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## "CONCEPTISMO" AS A COMIC TECHNIQUE IN MORETO'S "EL DESDEN, CON EL DESDEN"

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*El desdén, con el desdén* is a masterpiece of the Spanish comic theater. Because the theory and practice of comedy is so little understood, an analysis of this outstanding representative of the comic genre cannot fail to yield new insights into the comic techniques of its author, Agustín Moreto.<sup>1</sup> While *El desdén, con el desdén* contains examples of the comedic elements farce, satire, irony, and humor,<sup>2</sup> its most important single comedic element is wit in its purest form: *conceptismo*.<sup>3</sup> The conceits created by Moreto and expressed by his *gracioso* are repeated throughout the play and serve to unify its imagery and to reinforce the themes of deception and conquest implicit in the mission of Carlos and Polilla to conquer Diana's disdain.<sup>4</sup>

Early in Act I, Carlos tells Polilla that he has a plan and will need his help. In a series of clever plays on words, Polilla says that he will serve as the "inside man" in the campaign. In all editions except the one by Francisco Rico,<sup>5</sup> the line reads "Seré Simón y ayuda." Rico restores the reading of the *princeps* "Sinón" rather than "Simón" (540), thus rendering moot the problem of whether the "Simón" referred to is the *portero* of the Conde-Duque de Olivares or Simon of Cyrene, who helped to carry the cross on which Christ was to be crucified. As Rico explains, the "Sinón" referred to here is the Greek who by guile persuaded the Trojans to take into the city walls the famous wooden horse. This interpretation is the key that unlocks some complicated verbal and dramatic imagery.

The *gracioso* says that since he partakes of the nature of a moth ("polilla") he will be able to hide among the clothing ("camisas"), and that his presence will be unnoticed as he gathers his information. Polilla completes this word-play by saying that once introduced into the confidence of the owner of the "camisa" (543), he will be able to undermine her defenses: "Yo sabré apolillarle las entrañas" (546). This involved and entertaining series of images recalls the Trojan horse with its unsuspected cargo, and moves the entire exchange from the level of simple wordplay into *conceptismo*. Polilla returns to the idea of his being both a moth and a Trojan horse several times in the play, forming a running parallel between the two concepts, one ("polilla") obvious to all, the other ("Sinón") obscured until the edition of Rico, although Morel-Fatio did include it among the possibilities of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

In his first scene with Diana in Act I, Polilla, posing as a "médico de amor" (657), launches into a series of hyphenated puns which employ the verb *quitar* to show that love robs the lover of both his physical and his intellectual strength and gives him little in return. This is one of the most quoted passages in the play. It contains another example of *conceptismo*:

Amor es quita-razón,  
quita-sueño, quita-bien,  
quitapelillos también,  
que hará calvo a un motilón. (711-4)

These four lines are rife with double meanings. Moreto progresses from the complaints of the courtly lover to a pun on the word for flatterer ("quitapelillos"), which he then transforms into an involved concept that implies that the imprudent lover may be left bald. The use of the word "motilón" must have made the allusion even more amusing to those in the audience who may have known of instances of moral laxity on the part of laymen associated with the religious orders.

In these four lines the poet progresses from the sublime world of the courtly lover, through the intermediate level of double meaning implicit in the flatterer-balding victim, to the lowest level of love's suffering, the syphilitic. With this contrast between the idealized problems of the courtly lover and the reality of physical love's possible consequences, Polilla offers us a contrast between illusion and reality in love that he maintains throughout the play. Since we see the play through his eyes as he comments upon the action, we observe simultaneously the illusion (Carlos and Diana's view) and everyday reality (Polilla's view). The four lines that follow (715-8) use the diminutive suffix "-quita," culminating in a pun on its feminine form and the present tense of the verb *quitar* that perhaps implies both covetousness and fickleness on the part of females themselves. The "médico de amor" indulges in a series of plays on words that equate "el mal de amores" with "el mal francés." He claims to be able to cure "Al que es franco," meaning both syphilitic and generous in his payment, with the "ungüento blanco," which refers both to the mercury-based ointment used for treatment of the disease and to the color of silver coins, the "ungüento de México" (700-01).

When Diana asks his name, Polilla uses the alias Caniquí, which has the meaning of a thin cotton cloth often worn by women, an image that recalls the "camisa" of his exchange with Carlos. The fact that ladies often wore this cloth implies that Caniquí will be close to Diana's heart and therefore taken into her confidence. Caniquí is appropriate to the *gracioso's* purpose both as a means of entering the "pecho" (738) of Diana and as a veil to hide his

true identity. The moth (Polilla) thus assumes the disguise of the moth's prey (Caniquí) in order to insinuate himself into the confidence of Diana and serve as her "love doctor." In an aside that once again unifies the brilliantly complicated imagery used to symbolize deception, Polilla-Caniquí expresses satisfaction that he has thus far been effective in his role of "Sinón" and has successfully brought the Trojan horse into the walls of the "enemy fortress," which is the confidence ("pecho") of Diana. His words clearly demonstrate the persuasive power of a clever *hombre de burlas* who can disarm and make way for a future "siege" from an outside force (Carlos).

(Yo ya tengo introducción;  
 así en el mundo sucede:  
 lo que un príncipe no puede,  
 yo he logrado por bufón.  
 Si ahora no llega a rendilla  
 Carlos, sin maña se viene,  
 pues ya introducida tiene  
 en su pecho la polilla.) (731-8)

One of the most effective conceits is the one at the end of Act I. Polilla reassures his master that in his role as Caniquí he is the Trojan horse inside of the besieged fortress: "Me he hecho ya lienzo casero" (1056).

Laura, the *graciosa*, also contributes to the wordplay on the name Caniquí. Early in the play she good-naturedly chooses Caniquí for herself, commenting that if Cintia's eyes are dazzled by Carlos: "Y a mí el Caniquí, en secreto / me ha llevado las narices, / que me agrada para lienzo" (752-4). When Laura claims Caniquí in marriage at the end of the play, Polilla discards his disguise and shows that the joke is on her for believing his role-playing: "Sacúdanse todos bien, / que no soy sino Polilla: / mamóla vuestra merced!" (2923-5).

Polilla serves as adviser and confidant to both Carlos and Diana. His private conversations with each of them allow him to demonstrate his skill as a practical philosopher and storyteller. Polilla tells his master the parable of the fig tree, the significance of which would be immediately obvious to all segments of the audience.<sup>7</sup> But first he invites Carlos and the audience to laugh with him at himself by telling an amusing story from his own experience. This is the anecdote concerning his desire to have some grapes only after they had been placed out of his reach, and how he broke some ribs trying to climb into range (381-93). In this way Polilla tries to comfort Carlos with the practical reasoning that his master need break no ribs. A marriageable lady, like a ripe fig, will fall into the hands of the one who persists, because not to fall

is against the laws of Nature. Near the end of the play, when Diana turns to Polilla-Caniquí for advice after Carlos appears to accept the marriage arrangements that each has made with another, the *gracioso* observes that she is now ripe and has fallen right into the mouth of her waiting suitor: "Alto, ya cayó la breva, / y dio en la boca por yerro" (2511-2).

Polilla cleverly teases Diana when she complains of the neglect of her former suitors, coining new verbs with the names of Cintia, Fenisa, and Laura:

Si te enfada  
 ver tu nombre en verso escrito,  
 ¿qué han de hacer sino *cintiar*,  
*laurear* y *fenislar*  
 que *dianar* es delito? (2144-8)

The song that he dedicates to Laura reflects fixations on food and sex that are appropriate in a *gracioso*.<sup>8</sup> It also contains a conceit that Rico explains in his notes as a reference to the use of laurel leaves to marinate raw fish (*escabeche*):

Laura, en rigor, es laurel;  
 y pues Laura a mí me plugo,  
 yo tengo de ser besugo,  
 por escabecharme en él. (2175-8)

Polilla uses terms appropriate to card games, croquet, fencing, and hunting to comment upon the battle of wits between Carlos and Diana, a habit that emphasizes the fact that in his opinion courtship is just another game that has very little to do with love's everyday realities. He devises a plan by which Carlos may take advantage of the carnival festivities in Barcelona to frame his role as "desdeñoso."<sup>9</sup> After arranging for Carlos to overhear him "rehearse" with Diana for the courtly ritual that evening, he then becomes a spectator of the game between Carlos and Diana. Polilla observes: "¡Qué gran gusto es ver dos juegos!" (1212). He takes the audience into his confidence in this scene, during which he acts both as prompter and commentator. His wordplay centers on images of fire and water. He tells Diana to encourage Carlos and see how he reacts, wryly commenting in an aside: "Esto es / hacerla escupir al cielo" (1247-8). When the ploy does not bring the desired results, Polilla remarks: "Está la yesca mojada" (1256). Seeing that his master is getting the worst of the exchange, Polilla begins to prompt Carlos, reminding him to gargle rather than to swallow (1264). He tells Diana that he is encouraging Carlos to be more receptive to her. To the audience, Polilla puns on the expression "mascar a dos carrillos," saying that here he can "engañar a dos carrillos" (1268), deceiving each party by turns.

When he hears Diana's plan to have Carlos overhear her singing in the garden (1750-7), Polilla refers to her as Eve preparing Eden for the downfall of Adam (1770-1). He wittily compares her to both the apple and the snake in the Genesis story, and he makes a direct appeal to the men in the audience to join with him in mock censure of her devious plot to snare Carlos (1775-82). He warns Carlos that she plans to "soften him up" with the "canto" (1791), which means both singing and a pounding stone. He expresses his own contempt for the sham of courtship by comparing the finery of the ladies to the leaves of the artichoke (1852-63), leaving no doubt that his own interest in women is carnal rather than aesthetic. Polilla also includes a comment about the unreal world of the Dianas of Montemayor and Gil Polo as he scolds Carlos for saying that he could die of love: "Deja eso a los pastores del Arcadia" (1803).

Several of Polilla's conceits involve religious allusions. An example of this is the clever play on words in which Polilla likens the lover to a blind beggar who sings songs of "Passion" in the streets and on the streetcorners (437-8). Bruce W. Wardropper observes that religious allusions and images in this play are used for comic purposes: "This is not to say that the play is sacrilegious; the comedy based on religious practices merely serves to underline the fact that the work airs problems which have nothing to do with religion, or which are purely secular counterparts of theological problems."<sup>10</sup> Let us look at examples of these secularized and comical religious allusions that are at the same time examples of Moreto's *conceptismo*.

As the play opens, we have a scene between Carlos and Polilla in which the master is telling the *gracioso* of his love for the disdainful princess. Carlos laments: "este pesar no es tristeza, / sino desesperación" (19-20). The word "desesperación," which implies the possibility of suicide, is then used in a series of light-hearted plays on words by Polilla. The *gracioso's* initial reply to Carlos is: "Desesperación? Señor, / que te enfrenes te aconsejo, / que tiras algo a bermejo" (21-3). In his edition of the play, Rico explains that the comical allusion to "bermejo" probably refers to Judas Iscariot, who is traditionally represented as a redhead in religious paintings. Since Judas, who hanged himself, is perhaps the most famous case of "desesperación," this interpretation of the allusion is appropriate for this series of plays on words. Polilla's wordplay continues with the terms "ahorcar," "ahoga," and "soga," which serve to unify the comic imagery of the scene. Polilla asks "Cosa de ahorcarte? / que, si no, poco te ahoga" (28-9). When Carlos complains of his teasing, Polilla replies: "Pues si estás desesperado, / ¿hago mal en darte sogas?" (31-2). This conceit is masterful, refer-

ring as it does to the idiom "to tease" and implying that he is merely trying to help Carlos by "giving him enough rope to hang himself."

In the first scene of Act II Polilla, in the guise of a "love priest," hears the "confession" of Carlos. He observes that Carlos has so "wounded" Diana with his feigned disdain that she, too, has requested "confession" of Polilla-Caniquí. This is a cleverly composed series of conceits combining the idea of Cupid's arrow hitting its mark, the courtly lover's view of love as death, and the serious view of the necessity of confession before death (1082-4). Polilla concludes that in his role as "love priest" he has been as successful as he was in the role of "love doctor" in winning Diana's confidence:

Y con mi bellaquería  
su pecho ha comunicado,  
como ella me ha imaginado  
doctor desta teología. (1085-8)

At the end of the play, after Diana chooses Carlos for her husband, Polilla gives the couple a mock blessing: "Y mi bendición os caiga, / por siempre jamás, amén" (2918-9). In like manner, Laura observes that in his role as "love doctor" he has found an effective remedy for Diana's "sickness": "Viendo prohibido el plato, / Diana se ahitó de amor / y del desdén ha sanado" (2800-2). Thus Polilla-Caniquí serves Diana both as conceptualized (comic) doctor and as her father confessor. In this way love is represented in this comedy as an acknowledged sickness and a religion surrogate. The *conceptismo* is carried from the poetry into the action of the play by the role-playing as well as the language of the *gracioso*.

The uniqueness of *El desdén, con el desdén* as a comedy derives from the conceits that give coherence and unity to the basic comic modes of farce, satire, irony, and humor. As we have observed, it is the *gracioso* Polilla-Caniquí who, in his multiple roles of "love doctor," "love priest," and confidant to both hero and heroine, is constantly at the center of the action. He is a consummate *conceptista* who translates his conceits into action on stage. As running commentator for the audience he represents *desengaño*, a constant reminder of the reality behind the illusion of love. In this undisputed masterpiece of the Spanish comic theater Moreto uses the *gracioso* as his agent in the transformation of conceptual thinking from the language of the play into new dimensions of characterization and plot development. *El desdén, con el desdén* is a comic masterpiece largely because of the fact that in it *conceptismo* is transferred from the poetry directly into the dramatic action.

## NOTES

1. Studies that deal with the subject of comedy in the plays of Moreto include the unpublished dissertation of Anna Marie Lottman, "The Comic Elements in Moreto's *Comedias*" (Colorado, 1958), and Ruth Lee Kennedy's *The Dramatic Art of Moreto* (1932; rpt. Philadelphia: Smith College Studies in Modern Languages, XIII).

2. In the preface to *Comedy: The Irrational Vision* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), Morton Gurewitsch defines the major elements of comedy as four: farce, satire, irony, and humor. He states that wit "is the servant of all four" (9).

3. Ermanno Caldera, in *Il teatro di Moreto* (Pisa: Goliardica, 1960) notes the similarity between Moreto's ideas and the moral philosophy of Baltasar Gracián, the most accomplished *conceptista*.

4. The plot may be summarized as follows: Princess Diana is disdainful of love and marriage in spite of the efforts of her father and her suitors to change her mind. Carlos, the Count of Urgel, is stung by her disdain, falls in love with her, and proposes to win her by pretending to share her disdain for love and marriage. His companion Polilla, operating under the alias Caniquí, is the intermediary between Carlos and Diana. The strategy works. Diana declares her love for Carlos, and their betrothal is formalized by her father. The similarity of this plot to other Golden Age plays has been examined by Mabel Harlan in "The Relation of Moreto's *El desdén con el desdén* to Suggested Sources" (Bloomington: Indiana University Studies, 1924), XI, 1-109.

5. Quotations and numbered line references from the play are taken from the edition of Francisco Rico published in the Clásicos Castalia series in 1971.

6. A. Morel-Fatio, "Variétés," *BH*, 5 (1903), 186-8.

7. Lines 403-22 contain Polilla's parable of the fig. He compares Diana to the first fruit of the fig tree, "la breva," which is so high and unattainable that it cannot be picked or knocked loose by shaking the tree or throwing objects at it. The patient and persistent lover who waits until time and the maturation process cause the fruit to ripen will get the prize.

8. See José F. Montesinos, "Algunas observaciones sobre la figura del donaire en el teatro de Lope de Vega," in *Estudios sobre Lope de Vega* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1951), pp. 13-70. Polilla fulfills the requirements for a *gracioso* as defined by Montesinos in that he is obsessed with food imagery, he regards women as sex objects, and he occasionally parodies the actions and language of his master, for whom he is both loyal companion and confidant.

9. Rico speculates in his introduction that this play may have been intended for presentation at court during Carnestolendas, and that some of the ladies and gentlemen present may have taken part in the performance.

10. Bruce W. Wardropper, "El desdén con el desdén: The *Comedia* Secularized," *BHS*, 34 (1957), 2. I wish to thank Professor Wardropper for his encouragement and assistance to me in the preparation of this article, which I began at Duke University while participating in the 1975 NEH summer seminar on "Comedy in the Drama of the Spanish Golden Age."