Venereal Disease and the Gracioso: A Look at Moreto's El desnén con el desnén

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A LOOK AT MORETO'S EL DESDEN CON EL DESDEN 

One of the most intriguing characters in Moreto's El desden con el desden is the gracioso who goes by the names Polilla and Caniqui.3 This comic figure who makes his appearance from the very start in Act I, Scene 1 as Polilla and then introduces himself under the assumed name of Caniqui in Act I, Scene 5 has a dominant role in the play. And since the comedy is noted for its meticulous construction and disciplined art2 it is reasonable to conjecture that there may be some underlying and unifying significance to the two names of the gracioso. It is the contention of this paper that one concept which relates the various facets of Polilla-Canquí to each other and to the drama as a whole is the lowly and stigmatic subject of venereal disease, something which stands in perhaps intentional contrast to the courtly setting of the action and the nobility of the main characters. Before examining the Polilla-Canquí role and why venereal disease may be a motif for the gracioso, it might be wise to review the action of the play.

Carlos, the Count of Urgel, arrives with his servant, Polilla, at the palace of the Count of Barcelona, where he finds that Diana, the Countess of Barcelona's beautiful daughter disdainfully rejects all suitors. At first uninterested in Diana, Carlos, upon being sponsored by her, falls in love and determines to

29 Manuel Ruiz Llagost writes several essays on the importance of painting in Calderón's theater, among which is "Una lección dраматическая de Calderón: la pintura y el color escénico," Segoviano, 2 (1906), 91-104.

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A LOOK AT MORETO'S EL DESDEN CON EL DESDEN

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the new name he is to invent, Caniqui.

When Polilla does present himself to Diana, complete with costume as a "love doctor" and with comical affectations at Latin, he pretends his appearance with the line, "Plebe aite que de fuego mi entreda!" (648), and he establishes himself as one from the New World (Acapulco) who wishes to cure a "mal de amor." When Diana asks about the cure for "mal de amor" Polilla answers that he can cure "all que es francia" which means both the French disease (syphilis) and "generous in payment," with "unguento blanco" which refers to both the mercury-based ointment thought to be a cure for syphilis and to the silver coins called "unguento de Mexico." The thinking continues in the vein of the consequences of physical love when Polilla says:

Amor es quita-raido, quita-techos, quita-bien, quita-papelillos también que hará salvo a un motilón.

(711-714)

Here Polilla suggests that love may be "quita-papelillos" in the sense of "literary," and that love might cause even the "motive" (or lay brother in a convent, who was required to have a circular haircut) to become bald, references to the fact that hair loss is a characteristic of advanced cases of syphilis suffering. It is only shortly thereafter that Polilla gives himself the new name of Caniqui, and boasts of having acquired "intimacy" with Diana.

In Act II, with Polilla-Caniqui now pretending to work on Diana's side as she attempts to lure Carlos and then leave him, the wordplays again turn to basic elements, as the previous mentions, in connection with his master, "empasto de ranas" an ointment of mercuric oxide used for treating syphilis and "pelas de Jonás" another pharmaceutical term for mercuric oxide. All the while that Diana and Carlos speak of the fevers, passions, and fires of love on a higher plane, Polilla-Caniqui has in mind the consuming fires of the disease designated in France as the "fuego español."

In Act III we do not hear any more of Polilla-Caniqui's wise-cracks about the cures and cures for love's ailments. The emphasis now is on the conversations between Carlos and Diana and on the restraint that both are attempting to show. Only at the very end, when he is paired off with Laura, does Polilla-Caniqui revert to a joke about his name, as he suggests that everyone shake himself carefully since "polilla" is present.

Thus far venereal disease has been seen chiefly as a fixation in the mind of the buffoon, but there are other ways in which it relates to the Polilla-Caniqui figure. The name Polilla itself suggests one who like a moth is drawn into the flames, and Polilla as "care" or "unanimity" might suggest the symptoms of one suffering venereal disease. Caniqui comically claiming to come from Acapulco and immediately thereafter speaking of the "mal de amor" might be supposed to have brought a case of syphilis with him from the New World.

Further, Syphilis (Mercurial Syphilis or the French Disease), a work published in 1530 by the Italian physician, Fracastor, may provide the background for seeing yet more of more of Morcet's play in association with venereal disease. It was Fracastor, who in a poem written in Latin hexameters, gave the name Syphilis to a shepherd who was punished with venereal affection for his insult to Apollo (the sun god). The disease was named for the shepherd and because of the tremen-

dous success of Fracastor's work, the name came to replace previous appellations for venereal disease. If, following the classical allusions in El desden con el desden, Carlos is seen as Diana's mythological as well as real counterpart, then he can be said to correspond to the Apollo of Fracastor's poem, and Polilla-Caniqui can be imagined as the blushing and afflicted figure. While there is no proof that Moreto ever read Fracastor's work or even that members of his audience did, the great popularity and the number of editions and translations of Syphilis, especially in the sixteenth century, make possible the conjecture that Fracastor's ideas were "in vogue" as late as 1654, the publication date of El desden con el desden, and that Fracastor's writings may have been of part the general cultural backdrop of Morcet's work.

7 NOTES

1 Polilla uses both "moto" and "cumentos" or "cape." Cumente is the word for a type of dress or rich cloth of the type which might be used for women's undergarments.


3 All quotes from El desden con el desden are from the Francisco Rico edition published in Madrid by Claudio and in 1711. This quote is from page 68, lines 40-43. Subsequent quotes from the play will be indicated in the text by line number.

4 Lines 109-111. Riot's footnote on page 93 explains the meaning of the word strains.

5 See the corresponding footnote on page 98 of the Rico edition.

6 The items in quotes come from lines 109 and 1315 respectively. Although the term "empasto de ranas" may sound strange, frogs were indeed used in producing a mercury unguent thought to heal syphilis. See Theodor Rosscnberg, Microbes and Moral (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 41.


8 There has been much debate over which America was the origin of venereal disease. The important thing to remember here is that at the time of Meret's play many people were likely to associate venereal disease with the New World. Great outbreaks of the disease had ravaged Europe shortly after the return of Columbus and his men, and one or the other the most popular remedies for syphilis was guadalalupe, a wood indigenous to the Wm Indies. For an elucidation of the importance of this period see Bruce M. Dearington's Critical Transcription of Fracastor's 1530 treatise "El modo de adquirir e legno de India Occidentale," in RHM, 31 (1907-71), 213-211.


10 For medical aspects of El desden con el desden see the introduction in the Rico edition. This same introduction also suggests (page 49) that the date of composition for Morcet's play is quite close to the date of publication.

EL HORTELANO DEL PRADO: TIRSO OR DON ANTONIO SIGLER DE HUERTA?

HAROLD G. JONES, University of Missouri-Columbia

Recently, Ruth Lee Kennedy has suggested that the pseudonym "el Horteiano del Prado" refers to Tirso de Molina. She then fills in some gaps in Tirso's biography on the basis of the activities attributed to this "Horteiano" in a rejigment. I would propose an alternate interpretation. There are