since one cannot say "hand to hand."  
The greatest, most terrifying  
eclipse ever suffered by  
the sun from the time when it bloodily  
bewailed the death of Christ,  
was this one: because the globe,  
drowned in living flames,  
seemed to be suffering  
its final paroxysm.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Estrella, Astolfo, Segismundo

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 18-9

### Explanation and Analysis



This quote also occurs as Basilio tells Astolfo and Estrella about Segismundo, and it is significant because it further highlights Segismundo's fate as a monster and an evil man. Here, Basilio describes the "astrological conjunction," or prophecy, which foretells Segismundo's evil nature. The prophecy is bound to come true sooner or later, Basilio

claims, as “evil forecasts never lie.” Even the prophecy itself is described in violent terms, which reflects the violence of Segismundo’s evil nature. During the eclipse that is the “astrological conjunction,” the sun is “tinged with its blood” and is jousting, or stabbing, at the moon. The moon and the sun struggle through the “most terrifying / eclipse ever suffered by the sun” since the death of Christ was “bloodily bewailed.”

The comparison of Segismundo’s birth to the death of Christ reflects the sense of profound loss associated with Segismundo’s arrival. The suffering of the sun hearkens to the suffering of the people of Poland, which Segismundo is destined to cause if he ever ascends the throne. All of Earth is “drowned in [the] living flames” of the sun during the eclipse as if the world was “suffering / its final paroxysm,” or convulsive fit. Indeed, from the very moment of birth, as evidenced from the prophecy, it is apparent that Segismundo is cursed and destined to a life of evil and violence.

“I, referring to my books,  
found in them, and in all things,  
that Segismundo would be  
the most insolent man,  
the most cruel prince,  
and the most impious monarch,  
through whom his kingdom would come  
to be fragmented and divided,  
a school for treason  
and an academy of vice;  
and that he, carried away by his fury,  
amid fearful crimes,  
would one day set his foot  
on me, and that I, surrendering  
would find myself groveling before him  
(with what anguish I say this!),  
the gray hairs of my beard  
serving as a carpet to his feet.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Rosaura/Astraea, Estrella, Astolfo, Segismundo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 19

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which also occurs as Basilio tells Astolfo and Estrella about Segismundo, is important because it explicitly

outlines Segismundo’s fate: he will be a violent and evil man, who will abuse and divide his country and eventually overthrow his father, the king. Basilio prides himself in being a “learned” man, and has consulted his many books and advanced knowledge to confirm that the prophecy is true. In addition, Segismundo does indeed behave in the way Basilio describes when he is released from prison. Basilio says Segismundo will be “insolent,” and Segismundo certainly behaves inappropriately when he meets Estrella and Rosaura for the first time. Basilio claims Segismundo will be “cruel” and “impious,” and he does later throw an innocent servant off a balcony.

Basilio’s claim that Poland will become “fragmented and divided” comes to fruition as well, as the commoners begin to revolt and resist Astolfo, a foreigner from Muscovy, as their king. After breaking Segismundo out of jail, the rebellion overthrows the king, and Basilio is forced to surrender, “groveling” at Segismundo’s feet. Segismundo, however, proves the prophecy wrong when he exercises his free will to show his father mercy and restore him as king. While Segismundo is certainly all the terrible things Basilio claims he will be, he is also repentant and evolves into a righteous and moral man, ultimately proving the prophecy wrong.

“Well, I, lending credence  
to soothsaying fate,  
which forecast harm to me  
in dire predictions,  
decided to lock up  
the wild beast that had been born,  
to see whether a wise man  
can prevail over the stars.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Clotaldo, Estrella, Astolfo, Segismundo

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 19-20

#### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, too, appears as Basilio first tells Astolfo and Estrella about Segismundo, and it is important because it reflects Basilio’s plan to change the stars, so to speak. The prophecy, or “soothsaying fate,” which has “dire predictions”—namely that Basilio will ultimately surrender at Segismundo’s feet—is a “forecast [of] harm” for Basilio. As such, he selfishly locks Segismundo up, in anticipation of

such an attack. The use of the word “dire” suggests that Segismundo will likely murder his father, and Basilio cannot allow this to come to pass.

Basilio refers to Segismundo as a “wild beast,” and that is indeed how Segismundo is treated in prison. The tower that holds his cell is constructed in the middle of the wilderness, where there are no signs of civilization for miles. Segismundo is alone with the animals (and his jailer, Clotaldo), and he even wears animal skins to reflect his beastly nature. In locking Segismundo up, Basilio wants to discover if Basilio, a “wise” and “learned” man, can outsmart “the stars,” or overcome the prophecy. If Segismundo is locked up, his fate can’t be realized, and Basilio won’t have to surrender at his feet. Basilio’s attempt to manipulate Segismundo’s fate suggests that one’s life isn’t predestined after all, and implies it is dictated by individual decisions and actions instead.

●● The third and final factor is the realization that it was a tremendous mistake to lend easy credence to the predictions of events; because, even if his nature is inclined toward outrages, perhaps it won’t overcome him, since even the most dire fate, the most violent inclination, the most evil planet, merely dispose our free will in a certain direction, but never compel it in that direction.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Estrella, Astolfo, Segismundo

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, in the last portion of Basilio’s explanation of Segismundo to Astolfo and Estrella, Basilio reveals his belief that Segismundo can overcome his evil nature. This is important because it further suggests that one’s life is ultimately dictated by free will and individual actions, not predetermined fate. This quote represents the third factor of Segismundo’s imprisonment—the first being that Basilio locked Segismundo up out of love for the Polish people and the desire to save them from a tyrant, and the second being that in saving the people from a tyrant, Basilio became one himself. It also reflects the deep guilt Basilio struggles with


in response to imprisoning his own son.

Basilio realizes that imprisoning Segismundo based only on the prophecy has been a “tremendous mistake.” Basilio believes that even if Segismundo is evil and is “inclined toward outrages” of violence and tyranny, he can suppress these feelings and behaviors by exercising his own free will and simply choosing not to be evil. After all, Basilio argues, the prophecy and Segismundo’s “violent inclination” only point his free will in an evil direction, but the prophecy can “never compel” him to act in any given way. This implies that instead of being a powerless victim to a violent and evil fate, Segismundo has the control, through his free will, to overcome evil and prove the prophecy wrong.

## Act Two Quotes

●● I wish to determine whether heaven (which cannot lie, especially after giving us such great displays of its severity with regard to his cruel nature) can be assuaged, or at least mollified, and whether, overcome by merit and wisdom, it can go back on its word; because man has dominion over the stars.

**Related Characters:** Basilio (speaker), Segismundo, Clotaldo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Basilio explains to Clotaldo why he had him bring Segismundo, sedated and in a deep sleep, to the palace, and this passage is significant because it again implies that life is dictated by one’s free will, not fate or destiny. Basilio again explains that he wishes to change the stars, this time in releasing Segismundo from prison. Calderón was a Catholic priest, and his plays are often interpreted as religious instruction. As such, Basilio does not claim that the prophecy is false or untrue, since heaven (where the prophecy comes from) does not lie. This basic belief in the goodness of heaven reflects Calderón’s own deep religious conviction.

Instead of proving the prophecy wrong, Basilio wants to see if the stars can be “assuaged” or “mollified.” In short, Basilio

wants to see if fate can be appeased or convinced otherwise. Basilio believes that Segismundo's evil nature can be overcome through "merit and wisdom." The wisdom, of course, is Basilio's, but the merit must be Segismundo's. By simply choosing of his own free will to be good and righteous, he in effect overcomes his evil nature through merit. Basilio explicitly claims that "man has dominion over the stars," meaning one's fate is their own and dependent upon free will.

In other words, Clotaldo is convinced that Segismundo is smart enough to behave righteously and resist his evil nature, thereby negating the prophecy and doing right by his kingdom and people. Segismundo is "highminded," Clotaldo says, and the emphasis on "*can*" further insists that Segismundo is fully capable of simply choosing, through his own free will, not to indulge his violent tendencies. This again implies it is ultimately Segismundo, not fate or destiny, who decides what course of action his life will take.

☞ Sire, you ought to know  
that you are crown prince  
of Poland. If you have lived  
in hiding and retirement,  
it was in obedience  
to the severity of fate,  
which promises a thousand disasters  
to this realm at such time  
as the laurel of sovereignty  
wreathes your noble brow here.  
But, in the firm belief that your good sense  
will make you cancel the planets' decree—  
because a highminded man  
*can* resist them—  
you have been brought to the palace  
from the tower in which you were dwelling  
while your spirits  
were overcome by sleep.

☞ I'm not dreaming, because I feel and believe  
that which I was and that which I am.  
And, even though you regret it now,  
there's not much you can do about it:  
I know who I am, and even if you sigh  
and grieve, you won't be able  
to undo the fact that I was born  
heir to this crown;  
and if you saw me formerly  
a prisoner of my shackles,  
it was because I didn't know who I was;  
but now I have been informed  
as to who I am, and I know that I'm  
a hybrid of man and beast.

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Segismundo

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Segismundo wakes up in the palace, and Clotaldo tells him that he is actually a prince, and it is important because it again suggests that Segismundo, not fate, has control over the course of his life. Clotaldo explains to Segismundo that even though he is the crown prince of Poland, Segismundo has been imprisoned because his fate "promises a thousand disasters" unto the Polish people if the "laurel of sovereignty / wreathes [his] noble brow"—i.e., if Segismundo ever becomes king and the crown is placed on his head, it will be to the detriment of Poland and the people.

Despite this, however, Clotaldo is of the "firm belief" that Segismundo's "good sense" will "cancel the planets' decree."

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker), Basilio

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis



This quote occurs when Segismundo meets his father, Basilio, for the first time after learning that he is actually the prince, and it is important because it further depicts Segismundo as a beast. This quote also highlights the conflict between reality and illusion, one of the play's primary themes. In waking up and finding that he is actually royalty, Segismundo behaves violently, and it is clear that he will have to go back to prison. To ease his transition back to prison after learning of his royal blood, Basilio tries to convince Segismundo that his experience at the palace has all just been a wild dream, but Segismundo doesn't believe him.

Segismundo doesn't believe that he is dreaming because he knows who he was and who he is, and his perception—that he is a prince—is his reality and can't be changed, sleeping or awake. It matters very little if Basilio wants to take back his decision to tell Segismundo who he really is, he can't now

take back the fact that Segismundo is the prince. As perception is reality, there is no real distinction between dreams and reality, thus Segismundo is the prince either way. He is still, of course, the same animal he has always been, too, which now makes him a “hybrid of man and beast.”

●● Since we had been speaking  
about that eagle, when you slept  
you dreamt of empire,  
but even in dreams it would have been proper  
at that time to honor the man  
who raised you with such great pains,  
Segismundo, because even in dreams  
good deeds are never wasted.

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Astolfo, Basilio, Segismundo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57


### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Segismundo wakes up back in prison, and Clotaldo continues to convince him that his experience as the prince was just a dream, and it is significant because it further reflects the tension between reality and illusion and establishes the importance of morality and good deeds within the play. When Clotaldo first gives Segismundo the potion that puts him to sleep, it is during a lesson on the mighty eagle, which Clotaldo likens to royalty, and he smartly claims now this lesson is the reason for Segismundo’s dreams of “empire” and royalty.

During Segismundo’s experience as prince, he treats Clotaldo poorly. He curses Clotaldo for lying to him and holding him against his will, and he even threatens to kill him, and likely would have, had Astolfo not intervened. Clotaldo calls Segismundo out on his poor behavior now, even though his experience was just a dream. Clotaldo has raised Segismundo since he was born, and he has been his only human contact and link to the outside world. Segismundo should have remained loyal to Clotaldo and honored him, even in his dream. Clotaldo’s claim that “good deeds are never wasted,” not even in dreams, becomes Segismundo’s motto of sorts, and it is the reason why he chooses righteousness over the evil nature that his father, Basilio’s, punishment has imposed upon him.

●● It’s true, then: let me restrain  
my fierce nature,  
my fury, my ambition,  
in case I ever dream again.  
And I *will*, since we exist  
in such a peculiar world  
that living is merely dreaming;  
and the experience teaches me  
that the man who lives dreams  
his reality until he awakes.

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker), Clotaldo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Segismundo has agreed with Clotaldo that “good deeds are never wasted” in dreams, and this passage is important because it underscores Calderón’s primary argument that life itself is a dream, just as the title of the play suggests. Philosophical minds of Calderón’s time maintained that distinguishing dreams from reality is impossible, as one’s senses can never fully be trusted, and this theory is reflected in Calderón’s play as well.

Segismundo knows that he will have the chance to resist his violent tendencies in a dream and do good deeds because he will dream again. In fact, Segismundo is dreaming right now.

As Segismundo can’t fully distinguish his dreams from reality, especially when he is being manipulated by Clotaldo, all of life is a dream. This “peculiar world” is not easy to grasp, Calderón implies, and the result is a reality that seems a bit odd, but it is nonetheless Segismundo’s reality. Calderón suggests that perception *is* reality, and as reality is perceived in a dream just as it is while awake, *all* dreams are reality as well. Thus, Segismundo claims, “the man who lives dreams / his reality until he awakes.”

●● What is life? A frenzy.  
What is life? An illusion,  
a shadow, a fiction,  
and our greatest good is but small;  
for, all of life is a dream,  
and even dreams are dreams.

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker), Clotaldo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57-8

### Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs at the end of Act Two, once Segismundo wakes up back in prison after discovering that he is the prince, and it is significant because it again reflects Calderón's primary argument that life itself is an illusion and the only thing that matters is being a righteous and moral person. At this point—after waking up in a luxurious bed in a palace and having people respect him for the first time in his life—Segismundo is completely confused, and his life very much resembles a “frenzy.” Life is not at all the same as it was the day before, and it feels quite unreal.

Segismundo describes life as an “illusion, / a shadow, a fiction,” which implies that life is artificial and made up. It can't possibly be reality, but, of course, there is no way to be sure. As one can never be certain they aren't dreaming, Calderón thus implies that it is always best to behave in a way that is ethical and good. This effort “is but small,” yet, Calderón further implies, it is the only thing that is real—one's feelings and actions towards others—in a life that is otherwise merely a dream.

### Act Three Quotes

☝☝ I know you by now, I know you by now,  
and I know that you do the same thing  
to everyone who falls asleep.  
For me there is no more pretense,  
because, now undeceived,  
I know perfectly well that LIFE IS A DREAM.

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker), Clarín, Rosaura/Astraea

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the rebelling commoners break Segismundo out of jail, telling him for the second time that he is the crown prince of Poland, and it is important because it again reflects Calderón's central argument that life itself is just an illusion. Segismundo implies that life, or what he perceives as reality, isn't quite real. Finding out he is a prince after a lifetime spent being mistreated behind bars is unbelievable. Segismundo suggests, as does Clarín, that such a trick is practiced often in Poland, and that everyone

who falls asleep wakes up from time to time as the prince, only to be told that they are dreaming and hauled back to prison. Segismundo won't be part of their lie anymore, and he fully resigns himself to the fact that “LIFE”—in capital letters no less—“IS A DREAM” and not, strictly speaking, reality.

By this Calderón does not mean to imply that reality only occurs in one's dreams. He instead implies that all of life is an illusion—like a dream—since one's senses can't be trusted to fully discern what is real and what is not. This concept is seen again and again throughout Calderón's play. For example, when Segismundo first meets Rosaura, he believes her to be a male wayfarer, and when he meets her for the second time, he believes her to be one of Estrella's ladies-in-waiting. In this way, as Segismundo perceives something other than the truth, or reality, he cannot consistently discern reality from illusion, which, according to Calderón means that all of life is an illusion based solely upon one's perception.

☝☝ Rise,  
rise, father, from the ground;  
for you must be the North Star and guide  
to whom I entrust my success;  
for I now know that I owe  
my upbringing to your great loyalty.  
Come and embrace me.  
What are you saying?  
That I'm dreaming, and that I wish  
to do good, because good deeds  
aren't wasted, even in dreams

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo, Segismundo (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 64-5

### Explanation and Analysis



Here, the uprising has just broken Segismundo out of jail, and Clotaldo, who fears Segismundo will try to kill him, surrenders at his feet. This quote is significant because it implies that Segismundo isn't wholly evil as the prophecy suggests, and that he can, through exercising his own free will, decide to be good. As Clotaldo kneels, Segismundo orders him to stand. Earlier in the act, Clotaldo chastised Segismundo for not respecting him in his dream, especially since Clotaldo raised him since birth. Here, Segismundo

offers Clotaldo that respect and likens him to his “father,” who has been his “North Star” and given him much needed guidance, especially in terms of doing good deeds.

Segismundo finally pledges his loyalty to Clotaldo, as Clotaldo specifically asked him to do earlier, and Segismundo is ready to give him his due respect. It is Clotaldo who earlier taught Segismundo that “good deeds / aren’t wasted, even in dreams,” and he proves it here, since all of life is, after all, a dream. In treating Clotaldo with respect and honor, Segismundo resists his evil nature and effectively proves the prophecy wrong, and this again implies that it is free will, not fate, which determines the course of one’s life.

☛ Fortune, let me go and reign!  
 Don’t awaken me if I’m asleep,  
 and, if this is reality, don’t put me to sleep.  
 But, whether it’s reality or a dream,  
 to do good is what matters;  
 if it should be reality, just because it is good;  
 if not, for the sake of winning friends  
 for the time when we awaken.

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker), Clotaldo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 65

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Segismundo spares Clotaldo’s life and lets him go, and it is important because it again underscores Calderón’s assertion that life is an illusion and the only thing that is real—and thus the only thing that matters—is doing good deeds and being righteous and moral. Segismundo still doesn’t know if he is awake or dreaming, but he is so happy that he never wants to wake up if he is dreaming. Conversely, if this constitutes reality, then Segismundo never wants to close his eyes. This, too, implies that definitively discerning reality from illusion is impossible, so one shouldn’t even try.

For Segismundo, and according to Clotaldo as well, whether one is dreaming or awake is irrelevant. As one can never know for sure if they are dreaming or not, this renders everything an illusion, and the only thing that is real is how one feels and how they treat others around them. Segismundo has learned from Clotaldo, his teacher and his jailer, that good deeds are always best, and this drives the

moral message of the play. In choosing to behave in an ethical way, Segismundo not only secures himself the crown, he secures himself honor and friendship as well.

☛ I was born, so resembling her  
 that I was a portrait, a copy of her,  
 not in beauty  
 but in luck and deeds;  
 and so, I won’t need  
 to say that, an unfortunate  
 heiress to her lot,  
 I had the same as hers.  
 The most I can tell you  
 about myself is about the lord and master who has stolen  
 the trophies of my honor,  
 the remains of my good name.

**Related Characters:** Rosaura/Astraea (speaker), Clotaldo, Astolfo, Violante, Segismundo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 74-5

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Rosaura tells Segismundo her story and begs for his assistance in helping her avenge her stolen honor, and it is important because it both reflects the importance of honor within the play and the role of vengeance in restoring that honor, and further suggests that it is Rosaura’s fate to be stripped of her honor just as her mother was. Rosaura describes herself as a carbon “copy” of her mother, Violante, in that they have both been betrayed by men and abandoned after their honor and virtue were compromised. Just as Violante gave herself to Clotaldo before her left her pregnant and alone, Astolfo, too, has left Rosaura without her honor. As it is Rosaura’s fate to be left alone like her mother, it is implied that Rosaura has no control over this betrayal.


Yet the fact that Rosaura travels all the way to Poland to avenge her lost honor suggests that she does have control over this unfortunate fate. In seeking Astolfo out and killing him, Rosaura hopes to restore her lost honor. In stealing Rosaura’s honor, Astolfo has stolen her “good name,” and she intends to get it back by any means necessary. Calderón, however, implies that Rosaura’s honor is best restored by avoiding vengeance, since this path is immoral. Thus, vengeance is not honorable. Real honor is therefore found in restraint and kindness, not in vengeance and



murder.

☞ Sire, even though fate knows every pathway and finds the man it seeks amid the thickness of rocks, it isn't a Christian belief to say that there's no protection against its fury. There is, for the man with foresight can gain victory over fate; and, if you are not yet secure against distress and misfortune, create that security for yourself

**Related Characters:** Clotaldo (speaker), Segismundo, Astolfo, Basilio

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the play, as Basilio laments the fact that his kingdom is falling apart even after he tried for so long to save it, and it is significant because it again implies that one's free will and individual actions, not destiny or fate, guide their life and existence. Here, Clotaldo informs Basilio that even though fate certainly has a way of finding anyone, people are not completely helpless against its demands. Clotaldo claims it is not a "Christian belief" to assume that there is no protection against fate, which is to say that there *is* protection against fate. Christian beliefs largely guided life during Calderón's time, and since Clotaldo claims there is no Christian rule against challenging fate, this means it is fair game to do so.

With "foresight," Clotaldo claims, or good sense and intelligence, one can will over fate. In this way, Segismundo can ultimately win, too—if he puts his mind to it and decides to exert his own free will over the fate of his violent and evil nature. Clotaldo claims Basilio can create such "security" for himself, which implies that *anyone* can win over fate with the right mindset. This again suggests that life does not unfold on a predetermined path over which one has no control or influence. On the contrary, Calderón implies that one's life is dictated first and foremost by free will and individual actions, not fate.

☞ Why are you surprised? Why are you astonished, when my teacher was a dream, and in my anxiety I'm afraid I may wake up again and find myself once more in my locked cell? And even if that doesn't happen, merely dreaming it might is enough: for in that way I came to know that all of human happiness passes by in the end like a dream, and I wish today to enjoy mine for as long as it lasts, asking pardon for our faults, since it so befits noble hearts to pardon them!

**Related Characters:** Segismundo (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 88

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage represents the closing lines of *Life is a Dream*, after Segismundo has behaved righteously, proving the prophecy wrong and proving himself a good and moral man, and it is significant because it further reflects the importance of morality and ethics within the play. In a world where it is impossible to decipher illusion from reality, Calderón argues that the only things that matter are kindness and happiness, which Segismundo has finally achieved through his good deeds. True happiness is fleeting and passes quickly as if in a dream, and Segismundo intends on enjoying every minute of it, especially since he has spent his entire life thus far suffering in prison.

However, Segismundo still can't say for sure that he isn't dreaming, and he wouldn't be surprised to wake up and find himself back in his cell in the secret tower. The threat of this alone is enough to make Segismundo enjoy the gift he has been given in his newfound freedom, as he appreciates that it could be gone in a flash. By simply enjoying his happiness and doing good deeds, Segismundo defies his violent nature and proves the prophecy wrong, which is the surest way for Segismundo to remain free and stay out of the secret prison cell.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ACT ONE

Rosaura and her servant, Clarín, are flying high over an unknown mountain range on a hippogriff when the beast unexpectedly lands. Rosaura has no idea where they are, and she can't understand why they are landing. She climbs off the beast, dressed in men's clothing, and walks up the path ahead. Her journey is not clear, for she is "blinded by despair" and moves only according to "the laws of destiny."

Rosaura complains that Poland has not been kind to her, although she understands that it is her fate to be unhappy. Clarín interrupts. He reminds her that there are two of them, and he is certainly unhappy, too. They have both wandered away from their homeland, and they have both been dropped high on an unknown mountain. Clarín asks Rosaura what they should do, alone and abandoned on a mountain so near the end of day, when Rosaura suddenly notices a building in the distance. Clarín sees it, too—a "rustic palace" rising above the tree line—and he suggests they move closer. Soft light pours from the open door of the building, and they can hear the sounds of crying and rattling chains.

As Rosaura and Clarín move closer to the building, they hear a man, Segismundo, crying inside. "Ah, woe is me!" Segismundo cries. Rosaura immediately feels sympathy for the stranger, even though she does not know who he is or why he is crying. Inside the dimly lit building, a man sits in iron shackles, dressed in animal skins "like a wild beast." Rosaura suggests they stand in the shadows and listen to the man's lamentations. Perhaps they will learn who he is and what he is doing there, she says.

*Calderón repeatedly blurs the line between dreams and reality, which begins immediately with Rosaura's hippogriff. The mythical creature—which is half horse, half bird—makes the play seem dreamlike and unrealistic, and it is impossible to ascertain if Rosaura's experience constitutes reality or a dream. It is unclear where Rosaura comes from or where she is headed, and the reasons for her journey are not initially known, which adds to the play's dreamlike quality as well. Rosaura is "blinded by despair" because Astolfo has stolen her honor and virtue and left her, although she doesn't reveal this until much later. As Rosaura's mother was also abandoned after her own honor was stolen, Rosaura believes it is her "destiny" to have the same misfortune befall her, regardless of her own actions or free will.*



*Again, Rosaura seems to believe that she has no control over her life and happiness. For Rosaura, her life is predestined to be one way or another and is not the result of her own actions and choices. Clarín offers comic relief throughout the play and is often the voice of reason, and here he reminds Rosaura that she is not the only one who suffers unhappiness. The description of the building as a "rustic palace" hints at the prison's royal inmate, as the building has been constructed specifically to hold Segismundo, a prince.*



*A prophecy has claimed that Segismundo is destined to be a violent and tyrannical man, and he is often depicted in the play as a monster or some sort of wild animal, and his clothing made of animal skins reflects this. When Segismundo is later brought to the palace to see if he can resist his evil nature, he is given traditional clothing; but when he is sent back to prison after behaving violently, he is again wearing animal skins. Segismundo later claims that he behaves like a violent animal not because it is his destiny, but because he is treated like an animal, and his clothing is proof of this.*



Segismundo says his only crime is having been born. He laments his imprisonment, questioning what law or man has the right to deny another man the same basic right God has given to the birds, beasts, and fish. Rosaura whispers to Clarín, and Segismundo, overhearing their chatter, demands to know who is there. They step forward, and Rosaura claims to be only a “sad man” passing through. Segismundo grabs Rosaura and immediately threatens to kill her, as Clarín, claiming to be deaf, says he hasn’t heard a thing. Rosaura begs Segismundo to have mercy on them. Segismundo was “born human,” Rosaura says, and that should be enough for him to set them free.

Segismundo is softened by Rosaura’s pleas and lets her go. He tells her that he has been held in the same prison cell since he was born and has only had contact with his jailer, Clotaldo. “I am a man among beasts,” Segismundo says, “and a beast among men.” Rosaura claims she has been guided to this wilderness prison by heaven, so that she may find consolation in meeting a man who is even more unfortunate than she is. Suddenly, Clotaldo can be heard from inside the prison, making his way to Segismundo’s cell with a group of tower guards. Clotaldo is yelling at the guards and cursing them for allowing two strangers to enter the prison.

As Clotaldo moves closer, he orders the guards to kill the intruders at once. Clotaldo informs Rosaura and Clarín that they have violated a royal decree by entering the prison. He demands their weapons and orders them to surrender. Segismundo begs Clotaldo not to kill them, threatening to tear himself apart with his bare hands if any harm comes to them. Clotaldo ignores Segismundo and brushes him off. Segismundo has been imprisoned by “heavenly law,” Clotaldo says. His shackles are a “bridle to [his] arrogant / fury to keep it in check,” and Clotaldo won’t listen to that fury now.

The guards close and lock the door to Segismundo’s cell, and he continues to cry from the other side, lamenting his imprisonment and lack of freedom. Rosaura and Clarín beg for their lives, but Clotaldo can’t be swayed. He again orders the guards to disarm the strangers and blindfold them. Rosaura unsheathes her **sword** and hands it to Clotaldo. She tells Clotaldo that if she is to die, her sword must be kept safe, as it “encloses great mysteries.” She doesn’t know what mysteries the sword holds, but she is “relying on it” to avenge her honor against “an affront.”

*Rosaura’s disguise as a “sad mad” again points to the conflict between reality and illusion. Calderón ultimately argues that all of life is an illusion, which is certainly the case here. Rosaura’s masculine identity is a disguise (she later claims that her fate demanded she dress as a man, presumably because Clotaldo, her father, believed he had a son rather than a daughter) but as far as Segismundo can tell, she really is a man. Rosaura implies here that human beings have a sort of innate decency that makes them merciful, but Segismundo’s prophecy says he was born a monster, not a human.*



*Again, Segismundo is likened to an animal when he claims he is “a man among beasts and a beast among men.” Alone in the wilderness, Segismundo is the only man among the animals; but out of prison, left to his own devices, he is a “beast,” or an animal, in society. Segismundo’s kneejerk reaction to grab Rosaura and threaten to kill her before asking her story suggests that perhaps Segismundo is an animal as the prophecy claims.*



*The “heavenly law” Clotaldo speaks of is a reference to the prophecy, which claims Segismundo is destined to be a tyrannical king. King Basilio is keeping Segismundo hidden from the entire kingdom, and only Clotaldo knows who he really is. In sparing the people of Poland from a tyrant, Basilio is also depriving them of their prince, and his secret is closely kept. Thus, the prison is a secret, and anyone who enters is killed.*



*Rosaura’s story comes out in bits and pieces. Here, she admits that she is going to Poland to seek revenge for “an affront,” but she doesn’t say for what or against whom. The sword, too, is mysterious, and even Rosaura doesn’t know why. This again adds to the dreamlike quality of the play, as the audience can never be exactly sure what is happening.*



As Clotaldo takes Rosaura's **sword**, he is visibly affected. He asks Rosaura where the sword came from, and she says that it was given to her by a woman, whose name she will not reveal. The woman told Rosaura to take the sword to Poland and be seen with it by "nobility and eminent men." One of those men, the woman had said, would become Rosaura's "patron and protector." Clotaldo is shocked and wonders if he is dreaming. He left the very same sword with Violante years before, so that his unborn son might use it to find his father.

"What a sad fate!" Clotaldo thinks to himself, holding the **sword** in his hand. He suspects that Rosaura (who Clotaldo is convinced is really a man) is his son, yet Clotaldo is expected to kill the stranger for unlawfully entering the secret prison. If Clotaldo takes the two strangers to King Basilio, they will surely be killed, but to hide them from the king and disobey orders is unthinkable. Clotaldo is torn between his loyalty to his son and his loyalty to the king. Honor, Clotaldo notes, is "brittle stuff" and can be easily broken. He decides he can't possibly kill them, even if that means Clotaldo himself will be killed as punishment. As Clotaldo leads Rosaura and Clarín out of the secret prison, he can't decide who has the greater misfortune.

At the palace in Warsaw, Astolfo approaches Estrella, who has just entered with her ladies-in-waiting. Astolfo flatters Estrella, comparing her to Athena and Flora, claiming that she is "queen in [his] soul." Estrella isn't impressed with his flattery, however, and while he may shower her with compliments, she knows that his secret thoughts are deceitful. Astolfo denies any such thoughts and claims his compliments are sincere.

Astolfo reminds Estrella that their uncle, King Basilio, is childless and has no one to take the throne after his death. As the children of Basilio's sisters, both Astolfo and Estrella have expressed interest in the throne, but Astolfo suggests they join together in marriage instead of fighting over the throne. Estrella agrees that marriage is probably the best idea, but she doesn't trust Astolfo. She points to the pendant hanging from Astolfo's neck and claims it holds the portrait of another woman. Just as Astolfo begins to explain the pendant, the trumpets sound, announcing the arrival of Basilio.

*The woman Rosaura does not want to name is her mother, Violante. The sword means that Clotaldo is Rosaura's father, although Rosaura doesn't know this yet. Violante hopes that if Rosaura is seen with the sword by noblemen, Clotaldo will eventually find her and avenge her honor. Clotaldo, however, thinks he has a son, which is why Violante told Rosaura that her fate "decreed" she dress like a man.*



*Clotaldo is portrayed as a man of great integrity throughout the play. He constantly struggles with moral issues and his loyalty to the king, to himself and Rosaura, and even to Segismundo. Clotaldo's reference to honor being "brittle" is ironic, as Rosaura has come to defend her honor, proving just how fragile it is. Clotaldo's remark about his "sad fate" again suggest that life is predestined, but in contrast, his decision not to kill Clarín and Rosaura as ordered suggests that life is actually driven by free will and individual actions, not destiny.*



*Astolfo calls Estrella the "queen in his soul" because they both want to ascend the throne, which Astolfo thinks can be more easily accomplished if they are married. He is portrayed as having very little honor and is an opportunist who is simply looking for the quickest way to become king.*



*Astolfo and Estrella's belief that Basilio is childless again highlights the conflict between illusion and reality within the play. In reality, Segismundo is the rightful heir to the throne, but the perception is that Basilio is childless. It is later revealed that the pendant around Astolfo's neck holds the portrait of Rosaura, whom he presumably loves. Astolfo, however, has little honor, and he is willing to betray Rosaura and his love for her to become king.*



As Basilio enters, both Astolfo and Estrella plead their case to ascend the throne. Basilio assures them that they will be treated equally, but first he must make a confession. A lifelong pursuit of knowledge and science has earned Basilio the title of “learned.” Yet despite all his knowledge, Basilio admits, he is merely a “self-murderer.” Years ago, his wife gave birth to a son, but the “monster in human shape” killed her. The boy’s, Segismundo’s, birth was accompanied by an “astrological conjunction” that claimed he would be an evil man and tyrannical king.

*Basilio calls himself a “self-murderer” because by imprisoning his son and depriving him of his life and liberty, Basilio has, in a sense, killed his own image. Basilio questions the morality of his decision, even though he does it to save his people and kingdom. Basilio is depicted as a “learned” and enlightened man, yet he still mistreats his son. Segismundo’s prophecy—his “astrological conjunction”—claims Segismundo will be a “monster,” which seems to begin to come true with his mother’s death during childbirth. But of course, it’s possible that his mother died for any number of reasons; it’s merely the presence of the prophecy that makes Segismundo seem like a monster, rather than anything he actually does.*



Under Segismundo’s rule, Basilio claims, Poland is destined to be torn and full of dissent. Their country will be divided by war and vice, and Basilio will find himself a servant at his son’s feet. Basilio cannot let this come to pass, so he keeps his son locked up “to see whether a wise man / can prevail over the stars.” He announced to the kingdom that the prince had been stillborn, and he had the secret prison built deep in the wilderness. He declared the prison forbidden and passed stiff laws against trespassing in the area. Clotaldo has been Segismundo’s only contact with the outside world and has served as his jailer and his teacher, in both science and religion.

*Like Clotaldo, Basilio deeply struggles with his honor and loyalty. As the king, he has a duty to the people of Poland, and he sacrifices his son for his kingdom. Still, Basilio constantly questions if he has done the right thing and fights with the moral implications of his decision. Basilio is torn between what is best for his people and what is best for his son. As a “wise” and “learned” man, he is hoping to outsmart the stars by keeping Segismundo locked up. This way, Basilio hopes, Segismundo’s fate as a tyrannical king won’t be realized.*



Basilio tells Estrella and Astolfo that there are a few important factors to remember. First, Basilio loves the Polish people so much that he has gone to great lengths to keep them safe from a tyrant. Secondly, the fact that Basilio has deprived Segismundo—his own son—of the rights given to him by law, both “human and divine,” is not Christian. In saving the people of Poland from a tyrant, Basilio has become one himself. Lastly, Basilio has recently been thinking that perhaps Segismundo’s evil inclinations won’t surface, as even the most violent person has free will and cannot be compelled to evil.

*Basilio’s explanation lays out his moral dilemma. He is quick to point out that his decision to imprison Segismundo and deprive him of the rights given to him by both God and man isn’t Christian (i.e., it isn’t moral) but he argues he had good reason to do it. Calderón’s plays are often interpreted as moral guidebooks, and Basilio’s struggle to make the most ethical decision underscores the difficulty involved in maintaining one’s honor and morality. Meanwhile, Basilio’s belief that perhaps Segismundo can simply choose not to be evil suggests that life is not predetermined after all; perhaps Segismundo himself can “prevail over the stars” in the same way Basilio hoped to.*



Basilio has decided to bring Segismundo to the palace tomorrow. Segismundo will be placed on Basilio's throne and told to govern the people. In doing this, Basilio will accomplish three things. First, if Segismundo is a good and kind ruler, then Basilio will know that the prophecy was false and the people will have their prince back. Secondly, if Segismundo proves to be a tyrant, then Basilio will be justified in sending him back to prison. Lastly, if Segismundo must be returned to prison, then Basilio will join Astolfo and Estrella in marriage and present them to the people as the new king and queen.

*Segismundo's release is a sort of trial run, or experiment, to see if one's life is governed by fate or by free will. If Segismundo acts violently and behaves like a tyrant, the prophecy is correct, and it is Segismundo's fate to be evil. But if Segismundo resists his evil nature and is kind and gentle, then free will wins out. Plus, if Segismundo does behave like a tyrant and need to be put back in prison, then Segismundo's imprisonment is punishment, not just a precaution, and Basilio is off the hook and can stop feeling guilty about treating Segismundo so badly. Of course, what Basilio doesn't consider here is the way that his treatment of Segismundo has already shaped Segismundo's disposition—a point that will become very important later on.*



Astolfo agrees to Basilio's plan to bring Segismundo to the palace, and the people yell out for their prince. As Astolfo, Estrella, and the people exit, Clotaldo enters with Rosaura and Clarín. Clotaldo immediately asks to speak with Basilio, and Basilio can sense that something is wrong. Clotaldo admits that a misfortune has indeed occurred. He points to Rosaura, still convinced that she is a man, and tells the king that she and her servant have entered the secret prison. Basilio quickly tells Clotaldo not to worry. He has already revealed the secret, Basilio says, and he pardons them for trespassing at the prison.

*The shouts of the people for their prince foreshadow the uprising that is to come later in the play. The people won't be deprived of their prince, and they rise up in a rebellion when Segismundo is sent back to prison. Again, Clotaldo is struggling with his duty to the king and his duty to Rosaura, who he believes is his son. Clotaldo is expected to carry out his duties to the king without question, but Calderón implies this isn't so simple. In this case, the most ethical thing Clotaldo can do is disobey the king, since as far as he knows, that's the only way to save his son's life.*



Clotaldo is relieved. Now he won't have to tell Basilio that the stranger is his son. Rosaura turns to Clotaldo and thanks him for sparing her life, but he tells her that he has given her nothing. Rosaura has already told Clotaldo that she has come to Warsaw to seek "revenge for an affront," and Clotaldo says that since "a vile life is no life at all," she did not arrive with much of a life in the first place. Clotaldo secretly hopes that his words will push the stranger, whom he still believes is his son, into action to avenge his honor.

*Here, Clotaldo implies that Rosaura's life is worth less because her honor has been stolen, and to get it back, she must seek revenge. Calderón, however, ultimately argues the opposite. While he admits that honor is important, he implies in the play's conclusion that vengeance isn't moral or ethical, and that to seek vengeance actually works against one's honor in the long run.*



Rosaura admits that she doesn't have much of a life, but that will change after she has her revenge. Clotaldo returns Rosaura's **sword**, so that she may use it to avenge her honor, and asks her who her enemy is. She tells him that her enemy is Astolfo, Duke of Muscovy, but she refuses to tell him why. Clotaldo tries to convince Rosaura to go home and forget her quarrel with Astolfo—as a prince he couldn't possibly have insulted her—but Rosaura can't be swayed. She tells Clotaldo that she is not what she seems, and she says that if Astolfo has come to marry Estrella, then he has definitely insulted her.

*Here, Rosaura's story is finally revealed, even though she doesn't tell Clotaldo everything. Her remark that she is not what she seems is a reference to her gender, but it further underscores the conflict between illusion and reality. The reality—that Rosaura is a woman and Astolfo's jilted lover—is not known to Clotaldo, and his perception—that Rosaura is a man and his son—is wholly different. Rosaura's story also highlights Astolfo's despicable character. He pledged his love to Rosaura but has left her for Estrella so that he can become the king.*



## ACT TWO

Clotaldo and Basilio enter the palace, and Clotaldo says that he has carried out each of the king's orders. He mixed a powerful potion of herbs, which, with a "tyrannical force," put Segismundo into a deep sleep resembling death. Clotaldo went to visit Segismundo in his cell under the pretense of a lesson, and took with him the potion made of opium, poppy, and henbane. Clotaldo taught Segismundo all about the mighty eagle, the "queen of the birds," and at the mention of kingship, Segismundo was suddenly interested. "In reality," Clotaldo says, Segismundo's royal blood "stirs him."

Segismundo was surprised to learn that even the birds are obedient, and he swore that he would never submit to another "of [his] own free will." At that point, Clotaldo gave Segismundo the potion, and he fell into a deep sleep. The guards then placed Segismundo in the carriage and brought him to the palace, where they placed him in King Basilio's luxurious bed. Now that Clotaldo has done exactly as the king has ordered, he asks Basilio what his intentions are in bringing Segismundo to the palace.

Segismundo, Basilio reminds Clotaldo, is destined for "a thousand misfortunes and tragedies," and Basilio wants to find out if heaven "can be assuaged, or at least / mollified, and whether, overcome / by merit and wisdom, / it can go back on its word." In short, Basilio wants to know if Segismundo can overcome his evil nature. If he is violent and tyrannical, however, Basilio promises he will send him back to prison at once.

Basilio expects that Segismundo would be exceedingly upset to find out that he is a prince only to be sent back to prison, which is why Basilio insisted that Segismundo be brought to the palace in a deep sleep. That way, Segismundo's true nature can be tested after he wakes, and then if he *does* need to be sent back to prison, they can tell him it was all a dream. Clotaldo claims there are many arguments that prove Basilio's idea wrong, but it is too late now. They hear Segismundo heading their way, and as Basilio slips out of the room, he tells Clotaldo that he should be the one to explain to Segismundo who he is.

*The "tyrannical force" of the potion mirrors Segismundo's tyrannical fate. The deep sleep induced by the potion will later allow Basilio and Clotaldo to more easily convince Segismundo that his experience as the prince was just a dream, but even that won't keep him from becoming king—though he turns out to be a kind ruler rather than a tyrant. Clotaldo's claim that Segismundo's royal blood stirs him "in reality" further blurs the line between illusion and reality. Reality in the play is a matter of perception, but Clotaldo implies that Segismundo knows deep down who he really is.*



*Segismundo's comment that he won't submit to another "of [his] own free will" is ironic, since Basilio is banking on Segismundo's free will to prove the prophecy wrong. Clotaldo doesn't know why Basilio wants Segismundo sedated and brought to the palace; he simply does as he is ordered, which again reflects Clotaldo's honor and his unquestionable loyalty to the king.*



*Again, Basilio is looking to outsmart the stars with his "merit and wisdom." If Segismundo can overcome his evil nature through his own free will, he will effectively prove the prophecy wrong and change his fate through his own actions. This suggests that people are active, rather than passive, participants in their destiny. Again, however, Basilio doesn't consider that human actions—namely, his own act of imprisoning Segismundo—might also lead Segismundo to behave in ways that seem evil.*



*In telling Basilio that there are many arguments that prove his idea wrong, Clotaldo implies that Basilio's plan isn't exactly ethical. Basilio's plan to ascertain Segismundo's true nature is full of deceit and is thus immoral, but they have gone too far to turn back now. This, too, adds to Clotaldo's moral dilemma—he is expected to do things that he knows are wrong in the name of his duty to the king.*



Clarín enters, and Clotaldo is reminded that Rosaura is definitely a woman. Clarín says that Rosaura has changed into more appropriate clothing, has changed her name, and is posing as Clotaldo's niece. She is being treated as one of Estrella's ladies-in-waiting, and she is looking forward to the moment when Clotaldo avenges her honor. Suddenly, a very confused Segismundo enters the room followed by several servants. "To say I'm dreaming is mistaken," Segismundo cries in disbelief. "I know very well I'm awake!"

Clotaldo approaches Segismundo and asks to kiss his hand. Segismundo is even more confused. He asks why the man who usually treats him so badly in prison is suddenly treating him with such respect. Clotaldo explains that while Segismundo may doubt it, he is actually the crown prince of Poland. He has lived shackled in the prison because it is his fate to be a wicked tyrant, but his father, King Basilio, believes that Segismundo's good sense can overcome his evil nature. Segismundo is furious, and he immediately turns on Clotaldo.

Segismundo threatens to kill Clotaldo with his bare hands for lying to him, and a servant steps in to defend Clotaldo. The servant tries to convince Segismundo that Clotaldo was only obeying the king, but Segismundo insists that the king does not have to be obeyed if his orders violate the law. Segismundo threatens to throw the servant out the window, and Clotaldo, before slipping out of the room, tells Segismundo that he is behaving so badly and has no idea that he is only dreaming.

Astolfo enters, and Segismundo greets him, but Astolfo feels that Segismundo has not given him enough respect. He tells Segismundo that he is his cousin and insists they are equals, which only irritates Segismundo further. He doesn't see how he has possibly disrespected Astolfo, but he is distracted as Estrella enters the room. She greets Segismundo warmly, and Clarín introduces her as Segismundo's cousin. Segismundo asks if he may kiss Estrella's hand, which upsets Astolfo. The servant again interjects, explaining to Segismundo that his behavior is too forward. Segismundo grabs the servant angrily and drags him to the balcony, throwing the man over the edge.

*At some point, Clotaldo learns that Rosaura is really a woman, but this is only briefly mentioned. This interaction suggests that Clotaldo initially agrees to help Rosaura restore her honor by killing Astolfo; he only changes his mind once Astolfo saves his life later in the play. This complicates Clotaldo's view of vengeance and morality and implies he doesn't consider revenge wholly unethical. Segismundo's comment again underscores the overlaps between dreams and reality. He knows that he is awake, but this reality is completely unbelievable.*



*Segismundo's comment that Clotaldo treats him badly in prison complicates Clotaldo's character as a man of integrity. He is depicted as a man with morals—he is, after all, the one to teach Segismundo that good deeds are never wasted—yet he doesn't always follow this himself. Segismundo's immediate response of anger and violence again suggests that perhaps he is an animal as the prophecy claims—or, alternatively, that he is simply responding with reasonable anger to having been treated unfairly.*



*Here, Clotaldo plants the first seed in Segismundo's mind that he is only dreaming. It is clear to Clotaldo that the prophecy is correct and Segismundo will have to go back to jail, and he prepares for this by telling Segismundo that he is dreaming. Segismundo, however, points out the obvious: imprisoning him against his will, for any reason, is not ethical.*



*Astolfo's pompous behavior further reflects his despicable character. He is arrogant, and this makes Segismundo even angrier. Astolfo is jealous and threatened when Segismundo asks to kiss Estrella's hand. Astolfo has already spoken for Estrella, which is why the servant insists that Segismundo is being too forward. Clearly, Segismundo's violent treatment of the servant for such a benign offense again suggests that Segismundo's true nature really is evil and tyrannical and can't be resisted.*





Estrella yells out for help, and Astolfo tries to convince Segismundo to calm down, but Segismundo threatens to take his head off. As Astolfo exits, King Basilio enters, demanding to know what is going on. Segismundo explains that the servant irritated him, so he threw him from the balcony. Basilio tells Segismundo that he is sorry to see him behaving so badly. He had hoped to reconnect with Segismundo, but now he is only afraid of him. Segismundo claims he doesn't need Basilio, as no decent father would treat his son the way Basilio has treated him, "like a wild animal."

Basilio tells Segismundo that he wishes he had never been born, and Segismundo curses Basilio for depriving him of his liberty. Basilio tells Segismundo that even though he thinks he is awake, he is actually dreaming, but Segismundo refuses to believe him. As Basilio and Segismundo bicker, Astolfo and Estrella exit, and Rosaura enters, dressed as a lady-in-waiting.

Rosaura is afraid that she will run into Astolfo. Clotaldo has advised her to stay away from Astolfo and claims that he will worry about avenging her honor. Segismundo is immediately taken by Rosaura's beauty. He does not recognize her as the same stranger who wandered into his prison cell and asks her name. Rosaura says only that she is one of Estrella's ladies-in-waiting, and Clotaldo comes back into the room.

Segismundo tells Rosaura that he threw the servant from the balcony, and she says she understands why it was predicted that Segismundo will be a tyrant and a "wild beast." Segismundo says that he will show her how much of a monster he really is and orders Clarín to leave the room. Rosaura is frightened and is convinced she is about to die, but Clotaldo comes to her rescue. He again tells Segismundo that he is in a dream, but Segismundo says it doesn't matter. He can kill Clotaldo in a dream just as easily as he can in real life.

*Segismundo later claims that it is Basilio's poor treatment of him—not destiny or fate—that makes him behave like a violent animal. Basilio treats Segismundo "like a wild animal," thus Segismundo has been conditioned to act this way himself. This, too, suggests that one's life is governed by decisions and actions and is not ruled by predetermined fate, and it also reveals the difficulty of distinguishing between the two; Segismundo's violence could reasonably be interpreted as the result of fate (the prophecy) or free will (Basilio's cruelty).*



*Again, Basilio is trying to confuse Segismundo and plant the seed that he is dreaming, so that Segismundo can be convinced that his trip to the palace never really happened. That way, upon waking Segismundo won't know that he is actually a prince in reality, and he will continue to believe that he is just a random prisoner.*



*Again, this exchange suggests that Clotaldo doesn't initially have a problem killing Astolfo to avenge Rosaura's honor. It is only after Clotaldo becomes indebted to Astolfo when he saves his life that Clotaldo refuses to avenge Rosaura's honor. The fact that Segismundo doesn't recognize Rosaura again underscores the conflict between illusion and reality. In reality, Segismundo has already met Rosaura, but his perception is something entirely different.*



*Segismundo presumably tells Clarín to leave the room so he can kill Rosaura, which again implies that Segismundo really is a "wild beast" like the prophecy says. At this point, it seems Segismundo can't resist his evil nature after all, and he threatens to kill everyone. Clotaldo again is seen as the savior, but his morality falls short when he continues to lie to Segismundo and claim he is in a dream.*



Segismundo attempts to draw his dagger, but Clotaldo holds his hand. Segismundo orders him to let go, but Clotaldo refuses until Segismundo agrees to behave. The two men struggle, and Segismundo threatens to kill him. Rosaura yells for help and runs from the room, and Astolfo rushes in, coming to Clotaldo's aid. As Astolfo and Segismundo draw their swords, Basilio enters the room with Estrella. Segismundo threatens to kill Astolfo, too, and he tells Basilio that he will get revenge for his imprisonment. Basilio assures Segismundo that before he gets his revenge, he will wake up and discover that this has all been just a dream.

Basilio and Clotaldo exit, but Estrella and Astolfo stay behind. Astolfo claims that he isn't surprised that Segismundo has behaved so deplorably, but he promises to treat Estrella like the lady she is. Estrella tells Astolfo that his compliments must be meant for the woman in the portrait in the pendant around his neck, and Rosaura slips into the room unnoticed. Astolfo promises to remove the portrait and replace it with Estrella's, but as he exits, he thinks about Rosaura and asks for her forgiveness.

Estrella notices Rosaura. "Astraea!" she cries, calling Rosaura by the name Clotaldo has given her disguise. Estrella tells Rosaura that in the short time she has known her, she has grown to trust her, and she tells her all about her troubles with Astolfo. He says he wants to marry her, but he wears the portrait of another in a pendant around his neck. He has gone to get the pendant, Estrella says, to give to her, but she is embarrassed and prefers that he give it to Rosaura instead.

Estrella exits, and Rosaura is distraught. No one has ever been forced to endure such misfortune, she cries. She doesn't know what she should do. Clotaldo has advised her against revealing her true identity, and she doesn't want to disappoint him, but she can't hide herself from Astolfo forever. As Rosaura prays to God, Astolfo returns with the portrait and is shocked to find her there. Rosaura asks why he is so surprised. "I am Astraea," she says. Astolfo says he knows that she is supposed to be Astraea, but he loves her as Rosaura.

*Clearly, Segismundo isn't able to resist his evil nature, and he threatens to kill everyone for the slightest affront. Of course, it's also true that he's been horrifically mistreated for his entire life, which complicates the question of whether fate is truly responsible for his behavior. Here, Astolfo saves Clotaldo's life, which derails Clotaldo's plan to help Rosaura kill Astolfo and avenge her lost honor. He later claims he cannot take the life of a man who has saved his, and he is launched into yet another moral dilemma. Clotaldo is in an impossible situation—to honor Astolfo and repay his good deed, Clotaldo must betray his daughter, and vice versa.*



*Clearly, Astolfo is in love with Rosaura. He keeps her portrait and apologizes to her even when she isn't listening, but he is still willing to betray her to marry Estrella and become king, which further speaks to his despicable character. Still, he has just saved Clotaldo's life with complete disregard for his own, which somewhat redeems his otherwise unethical behavior.*



*Estrella's belief that Rosaura is really a lady-in-waiting named Astraea again suggests that reality is an illusion based only on perception. Estrella believes she can trust Rosaura, but their entire relationship is based on deception. Rosaura isn't who she says she is, and, ironically, she is the root of Estrella's problems with Astolfo.*



*Rosaura constantly laments her misfortune, which again implies that she has no control over her fate and is just along for the ride. In this way, Rosaura's life is predestined to be full of heartache, and there is nothing she can do about it. Meanwhile, her attempt to convince Astolfo that she is Astraea even though he knows the truth again underscores the play's constant confusion of illusion and reality.*



Rosaura tells Astolfo that she doesn't know what he is talking about. She only knows that Estrella has ordered her to wait for him and retrieve a portrait. Astolfo tells Rosaura that if she insists on keeping up her game, he will play along. He says that since he esteems Estrella so, he is sending her the portrait's original. All Rosaura has to do, Astolfo says, is bring Estrella herself. Rosaura demands the portrait and says she will not return without it, but Astolfo refuses. Astolfo and Rosaura begin to fight over the portrait, and Estrella enters. "Astraea, Astolfo," she asks, "what's going on?"

Rosaura quickly comes up with a lie. She tells Estrella that when she ordered her to get the portrait from Astolfo, it reminded her that she had brought her own portrait. She had stopped to look at it as she waited and dropped it. Astolfo picked it up and now refuses to give it back. Instead of giving her the portrait in his possession, he has taken hers and now has two.

Estrella orders Astolfo to give her the portrait and snatches it from his hand. She looks at it and agrees it indeed fits Rosaura's likeness. She then demands that Astolfo give her the portrait she asked for. She doesn't intend to ever speak to him again, Estrella says, but she refuses to let him keep the portrait. Astolfo wonders how he will ever get out of such a terrible situation. He tells Estrella that he can't give her the portrait, and Estrella says he can't give it to her because he is a no-good man. "Damn you, Rosaura!" Astolfo yells, as Segismundo, sleeping and dressed in animal skins with his legs shackled, is carried out of the palace by soldiers.

Clotaldo, Clarín, and two servants enter, and Clotaldo orders Clarín seized and locked up. Clarín asks why, and Clotaldo claims it is because Clarín knows his secrets. "You're a 'Clarion,'" Clotaldo says. Basilio enters, upset that Segismundo must be sent back to prison. Segismundo begins to dream and talk in his sleep, and Clotaldo and Basilio move in closer to listen. As Segismundo sleeps, he calls for Clotaldo's death and for Basilio to bow at his feet.

*Rosaura, of course, is lying. She knows perfectly well what Astolfo is talking about, but she continues her ruse, further blurring the line between reality and illusion. In telling Rosaura that he is sending Estrella the portrait's original by sending Rosaura, he effectively admits that the portrait is of Rosaura. The fact that Astolfo won't give up the portrait suggests that he is still in love with Rosaura, even though he plans to marry Estrella.*



*In telling this lie, Rosaura further blurs the line between reality and illusion. In reality, Astolfo has Rosaura's portrait because he is in love with her, but Estrella's perception is that the portrait really belongs to Rosaura and Astolfo has just picked it up off the ground.*



*Segismundo is obviously being sent back to prison. He has behaved like an animal just as the prophecy predicted, and he is dressed in animal skins to reflect his wild and evil nature. But this poor treatment—being shackled and treated like an animal—is precisely why, Segismundo later says, he behaves violently. This implies it is Basilio's actions, not fate, that influence Segismundo's nature and make him a tyrant.*



*A "clarion" is a trumpet, and in comparing Clarín to a clarion, Clotaldo implies that Clarín can't keep Clotaldo's secret that he is Rosaura's father. Clotaldo's imprisonment of Clarín also complicates Clotaldo's image as a man of integrity. Imprisoning Clarín certainly isn't ethical or moral, but Clotaldo does it easily enough, demonstrating that no one succeeds in upholding moral ideals all of the time.*



Back at the prison, the potion begins to lose its strength, and Segismundo wakes. “God help me,” Segismundo yells, “all the things I dreamt!” Clotaldo scolds Segismundo for sleeping all day. He claims that Segismundo fell asleep during his lesson on eagles, and has been sleeping ever since. Clotaldo asks Segismundo what he has dreamt, and Segismundo says that he was the prince of Poland. He admits that he tried to kill Clotaldo twice, sought revenge on his father for imprisoning him, and met beautiful women. Clotaldo exits, but before he does, he tells Segismundo that he should have honored the king. “[B]ecause even in dreams,” Clotaldo says, “good deeds are never wasted.”

Segismundo knows that Clotaldo is right, as “living is merely dreaming.” Segismundo questions what life is and decides it is only an “illusion.” Life is nothing but a dream, Segismundo concludes, “and even dreams are dreams.”

*Basilio’s plan to convince Segismundo that he was only dreaming has been successful, as is evident in Segismundo’s comment about the unbelievable things he dreamt. Clotaldo’s comment that “good deeds are never wasted,” not even in dreams, underscores Calderón’s primary argument. Calderón contends that one can never be completely certain they aren’t dreaming. Thus, it is best to always act in a moral way, since one can’t be sure what is reality and what isn’t. Reality is only a perception, but kindness and good deeds are real.*



*Again, Calderón implies that all of life is an illusion. In this way, nothing is real, except, Calderón implies, the way one behaves and how they treat other people. Kindness and morality are real, but everything else is an illusion.*



## ACT THREE

Clarín sits alone, held captive in an enchanted tower. He is being punished for what he knows, and he wonders what they will do to him for what he doesn’t know. Forced silence doesn’t suit a man with the name “Clarion” and he likens his punishment to death. Clarín thinks of his dreams from the night before, which were filled with thousands of delusions. He is weak from fasting and feels as if he may faint.

Suddenly, Clarín hears the sounds of drums and people shouting outside. They are making their way into the tower, and Clarín fears they are looking for him, although he can’t understand why. As several soldiers pour into the tower and begin looking around, Clarín wonders if they are drunk. A soldier approaches Clarín’s cell and calls the other men over. The soldier offers to kiss Clarín’s feet, and all the men shout: “Long live Segismundo!” Clarín wonders if it is some sort of tradition in Poland to arrest someone each day and then make them a prince.

*Clotaldo’s imprisonment of Clarín again suggests that he is not as moral and ethical as he pretends to be. Clarín has done nothing wrong, but Clotaldo punishes him because he poses a threat to him. As Clarín is portrayed as a chatterbox, his forced silence is the worst punishment imaginable. Clarín, too, is having a difficult time distinguishing dreams from reality.*



*Obviously, the men, who are rebelling against the king and have come to break their prince out of prison, have mistaken Clarín for Segismundo, but Clarín doesn’t initially know this. This misconception further blurs the line between illusion and reality, as the men falsely believe Clarín to be their prince, when in reality, he is merely a servant from Muscovy.*



Segismundo appears and asks who is calling his name, and the soldiers look at Segismundo and then back again to Clarín. Who, the soldiers ask, is the real Segismundo? Segismundo confirms that he is the real Segismundo, and Clarín immediately explains. Fearing a prophecy, Clarín says, King Basilio has deprived Segismundo of his liberty and plans to make Astolfo the new king. The commoners of the kingdom have revolted and will not accept the foreigner from Muscovy as their king, so the soldiers have come to the tower to recover their prince and overthrow the tyrant king.

As the soldiers shout and praise Segismundo, Clotaldo enters to investigate the noise. Seeing the soldiers and Segismundo, Clotaldo immediately throws himself at Segismundo's feet and begs for mercy. Segismundo insists that Clotaldo rise. He embraces Clotaldo, thanking him for his upbringing, and swears his loyalty to him. Clotaldo is confused and asks Segismundo what he is trying to say. "That I'm dreaming, and that I wish / to do good, because good deeds / aren't wasted, even in dreams," Segismundo proclaims.

Clotaldo informs Segismundo that if doing good is the theme of the day, he cannot possibly join forces with him and fight against King Basilio. Clotaldo says that Segismundo will have to kill him if he expects him to betray the king, and Segismundo begins to grow angry, but he quickly stops himself. Segismundo isn't sure if he is awake or not, so he tells Clotaldo that he envies his loyalty to the king and orders him to leave and join his king. They will meet later, Segismundo says, on the battlefield.

As the alarm sounds and Segismundo and Clotaldo exit the tower, Basilio and Astolfo enter. Basilio laments that his kingdom is torn and divided. Half of them are yelling for Segismundo; the other half cry for Astolfo. They are headed for great tragedy, Basilio fears. Astolfo urges Basilio to place the wedding plans on hold for now. Astolfo wants to be king, but if half of the people do not want him, he says, it is because he hasn't yet earned their respect. Astolfo asks for a horse. He will win their support riding against Segismundo. Basilio continues to lament his plight. In trying to avoid division in his kingdom, he has driven his people directly into it.

Estrella enters. Basilio must get ahold of the uprising, she warns, or Poland is sure to be soaked in blood. Clotaldo rushes in, bringing news of the soldiers who broke Segismundo out of the tower. "[Segismundo] aims to make heaven's prediction come true," Clotaldo warns. Basilio asks for a horse and claims he will defend his crown. "I shall be Bellona," Estrella says, exiting with Basilio and Asolfo.

*The interaction between Segismundo, Clarín, and the uprising soldiers is quite comical, which offers a bit of relief in an otherwise serious play. At this point, Segismundo believes that his previous experience at the palace was just a dream, and he has no reason to suspect that he is actually the prince.*



*By this point, Segismundo is completely confused, and he doesn't know what is real and what isn't. To Segismundo, the only thing that is real is his behavior and his treatment of Clotaldo. Furthermore, Segismundo's mercy towards Clotaldo after the way he has treated him suggests that Segismundo isn't really an animal as the prophecy suggests and is able to act on his own free will.*



*Again, Clotaldo is too loyal to turn on the king, which speaks to his supposed morality and strong ethics. Even though Basilio was wrong to imprison Segismundo, Clotaldo still will not betray him. Segismundo's kneejerk reaction is anger, which again suggests his violent nature, but this time, he is able to overcome this feeling through his free will.*



*Astolfo's suggestion that Basilio hold off on making him king until he can win over the people again suggests that Astolfo isn't as unethical and despicable as he at first seems. Even though Astolfo badly wants to be king, he doesn't want it if the people object, and he would rather beat Segismundo fair and square and prove his worth.*



*Bellona is an ancient Roman goddess of war, and when Estrella compares herself to Bellona, she means that she intends to fight Segismundo as well. Segismundo plans to "make heaven's prediction come true," which is to say he intends to behave violently and avenge his false imprisonment.*



Rosaura enters and approaches Clotaldo. She says that she arrived in Poland a poor, unfortunate woman, but she has found compassion in him. He advised her to assume a false name and stay away from Astolfo. Astolfo, however, could not be avoided, and he has again offended Rosaura's honor, so she begs Clotaldo to end her trouble by avenging the insult to her honor. After all, Rosaura says, Clotaldo has already agreed to kill Astolfo.

Clotaldo tells Rosaura that he very much wants to please her and restore her lost honor, even if that means killing Astolfo, but things have changed since Astolfo saved his life. When Segismundo wanted to kill Clotaldo, it was Astolfo who stopped him. So how, Clotaldo asks, is he supposed to kill Astolfo now? Clotaldo admits that he is torn between his loyalty to Rosaura and his newfound debt to Astolfo, but he ultimately cannot take the life a man who saved his. Rosaura maintains that Clotaldo is obliged only to her. Rosaura reminds him that she has received nothing from him since she was born, and it is time he be more generous with her, but Clotaldo still refuses to help her.

As Clotaldo and Rosaura exit, trumpets sound and Segismundo enters with Clarín and a group of soldiers. Moments later, Clarín points to Rosaura as she re-enters wearing a long, flowing tunic and brandishing her **sword**. She approaches Segismundo and throws herself at his mercy. She tells him that she is a most unfortunate woman, and while she has met Segismundo three times, he has never known who she really is. She first met him at the prison dressed as a man, and the second time as one of Estrella's ladies-in-waiting. Now she comes to him as both man and woman, dressed in fine clothing and wielding a sword, and she hopes that he may agree to protect her.

Rosaura tells Segismundo that she was born to a noblewoman in Muscovy. Her mother, Violante, had been very beautiful and was seduced by the compliments of a man. He promised to marry her, and she gave herself to him so completely that she considered them already married. He left her alone, but he left her his **sword**. Rosaura was born later and is a "copy" of her mother in "luck and deeds." Now, Astolfo has stolen Rosaura's honor, just as her mother's honor was stolen.

*Again, the fact that Clotaldo initially agreed to kill Astolfo to avenge Rosaura's honor suggests that Clotaldo does not find revenge immoral per se; he only objects because Astolfo has since saved his life, demonstrating that revenge comes second to loyalty and gratitude. Calderón, however, ultimately implies that revenge, regardless of the circumstances, is not honorable or moral.*



*This exchange again speaks to Clotaldo's moral dilemma. He feels obligated to both Rosaura and Astolfo, but in order to help one of them, Clotaldo must betray the other. In this way, while Calderón implies that honor is important, he also suggests it isn't worth sacrificing one's morals through revenge. It is ultimately more honorable, Calderón thus implies, to behave in a moral and righteous way.*



*The fact that Rosaura has met Segismundo three times, each time in a different disguise, again highlights the conflict between illusion and reality. By this point, it is impossible for Segismundo to know who Rosaura really is. Instead, reality is merely whatever illusion Rosaura presents to Segismundo. Rosaura's sword is a symbol of her true identity, but even that is inconsistent with her gender, which further confuses Segismundo and distorts reality.*



*The sword identifies Clotaldo as Rosaura's father, but because of Violante's history with Clotaldo, Rosaura believes she is her mother's "copy" and is destined to the same fate in "luck and deeds." This again suggests that Rosaura's life is predestined, and she does not have control over it.*



Astolfo has come to Poland to marry Estrella, and Rosaura is heartbroken. Violante convinced Rosaura to follow Astolfo to Poland and defend her honor, instead of letting it go as Violante herself did. Violante told her to unsheathe her **sword** and “the greatest nobleman” would take notice, and she does this now as promised. She has come to offer Segismundo her assistance, and together she hopes they can stop Astolfo and Estrella’s wedding. She already considers Astolfo her husband, and she can’t allow him to marry another.

Segismundo is confused and doesn’t know whether or not he is dreaming. If this is a dream, Segismundo thinks, it is very close to the original. Still, Segismundo thinks, what one enjoys in dreams, one enjoys in reality as well, so one must always dream of happiness. Segismundo doesn’t directly answer Rosaura, but he vows to restore her honor before he takes the crown. He sounds the alarm for battle, and Rosaura is upset that he is leaving. She asks him to speak to her, and Segismundo tells her that if he is to restore her honor, he must do it with actions, not words.

The sound of drums announces an attack on the palace, and the men begin to fight. As Clarín runs to hide, Basilio enters with Clotaldo and Astolfo, retreating from the fighting. Basilio’s men have been defeated by Segismundo’s supporters, and he tells Clotaldo that it is time to run. Gunshots erupt, and Clarín stumbles from his hiding place, bleeding.

Clarín falls dead to the ground, and Basilio claims that it is God’s will. Clotaldo tells Basilio that it isn’t “Christian” to claim there is no protection from fate, as a “man with foresight / can gain victory of fate.” Another alarm sounds, and Segismundo enters. Clotaldo tells Basilio to run, but he refuses. Instead, he throws himself at Segismundo’s feet and begs for mercy.

Segismundo addresses the people with Basilio at his feet. He claims his father, the king, has turned him into a “human beast.” Had Segismundo been treated with kindness, he may have grown up to be a kind man. However, Segismundo says, the only way to overcome misfortune is through sacrifice. As such, Segismundo tells his father to rise and falls himself to Basilio’s feet, accepting him as his father and his king.

*In telling Rosaura that “the greatest nobleman” would notice the sword and help her, Violante meant Clotaldo, but Rosaura is hoping that Segismundo will help her instead. While Rosaura believes that she is destined to the same fate as her mother, Violante’s advice that Rosaura go to Poland and defend her honor suggests that Rosaura actually has control over her fate and can change it with her own free will.*



*Again, Segismundo has no idea what is reality and what is an illusion, and the only things that are real are his perceptions and how he treats people. Segismundo’s vow to restore Rosaura’s honor suggests that honor is important, but his refusal to restore it through revenge again indicates that vengeance itself is not honorable. Thus, Rosaura’s honor must be restored in a different way.*



*The prophecy is correct in that the kingdom is divided by war, yet it is not Segismundo alone who brings the kingdom to this point. The dissent within the kingdom is the result of Basilio’s actions, not Segismundo’s, which again suggests that life is not predestined.*



*In saying that it isn’t “Christian” to claim that one has no control over their fate, Clotaldo implies that this assumption isn’t true. He instead argues that one does have control over their fate through free will, as long as one has the “foresight” to acknowledge this control—and not fall prey to the idea that fate dictates everything.*



*Again, Segismundo implies that it was Basilio’s actions and ill treatment of him, not fate or destiny, that caused him to be an animal and behave violently. In finally accepting Basilio as his father and king, Segismundo effectively proves the prophecy—and his father—wrong.*



On account of Segismundo's good will, Basilio immediately names him king of Poland. As his first act as king, Segismundo orders Astolfo to marry Rosaura and restore her honor. Astolfo, however, is hesitant. Rosaura is not of royal blood, he says, but Clotaldo interrupts and claims her as his daughter. Satisfied that Rosaura is indeed royal, Astolfo agrees to marry her, and Segismundo declares that he shall marry Estrella and make her his queen. Basilio is shocked by Segismundo's goodness. Segismundo claims that he was taught to be good in a dream, and even now, he is afraid that he will wake up in his prison cell. If he does wake back in his prison cell, Segismundo says, even that will be enough, as all "human happiness / passes by in the end like a dream."

*Calderón ultimately implies that it is impossible to discern reality from illusion, and the only thing that is real for Segismunda is his perception—his sense of his feelings and his treatment of others. In restoring Rosaura's honor in a nonviolent way, Segismundo ensures both Rosaura's honor and his own and shows once again that vengeance is not necessary for maintaining honor. And by sparing Astolfo's life even though he has treated both Rosaura and Segismundo badly, Segismundo effectively proves that he is not a monster as the prophecy suggested and instead has the power to change his destiny through his own free will.*







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