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# Constructing Authority in Lope De Vega's Egloga a Claudio: Self-Referentiality, Literary Judgment, and Ethics

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CONSTRUCTING AUTHORITY IN LOPE DE VEGA'S  
*ÉGLOGA A CLAUDIO*: SELF-REFERENTIALITY,  
LITERARY JUDGMENT, AND ETHICS

MARK J. MASCIA

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THE poetry of Lope de Vega has most often been analyzed for its treatment of themes such as love, religious devotion, or autobiographical introspection. However, one other key aspect of his poetry, especially of his longer poetical works (such as his *epístolas* and *églogas*), is the engagement of literature and ethical concerns often related to the art of writing poetry. The purpose of this study is to examine one such work, the *Égloga a Claudio* (1631),<sup>1</sup> a lengthy poem which normally should be classified as an *epístola*, for its role as a literary vehicle for passing judgment on different issues.

In the *Égloga*, a number of key issues will emerge. First, Lope expresses a generally critical attitude with respect to the linguistic excesses of *culteranismo* and in defending what he perceived as a “pure” form of Castilian poetry writing, untouched by the esthetic begun by Luis de Góngora and continued by his many imitators, in spite of the fact that *culteranismo* had by then become established. In engaging the topic of poetry within this poem, Lope evinces a sense of linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Sobejano dates the epistle slightly differently, and says the following: “la epístola ‘A Claudio’, en liras de seis versos, [es] de enero de 1632 probablemente, publicada suelta, y después recogida en el libro póstumo *La Vega del Parnaso* (1637)” (20). Rozas offers yet another time frame, although not radically different: “podemos situarla [=la epístola] . . . en torno al 6 de mayo de 1632 en que se firmaron las aprobaciones de *La Dorotea*, obra que el poema menciona como inédita, pero terminada, o casi terminada” (171). He then subsequently states: “podemos precisar que el poema a Claudio se escribió en un período de tiempo que va desde poco antes de ese abril a muy poco después del 7 de septiembre en que se fecha la fe de erratas de *La Dorotea*” (171).

nationalism while displaying his own literary pride in avoiding such trends and in having had a highly prolific literary career. In addition, Lope uses this *Égloga* as a means of self-promotion and ethical speculation on a problem he faced at the time from other poets, that of plagiarism and the question of originality. Finally, the poem is an exploration of other related topics, such as understanding the roots of poetic inspiration, and the distinction between natural talent and the formal study of poetry writing. In sum, the *Égloga* is at once a tool for literary criticism and self-validation, a weapon specifically targeting *culteranismo* and any poetry (and poets) Lope considers inferior, and a method of setting standards in both discursive and general human behavior.

The *Égloga a Claudio* (*Obras sueltas* I: 1-12), written to a friend, Claudio Conde, contains numerous autobiographical and literary data and is narrated from the perspective *de senectute*. Lope begins with a sarcastic reference to himself – “oye sin instrumento / las ideas de un loco” (3, 4) – and then discusses certain events of his life. His tone appears resigned, as he no longer fears death: “Voy por la senda del morir más clara, / y de toda esperanza me retiro” (103, 104). Juan Manuel Rozas observes that this poem’s dialectic is multifaceted: “la epístola, en lo esencial, está planteada desde una dialéctica juventud/senectud, que se desarrolla por tres caminos, que adelanto: Lope joven/Lope viejo; escritores jóvenes/Lope creador de la comedia nueva; vida y obra de Lope al servicio de su nación y de la Corona/menosprecio de él, viejo, por parte de la corte” (174). Lope’s allusions to age and life experience set the stage for the literary and ethical judgments that he will soon pass, as he progressively constructs a self-image of maturity and authority as much as one of weariness.

Lope’s first treatment of poets and poetry occurs in several strophes dedicated to *armas* and *letras* and the role of the human *ingenio*. He implies that the proverbial pen is mightier than the sword, as the mind guides discourse while brute force only guides the body: “que no es espada de la pluma el genio / que la gobierna el brazo, y no el ingenio” (137, 138). His observation of young poets, paradoxically described as “ingenios,” is significant: “y ahora ingenios mozos (cosa rara) / se meten versos por la misma cara” (143, 144). The poet is no longer concerned with approval – a logical notion, given the late stage in Lope’s life in which this was written – and admires only men of knowledge:

Mas yo que aun de esta ley mi nombre excluyo,  
 ni estimo aplausos, ni lamento agravios,  
 adoro en hombres sabios,  
 y de inorantes huyo.

(151-154)

Of note is Lope's intentional use of nameless "inorantes," an element connoting a clearly authoritative stance. Very early in the epistle, thusly, Lope begins to establish his literary identity as a skilled and intelligent poet, scornful of unnamed ignorant people "beneath him" – and, implicitly, as a *sabio* himself.

In spite of this declaration, however, Lope then uses the *epístola* to justify his lack of poetic honors. He rationalizes that he never had a regular *mecenas*, and that as a result, the metaphoric laurels of victory eluded him, though on one occasion, Lope declares, "Ya no me quejo de mi dura suerte" (157), despite these remembrances. Lope implicitly urges Claudio to believe that honors once were meaningful and that they would have been so at that stage in his life, if he had enjoyed continuously successful patronage. Deprived of such patronage, Lope pandered to lowbrow tastes, which he recounts with a comparison to painters who make haste. Lope controlled his pen without a *mecenas*, and wrote according to the conditions under which he lived. He was unable to treat serious topics or to develop a "sublime" style:

Por no faltar a quien mi cuello oprime  
 nunca pude ocuparme en cosas serias,  
 que en humildes materias  
 no hay estilo sublime:  
 porque es hacer Efimeras Poemas  
 sellar para romper frágiles nemas.

(181-186)

Lope's attitudes towards the lack of consistent patronage bespeak a belief in an entitlement to patronage along with a certain degree of resentment towards other poets as well. As Felipe B. Pedraza Jiménez observes: "Cree, aunque se muerda la lengua, que la inmensa copia de sus escritos, el ser el mayor poeta de España, le da derecho a la protección que la corona derrama sobre un sinfín de autores de segunda fila" (22). The poet underscores the importance of circumstance, which influ-

ences the way in which one writes and the audience to whom one writes, as much as other factors such as the *ingenio* do. In this manner, Lope uses the epistle as a means of literary and personal self-justification.

He then entertains questions of style in alluding to the *culteranos*, and then defends “pureza y armonía” in poetry:

Pensé yo que mi lengua me debía  
 (así lo presumió parte de España)  
 o el propio Amor me engaña,  
 pureza y armonía:  
 y si no lo permite quien lo imita,  
 o deje de imitar, o lo permita.

(187-192)

By the time this epistle was written, *culteranismo* had already become well-entrenched in Spanish poetry, a movement against which Lope would develop a reactionary stance. His reasons included the overuse of a hybrid, Latinized poetic idiom and a linguistic complexity obscure to many educated readers of the day. Rozas adds another dimension to the above verses, regarding favor and patronage: “Y todavía un paso más: estos escritores que tanto le deben y que le han quitado, según Lope, por medio de los señores, la opinión del vulgo, son precisamente los que no le permiten el premio, es decir, el acercamiento a sus pretensiones en la Corte” (185). For Lope, purity and harmony are what the new and presumptuous way of writing lacks.<sup>2</sup> Implied thus is the notion that proper poetry – and, by association, courtly favor – should not rest on prevailing *culterano* modes of writing. This way of writing stands opposed to Lope’s declared esthetics.<sup>3</sup>

Lope’s style had been scorned throughout the Baroque by *culteranos*, including Góngora, as too easy and devoid of intellectual complexi-

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<sup>2</sup> Jiménez Belmonte also offers the following analysis of Lope’s views on style as contained in this passage: “Esa humildad de estilo pasa a convertirse para Lope en su gran aportación a la literatura española, enlazándose sutilmente y merced a la ‘pureza y armonía’ de su estilo con la palabra poética de Garcilaso, y legitimando así su posición como clásico rodeado de imitadores a los que reclama reconocimiento” (13).

<sup>3</sup> Miguel Romera-Navarro distinguishes these competing esthetics with an implied nod in favor of Lope’s: “Probado está que puede levantarse la lengua castellana sin recurrir a barbarismos, pero los cultistas, por ignorancia o falta de ingenio, no lo piensan así” (370).

ty. They condemned him for his "humildad" (implicitly his oft-cited "humilde estilo" or "estilo llano"):

Parece elevación desvanecida  
 esta manera de escribir tan nueva,  
 que arrogante reprueba  
 la humildad de mi vida,  
 y es solamente acción desesperada  
 de quien se corta con su misma espada.

(193-198)

In the strophe above, Lope clearly attempts to vindicate himself and his style by merging an image of (apparently false) humility with that of authority, labeling the new school of poets as arrogant. The intention of literary speculation is salient again. As Javier Jiménez Belmonte has observed regarding this epistolary role, "[L]a epístola funcionaba . . . como una declaración de principios, poéticos y existenciales, de pública proyección, y a través de ella se solía manifestar la pertenencia a un determinado círculo amical cuya posición social e intelectual venía a justificar la propia situación del autor" (6, 7). Lope's personal and esthetic alliances thus become more prominent as the poem progresses.

Lope's self-reflection, here as elsewhere, allows the reader to see a defensive stance with regards to poetry and ethics along with the association between life and literature. As Claudio Guillén has noted, "Si Lope literariza su existencia, transfigurándola, es notable también su proclividad a literarizar la literarización, convirtiendo sus comentarios en autocritica y metapoésia, y su vida en la trayectoria de un escritor" (163). Indeed, the poet states his intentions and includes a metapoetic aspect seen in many other works, notably his sonnets: the need to write results from what one feels.<sup>4</sup> Rozas adds that Lope's defensive posture arises partly from attacks by other poets, notably Jusepe de Pellicer (the "famoso comentarista de la obra de Góngora," as Carreño indicates

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Égloga a Claudio*, Lope's salient words to this point include calling "los concetos" his "flores del alma" and "de la pluma efetos" (221, 222). For a more detailed study on the metapoetic relationship between emotion and the stated reason for writing, as seen in Lope's earlier sonnets of the *Rimas* (1602) along with their Petrarchan roots in love poetry, see Mascia's study, "The Sonnet as Mirror: Metapoetry and Self-Referentiality in Lope de Vega's *Rimas*." Longer poetic works such as epistles are thus not the only genre in which Lope's emotions are directly referenced as a key reason to write.

[27n], to whom Lope had lost the position of royal chronicler only several years prior to writing this poem, in 1629). In this instance, Rozas specifically refers to “las injurias de los jóvenes poetas, desde luego las de Pellicer en sus *Lecciones solemnes*” (194). Coupled with this attitude of self-defense is the notion that literature was Lope’s vocation because of “natural inclination,” which he justifies by citing the frequently metaphorized “Pastor de Mantua,” Vergil:

Dijo el Pastor de Mantua que las Musas  
eran su amor, como también mi estrella,  
no porque tenga en ella  
sus deidades infusas;  
mas por hallar en influencias tales  
para mi error disculpas celestiales.

(241-246)

Lope’s “natural inclination” is a *force majeure* which he describes using the self-referential (and somewhat vain) metaphor of the “Ruiñeñor” (248). In justifying his life and work, Lope declares that “imposible fuera / Que de la inclinación se defendiera” (251-252). Contextualizing this statement within the poetics of his time, Lope would have had what a number of theorists had called the poet’s *vena* or *furor*, as Luis Alfonso de Carvallo had stated: “solo con la naturaleza, inclinación y vena puede uno ser Poeta” (354). In this manner, Lope also implies that he himself has the inherent talent to be a successful poet – and, it would logically follow, as one who should command respect from his peers and from the patronage system.

Several key ideas stand out in the next section of the *epístola*, a recounting of Lope’s literary career, citing numerous names of his works.<sup>5</sup> With respect to *El Isidro* (1599), Lope inserts a nationalistic allusion to language:

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<sup>5</sup> In this section of approximately 160 lines, Lope names over 25 of his key works, including *La Arcadia* (259-264), the *Novelas a Marcia Leonarda* (343-348), the *Laurel de Apolo* (397-402), and *La Dorotea*, as of then unfinished (403-408). Rozas adds the following evaluation of this lengthy section: “[A]quí se expresa con habilidad de abogado defensor en pleno discurso. La obra culta, la no destinada al vulgo de los corrales, se cita de forma prácticamente exhaustiva. La va fichando en sus versos con tal rigor que hay que pensar que tal vez tenga los libros delante, como cualquier bibliógrafo” (182).

Luego con el Salterio Castellano  
 a la vida inmortal la voz inclino  
 de aquel Fénix divino  
 Labrador cortesano,  
 cuya fuente más pura que Helicon  
 tantos ingenios de laurel corona.

(271-276)

He appropriately rimes "Salterio Castellano" with "Labrador cortesano," as a Castilian lyric is proper for an equally Castilian saint (even though San Isidro was an intentional construct by the Counter Reformation Church in Spain), along with "Helicon" and "corona," the latter indicating what takes place on the former. National pride is conjoined with literature in this reference to *El Isidro*. Verses regarding the *Rimas* and *Rimas sacras* include brief references to the acts of crying and singing, reminiscent of the Latin *planctus* which gave rise to the emotional discharge of the *llanto*: "Lloré las Rimas del Amor humano, / Canté las Rimas del Amor divino" (283, 284). Again, Lope links emotional stimuli to writing poetry. Later, he proudly implies that he has a superior lyre in writing the *Triunfos divinos* (1625) and that his tastes became more focused and refined. With this section in mind, a distinction should be made between Lope's identification of his own work and what his work really was:

Hay una grave contradicción entre la verdad de su vida y obra (cristianas, renovadoras, populares y apegadas a lo erótico) y lo que el estilo de este *currículum* quiere mostrar. No lo ordena abiertamente desde lo religioso, amoroso y popular, sino desde lo clásico, grave y culto. . . . En realidad, la clave para entender lo que quiere expresar y potenciar, en su vida y obra, radica en los conceptos de dignidad y cultura (Rozas 183).

Later in this same section, Lope refers to his own *epístolas*. Detailing his alternation between poetry and prose, he notes that the number of his epistolary recipients is so large that he cannot be asked to recall all their names. Lope clearly "se mostraba . . . orgulloso de la abundante variedad de su trabajo y no olvidaba las epístolas" (Sobejano 18). Immodestly, he implies that he is equally dexterous in Latin and Spanish, regarding his translation of *De raptu Proserpinae*: "a la pluma Latina / trasladé la elegancia" (351, 352). It should be noted, however, that Lope never lexically or stylistically fuses together the two languages in his own lyric, unlike *culterano* poetry as he sees it. Lope then returns to



his *Rimas* and again associates “cantar” with “llorar,” whose present participles rhyme as well, while availing himself repeatedly (and immodestly) of the adjective “inmenso”:

En varias Rimas lágrimas inmensas  
mostraron con dolor de tanto olvido  
inmenso el ofendido,  
y inmensas las ofensas;  
canté mis yerros, y lloré cantando,  
que es volver a Sión cantar llorando.

(361-366)

Finally, Lope emphasizes his “estilo llano” and his reliance on tropes and “rhetorical colors” (414), before referring to his numerous *comedias* (“Mil y quinientas fábulas” [415], he proudly declares). In justifying his own rapid writing of so many dramatic works, Lope uses the comparison that certain painters can produce art in high quantities and still achieve greatness, stating that people have seen artists like Titian “pintar con las dos manos / sin ofender el Arte” (423, 424). For Lope, since great quantity does not preclude high quality, the principles of art are not betrayed. This section highlights Lope’s pride in his career and continues to build up his self-image as a prolific and respectable writer, one whose opinions should carry weight among others.

Near the end, Lope introduces a transition by examining artistic and literary principles. After ruminating on the role of nature and culture in shaping the creative genius (cf. 427-438),<sup>6</sup> Lope focuses on publishing and certain ethical principles necessary for a literary career. Ethics are frequently compromised when one must sell one’s work: “. . . al principio las impresas miras / ganar dineros y vender mentiras” (443, 444). However, what truly vexes Lope is the fact that certain authors published their work (of low quality) under Lope’s own name. He condemns this action more than its opposite (when others publish his work under their name, the standard form of plagiarism):

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<sup>6</sup> Montesinos analyzes this brief segment, where Lope expresses his understanding of the diverse ways in which artistic talent can be manifest: “porque naturaleza, a quien las debe, / aquí salpica púrpura, allí nieve” (431, 432). The eminent Lopist states, “El arte puede venir *luego*, y puede ser muchas más cosas que las que dijo o no dijo Aristóteles; por ende, hasta puede ser *nuevo*. Pero lo primario es esa naturaleza sin la cual no puede haber arte. El arte no se crea a sí mismo” (11, 12).

Mas ha llegado, Claudio, la codicia  
 a imprimir con mi nombre las ajenas,  
 de mil errores llenas,  
 o inorancia o malicia;  
 y aunque esto siento más, menos condeno  
 algunas mías con el nombre ageno.

(457-462)

Lope defends his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* and proudly alludes to its importance: "Débenme a mí su principio el Arte" (469). He notes once more the phenomenon of a writer having to sell his work – "la copia escrita / es fuerza que se venda" (501, 502) – overtly excusing his own commercialism throughout his life as a paid dramatist. Lope thus establishes his own set of ethics in this work, distinguishing activity that is necessary to survive from that which is not and which, in fact, would be considered dishonorable.

The epistle concludes with the question of originality and authenticity: imitation of proper models, and not plagiarism, is desired. Lope claims he can recognize when a conceit is original and when it is not – and borrows the last line of his sonnet, "La nueva juventud gramaticanda," from the *Rimas humanas y divinas del licenciado Tomé de Burguillos* (1634), in stating "tengo por vana Hipocresía / hurtar de noche, y murmurar de día" (515, 516). He mounts "una crítica a sus sucesores" and "[l]amenta en ellos – y sin duda estamos ante un teatro de generación calderonista, tan teñido de gongorismo – serios defectos y falsificaciones" (Rozas 184). Yet, in spite of his authoritative stance, Lope concedes the importance of good imitation in following poetic role models. The Fénix notes that his models are literary classics, such as Vergil, Garcilaso and Ovid (534), and then he succinctly states that "aquel es Sabio que los Sabios aman" (540). Clearly, Lope has used the epistle as a means of self-remembrance and literary justification, as Jiménez Belmonte observes: "Lope se proyecta a sí mismo como heraldo de una tradición literaria que lo enlaza con Virgilio y Ovidio entre los clásicos, con Garcilaso entre los pasados inmediatos y con el Príncipe de Esquilache, poeta claro, amigo y protector de Lope, entre los contemporáneos" (16). In this manner, Lope constructs his own self-image of being a living "classic."

However, in spite of his self-assurance regarding talent and knowledge, Lope voices disappointment at the turn of events in his life in the

final strophe, and concludes, “ya no he menester a la fortuna” (546). It would appear that all the fecund Lope had wanted was to write well and be respected as a writer. Yet, Lope also wants his reader to believe that respect had eluded him, in part due to the patronage system. In addition, he was unable to control the emergence of other literary trends such as *culteranismo* or to prevent the labors of lesser imitators or plagiarists. Gonzalo Sobejano aptly summarizes the epistle stating that “consumado ya el fracaso de sus aspiraciones a alguna recompensa . . . enviaría Lope a su mejor amigo, Claudio Conde, el inventario de sus desvelos como escritor, la historia de sus libros o memorial de méritos, en una singular epístola” (31, 32). It is this retrospective view – along with the esthetic and ethical issues examined – which determines the authoritative and self-reflective character of this epistle.

In conclusion, what emerges from this work is a vision of Lope as an author intensely concerned with issues of personal and literary propriety. The *Égloga a Claudio* allows Lope to establish himself with conviction as an authority on issues ranging from the state of Spanish poetry to the differences between proper and improper behaviors.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the poem is a means of advertising oneself from the perspective of a much older man reflecting upon a life and a career in writing, and deeply affected by life’s *desengaño*, which can be considered the real key to this work (Jiménez Belmonte 7). Narcissistic as it sometimes is, the epistle serves Lope as he takes on various roles – intellectual, ethical, and autobiographical – and fashions an authorial self unique to this genre.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Lope’s concern with proper behavior, in life and in literature, is not confined to just this one lengthy poem. Many other works evince some of the same basic attitudes, dating back to non-epistolary works such as the sonnets from the *Rimas*. Mary Gaylord’s analysis of Lope’s focus on personal and literary propriety within that collection can be applied here in much the same way: “[Lope] casts the question of the natural and the proper in poetry not only in their familiar ethical, nationalistic, and even theological terms, but in terms of the relation of the poet’s language to the self, to himself” (231). In treating the intertwined literary and ethical issues examined herein, Lope effectively uses the *epístola* as a means of self-creation.

This attempt at self-creation through versed epistles to a friend is certainly not limited to Lope within the context of the Golden Age. For instance, Garcilaso accomplishes the same in his “Epístola a Boscán,” as Barbara Brunner Edwards has demonstrated: “[H]e loves poetry and his true friends for the same reason: they both allow him to create, to give, and hence to exist – and to do so nobly” (6). The symbiotic relationship between lived reality, self-definition, and literary discourse is inherent in the epistolary genre.

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